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Mothers behaving badly:

Chaotic hedonism and the crisis of neoliberal social reproduction

Jo Littler

This article focuses on the significance of the plethora of representations of mothers ‘behaving badly’ in contemporary anglophone media texts, including the films *Bad Moms*, *Fun Mom Dinner* and *Bad Mom’s Christmas*, the book and online cartoons *Hurrah for Gin* and the recent TV comedy dramas *Motherland*, *The Let Down* and *Catastrophe*. All these media texts include representations of, first, mothers in the midst of highly chaotic everyday spaces where any smooth routine of domesticity is conspicuous by its absence; and second, mothers behaving hedonistically, usually through drinking and partying, behaviour that is more conventionally associated with men or women without children. After identifying the social type of the mother behaving badly (MBB), the article locates and analyses it in relation to several different social and cultural contexts. These contexts are: a neoliberal crisis in social reproduction marked by inequality and overwork; the continual if contested role of women as ‘foundation parents’; and the negotiation of longer-term discourses of female hedonism. The title gestures towards a popular British sitcom of the 1990s, *Men Behaving Badly*, which popularised the idea of the ‘new lad’; and this article suggests that the new lad’s counterpart, the ladette, is mutating into the mother behaving badly, or the ‘lad mom’. Asking what work this figure does now, in a later neoliberal context, it argues that the mother behaving badly is simultaneously indicative of a widening and liberating range of maternal subject positions and symptomatic of a profound contemporary crisis in social reproduction. By focusing on the classed and racialised dynamics of the MBB – by examining who exactly is permitted to be hedonistic, and how – and by considering the MBB’s limited and partial imagining of progressive social change, the article concludes by emphasising the urgency of creating more connections between such discourses and ‘parents behaving politically’.

Keywords: chaos * hedonism * motherhood * neoliberalism * social reproduction

Introduction

‘I’m allowed to be just as irresponsible as you!’

- Kelly, to her male partner, in *Bad Neighbours* (2014)

What is striking about so many recent representations of motherhood is that they so often depict a blend of extreme hedonism and chaos. From the box-office hit films *Bad Moms* and *A Bad Mom’s Christmas*, to recent TV comedy like *Motherland*, *The Let Down* and *Catastrophe*, from images of celebrity mother ‘fails’ in glossy celebrity magazines to comic books like *Hurrah For Gin*, a distinctive and pronounced discursive tendency in contemporary media is the depiction of what we might term ‘mothers behaving badly’. By this term I mean that, first, they depict mothers in the midst of highly *chaotic* everyday spaces where any smooth routine of domesticity is conspicuous by its absence; and second, they show mothers behaving *hedonistically*, primarily through vigorous drinking and partying -- behaviour more stereotypically, and conventionally, associated with men or women without children. These are women who have chats with drug dealers in parking lots late at night whilst their baby is in a car seat, who fall off the bed when high whilst trying to use a breast pump, who stop home baking and start hard partying.¹

We can, I think understand the ‘mother behaving badly’ as an emergent social type that is temporarily crystalizing at this particular moment. Such figures gain their volition and credence by being repeated across the mediascape (Dyer 1977; Hall 1969; Tyler 2008).² There have been a number of stock social types in recent years circulating around motherhood. They include the idea of the ‘welfare mother’ in the US, a working-class mother who has for several decades now in the neoliberal period been stigmatised as morally reprehensible, and is often intensely racialised (Briggs 2018; Hill Collins 2008; Wacquant 2009). The welfare mother has now become similarly vilified (whilst differently inflected) in a UK context: castigated as irresponsible, breeding too much and too selfishly, as parasitically draining the national body politic. As Tracey Jensen writes in *Parenting the*

¹ Similar events reoccur across a number of media texts; here I am referencing scenes in, respectively, *The Let Down*, *Catastrophe* and *Bad Moms*.

² Variouslly described as a social type, a cultural figure, and a stereotype. I discuss this more in Littler 2013.

Crisis, such figures are exaggerated to provide scapegoats and feed outrage in order to push through welfare reforms of marketisation and cuts, and are thus part of the ‘machinery of contemporary authoritarian populism’ (Jensen 2018). In opposition to the scorn heaped on the welfare and ‘chav mum’ (Tyler 2008) there are, however, other motherhood figures and roles which are presented as far more publicly acceptable, and are indeed vaunted, venerated and glamourized by establishment media discourse (McRobbie 2013). These include the ‘yummy mummy’, who attempts to maximise her heterosexual attractiveness and marketability (Hardyment 2007, Littler 2013, Phillips 2014); and the ‘mumpreneur’, who sets up a business whilst on maternity leave from her kitchen table whilst her children crawl beneath it (Eikhof et al 2013, Ekinsmyth 2013, 2014, Littler 2018).

The mother behaving badly sits somewhere between these two extremes of vilification and veneration, although she is closer - in terms of establishment-sanctioned social ‘acceptability’ - to the latter. She is not castigated, but rather presented as simultaneously fun, risqué and as justified in adopting these moments of carnivalesque excess. In this respect she appears to be operating in a different mode to what Melinda Cooper has identified as the ‘new social conservatism’ which transmits itself through family values (Cooper 2017). In this article, I examine the meanings of this social figure as part of what I identify as a wider discursive formation. I consider what it tells us about the present moment -- its particular balance of forces, or conjuncture – in terms of the options now available to mothers (or not) as well as in terms of the wider dynamics of social reproduction.³ I conduct this analysis in this article in three ways, and with reference to a range of contemporary anglophone media texts, including the films *Bad Moms*, *Fun Mom Dinner* and *Bad Mom’s Christmas*, the book and website *Hurrah for Gin* and recent TV comedy dramas *Motherland*, *The Let Down* and *Catastrophe*. Firstly, by discussing how ‘mothers behaving badly’ can be connected both to recent genealogies of hedonism, and to an expansion in self-presentations and representations of motherhood. Secondly, by considering how these moments of excess are directly related to a crisis of overwork and under-provision in social reproduction; here I draw on new and old work in social reproduction theory. And thirdly, by unpacking the classed, gendered and racialised dynamics these incarnations of motherhood indicate and wrestle with; by defining the texture of their intersectionality. This work is done both to unpack the character and limitations of the mother behaving badly, and

³ ‘The conjuncture’, that key term for cultural studies, is most famously explored in Hall et al 1978. I provide an explanation of the term in Littler 2016.

to examine what solutions they can, and cannot offer: to consider what political potentialities are on their horizon of possibility.

