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Redemptive Motherhood and a Discourse of Fear in Contemporary Apocalyptic Film

As David L. Altheide and others have argued, a discourse of fear is prevalent in contemporary U.S. life.¹ Marked by its integration into quotidian experience, such that it is often implied without being named, this discourse is detectable in a variety of media content. For example, fear permeates television ads—running the gamut from antibacterial soap to SUVs, institutional emergency notification systems and even the plots and subplots of popular film. Fear as a marketing and political tool is nothing new; however, it seems to have progressively become a staple of U.S. socio-political discourse as time has elapsed since the attacks of September 11, 2001, though, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 it was much more pronounced. Providing content analysis of news reporting in the months prior to and following 9/11, Altheide demonstrates a significant increase in the appearance of “fear” within a few words of “terrorism” and “victim” after 9/11 (56-58). He contends the resulting zeitgeist put the average citizen on alert and created an atmosphere ripe for acceptance of the “war on terror.” This linguistic trend also evoked a nostalgic vernacular that celebrates a heteronormative expression of gender and gender roles.

Susan Faludi (2007) has postulated that the re-glorification of traditional gender roles in post-9/11 culture responded to a perceived fall of U.S. masculinity as the nation faced its own vulnerability. The failure of (mostly male) leaders to protect the nation against a domestic attack brought latent anxieties over gender roles into focus. Fear and gender are intricately linked within this context.

While citizens are no longer barraged by color-coded terrorist warnings, fear continues to color U.S. culture and has paved the way for continued renewal and new acceptance of traditional gender roles. This can be seen perhaps most clearly in the current ideology of motherhood, society’s defining role for women. Representations of this role (often through the treatment of pregnant bodies) and the anxieties surrounding it in some pre- and post-apocalyptic films released since 2005—*The Island* (2005), *Children of Men* (2006), *The Happening*

¹ This article discusses the cultural landscape of the United States in the years following September 11, 2001. I mindfully use the signifier “U.S.” rather than “American” to refer to this region, though at times the latter would aid the “flow” of my narrative.

(2008), *WALL-E* (2008), and *Surrogates* (2010)—demonstrate a discursive context that proffers the pregnant female body (and by extension the social construction of motherhood) as a source of redemption for individuals and society-at-large. This fantasy of redemption may be cathartic for members of a postmodern world that is responsible for the horrors of 9/11, environmental disasters like Hurricane Katrina and a widespread economic crisis.

Faludi amply documents a masculine hero-narrative that became the story du jour following 9/11. An ensuing cowboy-culture revival necessarily competed with images of strong and independent women while the dominant narrative declared challenges to U.S. masculinity, and military operations as the “axis of evil” rhetoric commenced, unpatriotic. Barbara Einhorn notes that when nations place “insiders against outside groups,” the groups themselves are actually diverse. The issue of power then becomes contested among insider groups—as in the case of declarations of war. “It is here that gendered—and sexualized—discourses creep in, defining who belongs to the national body and disciplining those who do not... (197)” In the heat of post-9/11 nationalism women’s voices were often silenced, thus elevating the preferred male-gendered protectors back to their original status.

An absence of resolute female expression in the U.S. mass media as the nation processed and responded to 9/11, combined with news items portraying brave widows (highlighting brave, widowed mothers) and the contrived narrative of the Jessica Lynch rescue clearly communicated the passive role women were expected to take in this new world (Faludi, 2007). A gendered discourse of fear became the dominant national narrative. Jeffrey Melnick points to the role of the heroic father in post-9/11 films by Steven Spielberg (*Minority Report*, 2002, *Munich*, 2005 and *War of the Worlds*, 2005), Oliver Stone (*World Trade Center*, 2006), Mark Dindile (*Chicken Little*, 2005) and Spike Lee (*25th Hour*, 2002). Melnick suggests “it is not fathers per se who even constitute the main focus of this cultural discourse: it is just men. Using the social construction of fatherhood is a shorthand way of indicating the proper functioning of manhood (139).” Likewise, it may be argued that filmic constructions of motherhood signify a mainstream interpretation of proper womanhood.

