

# Ethics, gender and vulnerability in the films of Mia Hansen-Løve

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# Ethics, Gender and Vulnerability in the Films of Mia Hansen-Løve

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## Abstract:

This article introduces some contemporary philosophical approaches to vulnerability including that of Judith Butler, while focusing on feminist legal theorist Martha Albertson Fineman's concept of the vulnerable subject, developed out of Fineman's earlier critiques of the autonomous, self-sufficient subject of liberal political philosophy. It then looks closely at the different forms of vulnerability exhibited by the leading protagonists of Mia Hansen-Løve's *All Is Forgiven* (2007), *Father of My Children* (2009), *Goodbye First Love* (2011), *Eden* (2014) and *Maya* (2018), all of whom except one are men, drawing on Lawrence Schehr's writing about French postmodern masculinities and work by Geneviève Sellier on the changing dynamics of heterosexual gender relations in French cinema in order to forge an account of vulnerable male bodies and masculinities appropriate to the contemporary context(s) of the films discussed. To conclude, it returns to Fineman to suggest that her at least implicitly feminist concept of the vulnerable subject can offer a more persuasive account of the gendered character of vulnerability in Hansen-Løve's films than can Butler's recent ethical writings.

**Keywords:** vulnerability; autonomy; dependency; Mia Hansen-Løve; Martha Fineman; Judith Butler.

Vulnerability has been an important concept in a lot of recent ethical theory, having been addressed by philosophers as well-known as Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler. Kristeva's essay on vulnerability

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“Liberty, Equality, Fraternity...and Vulnerability” (2010) suggested that the concept should be added to France’s “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity” motto of humanist Enlightenment values, and Butler has published a series of books blending ethical thinking with political theory and moral philosophy that draw particularly on the ideas of precariousness, taken initially from Emmanuel Levinas, and of vulnerability, emphasized in Levinas’s writings on the face despite not being developed as a concept there.<sup>1</sup> Another philosopher to have written extensively on vulnerability and vulnerable subjectivity is feminist legal theorist Martha Fineman: Fineman’s 2004 book *The Autonomy Myth: A Theory of Dependency* sought to expose the particularly American myth, enshrined in law across the US, that citizens can and should be autonomous, and in some extremely influential articles that followed the book, Fineman develops vulnerability as an alternative paradigm to autonomy. According to Fineman (2008), “vulnerability is – and should be understood to be – universal and constant, inherent in the human condition” (p. 1). As a legal theorist, her purpose in developing what she calls “vulnerability analysis” is “to argue for a more responsive state and a more egalitarian society” (p. 1). However, the importance of her approach for my purposes is that she “want[s] to claim the term ‘vulnerable’ for its potential in describing a universal, inevitable, enduring aspect of the human condition” (p. 8) rather than for its “limited and negative” associations of “victimhood, deprivation, dependency, or pathology” when it qualifies “groups of fledgling or stigmatized subjects [that are] designated as ‘populations’” (p. 5). Fineman’s “vulnerability approach” to subjectivity “both expands upon and complements earlier work [she has done] in theorizing dependency” (p. 9), and secondly, and importantly for its consonance with other feminist-philosophical enquiries into this topic, “should be understood as arising from our embodiment” (p. 9).

A vulnerability “arising from our embodiment” also accurately describes Butler’s development of the term in the essay “Precarious Life” (2004) and in *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (2009). She however mentions vulnerability several years earlier in the essay “Ethical Ambivalence” (2000, p. 25), in a commentary on the Levinasian subject, where she describes any claim for the self-identity of the subject as “an act of irresponsibility, an effort to close off one’s fundamental *vulnerability* to the Other, the primary accusation that the Other bears” (2000, p. 25: my

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1. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (2009), *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (2012), and *Senses of the Subject* (2015).

emphasis). As Moya Lloyd (2008) emphasizes, “Ethical Ambivalence” and the writings that followed the events of 11/9/2001 in New York highlight that, for Butler, vulnerability is vulnerability to violence: she sees the US’s exposure to the world as vulnerable by the 11/9/2001 events as an opportunity “to reflect on the relation between human vulnerability and violence; and to consider ‘what, politically, might be made of grief besides a cry for war’” (Lloyd, 2008, p. 93). Lloyd summarizes, “in short, this is an ethics, indeed a potentially global ethics, which issues out of a common human experience of vulnerability, and particularly vulnerability to violence” (p. 92). It is because vulnerability as conceptualized by Butler is vulnerability to violence<sup>2</sup> that I have expounded it here alongside Fineman’s theory of the vulnerable subject, in which loss, grief and (potential or actual) violence do not figure significantly, since this difference will be important later in my analysis.

