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Women on top? Challenging the “Mancession” narrative in the 2010s chick flick

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ABSTRACT

The term “mancession” appeared after the economic crisis, spreading the false assumption that men were more affected by the recession than women. This discourse was fuelled across different US media outlets, including film. Some genres, such as the corporate melodrama, supported this rhetoric directly, while others did so more obliquely, as is the case of the chick flick, which pivoted to the trope of the successful working woman during the 2010s. While some contemporary films seem to pander to the myth of the “mancession” by showing women getting ahead in their careers while men fall implicitly or explicitly behind, this article argues that there is an increasing number of chick flicks that highlight sexism and gender inequality at the workplace, challenging postfeminist images of female success and empowerment. The essay analyzes how post-2008 (but pre-pandemic) working woman chick flicks downplay traditional concerns in the genre, such as romance, and open their scope to focus on women’s professional struggles, deploying the “mancession” narrative only to expose its contrivance, thus showing a greater feminist awareness than many of their predecessors often do.

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On a big screen, a movie trailer shows Cameron Diaz as the leader of a group of fierce woman warriors chasing a squad of male fighters out of their land. A female voice sets the scene: “a world where a hybrid breed of mutant male savages are feeding on the barren lands of Mother Earth. A time where mankind has been replaced by womankind.” The name of the film is *The Amazon Games*. This could very well be Hollywood’s next girl power franchise but it is just the name of the fantasy saga whose trailer Carol (Lake Bell) – the protagonist of *In a World ...* (Lake Bell 2013) – aspires to voice. As a woman trying to make it in the male-dominated voice-over profession, her experience is far removed from the images of female empowerment depicted in this fictitious blockbuster but cinema tended to focus on the exception that *The Amazon Games* represent instead. The decade of the 2010s did see a remarkable amount of women-centric epic and action movies featuring seemingly empowered female characters in the vein of this invented quadrilogy (*The Hunger Games* [2012-15], *The Divergent Series* [2014-16], *Star Wars* [2015 -19], *Ghostbusters* [2016], *Wonder Woman* [2017], *Tomb Raider* [2018], *Captain Marvel* [2019],

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Charlie's Angels [2019], *Alita: Battle Angel* [2019], *Birds of Prey* [2020]), but it is also rich in chick flicks focusing on women succeeding at the workplace against all odds. Films like *Morning Glory* (2010), *I Don't Know How She Does It* (2011), *The Five-Year Engagement* (2012), *In a World . . .*, *Trainwreck* (2015), *The Intern* (2015), *I Feel Pretty* (2018), *Second Act* (2018), *Late Night* (2019), *Long Shot* (2019), *Isn't It Romantic?* (2019), *Always Be My Maybe* (2019), *The High Note* (2020), and *Like a Boss* (2020) feature strong-willed women who manage to get ahead in their careers in a post-recessionary context. This context often goes unacknowledged by the films, but it is impossible to ignore for the contemporaneous spectator, who sees women thrive on screen in a moment of economic precarity, while men fall implicitly—or sometimes explicitly—behind.

For this reason, these movies appear to reinforce the so-called “mancession” narrative—the perception that men were more severely affected by the crisis than women. However, despite their frequent deployment of “failing men and coping females” tropes (Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker 2014, 9), this article argues that some of these films also highlight sexism and gender inequality at the workplace, challenging postfeminist images of female success and empowerment. By focusing on *In a World . . .* and *Late Night* as examples, the essay considers how some post-2008 (but pre-pandemic) working woman chick flicks deploy “mancession” rhetoric only to expose its contrivance, thus showing a greater feminist awareness than many of their predecessors do.

What “mancession”?

The term “mancession” (or “he-cession”) was coined after the economic meltdown by Mark Perry, professor of economics, in his blog *Carpe Diem* (2010) and it spread like wildfire during the following years across media outlets. The Great Recession that began in 2008 was deemed a “mancession” because unemployment among men rose more quickly at the onset of the downturn. Men’s and women’s unemployment rates were similar before the crisis, but in August 2009 male unemployment reached 10.9% (up from 5% in 2007), which constitutes the largest unemployment gender gap in the postwar era (Ayşegül Şahin, Joseph Song, and Bart Hobijn 2010). This difference is mostly attributed to men’s overrepresentation in those fields most directly affected by the recession, such as construction and manufacturing; while women’s work force concentrated in sectors that suffered fewer job losses initially, such as education, services, health care, and government.

The notion that women were thriving while men were falling behind led many segments of the US media to conclude that the situation meant “the end of men” (Hanna Rosin 2010) and that women would “rule the world” (Jessica Bennet and Jesse Ellison 2010) in this new context of economic instability. This brought about a renewal of masculinity in crisis tropes (Negra and Tasker 2014, 2; Suzanne Leonard 2014) and disseminated the idea of “reverse gender discrimination” by the Obama administration (Christina Hoff Summers 2009). Crucially, men’s “downfall” was presented by the media as the direct consequence of women’s rise, thus pitting the sexes against each other and depicting the tensions created by the recession as a gender conflict (Janice Peterson 2012, 281–82).

