

# Exploring representations of human resource management as moral dirty work: A film study

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[Correction added on 26 July 2024, after first online publication: The copyright has been changed.]

## Abstract

It has been claimed that the HR “profession” suffers from a chronic shortage of social legitimacy. In this article, we advance the idea that HR is also to some extent subject to public stigmatization for being immoral. In other words, we maintain that certain aspects of contemporary HR work can be conceptualized as morally dirty work. We provide empirical support for this contention by analyzing a set of 28 films portraying HR practitioners at work. The research results comprise both task-related and method-related filmic representations of HR work as immoral, thus furnishing a comprehensive and nuanced picture of the moral issues that can affect the HR profession. Furthermore, the results show that some of the HR characters analyzed—typically those who hold a role as (co-)protagonists in the story—realize the immorality affecting their work and decide to distance themselves from it by either exiting the role, trying to reform it, or openly raising resistance against their employer. These research results suggest the need to integrate dirty work scholarship into study of the HR profession, while they provide important indications in terms of future HR research, practice and education.

## KEYWORDS

dirty work, film analysis, HR profession, HRM, human resources, moral stigma, movies

...cinema burns and enlightens

Andrea Zanzotto

organizational-level (e.g., Heizmann & Fox, 2019; Sheehan, De Cieri, Greenwood, et al., 2014) strategies for mitigating this shortage of legitimacy, the recent pandemic crisis seems to have exacerbated the situation, representing a missed opportunity for HR people to improve their legitimacy status (Butterick & Charwood, 2021). In this article, we advance the idea that not only does HR work suffer from social legitimacy issues but it can also be subject to public stigmatization because some of its tasks and methods are considered problematic from the moral point of view. In other words, besides having poor legitimacy, certain aspects of contemporary HR work can be conceptualized as “moral dirty work” (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, 2014a; Hughes, 1958). Previous studies have already discussed the moral issues that can affect HR work. For example, some authors have affirmed that HR managers are socially irresponsible (Richards & Sang, 2021), that they “boot people out of the

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

A long-standing stream of HRM research has explored the evolution of the HR profession (e.g., Ulrich et al., 2013). In recent years, several voices in this research stream have highlighted that the HR profession has social legitimacy problems due to its explicit pro-business and pro-market orientation and its scant concern for employees and society at large (e.g., Dundon & Rafferty, 2018; Guerci et al., 2021; Kochan, 2004, 2009; Marchington, 2015; Thompson, 2011). Although HR professionals have engaged in interorganizational (e.g., Pohler & Willness, 2014) as well as

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door” and fake selection interviews during downsizings (Steers, 2008), that they contribute to normalizing workplace bullying (Harrington et al., 2012, 2015), and that HRM in organizations resembles propaganda in totalitarian regimes (Abbott, 2015).

In light of these arguments, we explore how HR work is portrayed as moral dirty work in movies. Films are widely recognized as suitable means for the assessment and extension of theories in organization and management studies (e.g., Bell, 2008; Phillips, 1995; Rhodes & Westwood, 2008). More specifically, filmic representations constitute an appropriate domain in which to investigate the moral stigma potentially affecting HR work because it has been explicitly argued that filmic representations can make visible and publicize those less pleasant aspects of a job or occupation, such as moral dirty work, which tend to be concealed from sight or covered by a social desirability bias in an interview setting (Bell, 2008). Furthermore, it is important to analyze films because they have a wider circulation and broader reach compared with other popular media, extending well beyond national borders (Bartlett et al., 2021; Bell, 2008; Casetti, 2008; Griffin et al., 2017).

In this article, using a mixed thematic and narrative approach (Mikos, 2013; Rose, 2016), we analyze an international set of movies, including various film genres, both humorous and dramatic in tone, portraying HR practitioners' work. Our results indicate that filmic representations of HR work comprise both morally dirty representations of typical HR tasks, concerning employee dismissal, employee acquisition, disciplining employees and managing culture; and morally dirty portrayals of methods adopted by HR characters in movies, like pursuing self-interest at the expense of others, submitting to the employer while acting against employees' interests, treating employees inhumanly and breaking organizational or legal rules. Interestingly, although several of these tasks and methods cannot be considered inherently immoral, in filmic representations they are persistently reported as morally dirty, suggesting that in the popular imaginary the HR profession is subject to moral stigmatization. Furthermore, the results show that most of those HR film characters that realize the immorality of their work try to redeem themselves by exiting the role, or reforming it or, as a third option, raising resistance against their employer and other managers.

This article contributes innovatively to the literature in several ways. First, it extends the idea that HR work has a shortage of social legitimacy and theorizes on that shortage by showing that publicly available representations of several HR tasks and methods can be understood as moral dirty work, thus furnishing a far more complete and severe view of the problem of the social legitimacy of the HR profession. Second, it empirically sets out the reasons why HR professionals can be morally stigmatized by showing numerous examples taken from filmic representation. Finally, it enriches a tensional view of HR professionals as experiencing a variety of moral issues in their work, thus providing HR research and practice with a range of possibilities that to date have been little explored.

## 2 | FROM POOR SOCIAL LEGITIMACY TO VIEWS OF HR WORK AS MORALLY DIRTY

A number of scholarly commentators have argued that HR work suffers from a chronic shortage of social legitimacy. This is a problem,

because legitimacy is recognized as being a crucial resource for any professional and occupational group (Abbott, 1988; Anteby et al., 2016). Although it is neither clearly defined nor theorized by those authors, by claiming a shortage of “social” legitimacy for the HR profession scholars have emphasized that HR practitioners and their work have scant legitimacy in the eyes of employees, as well as of local communities and society at large. Kochan (2004, 2009) and Marchington (2015), for example, have argued that, because of its explicit pro-business and pro-market orientation, the HR profession has actively contributed to restraining employees' rights and voice, inside and outside workplaces. In a similar vein, Dundon and Rafferty (2018) and Guerci et al. (2021) have affirmed that HR practitioners have contributed to exacerbating societal problems such as income inequality, in-work poverty and unemployment, by designing and supporting “inequality-increasing” compensation practices at the organizational level. According to Butterick and Charwood (2021), the detrimental effect of HRM practices became even more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the contrast between the public value of workers in sectors such as food, social care and transport, and their poor working conditions and remuneration, became clearly apparent.

The social legitimacy problem of HR work is connected to the strategies that HR practitioners, both as individuals and as a professional community, have enacted in order to gain legitimacy and influence within organizations. In fact, several scholars have noted that, in recent decades, HR practitioners and their professional associations have put a great deal of effort into trying to legitimize their position in front of employers and top managerial actors, as “valuable servants of power” (Wright, 2008, p. 1066), while at the same time downplaying their responsibilities and duties toward employees and society at large (e.g., Higgins et al., 2016; Keegan & Francis, 2010; Kochan, 2004; Marchington, 2015). The legitimacy of the HRM profession has therefore been built by looking especially at economic performance and business objectives, neglecting other stakeholders and their needs. Cayrat and Boxall's recent analysis of more than 200 empirical and normative articles on the role of the HR function confirms that there is “an apparent inclination of HR professionals striving for a more strategic role to favor a managerial agenda that may undermine employees' as well as their own well-being” (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023, p. 14).

Importantly, such efforts to gain internal legitimacy through a strategic partner role have not necessarily enabled HR professionals to increase their power within organizations (Aldrich et al., 2015; Sheehan, De Cieri, Cooper, et al., 2014; Sheehan, De Cieri, Greenwood, et al., 2014). Although in some cases, a higher organizational status is formally recognized—for example when HR professionals are given an executive role and granted entry into the C-suite—their actual involvement in strategic decision-making remains episodic and largely dependent on the CEO's or senior managers' views on HRM (Aldrich et al., 2015). In this regard, also the feminization of the HR profession seems to have had controversial effects, facilitating access to the board by HR professionals while limiting their actual power (Reichel et al., 2020). This means that, notwithstanding the emphasis on the strategic role of HRM in both the academic and

the practitioners' debate, or their increased access to top managerial positions, many HR professionals still have limited power in organizations. This may exacerbate the tensions they experience between contributing to business imperatives and objectives and maintaining an employee-focus (Sheehan, De Cieri, Greenwood, et al., 2014), thus constraining their capacity to engage in moral agency (Wilcox, 2012).

Indeed, besides the problem of a shortage of social legitimacy, another serious problem emerges from previous studies on HR work, because the behavior and work of HR practitioners have also been described as lacking morality, besides having scant legitimacy.

Several arguments and examples about the moral issues affecting HR work can be found in the literature. More than 30 years ago, Keenoy and Anthony (1992) and Legge (1998) questioned the very possibility for HRM to be moral. More recently, Parkes and Davis (2013) described HR managers as apathetic bystanders who do nothing to prevent wrongdoings in organizations, whilst Butterick and Charlwood (2021) affirmed that HR practitioners enact and sustain "amoral" forms of management. Similarly, Linehan and O'Brien (2017) stated that HR managers need to dissemble and neutralize their impulse to act morally in the workplace. More explicitly, Steers (2008, p. 339) cited the following as examples of "immoral organizational and HR practices" that HR practitioners have to deal with: issuing disciplinary procedures, "booting people out of the door," faking selection interviews during redundancy procedures, editing performance statistics, and tolerating bullying and harassment. Harrington et al. (2012, 2015) found that HR practitioners have a role in normalizing bullying behaviors in organizations by systematically defending supervisors against employees' claims. In stark contrast with the idea that HRM can contribute to the sustainability and social responsibility of firms (e.g., De Stefano et al., 2018; Ren et al., 2023), Richards and Sang (2021) have proposed the idea of a "socially irresponsible HRM" in organizations, which is unfair and unsupportive toward employees and lacks transparency about how HRM decisions are made. The most dystopic view of HRM has probably been advanced by Abbott (2015), who declared that the forms of cultural control enacted by HR managers resemble those of totalitarian regimes and their use of propaganda.

