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Political Discourse and Rhetoric: Challenging 21st Century Populism in *Chez nous/ This is our land* (Lucas Belvaux, 2017)

The visual representation of political populism (particularly right-wing ideology) is beginning to be critiqued in the context of Western European cinema, particularly from an ideological position. Much of the critical engagement is framed within the context of nationalism as a starting point, a seemingly mutually exclusive concept, that has filtered into this discourse. Populist discourse and style have become the mainstay of contemporary politics, and they are increasingly being leveraged for the purposes of election to high offices across Europe in particular. Discourse and rhetoric operate as important signifiers of how the political style of populism is articulated in the context of cinema as well as in the film, *Chez nous* (Lucas Belvaux, 2017). The film draws attention to the political system explicitly, analysing how the far-right – in this case populism – connects with local populations in France, and former industrial towns and centres that have experienced crisis more profoundly. Frey outlines a clear method of engaging with film reviews and 'press clippings' in a range of archives in France, Belgium and the United Kingdom to analyse the 'detailed reception documentation that capture when and how film was interpreted as a site of nationalism' (2014: 6). In order to decipher how the film uses discourse, rhetoric, and political style, the research for this chapter also critically considers both the text and film reviews. The film reviews and interviews were accessed through the Royal Belgian Film Archive/ Cinematek, which has a detailed database of film reviews of Belgian filmmakers (in this case, Lucas Belvaux). The transnational dimension of engaging with film reviews published in France, Belgium, the United Kingdom and United States of America reveals how the political connotations and signifiers laced within the film are evoked both in the national context - i.e. France - and in international contexts.[1]

The concept of populism can reside on either side of the political spectrum, and it is not exclusive to the far-right. In the context of Europe and 21st Century forms of political populism, it appears to have centred on the political right, particularly during election campaigns. One of the primary ways of defining the concept concerns 'a mobilisation characterised by a politics of personality centred on a charismatic leader who is said to embody the will of the common people and who is said to speak on their behalf' (Abts and Rummens, 2007: 407). This has certainly been the case for the election (and near election) of political candidates, such as Boris Johnson (UK), Donald Trump (USA), Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil) and Marine Le Pen (France), to name a few. The focus and 'spectacle' that surrounds Marine Le Pen will be focused on in more detail in the context of this chapter, since it resides at the locus of the film, *Chez nous*.

In terms of distinguishing between political populist discourse and populist style for the purposes of this chapter, Stavrakakis et al. (2017) argue that 'the central discourse of such (populist) parties is an emphasis on the protection of the nation, of the native people and culture, against the enemies of the nation and its dangerous "others": immigrants, foreigners or some other perceived external threat' (Stavrakakis et al., 2017: 421). This antagonistic relationship is, therefore, articulated through the 'paradigmatic possibilities' of the right, which 'refers to the ethnonational characteristics to identify the "people" with the (ethnic) nation' (Abts and Rummers, 2007: 409). Discourse – as a methodology for assessing populism and right-wing politics – is appropriate for the study of representations of the far-right party, the Front National in France (renamed by Le Pen as *Rassemblement national* in 2018). The notion of threats to French national identity and 'French traditional values' is, in essence, predicated on the 'interpellation upon the people (that) is structured along an antagonistic logic' (Stavrakakis et al., 2017: 430-431). This 'antagonistic logic' also reverberated through discourse pertaining to the film upon *Chez nous*'s release in France in 2017, with the Front National referring explicitly to Belvaux's film as 'an anti-FN propaganda film financed by the CNC' (Peron, 2017). The filmmaker, Lucas Belvaux, saw this discourse with regards to his film as 'a strategic reaction' (Denis, 2017: 5).

Lucas Belvaux's *Chez nous* follows young nurse Pauline, as she is 'seduced' (Peron, 2017) into the fictitious 'R.N.P' (Renewed National Party), and invited to stand as the local minister. In the film, Belvaux creates a fictional political party, which bears a striking resemblance to Marine Le Pen's contemporary Front National (Bacqué, 2017; Goodfellow, 2017; Screen Daily, 2017) or the current Rassemblement National/National Rally political party (since June 2018). The film is a fictional approach to the far right in France, but the connections to France's contemporary politics is not discreet or subtle. In *The New Yorker*, Lane argues that '(t)he shrewd boast of the R.N.P. is that it will reach over the heads of a tattered establishment and appeal to those, in the mind of the Party, represent the authentic France' (Lane, 2018). It is precisely this challenging the political establishment (as Lane contends) that coheres with the policy of the populist parties, selecting a range of issues that can be charged by political antagonisms. At first uncertain, Pauline is enticed by the slogans, the crowd's excitement at the ideas and ideology espoused by its charismatic leader (clearly an evocation of the Front National's Marine Le Pen). As a result, Pauline breaks with tradition (her father is a socialist), and much to his chagrin, she joins the populist party fictional 'R.N.P' and stands for election. Meanwhile, Pauline faces hostility from those she previously helped on the outskirts of the local town, highlighting the duplicitous nature of the party and its approach to populism. Martinez outlines in the French magazine *Positif* that *Chez nous* is 'inspired by the novel *Le Bloc* by Jérôme Leroy' (Martinez, 2017: 46), with Leroy also acting as