The “mancession” narrative became so pervasive that it was even claimed to threaten the American dream (Doug McKelway 2010). It told a story of male decline and female

ascendancy that was much less connected to the actual figures than to “larger cultural and economic anxieties that predate the Great Recession and that have to do with changing relations between men and women” (Alice O’Connor 2010). As many researchers have noted, the “mancession” was in fact a myth. The truth is that the recession’s impact on working women was much greater than public discourses claimed, with unemployment rates becoming particularly high for female main breadwinners, which led some commentators to suggest that the Great Recession was actually a “mom-cession” rather than a “mancession” (Jenna Goudreau 2010). Apart from this, women continued to experience structural inequalities that were in place long before the crash: on the one hand, lower rates of female unemployment were partly explained by an already unbalanced gender proportion in the labor force before the recession, with a 90.9% employment rate among American men (ages 25–54) versus only 75.4% of women in the same age group (Lawrence Mishel et al. 2012). As a result, even at the peak of the “mancession,” a greater proportion of men were still employed. On the other hand, women continued to endure the gender pay gap, earning 77 cents to the male dollar (Rosalind C. Barnett and Caryl Rivers 2011).

These gender-based inequities were rarely acknowledged in public discourses about the recession, nor was the fact that while men did lose more jobs than women, they recovered much more quickly: ninety percent of the jobs created after the recession in the US went to male workers. Meanwhile, the situation for women got worse rather than better during the recovery, partly because a great proportion of female workers were employed in the public sector, which was subject to important deficit reductions in the years after the downturn (Barnett and Rivers 2011). All of this led some commentators to label the economic recovery as a “man-covery” (Dara Z. Strolovitch 2013) and the “mancession” as an actual “she-cession” (Kimberly Christensen 2015), but these notions were never as widespread as “mancession” discourses. All in all, it can be surmised that the real crisis did not lie in the actual figures of the recession, but in the suggestion that “gendered norms were being challenged and gendered disparities possibly narrowing or reversing” (Strolovitch 2013, 172). Men’s predicament was often presented as women’s fault, creating “the mythology that in a new economic order, motivation and opportunity are both unequally apportioned in favor of women” (Leonard 2014, 54). This rhetoric was channelled through different media outlets in the years after the downturn, with film and television playing a crucial role in its dissemination.

Men lose, women win

In their examination of gender representation in recessionary culture, Negra and Tasker (2014, 15–17), and Michele Schreiber (2022) point at the corporate melodrama as one of the main sites of expression for recessionary masculinity in film. The failing male finance worker became a central figure in the cinematic articulation of men’s anxieties about their dwindling privilege in the face of precarity. In films such as *The Last Days of Lehman Brothers* (2009), *Up in the Air* (2009), *Money Never Sleeps* (2010), *The Company Men* (2010), *Margin Call* (2011), *Arbitrage* (2012), and *The Big Short* (2015) the downturn is presented as a tragic scenario for men that implies a threat to existing embedded systems of white male power (Schreiber 2022, 44). Some of these films also reveal an underlying misogyny

in their palpable rage against those career-oriented female characters who do not “play the part of accessory figures to the white male identity quest” (Negra and Tasker 2014, 17).

The discursive trope of failing males (and thriving females) is also present in man-centric comedies. The figure of the “slacker,” which became popular right before the recession in films such as *Failure to Launch* (2006), *You, Me and Dupree* (2006), or *Knocked Up* (2007), provided a convenient shorthand for “recession-era categorizations that slot men and women into opposing teams” (Leonard 2014, 42). This “boy-man” that has often voluntarily dropped out of the rat race and refuses to grow up remained popular after the financial crash (*Hall Pass* [2011]; *Jeff, Who Lives at Home* [2012]), contrasting with the “striver” woman he is usually paired with: a high-achieving female who has to discipline him into the adult world and is often punished for doing so. As happens in the corporate melodrama, these films also displayed a certain degree of anger against the women that enforce normative commitments onto the man-child protagonist (Leonard 2014, 45).