The conceptual fall of masculinity in post-9/11 culture, and imminent backlash against women, may be best represented by a reference to comedian Bill Maher’s standup routine mocking the “feminization” of the U.S. Maher lamented “feminine values are now the values of America: sensitivity is more important than truth, feelings are more important than fact, commitment is more important than individuality, children are more important than people (2003).” His diatribe against what he deemed “feminine values” illustrates a post-9/11 repertoire of grieving the emasculation of men, denigrating women, and urging both men and women to return to “proper” gender roles. In the years following post-9/11

culture (generally referred to as September 12, 2001—circa 2005) an articulation of “proper” gender roles continues to be expressed, though perhaps in subtler and potentially more pernicious, ways. This article maps the manifestation of that articulation in some contemporary apocalyptic films.

Apocalyptic and Dystopian Narratives

While both apocalyptic and dystopian films typically portray future worlds, these sub-genres of science fiction are markedly different. Apocalyptic narratives are concerned with the end of civilization while dystopian narratives are characterized by authoritarian or totalitarian societies—dystopias are in effect the negative of utopian worlds. The two terms may be easily confused, perhaps because the occurrence of one can lead to the other and indeed, the two may coexist. For example, a dystopian society might emerge in a post-apocalyptic world as survivors create new societies. Likewise, the ills of a dystopian society could be responsible for an apocalypse.

Three of the films discussed in this article may be categorized as pre-apocalyptic: *Children of Men*, *The Island*, and *Surrogates*. While some certainly portray dystopian societies, such as *Children of Men*, their focus concerns the end of civilization. In the case of *Children of Men* a dystopian society is depicted in a futuristic London but it is infertility, and the subsequent end of the human race that drives the plot. In fact, at the center of the story is a journey involving the safe relocation of a young woman who has become pregnant. In this respect the film may be considered apocalyptic, and specifically pre-apocalyptic since absolute infertility—though possibly imminent, has not yet occurred.

Apocalyptic narratives offer a space for negotiating tensions of the post-modern world, such as the cognitive dissonance resulting from a desire to limit one’s ecological “footprint” while realities of modern life simultaneously contradict those efforts. The apocalyptic films discussed herein offer fertile ground for analysis as societal anxieties are played out between the opening and closing credits.

The (Pernicious) Language of Equality

Prior to a discussion of these films, it is useful to consider the patriarchal language embedded in a discourse of women’s reproductive rights and to look at how that linguistic determinism operates in contemporary mainstream narratives about unplanned pregnancies. Graeme Turner suggests that a “theory of reality” is present in all cultures and describes it as the collective moral code that defines subjective pieces of reality (e.g. good vs. bad, them vs. us) such that those pieces become truths (155). A contemporary discourse of pregnancy

often expresses one such “truth” with a conflation of “embryo” and “baby.” This semantic choice conceptualizes an immature pregnancy still in the pre-fetal stage as nearly complete, ignoring the fact that the process actually takes months of sustained development.

An episode of *Sex and the City* illustrates this tendency. In “Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda” two of the famous four friends, Carrie and Miranda, discuss Miranda’s unplanned and unwanted pregnancy (though she will later change her mind). When Miranda explains she does not intend to involve her ex-boyfriend Steve, the man who inadvertently participated in her pregnancy, Carrie becomes visibly uncomfortable, prompting Miranda to ask, “Is it OK not to tell him?” To which Carrie ambivalently replies, “I don’t know. Is it?” The scene lays the groundwork for the morality issue that saturates the episode. Unable to come to terms with Miranda’s situation on her own (or indeed with Miranda’s help), Carrie consults her own boyfriend, Aiden. His disapproval is clear: “She’s gonna do it [have an abortion] without telling him?! ... It’s his baby too.” Though Carrie clarifies there won’t be a baby, Aiden persists, “[it] seems like the guy gets the shit end of the stick.”