From the new lad to the lad mom

‘I say we go punch that chick right in the tits!’

- ‘Carla’, *Bad Moms* (2016)

Two prime examples of the mother behaving badly narrative are the comedy films *Bad Moms* (2016) and its sequel *A Bad Mom’s Christmas* (2017). Both feature mothers in an affluent middle-class Chicago suburb reaching different ‘breaking points’ with the pressures of everyday life; pressures which are alleviated through screaming and then through cutting loose and partying hard. The main character Amy (Mila Kunis) is the overworked, overcommitted mother, juggling work, childcare, school PTA functions and domestic responsibilities, whilst her husband fails to pull his weight and cheats on her with a camgirl. After rebelling against the over-zealous instructions meted out by Gwendolyn, the uptight leader of the parent-teacher association (PTA), Amy goes to a bar where she meets her new mother-allies, Carla (Kathryn Hahn), a hedonistic, sexually upfront, working-class single parent, and Kiki (Kristen Bell), a naïve middle-class ‘good-girl’ and stay-at-home mother of four. Decrying the pressures they are put under as mothers, they raise a glass ‘to Bad Moms!’, after which good girl Kiki falls off her bar stool drunk.

The comic release of the film involves the mothers saying ‘no’ to many of the pressures they face in their everyday lives and partying together instead. As part of her new ‘realization’ that she needs to be less uptight and do less domestic labour, Amy hosts a large, riotous drink-fuelled party in her house (that party production involves domestic labour is not acknowledged or coded as such) to which the mothers flock, away from Gwendolyn’s party, which had featured the real live Martha Stewart, doyenne of doilies and other ‘homemaking’ middle-class craft. By contrast the party montage at Amy’s house features pregnant women, (token) women in hijabs, good-girl Kiki getting high on whipped cream, vodka thrown in the air, Carla stimulating a hand job with the vodka bottle, Carla making out with other women, slo-mo close-ups of Kiki’s child-made ‘mom’ necklace against jiggling breasts, a mother

falling off a kid's tricycle, and everyone throwing their hands in the air as Nicky Minaj raps against a high-energy, electro-house soundtrack⁴.

The party is part of Amy's pitch to be a new kind of PTA president, appealing to 'moms who want to do less!' and it is clearly a rejoinder to the insistent contemporary cultural pressure on mothers to carry the weight of responsibility to achieve in every sphere (as well as a rejoinder to overwork, discussed in the next section). In the process the narrative of *Bad Moms* blows a raspberry at what Angela McRobbie has described as the paradigm of the perfect, of a 'constellation of domestic excellence' (McRobbie 2015). 'I am so tired of trying to be this perfect mom! I'm done!' yells Amy in the PTA meeting in the school sports hall in the film's pivotal scene which sees her move toward 'bad momdom'. Alongside the rejection of 'the perfect' therefore, is the sudden embrace of doing a lot less and drinking and partying a lot more. The film provides dramatic satisfaction in part through its feminist affective charge: these women are depicted as unfairly over-burdened whilst the men are far less so. It also works to expand the repertoire of representations of motherhood, showing mothers at play and enjoying themselves, together, as well as at work.

In the process the film is part of a contemporary expansion in media representations of motherhood. This expanding representation has been particularly apparent in print, online and TV media, but has been slower with film, a realm notorious for its pronounced difficulties with gender parity in terms of both production and representation (Jones and Pringle 2015; Cobb and Wreyford 2018). There was a point in the early 2000s where to make screen-based media dedicated to the issue of motherhood seemed like a project which would either not garner much attention or be doomed to fail; the most extreme example being the film *Motherhood* (2009) starring Uma Thurman, which became the second largest financial flop ever at the UK box office, making £9 on its opening night (Hill 2010). This film's box-office demise was undoubtedly due to multiple marketing failures but it also spoke to a pronounced lack of enthusiasm all the way through the cultural and commodity chain for mothers as the focal point of sustained cinematic investigation. By contrast, since the early 2010s there has been a surge in both the production and consumption of screen-based representations of motherhood in the Anglophone mediasphere. TV and film representations of motherhood have expanded rapidly to join the more large realms of representation that have proliferated across magazines and books, constituting what Shani Orgad terms 'the hypervisibility of contemporary motherhood in popular culture' (Orgad 2019: 23). For as

⁴ David Guetta, 'Hey Mama', featuring Nicky Minaj, Bebe Rexha and Afrojack. 2014. Parlaphone.

Jacqueline Rose argues in her book *Mothers*, ‘in modern-day Western culture, mothers are invariably almost always the object either of too much attention or not enough’ (Rose 2018; kindle location 94).

The hedonism displayed by the mother behaving badly is of a particular kind. Release and escapism through bouts of intense hard drinking, smoking and sex was a hallmark of the ‘new lad’ from the mid-1990s, and his later female counterpart, ‘the ladette’. In many ways the ‘mother behaving badly’ can be understood as what we might call the ‘lad mom’. As her etiology can in part be traced back through these figures, it is worth revisiting some of their key features and genesis, particularly in relation to gender, sexuality and social politics.

