IRONIC IMAGES OF MOTHERHOOD
IN CONTEMPORARY
FRENCH CINEMA

by

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ABSTRACT

There is an increasing trend for contemporary French cinema to feature the family unit. As such, it now serves as the ideal locus for criticism and commentary on individual family members. One of the key members, who functions as the basis for many analytical conversations in the real world, is the mother figure. Through presenting her and her various roles in an ironic manner, contemporary French directors François Ozon, Valeria Bruni Tedeschi, and Noémie Lvovsky are each able to provide insight into what society expects of mothers and how mothers and non-mothers react and exist inside the demands of a patriarchal society. In films from the early 2000's to present, Ozon, Lvovsky and Bruni Tedeschi have showcased a myriad of mothers, from the non-mothers who seek motherhood, to the young single mothers struggling to survive, and from the well established mothers seeking empowerment through that role to the grandmother depending on her daughter for survival. By presenting the spectator with such a large variety of maternal imagery, Ozon, Lvovsky and Bruni Tedeschi are each able to criticize what society demands of mothers. Mothers are expected to bear sole responsibility for raising their children, with each fault in behavior a failing on their part. They are also expected to be wholly devoted to their children, sacrificing their own dreams, ambitions, and identities to become the ideal of maternal love. By presenting these mothers, who strive to meet their society's expectations, with a hint of irony, Ozon, Lvovsky and Bruni Tedeschi point to the absurdity of such high expectations for any individual. Through the often optimistic, if not traditionally happy ending, Ozon, Lvovsky, and Bruni Tedeschi are also able to point to a changing climate in the expectations of motherhood within western society, and indicate a hope of the reality of that apparent change.
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my children, first and foremost, Hannah, Charlie, and any future little ones. You inspire me daily. To my husband, for your never-ending support and love. To my parents, for giving me the confidence to strive for a better future.
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

Directors:

FO -François Ozon

VBT -Valeria Bruni Tedeschi

NL -Noémie Lvovsky
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Gaby (mother)
Augustine (sister)
Louise (maid)
Pierrette (Marcel's sister)
Suzon (older sister)
Catherine (younger sister)
Madame Chanel

Le Temps qui reste (2005)
Romain
Laura (grandmother)
Jany (waitress)
Father
Mother
Sasha (boyfriend)
Sophie (sister)

Ricky (2009)
Katie (mother)
Paco (Katie's partner, Ricky's father)
Lisa (Katie's daughter)
Ricky (Katie's child)

Potiche (2010)
Suzanne Pujol
Maurice Babin
Robert Pujol
Nadège (secretary)
Joëlle (daughter of Suzanne and Robert)
Laurent (son of Suzanne and Robert)

Valeria Bruni Tedeschi

Il est plus facile pour un chameau (2003)
Frederica (VBT)
Bianca (sister)
Pierre (boyfriend)
Philippe (former lover)
Mother
Father
Aurelio (brother)

Actrices (2007)
Marcelline (VBT)
Nathalie (NL) (assistant director)
Eric (young love in play)
Denis (director)
Mother
Nathalia (character in Turgenev's play)
Father

Un château en Italie (2013)
Louise Rossi Levi (VBT)
Ludovic (the brother)
Nathan (the lover)
Mother
Serge (family friend)
Jeanne (brother's fiancée)
Noémie Lvovsky

Carole and Jacques
Édith and François
Young mother (VBT)

Camille redouble (2012)
Camille Vaillant
Éric (Camille's husband)
Josepha (Camille's childhood friend)
Alice (Camille's childhood friend)
Louise (Camille's childhood friend)
Mother
Father

Faut que ça danse (2007)
Salomon (father)
Sarah (VBT) (daughter)
Violette (father's girlfriend)
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INTRODUCTION: Ever-changing interpretations of motherhood

While the use of irony as a literary technique may be simply defined as saying, or doing, one thing while meaning the opposite, its use, on the contrary, is often complex, sophisticated and hard to recognize. Irony is difficult to identify and decode for many reasons, as it "undermines stated meaning by removing the semantic security of 'one signifier: one signified'" (Hutcheon 13). The transmitted message no longer means what it appears to mean, but instead, a secondary, hidden message is being transmitted. This secondary message is challenging to decipher because irony, instead of openly criticizing social standards, does the opposite and often appears to be strictly adhering to the rules or norms that it does not support (Hutcheon 15). As a result, irony can often be misinterpreted as supporting that which it intends to critique. One ideal that is often treated ironically in contemporary literature and cinema is that of motherhood. Each society maintains and enforces certain standards of motherhood (Badinter, *Le conflit* 171), and by appearing to support these ideals, irony can instead be used to challenge and criticize them.

In recent films of François Ozon (FO), Noémie Lvovsky (NL) and Valeria Bruni Tedeschi (VBT), the use of irony to question these societal standards of motherhood is poignantly clear. This analysis will focus on how each of the directors uses various forms of irony to highlight traditional standards of motherhood in order to critique them and to open discussion to the possibility of an evolution towards a more positive set of ideals, as I will argue, that allows mothers to exhibit both positive and negative traits within the role of caregiver, as well as allowing non-mothers to form an identity not aligned with motherhood. In FO's *8
femmes, Le temps qui reste, Potiche and Ricky, one of the most frequent situations to be presented ironically is the competition between the mother, or mothers, and the non-mothers of the family, and the juxtaposition of the two individuals against one another. Whether they are mothers or not, each of these women negotiates her own maternal identity in relation to presumed societal standards, which will be explored further in chapter one. NL uses a similar juxtaposition of women characters in her films Les Sentiments and Faut que ça danse. An analysis of VBT's Actrices and Il est plus facile pour un chameau reveals a new dimension to the role of mother: societal expectations of achieving motherhood and an overwhelming desire to become a mother.

The birth of "the good mother"

In order to identify and discuss the ironic treatment of standards of motherhood, it is first necessary to determine the ideals that are being subverted. Historically, standards of motherhood have been used by Western societies to control women and to keep them limited to the dual role of housewife and mother, to the exclusion of all other roles. Traditionally, feminists either see motherhood as a situation leading to oppression, or they see it as the ultimate way for a woman to show control over her life through choosing to accept or reject the role. According to Élisabeth Badinter, a well-known French feminist and historian who specializes in the changing role of motherhood throughout history, current repressive societal standards of motherhood, in France and in many other western societies, found their beginning in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. While many scholars who write about the evolution of the family unit, such as Philippe Ariès, Edward Shorter and Yvonne Knibiehler, agree with Badinter that the modern day family found its naissance in the pre-modern period in France, not all concur with her on the
actual process of that evolution. According to both Badinter and Shorter, women who lived in French cities during that time were expected to follow a set of norms very different than those of women today. Mothers were almost all expected to turn their children over to the care of peasant *nourrices* out in the country.

While Badinter primarily focuses on this phenomenon in the bourgeois and noble classes, Shorter addresses its presence among the poor as well. According to Shorter, poor women would board out their own infants in order to accept a slightly higher salary to board someone else's (177). This practice was so common that "by the middle of the eighteenth century city children nursed by their mothers were the exceptions" (Badinter, *Mother Love* 73). Only the landed peasantry were poor enough to be exempt from this practice (Shorter 176). Instead of occupying themselves with the role of mother, as it is understood in the twenty-first century, these women "were forced by material circumstances and community attitudes to subordinate infant welfare to other objectives" (Shorter 169). The poor mothers had to help their husbands support their family, and for the richer women, social life was seen as such a necessity that even doctors of the time agreed that "these social obligations were valid reasons not to play the mother's part" (Badinter, *Mother Love* 71). All of the women who boarded their children had day-to-day obligations that excluded the role of mother and that were more important than attending to their children. According to both Badinter and Shorter, this would not change until society held children in a higher regard.

According to Badinter, this lack of responsibility for children had two main consequences triggering the transition to the standards of motherhood that can be seen to overlap in many modern societies. Each of these standards will be discussed along with a particular film that scrutinizes it in an ironic manner. The first consequence, upon which Badinter and Shorter agree,
is that because of the poverty of the wet nurses, the infant mortality rate was extremely high, consistently above 25% (Badinter, *Mother Love* 109; Shorter 181). The second consequence, upon which Badinter alone focuses, was beneficial to mothers. When women in the city were freed from the time-consuming task of raising children, some of them sought opportunities to become educated (*Mother Love* 83). The barriers standing between women and a solid education were innumerable during that time period, and many were unable to overcome them. With no formal schooling set up for them, women were only able to learn through direct access to a learned individual, "it was through the opportunities for intellectual exchange offered by their social lives that they learned the rudiments of philosophy and science" (83). As examples of women who were able to navigate society successfully and gain an education, Badinter mentions humanists, physicists, authors of memoirs and literary classics of the seventeenth century, such as Mme Dacier, Mme de la Sablière, Mme de La Fayette and Mme de Sévigné among others. While the majority of women were not able to educate themselves through social exchange, those who were successful offered an example for less fortunate women to follow.

However beneficial it was for women to gain an education through social exchange, philosophers of the time did not see it as such and sought a way to prevent women from following this path and to force them back into the homes and out of society. According to Badinter,

> From the end of the sixteenth century until the middle of the eighteenth century most men, among them the most respected of their age, united in a single refrain to discourage women from following this path. From Montaigne to Rousseau, Molière and Fénelon, women were beseeched to return to their natural role as housekeeper and mother. (*Mother Love* 83)
The dual role of mother and homemaker began to be referred to as natural, as if mothers who did not seek to care for their own children were acting against their natural and instinctual impulses. When studies showed that the overall population growth was beginning to stagnate from the high mortality rate among infants, men of the time saw an opportunity to pressure women to return to the home and the role of mother. With the assistance of well-known eighteenth century authors such as Rousseau and Voltaire (Badinter, *Mother Love* 122), society attempted to drive women toward their supposedly natural role of motherhood.

The aforementioned authors insisted that a mother's care was best and that mothers should be solely responsible for the nourishment of their own children. However, women did not instantly accept this change in societal expectations. Women's journals and magazines were used to reinforce this natural role, and "after 1760, publications abounded advising mothers to take care of their children personally and 'ordering' them to breast-feed" (Badinter, *Mother Love* 117). These publications began to create an image of the mother as a woman who devoted everything to that role. This societal pressure created the ideal of the maternal instinct that still exists today (117). This implies that mothering is natural. Not only are women naturally equipped to become mothers, but they also desire it above everything else. In the films considered for this project, there are many women who ambiguously portray this all-consuming desire for motherhood.

Despite the increased pressure from publications and society in the late eighteenth century, many women continued to resist the effort to make motherhood their whole identity. It took more than just these publications to convince women to devote themselves entirely to motherhood, as society needed to "enlist many arguments to urge mothers back to their 'instinctive' activities —appealing to their sense of duty, making them feel guilty, and even threatening them in order to convince them to resume their so-called natural and spontaneous
functions of mother and nurse” (Badinter, *Mother Love* 114). The result of this process of establishing new societal norms of mothering was tri-fold. Some women wholeheartedly submitted to the standards, attempting to portray the ideal mother through all their actions. Some obeyed to avoid conflict with their spouses and peers. Still others fought to reject the new norms. During the past two centuries women who fought back had open war declared upon them, and mothers and non-mothers were set against one another (119). It is through depicting, in sometimes satirical ways, ideal representations of the women like these, who accept or reject their status of mother, that contemporary directors FO, NL and VBT question standards of motherhood.

**Twenty-first century standards of motherhood**

If we look at current publications directed at women, such as "I Am not a Good Mother, nor Do I Aspire to Be," published online by *The Guardian*, and the case study "Maternal Instincts, Biological Clocks, and Soccer Moms: Gay Men's Parenting and Family Narratives" by Dana Berkowitz, modern day standards of motherhood mirroring those of the previous centuries become apparent. In "I Am not a Good Mother, nor Do I Aspire to Be," Bronwen Clune discusses her experience as a mother and society's guidelines for her to fit the role of a "good" mother. According to Clune, in order to be a "good" mother, she must be a woman who does it all. She must be selfless, ever-giving and, all the while, her sole concern must be raising her children. A "good" mother has an exclusive bond with her child that overpowers everything else. Furthermore, she must add to this perfection a certain appearance that is practical, fashionable and feminine. She must be, above all, well behaved. In her article, Clune admits her refusal to conform to this ideal at the same time that she admits to the pressure she feels to conform.
Support, in the form of childcare and mothering advice, for the standards that Clune discusses, can be found in publications such as *Ladies' Home Journal*, associations such as *La Leche League International* (est. 1956), online communities of bloggers known as "the mamasphere," and extensive publication of childcare manuals such as Dr. Spock's *Baby and Childcare*, as well as *Caring for Your Baby and Young Child* by the American Academy of Pediatrics, *J'éleve mon enfant* and *J'attends un enfant* by Laurence Pernoud.

In "Maternal Instincts, Biological Clocks, and Soccer Moms: Gay Men's Parenting and Family Narratives," Dana Berkowitz reports the findings of her case study on gay men and how they parent their children. While on the surface, this would seem to have nothing to do with maternity, as both men would be considered a father to their child, her findings were quite the opposite. Societal standards of motherhood are so present in everyday life that even men who are thrown into the role of parent feel the need to conform to society's expected maternal standards (Berkowitz 515). Berkowitz found that many of her participants "identified with roles or behavioral expectations associated with women and framed their parenting experiences in maternal terms, using such phrases as *maternal instincts, biological clocks, and soccer moms*" (522). Societal standards of motherhood set the mother up as the ideal caregiver who innately desires that role, while men are not supposed to possess the same natural desire (522). As a result, the gay men in Berkowitz's study felt the need to align themselves with maternal ideals present in society, in order to consider themselves as natural caregivers. While the study group was small, too small to be generalized to gay men as a whole, it does introduce an interesting notion, that for both men and women, society's maternal standards can overshadow an individual's own identity.
Over the past few decades, women have found many ways to contend with societal standards of motherhood. The most available way for modern women to struggle against the presumed ideal is a woman's right to choose when and if she will become a mother. It is also this choice that, more than any other aspect, opens up the imposed ideal of motherhood to irony. With the legalization of contraceptive use (1967 in France), equality laws that allow women equal access to employment (1970s) and education, as well as the legalization of abortions (1975 in France), the number of women who choose not to have children is on the rise, as is the age at which women begin having children. Despite this new-found ability to resist the standards of motherhood imposed upon them, many women still feel that their only option is to be the mother that their society tells them they must be. It is this still existing unrealistic desire to follow these standards to the letter that allows social criticism, in the form of irony, to become not only possible but also likely. For irony to exist, "there must be some possible speakers who would believe or intend what is being said" (Colebrook 12). It is this possibility of belief that makes irony so difficult to detect and interpret in everyday interactions, and much more so in literature and even in cinema. It is quite possible to watch the films of FO, NL and VBT at the level of immediacy and believe that they are supporting society's standards of motherhood. It is only through a close analysis of each film individually and in comparison to the others that the irony becomes apparent.

François Ozon, Noémie Lvovsky and Valeria Bruni Tedeschi

An examination of the uses of irony is missing in current research on all three directors. Due to the dual careers of VBT and NL as both actresses and directors, there is also an intertextual connection between the films of all three that has escaped investigation. NL acts in
her own films and some of VBT's films, while VBT acts in her own films, those of NL and those of FO. So, when looking at a selection of films from all three, the same actresses appear in multiple films. VBT's acting career began in 1986. Her directorial debut with *Il est plus facile pour un chameau* in 2003 allowed VBT to develop a semi-autobiographical production focused on the often dysfunctional family unit and present situations and characters that are cruel yet ridiculous (Mandelbaum 17). These themes were further developed just three years later in *Actrices*, and again most recently in 2012 with *Un château en Italie*. As a result of her fascination with the ridiculous, VBT's films are impossible to “prendre au sérieux” (17), which makes them a perfect platform for analyzing the use of irony to critique certain social norms.

While her focus on family situations is often brought to the forefront in current publications in cinema journals such as *Positif*, *Cahiers du cinéma*, and *Jeune cinéma*, as well as in articles in magazines and newspapers, a specific focus on the role of the mother remains to be explored.

In *Il est plus facile pour un chameau*, the main character is pressured by her own mother and her fiancé to accept the role of motherhood and to be like everyone else, i.e., pursue motherhood at every waking moment. In *Actrices*, from the first few moments of the film, the protagonist is haunted by her failed relationships and her inability to conceive. Ironically, as it is generally a mother's role to support her child, and in particular her daughter, in becoming a mother, it is Marceline's own mother who is the primary source of this torture. Through these ever-present presumed ideals and images of motherhood, together with socially expected norms, VBT is able to revisit standards of motherhood and develop a social critique of the role.

Through the writing and production of all of her films, VBT has worked closely with another well-known director, NL, who also has a career as both an actress and a director. Her first full length film, *Oublie-moi*, was released in 1994, while her acting career did not begin
until 2001. Like VBT, NL is well known for featuring the family unit on-screen with all of its problems. Although few critical writings on her films have been published to date, some of the main themes identified by critics are the reversal of relationships, such as the daughter caring for the mother, or the mother and daughter having a child together (Baumann and Garbarz 20).

There is also a duality that exists within the familial relationships in NL’s scenarios (Masson, "Faut que ça danse" 50; Alion, "Entretien avec Noémie Lvovsky” 79). Her families are brutal and at the same time fragile, distant and yet closely connected. Salomon in Il faut que ça danse, when he starts dating, denies that he is married and has an adult daughter. He even denies knowing his pregnant daughter as she runs after him to get his attention, all for the sake of his new love. However, at the same time, he is there to offer his support if his wife or daughter needs him. The tie between family members is an attachment that draws NL’s characters towards one another, and at the same time, pushes them apart. This is particularly true of the maternal figure in each of her films.

Similarly, little attention has been paid to the theme of maternity in research on FO. Of the three directors, his filmography is by far the most prolific. He is also the only one of the three, to date, with a monography dedicated to his work, written by Andrew Asibong in 2008. FO's directorial career began very early in life, as he directed many films during his adolescence, casting his own family members and focusing on the family unit with a blend of comedy and horror, like many of his later films (Asibong 2). FO's early movies, full-length films and shorts, seemed to focus on the brutal and violent side of human nature, at the same time that the films were "surreal and comic" (Sklar 48). Later movies focus less on violence in relationships, but continue to concentrate on the psychological struggles of the main characters within familial relationships. The structure of the family, including specifically the role of the father, his
presence or absence in the family, is an overarching theme that is frequently cited or analyzed in critical works on FO (Asibong 48). Another noticeable feature of FO's films is the central placement of women in the storyline, which according to FO is because his films are about emotions, intimacy and characters' feelings instead of action (Fern). Aside from his focus on women and their issues on-screen, FO's films share many qualities with those of NL and VBT, including the use of duality, psychological struggles, the reversal of roles within familial relationships, and the mélange of the characters' past, present and fantasy on-screen.

**Methodology of analysis**

For each of the films in this study, I will be analyzing the cinematic decisions that the directors made in their portrayal of women. In particular, I will be looking at how the traditional societal standards of motherhood are subject to irony. This irony will be analyzed through both current feminist theory and socio-cultural theory. In cinema, and in melodrama, in particular, the director has more at his or her disposal than just the written word to convey irony. It is the *mise en scène* (lighting, montage, visual rhythm, décor, style of acting, music and so forth) that gives meaning to what is seen on-screen. Therefore, it is each and every one of these features that the audience must examine in order to understand irony in cinema.

Examples of cinematic irony can be found both in films of the American director Alfred Hitchcock and the French director Agnès Varda. In *Le Bonheur*, Varda criticizes, through irony, the idealized view of the wife and mother present in her society, through the use of visual images from sources outside the film, sources such as *Elle* and *Marie Claire* (DeRoo 191). She presents these images in a way that prompts the viewer to actively question society's ideal. For example, in popular women's magazines of the day, women were often depicted through images of their
hands doing housework. Only their hands were shown and this was meant to portray a sense of 
busyness and fulfillment through housework. In order to critique this ideal through irony, Varda 
juxtaposes images of the female protagonists' hands doing housework against full body images 
of her husband at his place of work. The female protagonist is therefore presented as less 
valuable than her husband, as well as less of a person, since it is her anonymous hands that work 
 ceaselessly. In Varda's Le Bonheur, it is the imagery used in the film that conveys an ironic 
critique (191). Alfred Hitchcock's Blackmail presents us with another example of irony used in 
cinema.

In Blackmail, irony is conveyed by undercutting romantic conventions through "the 
development of characters, plots, and imagery" (Brill 148). Hitchcock takes traditionally 
romantic episodes and images and reverses the traditional significance, not allowing them to 
progress as they would in a conventional romance. Hitchcock also uses the color of the clothing 
that his protagonists wear, to undermine traditional romantic conventions. In order to convey 
irony, he uses all the cinematic tricks at his disposal. The films chosen for this project 
communicate irony in the same way, through undermining and overturning conventions, 
imagery, including colors and clothing, and juxtaposing the representation of characters. Each of 
these aspects reveals to the reader that irony is being used.

Once the audience has identified the situation that is being treated ironically, the literal 
meaning can be rejected, which according to Booth, in his work on irony, A Rhetoric of Irony, is 
only the first step that a reader, or spectator, must follow to identify and interpret irony. After 
rejecting the literal meaning, the audience must contemplate alternative meanings while 
considering the speaker's knowledge and beliefs, and eventually choose a new meaning or, more 
likely, a new cluster of meanings to assign to the situation (10-12). Rejection of the literal
meaning of any given situation, context or statement comes from the omnipotent position of the observer, where the spectator knows more about a situation than the characters involved in it. According to Elsaesser, in his essay on irony in melodrama, "irony privileges the spectator vis-à-vis the protagonists, for he registers the difference from a superior position" ("Tales of Sound and Fury" 66). The spectator is placed in a position to know more about the lives of the characters than they do themselves and as such, the spectator is able to identify which standards are being critiqued. In both literature and films, the spectator can see where the storyline and the situation contradict one another. Irony is understood within the context of the whole, forcing the reader or audience to reference previous or following scenes in order to understand.

There are many forms of irony, as outlined by Douglas Muecke in Irony and Irony and the Ironic, including, but not limited to, dramatic irony, narrative irony, cosmic irony, situational irony, verbal irony and Socratic irony. It is necessary to highlight the differences in utilization of irony between comedy and melodrama, since the films of the chosen corpus fall under both categories. Melodrama is by definition an exaggeration of events and characters that are meant to create audience identification through emotion, and comedy, on the other hand, exists to make the audience laugh. In melodrama, irony is generally found in the series of events and in audience becoming aware of the events before the characters do. Meucke points out that irony is inherent and unavoidable in the theatre because of the contraction between sight/knowledge (the audience) and blindness/ignorance (the characters) (Irony and the Ironic 66). In comedy, an idea must be taken to the extreme to convey an ironic critique. For example, in VBT's Un château en Italie, the main protagonist, Louise Rossi Levi, journeys to see a nun to obtain her blessing for a successful pregnancy. In and of itself, there is nothing ironic in this quest, and no events have foreshadowed for the audience what will happen, so there is no ironic contradiction between
what the character expects to happen and what the audience suspects will happen. When Louise
is denied access to the building, she takes off her shoes, barrels down and ploughs through the
nuns guarding the door like a football player running toward the goal line. She sprints through
the building, up numerous flights of stairs, all while the nuns that were guarding the door are
now chasing her. The entire scene quickly turns to a slapstick comedy. What lies beneath the
comedy of this scene is irony, and through it, a social criticism of the pejorative view of women
without children.

While a variety of irony is used by FO, VBT and NL, the main forms of irony employed
in the film corpus for this project are narrative and verbal irony. For the purpose of this study,
narrative irony is defined as a difference between what a character says and what a character
does. For instance, Romain, from Le temps qui reste, claims to dislike children and then
willingly fathers a child for a couple he does not know and who is unable to conceive on their
own. To highlight the presence of irony during this sequence of events, FO uses close-ups of
differing sizes of the characters as well as background noise.

Narrative irony can also be a discrepancy or juxtaposition between two characters. For
instance, Marcelline and Nathalie, from VBT's Actrices, stand in opposition as mirror images of
one another, as each leads a life that the other desires. Throughout the film, VBT, like FO, uses
extreme close-ups and background noise to set up a competition between the two women. VBT
is able to use their juxtaposition to ridicule both of their representations of motherhood.

Verbal irony is also present in many of the films, and it is defined as the difference
between what is said and what is meant. An example of this type of irony can be found in the
character of Mme Pujol, from FO's 2010 film Potiche. At the beginning of the film, Mme Pujol
continually asks where her place in life is, as if she did not know. Throughout the film, the
audience realizes that she is not questioning herself and her place, but something else entirely. She is not asking because she does not know her place, but, instead, to point out that M. Pujol is unaware of the importance of her role, a contrast that becomes strikingly apparent later in the film. In order to convey this irony, FO uses medium shots where both M. and Mme Pujol can be seen, without background noise. These close-up shots allow the audience to see her facial expressions, and the context of the conversation that Mme Pujol has with M. Pujol. In all of these instances, the directors use cinematic techniques such as shot size, splice transitions and lack of camera movement, to show the difference between what is said or done and what is actually meant at another level of reading of the cinematic text.

To convey the narrative and situational irony present in their films, all three directors rely heavily on melodramatic aspects. Key elements of melodrama, which are apparent in each of the films, are conflicts and tensions of a middle-class family, higher emphasis on emotion than action, juxtapositions of various emotions, a break with reality within the story, conflict between generations (grandmother-mother-daughter) and, perhaps most importantly, an obscured social criticism (Mercer and Shingler 10-16). In melodrama, there are often conflicts that must be resolved and it is the female characters that must "attempt to solve these problems and maintain the family (that is, to resolve familial conflict) through the repression of their own desires and other acts of self-sacrifice" (Mercer and Shingler 25). Through this attempt to resolve conflict that revolves around the female characters, melodrama can often be used to present a critique of certain aspects of society. According to Asibong, "theorists such as Thomas Elsaesser (1972) and Laura Mulvey (1987) have proposed that, in the hands of the right director, melodrama can serve as a crucial critique, or even a necessarily limited explosion of repressive social formations" (131). Because of the emotional nature of melodrama, it can often be used to examine and
critique repressive standards within a society and, in particular, standards that are repressive to women, as women are usually both the main focus of the melodramatic storyline and its targeted audience.

In melodramas, or melodramatic situations in films that are not wholly melodramas, irony is found in downplayed emotional situations, emphasized spatial distance, reversal of viewpoints, as well as an expressed support for both sides of an argument at the same time. According to Elsaesser, "highly emotional situations are underplayed to present an ironic discontinuity of feeling or qualitative difference in intensity, usually visualised in terms of spatial distance and separation" ("Tales of Sound and Fury" 66). While in literature, spatial distance and separation must be described in order for the readers to see and interpret them, in theater and in cinema the director can more easily play with spatial distance to reinforce certain interpretations. Directors can simply present the spectator with spatial distance between characters that stands in opposition of the emotional nature of the scene.

Aside from spatial distance, Elsaesser also posits the possibility of irony through setting up and reversing points of view throughout the storyline. He surmises that "this double-take works as an ironic reversal, retrospectively installing another point of view" ("The Cinema of Irony" 3). By overturning arguments already set up in the film through an ironic reversal, the entire premise of the film is thrown into question. Returning again to FO's Potiche, we see an example par excellence of this type of reversal. In the beginning of the film, Mme Pujol is set up as the perfect bourgeois wife and mother, who has no life, no ambition, no desire to move outside of the domain of her home. Once this interpretation of her character is firmly established, the rest of the film seeks to undermine and reverse it, through the situations that Mme Pujol is placed in, which seem to force her out of her traditional role of stay-at-home mother. In the end,
after winning the race for Deputy Mayor, Mme Pujol is clearly seen as a powerful business woman and a powerful maternal figure, not as the submissive wife and mother that she appeared to be in the beginning. This ironic reversal encourages the spectator to question and re-interpret the traditional standards of motherhood that are so clearly dominant in the beginning of the film.

Aside from viewing motherhood through the lens of melodrama and the historical development of the role, it is also necessary to look at motherhood through a feminist perspective. As mentioned earlier, feminists typically see motherhood as a way to oppress women, and as such they see it as a role that needs to be struggled against. One of the earliest feminist to reject the ideal of motherhood was Simone de Beauvoir. In her work *Deuxième Sexe*, and in her personal rejection of the role of mother, she set the stage for later women desiring to reject the idea of a woman existing solely as a mother. One such feminist is Luce Irigaray, who has published extensively on the topic of motherhood. In her 1981 conference presentation on the role of the mother in the family, entitled *Le corps-à-corps avec la mère*, she asks the audience: "qu'en est-il du rapport imaginaire et symbolique à la mère, la femme-mère; qu'en est-il de cette femme en dehors de son rôle social et matériel de reproductrice d'enfants, de nourrice, de reproductrice de force de travail?" (14). It is through the role of mother that women have traditionally been marginalized and assigned a very narrow role in society. Irigaray explores how women can adapt the role that they have been forced into by society, in order to embrace their status as, both, a woman and a mother. It is not necessary to relinquish one in order to achieve the other. Irigaray states,

> je crois qu'il importe que nous refusions de nous soumettre à une fonction *abstrait* de reproduction et à un rôle déssubjectivé: le rôle social maternel déssubjectivé, commandé par un certain ordre, soumis à la division du travail-
producteur/reproductrice — qui nous enferme dans une simple fonction….Nous n'avons pas à renoncer à être des femmes pour être des mères. (27)

Being a mother does not mean that a woman must submit to a certain set of abstract ideals and standards that are forced on her by her society. She does not have to be either a mother or a woman, she can be both at the same time. Again, Mme Pujol, in *Potiche*, presents us with one example of a woman who refuses to be limited by her role as mother. She instead uses that role to her advantage in the business world. An additional example of a mother who refuses to be narrowly defined can be found in NL's 2007 film *Faut que ça danse*, although the character's refusal is the complete opposite of Mme Pujol's. Instead of using her maternal status to advance her career, Geneviève Bellinsky rejects the role entirely by regressing to a childlike state where she is entirely dependent on her husband, daughter and a live-in caretaker, M. Mootoosamy, for all her needs, whether monetary, emotional or physical.

Irigaray continues with her argument when she describes the multiple roles of women beyond bringing children into the world. She states that "nous mettons au monde autre chose que des enfants, nous procréons et créons autre chose que des enfants: de l'amour, du désir, du langage, de l'art, du social, du politique, du religieux, etc." (28). This echoes the idea that Mulvey discusses in her essay on psychoanalysis, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," of the representation of women who are seen as only bearers of meaning and not makers of it. Irigaray argues that by their very nature, women are creators of meaning, as their lives and their influence extend beyond the propagation of the human race through the production of children. A woman's influence reaches every aspect of the society in which she lives. She essentially influences everything she touches, and thus, silencing her in the narrow role of mother is impossible. The role of woman as creator can be seen in various films chosen for this project, including *Actrices*,

where the main protagonist is an actress and literally brings to life the character of the play she is performing. In *Il est plus facile pour un chameau*, Frederica not only expresses herself through ballet, but she is also a playwright. She therefore creates her identity through both dance and theatre. The youngest daughter in *8 femmes*, who has not yet achieved the valued role of mother, sets up an elaborate murder mystery for her family, none of them knowing that it isn't real. Each of these women acts as creators beyond merely creating children, however they are not entirely successful in their creation. In *8 femmes*, the result of the daughter's game is that her father commits suicide. In *Il est plus facile pour un chameau*, Frederica's play is rejected, and in *Actrices*, the main character is haunted by the image that she has brought to life. They have found a way for their voices to be heard, but once again irony is used to subvert typical expectations, even of their success in creating other than children.