Many of the characters Mia Hansen-Løve has brought to the screen have vulnerability as a striking characteristic: in *All Is Forgiven* (*Tout est pardonné*, 2007), the intelligent and well-read Victor (Paul Blain) is incapable of holding down a job that would support his wife and child as well as himself, instead spending his days writing, walking around the city, and taking drugs. Grégoire Canvel (Louis-do de Lencquesaing) of *Father of My Children* (*Le père de mes enfants*, 2009) has been an admired film producer, husband of Sylvia (Chiara Caselli) and father to their three daughters for many years, but despite professional success has failed to face up to his inadequate financial management of his company Moon Films for this entire period. Paul Vallée (Félix de Givry), the DJ protagonist of *Eden* (*Éden*, 2014), resembles Grégoire in his incapacity to face up to diminishing professional success, which leads to a temporary breakdown resembling Victor’s. Vulnerable masculinity – in the first two instances flawed fatherhood (and it is significant too that *Eden*’s Paul only finally gives up music when he learns that his girlfriend from DJ-ing years aborted their child) – is thus a hallmark of three of Hansen-Løve’s first four films. (The fifth, *Things to Come* [*L’Avenir*, 2016] will not feature in this discussion because neither of its significant male characters exhibit vulnerability – husband Heinz [André Marcon] is the unfaithful husband who makes a seemingly smooth transition to a life with his new partner when compelled by his children to choose between their mother and her, and Fabien [Roman Kolinka] is an entirely healthy young man emotionally, morally and intellectually.) There is at least one

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2. Vulnerability’s relationship to violence is also explored in Maria Flood’s “‘The very worst things’: violence and vulnerability in Djamila Sahraoui’s *Yema* (2012)” (2018).

vulnerable woman in Hansen-Løve's films, Camille (Lola Créton), of *Goodbye First Love* (*Un amour de jeunesse*, 2011), a film whose men, like those of *Things to Come*, successfully manage any vulnerabilities dogging them. Camille attempts suicide when the overwhelming passion of her teenage relationship with Sullivan (Sebastian Urzendowsky) does not stop him leaving her to travel for an extended period. Vulnerable masculinity is again to the fore in Hansen-Løve's sixth film *Maya* (2018), whose central character Gabriel (Roman Kolinka) takes time out to recover from his months of captivity as a hostage in Syria.<sup>3</sup>

### **Fragile Life in *All Is Forgiven***

Out of all Hansen-Løve's leading protagonists, wayward husband Victor is the most obviously psychologically vulnerable, arguably even in the pathological sense kept as a category by some writers about vulnerability. Victor's consumption of alcohol early in the day is the first indication of his fragile disposition, followed by drug-taking, as a carefully paced scene observes him make an excuse about running an errand in order to leave Annette (Marie-Christine Friedrich) and Pamela (Victoire Rousseau) during their afternoon out in Vienna and meet a contact from whom he can score. Barely any words are exchanged during this risky rendez-vous, about which Victor predictably says nothing to Annette. In Paris, in due course, we see Victor talk to a sympathetic medical practitioner who grants his first request for a prescription but later refuses to renew it, because Victor is not even trying to work at autonomous paid employment and by not respecting their contract regarding his dependency on drugs, exploiting the doctor's goodwill. A short episode in the first, Vienna-based chapter of *All Is Forgiven* gives symbolic expression to Victor's psychological and physical problems with

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3. By addressing vulnerability primarily as it is seen in Hansen-Løve's male characters here, I am going against the grain of Anglophone criticism of her cinema to date, which has focused on girls and girlhood: Fiona Handyside has published two articles on girlhood in Hansen-Løve's first three films (2015; 2016), and in "Precarious Lives: On Girls in Mia Hansen-Løve and Others" (2012), Emma Wilson brings Hansen-Løve's first two feature films into dialogue with Judith Butler's writing about precarity and precariousness by drawing on *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), in which Butler explores the opacity of human subjectivity as well as some fundamental questions about self-knowledge, ethics and responsibility, selecting eclectically from the work of Adorno, Levinas, Foucault and Nietzsche. Wilson brings out the opacity of the young girl subject in beautiful readings of scenes from *All Is Forgiven* and *Father of My Children* that emphasize opacity more than they do precariousness or vulnerability, the latter being the philosophical focus shared by Butler and Fineman (Fineman does not consider the representational aspects of subjectivity).

dependency: at the end of the same afternoon on which Victor abandons his wife and daughter to meet his drug-dealer, the family returns home via a bridge over the Danube from which Victor points out the Reichsbrücke – another, reconstructed bridge whose original structure collapsed when it was a hundred years old, in 1976. His aim is to tease and light-heartedly scare Pamela by suggesting that the bridge's collapse was a modern urban disaster, when in fact, he quickly admits, it happened at night and only one life was lost. But in her momentary alarm about bridges' fragility, Pamela calls out to her mother, who reassures her in German that bridges are built out of strong materials and do not collapse easily. As she goes on to further reassure her daughter that "bridges are indestructible", walking away and ahead of Victor as she does so, the camera remains on him as he impassively listens to his wife's dismissal of his parable about unpredictable and inexplicable fragility. It is an issue that evidently concerns him, and one she does not understand.