Whereas in the 1980s the idea of the metrosexual, style-conscious and empathetic ‘new man’ had emerged as a subject position for men to inhabit, through the pages of the style press, advertising and film, by the mid-1990s the lager-swilling, ‘bird’-chasing, ‘refreshingly blunt’ new lad had strutted in front (Nixon 1996). The new lad embodied a hedonistic, frequently irresponsible form of masculinity, one borrowing from a more ostensibly working-class vocabulary and machismo. As Tim Edwards put it, ‘whereas the New Man was potentially easily perceived as ‘namby-pamby’ or at least as sexually ambivalent, the New Lad was all too certain of his often downright adolescent sexual orientation’ (Edwards 2006: 42). The most spectacular vehicles for his popularization were glossy men’s magazines, particularly *Loaded*, and later the even sexually cruder *Nuts* and *Zoo* (Mooney 2014). The new lad also surfaced in ‘ladvertising’, films, popular fiction and TV sitcoms such as *Men Behaving Badly*. This long-running and hugely popular sitcom (6 series in the UK between 1992-1998; 2 series in US 1996-7) depicted two flat-sharing men living their ‘second childhood’ largely on the sofa together drinking beer, watching TV and talking about women. Their behaviour was largely framed as pleasurable juvenile, in opposition to the ‘boring’ maturity of their girlfriends.⁵

Ros Gill and David Hansen-Miller note that ‘the new lad was a cultural figure organized around homosocial bonding and predatory and objectifying attitudes towards women. Lad mags offered a hedonistic, apparently shameless, celebration of masculinity, constructed around men’s assumed obsessions with drinking, football and (heterosexual) sex’ (Gill and Hansen-Miller 2011). What separated new lads from unreconstructed versions of traditional masculinity was their post-feminism; for new lads were self-consciously aware that they offend against contemporary norms of good taste and “reasonable” attitudes to

⁵ The US version was deemed too risqué by some networks, yet new lads were heavily pushed in US film.

women. This ‘ironic’ ethos was captured in the strapline of *Loaded*: ‘For men who should know better’ (Gill and Hansen-Miller 2011).

The anti-aspirational, ‘refreshing’ articulation of masculinity offered by the new lad was widely and accurately critiqued by many as constituting sexism in new clothes. Imelda Whelehan’s book *Overloaded* read new lads as offering a reactionary retrosexism (2000). The new lad was also located in relation to classed anxieties of masculinity at a time of post-Fordist de-industrialisation, as old certainties of masculine labour dried up, their work having been outsourced overseas. Ben Crewe interpreted new lads as a rejoinder to the more ‘middle-class’ and ‘liberal’ sensibility of the new man (Crewe 2003). Whilst most lad mags folded in the 2000s amidst a troubled magazine market, the mediation of the new lad lived on through the ‘lad flick’ in films like *The 40 Year Old Virgin* (2005), *Role Models* (2008) and *The Hangover* (2009). The ethos of the new lad has also more recently been rebooted through websites aimed at young men, particularly the highly successful *UniLad*, as well as through the wider cultural acceptability of aggressively macho behaviour and politics, a form of masculinity that the new lad was a harbinger of.

The ‘ladette’ emerged shortly after the new lad, particularly in the UK, as his female counterpart. TV and radio presenters like Zöe Ball, Sarah Cox and Denise Van Outen presented hard-partying, confident and irreverent personas that were apparently the antithesis of conservative femininity. (Denise Van Outen stole an ashtray from Buckingham Palace and sent it back on air with a stuffed camel saying ‘sorry, Ma’am. I didn’t mean to give you the hump’; Donovan 2017). They smoked, drank copious amounts of alcohol, were photographed pinching men’s bums. As one commentator wrote:

That was the beauty of ladette culture: it took the old, stuffy gender model – where the man went out boozing and the woman patiently waited up – and flipped it. [...] They were taboo-breakers in a world that expected women to stay at home and raise kids. (Donovan 2017)

The ladette didn’t have kids. She was usually a twenty-or thirty something with disposable income. Like the new lad, she was invariably white. In 2007 Angela McRobbie astutely interpreted the ladette as a ‘phallic girl’, part of the new sexual contract which was imbuing young women with forms of agency within the circumscribed norms of consumer culture, enabling them to adopt male characteristics as long as they did not critique sexism too much:

Like the young women in post-feminist masquerade, the phallic girl (or ladette) is suggestive of novelty in their inhabiting of gender equality now gained, without this providing the occasion for the critique of masculinity. Indeed the position of phallic girl can be understood as made available by the logic of the consumer culture, which in this case confirms and consolidates patriarchal privilege and masculine hegemony by apportioning some limited features of this privilege to young women, within specified conditions that they withhold critique of their male counterparts and that they are complicit with the norms of the new leisure culture where sexuality is re-defined within the tabloid language of masculinist pleasures. (McRobbie 2007: 733).

For McRobbie the partial gender settlement offered by this form of consumer citizenship was regressive. Similarly, for Imelda Whelehan, '[t]he ladette offers the most shallow model of gender equality; it suggests that women could or should adopt the most anti-social and pointless of 'male' behaviour as a sign of empowerment' (Whelehan 2000: 9). It was not the hedonism that was problematic, in other words, but the complex it was part of: its articulation to sexism and competitive neoliberal consumer culture.

By the mid-2010s the ladette was not so much in evidence as a vaunted subject position in the media (although this behavioural subject position most likely contributed to the ongoing boom in pre-wedding bachelorette / 'hen nights'). Her drinking and partying fed into sensational tabloid coverage and public /moral panics about drinking culture, within which women, and particularly working-class women, were the subject of more social disapproval than men (Redden 2008; Wood 2018). By 2017 the online magazine *Vice* was publishing an article entitled 'The Rise and Fall of the Ladette', and millennials were drinking and smoking less in record numbers (Donovan 2017). But the ladette did not fully disappear: she morphed into the mother behaving badly.

The genealogy I am positing is fairly literal in the case of *Bad Moms*, given that the film was written and directed by Jon Lucas and Scott Moore who also wrote and produced lad flick *The Hangover*.⁶ The female characters in *Bad Moms* learn how to 'behave badly': to not care about the external pressures of work, their inadequate partners, or the opinions of other mothers who are depicted as neurotic about homemaking or parental responsibility.

⁶ Whilst *Bad Moms* was a box-office hit (\$22m budget, \$189m box office) it is noticeable that *The Hangover* received much more critical and commercial success; it was the 6th highest grossing ever R rated film in the US at \$467.5 and won a Golden Globe for Best Musical/Comedy.