In light of these arguments and examples, rather than as simply having poor social legitimacy, several aspects of contemporary HR work can be described as lacking morality or, in other words, as a specific type of "dirty work" known as "moral dirty work" (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, 2014a; Hughes, 1958). Although legitimacy and morality can be considered two different things (Helms et al., 2019), it has also been argued that they are interrelated because a perceived lack of morality in the form of moral taint undermines the very legitimacy of an occupation (Ashforth, 2019; Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014a; Devers & Mishina, 2019). Therefore, shedding light on those aspects of HR work that are more likely to be morally stigmatized will aid understanding also of how to mitigate its social legitimacy problems.

### 3 | RELEVANCE OF DIRTY WORK SCHOLARSHIP TO UNDERSTANDING CONTEMPORARY HR WORK

The concept of "dirty work" was introduced by the sociologist Everett Hughes (1958), who, while loosely defining it as work that is tainted from the physical, social or moral point of view, applied the notion to a wide range of tasks and occupations, such as those of apartment janitors, nurses (Hughes, 1958) and SS prison guards (Hughes, 1962).

Ashforth and Kreiner (1999, p. 415) expanded and elaborated the original contribution of Hughes (1958, 1962) by defining three main subtypes of dirty work, as follows: physical taint occurs "where an occupation is either directly associated with garbage, death, effluent, and so on" (e.g., janitor) "or is thought to be performed under particularly noxious or dangerous conditions" (e.g., firefighter); social taint occurs when work "involves regular contact with people or groups that are themselves regarded as stigmatized" (e.g., prison guard) "or where the worker appears to have a servile relationship to others" (e.g., shoe-shiner); moral taint "occurs where an occupation is generally regarded as somewhat sinful or of dubious virtue" (e.g., exotic dancers) or "where the worker is thought to employ methods that are deceptive, intrusive, confrontational, or that otherwise defy norms of civility" (e.g., private investigator). Subsequently added has been the fourth dimension of "emotional dirty work," which concerns those workers and occupations that come into contact with emotions perceived as out of place, undesirable, taboo, or burdensome (e.g., the "Samaritans" studied by McMurray & Ward, 2014, or the US border patrollers studied by Rivera, 2014).

In the dirty work literature, the terms "dirt," "taint," and "stigma" are used interchangeably, meaning by the last a stigma that operates at the occupational group level (Zhang et al., 2021). It is also worth noting that researchers do not consider "dirt" or "taint" as inherent to a certain kind of work; rather, they are the result of a social construction process, the product of external attributions in which a variety of social actors and circumstances play a role (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, 2014b; Dick, 2005; Grandy & Mavin, 2012). As a consequence, what matters for denoting an occupation as "tainted" is the existence of a general, public stigma in its regard, as also evidenced by the general stigma literature (e.g., Bos et al., 2013; Goffman, 2009).

Researchers in this tradition reiterate that every occupation involves some form of dirty work (e.g., Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Kreiner et al., 2006), although a major factor differentiating among occupations is their prestige, which mitigates the experience of taint (e.g., Ashforth et al., 2007; Tracy & Scott, 2006). Moreover, whereas in some cases, taint is attributed to the entire occupation (e.g., private investigators and bill collectors are affected by a "pervasive stigma," according to Kreiner et al., 2006), in many others, only particular tasks or aspects of an occupation are affected by taint (known as cases of "compartmentalized stigma," Kreiner et al., 2006; see also Baran et al., 2012). This has led to the analysis through the dirty work lens of not just low-status occupations that have been conventionally considered "dirty jobs," such as exotic dancing (Grandy & Mavin, 2012)

and cleaning (e.g., Soni-Sinha & Yates, 2013), but also relatively high-status occupations. In particular, in the last decade of research, there has been a shift toward the study of white-collar occupations (Carollo & Gilardi, 2022; Stanley & Mackenzie-Davey, 2012), so that a number of corporate professions and managerial occupations have come under the scrutiny of dirty work researchers (e.g., Branicki et al., 2019; Morales & Lambert, 2013).

One further reason why dirty work scholarship is important for studying HR work is the special character attributed to moral stigmatization. Moral dirty work, in fact, is considered peculiar, if compared with “physical,” and “social” dirty work, because it is more difficult for the worker to justify it to external observers (Ashforth et al., 2007; Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014a; Tracy & Scott, 2006). Moreover, it has been said that moral taint is more fluid and unstable, so that it can be applied to a great variety of professions and occupations, also beyond those commonly considered “dirty” (Simpson et al., 2012). For example, it has been argued that accountants (Morales & Lambert, 2013), corporate lawyers (Chow & Calvard, 2021), resilience managers (Branicki et al., 2019), CSR managers (Fontana, 2020), and public relations professionals (Sommerfeldt & Kent, 2020) are “morally stigmatized” for various reasons.

HR work has already been described as “moral dirty work” in the literature in relation to the task of dismissing employees (Rayner et al., 2014). Although this task is not exclusively performed by the HR function in organizations, HR practitioners are widely recognized as being directly involved in downsizings and layoffs (Higgins et al., 2016; Johnson & Watt, 2022; Rayner et al., 2014; Stevens & Hannibal, 2023). Furthermore, as the numerous authors pointing to the moral issues affecting HR work suggest, there are many other aspects of contemporary HR work that, above and beyond employee dismissal, encourage the adoption of the lens of moral dirty work.

#### 4 | EXPLORING MORALLY TAINTED REPRESENTATIONS OF HR WORK IN FILMS

Organizational and management scholarship have already relied on fictional texts to create new spaces for research and theorization (Bell, 2008; Buchanan & Huczynski, 2004; Czarniawska-Joerges & Guillet de Monthoux, 1994; Holt & Zundel, 2018; Phillips, 1995; Rhodes & Westwood, 2008). Scholars in this tradition have criticized the rigid distinction between what are normally considered to be separate domains, arguing that there is knowledge about management and organization in fictional texts (Rhodes & Westwood, 2008) and that theory is a fictional genre in itself (Phillips, 1995). They thus encourage exchange and hybridization between the two for the better understanding of organization and management issues. Compared with other empirical sources, like interviews or survey data, fictional texts have the advantage of being amply accessible and resonating—either by contrast or similarity—with the assumptions and beliefs of an extended audience (Bell, 2008; Czarniawska-Joerges & Guillet de Monthoux, 1994; Rhodes & Parker, 2008; Rhodes & Westwood, 2008). In his seminal article, Phillips (1995, p. 625)

suggested analyses of novels, plays, poems, and films as “legitimate approaches to the study of management and organization.”

Films in particular have occupied a prominent position in organization and management studies in the past three decades, while being considered part of a more general “visual turn” (Bell & Davison, 2013). This is probably due to the fact that, as Denzin (1991) notes, there has been a switch from “literacy” to “videocracy,” with people increasingly relying on moving images to make sense of the world. Cinema, also known as “the 7th art” and “the eye of the [20th] century” (Casetti, 2008), has thus been described by organizational scholars as “almost by definition culturally significant” (Beard, 1994, p. 303) and “one of the most influential mediums of modern culture” (Dimnik & Felton, 2006, p. 130). A variety of topics have been analyzed through filmic lenses in organizational scholarship, from images of technology and organizational futures (Corbett, 1995) to organizational spaces (Panayiotou & Kafiris, 2011), from mafia eating habits (Parker, 2008) to business (un)sustainability (Bradshaw & Zwick, 2016). Overall, leadership research (e.g., Bartlett et al., 2021; Buchanan & Hällgren, 2019; Islam, 2009) and management learning scholarship (e.g., Edwards et al., 2015; Huczynski & Buchanan, 2004) have benefitted especially from films as sources of theoretical insights.

Another stream of organizational research that has relied on the analysis of films is the study of occupations and professions. In this case, the accounting profession seems to be one of the most studied (e.g., Beard, 1994; Dimnik & Felton, 2006; Felton et al., 2008), although also studies on public relations professionals (Ames, 2010), nurses (Hallam, 2002) and salespeople (Hartman, 2006) can be found in the organization and management studies literature. Researchers in this stream have been particularly worried by the “negative” (Ames, 2010), “unethical” (Felton et al., 2008) or even “vilified” (Hartman, 2006) images of the aforementioned occupations that emerge from filmic representation. This might not be surprising, because it has been repeatedly affirmed that negative representations of organizations and management abound in movies (e.g., Bell, 2008; Rhodes & Parker, 2008; Rhodes & Westwood, 2008). Moreover, popular visual representations tend to exaggerate, glamorize, and sensationalize characters and events in order to attract attention and attain commercial success (Buchanan & Huczynski, 2004; Whiteman et al., 2018). At the same time, films, as a visual narrative form of popular culture, are inherently ambiguous and do not support definitive interpretations (Phillips, 1995; Rhodes & Westwood, 2008). They are thus helpful for understanding the complexities and tensions and for interrogating the values and beliefs that characterize particular social and professional worlds (Islam, 2009; Phillips, 1995; Rhodes & Westwood, 2008; Whiteman et al., 2018).

In sum, past research demonstrates that film analysis is a promising approach with which to investigate the problematic aspects of an occupation or profession (e.g., Ames, 2010; Felton et al., 2008; Hartman, 2006). It is thus of interest also to scholars studying HR work. Dirty work research has already focused on media representations of occupations (e.g., Grandy & Mavin, 2012; Stanley & Mackenzie-Davey, 2012), noting that films have an impact on social

dynamics of stigmatization (Dick, 2005; Tracy & Scott, 2006). As a result of these considerations, the objective of this article is to explore morally dirty representations of HR work in films.