the co-writer on the film. As outlined by the French newspaper *Le Monde*, the novel is, in turn, 'inspired by the Front National' and 'invites us to understand how, over the last thirty years, the extreme far-right has succeeded in regaining its strength' (Prolongeau, 2011).[2] One of the central tenets of the novel also holds true for the film, particularly in terms of articulating the extreme right's political ideology through antagonisms. As Prolongeau (2011) contends with regards to the novel, '*Le Bloc* takes us back to the fundamental principles of this extreme far right in the process of banalisation: violence and the hatred of others'.[3] Reviews of the film, however, have highlighted that the film does not clearly present a challenge to the articulation of right-wing ideologies and discourse. This resonates with wider approaches to populism in contemporary Europe, since, in the context of so-called New Austrian cinema, Sathe argues that '(t)he challenge of the more penetrating, in-depth representations of what motivates and sustains far-right supporters and figures (..) remains unanswered' (Sathe, 2018: 210). The motivations for this turn are not challenged and engaged with, the ideologies of the far-right are presented and bound up with the political notion of spectacle. In essence, this articulation of populism coheres with contemporary political debate and style with regards to the political right, to conservatism and — more prominently — the far right. Let us now focus on the critical examination of populism in the context of French cinema historically and how nationalism has operated within French cinema, particularly in relation to the extreme far-right and the Front National.

Nationalism and Populism in French Cinema:

The interpretation of right-wing political populism in the context of cinema is laced with connotations of nationalism, particularly in terms of the political rhetoric and discourse. However, the connotations of populism — particularly through verbal and visual rhetoric and cinema — have shifted in France over time, away from the 1930s and the Leftist politics of the proletariat to contemporary forms of right-wing nationalism that appear to align with the ideology of the controversial party, the Front National. Returning to the contextual interpretative frameworks of populism, the 'paradigmatic possibilities' of the Left 'identifies the people in socio-economic terms as the working-class exploited by the bourgeois elite' (Abts and Rummers, 2007: 409). This dialectic certainly underpins French cinema in the 1930s, and early interpretations and analyses of populism in the context of French cinema that centred on the proletariat.

The deployment of the concept of 'populism' in the context of French cinema is not new, as evidenced by O'Shaughnessy's (2001) analysis of the 'Parisian popular' of the 1930s. As Hayward productively outlines, the 1930s in France witnessed the competing of the far-right and Left as a response to the 'incompetence of the parliamentary regime' (Hayward, 2005: 126-7). With

fears and anxieties around the rise of the far right and the turn to fascism, the Popular Front was formed in 1934 and gained power in 1936, composed of 'Communists, Socialists and leftist Radicals' (Ibid., 127). O'Shaughnessy contends that the 1930s in France represented 'a time of economic slump, increasing racism and mounting international tension', which lends itself to cinematic imaginaries that focus on 'the homely, rooted local winning out over a dangerous or decadent cosmopolitan modern' (O'Shaughnessy, 2001: 81). French cinema of the 1930s was characterized by — at times — an 'idealisation of rooted community and folkloric cultural forms' (O'Shaughnessy, 2001: 87), laced with 'populist motifs (that) drew strength from, and reflected, a very particular political and social climate, one marked by the difficulties of the Depression, the increasing ideological gap between Left and Right, and the spirit of the Popular Front as well' (Greene, 1999: 167). The important differential is that this representation of populism in France is strictly Socialist and on the political Left at this time. Andrew points to the French poetic realist films of the 1930s as articulating the idea that 'its social pertinence lies less in such themes than in the authenticity of its particularly engaging "spectacle of the proletariat"' (Vincendeau cited in Andrew, 1995: 223). Drawing on key films of the 1930s such as *La Grande illusion* (Jean Renoir, 1937), Frey contends that the film articulated the 'theme of working-class heroism matching popular communist rhetoric of the period' (2014: 167).