According to Irigaray, women deserve the right to be more than silent images of motherhood. She insists that women, in the role of mother, must be given the right "au plaisir, à la jouissance, à la passion. Lui donner droits aux paroles, et pourquoi pas parfois aux cris, à la colère" (*Le corps à corps avec la mère* 28). Mothers deserve the right to be heard and seen. Irigaray insists that women should not confined to a limited definition of motherhood. By accepting the role of mother, they need not relinquish any part of their emotional lives as women. This project will analyze each of these aspects of motherhood, from the silent role of bearer of meaning to the emotional struggle of a dual identity of mother, as well as how each aspect is ironically represented within the films. By exposing the standards and narrow interpretations of the role of mother, that role can be opened up to the possibility of being transformed into something new.
Outline of this project

This project will focus on a variety of uses of irony that expose and denounce socially expected norms of motherhood in eight specific films by FO, NL, and VBT. However, criticizing ideals of motherhood through irony in contemporary French Cinema is not limited to the films chosen for this project. Additional directors and films will be briefly introduced at applicable moments in the text in order to show the breadth and scope of ironic criticism in French cinema. This criticism will be treated through a historical perspective of motherhood, a feminist approach to the notion of motherhood as well as the analysis of melodramatic elements in the diegetic reality of each film. For the purpose of this oeuvre, "diegetic" will be adapted from Bordwell and Thompson’s definition of diegesis in their introduction textbook to film analysis, *Film Art*: "The total world of the story action…the Greek word for 'recounted story'"(80). Within the appropriate chapter, each film will be discussed as a standalone criticism of motherhood, as well as in conjunction with other films that comment on the same aspects of motherhood.

The first chapter will focus on the juxtaposition of mother and non-mother characters on-screen where society's standards of motherhood are scrutinized and critiqued through irony. The primary films to be discussed in this chapter will be *Actrices, Faut que ça danse, Les sentiments, Potiche*, and *8 femmes*. Each of these presents a mother who is continually in competition with a woman who is not a mother, whether she is aware of it or not, such as in *Les sentiments*, by NL, where Carole has no idea that her new neighbor and friend, Édith, is having an affair with her husband. This chapter will present specific instances of irony in each of the films and discuss the specific societal standards of motherhood that these ironies undermine.

The second chapter will focus specifically on the difficulties associated with raising children and being a stay-at-home mom versus a working mom. *Ricky, Potiche, and Actrices* will
be discussed, all three of which showcase the struggle working mothers endure in order to be successful mothers and to have a career. All three also deal with how the society within the cinematic world reacts, sometimes unfavorably, to the mother's struggles, such as in *Ricky*, by FO, which opens with a scene where Katie is begging a social worker for help with raising her children. She is met with a cold shoulder and a refusal. She must manage on her own. Through the presentation of young mothers and a close analysis of the scenes in which they are first introduced, this chapter will look at the ways that the young woman's struggle to become a mother is pitted against societal standards, and how each particular director critiques those standards.

The third chapter will focus on the older mothers presented in the films selected for this study, as they are just as revealing in the uses of irony. How these women are able to adapt to a new role of motherhood through passing the burden of parenthood on to their adult children is the focus of this chapter. It scrutinizes the older mother's influence on her daughter's ability to fulfill the role of mother. The primary films discussed in this chapter will be *Potiche*, *8 femmes*, *Camille redouble*, and *Il est plus facile pour un chameau*, all of which feature an older mother who plays a significant role in her daughter's life and who influences her daughter's decisions regarding motherhood. *Le temps qui reste* will also be discussed as Romain's grandmother and mother play significant roles in his life. What do societal standards indicate as an aging mother's role, and how is that role enacted on-screen? The character is either faithful to those standards, like the grandmother in *8 femmes* who lives with her daughter and plays an active role in her daughter's motherhood. Or like the grandmother in *Le temps qui reste*, she rejects those standards. While she advises her grandson Romain and remains his only confidante in his battle with cancer, she does not play an active role in his life, or in the lives of the other family
members. Through their portrayal of characters that either follow or reject societal standards of motherhood, the three directors are once again able to comment on society's expectations without directly critiquing society.
CHAPTER ONE: Conflictual irony: on-screen portrayal of the competition between non-mothers and mothers

*It is in maternity that woman fulfills her physiological destiny; it is her natural "calling," since her whole organic structure is adapted for the perpetuation of the species.*

(Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe* 456)

**Introduction**

In cinema, women are often presented on-screen in a variety of ways that reflect standards, expectations and situation that exist in society. One of these situations is the competition between women with children and those without. This competition can be for the love of a man, for the dominance in a given situation, or for the supposedly natural role of mother. In the juxtaposition of mother and non-mother characters on-screen, irony, in a variety of forms, is used to scrutinize and criticize society's standards of motherhood. Through visual and situational irony, in particular, contemporary directors are able to use film to explore and analyze the previously idealized notions of motherhood.

François Ozon, Valeria Bruni Tedeschi and Noémie Lvovsky, all three of which have been noted for their familial focus and melodramatic directorial tendencies, use the evolution and stagnation of the competitive relationship between mothers and non-mothers to further comment on the juxtaposition of the women on-screen. The primary films discussed in this chapter will be
Actrices, by VBT, which features a stagnant relationship between Marcelline and her mother, and Potiche, by FO, which features an evolutionary relationship between Mme Pujol and her daughter, Joëlle. This adjacency of the mothers and non-mother can have a variety of effects on the women on-screen, from madness and attempted suicide to camaraderie and intimacy. Each director uses camera angle, shot size and even color while filming and producing, to convey the on-screen competition between the two categories of women and the evolution of it.

Never-ending rivalry

In 2007, VBT released her second film, Actrices. As indicated by the title, the film, on the surface, revolves around the life of a famous actress, Marcelline, and her role in a new stage production of Turgenev's Un mois à la campagne. Outside of work, Marcelline is struggling with the realization that soon her body will no longer be able to conceive and support a baby, a role in life that she desperately wants. This internal emotional struggle between what she desires and cannot have manifests itself in many ways, primarily in her inability to grasp her role as Nathalia Petrovna in the production of Un mois à la campagne, in hallucinations of long dead family members and friends, and even a manifestation of Nathalia Petrovna herself. Throughout the film, Marcelline is continually bombarded with and tortured by her perceived ideal role of a mother that she cannot achieve. It is this role alone that will, in her mind, allow her fulfillment and happiness. Her emotional torture is precipitated, first by her mother and then by the mere presence of Nathalie, the director's assistant. Nathalie appears to have everything that Marcelline wants, a loving husband and a brand new baby. Ironically, Nathalie is willing to give up what Marcelline wants in order to have the freedom and wealth that Marcelline has. Throughout the film, the director, VBT, continually places these two women in scenes of opposition, where their
desires are set in juxtaposition and they are faced with the overwhelming weight of their internal competition with each other.

From the very first scene, before the spectator knows about Marcelline's desire to be a mother, VBT insists on the external pressure placed on Marcelline, to find a man, settle down and start a family. Before Marcelline is seen or named, VBT begins the diegetic storyline with a scene between two older women discussing the men Marcelline could have and should have married. Two of the many things to note in this scene are the camera placement and shot duration. VBT employs a master shot that remains stationary for the duration of the conversation between these two women. VBT places the camera in the room in close enough proximity for the spectator to be able to read the labels on the moving boxes, all containing kitchen supplies with labels such as *vaisselle*, *verre*, and *assiette*. This proximity invites the spectator into the conversation and makes her complicit in the criticism therein. VBT also uses this initial scene to mark marriage as an important goal for Marcelline, even before the spectator knows the character's name. Without realizing it, the spectator has been pointed toward the prevailing concept of marriage as an essential component of a complete life. Without this component, Marcelline's life seems unfulfilled. At this point, motherhood has not yet been indicated as important, until Marcelline pleads with the Virgin Mary, which will be analyzed and discussed further later in this chapter, the spectator only notes marriage as an important goal for Marcelline.

This scene is ironic in that both Marcelline's mother and aunt talk about her as if she had already passed away. They discuss the way that life could have been for her, as if she no longer had the ability to change or continue her life. They talk about the men she could have had and where she could have been now. Even though Marcelline is a middle-aged successful and
famous actress, VBT makes it clear, before introducing her protagonist to the audience, that this character is past all hope and has nothing to live for. This overwhelming struggle for a meaningful life is echoed throughout the rest of the film, by the actions of the protagonists, as well as Marcelline's own insistence on "Je veux vivre!!!" when she feels trapped.

The description of Marcelline that is presented by her mother and aunt, and ironically by Marcelline herself, is echoed by VBT's first portrayal of Marcelline on-screen. Marcelline's life, as the spectator will learn, is unremarkable. The overarching irony in this presentation, which becomes apparent as the storyline progresses, is that Marcelline is unremarkable despite her success as an actress, a profession that by its very nature attracts attention and notice from all. Despite this successful career in the public eye, Marcelline is invisible, blending into the background, which is the most apparent in Marcelline's first on-screen cameo.

![Marcelline walking down the stairs to greet her mother and aunt.](image)

VBT chooses a medium shot on a flight of stairs to present her protagonist to the audience. Marcelline is first seen descending the stairs, as her mother and aunt patiently wait for her at the bottom. Her mother is wearing a pink hat and a black coat. Her aunt is dressed in a leopard print...
coat and her bright red hair is clearly visible. Light coming from a window halfway up the stairs illuminates their faces. As Marcelline slowly walks down the stairs, the camera pans down to follow her, keeping her entire body framed on the left side of the shot. She is dressed entirely in beige, her dress, her boots and even her cardigan. Her hair is blond, almost the same color as her dress and boots. Nothing stands out. No feature is highlighted by color like her aunt's coat and mother's hat. The window illuminating her mother's and aunt's faces is behind her and hence none of her physical features are accentuated by light. Marcelline is entirely unremarkable. Her descent down the stairs is silent, with no one speaking till she reaches the bottom. Her mother's first words are to express her disappointment in Marcelline's isolation from the people around her, and in particular, her isolation from men. Marcelline dons her red coat, which is the first hint of color, and attempts to leave the apartment.

As Marcelline ventures toward the exit, her mother continues insisting that Marcelline find a lover and establish a family. The cinematic choices of VBT echo the entrapment and inability to escape that Marcelline feels. The elevator does not work, preventing a quick escape and forcing Marcelline to take the stairs. However, the stairs are no easier. Two men are carrying a red sofa up the stairs, forcing Marcelline to wedge between the two men, the sofa and the railing in order to flee. Her attempts to escape are in vain as her mother and aunt follow her in what quickly resembles a slapstick comedy as all three women squeeze between the oversized red sofa and the staircase railing. By rendering this pursuit comical, VBT reveals the absurdity of an all-encompassing pursuit for motherhood, which is what the spectator sees develop in Marcelline's life. By beginning Marcelline's pursuit, through Marcelline's mother's physical pursuit, VBT is able to make a satire of the entire situation.
Once the three women are outside, the comical once again turns serious as VBT employs an arc shot to mimic the motion of Marcelline's mother circling around Marcelline. The motion of the camera and mother furthers the impression of disorientation and entrapment that was conveyed at the broken elevator. In the end, Marcelline must literally run away from her mother, her aunt, and the spectator to escape their oppressive criticism. Vanderschelden, in her article on VBT, describes this first encounter in this film between Marcelline and her mother as brutal: "Marcelline's difficulty with being an adult and her unresolved craving for motherhood are brutally exposed by her mother" (246). While this encounter is indeed harsh, it is also sarcastic and comic. VBT uses the sarcasm and brutality to comment on the pressure felt by Marcelline to conform to familial expectations and to become a mother. This pressure is often felt by women without children, even those who have chosen a life with no progeny. This scene serves to set the context as well as the intended interpretation for the rest of Marcelline's actions as she suffers from an overwhelming desire to become a mother herself.

Marcelline's anguish is repeatedly pushed to the forefront by VBT's technical decisions, and in particular, with the character's first on-screen interactions with her long time nemesis, Nathalie. The first time these two women are presented together is when Marcelline shows up to meet the cast of the play that she is starring in. Marcelline, late, excuses herself for being tardy and the director begins to introduce each cast member to Marcelline. As he does this, VBT films each cast member in a shot-reverse shot with Marcelline. Marcelline is the center of attention throughout the introductions, with the camera returning to her after each cast member is presented. There is one woman who is not introduced, Nathalie, as we will discover later. VBT inserts images of Nathalie in and amongst the shot-reverse shot introductions. The spectator learns later that this woman is an old friend of Marcelline and her competitor. However, for the
moment, all that the spectator sees is a woman VBT films from the side with a close-up. She is staring off screen, in the direction of Marcelline, with an undeniably critical gaze that is easy to see because of the proximity of the camera. Despite being excluded from the introductions, Nathalie is not shown as a timid anxious woman who is easily pushed to the periphery, but instead, is allotted much time on camera, which make her intense gaze clear to the spectator and rendering her character important. Her silent introduction to the spectator, coupled with the omission of her introduction to Marcelline, set her in opposition to Marcelline. VBT once again uses colors to separate Marcelline from those around her. She is still dressed in pale colors. Nathalie, however, is dressed in burgundy, with dark hair and makeup, similar to Marcelline's mother and aunt during the first appearance of Marcelline on-screen. This identification between characters based on VBT's choice of costume color contributes to the ironic opposition between Nathalie and Marcelline.

This juxtaposition continues when Nathalie and Marcelline are finally introduced to one another at the soiree after the cast reads through the play together. VBT films Marcelline standing by herself. Fellow cast members are in the background, but it is apparent that Marcelline is separated and not an integrated part of the cast, reflecting her mother's earlier comment. Marcelline even turns her back on the camera, isolating herself from the spectator as well. Even in the next shot sequence, where Marcelline is standing with many other members of the cast, she is still isolated. She is once again the only one wearing light colors. The rest of the cast is dressed in dark grey and black. Marcelline is occupying the center of a large shot, so that the background and additional cast can be seen. There are four people darkly dressed on her right and four on her left. It is at this moment that Marcelline's director corrects his previous oversight of not introducing Marcelline and Nathalie, which can be seen in the image below.
Nathalie and Marcelline at the cast party with the director and a fellow actor.

The sequence shot begins as Marcelline follows the director across the café to where Nathalie is seated. Nathalie is seated away from most of the cast, but she is not alone or isolated like Marcelline. She is seated on a barstool, which gives her the illusion of height on the screen, next to one of the other actors. In the shot pictured above, the introduction has already occurred and at this point the camera changes sides, showing the back of Nathalie's head and Marcelline's face. Marcelline is now partially hidden by the director, and is still blending in with the background, literally now, as the walls are painted the same color as Marcelline's dress. Her facial expression is fixed and her body unmoving, while the small portion of Nathalie's face that can be seen is animated and her body is shifting as she talks, conveying an amusement and ease, while Marcelline conveys just the opposite.

VBT films this "official" introduction between Marcelline and Nathalie with a shot-reverse shot. Nathalie is still animated as she reveals to the director that she and Marcelline are old friends and colleagues. Despite Nathalie's animation and apparent joy at the reunion, shots of Marcelline show her looking down and away, refusing to engage in the conversation. Even mid
conversation, Marcelline is isolated from the world around her as she stands slightly separated from the other members of the cast, and she refuses direct eye contact. She appears timid and withdrawn, as if she were ill at ease with this confrontation. As Nathalie begins to list the roles that the two of them have been in competition for in the past, the camera shows, for the first time, Marcelline looking directly at Nathalie. As Marcelline fixes her eyes on her previous rival, the competition begins again. Nathalie starts citing lines from roles from their past. Marcelline attempts to talk over Nathalie to no avail. Nathalie continues running lines. Marcelline tries to keep up, but she cannot remember all the lines. This scene sets up the ironic relationship between these two women that will continue throughout the film. In spite of Marcelline's success as an actress, and Nathalie's apparent failure to achieve the same success on stage (as she is Marcelline's understudy), their roles in "real life" are reversed. Nathalie becomes the dominant, controlling individual and Marcelline becomes the "understudy."

The things that mark Nathalie as superior are her line of sight, her animation while speaking, and the size of the camera shot. Throughout this first shot-reverse shot conversation, Nathalie is more animated, moving her head while speaking and therefore taking up more space on the screen. Despite the fact that Marcelline is standing while Nathalie is sitting, Nathalie is looking straight ahead while speaking to her, not up as would be indicated based on their relevant positions. Only Nathalie's face can be seen while the camera focuses on her, her body extends below the shot and her hair extends above it, making her take up the entire frame from top to bottom. However, Marcelline is smaller on-screen, even though she is taller than Nathalie. The camera is further away from her. While her body does extend below the shot, like Nathalie's, there is space at the top above Marcelline head, preventing her from taking up the entire space allotted.
These differences give preference to Nathalie, as does the on-screen action. Nathalie is talking over Marcelline, always with her wits about her, while Marcelline is stumbling for the words to say. Nathalie is seemingly comfortable with who she is, while Marcelline is not. This discomfort is only reinforced when it is revealed that Nathalie has just had a baby, the one thing that Marcelline wants more than fame and fortune. Marcelline gives her congratulations and turns from the conversation, wiping a tear away and returning to her isolation in the exact spot where she started at the beginning of the soiree, with her back to the camera. The irony is that as a working woman, with only herself to satisfy, Marcelline is the one that cannot fit in and who has no place, while Nathalie, who has a husband and a daughter that she must consider and support, is more engaged in the lives of those around her. She is involved in the society about her while Marcelline is excluded from it, apparently by choice as it is she who pulls away.

The next scene confirms this isolation as Marcelline goes to the stage where she will perform. Once arrived, she acquaints herself with the sofa that she will be seated upon for the majority of the play within the film. She talks to the sofa, as if she were so alone that she has no one other than the sofa to converse with, and also apparently trying to be at ease with the world around her. However, the end result of her monologue, in the theatre, with no counterpart, is not comfort and ease, but awkwardness and further isolation. Even though she is alone in the theatre with the sofa, she cannot escape from the inherent competition that exists between her and Nathalie, as Nathalie follows her into the theatre and watches from where the "audience" should be.

As evidenced from their first conversation where Nathalie recited lines from old plays they were both in, Nathalie has been repeatedly trying to take Marcelline's place as an actress. If the spectator were in doubt of this apparent desire to swap lives, VBT creates a clear sense of
Nathalie trying to replace Marcelline during a brief scene with Nathalie on the subway by herself. When all the people around her get off the train, Nathalie begins to practice Marcelline's lines. Nathalie is completely in character, from hand gestures to facial expressions, she is portraying Nathalia. Nathalie is so at ease in the portrayal of this character that she even gives the impression that she is a better fit for the role than Marcelline, who repeatedly appears ill at ease in her own life, and much more so when portraying another.

As if it were not enough for Nathalie to practice the role of Nathalia alone on the subway on her way home from work, she also practices her interpretation of Nathalia in the theatre, near the same sofa that Marcelline attempted to converse with at the beginning of the film. When Marcelline walks in on Nathalie practicing the role of Nathalia, Nathalie, instead of being embarrassed at the interruption, offers to test their interpretations of Nathalia, one against the other, to see who has the best portrayal. Even VBT's choice of name for her secondary protagonist suggests that Nathalie is better suited for the role, as Nathalia and Nathalie are nearly interchangeable in and of themselves.
Nathalie and Marcelline pitting their interpretations of the character Nathalia against one another.

As Marcelline arrives on stage to challenge Nathalie, the two women circle each other, as in a bull fight, each waiting for the other to make an aggressive advance. The two women end up standing opposite one another in an establishing shot, where a great deal of the background can be seen. It is clear that they are alone in the theatre. The two women are putting on a show, ironically they are their only audience. While they both perceive their actions to be immensely important and out in the open, this competition exists between the two of them alone. Society at large has no stake in how this bullfight will end. However, in the end, there is no clear victor. The two women stand locked in competition. Nathalie wanting the life she perceives that Marcelline has, and Marcelline secretly desiring what she thinks Nathalie has, a happy family.

Above all other desires, Marcelline wants a child. The desire is so overpowering that it manifests itself, not only in Marcelline’s relationships with other women, but also in intense physical and emotional discomfort. Aside from the rivalry with Nathalie, VBT uses Marcelline’s interactions with the Catholic church to demonstrate Marcelline's unsatisfied and irresistible need
for motherhood. Each scene with the church builds upon and intensifies the previous. On her second visit to the church, Marcelline can hardly stand under the weight of her desire. She grabs the rail in front of the statue of Mary to stabilize herself as she falls to her knees in front of the statue. To begin her prayer, she asks for forgiveness for her previous request, as it was not right. She continues with a new request to be "remplie" or to be filled up. Her current life is empty.

She has nothing to hold onto, nothing meaningful. She sees her life as an empty reflection of the emptiness that she feels within. She once again promises to renounce fame and glory if only Mary will help her have a child. According to Vanderschelden, "Marcelline becomes overwhelmed by doubts about the purpose of her life, is also obsessed by the desire for motherhood, and questions her talent as an actress" (243). In an interview with Baumann and Garbarz, VBT herself describes Marcelline as hoping "désespérément d'être enceinte" (19). Her inability to conceive overshadows every aspect of her life. She is no longer able to function, or feel a connection to her own body, which is portrayed as ridiculous due to exaggeration.

VBT pushes this disconnection to a level of parody in a scene shortly after the gynecologist informs Marcelline that if she wants children, it needs to be sooner rather than later, as she will ere long lose all physical ability to conceive, that in turn affects her professional life. While practicing her role in the play, Marcelline does not know if she is right- or left-handed and stands immobile in front of a door she cannot open because she does not know which hand to use. The absurdity of Marcelline's paralyzing indecision is poignantly critiqued by her director who insists that she complete the menial task of opening the door. However, no matter how many times she approaches the door, she cannot reach out with her hand to open it. She eventually opts for her foot, kicking the door open. In an interview with Rouyer, VBT commented on this connection as "Même les émotions passent par ce travail sensoriel" (32).
VBT chose to have her characters express their emotions through their tactile interaction with the world around them, thus emphasizing the coordination between mind and body.

Marcelline's inability to feel connections to her own body can also be seen when she is trying on a green dress for the play. She announces that her body refuses to accept the green. In a shot-reverse shot sequence with the director within the film, Marcelline attempts to explain how her body is revolting against her, how it is betraying her. It is not her mind that refuses, but her body. Her body will reject the dress even if it were dyed another color because it will always be a green dress. It is after this scene that Marcelline tries to quit the play and run away, but is prevented from doing so by the director. He stands in the doorway and becomes physically violent with her. She repeatedly screams "je veux vivre," I want to live, throughout this entire scene of violence. Her proclamations stand in direct ironic juxtaposition with her actions.

Even though she claims to want to live, implying an engagement with life, and an active participation, her actions portray a retreat from life. She is continually running from instead of engaging in life. This contradictory behavior emerges each time Marcelline is faced with social expectations that do not match her life. In her book on irony, Colebrook emphasizes the use of irony to distinguish "between those statements and actions that we genuinely intend and those that we repeat or mime only to expose their emptiness" (3). In these moments of contradiction within the film, VBT uses irony to expose the emptiness of the standards that Marcelline cannot meet. Instead of a true desire to live according to the wishes of those around her, i.e. the director and her mother, the spectator instead sees Marcelline opposing societal standards and designs.

As the scene continues, despite the overbearing opera music in the background, which, ironically, can stereotypically be associated with comedy instead of violence, the on-screen director can be heard insisting that he can help Marcelline. She cannot escape, just like she could
not escape her mother’s reminders that she is not complete without a husband and child. She is literally and figuratively barricaded in her pre-assigned role. In the ensuing sexual encounter between the director and Marcelline, which may be perceived as rape or consensual, although the confusion of it prevents the spectator from an accurate determination, we do not know if she is crying or laughing.

The director appears to be doing what he claims, helping Marcelline realize her desires. After all, he is seemingly offering her a way to become pregnant and achieve her ultimate desire, even though Marcelline refuses. This encounter with the director is ironic in its ambiguity. Is it a violent attack that should not be condoned, or is it the demonstration of affection that is to be admired? Another ironic edge to this sexual encounter is presented later when the spectator learns that the director is a homosexual, calling into question what actually happens in this failed sexual encounter. VBT’s satiric presentation of this scene is further evidenced in Marcelline's third and final trip to the Catholic church she has been frequenting. While she refuses the director's sexual advances, a man that she knows and with whom she has a history, she goes out of her way to seek a sexual encounter with a priest, whom she has presumably never met before.

Marcelline's on-screen relationship with the church comes to an end in a scene where she asks a priest to make her a mother. VBT films Marcelline running across the courtyard in the rain. She arrives just as the priest is closing the doors of the church. The scene with the priest mirrors her situation of running out of time biologically. He is literally shutting the door, just as figuratively the pathway to motherhood is being obstructed. As she talks to the priest, he stands in the doorway, ready to close the door. He gives her no indication that he has the time or willingness to help her. She begs anyways, for him to make her a mother. Throughout the entire conversation, she is filmed from the side while he is filmed from the front. This creates a sense
of distance between the priest and the audience, placing him out of reach, just like Marcelline's maternal desires. The priest does not answer Marcelline's pleas. He just closes the door that she is unable to penetrate. This is the second time that Marcelline has been faced with a closed door. This is a physical obstacle that represents the barrier between what Marcelline has, fame, and what she wants, a child.

This overwhelming desire to have a child can also be seen in VBT's first film, *Il est plus facile pour un chameau*. Frederica, the protagonist, goes to the park several times to watch the children at play. She even converses with a stranger and claims that one of the children is her own. She is seated on a bench, far off from the children. VBT films her as if she were outside, looking in and not a part of the scene. In a shot-reverse shot sequence, a stranger comes up to her and begins a conversation about children. While filming the stranger, VBT opted for a clear, crisp background. Both children and parents can be seen in the park. However, while filming Frederica, VBT made the decision to film the background out of focus. This inability to clearly distinguish the objects in the background adds to Frederica's isolation. Frederica runs into the
same stranger several times, and each time she is in the park watching children that are not hers. Even though Frederica is isolated from those around her, and from her coveted role of mother, this stranger from the park becomes her imagined link to motherhood. Through repeated trips to the park, she develops a relationship with this stranger that stands in contrast to the demonstrated isolation. VBT further reinforces this imagined relationship at the same time as she conveys to the spectator Frederica's desire to be a mother in a scene where she imagines that she married the man from the park and, already pregnant, is going to have his child. According to Vanderschelden, "Frederica…has a difficult relationship with her mother and sister, and she desperately wants to be a mother" (243). This daydream, despite taking place entirely in her head, serves as a "real world" outlet for her difficulties.

The daydream is filmed with the same colors and textures as the rest of the film. The row of trees separates the two from the rest of the world. As she is daydreaming, she is cut off from the difficulties and the disappointments of reality. Frederica, like Marcelline, feels that she is running out of time. VBT makes the issue of time pertinent when a friend of Frederica's meets the two in the daydream and Frederica explains that she met the man yesterday, they got married and she will very shortly give birth, condensing the much longer timeline of meeting, falling in love, getting married and enduring a nine-month pregnancy to a matter of days. The result of VBT condensing the timeline is an ironic speeding-up of the process of motherhood because of the utmost urgency of experiences. The achievement of motherhood at the end of the process becomes the most important and most significant part. It also conveys the idealized version of motherhood that is being sought. Nothing about this three day process is grounded in reality. It is an unattainable ideal that is being sought.
Frederica's daydream that she is married to the man from the park and they are expecting a child shortly.

FO’s *Le temps qui reste* also holds an example of this desire to have a child with a stranger. As the main character, Romain, is traveling to visit his grandmother, he meets a middle-aged waitress. In a shot-reverse shot, she explains to him that her husband is sterile and they cannot have children. They both find Romain handsome and hope that he will help them conceive by sleeping with her. Just as Marcelline asked the priest to help her achieve motherhood, this young waitress wants so desperately to have a child that she asks a complete stranger to help her in the intimate task of becoming a mother. Seeking out a stranger allows these women the appearance of a way to motherhood with no strings attached, giving them an imagined sense of agency over their own lives.

FO begins filming the conversation with the waitress looking straight at Romain, talking to him, but as she begins to discuss her situation, the impossibility of motherhood, she looks down, uncertain, embarrassed. She hesitates as she speaks, which conveys uncertainty and discomfort. VBT presents Marcelline with a similar discomfort when she asks the virgin Mary to
bless her with motherhood. Just as Marcelline offers to relinquish her fame and fortune in exchange for having a child, the waitress similarly offers to turn all her savings over to Romain, if he will help her to conceive. It is important to note, among other similarities, that these two women, in similar situations, though in entirely different films, are played by the same actress, Valeria Bruni Tedeschi, adding yet another layer of intertextuality between the two characters.

*The waitress lowering her eyes in hesitation as she asks for Romain's assistance in conceiving a child.*

*Marcelline accidentally blowing out the candle in the church as she asks the Virgin Mary for assistance in becoming a mother.*
Despite Marcelline's proclamations that she is willing to give up her fame and fortune, she makes no indications of her preparedness to do so in the film. She continues to go about her life as if she were fully invested in being an actress, until the last moments of the film, where she escapes it all by jumping off a bridge and swimming away, but there is no way to judge if this is indeed a relinquishment, or an escape from the pressure. It is clear throughout the film that Marcelline is uncomfortable with the pressure placed upon her. She is ill at ease, as portrayed at the cast party discussed earlier in this chapter, and in particular in her propositions to the priest at the Catholic church. In the image above, Marcelline has, for the first time on-screen, entered a Cathedral to pray to the Virgin Mary for assistance in becoming a mother.

It is important to note here the role of the Virgin Mary in the Catholic Church. She is seen as the perfect mother, chosen by God to bear the very role that Marcelline is denied. She is exalted above women, and as a Saint associated with grace is said to provide individuals with hope along their journey. Mary is meant to make divinity accessible. It is through her that worshipers can approach her Son and God the Father. These are the things that Marcelline seeks from her, but finds instead of a warm and understanding mother, a cold unmoving statue from whose presence she is eventually barred. Much like Samuel's mother, Hannah, in the Old Testament, Marcelline pleads and bargains with God to grant her the gift of a child, promising to give up the only thing she has of value, her career and her fortune. In addition to pleading with the Virgin Mary, Marcelline lights a prayer candle. In the Catholic church, lighting a candle in accompaniment to a prayer symbolizes, among many other things, the duration of the prayer (A Catholic Life). Even though the actual prayer has ceased and the individual has left the church building, the candle continues to burn as a symbol and remembrance of that prayer.
The irony found in this scene comes from this meaning, from this enduring light and prayer. Marcelline lights the prayer candle before kneeling to begin her prayer. As she speaks, the flame of the candle flickers and threatens to go out. She must reposition the candle further from her mouth and pay as much attention to the candle as she does to her prayer, whispering softer as to not endanger the flame. Despite her efforts, Marcelline is unable to even finish her prayer before the candle is blown out. Instead of a symbolic representation of the remembrance of her prayer, the candle instead becomes a manifestation of her inability. She is so desperate to be transformed into the mother that society tells her she must become that every other aspect of her life also falls short. She isn't even able to light a candle and pray the way that society prescribes. While Marcelline, at first, seeks a miracle to remedy her inability to conceive, she does later resort to caring for a child that is not her own.

Similarly, FO's *Regarde la mer* also holds an example of a woman so desperate to be a mother that instead of trying to find a man to help her, she steals a child. Tatiana is a vagabond, wondering the world without a home to call her own. Along her journey she befriends a young mother who has been left alone in the country by her husband who valued work over family. It is not till the end of the film, when the husband returns, that the spectator learns the real reason for the apparent friendship. In the middle of the night, Tatiana sneaks into the home, brutally murders the young mother and steals her child. She becomes a mother through violence, as the last scene of the film shows her fully acquiring the role as she sails off on a ship alone with the child.

The relationship between Marcelline and Nathalie is, however, a much less violent and less successful example of an attempt to acquire the coveted position of mother by stealing a baby. Shortly after Marcelline unsuccessfully asks a priest at the Catholic church, where she
blew out the prayer candle, to make her a mother, she finds a child crying backstage. Marcelline looks everywhere for someone to care for the baby, the child's mother or the stage hand to help her find the mother, but she is seemingly completely alone in the theatre.