## 5 | METHODOLOGY

Films are cultural artifacts subject to mass consumption by millions of viewers. As a consequence, on the one hand, films are considered performative (Bell, 2008; Griffin et al., 2017; Holt & Zundel, 2018), meaning that they have an impact on everyday social and organizational reality through the myths, narratives, discourses, and representations they contribute to circulate. On the other hand, films are influenced by current social practices and work behaviors, as well as the assumptions held about them by a large audience. All those involved in film production, such as producers, directors, screenwriters, and actors, are well aware of viewers' expectations, which inform all aspects of the production process (Bartlett et al., 2021; Bell, 2008; Griffin et al., 2017; Mikos, 2013).

Rather than adopting a strictly determinist or correlational view of these relations, or assuming that films strictly "shape" or "reflect" social reality, this article takes the position that the relationship between the film medium and social reality is two-way and culturally significant (Beard, 1994). Therefore, films are conceived here as meaning-making narratives and items of "social science fiction" (Buchanan & Hällgren, 2019; Dallyn & Marinetto, 2022) that can be used to expand the theoretical repertoire about organization and management (Bell, 2008; Holt & Zundel, 2018; Phillips, 1995).

A note of caution concerns the fact that interpreting popular culture is always a partial exercise since there are multiple possible interpretations (Huczynski & Buchanan, 2004; Phillips, 1995; Rhodes & Westwood, 2008). Moreover, no one has the definitive right to judge on the absolute moral rightfulness or wrongfulness of certain actions or behaviors, because moral dirty work and processes of stigmatization in general are always socially constructed (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014b; Dick, 2005). Therefore, in this article, we put forth specific interpretations among the numerous ones possible of the films analyzed, subjecting our own point of view to the critical scrutiny of the reader-viewer. Working with films has the advantage of enhanced transparency and verifiability of interpretations because films have wide circulation and are easily accessible to a large audience, extending beyond the traditional boundaries of academia (Czarniawska-Joerges & Guillet de Monthoux, 1994; Holt & Zundel, 2018; Rhodes & Parker, 2008).

### 5.1 | Data collection

To construct the corpus of films to be analyzed (Mikos, 2013), we relied on indications from many different sources. Following Dimnik and Felton (2006), we initially asked HRM scholars, industry experts, HR practitioners in various countries and film experts, either via personal contact (e-mail or phone call) or social networks, to indicate

movies in which an HR character was portrayed. In addition, as similarly done in previous studies (e.g., Ames, 2010; Dimnik & Felton, 2006; Hartman, 2006; Panayiotou & Kafiris, 2011), we searched in IMDb, the largest and most relevant international movies database available online, for keywords such as "HRM," "HR manager," "HR consultant," "personnel manager," "HR practitioner," and combinations of them.

Because we were interested in analyzing contemporary, or at least relatively recent, cinematic representations of HR work, we limited our search to films released in the last 25 years. Six movies had to be excluded because we were not able to find them or, although we found them available on DVD or online streaming services, they were in a foreign language that we did not know and did not have English subtitles. We watched all the remaining films (57) and, in line with Dimnik and Felton (2006) and Beard (1994), we decided to keep in our dataset only those movies in which we could identify a character clearly playing the role of an HR practitioner, even in a cameo part. Therefore, we excluded those films (29) in which HR duties were performed by characters not identifiable as HR people either through context or dialogue (entrepreneurs, line managers, etc.). Our selection choices were triangulated with film reviews and plot summaries published on IMDb, MyMovies, and other specialized websites.

Like previous articles investigating films (e.g., Islam, 2009; Panayiotou & Kafiris, 2011), the objective of our selection was to identify and bring to academic attention a corpus of films with a characteristic in common (Fougère, 2022; Mikos, 2013), that is, they portray HR practitioners at work. As a result of our selection process, the final database comprised 28 films. This set can be considered fairly comprehensive of filmic depictions of the HR profession released in the last 25 years in Western countries. The list of analyzed films is provided in Table 1. Additional information, including the film's genre(s), the main character(s) of interest and their roles, and a link to the film's IMDb webpage, which reports a short summary of the plot, is provided in Table A1.

### 5.2 | Analytical approach

As a first step, three of the four authors of this article watched the films several times and took extensive notes, while meeting regularly, every second or third film, to exchange impressions and interpretations. In this phase, they worked to translate films into texts (Bartlett et al., 2021; Bell, 2008; Parker, 2008), compiling analysis sheets in which the results of the individual analyses converged. In particular, detailed notes were taken on the relevant scenes, documenting where to find them in terms of playing time, and transcribing dialogues verbatim (Fougère, 2022). Once the analysis sheets had been completed, the fourth author, who is a film studies researcher, reviewed them, helping to refine them on the basis of his own expertise and understanding of the movies. We then collectively conducted a thematic analysis of the empirical material, breaking the films down into short scenes or sequences that provided an illustration of our research object, that is, morally dirty representations of HR work (for a similar

**TABLE 1** List of analyzed films.

| #  | ID (initials of the title) | Original title                | Title in English            | Director(s)             | Release year |
|----|----------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|--------------|
| 1  | AFM                        | A family man                  | -                           | Mark Williams           | 2017         |
| 2  | BAFG                       | Bienvenido a Farewell-Gutmann | Welcome to Farewell-Gutmann | Xavi Puebla             | 2008         |
| 3  | BAB                        | Bienvenue à bord              | Welcome aboard              | Eric Lavaine            | 2012         |
| 4  | C                          | Corporate                     | -                           | Nicolas Silhol          | 2017         |
| 5  | CM                         | Carole Matthieu               | -                           | Louis-Julien Petit      | 2016         |
| 6  | DFDH                       | Direktøren for det hele       | The boss of it all          | Lars von Trier          | 2006         |
| 7  | DGSM                       | 10 giorni senza mamma         | When mom is away            | Alessandro Genovesi     | 2019         |
| 8  | EG                         | En guerre                     | At war                      | Stephane Brizè          | 2018         |
| 9  | EM                         | El método                     | The method                  | Marcelo Piñeyro         | 2005         |
| 10 | GAJ                        | Get a job                     | -                           | Dylan Kidd              | 2016         |
| 11 | H                          | Hodejegerne                   | Headhunters                 | Morten Tyldum           | 2011         |
| 12 | JSVTS                      | Je suis à vous tout de suite  | I'm all yours               | Baya Kasmi              | 2015         |
| 13 | KUWTJ                      | Keeping up with the Joneses   | -                           | Greg Mottola            | 2016         |
| 14 | LLDM                       | La loi du marché              | The measure of a man        | Stephane Brizè          | 2015         |
| 15 | LQH                        | La question humaine           | Heartbeat detector          | Nicolas Klotz           | 2007         |
| 16 | MMPL                       | Mobbing. Mi piace lavorare    | Mobbing. I like to work     | Francesca Comencini     | 2003         |
| 17 | OCP                        | Office Christmas Party        | -                           | Josh Gordon, Will Speck | 2016         |
| 18 | OTB                        | Outside the box               | -                           | Philip Koch             | 2015         |
| 19 | RH                         | Ressources humaines           | Human resources             | Laurent Cantet          | 1999         |
| 20 | TAEF                       | Tudo acaba em festa           | It all ends in a party      | André Pellenz           | 2018         |
| 21 | TCM                        | The company men               | -                           | John Wells              | 2010         |
| 22 | THRM                       | The human resources manager   | -                           | Eran Riklis             | 2010         |
| 23 | TI                         | The internship                | -                           | Shawn Levy              | 2013         |
| 24 | TMM                        | The Menkoff method            | -                           | David Parker            | 2020         |
| 25 | TW                         | The whistleblower             | -                           | Larysa Kondracki        | 2010         |
| 26 | UIA                        | Up in the air                 | -                           | Jason Reitman           | 2009         |
| 27 | VFTP                       | View from the top             | -                           | Bruno Barreto           | 2003         |
| 28 | VSDA                       | Volevo solo dormire addosso   | To sleep next to her        | Eugenio Cappuccio       | 2004         |

approach see, for example, Bartlett et al., 2021; Corbett, 1995; Panayiotou & Kafiris, 2011). In this phase of the analysis, we systematically selected those film extracts that pertained to our research objective, using the concept of “moral dirty work” as defined in the literature (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, 2014a) as a sensitizing concept (Blumer, 1954) that oriented our gaze when rewatching the movies, or particular scenes, and going through the transcripts. Table 2 illustrates our thematic coding process.

However, a film is not just a collection of single scenes or shots; it also has an overall narrative structure that connects the different sequences into a story (Sikov, 2020). In the final phase of the analysis, we therefore conducted a narrative analysis of the films sampled, meaning that we looked at the overall narrative structure (i.e., the sequence of events and situations), considering the evolution of the plot and of the characters of interest throughout the story (Mikos, 2013). In particular, drawing inspiration from the so-called “hero’s journey” (Campbell, 1949; Vogler, 2007), we selected those films in our dataset (14) that made it possible to trace an evolution or

a development in the story of the HR character(s) portrayed, and analyzed them through narrative theory (for a similar approach, see Huczynski & Buchanan, 2004; Islam, 2009). As a result, the endings of the films were classified into three overarching typical story outcomes describing the final point of arrival of the HR character(s) in the narratives.

