

**The final version of this manuscript is published as:**

Archetti, Cristina (2019). No life without family: Film representations of involuntary childlessness, silence and exclusion. *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics*, 15(2): 175–196. [https://doi.org/10.1386/macp.15.2.175\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/macp.15.2.175_1)

## **No life without family: Film representations of involuntary childlessness, silence and exclusion**

**Cristina Archetti**, University of Oslo

### **Abstract**

Forming a family and having children constitutes an adulthood rite of passage, one of the tacitly assumed requirements of a fulfilled life. What happens, then, when the “family dream” does not materialize? This article addresses the dark sides of the “family imperative” by focusing on representations of involuntary childlessness (i.e. childlessness not by choice) in film. It advances the argument that popular culture, far from being “mere entertainment”, plays an important role in wider processes of stigmatization, silencing and, as a result, exclusion of those who do not have a family. The analysis, which is informed by a broader study into the structure of silence surrounding childlessness, presents the findings of a comparative qualitative content analysis that examined the (troubling) representations of involuntary childless individuals in 50 films from Italy, Norway and the United States. It discusses their far-reaching cultural and political implications, making practical suggestions to counter their stigmatizing effects.

### **Keywords**

family

involuntary childlessness

film

popular culture

representation

narrative

stigma

exclusion

### **Introduction: The dark side of family**

Forming a family and having children constitute an adulthood rite of passage, one of the tacitly assumed requirements of a fulfilled life. To the point that research on (in)fertility, to frame the importance of the subject, often does not need more than to re-state their uncontested value. As one study(Boivin et al. 2007: 1506), for example, points out: ‘[p]arenthood is undeniably one of the most universally desired goals in adulthood, and most people have life plans that include children’ . What happens, then, when the ‘family dream’ does not materialize? This article addresses the dark sides of the ‘family imperative’ by focusing on involuntary childlessness (i.e. childlessness not by choice). More specifically, it examines the way in which narratives about childlessness in film contribute to wider processes of stigmatization, silencing and, as a result, exclusion of those who do not have a family.

Childlessness affects, on average, one adult (over 45) woman in five (OECD 2015: 5; Beaujouan et al. 2017: 4) and one man in four in the western world (Präg et al. 2017: 8), and yet it is nearly non-existent from the perspective of the general population. Particularly the *involuntarily* childless are virtually invisible: this happens despite the fact that they

constitute, according to estimates (Keizer in NWO 2010), up to 90 per cent of all people without children. Considering the stigma (Miall 1985; Whiteford and Gonzalez 1995) and taboo (Pfeffer and Woollett 1983: 82; Thorn 2009: 48) surrounding this condition, it might be no real surprise that the voices of the involuntary childless tend to be under-represented in public debate.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, invisibility cannot be easily explained if one considers the ubiquitous communication opportunities offered by the Internet and social media, the relevance of the subject to the demographic crisis of the western world (Kassam et al. 2015; Kotkin 2017) and the sheer amount of individuals involved – we are talking, for instance, of about 3.5 million people having difficulties getting pregnant in the United Kingdom alone (NHS 2017). Beyond those who struggle to conceive, perhaps out of medical issues, there are countless more individuals who are childless “by circumstance”, as a result of what is often referred to as ‘social infertility’ (Berrington 2016: 58): due to the death of a partner, having been ill during one’s fertile years, not being able to afford assisted reproduction, among many other possibilities (Day 2013), or, as in the case of unmarried people, singles and gay and lesbian couples, through policies that might exclude one from access to fertility treatment (Sundby 2010: 179; Ethics Committee of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine 2013).

Investigating the roots of the invisibility of the involuntary childless is important because the lack of awareness of the needs of a growing proportion of citizens translates into policy gaps. Among the most pressing ones are the absence of structures to deal with the long-term impact of the trauma of infertility (on the link between infertility and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder [PTSD] see: Bartlik et al. 1997; Bradow 2012) and the lack of support for senior childless citizens in an economic context where even welfare states increasingly rely on the care provided by close family members (Ageing Without Children [AWOC], n.d.).

This article presents the findings of a comparative qualitative content analysis that examined the representations of involuntary childless individuals in 50 films from Italy, Norway and the United States. The analysis is part of a wider study that set off to understand why, despite the affordances of twenty-first-century communication, there is so much silence, globally, around such a sizeable group of individuals. That investigation additionally relied on in-depth interviews with 18 women and men from Italy, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom, China and Denmark; an ethnography that has been ongoing for five years and involved: participant observation on Internet discussion fora dedicated to trying to conceive and closed Facebook groups for the involuntary childless;<sup>2</sup> organization, participation and contribution to events dedicated to in/fertility (in Sweden, Norway and online);<sup>3</sup> and countless informal conversations with childless individuals. While the argument illustrated here is informed by this broader study and references to interviews and the ethnography will be made in passim to support the discussion, the analysis focuses, for the purpose of this piece, on the film content analysis.

The argument will develop in five sections. The first locates the role of popular culture and film in wider processes that lead to silencing and exclusion. The second reviews the scant literature on the representation of the involuntarily childless. The third part of the article addresses the methodology, including the conceptual and practical challenges of investigating a taboo topic. The fourth part presents and discusses the results of the qualitative content analysis. The last and concluding part addresses the social and political implications of the findings.

### **Popular culture and the construction of reality**

The broader study that the content analysis of film presented in this article is part of is based on Bruno Latour's (2005) understanding of the world as an entanglement of humans, ideas, objects, places and technologies. In this context, fiction, together with any form of representation, is a constitutive component of the world of meanings that we inhabit. Richard Rushton explicitly talks, in this sense, about 'filmic reality' (2011: 5): film has a concrete impact on our lives by allowing us 'to make sense of experiences, thoughts, and feelings in such a way that we become able to incorporate them into the reality of our personalities, our memories, our "being"' (2011: 5). As he further phrases it, '[f]ilms have given us new ways to dream, but those dreams have also made available new domains of reality' (2011: 7). The argument here is that, just like film can open up new domains of reality, it can also limit them.

Narratives are a key aspect of how this happens. Not only are they the basic currency of the social world we inhabit (Tilly 2002), they also define who we are – our identities (Murray 1999: 58). Even the stories we tell about ourselves, however, are never chosen freely, but develop on the basis of publicly available narratives. Identity, in this perspective, as a radical lesbian feminist who was a central figure of the early women's movement put it, is 'what you can say you are according to what *they* say you can be' (Johnston 1973 in Fullmer et al. 1999: 134, emphasis added). The media – and with them popular culture and cinema – are an important arena where these narratives are formed, negotiated, institutionalized, contested and transformed. They also have a strong influence in terms of setting the standards of what is regarded as 'normal' or 'acceptable' against what is 'deviant' (Gross 2001: 11). These narratives, according to my study, have an impact on the identity, well-being and behaviour of the childless, ultimately reflecting on their perception of – and communication (or lack of it) with the world around. I will briefly unpack these points.