Insights into Victor's vulnerability that demonstrate the pressure of (hetero)normative ideals of masculinity are offered in a dialogue with his sister Martine (Carole Franck) shortly after the family's return to Paris. Despite having previously taught literature at university level and privately, and coming under pressure from his wife to bring in an income, Victor is no longer willing to take a higher teaching qualification or earn his living in this way: his idea of how to spend his time is to work (intellectual work comprising reading and writing) in the mornings, to occupy his afternoons with flâneur-style walks around the city, and to take drugs in the evenings. Although she laughs at the apparently unconcerned attitude and defence of this lifestyle produced by the unbearable anxiety Victor also describes, Martine, who will later offer her brother unstinting support in the process of reuniting with Pamela, advises him practically that he should seek out her company or that of friends when he needs to talk, rather than expecting the understanding of his conventional young wife. Victor's breakdown occurs when, after he and Annette separate, he takes further risks with his health by becoming involved with a heroin addict called Gisèle (Olivia Ross) via a drug-dealer friend called Zoltan (Wieland Amand), moves in with her at Zoltan's, and starts to share her heroin habit. The overdose Gisèle takes one night while Victor is asleep evidently shakes him to the core, as the scene of his panic at finding Gisèle's cold body cuts to one in a hospital ward where Annette is arriving to visit: Victor has been shocked into realizing the extent of his dependency, and although he is able to leave his bed, he shuffles along like an old man. Although we meet a re-energized and healthier Victor in the second part of *All Is Forgiven*, explained by Martine to be much more at peace with himself than when he and Annette separated eleven years

earlier, news of his death reaches Pamela (Constance Rousseau) at her step-grandfather Paul's (Claude Duneton) shortly afterwards. Just prior to the phone call that brings the news, a sequence of cross-cut shots of Victor and Pamela writing to one another and reading each other's letters culminates in a short scene of Victor in his Paris flat, alone but occupied writing, smoking a cigarette and drinking coffee. The window is open, the light bright, and he is listening to music, apparently contented, and more deeply so when he reclines on the bed to read a letter from his daughter. Nothing indicates his imminent death, due to a fragility or vulnerability as mysterious as that of the collapsed Reichsbrücke over the Danube Victor briefly alarmed the much younger Pamela with years earlier.

### **Risk, Denial and Failure in *Father of My Children***

In the opening sequence of *Father of My Children*, a set of shots of Grégoire Canvel doing business on his mobile phone while walking to his car make him look every inch the debonair, successful film producer. Yet as Jean-Marc Lalanne (2009) points out, it is soon evident that Grégoire is a man whose time is running out: he is pulled over by the police for speeding as he approaches the second home his family visits at weekends, learns his licence has run out of points, and has it temporarily confiscated. This literal loss of autonomy exposes Grégoire's dependency on his family, but also subtly reveals, through his unawareness that a single additional infraction will lose him his driving licence, how he tends to take risks he simultaneously blocks out. A phone conversation with his production assistant Valérie (Sandrine Dumas) during the drive has already revealed that the director of one of his company's current productions, Stig Janson (Magne-Håvard Brekke), is overspending enormously by insisting on reshooting scenes he is unhappy with and by finding alternative locations, yet Grégoire, who replies that there is no point in acting on this, is entirely oblivious to the danger of the situation.

It is only after Grégoire's suicide, as his eldest daughter Clémence (Alice de Lencquesaing) discovers she has a half-brother from her father's first marriage, that Grégoire's past connects with his shocking decision and shows his vulnerabilities to be enduring: a letter to him from his first wife Isabelle (Valérie Lang) reveals that their son Moune began having minor behavioural problems when he first attended school. These worsened, leading her to forecast his turning into "a sad man interested only in his sterile eccentricity", yet despite risking being submerged in debt Grégoire gave generously to Isabelle for Moune. In another letter written to Sylvia as he set up Moon Films in Paris, Grégoire described the solitude and depression of his widowed father, who rarely left the house and seemed to have given up on life. Grégoire's comment about how his

father's house suffered visibly from the absence of women is impossible not to understand in relation to the four women and girls of his own family, and his dependency on them for love, company and happiness – emotional stability, in short. Grégoire's personal and professional lives are fuelled by love and passion, and by indulging his admiration for directors he considers geniuses (a word he uses about Stig Janson) over many years, he has disregarded the financial consequences of his behaviour in a way that risks both his own business and the security and well-being of his family.