The complexity of the term 'populism' in this regard concerns its deployment to refer to the extremes of the political Left or Right. Greene (1999) argues that French cinema of the late 1980s and early 1990s evoked populist ideology through cinematic allusions and references to the 1930s. In this case, spectators were encouraged to 'think in terms of "now" and "then", they suggest how powerfully cinema itself functions as a "site of memory"' (Greene, 1999: 159). The articulation of populism in the context of the so-called 'golden age' of French cinema resembled the representation of the working-classes in local communities, and films anchored in working-class neighbourhoods and milieux (Greene, 1999: 166). There are films contemporaneous with Belvaux's *Chez nous* that tap into the spirit of the 1930s and the sentiments of left-wing populism, such as the Finnish filmmaker Aki Kaurismäki's *Le Havre* (2011), which is also set in the French North. However, its evocation of politics resonates with the past more than the present. Breger posits that the film 'presents a — forcefully simple — fairytale of solidarity against the neo-imperialist regime of contemporary European border control' (Breger, 2015: 511). By taking place in the location of Le Havre — evocative of the poetic realist *Le Quai des Brumes/Port of Shadows* (Marcel Carné, 1939) — Kaurismäki's films draws on the spirit of populism, solidarity and community of the past to counter the neo-liberal capitalist present (the lead character's name being Marcel Marx attests to this). Breger further evinces this turn: '(in) the opening sequence, Marcel

drives home a romantic (...) version of left-wing anti-capitalism by announcing, "Money moves in the shadows."' (Breger, 2015: 513). The representation of populism in the French North, in this case, draws on the spirit of the past and left-wing populism, whereas the Pas-de-Calais region considered in Belvaux's contemporary France shows how the tradition has made way for the ideologies of the far-right. The shift is primarily predicated on the loss of heavy and traditional industries in the region and the subsequent sense of a crisis in the working-class. The inexorable rise in unemployment in the area since the 1980s (and the period of deindustrialization) has fueled a sense of crisis and loss, which has been politically leveraged by populist parties. The concept of populism has shifted, in terms of general and popular discourse, towards the far-right. As Betz argues, populism is used less critically as a concept and has instead become 'conflated with demagoguery, political manipulation, the provision of simple solutions to complex problems, and the promotion of a black-and-white view of politics and the world' (Betz, 2018: 86). For Betz, populism does not have its own clear ideology, and it instead functions as a form of 'mobilisation' predicated on rhetoric, political style, discourse, and 'grievances' (Betz 2018: 87). The 'muddied' (Betz 2018: 86) discourse of populism is also evidenced by the re-branding and 'modernising' of the FN party (Stockemer and Amengay, 2015: 374). Stockemer and Amengay contend that this change in the FN by its leaders presented 'acceptable rhetoric' and 'incorporated radical leftist elements into the programme (…) with a nationalist twist' (Le Pen 2015, cited in Stockemer and Amengay, 2015: 374). This is the case in Belvaux's *Chez nous* in which populism is tied instead to nationalism and is evocative of the ideology of the political right and wider radical political thought.

Engaging more with the far-right populist discourse, Frey outlines the extreme right-wing sentiments that permeated French films, contending that key French stars of the 1960s espoused right-wing views openly and that later postwar films like *Pierre and Djemila* (Gérard Blain, 1987) articulated a position around the loss of French national identity which 'must stop' (Frey, 2014: 200). This political communication and ideological position were evoked at a time of the first rise of the Front National in France under the auspices of Marine Le Pen's father, Jean-Marie Le Pen. This form of nationalism is tied to discourse and rhetoric around immigration in France. From this premise, Frey considers the national/transnational binary an important development for a historical overview of postwar French cinema and nationalism (2014: 4-5). There is also a perception that 'organic nationalism' in France stems from 'constitutional nationalists' that tend to articulate their political communication and rhetoric from the right, which can be traced back to key figures like General Charles de Gaulle (Frey, 2014: 8). This chapter will return to this theme in the context of Belvaux's *Chez nous*, since this discourse features as a key continuity in the articulation and communication of the extreme far-right in the film. Moreover, the focus on

nativism and antagonisms predicated on issues such as immigration has not remained in the 1980s' iteration of the Front National, in that it recurs more widely as a salient issue within populist debates in Western Europe. The focus on nativism and national identity operates as a means of mediating sentiments of national crisis.