Not only is the physical inability to conceive a source of stigma, ‘an attribute that is deeply discrediting’ that most affected individuals wish to hide (Goffman 1963: 3), psychological suffering and physical pain might also prevent them from both reflecting on one’s condition and talking about it. For some of my interviewees, for example, talking about their own experience of being childless was at points so hurtful that they momentarily had to stop speaking because pain was constricting their throat, squeezing their chests and tears had started swelling in their eyes. Arthur Frank (2013), in identifying narratives of illness, also describes the way a rupture in one’s life course – infertility is indeed perceived as a life crisis (Hirsch and Hirsch 1995; Lechner et al. 2007; Leon 2010) – takes the form of a ‘chaos story’: effectively a ‘non-story’ told on the ‘edges of speech’ (Frank 2013: 101). Suffering, on the basis of my interviews, is rooted in two narrative mismatches. The first is not fitting into one’s own self-narrative: for instance the imagined story of a woman as a mother she cultivated since she was a child, denied by her inability to reproduce. The second is related to struggling to find a meaningful role for oneself in established public narratives within societies that, irrespective of geography, political or cultural orientation, tend to be “pronatalist by default” (Brown and Ferree 2005; Moore 2014: 162): if the truly realized woman is portrayed as a mother, then a childless person cannot be realized – perhaps it cannot be a woman at all.<sup>4</sup> Media representations are, in this respect, crucial in reproducing the values and practices of a culture’s dominant ideology (Gitlin 1978; Storey 2009). In the case at hand, more specifically, they define “appropriate” public narratives about family and gender roles (Tincknell 2005). What is processed by the brain – the messages that bombard us through social interactions, social media or popular culture about what it means to be “realized”, “happy” or “successful” – ultimately affect our willingness, and very ability, to

speak out. This matters for the purposes of both public debate and policy-making: who remains silent does not get represented.

### **Researching the invisible in plain sight: A neglected topic**

There is not much research on the representation of the involuntarily childless, irrespective of the medium. Sociologist Gayle Letherby, one of the pioneers of research on this group (see Letherby and Williams 1999; Letherby 2002, for instance), argues that non-motherhood has been ‘the poor sister within feminism’ (Letherby 2000: 143). Showing that this marginalized status is a reflection of a broader cultural invisibility, historian of family and reproduction Christina Benninghaus observes that ‘[w]hile Western culture has produced countless images of mother and child, childlessness is hardly ever visualized’ (2014: 2). When images exist, in fact, they tend to portray childless women in relation to what they do not have or are not. In this respect, Letherby again points out that, even the cover of an issue dedicated to ‘Living Without Children’ in an academic journal (1999) is ‘a gallery of photographs of children’ (2000: 143).

The notion of the childless as defined by a fundamental lack in their lives in comparison to parents is emphasized by other studies. Franklin, in an investigation of the (textual) construction of infertility in popular representations of new reproductive technologies, finds that the involuntarily childless tend to be portrayed as ‘victims’ and ‘sufferers’ affected by ‘desperation’ and ‘anguish’ in juxtaposition to the ‘happy’ parents (1990: 200).

When representations are not entirely negative, positive attitudes are conditional to women falling in line with normative, morally laden expectations. Melissa Graham and Stephanie Rich (2014), for instance, in a qualitative analysis of Australian print media sources (2007–

11), find that childless women are represented through four main frames. Either they are met with sympathy if they are trying to conceive – this, however, might be withdrawn if they are not deemed socially appropriate as mothers, as in the case of singles or lesbians – or turn into pity if they do not manage to get pregnant (‘sympathy worthy women’ frame). Alternatively, they are presented as pursuing hedonistic and care-free lifestyles (‘reprimanded women’); they place their career before motherhood (‘career women’); or are misguided victims of emancipation ideals (‘the artefact of feminism’).

Existing literature also overwhelmingly revolves around female representations, even if research demonstrates that men are affected by childlessness as much as their female counterparts (Hadley and Hanley 2011; Hanna and Gough 2016). Kenneth Gannon and others (2004), in a rare study related to male childlessness, analyse the way in which infertility and masculinity are constructed in British broadsheets (1992–98), finding that male infertility (the focus is on sperm count decline) is conflated with impotence and that men are positioned as threatened by forces outside their control. Although childless men, not differently from women, are still portrayed as vulnerable victims, their representations draw on stereotypical masculine analogies and vocabulary, like warfare (‘assault on the male reproductive organs’, ‘under attack’, ‘waging a losing campaign’, Gannon et al. 2004: 1173).

There are really no studies I am aware of that explicitly address the portrayals of the involuntary childless on the screen. Observations can, however, be gathered from analyses that focused on motherhood, biopolitics and fertility. Portrayals are overwhelmingly negative across the board.



Cheryl Koos (2009), in examining the politics of female identity in French cinema in the inter-war period, shows how two iconic films – *Maternité* (Benoît-Lévy and Epstein 1929) and *La maternelle* (Benoît-Lévy and Epstein 1933) – were both products and vehicles of broader debates about appropriate female gender roles. Among the cultural icons that were present in the films and also populated the French political and social discourse of the time were ‘the exalted mother’, the ‘monstrous, childless *femme moderne* (modern woman)’ and the ‘*femme seule* (single woman) who fell somewhere in between’ (Koos 2009: 4). An analysis (Hellstrand 2011) of the ‘politics of survival’ in the more contemporary science fiction TV series *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-09) shows, instead, the parallels with contemporary biopolitics (with particular reference to the case of the Norwegian welfare state, in fact). As Ingvil Hellstrand explains, in the series, the reproductive ability is ‘a sacred quality that supersedes individual freedom’ and ‘post-human [technology assisted] reproduction’ is ‘an evolutionary advancement the female body cannot refuse’ (Hellstrand 2011: 21). This takes the form, in the plot of the story, in the single and voluntarily childfree character (Starbuck, played by Katee Sackhoff), who embodies both ‘anti-natalist and technocritical perspectives’, vanishing in the last episode (Hellstrand 2011: 20). De Boer et al. (2019) largely confirm the silencing and visual erasure of those who remain childless in their analysis of representations of women in reality TV shows that deal with couples undergoing fertility treatment. While the reality genre could potentially offer an insight into the experience of infertility – for instance by showing ‘alternative and otherwise obscured choices, experiences, and lifestyles in relation to the status quo, such as adoption, childlessness, male infertility, or couples’ shared suffering’ (De Boer et al. 2019: 3) – a qualitative content analysis of seven series aired on global TV channels (Discovery Channel, Style Network, E!) between 2009 and 2016 ultimately reveals that these shows reinforce traditional (pronatalist) stereotypes. Such series, in fact, show women who are willing and

able to endure fertility treatment, who control and discipline the messiness and risk of the procedures involved and eventually *always* become mothers, to the point that the only couple who does not conceive, among those participating in the shows, is made to quietly disappear.

Within this context, the study presented in this article is the first systematic and large-scale analysis specifically focusing on the representations of the involuntary childless. Based on the studies mentioned above, the childless were expected to be portrayed negatively. I further hypothesized that they would be either passive and marginalized victims – this would also fit previously referred to literature on childlessness and stigma – or active characters whose behaviour is morally reprehensible. By relying on research on perceptions of the childless (Calhoun and Selby 1980; Letherby 2002; Koropecj-Cox et al. 2015) I further expected characters without children to be portrayed as cold, immature, selfish, career-oriented and emotionally troubled.

### **Methodological challenges**

I chose to compare films from Italy, Norway and the United States partly out of opportunistic reasons (understanding of the original language), but also to verify the relationship between, on the one hand, broader cultural narrative frameworks related to gender, the role of the individual and family in society and, on the other, the representations of the childless. In this sense the analysis was going to be exploratory: would childlessness in Norway – a country with a tradition of gender equality and strong welfare state (Ellingsæter and Leira 2006) – be portrayed differently than in the United States – liberal and individualistic (Waldman 2006: 69, 75–77) – or Italy – relatively more patriarchal and family-centred (Luciano et al. 2012)?

The film content analysis addressed the question ‘What are the representations of involuntarily childless individuals like?’. This consisted of a holistic qualitative examination of the characters’ features and motives within each story plot: Who are the childless in the story? What do they do? What are their values? These aspects were coded on the basis of visual appearance and actions (What do the childless look like? What do they wear? Which spaces do they inhabit? What do they eat? How do they move?), and in terms of their dialogue (What do they say? What do they think?).