Several scenes leading up to Grégoire's suicide reveal the full extent of his denial of Moon Films' debts. When the company's bookkeeper Frédéric (Antoine Mathieu) reminds him that the lab that processes all their film stock is owed €1m plus interest, Grégoire simply suggests that it may help if he has lunch with the lab's new manager, and he is again far too relaxed in the offices of the Ciné-Credit bank where, after the cast and crew of Stig Janson's film *Saturn* cash pay cheques for a huge sum of money when the film is already way over budget, Grégoire is reminded that he is €4m in the red. Back in Moon Films' office, he fobs off Valérie's warning that the company is going under with vague appeals to the future. Shortly afterwards, Valérie deposits a post-it on his desk reading "Your lawyer says to call", but although Grégoire checks his mobile phone, we do not see him do this, and a cut to the family's flat reveals that he has left the office unusually early, to Sylvia's surprise and concern. Grégoire's depression starts to become visible; his movements are slow and heavy, his attention turned in upon himself. At the office the next day he takes a siesta, before the action cuts to a darkened cinema where he is viewing rushes, and a text message flashes up telling him the tax department is sending in bailiffs. When Grégoire meets Sylvia that evening on a bridge over the Seine near the Cinémathèque, where he is due to speak at a function, his first words are "It's over....It's such a failure". He does manage to drive to the office the next day, deal with some minor matters, and let Valérie know he is as up-to-date as her with the freezing of Moon Films' assets and seizing of the negatives of one film in production. However, after staring at his reflection in the blank screen of the laptop computer on his desk, he says he is going out to take some air, and leaves the office for the final time.

### **Failing Fatherhood and Postmodern French Masculinities**

These masculine protagonists of Hansen-Løve's first two films remain sympathetic characters despite their failings and risk-taking behaviour: Victor may not provide for Pamela financially for long, but he was never an unworthy ("indigne") father, as he tells her when re-explaining the



family's past in order to correct her mother's misrepresentations. Like Grégoire with younger daughters Valentine (Alice Gautier) and Billie (Manelle Driss), Victor plays with the young Pamela imaginatively and shows his affection for her both physically and verbally when they are reunited after time apart. In *Father of My Children*, when Clémence discovers that she has a half-brother from Grégoire's first marriage, she is ready to accuse him of having abandoned his first-born, but is corrected by her mother's account of how Grégoire's first marriage ended: finding fault with him as a father is not as straightforward as she imagined. But fatherhood is unquestionably a problem for Victor and Grégoire, whose dependency on their spouses and families is compounded by risk-taking behaviour that endangers those closest to them as well as themselves. This behaviour demonstrates a lack of agency over their vulnerabilities (Victor through lack of will, Grégoire through denial), when the daughters who depend on them, by virtue of their youth and legal status as minors, cannot exercise agency over the precarity their fathers create. For Hansen-Løve, it seems, risk-taking is a masculine behaviour that might itself be seen as a vulnerability, but above all exposes the inefficacy of agency in managing the vulnerabilities of others (dependents) as well as one's own. As we shall see shortly, in *Goodbye First Love*, *Eden* and *Maya*, fatherhood is a state that male protagonists Sullivan (Sebastian Urzendowsky), Paul and Gabriel (all aged between nineteen and thirty-four) do not even aspire to: that Gabriel's ex-girlfriend Naomi (Judith Chemla) wanted a baby when he did not is a point he reminds her of when she but not he wants their relationship to resume after his return from Syria. Gabriel's dangerous occupation as a war reporter makes him a risk-taker like Victor and Grégoire, albeit of a more courageous kind, and he, Sullivan, and Paul are in fact never in the same place for long enough to be suited to fatherhood, as the next two sections will detail.

First, the work of Lawrence R. Schehr in *French Post-Modern Masculinities* (2009) can help contextualize the increased vulnerability and decreased capacity shown by Hansen-Løve's inadequate and "absent" male protagonists, as in his book Schehr tackles head-on "a changing hegemony in which heteronormativity and phallogocentrism have themselves perhaps finally come face-to-face with notions of their own mortality" (p. 1). Schehr's thesis is both historical and relates particularly to representational art forms and media:

as traditional notions of masculinity and male sexualities have been put into question in France, there have been representational reactions to, and incarnations of, changing masculinities in the post-modern world, and this, in a variety of genres. (2009, p. 1)