The evocations of crisis — that resonate from periods gone by — have re-surfaced contemporaneously in the 2010s, in the wake of the economic crisis of 2008 in Western Europe and the USA. The re-emergence of far-right nationalism and populism has occurred during a period of crisis in the working-classes, with the sense of lost industries and against the backdrop of high levels of unemployment. This is a key continuity in the BBC documentary, *Travels in Euroland* (2019), which highlights the transnational connections between the rise of populism across Western Europe. In Harvey's *Nationalism in Contemporary Western European Cinema*, White contends that '(t)he rise in nationalism across Europe has occurred (...) within a context in which nation states are less able to express independence and increasingly pushed towards acceptance of economic interdependence' (White, 2018: 20). The notion of the intrinsic focus on the folkloric and communities are articulated in the local cultural imaginary, as depicted on screen and through film. Harvey's approach to nationalism in the context of Western European cinema draws on 'localised representations' as a means of 'unpacking' or even contesting nationalism (Harvey, 2018: 5). The depiction of the local, therefore, operates as a useful and instructive tool for decoding the articulation of political populism — predicated on nationalist concepts and discourse — since there is an explicit targeting of so-called neglected areas and regions to speak to wider concerns and issues, or collective crisis. Harrod (2020) identifies the continuities of right-wing populism and the political characteristics of genre filmmaking in France, placing an emphasis, in particular, on the rom-com. According to Harrod's (2020) survey of French cinema in the 2010s, there is a clearly identifiable masculinist, patriarchal, family-centred and anti-American basis that underpins a nationalist and populist French rom-com film. The connection to rom-coms and populist ideas is particularly relevant to Belvaux's filmmaking, since it is widely reported that Belvaux decided to embark on the political drama, *Chez Nous*, due to the hostility experienced and the regionalist verbal rhetoric heard whilst on set producing the rom-com, *Pas son genre/Not my Type* (Lucas Belvaux, 2014) in the Northern French city of Arras (Denis, 2017: 5).

Chez Nous: Visual Rhetoric and Evocation of Political Style

Although the title of Belvaux's *Chez Nous* evokes a certain nostalgia and longing for a return to homeland and national belonging, the film effectively takes aim at the politics and political parties that draw on these sentiments and discourse. *Chez Nous* represents the contemporary Front

National, mirroring the extreme-right French party and its leader Marine Le Pen. The fashioning of the political leader in the film highlights how there is an emerging cult of personality around the political figure, functioning as 'pseudo-celebrities' (Moffit and Tormey, 2014: 388). As outlined by the trade magazine *Screen Daily*,

> Dorgelle and the 'RNP' (Renewed Nation Party) clearly represent Marine Le Pen's Front National, which these days seeks to dissociate itself from the more hardcore image of her father and predecessor Jean-Marie Le Pen. But it's clear that the 'RNP's' 'liberal' image is skin-deep and highly duplicitous. The party makes a point of claiming that it's neither left nor right, that it's for the people, against traditional politics and for breaking the mould (*Screen Daily*, 2017).

From this premise, the film articulates the 'duplicity' of extreme right-wing politics, its divisive politics and its focus on 'the people'. This is articulated through the rallying cry of '*on est chez nous*' (this is our land) that rings throughout the film, and operates as the slogan for the populist candidates. The repetition of the verbal rhetoric as it is chanted by the crowds highlights its resonance, as well as affirming its power for exclusion and, in turn, its political power. The discourse is loaded, and focused on the process of scapegoating as well as evoking tradition, nostalgia, nativist identity, and folk culture. Roddick sums up the phrase in the context of right-wing discourse neatly by arguing that it 'tows in its wake a heady mix of xenophobia, anti-immigrant feeling and religious hatred wrapped up in an anodyne everyday phrase, relying on the duality of "them" and "us"' (Roddick, 2017: 10). The language employed by the supporters of the film's 'R.N.P.' is also concomitant with the contemporaneous Front National in France (as noted by *Screen Daily*), particularly in terms of the focus on 'anti-immigrant sentiment', 'the inability of the French state to integrate any more populations' and 'the contamin(ation of) native culture' (Stavrakakis et al., 2017: 431). However, it is important to note that these sentiments are coded through the choice of language. This is evocative of the FN in terms of its coded rhetoric, for which 'the party's anti-Islamic discourse is embedded within a republican discourse that stresses the two terms *laïcité* and republicanism' (Stockemer and Amengay, 2015: 375). Bastow further argues that the FN's 'commitments' to secularism and 'to the Republic were used to justify the FN anti-immigrant platform' (Bastow, 2018: 22). Historically, the notion of the term 'nous' has been deployed in political contexts, and Maréchal Pétain, who 'was an incredibly vain person who referred to himself in monarchical terms as '*nous*'' (McMillan, 1985: 131, cited in Hayward, 2005: 129). This was an articulation of the Vichy government, and its anti-immigrant connotations (see Hayward, 2005: 130). Its rhetorical signification is affirmed through its casual nature, co-opting a routine phrase for the purpose of extending the appeal of the far-right.

