

# Mothering in the Third Person: the Absent Mother of French and English Cinema 1959-1979

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## **Declaration**

I, Melissa Lauren Powell, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis. All translations provided are my own unless otherwise stated.

## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the tensions between the cultural construction of motherhood as a discourse and the complex subjectivities of individuals who mother, through analysing representations of mothers in French and English cinema. It begins with a theoretical background on discourses of motherhood in European thought. Drawing together feminist writing on motherhood with Lee Edelman's theory of the Child, I argue that overzealous imaginations of the Child as the ideal cultural subject are used as grounds to legitimise the erasure of mothers as individual subjects. From here, I examine the extent to which this construction of the child-as-subject leads to representations of mothers in film that identify implicitly with the perspective of the child, and ask whether this engenders an absence of mothering subjects. I explore this question in relation to key gender-related issues that are thematised in English and French film in the 1960s and 1970s. Firstly, I look at gendered commentaries on consumer culture in French new wave and English 'kitchen sink' films and argue that masculinised perspectives in these narratives are particularly critical towards the mother in the home as a symbol of domestic objectification. Secondly, I consider representations of unplanned pregnancy and abortion in these films. Taking into account the historical context of public debate in France and England on the decriminalisation of abortion, I suggest that these representations contain important reflections on the meaning of motherhood and the tension between the subjectivities of maternal women and imagined children. I move on from this to a final section exploring films that pose a challenge to traditional ideologies of motherhood, either through the representation of marginalised mothering identities or through critical feminist filmmaking practice. I therefore ultimately argue how film can be used not only to consolidate but to deconstruct the absence of mothering subjectivities.

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## **Introduction**

### *Deus Ex Matre: The Child-as-Subject and the Absent Mother*

The figure of the mother is a silent presence of European cinema. Like an unconscious, she is beneath the surface, haunting other characters' stories and psyches but without speaking audibly. She is both omnipresent and radically absent; the image of the mother, as a relational object and cultural symbol, is deeply embedded across many of the film narratives I discuss, yet the mothering subject is elusive. This thesis aims to locate the absent mother in a selection of French and British films from 1959 to 1979. It will confront the ossifying influence that cultural ideologies and expectations around motherhood exert over filmic representations of mothers and families. Absence, here, is understood less as a literal absence than as an absence of possibilities for autonomous symbolisation. My contention is that a powerful, masculinist discourse frequently informs European cinema's maternal representations, which requires the image of the mother, but allows her limited expressive possibilities, and few opportunities for realisation as a subjective being without radical intervention.

This thesis examines the extent and nature of mothers' absence from French and British films of this period. It will consider how far representations of mothers are conditioned by and subordinate to the perspective of the child-as-subject. It also examines how filmic narratives and representations respond to social change where motherhood is conceptually or practically at stake, including political discourse around reproductive rights, and popular feminist movements. Finally, it will enquire into possibilities for representing maternal subjectivities, looking at how film might be used to produce a maternal counter-discourse.

Several contextual and cultural factors make my geo-temporal parameters a productive area of inquiry. This is a period of important social change and political upheaval in Britain and France, encompassing radical political movements addressing liberation and identity issues around gender, race, class and sexuality and a cultural and artistic output that often engages with these social changes. Specific to European culture are the May '68 student protests in France and the surrounding sexual revolution in Europe. Within this project, I am particularly interested in the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and the changes in French and British women's lives. This is a significant moment for feminism in both academic and practical terms

and for lived experiences of femininity in general. Furthermore, issues around motherhood, mothering, contraception and the position of women in the family are central within this era's discourses on femininity.

Within the academy, important work on difference feminism was produced in the 1970s, and in terms of activism, fundamental to the 'second wave' of feminism were campaigns for women's reproductive rights. Key events that factored in this debate include the advent of the contraceptive pill and the decriminalisation of abortion in many Western European states, including France and Britain. These historical events in tandem with the political action and ideologies of second wave feminism contributed to re-examinations of traditional conceptualisations of motherhood and family in these decades. Correspondingly, there is a high volume of films from this era that deal thoughtfully and diversely with what it means to be women and mothers in the face of social change.

However, this is not at all to suggest that these historical factors and popular feminist movements changed experiences of femininity and motherhood right away and for everyone. Traditional concepts and ideologies of 'good' and 'bad' mothering persist as external societal pressures and internalised anxieties, often leading to interesting discourses on motherhood in the films of this period, as they must often negotiate this complex clash between entrenched cultural mainstays and new possibilities; intergenerational conflict is frequently thematised. English and French cinema at this time often foregrounds younger protagonists, and addresses issues such as unplanned pregnancy and decisions over abortion, marriage and single motherhood. The figure of the older mother of the previous generation is present too, but less prominent, sometimes lingering as the spectre of the unfree woman who resents her daughter's freedoms, sometimes ultimately revealing herself as a figure of kindness, allowing generational conflicts to be resolved in greater understanding.

There are abundant grounds for rich analysis between French and English cinema within this timeframe. Both produced renowned and characterful 'national' cinemas, and their subjects of interest and the political climates in which they were made hold enough similarities for meaningful comparison whilst leaving ample room for reflections of nuance and distinct stylistic and thematic concerns. The late '50s and early '60s are generally understood to encompass the first French '*nouvelle vague*'

and British ‘new wave’ cinemas. The *nouvelle vague* is a highly distinctive and widely praised movement within cinema history, and the British new wave is clearly stylistically influenced by its aesthetics and techniques. Several prevalent themes are common to both movements, including a concern with the representation of everyday life, individual psychologies, youth culture and sexuality; the interest in the quotidian often places the protagonist (usually a young man) in the context of family relations, and the thematisation of youth and sex often involves questions of female sexuality and the spectre of unplanned pregnancy. Motherhood is therefore ‘in the air’ in diverse ways throughout many of these narratives, though the experience of mothers themselves is rarely explored meaningfully. Beyond the new wave cinemas, and particularly in the later ‘60s and the ‘70s, however, filmmakers in both countries also produced work addressing motherhood from explicitly feminist perspectives, though often on the ‘peripheries’ of mainstream cinema. Both cinemas offer abundant explorations of motherhood from a variety of perspectives, and provide ample grounds for a fruitful inquiry into maternal representations in cinema.

My film selection is drawn along two major lines. The majority of the thesis looks mainly (though not exclusively) at new wave and ‘social realist’ cinema, whilst the final part focuses on avant-garde and feminist films. I have found during my selection process that themes of and around motherhood feature particularly prominently and consistently within these groups. Concerning the films selected for the final section, the connection is straightforward: these films directly engage with motherhood as a central concern, and often either adopt an explicitly feminist perspective, or have been received as feminist films. The presentation of motherhood, in this case, is self-aware, deeply considered and often political. In regards to the new wave and social realist films selected for the first two chapters, I have tended toward choosing prominent or canonical films from each national cinema. In this case, I will be looking at how assumptions about and around motherhood are constructed within the films themselves and within the extensive bodies of critical literature surrounding them. Gender and sex are pervasive and important issues in these groups of films, and have been widely commented upon, but motherhood as an element of this is often neglected. The films I have selected for close study are all closely tied to the contemporary moment in the societies in which they are set, have a stake in representing ‘everyday’ life and lives, and tend to deal with personal relationships as

their primary areas of focus. The ‘everyday’ is an ideal situation in which to locate the mother; family and romantic relations are often the driving forces behind the narratives of these films, but rarely present motherhood as an experience. These films provide ample material, therefore, for an investigation of what could be called motherhood in the ‘third person’.

### **Methodology and Theoretical Background**

My thesis draws primarily on feminist and psychoanalytic critical theory, alongside film theory, in order to examine the chosen films within a unified theoretical framework. When grounding my discussions in mother-child relations, my understanding of the child-as-subject is informed by Lee Edelman’s work on the figure of the Child (2004). Edelman argues that the child is seen in Western society as the ideal model of citizenship, an articulation in the imaginary of the perfected collective and individual self: ‘That figural Child alone embodies the citizen as an ideal, entitled to claim full rights to its future share in the nation’s good, though always at the cost of limiting the rights “real” citizens are allowed’ (*ibid*: 11). This potential omnipotence, needless to say, is always only imminent – the child is ‘the telos of the social order and [...] the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust’ (*ibid*) – but its value, and that of the child, actively realised in the present. Edelman’s argument develops to address the idea of ‘reproductive futurity’ in society, which he mobilises to help explain the social oppression of gay men. What his argument does not consider, however, but which can be excavated from it by bringing his thesis into dialogue with second wave feminist theory, are the gendered implications of the privileging of the child, particularly as concerns the impact upon the mother. Initially, by considering Edelman’s theory alongside feminist arguments on the masculinisation of citizenship, we might further add that the figural child is paradigmatically presumed male; the future and its imagined spiritual and material prosperity is held in trust for sons, not daughters. Even more pertinent is the implicit office of the mother, as surely, this cultish veneration of the child that underpins cultural narratives of being necessitates her subordination and demands the sacrifice of her selfhood and access to expression. If the child she (re)produces embodies progress, agency, even humanity itself, then surely any pretension to desire, selfishness or subjectivity on her part is a cardinal societal sin as well as a personal evil. The son has become our cultural protagonist, leaving the mother a choice of identity between supporting character or villain.