As far as women-centric comedies are concerned, it should be noted that these have rarely engaged seriously with their economic context. Despite this, there is a significant difference between pre and post-recession chick flicks. Pre-2008 movies tend to have a more optimistic tone and they often downplay the importance of female labor by celebrating unambitious characters willing to sacrifice work for love or—in the case of more career-oriented female protagonists—resorting to retreatist or downshifting plots (Joanne Hollows 2006, 108; Diane Negra 2009, 15; Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters 2014, 65). In contrast, post-recessionary chick flicks often entail a revision of old certainties about gender, class, and coupledness and tend to display a gloomier view on relationships (Diane Negra 2020, 58). For Suzanne Leonard, the climate of scarcity brought “a sense of suspicion of any affective attachment, be it romantic, sexual, homosocial, or familial” (Suzanne Leonard 2020, 64) prompted by a neoliberal mind-set of self-interest. This heightened sense of self-preservation also resulted in a greater preoccupation in the genre for the material realities of its female characters, who could no longer be unproblematically detached from their jobs. Despite this, they still retained traditionally feminine characteristics in the shape of a “safe” kind of entrepreneurialism involving occupations associated with the domestic sphere such as baking and crafts (Pamela Thoma 2014) or, again, in the subordination of career to romance (*Bridesmaids* [2011], *What’s Your Number?* [2011]). If male redundancy is presented as a drama, female unemployment constitutes a comedic scenario fraught with romantic potential, with the achievement of intimacy foreclosing all other concerns. Negra and Tasker argue that in the recessionary chick flick female precarity is equated with romantic failure and—even if romantic heroines can no longer afford to relinquish their jobs so easily—heterosexual coupledness provides a sense of economic (and ideological) stabilization for the female characters (Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker 2013, 351).

As Negra and Tasker acknowledge, this kind of resolution feels increasingly strained, which I believe has prompted a change in some of the chick flick’s tropes during the 2010s. This article engages with some of the ideas put forward by these authors in *Gendering the Recession* (Negra and Tasker 2014), considering the chick flick’s response to the downturn and how the genre has evolved during the decade. While the romantic plot still remains a central element in many of these films, this article aims to highlight a growing tendency in the chick flick to subordinate love to professional achievements.

The way in which some of these movies portray women's professional prospects has often been criticized, though. Suzanne Leonard, for instance, points out how some cultural texts of the early 2010s deploy the successful girl trope to trumpet postfeminist notions of equality and choice that disregard issues of race and class privilege and misrepresent the dire economic panorama in which their high-achieving characters are inscribed: "The false assumption that assertiveness equals ascendance, and that career success represents an option available to women at all points in the life cycle likewise reflects a common discursive positioning of women as impervious to a financial crisis that has nevertheless devastated men" (Leonard 2014, 32). In this light, films such as *The Five-Year Engagement* – in which the female character's accomplishments bring about her partner's professional downshifting—would be contributing to the "mancession" narrative. For Leonard, this kind of movie fuels resentment between the sexes by presenting women as "symbols of financial vitality" (Leonard 2014, 51) that outpace men, who occupy increasingly irrelevant positions in their lives.

According to this, chick flicks like *The Proposal* (2009), *Morning Glory*, *I Don't Know How She Does It*, *In a World . . .*, *The Intern*, *Second Act*, *Late Night*, *Long Shot*, *Always Be My Maybe*, *The High Note*, and *Like a Boss* would be pandering to discourses of "mancession" by showing women getting ahead in their jobs while men fall behind. Even though some of these films may lend themselves to this reading, I would argue that they also show the price women—unlike men—have to pay for their professional achievements, and how rare their success is in predominantly male professions. In so doing, some of these chick flicks challenge the sexism of "mancession" rhetoric, showing a greater feminist awareness than many of their predecessors, even if they sometimes indulge in the habit of providing fantasy resolutions based on the neoliberal ethos of individualism that overlook structural inequalities.

These films also deviate from the genre's propensity to rely on heterosexual coupling to secure economic stability. Quite the opposite, the movies mentioned above feature career women—mostly in traditionally male professions—in which love often plays second fiddle to professional achievements. In what follows I will analyze two films that I consider representative of this trend: one from the mainstream, *Late Night*, and one from the independent sector, *In a World . . .*. These movies have been chosen because of their points in common. Both have a similar premise: a young woman's struggle to break into a male-dominated field in a post-recessionary context. They are also female-centered projects dealing with the entertainment industry in a self-reflexive manner, thanks partly to Mindy Kaling's and Lake Bell's double duties as both writers and lead actresses (Bell also directs). Through these examples I hope to show how, despite their varying degree of engagement with the task of unpacking sexist discourses about women at the workplace, some chick flicks of the 2010s foreground feminist concerns more directly than their predecessors.

Never give up: *Late Night*

Late Night is a mainstream film directed by Nisha Ganatra. The script is penned by Mindy Kaling, who also plays Molly, the protagonist. Working at a chemical plant, Molly's dream of becoming a comedy writer seems impossible, but one day she manages to obtain a job interview at Katherine Newbury's acclaimed late-night talk show. Katherine (Emma

Thompson)), its legendary host, is presented as ruthless and out of touch with reality. When she is accused of hating women, she decides to hire one immediately and Molly happens to be in the right place at the right time, becoming a token in an all-male writing room. Thus, she will have to overcome her colleagues' misgivings and prove her worth while helping save Katherine's show, whose audience ratings are on the wane.