Instead, they are taught to embrace the pleasure principle through intense bouts of partying. In this they are largely led by Carla (the working class character, whose tendencies towards hedonism and not caring make her simultaneously the leader, the teacher and a subject with dangerous and feckless tendencies). Whilst the film ‘opens out’ the subject positions of its mothers, the filmic gaze is also often reminiscent of ‘lad movie’ aesthetics: high-octane party scenes, Carla jacking off a vodka bottle, Kiki’s jiggling breasts, and a cut of women suddenly kissing each other (Carla: ‘I made out with so many women tonight!’).

Other media texts with a less overt linkage back through new lad/ladette culture, nonetheless echo some of their key tropes. Katie Kirby’s bestselling book *Hurrah For Gin: A book for perfectly imperfect parents* (2016), for instance, and her website and popular social media image/memes feature acerbic reflections on parenting and comic cartoons. Drawn in the ‘stick man’ style of a small child’s picture, they are laced with barbed and swears reflections on children and parenting (e.g. Stick child: ‘Mummy why don’t we have an elf that moves around like everyone else?’ Stick mother: ‘Because mummy’s got enough on her fucking plate sweetie pie!’)⁷. The cover of the book shows a mother, holding a red-faced crying baby whilst her toddler throws juice on the floor and her saucepan burns: her thought bubble shows her dreaming of gin. Other cartoons show them in the supermarket, in an aisle labelled ‘Beers, Wines and Spirits’, with her children saying ‘Mummy’s special squash!’ and ‘You love it don’t you mummy! YOU LOVE IT!! (Kirby 2016: 18). As with the men behaving badly of the 1990s, this mother is both infantilized (in this case, via stick figures) and drinks copious amounts of alcohol as a form of pleasure and escape.⁸ Unlike them, however, she cuts loose in very temporary bursts, as the rest of the time is spent looking after children and -- unlike the men on the sofa -- ‘being responsible’.

In the BBC comedy *Motherland* (2016) the main characters similarly use alcohol to relieve domestic and work pressure and exist in perpetual states of chaos. At the school fundraiser, Liz pours bottle after bottle of random alcohol into the sangria (‘In Spanish, Anne, ‘sangria’ means add fucking anything’). ‘It’s not Glastonbury, Liz!’, the stay at home dad tells her. ‘It’s a bloody school fundraiser,’ she replies, ‘we need alcohol, Kevin!’. Liz, who is, like Carla in *Bad Moms*, the working-class mother, behaves most overtly like a ladette. For example, during the school fundraiser there is an ‘auction of promises’, and the only person to bid for snobbish, self-regarding compere Amanda’s promise of a kiss is Liz (who bids a

⁷ <https://www.instagram.com/p/BcLQpsoNlN/> December 1 2017

⁸ Mothers drinking a lot of alcohol has also been the recent subject of media discussion and condemnation (see Abramson 2018)

damning 50p as opposed to Amanda's proposed starting price of £10). Letting out some of the pent-up aggression accrued from having noticed that Amanda has been using a sanitising wipe on her hands every time she comes into contact with either her or her child, Liz drunkenly walks onto the stage and aggressively kisses her.

Motherland satirises the chaos and the temporary, carnivalesque behaviour that not only gets them through the day but indicates women on the edge, having to deal with multiple pressures and class-based inequalities (which I discuss in more detail below). In *Tully* (2018), a bleaker, more indie-oriented take on the 'mother behaving badly' genre, a depressed new mother goes on a bender in her old haunts in Brooklyn, getting so drunk she crashes the car. The 'reveal' at the end of the film, whilst ambiguous in nature, indicates that the woman she was out with was a phantasmatic version of her younger, carefree self. She recovers and the final scene shows her partner finally helping her with the washing up, and holding her hand, forced into greater levels of equality.

The 'mother behaving badly discourse' is therefore not identical or uniform across texts. Some, for example, represent male and female partners *simultaneously* 'behaving badly'. The film released in the US as *Neighbours* (2014), and as *Bad Neighbours* in the UK and Australia,⁹ depicts a couple with a young baby who end up living next door and at first partying with, and then feuding with, their new fraternity house neighbours. The couple argue who over who should be allowed to play most and be the most irresponsible. Kelly (Rose Byrne) tells her partner, in a direct demand for equal-hedonism rights, that also indicates the infantilised quality of the hedonism, 'It's offensive that I have to be the smart one all the time! I'm allowed to be just as irresponsible as you!'. As with *Bad Moms* the genesis of the film has direct connections to the lad movie genre. Seth Rogen, who has been highly involved as an actor and in director in many previous lad movies including *Superbad* (2007) and *Zack and Miri Make a Porno* (2008), features in a starring role as well as being a co-producer of the film.¹⁰ Despite the narrative showing the mother drinking, getting high, partying, scheming and feuding with her partner, the film gives far more screen time to, and is far more interested in, her husband. This is reinforced by the film poster, which features Rogen with a baby in a sling next to his bad sorority neighbor (Zack Efron), indicating how the film's core dramatic tension is devoted to conflicting modes of homosocial masculinity.

⁹ So as to avoid confusion with the long-running Australian soap opera which has been very popular in the UK.

¹⁰ The film was also directed by Nicholas Stoller, who previously directed lad movies *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (2008) and *Get Him to the Greek* (2010).

The lad dad, in other words, gets substantially more of everything -- including representational space -- than the lad mom.

Where this co-parenting narrative *is* present in more equitable fashion is the TV series *Catastrophe* (2015-19), in which a man and a woman have a 6 day casual sex-athon after which they end up living and having a baby together. *Catastrophe* in effect presents ‘the phallic girl’ getting older and having a baby with a male character who is half new man, half new lad. (Indicating this equitable hedonism, and in contrast to *Bad Neighbours*, an early promotional still for the series show Horgan and Delaney both catching water leaking from the roof with wine ice-buckets). In *Catastrophe*, hedonistic behaviour happens before the baby is born and continues for both of them in more chaotic and episodic form after the birth. In episode 3 of season 2, Sharon falls of the bed whilst smoking weed and using a breast pump; in season 3 she ends up kissing a far younger man and, too drunk to remember what happens, has to track him down to find out. *Catastrophe* is noticeably more egalitarian in its gender dynamics than most of the texts I have discussed. The narrative demonstrates both parents wrestling with the different perspectives on what a good relationship before and after having children involves, and the struggles of both the man and the woman in relation to care and work. It is also, and presumably not uncoincidentally, more equitable in production, being co-written by comedians Sharon Horgan and Rob Delaney, who also co-star as the main characters.