## 6 | RESULTS

The research results are organized into three sections. The first two sections set out the results of the thematic analysis strategy, reporting task-related and method-related filmic representations of HR work as morally dirty. The third section summarizes the results of the narrative analysis, showing how some HR characters react when they realize the immorality of their work. Our results include both representations of HR as immoral and more positive ones. Interestingly, in the front-end of the movies analyzed, dirty representations

**TABLE 2** Illustration of the thematic coding process.

| Aggregate dimensions   | Second-order codes   | First-order codes   |
|--|--|---|
| HR tasks represented as morally dirty in films                   | Employee dismissal   | Downsizing, collective dismissals<br>Individual dismissals  |
|  | Employee acquisition   | Employee poaching<br>Fostering competition among candidates   |
|  | Disciplining employees   | Formalism, rule-enforcement<br>Moralizing employees<br>Punishing and silencing deviant employees                      |
|  | Managing culture   | Indoctrination through training<br>Corporate propaganda   |
| Method-related morally dirty representations of HR work in films | Pursuing self-interest at the expense of others                      | Power seeking<br>Careerism and workaholism<br>Neglecting responsibilities in other spheres (e.g., family)             |
|  | Submitting to the employer while acting against employees' interests | Upward-looking posture<br>Lying to employees and other stakeholders<br>Downplaying responsibilities towards employees |
|  | Treating employees inhumanely  | Emotionless, detached<br>Disrespectful, offensive<br>Treating employees as inferiors                                  |
|  | Breaching rules  | Intrusiveness, violation of privacy<br>Discrimination<br>Power abuse<br>Bullying employees                            |

of HR work are dominant, if not exclusive, in the large majority of them (the first and second results sections account for those representations). More positive representations, instead, are considered in the third section, because they usually appear in films after the HR characters have become aware of the immorality of their work; a realization which typically induces them to reevaluate the relation with their profession.

### 6.1 | Task-related morally dirty representations of HR work

In the movies analyzed, we found that four HR tasks were repeatedly portrayed as tainted from the moral point of view. Task-related negative representations concerned in particular employee dismissal, employee acquisition, disciplining employees, and managing culture.

### 6.1.1 | Employee dismissal

In the extant research (e.g., Johnson & Watt, 2022; Rayner et al., 2014; Stevens & Hannibal, 2023), dismissing employees has already been depicted as morally dirty. Within our dataset, several movies focused almost exclusively on this task, presented as performed by HR professionals working within an organization (e.g., *Volevo solo dormire addosso*, *La question humaine*, *Je suis à vous tout de suite*, *Corporate*), or as consultants (*Up in the air*). For example, in the first scenes of *Volevo solo dormire addosso* (6:10–8:11) the protagonist, Marco Pressi, who is HR manager in the Italian subsidiary of a multinational company, meets Jean-Claude, the Global HR Director, who asks him to fire 25 workers in 3 months. This achievement will be rewarded with a promotion, a 30% salary increase, a 5000 euro bonus and a new company car. The career of Marco as HR manager, along with other benefits, thus depends on his ability to downsize the workforce. In another movie, during a board meeting the president of a company proposes a drastic reduction of the workforce. When another manager suggests selling the recently acquired headquarters building instead of laying people off, the president exclaims “I’m not selling the new building! [...] Get hold of Human Resources, have them start making up a list for another round of downsizing” (TCM, 42:22–43:09). In these scenes, HR professionals are portrayed as having little agency concerning important decisions that affect employees. Indeed, in both cases the downsizing decisions are taken by the CEO or a top manager, from whom an HR manager passively accepts instructions without challenging them or exploring possible alternatives.

Movies present employee dismissal as composed of two subtasks: individual and collective dismissal. Accordingly, sometimes HR professionals are represented as firing individual employees. For example, in the comedy *Je suis à vous tout de suit* the protagonist, Hanna Belkacem, who is HR Director of a wine-export company, in a couple of scenes makes employees redundant but, because she cannot stand making people suffer, she tries to comfort them, with comical results (JSATS, 17:30; 1:15:00). In other cases, HR professionals are engaged in extensive downsizing. In a scene of *La questione humaine*, the HR manager, Simon, is praised by a top manager for his ability to lay off employees (eloquently referred to as “units” in the following excerpt):

We asked you to review the employee evaluation criteria. You really gave your all. We passed from 2500 units to 1200. We recovered all our shareholders. It was a great success! The quality of your files was most impressive... you know perfectly how to define evaluation criteria, according to the company’s needs. That’s your strength, Mr. Kessler.

(LQH, 1:06:05–1:06:50)

### 6.1.2 | Employee acquisition

It emerged from the movies that also tasks related to employee acquisition have been repeatedly represented as morally dirty, again with

certain movies predominantly focused on two subtasks (*A family man*, *Headhunters*, *El método*, *The internship*, *Get a job*). First, HR professionals in movies are shown as poaching employees, while being unfair against competitors and displaying a predatory attitude toward candidates, whom they consider to be “prey,” or simple “heads” to be “hunted.” This is signaled by the derogatory meaning of the term “headhunters” with which these HR professionals are designated. Evidencing the stigma that the term carries, the wife of an applicant who answers a phone call from an HR professional instead of her husband in *A family man*, says: “he got a call from another head... um, from another recruiter” (AFM, 1:03:43). Eloquently, Dan, the protagonist of the movie, presents his job in the initial monologue in these terms:

I’m a headhunter, and I’m the purest form of a salesman alive. I sell the American dream. I make money out of thin air, smoke, whole cloth.

(AFM, 0:35–0:45)

Besides displaying a predatory attitude toward candidates, in some movies selectors are shown as fostering rough competition among applicants. In *The internship*, for example, the selection of new interns is represented with an HR manager administering a gamified selection process which makes candidates compete harshly with each other. Mr. Chetty presents the first step of the process as “the first of several challenges” (TI, 44:40) and, in the middle of the process, he reiterates: “Only two challenges remain, after which only a mere handful of you will be offered full time employment” (TI, 1:24:10). This leads some teams of interns to behave in an extremely nasty manner and employ tricks to outdo their competitors.

The competition fostered among candidates becomes even harsher in movies representing the selection of managers. In *El método*, a sophisticated selection game is conducted by HR professionals who monitor everything from the outside through cameras. The game consists of a hyper-realistic stress test designed and orchestrated remotely by a team of psychologists, in which eight candidates compete against each other. For example, during the process, applicants are informed that one of them is not a real candidate but is a member of the HR Department, so that the applicants start suspecting each other (EM, 13:30). Also, at the end of the movie, the three remaining candidates have to play a game, and two of them collaborate against the third one, always passing her the ball to force her into making a mistake (EM, 1:23:20–1:31:55).

### 6.1.3 | Disciplining employees

Disciplining employees is a third task depicted as morally dirty in films and which is often associated with HR professionals, who are thus represented as strict formalists and rule-enforcers. In *The internship*, for example, Mr. Chetty disqualifies a team of candidates without assessing the result of their performance just because it was not delivered exactly as required, arguing: “Attention to detail is of paramount



importance here, and my instructions were explicit. If there is no recording, then it is as if you didn't even show up today" (TI, 1:34:08–1:34:16). In the comedy *10 giorni senza mamma*, two HR professionals compete in front of the CEO to be perceived as stricter in punishing a woman who has been videorecorded while stealing just three screws. They thus start acting as if they are bidders in an auction, escalating the suggested sanctions just to obtain professional advantage over each other:

**Carlo:** I will send her a letter of reprimand.

**Alessandro:** But she betrayed our trust [...]

**Carlo:** We will deduct the cost of the three screws from her salary and give her three days of suspension.

**Alessandro:** Four days.

**Carlo:** Eight days and a fine.

**Alessandro:** Two weeks, a disciplinary measure. And a fine.

**Carlo:** One month suspension and we report her to the police. Even better: I'll fire her.

(DGSM, 18:39–19:50)

The task of disciplining employees sometimes spills over into employees' private lives and takes the form of moralizing efforts by HR professionals. For example, in a movie scene a recruiter crudely suggests a candidate should give up smoking and take more care of his appearance to increase his chances of being hired (TCM, 57:00). In the context of job interviews, disciplining can take the form of discriminating or even blaming candidates who are considered awkward or display nonstandard characteristics (BAB, 1:15). Last, punishment is used by HR professionals to silence rebellious employees. In *The whistleblower*, for example, the protagonist speaks up about human trafficking in the UN agency where she is working. Along with several other threats and acts of retaliation by a UN HR functionary who tries to silence her (e.g., see TW 1:07:28–1:09:05 and 1:38:10–1:39:15), toward the end of the film, when she complains to the security officer removing her company badge, the same HR manager intervenes, saying: "What is happening here? You have been removed from office. Give me your badge." Afterward, he asks the security officer to escort her out of the building (TW, 1:31:50–1:32:59). Similarly in *Carole Mathieu*, Carole, who is an occupational doctor at a big French telecom company, is continuously hampered in her meetings with overstressed employees by Christine Pastres, the HR Director, who forces her to strictly follow the schedule, to limit interviews to 15 minutes, not allowing any informal contact between the doctor and employees.

#### 6.1.4 | Managing culture

The fourth HR task depicted as morally dirty in films corresponds to what organizational scholars have called "managing" or "engineering" culture, thereby indicating attempts to influence organizational members' self-definition and values (e.g., Alvesson, 2002; Kunda, 2006). In the movies analyzed, HR professionals promoted various initiatives to

align employees' identities with that of the organization. These initiatives were depicted as extreme forms of cultural control, enacted through training activities and seminars directed at employees. For example, in *Outside the box*, the HR Director Peter Kraußmann organizes an extreme outdoor survival camp in which a group of employees are required to wear uniforms and accomplish "missions" in a war-like setting, guided by a military instructor, in order to enhance their "stress tolerance abilities" and team spirit. Furthermore, the initiative is spectacularized by being videorecorded and broadcast live to a group of journalists, making the participants involuntary ambassadors of the company's culture. In *The Menkoff method* instead, the odd HR consultant Max Menkoff organizes morning "calisthenic" workouts in the company courtyard, during which employees are forced to dance in line and sing Soviet-like songs.