Late Night and *In a World . . .* share a similar starting point: both of their protagonists gain access to jobs that are initially presented as completely out of reach for them. Like Kaling herself—who according to her autobiography was brought to *The Office's* (NBC, 2005-2013) writing room as a diversity hire—Molly joins the staff of a prime time late-night talk show despite being a young Indian woman with no connections in the industry, no prestigious degree and no previous experience. At first, everyone takes for granted that the position is for the brother of one of the writers, Tom (Reid Scott), whose father used to work for Katherine. The writers' room is depicted as a boys' club in which women are not welcome. When Molly joins them she is coldly received, having deprived Tom's brother of what is perceived as his "natural" right to the job. In a later scene Molly overhears Tom—who has an elite college degree—complaining on the phone about this injustice: "Right now it is a hostile environment in which to be an educated white male. It's staggering how unfair it is, ok? Staggering! Yeah, and they completely overlooked my brother." This scene addresses directly the widespread assumption that women are outpacing men in the market place, usurping their main breadwinner roles (Liza Mundy 2012). Tom's grievance against Molly's recruitment highlights how oblivious he is to his own white male upper-class privilege. This idea is explicitly voiced by Molly, who confronts him: "I'd rather be a diversity hire than a nepotism hire 'cause at least I had to beat out every minority and woman to get here. You just had to be born." The film makes it clear that Tom's and his male colleagues' animosity toward Molly is not a matter of figures—one woman versus nine men in the writers' room can hardly be considered as a takeover—but they deem Molly's hiring "staggering" and "unfair" because of the threat it represents to the established power dynamics between the genders at the workplace.

Molly does manage to stand up for herself in this scene, but despite her apparent confidence, her claim to the job is constantly questioned by her peers. In a poignant conversation with Katherine, she complains about Tom "inheriting" the job from his father. Katherine reminds Molly then that her claim to the position is not strictly meritocratic either, just like Katherine's own beginnings: married to one of the most revered television personalities of the last decades, she was often accused of sleeping her way to the top. As Katherine tells Molly, "the point is you're here and if you want people to see you as something other than a diversity hire, you have to make them. It's not fair, but it never is for women." The film is thus highlighting the fact that Molly's and Tom's hirings are not that different and—even though both positions can only be kept through talent and hard work—unlike Tom's, Molly's worth will be constantly doubted. In the end, Molly accepts she did not get the job because of her merits, but she becomes determined to take advantage of the situation—just like privileged white men have always done—and prove her worth. The movie thus highlights the fact that women and minorities are perfectly well-equipped to occupy the same positions as white men, but they need to be given the chance to show their talent. This discourse destigmatizes positive discrimination, suggesting quotas are necessary for the marketplace to avoid missing out on valuable members of the work force, and criticizing the deceptiveness of the meritocratic

neoliberal rhetoric, which clashes with the reality faced by those who cannot compete for a job on equal terms because of their gender, race, or socio-economic background.

Late Night also condemns inequality in the way women are treated more broadly in the public sphere. When it is revealed that Katherine had an affair with a younger member of her staff, she is viciously slut-shamed by the media, which highlights the double standard men and women are routinely subjected to. However, despite her mistake, she is not harshly punished by the narrative, being promptly forgiven by her husband and by the audience when she addresses the issue in her show. Following Molly's advice, she opens up, confessing her flaws. Crucially, it is not her infidelity that is presented as Katherine's biggest sin, but the neglect of her work. Her disconnection from her audience in the last years had been punished with dwindling ratings. By contrast, her personal misstep is promptly forgotten when she manages to get in touch with the audience's interests again.

In this way, *Late Night* refuses to judge women by different standards than men in the treatment of this character's sex scandal. However, in so doing, it also reveals a certain degree of engagement with the neoliberal ethos of individualism: it is the disclosure of Katherine's inner self that redeems her in front of her audience and eventually grants her forgiveness and renewed success. Unlike her previous attempts at regaining the audience's favour, which were penned by others and felt fabricated, Katherine's final monologue is actually her own. This moment is movingly real, not only thanks to Emma Thompson's outstanding performance, but also due to the way in which the scene is visually coded. In contrast with the quick editing pace and comic tone of the scenes in which Katherine self-consciously exploits her own persona in order to appeal to a broader audience, her final speech feels solemn and honest, thanks to a slower editing tempo filled with longer takes and increasingly closer framing that emphasizes the intensity of the moment; as well as point of view shots that convey the character's agitation at her revelation. The abundance of reverse shots highlighting the audience's emotional reaction to Katherine's words give us the key to understand that she has managed to win everyone over thanks to the honest disclosure of her true self.

After her "near miss" with cancel culture Katherine seems to change willingly, fully embracing the idea that taking advantage of the "uniqueness" of her voice as an older female talk show hostess in a male-dominated sector is what makes her stand out from the rest. Conversely, Molly is presented as well-equipped to write for her, and—despite being a diversity hire—it is her individual talent, determination, personal drive, and singularity that eventually lead Molly to achieve her goal. The characters' "specialness" as females in a largely male industry is thus turned from weakness into strength by a movie that cannot entirely shake individualistic ideals but is still committed to denounce gender imbalance at the workplace and willing to support affirmative action.