This conceptualisation of the child can be used as an illuminating cipher for interpreting psychoanalytic paradigms of children, mothers and subjectivities. My theoretical methodology uses a critical approach to psychoanalytic theory alongside second wave feminist scholarship on motherhood viewed in the light of the child-as-subject as a hegemonic cultural schema. Theorists whose work has been particularly operative in shaping my approach include Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Melanie Klein, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. Psychoanalytic theory is an apposite background for this project due to its preoccupation with mother-child relations and the development of the subject, and also its prolific applications within film theory. However, I also contend that Freudian psychoanalytic theory privileges a phallogentric and child-centric concept of subjectivity in which the mother can participate only as an object or imaginary function. I therefore use feminist (Irigaryan and Kristevan) readings, which critique Freudian psychoanalysis and advocate a subversion of patriarchal discursive presuppositions, to build a framework that engages with the mother on her own terms, as a specific cultural subject, and resists synthesising the assumption of a unidirectional child-mother relation which has become commonplace in psychoanalytic theory and its applications.

Throughout psychoanalytic theories of the self, the mother has become object *par excellence*, the measure of Otherness against which the child-citizen defines itself as a coherent cultural subject. The child is entitled to the ‘authentic’ experience and expression of culture, whilst the mother is expected – and with remarkably little gratitude – to willingly relinquish her subjectivity, her language and her specific relationships in order that the sovereign child might have his in abundance, according to the laws of patriarchal societal bequest.<sup>1</sup> Psychoanalytic tradition constructs the mother as a vital presence in the individual’s early, pre-linguistic stages of development, throughout which the infant often experiences the mother as part of itself, and subsequently as a prominent figure in and of the unconscious. Somewhat subversively, therefore, rather than as *containing* the child, the mother is symbolised as contained *within* the child. In order to participate satisfyingly in (patriarchal) culture, furthermore, it becomes necessary for the subject to separate from and renounce the ‘actual’ mother. These models of the self paradigmatically exclude a self-

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<sup>1</sup> However, this is only really available to the masculine; Freud’s work on femininity insists that girls will always experience themselves as ‘castrated’ and can only achieve a satisfying subject-position through a son (Freud: 1933b: 256).

determining maternal voice. My theoretical approach uses a feminist critique of psychoanalysis in tracing the absent mothering subject in film.

One of the most fundamental models of selfhood in psychoanalytic theory is the Freudian Oedipus complex. In the myth, Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother, blinding himself as punishment when he discovers his crime (Freud: 1900: 364-365). Freud developed this story as a model of a universal subconscious desire, in which the mother, as primary love object, is desired by the child, and the father becomes his rival. In the early stages of development, the child is attached, in a satisfying relationship, to his mother. However, this desire is forbidden within the law of the father (identified with the superego). Freud theorised that a 'castration complex' was instrumental in the male child's relinquishing his desire for his mother and moving towards identification with the father; the boy fears his illegitimate desire for the mother will be punished by the deprivation of his most valued organ, of which he becomes keenly aware in the genital phase. Freud argues that this punishment is modelled within the myth; Oedipus's loss of his eyes is a figure for castration (1919: 139). Notably, it is no longer the actual father who will do the castrating, but Oedipus himself, acting on behalf of the superego, or his internalisation of patriarchal law, suggesting that the father cannot really be killed. To protect against a punitive and humiliating castration, the male subject, Freud suggests, identifies himself with the powerful patriarchal figure; in 'normal' development, the paternal superego banishes and covers over the closeness with the mother.

However, the discovery of sexual difference in the mother, or of the idea of potency and lack between father and mother, is the organising principle for both Freud's Oedipus and castration complexes, independently of which the law of the father loses its meaning and menace. To be initially satisfying, the mother is assumed to be 'whole', which for Freud could only mean phallic. Freud consistently asserts that the incipient knowledge of a lacking or less-than-male state of being is profoundly traumatic for the infant (1933b: 252). Subsequent to this knowledge, the mother (and all femininity with her), once so highly admired and prized, is made irreparably inferior; 'One thing that is left over in men from the influence of the Oedipus complex is a certain amount of disparagement in their attitude towards women, whom they regard as being castrated' (Freud: 1931: 376). She becomes the site of lack, an emptied vessel, standing in the unconscious for the disgrace of femininity, and the unhappy

state of absent being. Freud argues she is believed to have *been* castrated, engendering the boy's fear of femininity as punishment. Since, in Freud's conception, the superego is the distributor of castration, we see how the mother is utterly subjugated by the patriarchal. This foundational model is rooted in male experience. It functions because the penis is valued so highly and femininity read as male humiliation. When we look for the mother's experience, furthermore, we come up empty. She is a figure of paramount significance within these complexes, yet Freud's theory leaves her nothing but a vacuum of expression; seen from this vantage point, she is little more than a function in her child's subject-formation.

Along with Irigaray and other feminist psychoanalysts, I employ a critical reading of Freud that sees his work as an illuminating commentary on a cultural situation, but understands that situation as profoundly contextual.<sup>2</sup> That is to say, the constitution of the mother in absence does not reflect ineluctable social truth, but is the result of a hierarchical discursive enterprise, requiring deconstruction. A fundamental conviction within Irigaray's work is that 'any theory of the subject [Oedipus included] has always been appropriated by the "masculine."' (1974: 133). 'Woman', and to an even greater extent the mother, is not a self-declared being, but a myth told by men, as a constituent part of the male self. The mother acts as an 'origin story' (*ibid*: 42-43), an imago of femininity constructed by and supporting phallogocentric fantasy. Irigaray suggests this as an implicit structuring principle throughout Freud's work. The imposition of the masculine model further leads to suppression of the rights and expression of the feminine, giving cultural monopoly to the figural father and mastery over the public and private to men. The law of the Father makes all things, all children, all ideas, all desires, belong to him:

For the patriarchal order is indeed the one that functions as the *organization and monopolization of private property to the benefit of the head of the family*. It is his proper name, the name of the father,

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<sup>2</sup> Irigaray produces a convincing argument on how Freud's theories of gender do not adequately account for social context: '[Freud] does not invent female sexuality, nor male sexuality either for that matter. As a "man of science," he merely accounts for them. The problem is that he fails to investigate the historical factors governing the data with which he is dealing. [...] That he interprets women's sufferings, their symptoms, their dissatisfactions, in terms of their individual histories, without questioning the relationship of their "pathology" to a certain state of society, of culture. As a result, he generally ends up resubmitting women to the dominant discourse of the father, to the law of the father, while silencing their demands. (*PoD*: 1977b: 70)

that determines ownership for the family, including the wife and children. (1977b: 83, original emphasis)

Woman, meanwhile, is ‘nothing but the receptacle that passively receives his *product*’ (1974: 18). The mother is made absent from the theory; through appropriation of the feminine generative capacity, motherhood is made a raw resource, to be sculpted and hallmarked by the masculine.

Responding to Freud’s Oedipus complex, as well as his work in *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Irigaray also examines ‘the murder of the father as founding the primal horde’ (1991: 36). Irigaray suggests that this famous patricide in fact forgets and represses ‘a more archaic murder, that of the mother [...] what is now becoming apparent in the most everyday things and in the whole of our society and our culture is that, at a primal level, they function on the basis of a matricide’ (*ibid*). The mother is made so absent from the imagination of society and self that even the ancient fact of her absence is forgotten. The mother-as-subject is repelled and obliterated by her son, in whom all culture and citizenship are closed off (from her), and the vestiges of her image are then threaded into his needs and narratives; ‘Hasn’t the mother already been torn to pieces by Oedipus’s hatred by the time she is cut up into stages, with each part of her body having to be cathected and then decathected as he grows up?’ (*ibid*: 38). Although life began in the mother, she becomes a square peg as a figure for subjective life, which draws its anthropomorphic model under the insistence of being the only possibility; ‘[Culture] has blindly venerated the mother-son relationship to the point of religious fetishism, but has given no interpretation to the model of tolerance of the other within and with a self that this relationship manifests.’ (1990a: 39). In her effacement from representation, her exile from subjecthood, Irigaray suggests, borrowing a term from Freud, that the relation to the mother (and with this, the mother-as-subject and any relations belonging to her) have become ‘the ‘dark continent’ *par excellence*’ (1991: 35). She is made absent, and the law-of-the-father forbids any attempt to find her. Irigaray’s re-readings of Freud encourage a deconstructing approach to representations of mothers, and suggests that mothering subjectivities, though lost, may potentially be rediscovered. These elements of her work are useful in shaping my theoretical approach, and especially in producing against-the-grain readings of various films.

Freud's Oedipus theory has been built upon by many other theorists. Lacan is a particularly renowned Freudian, and his ideas have had significant impact on film theory (notably, Christian Metz: 1977). One particularly important Lacanian innovation is the reinterpretation of the phallus. Whereas for Freud this was directly linked to the actual penis as a tangible sign of superiority, Lacan argued that it was purely a signifier, detached from material anatomy (Sean Homer: 2005: 56). The phallus, in Lacan's conception, organises the Symbolic, a fraudulent (though ineluctable) structure in which language replaces 'being', and the sign stands in for the signified. Whereas Freud's Oedipus complex is dissolved through its traumatic relationship to castration, Lacan defines the Oedipus complex as the transition from the Imaginary to the Symbolic, which is an inherently castrating process. For Lacan, however, castration does not indicate deprivation of the penis (having shown the phallus and the penis to be largely disconnected, this cannot be as meaningful a figure as it is for Freud), but 'the cutting off, not of one's penis, but of one's *jouissance* and the recognition of lack' (*ibid*: 95). Lacanian transcendence of anatomical determinism potentially offers an interpretative addendum which more readily understands gender as conditioned by a discursive hegemony. Nonetheless, the position of the mother within Lacanian subject-development remains one of expressive absence and subordination. Read with this awareness, Lacanian formulations will be used in my thesis to critique the representational absence of the mother.