The mother behaving badly who populates so many recent media texts is indicative of a progressive expansion of the realm of representations of motherhood and is a social type which conspicuously rejects the paradigm of the perfect. She copes with having too much to do by letting go of her coping persona. Her genesis can in part be traced back through the ladette and the new lad, with whom she shares traits of regression, drinking, swearing and partying hard. She can be understood as a kind of ‘lad mom’, or a grown-up ladette with kids. Importantly her lad mom behaviour is not permanently ongoing (such as it was with the *Men Behaving Badly* of the 1990s, for example) but is rather restricted to temporary bouts of hedonism. It functions as a release: and as an educational form of catharsis. But what exactly is ‘being taught’, and what is it an escape from?

Overwork: the failure of social reproduction

‘We do way too much stuff ... If I get elected we will do way less stuff’

The first episode of *Motherland* opens with Julia frantically speeding her kids to school in the car, shouting ‘Arsehole!’ at other drivers, screaming at her kids whilst simultaneously telling her work colleague on the phone that she’s running late. This is contemporary maternal multi-tasking. She arrives at the school to find it is, in fact, half term: the school is closed. Julia spends the whole of the episode attempting to organize replacement childcare. She talks to her husband on the phone; the camera cuts to him leisurely choosing a snack in a café. We never see him at home throughout the series, but rather in a range of untaxing locations (a go-carting alley; on a boat) which he does not divulge to Julia, to whom he insists he is working *so hard*. The comedy is generated by the stark visual and verbal juxtaposition; he signs off with the catchphrase ‘whatever you decide, I’m right behind you’ then, in direct contradistinction to this statement, puts the phone down. Turning up at her mother’s house, Julia spies her foot behind the sofa; her mother is hiding to avoid her daughter imposing yet more childcare on her (as she says later ‘I’m not doing it any more, Julia’). Before the opening credits, and after more car trouble, we hear Julia’s cry: ‘AAAAAARRRRGGHH!!’. Lurching from one crisis to the next, and drinking wine throughout the episode, by the end she has drunkenly enraged the passive-aggressive middle-class ‘alpha moms’ and formed her own band of misfits (wet needy father Kevin and sanguine working-class Liz).

Structurally, this plot is very similar to the opening scenes of *Bad Moms*, where Amy lurches from crisis to crisis on her way to work, covered in pasta, whilst her husband does nothing. Similarly, after reaching breaking point, there follows intense moments of bonding with friends who, whilst very different, share some of her problems. The supportive ‘squad’ and its composition is significant, as I will discuss in the next section. But first we need to discuss why these women are so stressed.

Parenthood is never a simple or easy matter: a completely stress-free experience of parenthood would never be realistic, no matter what Victorian images of motherhood or contemporary greetings cards display. Yet these levels of stress, put here on such vivid display, are highly marked and pronounced and shown to be the direct causal reason of why these contemporary mothers are ‘behaving badly’. And the key reasons for this stress, in many of the narratives discussed, are firstly, an overwork culture, and, secondly, partners who do not or who are not able to co-share parenting in a fully egalitarian fashion. We have seen in the scenes I have described from *Motherland* and *Bad Moms* that these two factors are foregrounded. Together they indicate, and sometimes speak to, a contemporary crisis in

the ability to care, and particularly in terms of precarity, patriarchy and an endemic culture of overwork.

To understand more about what is going on here we can turn to contemporary theorisations of social reproduction. The expansion of interest in social reproduction theory has largely been driven by left feminists who want to emphasise and explain the interrelationship between, firstly, the capitalist market and waged labour, and secondly, the ways we inhabit and reproduce life that are not restricted to waged labour, including caring for children, relatives and social lives with friends and neighbours. As Tithi Bhattacharya puts it, SRT is unique in the sense that it ‘theorizes the relationship between the market and extra-market relations rather than simply gesturing toward their distinction’ (Bhattacharya 2017: 14). Nancy Fraser emphasizes that we cannot understand the spheres of production and reproduction separately, as they are fundamentally interrelated; and she persuasively argues that we are living through a crisis in care which expresses the social reproductive contradictions of financialized capitalism. This is a regime which

‘has relocated manufacturing to low-wage regions, recruited women into the paid workforce, and promoted state and corporate disinvestment from social welfare. Externalising care work onto families and communities, it has simultaneously diminished their capacity to perform it.’ (Fraser 2016: 104)

We can relate this regime and its theorization back to earlier feminist challenges around work and gender. Second-wave feminism was multifaceted, containing many different (e.g. radical and liberal) strands. But the drive of socialist feminism wanted to ‘transform the world so that both men and women could together find our place in the sun’, as Lynne Segal put it: to include both men and women in the public workplace, shorten the working week, and to enable both men and women to become equal caregivers and caretakers of children (Segal 2018; 2017). This ideal is what Nancy Fraser has also and elsewhere characterised as the ‘universal caregiver’ model of social and economic reproduction (2016). With the advent of neoliberal capitalism from the late 1980s, the dominant ideal did indeed become that of the ‘two earner family’. But instead of a shortened working week and sufficient support structures, capitalism twisted the aims of the feminist movement and made the full-time dual income a norm. Over the past 60 years the global north has moved from single to double income family without absorbing the left feminist demand for reduced working hours: for a 3-4 day working week for all carers (or for all).