The following scene, where she quietly sits with the child and immediately assumes the role of mother, calls into question the seriousness of her search for the baby's mother. The scene is filmed in a dark room with the lights out, which gives the audience the impression that the action taking place is secret, and is to remain hidden. When Marcelline realizes that the baby is hungry, she attempts to offer it her breast in order to nurse. The spectator already knows that Marcelline's body has failed to produce a child, and yet Marcelline expects to be able to nurse. She fully intends to feed the infant in the most natural way possible, however, it is impossible for her to do so. The underlying irony here is Marcelline's faithful dependence on a body that physiologically cannot perform the breastfeeding.

VBT uses the presence of this irony to critique through paradox what feminists have been criticizing for generations, defining women through sexual reproduction. According to Hird and Abshoff, in their article on the perceived inherent contradiction that exists when women do not have children, "The symbolic configuration of women as mothers extends beyond the familial boundary to support an ideology of gender that specifies women's 'nature' as sexually reproductive" (347). If Marcelline's existence as a woman is only confirmed through becoming a mother, something that is impossible for her to do, then how can she confirm her own identity? How can she exist? However, instead of confirming this definition through sexual reproduction, VBT films Marcelline in such a way as to question this definition and show the pressure Marcelline feels at its mere existence.
In the character of Marcelline, VBT presents the spectator with someone who is unable to be aligned with cultural expectations for her. According to schema theory of learning, as discussed by Jean Piaget, learners use categories to make sense of their environment, such as lumping both cats and dogs into the schema of animals, or in the case of Marcelline, placing her into the schema of woman as defined by sexual reproduction. Each schema is defined by a set of characteristics. When the learner is presented with knowledge that does not readily fit into a pre-existing schema, a new schema must be created, potentially re-categorizing all knowledge for the individual. By presenting the spectator with a woman who does not fit into the culturally expected schema of mother, VBT challenges the entire categorization, forcing the spectator, and the culture within which said spectator lives, to redefine and recreate the schema of womanhood.

This is not the only instance where VBT challenges preconceived notions of womanhood, or motherhood, western society sees caring for infants as a mother's prerogative. It is often her sole occupation. Her body is specifically designed to create, grow and care for an infant, with breastfeeding being not only the most natural form of sustenance, but also the most beneficial for an infant. Through Marcelline's attempts to nurse a child that is not her own, VBT criticizes another natural aspect of motherhood.
Marcelline attempting to breastfeed an infant that she found crying.

VBT films Marcelline's attempt to breastfeed in a dimly lit, isolated room. This choice of location mirrors the inner struggle of Marcelline. She is attempting to hide her desire to be a mother from the people in her life, just as she enters a dark quiet room to breastfeed a child that is not hers. Ironically, this setting also serves as the visualization of a womb. It is dark, warm, comfortable, and above all, safe. Marcelline and the infant enter this room to hide from those around them, and are successful for a time. However, Nathalie, the mother, comes looking for her baby, interrupting the supposedly natural act of breastfeeding and forcibly removing her infant from the hands of Marcelline. This interruption by the infant's mother is ironic on many levels. It was the mother, Nathalie, who left the child alone, scared and crying, in the first place. She stepped, however briefly, away from her role as mother. It is also Nathalie that overreacts to seeing her child in the arms of another and runs away announcing to the world that Marcelline is insane. Marcelline, on the other hand, is humiliated and embarrassed, though she was merely acting upon what, supposedly, is the instinct of every woman and mother, to nurture and comfort
a child. In essence, she was becoming the mother society insisted she become. This scene, of Marcelline literally, even if unsuccessfully, taking Nathalie's place, if even for a moment, further reinforces the juxtaposition and tension between the two actresses that has existed from the beginning.

In the end, Marcelline flees from the competition, leaving her role open, later in the film, for Nathalie to step in and thus achieve the goals she is longing to accomplish. In what at first appears to be a suicide attempt, Marcelline jumps off a bridge into the water below. However, the film ends with Marcelline swimming away, having clearly, and with intention, survived the jump, the implications being that she is seeking life not death, a reprieve from the demands of the competition she has been engaged in with Nathalie, and from her futile quest to become a mother. The waters of the Seine hold an additional symbolism for Marcelline, through jumping into the water, she is essentially undergoing a transformation through death, burial and resurrection.

Marcelline swimming away after having jumped off the bridge.
Throughout the film, Marcelline has repeatedly sought life outside of the competition with Nathalie, by accepting and embracing her isolation. She breaks the circle of competition, of chasing what the other has, by fleeing from it. VBT uses this ironic contrast, between chasing and fleeing, to critique the status quo of socially expected relationships between women. It is easy to see how unhappy Marcelline is, although Nathalie is just as unhappy. She does not want the child and the husband that she has, even though this is not apparent till much later in the film. The overarching irony is that in the past, these two women have always been up for the same roles and have always gone after the same goal. However, they now stand on opposing sides of motherhood, instead of the stage, still seeking what they perceive the other to possess, happiness.

The irony in this desire is that each woman is so engrossed in her own suffering that she cannot see that the other woman is just as unhappy, resulting in more suffering for each woman. They both see each other as utterly content and are each filled with longing for what the other has. In reality, they are both miserable and chasing an ideal happiness that does not exist. This can be seen as a commentary on the competition for the title of the ideal woman between mothers and non-mothers. Each one perceives the other as lesser, but in reality they are both equally unhappy in the film. VBT shows them this way to further comment on the reality of woman's existence. Women are expected, by the societies they live in, to become mothers. This expectation puts undue pressure to live up to an ideal. Whether they become mothers or not, women cannot find happiness in what society tells them they should be. Mothers harbor anger and resentment toward their children (Rich 24) and the involuntary childless harbor envy toward women who achieve motherhood (Letherby and Williams 723). Mothers and non-mothers are locked in a relationship, continually defining themselves by what the other has that they do not.
Marcelline's apparent suicide attempt at the end of the film is a reflection of her desire to live outside of the pressure placed on her to become a mother. She flees from the play in which she holds the leading role and from her imaginary manifestation of Nathalia Petrovna, who she frequently converses with and treats as a real individual. Nathalia is not the only manifestation that Marcelline interacts with. Films allow for the realistic manifestations of ghosts and fragments of the imagination and VBT uses this to introduce Marcelline's father and past lover, both of which Marcelline blames for her current unmarried state. She is unable to live in the world around her, because she is still influenced by the dead.

Not only does Marcelline know she is having difficulties portraying Nathalia, but Nathalia appears to her in order to tell Marcelline that she is an insufficient representation of love and motherhood. Nathalia does not hold Marcelline responsible for her inability; as a single unattached woman, Marcelline has no feasible way to accurately portray Nathalia. Marcelline does not have what it takes to portray a woman in love because it is a sentiment that she does not know. As Marcelline runs from the play and her perceived competition with Nathalie, Nathalia follows her, insisting that she return and that Marcelline cannot escape. This pursuit mirrors the chase at the beginning when Marcelline ran from her mother and aunt as they insisted on the same thing, that Marcelline was not good enough on her own, without love and a family. From the frantic running, and VBT's filming choices in pursuing Marcelline with the camera, it is apparent that Marcelline is overwhelmed, seeking escape. As she jumps off the bridge, the camera returns to the ghost of Nathalia who walks away, uncertain of where to go now. The camera also returns the spectator to the play, to see that Nathalie, as Marcelline's understudy, has stepped into Marcelline's role as Nathalia. The implication is that life is continuing without Marcelline, as if her absence were unremarkable. Through this unremarked absence, VBT is able
to further criticize society's paradigm of a competition between women who are mothers and women who are not. The competition is arbitrary, as the absence of one competitor cancels out the competition entirely.

However, the film does not end with a suicide, implying that the only escape is death, but a watery death, burial and resurrection suggesting new beginnings, and a cleansing of the old self. Marcelline desires life, not death, when she jumps. Despite the many possible positive meanings of the end of the film, VBT intentionally leaves the end open for interpretation. Bourget commented on the ambiguous nature of the end of the film in his review in Positif. He describes the ending as "une note tenue aussi belle qu'ambiguë" (16). The end conveys no real termination of the storyline. The spectator is left to question everything: what happened? what about the play? what about her career? what about her desired motherhood? The spectator is left with more questions than answers, which is becoming increasingly more common in contemporary French cinema.

The one thing that is overwhelmingly clear as Marcelline literally runs from the play, leaving the stage behind her, refusing to heed the pleas of her imagined Nathalia, and never ceasing to run, is that she is fleeing from the pressures that exist in her world. She has finally managed to escape the constraint she has felt to conform to society's implications that women exist only through motherhood. Due to her obsession with motherhood, this escape is paradoxical. Hird and Abshoff claim that society defines childless women as "an oxymoron, defined by something they are not" (348). In a society that defined her through the motherhood she could not attain, Marcelline would not be able to accomplish the realization of her own identity. For her, the only answer is to flee. Through this flight, VBT is able to offer an alternative to existing within a paradigm of woman that equals motherhood.
From competition to camaraderie

Another way to break the supposed competition between mothers and the voluntary childless women is for the two women to pursue a common goal. This method can be seen in FO's 2010 film, Potiche. FO creates a competitive relationship between the protagonist, Mme Pujol, and her husband's secretary and mistress, Mlle Nadège. In the 1970's, which is the setting for this film, options for women were much more limited than they are today. The woman's place was mostly in the home, caring for the children. According to Rich in her groundbreaking Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution, she felt, early in her life, while still confined by the institution of motherhood created by Freudian America, that housecleaning and caring for the children made her a real woman because "this is what women have always done" (26). It was in the home that she felt she belonged and that she was told she belonged; of course things changed soon afterwards.

Outside of the role of wife and mother, women's options in France were as limited in the 1970's. One of the roles women were allowed to play was that of secretary. While all women, stereotypically and presumably, seek motherhood, the stereotypical secretary existed outside of that dynamic. She was a young unattached beautiful woman who without hesitation received and responded to all sexual advances from her boss. She was the alter ego to all mothers, and much resentment and envy was harbored between the two. Thus women's roles were limited to being defined through their relationship to a man: they could be wife, or mistress.

What FO presents the spectator with at the beginning of Potiche is this stereotypical struggle between women. Mme Pujol is limited to the realm of her home and Mlle Nadège, as the secretary, exists only as the mistress. Instead of maintaining this relationship throughout the film, FO leads the women through many transformations and transitions within their relationship,
from a dynamic that depends on their relationship to M. Pujol, to one where M. Pujol is entirely excluded. In the beginning, both women occupy the parallel roles as caretakers to M. Pujol, with their actions resembling those of a mother. The relationship between the two women progresses from one of feigned equality, as presented by FO, to one of inferiority (or childlike association) and eventually evolving into one of respect and admiration, as will be illustrated shortly.

Unlike in *Actrices* and *Faut que ça danse*, where VBT and NL, respectively, do not allow their protagonists to ignore, avoid or overlook the competition that they are in, FO creates a situation between Mme Pujol and Mlle Nadège, in which Mme Pujol is able to ignore her competition with her husband's secretary, and even negate it. Mme Pujol continues with her life and Mlle Nadège is pulled along until their relationship evolves to a point where Mlle Nadège looks at Mme Pujol with admiration and a desire to be an integral part of her success.

During the first interaction between Mme Pujol and Mlle Nadège, FO presents both women as equals. Mme Pujol calls her husband's office to tell him that he forgot his heart medication and Mlle Nadège answers the phone. Before Mme Pujol notices that M. Pujol forgot his medication, FO films her in a medium long shot cleaning the kitchen. This shot is used to show Mme Pujol's surroundings. She is maintaining her domain, tidying up for M. Pujol. When she notices the medication on the counter, she phones the office. FO also films Mlle Nadège in a medium long shot so that the audience can see her surroundings and how she is maintaining her domain as well. She is filing and cleaning up the office. In her realm, she occupies a similar role with similar chores to those of Mme Pujol in the home. Presenting the two women in this parallel manner portrays their equality through dependence on men. Whether in the home or in the office, each woman serves similar purposes in relation to M. Pujol. They are equally taking care of the man in their lives, who places them both into the role of subaltern. Due to their unequal positions
in society, with Mme Pujol, the wife, retaining social privileges over Mlle Nadège, the lover/secretary, the seeming equality between the two women presents a contradictory and feigned equality.

As the phone rings, calling Mlle Nadège away from her organizational task, FO makes use of a split screen shot to show both women at the same time throughout the conversation instead of the more typical shot-reverse shot to film a conversation, bringing the two women into a discourse on equality. This choice allows the audience to see both women at once, allowing them to exist as mirror images on-screen. This reflection is further echoed by what is seen on-screen surrounding the two women. Each woman has the phone on the left, the background is an office/library, right hand up near the waist, and both are in a medium shot where they can only be seen from the waist up.

Left: Mlle Nadège answering the phone when Mme Pujol calls regarding the medicine.
Right: Mme Pujol talking to Mlle Nadège.

Through their first on-screen conversation, FO maintains the feigned equality between them. Unlike in Actrices with Marcelline and Nathalie, the ironic juxtaposition between the two
is not firmly established from the beginning. Instead, the relationship between Mme Pujol and Mlle Nadège can even be interpreted as friendship, as they engage in the mutual pursuit of maintaining M. Pujol's health by insuring that he takes his heart medication. As adultery is socially accepted, and even stereotypical in France, the root of their competition is not found in their mutual pursuit of M. Pujol. In fact, up to this point in *Potiche*, the audience is unaware of the competition between the two women. The revelation, to the audience, of this competition comes after M. Pujol enters his office and makes a sexual gesture toward Mlle Nadège. At this particular moment in this scene, FO films Mlle Nadège standing up on a ladder, with her back and posterior toward the camera. She is clearly on display, making the sexual nature of her relationship with M. Pujol evident, which clearly aligns Mlle Nadège with the expected role of mistress for a secretary in this timeframe.

Once M Pujol enters the scene and engages in a conversation with Mlle Nadège, she proceeds to criticize M. Pujol's other possible sexual exploits, setting her character up as a jealous one. She then criticizes Mme Pujol and her role as a foolish nagging housewife. This verbal criticism demonstrates Mlle Nadège's perceived superiority over Mme Pujol. As Mlle Nadège talks condescendingly about Mme Pujol, the spectator expects their next encounter not to be one of equality but one where Mlle Nadège would clearly be the superior, however, this is not the case, which portrays a valorization of marriage over adultery.

As the story progresses, Nadège, instead of appearing as superior, is presented as inferior to Mme Pujol, and eventually even inferior to Mme Pujol's entire family. There are many ways that FO portrays Mlle Nadège as inferior within her relationship to Mme Pujol. FO's reversal of the initial impression of the dynamic between these two women begins at the same time that a transition can be seen in the character of Mme Pujol, from an insignificant housewife, or a
"potiche," to a powerful matriarch. When Mlle Nadège comes to Mme Pujol's home, to tell her that her husband has been taken hostage by his employees, FO once again films the women in positions of equality. They are the same height in the frame and are filmed standing beside each other as if working together to solve the situation at hand.

While Mme Pujol's children are filmed arguing, Mlle Nadège and Mme Pujol are simply talking about what needs to be done. The two women are filmed side by side in a medium shot, just large enough for both women to occupy the screen. Instead of filming in a shot-reverse shot, FO filmed the conversation of the two women in the same shot, maintaining an apparent unity between the two of them. As Mme Pujol and Mlle Nadège discuss the situation, there is a shot-reverse shot between these two characters and Mme Pujol's children. This separation via shot-reverse shot, between the two groups, creates an affective distance between the two women and the two children. This separation is important for two primary reasons. First, it allows Mme Pujol to clearly occupy the role of a mother. Despite the fact that both her children are adults who are capable of making their own decisions, and both try to tell their mother what to do about the situation with their father, the separation allows Mme Pujol to maintain a distance and a measure of control over her children and the situation.

Secondly, this chasm between Mme Pujol and her children is important because Mlle Nadège is currently occupying the same location of control and power as Mme Pujol, separated by the same chasm from the children. This false sense of equality is reinforced when Mme Pujol begins to lament the fact that M. Pujol frequently forgets to take his heart medication. Mlle Nadège chimes in, accepting shared credit for the wellbeing of M. Pujol, as she is the one who frequently reminds him to take his drops. Mme Pujol willingly shares this responsibility with
Mlle Nadège. Once FO has firmly established the apparent equality of the two women, he shatters it.

The first marked difference in the presentation of Mme Pujol and Mlle Nadège as equals comes when Laurent returns home after his failed attempt to free his father and Mme Pujol takes control of the situation. Mme Pujol decides to go out on her own as she has a plan. FO films all cast members as they simultaneously stand and move; however Mme Pujol is the only one to leave. As she does so, she tells her children to stay and wait for her. Upon her departure, the camera stays stationary on Mme Pujol's children and Mlle Nadège. At first Mlle Nadège is standing off to the left, far enough away from the children, where she is separate from them, but as Mme Pujol exits the view of the camera, Mlle Nadège steps closer to the children. As she moves toward Laurent and Joëlle, she becomes included in the group and all three then sit in unison on the couch. The camera rests on them for a moment, creating an air of equality between the three. Without a word, Mlle Nadège has been demoted from a position equal to that of Mme Pujol to a position equal to that of the children.

*From the left: Mlle Nadège, Laurent and Joëlle sitting on the couch awaiting Mme Pujol’s return.*
She is presented as a child herself because she, like the children, must wait at home to see what Mme Pujol will do. In the image above, there are many dimensions that create a parallel between Mme Nadège and Mme Pujol's children. However, there are also few distinct differences that divide the three. Mlle Nadège is seated at the same level as the other two, and like them, she has her arms crossed in front of her. Even though she is wearing navy blue, which marks her entire outfit as darker than the other two individuals, she also has her legs, below the knee, exposed, which, in color, matches Joëlle's beige skirt. These similarities create an identification that forces Mlle Nadège to exist on a level equal to that of Mme Pujol's children. However, Mlle Nadège's dark hair, and navy blue upper body, set her apart to some degree, which creates a distance between her and Mme Pujol's children. This difference allows her to exist outside of being childlike. With the dark colors, she almost seems to belongs more to the exterior of the house than to the inner circle of the family. By filming this scene in this manner, FO creates an infantile character who is alienated from the family.

This is not the only instance where Mlle Nadège's behavior is presented as childlike. After M. Pujol is released from the hospital, her desire to prepare her special soup for M. Pujol is presented as a childlike desire to help "papa" feel better. This presentation is ironic, in that it so closely aligns with cultural expectations of women without children, who are typically seen as not yet having achieved adulthood. According to a recent case study on non-mothers, and how they are perceived by the society around them, "the word 'childfree' also has associations with the word 'carefree,' which in turn implies a childlike state. Thus, women who have no children are considered to have no responsibilities and thus to be like children themselves" (Letherby and Williams 723). Therefore, not obtaining the supposedly coveted role of motherhood places Mlle
Nadège into the perceived space of someone immature and childlike, even though the spectator is shown no indication that Mlle Nadège desires motherhood.

The result of FO's portrayal of Mlle Nadège as childlike is two-fold, first he is able to elevate the spectator's perception of Mme Pujol, as she is the "adult" in the situation and the one able to accomplish the tasks that need to be done. The second result is a critique through irony. According to a recent study by Hird and Abshoff on the interpretation of women solely as mothers, "What we find is that womanhood is strongly associated with motherhood, to the extent that women who reject motherhood, or who fail to attain it, are viewed as both infantile and un-feminine...motherhood is associated with maturity, implying that childless women have not attained adulthood" (358). It is this notion of implied childhood that FO critiques.

This relegation of the woman without children to the role of a child is also portrayed by FO in 8 femmes when the grandmother, Mamy, begs indulgence for her adult daughter's mischievous behavior, as "Augustine est une vraie gamine" (Mamy). While Mlle Nadège is only presented as childlike, FO takes the irony one step further with Augustine. Not only is she a child, but she is also an old maid, so undesirable that she has been relegated to a life of caring for her mother with no hope of intimate companionship. On a further ironic note, FO has Augustine seek advice and assistance from the maid who is also the mistress to the man of the house. When discussing the unfeminine nature of childless women, Hird and Abshoff state that "This association includes the claim that women contain a natural immutable 'instinct' to procreate, which childless women lack. This 'instinct' supposedly derives from a pre-given, universal female essence" (358). It is this female essence that Augustine lacks in her state as an old spinster, however, this presentation is entirely reversed when she dons Gaby's (her sister's) gown and becomes sexually attractive.
There are many levels of irony created by FO in this situation. Augustine must imitate the mother of the group to become attractive and she becomes attractive in a group of women. There are no men presented at any time during this transformation. She undergoes this process, not to become sexually attractive and enter into a relationship, but to be valued amongst the women of the group. Up until her transformation, Augustine has been dismissed by the group, overlooked and criticized. She is unfriendly and no one wants to be around her. This absence of men is important for FO's criticism of preconceived societal notions of womanhood. It presents the idea that women alone are responsible for changing the way they are viewed by society, and that it is the women in the society that can change the way other women are perceived.

The association of the childfree woman with an adolescent herself is even more noticeable in the characters played by VBT in Il est plus facile pour un chameau and Actrices. In Il est plus facile pour un chameau, after the protagonist Frederica has rekindled a romance with a former lover, during a turbulent moment in her relationship with her fiancé, VBT films Frederica daydreaming about being the daughter of her lover and his wife. The colors in the background are light, with polka dots, light pink walls and white pillows. The entire scene has the appearance of an infant's room.

After a child's nightmare, Frederica climbs into bed with her lover and his wife. She is welcomed into the room and into the bed by her "mother," her lover's current wife. While in her real life Frederica is excluded from her lover's life, outside of their sexual trysts, and by extension excluded from his family, during this daydream, she is invited into their relationship. This is ironic because as his mistress, Frederica does play a role in their relationship, with the possibility to come between them and destroy the relationship, not make the familial unit stronger as she is attempting to do in her daydream. Also, as his mistress, her participation in the
relationship is meant to be a secret, and to be isolated from participation in the family. However, without a family unit and children of her own, Frederica seeks participation and association with motherhood in any way that she can, such as assuming the role of an infant just to play a role in the family.

Frederica’s daydream where she is the child of her former lover and his current wife.

In Actrices, late in the film, VBT also films Marcelline sleeping in bed next to her mother. Her mother tells Marcelline that she is childish and selfish. According to Vanderschelden, "both [Frederica and Marcelline] tend to be infantized [sic!], as if to blur the distinction between adulthood and childhood" (246). Frederica, in Il est plus facile pour un chameau, inadvertently soiled the couch with menstrual blood and her mother accuses her of still being a child because she is not responsible for her own actions. Similar to a mother introducing her adolescent daughter to the responsibilities of adulthood brought on by the commencement of her menstrual cycle, Frederica’s mother must inform Frederica that she has stained her seat with blood. Like Marcelline in Actrices, Frederica does not have control over her reproductive
processes, and it is the mother who steps in, takes control and cleans up after Frederica. Despite Frederica's outstretched hand, demonstrating her willingness to take responsibility and clean the soiled cushion, she is not allowed to do so. This refusal by the mother implies that Frederica, although willing, is incapable of performing the task to her mother's satisfaction.

Frederica's mother cleaning the love seat that Frederica soiled with the commencement of her period.

If we return to Potiche, and Mme Pujol's appearance of superiority over the childlike Nadège, the reader sees that Mme Pujol retains this position as she is able to accomplish the release of her husband, through the assistance of an old political friend, a feat that no other member of the family was able to accomplish. Shortly after his return home, M. Pujol suffers a heart attack and must be rushed to the hospital. It is during his removal from the house that Mlle Nadège is further demoted from the role of equal to Mme Pujol, and simultaneously expelled from the house.

As the ambulance medics leave the house with M. Pujol, Mlle Nadège is the first to appear on-screen. While shooting this walk from the house to the ambulance, FO inserts a brief shot-reverse shot that shows M. Pujol's wife and children still standing on the porch while Mlle
Nadège walks by M. Pujol's side as he is carried out. When Mlle Nadège offers to take Mme Pujol's seat in the ambulance, Mme Pujol grants Mlle Nadège's request to accompany M. Pujol, but Joëlle refuses to allow it, insisting instead that she accompany her father. While the shot remains stationary on Mme Pujol, "Non, Nadège" is heard in the background. When the camera returns to Mlle Nadège, Joëlle walks in between Mlle Nadège and the ambulance, separating M. Pujol and Mlle Nadège. At this point, Joëlle is standing next to the ambulance staff and Mlle Nadège is off to the side. Joëlle turns to face Mlle Nadège from the side of the ambulance as Mlle Nadège steps back, surprised by this refusal. As one of the ambulance staff opens the door to get in the vehicle, the opening door literally pushes Mlle Nadège even further away from the ambulance and M. Pujol.

Joëlle stepping in between Mlle Nadège and M. Pujol, asserting her right to ride with her father to the hospital.

The camera rests stationary, as first Joëlle, then the ambulance staff, then the actual physical barrier of a door, all work together to exclude Mlle Nadège. FO further emphasizes this rejection when the camera returns to Laurent and Mme Pujol. They discuss Mme Pujol's new
duties as she is taking over her husband's position at the factory, while the camera remains several steps away in the vicinity of Mlle Nadège. Through camera placement, FO is able to accentuate Mlle Nadège's separation from Mme Pujol, and invite the spectator to share the sentiment. As Mme Pujol and Laurent enter the house and close the door, Mlle Nadège enters the shot from the left and walks up to the door. However, ignoring her presence, Laurent and Mme Pujol have already closed the door, barring access to the house and once again literally leaving Mlle Nadège excluded. Within the first half of *Potiche*, Mlle Nadège has transitioned from apparent equal to Mme Pujol, through her relationship with M. Pujol, to equal to Mme Pujol's children, to be finally excluded from the family. Mlle Nadège is not seen again until Mme Pujol has fully assumed the role of *patronne*.

As Mme Pujol's role evolves throughout the story, so does Mlle Nadège's, as well as their relationship to one another. Her primary role in the factory was to cater to M. Pujol, but with his departure, Mlle Nadège loses that identity and that role, which forces her to undergo a transformation as she works for Mme Pujol instead of M. Pujol. Eventually, Mlle Nadège refuses her previous role at M. Pujol's side and instead decides to stand with Mme Pujol. From the point where Mme Pujol takes over her husband's role at the factory, the relationship between her and Mlle Nadège begins to take a more positive turn, which is mirrored by their mutual presentation on-screen.

The next scene where the two women are filmed together comes after Mme Pujol has taken over the factory in her husband's stead. Before reopening the factory, she must negotiate with the strikers. As the secretary, Mlle Nadège takes her place next to Mme Pujol at the negotiating table. The two women sit at the same time, their actions becoming mirrors of one another. The camera films both women from the side as they take their seats, so that their figures
can clearly be seen to parallel one another. As the camera moves to show the women from the front, Mlle Nadège can more clearly be seen to be mimicking Mme Pujol, thus the reflection is intentional. FO films them in the middle of the shot, seated side by side, so that they are the same size on-screen. Each woman holds her hands interlaced in front of her. Mlle Nadège even pulls her sleeves up slightly so that her forearms are showing as well, just like Mme Pujol's. Mlle Nadège is now becoming a mirror image of Mme Pujol, even though a difference in appearance still exists due to their relative positions in society.

This mirroring is ironic in the fact that before, there was previously no way for Mlle Nadège to mirror M. Pujol. She had to find a different way to fulfill her role as secretary, resulting in the affair. However, she is not deprived of her feminine identity if she mirrors Mme Pujol. The underlying irony here is that she becomes even more feminine, and gains respect for her own identity through mirroring another woman. Instead of remaining a woman through challenging Mme Pujol and proving herself superior, as society tells her she must, she attains a more stable identity through aligning herself with another woman. Together, they are more powerful than they are apart and they attain the ability to challenge even more of the social norms of their time. From this point, the two women work together, not just in appearance but in the cinematic reality.
Mlle Nadège mimicking Mme Pujol's posture in front of the men responsible for the strike at the factory.

Mme Pujol is now a working woman, and Mlle Nadège is no longer infantile but an integral part of the business, with a new identity, as both women adapted to meet the demands of their new roles. Mme Pujol depends on Mlle Nadège's presence and assistance. This dependence and mutually working together is reinforced in the subsequent scenes of Mme Pujol and Mlle Nadège together at the factory. The women are walking side by side, discussing and managing all aspects of the company. As a result of this dependence, Mlle Nadège refuses to continue her liaison with M. Pujol when he returns to the factory. She refuses her expected role of mistress: thanks to her new boss, Mlle Nadège is now a new woman. She has her boss's respect. She stands up to M. Pujol, insisting that he leave his wife if he wants things between them to change because she will not be a trophy, a thing. As a result of her changed relationship with Mme Pujol, Mlle Nadège is now in control of her emotions and her other relationships, and therefore, declines the role that she was previously assigned.
This transition continues when Mme Pujol becomes Deputy Mayor and Mlle Nadège is in the crowd claiming Mme Pujol as her patronne. Mme Pujol claims her role as mother as an influencing factor in her ability to win the election. She is the mother par excellence and as such Mlle Nadège aligns herself with her instead of against her. During a brief conversation between Mlle Nadège and another employee, the spectator is told that Mlle Nadège has cut all ties with M. Pujol as her boss, and Mme Pujol is her boss now. In the moment when Mme Pujol is presented as mother par excellence, Mlle Nadège proclaims her unwavering loyalty to her. The two women have transitioned from competition to camaraderie. Nadège no longer looks down on Mme Pujol, as a compensation for desiring the man that was "lawfully" Mme Pujol's, but now looks up to Mme Pujol with respect. The competition and combativeness between them disappears as they work together for a common goal.

Mlle Nadège proclaiming her allegiance to Mme Pujol to another factory worker.

There is not a single point throughout their relationship that FO places Mme Pujol and Mlle Nadège in a direct confrontation with one another. They seem to be friends, and while that façade is quickly destroyed for the spectator, the two women continue to exist within that dynamic and eventually evolve to meet and exceed the false friendship that they began with. In
Les sentiments, NL creates a similar dynamic of two women who are in direct competition for the love of one man, while attempting to maintain a friendship. Unlike the relationship between Mme Pujol and Mlle Nadège, NL's two female protagonists, Édith and Carole, face a moment of direct confrontation, where they must address and react to the competition that they are locked in by their mutual attraction and sexual rapport with Jacques.

The revelation of their competition comes late in the movie. NL films Carole as she goes by herself into the wine cellar to pick out wine for dinner. Édith and Jacques, not knowing that Carole is already in the cellar, descend as well. NL has Jacques comment on the fact that the light in the wine cellar is out, and so the audience expects the cellar to be dark. As the couple begins to enter the wine cellar, the camera switches to Carole. NL has Carole kneeling down on the floor, searching for a bottle and reading wine labels with a match. As the match goes out, Carole is indeed left in the dark. Her presence in the dark is both important and symbolic. Up to this point, she has been in the dark in regards to her husband's relationship with their younger neighbor. Just like the match lit a small area around her, she was only able to see to the boundary of her role as wife and mother. She was unable to see the relationship that her husband had outside of that rapport. Édith, as a non-mother and younger woman, represents the ideal mistress. Even though she is herself married, she frequently takes on the role of child in relation to Jacques. Her claim on Jacques comes from this infantile location, as a woman that Jacques can assume all control over and responsibility for, while Carole's relationship to Jacques stems from the children that she bore him.

The importance of the dark is that the couple is unable to see her as they enter the cellar and embrace. As they kiss, the camera moves from in front of Carole to behind her. The audience can now see Jacques and Édith from Carole's perspective. The camera is on the same level as
Carole, she is kneeling, which puts the audience lower than the couple and looking up at them. Since they entered with a flashlight instead of a match, the entire cellar is illuminated when they walk in. They can clearly be seen. Carole can also be seen in the bottom left of the shot. Her presence reminds the spectator of her exclusion from her own marriage and friendship. As she stands, NL places the camera in front of Carole. From that position, the audience can clearly see Carole's facial expression in a medium close-up, which is used to show reactions and focus on the subject. She drops the bottle she was holding and the noise alerts the couple to her presence. NL turns the camera to face the couple; they are filmed in a medium shot so that their expressions of surprise and dismay can be seen as well. This is where the scene ends, but the ironic overtones extend far beyond this moment.