The rallying cry of '*on est chez nous*' is also wrapped up in the visual style and rhetoric of spectacle. The chants from the crowd surround the mythology of the stand-in and symbol for Marine Le Pen, Agnès Dorgelle. The phrase is used interchangeably with the references to 'the people', which evokes a nativist sensibility. Through the use of language connoting 'the people' and 'us', it operates in the context of 'glottophobia' (Arditty and Blanchet, 2008) to posit difference, and align with nationalism. The spectacle highlights the cult of personality that surrounds individuals in positions of political power, when their rhetoric and dialogue is expressive of a community's anxieties in twenty-first century France. Peron argues that the spectacle and the chanting from the largely white crowd in the film, focuses on faces that are 'deformed by patriotic anger' (Peron, 2017).[4] What was formerly the representation of 'the camaraderie, the solidarity, that prevailed in the traditional working-class milieux' (Greene, 1999: 182) is now turned into the collective spectacle of anger and hate in a political arena. The lyrics to the French national anthem (*La Marseillaise*) are laid bare, with the framing of a violent spirit embraced by the crowd as outmoded and outdated as they sing its first verse and chorus. The language used in the anthem and the connotations of key phrases (such as 'impure blood') have been perceived as 'controversial' in a contemporary context (Marshall, 2015). With regards to British politics and the Brexit vote, Forsdick argues that 'the spectacle of Boris Johnson' is concomitant with the iconography and language of division and hate (Forsdick, 2016: 58). The language deployed articulates territory and difference through pernicious discourse and rhetoric that coheres with 'glottophobie', that is, the 'prejudice against others on the grounds of linguistic difference' (Blanchet, cited in Forsdick, 2016: 59). For Arditty and Blanchet (2008), the concept of 'glottophobie' is tied to linguistics that 'reproduce', in essence, 'social inequalities' and general forms of 'exclusion' as a form of 'alterophobia'.[5] This prejudice is articulated systematically in the language and discourse used, which can effectively communicate difference and exclusion, whether that may be explicit or not. This idea is, therefore, embedded with the language used in *Chez nous*, which — whilst banal in its phrasing — is powerful through what it implies and how it is energized through group dynamics and tone.

In *Le Vif*, Danvers highlights the importance of the rhetoric in *Chez Nous* and the turn to populism, by drawing attention to the phrase '*pour changer les choses*'/to change things (Danvers, 2017). This phrase and the language deployed recall the discourse and slogans articulated during the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom. It serves again as another routine phrase that has been charged with political significance and meaning that can be easily disseminated as well as being void of any true specificity. Once again, the banality of the language and phrasing exploits the 'glottophobie' (Arditty and Blanchet, 2008) embedded within it, since it posits difference.

Nostalgia, tradition and memory are referenced as part of a dialogue that connotes 'change' and 'again', where the past is used in a positive light, in particular to connect with voters from white, formerly working-class areas and neighbourhoods. The notion of 'change' as evoked through political rhetoric, is not necessarily one that pertains to progression, but merely a harking back (a regression).

The notion of 'glottophobie' is also articulated through a dynamic in the film where the language deployed by the populist party is framed as actioned xenophobia and antagonisms through the inclusion of far-right and the '*milices*'/French militia (Prolongeau, 2011). The visual rhetoric of posters is used to draw attention to the troubling xenophobic discourse of the party. During local briefings, posters, labelled with '*Stop à l'invasion*', are placed at the forefront of the party's politics in order to appeal to the community. The posters, therefore, use the aforementioned visual rhetoric of internal and external threat, as posited by Stavrakakis et al. (2017) to antagonistically appeal to the electorate. This is combined with sequences in the film for the '*milices*' (who launch an attack 'in defense' of Pauline as the representative of the populist party). The dangers of the language and the 'glottophobie' (Arditty and Blanchet, 2008) laced within it rise to the fore in an explicit way, through the use of confrontational scenes of Pauline's partner Stanko's threatening behaviour and humiliation of migrants to France. Through the combination of the nuances of language and the striking scenes of violence, the spectator witnesses first-hand the power of the language deployed by the politicians and how it gives rise to acts of violence. As such the language is not banal, but harmful, exclusionary and has the potential to result in hate attacks and xenophobic violence. The film's ending, Pauline's uncovering of Stanko's continued xenophobia and fascist behaviour towards migrants, is ultimately condemned.

Returning to the notion of nostalgia and tradition, Belvaux evidently draws on the 'localised representations' (Harvey, 2018: 5) as evocations of the past. As Greene contends in the context of 1980s French cinema,

> it is certainly no coincidence that populist themes should be evoked so consistently, and with such evident nostalgia, at that very juncture when the traditional working class, as well as the world surrounding it, seems to have come to an end (Greene, 1999: 185).

The local is particularly salient given that it is tied to the rise of the Front National and areas that have begun to shift to the political right, as evinced by TV documentaries like the BBC's *Travels in Euroland* (2019). The series engaged with the manufacturing towns of the North of France where Marine Le Pen held rallies in the lead in to the 2017 French election. It posited that the decline in traditional local industries and increasing levels of unemployment in these regions are primary

factors in the rise of right-wing populism in the formerly working-class and left-wing communities of Northern France, due to views pertaining to anti-globalization. In the French film magazine, *Positif*, Martinez draws attention to the film's location in the French North, as it is an economically depressed area where 'employment has deserted' the population, leaving the former mining and manufacturing towns as 'privileged terrain' for the Front National (Martinez, 2017: 46).[6] The rhetoric of politicians belonging to these populist parties reference the local industries and manufacturing industries in their speeches, drawing on nostalgia and tradition as mechanisms to reach the local electorate.