The mother figure is notably important in Lacan's Imaginary, and particularly in the shapeless moment predating the alienation of coming-into-subjecthood. Before the child discovers his fragmentation, the mother is fundamental to the idea of 'wholeness'; the child interprets continuation between their bodies, between his body and the world, between his desires and hers. Eventually, however, the child recognises the mother/child split; key to separation, and to the realisation of subjectivity, is the understanding of the mother as Other as 'the child slowly comes to realise that it is not identical to, or the sole object of, the mother's desire' (*ibid*: 55). She is the primary model for unknowability, placing her in a more difficult position than the (paternal) phallus as primary signifier of lack, since, after all, the 'absent' Symbolic that the phallus organises encapsulates the hierarchical structures by which the subject becomes knowable in its absence.

The distinction between self and mOther is initiated by the appearance of her desire, to which the child realises it cannot be commensurate. This avowal of the mother's desire perhaps allows her more agency than Freud's theories, but it is a radically inexpressible desire. Separation, Lacan suggests, is a key process of normal development, and essential to this is the mother's revealing herself to be lacking, her Otherness of desire:

The mOther must show some sign of incompleteness, fallibility, or deficiency for separation to obtain and for the subject to come to be [...] the mOther must demonstrate that she is a desiring (and thus also a lacking and alienated) subject, that she too has submitted to the splitting/barring action of language, in order for us to witness the subject's advent. (Bruce Fink: 1995: 53-54)

Although Lacan posits the phallus as 'primary signifier', and primary lack, there is an early sign of absence in the maternal. At this point, the child still believes in the phallus as an attainable entity that contains the mother's desire (Homer: 2005: 55). Furthermore, the lost maternal continent of oneness becomes a bad place to remain; the too-present mother threatens the child's subjecthood:

What provokes anxiety? Contrary to what people say, it is neither the rhythm not the alternation of the mother's presence-absence [...]: security of presence is found in the possibility of absence. What is most anxiety-producing for the child is what the relationship through which he comes to be – on the basis of lack which makes him desire – is most perturbed: when there is no possibility of lack, when his mother is constantly on his back. (Lacan's *Seminar XX* in Fink: 1995: 53)

Through separation, the mOther becomes profoundly unknowable. Lacan draws a particularly powerful image of the mOther and her desire in his *Encore* seminar series: the Crocodile Mother.

The mother's role is the mother's desire. That's fundamental. The mother's desire is not something that is bearable just like that, that you are indifferent to. It will always wreak havoc. A huge crocodile in whose jaws you are – that's the mother. One never knows what

might suddenly come over her and make her shut her trap. That's what the mother's desire is.

[...] There is a roller, made out of stone of course, which is there, potentially, at the level of her trap, and it acts as a restraint, as a wedge. It's what is called the phallus. It's the roller that shelters you, if, all of a sudden, she closes it. (Lacan: 1991: 112)

This image encapsulates fundamental Lacanian constructions of the mother. She is monstrous, Other, marked by a bodily metaphor of dread. Her desire is not of a subject, but an Other. There is little reason for her desire to be so horrific apart from the fact that it is unrelatable. The position of the phallus, furthermore, is of protection, contradictorily, of solidity. Therefore, despite any positive associations of the mother, she becomes a figure of imminent destruction, to be placated and subdued by the paternal.

My method uses Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to support my readings of the absent mothering subject in mother-child (particularly mother-son) narratives, but also understanding them as subject to the (patriarchal) models they describe. To this I also add the work of Melanie Klein,<sup>3</sup> who, tending towards greater interest in feminine relations and experiences, is of use in examining representations of mothers and daughters and in beginning to excavate a subtext of maternal subjectivity within a discourse that nevertheless remains patriarchal and child-focused. Klein returns to Freud's 'femininity phase' as the male equivalence of girls' castration complex; rather than both sexes experiencing anxiety or envy over the 'superior' male organ, Klein argues that boys experience an equally powerful epistemophilic drive towards the womb, and its creative capacity (Klein: 1928: 75). Against Freud's 'penis envy', we might postulate 'womb envy' in boys. The girl still experiences envy, yet since both genders are now in a position of having *and* lacking, this does not automatically place her at such a disadvantage. There is, however, an important difference that creates a potential imaginary hierarchy between genders: whilst boys actually do 'possess' the special organ, girls' special object in the creative womb is

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<sup>3</sup> My understanding of Klein's work has been developed in particular in relation to 'The Psychological Principles of Infant Analysis' (1926), 'Early Stages of the Oedipus Conflict' (1928), 'Infantile Anxiety Situations Reflected in a Work of Art and in the Creative Impulse' (1929), 'The Importance of Symbol Formation in the Development of the Ego' (1930), 'The Psycho-Analytic Play Technique: Its History and Significance' (1955) and 'A Study of Envy and Gratitude' (1956).

only imminent. Furthermore, boys fear castration by the father for desiring the mother, and girls fear the *internal* destruction of their capacity for motherhood. Therefore, whereas boys can prove to themselves that they have not yet been castrated, girls cannot be entirely certain that they have not already been irreparably damaged by the mother. This might be a cause of girls' relationships with their mothers often being characterised by an exaggerated degree of anxiety and distress, and furthermore leads to an 'overvaluation' of the penis in both boys and girls (*ibid*).

In a comparable model to Lacanian maternal Otherness, the (imagined) mother in Klein's theory is thought by the child to contain an internal world of secret riches, which are greedily devoured through the 'good breast', yet this is never enough, because satisfaction is fleeting. The child also wishes to plunder the mother's womb and body and rob her of the riches (children, faeces and the father's penis) that it is thought to contain (Klein: 1928: 72). In response to the 'castrating' deprivation of body and knowledge it experiences, the child desires the destruction of the maternal body. Klein's work is useful in developing the image of maternal absence in Freud and Lacan, which is passive and quiet with all activity performed by fathers and sons, to suggest a greater presence of aggression and force in the mother's being made absent. This is useful in interpreting themes of conflict and denigration in maternal representations. Furthermore, though Klein's concern remains with the experience of the child, it is possible to interpret an indication of mothers' experience. Her work suggests that the mother can be represented beyond archaic Otherness; there is a notion of a mothering subject behind the monstrous, cathected, and emptied maternal construct.

The maternal body is also an important way of symbolising the mother; the Kleinian attacked mother, Lacanian Imaginary oneness and Freudian mother as object of desire and original prohibition all use corporeal discourses to place the mother within a system of absence. Feminist scholarship on motherhood also often thematises the maternal body to illustrate operations of oppression and suggest reclamation strategies. These perspectives are useful for my thesis; as film is a visual storytelling medium, it is particularly interesting to address intersections between cultural narratives and ideologies of motherhood and the image and inscription of the maternal body.

Kristeva offers illuminating theories on the maternal body in culture. For her, these discourses are closely linked with ideas on sacredness and defilement. Kristeva suggests that the maternal body is intimately related to what she calls the 'abject'; the maternal is that which is cast off, abjected, in order to define the clean and proper self (1980c: 53). This develops the psychoanalytic schema of the split from the mother in the subject-formation process by theorising what becomes of the maternal debris inevitably (but silently) jettisoned in the process of this imaginative surgery (*ibid*: 54); 'It lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter's rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master. [...] To each ego its object, to each superego its abject.' (1980a: 230). The abject is an outside, an absence of reason according to dominant discourse, and profoundly Other, all of which can be understood as maternal characteristics in patriarchal narratives. The maternal body, after all, in its resistance to numbering and its capacity to undermine the binary closing off of Other and self, threatens the cleanliness of absolutism:

The abject confronts us, on the other hand, and this time within our personal archeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold of *maternal* entity even before ex-isting outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling. (*ibid*: 239)

This threat produces a cultural necessity of renouncing the mother and submitting instead to the law-of-the-father, which covers her over with a story about the coherence of the self and the binary fabric of social truth. The absence of the mother is thereby insisted upon, yet pushed to the excluded margins of narrative coherence, a blankness that can be felt but denied by the subject.

Kristeva's abject is useful in interpreting filmic representations of maternal bodies that appear paranoid, denigratory or violent. However, she also uses images of sacred mothers (particularly the Madonna) to show how a 'purified' maternal body has been appropriated to objectify mothers and make maternal representations respond to various needs of the masculine subject. Religious discourse has been instrumental in neutralising and emptying out the mother, and European ideas of maternity are

heavily subsumed under Christian ideology (1983: 133). Kristeva argues that this maternal imaginary has been made to serve as ‘an adult (male and female) fantasy of a lost continent: what is involved, moreover, is not so much an idealized primitive mother as an idealization of the – unlocalizable – *relationship* between her and us, an idealization of primary narcissism’ (*ibid*). The Christian ideal of motherhood is tied to the sublime; it is the clean surface (ready for projection) left after the filth and defilement of the maternal abject has been wiped away. This maternal imaginary is a potent site of projection for much psychic activity, inevitably entailing the silencing of the mother in favour of the child.