The dual-income, overworking family is a palpable source of stress for the mothers behaving badly. It is compounded by a context in which women are still being awarded the role of what Rebecca Asher has usefully termed the ‘foundation parent’ (Asher 2011; see also Adkins and Dever 2015) and bearing the brunt of the ‘mental load’ (Emma 2017). In the UK, for example, the last Office for National Statistics (ONS) report on the subject found that “On average, men do 16 hours a week of [...] unpaid housework compared with the 26 hours of unpaid work done by women a week”. As we have seen, the everyday chaos and stress this dual workload produces constitutes the narrative opening of *Bad Moms* and *Motherland*. The conceit of *Bad Moms Christmas* is that Christmas is a ritualistic site for gendered overwork and they should ‘take Christmas back’; Amy’s appeal at the PTA meeting in the first film is to stand for ‘the moms who want to do less’. The exhaustion of the mothers in *Tully* and Australian TV series *The Let Down*, who similarly have a more depressive (aesthetically ‘indie’) and simultaneously less communal take on material inebriation, is shown to be to a not insignificant degree due to their atomisation and to a combination of the reluctance and structural difficulties of their male partners in sharing the childcare. (The more sadistic and violent edge of sexism is also palpable in how, as Shani Orgad has astutely pointed out, there is an undercurrent of male violence in recent TV series about motherhood such as *Big Little Lies* and *Desperate Housewives*, which indicate a ‘subjection to male violence beneath the veneer’ of their stunning, expensive houses (Orgad 2019: 9-10)).

Other drivers of anxiety and stress gestured towards by these media include cultural prescriptions of ‘correct’ parenting and test culture in schools. In *Bad Moms* the pivotal moment when Amy loses her shit is a scene satirizing all the ‘bad’ ingredients that need to be left out of cakes for the cake sale (‘No BPA No MSG [...] No Nuts No Eggs No Milk No Butter’) after which the mothers in the bar complain ‘There’s so many rules now! We all work too damn hard to make our kid’s lives amazing and magical...their lives already ARE amazing and magical. Let’s be BAD MOMS!’. Whilst some of these issues are comedically exaggerated, and remain fairly general, they also point towards certain social trends in both childcare and schooling. Firstly, the emphasis on rules and lack of fun indicate something of how neoliberal trends in education governance have frequently worked to marginalize, for example, both play, and learning through play (in the UK, particularly outdoor play as numerous school playing fields have been sold off to private providers since the 1980s); and to re-prioritise rote learning and extremely narrow forms of test-based education because they generate metrics that can be used force schools to compete (Benn 2011, 2018). The ‘too many rules’ that the *Bad Moms* refer to also relates to the expansion in parenting discourse

and guides which have mushroomed over the past few decades (on this tradition and its expansion see Hardyment, 2007). The intensification of these ‘rules’, whilst subject to endless contestation and dispute, are part of a culture of increasingly ‘responsibilising’ parents for the life chances of their children and diminishing the role of the state. Tracey Jensen has persuasively discussed this tendency as the new ‘machinery of parent-blame’, an emphasis on which ‘disguises and obscures the structural processes and excesses that are widening social inequality and deepening the poverty of those marginalized at the bottom’ (Jensen 2018:16).

All these issues are interconnected and part of the structural logic of competitive neoliberal inequality. This narrow instrumentalization of education, involving an intensification of homework, and school cuts and privatisation, which lead to endless financial appeals to parents for fundraising, form, as we have seen, the backdrop to key scenes in these dramas. Alongside this expanded burden of pressure on domestic life, due to the neoliberalisation of schooling, are the expanding working hours of the two-earner family: the increasing working hours of women and the non-decreasing working hours of men.

Class, ‘race’ and horizons of possibility

But what are the solutions, and who is able to grasp them? In her book *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*, Catherine Rottenberg postulates that perhaps the key modality of neoliberal feminism is the idea of ‘work-life balance’. Whereas a ‘choice feminism’, involving choosing to work in the public sphere or not, was trumpeted as the key mode of liberal feminist emancipation from the 1970s, today, achieving work-life balance is, she argues, presented as ‘neoliberal feminism’s ultimate ideal’, ‘enfolded into mainstream common sense’ (Rottenberg 2018: 13). Crucially, it is presented as matter of personal skill rather than social possibility.¹¹ The balance discourse, argues Rottenberg eloquently, ‘helps solve one of neoliberalism’s constitutive tensions by helping to ensure women desire work-family balance and that all responsibility for reproduction falls squarely on the shoulders of individual women’(17).

¹¹ As gestured toward in the title of the second chapter of her book, ‘How Superwoman became balanced’, indicating the transition she is tracing from Shirley Conran to Sheryl Sandberg.

The recalibrated work-life balance is therefore presented by neoliberalism as a ‘feminist solution’ which is able to be achieved by individuals, otherwise they are they, themselves, individually to blame: they are failing at life. This discourse is palpable in some of the texts I have discussed which feature mothers behaving badly. In *Bad Moms*, for example, Amy’s boss rediscovers her worth (after previously firing her after she took time off for emergency childcare) and financially rewards her. Her new role as PTA president - a role which we might note would, in reality, involve *more* free labour – results in a changed culture, of mothers not stressing as much and ‘doing less’. Clearly the burdens of contemporary social reproduction including domestic labour are all able to be magically whisked away if you only have the right mindset and lean in.¹² The film takes the issue of care seriously (as well as lightly, through its comedy). But the fact that individuals do have to calibrate their own response to such contexts is adopted, whittled away at and transmuted into the intensely narrow message that such contexts can readily, easily and only be completely transformed via the right mindset. ‘Behaving badly’ on a very temporary basis is projected as therefore helping produce the optimum solution. It stops the women being ‘wimps’ and ‘pushovers’: these phallic moms ‘grow some balls’, to use their lad-like imagery, in order to deal with their husbands, the PTA and the corporate workplace.