There is no physical or verbal confrontation between the two women. Instead, Édith waits till the next morning when the children and Jacques have all left for the day and she goes to talk to Carole about what happened. In a scene similar to their first meeting, when they started their acquaintance and even friendship, Carole and Édith sit in the living room. Unlike that first meeting, NL has Carole sit immobile, never looking at Édith as Édith tries to beg for forgiveness. NL has the camera pull away, zooming out till the scene is filmed from outside the window. From this position, the two women appear to be separated by the wood borders of the glass window panes. Each woman is contained within a box, both separated from each other. This stands in direct opposition to the scene of their first meeting and dinner together where NL had the camera inside the room with the two women communicating virtually the entire time. The camera inside the room creates a sense of friendship and companionship, whereas the camera outside of the house creates a distance and a separation, first between the two protagonists and then between the audience and the protagonists.
Conclusion

Through an examination of each of these women, and how each of their situations change, we can see an ironic critique of the role of mother as well as an overall transformation leading to a new interpretation of women, instead of defining them solely based on their existence as mothers. Whether they can become mothers or not, and whether they want to become mothers or not, all women are undeniably defined by their relationship to motherhood. In this chapter I have analyzed women who desired, but were unable to attain motherhood, as well as women who desired an existence outside of motherhood. By using irony to overshadow all maternal assumptions, NL, FO and VBT were able to criticize modern day understanding of what it is to be a woman. "These women reflect a radical departure from hegemonic understandings that to be a woman is inextricably bound to motherhood" (Gillespie133). The protagonists presented in the films of our corpus allow for women to exist outside of motherhood. Despite expectations within the film that each of the women attain and maintain motherhood, they are each able to exist and seek a life outside of that pressure. All of these women are able to pursue a successful career, as writers, actresses, and the like. Through presenting the spectator with successful women, the directors are able to undermine assumptions about what role each woman is "supposed" to play, at the same time that they call attention to the absurdity of the cultural assumptions in relation to the achievement of motherhood.

The pressure placed on a woman to achieve motherhood, from society, as well as friends and family, is overwhelming and impossible to struggle against. "A study of attitudes toward women with varying numbers of children found that childless women were perceived by others to be less happy and their lives were evaluated as less rewarding" (Kelly 165). The answer to this pressure and perceived unhappiness according to the films of our corpus is not to struggle against
it, but to circumvent the dynamic entirely. The only way to fight it is to seek to redefine the perception of women outside of motherhood. Without achieving motherhood, women are typically seen by society and therefore presented by the directors of our corpus as childish, selfish and incomplete, always challenging the nearby mother figure in order to overcome this deficiency. Women are also placed, willingly or not, into a competitive relationship with other women who have achieved the desired role of mothers. Again, as with the pressures of society, there is no way for women to directly combat this competition. In order to overcome the competitive relationship, they must transform the relationship. "Some childless women do identify gendered relations of power and view childlessness as one strategy for achieving an empowered femininity" (Kelly 169). By refusing to buy into preconceived cultural expectations to achieve motherhood, women are able to achieve power in a patriarchal society. They are not expected to remain bound to the home and are therefore able to influence society from the workforce. They are also able to find a new locus of power that future women could capitalize on. In addition to providing examples of successful women outside of motherhood, one of the films, *8 femmes*, also provides for the possibility of women becoming lovers, and achieving power through the elimination of men. However, this course also takes them further away from the "legal" relationships or a possibility of natural motherhood. In this dynamic, motherhood must be achieved through artificial assistance, which is also the dynamic faced by many women who are unable to conceive on their own.

These transformations in the perception of women, in association to their role as mother, takes the cooperation of both the mother figure and the non-mother working together, to achieve feminist goals and the redefinition of women, instead of working against each other in order to prove who is the most feminine. FO, VBT and NL, through their films, call for a forward moving
momentum in the redefinition of women that will be to the mutual benefit of mothers and non-mothers. As evidenced by the women in the films of this chapter, women can then be defined by many other aspects instead of being bound to one single role of mother. They can be successful, prosperous, happy, powerful, and even nurturing and loving without having to subject themselves to the expectations of their family and the patriarchal society in which they live.
CHAPTER TWO: Irony of childhood: on-screen portrayal of young mothers' struggle to cope

For while maternal devotion may be perfectly genuine, this, in fact, is rarely the case.

Maternity is usually a strange mixture of narcissism, altruism, idle daydreaming, sincerity, bad faith, devotion, and cynicism.

(Simone de Beauvoir, Le deuxième sexe 484)

In contemporary French cinema, the family unit frequently plays a central role. Powrie, in his writing on the influence of society on cinema, describes it as an obsession (303). Due to the prominence of the apparition of the family in contemporary cinema, films becomes an ideal venue through which one critiques societal ideals of the roles of each family member. The mother, more often than any other family member, rises to prominence, occupying the role of matriarch; center and head of the family, a position that she assumes since she is the literal creator of the family. This powerful mother matriarch can be seen in contemporary films, such as Un conte de Noël, by Desplechin (2008), Un château en Italie by Bruni Tedeschi (2013), Le passé by Farhadi (2013), and Les garçons et Guillaume, à table! by Gallienne (2013). Each film seems to offer a new role for the matriarch to fill, sometimes with power, sometimes with weakness and fragility.

One maternal role that seems to have remained unchanged, despite feminist efforts to modify public perception of motherhood as a locus of subjection, is that of caretaker. Regardless what movie you pull up a chair to watch, the "ideal" mother/caretaker is always the same. She is
the first to get up and the last to go to bed. She, alone, takes care of the home and the children, being solely responsible for fulfilling each and every need of her entirely dependent children. Akass writes about society at large, "Looking at the acres of newsprint dedicated to mothering, it is clear that, as a society, we view childrearing as one of the most important jobs a woman can do" (137). With such an emphasis placed on the role of childrearing in society, it is easy to see why having children would appear important and significant in cinema as well, and in particular within the films of our corpus that focus on family dynamics.

With the importance dedicated to mothering in contemporary media, it is an association with womanhood that any spectator is assumed to make. She will see the woman on-screen, see the children on-screen and automatically assume that the two are deeply and naturally connected, for that is the media atmosphere that we live in. With this automatic association in mind, a careful spectator may need to see past what she is supposed to see in the films of our corpus and begin to understand the irony behind the assumptions, not only that all women want motherhood, but also that all women are naturally gifted to be mothers and to expertly fulfill every aspect of that role.

Frequently, the mother's daily tasks, whether she is a working mother or not, include getting the children up and prepared for school, cooking breakfast, and insuring that everyone and everything is ready for the day to begin. Caregiver, by general standards (Badinter, Kisner, etc.), is one of the roles that remains exclusively "maternal" and exclusively the duty of the woman of the house. According to Badinter, in Dead End Feminism, "It is true that we have returned to the implicit definition of woman through motherhood" (6). She asserts that despite movements away from defining a woman solely through her status of mother or non-mother at the height of feminist influence, society recently has seen a shift back to previously accepted
paradigms, reenacting typical images of women, ones that were popular when "mother" and "woman" were synonymous. Ironically, these two words are frequently used as interchangeable, because as everyone knows, women are naturally gifted to be mothers.

This assumption is ironic when taken into consideration with the large number of women who reject, or fail, to achieve motherhood. A woman's existence as mother is a choice, despite continuing portrayals of it as a natural state. According to Kinser, in her book on the ever-changing relationship between motherhood and feminism in society, we can "see residual arguments that women's natural roles as mothers are their primary functions and that their energies are properly channeled into their home, even if they also work outside the home or attend school" (Motherhood and Feminism 11). As a society, we may take for granted that these daily tasks are the responsibility of the mother and the mother alone. This assumption is ironic in that it places a great weight on the mother's shoulders, fortunately, as she is a woman, she is presumably naturally gifted to bear it all and to thrive under this weight, or so the myth of the maternal instinct tells us.

In response to this assumption of a naturally gifted caretaker, Kinser wrote that "People often prefer to think that things just are the way they are and that nobody made them this way. So, for example, it's easier for people to think that women just are more nurturing and that men just are more aggressive than it is to think that maybe we create the conditions…" (Motherhood and Feminism 9). Again, Kinser points to the assumption that women are meant to be caretakers and that they are naturally suited for that profession. Whether women work outside the home or not, it is still supposedly their natural role to take sole responsibility for the children. They are, after all, seemingly, the only ones capable of nurturing. As discussed in the previous chapter,
there are many women, a number that has only increased in recent years, that choose to define themselves and their femininity outside of maternity, in roles such as politician and artisan.

The irony in this assumption also extends to the father, unilaterally excluding him from the role of caretaker, however, according to an article recently published in *Time Magazine* on the perceived necessities of a two-income household, "the number of stay-at-home fathers in the past decade has doubled since the 1970s to about 550,000 men, and that figure is expected to grow" (Torabi). Also according to a study by Brigham Young University and Utah State University on the role of the father in child development, a strong relationship between the father and child results in a more stable family unit (Galovan, Holmes, Scramm and Lee 1863-64). Therefore, according to research on the psychological well-being of children as they grow, the father is a necessary component. However, in popular culture, he is not always presented as essential. If fact, in the films of our corpus, the father figure is entirely absent, or entirely inadequate in the role of caregiver. He is merely there as a means to create a baby and fulfill the woman's maternal desires.

This exclusion of the paternal figure leads to the assumption that women, to the absolute exclusion of men, must be perfect caregivers. Elizabeth Badinter commented on this dynamic between men and women in her recent book on motherhood, *Dead End Feminism*. She describes the relationship as: "Men will never willingly abandon the material and sexual privileges their domination of women affords them" (27). As women are forcibly relegated to the role of caregiver, this becomes a subordinate role, which allows men dominance over women. If a man were to join a woman in the ranks of caregiver, it would force him and the woman to appear as equals. Badinter also notes that "from child to women there is but a short step. Both are innocent and powerless victims of aggressive and dominating man" (31). Not only can man not join
woman as caregiver because he would be giving up his superiority, but it would also be going against his supposed natural characteristics, just as not to be a caretaker would be supposedly going against nature for women as well.

Through the lens of irony, FO, NL and VBT are able to question the supposed natural role of the mother and to create a new set of dualistic ideals, allowing the mother to exist both inside and outside of the role of ideal caretaker. The most ironic presentations of motherhood come in the form of role reversal (between the mother and daughter), an exaggerated exclusion of the father from the family (frequently resulting from his death), and the mother to occupying the role of defender (against both imagined and actual mistreatment). Through an ironic interpretation of each of these aspects, FO, NL and VBT call attention to a cornucopia of questions that feminists have been asking for decades about women's existence as mothers and their possible presence outside of this role.

**Mother-daughter role reversal**

Psychologists typically use role reversal as a technique to allow an individual "to encounter different thinking patterns, emotions and behavioral strategies" (Pam), rendering it a positive experience for both parties involved and allowing emotional growth. While this is a relationship building exercise under the supervision of a psychologist, when this reversal routinely happens in everyday situations to parents and children, it is no longer a positive experience but a negative and possibly detrimental experience known as *parentification*, that can further be broken down into *emotional parentification* or *functional parentification* (Irimescu 87). This dynamic between children and parents is important to examine because it is the reverse
of what is typically seen in parent-child relationships and it can have negative ramifications for the child far into adulthood.

This type of role reversal in a family could result in problems in future relationships and emotional instabilities. This negative type of role reversal, where the child must assume responsibility for the needs of the family, either emotional or financial, and in particular the mother, can be seen in NL and FO's ironic presentation of the mother/daughter relationship in *Camille redouble* (NL), *Faut que ça danse* (NL) and *Ricky* (FO). Each mother/daughter dyad presents a dual existence, where not only each individual occupies the role of the other, but they also become one another's double and mirror image.

Mother-daughter role reversal is most clear in the beginning moments of FO's 2009 *Ricky*, which tells the story of a young mother and her daughter and how their lives and relationship are transformed when they are joined by Paco, a co-worker and lover to the mother, with eventually a new baby born out of this relationship. With the addition of Ricky, their lives change in unexpected ways, as he is a unique infant. Shortly after his birth, Ricky sprouts wings, reminiscent of chicken wings in the beginning. These uncommon limbs eventually grow into magnificent wings that allow him to take flight and soar, leaving his mother behind. However, in the beginning, Katie (the mother) and Lisa (the young daughter) lead a mundane, unspectacular life.

Lisa goes to school and Katie goes to work, yet, from the first time that Katie and Lisa are seen together, where Katie is sleeping and Lisa endeavors to wake her, the rather poignant role reversal is clear. FO chooses a medium shot to introduce the audience to the sleeping Katie as she clumsily turns off her alarm and continues to sleep. Lisa also is filmed in a medium shot, however she is not sleeping, but up, awake and moving. The first time she is filmed, she emerges
from a well-lit room at the end of the hall, walks toward the camera and then turns to the right to enter the living room where her mother sleeps. This first interaction between the two sets up the mutually dependent relationship that lasts throughout the film.

As Lisa enters her mother's room, the camera follows her to the window where she opens the curtains before turning to address her mother. By following Lisa to the window with the camera, FO forces the spectator to focus on her gestures. This action of opening the dark room to the light of day places Lisa on the level of superiority in relation to her mother. Lisa is forcing her mother to begin the day. FO has Lisa remind her mother of her obligations and her duties. It is Lisa that insists on her mother getting up and starting the day and the mother who insists that she does not want to work. She does not want to meet her obligations or her responsibilities. Katie works on an assembly line, in a meaningless mundane job.

She does not have a particular set of skills that make her uniquely qualified for the position she holds. She could be replaced by anyone at anytime, hence her reluctance to begin again the repetitive actions of her daily life. FO spends very little time on this very important sequence of morning actions that suggests a routine, to the spectator, something that the daughter does often, maybe even daily. The responsibility in this relationship is reversed, as the younger of the two takes charge and forces the adult to prepare for her day. Throughout the initial presentation of Lisa, she is continually associated with light. As she exits her room and enters the hall, the spectator notices that her room is already well lit, as if she had been up for hours. The spectator will also notice that the first thing Lisa does upon entering her mother's room is to cross the room to the window and open the curtains, letting in the light of day. It is thus Lisa, from her first moments on-screen, that is associated with light, which is typically associated with goodness, purity and morality, all of the associations that the "good mother" holds as well. By
creating a link between Lisa and light, FO is laying the groundwork for later associating her with the good mother. This association also comes in the form of the caretaker tasks that Lisa routinely takes on.

The role reversal between Lisa and Katie is reinforced when Lisa leaves her mother’s room. The camera follows Lisa to the kitchen, where she is seen preparing breakfast for herself and her mother. In the first few seconds of their relationship, as we see it on the screen, Lisa told Katie that it was time to wake up and go to work, and she prepared breakfast for the two. So far Lisa has taken on all the weight of the relationship. The only time we see Katie take on any responsibility in this first sequence of events is when she drives Lisa to school on her motorcycle. However, later in the day, she is unable to retrieve Lisa from school till after dark and she forgets Lisa’s helmet. Ironically, her one action of responsibility shows instead her complete irresponsibility.

Left: Lisa insisting that her mother wake up as it is time to begin getting ready for the day.
Right: Lisa alone in the kitchen preparing breakfast after telling her mother to get up.

The role reversal between Katie and Lisa coupled with Katie’s inability to maintain the safety of her daughter conveys a sense of confusion within the relationship: who is the mother?
Who is the daughter? By placing these scenes of responsibility inversion at the beginning of the movie, FO forces a similar interpretation of the relationship throughout the rest of the film. Katie's role as a mother is continually questioned, as Lisa is seemingly placed in a role superior to that of her mother through her actions to begin the day while her mother remains inactive. This can be seen to an even further extent when Katie leaves Lisa at home alone while she goes out on her first date with Paco. In France, it is generally acceptable to leave a child 10-12 years old alone for a few minutes after school, or for a quick trip to the store. However, Katie's decision to leave Lisa alone for hours on end to go on a date is far outside the socially accepted norm. FO uses this abandonment, early in the story, to further establish Lisa's existence as an adult instead of a child (Léderrey). Lisa interrogates Katie like any responsible parent about what time she will be home, where she is going and who she is going with. Lisa even waits up for Katie to come home, and is surprised when she discovers that her mother brought Paco home.

Shortly, in the movie, but diegetically some months after this intrusion into her home by Paco, Lisa, with reservation, welcomes a younger brother into her home, into her very own room. Without ever showing Katie as pregnant, FO shocks the audience with a new cast member, a baby that Lisa is allowed the responsibility of naming, Ricky. With the introduction of a new baby to care for, Lisa takes on even more maternal obligations. Once Katie forces Paco to leave the family, she takes on more responsibilities as well. Instead of occupying each other's roles, Lisa and Katie now both occupy the role of mother, which allows them to become mirror images of one another. This dual incarnation of mother allows each female figure to occupy both ends of the dichotomy of bad/good mother.

With the introduction of Ricky and the abandonment by Paco, Lisa seems to quickly transition from good mother to untrustworthy mother, the irony being that as a child, she is given
responsibility for another child, and is judged for not being good enough. In the beginning, she essentially acts as mother to her own mother, as we have seen above. It is, seemingly, entirely Lisa's responsibility to take care of the family. After Paco joins the mother-daughter dyad, this is seen to a lesser degree until the birth of Ricky. The infant introduces another character that Lisa must care for. While Katie and Paco quarrel, or are otherwise occupied, it is Lisa's responsibility to feed and comfort Ricky. She is frequently seen, sitting alone with Ricky, as if the two of them were alone in the apartment. FO chooses to film the siblings in this way to convey a sense of isolation from the supposed parental unit of mother and father.

![Lisa giving Ricky a bottle and comforting him while his parents quarrel in the other room.](image)

In his article on the typical mother-daughter relationship, Spitz described the phenomenon of mothers and daughters reflecting one another, as we have seen in Ricky, as "Yet, its fabric importantly suggests that daughter and mother are one and that their experiences both reciprocate and replicate each other" (411). Such mirror imaging of the mother and daughter typically appears later in life when the daughter becomes a mother in her own right. With the role reversal apparent in the relationship between Katie and Lisa, the spectator can glimpse this reflection while Lisa is still a child herself. In this relationship, age makes no difference. Even
though Lisa is not that many years older than Ricky, she appears as a stand-in mother, feeding him, bathing him and soothing him when he is upset. She fulfills every maternal need that Ricky has, however, unlike in the beginning, where she was acting as a mother to Katie, in the relationship with Ricky, Lisa exists as a co-mother.

Katie, before the linear depiction of events begins, is presented in a moment of maternal failure. At the beginning of the film, FO places a flash-forward of a young mother begging a social worker for assistance with her two children; the spectator only understands later that this young abandoned mother is Katie. She has been abandoned by her partner and cannot meet the needs of their children on her own. In a typical filmed conversation, as we have often seen so far, directors use a filming technique known as a shot-reverse shot, where the audience is allowed to see through the eyes of each character and follow emotional responses on both faces as the camera shifts from one person to the other. Instead of filming Katie begging for assistance in a shot-reverse shot, FO used a stationary close up of Katie. The result of the presentation of this scene, a one-sided conversation, is that the spectator is dragged into the story, in essence, taking the role of the social worker in denying Katie support and assistance.

The only eyes through which we perceive Katie are those of the unseen social worker. The only emotions we witness are those in response to our refusal to help. We are complicit in the social worker's condemnation of Katie to failure, which implicates society at large. Society becomes just as responsible for the impossible weight of sole caregiver placed on mother's shoulders and for the inevitable failure that follows. The consequence of this first scene is double-fold. The first effect created by the untraditional filming is the development of a unique identification between the spectator and Katie, and the second, that will be discussed later, is an expectation of failure.
Katie as she begs the social worker for assistance with her two young children, because caring for them has become a burden that she cannot face alone.

The initial spectator's unique identification with Katie is a common component of melodramas, which according to Mercer and Shingler often feature a "protagonist, who tends to be privileged by a high degree of audience identification. In this way, the audience is invited (or, indeed, induced) to sublimate their own fears and anxieties onto the central figure who is, in most cases, also the victim of the drama" (12). FO uses these elements of melodrama to mark the importance of the family structure and to comment on the state of society in a non-intrusive, non-critical way, both of which melodrama is well known for. This scene presents Katie as a victim because she has been abandoned, seemingly through no fault of her own. She does not see how she can work and look after her children. She is only one person and cannot do both simultaneously. She is therefore asking for someone else to step in and assist her, not with money so she can stay with her children, but by taking over her mothering responsibilities, so that she can maintain the role of bread winner, a role typically reserved for the father figure. Unfortunately for Katie, she is denied assistance by the only person that could help her, a representative of the government.
Just as the social worker looked at Katie and told her that she needed no assistance, the spectator, from this moment forward, feels compelled to make the same judgment. However, since the audience is the ultimate recipient of Katie's request, the spectator continues the journey with Katie, personally invested in the outcome, hoping for the best since the spectator was forced, through FO's portrayal of the social worker, to deny Katie assistance in the beginning. This denial of government assistance is not only ironic because of the part the spectator is forced to play, but also because of the unexpected nature of it. The French government mandates many levels of financial assistance for women with children, whether the father is present or not. The spectator's expectation is that Katie will receive the assistance that she requests, but this expectation is left unmet. Katie becomes a reflection of the hopes and fears that the typical spectator holds for her.

The second effect of Katie's situation, which presents us with an example of dramatic irony, is that Katie's denied plea for assistance creates an expectation of catastrophic failure; an expectation that is somehow not met despite Katie's loss of Ricky, when he flies away at the end. This expectation encourages the spectator to overlook lapses in Katie's role as mother, to the extent that Katie has been hailed by critics as an unfaultable example of maternal strength and love. In her review published in the *Jeune cinéma*, Heike Hurst describes Katie as perfection itself despite Katie's own claim to be an unfit mother, the loss of her son through a media stunt and her resulting suicide attempt from devastation. She is incomparable to all other mothers, which render her perfection unrealistic.

En revanche, personne, vraiment personne ne sera aussi parfait que cette mère que le film nous propose. *Ricky* est avant tout le portrait admirable d'une mère exceptionnelle: rien ne la surprend, elle trouve des solutions à tout. Elle fabrique
les vêtements qu'il faut et ne fait jamais de reproches, sauf à elle-même. C'est en cela seul qu'elle est une mère comme toutes les autres mères. (Hurst 124)

Hurst, comprehending the irony implied by FO in Katie's perfection, also notes that Ricky presents itself as a "jeu de piste" (124) with the spectator being responsible for discovering the truth behind each of the ironic presentations.

By allowing Katie to exist solely as an ideal mother, as noted by the critics, FO is able to use situational irony as described by Linda Hutcheon in *Irony's Edge*, "the intentional transmission of both information and evaluative attitude other that what is explicitly presented" (11), in order to present Katie to the audience within the frame of a maternal failure, i.e., her desire to give up her children, and her inaction in her maternal role. Katie represents, instead of a perfect mother, an ironic critique of the ideal mother who as opposed to being a naturally gifted expert in the role, as was discussed in the introduction, develops a double existence. Instead of being, as critics claim, "victorieuse dans l'acceptation, dans sa façon généreuse de s'ouvrir à l'autre, à l'aventure de l'inconnu qui s'offre à elle" (Gombeaud 41), she refuses to accept the trials and tribulations that she faces and instead lives in her apartment isolated from the world. On the one occasion in the film when she takes Ricky out of the house, he flies off and she, her daughter, and security personnel spend the following scenes chasing him around a store. The result of this outing is that the world now knows about Ricky and Katie is pursued and badgered by the media. Ricky must undergo medical examinations and Katie's existence as mother is scrutinized.

The mother figure presented by FO is dualistic on two fronts. She is at once interchangeable with her daughter in the role of caregiver, and she exists in the contradictory domains of failure and tremendous success. Instead of an ideal, Katie portrays the difficulties
associated with caring for a child as a mother, nurturing and financially supporting her children. These difficulties are often overlooked and minimized when the role of mother is treated as instinctual. This is a situation that Beauvoir commented on in her iconic feminist text, *Le deuxième sexe*, when she discussed the idealization of children, and placing them as more important than their mother. Society dictated that the mother was to devote her entire life and being to the children that she bore. About the weight and responsibility of caring for a child as a mother, she wrote: "he is a rich possession, a treasure, but also a charge upon her, a tyrant" (483). Somehow this tiny child has the ability to rule over every aspect of his mother's life. This child becomes all encompassing, seemingly denying her any existence outside of motherhood.

The term tyrant, employed by Beauvoir, clearly describes the relationship that both Katie and Lisa develop in regards to Ricky, as FO portrays it on the screen. Katie is unable to go to work and Lisa is no longer seen attending school during the day. Their entire lives have been engulfed by this new child. As previously mentioned after Ricky's birth and Paco's departure, Katie essentially becomes a shut-in. She exists solely as Ricky's mother, taking care of him, no longer going to work or leaving the house. He has become her whole life and Katie has lost all personal identification.

While it may be typical for a mother to be engulfed by her existence as mother, this is seen to an extreme in Katie's case because of the miraculous and fantastic existence of Ricky's wings. Symbolically, "wings are the expression of the aspiration of the soul towards a higher than human condition, in other words the aspiration to transcend the human condition. Wings are related to the cognitive faculty, imagination, thought, freedom and victory" (Albornoz and Fernández). As a representation of freedom, Ricky's wings in and of themselves are ironic. For Katie, Ricky is the opposite of freedom. He is what binds her to the house and prevents her from
going to work, and prevents Lisa from going to school. On a contrary representation, Ricky also symbolizes transcendence, the ability to change and go beyond current interpretations. By giving Ricky wings, FO was able to comment on the power of creation inherent in becoming a mother, on the miracle of every child, and allow motherhood to become a locus of change.

When considering the difficulties associated with motherhood in Ricky, we must also consider Katie's successes that played a large role in many critics' interpretation of Katie as the "good mother." Her ultimate success is most clear in the last scene of the movie. Shortly after watching her son fly away and escape her care, Katie returns to the lake where she last saw him. Moments before what appears to be an effort to permanently submerging herself in the lake, Katie sees her winged son return to her in what seems to be an effort to say good-bye. This encounter with her son interrupts and prevents Katie's attempted suicide. In an ironic turn of events, Ricky is living and thriving in the wild without his mother. He is doing better on his own than he was under the close supervision of his mother and older sister. She no longer regrets the loss of a child, but is overwhelmed with pride at his accomplishments. Her despair is removed by this encounter with Ricky, and her outlook on life is apparently transformed. She returns home to Paco and Lisa, making amends and instead of dwelling on the loss, begins her life again, as is evidenced by the last images of the film.
Katie as she lays on the couch, proudly displaying her pregnant abdomen after her brief reconciliation with Ricky and then with Paco and Lisa.

In this last scene, Katie is once again pregnant; this time being seen during her period of child gestation. Having survived and further developed as a mother with her last miraculous baby, she is content to be back where she began; awaiting a new tyrant. In his review, Gombeaud describes Katie during the last seconds of the film as: "Katie est heureuse car elle attend tout de cet enfant sans rien attendre de lui. François Ozon filme peut-être le plus grand des bonheurs: sans prévenir, un rayon de soleil passe par la fenêtre et entre dans la maison" (41). As Katie is laying on the couch, she is bathed in sunlight from the window, reversing the dynamic set-up by FO at the beginning, where the daughter, instead of the mother, was associated with light.

It is this final presentation of Katie being pregnant again and finally content that allows and forces the interpretation that so many critics see of Katie as the perfect mother. However, with our comparison of this ideal Katie with the Katie from the beginning of the movie, we see instead that FO presents a new version of a mother that includes failure, self-doubt, loss of a child and loss of self, all while allowing for continued existence within the role of mother. Through Katie, FO gives the spectator a realistic, instead of idealistic maternal figure. While she
is not the picture perfect mother that critics see, FO allows her moments of success, interwoven between her moments of failure. One such moment of success is her ability to create clothing for Ricky. As a mother, it is part of the job description to make sure the child is clothed. Since Ricky is unique from all other children in that he has wings, Katie must find a way to make store bought clothing fit him. With Lisa's assistance, Katie cuts holes for Ricky's wings and fabricates garments that fit him perfectly. The spectator sees Katie bath him, cloth him, defend him and give up her outside life for him. She becomes defined solely through her role of caretaker.

This dualistic maternal image, of failure and strife interspersed with successes, is echoed in NL's 2012 film *Camille redouble*, in which a failed actress, emerging from a twenty-four year failed relationship, is miraculously transported back in time, while intoxicated at a New Year's eve party, to when she was sixteen, where she is given the opportunity to relive her mistakes and confront the tragedy of her mother's death. *Camille redouble* and *Ricky* both exist in the realm of science-fiction and fantasy, where events are to be continually questioned and never taken at face value. The film opens with a middle-aged woman (Camille) laying in a bed. As a dark man approaches and slits her throat, the director calls for more blood, indicating to the spectator that she is watching a *mise en abyme*, a scene in a film, within a film. As Camille leaves the stage, she is offhandedly referred to by the director as mediocre. In the next few scenes, the spectator learns that both her career and marriage are failing. It is with this impression of Camille that the storyline begins, and the spectator meets Camille's daughter, in a mother-daughter role reversal situation similar to the one that FO created between Katie and Lisa in *Ricky*.

Just as Katie was unable to get out of bed and get ready for work without the assistance of Lisa, Camille is unable to prepare to go out for the evening on her own. She depends on her daughter to help her get dressed, to pick out clothes and to prompt her to leave the apartment.
Even though her destination is a party, where she should be able to have fun, Camille is still reluctant to leave. NL uses this situation and this mother-daughter dynamic to portray Camille as a weak, unsuccessful mother who has no authority over her own life, or over that of her daughter. Similarly to the voluntary childless woman discussed in chapter one, she is portrayed as childlike. This childlike association is only reinforced as the film progresses and Camille is sent back in time, to when she was, indeed, an adolescent.

Left: Camille and her daughter as her daughter picks out her clothes for her. Camille is talking about her deceased mother. Right: Camille's daughter dressing her.

As the first scene between Camille and her daughter opens, NL films Camille's daughter pouring her mother's glass of whiskey into the sink and taking away the bottle. Through her actions, she is telling her mother that she has had enough to drink. The bathroom is very cluttered and tight, conveying a sense of confusion. Her daughter disappears through one door only to emerge through another. Camille makes the same round, to where her daughter is, so that her daughter can help her get ready. The daughter selects clothes for her mother to wear to the party, and tells her not to think about the tragedy of her own mother's death. However, as she indicates that Camille should not dwell on the death that happened when Camille was a teenager, the daughter hands Camille a dress that once belonged to Camille's mother, for Camille to wear to the party.
There are many contradictions in the scene. The first contradiction appears in the form of Camille's daughter dressing her mother. Camille is being told not to think about her own mother, while being instructed to dress and therefore to appear and to act like her own mother. According to Laura Mulvey, in her article on melodrama entitled "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama," such contradictions allow the character to face likely defeats and impossible confrontations (54). Camille's difficult confrontation takes the form of her trip to the past where seeing her own mother forces her to face her own failures as a mother and as a daughter, in conjunction with the loss of her mother.

According to Hird and Abshoff, "Some individuals avoid parenthood because of a fear of not living up to the standards set by their own parents, particularly if their parents were exceptional" (354). As the spectators find out early in the plot, Camille believes that her mother was the ideal of maternity. She was calm and caring, with a beautiful and soothing voice. Camille could find no fault with her. Camille accidentally stumbled into motherhood at a young age, and was unable to let her fears of not living up to the example of her own mother prevent her from becoming a mother. Even though Camille did not avoid motherhood like the women in Hird and Abshoff's study, she still exhibits the same fear of parenthood and the same fear of failing in comparison to her own mother.

The spectator sees this fear of not living up to her mother's standard when Camille talks about her mother in the present, when her daughter is helping her prepare for the New Year's Eve party at the beginning of the film. According to Camille, everything that her mother did was perfect. When she woke Camille up for school in the morning, she was gentle yet firm with her. Her mother's voice conveyed peace and calm. These are the things that Camille sees as ideal in her mother, but that she herself does not possess. The image of Camille's mother waking her for
school is one of the first interactions that we see between Camille and her mother. After presenting the spectator with this woman's perfection through Camille's description of her, NL shows the spectator the image of perfect gentleness.