The Christian narrative is a powerful model of being in European culture, instructing societies and individuals on the ordering of power and gendered hierarchies, the family being a useful structural allegory therein. The centrality of the Father within this model need hardly be reemphasised; Christianity is a social structure that constantly reaffirms masculine-paternal power. The position of the mother, however, is conflicted; Christianity could not do without representing the maternal procreative power, hence ‘Christ, the Son of man, is in the end “human” only through his mother: as if Christic or Christian humanism could not help being a form of maternalism’ (*ibid*: 134). The mother is given her earthly dues for this: ‘it is Mary, woman and mother, who takes it upon herself to represent the supreme terrestrial power’ (*ibid*: 140). The mariological mother is potentially supremely powerful, as she is able to authentically create, and embodies the communion with the one and the Other, yet this suggests a potent matriarchy that threatens to upset the power structure. Therefore every effort is taken to empty the mother out, making her an absent symbol. This is performed within the Christian narrative largely by ensuring that the mother’s earthly generative power is endlessly subordinated to masculine-coded spiritual generation. Her son is no longer hers, but ‘man’s’; maternity is made the sign of masculine creativity.

Because she has the (symbolically) creative body, the mother is entitled first to just this, and then not even this. The (maternal-)feminine is rarely understood as a structural endpoint; women are encouraged to be content to be the *sign* of generation, at best achieving purpose *à-la* Madonna through the engendering of a powerful son. The spirit belongs to him, but the body, an empty vessel *representative* of the spirit, must be enough for her. Even this, however, is not truly hers, as the maternal body in

some respects also symbolically belongs to the child: 'Of the virginal body we are entitled only to the ear, the tears, and the breasts' (*ibid*: 142). This body, more or less all she has left of herself and her relation to the child, ultimately excludes her further: milk and tears are 'metaphors for non-language' (*ibid*: 143). A maternal experience is suggested here, but it is made inexpressible or unworthy of expression. Kristeva also links this exclusion from representation to the idea (apocryphal and latent) of the mother/Madonna as virginal, or 'pure', blank, free from desire:

[W]e witness the emergence of the "virginal Maternal" function in the symbolic economy of the West: from the high Christic sublimation which she aspires to achieve and at times transcends, to the extralinguistic realms of the unnameable, the Virgin Mother occupies the vast territory that lies on either side of the parenthesis of language. (*ibid*: 144)

The child is created through the love of the father, using the virgin-mother as a blank and obliging medium. She is not only absent from the creation and gestation of the child, but also from his being and his family. Historically, biological maternity has been the clearest signifier of parenthood. To defend its own rights to the child against this, however, patriarchy covers the body with the Word. The New Testament ensures that maternal-biological ties are renounced in favour of logocentric ties to the father; Mary, and motherkind with her, is written out of genealogy, out of spiritual and cultural ownership: 'On the rare occasions when the Mother of Jesus does appear in the Gospels, it is in order to signify the fact that the filial bond has to do not with the flesh but with the name' (*ibid*: 136). The Christian narrative of self and the mother's position therein demonstrates and perpetuates the patriarchal organisation of cultural discourse on subjectivity. This discourse, furthermore, is deeply culturally ingrained, and, like Oedipus, is to be found broadly and deeply under the skin of European storytelling. Bringing Kristeva's work into dialogue with Edelman's child-citizen, these models are pertinent in deconstructing narratives of objectification throughout mother-son representations.

Irigaray also sees the representation of the feminine/maternal body as indicative of discursive erasure of femininity. As evidenced through Freud, a phallogentric economy of language and representation has made masculine/feminine synonymous

with presence/absence: ‘her sexual organ represents *the horror of nothing to see*. A defect in this systematics of representation and desire’ (1977d: 26). In other words, ‘nothing you *can* see’ becomes ‘nothing *to* see’. However, we should read this nothingness not as a representation of lack, but as a lack of representation, a ‘hole in the texture of language correspond[ing] to the forgetting of the scar of the navel’ (1991: 41). The equation of femininity with non-being, however, is insidiously potent. Despite the symbolic value of the maternal body for masculine purposes, the male body becomes the only truly meaningful one; ‘only that which manifests itself in the form of a man is the divine child of the father’ (1990a: 40).

Since our societal structures are based on masculinity and physical metaphors of maleness, we have few resources with which to represent the female (or non-male) body. Irigaray describes how social taxonomies correspond to a masculine binary system, privileging absolute units. This system cannot adequately account for the mother, who ‘*is neither one nor two*. Rigorously speaking, she cannot be identified either as one person, or as two. [...] And her sexual organ, which is not *one* organ, is counted as *none*’ (1977d: 26, original emphasis). What is left for the mother is a lexicon of ‘filthy, mutilating words’ (1991: 41). Irigaray describes the visceral, denigrating discourse around her:

The mother has become a devouring monster as an inverted effect of the blind consumption of the mother. Her belly, sometimes her breasts, are agape with the gestation, the birth and the life that were given there without any reciprocity. Except for a murder, real and cultural, to annul that debt? To forget dependency? To destroy power? (*ibid*: 40)

The physical signs of femaleness and their representation are largely covered over by the self-aggrandisement of the masculine. The father not only ‘forbids the bodily encounter with the mother’ (*ibid*: 39), but imposes his language and law in her place. The ‘phallus [is] erected where once there was the umbilical cord’ (*ibid*: 38), and the proper name (a mark of paternal pedigree) ‘replaces the most irreducible mark of birth: the *navel*’ (*ibid*: 39). The mother is radically excluded from subjective expression.

A recurrent theme in Irigaray's work is female genealogy. Genealogies and patronyms are used to express origins and belonging, to organise and make sense of our-selves socially. Irigaray argues that genealogy has become an exclusively masculine practice; the subject-individual is read through his fathers, casting the mother as a blank instrument of male incarnation: 'what is now termed the oedipal structure as access to the cultural order is already structured within a single, masculine line of filiation which doesn't symbolize the woman's relation to her mother' (1990b: 8-9). Irigaray insists that matrilineal, genealogies are not absent but wilfully suppressed (*ibid*: 9). Woman 'is forced to renounce the marks of her ancestry and inscribe herself on man's pedigree' (1974: 33), renouncing her name and family history. In any case, woman's original name was patronymic, hence women are constantly set adrift, never moored to any sense of origin, but exchanged like coins, without significant personal history other than the size rather than shape of their value, left in a lonely state of 'exmatriation' (*ibid*: 43). Mother-daughter relations suffer, as the patriarchal system of family ensures that women are comprehensively isolated from one another and the mother is buried by the husband. Women are cut off from their origin to allow men to repeat theirs. This leaves the mother in a paradox of omnipresence without power, abundance only insofar as she conforms to the image in which men have made her. This is the only relation to the mother that Christian culture permits, and it is fictional. The production of the woman-mother imago, furthermore, is circular:

[S]he will be inscribed or will inscribe herself in this way, in an infinite genealogical process/trial, an open count of the discount of origin: whereby she will be "like" her mother but not in the same "place," not corresponding to the same point on the number line. She will be her mother and yet not her mother, nor her daughter as mother, *with no closure of the circle or the spiral of identity*. (*ibid*: 76, original emphasis)

Unlike the patrilineal family, the feminine familial cycle permits no progression, simply capacity for replication. The male system allows (indeed, insists upon) the coexistence of lineage and individuality. The mother, however, is a static property, neutralised as an instrument rather than subject of generation. Irigaray shows that this model of family organisation engenders animosity between mothers and daughters.

She argues that daughters might feel anger partly ‘at that powerful and then castrated mother, because she had brought a castrated child into the world’ (*ibid*: 106), but also because of this preclusion of identity (*ibid*: 43). Along with Klein, Irigaray’s work is particularly useful in discussing representations of mother-daughter relationships in my thesis.

Irigaray’s work demonstrates how the mother is made absent from discourse and culture, through her body, her subjectivity, and her right to family and language. However, she also suggests strategies to enable women and mothers to speak as subjects, establishing a discourse and rights appropriate to them (1990d: 73), through a rupture in the discursive and political machinery of patriarchy (1977b: 78). Towards the end of my thesis, this work on feminine-maternal specificity, and the potential capacity for art to represent meaningful maternal subjectivities, will be relevant in analysing films that attempt to establish maternal voices and counter-discourses on motherhood.

My methodology employs a combination of the theories discussed above to present a critically structured analysis of the absent mothering subject in British and French cinema. Psychoanalytic theory is an appropriate framework due to its focus on object-relations and its renderings of the maternal relation, as well as its absorption into film theory; it is, indeed, already critically employed in analyses of several of the films of my primary corpus. However, psychoanalytic principles are often taken on their own terms, synthesising the exile of the mothering subject from narrative. My approach therefore offers original insight by employing throughout an awareness of feminist critiques of these theories, as well as utilising feminist methodologies to produce independent readings. Not only will this cover new ground in understanding representations of mother figures within the cultures and period I address, it will also contribute a novel approach to the study of motherhood in cinema generally, in which, as yet, few authors have addressed the canon of European cinema, nor employed an approach led by feminist critical theory, which offers a rich and informative lens through which to understand (the absence of) maternal subjectivities in cinema.