At first sight, Molly's and Katherine's eventual success seems to reinforce the "mancesion" myth, but it can be argued that the "women on top" discourse is actually challenged in *Late Night* by questioning how "on top" these women really are. The movie presents female characters in important positions who are the exception rather than the rule in their professional contexts. Apart from Molly, whose "exceptionality" as a comedy writer in a male-dominated world is the pivotal conflict in the film, there are two other female characters: Katherine and Caroline (Amy Ryan), the new head of the network. She is only featured in a few scenes and she is depicted as calculating and merciless in her

determination to improve the network's ratings. As in Caroline's case, Katherine is the only woman among her peers—and she is about to be replaced by a younger, less prepared male comedian who sports a xenophobic, sexist brand of humor – which again challenges “mancession” discourses of “female ascendancy.” The fact that the two women in positions of power are depicted as cold and out of touch with their feelings is in synchrony with another “mancession” trope: the “masculinized woman,” who has had to harden herself and “masquerade” as male to succeed (Elena Oliete-Aldea 2021). However, while this trope is usually chastised in genres such as the corporate drama, the “masculine women” of *Late Night* are eventually redeemed. As is often the case in the career-woman chick flick, Katherine is humanized when she changes her attitude in order to save her show. Conversely, Caroline is capable of recognizing the value of Katherine's effort, allowing her to keep her job. The film's choice not to use either of these two characters as scapegoats reveals a self-conscious attempt not to blame particular women for the social ills depicted in the it. Instead, structural sexism, racism, classism, and ageism are presented as primary causes for both Molly's and Katherine's predicaments.

The singularity of Molly's and Katherine's status in *Late Night* as television writer and host respectively highlights the conspicuous scarcity of women in this industry, thus questioning the “mancession” narrative by rejecting the myth that women have the upper hand in the new economic order. The film thus points to a reality that has largely been silenced by the media: that white upper and middle-class men were not hit harder by the depression and the status quo was never substantially altered. Despite this, being a mainstream comedy, *Late Night* features a feel-good ending through a coda that tries to reconcile the values of individual worth with the need for structural change. One year later, the show is still on air, but the office looks very different now, having become a more welcoming and diverse work space. This is Molly's doing: at one point, her continuation in the show depends on one condition: “no more hiring people who all look the same.” One year later her wish has been granted. A tracking shot follows Katherine as she walks through the office in a series of long takes that show a luminous, friendly, and diverse workplace. The film thus provides a fantasy of systemic change thanks to individual action that is not a reality yet. However, despite the unlikelihood of such an ending in the real world and the film's previous appeal to Molly's and especially Katherine's uniqueness and personal qualities, it still presents structural—rather than solely individual—change as an important ingredient for the happy ending, which problematizes post-recessionary media culture's rhetoric on how success and happiness can be achieved through personal agency and self-management alone (Negra and Tasker 2014, 2).

This coda also encapsulates the nature of the two main characters' happy endings. Katherine seems a different person now: all smiles, and sporting a softer, more feminine look, her new-found warmth and “truth” are rewarded with the audience's applause as she steps into the studio. Not only does she go unpunished for her infidelity, but her disregard for traditionally heteronormative goals such as family and motherhood is celebrated, with professional success being presented as a legitimate source of fulfillment for women. Similarly, even though a romantic relationship between Tom and Molly is suggested the end, romance is conspicuously downplayed, as Molly's actual happy ending consists in having been promoted to head monologue co-writer. Here it is worth noticing that, after saving the show, Molly could have easily replaced Tom in his position as main writer. However, the movie chooses to present both characters as equals by the

end. Thus, the film proposes a fairly traditional heteronormative version of equality based on gender balance that complies with the conventions of mainstream romantic comedy while putting forward a subtle critique to the “mancession” narrative: Molly was never “on top” and did not intend to take away Tom’s job, she just sought equal opportunity. In this way, not only does *Late Night* display a feminist awareness in subordinating traditionally female goals to notions of personal autonomy and fulfillment, it also shows its engagement with a post-recessionary context in which attaining professional stability has become the chick flick’s real quest, and “the One” is not a man, but a job.

Finding your voice: *In a World* . . .

In a World . . . shares many of *Late Night*’s themes. It is an independent film written and directed by Lake Bell, who also plays the main character: Carol, a vocal coach trying to break into the movie trailer voice-over profession. She is the daughter of Sam Soto (Fred Melamed), one of the most celebrated figures in the business but, rather than an advantage, this turns out to be an obstacle when she finds herself in competition with him for a big assignment. Carol will not only have to face the industry’s inherent sexism, but also her own father’s jealousy.