In explaining how I selected the sample of films for the analysis, it is worth addressing the conceptual and practical difficulties of researching what is, effectively, a taboo topic. These challenges relate to the in-built bias in the very way in which film databases are organized, funding and institutional support available to film-makers and geared towards the interest of the majority, and cultural assumptions that see childlessness as a (white, heterosexual) woman’s problem. While they cannot be fully discussed due to space limitations, they help in making more concrete the point that film content is more than entertainment, rather both the outcome and a further tool of consolidation of the whole society that produces it.

A first challenge was identifying the films that were relevant to the study. As my interviews revealed, childlessness is about much more than not having a baby: it is an existential crisis that affects all aspects of one’s life. Yet, the majority would tend to associate it with infertility, often understood as sterility. Even buying into the majority’s definition, there are extremely few movies that deal explicitly with trying to conceive. This led me to additionally search within story plots for characters, mostly secondary ones, that did not have children. This, however, opened up new questions. All people at some point in their life are childless. At which stage does not having children become ‘an issue?’. In Norway, for instance, the

‘motherhood harping’ (Moi 2004) – the enquiring by relatives and acquaintances about when one is going to have a baby – tends to start in one’s 20s. In other western countries, childlessness might become problematic for women in their 30s or even, given the (wrong) belief that fertility treatments can ensure pregnancy in advanced age, even in their 40s. And in the case of men, whose fertility is – again wrongly (Your Fertility 2017) – assumed not to be unaffected by the passing of time, when might not having children become “noticeable?”. Is it ever an issue for a man?

As a way of getting around these obstacles, I selected films in which not having children, either for the protagonist or secondary characters, was relevant to the story plot. In the case of Italy, on the Italian Cinema Database of ANICA,<sup>5</sup> which allows searches on the text of detailed movie plots, I looked for ‘*senza figli*’ (‘without children’), ‘*infertilità*’ (‘infertility’) and ‘*sterile*’ (‘sterile’) (the equivalent of ‘childless’ does not exist in Italian). As for the US case, the American IMDb database also allows keyword searches.<sup>6</sup> The term ‘childless’, however, retrieved a list of movies that had already been categorized: somebody, somewhere, at some point in time had attached terms to each movie that now shaped the results of my search:

childless (7 titles)

childless-couple (68 titles)

childlessness (63 titles)

childless-marriage (19 titles)

childless-mother (5 titles)

childless-woman (2 titles)

Judging by the list, “childlessness”, in the mind of the label-attacher, is not a man’s issue. What looks like an objective search made by a machine is in fact the result of decisions – which might be wrong or affected by individual bias or unconscious stereotypes – of one or more human beings. This shows the difficulty of extricating oneself from the dominant view when this is embedded in the very criteria according to which reality is organized. This observation led me to revise my own rules for the selection of movies by adding films I came across that involved an adult childless man whose lack of family attachments were central to the plot.<sup>7</sup> Despite my efforts to include films that questioned dominant assumptions about both the meaning of childlessness and those who are affected by it, there was a bottom line that I could not get around: the fact that, irrespective of which inclusion criteria I used, some categories would not be represented in the sample because they were absent in the ‘relevant’ plots to start with. In this respect, my film sample ultimately did not include any childless queer, disabled or black character, for instance.

For the case of Norway, I initially referred to the database of the Norwegian Film Institute, where it is possible to search movie titles by keyword.<sup>8</sup> ‘Childless’, however, whether in English or in Norwegian (*barnløs*), did not retrieve any results at all. Yet, there were several movies that contained the terms (I entered them in English) ‘family’, ‘children’, ‘parents’, ‘mother’. The country is, in fact, known internationally for its films, especially produced in the 1990s and noughties, about children and stories of ‘coming of age’ (Cowie 2005: 17–25). This aspect highlights the constraints of making cinema in a small country: producing a movie is so expensive that it would be an unviable activity in Norway without extensive state support (Holst 2006). The fact that such funding is taxpayers’ money additionally means that it needs to be geared to topics that are perceived most socially (read majority-)relevant.

To identify viable movies I thus had to turn to Norwegian colleagues in Film Studies.<sup>9</sup> I asked them to think about any movie they had watched where they remembered a character without children. I also arranged a meeting with Jan Erik Holst, former director of the Norwegian Film Institute and author of multiple books on Norwegian cinema. He has literally watched *all* Norwegian movies. After several chats, coffee meetings and various rounds of e-mail exchanges, I compiled a combined list of these experts' suggestions.

I watched all the films I could get hold of (eighteen from Italy, seventeen from Norway, fifteen from the United States),<sup>10</sup> either on online film archives or DVD. They spanned the timeframe 1949–2017. Since several Italian older movies were no longer publicly available in any format, I spent a week at the movie archives at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (Experimental Cinematography Centre) in Rome to watch them. A few of them even needed to be digitized before I was able to access them. This required multiple phone calls and e-mail exchanges months in advance of my trip, further showing the amount of effort, time and resources that are required for investigating non-mainstream topics – which partly, logistically, explains why they tend to remain that way.

## **Findings**

The results of the analysis exceeded initial expectations in terms of the negativity of the portrayals. Among the findings I am going to discuss are the fact that the childless tend to die, either by suicide or killed by others; if they do not die, they acquire a child against all expectations; only men and female (super)heroes can overcome the trauma of infertility; and childlessness by circumstance practically does not exist. Given that the films I analysed spanned seven decades, I had expected the representations of childless individuals to change

across time and country, reflecting different and evolving cultural, social and political contexts. Instead, representations were remarkably regular across the board. If anything, Italian representations, even from the past, were more progressive than Norwegian contemporary ones.

### **Troubling portrayals**

Childless characters either die, mostly because they commit suicide (especially in Norway: *Skadeskutt* ['Wounded'] 1951; *Limbo*, 2010; *Søndagsengler* [*The Other Side of Sunday*], 1996; suicide is also suggested in the ending of *Jentespranget* [*Lina's Wedding*], 1973) or are killed (for instance in: *Døden er et kjærtegn* [*Death is a Caress*], 1949; *Fatal Attraction*, 1987; *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*, 1992). If they do not die, it is because they become "normal" by acquiring a baby, often against all odds: by conceiving with a husband's look-alike (*Over stork og stein* [*Stork Staring Mad*], 1994); by magic (*Ma non per sempre* ['But not forever'], 1990); through complicated surrogacy arrangements (*Venuto al mondo* [*Twice Born*], 2012); by adopting (*Padri e figli* [*A Taylor's Maid*], 1957; *While We're Young*, 2014); having access to others' children (in *Raising Arizona*, 1987, by kidnapping a child); having a baby donated to you (*Il futuro é donna* [*The Future is Woman*], 1984); and finding a baby in a basket on the doorstep (*Noe helt annet* ['Something totally different'], 1985), or in a rubbish bin (*Il cosmo sul comó* ['The cosmos on the commode'], 2008).

If a childless individual manages, without a child, to get on with life, it is because the person in question is either a female superhero (*Wonder Woman*, 2017; the character of Black Widow [Scarlett Johansson] in *The Avengers: Age of Ultron*, 2015), a female astronaut (the main characters in *Prometheus*, 2012 and *Gravity*, 2013) or a man (*Up in the Air*, 2009; *La grande bellezza* [*The Great Beauty*], 2013; *Knight of Cups*, 2015). This implicitly points to

the fact that, while for men it tends to be socially acceptable to be childless, for a woman it seldom is unless she is devoting herself to a higher cause for the sake of the entire humanity.

**Figure 1:** Childless heroines: Diana (Gal Gadot) in *Wonder Woman* (2017) and Elizabeth Shaw (Noomi Rapace) in *Prometheus* (2012).