Camille's mother waking her up to go to school after Camille has been transported back in time.

Being transported back in time, Camille is once again able to experience the sweet sound of her mother's voice that she praised and lamented the absence of, earlier in the film. When Camille is transported back in time, her mother offers a different maternal image. She is seen by outside sources, including her own daughter, as a tremendous success, but personally, she sees herself as a failure. This self-perception of failure is as a direct result of her 16-year old daughter, Camille, becoming pregnant. After Camille's announcement, her mother insists that she herself cannot be a good mother. In Camille's imagined trip back in time, her early pregnancy results from her mother's inability to protect her from early sexual initiation into adulthood, at least that is how Camille's mother interprets the situation. She sees herself as successful or deficient based on the achievements and mistakes of her daughter. Through this interdependence, NL directly
comments on the mother-daughter relationship and its tendency to be intertwined. Instead of Camille's role of mother being interchangeable with that of her own mother, like in the case of Katie and Lisa, Camille is an extension of her mother.

The end result for both Camille and her mother is to be simultaneously placed in contrary roles of competence and incompetence. Camille reveals all that her mother did for her, including waking her up and preparing breakfast for her daily. Ironically, the spectator noticed that such care was not one of Katie's accepted duties as a mother in FO's Ricky. This admiration and description has the end result of elevating Camille's mother and equating her with the ideal. Just as Katie and Lisa are mirror images of one another, so closely mirroring each other that they are essentially interchangeable, Camille and her mother become mirrors of one another as well, even though the circumstances and reasons differ between the two mother-daughter dyads. Camille's reflection of her mother is more concrete as she parrots her own mother's words to her daughter, twenty-four years after her mother's death, and she even accepts to dress just like her mother, wearing her mother's outfit to the New Year's Eve party.

In Camille redouble, Camille's self-perceived failure at being a mother is evident, not only through her limited interactions with her daughter, which are limited to a few minutes on-screen, where the daughter insists on dressing Camille for the New Year's Eve party, but also in another scene during her return in time with her high school professor where she reveals to him her dilemma of time travel and discusses the importance of motherhood to her personally. During her trip to the past, Camille, still thinking as an adult woman, is able to rediscover the importance of her own motherhood, and how much being a mother means to her. She confesses to her professor that she is afraid of correcting too many mistakes and changing her past in such a way she would lose her only opportunity at motherhood. However, NL creates a contradiction
in Camille's behavior, when the latter returns to the present and there is no indication in the plot that motherhood is important to her. NL entirely disregards Camille’s existence as a mother when she films Camille in the diegetic present.

During her return to the past, Camille is obsessed with reclaiming her maternity, but her daughter is not seen again after her return to the diegetic present. The confusion is caused by Camille who rushes to verify that the professor she was intimately involved with is still alive, and sets up a meeting with her ex-husband to mend their friendship, but not the marriage. However, she is never seen verifying the continued existence of her daughter when she returns to the present. NL uses the irony inherent in Camille's saying one thing but meaning another to call attention to her character's pseudo-maternal desire. Through Camille's actions, NL is able to criticize the cultural ideal that motherhood is everything. Camille seeks to rediscover her motherhood, but in reality it is her own life that she wishes to pursue. After her voyage back in time, she becomes less dependent on her daughter and begins to stand on her own two feet, even content in her divorce, which stands in a complete opposition with what was seen in the beginning of the film.

In *Faut que ça danse*, another film by NL, the mother figure, similar to Camille as we see her in the beginning, depends on those around her to take care of her. However, she takes dependence to a new level, with a complete reliance not just on her daughter, but on a live-in caretaker, and a complete inability to do anything for herself. NL's *Faut que ça danse* tells the story of the Bellinsky family, Geneviève, infantile and dependent, Salomon, seeking a life of his own, and their daughter Sarah, on the verge of becoming a mother. *Faut que ça danse* shows the most extreme case, not just role reversal between the daughter and mother, but between the
mother and all other characters, as the mother conveys a complete failure in personal care, on all levels, including emotional, physical and psychological.

Geneviève presents the spectator with such an extreme example of refusing the role of caretaker that she is rarely even seen moving under her own power, frequently being carried by her estranged husband and live-in caretaker. This dependence, as it is implied later in the movie, is entirely voluntary, with Geneviève losing the ability to use her legs, or rather refusing to use her legs, or to move on her own when her estranged husband or live-in caretaker do anything to displease her. She chooses to become a master-manipulator in order to get more care and support. She also periodically depends on the assistance of her daughter Sarah, like the mothers in Ricky and Camille redouble. However, unlike Lisa in Ricky and Camille's unnamed daughter in Camille redouble, who simply take over for their mothers within the diegetic world, Sarah in Faut que ça danse! takes it one step further. She is the lens through which the spectator is introduced to, and gets to know Geneviève.

Before Geneviève has the chance to speak or present herself to the audience to be interpreted, Sarah takes the initiative and tells us exactly who her mother is. A weak woman without the ability to run her own life, an interpretation that is supposedly supported at every turn throughout the film. However, when examined through the lens of irony, many deeper meanings emerge. Geneviève is portrayed by NL as independent, selfish and entirely in control of her own world. Each aspect of her character is slowly revealed through the course of the film, which allows NL to create two parallel perceptions of Geneviève that preclude each other in order to force the spectator to question all the presentations of motherhood throughout the film.
Geneviève and M. Mootoosamy in the opening scene of Faut que ça danse parade celebrating the Hindu deity Ganesh (the god of wisdom and knowledge).

The first words heard in the film are Sarah's, in a voice-over, as we watch her mother at a Ganesh parade: "La dame blonde en sari, au milieu de la foule. C’est ma mère. Ne me demandez pas ce qu'elle fait à la fête de Ganesh. Ma mère vit avec M. Mootoosamy. Enfin… elle ne vit pas vraiment avec lui. Il s'occupe d'elle" (Sarah, *Faut que ça danse*). This presentation relegates her mother to the realm of invalid despite the contradictory image the spectator sees of Geneviève happily walking in the parade. This verbal description of her mother at a parade, to celebrate the Hindu deity Ganesh, is ironic in that her mother is presented as inept and foolish while the god, in whose celebration she is participating, is known for his association to both wisdom and knowledge. They are polar opposites.

Geneviève's inability is nevertheless reinforced when, with the last words of Sarah's presentation, the scene shifts to a man running water in a bathtub. As Sarah says that M. Mootoosamy takes care of her mother, we are shown her mother's total dependence on her caretaker, although we later learn that such behavior is a charade and that she has the power and control to do whatever pleases her. However, for the moment, M. Mootoosamy runs the water,
tells Geneviève that it is her bath time, helps her stand up to the edge of the tub and even after he leaves the room, he still directs her, informing her that she must undress before getting into the bathtub. Even more than Camille or Katie, Geneviève is treated like a child, being told what to do at every turn. She appears or acts, when it pleases her, as an invalid and as such has seemingly relinquished her function as mother.

M. Mootoosamy instructing Geneviève that it is time for her bath and proceeding to help her stand up and walk to the tub.

Geneviève remains dependent and childlike from beginning to end, with only the spectator's perception of her behavior changing over time. Through witnessing Geneviève's interactions with her family and her caretaker, the spectator learns that Geneviève is not an invalid. While Geneviève is indeed mentally unstable, hence her confinement in a psychiatric hospital at the end of the film, she is able to use her apparent insanity to manipulate those around her. Her physical abilities in particular are frequently cited as dependent on her mood and her desires. Salomon reminds her during one of their outings that once, because she was unhappy with him, she pretended to be lame and called the fire department for assistance. The explanation of this instance allows the spectator to understand that Geneviève's reliance on those around her
is voluntary. She is not forced to be such, but daily makes the decision to have people wait on her hand and foot.

*Geneviève being carried around her home by M. Mootoosamy and her estranged husband, Salomon.*

While Camille and Katie can be compared to one another as they both strive to achieve more and seek transformation through their experiences as mothers, Geneviève stands in stark contrast to them both. She seeks no transformation. As evidenced by her prolonged dependence as well as seeking opportunities to further that reliance, Geneviève is a woman who finds joy in having others serve her. That joy can be seen, in particular, in the scene pictured above, of Geneviève being carried by both her husband, Salomon, and M. Mootoosamy. In an earlier episode, M. Mootoosamy left her side to spend time with his family. When he returned, he found her on the floor feigning the inability to use her legs. When Salomon comes by to help M. Mootoosamy with Geneviève, the two pick her up and act as her legs, taking her wherever in the house she wants to go. At the end of the scene, Geneviève jumps from their arms, successfully landing on her legs, proving that she never lost control of them in the first place.
Through the character of Geneviève, NL creates an image of motherhood that stands in opposition to the socially expected norm. Geneviève does not appear as a woman consumed by her role as mother, but instead she is a mother who refuses to take on the mantle of caregiver. She becomes the tyrant over her child, demanding from her and consuming her life, instead of her daughter being a tyrant over her mother's life. As previously stated, according to Beauvoir, children can typically be perceived as tyrants consuming all the mother's time and energy (483), and this worldview of children continues today, as many women "perceive motherhood in terms of a loss of free time, energy, and ultimately identity" (Gillespie 130). Despite the fact that women are expected by society at large to seek motherhood as the only fulfilling role, many women find motherhood unpleasant and associate it with a cost instead of a gain. The majority of these women avoid motherhood, choosing to remain childless, however, some, like Geneviève, indeed become mothers. It is important to note here the generational difference between Geneviève and the other previously discussed mothers. Since she is from an older generation, the already mentioned stereotypes about mothers finding joy in motherhood still exist. Geneviève exists in opposition to the existing stereotype, which allows her to find joy in life outside of motherhood.

According to a recent study by Kelly, published in the *Women's Studies Quarterly*, women who become mothers later in life, after the establishment of a career, despite previous misgivings, frequently express anger and resentment at women who have chosen a childfree life (165). NL uses Geneviève's situation to present another alternative to anger and resentment against the overwhelming burden of motherhood. Through Geneviève's manipulation, NL is able to convey the possibility of a refusal of the responsibilities of motherhood, creating the model of a woman who does not inherently need to inhabit a caretaker role.
In Geneviève's situation, no one is excluded from the act of caring for her. Everyone around takes on an aspect of caregiver, including M. Mootoosamy, her daughter and her daughter's husband, Salomon, her estranged husband, and even his new mistress (that we see interacting with Geneviève near the end of the film, when Sarah is in the hospital after the birth of her daughter). In Geneviève's world, no individual is excluded from providing for her. Hers is not simply a role reversal, but a role refusal. She, similarly to many of the voluntarily childless women, sees motherhood as burdensome. According to a recent study on the increasing trend of choosing a life without children, Gillespie found that for the childfree, "motherhood included demands, hard work, responsibilities, and sacrifices to their well-being that they were not prepared to make" (133). Geneviève is unwilling to put the needs of her daughter before her own needs, therefore refusing the nurturing role that she would have been expected to naturally desire. Through this critique of what society frequently perceives as the natural role of all women, NL is able to undermine the spectator's expectations of the situation, and allow the spectator to consider the new possibility of motherhood.

Paternal exclusion from the family

When mother and daughter are presented as interchangeable caretakers and as sole bearers of responsibilities, there is an inevitable exclusion of the father. As mother and daughter take over all aspects of child care, there is, in most presentations of the relationship, nothing left for the father to do. In his article on the mother-daughter relationship Spitz describes this phenomenon: "in order to focus on the mother-daughter dyad, the myth, as we have seen, relegates its male characters to the periphery, and this is likewise a feature of contemporary novels that treat the mother-daughter theme" (415). This relegation to the periphery is not only
seen in contemporary novels but also in contemporary cinema. Paternal exclusion, on many occasions, has been noted by critics regarding recent films of FO. In his 2002 film *8 femmes*, the father figure occupies the contradictory space of being ever present (the center of discussion) and ever absent (rarely seen). In *Faut que ça danse*, by NL, the father refuses to acknowledge the existence of his daughter when her presence impedes his agenda. In *Actrices*, by VBT and *Potiche* (FO), the father is simply never seen in the role of caretaker. However, FO in *Ricky* takes a different approach and shows the forcible removal of the father from the family, for being an inadequate caregiver.

While most fathers in this study are absent instead of inadequate, Paco, in *Ricky*, is presented as neglectful and insufficient, and even worse, when both Katie and the audience suspect him of physically abusing his son. When Katie and Paco bring their new son home from the hospital, Katie is surprised to see that during her stay in the hospital, Paco has converted Lisa's room into a nursery for Ricky, even though Lisa will still be expected to sleep there. She will now be in his room instead of her own, a transformation she is clearly not pleased with. To Katie, this gesture elevates Paco to the role of caregiver. While Lisa's reaction is shock and wonderment at where she will sleep now, as if she had been replaced by this new infant, Katie does not notice or comment upon the displacement of her daughter. As an extension of Katie, there is no reason for Lisa not to step aside and let the new baby take control of her life as well.

Due to the spectator's identification with Katie, which was established through the meeting with the social worker at the beginning of the film, the spectator follows Katie's lead and interprets Paco's actions as those of a thoughtful caregiver.

Through this scene, and in particular, Katie's surprise and happiness at having a space already prepared for the newest addition, FO creates a high expectation of success for Paco in the
role of father, an expectation that is quickly destroyed when we see Paco's interactions with Ricky. From the very first scene of the family at dinner, FO makes it clear to the audience that Paco, in Katie's eyes, and therefore, in the spectator's perspective, is an inadequate caregiver. As Ricky begins to cry, Paco insists that he can take care of the situation and attempts to give Ricky wine in order to calm him. A very surprised and shocked Katie rushes to Ricky, pushing Paco to the side and taking over the situation. What Ricky needs is nourishment, and the only one able to provide it is Katie, in the form of nursing. This brief interaction conveys to the audience that what Paco has to offer is not what Ricky needs nor wants, as in the offer of wine, which is shown as inappropriate and only serves to increase his crying. According to FO, as we understand it through the character of Katie, what Ricky needs is care from his mother and from his mother alone. This inadequacy in the role of father is further reinforced when Paco and Katie exchange responsibility of caring for Ricky, each supposedly occupying the role of caregiver while the other is at work. As they are a two-income family, the exchange of responsibilities seems inevitable, despite Paco's problematic behavior.

Ironically, through this arrangement, FO shows us what would appear to be another occasion for Paco to succeed in his role as father, but is instead an occasion for failure. Since Paco, as a father, is not a socially acceptable caregiver, he is expected to fail. Paco's neglect becomes most clear on his first day of Ricky duty. As the scene opens, he is stretched out relaxing, apparently enjoying his time off work. FO chooses to portray Paco as neglectful in a scene where he is shown in a medium shot laying on the couch while Ricky can be heard crying in the other room. Paco is completely at ease, seemingly without a care in the world, and Ricky is clearly in distress. There is an obvious opposition between Paco's relaxed state and Ricky's agitated one, despite the mirror images their respective positions in bed seem to imply.
Even when Paco enters the room to soothe Ricky, his only words are to convey that Ricky must wait while his bottle warms up. Paco then abruptly leaves the room not bothered by Ricky’s continued screaming. After giving Ricky his bottle, Paco places him back in the crib, turns on the mobile above the crib and leaves the room. The on-screen time that Paco spends with Ricky is negligible, which stands in direct contrast to his previous apparent attempts to care for Ricky and to spend time with him, such as making a room for Ricky and attempting to feed him, during the family dinner. While the "mothers" are there, he plays the role of the caring father, but during his time alone with Ricky, he is only there to, reluctantly, meet Ricky's basic needs of nourishment. For Ricky, this is a time of no physical or emotional stimulation and no social interaction with his father.

It is at this point that Katie returns home from work, having fetched Lisa on the way. Upon entering the apartment, Katie once again assumes control, pushing Paco to the periphery and questioning his parenting ability. As she is changing Ricky's diaper, she asks if he had fun with daddy and if daddy took good care of him. As Ricky is clearly too young to answer his mother's question, it is meant for the spectator more than Ricky. The spectator saw what happened during the day and knows that Ricky appeared to have been neglected. This negative
response is only emphasized when Katie, to her surprise, discovers multiple bruises on Ricky's back. Katie's ensuing accusations of abuse reinforce what the spectator has observed all along: Paco is a bad father. He is abusive and neglectful. Such an assumption about men is promoted by western society as well. In a recent study on paternal relationships with children whose parents are divorced, Crowley found that "organizations have wrongly, in their view, persuaded judges that women are almost always blameless when there are allegations of violence, leaving fathers to carry the burden of unjustified guilt simply by accident of their sex" (235). For no reason, other than his gender, Paco is assumed to be violent and at fault when injury is expected. Katie sees no option for the bruises other than Paco's failure as a father. Setting Paco up as deficient in this manner allows the spectator not only to understand Paco's abandonment of his son, but to secretly hope for it. Having been lead to believe that Paco has abused his own son, the spectator desires a resolution before Ricky is injured further, with Paco's departure being the best method of ensuring Ricky's safety. It is not until after Paco's departure that Paco's innocence is discovered; he never abused his son. The bruises were a result of Ricky growing wings, a miraculous and unexpected turn of events that serve to prove Paco's innocence to Katie and to the spectator.

But it is too late, the damage has been done and the father has been excluded from the family. It is necessary to take a moment here to comment on the fantasy and spectacle of a child growing wings. The scenario is completely unrealistic, and as such provides FO with a much greater leeway in criticizing contemporary standards of motherhood. Ricky, with his wings, represents a true miracle, a child unlike any other. He presents a unique set of challenges to his mother and sister, but these challenges are not dissimilar to those faced by most women entering motherhood. Ricky must be clothed and fed, and provided with a safe environment. He alienates
his mother from the rest of society to a great extent, but so do most children. By designing Ricky with wings, FO is able to take the caretaker role that all mothers are supposed to assume to an extreme and show the absurdity of total reliance on one individual for care. There is no feasible way for Katie to meet all of Ricky's needs without assistance.

When Paco eventually returns to Katie, his action of contacting local reporters, who Katie has been fleeing, and encouraging Katie to parade Ricky in front of the media, causes the loss of the infant. The prima facie conclusion that FO offers through this series of events is that fathers are inadequate caregivers, but deeper consideration, and comparison with other on-screen father figures, offers a different conclusion about paternal roles. After the loss of Ricky, Katie blames herself, not Paco, as she was the one who let go of the string attaching Ricky to her. Paco also makes the decision to stay with Katie and Lisa to help them cope, and as evidenced by Katie's pregnant abdomen at the end of the film, Paco makes the choice to be a father again. This decision to reclaim fatherhood stands in direct opposition to his portrayal as an uncaring, disengaged father. Because the suspected abuse was a misunderstanding, as was his forced exclusion from the family, FO offers to the spectator, through his terminal portrayal of Paco, the possibility that fathers are misunderstood caretakers, rather than absent uncaring caregivers.

In other films of the corpus, the spectator is not a witness to the departure of the father. The father is simply absent, and this absence is conveyed in such a natural way that the spectator never questions it. Take for instance the situation of Nathalie, in Actrices, from the moment when Nathalie is introduced to the audience, we are made aware that she is married and has a young child, however, no mention is made of her husband. He is introduced late in the story, just before Nathalie proposes to abandon both him and her daughter for a chance to be with the director, who, ironically, is gay. In what appears to be a chance for her husband to exist within
the role of a father, Nathalie packs her bags and leaves her family. In spite of packing her suitcase and walking out on her family, leaving both her husband and her daughter, we do not see her husband caring for the young infant, the only time the baby is shown directly is at the theatre, with its mother, Natalie. When Raymond, similarly to Paco in Ricky, is presented with the opportunity to be a father, the mother steps in, takes over, and denies him entry into the role, despite the fact that it was Nathalie who abandoned the role of caretaker.

While the spectator does not witness Nathalie's refusal to allow Raymond the care of their child after she abandons them, the end result is that Nathalie maintains full responsibility for the child while she is at the theatre. Raymond is never seen in the same scene as their infant, unlike in Paco's case, the spectator does not see Raymond's supposed paternal failure. Despite the fact that FO initially presents Paco as inadequate, as all fathers tend to be interpreted as insufficient, there is a push in contemporary society, which is echoed by the irony present in both of these father-child relationships, toward a modern father who appears as a mirror image of motherhood. About this new father figure, Crowley writes, "In other words, not only does he work full time, but he also is present at his children's birth, goes to school conferences, does their laundry, and prepares their meals. . . . This 'new father' is, in fact, just like any other modern mother" (223). Both Raymond and Paco are presented with the opportunity to be such fathers. This provides a subtle comment on the reason for the absence of the fathers in the caretaker role. Both men are willing, but cannot live up to the social standards imposed on and internalized by the mothers. These men are therefore denied the opportunity to prove themselves or to demonstrate their abilities.

Potiche (FO, 2010) presents two examples of entirely absent father figures, in M. Pujol and in Joëlle's husband. M. Pujol spends his days working at the factory and tells his wife that
the children are hers, implying that she has full ownership in raising the progeny, as it is not his job. Despite the fact that this story is set in the 70's, these familial views of children being the sole responsibility of the mother can still be seen in current studies on familial structures. There continue to be "enormous gaps in paid and unpaid work between the sexes, with women allocating 12.9 hours a week to child care, and men only completing 6.5 hours on this task" (Crowley 223). Fathers continue to spend half as much time caring for children as the mothers do. It is assumed, by western society, that men work outside of the home and women are therefore responsible for what happens in the home. FO uses this paradox to critique the current family dynamic that is still assumed to be natural, with the mother at home and the father at work. M. Pujol goes so far as to refuse to allow his daughter to work at the factory with him. His daughter, Joëlle, is also suffering from the absence of the father of her children. When she first appears at her mother's home, she reveals to her mother that Jean-Charles is away again on business. She asserts that since she is always home alone with her two boys anyway, she sees no reason not to divorce him. Like Nathalie's husband, Raymond, in Actrices, Joëlle's husband is rarely seen in the movie, and is never seen in a fatherly role.

FO's 8 femmes, similarly to Potiche, is set in the past, specifically in the 1950's and portrays the life of a bourgeois family. Powrie and Keith describe the plot of 8 femmes as focusing on the father figure, "but in his absence, as the women try to work out who killed him" (294). Despite the apparent focus on the father, it is the women who drive the storyline. The father has been discovered with a knife in his back and it is up to the women in his life, daughters, wife, servants, and lovers, to set off on a fact-finding mission in order to find the truth about the murder. What they discover in the end is that the father (husband, and lover) was never really dead and that the murder was an elaborate hoax set up by the youngest daughter,
Catherine. Throughout the movie, each character must reveal her last conversation with the supposedly deceased Marcel. The whole story revolves around him and their interactions with him. He is literally the center of the events, this centrality exists even before his supposedly dead body is discovered in his upstairs bedroom. As soon as Suzon arrives home, the conversation revolves around Marcel, his job, his stresses, and whether to wake him for the morning or let him sleep for a while. As 8 femmes is set as a musical, there is even a song about Marcel entitled "papa t'es plus dans le coup" that Gaby, Catherine and Suzon sing together.

Gaby, Catherine and Suzon, as they sing and dance to the song "papa t'es plus dans le coup."

This song is ironic on many levels, as it expresses how "papa" is not with it. He is out of touch, not only with current trends, but with his family as well. As we learn through the progression of the story, this song is entirely accurate, as Marcel, the father, is completely unaware of the secret life that each of the women leads. As the song asserts, Marcel is not involved in the day-to-day life of his family. He is absent, even though he lives in the same home. This absence is reflected throughout the story as well.
If we briefly return to NL and her 2007 *Faut que ça danse*, we see another contradictory father who is ironically both present and absent. Salomon, the father, on the surface, appears to be involved in his daughter's life. He is even in her home when she returns from the doctor with the happy news that she is finally, unexpectedly, pregnant. He responds with congratulations and a short speech about how important children are and what a blessing they are. While he is content to be present in his daughter's life when and where he desires, his involvement must be on his terms. When he no longer desires engagement, his daughter merely ceases to exist. This choice to exclude his daughter is most poignantly conveyed in Salomon's love affair with Violette. Salomon informs Violette on their first date that he is widowed and has no children. Both assertions are false as he is separated from his wife, who is living, and he has one adult daughter, Sarah.

His two worlds collide when Sarah sees her father and Violette walking on the sidewalk. She stops the cab and runs after him. Clutching her pregnant belly as she pursues him, Sarah tries with no success to get her father's attention, but he will not acknowledge her. Even when she catches up to him, he refuses to look at her. The result of NL's directorial decisions in presenting this contradicting relationship between Salomon and his daughter is to leave the audience questioning the validity of Soloman's professed family importance. How important are children if they can be ignored? The spectator is also lead to further questioning the dedication of the father in regards to his own children.
Salomon and his girlfriend Violette walking down the street while Sarah chases after them trying to get her father's attention.

The irony in this scene lies in the contrast between Salomon's words and actions. Despite asserting that children are important, when his daughter reveals that she is expecting a child of her own, he distances himself from her. He leads a double life, which leaves him disconnected from his family. His own personal life is much more important than his child and his forthcoming grandchild. Salomon impersonates an ironic juxtaposition and contradiction between a man involved in his daughter's life and a man who ignores his children. He, like the other fathers presented in this study, is given the opportunity to participate in familial activities, and outside of unwillingly assisting his estranged wife, he refuses to take it.

Each of the fathers presented here portrays inadequacy in the role of paternal caregiver. On many occasions, he is expelled from this role, and sometimes he himself relinquishes the role. He is never presented as an appropriate companion caregiver, or primary caregiver. That is a role exclusively claimed by women. Each of these fathers presents an example of paternal detachment. This absence is conveyed through the limited time allotted to men, or being filmed
only from behind, with their faces never shown. It is through this extreme presentation of absence that the irony and criticism of mother alone as caretaker can be found. Societal pressure tells women that it is their responsibility alone to care for their children. While we have seen several women in our corpus refute this burden, the expectation still exists and fathers, as potential caregivers, must still contend with it. Fathers, as presented in this film corpus, frequently exist outside of the family. From this location, fathers are seemingly unable to fulfill the basic needs of children that might depend on them and as such the responsibility of caretaker is denied them.

Mother, defender of all

Aside from assuming all child rearing responsibilities, to the exclusion of the father, the traditional maternal images, such as are presented by the film corpus, also assume the role of protector. Not only is a mother responsible for meeting all her children's needs, but she must also stand in the gap between them and anything or everything that might cause them harm. The role of protector can be a source of great power to the mother figure, as seen in the character of Mme Pujol, from FO's Potiche, when she embraces the community as her own children. She is ready to protect, which allows her a different type of validation, outside of her existence as a potiche. Ironically, her strength appears when she ceases to follow traditional standards of motherhood, and she agrees to step outside of that role, a phenomenon that will be examined later.

However, the role of protector may also lead to oppression within that position. When looking at Actrices, Ricky and Potiche, many aspects of this function of protector are presented in an ironic manner; embodying the contradictory aspects of power and oppression. Irony serves to criticize traditional dimensions of maternity by rendering mothers both imposing and
powerful, and yet incompetent at the same time, such as in the case of Katie (Ricky) and Camille (Camille redouble), when their daughters must join the role of caretaker. The role of maternal protector becomes all encompassing, as is evident in Katie's self-sacrifice. It is also inescapable, evident in Nathalie's (Actrices) inability to permanently relinquish her role of mother after abandoning her daughter and husband with the proclamation "J'ai pas envie d'être mariée" (Nathalie, Actrices). VBT also chooses to leave ambiguity in the moment of abandonment. While Nathalie is filmed packing her bags and leaving Raymond, without her daughter, she is later seen caring for the baby girl and defending her from Marcelline's suspected abuse. This ambiguity serves to further assist VBT in her criticism of the role of mother, which will be further discussed later. In addition to these two women, Nathalie and Katie, who appear to be confined in and defined by their maternal roles, our film corpus also provides for an example of a woman able to wield motherhood as if it were a weapon. Mme Pujol (Potiche) provides an example of a woman with a unique ability to accomplish her own desires by manipulating her maternal role and by expanding it to encompass the masses.

Our analysis will begin with Katie, our supposedly ideal mother, as identified by some critics. In Katie, we see a woman who is willing to sacrifice her own desires and her own relationships in order to protect her son from alleged abuse and to shield him from the world. She banishes the child's father from their lives to protect Ricky and when she discovers the truth about Ricky's miraculous wings, she becomes, essentially, a shut-in as a protective measure to hide Ricky's condition from the world. Nathalie, from Actrices, faces a parallel situation where she must defend her daughter and snatch her from what she perceives to be abuse by Marcelline. Both women stand as protectors for their young infants, or rather mediators between their children and the world around them.
Considering the on-screen moments when these two women come face to face with suspected abuse, many similarities are present in the way that FO and VBT filmed the two sequences. Each woman is filmed in the middle of the screen, taking up the majority of the space allotted, Katie because she is filmed in a close-up, and Nathalie because she is filmed in a medium shot, with nearly her entire body onscreen, which renders both women imposing. Katie's confrontation, with Paco is filmed in a shot-reverse shot, however, Katie never leaves the screen.

The traditional use of a shot-reverse shot is to move the camera from one individual to the other throughout the conversation so that the audience may take on the persona of the listener, i.e., looking directly at the speaker. However, FO chooses to have Katie remain on the screen both while she is speaking and while Paco is speaking. When the camera shifts to Paco, Katie is still present in lower left corner of the screen. The result of this continued presence is for Katie to assume dominance. She becomes the driving force in the scene, all action revolves around her. Despite the fact that the conflict is based on an error of perception, and Paco is innocent of all charges, the scene is set in such a way as to force the spectator to share Katie's opinion and to focus exclusively on her as if she existed alone in the role of parent.

Left: Katie holding Ricky close as she questions Paco about the bruises on Ricky's back.  
Right: Nathalie holding her daughter close after discovering Marcelline attempting to nurse.

Left: Katie holding Ricky close as she questions Paco about the bruises on Ricky's back.  
Right: Nathalie holding her daughter close after discovering Marcelline attempting to nurse.
In *Actrices*, VBT uses motion to convey the same dominance between Nathalie and Marcelline. As Marcelline is sitting alone in the room with the infant, Nathalie rushes in and snatches her baby from Marcelline's arms. The focus of the scene is immediately shifted to Nathalie. Both Katie and Nathalie become powerful in their maternal roles, a power that they use to seek out the truth about the abuse and to alienate, or denounce the abuser, even though, ironically, their ability to maintain the role of mother is continually questioned. Katie forces Paco to abandon her and their son, and Nathalie leaves the room proclaiming to all who will listen what monstrous act Marcelline has attempted.

Aside from motion and presence in the shot-reverse shot, the posture of both Nathalie and Katie conveys a sense of superiority and imposition as can be seen in the images above. Each woman is presented tightly holding her child to her with the right hand covering the back of the head and the left hand supporting the child's weight. With the addition of the child, each woman becomes even larger on-screen. This imposing nature is only logical, considering the situation. The two women firmly believe that their child is being mistreated and take action to correct the problem and threaten the offender into submission.

These two scenes are not ironic in and of themselves, however, if we take these scenes into account, considering the greater context of each of the films, i.e., what happens before and after, the irony becomes clear. Situational irony takes place when there are discrepancies between the circumstances of one event and the narrative as a whole. If we begin with Nathalie, in this scene, she plays the loving, protective mother who will swoop in and save her daughter at a moment's notice, but how did the infant girl come to be in Marcelline's possession? Marcelline found the baby alone and crying, and seemingly came to its rescue when the mother was
nowhere to be found. Indeed, the spectator does not even know whose baby it is until Nathalie charges in, proclaiming Marcelline's folly.