Although he acknowledges that in “an analysis of the crisis in masculinity in the post-modern subject, any temporal beginning would be somewhat arbitrary” (Schehr, 2009, p. 8), Schehr argues that “the most enduring and far-reaching effects” of France’s 1968 events and associated cultural revolution “were seen in the movements of liberation, particularly the women’s movement and gay liberation, which were both repositionings of the sexual and the political” (Schehr, 2009, pp.8–9). Selecting “AIDS and the Internet” as two particularly appropriate names for “a turning point for this voyage toward new forms of masculinity” while admitting that others such as “mobile phones, globalization, and GPS” would be equally suitable, Schehr argues that all these names are “signs of the end of the independent subject in the nineteenth-century sense of the anonymous or invisible Baudelairean *flâneur*”, “signs of the fact that the individual is never fully alone and never fully himself” (Schehr, 2009, p. 10) – a deliberate masculinization of the pronoun justified by masculinity/ies being the object of his enquiry.

There have been manifold changes to French masculinities over the last third of the twentieth century and first part of the twenty-first, chartable first in the gay liberation movement and the AIDS crisis, and then in important legal changes to the family: in 1999 the PaCS or *pacte civil de solidarité* allowed civil union between two adults for the first time, anticipating the introduction of gay marriage (*le mariage pour tous*) in 2013. In the space of fifteen years, a radically altered legal framework transformed the types of interdependencies into which men could enter. Taking the view that the “death of the author” written about by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault at the end of the 1960s can with equal validity be termed “the death of the subject”, Schehr suggests that these changes “could therefore be seen, in a perverse way, as the feminization of the male subject in a manner that defines the new masculinity as a visible, palpable, vulnerability” (Schehr, 2009, p. 11). The texts in which he goes on to demonstrate this vulnerability are mainly literary and by exclusively male authors Guillaume Dustan, Erik Rémès, Maurice G. Dantec, Fabrice Neaud (a graphic novelist), Nicolas Jones-Gorlin, Michel Houellebecq and Marc-Edouard Nabe; the only filmmakers Schehr treats are Sébastien Lifshitz and the writing-directorial team Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau, both of whose films treat predominantly gay and transgender themes. Schehr’s study is about the narrators and characters that people these writers’ and filmmakers’ texts, but not about their authors or authorship; therefore, his historical survey and theorization of French postmodern masculinities is, I maintain, equally relevant to films made by a French female director between 2007 and 2018 as to the works he analyses in the book. Hansen-Løve’s male characters are exclusively

heterosexual, and it is arguable to what extent their vulnerabilities intersect with their sexual relationships with women, although interestingly, this is more obvious in the recent *Maya*. However, the range of observations collected in Schehr's very sexuality-focused theoretical and historical study can certainly usefully elucidate a cinema (Hansen-Løve's) in which men are more often vulnerable than not, and heteronormative masculine ideals therefore no longer hegemonic.

### Life Crises in *Eden* and *Goodbye First Love*

The character played by Roman Kolinka in *Eden*, Cyril (one of the group around DJ Paul Vallée), draws constantly and acts as illustrator for the artwork needs of Paul (Félix de Givry) and Stan's (Hugo Conzelmann) duo *Cheers* and other musicians. For as long as he is in a relationship with Sonia his life is stable, but when they split up he gets thrown out of a club night for fighting, after which he tells Paul how lucky he is to have Louise (Pauline Etienne), and confesses that living at night depresses him. He walks out of an initially very good-natured argument about the quality of Paul Verhoeven's film *Showgirls*, which he rubbishes, then refuses to come on *Cheers*' US tour because of a work deadline and because he does not think he is needed by the group, none of whom notice how depressed he has become. When Paul hears from Stan, at the offices of the New York radio station Radio FG, that Cyril has taken his own life by throwing himself under a metro train, he exits from the broadcasting studio and weeps, and the action cuts back to Paris and Cyril's funeral, at which they admire the graphic novel *Le Chant de la Machine* he was struggling to complete as they left.

Cyril's suicide is at least part of the reason that Paul splits up with Louise, his second serious girlfriend, as she is deeply affected by it, something Paul is unable or unwilling to deal with. Throughout his DJ-ing years, Paul borrows money from his mother (Arsinée Khanjian) without telling her that he has a cocaine habit, and has a string of relationships with women – the long-term one with Louise, followed by a much less stable one with Margot (Louise Smet), who is succeeded by Yasmin (Golshifteh Farahani), on whom Paul seems more practically dependent than previous girlfriends. After leaving Margot out of frustration at being strung along, but before meeting Yasmin, Paul goes to visit Louise, now in another relationship with two young children and living on France's north coast. In due course, Louise separates from the father of her children and returns to Paris to stay with her mother, a period during which she and Paul see one another and (as when he visited her *en famille*), he seems comfortable helping her out with the children.