In fact, ordinary women without children, within the plots I have analysed, have no reason to live – compare Vanessa (Angelina Jolie) in *By the Sea* (2015) to Jep Gambardella (Toni Servillo) in *The Great Beauty* (2013). Alternatively, to juxtapose two characters within the same movie – *1001 Gram (1001 Grams)* (2014) – one can observe the striking difference between the increasingly depressed lead character (a childless female scientist) and her love interest, a kind and cheerful Frenchman (a childless male scientist).

**Figure 2:** Jep Gambardella (Toni Servillo) in *La grande bellezza (The Great Beauty)* (2013) vs Vanessa (Angelina Jolie) in *By the Sea* (2015).

Childless individuals, on top of this, are weird, cold, neurotic and hysterical at best (*Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, 1966; *Un fiocco nero per Deborah [A Black Ribbon for Deborah]*, 1974; *While We are Young*, 2014), out to destroy other people's lives at worst (the Queen [Salma Hayek] in *Il racconto dei racconti [Tale of Tales]*, 2015; Ravenna [Charlize Theron] in *The Huntsman: Winter's War*, 2016). Their terminator-like destructive fury (*Fatal Attraction*, 1987; *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*, 1992) is often the reason why no other choice is left but to kill them to defend oneself (and the nuclear family) from their evil.



**Figure 3:** Embodiment of evil: Ravenna (Charlize Theron) in *The Huntsman: Winter's Wars* (2016).

The childless tend to lead a disordered life. They excessively drink alcohol, smoke, consume junk food and behave irrationally: the lead character Mavis (Charlize Theron), in *Young Adult* (2011), for instance, gets intoxicated as a matter of daily routine. In *Kassierer Jensen* ('Cashier Jensen') (1954), the wife in a childless marriage is shown as lazily reading romantic novels and eating chocolates while her husband is at work. Alex (Glenn Close) of *Fatal Attraction* (1987) is portrayed sitting on the bed and trying to ring Dan ([Michael Douglas], who has disconnected the phone) while surrounded at once by a tub of ice cream, Oreo cookies, a packet of crisps, a glass that contains what looks like white wine and an ashtray with a cigarette. This is just before she starts violently stabbing the buttons of the phone with a pencil.

**Figure 4:** Alex (Glenn Close) surrounded by junk food in *Fatal Attraction* (1987).

The childless also live in empty, soulless flats. The lead character in *1001 Gram* (*1001 Grams*) (2014), Marie (Ane Dahl Torp), can be seen in several scenes of the movie drinking wine in the dark, in a flat getting emptier and emptier as her divorce moves along. A reason for this unruly life is that the childless are not truly able to take care of themselves because they are not real adults. The tagline of *Young Adult* (2011), underlining this point, is '[e]veryone gets older, not everyone grows up'. Corinna (Naomi Watts) and Josh (Ben Stiller) in *While We're Young* (2014) become finally adult, after having spent most of the story with a younger couple in their 20s, by taking the decision to adopt. Although this set of movies was not part of my sample, the *Bridget Jones* trilogy (*Bridge Jones's Diary*, 2001;

*Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*, 2004; *Bridget Jones's Baby*, 2016) similarly portrays a figure of fun that finally gets “normalized” and turned into a “grown up” through getting married and having a baby. Bridget’s (Renée Zellweger) character, by the way, also consumes plenty of ice cream, binge-drinks and smokes.

**Figure 5:** Empty spaces in *1001 Gram (1001 Grams)* (2014).

Women, in the stories I have analysed, are so affected by the inability to bear a child that their characters tend, as a result, to show extreme signs of stress and even develop mental illness. An illustration is provided by Gemma, the tormented character played by Penelope Cruz in *Venuto al mondo (Twice Born)* (2012), or Deborah (Marina Malfatti) in *Un fiocco nero per Deborah (A Black Ribbon for Deborah)* (1974).

In addition to this, there seems to be a suggestion that their frustrated urge to procreate leads them to be sexually out of control. Vanessa (Angelina Jolie) tries to seduce a younger man in *By the Sea* (2015). This aspect is brought to the extreme in the story of Valeria (Barbara Bouchet), a barren woman who is obsessed by sex and ends up locked in a mental asylum, in an Italian movie (*Valeria dentro e fuori* [‘Valeria inside and outside’], 1972). This last film, which dwells on the verge of pornography, is a disturbing journey into the character’s hallucinations.

Beyond the negative stereotypes, the problems with these representations are that life without children is never an option and that a woman who is not technically barren can always get

pregnant, and mostly at first attempt – see *Maggie's Plan* (2015) or *Over stork og stein* (*Stork Staring Mad*) (1994). In fact, childlessness appears as a “temporary” condition until it gets “solved”. Childlessness by circumstance does not exist. Miracle babies are the norm.

I had loosely hypothesized Norwegian movies to show more open-mindedness towards childless women, out of a tradition of gender equality. I expected that Italian movies, especially from the past, would be more conservative, along the line of a longer history of patriarchy and an association with Catholic culture. Instead, I found Norwegian films, even contemporary ones, to be strongly stereotypical and matching the conservatism of post-war Italian films. Italian movies from the 1980s onwards, in fact, are considerably more daring in portraying characters that challenge the norm. Several films, for instance, deal with male infertility, an issue that is never squarely addressed within the rest of the sample with the exception of the Norwegian *Skadeskutt* (‘Wounded’) (1951), which tells the story of a mentally ill childless man, Einar. While the film plot might positively serve to educate viewers that people suffering from mental illness are human beings with problems and, as such, deserve understanding, Einar is depicted as mentally ill precisely *because* of his infertility. In addition to this, confirming points I have made previously, the film closes with a questionable “happy ending”: after having put in danger the life of a newborn baby, he commits suicide to the relief, as it turns out, of everyone else.

Although most of the Italian movies addressing male infertility are comedies (*Il gatto mamme*, 1975; *Le donne non vogliono piú* [‘Women no longer want’], 1993; *Il cosmo sul comó* [‘The cosmos on the commode’], 2008), they do manage to breach “a taboo within the taboo” by dealing openly with the topic. In *Il bell'Antonio* (*Bell'Antonio*) (1960), a drama that was nothing short of revolutionary for its time, the character of Antonio (Marcello

Mastroianni) further presents the tragedy of male impotence. In contrast to the personal, “domestic” trauma of female infertility, this is portrayed as a very public issue. In the Sicily of the fascist time the story is set in, sexual prowess appears to be equated with social and political status: Antonio’s impotence thus becomes a source of shame for his entire family.

**Figure 6:** Rare role reversal: in *Le donne non vogliono piú* (‘Women no longer want’) (1993) Luca (Pino Quartullo) longs for a child, while Francesca (Lucrezia Lante della Rovere) is only interested in her career.

It is also mostly in Italian movies that childless women are presented as strong and resilient. Examples in this respect are: *Donna d’ombra* (‘Shadow woman’) (1988); *Ma non per sempre* (‘But not forever’) (1990); *Viaggio Sola (A Five Star Life)* (2003); and *Due partite* (‘Two card games’) (2009). A notable Norwegian exception is *37 og et halvt* (‘37 and a half’) (2005). The protagonist, Selma (Helén Vikstvedt), clumsy and unglamorous, is a Nordic version of Bridget Jones. She triumphs against her detractors, in the end, by becoming a columnist for a national newspaper, as it was her dream, and by even getting a boyfriend. However, she is still a comic figure, who cannot be taken seriously until she has a job and a relationship. She is 38 and a half by the end of the movie. We can imagine she is still on time for trying to conceive – or IVF.

*Viaggio Sola (A Five Star Life)* (2003) was the Italian film in which, most clearly within the whole sample, a childless adult woman, Irene (Margherita Buy), was neither portrayed like a figure of ridicule nor pitied. Irene plays the forty-something childless and single character of a “mystery guest” who travels to the most luxurious hotels in the world to review their

standards. In the story she is *respected*, together with her choices and her lifestyle. She is treated, in fact, as if she was a male character.