Nostalgia and tradition course through the landscape and the background of the images that are suffused with memory, as evidenced by the recurrent images of the slag heaps that occur across the landscape in Belvaux's wide-angle shots. Greene considers the slag heaps as representatives of a 'landscape of loss' for the working-class in France with the '"abandoned vestiges" of working-class life' (Greene, 1999: 186) being gentrified and breaking with its industrial heritage. The symbolism, therefore, resides in the landscape. The film is heavily rooted in the iconography of the region and the local, and does not extend beyond the borders of Nord-Pas-de-Calais, such as the slag heaps, the deployment of flags, and the use of the colours of the local football club, Lens. Regionalism is, therefore, foregrounded through imagery and symbolism, with the only references to the transnational evoked through negative discourse. As I have outlined previously, Belvaux has an auteurist tendency to evoke the past through the landscape, and particularly through the images of the slag heaps in his 2006 'social thriller', *La Raison du plus faible/The Right of the Weakest* (Steele 2019: 172-173).[7] The political significance of these former working-class and industrial monoliths of the region's coal-mining heritage is evidenced by Agnès and Pauline's photo opportunity for the 'R.N.P' party. It represents an example of political posturing, attempting to use symbolism and imagery to connect to a potential electorate, which aligns politicians who do not have a direct alignment and empathetic understanding to a local population. The political styling of Dorgelle, as the Le Pen stand-in, is further evidenced by Agnès Dorgelle's photo opportunity alongside Pauline — a representative of the local population, its community and the former industrial working-class — in combination with the slag heaps in the background. The image foregrounds the intentionality of how politics and politicians use symbolism and visual rhetoric as a means of communicating to particular audiences, shifting their connotations from working-class and traditional representations to symbols of a lost past for a now-disenfranchised working-class. However, the 'duplicity' of these images is not removed, since the slag heaps and these symbols of heritage link to the historic patterns of immigration to the region, particularly from Poland, Italy, and later North Africa in both the pre- and post-war period

of French history (Cross, 1980: 624; Fontaine, 2015: 259-60 and 266-68; Klessman, 1986: 337). This contrasts radically with the party's slogans and discourse in the film, which draws on rising sentiments of external threat and scapegoating and even deploying loaded language, such as 'invasion' to evoke the extreme far-right's position on immigration to France. In essence, history, tradition and nostalgia are repurposed for the political styling and spectacle of the populist far-right.

Challenging populism in *Chez Nous*: A 'committed cinema'

The approach to right-wing populism by Belvaux resonates with key films articulating a sense of social and economic crisis in Western Europe, particularly in terms of its approach. Belvaux's film uses class stratifications in a way to articulate the complexities of populism in France and to nuance the appeal of the far-right political party. This position is neatly contended in the French newspaper, *Le Monde*, in which the reviewer outlines that 'Belvaux never forgets that behind these (political) manoeuvres lies another failing, that of the consolidation of certain social hierarchies' (MA. MT 2017).[8] In a similar manner to the contemporaneous *I, Daniel Blake* (Ken Loach, 2016), the film offers didacticism, in terms of clearly articulating a moral position.[9] White interprets Loach's film as a representation of the "'liberal Left('s)" response to resurgent nationalism' (White, 2018: 21). In *Sight & Sound*, Roddick contends that *Chez nous* operates as a 'model for a new kind of committed cinema, triggered by a distrust of the new political climate' (Roddick, 2017, 11). *Chez nous* offers a 'new kind of committed cinema' (11) through its representation of politics directly, rather than through experimental filmmaking and the raw, immediate camerawork in the post-1968 spirit. Bradfer similarly argues that the film is 'more engaged than militant' (Bradfer, 2017: 4-5),[10] and Feuillère outlines that the film has the initial appearance of a TV-film production, but, at its core, 'it enters bare foot into this war, that of images, with the arms/weapons of cinema' (Feuillère, 2017).[11]

The 'duplicity' of the articulation of populism is highlighted through the working-class characters. Pauline's father operates as the ideological centring of the film, a working-class character who retains his Leftist sensibilities, staying true to his working-class roots and with a focus on the collective. The collective spirit is articulated by the character and his references to post-industrial Northern France and the fight of the former working classes. Pauline's father represents the industrial workers who had embraced the liberal spirit of 1968, and still hold onto their belief system of the Left-wing collective and trade unions. Pauline should — in his eyes — follow in his footsteps, and he is taken aback (and disgusted) by her attraction to the populist far-right party. As a result, through the character of Pauline, the film, essentially, draws attention to