At this point in the story, Miranda’s pregnancy is still in the embryonic stage, yet Aiden refers to a baby. His argument that the guy “gets the shit end of the stick” politicizes Steve’s “situation” and advances an equality argument used by the Father’s Rights Movement (FRM) that necessarily works against women’s rights. In this instance, the doctrine dictates that a “deprived father” has lost control over his contribution to the fertilized egg and is stripped of his “right” to fatherhood by an unfairly advantaged woman. The FRM claims that such inequality must be redressed, necessitating a rescission of rights for the woman (Khader, 58-59).

Luce Irigaray addresses the language of equality in several of her writings. Taking a strictly separationist stance Irigaray suggests this language is part and parcel of a patriarchal system that favors the masculine. Her fear is that in most instances when women and men connect, the masculine will dominate (*To Be Two*: 33-59, 110). In *Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Cultural Difference* (trans. 1993) Irigaray offers the placenta as a metaphor for an intersubjectivity that would allow two parties to connect without losing their individual identities. Her metaphor counters Sigmund Freud’s theory that the route to an autonomous self requires a painful separation from the mother. According to Laurel Bollinger, Irigaray suggests the placenta acts as a mediator between the woman and the fetus, allowing a symbiotic relationship to evolve while separating and protecting each entity (328-331). Without the function of the placenta the relationship would be purely parasitic. In other words, the fetus-mother connection Freud assumed may be too simplistic.

Irigaray’s theory of connection, achieved through separateness, is important in understanding the function of the language of equality when applied to

reproduction. As Serene J. Khader explains, the language of equality used by the FRM can distract us from the fact that women and men are already culturally unequal (50). A dominant and patriarchal linguistic framework disrupts any attempt at equal rights. If we claim equal rights for women and men and evaluate those rights according to a masculine ideal, women's rights will yield to men's when the two are incompatible. Following such reasoning, Steve's right to fatherhood overrides Miranda's bodily integrity, thus nullifying any attempt at establishing equal rights (e.g., his "right to fatherhood" can not coexist with her corporeal rights).

The act of terminating a pregnancy removes the potency of the man and is interpreted as a symbolic castration in narratives such as the *Sex & the City* episode described. The problem of the filmic female body as a castration threat, with its overpowering sexuality, is dealt with in a variety of ways, most often with the subordination of the woman. Recent romantic comedies and comedy-dramas keep female sexuality under wraps with the glorification of motherhood, and, in the case of some recent films like *Waitress* (2007), *Knocked Up* (2007), and *Raising Helen* (2004), an almost obedient acceptance of unplanned motherhood. The *Sex and the City* episode in which Miranda wrestles with her options was aired in August of 2001. In many narratives since 9/11, however, the decision to bring an unplanned pregnancy to term is made with little or no deliberation as in *Waitress* and *Knocked Up*. Even in *Juno* (2007), with a brief scene in an abortion clinic, the decision is made swiftly and is based on the notion of a "baby," still in the embryonic stage, already having fingernails. Representing pregnant female bodies as unquestionably on the road to motherhood does the cultural work of uplifting manhood back to the dominant position. Female bodies in these instances function as passive heroines serving the greater good of *mankind*.

Surrogacy: An Answer to Our Fears?

If the pregnant female body functions as a passive heroine, then a surrogate mother takes that passivity to a new level. Surrogates carry and nurture life that "belongs" to someone else. This theme is played out in several contemporary apocalyptic films that engage cultural fears about destruction and hopelessness. Surrogates may offer hope to the infertile, be it humans with inhospitable reproductive systems or a planet with an inhospitable ecosystem. In the following films, android or clone surrogates offer new life to the humans they serve. Though not all resemble the female body, their function—serving others, is read as feminine. Clues that encourage this reading are either explicit, as with the female-gendered android in *Wall-E* or implicit as in *Surrogates*, which takes for

its title a term commonly used to refer to surrogate mothers (as a quick online search for “surrogate” demonstrates).