**Figure 7:** Selma (Helén Vikstvedt) in *37 og et halvt* ('37 and a half') (2005) vs Irene (Margherita Buy) in *Viaggio Sola (A Five Star Life)* (2003).

### **Discussion: Fiction becomes reality**

What I found about the representations of the childless is not unique to their group.

Stereotyping and stigmatization on-screen also affects other minorities. Asian characters on British TV, for instance, tend to be moulded onto the stereotypes of the prostitutes when female, techy guys and geeks, servants or sexual predators when male (Khan 2017; Levin 2017). Half of Latino immigrant characters in TV programmes in the United States (2014–16) were found to be represented committing an unlawful act (The Opportunity Agenda 2017: 5). Larry Gross (2001: 63), who examines the progressive gain of visibility in the US media by gay and lesbians, writes that 'out of thirty-two films between 1961 and 1976 with major lesbian or gay characters, thirteen feature gays who commit suicide and eighteen whose homosexual character are murdered'.

Stereotypical representations are known to affect negatively the perceptions of the groups portrayed (The Opportunity Agenda 2013). In my own study I additionally gathered evidence about the way media and popular culture representations come silently to constitute, through a daily drip of messages that we might not even consciously notice, the assumptions that underpin our reality. To mention a few examples, not only were several childless individuals I interviewed misled in thinking that getting pregnant would be 'easy' and that fertility treatments could, in the worst case, *always* fix the problem – along the lines of the film

stories that I analysed – but the discrepancy between the high hopes supported by these false impressions and the reality of infertility created even more suffering. In addition to this, as a result of practically never hearing about the experiences of others who are in similar circumstances, often the childless themselves believe the stereotypes. This tends to happen, as Gross (2001: 16) documents in relation to gay individuals in the United States, when there is no other discourse available about a minority but the clichés produced by the majority. As a participant to a public debate I organized about involuntary childlessness in Oslo in 2018 (‘Untold stories: When the family dream goes unrealized’, Litteraturhuset. Oslo, 8 February) wrote to me afterwards:

[it] was an overwhelming experience to be able to talk about this [childlessness] openly with other people. I [...] left [...] with what felt like a new reference point in my own process [of dealing with infertility] – Meeting sane, nice, intelligent, childless people I could identify with.

These last words underline the subtle power of media representations in building unconscious assumptions – in this case again reflecting the portrayals that I analysed – that other childless people are mentally disturbed.

The film analysis also helped in unravelling the roots of the shame associated with being childless. While individuals affected by stigma – like infertility – are expected to be acutely aware of how they ‘fall short’ of the way they ‘ought to be’ (Goffman 1963: 7) and thus conscious of it, stigma is socially constructed (Goffman 1963: 3). The negative representations that I illustrated do contribute to the public discrediting of the childless and their consequent self-censorship. The less visible the childless, in turn, the more excluded

they become from public discourse and the more society, socially and politically, becomes organized around the needs of “the others” with families.

Ultimately, as other studies have done indirectly (Hellstrand 2011; De Boer et al. 2019), this analysis confirms a central and underlying message that resounds across the whole sample of movies: a life without children, outside the family framework, especially for women, is unthinkable and impossible.

## **Conclusion**

The results raise important questions about the long-term, subtle effects of popular culture representations, together with other influences, on: the identity and well-being of the involuntary childless; young people’s family planning choices, especially given that pregnancy tends wrongly to be presented as unproblematic to achieve, if one is not outright barren; and exclusion from public discourse and, consequently, political representation.

There is, one could argue, no obligation on the part of a director to present an accurate portrayal of reality – film is art. The fact that ‘nobody does it on purpose’ and that it is ‘only fiction’, though, does not mean it does not have real effects. Besides, art, and cinema with it, is always political. As Bertold Brecht (1978 in Storey 2012: 3) once put it in relation to theatre:

Good or bad, a play always includes an image of the world [...]. There is no play and no theatrical performance which does not in some way affect the dispositions and conceptions of the audience. Art is never without consequences.

A demonstration of how seriously media representations of female characters in movies are taken in terms of their contribution to gender equality is the fact that Swedish cinemas have started attaching an ‘A rating’ to the movies that satisfy the Bechdel-Wallace test’s criteria (Kang 2016; A-list Film 2018). To pass the test, named after American cartoonist Alison Bechdel and her friend Liz Wallace,<sup>11</sup> a work of fiction must feature: (1) at least two named women, (2) who talk to each other, (3) about a subject other than a man. Following observations that characters from ethnic minorities tend to be associated with illegal activities, another set of criteria – the ‘Chavez-Perez test’ – has been developed to determine whether two non-white characters in a movie speak to each other about something other than crime (A-List Film 2018).

Responding to the results of the analysis, and in the same provocative spirit of the previously mentioned tests, I would like to end this article with a practical suggestion to sensitize filmmakers and audiences to the perspective of a growing group in our society: some criteria to refer to in order to ensure that the representation of individuals without children is not gratuitously stigmatizing. To pass it, a film should show a childless character: (1) whose life is not meaningless; (2) who is not trying to acquire a child at all costs; and (3) who dedicates herself/himself to activities other than ruining other people’s lives.

## **References**

- Ageing Without Children (AWOC) (n.d.), ‘Ageing without children – Why does it matter?’, AWOC, <https://awoc.org/definition-of-ageing-without-children/>. Accessed 3 January 2018.
- A-List Film (2018), ‘Home page’, <http://www.a-listfilm.com/>. Accessed 12 October 2018.



Archetti, C. (2016), 'Invisible women: Where have all the childless gone?', *Myter och sanningar om fertilitet – en temadag om ofrivillig barnlöshet* ('Myths and truths about fertility – A day on involuntary childlessness'), Stockholm, 28 May.

\_\_\_\_ (2017a), 'Breaking the wall: A researcher's journey through stereotype, silences and taboo', *Ofrivilligt barnlösas dag – Temadag: Kan man leva ett bra liv som ofrivilligt barnlös?* ('Unvoluntary Childless Day 2017 – Is it possible to have a good life without children?'), Stockholm, 27 May.

\_\_\_\_ (2017b), 'The controlling hand behind the screen: Erasing the life of childless women in Norwegian, Italian and American Cinema', *Gender and Representation: Graduate Conference*, University of Oslo, Oslo, 3 November.

\_\_\_\_ (2018a), 'Embodied', World Childless Week, 12 September,  
<https://worldchildlessweek.net/childlessness-and-the-arts/2018/8/30/embodied-cristina-archetti>.

\_\_\_\_ (2018b), 'Speaking out with different words: Why we need research from a childless perspective and why art can help, too', World Childless Week, 12 September,  
<https://worldchildlessweek.net/childlessness-and-the-arts/2018/9/7/speaking-out-with-different-words-why-we-need-research-from-a-childless-perspective-why-art-can-help-too-cristina-archetti-34pnh>.

\_\_\_\_ (2018c), 'Trilogy of grief', World Childless Week, 12 September,  
<https://worldchildlessweek.net/childlessness-and-the-arts/2018/8/30/a-trilogy-of-grief-cristina-archetti>.

\_\_\_\_ (2018d), 'Writing about invisibility: Childlessness beyond not having the baby', *Usagte familiehistorier: Når familiedrømmen ikke lykkes* ('Untold stories: When the family dream goes unrealized'), Litteraturhuset, Oslo, 8 February.

Bartlik B., Greene, K., Graf, M., Sharma, G., and Melnick, H. (1997), 'Examining PTSD as a complication of infertility', *Medscape Womens Health*, 2:3, p. 1.

*Battlestar Galactica* [TV series] (2004-09, USA).