The dark, immoral side of cultural management is provokingly denounced also in *La question humaine*. In this movie, Simon, the HR protagonist of the story is asked, among other things, to investigate the CEO of the French subsidiary, because "the Head Office in Germany wants a detailed report on Mr. Just" (LQH, 8:00). After he realizes that the reasons for the investigation are specious, Simon refuses to write the report. He thus starts receiving threatening anonymous letters in which his past statements concerning his methods for training, selecting and evaluating employees are mixed with the language used by Nazis during the Second World War to describe the so-called "Final Solution", their plan to exterminate European Jews (LQH, 1:48:00–1:52:45). The movie as a whole presents a dystopic view of the corporate world, with top managers depicted as Nazi hierarchs and the HR function as performing surveillance and propaganda tasks. This is consistent with Abbott (2015), and it is probably the most critical representation that we found in films of the morally dirty tasks performed by HR practitioners.

### 6.2 | Method-related morally dirty representations of HR work in films

In addition to task-related morally dirty representations, films also portray HR characters as insistently adopting questionable methods in their daily work activities. These are transverse methods and approaches, non-task specific, that recur in various occasions and situations, and can be classified into four main clusters: pursuing self-interest at the expense of others, submitting to the employer while acting against employees' interests, treating employees inhumanly, and breaching rules.

#### 6.2.1 | Pursuing self-interest at the expense of others

First, HR professionals are depicted as pursuing self-interest at the expense of others. They usually do so by relying on their formal power, as they are often portrayed as greedy power-seekers that pull rank on others. In *Volevo solo dormire addosso*, for instance, the

protagonist asks the manager of the Administration Department to produce certain documents. The manager replies that it is 7 p.m. and his staff is leaving, but the protagonist brusquely replies: “send those who complain to me” (VSDA, 10:50).

As a consequence, HR professionals are also depicted as constantly trying to increase their formal power, which induces them to work day and night at the expense of their families. For instance, Dan, the protagonist of *A family man*, gulps coffee and energy drinks in the morning to be productive (AFM, 3:31). He misses family events which he knows are important for his children (20:11) and, as a consequence, he often has arguments with his wife (e.g., 30:34). In some cases, HR professionals in movies appear so unscrupulous and careerist that they resort to their families to pursue their professional goals. This is the case of Carlo who, while driving to a company party, tells his children to always smile to the CEO (DGSM, 1:12). HR professionals in films also use their body to get professional advantage: in *Direktøren for det hele* (3:37), an HR manager has sex with the CEO the very first time she meets him.

The obsession with power of HR professionals is well symbolized by a story told in *Bienvenido a Farewell-Gutmann* by a spooky top manager, Luger, to the HR team of the organization. Luger explains to them how to trap a monkey by...

making a hole in a tree of the same size as the hand of the monkey and putting nuts inside it... and it's done: the monkey won't let go of the nuts to escape, it'll remain trapped with its hand full of nuts in the hole.

(BAFG, 27:10–27:56)

The scene draws a parallel between monkeys and the HR team, which in the movie consists of three managers competing for a promotion (the metaphorical “nuts”). This representation is in line with empirical evidence on workers who perform morally dirty jobs: they are more likely to be animalized than workers performing other types of dirty work (Valtorta et al., 2019).

## 6.2.2 | Submitting to the employer while acting against employees' interests

A second cluster of methods depicted as dirty concerns HR practitioners submitting completely to the employer or powerful managers' will, while opposing other employees' interests. For example, in *En guerre*, while the top management of a company is planning a radical workforce reduction, the HR manager is always portrayed as silently and submissively accepting its decisions (EG, 1:20). In *Office Christmas party* instead (28:10–28:56), Mary, an HR manager, substitutes a set of posters she prepared to “moralize” employees in regard to the upcoming party (saying, for example, “Party wisely” and “Drink responsibly”) with a new poster (“Party like there is no tomorrow”) when the top management informs her that the party must be successful because an important client will be present. Interestingly, the

only original poster left by Mary states “HR is watching you.” Similarly, in *Get a Job*, when a young employee of an executive placement company presents to the board of directors his idea of substituting traditional resumé with video-CVs, the HR Director initially supports him. However, when she realizes that top managers have a different opinion, she quickly aligns with them, saying: “everyone has always loved the old resumé” (GAJ, 33:00). Complete submission to managerial power is comically represented in *10 giorni senza mamma*, when Carlo eats one of the fishes the CEO is using for a fish pedicure, commenting on his Eucharist-like gesture by saying: “now you are part of my DNA” (DGSM, 18:00).

As a corollary of the portrayed collusion of HR practitioners with managerial power, several movies show them manipulating people, for example by lying. In the Israeli movie *The human resources manager*, the employee of a family firm dies in a terrorist attack. The press pillories the company because it did not immediately realize that the victim was employed by it. The HR manager protagonist of the story, who himself does not remember anything about this employee, is instructed by the owner to remedy the public scandal and save the reputation of the company. Behaving cynically just to preserve the company's reputation, together with his professional position, to a subordinate who asks if he remembers her, he lies by saying “Of course” (THRM, 4:14), as he does later with a journalist (THRM, 12:15). In a similar exchange with the son of the dead employee, the HR manager hypocritically reiterates “You know your mama worked here? Very good woman... Yulia was a special person” (THRM, 54:00). In other cases, HR professionals do not explicitly lie, but are not transparent with employees. In the selection process represented in *El método*, for example, no information about the mysterious “method” is shared with the applicants, who continue to make assumptions about how the process works, in a climate of growing tension among them.

Besides lying or hiding information, HR professionals in movies use rhetoric to downplay the conflicts occurring between employer and employees. For instance, during a meeting with the trade unions, an HR manager says:

My feeling is that our discussion is not constructive [...] a deterioration of our relationship is not in the interest of anybody [...] [the downsizing] was very painful, we are speechless and your pain is exactly what we, as your managers, feel [...] what matters now is staying together [...]

On the other side of the table, the union representatives reply with sentences like:

Are you trying to make us cry? [...] Us? We are those who work themselves to death while you pocket millions? [...] But we are not together. This is what we are trying to tell you!

(EG, 5:03–6:14)

HR professionals in films are presented as manipulating employees also by downplaying companies' responsibilities in their regard. A tragic example appears in *La loi du marché* when a shop assistant is fired and, after that, died by suicide. The next day, the HR Director meets the supermarket's workforce to convince them that the woman killed herself for personal reasons, because she had a drug-addicted son and severe financial problems (LLDM, 1:15:50).

### 6.2.3 | Treating employees inhumanly

Treating employees inhumanly is a further morally questionable method used by HR professionals portrayed in movies. Several movies present HR professionals as emotionally detached from employees, with whom they use a cold bureaucratic language. For example, in *View from the top*, when a disappointed aspirant asks the head of a flight attendant trainee program to see the test she has supposedly failed, the HR manager says "That's not procedure" (VFT, 38:00). Similarly, in *Bienvenido a Farewell-Gutmann*, the interviewer coldly says to a rejected candidate who has burst into tears:

I am sorry to tell you that you don't suit the post, but we'll keep your details should a suitable post arise in the future.

(BAFG, 9:00)

In *Keeping up with the Joneses* the protagonist Jeff, who is HR manager of a Tech company, leaves two employees alone to resolve their relational conflict while he plays with his cellphone, although the two employees had explicitly asked him not to do so. In the end, Jeff has to call the security guards to break up their fight (KUWTJ, 7:48).

The inhumanity of HR professionals is also represented by them being disrespectful to employees:

**Employee:** You want to get rid of me because I've had my fourth child. You want us to be sterile.

**HR manager:** Not at all... and my compliments for your fourth child. I have great esteem for you and your fertility. Your problem is that, when you're not on maternity leave, you do fuck-all.

(VSDA, 1:06:05–1:06:15)

HR professionals' inhumanity is sometimes presented as informed by a view of employees as inferiors. For example, when talking about the HR manager, a worker says:

When I ask her something, she never answers and she looks down on us. She should stop walking all over us.

(EG, 10:20)

Similarly, when preparing an employee survey, the HR Director Jambon suggests that Frank should use close-ended instead of open-

ended questions because employees—depicted as mentally deficient in the scene—would be scared by the blank space (RU, 44:00).

### 6.2.4 | Breaching rules

The fourth cluster of morally dubious methods employed by HR professionals in movies consists in breaches of organizational or legal rules. HR practitioners often engage in intrusive behaviors to obtain personal information about employees or candidates. Such information is often irregularly or even illegally acquired: for example, by asking intrusive questions about candidates' private lives in job interviews (LQH, 15:00), or by searching for additional private information on the Internet, without having the informed consent of applicants (H, 25:01). They also subtly obtain information about employees from colleagues, bosses or family members. Or they do so by creating personal relationships with employees. For example, in *Headhunters* the same recruiter who is used to searching for private information about candidates on the Internet at night in a sneaky manner, organizes a squash match with a candidate to steal information directly from him for illegal purposes. In other cases, HR managers in movies bypass organizational procedures and consult confidential company data on employees (e.g., VSDA, 1:08:03–1:08:54).

Moreover, HR professionals are portrayed as discriminating against employees according to a wide set of characteristics, such as (i) age—in *Tudo acaba em festa* (6:06–7:30) the HR team of a company tries to dismiss a group of six elderly employees in order to hire younger ones and save on labor costs; (ii) health—in *Bienvenido a Farewell-Gutmann* Adela excludes a candidate with epilepsy from the selection process, saying: "You're obsessed with your illness" (1:07:10–1:09:20); (iii) ethnicity—in *A family man* (10:43–11:47) Dan, while training an apprentice, suggests not proposing to companies candidates with Arab-sounding names; and (iv) nationality and gender—in *The human resources manager* (6:20), when talking about an immigrant employee, a line manager asks the protagonist: "Did you know she has a degree in engineering? You sent the poor woman to scrub floors!"