A recurring science fiction theme involves the obsolescence of the human body. We see this in countless films about androids such as *Blade Runner* (1982), *The Stepford Wives* (2004), and most recently *Surrogates* (2009), directed by Jonathan Mostow. Mostow’s film, adapted from a graphic novel of the same name, imagines ultimate freedom from human vulnerability as people turn to machines to live their lives for them. Remotely controlled androids, or surrogates, go out into the world while their operators plug in from the safety of their own homes. The plot is predicated on the notion that humans fear everyday dangers and will opt for guaranteed safety over embodied, lived experience if given the choice.

Reproduction in *Surrogates* has nothing to do with babies; in fact, the failure to explain the existence of children is a weakness of the film. It involves, instead, reproduction of self in a much more explicit way. As people turn to younger, stronger and replaceable (this point is significant) surrogate models they are able to live life in new ways—taking risks they otherwise would not. And yet, life is safer with surrogates. If something happens to your current surrogate, you can replace it with another. As one news anchor in the film reports, racism, crime and communicable disease no longer afflict society.

The timing of this adaptation is striking. The years since 9/11, still marked in the U.S. by a discourse of fear, have seen Hurricane Katrina and a significant economic recession. Unlike 9/11, which unified the country (on the surface), Hurricane Katrina and the housing crises of 2008 reinforced a rift in U.S. society. These events exposed a glaring racism and classism embedded in the structural (institutional and social) framework as sub-par infrastructure and sub-prime loans exerted their greatest impact on groups inhabiting the lower economic strata. *Surrogates* provides an answer to social ills such as these with an imagined world where the playing field is (nearly) leveled by the capacity to hide behind a wholly self-constructed identity, save for newer, and more costly, surrogate models owned by some with special features. It seems all, but the radical minority—confined to the outskirts of the city, are living in/through surrogate models that exemplify today’s health and beauty standards. It is curious that the moniker “surrogate” was chosen to describe these androids, rather than something arguably more appropriate like “avatar.” Perhaps it is no coincidence that a term made popular by technological advances in assisted-reproduction is borrowed to refer to another type of human reproduction made possible by technology.

Pixar’s computer-animated *WALL-E*, directed by Andrew Stanton, presents a life-giving machine of another notable name, Eve. Groups of humans aboard spaceships comprise a large fortified family—protected in space from imminent demise on Earth, a planet that has been corrupted by post-industrial excess and

waste. Life eventually returns to Earth through the surrogacy of Eve, a sentient egg-shaped robot. As the plot unfolds, Eve carries—in a pod within her midsection, the plant life that will provide vegetation for the vast wasteland Earth has become. In both *Surrogates* and *WALL-E* the motivating force is fear. The use of android “doubles” in *Surrogates* is preventive and the fear that drives this usage is immediately referenced in contemporary society: fear of what others may inflict upon us. In fact, the urban landscape of the film, set in Boston, looks very much like the present-day city, thus strengthening the reference to contemporary fears. *WALL-E* on the other hand, takes place in a post-apocalyptic world and addresses our fears of the future. Eve is a response to the inhospitable planet Earth—made that way by the hands of humans who turned a blind eye to the destruction they participated in as members of a technological society run amok. She is a bio-archeologist of sorts, scanning the Earth for signs of life (rather than searching for material evidence), eventually finding it in a small, tenacious plant; a job that has become too dangerous for humans given the condition of the planet. When Eve safely transports the last vestige of Earth’s biosphere to the humans in space she alters the future of the planet and of humankind. Her discovery motivates those aboard spaceships to return to Earth and repopulate it. Eve’s surrogacy therefore provides redemption for humans as they are given a second chance on their home planet.