Beaujouan, É., Sobotka, T., Brzozowska, Z., and Zeman, K. (2017), 'Has childlessness peaked in Europe?', *Population and Societies*, 540: January, pp. 1-4.

Bechdel Test Movie List. (n.d.), 'The Rule', <https://assets.rbl.ms/17554657/origin.jpg>.

Accessed 10 November 2017.

Benninghaus, C. (2014), "'No, thank you, Mr Stork!': Voluntary childlessness in Weimar and Contemporary Germany', *Studies in the Maternal*, 6:1,  
<http://www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk/articles/abstract/10.16995/sim.8/>. Accessed 12 January 2017.

Berrington, A. (2016), 'Childlessness in the UK', in M. Kreyenfeld and D. Konietzka (eds), *Childlessness in Europe: Contexts, Causes, and Consequences*, Cham: Springer Open, pp. 57–76.

Blackstone, A. (2014), 'childless... or childfree?', *Contexts*, 13:4, pp. 68–70.

Boer, M. L. De, Archetti, C. and Solbrække, K. N. (2019), 'In/fertile monsters: The emancipatory significance of representations of women on infertility reality TV', *Journal of Medical Humanities*, pp. 1-16,  
<https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007%2Fs10912-019-09555-z.pdf>

Boivin, J., Bunting, L., Collins, J. A. and Nygren, K. G. (2007), 'International estimates of infertility prevalence and treatment-seeking: Potential need and demand for infertility medical care', *Human Reproduction*, 22:6, pp. 1506–12.

Bradow, A. (2012), 'Primary and secondary infertility and post traumatic stress disorder: Experiential differences between type of infertility and symptom characteristics', Ph.D. thesis, Louisville, KY: Spalding University.

Brown, J. A. and Ferree, M. (2005), 'Close your eyes and think of England: Pronatalism in the British print media', *Gender and Society*, 19:1, pp. 5–24.

Calhoun, L. G. and Selby, J. W. (1980), 'Voluntary childlessness, involuntary childlessness, and having children: A study of social perceptions', *Family Relations*, 29:2, pp. 181–83.

Cowie, P. (2005), *Cool and Crazy: Modern Norwegian Cinema 1990-2005*, Oslo: Norwegian Film Institute.

Day, J. (2013), '50 ways not to be a mother...', Gateway Women, 6 September, <http://gateway-women.com/50-ways-not-to-be-a-mother-with-apologies-to-paul-simon/>. Accessed 27 September 2016.

Edelman, L. (2004), *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Ellingsæter, A. L. and Leira, A. (eds) (2006), *Politicising Parenthood in Scandinavia: Gender Relations in Welfare States*, Bristol: Policy Press.

Ethics Committee of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine (2013), 'Access to fertility treatment by gays, lesbians, and unmarried persons: A committee opinion', *Fertility & Sterility*, 100:6, pp. 1524–27.

Éva, S. T., Brzozowska, Z. and Zeman, K. (2017), 'Has childlessness peaked in Europe?', *Population and Societies*, 540: January, pp. 1–4.

Frank, A. (2013), *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness & Ethics*, 2nd ed., London: University of Chicago Press.

Franklin, S. (1990), 'Deconstructing "desperateness": The social construction of infertility in popular representations of new reproductive technologies', in M. McNeil, I. Varcoe and S. Yearley (eds), *The New Reproductive Technologies*, London: Macmillan, pp. 200–29.

Fullmer, E. M., Shenk, D. and Eastland, L. J. (1999), 'Negating identity: A feminist analysis of the social invisibility of older lesbians', *Journal of Women and Aging*, 11:2&3, pp. 131–48.

Gannon, K., Glover, L. and Abel, P. (2004), 'Masculinity, infertility, stigma and media reports', *Social Science and Medicine*, 59:6, pp. 1169–75.

Gitlin, T. (1978), 'Prime time ideology: The hegemonic process in television entertainment', *Social Problems*, 26:3, pp. 251–66.

Goffman, E. (1963), *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Graham, M. and Rich, S. (2014), 'Representations of childless women in the Australian print media', *Feminist Media Studies*, 14:3, pp. 500–18.

Gross, L. (2001), *Up from Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Hadley, R. and Hanley, T. (2011), 'Involuntary childless men and the desire for fatherhood', *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology*, 29:1, pp. 56–68.

Hanna, E. and Gough, B. (2016), 'Emoting infertility online: A qualitative analysis of men's forum posts', *Health*, 20:4, pp. 363–82.

- Hellstrand, I. (2011), 'The shape of things to come? Politics of reproduction in the contemporary science fiction series "Battlestar Galactica"', *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 19:1, pp. 6–24.
- Hill, A. M. (2014), 'The childless woman as failure; or, the "Spinster Aunt" as a provocation for the future', *Women in German Yearbook*, vol. 30, pp. 164–74.
- Hirsch, A. M. and Hirsch, S. M. (1995), 'The long-term psychosocial effects of infertility', *Journal of Obstetric, Gynecologic and Neonatal Nursing*, 24:6, pp. 517–22.
- Holst, J. E. (2006), *Det lille sirkus: Et essay om norske filmer og produksjonsforhold 1946-2006* ('The little circus: An essay on Norwegian film and production conditions 1946-2006'), Oslo: Norsk filminstitutt.
- Kang, I. (2016), 'What happened after Swedish theaters introduced a Bechdel rating for its movies?', IndieWire, 17 February, <https://www.indiewire.com/2016/02/what-happened-after-swedish-theaters-introduced-a-bechdel-rating-for-its-movies-204746/>. Accessed 13 February 2017.
- Kassam, A., Scammell, R., Connolly, K., Orange, R., Willsher, K. and Ratcliffe, R. (2015), 'Europe needs many more babies to avert a population disaster', *The Guardian*, 23 August, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/23/baby-crisis-europe-brink-depopulation-disaster>. Accessed 24 August 2015.

- Khan, C. (2017), 'Goodness gracious me – Why are there still so few Asian people on TV?', *The Guardian*, 8 March, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/mar/08/asians-on-british-tv-no-progress-actors-or-programmes>. Accessed 15 May 2017.
- Koos, C. (2009), 'The good, the bad, and the childless: The politics of female identity in *Maternité* (1929) and *La Maternelle* (1933)', *Historical Reflections (Refléxions Historiques)*, 35:2, pp. 3–20.
- Koropecykj-Cox, T., Çopur, Z., Romano, V. and Cody-Rydzewski, S. (2015), 'University students' perceptions of parents and childless or childfree couples', *Journal of Family Issues*, 39:1, pp. 155–79.
- Kotkin, J. (2017), 'Death spiral demographics: The countries shrinking the fastest', *Forbes*, 1 February, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/joelkotkin/2017/02/01/death-spiral-demographics-the-countries-shrinking-the-fastest/#445392afb83c>. Accessed 12 October 2018.
- Latour, B. (2005), *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lechner, L., Bolman, C. A. W. and Dalen, A. van (2007), 'Definite involuntary childlessness: Associations between coping, social support and psychological distress', *Human Reproduction*, 22:1, pp. 288–94.