The last subset of irregular-illegal behaviors concerns representations of HR professionals abusing their power. For example, later in the same movie, the HR manager that appears in the previous scene is portrayed as bribing a local police agent (THRM, 35:15–36:16). In another movie, the HR professionals conducting job interviews try to leverage their power and position to gain personal advantages, such as obtaining a meeting with his ex-wife from a candidate who knows her well (BAFG, 54:00), or having sex with an attractive candidate (BAFG, 14:30–16:00 and 39:10–43:50). Power abuse is also used by HR professionals to achieve their professional goals. In *Outside the box*, for example, the HR Director Peter "buys" the silence of an employee about his irregularities by promoting the employee and doubling his salary (OTB, 28:20–28:35).

Finally, HR professionals in films abuse their power to force employees to resign. The whole movie *Corporate* is about Emilie, the

HR manager protagonist, and Stéphane, the HR Director, trying to blame employees and their personal problems in order to conceal the system they have put in place to force the resignation of unwanted members of staff. Similarly, in *Mobbing. I like to work*, the HR manager engages in bullying behavior against Anna, the protagonist, for example by isolating her from colleagues at lunch (MMPL, 13:50), by assigning her workspace to another employee without notifying her (19:10–20:40), or assigning her a nonworking laptop (21:30). At the end of a long series of abuses, the HR manager asks Anna to resign:

I've prepared a resignation letter for you [...] believe me, what has happened until now is nothing if you don't agree to sign this letter. You will go back to your family with many more problems, and I'd like to see what you will say to your relatives, especially to your daughter... who has only you.

(MMPL, 1:15:40–1:18:25)

This scene provides a particularly nasty representation of the methods that HR professionals employ in the films analyzed.

### 6.3 | Possibilities of moral redemption for HR characters

Through narrative analysis, we traced the evolution of HR characters in the films analyzed. Although this evolution is not always the case, because in those movies in which a HR character performs the role of a “villain” (15 in a total of 40 characters considered: see Appendix A for more information about HR characters' narrative roles), such as Christine Pastres in *Carole Matthieu* and Stéphane Froncart in *Corporate*, they simply persist with immoral actions – or even escalate them (e.g., John Blakely in *The Whistleblower*). Other films, however, show that in many cases HR characters, in the attempt to redeem themselves, move through the classic stages of the so-called “hero's journey” (Campbell, 1949; Vogler, 2007). This is a narrative template common to all kinds of stories in which characters encounter a crisis and, by facing and surmounting it, are substantially transformed. This is by far the dominant representation when HR characters have a role as (co-)protagonists in the story, while applying also to some HR characters with a secondary role. Accordingly, 14 movies in our dataset depict a total of 17 HR professionals realizing the moral dirtiness of their job, and this realization causes significant personal and professional changes aimed at redeeming themselves. Specifically, three main possibilities of moral redemption emerge from filmic representation: “exit,” “reform” and “resistance.”

#### 6.3.1 | Exit and reform

The film *Up in the air* clearly illustrates the first two variants of this narrative mechanism, which are often represented together. Ryan, an experienced HR consultant specialized in firing, and Natalie, his young

and enthusiastic apprentice, face a personal crisis triggered by the suicide of a woman they have fired (a repetitive trope, found in five of the movies analyzed). Because this suicide violently confronts them, for the first time, with their moral responsibilities, they choose to react in different ways: Natalie leaves her HR job (exit); Ryan decides to keep working for the same consulting company, but adopts a more self-reflexive and caring-for-others approach (reform). These two reactions appear in different forms in several movies.

Similarly, in *Bienvenido a Farewell-Gutmann*, two HR professionals quit their jobs. This is the case of Lázaro and Fernando, who during the film compete against each other and against a third HR manager, Adela, for a promotion. Toward the end, however, they discover that this ruthless competition was not designed to promote anybody, but to select the only HR professional that would remain in the company. They thus realize how immoral this selection process is and, more generally, how immoral their HR work is. After their self-dismissal (exit), they undergo a sort of moral redemption as Lázaro, who is presented in the movie as sex-addicted, refuses to have sex with an attractive candidate to whom he has formerly made advances (BAFG, 1:35:28–1:36:15). Diversely, Fernando, who is alcohol-addicted, on leaving the company car park for the last time throws away a bottle of whisky that he has kept in his car, having realized that his alcoholism and the failure of his marriage are strictly connected to his HR job (BAFG, 1:37:00–1:37:43). Adela, instead, who has won the competition, decides to stay in the role but to interpret it more ethically (reform), hiring the candidate that she previously discriminated against because of his health problem (BAFG, 1:37:53–1:39:37).

Another example of transformation entailing moral redemption through “exit” and “reform” is that of Dan, who is portrayed as a workaholic and hyper-competitive headhunter at the beginning of the movie. However, the turning point of the story comes when he is told that his son is seriously ill (AFM, 33:40). After that, he starts neglecting his work and spending time with his family. Toward the end of the film, he leaves his company (exit) and opens his own consultancy, working from home. The last scenes of the movie portray Dan reforming the way he interprets his job by helping free of charge an elderly candidate to find a job, whereas in the rest of the movie, he had preferred to avoid proposing elderly persons (AFM, 1:23:00–1:25:16); or proposing to a customer a brilliant engineer with an Arab-sounding name, whereas in his previous job, he had systematically avoided proposing candidates with non-American names (AFM, 1:44:48).

#### 6.3.2 | Resistance

Besides “exit” and “reform,” the third option available in the movies to those HR characters who decide to redeem themselves is “resistance,” which entails a direct and harsh confrontation with their employer or other top managerial actors. In *10 giorni senza mamma* Carlo faces a personal crisis when he realizes that the babysitter he has hired to look after his children while he is at work is the same woman that he had fired for stealing just three screws. When she discovers who Carlo is, the babysitter quits the job. Carlo is thus forced

to attend a company meeting bringing his three-year-old daughter with him. Because during the meeting Carlo appears focused entirely on her, he is fired. After leaving the organization, when his wife returns from holiday Carlo decides not to work anymore. Furthermore, he asks his wife, who is a labor lawyer, to assist the fired woman in a legal suit against their former employer for unjustified dismissal (DGSM, 1:26:34). At the end of the film *Corporate*, Emilie resigns and decides to collaborate with the work inspector and the police to uncover the illegal system for downsizing the workforce she had contributed to implementing. Similarly, in the movie *Ressources humaines*, to prevent the hidden workforce reduction plan that would lay off 12 people, including his father, Frank steals secret company documents from the HR Directors' computer and informs the employees of the company's real plans (RU, 51:54–52:40). Frank is consequently fired by the HR Director and decides to join the union in its campaign, convincing his father as well to support the final strike in front of the factory (RU, 1:31:00–1:37:00).

An uncommon example of resistance from within the organization is provided in the movie *Tudo acaba em festa*. When Vlad, the HR manager protagonist of the story, finds out that the end-of-year party he has organized was only a diversion to cover the closure of the subsidiary company he works for, he immediately jumps onto the stage and reveals everything to the rest of the employees, who will eventually lose their jobs. After the party tumultuously ends, Vlad promotes a workers' buyout, involving also the senior employees that he previously tried to dismiss (see TAEF, 6:06–7:30), and at the end of the movie he becomes the HR Director of the new employee-owned company (TAEF, 1:16:30–1:17:51).

In sum, three main possibilities of moral redemption emerge from the films analyzed. In some cases, HR characters simply exit from the role, usually by being dismissed or by spontaneously resigning (e.g., *Volevo solo dormire addosso*, *The company men*, *Up in the air*, as regards Natalie, *Benvenuto a Farewell-Gutmann*, as regards Fernando and Lázaro); in other cases, they decide to stay in their HR roles and perform them in a “more ethical” and sensitive way in regard to employees and their direct collaborators (e.g., *A family man*, *Hodejgerne*, *The human resources manager*, *Up in the air* as regards Ryan, *Benvenuto a Farewell-Gutmann* as regards Adela); finally, some HR characters redeem themselves by turning against and openly resisting their employer (e.g., the protagonists of *Dieci giorni senza mamma*, *Ressources humaines*, and *Tudo acaba em festa*).

## 7 | DISCUSSION

Drawing upon thematic and narrative analysis of an international corpus of movies, this article has explored filmic representations of HR work as moral dirty work. Thematic analysis has shown that HR work is portrayed as morally dirty in relation both to typical HR tasks, like employee dismissal, employee acquisition, disciplining employees, and to managing culture. A range of methods portrayed as immoral are adopted by HR characters in films, like pursuing self-interest at the expense of others, submitting to the employer while acting against

employees' interests, treating employees inhumanely, and breaking organizational or legal rules. In response to moral dirtiness, the narrative analysis has shown that some of the HR characters portrayed tried to redeem themselves in three main ways: simply exiting from the profession; staying in the profession and trying to morally reform it; turning against the employer and other managers and raising resistance. These research results offer several contributions to, and implications for, HR research, practice and education.

### 7.1 | Theoretical contributions and implications

The three main contributions of this study center around the following: the portrayed immorality of HR work; the specific aspects of this work that can lead to social attributions of immorality; and the strategies that can be employed to address and manage those attributions.

The first theoretical contribution stems from the results of our thematic analysis of filmic depictions of HR work. Building upon prior scholarly work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, 2014a; Hughes, 1958), this analysis empirically substantiates the contention that HR work can be viewed as immoral. Previous research on the evolution of HR work has acknowledged the challenge of its social legitimacy (e.g., Dundon & Rafferty, 2018; Kochan, 2004, 2009; Marchington, 2015). However, the idea that these problems can involve the moral stigmatization of HR work is almost absent from the debate, except for some studies on employee dismissal (Rayner et al., 2014; Stevens & Hannibal, 2023). Our results extend moral stigmatization to various aspects of HR work. While we acknowledge that it is possible for some readers or viewers, depending on their personal and contextual backgrounds, to perceive some of the scenes and examples illustrated as not necessarily immoral but rather perhaps simply troubling or cringeworthy, overall, the results of this study suggest that in the popular imaginary, the HR profession is subject to several forms of moral stigmatization, and that HR work is commonly depicted as morally dirty work.