Michael Bay’s *The Island*, starring Ewan McGregor and Scarlett Johansson, offers another surrogacy scenario. In his futuristic, pre-apocalyptic world, Bay imagines a new kind of “privatized protection” in a unique form of life insurance.² For a price, the wealthy can buy clones of themselves that will be housed in a special, non-toxic environment as insurance—in the event that an organ or limb is needed at a later date. In order to ensure the fitness of organs and body parts, the clones need exercise, a balanced diet and the health benefits of social interaction. In other words, they need to live.

The Island interrogates issues of humanness and by extension, nationality. As Judith Butler notes “sometimes the very terms that confer ‘humanness’ on some individuals are those that deprive certain other individuals of the possibility of achieving that status, producing a differential between the human and the less-than-human” (2). Though the clones may have become nearly human through their experiences and intellectual development, they lack a significant

² Elaine Tyler May discusses the modern phenomenon of privatized protection in her essay “Gimme Shelter: Do-It-Yourself Defense and the Politics of Fear (2008)”. She details a system of privatized protection at work today and locates an analogous ideology operating in the 1950’s. Another important essay on the subject of privatized protection is Bianca Nielson’s “Home Invasion and Hollywood Cinema: David Fincher’s *Panic Room*(2005)”. Nielson offers an assessment of the film’s engagement with cultural anxieties over domestic security.

biological signifier—a human mother, and are therefore unable to achieve the status and rights of human citizens.

McGregor and Johansson play two clones that live among others in a crowded and contained world designed to simulate an authentic human experience. No one there knows s/he is a clone. Upon their arrival in the “new world” they are all told the same apocalyptic story of the world outside: a disaster has made the natural world hostile to humans. As “survivors” are found and brought into the man-made haven, they must go through a period of “decontamination” before they can live among the others. In actuality, after clones are purchased and assembled, they go through a gestation period in a simulated womb. A particularly disturbing aspect of this is that they begin this period at the life stage of the person who has purchased them. Therefore, there are “babies” of all ages in these “pregnancy sacs.” Once the clone is ready for “birth,” the water is broken and the “umbilical cord” (made up of wires) is cut. The “newborns” then go through a period similar to babies, requiring plenty of sleep and nutrition. When ready, they enter society with the skill set of a toddler and need much guidance and patience early on.

In this contained clone world, no one dies or just disappears. When an organ is needed for a client, a fixed lottery occurs with the winner reportedly on their way to a paradise called “The Island”—the last pathogen-free zone on earth. However, they are really on their way to the operating table where they will be “terminated” once their necessary parts are removed. The corporation that created them considers the clones disposable. Echoes of insidious immigration policies, say, declaring migrant Mexican workers illegal aliens, can be heard as the clones played by McGregor and Johansson learn they have no rights.³

One of the female clones represented in *The Island* is pregnant, apparently a new “item” in reproductive-assisted technology. Immediately after her baby is born, the clone mother, and unwitting surrogate, is given a lethal injection and the baby is delivered again—this time down the hall, to the client (the real mother?). *The Island* exposes a repugnant nationalism that employs an “us versus them” rhetoric in order to maintain a hierarchical society where non-nationals or “aliens” (in this case, clones) support the lives of the elite. The clone-mother and baby even seem to symbolize a popular, if contrary, political imperative that allows for the death penalty but seeks to criminalize abortion.

The non-human surrogates discussed in this section are imagined as female, by name and/or design, and offer an opportunity to reflect upon cultural assumptions about the value and function of women. In each example the surrogates are replaceable (though that would take quite an investment in *The*

³ See Mae M. Ngai’s book *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern American* (2004) for more on the illegalization of select immigrant groups.

Island) and yet, they provide a degree of redemption in the form of new life. Khader suggests there is a lack of affirmative symbolizations of women (and pregnancy) because women's experiences are bound to a "mythical imaginary" containing a set of conditions that dictate how we evaluate our world. Those conditions, she explains, articulate functions for women that are beholden to the needs and desires of men (59). In these science fiction films machines, imagined as female, serve men by serving the greater good through their reproductive abilities.