- Leon, I. G. (2010), 'Understanding and treating infertility: Psychoanalytic considerations', *The Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis and Dynamic Psychiatry*, 38:1, pp. 47–75.
- \_\_\_\_ (2000), 'Images and representations of non-motherhood', *Reproductive Health Matters*, 8:16, p. 143.
- \_\_\_\_ (2002), 'Childless and bereft?: Stereotypes and realities in relation to “voluntary” and “involuntary” childlessness and womanhood', *Sociological Enquiry*, 72:1, pp. 7–20.
- Letherby, G. and Williams, C. (1999), 'Non-motherhood: Ambivalent autobiographies', *Feminist Studies*, 25:3, pp. 719–28.
- Levin, S. (2017), “‘We’re the geeks, the prostitutes’”: Asian American actors on Hollywood’s barriers’, *The Guardian*, 11 April, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/11/asian-american-actors-whitewashing-hollywood>. Accessed 12 April 2017.
- Luciano, M., Sampogna, G., del Vecchio, V., Giacco, D., Mulè, A., Rosa, C. de, Fiorillo, A. and Maj, M. (2012), 'The family in Italy: Cultural changes and implications for treatment', *International Review of Psychiatry*, 24:2, pp. 149–56.
- Miall, C. E. (1985), 'Perceptions of informal sanctioning and the stigma of involuntary childlessness', *Deviant Behavior*, 6:4, pp. 383–403.



- Moi, T. (2004), 'Moderskapsmaset' ('The harping on motherhood'), *Morgenbladet*, 2 January, p. 48.
- Moore, J. (2014), 'Reconsidering child freedom: A feminist exploration of discursive identity construction in childfree live journal communities', *Women's Studies in Communication*, 37:2, pp. 159–80.
- Murray, M. (1999), 'The storied nature of health and illness', in M. Murray and K. Chamberlain (eds), *Qualitative Health Psychology: Theories and Methods*, London: Sage, pp. 47–63.
- NHS (2017), 'Infertility', NHS, <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/infertility/>. Accessed 20 September 2018.
- NWO (2010), 'Kinderloosheid is zelden een keuze' ('Childlessness is rarely a choice'), NWO, 5 February, <https://www.nwo.nl/actueel/nieuws/2010/Kinderloosheid+is+zelden+een+keuze.html>. Accessed 23 March 2017.
- OECD (2015), 'Childlessness', OECD Family Database, [https://www.oecd.org/els/family/SF\\_2-5-Childlessness.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/els/family/SF_2-5-Childlessness.pdf). Accessed 25 March 2017.
- Pfeffer, N. and Woollett, A. (1983), *The Experience of Infertility*, London: Virago.
- Präg, P., Sobotka, T., Lappalainen, E., Miettinen, A., Rotkirch, A., Takács, J., Donno, A., Tanturri, M. L. and Mills, M. (2017), 'Childlessness and assisted reproduction in Europe', Summary report of key findings for WP4, Families and Societies Working Paper, 69, pp. 1–

32. <http://www.familiesandsocieties.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/WP69Pragetal2017.pdf>. Accessed 9 February 2018.

Rushton, R. (2011), *The Reality of Film: Theories of Filmic Reality*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Storey, J. (ed.) (2009), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, 4th ed., Harlow: Pearson Education.

\_\_\_\_ (2012), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, London: Pearson.

Sundby, J. (2010), 'Infertility in public health: The case of Norway', *Facts, Views & Vision in Obstetrics and Gynecology*, 2:3, pp. 177–81.

The Opportunity Agenda (2013), *Media Representations and Impact on the Lives of Black Men and Boys*, New York: The Opportunity Agenda,  
<https://opportunityagenda.org/explore/resources-publications/media-representations-impact-black-men>. Accessed 18 October 2018.

\_\_\_\_ (2017), *Power of POP*, New York: The Opportunity Agenda,  
<https://opportunityagenda.org/explore/resources-publications/power-pop/executive-summary>. Accessed 18 October 2018.

Thorn, P. (2009), 'Understanding infertility: Psychological and social considerations from a counselling perspective', *International Journal of Fertility and Sterility*, 3:2, pp. 48–51.

Tilly, C. (2002), *Stories, Identities, and Political Change*, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield.

Tincknell, E. (2005). *Mediating the Family: Gender, Culture and Representation*, London: Hodder Arnold.

Waldman, E. (2006), 'Cultural priorities revealed: The development and regulation of assisted reproduction in the United States and Israel', *Health Matrix*, 16:1, pp. 65–106.

Whiteford, L. M. and Gonzalez, L. (1995), 'Stigma: The hidden burden of infertility', *Social Science and Medicine*, 40:1, pp. 27–36.

Your Fertility (2017), 'Age', Your Fertility, <https://www.yourfertility.org.au/everyone/age>.

Accessed 12 September 2018

### **Contributor details**

Cristina Archetti is professor in political communication and journalism at the University of Oslo, Norway. Her multidisciplinary research focuses on the role of communication, both mediated by technologies and face-to-face, in politics and society. She is author of three books: *Explaining News: National Politics and Journalistic Cultures in Global Context* (Palgrave, 2010); *Understanding Terrorism in the Age of Global Media: A Communication Approach* (Palgrave, 2012); *Politicians, Personal Image and the Construction of Political Identity: A Comparative Study of the UK and Italy* (Palgrave, 2014). She won, among other international prizes, the 2008 Denis McQuail Award for Innovating Communication Theory.

Cristina's current research focuses on how media and communication contribute to the construction of deviance and taboo. She is particularly interested in the mechanisms that lead to the silencing and marginalization of the involuntary childless. Beyond researching childlessness, she has both organized events to raise awareness about this topic and contributed to its discussion across Norway, Sweden and online ([www.WorldChildlessWeek.net](http://www.WorldChildlessWeek.net)). She is in the process of publishing the book, *Silent Bodies: Deconstructing Childlessness in the Age of Communication* (provisional title), an analysis of the social and political repercussion of involuntary childlessness and its existential ramifications all aspects of one's life.

Contact:

Department of Media and Communication, Institutt for medier og kommunikasjon – IMK,  
University of Oslo, P.O. Box 1093 Blindern, N-0317 Oslo, Norway.

E-mail: [cristina.archetti@media.uio.no](mailto:cristina.archetti@media.uio.no)

## **Appendix**

### **Representations of the involuntary childless: List of films**

The list is organized in chronological order of release, per country: Original title (translation) (director, year). Production company.

#### **Italy**

*Padri e figli (A Taylor's Maid)* (Mario Monicelli, 1957). Royal Film, Filmel, Lyrica Filmel.

*Il bell'Antonio (Bell'Antonio)* (Mauro Bolognini, 1960). Arco Film, Cino del Duca, Societé Cinématographique Lyre.

*Valeria dentro e fuori* ('Valeria inside and outside') (Brunello Rondi, 1972). Naxos Film.

*Un fiocco nero per Deborah (A Black Ribbon for Deborah)* (Marcello Andrei, 1974). Paola Film S.r.l.

*Il gatto mammone* (Nando Cicero, 1975). Medusa Distribuzione.

*Il futuro è donna (The Future is Woman)* (Marco Ferreri, 1984). Faso Film, Union Générale Cinématographique SA, Ascot Film GmbH.

*Fatto su misura* ('Made to measure') (Francesco Laudadio, 1985). R.P.A. Cinematografica.

*Donna d'ombra* ('Shadow woman') (Luigi Faccini, 1988). Piperno, RAI Radiotelevisione Italiana.

*Ma non per sempre* ('But not forever') (Marzio Casa, 1991). Cecchi Gori Group Tiger Cinematografica, Esterno Mediterraneo Film, Reteitalia.

*Le donne non vogliono più* ('Women no longer want') (Pino Quartullo, 1993). Penta Film, Officina Film.

*L'inverno* ('Winter') (Nina Di Majo, 2002). Dodici Dicembre, Farfilms, Rai Cinema, Psycho Film.

*Viaggio sola (Five Star Life)* (Maria Sole Tognazzi, 2003). Bianca Film.

*Il cosmo sul comò* ('The cosmos on the commode') (Marcello Cesena, 2008). Medusa Film, Agidi.

*Due partite* ('Two card games') (Enzo Monteleone, 2009). Cattleya, Rai Cinema.

*Venuto al mondo (Twice Born)* (Sergio Castellitto, 2012). Medusa Film, Alien Produzioni, Mod Producciones, Picomedia, Telecinco Cinema.