Accordingly, we present a novel theoretical perspective on the issue of social legitimacy within the HR profession, revealing that HR work grapples with a societal moral stigma which could significantly impact the struggle for social legitimacy of the HR profession. Scholarly arguments posit an interconnected relationship between legitimacy and stigma (Ashforth, 2019; Devers & Mishina, 2019), where moral taint can undermine the legitimacy of an occupation (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014a). The present study also posits this relationship, adding to a recent line of research that investigates moral ambiguities in white-collar and managerial professions (e.g., Branicki et al., 2019; Carollo & Gilardi, 2022; Chow & Calvard, 2021; Fontana, 2020; Morales & Lambert, 2013). This body of studies on “dirty professions” suggests that the challenge of moral ambiguity is not exclusive to HR professionals. However, we contend that the moral stigma associated with public representations of the HR profession is particularly significant because HR practitioners are commonly perceived as having a great capacity to substantially impact the lives of others (Margolis et al., 2007; Wilcox, 2012), for example through

hiring or firing decisions. Consequently, future research should adopt a perspective grounded in the concepts of “dirty work” and occupational-level stigma to further unpack the dynamics of stigmatization that might affect this specialized managerial domain.

The second theoretical contribution of this study concerns the specific aspects of contemporary HR work that can attract moral stigma. Films encompass both task-related and method-related representations of HR work as moral dirty work. Interestingly, only a few typical HR tasks are over-represented in movies in dirty terms. As noted by dirty work scholars in previous studies on other occupations (e.g., Baran et al., 2012; Kreiner et al., 2006), it is not possible to determine with certainty whether it is those tasks that are considered dirty in themselves or if it is because of the way they are performed. This blurs the boundary between tasks and methods also in the case of HR work, suggesting that an overall re-definition of the HR profession, in both its tasks and methods, may be needed in order to improve its social legitimacy status.

Our research results in this regard speak to current conceptualizations of strategic transformation within the HRM profession, which suggest that HR professionals risk falling into what could be termed “the strategy trap.” Indeed, while the strategic evolution of the role has generally augmented the power of HR professionals within organizations by showcasing their direct impact on the company's performance to top-level executives, criticisms have been made regarding the adoption of a business-oriented logic and engagement in behaviors that just serve elite actors (e.g., Kaufman, 2020; Marchington, 2015; Thompson, 2011). As a result of these criticisms, alternative perspectives on HRM have recently emerged, advocating that HR professionals should play a more active role, either by expanding their current tasks in order to contribute to the achievement of corporate social responsibility and sustainability goals (De Stefano et al., 2018; Ren et al., 2023), or by embracing a multi-stakeholder outlook in their approach to traditional HR work (Beer et al., 2015). The fact that morally dirty representations of HR work concern many different aspects of HR work reinforces these contentions. Alternative views of HRM can thus help to respond to the criticisms currently affecting HRM, especially if they trigger an overall reevaluation of HR work. Our results indicate that this reevaluation may liberate the HR profession from the aforementioned “strategy trap” and help reinstate its social legitimacy if it ambitiously focuses on both the tasks and methods adopted by the HR professional community.

This leads to the article's third theoretical contribution, which pertains to the strategies that some of the HR characters analyzed adopt in response to the perception that their work is immoral. The narrative analysis of our empirical data generally portrayed HR practitioners in movies as grappling with various moral quandaries. It thus aligned with earlier scholarly depictions of HR work as “tensional” (e.g., Kochan, 2004, 2009; Linehan & O'Brien, 2017; Marchington, 2015). We advance this literature by identifying three possible patterns of redemption in response to perceived immorality, suggesting an innovative perspective that challenges the conventional portrayal of HR professionals solely as agents exercising power and

control in favor of employers and top-level management extant in the literature (e.g., Abbott, 2015; Dundon & Rafferty, 2018; Harrington et al., 2015; O'Brien & Linehan, 2019). On the one hand, the filmic representations considered support this notion by depicting certain HR characters as either remaining aligned with the views of top management and endorsing or even escalating immoral decisions that negatively impact workers (15 of 40 characters considered) or, alternatively, leaving the role and the organization because they see no other option (a strategy chosen by five characters). On the other hand, the filmic representations suggest that HR professionals can wield their agency in a more ethical and employee-centric manner (the “reform” strategy is pursued by seven characters), and even actively resist managerial power and control (five characters). This latter resistance strategy proposes novel avenues for research.

The literature has conventionally portrayed HR professionals as “resistance-facers,” delving into how they can overcome resistance by management or employees to specific HR practices (a dominant topic in current HRM research, as evidenced by Kurdi-Nakra et al., 2022). Filmic representations suggest that future investigations should reconsider this perspective, instead examining HR professionals as active resisters. Specific attention should be paid to determining the extent to which the power and agency wielded by actual HR professionals can enable them to resist demands by employers and other powerful managerial actors for HR methods and tasks that are likely to be subject to moral stigmatization. Additionally, although film narratives by their very nature normally focus on the story of one, or more rarely a few, character(s), therefore providing mainly examples of individual resistance, it would be particularly interesting to explore the group or collective resistance raised by HR professionals, possibly complementing research on the HR role and profession with the various possibilities already illustrated in the literature on workplace resistance (e.g., Mumby et al., 2017).

## 7.2 | Implications for HR practice and education

Besides theoretical implications, we believe that this study has several implications for HR practitioners, their associations, and for HR educators. These implications are based on the clash between how HR work is portrayed in popular films, where morally tainted representations of the HR profession are present and diffused, and how HR work is often described by HR practitioners and educators: as a profession aiming at making employees satisfied, healthy, and happy by developing their full potential in terms of personal and professional growth, prosperity, and well-being.

One primary implication regards HR practitioners, which should develop a more nuanced understanding of the perception of their work within the organization and in broader society. In particular, they should realize that their increasing focus and efforts to gain internal legitimacy from senior leaders have led them to being perceived as prioritizing a managerial agenda, at the expenses of employees and other stakeholders, as filmic representations clearly depict. Therefore, HR practitioners should devote their efforts into finding a new

balance between the need to be strategically relevant and the necessity of ensuring employee and stakeholder satisfaction and well-being. Our results may serve as a starting point for this reconfiguration, as they illustrate a wide set of tasks- and methods-related aspects of HR work that are more likely to attract moral stigmatization.

We also believe that professional associations can play an important role in this regard. Specifically, our study suggests that those involved in HR professional associations should try to concretely change actual HR work practices to counter the immoral representations of the profession. This could take different forms, such as adopting an ethical code for the HRM profession and constantly monitoring its application, or developing rigorous HR professional certifications which require candidates to master ethics-related abilities and knowledge. If properly designed and implemented, these tools could support the professionalization trajectory of HR professionals, equipping them better to resist managerial pressures toward those methods or tasks that are more likely to attract moral stigmatization.

Last, HRM educators can promote ethical awareness among HR students at all levels. This means that the design of HRM educational programs should place strong emphasis on the moral dimensions of the HRM profession. In this regard, as demonstrated by previous instances in management education and learning (e.g., Edwards et al., 2015; Hassard & Holliday, 1998), films can constitute a valuable source of vicarious experience for HR students and managers. Again, this article describes a set of films and film-scenes portraying HR managers' lived experience, along with combinations of situations-tasks and methods-behaviors that could be employed as examples for experience-based education by HR educators to familiarize current or future HR managers with the moral challenges which are constitutive of the profession.

### 7.3 | Limitations and directions for future research

As regards our selection of films, more diverse corpuses of movies which contain an HR character should be analyzed, especially considering that our dataset comprised only 16 countries in terms of the film's director nationality and the country of production (see Appendix A for an overview). Our dataset was indeed skewed toward certain countries, in particular European and North American ones, and it can thus be considered well representative of Western filmic depictions of HR work. This may also be a problem, however, as it has been shown that cultural and institutional forces affect HR roles enactment in organizations (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023) with potentially significant differences between Western and non-Western countries (e.g., Galang & Osman, 2016; Mamman & Al Kulaiby, 2014). In this regard, agreeing with Parker's (2006, p. 14) statement that "popular culture is rarely genuinely global," we suggest that future research should consider different datasets and compare our results with movies produced in other regions of the world. Moreover, other aspects of HR work could be fruitfully studied through filmic representations. Indeed, while all the films analyzed comprise morally tainted representations of HR work, with 16 movies presenting

(exclusively, or almost exclusively) such dirty representations, thus resulting in prevalence, numerous morally neutral as well as morally righteous representations of HR practitioners' tasks and behaviors can also be found in movies, especially in those that include a turning point and the moral redemption of the HR character in the story. These deserve further consideration by future research, also in order to understand the extent to which those tasks and behaviors that more easily attract moral stigmatization are considered "core" to the HR profession (Kreiner et al., 2006). The timespan of the analysis could be extended to track the evolution of the representations of HR and personnel professionals in movies over time. Because movies, and popular culture more in general, tend to be critical of companies and their managers (Bell, 2008; Hassard & Holliday, 1998; Rhodes & Parker, 2008; Rhodes & Westwood, 2008), we do not assume that the representations reported in this study are strictly reflected at the societal level by the general public or in workplaces. Future research should thus compare the results of this study with data collected on actual public perceptions of HR professionals, or with employees' perceptions of them.