Not all the texts proffer such neoliberal ‘work-life balance’ solutions. *Motherland* for instance acerbically relays the pressures of working parenthood, but Julia’s corporate achievements are less revered than undercut and poked fun at.¹³ In fact, all the characters in *Motherland* are satirised, including the stay at home mothers (SAHMs) and the lone stay at home father (there is no progressive mode of fatherhood to be found in this programme). *Motherland* has an acute eye for class dynamics, skewering the passive-aggressive elitism of the upper-middle class, both in their condescension to the working class character and to the working mothers, who they regard with perfect neoliberal logic as simply having made a bad choice, rather than needing to earn money to live. (As posh SAHM Amanda says to middle-class working mother Julia: ‘You work so hard. I *really admire* how you can just switch off your family and focus on your job. Because – this is just my personal thing – I would just *hate myself* too much’. *Motherland* S1 E1).

¹² The archetypal neoliberal career woman, who endorses gendered liberation on a solely individualized basis, being Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook COO, whose book *Lean In* (2015) spawned a wide range of ripostes from left feminists including Dawn Foster’s book *Lean Out* (2016)>

¹³ In one episode, for example, a repeated joke is made about getting back to work as Peter Mandleson - the massively unpopular Svengali of UK’s New Labour party– is going to be presenting an award.

Perhaps the most sympathetic character in *Motherland* is Liz, the no-nonsense working class mother who lost her job at the Citizen's Advice Bureau ('when they started recording calls for training purposes'). This brings us to the key issue of how class and race is calibrated in relation to the mother behaving badly. Whilst the working class characters are also often depicted 'behaving badly' in these terms, they are usually more excessive figures who play a pedagogic role from which the middle-classes learn. This is the case both with Liz in *Motherland*, who helps the character through which the series is 'focalised', Julia, to be less uptight and 'cut loose' a little; and with *Bad Moms*, where, as we have seen, Carla teaches stressed Amy (the main character through which the film is focalised) and good-girl Kiki how to party. The working-class women are thus the conduits through which risqué carnivalesque behaviour is learnt and adopted as temporary therapy; but they continue to be placed in their role as second-class citizens. Carla's behaviour is too outré, an extremity both loved and ridiculed in the film. *Motherland* is more astute on class, with Liz critiquing how middle-class Julia drops her at any possibility of social climbing with the middle-class mothers. Yet the narrative is focalised through Julia, and noticeably Liz gets fewer and fewer lines as the series progresses. A recurring message in both is that working-class mothers are mainly there to help middle class mothers learn how to more effectively, *pace* Foucault, 'conduct their conduct'.

The mother behaving badly is therefore primarily depicted as a middle-class woman, one who is subject to the pressures of intensifying and precarious working cultures as an expected matter of course. *Catastrophe* for example illustrates how working patterns are uneven and precarious, with sudden sackings and job loss. The workplaces in *Bad Moms* and *Motherland* make demands which leak into domestic life and are not understanding of domestic pressures. These representations of what Nancy Fraser terms 'the two earner family' show parents overworking with insufficient support structures. They rarely, however, pause for long on the far greater difficulties and injustice faced by working-class mothers, who have to work harder balancing even more precarious work and often working whilst living in poverty, a state of being that Julie Wilson and Emily Chivers Yochim (2017) have analysed so incisively. Where this media focus *can* be found in popular culture is within recent work focusing on single mothers, such as the remarkable film *The Florida Project* (2017) and the TV series *SMILF* (2017), which winds the daily effects of poverty through its narratives, from not being able to pay bills, through having bags and trainers stolen, to long queues at the health clinic.

The racialisation of the mother behaving badly is, likewise, a critical factor in her positioning, and a constitutive aspect of who exactly is allowed to inhabit this mode of being. Crucially, the MBB is a discourse primarily aimed at relatively middle-class mothers who are either white or primarily ‘pass’ as such. *Motherland* and *Catastrophe* are very white TV shows, in which brown or black characters predominantly appear in highly brief walk-on parts or as extras. In this respect the programmes reflect the wider problems in the UK with diverse TV production and casting (Saha 2018). The US films, whilst also highly restricted in their diversity, are noticeably differently inflected. The main characters are, similarly all white or very light-skinned. All four protagonists of *Fun Mom Dinner* are white. Mila Kunis who stars in *Bad Moms* is light-skinned and has in the past often been cast in Latina roles; *Bad Mom’s Christmas* gives her a white mother and a new Latina boyfriend.¹⁴ The black character in *Bad Moms* (Stacy, played by Jada Pinkett Smith) has a supplementary role, as part of the group of hostile, neurotic PTA mothers. She is a conservative ‘establishment’ figure – echoing the wider tendency of US media to depict far more black people in establishment roles than have ever actually existed (Gray 1997). She is also marginal and unsympathetic. Similarly the judgemental, uptight figure in *Fun Mom Dinner* is a very young, smartly/conservatively dressed black girl who finds the group smoking drugs in a toilet and threatens to tell the manager.

The black characters in these media texts, then, cannot take part in the fun: instead, they are either absent, or are depicted policing and spoiling it. They speak to a wider representational gap, in academia as well as popular culture, about black motherhood (Hall Collins 2008; Phoenix 1991; Baldwin 2019). At the same time, as I mentioned earlier, black music is often used as a soundtrack. In *Bad Moms*, black American rap and dance music facilitates predominantly white partying: it enables their therapeutic transgressions, their temporary bouts of carnivalesque liberation.¹⁵ Black culture, in other words, becomes a means to ‘make white lives better’ (Springer 2008, 94; see also hooks 1992). The ‘solution’ of therapeutic carnivalesque hedonism is, then, not a subject position offered equally to all. It is primarily liberation for the white mothers, especially middle-class white mothers. In a well-publicised climate of police brutality and racism, (Yamahtta-Taylor 2017) it is hard to imagine the transgressive pleasures of raucous, often barely legal or mildly illegal behaviour being offered to black mothers in the same register.

¹⁴ Mila Kunis arrived in the US with her Russian Jewish parents as a child.

¹⁵ Many thanks to Gail Lewis for raising this point and discussing it with me during a talk I gave at Birkbeck in 2018

Conclusion

'I'm sorry that we live in a patriarchy and that modern economics is skewed in favour of men!'