This rekindling of their relationship occurs not long after the first occasion on which Yasmin rescues Paul from danger, when he gets drunk at a commercially disastrous New Year's Eve party on a riverboat and almost goes overboard, evidently becoming desperate about his financial problems. But the trigger for his breakdown is learning, during what seems to be a springtime walk with Louise and her children in Paris's Luxembourg gardens, that she aborted their child without telling him during the DJ-ing years. Visibly shocked, Paul returns home immediately and is found by Yasmin not long afterwards collapsed on the floor of his flat and moaning "stop the music". Yasmin takes him to his mother's, and when he comes round, Paul confesses his cocaine addiction as well as the enormous debts his mother already knows about. So, although the crisis that causes Paul to turn his life around is due in large part to waning audiences at club nights and the consequent money problems, a new awareness of a missed opportunity of fatherhood is also a key factor.

The mode of vulnerability exhibited by Paul Vallée in *Eden* is to some extent gender-stereotypical, as a youth extended into his mid 30s by a profession that allows a life without fixed routines is a life course more likely to be followed by men than women. And although Hansen-Løve individualizes her characters' patterns of relationality extremely carefully, the same could be said about the crisis undergone by Camille in *Goodbye First Love*, which stems from the unusual earnestness with which she lives her passionate relationship with Sullivan (at nineteen, four years her senior). Early in the relationship she tells her mother that love is the only thing that matters to her, her "reason for living", and while Sullivan is preparing the trip to South America that will separate them for at least a year, Camille (he reports to his mother) threatens to throw herself into the Seine if he leaves as planned. Sullivan is the source of meaning in Camille's life, and once he has departed, it is evident that none remains: by attending school and visiting the family's second home in the Ardèche with her parents rather than her lover, Camille is just going through the motions. Sullivan writes passionately to begin with, but when the letters peter out after a conclusive-sounding questioning of the "reality" of their relationship (Sullivan says he feels as if he dreamt it), Camille takes the pins out of the map of South America on which she has charted his travels, removes the map from the wall, and swallows an overdose of pills taken from the family bathroom. For years afterwards she is unable to allow any other man to touch her, and even when she is fully recovered from the depression that led to her suicide attempt and in a relationship with Lorenz (Magne-Håvard Brekke), a chance meeting with Sullivan's mother on a bus presents her with an opportunity for contact she is unable to resist: she gives Selma (Özay Fecht) her mobile number,

Sullivan sends her a text message not long afterwards, and the couple begin meeting regularly again, resuming their sexual relationship. Camille is in thrall to this passion, and takes increasing risks over where she and Sullivan meet – in a hotel room after she tells him she will sleep with him, then in a disused building Camille has access to via her architectural project, and then in the flat she now shares with Lorenz, who is working away from Paris at the time. Although she is finally thwarted by a train strike that prevents her from travelling to Marseille to spend a weekend with Sullivan, the resumption of their relationship literally comes closer and closer to home, indicating that her declaration to her mother at fifteen that love is her only reason for living is still governing her behaviour, an arguably self-destructive tendency she cannot resist, and perhaps one stereotypically found in adolescent and young women.

Sullivan does not suffer a life crisis on account of his and Camille's relationship, but behaves comparably to other of Hansen-Løve's male protagonists in the manner in which he ends it, on both occasions (while travelling in South America and in a letter sent to Camille's mother's home after the months during which the affair is resumed in adulthood). In the second letter, Sullivan says he is leaving Camille (again) because he does not know how to control his love for her, how to fit it into a life without a desire for a lasting relationship and children. (This is to judge by his reaction to a sketch of a man with a child Camille buys for him on their last meeting in Paris – he weeps, then forgets to take the sketch with him when he leaves the following morning.) Their love is stronger than passing time, he suggests, and he hopes they (although this must really only refer to himself) will meet again later in life when they are better able to deal with it, a hollow-sounding if evidently sincere declaration. Although he does not say so, Sullivan's letter, like the one he wrote from South America years previously, reveals him to be incapable of the kind of relationship Camille wants and demonstrates herself suited to. And this seems to be because he needs autonomy in his personal life, in contrast to secure dependency: being single and having flings (*aventures*) is the life he describes to Camille when they first meet again in Paris (to her displeasure), whereas she seeks (and has found in Lorenz) stable mutual dependency.