Nathalie insists that Marcelline had no right and no reason to take her child from the laundry room in the first place, as children just cry sometimes and there was no maternal abandonment. However, when looking at Nathalie's actions just before this scene, the spectator sees a different story, one that indeed involves maternal abandonment. The spectator must simply think back to Nathalie's previous conversation with the director, where she proclaims her love for him and asks for the same in return. She assures him, "Je suis prêts à tout quitter. Je suis prêts à attendre. J'aime votre visage. Je suis prêts à changer ma vie pour un baiser de vous….Je les abandonnerai" (Nathalie, Actrices). In light of this revelation, that she is indeed willing to abandon her daughter as well as her husband, and considering the fact that shortly after this revelation she leaves her husband, the latter supposedly in charge of the baby as she leaves the apartment alone, her ardent defense of her daughter becomes ironic and contrary to her previous assertions.

*Left: Marcelline finds the baby alone, crying, and is unable to find its guardian. Right: Nathalie begs the director to love her back, asserting that she would give up anything and everything for just one kiss.*
In Ricky, two scenes, in particular, show the spectator Katie's desire to abandon and relinquish responsibility for her children. As we saw earlier, the first scene of the film opens with Katie begging for the possibility to allow someone else to care for her children. She claims that she is incapable of performing the task of caregiver. She needs assistance to fulfill her role, and the assistance that she requests is to temporarily forego all obligations for her children and to give them over to the care of the state. The second scene of abandonment comes after Paco returns to the family. He encourages Katie to present Ricky to the media, insisting that they could make money by parading him in front of journalists, which of course could be used to care for Ricky. At Paco's insistence, Katie ties a string to Ricky's ankle, in order to keep him from escaping, takes him outside and allows him to fly or rather, perform for the media personnel gathered to gawk at him.

Katie, staring in amazement at her son in flight, does not realize that she has let go of the string that was keeping Ricky from flying away.

Unfortunately, Katie is so mesmerized by the sight of Ricky flying that she forgets to hold on to the string. She lets him go. At the moment of Katie's realization, FO makes the decision to show Katie and Paco. The spectator does not see the string or Ricky flying away, but
rather a close-up of Paco and Katie so that both of their facial expressions can be seen. Paco is looking with surprise at Katie as it is Paco that realizes that she let go of the string and questions her about it. At this time, she does not recognize that she is no longer holding on to Ricky, but rather is looking up at him in amazement and bewilderment. The beautiful figure of her son has all of her attention. She releases her infant into the wild where he will have to fend for himself. As he flies away, they are able to follow him for a while. They make it to a lake, but cannot follow him further. This lake represents an impenetrable boundary, an un-crossable border between mother and son. The resulting irony is that maternity becomes fragile, easily tarnished and broken.

It is in a particular moment in time, when the role of mother offers both Katie and Nathalie a measure of power, that their ultimate weakness shows through. Nathalie is selfish and Katie is so engulfed by wonderment at her child and his accomplishments that she no longer exists outside of her role of mother. It is all encompassing, so much so that she releases the string that ties her to him. Ironically, her bond is so strong that she forgets that she is not physically attached to her child, as if he were still part of her like he was before birth and before the umbilical cord was cut.

If we turn our attention to Mme Pujol from FO’s Potiche, we see a woman who, contrary to Katie and Nathalie, wholeheartedly embraces and exploits her role as protector on a much larger scale, to such an extent that she is elected to the position of Deputy Mayor, which allows her to completely relinquish her role as a potiche and to claim a new role as mother/protector to the masses. Mme Pujol portrays the inherent power that this role conveys. She tells her audience that they are all her children and she wants to open up an umbrella and shelter them all.
The crowd begins to chant, "Maman, maman." In her article on the role of motherhood in women's lives, Spitz considers one of the driving desires for motherhood as "the wish to possess in perpetuity the power conferred by this role" (Mothers and Daughters 419). The power Spitz is referring to is the capacity to create life, a biological ability that in essence gives women power over life and death. Women are given, symbolically, the same power as a goddess, they can create life and therefore have power over that life. It is this power that Mme Pujol is able to expand when her role of mother encompasses the masses at the end of the film. She is no longer responsible for her two children, but rather for the entire demographic region.

Mme Pujol in Potiche when she greets her adoring crowd after winning the race against the current mayor.

From early in the film, Mme Pujol makes it clear that her role as mother is very important to her. It is more important than her role as wife, and even momentarily gives her authority over her husband. It also serves as her locus of power in managing her husband's factory and in winning the race for Deputy Mayor against M. Babin. Her power in this role of protector is first demonstrated, to a lesser extent, shortly after M. Pujol returns home from being detained and
imprisoned by his employees on strike. M. Pujol has refused to give his approval to the woman
his son is dating. He insists that Mme Pujol force them to break up. Instead, Mme Pujol tells M.
Pujol that when it is a question of the happiness of their son, her husband does not have the right
to make decisions. She alone has that power. She tells him "Écoute Robert, cette fois, il s'agit du
bonheur de notre fils, et ce n'est pas parce que tu es malade que je céderai devant ton
impérialisme. Tu dois comprendre et accepter qu'il est amoureux" (Ozon 74). She refuses to
follow her husband's instructions and interfere in their son's relationship. She defends her
children when their happiness is threatened, much like Katie (Ricky) and Nathalie (Actrices)
stand as protectors for their children. She is a mother, and as a mother, it is her responsibility,
according to current and past societal trends and expectations, to protect her children. As stated
in current online publications aimed at mothers, such as Livestrong, and even well-known
publications such as Time Magazine, one of a mother's primary functions is to serve as a
protector and to be willing to lay her life down for those of her children. Suzon Pujol takes this
same mentality of ultimate protector to the umbrella factory when she takes over for her
husband.

She brings her children into the factory to work with her and creates a family atmosphere,
using her position as a mother to direct the factory as she would her family. She wants to protect
those around her. She wants to be a mother to all, because it is an important role for her. When
her family is in danger, she does not hesitate to make the necessary decisions to save them. She
is the one who saved her husband from his employees and protected the happiness of her son.
She is simply taking the next logical step in occupying the same role for the entire community.
The role of mother automatically gives her a level of power and superiority. In playing this role
of the aggressive and defensive mother, she can be elected as Deputy Mayor.
Conclusion

In this chapter, I have looked at a variety of ways that mothers are presented as caregivers, from fulfilling basic needs to existing as protectors from the cruelties of the world, and also the many ways that the father figures are excluded from all caring and nurturing roles. Through the irony used, the spectator is lead to the interpretation that the ideal mother does not exist, "mother" is rather a role in which failure and success can coexist. The ironic exclusion of the father figure highlights his anticipated role in the family as well as adding an emphasis on the weight of the role of sole parent and protector placed on the mother's shoulders when the father, as expected, distances himself from his family. This is an expectation that is changing, as fathers take on new caretaker roles, and with some men becoming stay-at-home fathers, allowing mothers to work outside of the home. As we saw earlier in "Don't Let Your Husband Be a Stay-At-Home Dad," Torabi reports that the number of stay-at-home fathers has doubled in the last forty years and is expected to continue to grow. All of the men discussed in this chapter fall into the category of fathers that work outside the home, with none presenting the spectator with a viable option as a replacement to maternal care. Despite the trend in society for men to seek more active roles in the lives of their children, it is still a position that is denied them by the mothers. The only legitimate option is for the mother and father to exchange roles entirely, but even then, as was seen in the case of Paco and Ricky, the father is perceived as an inadequate replacement. Until western society decreases the pressure for perfection placed on the caretaker role, neither women, nor men will be able to adequately fulfill it.

Despite the cultural assumption that women are natural caregivers, it is a learned position, with the role of protector frequently being needed to accomplish the task.
Feminists refuted the common assumption of motherhood as something innate to women. They showed that the association of maternity with woman's "nature" conflates biological and social motherhood, and denies that motherhood is work. When motherhood is framed as "nature," social motherhood (that is the care work done by mothers and the rearing of children) appears as women's "natural" responsibility and at the same time as performed out of "natural" love. (Neyer and Bernardi 165)

As highlighted in the citation, as long as motherhood is seen as natural, the struggles of women to attain and maintain motherhood will not be acknowledged. Women are genetically designed to bear children and the inherent assumption in that genetic ability is that motherhood is biologically programmed as well. As they show protagonists, both men and women, that struggle with putting on the mantle of motherhood and living up to expectations of the ideal caretaker, FO, NL and VBT have been able to point out the difficulties associated with motherhood, and further call into question the assumption that it is a natural state with a natural set of talents. By indicating that it is not a natural role, that instead motherhood is a learned talent, each of the directors has been able to open up the role to the possibility of success and failure co-existing.
CHAPTER THREE: Generational ironies: on-screen portrayal of mothers with adult children passing on the burden

_Becoming a mother in her turn in a sense takes the place of her own mother: it means complete emancipation for her._

(Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* 465)

**Introduction**

When studying the mother in any family, there is one liaison that stands out as complicated above the rest, the mother-daughter relationship. Parts of this affiliations have already been discussed in the previous chapter, within the specific context of a young daughter taking over the mothering responsibilities from her mother and becoming, in essence, a double for her mother. As the young daughter grows, this relationship becomes progressively more perplexing and entangled. This chapter will explore many additional facets of the mother-daughter relationship in the films of this corpus. The mother figure in any family holds a wide variety of roles, from caretaker to financial provider, from instructor to counselor, but no matter the age of her children, she always has a role to play in their lives. As her children grow, her role changes, but it never disappears.

One of her never-ending responsibilities to her children is that of conveying her approval in all their endeavors, for her disapproval can carry enough weight to drastically change the daughter’s behavior as is discussed by Miller-Day in her book on intergenerational relationships *Communication among Grandmothers, Mothers, and Adult Daughters: A Qualitative Study of*
Maternal Relationships. There are many moments in a daughter's life when maternal validation is necessary for the successful progression from one stage to the next.

The most pivotal moment is a daughter's own entrance into motherhood. According to Luce Irigaray, in her ground-breaking oeuvre Le temps de la différence, patriarchal society insists on a forced break in the mother-daughter relationship in order for the daughter to attain autonomy and to become a woman in her own right, albeit often subject to her husband. She criticizes the patriarchal mandate of this rupture: “un des carrefours perdus de notre devenir femme se situe dans le brouillage et l'effacement des relations à notre mère et dans l’obligation de nous soumettre aux lois du monde de l’entre-homme" (Le temps 111). To achieve self-fulfillment, daughters are instructed to disassociate with their mothers and other women of the world, which leaves the daughter to negotiate her womanhood on her own, in relation to men and not to other women, who might be able to provide support. According to Irigaray, this separation forces women to be subject to their husband’s authority. This isolates them from other women, relegating them to live solitary lives in their own homes with only their young children for companions, leaving them with no ability to join forces, stand united or provide support for one another.

The only option left for the reunification of women and for the healing of the ruptured mother-daughter relationship is in motherhood. Irigaray describes this possible reunification, “Pour les femmes, plus secrètement, la maternité représente le seul remède contre la déréliction ou la déchéance imposées dans l’amour par les instincts masculins, et aussi un chemin pour renouer avec leur mère et les autres femmes” (Le temps 111). By becoming a mother herself, each daughter is presented with the opportunity to once again, as she was allowed and expected by society during her childhood, to seek out her mother’s companionship.
It is a strange paradox that society demands both a separation of the mother-daughter binome at the same time that it demands that the daughter mirror her mother in becoming a mother. Maternal validation can come in the form of acknowledging and accepting a daughter as equal due to maternity, or be more complicated, as maternal involvement in the daughter's process of becoming pregnant, from participation in her daughter's romantic relationship to figuratively replacing her daughter's lover. Besides the maternal involvement, we must also discuss the women who exist outside of the typically perceived notions of mother, those women who chose not to participate in their daughter's lives, and the resulting effects on the mother-daughter relationship, or lack thereof.

"Maman, je suis enceinte"

The first aspect of the mother-daughter relationship to be explored is maternal approval of entrance into motherhood. Within our film corpus, there are four announcements of maternity to consider. In *Faut que ça danse*, NL provides the spectator with a mother, Geneviève, who refuses to accept or even acknowledge that her daughter is pregnant. NL's most recent film analyzed here, *Camille redouble*, showcases the example of a mother forced to accept her underage daughter as an equal because of her impending motherhood. In FO's 2002 *8 femmes*, the mother, Gaby, acknowledges her daughter's pregnancy but refuses to accept it. In his 2010 *Potiche*, FO emphasizes, through the example of a woman who has already been admitted to the ranks of mother because she has already given birth to two children, the importance of continued maternal support when the daughter once again faces pregnancy. Each of these films shows a different aspect of the complicated mother-daughter relationship, and in particular how that relationship is affected by the daughter's entrance into motherhood. Through irony and
melodramatic aspects, each of the directors is able to satirize the mother-daughter relationship. This use of satire provides a commentary on the development and continual change that happens within the mother-daughter relationship.

**Faut que ça danse**

In NL's *Faut que ça danse*, the protagonist, Sarah, is forced to enter a new stage in her relationship with her mother when she discovers that she herself is carrying a child. When Sarah learns that she is pregnant, the news comes as a surprise to both Sarah and the spectator. Up to this point, NL has completely neglected to present the spectator with Sarah's desire for motherhood. Sarah becomes defensive, refuses to accept the news and accuses the doctor of intentionally misleading her because she had previously told Sarah that pregnancy would never happen. Despite her desire for children, she had trusted the medical professionals and given up all hope of motherhood. NL shows the fortitude of Sarah's disbelief through her interactions with the hospital secretary whom Sarah charges with the task of finding the correct woman and giving her the results because that woman does not know that she is pregnant. This refusal to accept her own pregnancy creates a distance between Sarah and the role of motherhood. If she is unable to accept the existence of her own child, how will she come to an acceptance of motherhood? For Sarah, this is a complicated journey.

She begins by announcing the news, which she does not yet believe, to her partner and her father immediately upon her return home. Through this difficulty in accepting motherhood, NL ironically portrays the role, not as *natural* for all women, but as a role that women must learn to accept and fulfill. One need only look at the myriad of self-help parenting books aimed at mothers, such as *The 5 Love Languages of Children, Screamfree Parenting: The Revolutionary*
Approach to Raising Your Kids by Keeping Your Cool, The Sh!t No One Tells You: A Guide to Surviving Your Baby’s First Year, in order to understand that being a mother is a learned skill, not an inherently natural ability. These publications frequently treat motherhood as a scary life altering endeavor that must be struggled through and survived, despite society-at-large’s insistence that motherhood is a natural source of joy for all women. These self-help books teach us, on the contrary, that motherhood is a learned behavior.

It is a journey of acceptance akin to what NL presents in the character of Sarah. NL sets Sarah off on her journey with an inward reflection, towards her own life and her own past, both of which have constructed her identity up to this point. As Sarah continues to process this new addition to her life, her inward concentration becomes apparent in a flashback. The camera zooms in on Sarah's face as she is riding her exercise bike, a zoom-in that can be interpreted by the spectator as an invitation to enter her thoughts and to share her memories. With a voice of a mother affirming, "c'est elle, notre fille," the spectator is transported to a memory from Sarah's childhood. The camera continues to zoom in on a middle-aged woman and a young girl standing in what appears to be an attic or storage facility full of boxes and plastic wrap.

Sarah questioning her mother about the parentage of the young girl in the picture.
The placement of this conversation in a room full of packed boxes conveys a sense of transition, as things are packed and put away when they are no longer needed. The location also conveys a sense of intimacy. In this storage room, Sarah and her mother are isolated from the world around them. They are, seemingly, the only two that exist. They are cut off from the world around them, their subject becomes the focus of the conversation. The young girl questions her mother's affirmation with: "Notre fille à toi et moi?" As the conversation continues, the spectator realizes that these two are discussing a young girl in the photo as if she were their own daughter. As Sarah questions her mother to confirm her understanding that she is indeed one of this child's parents, she also inquires if she is the mother or the father of the young girl. This questioning of her role as a parent serves to reinforce the learned nature of this role and her dependence on her mother in developing her identity as a parent. In order to discover who she is as a parent, Sarah must defer to her mother, gaining agency and identity through this association. When her mother gives her the option to choose, she chooses to be the father.

Sarah, as a young girl, adopts the role of father in order to share the role of parent with her mother. There is both paradox and folly in this choice. It is important that Sarah occupies the function of father instead of the role of mother because she and her mother cannot both be the young girl's mother. NL places this choice in Sarah’s past, and as part of her journey to acceptance, in order to emphasize and satirize Sarah’s entire process of acceptance. The impossibility of two women existing in the role of mother can also be seen in NL's film Camille redouble. When Camille confronts her mother with her teenage pregnancy, her mother's response is to assume the stance of "I can't be a good mother if you are a mother." She and Camille cannot occupy the same role as mother, just as Sarah and Geneviève, although for different reasons, cannot occupy the same role.
Returning to the film *Faut que ça danse*, as Sarah's childhood discussion with her mother comes to an end, NL returns the spectator to the diegetic present, where Sarah is seen sitting at the foot of her mother's bed. She is no longer standing next to her, childlike, as she was in the flashback, but placed across from her as an adult. Through this transition from side by side to face to face, NL breaks the shared parental unit and allows Sarah to stand as a mother in her own right (or at least provides her with the option to do so). However, for this transition from co-parent to mother to be complete, Sarah must seek approval from her mother.

While Sarah is easily able to announce to her father and husband that she is pregnant, even when she does not believe it herself, the disclosure to her mother is more difficult. Sarah informs her mother that she is pregnant through the recollection of the previously mentioned child that they supposedly shared when Sarah was only a child herself. While the child in the photograph is named, Bevi, she is not further discussed. She remains a mystery. NL left this mystery because the identity of the child, what she looked like, where she lived, none of it holds importance. The relevance of this instance with the shared, imagined child is that through it, NL is able to convey the influence of the role of motherhood in Sarah's life and the value of her mother's approval and participation in her acquisition of that role.

*Right: Sarah reminiscing about the child that she believed she shared with her mother when she was a child.*

*Left: Geneviève recollecting the importance of motherhood to Sarah when she was a child.*
To Sarah’s recollected memory, Geneviève responds: "Tu voulais tellement avoir un enfant… C’était très important pour toi." Without acknowledging the truth of her mother's statement, or refuting it, Sarah reveals to her mother; "je suis enceinte." Sarah waits for a response from her mother that never comes. Her mother remains silent, refusing to acknowledge Sarah's entry into motherhood in which she is not directly involved. When Sarah was a child, she "shared" responsibility for Bevi with her mother. They were in a sense co-mothers to the young girl, even though Sarah chose the role of father. Through this, Geneviève was able to maintain some control over her daughter's motherhood, even though the motherhood was imagined.

As an adult, Sarah is presented with the opportunity to enter into the role of mother under her own rights, without the assistance of her mother. Motherhood has apparently been very important to Sarah since her childhood years, a desire that Geneviève, in the past, wholeheartedly endorsed and supported, as evidenced by the flashback of their imagined shared parenthood through Bevi. Yet her mother’s response of support to this current proposition of motherhood is complete stillness. Geneviève refuses to even acknowledge her daughter’s announcement. This denial is marked not only by Geneviève’s refusal to speak, but also by NL’s directorial filming decisions.

When Sarah first reveals to her mother that she is pregnant, we saw that Geneviève refuses to respond. This is important on many levels. In refusing to acknowledge Sarah’s proclamation of motherhood, Geneviève remains the center of attention. Sarah's pregnancy is no longer the focus of the scene, both Sarah and the spectator are placed in a subordinate position where they must wait for Geneviève to allow the story to progress. There is about twenty seconds of complete silence, no diegetic or non-diegetic music, no conversation, no movement. Geneviève does not even acknowledge her daughter's statement by looking at her. Throughout
the film, NL has presented Geneviève as a woman who manipulates those around her and who desires everyone's attention, at all times. NL uses this scene to further reinforce the power that a mother retains over her daughter as her daughter chooses to enter into motherhood.

Sarah waiting for her mother's response after informing her that she is pregnant.

As well as power and control, NL is able to clearly convey the separation in this mother-daughter relationship through the positioning of the two women on-screen. We can see that Geneviève is laying on the bed, but only her arms and head are visible, the rest of her body is under a dark blue housecoat and a dark blue blanket. She is at the head of her bed, while Sarah is awkwardly sitting on the edge of the foot of the bed with her arms and legs pulled close to her, which makes her appear withdrawn. With all of her things in her lap, she also looks out of place, as if she were uncomfortable in her mother's home, as if she did not fit in, and were not accepted. As Geneviève refuses to look at her daughter, this distance becomes even more apparent. Geneviève will not accept her daughter's entrance into motherhood or admit her as an equal through motherhood. She instead regresses to a further dependence on others. Later in the film,
she eventually gives up all apparent control of her life and moves into a mental hospital. Instead of enabling Sarah's pregnancy to alter her relationship with her mother, NL allows her mother to continually to exist in a world that revolves around her alone. An interesting intertextual reference to note is that Geneviève pretends to lose the ability to use her legs when she wishes more attention from those around her. The grandmother in FO’s 8 femmes, similarly, lives her life in a wheelchair. She must be taken care of by her daughters both physically and financially. However, as the spectator witnesses it late in the film, the grandmother has full control over her legs and she simply refuses to use them in order to be taken care of. She, like Geneviève, feigns dependence to avoid responsibility.

8 femmes

FO's 2002 8 femmes tells the story of a family of eight women, set in the 1950s, as they investigate the murder of the man of the house. He exists for each of them as father, brother, husband, son-in-law, master, and lover, essentially symbolizing all aspects of the masculine within the society. As such, due to his presumed untimely death, he is not present in the storyline. The spectator is thrown into a cinematic environment where women are in charge, and the only beings that exist in this universe. It is interesting, within this dynamic, to look at the many literal and figurative mother-daughter relationships. Gaby has two daughters, Suzon and Catherine, however, due to her social prominence, Gaby also has a live-in cook that also acts as a mother to Suzon and Catherine. Gaby, as well as being a mother, is a sister and daughter. Mamy is mother to both Gaby and Augustine. As is revealed later in the storyline, Suzon is herself going to be a mother soon, however it is never indicated in the diegetic action if she will have a daughter or a son.
Within this female-dominated world, each of the women is coerced to publicly reveal secrets about her life, in order to prove to the others that she is innocent of the crime. It is under the guise of this murder investigation that FO forces Suzon, the oldest daughter, to disclose the news of her unexpected pregnancy. Catherine, the youngest sister, hid in the hall the night before and saw her sister return home, meet with their father, reveal her pregnancy and depart again, only to pretend that it never happened. There are several things that need to be noted about this portrayal of Suzon's announcement. Unlike Sarah in *Faut que ça danse*, who is willing to share the news of her pregnancy with those around her, Suzon chooses to hide her pregnancy instead of confronting this group of women about it.

Through the use of a flashback, where the father's silhouette is seen only from behind, FO shows the audience that it was simple for Suzon to slip into the house and talk to her father about her pregnancy. However, in front of these women, the information does not come easily. She is challenged to reveal it, and is essentially put to trial, where she is forced to discuss the truth. As Suzon unveils these facts, FO films her in the middle of a circle of women, as can be seen below. She is surrounded on all sides, unable to escape. She is not just confessing to her mother, but to generations of women, grandmother, aunt, sister, maid, cook, asking them all for their understanding and acceptance. As an adolescent, she is seeking admittance into the realm of adulthood.

*Left: Suzon surrounded by the other women involved in the murder investigation
Right: Suzon stepping away from the other women and turning to face them.*
While it is apparent that Suzon has the support of her father, since she insists that she would never have returned home from her first semester at college without his approval, it is her mother's support and understanding, above all, that she desires. Despite the large number of women surrounding Suzon as she confesses, it is her mother who takes precedence. In the beginning of this scene, Suzon had taken control of the group, stepping in as the only trustworthy one, since she was, presumably, the only one who had not been in the house the night before, when her father was supposedly killed.

As she takes control, Suzon is forced to admit that she came during the night to reveal a secret to her father. At this point the scope of vision narrows to include only Suzon and her mother, highlighting the importance of her mother in her confession. Her mother walks up to her and embraces her. Gaby has initiated contact with her daughter, which symbolizes an intimacy and understanding between them. By narrowing the scope of the conversation to Gaby and Suzon, FO indicates to the spectator that this relationship holds a higher importance that other relationships between women. It is her mother's blessing alone that Suzon seeks amongst all the other women that are still present, though invisible to the camera. However, FO does not reward Suzon with the comfort and support she is seeking, for as soon as Suzon tells her mother that she is pregnant, her mother pushes her away.

Right: Gaby and Suzon embracing immediately before Suzon announces her pregnancy.
Left: Gaby as she pushes Suzon away after the announcement of her pregnancy.
This physical distance symbolizes the psychological distance that is created between Suzon and her mother through Suzon's pregnancy. Gaby's first reaction is one of surprise and disbelief... how can her daughter become a mother in her own rights? However, Gaby's reaction swiftly shifts to disappointment and refusal to accept Suzon's unexpected entrance into motherhood, which becomes apparent in a later conversation, to be discussed shortly, between the two. While fear, supposedly at rejection, is apparent when she first conveys the news to her mother and the other important women in her life, the second, later scene between Suzon and her mother concerning Suzon's pregnancy displays a young women with much more confidence as she seeks her mother's support in her journey into motherhood.

Left: Suzon as she approaches her mother to ask for her approval.
Right: Suzon stepping away from her mother as her mother accuses her of being a slut.

Her quest for maternal approval continues, in this second scene, when she returns to her mother once again to ask specifically for her acceptance, shortly after the initial confession. Her mother's reaction remains the same, to distance herself from Suzon. This second attempt to seek her mother's support reinforces the importance of the mother in her daughter's entrance into motherhood. It is worth noting the progression of events in relation to Suzon's pregnancy. At the end of this scene, she discovers that she is not Marcel's daughter, but that her mother, similarly, was pregnant with her before she married Marcel, which presents the spectator yet another
mirror image of mother and daughter like those discussed in chapter two. The revelation of paternity is significant because it alleviates the question of incest that could manifest later in the film when Suzon reveals to her younger sister that Marcel, the only man in the family, is the father of her child. Despite the significance of maternal consent in attaining adulthood through motherhood, it appears to be difficult for mothers to accept the entrance of their daughters into adulthood. One of the difficulties seems to lie in the loss of control over her progeny.

While the daughter is a child, her mother has complete control over her, where she goes, who she speaks with, but entrance into adulthood, symbolized by marriage or motherhood, represents a forced separation in the mother-daughter relationship, both physically and affectively. As discussed in the chapter introduction, Irigaray insists that the only remedy to this rupture is motherhood. Therefore it is through her announcement of impending motherhood that Suzon is able to begin the reunification process with her mother. However, before demonstrating their reunification, FO endeavors to clearly portray distance in their relationship. This forced physical separation is mirrored in the manner that FO films the first and second conversation between Gaby and Suzon. Both scenes begin with the two women coming close together and initiating physical contact, symbolizing the closeness that they maintained in their pre-pregnancy relationship.

As can be seen in this conversation, it is through the announcement of pregnancy that the mother-daughter relationship is ruptured, seemingly beyond repair. Despite the continued discussion between Gaby and Suzon, this disconnect is not presently resolved. Given the fact that all the women are currently focused on revealing secrets that may lead to an uncovering of a murderer, the distance between Gaby and Suzon does not take precedence in the sequence of events. The group continually has something more important to discuss. As a result, FO portrays
the disruption in the mother-daughter relationship as easily pushed to the side. This easy dismissal is important when considering the context of the relationship. There exists a plethora of literature on negotiating the mother-daughter relationship that is fraught with peril and misunderstandings. From popular literature, such as *You're Wearing That?: Understanding Mothers and Daughters in Conversation*, by Deborah Tannen, to case studies along the lines of *Widening the Family Circle: New research on Family Communication*, edited by Kory Floyd and Mark Morman, we conclude that women are lead to believe that the mother-daughter relationship is a misunderstanding waiting to happen.

With the current societal emphasis on the importance of mother-daughter communication and advice on how to repair the bond, it is clearly an aspect of the relationship that is important and perhaps difficult to maintain. By quickly dismissing an argument that could undo the foundation of this onscreen mother-daughter bond, FO highlights the importance of the relationship as a whole, outside of individual interactions and discussions. According to Irigaray, "la situation est différente pour la fille, potentiellement mère, et qui peut cohabiter avec sa mère sans détruire l’une ou l’autre" (*Le temps* 122). For a young daughter, who is still living at home, entering into adulthood through motherhood, the mother-daughter relationship is even more difficult to navigate.

The two women must relearn how to cohabitate within the context of the film. While the spectator is unable to know if Suzon plans to return home permanently, as that decision exists outside of the diegetic context of the film, the audience is able to see these two women attempting to live together for the duration of the film and it is this specific cohabitation that must be analyzed. These onscreen, fictional women, are not like the women of recent case studies whose relationships come to a screeching halt when their mother-daughter bond is
disrupted. FO also provides a commentary on the existence of the mother-daughter bond amongst other female connections. Within the female dominated world as seen on-screen, women are able to negotiate their relationships without patriarchal interference. Without the forced separation and reunification as discussed by Luce Irigaray in *Le temps de la différence*, women are potentially able to exist in unity with one another. As can be seen in 8 femmes after the Catherine witnesses Marcel commit suicide. When Catherine reveals that her father's death was a hoax, she unlocks his door to find a man distraught at the behavior of his family. As a result, he takes his own life. Now all the women know for sure exactly what happened to Marcel, and are reassured that all patriarchal influence has disappeared. As such the women all come together, indifferent to states of motherhood and non-motherhood to comfort one another. All previous disputes and disagreements have disappeared. The easy dismissal portrayed by FO is not always the case in mother-daughter relationships in contemporary cinema. At times, the dispute over entrance into motherhood remains unresolved as is the case in NL's *Camille redouble*.

**Camille redouble**

NL's *Camille redouble*, released in 2012, tells the story of Camille, a middle-aged failed actress whose mother died when she was only sixteen. Camille's mother died the day after Camille found out that she was pregnant, before Camille had time to share the news with her mother. Thus, Camille was unable to confront her mother with her newly acquired state and successfully negotiate her mother's approval. Happily for Camille, after witnessing her life fall apart in her forties as we have seen, she is miraculously transported back in time to just before
her sixteenth birthday, where she is able to correct many past mistakes, including not telling her mother about her pregnancy.

When Camille is able to reveal her pregnancy to her mother during her trip back in time, NL's cinematographic decisions mirror the change in the power dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship brought about by Camille's impending maternity. Even though she has been promoted to the level of equal with her mother through her pregnancy, there is still a struggle between them in this trip back in time; a struggle for Camille's mother to accept her daughter's existence as an equal. The inherent paradox present in the adult woman placing herself in her younger "self" contributes to the overall irony of the situation. As an adult, imitating a child, Camille is seeking her mother's approval to become an adult. In order to successfully pass into adulthood, Camille must, in her eyes, attain her mother's acceptance. Floyd and Mormon comment on this real-life paradox:

> Within this script, a daughter’s continued acceptance in the enmeshed mother-daughter relationship was conditioned on meeting her mother’s high expectations. Thus, from adolescence into later life, she would converge her meanings with her mother’s and over-accommodate maternal perceptions for relational maintenance purposes. (7)

In order to maintain the mother-daughter relationship, Camille is expected by the audience to over-accommodate her mother's desires for her. This is seen to some extent when Camille discloses to her mother that she is expecting a baby.
Camille waiting in the dark for her mother to arrive home in order to tell her about her pregnancy.

At the beginning of the scene where Camille reveals to her mother that she is pregnant, Camille is sitting alone in the dark, waiting for her mother. This darkness implies secrecy as well as serenity. Camille sits completely immobile, tarrying in the kitchen. No aspect of the scene conveys anxiety or uncertainty. The actual conversation is filmed in the typical manner of a shot-reverse shot, switching from Camille to her mother as each speaks. As you can see in the image above, Camille is filmed seated, while her mother is standing near the table. While filming Camille, the camera, which conveys the line of sight of Camille's mother, is at the same level as Camille.