The Safely Contained Family

M. Night Shyamalan's *The Happening* is imbued with classic male heroism. At an important juncture in the story the protagonist, played by Marc Walberg explains to his wife, "You want me to protect you, this is how we have to do it." Indeed Walberg's character, Elliot Moore, does protect his wife and emergent family in this postmodern thriller. A natural disaster has gripped the eastern U.S. seaboard and what is initially thought to be a biologically based terrorist attack (with humans at the helm) turns out to be revenge perpetrated by plants. A variety of flora begin releasing neuro-toxins whenever a large number of humans gather in the same location. It seems the plants are fighting back against humans who have inflicted damage upon the natural world. Elliot figures this out and protects his family by isolating them.

The air-born, pheromone-like substance the plants emit blocks the neurotransmitters that control survival instincts, causing people to enter zombie-like states and commit suicide. Attacks begin in New York City, making their way down the coast, hitting densely populated areas. An early scene with NYC construction workers jumping off building roofs is eerily reminiscent of the familiar image of office workers jumping from the twin towers, a visual reference that signals the film's distance from 9/11. As Melnick notes, the "falling taboo" in art after 9/11 seemed to have been lifted by 2006 (91).

Though *The Happening's* distance from 9/11 provided "clearance" for the visual of falling bodies, it maintained a piece of 9/11 culture in its nostalgia for traditional gender roles. Elliot's relationship with his wife, Alma, played by Zooey Deschanel, is at best strained at the start of the film. Alma is portrayed as a deficient wife—emotionally inaccessible and secretive—in contrast to her sincere and hopeful husband. What eventually saves their marriage is her embrace of motherhood. As the two flee Philadelphia and embark on an arduous journey to safety, they inadvertently become adoptive parents for a young girl named Jess. On the road to safety, Alma begins taking responsibility for Jess and comforting her, which does not go unnoticed. When she apologizes to Elliot for her previous "bad wife" behavior, his reply indicates forgiveness, placing an

emphasis on her mothering role: “you’ve been great with Jess.” Indeed, it seems he is able to forgive her *because* she has been “great with Jess.” The role of motherhood has a redemptive quality for Alma as well as for their marriage. This attention paid to Alma’s mothering role, which is furthered at the end of the film when she discovers she’s pregnant, places her firmly in a traditional passive and “feminine” role while Elliot confronts the horror of the day. As the threat plays out so do these retro-gender roles.

The notion of the safely contained family is nothing new to U.S. culture. In *Homeward Bound* (1988), Elaine Tyler May argues that the conceit was also popular during the cold war. She suggests that when the bomb dropped in Hiroshima and World War II ended, a new anxiety took over with the looming threat of a nuclear war thus creating an atmosphere where U.S. citizens felt the need to find safety and comfort in their daily lives. Families were expected to protect their own, as domestic policy did not include civil defense. While containment became the motto of foreign policy, containment of family life mirrored it. We are seeing a similar predilection today with a focus on national containment (in a “global” world) at U.S. borders and on U.S. airlines. Perhaps it is not surprising then, as Shyamalan presents a world where containment equates survival, he also imbues that world with traditional family values.

Toward the conclusion of the film, Alma happily discovers that their family of three (Elliot, Alma and Jess) will soon become a family of four. Though the final scene shows another attack beginning in Paris, the film leaves viewers confident in the survival of this growing family. Alma’s maternal instincts with Jess, as well as her pregnancy, provide a measure of hope and redemption in an uncertain world.

The Happening unapologetically exploits fears of another terrorist attack with its focus on urban terror. A post-9/11 audience knows how to read the text that includes such elements as groups of people glued to television sets reporting news of the latest attack, early speculations as to who is responsible and the unmistakable visual reference of falling bodies. As if following a post-9/11 script, Shyamalan provides an answer to our fears with the portrayal of Alma, a woman on the verge of destroying her marriage, when she finds redemption in the role of motherhood and finally submits to her husband. In doing so, she elevates his position from that of a mistreated husband to a family hero. Indeed, Alma embodies the catharsis offered in *The Happening*.