### **Literature Review**

There has been a handful of major studies published since the 1990s on motherhood and cinema, though this area of inquiry remains underdeveloped in

comparison to other themes within feminist film studies. Though important insights have emerged from the work on motherhood and film over past decades, there exist clear limitations and unexplored areas that my thesis seeks to confront. Explorations into motherhood and cinema currently demonstrate bias towards North American melodrama. Within this, there is an imbalance of focus favouring a few canonical films; *Stella Dallas* (1937), *Marnie* (1964) and *Now, Voyager* (1942), for instance, are commented on widely as exemplary maternal film texts, suggesting a narrow application of the theory. Furthermore, critics that move beyond the melodramatic usually maintain genre-specific models of analysis; the mother figure in horror film, for instance, is also relatively well-explored. However, few works have shown sustained interest in films outside the North American mainstream. There is ample scope, therefore, to build on existing discussions on mothers, representation and film, venturing beyond the framework of Hollywood genre cinema.

E. Ann Kaplan is one of the most prolific scholars working on motherhood, popular culture and film; her most comprehensive work is *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (1992). This is an extremely broad study, dealing with motherhood in the North American melodramatic genre within literature and fiction film from 1830 onwards. Kaplan acknowledges this as an over-ambitious project; however, the thesis usefully establishes fundamental frameworks for studying motherhood and film. Methodologically, Kaplan favours a Lacanian approach. She emphasises several foundational concepts within feminist theories on motherhood, including problems of maternal subjectivity within patriarchal discourse and the ideal/evil mother binary sketched by Freudian psychoanalysis, and its effect on representation. She also advocates a contextual approach to motherhood, uniting historical-social maternal discourses, economic and technological changes affecting motherhood as an institution, cultural representations and psychoanalytic discourses and processes of mothering. Though it is overreaching for a single study to thoroughly account for all these aspects, it usefully demonstrates various factors by which ideations of motherhood are co-opted. She develops what she calls “‘Master’ Motherhood Discourse[s]”, seeking to cohere a narrative of motherhood at a given historical moment, as a discursive construct, rather than a lived experience. She acknowledges the limitations of this discussion, pertaining only to white, middle class, Western women, and encourages future research to explore

alternative paradigms of motherhood. Her text addresses three ‘types’ of mother: the historical, the psychoanalytic and the fictional (she notes that there is also a ‘real’ mother, who lies beyond the scope of her research, but has been studied more thoroughly in sociology). Kaplan’s main contribution with this study is to begin to map historically shifting ‘master’ narratives of motherhood and their effects on and in representation, whilst advocating awareness of the political contingency of these discursive constructs.

Kaplan usefully brings together historical, psychoanalytic and feminist discourses in her inquiry into filmic representations of motherhood. However, her research is self-admittedly too broad in scope, entailing an eschewal of non-mainstream representations and finer specificities of medium. The singular focus on melodrama is also problematic. Though melodrama offers a lot to the study of screen motherhoods in itself, Kaplan may have unintentionally contributed to an orthodoxy of approach which takes melodrama as a uniquely privileged model of motherhood narrative. There therefore remains much scope to build on Kaplan’s work.

Another book-length study concerning mothers in film and privileging melodrama is Suzanna Danuta Walters’ *Lives Together/Worlds Apart: Mothers and Daughters in Popular Culture* (1992). Walters’ approach also combines psychoanalytic theories and historical context (in this case, chiefly North American women in the late twentieth century). Her study utilises several media, exploring not only film, but also literature, television, magazines and advertising. Her thesis shows how patriarchal culture, through these media and more, establishes impossibly contradictory and blameful constructions of womanhood, aiming to engender competition between women. She argues that Western culture builds a narrative in which mother-daughter relations appear as little other than a destructive cycle of violence and anxiety, and that separation is eminently desirable, though Walters suggests that this need not be so. Her argument would be interesting to expand to address European representations of mother-daughter relationships in film texts and critical theory. However, Walters, like Kaplan, maintains a primary focus on Hollywood melodrama, and applies North American feminist theory.

Several feminist film scholars have produced shorter works regarding motherhood and film melodrama, often as part of projects addressing cinema and

femininity more widely. In these cases, maternal melodramas, for which women constitute the majority of characters and audience, have often been read as singularly 'feminine' texts, providing (prospectively) a space for inquiry into and articulation of women's experiences. Jackie Byars (1988) uses 'recuperative' readings of film texts in order to excavate elements of feminine resistance. Byars demonstrates how a Chodorowian<sup>4</sup> psychoanalytic model can be methodologically applied to feminist readings of cinema as an antidote to Freudian paradigms. Particularly important here are relationships between women; informed by Chodorow's work, Byars offers alternative models of film-viewing to the hierarchical masculine nexus of oedipal desire of the type demonstrated iconically in Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975). She also uses maternal melodramas as exemplary cases in which Chodorowian analysis is more effective than Freudian or Lacanian, since they are not only unusual in their focus on communities of women, but are also films that tell different stories, and enunciate them differently. She argues there is potential to recover resisting feminine and maternal voices within film melodrama. Her demonstration of an alternative paradigm to the more institutionalised Freudian approaches sketches a valuable oppositional framework with which to explore representations of mothers and mother-daughter relations in film, applicable beyond melodrama. However, she also risks over-generalisation; after all, though they are 'for' women and 'about' women, not all melodramas are *by* women, and those that are, are not automatically feminist; even where they resist patriarchal forms, they may not resist patriarchal ideologies.

Other notable theorists to comment on 'feminine' genres include Molly Haskell, Tania Modleski and Annette Kuhn. Haskell (1974) shows how 'Women's film' is often used derogatorily, permitting the dismissal of women's feelings. She discusses the nature of the woman's film, analysing character types, audience interactions, plot points and models, and themes (for instance, self-sacrifice). It may be argued that the genres she discusses are particularly maternal, since they tend to focus on the domestic, whereas, as Haskell points out, marriage, parenthood and domesticity tend to indicate narrative closure in more 'masculine' genres. Modleski and Kuhn have also worked on maternal melodrama, and added to this the genre of soap opera as a form

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<sup>4</sup> As outlined in *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (1989) and *The Reproduction of Mothering: psychoanalysis and the sociology of gender* (1999).

that specifically addresses women. Modleski (1988) examines types of narratives and genres aimed at women across literature, film and television, and how these might construct a feminine subject position. She suggests that soap operas address the spectator as 'ideal mother', a proposition expanded by Kuhn (1984). The suggestion of a mother-subject position functioning extra-cinematically as well as diegetically has intriguing interpretative potential beyond this genre. These writers also see the potential of 'women's genres' as a space for feminine self-expression and articulation. The 'maternal' nature of these genres, furthermore, puts the mother at the centre of these enterprises of feminine resistance.

The work on the maternal genre film by North American critics has produced useful and interesting insights. Nonetheless, Hollywood melodrama has enjoyed an imbalance of analysis within writing on motherhood and cinema, entailing a theoretical annexing of the mother. Whilst it is important to study representations of women and mothers in mainstream 'feminine' genres, mothering types and figures do not cease to exist outside this narrow framework, and thorough, theoretically-led feminist analyses of mothers outside genre models are lacking.

The second area to have received significant attention within the study of motherhood and cinema is horror. Two notable theorists herein are Barbara Creed and Sarah Arnold. Creed (1986) discusses the image and usage of the monstrous feminine in horror film, highlighting the specific maternal character of this figure. She links the effectiveness of horror to unconscious psychic processes, especially those identified with the mother, such as Freud's castration complex, the devouring phallic mother and the 'archaic mother', alongside Kristeva's 'abject'. She outlines a convincing argument on the production of 'bad mother' figures in film and the psychic properties associated with them, though horror cinema is a highly exaggerated iteration thereof. Her application of Kristeva's work to motherhood and cinema is enlightening. It bears mentioning, however, that abjection is just one side of the Kristevan coin of maternal representation; Kaja Silverman also applies Kristeva extensively to her work on cinema, and dedicates a substantial portion of *The Acoustic Mirror: the Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (1988) to the maternal voice and Kristeva's 'chora'<sup>5</sup> (which, in opposition to the abject, forefronts the comforting and creative elements of

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<sup>5</sup> Developed in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974).

motherhood) and its application to film theory. These analyses work well, and there is much potential for further application of Kristeva's theories within film theory.

Sarah Arnold examines motherhood in American and Japanese horror cinema in *Maternal Horror Film: Melodrama and Motherhood* (2013). As the title suggests, there is further focus on melodrama; she asserts the similarities between the two most popularly discussed maternal genres, though claims of symmetry are at times forced. Arnold is interested in the theme of maternal sacrifice common to melodrama and horror. A main development of Creed's work is to assert that the 'abject' mother is not the only maternal figure in horror films, drawing a distinction between 'good' and 'bad' mother types (well-established in critical theory on motherhood) and their applications within horror. She asks if one or several essential type(s) of mother can be located in horror cinema.

My thesis does not include horror films, and hence does not seek to develop the work done on this genre's specific maternal fascination. What is of use, however, is the theoretical work on motherhood, the return of the repressed and psychic processes in filmic representations emerging from these discussions. Seeing melodrama and horror as particular symptomatic enunciations of these topics rather than as fundamental to them will allow a development of the theoretical elements in a versatile and non-genre-dependent manner.