*La grande bellezza (The Great Beauty)* (Paolo Sorrentino, 2013). Indigo Film, Medusa Film (co-production), Babe Film (co-production), Pathé (co-production), France 2 Cinéma (co-production).

*Il racconto dei racconti (Tale of Tales)* (Matteo Garrone, 2015). Archimede, Le Pacte, Rai Cinema.

## **Norway**

*Døden er et kjærtegn (Death is a Caress)* (Edith Carlmar, 1949). Carlmar Film.

*Skadeskutt ('Wounded')* (Edith Carlmar, 1951). Carlmar Film.

*Kasserer Jensen ('Cashier Jensen')* (Nils R. Müller, 1954). Contact Film AS, Ø. C. Vennerød & Co.

*Jakten ('The hunt')* (Erik Løchen, 1959). Studio ABC AS.

*Jentespranget (Lina's Wedding)* (Knut Leif Thomsen, 1973). Teamfilm AS.

*Hustruer (Wives)* (Anja Breien, 1975). Norsk Film AS.

*Hustruer – Ti år etter (Wives – Ten years after)* (Anja Breien, 1985). Norsk Film AS.

*Hustruer III (Wives 3)* (Anja Breien, 1995). Norsk Film AS, Magdalenafilm AS.

*Arven ('The inheritance')* (Anja Breien, 1979). Norsk Film AS.

*Brennende blomster ('Burning flowers')* (Eva Dahr and Eva Isaksen, 1985). Norsk Film AS.

*Noe helt annet ('Something completely different')* (Morten Kolstad, 1985). Media Vision AS, Norsk Film AS.

*Over stork og stein (Stork Staring Mad)* (Eva Isaksen, 1994). Moviemakers AS, Norsk Film AS.

*Søndagsengler (The Other Side of Sunday)* (Berit Nesheim, 1996). NRK Drama.

*37 og et halvt* ('37 and a half') (Vibeke Idsøe, 2005). Filmkameratene AS, Svensk Filmindustri AB.

*Limbo* (Marie Sødahl, 2010). SF Norge Produksjon AS, Nimbus Film (co-production), Bob Film Sweden (co-production), Galt Alliance Films (co-production).

*Sykt lykkelig* (*Happy Happy*) (Anne Sewitsky, 2010). Maipo AS.

*1001 Gram* (*1001 Grams*) (Bent Hamer, 2014). BulBul Film AS, Slot Machine (co-production), Pandora Film Produktion (co-production).

*Shelley*<sup>12</sup> (Ali Abbasi, 2016). Profile Pictures.

## **Unites States**

*Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (Mike Nichols, 1966). Warner Bros.

*Raising Arizona* (Joel Coen and Ethan Coen, 1987). Circle Films.

*Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, 1987). Paramount Pictures.

*The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* (Curtis Hanson, 1992). Hollywood Pictures, Interscope Communications, Rock'n Cradle Productions.

*Up in the Air* (Jason Reitman, 2009). Paramount Pictures, The Montecito Picture Company.

*Young Adult* (Jason Reitman, 2011). Paramount Pictures, Denver and Delilah Productions, Indian Paintbrush, Mandate Pictures, Mr. Mudd, Right of Way Films.

*Prometheus* (Ridley Scott, 2012). Twentieth Century Fox, Scott Free Productions, Brandywine Productions.

*Gravity*<sup>13</sup> (Alfonso Cuarón, 2013). Warner Bros., Esperanto Filmoj, Heyday Films.

*While We're Young* (Noah Baumbach, 2014). InterActiveCorp Films LLC.

*Maggie's Plan* (Rebecca Miller, 2015). Black Bear Pictures, Freedom Media, Hall Monitor, Locomotive, Rachael Horovitz Productions, Round Films.

*By the Sea* (Angelina Jolie Pitt, 2015). Universal Pictures, Jolie Pas, Pellikola, Plan B Entertainment.

*Knight of Cups* (Terrence Malick, 2015). Dogwood Films, Waypoint Entertainment.

*Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Joss Whedon, 2015). Marvel Studios, Walt Disney Pictures.

*The Huntsman: Winter's War* (Cedric Nicolas-Troyan, 2016). Universal Pictures, Roth Films.

*Wonder Woman* (Patty Jenkins, 2017). Warner Bros., Atlas Entertainment, Cruel & Unusual Films, DC Entertainment, Tencent Pictures, Wanda Pictures.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> The article uses the term 'childless' to refer to those who, involuntarily, do not have children. This is to differentiate them from those who are voluntarily so and who often refer to themselves, to emphasize the positive and desirable aspects of not having children, as 'childfree' (Blackstone 2014). As I have argued elsewhere (Archetti 2018b), however, the use of this terminology is in itself problematic since it disproportionately emphasizes choice and an individual's ability to manage one's own life according to a 'plan'. Life circumstances, in reality, are often beyond one's control and having a baby always involves, even in the case of assisted reproduction, at least another human being.

<sup>2</sup> The interviews (conducted May 2016 to October 2017, both face-to-face and via Skype) lasted between 40 and 86 minutes, with an average of about an hour. They included sixteen women and two men. The sample, given the difficulty in finding individuals willing to talk about such a sensitive subject, was largely opportunistic. Most interviewees were met at events dedicated to in/fertility. Some contacts were obtained through snowballing. The main online discussion fora related to pregnancy were Mumsnet – Conception



---

(<https://www.mumsnet.com/Talk/conception>), Baby and Bump

(<https://babyandbump.momtastic.com/>), and Baby Center (<https://www.babycenter.com/>). In relation to involuntary childlessness, the participant observation took place on closed Facebook groups (Ofrivilligt barnlös – andra sidan tröskeln-för kvinnor [Unvoluntary childless – the other side of the threshold-for women], Childless Path to Acceptance, Childless Perks); the website of Gateway Women (<https://gateway-women.com/>); and World Childless Week (<https://worldchildlessweek.net/>).

<sup>3</sup> The author, for instance, contributed to (Archetti 2018d) and organized the event ‘Untold stories: When the family dream goes unrealized’ (Litteraturhuset, Oslo, 8 February 2018). She delivered keynote speeches at two events organized by Barnlängtan, the Swedish Association for the Involuntary Childless (Archetti 2016, 2017a) and at a graduate conference (Archetti 2017b) on ‘Gender and Representation’ (University of Oslo, 3 November 2017). She served as spokesperson for Norway in the online event ‘World Childless Week 2018’ (10–16 September) (Archetti 2018a, 2018b, 2018c).

<sup>4</sup> On the lack of a place for a childless woman in western neo-liberal society see Hill (2014); refer to Edelman (2004) for a broader critique of how the lack of children (by queer subjects, in the specific case of the source) places one outside both politics and social belonging.

<sup>5</sup> Associazione Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche Audiovisive e Multimediali (‘National Association for the Cinematographic, Audiovisual and Multimedial Industries’), <http://www.archiviodelcinemaitaliano.it/>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.imdb.com/>.

<sup>7</sup> In my sample, for instance: *Up in the Air* (2009), *La grande bellezza* (*The Great Beauty*) (2013), *Knight of Cups* (2015).

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nfi.no/eng>.

<sup>9</sup> Thanks to Jon Inge Faldalen and Ove Solum at the University of Oslo.

---

<sup>10</sup> The full list is available in Appendix.

<sup>11</sup> The test's criteria began as a set of humorous observations in the comic book *Dykes to Watch Out For*, in a strip entitled 'The Rule' (Bechdel 1985 in Bechdel Test Movie List n.d.: n. pag.).

<sup>12</sup> This is a Danish/Swedish movie, which was widely shown in Norwegian cinemas.

<sup>13</sup> This is a UK/US film.