### **Recovery Time in *Maya***

The handsome, slender figure of Gabriel (Roman Kolinka) is constantly in the frame in *Maya* (2018), and it is tempting to think that Hansen-Løve has cast him with this physique in mind, even if she has explained her choice as wanting to give a lead role to an actor who already had two admired performances to his credit in *Eden* and *Things to Come*

(Mia Hansen-Løve, 2016). *Maya* opens on a mirror shot of Gabriel in the shower at the hotel he and Frédéric (Alex Descas) are staying at before being flown back from the Middle East to Paris, and an enormous area of bruising from the violence he has been subjected to as a hostage is clearly visible on his back. When Gabriel emerges from the shower into the bedroom, his emaciation is apparent, confirmed at the hospital check-up a day or so later when his weight (he is 1.83m or 6ft tall) is recorded at 61 kilos or 9st 8lbs (far lower than before his captivity, judging by Gabriel's reaction). Physical vulnerability is therefore part of Gabriel's appearance and persona throughout *Maya*, and since he is lightly clad and spends a lot of time reclining on beds or walking on beaches and through touristic sites, we have ample opportunities to observe his frailty.

Whether Gabriel's condition following his ordeal in Syria is "post-traumatic" is a question posed by some of *Maya*'s reviewers, as well as one put to him by the psychiatrist he sees at the Paris hospital straight after his return to France. This specialist in the effects of captivity asks him if he would describe his four months as a hostage as "traumatising", to which Gabriel replies very precisely that that is not the term he would use. He passes a test of his ability to talk about the torture, beatings, and other psychologically violent aspects of his captivity, and opts not to take advantage of the course of psychotherapy on offer, saying that for him, action is more therapeutic than words (a telling statement from a reporter regarded by his colleague Frédéric as the more gifted of the two of them at writing). Since Gabriel does appear to recover fully from his Syrian ordeal in due course, this avoidance of psychiatrists and psychotherapy seems as much a deliberate aloofness from debates about talking therapies by Hansen-Løve as writer and director as anything else: even if Gabriel confides a few important facts about his childhood and family to *Maya* (Aarshi Bannerjee) during his months in India, he is certainly not someone to rely on language and narration to deal with feelings and difficult experiences, as he tells the Parisian psychiatrist. He displays no unusual psychological vulnerability, but vulnerability is relevant to *Maya* because the film is all about how we react to and recover from testing and violent experience.

Vulnerability is also progressively played out in Gabriel's relationship with *Maya*,<sup>4</sup> in which he uses his professional commitment as a reason

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4. Corinne Renou-Nativel (2018) sees Gabriel's tendency to run away from (*fuir*) almost everything as exaggerated and describes his relationship with *Maya* as "a poignant story of failed love" (*une poignante histoire d'amour ratée*).

not to become involved, and when he does, is as absent as he is present. When Maya awakens alone after their first night together and has to go outside to locate him, he makes a rather feeble excuse about her looking so happy as she slept, and when he returns to India at Christmas, he leaves the morning after their reunion. Like Sullivan of *Goodbye First Love*, whom Hansen-Løve describes as possessing a fickleness [*quelque chose de fuyant*] that makes him “elusive [*insaisissable*] from start to finish”, Gabriel suffers from “an inability to be present” [*une incapacité à être là*] (as quoted in Delorme, 2011, p. 54), a type of masculine inadequacy that shapes the narrative of *Goodbye First Love*, *Eden* and *Maya*.

### Reconfiguring Male Domination

In a 2015 essay entitled “Pitiful Men, Instrumental Women: The Reconfiguration of Masculine Domination in Contemporary Popular French Cinema”, Geneviève Sellier examines a range of recent French films that feature vulnerable and/or inadequate male characters:

Indeed, it seems that popular French cinema, compelled as a result of social developments to give up the possibility of delivering an unequivocal eulogy of a patriarchal, virile masculinity (such as that embodied by Gabin in the 1960s, then Delon and Belmondo in the 1980s), has (provisionally?) constructed a fallback position that consists of highlighting masculine figures who are vulnerable, defective, disabled, pitiful, or neurotic, and with whom the spectator – especially the female spectator – is invited to empathize. The function of female characters is to relay this empathetic gaze through the fiction by acting as an antipathetic foil (bad mother, vindictive wife, manipulative mistress), which has the effect of making the insufficiencies of the male character seem more than excusable. *To find alternative configurations of gender, one unquestionably would need to look at less popular films, lower down in the box-office statistics.* (2015, pp.936–937: my emphasis)<sup>5</sup>

I argue that Hansen-Løve’s critically highly successful but commercially quite averagely-performing cinema offers exactly the sort of “alternative configurations of gender” Sellier thinks might be found in “less popular”

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5. Sellier’s suggestion here that virile, patriarchal masculinity was still in place in French cinema of the 1980s is controversial, given that critics such as Phil Powrie (1997) have dated a crisis in French cinematic masculinity to precisely this decade, but by mentioning just Delon and Belmondo as the stars illustrating such continuing domination, she is not necessarily making a general claim about that decade.