Two final major works on motherhood and cinema to mention, which move beyond the established traditions, are Lucy Fischer's *Cinematernity: Film, Motherhood, Genre* (1996) and Betty Jay's *Weird Lullabies: Mothers and Daughters in Contemporary Film* (2008). Fischer seeks explicitly to move beyond the sphere of melodrama, although this entails a review of work on maternal melodrama, returning to the pantheon with *Stella Dallas*, *Now, Voyager* and *Mildred Pierce* (1945). She then offers analyses of representations of motherhood across several lesser-explored genres, including crime film, comedy, thrillers and experimental film, emphasising the possibility of a broader study of mothers in cinema, and helping to counteract the danger faced by the field of being entirely subsumed within a small number of modes. However, in resisting melodrama more or less on its own terms, *Cinematernity* still complies with the idea that genre *must* be engaged with on some level. Though it is fair to argue that general patterns of motherhood depictions might be observed within

genres, this overlooks potentially fruitful analysis of films that do not conform easily to generic forms. Furthermore, Fischer's work is limited to North American cinema, excepting a short analysis of Chantal Akerman's New York-based documentary, *News from Home* (1977). Jay investigates mainly North American films produced from the 1990s onwards and uses intersectional feminist methodology to explore representations of mother-daughter relationships therein. She investigates traditional ideologies of motherhood, and how these set narratives can be disrupted, creating new space for mother-daughter bonding. However, her work could be taken further in terms of application of critical theory (she limits herself generally to American theorists, whereas European feminist theorists would provide some apposite insights).

No major work has yet been published that deals primarily with representations of motherhood in European cinema. Motherhood does appear incidentally within more general work on these cinemas, and these areas will be discussed within the body of my thesis in relation to specific themes. However, these discussions remain fairly sporadic and often theoretically unembellished, hence there is abundant academic space in which to develop a deeper comparative analysis of this material. Within studies on the representation of motherhood in cinema, there are clear limitations of national cinema, canon and genre, which has largely excluded European films and non-Hollywood genres. Furthermore, European feminist methodologies, which offer potentially illuminating insights on this topic, have been less popularly utilised. Within work on European cinemas, there has been no major unified thesis on this topic, despite being given some attention in broader works on particular directors or movements. Some work in this area is strong on historical context, but a deeper analysis could benefit from a more cohesive theoretical approach and focused close readings.

### **Chapter Outline**

This introduction concludes with a case study of François Truffaut's *Les 400 coups* (1959), an emblematic film of the *nouvelle vague* that has been strongly critically associated with motherhood, in which I apply the psychoanalytic and feminist theories discussed above to address oedipal models as structuring narratives of mother-son relationships. Following this, my thesis is divided into three main chapters. The first, *Conception*, focuses on canonical films from the French new wave

and English 'kitchen sink' cycle and deals with the conceptual construction of the son-as-subject, mother-as-object. I examine the imagination of the family from patriarchal and filially-focused perspectives and how this erases the mothering subject. In particular, I discuss how this absenting discourse of motherhood interweaves with meditations on consumerism and mass culture that were prevalent in French and English cinema during this period. The first section, 'Maternal Products and the British Kitchen Sink: *A Kind of Loving*', takes John Schlesinger's *A Kind of Loving* (1962) and other English social realist films and argues that the mother in the home is produced by the films' masculine identification as a particular kind of figure for the dangers of consumer culture, and that the 'bad mother', preoccupied with material objects, represents a threat of domestication and objectification that the hero must overcome in order to maintain his subjectivity. The second section, 'Variations on Theme: the Mass-Reproduction of Mothering in Varda and Godard', looks at more critical approaches to this idea in works by Agnès Varda and Jean-Luc Godard.

The second chapter, *Gestation*, concentrates on the representation of unplanned pregnancy in film. With a close focus on abortion and reproductive rights, I look at how these issues are represented in cinema, relating this, where relevant, to contemporaneous debates around the decriminalisation of abortion in both countries. This chapter not only looks at moments of ambivalence in experiences of pregnancy, but also considers thinking on abortion as a 'gestational' moment for ideas on motherhood, as such debates as occurred in Britain and France essentially pit the rights of existing women against those of an as-yet imagined child. The first part, 'Victimhood, Trauma and Independence: Ambivalent Narratives of Reproductive Rights in Swinging London and Beyond', takes films from the 'kitchen sink' and 'Swinging London' cycles of films, and analyses the representation of abortion experiences from the identificatory perspectives of male and female characters, focusing in particular on their construction of guilt and victimhood. 'Sympathy for the Devil: Displaying and Re-Writing the Victim of Abortion in French Melodrama and New Wave Cinema' concentrates on how the idea of the female 'victim' of abortion is presented in French film. This is framed initially by a discussion of the solicitation of sympathy through excessive victimhood in earlier French melodramas, before moving onto a discussion of how the *nouvelle vague* tends to subvert this trend. The final part of this section is then dedicated to a close reading of Agnès Varda's *L'Une*

*chante, l'autre pas* (1977), which reflects explicitly on the reproductive rights movement in France.

Finally, Chapter 3, *Delivery*, deals with the emergence of films that problematize the homogeneity of mainstream motherhood narratives. Focusing on the idea of 'mothering in the margins', this chapter deals with difference within experiences and representations of mothering practices and kinship structures that are not addressed by the types of ideological mothering constructions critiqued within this introduction. 'Whose Lineage is it Anyway?: Black Motherhood, Queer Communities and Exclusionary Practices in the Ideology of the Child' looks at expressions of racial and sexual difference and how the films I have chosen represent the negotiation of these identities alongside erasing stereotypes of motherhood. The final part, 'Embodying the Absent Mother in Feminist Film Practice' draws together many of the ideas from the previous sections. Here, I use close readings of Varda's *L'Opéra Mouffe* (1962) and Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977) as exemplary works of critical engagement with the problems and tensions of dominant motherhood ideologies. I examine how each film applies feminist thought and theory in order to create original articulations and aesthetic discourses of mothering that illustrate the heterogeneity of mothering subjects.

The title of this dissertation, *Mothering in the Third Person*, reflects descriptions of the *nouvelle vague* as 'cinema in the first person' (described in Emma Wilson: 1999: 18-19) and also Geneviève Sellier's critical rendering of this as cinema 'in the first person masculine singular' (Sellier: 2008: 7). It is intended to highlight how the assumption of usually young and masculine storytelling voices within the highly personal domestic cinemas of this period (to which the themes of gender, sex and family are often highly important) might also appropriate the narratives and identities of mothers within these stories. The fundamental question addressed by this thesis is whether and how mothering subjects are made absent by the supposed primacy of the (paradigmatically masculine) child-as-subject. Throughout the thesis, I use the term 'mothering subjects' in order to distinguish the individualised, diverse and complex people who mother from the more generalised ideological image of 'the mother' as a symptom of patriarchal discourse. I aim to examine the representation of both 'the mother' and mothering subjects within the films I discuss.

## Case Study

### *Fragments of Jocasta in Les 400 coups*

François Truffaut's *Les 400 coups* (1959) is one of the defining films of the *nouvelle vague*, and a landmark of European cinema. The *nouvelle vague* represented an ambitious and creative new generation of young filmmakers and an innovative approach to filmmaking that foregrounded the concerns of youth and personal, individual stories, and sought to artistically exploit the specific potentiality of film as a medium.<sup>6</sup> The theories that underpinned this had been collecting for some years.<sup>7</sup> One of the ontological propositions on the nature of filmmaking was Alexandre Astruc's suggestion in his article on the 'caméra-stylo'<sup>8</sup> that 'cinema will gradually break free from the tyranny of what is visual, from the image for its own sake, from the immediate and concrete demands of the narrative, to become a means of writing just as flexible and subtle as written language' (Astruc: 1948: 32). This notion of film 'écriture' (Sellier: 2001: 127) was partly articulated through a highly personal approach to storytelling in many new wave films, often focusing on the narratives and psychologies of individual protagonists (usually young men), with whom the viewer is expected to identify (*ibid*: 126). It has become a critical commonplace for feminist scholars to critique the gendered organisation of the new wave, concerning both the 'ontological misogyny' (*ibid*: 98) of the representation of women and the paucity of *auteurs*.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the conceptual origins of the movement are frequently narrativised as an intergenerational masculine saga of competing potencies, seeing Truffaut and the *Cahiers* group as engaged in a revolt against their cinematic forefathers or the '*cinéma de papa*'. Commentators have highlighted the oedipal overtones of this construction (Hayward: 1993: 238; Wilson: 1999; 14; Sellier: 2008: 5). A discourse of sons and fathers, therefore, underlies the concept (and the 'conception', immaculate and motherless in its way) of new wave cinema in France.

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<sup>6</sup> James Monaco (1976), Susan Hayward (1993) and Emma Wilson (1999) provide detailed analysis of the historical and conceptual contexts around the *nouvelle vague*, and its stylistic trends and prominent concerns and subjects.

<sup>7</sup> In his introduction, Monaco (1976) sets out some of the key precedent theorists and ideas whose work informed the *nouvelle vague* movement, including Alexandre Astruc and André Bazin's moral realism.

<sup>8</sup> 'Camera-pen'.

<sup>9</sup> Susan Hayward (1993), Susan Hayward and Ginette Vincendeau (2000), Genviève Sellier (2001) and Emma Wilson (1999) are particularly engaged with gender in their analyses of the *nouvelle vague* and French cinema generally.