The Pregnant Body is the New Hero/ine

Alfonso Cuarón’s *Children of Men* (2006) perhaps best exemplifies the insidious nature of an ideology of redemptive motherhood. Set and filmed in London, the film resonates with a post-9/11 U.S. audience, where it has

enjoyed much of its success.⁴ *Children of Men* articulates an abstract form of surrogacy as Kee, a “foogie” or illegal immigrant carries life within that will offer redemption for the world. The first pregnant woman the world has seen in eighteen years, Kee becomes subject to various factions that would like to use her body, and baby-to-be, for political purposes. As such, the developing fetus she carries and indeed, her pregnancy and body are not her own. In a manner similar to *The Island*, issues of humanness are tied in with nationality and rights to citizenship.

Motherhood is progressively linked with nationalism in post-9/11 culture—offering symbolic redemption to an emasculated country and a postmodern world. As Turner’s theory of reality points out, cultural truths evolve out of repeated messaging (particularly those coming from apparently innocuous sources like mainstream films). In contemporary U.S. culture such truths about motherhood offer support for politically conservative views that threaten women’s corporeal autonomy. The treatment of the pregnant body in *Children of Men* epitomizes this in the blatant exploitation of a young woman’s body.

In the pivotal scene when Kee reveals her pregnancy to the film’s protagonist, Theo, we understand the enormous significance of her pregnancy. The setting is laden with biblical references. She undresses before Theo in a barn while surrounded by cows. Lighting is warm and soft, accentuating the beauty of her dark skin and protruding belly while operatic music signals the enormous significance of her pregnancy. The message is clear, she and her baby offer hope for the world.

The landscape of *Children of Men* is the product of a homogenous, global world—the London presented could easily be a future dystopic New York City or Tokyo. Cuarón employs a cinematographic pastiche that effectively sets up this dystopian, pre-apocalyptic narrative. We see this in the deteriorating urban landscape. Graffiti and billboards provide historical clues: “Avoiding Fertility Tests is a Crime,” “Last one to die please turn out the light” and crude, arcane street-cages are used for herding illegal immigrants, the new post-industrial waste waiting to be deposited and recycled elsewhere. Yet, even in the midst of this overpopulated urban wasteland, citizens mourn the death of the youngest person in the world as news of his demise monopolizes television and computer screens. What they are actually mourning, however, is the slow death of humankind; they mourn their infertile world.

Cuarón’s *Children of Men* makes an interesting departure from the novel of virtually the same name, by P.D. James (*The Children of Men*, 1992). In James’s

⁴ According to boxofficemojo.com a little over half of *Children of Men*’s total gross income (worldwide) has been gleaned in U.S theaters.

book the men are impotent but in the movie it is women who are infertile, as evidenced by the opening of joke told in the film, “why are women infertile?” One may ask the same question of the film’s creators: “why are women, and no longer men, infertile in this story?” Faludi might suggest the public is not ready for that kind of assault on masculinity. Likewise, it could be argued that the creators of *Children of Men* understood audiences would more immediately recognize hysteria about female infertility than male impotency.

Such hysteria or fear is also expressed in contemporary comedies. Consider the following narration in *Baby Mama* (2008), directed by Michael McCullers as the protagonist played by Tina Fey explains her position in life. Her identity, fostered through a professional career seems to be linked with victimhood now that she has entered her late thirties, single and childless.

I did everything that I was supposed to do. I didn’t cry at meetings, I didn’t wear short skirts, I put up with the weird upper management guys who kiss you on the mouth at Christmas. Is it fair that to be the youngest VP in my company I will be the oldest Mom at preschool? Not really but that’s part of the deal. I made a choice. Some women got pregnant. I got promotions. And I still aspire to meet someone and fall in love and get married. But that is a very high-risk scenario. And I want a baby now. I’m thirty-seven.