films: she completes the conclusion from which the quotation above is taken by saying

even then, however, it is not certain that one would find at the other pole, in auteur cinema, representations that are any more finely attuned to the contradictory reality of male/female relations that pertain in contemporary France. (Sellier, 2015, p. 937)

Hansen-Løve's auteur cinema furnishes multiple scenarios of this "contradictory reality of male/female relations". There are no stereotypical bad mothers, vindictive wives and manipulative mistresses among the women associated with the male protagonists I have discussed, but a whole range of character types – cold bourgeoisie Annette in *All Is Forgiven*, loving and long-suffering Sylvia in *Father of My Children*, the string of different women who have relationships with *Eden's* Paul, and the beautiful and intelligent (if possibly rather innocent, on account of her youth) Maya. Hansen-Løve's films seem to be exploring the very contradictory reality of heterosexual gender relations to whose existence Sellier points: their vulnerable men, who are also "failing", inadequate fathers or not fathers at all, point towards a de-patriarchalized or post-patriarchal society, which an account of subjectivity organized around dependency or interdependency may facilitate much better than one that assumes or aspires to autonomy.

### Vulnerabilisation of the Subject

In proposing a concept of vulnerable subjectivity to replace the universal subject underpinning the liberal tradition of political philosophy, Fineman (2008) is targeting the notion of an autonomous, non-dependent subject Western philosophy may usually have claimed to be gender-neutral, but whose masculinization has been thoroughly unmasked and exposed by feminist scholarship:

feminist scholars have scrutinized and criticized the ways in which dominant theory and popular politics idealize notions of independence, autonomy, and self-sufficiency that are empirically unrealistic and unrealizable. Feminist critics, specifically in bringing dependency and care work into light and under scrutiny, have offered a model of interdependence in which the liberal subject is enmeshed in a web of relationships and perceived as dependent upon them. (p. 11)

Fineman's work, which she has described as "post-metaphysical", does not engage with the entire tradition of Western philosophy and the range of approaches to the autonomous subject taken by philosophers



of ethics.<sup>6</sup> In targeting autonomy and replacing it by vulnerability, however, she draws attention to importance of dependency and interdependence, highlighting the part that feminist philosophy has played in exposing that autonomy is not and never has been gender-neutral. In their introduction to *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy* (2014), Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers and Susan Dodds claim that

there has been little systematic analysis of the concept of vulnerability. [...] despite its importance to debates about the ethics of care (Virginia Held, Eva Kittay), bioethics (UNESCO and the European Commission's *Basic Ethical Principles in Bioethics and Biolaw*) and the interest Butler's work has sparked in "the notion of vulnerability as an ontological condition of our humanity. (pp. 1–2).

Fineman, however, stated in 2008 that she has moved from the critique of autonomy and analysis of dependency to the development of vulnerability because it is "a more encompassing concept", "may ultimately prove more theoretically powerful", and can generate more "politically potent analyses (p. 11).

In considering whose approach to vulnerability can best account for the anxiety, proneness to addiction, denial, dependency on women, and emotional fickleness of the leading male characters of Hansen-Løve's films, Fineman's concept of the vulnerable subject seems better than the approach to vulnerability taken by Butler in her recent ethical and moral-philosophical writings. The Levinasian subject Butler brings into her thinking in these writings is utterly different from the autonomous and sovereign subject of ontologically grounded philosophies, since it is by reversing the priority of ontology over ethics that Levinas reconfigures ethics as a "persecution" or originary vulnerability that precedes being. Butler can be said to be emphasizing our lack of autonomy and dependency on others for our survival in the same way as Fineman does, but since the vulnerability Butler envisages is "particularly vulnerability to violence" (Lloyd, 2008, p. 92) and the threat of violence

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6. A rapid explanation of the "autonomy orthodoxy" (what Fineman calls the "autonomy myth") by contemporary continental philosopher Simon Critchley can be found in the first and second chapters of his *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (2012). Whereas autonomy is "the basic principle of Kant's ethics" (p. 32), Levinas sees "two main tendencies in Western philosophy: autonomy and heteronomy" (p. 56), and because autonomy has usually been dominant, "sees his task as the attempt to breathe some life back into the latter" (p. 56).

and any dynamics of vengeance (actual or potential) are entirely absent from the enmeshed, web-like dependency that characterizes the social existence and emotional lives of Hansen-Løve's characters, Butler's approach offers less to an analysis of her films. The vulnerability of Hansen-Løve's leading protagonists takes different forms, while always relating to their intersubjective bonds with others, and affecting men distinctly more than women. Hansen-Løve's variously vulnerable men call for a contemporary philosophical approach to subjectivity that takes account of ongoing changes to Western masculinity and heterosexual gender relations, and Fineman's concept of the vulnerable subject offers just such an approach.

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