In the case of Truffaut in particular, the language of oedipal paternalism is more than idle allegorising. Aside from his real-life connection with André Bazin, who ‘fut pour lui plus qu’un père’ (Collet: 1972: 75),<sup>10</sup> and who nurtured his cinematic talent, it is well-documented how the themes of neglected children and absent parents, and the unhappy familial figures of the unjustly maligned son, the cruel and distant, yet physically appealing, mother, and palliative paternal surrogates (corresponding to various magnitudes of adequacy) constitute ongoing concerns in Truffaut’s work to the point of obsessiveness. This is certainly the case for his semi-autobiographical Doinel cycle, which begins with *Les 400 coups*.<sup>11</sup> The collective oeuvre of the *nouvelle vague* has been variously defined as ‘cinema in the first person masculine singular’ (Sellier: 2008) and ‘*cinéma des jeunes*’ (Hayward: 1993: 232). Considering this alongside the abundance of filial/paternalistic metaphors surrounding the movement, as well as the presence of literal and figurative depictions of family throughout the films themselves, I suggest that the *nouvelle vague* represents with particular lucidity a type of ‘cinema of the son’.

Many interpretations of Truffaut are what we might call ‘with the grain’ readings in terms of gender, taking him on his own terms to uncritically gloss themes such as the search for a maternal lover, or the man-as-artist/woman-as-art truism that recurs frequently in his films, including in the Doinel cycle. Don Allen, for instance, categorises the major themes of Truffaut’s work thus:

...the importance and difficulty of friendship, especially male friendship; the role of women – are they magic? are they unique? are they dream goddesses, mother figures or whores? – the fascination with language and especially the written word; the conflict between the provisional and the definitive; the obsession with obsession; the complete intoxication with cinema and the tendency to take refuge in it as being ‘more harmonious than life’; the increasing preoccupation with absolutes. (Allen: 1985: 8)

The fact that the question of women (without any pause on the part of the author as to whether or not questions such as ‘are women dream goddesses, mother figures

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<sup>10</sup> Who ‘was more than a father to [Truffaut]’.

<sup>11</sup> The cycle consists of five films made over a twenty year period and follows the character Antoine Doinel, portrayed throughout by Jean-Pierre Léaud, from childhood to adulthood.

or whores?’ are relevant, or whether these are indeed the only options) is blended in amongst questions of language, art and male relations (which, unlike female relations, are not synonymous with men themselves) seems indicative of a tacit collusion with Truffaut in understanding women (and mothers) as objects within masculine experiences and identity discourses. Annette Insdorf (1994) also sees the ‘Are women magic?’ question as central to Truffaut’s work and concerns, and dedicates an entire chapter to this theme in her book on the director, in which she mounts a defence of Truffaut’s representation of women, arguing that he has created ‘a rather bizarre gallery of rich female portraits’ (1994: 105). Though she does acknowledge that ‘Truffaut’s females are often portrayed as existing less in, of, and for themselves than as realizations of male visions’ (*ibid*: 115), she does not press the issue, and ultimately also reads ‘with the grain’ regarding Truffaut’s discourse of masculinity, women and art. The favouring of male subjectivity is clearest in her analysis of *L’homme qui aimait les femmes* (1977), which is highly sympathetic to the film’s womanising hero, seeing Bertrand’s pursuit of strange women for sex as comedic, and excusing any predatory or manipulative behaviour on his part as victimhood; ‘Bertrand’s frenetic flirting must be traced not only to the rejection by his mother, but to his painful separation from the one woman he truly loved’ (*ibid*: 206).

This dynamic has also been recognised in *Les 400 coups* and the wider Doinel cycle. Antoine is presented as a frustrated, but potentially very capable, artist, whilst his mother is simultaneously love object, subject matter, and stumbling block. In-keeping with the privileging of the filial perspective, many readings of the film are markedly sympathetic to Antoine (for instance, Fanne: 1972, Collet: 1977). Diane Holmes and Robert Ingram (1994) also employ psychoanalytic readings to discuss gender and motherhood in Truffaut’s work. Their intention is to consider the body of criticism that sees Truffaut as misogynistic and mother-hating and provide a ‘case for the defence’ in rebuttal. However, their argument relies mainly on the presence of childish or passive male characters and the occasional introduction of a feminine voice in Truffaut’s films. The mother figure is a consistent concern in their thesis, but does not come off well, presented more or less as a polarised ideal or castrating archetype, positioned at the heart of her son’s emotional struggles. Though they attempt to defend the complexity and richness of Truffaut’s female love-interest characters, little effort is made to redeem the mother from the mire of objectification.

There are some instances of explicit criticism of Truffaut's imbalanced representations of mothers; Françoise Audé goes as far as to claim 'François Truffaut est devenu le cinéaste de la haine de la mère. De *sa* mère'<sup>12</sup> (Audé: 1981: 49). However, even some interpretations of *Les 400 coups* that explicitly focus on gender often end up speaking in collusion with the son. In Gillain's (2013) application of Winnicottian theory on childhood and delinquency to the film, for instance, though this is an interesting and novel approach, she ends up speaking in a fairly traditional psychoanalytic voice, suggesting the mother as little more than a function in the development of her child's psyche. Similarly, Geneviève Sellier (2008), despite using a feminist methodological structure that draws on Kristeva, Derrida and Irigaray, amongst others, agrees with Gillain that the 'unloving mother' is at the centre of Truffaut's work and psychology, but does not much challenge the 'bad mother' construction.

Various critics have used different psychoanalytic lenses in examining this relationship, but the applications too often use an understanding of psychoanalysis that synthesises but does not question the hierarchically subjugated position of the mother, and fails to reflect significant feminist critiques of psychoanalytic theories. My analysis will engage with the existing critical body by developing psychoanalytic interpretations from a feminist position that recognises the multi-directionality of the mother-child relationship. Whilst it is important to acknowledge that Antoine is, of course, the film's protagonist, and the subject of an intense psychological portrait, my approach will develop our understanding of *Les 400 coups* by unpicking various ideologies and assumptions that structure its depiction of motherhood. I do not intend to argue that representation of the mother as a secondary or supporting character is in itself problematic. What I do contend, however, is that it is assumed, by the vast majority of Truffaut critics as much as by the film, that the mother has *no possibility* of subjectivity, that she does not exist outside of how the child perceives and creates her. Attached to this is also the rigid mythmaking of the absolutely good or bad mother. By taking such a seminal and widely discussed film as a case study, I hope to demonstrate how entrenched ideologies can operate implicitly in highly visible representations of mothers.

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<sup>12</sup> 'François Truffaut has become the *cinéaste* of hatred for the mother. For *his* mother.'

Though the narrative attention of *Les 400 coups* is clearly and pronouncedly centred on Antoine, the figure of the mother is at the psychological heart of the film. It bears emphasising, however, that the mothering subject is not; Gilberte Doinel is represented as a relative figure, present only as a term of filial meaning and self-narrativisation. In this sense, the film's maternal representations fall into a typical pattern of the 'good' or 'bad' mother representational binary; spectres of both poles are present in this film. *Les 400 coups* conforms to the archetypal cultural paradigm of the 'split' mother, a fantasy of maternalism as either ideal or terrible, with little complexity in between.<sup>13</sup> The good and bad mother archetypes are essentially defined according to their correspondence to the development of the child's subjectivity, a proposition which is in this case supported amply by the mechanics of the film, as acknowledged by Holmes and Ingram: 'In Truffaut's first full-length film, the mother is seen only through the eyes of her son – as intensely desirable, emotionally and sexually, and as cruelly unattainable' (1994: 118). The fantasies of goodness and evil that underlie this maternal representation, mediated through the subjectivity of the son, both engender an absent mother. Antoine's idealised mother image is without substance, existing only in accordance with his desires. His 'bad' mother is too distant and denigrated in absentia as cruel, vain and heinously neglectful.

The phantasm of an ideal mother created by Antoine in *Les 400 coups* is, in typically Freudian fashion, substantially connected to the maternal body. Gilberte Doinel herself is clearly a fetishized figure, presented as dangerously and frustratingly seductive. As has been discussed, corporeality is a paramount consideration in cultural imaginations and representations of motherhood; whether Freud's forbidden Jocasta, D.W. Winnicott's 'good enough' holding environment (1965), Klein's good and bad breasts (1955; 1956), or the poles of abjection and sanctity described by Kristeva (1980a), amongst innumerable other representations from religious and secular art, as well as science and sociology, the maternal body has been colonised by objectifying discourses of symbolisation, remarkably few of which belong to the mother herself. In Antoine's case, the relation to his mother is achingly oedipal; her body is greatly desired, and an object of masculine competition, with little regard for the mother as a subjective agent.

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<sup>13</sup> See Melanie Klein: 1955 and 1956, and Rozsika Parker: 2005.

Her sexually objectified and appealing body is also broken down into parts. The motif of women's legs as a fetish object recurs almost obsessively in Truffaut's films, and is generally attached to the maternal. Gillain analyses in particular detail the image of women's legs on staircases, asserting 'This shot is seminal in Truffaut's films, and legs will remain forever linked to maternal exhibitionism and sexual appeal' (2000: 148). This shot is first drawn attention to in *Les 400 coups*. After an elating family outing to the cinema, feeling particularly pleased with himself and happily confirmed in his status as patriarch, Monsieur Doinel seizes his wife's leg on the stairs and shows it to Antoine. She rebukes him, but only jokingly. However, at this point in the narrative, Gilberte has a vested interest in establishing ostensible family harmony, as Antoine has recently discovered her during a liaison with another man, and the cinema trip is part of a ploy to placate him through offering the maternal affection he desires, thereby soliciting his silence. Nonetheless, there is a sense in which this sequence of (albeit fraudulent) familial happiness suggests things as they 'should' be, with everything (son, father, mother) in its right place. This includes the imposition of paternal authority in the figure of the father; Doinel's grabbing of the leg instructs Antoine in manly desire, but sets limitations, showing that Gilberte is *his*. Of course, knowledge of the affair ensures that this circumstance is merely aspirational. However, Gilberte is simulating the 'good mother', and relinquishing her body to a masculine-oedipal narrative of desire and possession comes with this territory.