Unlike other chick flicks, *In a World* . . . acknowledges the precarity of its context from the very beginning: the first scene makes clear that thirty-year-old Carol lives with her widowed father because she can barely make ends meet with her work as an elocution coach. Her unstable financial situation and her ambition to make it into the more lucrative field of trailer voice-overs becomes the central conflict in a movie that leaves romance in the background to focus on its protagonist’s professional struggles in the face of economic hardship. When she is forced to leave her father’s house to make room for his trophy girlfriend Carol moves in with her sister, Dani (Michaela Watkins), and brother-in-law, Moe (Rob Corddry).

Sam’s strained relationship with his daughter contrasts with his close bond with Gustav (Ken Marino), a rising voice-over talent. After the death of Don LaFontaine¹ – the undisputed king of the business—Sam promises Gustav to pass him the torch. However, things do not go as planned, as Carol starts to gain traction in the business, becoming the frontrunner candidate for *The Amazon Games*, the big epic quadrilogy that is expected to resurrect LaFontaine’s mythical catchphrase “In a world . . .” The dysfunctional father-daughter relationship at the center of the story is used to explore issues such as sexism at the workplace, the “mancession” narrative, and the anti-feminist backlash revived by the recession.

When Gustav and Sam learn that an unknown woman (Carol) has taken an important assignment from the former, both men bond over misogynistic remarks about women’s changing roles in today’s world:

Sam: Times are changing. That’s the way it is. Nowadays, they’re flying planes, they’re taking jobs. That’s just the reality.

Gustav: Welcome to today’s world.

Sam: I mean, it wasn’t too long ago that I can remember, all I had to worry about with the ladies was how quickly to get their panties off.

The scene engages consciously with “mancession” rhetoric, ridiculing it while showing its viciousness: as happens in *Late Night*, a single woman snatching a job from a man’s hands in a male-dominated field can hardly be considered as a threat. Moreover, having both men complain about women stealing their jobs while being served by a young handmaid who is lustily stared at by Sam is meant to further highlight the preposterousness and sexism of the “mancession” narrative: for each woman “stealing” a job from a man, there are countless underachieving others in precarious positions being routinely sexualized. *In a World . . .* suggests that the lack of women in the voice-over industry—which may be easily read as an example of the structural inequalities that affect women more generally in the workplace—is not perceived as a problem by those men in the field. Quite the opposite, they regard Carol’s presence as a sign of crisis in the sector. Here the film is obliquely pointing out how the concept of crisis is constructed by those in power, being considered as such only when it affects them directly. As Dara Z. Strolovitch argues, the notion of crisis “relies on assumptions and practices that reflect, reproduce, and constitute prevailing attitudes and normative expectations about racialized and gendered labor and economic inequalities” (Strolovitch 2013, 168). This means that for marginalized groups, disparity and hardship are perceived as the fabric of everyday life, while that same hardship is coded as crisis when it affects privileged members of society, that is, white heterosexual upper-class men such as Sam and Gustav. At bottom, as Sam’s objectification of women shows, it is the challenging of gender imbalance that they perceive as crisis, not the actual figures of women entering the business.

The sexism in Carol’s work environment is further highlighted in a later scene of male bonding at the steam room. The homosocial connotations of the setting are counteracted by Gustav and Sam’s “macho talk,” with the former bragging about his sexual encounter with Carol. Their misogynistic banter goes up a notch when Gustav reveals she turned out to be the girl who took his assignment. Not knowing that he is talking about his own daughter, Sam is particularly malicious, urging Gustav to take revenge by showing her “who is the boss.” Sam and Gustav’s contempt for Carol recalls the resentment against women displayed by the media in the wake of the recession. This is highlighted by Susan Faludi, who emphasizes how the economic downturn sharpened male anti-feminist radicalism, resulting in an intensification of the backlash that started decades ago and seems “never-ending” at this point (Susan Faludi 2014, 151). The scene shows that women may be making strides in the marketplace but men still have the power to humiliate them by resorting to deeply-entrenched prejudices about female sexuality.

When Carol becomes the prime contender to become the voice of *The Amazon Games’* trailer, she joyfully tells her father. This is the moment in which Sam realizes his daughter was the girl Gustav had been talking about all along. Instead of supporting her, he discourages her and bids for the job himself, betraying his protégé and disappointing his daughter. The competition among Carol, Gustav, and Sam is resolved at the Golden Trailer Awards, where Sam is due to receive a Lifetime Achievement Award. When *The Amazon Games’* trailer is unexpectedly premiered at the ceremony featuring Carol’s voice, a devastated Sam storms off to have a private breakdown, followed by his daughter and girlfriend, Jamie (Alexandra Holden). His cowardly flight from both women is artfully intercut with images from the movie trailer showing powerful female warriors chasing men away from their land. *The Amazon Games* portrays an apocalyptic battle between the sexes, literally enacting the “scarcity perspective” the “mancession” narrative hinges on.