Beyond the research strategies that could overcome its limitations, we believe that our study opens up numerous avenues for future research deriving from further integration between HRM and dirty work scholarship. In addition to moral taint, for example, other types of taint might affect HR work, such as social taint due to HR practitioners' subservience to powerful organizational actors, or emotional taint because they can come into contact with unpleasant emotions expressed by the employee-recipients of their work. These potential further layers of stigmatization should be explored systematically and in different contexts. Moreover, research on the individual-level strategies and the emotional labor performed by HR professionals to cope with the less pleasant aspects of their work (e.g., Linehan & O'Brien, 2017; O'Brien & Linehan, 2019) could be fruitfully integrated with research on taint-management strategies at the occupational group- and organizational level, as dirty work research suggests (Ashforth et al., 2007; Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Finally, dirty work scholars have noted that gender plays a role in social dynamics of stigmatization (e.g., Soni-Sinha & Yates, 2013). This is evident also in how female HR characters are portrayed in movies because they normally display very submissive postures toward the CEO and other managers, and furthermore, they are those characters that least often opt for resistance as a moral redemption strategy. These representations are meaningful especially in light of the increasing feminization of the HRM profession signaled by several authors (Kochan, 2004; Reichel et al., 2020; Sheehan, De Cieri, Greenwood, et al., 2014). We thus suggest that the connection between gender and dirty work should be further explored, and that HR work represents a relevant context in which to do so.

## 8 | CONCLUSION

In this article, we have analyzed morally dirty representations of HR work in films. The research results show that several aspects of contemporary HR work can be understood as morally dirty, since both

HR tasks and methods are portrayed as tainted from the moral point of view. Films also depict a narrative mechanism of moral redemption for HR characters whereby some of them manage to distance themselves from moral dirtiness. Overall, these results suggest that the problems currently affecting the HRM profession and practice could be more severe than has been assumed to date, and that there is great potential for increasing the social legitimacy of the HRM profession by intervening on those aspects of HR work that can contribute to its public moral stigmatization.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We do not have conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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## APPENDIX A

TABLE A1 Additional information about the empirical documentation.

| #  | ID (initials of the title) | Genre           | Director's nationality | Production country(ies)                          | Original language(s)                | Runtime in mins | Main character(s) of interest (with gender and narrative role)   | Link to the IMDb webpage (with storyline)   |
|----|----------------------------|-----------------|------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|-----------------|--|---|
| 1  | AFM                        | Drama           | English                | Canada, US                                       | English                             | 105             | Dan Jensen (M), recruiter, protagonist   | <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1718924/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1718924/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1</a>       |
| 2  | BAFG                       | Comedy/drama    | Spanish                | Spain  | Spanish                             | 106             | Adela (F), Fernando (M), Lázaro (M), HR managers and co-protagonists   | <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1002959/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1002959/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1</a>       |
| 3  | BAB                        | Comedy, romance | French                 | France   | French                              | 95              | Isabelle (F), HR manager, narrator and co-protagonist  | <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1890377/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1890377/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1</a>       |
| 4  | C                          | Drama           | French                 | France   | French                              | 95              | Emilie Tesson-Hansen (F), HR manager, protagonist. Stéphane Froncart (M), HR Director, villain   | <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5460548/">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5460548/</a>                                       |
| 5  | CM                         | Drama           | French                 | France   | French                              | 86              | Christine Pastres (F), HR Director, villain  | <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4928704/">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4928704/</a>                                       |
| 6  | DFDH                       | Comedy          | Danish                 | Denmark, Germany, France, Italy, Sweden, Iceland | Danish, English, Russian, Icelandic | 99              | Lise (F), HR manager, secondary character  | <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0469754/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0469754/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1</a>       |
| 7  | DGSM                       | Comedy          | Italian                | Italy  | Italian                             | 95              | Carlo (M), HR manager, protagonist. Alessandro (M), HR manager, villain  | <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8660788/?ref_=nv_sr_srsrg_0">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8660788/?ref_=nv_sr_srsrg_0</a> |
| 8  | EG                         | Drama           | French                 | France   | French                              | 97              | HR Director (F), secondary character unnamed, always appearing beside the other managers   | <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7555774/">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7555774/</a>                                       |
| 9  | EM                         | Drama, thriller | Argentinian            | Argentina, Spain, Italy                          | Spanish                             | 117             | Montse (F), HR assistant, secondary character. Team of psychologists, mentioned but never shown in the movie, remotely controlling the selection process | <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0427582/?ref_=nv_sr_srsrg_0">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0427582/?ref_=nv_sr_srsrg_0</a> |
| 10 | GAJ                        | Comedy          | American               | US   | English                             | 83              | Tanya Sellers (F), HR Director, secondary character  | <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1468846/">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1468846/</a>                                       |

TABLE A1 (Continued)

| #  | ID (initials of the title) | Genre                    | Director's nationality | Production country(ies)          | Original language(s)      | Runtime in mins | Main character(s) of interest (with gender and narrative role)  | Link to the IMDb webpage (with storyline)   |
|----|----------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|---|---|
| 11 | H                          | Action, crime, thriller  | Norwegian              | Norway                           | Norwegian, English        | 96              | Roger Brown (M), HR manager, protagonist  | <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1614989/?ref_=nv_sr_srsrg_1">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1614989/?ref_=nv_sr_srsrg_1</a> |
| 12 | JSATS                      | Comedy, romance          | French                 | France                           | French                    | 100             | Hanna Belkacem (F), HR Director, protagonist  | <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4025194/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4025194/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1</a>       |
| 13 | KUWTJ                      | Comedy, action           | American               | US                               | English                   | 105             | Jeff Gaffney (M), HR Director, protagonist  | <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2387499/">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2387499/</a>                                       |
| 14 | LLDM                       | Drama                    | French                 | France                           | French                    | 97              | HR Director (M), unnamed, secondary character   | <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4428814/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4428814/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1</a>       |
| 15 | LQH                        | Drama, historical        | French                 | France                           | French                    | 143             | Simon Kessler (M), HR manager, protagonist  | <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0765141/?ref_=nv_sr_srsrg_0">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0765141/?ref_=nv_sr_srsrg_0</a> |
| 16 | MMPL                       | Drama                    | Italian                | Italy                            | Italian                   | 89              | Mr Venzi (M), HR manager, villain   | <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0373930/?ref_=nv_sr_srsrg_5">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0373930/?ref_=nv_sr_srsrg_5</a> |
| 17 | OCP                        | Comedy                   | American               | US                               | English                   | 105             | Mary Winetoss (F), HR Director, secondary character   | <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1711525/">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1711525/</a>                                       |
| 18 | OTB                        | Comedy, action, thriller | German                 | Germany                          | German, Italian, English  | 79              | Peter Kraußmann (M), HR Director, villain   | <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4837232/?ref_=fn_al_tt_3">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4837232/?ref_=fn_al_tt_3</a>       |
| 19 | RH                         | Drama                    | French                 | France                           | French                    | 100             | Frank (M), HR intern, protagonist. Mr Jamobon (M), HR Director, villain                                   | <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0220726/?ref_=fn_al_tt_3">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0220726/?ref_=fn_al_tt_3</a>       |
| 20 | TAEF                       | Comedy, romance          | Brasilian              | Brazil                           | Portoguese                | 100             | Vlad (M), HR manager, protagonist. Sergio (M), HR manager, Claudia (F), HR Director, secondary characters | <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9303696/?ref_=nv_sr_srsrg_0">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9303696/?ref_=nv_sr_srsrg_0</a> |
| 21 | TCM                        | Drama                    | American               | US                               | English                   | 113             | Sally Walcox (F) HR manager, secondary character  | <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1172991/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1172991/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1</a>       |
| 22 | THRM                       | Comedy/drama             | Israelian              | Israel, France, Germany, Romania | Hebrew, English, Romanian | 103             | HR Director (M), unnamed, protagonist   | <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1311075/?ref_=nv_sr_srsrg_0">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1311075/?ref_=nv_sr_srsrg_0</a> |
| 23 | TI                         | Comedy                   | Canadian               | US                               | English                   | 119             | Roger Chetty (M), HR manager, secondary character, Andrew (M), HR manager,                                | <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2234155/?ref_=nv_sr_srsrg_0">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2234155/?ref_=nv_sr_srsrg_0</a> |

(Continues)

TABLE A1 (Continued)

| #  | ID (initials of the title) | Genre                  | Director's nationality | Production country(ies) | Original language(s) | Runtime in mins | Main character(s) of interest (with gender and narrative role)   | Link to the IMDb webpage (with storyline)   |
|----|----------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|-----------------|--|---|
| 24 | TMM                        | Comedy, crime, fantasy | Australian             | Australia               | English              | 87              | secondary character<br>Max Menkoff (M), HR consultant, Svetlana (F) and Karpov (M), (his) HR assistants, villains. Marjorie Werne (F), HR manager, secondary character | <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3174842/">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3174842/</a>                                       |
| 25 | TW                         | Drama                  | Canadian               | Canada, US, Germany     | English              | 112             | John Blakely (M), HR manager, villain  | <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0896872/?ref_=nv_sr_srsrg_4">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0896872/?ref_=nv_sr_srsrg_4</a> |
| 26 | UIA                        | Comedy/drama           | American               | US                      | English              | 109             | Ryan Bingham (M), Natalie Keener (F), HR consultants, co-protagonists  | <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1193138/?ref_=nv_sr_srsrg_0">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1193138/?ref_=nv_sr_srsrg_0</a> |
| 27 | VFTP                       | Comedy, romance        | Brazilian              | US                      | English              | 87              | John Witney (M), HR manager, villain   | <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0264150/">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0264150/</a>                                       |
| 28 | VSDA                       | Comedy/drama           | Italian                | Italy                   | Italian              | 98              | Marco Pressi (M), HR manager, protagonist  | <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0430746/?ref_=nv_sr_srsrg_0">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0430746/?ref_=nv_sr_srsrg_0</a> |