The camera is not looking down on her, which would imply that she is inferior to her mother, and the camera is not looking up at Camille, which would be illogical, but would also convey Camille's superiority. When the camera shifts to her mother, it is once again at the same level as Camille, implying a certain equality between the two women on-screen. Introducing both through the same line of sight allows NL to film the mother taking up the majority of the screen. This portrayal of preference on-screen by NL is important because it marks the
significance held in this relationship and in this moment of revelation. This is the situation that Camille regretted never having had with her mother and that she has sought to create since being transported back in time.

Throughout the conversation, Camille's mother remains standing. The height difference, between Camille seated, and her mother standing, implies a superiority in Camille's mother, which contradicts the equality conveyed by the line of sight. NL films the mother as she is moving on-screen, allowing the camera, and therefore the spectator, to focus on Camille's mother's version of motherhood. While the mother is shocked at the news that Camille is pregnant, she is still, for the moment, in charge of the situation, and comfortable with her superiority in her own domain, namely her home and her kitchen. It is important to note that this entire scene takes place within the confines of a delusion of a return to childhood and that the spectator sees not a young actress playing Camille, but the 40 year old version of Camille in adolescent's clothes. This is significant as it indicates to the spectator the importance of this relationship to Camille. Her mother's approval was important enough to be the main focus of her delusion and important enough that she needed to address it as an adult.

Camille's mother's control is once again reflected when she finally sits. Instead of joining Camille at the table, which would make their height and internal power equal, Camille's mother remains in charge by exiling Camille from the kitchen at the moment that she takes a chair. Insisting that she is too upset to look at her daughter, she tells Camille to go to bed. This action of the mother sitting, as the daughter gets up to leave, imparts a sense of displacement, as if Camille and her mother could not maintain the same domain. This reflects Camille's mother's later insistence that she cannot be a good mother if Camille is pregnant at sixteen.
They cannot literally or figuratively occupy the same space, even though they can exist as mirror images of one another. One must leave, and as Camille's mother is the only actual mother at the moment, it appears as if it is Camille who must acquiesce. As Camille leaves the table and walks to the door to exit the room, she appears to be standing in the corner. The door to exit the kitchen is conveniently placed in the corner of the room. Not only has she been exiled from the kitchen, but she must go to the darkest corner of the room alone, almost as if she were a child in time out. At this point, in both the dialog and in the filming, it appears as if no transition has been made.

Camille, as an adult lost back into her teen years, has worked up the courage to tell her mother of her soon-to-be entrance into motherhood and she has been rejected. She is not allowed to return to her previously held position of mother, the one she occupies in her real life, but not here in her imagined reality. However, the conversation does not end here. With the confidence of an adult and a mother, Camille returns to the kitchen, taking control of the situation, as can be seen below. Up to this point, events could simply have been a memory of what Camille had experienced as an adolescent, but from this conversation forward, it is a journey of psychological healing through imagining the actions that could have been different.
Camille insisting that these things happen, that her pregnancy is not out of the ordinary.

She refuses to permanently leave the kitchen, as she reenters the room and pulls a chair around to the other side of the table to sit next to her mother. It is at this point that the power dynamic drastically changes. As can be seen in the image above, Camille is now taller than her mother on-screen. She is also looking straight at her mother as she is talking, while her mother is looking down and away, which implies inferiority and uncertainty as opposed to Camille's superiority and confidence. Upon Camille's return, there is also more light in the kitchen. This light, at the end, stands in contrast to the dark serene secrecy at the beginning of the conversation. There is now no secrecy, and only excitement in the place of serenity. Her mother, noticing Camille's excitement, points it out for the spectator by telling her daughter that the pregnancy is making her giddy. Consequently, the mother disapproves of both Camille's excitement and pregnancy. Camille's superiority throughout this conversation is further reinforced by NL's filming decisions in the last moments of the confrontation.

At the end of the discussion between Camille and her mother, Camille feigns a return to adolescence through a request for her mother to tell her good night. When Camille insists that her mother do it the right way, she leans toward her mother, initiating the physical contact.
she asserts that her mother embrace her again, she maintains the same position on-screen. She is bent forward, toward her mother, to close the distance between them. It is in this moment that the spectator sees an aspect of Camille that has not been previously demonstrated. Until this point, Camille is unsteady, not knowing what to do with her life or where to go. She has truly fit the typical description of an adolescent, with no clear sense of the future, even though in the "reality" of this film, she has already lived it. In this moment of maternal confrontation, Camille becomes steadfast. She knows what she needs and wants, what has been missing up till this point, namely, the approval from her mother, it is Camille's desire for acceptance that gives her agency in this scene. This, seemingly, is the reason she was taken back in time. Being presented with this one opportunity to fix her ever-lingering regret, she will not move till it is accomplished. The confidence and purpose she gains in this confrontation is visible in her actions throughout the rest of the film as well.

Camille's refusal to leave the room presents a clear contrast to her previous reaction to her mother. When told to leave the kitchen, Camille, initially, got up immediately to depart, only hesitating after she reached the door. But in this secondary portion of their conversation, after Camille's return to the table, it is Camille who refuses to move, and who forces her mother to be displaced. Her mother attempted to deny her access to maternity by confining her to the position of a child that was unaware of the gravity of her decision.

She even attempted to exile her from her presence entirely, by sending her to her room, as one would do to a small child. However, as an adult in an imagined adolescent's body, Camille is able to resist her mother's attempts to deny her. As she is already a mother herself, in her "real" life, she is able to confront her own mother as an equal and demand admittance to the treasured position of mother. Despite Camille's presence as an adult in this conversation, the confrontation
with her mother is still difficult for her, as evidenced by her initial reaction of leaving the kitchen when her mother tells her to. As Camille's mother shifts to wholeheartedly embrace Camille, she is figuratively making room for Camille to join her. This rapprochement is necessary in the lives of women as they enter into motherhood because it allows them access to the community of mothers that already exists. Through a common shared experience, motherhood, this community of women is able to provide support to one another just as each individual mother is able to aid and support her own daughter as she enters into motherhood.

The irony in this ultimate imagined end of maternal acceptance is that Camille is only able to have this conversation because she is in fact an adult and a mother. She has seen her daughter grow up and succeed in life. Instead of approaching her mother out of fear of the unknown motherhood she is facing and telling her mother that she made a mistake, she, as a 40-year old adult, is rather telling her mother of her successful transition into motherhood on her own and is asking her mother to accept her as an equal. We see the same type of relationship, an adult daughter with children asking for her mother's approval, in FO's 2010 Potiche.

Potiche

Potiche tells the story of Mme Pujol as she transitions from a simple housewife to a powerful politician. A key relationship in her journey is with her daughter, Joëlle. As Mme Pujol steps up to replace her husband at the umbrella factory, she brings her children into the business with her. Joëlle works alongside her mother to maintain the family business. While Laurent never waivers in his devotion to his mother, Joëlle does not remain faithful. After her father's recovery, Joëlle sides with her father, and publicly votes against her mother in the board meeting, in order to force her mother out of the family business and back into the home. Joëlle wishes to
relegate her mother to the position of only a mother because it is in this role that Joëlle will be able to depend on her mother the most. In acquiring new roles and responsibilities, Mme Pujol has been able to define herself outside of the role of maternal caregiver and has relinquished the stereotypical role of mother as defined by Alison Stone in *Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and Maternal Subjectivity*, where "mothers are expected to be entirely absorbed in their children's needs and inattentive to themselves" (19). Joëlle, as she approaches motherhood anew, wishes to maintain a mother who is entirely absorbed in her life. While it at first appears as if Mme Pujol acquiesces to Joëlle, the spectator later learns that Mme Pujol uses this opportunity to better take over the city.

As Mme Pujol is preparing to leave the factory permanently, Joëlle comes to her to explain her betrayal and to request her mother's continues support. It is important to note the time (night) and the location (factory/work) of this discussion. Through her defense of her actions, Joëlle asserts that she is no longer able to do everything on her own. Not only does she need her husband to be there with her but she also needs her mother's forgiveness and continued support. Up until this point, Mme Pujol has been an active participant in her daughter's motherhood, having her and the children over for dinner, offering to watch the boys, etc. That is the kind of support that Joëlle will continue to need. A scene analysis of FO's filming decisions in the presentation of this interaction between the two women exposes a deep understanding between the two, as well as a sympathy between them for the burden of motherhood.
Mme Pujol (left) and Joëlle (right) as Joëlle reveals to her mother the reasons for her betrayal.

In the scene pictured above, both Joëlle and Mme Pujol are seated together, their sides touching, both looking in the same general direction and both essentially the same height on the screen. Neither one is taller, larger, or more accented by light than the other, hence neither individual is given superiority on-screen. They are, at this moment, equal, as Joëlle reveals her decision to sacrifice her career, and that of her mother, for her child. Immediately before this, the power dynamic in the relationship was different, much like in the initial part of the conversation between Camille and her mother. Before Joëlle's revelation, Mme Pujol was packing her office at the factory, where the pictured scene takes place, which demanded a certain amount of movement on Mme Pujol's part. She was positioned behind the desk, moving back and forth, while Joëlle remained seated before her mother, as if her mother were the judge and she were the criminal asking for lenience and pardon. Joëlle's demeanor also conveys despair.

As Joëlle reveals her pregnancy, her mother, no longer on the opposite side of the large desk, comes to sit beside Joëlle, initiating physical contact. This transition is contrary to the reaction seen in FO's 8 femmes, where the mother is played by the same actress, Catherine
Deneuve, and where the announcement of pregnancy creates a distance as opposed to a closeness. Here, the element of judgment disappears as the two women come close together. They become equal by giving up their lives outside of the home to maintain their roles as mothers. As a result of their maternal obligation, both Mme Pujol and Joëlle are replaced by their husbands at the factory. M. Pujol reclaims his position as CEO and Joëlle's husband takes over her position. Joëlle desires and orchestrates this replacement, while Mme Pujol is forcibly replaced due to the betrayal by her own daughter. They are both sacrificing, even though unwillingly on the part of Mme Pujol, their careers for their children, placing the role of mother as more important than that of business woman. However, Mme Pujol takes advantage of the opportunity presented by her forcible removal to strive for something larger, mother to a society in the form of Deputy Mayor.

Through this presentation of motherhood as an excuse for betrayal, i.e., Joëlle choosing to side with her father instead of identifying with her mother, FO presents motherhood as both positive and negative. It has brought these two women together, but at the same, it has separated the two of them from the rest of the world. Through motherhood, they are both relegated by society to the home. It is their domicile, their domain. Their existence outside of it is limited, and it is this limited existence that they are both supposedly returning to as they leave the workforce. As we know and although it is not apparent in this scene, Mme Pujol will shortly overcome this forced separation from the world.

However, Joëlle is no longer seen outside of her home. In fact, the location of the last scene is ambiguous and the spectator does not know if she is in her home or in her mother's home, which reinforces the idea that Joëlle has taken her mother's place as a potiche. Her pregnancy is reflective of the description given by Simone de Beauvoir, "She feels it as at once
an enrichment and an injury; the fetus is a part of her body, and it is a parasite that feeds on it; she possesses it, and she is possessed by it; it represents the future and, carrying it, she feels herself vast as the world; but this very opulence annihilates her, she feels that she herself is no longer anything" (466). Before her pregnancy Joëlle was considering divorce, a life free to create her own meaning and identity through employment and self-development, but this unplanned pregnancy has changed those dreams. She becomes nothing but a pregnant woman, and stands in stark contrast to her mother who has overcome the burden of motherhood and used it to her advantage.

Joëlle has relinquished her employment at her father's factory and her life outside of the home. Her continued existence is confined to the realm of mother, which is evident in the last scene of the film where Joëlle sits with her children and father in a dark room, separated from the world, watching her mother on the television. This unborn child has taken over her life, and taken it away, or rather, in order to attain help from her husband, she has given all autonomy away, allowing this unborn child to take control of her life. While this is a rather dim vision of motherhood, it is necessary for FO's ironic critique thereof.

In the beginning of the diegetic storyline, Joëlle stated that the one thing she never wanted to become was a *potiche* like her mother. By this criticism she meant a woman whose entire life revolves around her children and her home, with no hope of a link to the outside world. In the end, she is exactly what she thought her mother was. She gave up her job as well and forced her mother to do the same in order to stay at home with the children. She worked hard to push her mother back into this role only to be confined to it herself and forced to accept her mother's superiority and existence outside of the role of mother, which is highly ironic.
Journey to and through motherhood

In addition to playing a significant role in their daughters' entrance into motherhood, mothers in this film corpus also take advantage of the possibility to be involved in many other aspects of their daughters' life. Our film corpus presents an ironic interpretation, by each of the directors, of two additional aspects of maternal involvement. First to be discussed is the involvement in a daughter's love life, or lack thereof, before the accomplishment of motherhood, and secondly, in a daughter's child-rearing techniques, once motherhood has been achieved. Maternal involvement does not start at the point of motherhood. A mother is often involved in her daughter's quest for motherhood, mainly in the form of support, which allows her daughter to achieve motherhood on her own terms. However, there are instances where support becomes overwhelming. Instead of maintaining the role of passive observer, a mother becomes an active participant in her daughter's love life. Sometimes, this overt, overwhelming participation can lead to resistance to becoming mother on the part of the daughter. This hesitance to pursue motherhood is widely known as matrophobia, and will be discussed in greater detail later.

Active participant in a daughter's love life

*Faut que ça danse* (NL), *Il est plus facile pour un chameau* (VBT), *Actrices* (VBT) and *Potiche* (FO) all present the spectator with examples of a domineering mother who in some ways replace the significant other in their children's lives. There are two primary ways within these films that the mother replaces a daughter's lover. The first is through a shared child, where the daughter and mother seemingly have a child together, and the second way for a mother to replace the lover is through the presentation, on-screen, of the mother as one of the partners of the couple, sometimes even replacing her own daughter in the duo. VBT presents the spectator with
an example of the latter portrayal of maternal involvement in her film *Il est plus facile pour un chameau*. In the film, Frederica is struggling to accept the terminal illness of her father and as a result, spends a great deal of time with her mother. At one dinner in particular, Pierre, Frederica's significant other, accompanies her. From the beginning of the sequence, Frederica and Pierre are separated on-screen, and not seen side by side in the same shot after their entrance. Pierre is, instead, filmed with Frederica's mother, as can be seen in the two images below.

*Left: Pierre and Frederica's mother sitting on the couch talking.*  
*Right: Pierre and Frederica's mother at the dinner table discussing his Italian heritage.*

Throughout the film, Frederica's mother has been curious about her daughter's relationship with Pierre, continually questioning her daughter about him and about the present condition and future goals of their relationship. Taken within this context, Frederica's mother becomes an active participant in her daughter's romantic relationship. She literally separates her daughter from her lover. While this can initially be attributed to stereotypical aspects of the overly involved Italian mother, VBT takes maternal preoccupation even further than that, replacing Frederica on-screen with her mother, who has already, as discussed in chapter one, relegated her daughter to the role of child. In reference to Demeter and Persephone, “myth and its modern counterparts force us to recognize the power of *gendered sameness* and of biology—to see, in other words, that because the girl *is* a second edition of her mother, their object relations
are deeply structured by this sameness” (Spritz 416). The two women seem interchangeable in this presentation of the relationship. This directorial choice to separate Frederica from her lover reinforces Frederica's exclusion from her relationship and her distance from her coveted role of motherhood. If she is no longer involved in a relationship, her quest for motherhood becomes as impossible as the one faced by Marcelline in VBT's Actrices. She cannot create a baby on her own, as the presence of a partner is necessary for the pursuit, however, that role is being occupied by her mother.

In the films of VBT and NL, the mother's propensity to replace her daughter's significant other can also be seen in dreams or daydreams about having children with the mother. According to Stone in her work on feminism and psychoanalysis, daydreams and fantasies help to shape our perception of the world around us. She states: "we never cease to perceive the world by way of our fantasies, old ones that we retain from infancy and their newer successors and modifications. Without this, our experience would lack meaning" (28). It is through their daydreams about pregnancy and motherhood that many of the daughters within our corpus are able to interpret and accept their acquisition of, or their inability to achieve motherhood. We saw that in Faut que ça danse, the spectator is privy to the daughter's thoughts about a child shared with her mother, through NL's use of flashbacks within the film. After Sarah learns that she is pregnant, she recalls an encounter with her mother where they discuss a child they "shared." For our current discussion, the importance of this shared child is found in the meeting between Sarah and her mother that takes place in the main narrative. She reveals that as a child, she truly believed that she and her mother shared a child. Only now as an adult does she assert that the whole situation was crazy. The ironic contradiction here is that NL's use of a flashback places a distance between Sarah and the imagined shared parenthood. It also places Sarah in a position of maturity and
adulthood, where she should be able to comprehend her mother's craziness and limitations, as well as the possibility that her mother is incapable of offering her support. This causes the spectator to question both Sarah and her current pregnancy. In seeking her mother's approval, is she seeking her mother as a partner once more? Or is she seeking distance from her mother through a pregnancy that does not involve her mother?

In VBT's Actrices, the announcement of a shared child is much more graphic, including a description of the sexual act associated with it. Despite her gynecologist's efforts to refer her to a psychiatrist, Marcelline insists on communicating to the OBGYN a disturbing dream in which she was impregnated by her mother. Marcelline is not sure how it happened, but she supposes that she and her mother must have rubbed together, allowing her mother's fluids to enter her. While this revelation is enough to catch any spectator's attention, the filming choices of VBT serve to further accentuate its ironic overtones.

Marcelline spinning around in the pool as she reveals her dreams to her gynecologist in a voice-over
Listening to this description while watching Marcelline play in the water, seemingly like an infant in amniotic waters, places the same contradictory distance that we saw between Sarah and her mother. As Marcelline describes her dream, FO chooses to use a voice over, and a medium shot of Marcelline spinning in the water at her local public pool. The discussion begins as Marcelline is seen swimming underwater, turning around and around in a disorienting whirl of bubbles. This pool is significant on many levels and appears as a character many times throughout the film. According to Spritz, it is common for contemporary literature to use “ocean as a metaphor for psychological distance between mothers and daughters. . .external waters serve both to connect and to divide the women—and thus they serve as metaphors for the inner amniotic waters, which originally united and divided the pair” (416). Set against this backdrop that represents the tenuous nature of the mother-daughter relationship, the spectator hears Marcelline describing the dream in which her mother impregnated her.

For Marcelline, water represents escape, naivety and disengagement. It serves to further reinforce her position as childlike, since she is frequently seen playing in the water and even mistakenly goes swimming on a day that the pool is reserved for children. As the scene transitions, Marcelline is no longer silenced by water, but pacing, in an agitated manner, in the gynecologist's office, demanding an interpretation of the dream. There are many levels of irony in this dream revelation. The gynecologist has no grounds on which to provide Marcelline a legitimate dream analysis. She works with the body, not the mind.

An additional irony is found in that this doctor is the one that Marcelline talks to about all her reproductive problems. More than anyone else in the diegetic reality, the gynecologist should thus understand Marcelline's struggles. She is the only one that knows Marcelline cannot get pregnant, and the only one who knows Marcelline's desire for it. This is the only open
relationship that Marcelline has. She does not confide in anyone else. Ironically, the gynecologist is a paid member of Marcelline's reality and as such has no personal interest vested in Marcelline. The scene serves to reinforce, yet again, Marcelline's solitude in her own life. The gynecologist refuses to enter Marcelline's universe. While no interpretation is offered by the characters involved, this scene does allow the spectator a further understanding of the complexities inherent in this mother-daughter relationship.

According to Freud, in his work *The Interpretation of Dreams*, dreams must be analyzed to find their true purpose to the psyche: "When the work of interpretation has been completed the dream can be recognized as a wish fulfillment" (42). Individual items in dreams need to be scrutinized while looking at the life as a whole. Dreams can be a reflection of real life where the individual can impose condensation and displacement on everyday struggles in order to be able to face them. If a given situation is represented by symbols in the dream, the individual, for example, Marcelline, can face the situation and attempt to resolve it without directly confronting the root issue.

For Marcelline, the issue is her inability to please her mother by obtaining pregnancy. From what the spectator has seen, the only way for Marcelline to live up to her mother's expectations, and to be a success, is to become a mother. Dreaming about her mother impregnating her symbolizes the permission given to her mother to dominate her own ability to become pregnant, which mirrors her mother's attempts to control her love life. All along, Marcelline's mother has been insisting that Marcelline pursue a family, suggesting prayer at the church (which Marcelline does), returning to past lovers (which Marcelline does) and many other things, all of which Marcelline faithfully fulfills, although the end result is still the same. She is unable to attain pregnancy on her own. The image of Marcelline's mother, making her daughter
pregnant, is a clear representation of the power and domination of Marcelline's mother in her life.

Marcelline cannot achieve motherhood, unless her mother bestows upon her the privilege.

**Matrophobia**

The result of this maternal pressure and active involvement can lead to a reaction of matrophobia on the part of the daughter. Matrophobia "is the fear not of one's mother or of motherhood but of becoming one's mother. Thousands of daughters see their mothers as having taught a compromise and self-hatred they are struggling to win free of" (Rich 235). This is what Joëlle, in FO's *Potiche*, transmits to the spectator. She is a mother, so that is not her fear. She spends a great deal of time with her own mother, so that is not her fear either, but Joëlle tells her mother that the worst thing in the world would be to become a *potiche* like her. She sees her mother as unhappy and being bound to her role as a trophy wife. Outside of that, Joëlle sees no identity in her mother, no need and no innate desire to attain any goal. Mme Pujol is simply Mme Pujol. The fear of losing her own agency is what Joëlle has to contend with.

*Joëlle as she tells her mother that although she loves her she does not want to end up like her.*
This is a difficult situation for any daughter to maintain, as it is from her own mother that she learns what it is to be a woman, and what it means to be a mother. According to Gardiner, in order for a daughter to progress in her development, "The daughter must pattern herself after her mother, acquire her gender identity, learn her roles, and at the same time differentiate herself as a person" (147). Joëlle, just like any other daughter, must model her own motherhood after that of her mother, and yet find some way to become her own individual.

This scene, given the context of the movie as a whole, is utterly ironic, since, as previously noted, in the end, it is Joëlle who becomes exactly what she fears, a potiche, while at the same time she learns that her mother is not what she perceived. Mme Pujol is a strong woman who uses her motherhood to her own advantage in order to succeed in the male dominated political world. Joëlle rejected her mother's identity as being wholly subjugated by the patriarchal society in which she lived, when in reality, Mme Pujol was the only one of the two who could successfully navigate the patriarchal society that defines them both.

When considering Actrices by VBT, the refusal to become one's mother is more poignant and violent than it is in the relationship between Joëlle and Mme Pujol. Marcelline, after a late night confrontation with her mother, attempts to physically silence her mother. She attacks her mother, climbs on top on her in the bed and places her hand over her mouth. During this whole scene Marcelline screams at her to be quiet and to stop talking, that can be seen in the image below where Marcelline lunges at her mother. Instead of stating that she does not want to be like her or refusing to dress as her, as the women in the two previous examples, Marcelline attempts to permanently silence the maternal image that she fears.
Marcelline attempting to silence her mother.

VBT situated this scene at night, shortly after Marcelline crawled into bed with her mother because she could not sleep, seemingly reverting to a time when she was a child when climbing into bed with a parent was acceptable. Through the placement of this scene, with the mother in her room, in her bed and taking her medication, VBT forces Marcelline to become a mirror of her mother. The other women observed in other films of this corpus were afraid of and resistant to becoming a mirrored representation of their mothers. However, they had children. Marcelline, even after having done everything that her mother suggested that she should do, is still unable to bear offspring. Marcelline's reaction to identification with the maternal model is much more violent because of this missing element of achieved motherhood.

Her mother represents what she is unable to achieve, and is therefore a constant frustration to her. Rich explains this struggle thus: "the mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree women, the martyr. Our personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mothers'; and, in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery" (236). Marcelline attempts to silence her mother literately in order to
purge herself of the personal failure that her mother represents. She is so intertwined with her mother's desires for her life that she no longer knows where the boundary between them is. This identity confusion can also be taken one step further and be interpreted as Marcelline attempting to subdue and suppress her own maternal instincts and desires, which have lead to nothing but internal torture for her up to this point.

**Raising generations**

FO's *8 femmes* and *Potiche* allow the spectator a glimpse into yet another mother-daughter relationship, where the mother offers continual "support" in the process of child rearing, much like in *Ricky*, where the mother and daughter become interchangeable in their caregiver roles. In FO's *8 femmes*, Gaby marries well at a young age, which results in a large home, two children and two maids. Due to this prosperity, she is able to care for both her own mother, Mamy, and her sister, Augustine, providing them with shelter and financial support. It must be mentioned, at this point, that there is a similarity between the two names, Mamy (the grandmother) and Gaby (the mother). As mother and daughter frequently become mirror images of one another, it is interesting to see two women with names so close that they can be easily mistaken for one another in general discussion. In addition, the ending of "y" in both Mamy and Gaby is traditionally considered a more fashionable and bourgeois ending to names. This spelling structure further adds to their mirroring of one another. However, the granddaughter, Suzon, has a traditionally common or peasant like name, setting her apart from the other two women, the mothers.

From the moment that Suzon, Gaby's eldest daughter, returns home from school, she is confronted with two mothers from two different generations. Pictured below is a discussion
around the breakfast table shortly after Suzon's return home, which clearly demonstrates to the spectator the power dynamics within the grandmother-mother-daughter relationship.

*Mamy joining Suzon for breakfast after Suzon's early morning homecoming.*

In the scene featured above, Mamy wheels over to the table as Suzon sits down to begin breakfast. While it is not evident from this image, Mamy is in a wheelchair and uses her supposed handicap to manipulate others into allowing her full dependence on them. As the spectator is not yet aware of Mamy's use of the wheelchair in this manner, she appears to be unable to support herself. This, as well as the fact that she is living in her daughter's house and relying entirely on her daughter for financial support, should place Mamy in an inferior role. On an economic level, Mamy is inferior to Gaby. On the basis of how the characters are physically portrayed in the image above, Mamy's supposed role as inferior is only further reinforced.

Gaby is standing while Suzon and Mamy are sitting, which allows Gaby to appear taller than the other two in the triangle. It is impossible for Mamy to do anything other than sit, as she is confined to a wheelchair. By remaining standing next to her immobile mother, Gaby conveys an independence and strength within her role that is missing in the other two characters. Mamy is
placed on the same level as Suzon, as if she also occupied the role of a child (a portrayal of woman as childlike that we have seen in other films analyzed).

It must also be noted that during this conversation, Gaby stands in between her mother and Suzon. While they are presented as equally dependent, based on their relative physical positions, they are separated from one another. Gaby is not only superior to them both, but it is through her, as the authority figure, that they must interact. These two aspects of her position on-screen clearly set her up as the superior mother in the relationship as well as the woman supervising the flow of information. Since the story of *8 femmes* is a murder investigation, maintaining the flow of information becomes a pivotal role of superiority for the women in the film. As the women are on a quest for information, it is important to remember that even when they control the flow of data, things are not always what they appear to be, leading us to question Gaby's apparent control of the situation. Through the contradictions between the actions on-screen and the physical representations of the women involved, FO is able to set up a juxtaposition between what appears and what is, thus creating an ironic critique of the mother-daughter relationship, which continually shifts the locus of power amongst the women.

While Mamy appears inferior to the unsuspecting spectator, she is, in fact, demonstrating her superior knowledge of the inner-financial workings of Gaby's household in this scene. It is interesting to note here Mamy’s handicap. Throughout the majority of the film, Mamy is confined to her wheelchair. All those around her must cater to her needs and care for her. Near the end of the film, when Mamy feels the need to comfort Augustine, she stands up out of her wheelchair and runs up the stairs. When questioned about the sudden ability, she hesitantly states that it was a Christmas miracle, as if she could think of no other excuse for her behavior. From this point on, she does not return to her wheelchair. Mamy, similarly to Geneviève in *Faut que*
\textit{ça danse}, is only an invalid when it is to her benefit. Through it, she is able to manipulate those around her into caring for her.

However, during the initial presentation of Mamy, the spectator is as of yet unaware of Mamy’s true ability and must content herself with an analysis of Mamy’s behavior while in the chair. During the course of the conversation at the breakfast table, Mamy reveals to Gaby the tenuous financial situation that her husband, and therefore the entire household, is in, and his emotional turmoil over the situation. Mamy is disclosing information that Gaby is entirely unaware of. Through this revelation, Mamy is asserting that she is still superior to Gaby. She is still the mother overall and aware of all that is going on in the household. However, this supposed shift in maternal superiority is called into question once again later, in the film when it is revealed that Suzon is expecting her first child. Instead of two mothers, the spectator is witness to three generations of mothers negotiating their respective roles, as three women/mothers under the same roof they must each stake their claim as to what they are responsible for within the household.

It is also important to mention that despite the continual shift in maternal power and ambiguity, Mamy, from this scene forward, essentially becomes mother to two sets of children at once. Gaby and Augustine often revert to a childlike interaction of continual bickering, which is mirrored by the interactions between Gaby's two children, Suzon and Catherine, who also argue as if they were small children. Mamy becomes, once more, the mother of all, directing her own children, even though they are adults, and directing her daughter's children in their behavior and interactions with one another. She directs each set of "children" as if she were rearing them and instructing them, preparing them for adulthood, since that is her responsibility as mother. While Mamy is linked to Geneviève through the inability to use her legs, she appears in stark contrast
to her on the level of involvement. Mamy is enmeshed in every aspect of her daughter’s life and in her grand-daughters’ lives, to such an extent because that they are all living in the same home. The situational irony here is that each of the women being "reared" and "prepared" for adulthood is already an adult, or at least well into adolescence, with Catherine at sixteen being the youngest. Therefore, Mamy's efforts are inconsequential, as there is no one left to benefit from her instruction. Despite her attempts to remain the matriarch of the family unit, she is relegated to the periphery, where her involvement can be ignored. Unlike the maternal preoccupation seen in Actrices and Il est plus facile pour un chameau, where overt maternal involvement causes trauma and confusion, Mamy offers the image of a supportive matriarch. She becomes an active participant in her daughter's mother-daughter relationship. While each of these women present examples of involved mothers as they are overly concerned with their daughter's lives, maternal participation is not always possible. Sometimes women are defined by just the opposite, by an utter refusal to support and participate in their child's life. These women exist as if they never had children, mirroring those who remain voluntary childless that were presented in chapter one, and who exhibited childlike characteristics.

**The burden of involvement and women's refusal of it**

When the spectators consider the mothers of grown children within the film corpus considered here, they see several women who choose not to be involved in their children's lives, who choose themselves over their family. The two primary examples are the grandmother from FO's *Le temps qui reste* and the mother, Geneviève, from NL's *Faut que ça danse*. Both of these women are separated physically and emotionally from their families. The result of this separation creates an example of motherhood that more closely resembles one of the non-mothers discussed.
in chapter one, a childlike woman, free from the constraints of a family, who can act selfishly without repercussions. Taking a closer look at these two women provides a counter-critique to the presentation of mothers as actively involved in their daughters' lives, and creates an ironic juxtaposition that even further demolishes society's fixed interpretations of what a mother should be and how women should be defined by that role.

In FO's *Le temps qui reste*, the story centers around Romain and his battle with cancer, but the world around him is riddled with examples of motherhood; his sister is a mother, whom he viciously criticizes, his own mother is present, who he also criticizes and despises. There is also a young woman who asks for Romain's assistance so that she may become a mother. Each of these women exist within Romain's world, seeking out his company and participation in their lives. They seem to be drawn to him, while he flees from them. There is, however, a fourth example of motherhood that Romain goes out of his way to interact with. His grandmother, Laura, lives in another part of France, and Romain must endure a prolonged trip in the car to reach her. This physical distance mirrors the emotional distance that exists between Laura and the rest of the family.