This discourse frames discussions of gender and the economic crisis in terms “of a ‘zero sum’ battle for resources between women and men in a world defined by gender competition and conflict. Women are declared the victors, and men the victims” (Peterson 2012, 285–286). The film parodies this idea through crosscutting, which establishes a ludicrous parallelism between the epic battle won by the Amazons and Carol’s professional victory over her distraught father. The scene ends with a graphic match cut that associates the Amazons’ battle cry with a shot of Sam’s loud weeping. Thus, the movie playfully rehearses *The Amazon Games*’ premise in the real world: “a world in which mankind has been replaced by womankind,” enacting men’s fears of obsolescence in the face of feminist progress. Having a grown man—and one of the main figures in the field, no less—running away from two young women to cry like a child mocks men’s faint-heartedness at women’s claims for equal opportunity. However, the parodic nature of the movie trailer, the over-the-top pathos of Sam’s reaction, and the ridiculousness of the whole situation in general make clear that, rather than simply proposing a triumphalist ending in which women end on top, the film is highlighting the preposterousness of male fears and the fantastical nature of the scenario conjured up by *The Amazon Games*.

The movie’s reluctance to offer a common-place feel-good ending in the vein of other postfeminist fantasies of the 2010s is also evident in the scene in which Carol meets Katherine Huling (Geena Davis), the executive producer of *The Amazon Games*, who is presented as an important figure in the industry. When she bumps into her in the bathroom, Carol thanks her for the opportunity but her enthusiasm is tempered by Katherine’s response:

Sure, you have perfect tone and a strong sound that’s a fitting choice for the genre. But I’m using you for a bigger purpose. This pseudo-feminist fantasy tween chick-lit bullshit is a devolution of the female mission. It’s cancerous to the intelligence of young women. You got this job because whether the general public chooses to acknowledge it or not, voice-over matters. Everyone in the world watches movie trailers. Everyone in the world sees commercials on television. Or they hear them on the radio. And that is power! Look, this quadrilogy is going to make billions of dollars and your voice is going to be the one to inspire every girl who hears it. And that’s why I chose you. Not because you were the best for the job. Because frankly, you weren’t. I bet your dad is proud.

This scene provides the film with a more nuanced take on feminism than most contemporary chick flicks tend to display. Katherine’s speech is denouncing how contemporary popular culture’s representations of individual female empowerment like *The Amazon Games* may be actually detrimental to the feminist cause. The new wave of films featuring “empowered” female characters create the illusion that women have already “made it,” when they have not, thus stalling actual political feminist action. *In a World . . .* makes clear that real power lies behind the scenes: it reflects on how voice-over matters because it provides a controlling point of view, it shapes our ears to interiorize established gender roles, crafting our identities. Katherine recognizes the importance of “being heard” and that is why she chooses Carol for the job, because women need to hear other women as the voices of authority. Her speech implies that Carol’s voice may be a more significant site of inspiration for young girls than the vacuous images of “girl power” franchises like *The Amazon Games* have to offer. In this way, *In a World . . .* criticizes simplistic representations of female empowerment trending in contemporary culture while pointing at less obvious but more meaningful sites of actual power for women.

Carol gets the job not because of her individual talent, but because she is a piece of something larger than her. Katherine's choice is political, rather than meritocratic. And not only that: Carol's victory is largely the product of a collective effort. The collaborative work environment of the studio team plays a decisive role in her success. All of this downplays the meritocratic discourse of neoliberalism: the "anyone can make it through hard work" fantasy endlessly enacted in the media is shown to be subject to larger forces at play. In this particular case, the tables have been turned and it is a woman being favored by the prevailing status quo. This seems to support the "mancession" narrative but it also highlights the unfairness of the situation women have historically endured. Katherine's unilateral decision to hire Carol instead of one of her better equipped male competitors also points at the need for structural change rather than individual solutions for gender disparity at the workplace. The movie could have been one more meritocratic fairy tale, celebrating Carol's specialness as reasons for her success, but it chooses to highlight her integration in a group and her "ordinariness" instead, defending women's right to be unexceptional and still occupy a position in visible public venues, just like men have always done. As happens in *Late Night, In a World* . . . emphasizes the need for quotas to draw attention to the work of non-dominant groups but is less enthusiastic about the merits of its main character, somehow stating that affirmative action is sometimes needed to reclaim a fair spot in the public sphere. As Katherine's decision shows, this responsibility may fall on women's shoulders: sorority is presented as a possible solution to adjust power imbalance, with Katherine helping a younger peer thrive while supporting the feminist cause. In this sense, the choice of Geena Davis—feminist icon of the 1990s and founder of the Geena Davis Institute on Gender and Media—for this cameo role is spot on.