the political 'radicalization' of a generation in France, which, as Belvaux articulates, arises when 'we speak of suffering, of betrayal, of the collapses (industrial and economic), never (do we talk about) what we are going to build' (Denis, 2017: 5).[12] In this context, Pauline is interpreted as betraying her trade union, working-class roots by aligning with the far-right political party. Through the character, the superficiality of the 'spectacle' of the politician is exploited. Pauline is a political instrument — a representation of the generation and demographic that the party wants to reach. But she is no more than a surface 'spectacle' the party seeks to exploit. Beneath the façade, the machinations of the political party are highlighted by the elder, white, middle-class doctor, Philippe Berthier, who is manipulating the system to refashion the fascist party, the 'Patriotic Bloc', in the twenty-first Century, with the approbation of the 'R.N.P.' leadership. Pauline was previously unaware of this background, and she is presented as the 'new, clean, fresh' face of the re-invented 'R.N.P.' The 'R.N.P.' are attempting to 'hide' Berthier away (as Agnès Dorgelle and Pauline Duhez represent their new face) whilst the party, essentially, still adheres to the views of the 'Patriotic Bloc'. This is evidenced by Pauline's final conversation with Philippe Berthier. Berthier reveals that the party's programme was prepared before she opted to join the 'R.N.P.', and he describes it as the 'Bloc's programme, with local adjustments'. This represents a crucial moment for both Pauline and the spectator, since Berthier's reference to the political programme confirms that the 'R.N.P' is essentially a re-branding of the far-right 'Patriotic Bloc'.

Family is a key thematic continuity in the challenging of right-wing populist ideas and discourse in Belvaux's *Chez Nous*. This is in contrast to the 'topos of family' in populist rom-com films from the contemporaneous period (Harrod, 2020: 106), where the notion of 'a familial unit underpinned by blood ties — (is) promulgating (as) a nationalistic fantasy' (108). Intriguingly, as the film demonstrates, the fallacy of family and right-wing populism in France is clearly evinced by the FN party and its attempts to break with the past and, in doing so, patriarchal culture. The new populist party is attempting to re-brand its far-right policies and ideologies, by distancing itself from the past, which, in the case of the FN recalls the break from the image of Jean-Marie Le Pen. Betz draws on Marine Le Pen as an example of populism and the radical right, arguing that 'Marine Le Pen's strategy of *dédiabolisation*, designed to reinvent the Front National (FN) as a modern, presentable party by jettisoning the FN's heritage of virulent anti-Semitism, Catholic fundamentalism, Pétainism, and its nostalgia for *l'Algérie française*' (Betz, 2018: 86).[13] In Belvaux's *Chez nous*, the fictional 'R.N.P' is attempting the distance itself from its extreme-right wing past. Although the leadership from the 'Patriotic Bloc' (a fictional extreme-right wing party in the film) still operates in the corridors of power from a backseat, Agnès Dorgelle is the outward face of the party, and the new entrants to the party need to be agreed by her. The male figures, such as Philippe

Berthier, are tainted by their past and their image in the 'Patriotic Bloc' (so must be 'invisibilized'), and Dorgelle offers a fresh take and perspective on politics that is distanced from the previous incarnations of the political discourse and rhetoric. Moreover, Pauline's decision to run for election as part of the 'R.N.P.' represents a break from her father's communist past. However, Belvaux *Chez nous* points out that there is very little difference between the past and present incarnations of the political parties through the fictional 'R.N.P.'. By looking back at the ideas of the 1940s, this lack of change is evidenced by the present party's rhetorical similitude with that of the then 'National Revolution (which) replaced the Republican triumvirate of "*égalité*, *fraternité*, *liberté*" with "*patrie*, *travail*, *famille*" and, as the words clearly connote, advocated the promotion of the family' (Hayward, 2005: 131). The spectacle of the contemporary politician is also bound up with this nationalistic discourse, through the choice of the leader as an evocation of Marine Le Pen (the female as emblematic of the family). As Harrod contends, the 'French word for homeland, *la patrie*, symbolised the Revolution upon which the modern nation-state was founded, as a woman giving birth' (Harrod, 2020:101). The characters of Agnès Dorgelle and Pauline Duhez are deliberately placed at the centre of the political 'spectacle', since, as Belvaux suggests, their image contrasts with the core belief system and ideology of the populist parties, and, therefore, presents a 'softer', 'maternal' image and facade (Denis, 2017: 5). It is precisely this dialectic that generates significance through opposing ideas that evoke the populist party as representative of 'the people', actively promoting a nurturing image.