Note the definitiveness in the last sentence. She’s thirty-seven; nothing more needs to be said. As the movie advances, the fear of not being able to bear her own child escalates and she turns to a surrogate agency. The comedy ensues when she is paired with a surrogate, played by Fey’s former *Saturday Night Live* partner Amy Poehler. The incompetence of Poehler’s character and desperation of Fey’s create the comedic moments in the film. By the end of the film, however, both characters are redeemed as each becomes pregnant without technological assistance. *Baby Mama* seems to suggest a hierarchy exists even for pregnant women; one that preferences those who reproduce “naturally.”

Fey’s character offers a contemporary performance of womanhood that accepts motherhood as its pinnacle. As the doctrine that women “can have it all”⁵ is questioned in contemporary society, the construction of womanhood has shifted and is often artificially located in a space of tension between two distinct choices: career or family. The construction of womanhood performed by Fey’s character in *Baby Mama* demonstrates this tension as her character comes to

⁵ A classic television ad for Enjolie perfume in the late 1970s and 1980s advanced the notion that women can have it all (or, do it all) with its take on a Peggy Lee song from the 1960s, “I’m a Woman.” In Enjolie’s interpretation, the perfume empowers a woman to “bring home the bacon, fry it up in a pan, and never let [him] forget [he’s] a man.” In other words, she was a non-threatening career woman. Susan Douglass and Meredith Michaels suggest that an unwritten agreement in the ‘80’s held women would not shirk their “wife duties” if they also had careers (Douglas and Michaels, 2005).

terms with that which she “gave up” in order to have a career. Yet, despite such depictions, real-life examples of professional women who are also mothers abound in contemporary U.S. society. The image of the woman who must choose between an exclusively professional life and a family seems to have no current exemplar.⁶ It is contextually out of place. Such contemporary representations, which supplant historical social and legal constrictions onto the condition of women today, may therefore be considered examples of simulacra—copies without originals (Baudrillard, 1998). This simulacrum continues to exist and thrive through repeated performances in popular culture. Butler suggests that all gender is performance (1990), or socially constructed. Accepting her theory, we might ask what function this particular performance of womanhood (necessitating a choice between career and family) serves. Why has it become a popular trope in our cultural landscape?

While the fathers of Melnick’s “father art” are heroic, the central function of mothers in contemporary popular culture seems to be serving others through their reproductive capabilities. Khader explains that the language of patriarchy reduces women to “functions, property and subjects of nature rather than culture” (69). She notes the pervasiveness of representations of women as sites of service in western culture today (66-69). As long as we are trapped in this kind of linguistically determined mode of perception, women’s bodies are measured according to the reproductive function they serve. Susan Kozel states, “[w]ithin patriarchy there is no scope for women to obtain reflections of themselves (117).” There is therefore no linguistic precedent for placing the corporeal experience of pregnancy above the service it provides. Within such a framework a simplistic “career-or-family” rhetoric may be an attractive alternative to confronting deep-seated social and cultural inequities.

In contemporary U.S. culture a discourse of fear continues to inform ideology. The implications for women are significant as a social construction of motherhood imbues it with a redemptive quality on a national scale. Such redemption necessitates a denial of the experience of pregnancy in order to maintain its social function, putting women’s reproductive rights at risk. The role of proper womanhood is thus defined and serves a cultural imperative that elevates manhood back to its “proper” position whereby men provide protection in an uncertain world. The films discussed herein engage in this discourse, offering representations of motherhood and pregnancy imbued with redemptive qualities in pre- and post-apocalyptic narratives.

⁶ While there may be women in contemporary U.S. society who do feel a real need to choose between a career and family, the notion that this is universally true—as *Baby Mama* seems to suggest with its normative treatment of that dilemma, is unfounded.

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