The importance of sorority for women's professional advancement and personal well-being in general is not limited to this scene, though. Through the movie, Carol's bond with her sister Dani is presented as her main source of both affective and economic security. Similarly, Sam's girlfriend's willingness to always side with his daughters becomes instrumental in Carol's happy ending: when Sam throws a tantrum at the awards ceremony, Jamie threatens him with a breakup if he does not start acting like a father instead of a diva. The power balance between the adoring young fan and the older voice-over icon is inverted in this scene, with Sam begging Jamie to stay and deciding to do the right thing. Eventually, he dedicates the award to his daughters, putting them ahead of work for once and validating Carol's achievement.

Carol's happy denouement encompasses therefore both personal and professional fulfillment. Both happen to be entwined, as the reconciliation with her father also entails the recognition of one of the main figures of the industry. Interestingly, the happy ending also includes a romantic relationship, but—as happens in *Late Night* – this is downplayed by the narrative. In the end, Carol gets together with Louis (Demetri Martin), the voice-over studio's producer. Through the movie he is clearly infatuated with her but Carol never seems particularly taken with Louis. They do have a fun date that points at a possible future together but the romance never takes center stage, always subordinated to Carol's professional struggles.

The very last scene shows that Carol has started her own voice coaching course, teaching low self-esteem, squeaky-voiced women how to sound more authoritative. The importance of "being heard" is once again underscored, as well as the need for women to support each other in this process. Interestingly, the ending includes Louis as

well. His presence suggests that Carol and him are a couple now, which indicates that romance remains an enduring heteronormative expectation in the contemporary chick flick. Carol's sister and brother-in-law are also there, highlighting the importance of family support and social integration for the individual's well-being. However, the movie's set of priorities is visually encapsulated by mise-en-scène through a composition that highlights Carol's figure, standing in the middle of the shot, fully engaged in her work, while Louis is in the recording booth, literally in a corner, together with Carol's sister and brother-in-law. Even though Louis, Dani, and Moe are acknowledged as part of Carol's happy ending, the small space they occupy points at the secondary role both romance and family play in it. So, as happens in *Late Night*, *In a World . . .* follows many of the conventions of romantic comedy but they apply to the character's professional quest mainly, placing the feminist drive for personal achievement above romantic fulfillment. As Carol's course's tagline highlights, the emphasis lies on speaking up and making women's voices be heard instead. A romantic interest is welcome, but not essential.

Conclusion: speaking up

Even if some contemporary chick flicks still present heterosexual romance as their characters' ultimate goal, this convention has become increasingly problematic in a context marked by economic hardship. Chick flicks revolving around romance exclusively became scarcer as the decade progressed, gradually outnumbered by films concerned with a broader spectrum of preoccupations, including professional and personal fulfillment (Beatriz Oria 2021a, 2021b). A noteworthy number of movies acknowledge the precariousness and volatility of the job market either implicitly or explicitly and, more importantly, challenge sexist discourses reinvigorated by the economic crisis, such as the "mancession" narrative. Behind their innocuous comedic façade, they highlight structural inequalities at the workplace, raising awareness about the exceptionality of postfeminist stories of female success in the face of adversity.

Even if *In a World . . .*'s and *Late Night*'s self-reflexivity about the entertainment industry and the feminist credentials of their creators and casting are not necessarily typical of other chick flicks, these movies can be seen as two conspicuous examples in a group of films that pivot on the "mancession" myth only to subvert it, thus putting forward a more committed feminist agenda than many of their predecessors and some of their contemporaries. Regardless of their feel-good happy endings, both movies expose the unsoundness of "mancession" rhetoric by displaying the rarity of their characters' success in a male-dominated world. Although *Late Night* lays a greater emphasis on its characters' individual "uniqueness," both films eventually dismiss the neoliberal discourse of meritocracy to highlight the existence of larger forces at play boosting certain social groups' professional prospects while thwarting others.' Both movies destigmatize quotas, presenting them as necessary for the system not to miss out on valuable talent, and recognize the importance of structural change in their denouements, even if they do not tackle this issue in the same manner. Being an independent movie, *In a World . . .* is less triumphalist in this respect. Its ending acknowledges the need for structural change while highlighting the fact that this is not a widespread reality yet. Meanwhile, as a mainstream product, *Late Night*'s denouement feels more utopian: its cheerful resolution provides a fantasy of social progress which is yet to be realized in the real world.

Interestingly, both films' happy endings downplay romance in favor of professional satisfaction for their heroines, nodding to a precarious economic context in which finding "the One" job may be more rewarding than finding a partner; and they portray sorority not only as a source of personal fulfillment, but also as the possible spark for a shift in the status quo: in both movies the seed of systemic change is sowed by an older woman in a position of authority helping a younger peer to make her voice be heard in the midst of a sea of male voices. By promoting sorority as the answer to sexism and gender inequality, these movies tie in with a cultural climate marked by social movements such as *MeToo* and *Time's Up*, which may have ignited a renewed feminist awareness in a genre often accused of the opposite. Finally, the chick flick is speaking up.

Note

1. Both LaFontaine and Fred Melamed are renowned voice actors in real life, which adds to the film's intertextuality.

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