FO makes it clear, through the way he presents the interactions between Laura and Romain, that Laura does not have a sustainable relationship with any other member of the family. During her one and only cameo in the film, she explains to Romain the unbearable weight of responsibility that she felt, which lead to her separating herself from her son, Romain's father, when he was a child, and thus to her remaining distanced from her family. She tells Romain, "Alors je suis partie, j'ai fui. J'ai abandonné mon enfant, ton père." As a result of her flight from responsibility, she was called "une mauvaise mère" and "une putain." She insists that had she not left her child, she, like her husband, would have died. She chose her own life over
that of her child. She departed, leaving her son to fend for himself and to live or die without her intervention or attention. She does not even mention in the course of the conversation who was to be in charge of her son. To her, her departure was important, not the situation her son was left in.

Even though some called her actions selfish, she states that she was simply following her survival instincts. This conversation conveys two important models of motherhood to the spectator. First, the spectator sees the overwhelming weight that a mother feels as the sole caregiver to a child. This was the role this grandmother was expected to assume when her husband died. The grandmother admits her feelings of inadequacy in the face of that responsibility. She feared that caring for a child with no assistance would kill her if she fulfilled it. It was a job that took more determination and strength than she possessed, which leads the spectator to the second assumption about motherhood. There is always a choice between self-preservation and self-sacrifice, which each mother must apparently make.

The separation of mother and child can also be seen in NL's *Faut que ça danse*, which offers an extreme example of an uninvolved mother who chooses herself over her child. As already discussed, Sarah becomes pregnant during the course of the film and seeks her mother's approval for successful entry into the role, which is ironic as her mother is presented by NL, from the very beginning, as incapable of true involvement. As the storyline progresses, the spectator becomes aware that Geneviève will refuse all involvement in her daughter's existence as a mother. She will not acknowledge her daughter as a mother, or participate in the baby's life as a grandmother. This complete refusal is made most clear when Sarah goes into labor.

Sarah's mother has selected to be placed in a mental hospital. During a visit, Sarah steps outside for some air and goes into labor. As can be seen in the image below, Sarah is not only
without maternal support, she is entirely alone when the process starts. This can be understood as a poignant comment on motherhood as a solitary journey. Despite the fact that the creation of a child necessitates the participation of a man, the actual process of nurturing the child and bringing it into the world is a work that the mother supposedly accomplishes all alone. While it is, biologically, her body that must bear the weight, the further implication is that there is no one to possibly share the burden, as we see clearly in *Faut que ça danse*. There is solitude as motherhood is achieved, and NL portrays this isolation as Sarah goes into labor.

Geneviève's total exclusion from any events becomes clear when it is announced inside the mental facility that Sarah has gone into labor. The camera rests stationary as everyone at the table rises and rushes outside to Sarah's assistance, with the exception of her own mother. She remains seated, refusing to go to her daughter. When it comes to her daughter, Geneviève is numb and insensitive, refusing any action on her part that would force any involvement in her daughter's life. This refusal to move can be seen in the image below, where Geneviève is filmed

*Sarah alone as her contractions begin.*
seated in the middle of the image, while all the other patients/visitors around her race to Sarah. It is also important to note the ease with which Geneviève blends into the background. As she is facing away from the camera and her hair is light blond, similar to the color of the walls, she is rather difficult to point out in the middle of the image.

Geneviève remaining behind, refusing to join her daughter, as all three others at her table rise to assist Sarah.

This same absent presence (present in body, but emotionally disengaged) can be seen in the hospital room after Sarah has given birth. Geneviève is physically in the room, but shows no signs that she is aware of the new baby or her daughter's existence as mother. She becomes more childlike than ever, getting into everything, including the food that was brought in for Sarah. Her presentation as childlike does not come as a surprise at the end of the film, it is a characteristic that has been consistent throughout the film. She has been continually dependent on Mootoosamy, her caretaker, for all of her needs. He must run her household, take her on trips, pay for her groceries, and manage her finances. Even after her admittance to the mental hospital, he still acts as a caregiver during her visit to Sarah in the maternity ward. He directs her away
from things she should not play with and away from people she should not bother. He follows her around, preventing her from bothering anyone, as one would a toddler.

Geneviève has been completely dependent on him, and on the rest of her family, and even here in the mental hospital, she need not care for herself. Through this dependence, she becomes a mirror image of the voluntary and involuntary childless women that were presented in the first chapter. As a woman who refuses her role as mother, she essentially becomes a non-mother, losing the title she does not whole-heartedly, or even half-heartedly, embrace. In this manner, the film leads to a satiric criticism of the role of woman, as portrayed by patriarchal society, mother and the identification of motherhood as natural and all fulfilling.

Conclusion

Each of the films discussed in this chapter provides the spectator a mother-daughter relationship that allows the audience to question the validity and importance of the separation and tentative reintegration of a mother and a daughter. Each pair attempts to renegotiate their relationships as the daughter enters the supposedly coveted role of mother. While some mothers choose to be overly involved, others choose to exist outside of their families within the diegetic world of the films. When all of these mothers are taken into context, the spectator is presented with a wide variety of maternal responsibilities and levels of involvement. Through ironic portrayal, each of the films avoids a judgmental paradigm of mother as right or wrong. It is left up to the spectator not to judge these women, but to notice them. They are all mothers, whether they accept the role or not. They are there to widen our understanding and expectation of the maternal principle. Mother is not an easily defined role and should not be treated as such. These films show mother-daughter relationships that are complex, with the grandmother-mother-
daughter relationship being even more so. Through portraying society’s expected maternal roles and then undermining the demonstration of those expectations with the situational and contradictory irony, each director succeeds in challenging the spectators’ preconceived notions of motherhood and forcing them to question what they expect to see based on preconceived cultural ideals on motherhood.
CONCLUSION: Present and future states of maternity

Modern day motherhood

Over the past few decades, women have made tremendous progress through feminist efforts for equality. One might even imagine that feminists work was nearly completed as women are, supposedly, no longer bound to the home by their gender. Women are able to pursue any career path they desire. Even the United States military was recently forced to open all positions to women candidates. Women are now free to choose their career over motherhood at any given point, and pursue an education just as any man would be able to. It is, however, not that clear-cut for women who choose to forego the traditional path of stay-at-home mother. Despite the decades of progress seen on the feminist front, womanhood is still inexplicably bound to motherhood. Women are still defined by the terms “mother” or “non-mother.” In spite of feminists efforts to the contrary, motherhood is still seen by society at large as the ultimate goal of all women. Any woman, having not yet achieved motherhood, will face social scrutiny.

Women who are unable or unwilling to become mothers are criticized and viewed a lesser individual because they have forsaken their "natural" role. As evidenced by the many case studies and articles on the topic. In "Images and Representations of Motherhood," Gayle Letherby addresses the appearance of children on the cover of "Living without Children" as if the publication was defining women by what they were lacking. In "Non-Motherhood: Ambivalent Autobiographies," Gayle Letherby and Catherine Williams attempt to address the negative stereotypes that they personally faced for choosing to remain childless. Letherby and Williams
describe society's stance as "we repeatedly faced the presumption that having a child is central to femininity, that without this desire or ability we are unfeminine and abnormal. Our society still takes for granted that 'woman' equals 'mother' equals 'wife' equals 'adult'" (721). Like most non-mothers, these two women daily face social presumptions that, despite their advanced, educational achievements, they have not yet reached adulthood because they have not yet achieved motherhood.

This assumption is engrained in the beliefs of western society to such an extent that it is even seen in political addresses. In her article on the rejection of motherhood in contemporary French literature, Natalie Edwards comments on society’s acceptance of the criticism of non-mothers. She opens her article with commentary on Senator Bill Hofferman's criticism of Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard as "deliberately barren." She states:

Denigrating a woman on the basis of her choices over her own reproduction is troubling in the twenty-first century, several decades after the legalization of contraception and abortion awarded these choices in law in most Western countries. What is more troubling is that the man who made this comment — and the system that condoned it — finds that it is acceptable to criticize a woman publicly for choosing not to reproduce, which is revelatory of persistent attitudes towards women and maternity. (25)

According to Edwards, the simple fact that this criticism was allowed, even though the Senator was pressured to later apologize, is a sad commentary of the state of the society that we live in. Despite efforts by feminists to obtain equality with men, and to no longer be defined by their reproductive systems, women are still seen by society as mothers, first and foremost.
Societal expectations of the association of woman and mother can also be seen in recently
developed methods of therapy for women suffering from dementia. According to Carefect: *Home Health Services* and *Annals of Long-Term Care*, a popular technique used to encourage
dementia patients to remain active and engaged in life is doll therapy. Women, primarily, and
some men, are given a doll to care for as they progress through the stages of dementia. In the
beginning, the patient will change, feed and tend to all needs of the doll as caring for a real baby.
As their condition progresses and they are no longer physically capable of tending to the infant,
they will talk and sing to it.

There are many facets of the therapy technique that need to be noted. First, the more life-
like the doll is, the higher chance of success the therapy has. And second, the doll must not be
given directly to the patient as the fear of failure in the face of social expectations would cause
the experiment to fail. However, if the patient finds the doll, much like Marcelline with
Nathalie's baby, then their nurturing instincts are expected to kick in and the patient will
willingly feed, cloth, change, and in general care for the doll as long as she is able. This therapy
technique is very exemplary of what society sees as a woman's purpose in life. As she ages and
begins to lose her mental capacity, it is her mothering skills that she will presumably be able to
retain the longest, as it is supposedly her natural function in life. These studies neglected to
mention if the women involved in the therapy techniques were mothers or non-mothers.

Not only does society see women without children as unnatural, but it also sees them as
not having achieved maturity. If a woman is unable, or unwilling to achieve motherhood, she has
forsaken adulthood as well. Gillespie, as cited at the beginning of the conclusion, underscores the
importance of this relationship in her article on the ability of women to be both non-mothers and
feminine. "Nonetheless, in Western societies, pronatalist culture discourses establish a template
of femininity, whereby motherhood is perceived to be the cornerstone of adult femininity" (123-24). A pronatalist culture is a culture that encourages the proliferation of the birthrate. Western cultures have placed such a high expectation on women to achieve motherhood that women who refuse to or cannot attain motherhood are labeled, not only as unfeminine, but also as childlike themselves, as we see in Augustine and Catherine from FO's *8 femmes*.

In order to achieve adulthood and societal respect, it appears women must become mothers. Even in the twenty-first century, these archaic ideals still exist. Women who choose not to become mothers are criticized by society and must continually defend their choice to abstain from motherhood. According to Edwards, "a woman who chooses not to have children and can speak on the judgmental stance of patriarchal society, woman who decides to bring a life into the world is rarely called upon to justify her choice, whereas a woman who decides not to is" (29). It is taken for granted that women want to become mothers. It is the supposedly natural state for all women and therefore the only thing to provide fulfillment. Those women who choose not to embrace their natural state must be questioned in order to find the underlying reasons for their decision. This endless interrogation lends itself to the interpretation that these women must be fixed, and in order to remedy their deviance from nature, the root cause must be feted out. This places an incredible pressure on women to conform to cultural demands. "Scholars have found that nearly all childless women felt that they faced some disapproval from friends and family" (Kelly 165). This pressure to seek and achieve motherhood begins from childhood. Daughters are trained to be mothers, even in the toys they are given, from their earliest existence. This early ability to be caretaker is clearly evident in Lisa (*Ricky*), who as a child herself cares for her mother and her young brother. She knows well how to clothe, feed and comfort him, while his father, an adult nonetheless, is shown to be completely inept at caring for the infant.
Aside from existing as a training tool, the mother-daughter bond is typically presented as incomprehensibly complicated. The mother is expected to be so involved in the life of her child that her identity ceases to exist, and she is expected to teach her daughter to mimic this loss of self. Daughters are taught to identify with their mothers and with society’s perception of the ideal mother. This identification can create an overpowering bond between the two, leaving their identities indistinguishable to the rest of the world around them. Hirsch describes it as such:

What has hardly changed, between Freud and the works of Nancy Chodorow or Luce Irigaray, is the presentation of a mother who is overly invested in her child, powerless in the world, and a constraining rather than an enabling force in the girl's development, and an inadequate and disappointing object of identification. (169)

Instead of allowing her daughter to develop on her own, and become the woman she desires, the stereotypical, traditional mother is isolated from the world and creates a codependent relationship with her daughter.

In reference to the classic myth of Demeter and Persephone that epitomizes this intertwining of two individuals, Spritz states, "well-acted, this scene conveys the sheer weight of ongoing maternal presence as it shapes the consciousness of a daughter" (415). The contemporary mother-daughter dyad, like the one seen in Demeter and Persephone, is cut off from the world around them. They become each other's life and link to the outside world. This codependence was particularly analyzed in regards to the relationship between Marcelline and her mother in Actrices. Marcelline was so dependent on her mother that she even dreamed that her mother made her pregnant.
The result of being isolated from the world is the perpetuation of motherhood as a limited existence, and a perpetuation of the ideal that its existence is a supposed necessity for fulfillment and completion in life. Each of the films analyzed in this work presents women, who, through an ironic portrayal by the director, are able to challenge preconceived notions of motherhood as limitation and open up a dialogue with the spectator as to what motherhood is and what purpose it serves in womanhood.

Aside from only treating societal expectations for all women to become mothers, FO, NL and VBT have each also addressed the notion that once motherhood has been achieved, there is a new set of societal expectations that women are supposed to meet. Included in these assumptions is the anticipation that women are to bear the sole responsibility for their children. One way that this is accomplished is through the introduction of the father figure, who, ironically, remains in the periphery and is never allowed to live up to societal standard of the ideal caretaker as embodied by the perfect mother who does it all, cooking, cleaning and rearing the children.

According to Tarr and Rollet, in regards to the introduction of the father figure in the family dynamics, "comic fantasy of men taking over women's roles while women do their own thing draws attention to the way women/mothers are normally expected to juggle their lives" (174). By showing men failing to adequately care for their children and work to provide for them, FO, VBT and NL convey to the spectator the difficulty and absurdity of placing the weight of caretaker on one parent. The three directors are able to lead the spectator to an understanding of the duality of the role of caretaker. It is a role in which both success and failure exist, and it is a mantle carried by both men and women. In using irony to present the given situations, the directors are able to expand the role of caretaker beyond its current configuration.
All women in the movies analyzed within this corpus face pressure to conform to society's expectations and pursue motherhood. Despite the inherent difficulties in assuming this role, many women still choose to seek it. However, because of the difficulties, many women seek to circumvent it, and redefine womanhood outside of motherhood. According to Kelly, "[Childless] women reflect a radical departure from hegemonic understandings that to be a woman is inextricably bound to motherhood. Indeed an increasing number of women reject and resist pronatalist culture imperatives of femininity that conflate woman with mother" (171). Many contemporary women seek to define themselves without assuming the role of mother. The possibility of their success outside of motherhood highlights the error in the assumption that in order to be whole and to be happy, all women must endeavor to attain motherhood. The role is not as natural as patriarchal society would have women believe. It is a learned role and must be treated as such. One of the conclusions drawn from the films of this corpus is that women who so desire should be allowed to attain it without the expectation of perfection and women who reject it should be allowed to form an identity outside of it.

**Motherhood in François Ozon, Valeria Bruni Tedeschi, and Noémie Lvovsky**

The film corpus chosen for the purpose of this study clearly demonstrates society's ideals about motherhood. Marcelline, from VBT's *Actrices*, most clearly represents the pressure that women feel to conform to expectations and whole-heartedly pursue motherhood. Instead of envisioning Marcelline as simply a mirror of what women suffer, VBT presented Marcelline with an edge of irony. Instead of merely desiring the state of motherhood, Marcelline is obsessed with it, praying for it and even asking a priest to make her a mother. Motherhood consumes her every thought until it begins to interfere with her life. She is no longer able to function and
eventually is so overwhelmed by the pressure to conform that she runs away from her established life. All of this allows VBT to poignantly critique the pressure felt by women to become mothers. It is an impossible burden to carry. However, the termination of the film offers hope for a different future. VBT swims away, after jumping off a bridge, to the tune of her own internal music.

She seeks, and seemingly finds an existence outside of the struggle to conform. Through fleeing patriarchal society, she is able to live on her own terms. This optimistic ending enables VBT to point to a future where women are not bound by their association to motherhood. In examining Katie, from FO's *Ricky*, we saw an example of what women suffer once they have conformed to societal standards and achieved motherhood. Again, the irony played into the mode of presentation, allowing FO to offer commentary and criticism on perceived notions of motherhood. Mothers are frequently expected to be everything to their children, so much so, as previously discussed, that their own identity is lost. Children are a treasure that must be cared for and protected at all costs. FO chose to present Katie as a single mother who bore the sole responsibility, emotionally and financially, of caring for her son. Ironically, he also used Katie as an avenue through which to portray the inherent impossibility of living up to those expectations.

Through this presentation, FO was able to highlight the absurdity of expecting one individual to provide for the needs of an entire family. Katie, in an effort to protect her son, expelled the father from the home, as he was an inadequate caregiver. In an ironic turn of events, Paco, the infant's father, was innocent of all charges. The infant, Ricky, was never abused. When applied to western societies, this incident allows for the interpretation that men are unfairly excluded from the role of caretaker. The role of motherhood is important, but fatherhood is just as important in the development of the child and in the maintenance of the family unit. *Ricky*
shows the spectator that society's demands on a woman are unrealistic, but also allows for the possibility of happiness in a combined responsibility for parenthood.

FO also presents the spectator with a positive interpretation of motherhood as a source of power in his film *Potiche*. The protagonist, Mme Pujol, is able to use her existence and experience as a mother to promote her political career. Motherhood no longer binds her to the home but allows her to achieve her potential. There is an increasing trend, in contemporary French cinema, for pregnancy and motherhood to become "more or less empowering for women," so that it does "not confine them to traditional caring, nurturing roles" (Tarr and Rollet 120). It is this tendency that FO, VBT, and NL have each capitalized on in their recent films. They chose the family unit as the center of their diegetic reality in order to open up a discussion on recent societal trends and propose an optimistic interpretation for the future. Through this tendency, to present women not confined by motherhood, FO, VBT and NL are able to lead the audience to question the standards they see in the world around them. FO, VBT and NL use their characters to interrogate the spectator and open up the possibility for further discussion and evolution of the expectations of mothers and of women.

**Future state of motherhood**

In the past, feminists have fought against motherhood as a site of patriarchal oppression. They have fought against the idea that women are bound to the home and their child, and that these are all they need to achieve happiness. They have fought against the idea that motherhood is natural and all-fulfilling and that women should happily relinquish their ambitions and identities in order to embrace motherhood. In some aspects, they have succeeded, but rearing
children still stands as an impasse to many women, even though recently, many men who have decided to pursue the role of caretaker.

There is however change on the horizon, partially evident in the ironic portrayal of motherhood in contemporary literature and cinema. Now more than ever, women are able to pursue a life outside of motherhood, beginning with the fully embraced refusal of motherhood. According to Edwards, "by restoring voice to the non-mother and insisting that there should be no shame in this lifestyle" women are able to "proclaim a female identity that does not depend upon reproduction" (36). The first step is to refute the negative associations with the refusal to become a mother. Women still face a great deal of mistrust when they choose not to become mothers. Their every action is interrogated, and the society around them wants to know why each decision leads them away from motherhood instead of towards it. By presenting the spectator with characters similar to Marcelline in VBT’s Actrices, who are driven mad by the pressure to obtain motherhood, FO allows the spectator to see the result of the never ending interrogations. Women like Mlle Nadège, in Potiche, are able to demonstrate to the spectator that success outside of motherhood is possible, although difficult to negotiate. Through character portrayal and development throughout the diegetic storyline, FO, VBT and NL are each able to demonstrate a need for change in perceptions of motherhood.

According to Letherby, this transition in the ideologies associated with motherhood is already taking place, "A more positive representation of non-motherhood is emerging and stands in opposition to the narrower and more negative historical and contemporary representations of non-motherhood, where women are defined only in terms of their lack of a relationship to children" (143). These three directors have tapped into a locus of change within western societies, and are therefore able to push for the creation of a new definition of motherhood and
consequently of parenthood and womanhood, direct the spectator toward independent definitions of each.

**Where do we go from here?**

FO, NL and VBT have made tremendous progress in calling attention to the difficulties associated with motherhood and the pressure many women face to pursue that path to happiness. But there is yet much research and analysis to be done. Women are still defined by their relationship to motherhood (they are mothers or non-mothers), despite decades of work by feminists. Given that women are physically designed to create, carry and birth children, redefining woman without motherhood is difficult. However, perhaps, instead of endeavoring to remove motherhood from womanhood and define them independently of one another, progress in the future can continue towards redefining motherhood and eliminating the ideal "good" mother that society imposes on all women, mother and non-mothers alike. Even voluntarily childless women face societal expectations to be "good" mothers. While they have not yet achieved motherhood, they are expected to do so and to desire it whole-heartedly. Without achieving motherhood, they cannot be expected to be happy. FO, VBT and NL each present women who carry all aspects of woman and mother, demonstrating success and failure within the same role. The implication is that both can exist without the result being undeniable failure. The "good" mother is comprised of more than perfection in every aspect of her life and her existence is not necessary to be successful.

While this *oeuvre* has dealt with the ironic representation of motherhood within a very specific film corpus, this topic is also treated in many other films by the selected directors as well as many directors outside of this corpus. FO's recent *Jeune et jolie* (2013) presents the spectator
with a complicated mother-daughter relationship where the two women once again mirror one another; only this time in their sexually promiscuous behavior. The violence in this mother-daughter dyad is directed from the mother to the daughter instead of from the daughter to the mother, as we saw in VBT's *Actrices*, which presents the possibility of a different interpretation of feminine violence. VBT's *Un château en Italie* (2013) presents a parody of the quest for motherhood as Louise Rossi Levi bullies her significant other into participating in an in vitro fertilization procedure and then plays a game of cat and mouse in a church while in search of a chair that is said to be good luck for expectant mothers. As an actress, VBT starred in *Il capitale umano*, by Paolo Virzì (2013), which yet again presents the spectator with family dynamics at its core. In 2015, NL played the conservative, country mother as she dealt with the death of her husband and the untraditional sexual orientation of her daughter. If we expand our gaze and consider films outside of the corpus of directors and actors discussed here, we see films like *Fatime*, by Philippe Faucon (2015), that treats single motherhood, and *21 nuits avec Pattie*, by Arnaud Larrieu (2015), where a middle aged daughter must deal with the death of her mother. Family relations is currently a popular topic in French cinema and much remains for me, and others, to explore, not only in the representation of mothers and the mother-daughter relationship, but also in regards to nontraditional family dynamics such as absent parents, surrogate caretakers, and problematic youth.
WORK CITED


APPENDIX A

François Ozon

Potiche (2010)

Set in the 1970’s, Potiche tells the story of an umbrella factory owner, Robert Pujol, and his family. The workers at the factory go on strike and take Robert hostage. When his wife finally orchestrates his release, he suffers a heart attack and must take a medical leave of absence from his position of manager and owner of the factory. His wife, Suzanne Pujol, steps in and takes his place. Under her guidance, the factory exceeds all expectations. The strikes cease and Suzanne even brings her children into the business with her. As manager of the factory, Suzanne relies heavily on the advice of Maurice Babin, the deputy mayor and her husband’s political rival. Throughout the course of the film, it is revealed that Maurice and Suzanne had an affair in the early days of her marriage to Robert, in fact, she had so many affairs that she is unsure of the identity of the father of her son. Despite the fact that the factory is running smoother than ever with Robert out of the way, he desires to return as manager of the factory when his health permits. Since Suzanne will not relinquish her position easily, Robert must turn their daughter Joëlle against her mother. With Joëlle’s assistance, Robert is able to vote his wife out of the factory at a meeting of the shareholders. Even though Suzanne is forced out of the factory, she does not return to being a housewife. Instead, she strives for something larger, and the movie ends with her election to the position of Deputy Mayor.

Ricky (2009)

Katie lives a mundane life, getting up every morning to drop her daughter off at school and fulfill the repetitive tasks of a factory worker. She and her daughter Lisa live in a small one bedroom apartment. Both their lives drastically change when Katie meets Paco at work. They quickly become lovers and Paco moves in. Shortly after their romance begins, Katie has a baby, Ricky. Ricky is not like any other child, for he soon sprouts wings. The bruises on his back from the process are misinterpreted by Katie to be paternal child abuse and Paco is exiled from the family. Katie and Lisa do all in their power to care for the special infant, foregoing school and work to be his caretakers. When he is eventually discovered by the world, Paco returns to assist Katie and Lisa in the raising of young Ricky. When he returns, Paco convinces Katie to let the press see Ricky for a fee, money that could be used to help raise Ricky. Unfortunately, Katie accidentally lets loose of the rope tethering her to Ricky and he flies away. Katie is able to see Ricky briefly before the end of the film, allowing her to accept Ricky’s fate and move on with her life with Paco and Lisa.
*Le temps qui reste* (2005)

*Le temps qui reste* tells the story of Romain, a young successful homosexual photographer. Shortly after the story begins, Romain learns that he has terminal cancer. As he struggles with the knowledge of his impending death, he hides the truth of his illness from his family and lover at the same time that he distances himself from them. The only one he confides in is his grandmother, when he takes an extended road trip mid film to spend time with her. She convinces him to reconcile with his sister and seek comfort in his family, which he does to the best of his ability. This road trip to see his grandmother also provides François Ozon the opportunity to introduce Jany, a café waitress. She and her husband are struggling with infertility, and although Romain is completely unknown to them, they ask him to help Jany father a child. While Romain refuses at first, he eventually says yes, seeing this possible child as a means to overcome death. Jany becomes pregnant, and Romain leaves all his worldly possessions to this child that he will never meet.

*8 femmes* (2002)

As she returns home from her first semester away at college, Suzon is surprised to find her father has been murdered in the night. The eight women of the household, Mamy (the grandmother), Gaby (the mother), Catherine (the sister), Augustine (the aunt), Louise (the maid), Chanel (the cook), Pierrette (the sister-in-law), come together to solve the mystery of Marcel’s murder. During the investigation, they each take turns interrogating and accusing one another, revealing secrets all the while, such as Suzon is pregnant with her father’s child. Gaby was pregnant with Suzon, by another man, when she married Marcel. Pierrette and Chanel are lovers. Louise was having an affair with Marcel. Augustine was in love with Marcel, and jealous of Gaby’s feminine appearance. Catherine and her father concocted this murder scheme to give him a break from the pettiness of his family. When Chanel figures out Catherine’s secret, Catherine shoots at her to silence her. In the end, Catherine reveals the truth asserting that she was the only one that actually loved her father. Unfortunately, Marcel is so disturbed by the actions of his family after his supposed murder that he takes his own life shortly after Catherine reveals that he is still alive.

Noémie Lvovsky

*Camille redouble* (2012)

Camille is a middle-aged actress going through a difficult divorce. Her husband is fathering a child with his mistress. The divorce is forcing Camille to sell their home. She turns to alcohol to remedy her problems. During a New Years’ Eve Party, Camille is miraculously, transported back in time to her adolescence. Once there, she is able to see her mother again, who died when Camille was a teenager, and to reconcile with her. Camille always regretted that she never had the opportunity to tell her mother she was pregnant. She remedies this regret while stuck in her past. While her mother’s reaction is not as positive as Camille desired, at least she was able to reveal her own daughter’s future existence. Camille also has the chance to fall in love again with her future husband. Camille realizes that she still loves him and always will, she, therefore,
allows herself to enter a relationship with him. However, she also begins an amorous *rapport* with her science professor, finding comfort in revealing to him the truth about being transported back in time. Camille even seeks him out after returning to the present. She does not reconcile with her estranged husband when she returns to the present, but is able to part with him on friendly terms.

*Faut que ça danse* (2007)

Geneviève and Salomon separated long before the beginning of *Faut que ça danse*. Geneviève lives with her caretaker, Mr. Mootoosamy, and Salomon is actively pursuing a physical relationship with Violette, a slightly younger woman who has never been in a serious relationship. Salomon is still involved in his daughter’s life, frequently visiting her and her husband at their home. He is even there on the day that Sarah returns home from the OBGYN with the exciting news that she is pregnant. As Sarah learns to accept her impending motherhood, she must also learn to negotiate her relationships with her mother and father. Salomon places his relationship with Violette above that of his daughter, refusing to even acknowledge her existence in Violette’s presence. Geneviève becomes increasingly dependent on her caretaker, to such an extent that her family places her in a psychiatric long term care facility. It is in this facility that Sarah goes into labor and must have her child. All disputes seem resolved by the end as Sarah’s father brings his mistress to the hospital to meet the grandchild. Geneviève visits as well, once again under the care of Mr. Mootoosamy.


Edith and François move to the country shortly after their marriage. François is a doctor, and they move in next to Jacques and Carole so that he can learn how to be a country doctor from Jacques. As next door neighbors, Edith and Carole quickly become friends. As co-workers and neighbors François and Jacques also become friends quickly. The two couples spend most of their free time together, frequently having picnic and family dinners. As the four become friends, Jacques and Edith begin having an affair. They sneak around and imagine what life would be like if it were just the two of them. At a family dinner on evening, Carole discovers their secret forcing them to end their affair. Jacques reacts violently to the separation and assaults Carole, placing her in the hospital. In the end both couples decide to work through their issues and remain married. They just cannot do so as neighbors, so Edith and François move away, leaving Jacques to pine after Edith and regret her loss.

Valeria Bruni Tedeschi

*Un château en Italie* (2013)

Louise Rossi Levi is a successful single actress who is dealing with the impending death of her brother, Ludovic, from AIDS, and the forced selling of their family home in Italy. She is also struggling with infertility. She wants a child above most everything else in life, but has no way to achieve it. Shortly after the beginning of the diegetic story, Louise meets Nathan, a young aspiring actor completely infatuated with Louise. After he tracks her down in Paris, the two
begin to date, despite the large age gap. Louise is the same age as Nathan's mother. Nathan, unwillingly, assists Louise with an in-vitro fertilization. Forcing him to do so places an additional strain on their relationship, resulting in the termination of their liaison. Louise then has to face the loss of her brother and the failure of the in-vitro fertilization treatment on her own. After their separation, Nathan realizes what he has lost in regards to his relationship to Louise and once again tracks her down. The movie ends with Nathan running across the lawn of Louise's family home in Italy to embrace Louise.

*Actrices* (2007)

*Actrices* tells the story of two women, Marcelline and Nathalie. They are both actresses and long time acquaintances. Marcelline is the most successful professionally, and Nathalie is the most successful personally. Nathalie has a husband and a new infant at home, but her career has suffered as a result of her focus on her personal life, so much so that she now plays as an understudy instead of a being an actress. The role of star actress is reserved for Marcelline, who is the leading lady in the theatre's most recent production of Turgenev's *Un mois à la compagne*. Unfortunately, the one thing that she desires above all else is out of reach, as she has no feasible way to become a mother. Marcelline repeatedly seeks assistance from the Catholic Church, from praying to Mary, to asking a priest to make her a mother. In the end, the OBGYN tells her that she is running out of time and Marcelline realizes that there is nothing that she can do. She is so overwhelmed by life that she runs away in the middle of a performance and jumps off a bridge. While, at first, this appears to be a suicide attempt, the last image of the film is Marcelline swimming away to the sound of jazz music.


Frederica's father is dying and her relationship with her sister and mother is stained. Her mother is overly involved in her personal life and insists on meeting Frederica's long time boyfriend. Frederica's boyfriend wants to find a place they can call their own and to start a family. Frederica is terrified by this proposition and instead reignites a relationship with a former lover who is now married with children. She is so engrossed in this new relationship that she follows her lover's wife and child around and forces a chance meeting. She even imagines her possible life with her lover and his wife. This relationship does not last and she returns to her boyfriend and find a way to move forward with the relationship. She must also come to terms with the reality of her parents' relationship. Her mother had an affair early in the marriage and her sister is not her father's child. In a jealous moment, Frederica reveals to her sister the hate that her father harbors toward her sister for their mother's infidelity. Before her father's death, Frederica attempts to patch her relationship with her sister. In the end, Frederica manages to reunite with her boyfriend and to mend her relationship with her sister. Despite the lack of comical situations throughout the film, it ends in a satirical slapstick comedy scene, where Frederica's father's coffin is too large to fit inside the small plane, despite the efforts of the two men to wedge it into the door.