-- Julia, *Motherland* (BBC) 2016

The 'mother behaving badly' is, then, usually a white middle-class figure who learns from working class and non-white cultures how to reform her conduct, cut loose and recalibrate her behaviour, offering minor challenges to the patriarchy and large amounts of neoliberal responsabilisation. She is a figure instantiated across a range of texts, all with different inflections, perspectives and to some extent, agendas. This range and complexity is also the case with the solutions and 'resolutions' offered by the texts. Yet there are distinct themes and discourses which can be identified. I have defined the MBB as being marked by *hedonism* on the one hand and *domestic chaos* on the other. Hedonism is clearly one of the 'solutions' on offer, in its temporally restricted form: being offered as a blast of lifestyle-experience 'medicine' to clear away the stress and enable new forms of coping with a social, political and cultural climate that is making it harder for all forms of social reproduction to function aside from that of the very rich. Whilst I have already provided a sociological diagnosis of the mother behaving badly, to conclude I want to expand on the prescriptions, restrictions and disavowals offered by this figure: on the political and social solutions which are, or are not, on its horizon of possibility.

If partying and drinking are part of the constitutive resolution of temporary hedonism offered to and by the mother behaving badly, so too is female camaraderie: for, as we have seen, her representations always feature female bonding sessions. Alison Winch has written of 'the gynaeopticon' – where girlfriends police each other's bodies, particularly over weight and producing 'sexiness' for a male gaze (Winch 2013). This mode always erupts at some point in MBB bonding; in *Bad Moms* for instance, Carla and Kiki go through Amy's wardrobe making fun of her 'unsexy' bras, a scene deemed so representative it was included in the film's trailer. But homosocial female groups also provide other forms of interaction and meaning (see also Ehrstein et al 2019). They can also revel, for instance, in the fat carnivalesque (*Fun Mom Dinner*) and the active, aggressive female sexual subject (Carla in *Bad Moms*), simultaneously vaunting and diminishing them. At the end of *Girlfriends and*

Postfeminist Sisterhoods, Winch makes the case for a feminism which can explore conflict and ugly feelings as a productive force, and this is what some of these texts, at their best, do; in *Motherland* the ugliness of Julia's class-based social climbing, and Anne's neuroticism, become the topic of acerbic group talking sessions. The MBB 'squad', then, is usually framed as an odd squad, and includes a bundle of issues and problematic femininities which can be sporadically unpacked, as well as problematically normalised.

A far less contested motif of resolution frequently offered to and by the MBB at key dramatic moments is that of a burst of hyperconsumption. At the ending of *Bad Moms*, the odd squad, now expanded to include the PTA members, go on a luxurious trip in a private jet owned by Gwendolyn's husband. In *Bad Mom's Christmas* the grandmothers announce that they have become friends and are going on a trip to Las Vegas. And in *Fun Mom Dinner*, the four women drive off in a red Porsche, in a reference to the film *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* that the characters had discussed earlier. This time it is the mothers who are inhabiting the hedonistic hyperconsumption of the 1980s rather than a teenage boy.¹⁶ The fantasy of being loaned an ultra-leisured lifestyle of the super-rich can be understood as in part a response to the increasing pressure placed on both middle and working class mothers. Both mobilising the historical role of female consumption (Casey and Martens 2017), it conducts vigorous ideological work to try to normalise overconsumption, disavow environmental crisis and commercialise its female subjects. The mother behaving badly, in other words, does not behave so badly she wants to work alongside her female friends to criticise or campaign against - let alone trash - the spaces of the ultra-rich. Instead, she aspires to inhabit them.

This discourse therefore reveals some of the ruptures and faultlines in contemporary systems of social reproduction shared by so many. The mother behaving badly is a figure dramatising how *too much* work, both inside and outside the home, is overloaded onto women. It usually articulates the existence of patriarchal dynamics, registering them as a problem. Sometimes this is very explicit (in *Motherland*, for example, Julia tells her mother through the letterbox: '*I'm sorry* that we live in a patriarchy and that modern economics is

¹⁶ Again, the luxury consumption is the property of a man; they are loaned the car by one of the 'fun moms' husbands. The women talk about Ferris Bueller and other teen films earlier in *Fun Mom Dinner*, and the writer Julie Rudd discussed this facet in interview: "I'm 48, so I grew up with John Hughes movies. I loved this idea that these women were of that age, and that on this night they find themselves feeling again like how they were before they were wives, before they were moms. The talk of the John Hughes movies, in a way, is like that touchstone to who they were when they were younger and how their ideas of romance were formed. It was important to feel like they were sort of going back to a more reckless time, the time when they were teenagers' (Rosen Fink 2017).

skewed in favour of men!’). It rejects the mythology of the perfect and points out both pressures and patriarchal privilege. The prescriptions, the messages of ‘what is to be done’ about these problems are built into the social type itself: short blasts of lifestyle hedonism, which entail drinking, partying, female camaraderie and hyperconsumption, and suggested longer-term resolutions of recalibrated work-life balance and partner-training.

The MBB is however frequently blind about the distinct nature of the classed and racialised nature of its own privileges and always stops short of providing structural social solutions, leaving its prescription within the realm of the small female friendship squad. In these terms it works to reinscribe the work-life balance motif of contemporary neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg 2018) calibrating it through hedonistic female friendship. If these mothers behaving badly were to address the issues they point to in a more progressive fashion, and to work at changing them for other people as well as themselves, they would need to be shown making connections with what we might call Parents Behaving Politically: with the politicians, feminists and campaigning groups arguing for a reduced 3-4 day working week; for an end to and a reversal of cuts in public welfare; for extended maternity and paternity leave policies; for public funded and co-operative childcare provision; for caps on high as well as low pay (Coote et al 2010; Dowling 2019; Hester and Srnicek 2019; Littler 2018).¹⁷ For all the fun of watching, writing and reading about the mother behaving badly, it would be far more exciting, satisfying and liberating to be able to write about such developments in the future.

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¹⁷ In the UK senior figures from the UK Labour Party, particularly John McDonnell, have supported the 4 day week, which has also being promoted by editorials in *The Guardian*, indicating the extent to which this struggle is becoming more mainstream; and is popularized by The Women’s Strike <https://womenstrike.org.uk/about/>.

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