Roddick contends that '(t)he French term for this astute image-tweaking is "*dédiabolisation*" — literally getting rid of the devil, which in Le Pen's case means daddy' (Roddick, 2017: 10). *Chez nous*, therefore, draws a parallel with the breaking with the past in relation to the father. Whereas Marine Le Pen is trying to reach a larger electorate through a distancing with 'the racist shadow of her father' (Roddick, 2017: 10), Pauline's break from her father's ideology is contrarian and conflicted. This is precisely the point that populism is re-affirming. This 'duplicity' is indicated through Pauline's family, which highlights the ideological divide that underpins the region and the former working-classes in the disenfranchised communities. These communities, based on high levels of unemployment, seek to regain a sense of paternalism and reaffirm patriarchal culture through male identity that appears to be fragile, as I have argued previously in Belvaux's films (Steele, 2019). *Chez nous* indicates that, rather than building families and senses of belonging in the community, the populist right-wing ideas and discourse are, in fact, divisive. In essence, it leads to the breakdown of the family, in particular the filiation of father and daughter. Since Pauline is a nurse working in the community, the film attests to wider concerns of social fragmentation. As Pauline joins the equivalent of the Front National in the film, she is no longer able to work with

— and treat — the patients that do not share her public views, culminating in violence between the communities. The film's purpose is to highlight that populism is a more destructive force, leading to social fragmentation and family division, as opposed to the moderate traditional views to which it purports to adhere on the superficial surface.

In essence, Belvaux's *Chez nous* articulates the complexity of political populism when challenged through the medium of film. Situated politically on the liberal Left, the film is designed for spectators to read the political discourse and visual rhetoric in a way that is critical and considered. It proves revelatory for the language deployed by populist parties, which resonates with emerging concepts such as 'glottophobie'. The significance of language to operate as an implicit construct for exclusion and marginalisation is articulated through the chants, visual spectacle, and visual rhetoric as presented in the film. The populist strategy is outlined in a readable context for spectators through visual references and landscapes. However, at its centre, the film offers its challenge and sensibility of the liberal Left through Pauline's eventual denouncement of the far-right and her realization that there is no difference between Dorgelle's re-branded fictional 'R.N.P' and the extreme far-right. In the case of Pauline, the film highlights how a denouncing of populism can heal the family, and, as a result, *Chez nous* articulates the divisiveness of far-right political populism by using and promoting the image of the maternal, namely, that Pauline is easily replaced by another mother. In essence, the film highlights how the populist political party operates through the spectacle and image of the maternal (and the blonde bob as ideal French woman), and this is, in fact, divisive for the family, the community, and the nation. This thematic continuity — presented in the film as text — is still deciphered in the context of nationhood.

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[1] See Frey (2014: 5-10) for more detail on this method of analysing nationalism in the context of postwar French cinema.

[2] 'Jérôme Leroy nous invite à comprendre comment, depuis trente ans, l'êxtreme droite a réussi à reprendre du poil de la bête' (Prolongeau 2011).

[3] '*Le Bloc* nous ramène aux principes de base de cette droite extrême en voie de banalisation: la violence et la haine de l'autre' (Prolongeau 2011).

[4] 'on regarde ses visages, déformés par la colère patriotique' (Peron 2017).

[5] 'Ce phénomène entre de notre point de vue, dans ce que l'on peut analyser comme "reproduction" au moins partielle des inégalités sociales et dans ce que nous qualifierons ici de "glottophobie"; forme particulière de l'altérophobie' (Arditty and Blanchet 2008).

[6] 'il y en a tant dans ces anciens bassins ouvriers du Nord que l'emploi a déserté; terrain de chasse privilégié du FN' (Martinez 2017: 46).

[7] In *Francophone Belgian Cinema*, Steele also analyses Olivier Masset-Depasse's short films, arguing that the slag heaps in Wallonia (the French-speaking region in Southern Belgium) connect with socio-political issues of the past and the traditions of coal-mining communities (2019: 113-120).

[8] 'Belvaux n'oublie jamais que derrière ces manoeuvres réside un autre enjeu, celui de la consolidation de certaines hiérarchies sociales' (MA. MT 2017).

[9] Martinez's review of *Chez nous* in *Positif* contends that the mise-en-scène of Belvaux's film 'becomes didactic' at the same time as 'not judging' the character of Pauline and contemporary France (Martinez 2017, 46). In *Le Monde*, the film review also outlines that the film has adopted a didactic approach (MA. MT 2017). Screen Daily (2017) also outlines that Belvaux's film has a 'Loachian vein'.

[10] 'Plus engagé que militant' (Bradfer 2017: 4-5).

[11] 'Avec *Chez nous*, il entre de plain pied dans cette guerre, celle des images, avec les armes du cinéma' (Feuillère 2017).

[12] 'On parle de souffrance, de trahison, d'effondrement, jamais de ce qu'on va construire' (Denis 2017, 5).

[13] Bacqué's (2017) review of the film in *Le Monde* also cites that the process of "dédiabolisation" is articulated in the film through the references to the "Patriotic Bloc's" former leadership and political discourse (who now work behind the scenes in the fictional "R.N.P.") 'resembling members of the FN'.