In *Les 400 coups*, the camera becomes a co-conspirator in Antoine's desire for the mother. Given the film's clear aesthetic and narrative anchoring on Antoine, and the purely relative objectification of his mother, it is straightforward to observe an expression of Mulvey's paradigm of the gendered gaze at work in this film:

In the world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (Mulvey: 1975: 19)

The mechanics of the cinematography in *Les 400 coups* certainly support this dynamic. In the scenes in the flat that involve Antoine and Gilberte alone together, the closely-focused shots of Antoine solicit intimacy, empathy and understanding from the spectator, whilst the representation of Gilberte, whose image is by contrast remote and fleeting, often broken up visually into desirable parts, resists identification but invites voyeurism. This is particularly apparent in the first scene in which Gilberte appears, in which Antoine watches her remove her stockings, and also in the scenes in which Antoine pretends to be asleep in bed as Gilberte walks through his room, first in a nightgown and elegant slippers, and later in an evening dress, fur coat and high heels. The camerawork here consistently follows Antoine's face, whilst Gilberte's image is severed, her significance reduced to just a pair of glamorous legs. The only instance in which Gilberte is represented without Antoine is the brief moment after she has sent him out to buy flour in which she looks at her face in the mirror. However, the fact that even alone she is symbolised by a mirror-image reaffirms her position as a visual object. In this instance she enjoys her own body and takes control of her image, yet this is not framed as politicised subversion, but as simple narcissism, a jealous guarding of a property (her body) which, according to the laws of patriarchal culture, does not belong to her.

Desire for the mother and the maternal body run through the film as thematic veins. According to Gillain, 'In *Les 400 coups*, the underlying plot expresses a passionate desire for fusion with a maternal figure. This desire is not presented as real, for Madame Doinel will never fulfil it, but as the expression of a haunting nostalgia' (2000: 149). Gillain's location of Antoine's nostalgia for the mother at the psychological heart of the film is justified. However, in Antoine's case, I suggest that this longing is for an idealised maternal *relation*. 'Wholeness' here indicates that of the child, whose 'good mother' has been swallowed up, allowing him to introject maternal love to bolster his development into a powerful and productive citizen. Antoine's arrested longing to be mothered is suggested as a sign of undernourishment, and therefore indicative of her failure as the 'good' mother, who is passive, self-less and subordinate, a ready resource for her son. However, the discourse of good or bad mothering deals in absolutes; the 'bad mother's' failings are comprehensive in character.

Having established the empty and remote spectre of the ideal mother that she is not, the film seeks to denigrate Gilberte into the pandemonium of arch maternal failures for her unwillingness or incapacity to equal the lofty cultural demands of filial devotion. The purported terribleness of her failure to provide a comprehensive self-sacrifice is made even more urgent by the location of Antoine at the cusp of creative potency,<sup>14</sup> suggesting that maternal negligence is not only irresponsible to the child as an individual citizen, but also arrests the development of culture itself, which is, after all, imaginarily located within the son. Commentators often seem eager to condemn her in equally damning terms; Holmes and Ingram capture the pervasive critical mood in their summation of Gilberte Doinel:

Madame Doinel is the archetypal ‘bad mother’, refusing to provide the maternal warmth and protection associated with breast and womb, self-absorbed and indifferent to her son’s emotional and confusedly erotic desires. (1998: 117)

There are far worse and more abusive mothers in the history of European cultural representation; there are worse fathers in abundance; there are even worse and more irresponsible parents within the film (specifically, René’s alcoholic mother and gambling father), but the demands of maternal idealism are remarkably unforgiving.

Gilberte’s ‘bad’ mothering in *Les 400 coups* appears rooted in a mis-ordering of presence and absence, according to the dictum of a filially-focused narrative of subjectivity. The mother’s presence and absence are a necessary component of the child’s coming to subjectivity;<sup>15</sup> understanding the mother’s absence and otherness is the term against which the child defines his selfhood, ultimately coming to desire separation. The ‘good mother’ acquiesces passively in this process. The ‘bad mother’, however, brokers presence and absence on her own terms, providing a threatening excess of one or the other. *Les 400 coups* portrays Antoine as a victim of a self-ishly absent mother, the accusation of which resonates from the first scene in which Gilberte is imaginatively ‘featured’, which in fact precedes her physical entrance. Home alone, Antoine surreptitiously enters Gilberte’s bedroom and sits by her dressing table. There

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<sup>14</sup> Scholarship on Antoine and the role of writing in the Doinel cycle is extensive, and frequently conforms to a narrative of masculinist creative subjectivity. Jean Collet (1977) looks in detail at the theme of writing in *Les 400 coups* specifically.

<sup>15</sup> This is well-explained, with reference to Lacan’s Seminar X, in Fink: 1995.

are three mirrors in shot, meaning that Antoine is surrounded by self-images. After stealing some loose money, he enters the bedroom and proceeds to handle Gilberte's various belongings, using her brushes, smelling her scents, even operating her eyelash curler. This could be read (possibly in a Kleinian spirit of the plundering child) as an unwelcome intrusion into the space that the mother keeps for herself, perhaps into her body as well, given the physical and sensual connotations of the selected possessions. However, in the broader context of the film, the scene is far more likely to be understood as an effort on Antoine's part to compensate for an absence of maternal comforts.

The compulsion to sympathise entirely with Antoine and his psychic struggles is emphasised by the multiplication of his image in the mirrors, which Gillain argues 'suggests a painful fragmentation of his personality that has occurred in his quest for a stable identity' (2013: 28), and which foregrounds the identity discourse of the child. Gillain further emphasises the centrality of longing for the mother, arguing that this scene particularly 'expresses a wistful nostalgia for an absent mother' (*ibid*). Jean Collet also offers an interesting description of this scene: 'Par le parfum, en jouant avec la pince à cils, *Antoine introduit sa mère dans la scène*'<sup>16</sup> (1977: 45, my emphasis). Antoine's reconstruction of the absent mother figure in this impactful scene suggests his capacity to symbolise independently the comforting maternal environment he lacks: the self-less and devoted mother who will become part of him. What is particularly interesting in the aesthetics here is the erasure of the 'actual' mother from a scene that is so maternal in nature. Stories about mothers, as told paradigmatically from the focal point of their sons, do not require the presence of the woman herself.<sup>17</sup> Good or bad, his account will posture towards comprehensive authenticity.

The mirror scene is only the first in a series of images in *Les 400 coups* that writers have identified as maternal symbols. The mother is in fact symbolised ubiquitously throughout the film through a dialectic process of absence and substitution which keeps identification with a mothering subject at bay. Maternal

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<sup>16</sup> 'By the perfume, in playing with the eyelash clip, *Antoine introduces his mother into the scene.*' (My emphasis)

<sup>17</sup> My reading of this scene is informed by Mary Ann Doane's (1981) work on the absence of women from stories 'about' them in her analysis of scenes from *Caught* and *Rebecca*.

visual and semantic metaphors that have been highlighted critically include the sea,<sup>18</sup> Paris,<sup>19</sup> and the fairground rotor (*ibid*: 47-48; Gillain: 2000: 145). What is significant about these signs of motherhood and absence generally is that they suggest a fond effort on the part of Antoine and the film itself to displace the ‘bad’ mothering subject and fill the space of exile with an ideal ghost. This is in fact in-keeping with a discursive economy of filial subjective sovereignty that expects an endless tithe of maternal nourishment, but which does not require (indeed, cannot support) the presence of the mothering subject. The figurative creations of motherly love are altogether more manageable. Most commentators see these moments of maternal imagery in *Les 400 coups* as symptomatic of Antoine’s tragically stunted oedipal development, and the mother’s cruel and wilful deprivation. Yet they may also be read as strategies of resistance against the knowledge of maternal ambivalence<sup>20</sup> and subjectivity, writing her out of expression and reinstating the cathected and self-less mother-object patriarchy understands as its entitlement. The mother, in this case, remains the expressive property of the son. Rather than confront the mother’s subjectivity and independent identity, it is easier to cast off her inevitable self-ishness as wholly and irredeemably bad, leaving a residue of pliant maternal symbolism for the son to shape according to the law of phallogocentrism.

Gilberte is demonised for not completely sacrificing her-self to the needs of her son, and for being the ‘too-absent’ mother. What she *does* with her independence, however, is rarely represented. One of the few encounters with Gilberte outside the home occurs in the scene in which Antoine discovers her infidelity. A carefree and childishly gleeful sequence of Antoine and René’s playful truancy is jarringly interrupted as Antoine catches sight of his mother, dressed in her glamorous furs, kissing another man in the street. Collet describes this scene:

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<sup>18</sup> Holmes and Ingram have pointed out the near-homophony of *la mer* (the sea) and *la mère* (the mother) and the qualitative links between the figures (1998: 118); Antoine imagines the sea as a distant and unknown, but greatly appealing, presence, which he longs to experience. However, when, at the end of the film, he does reach the sea, it too is found to be disappointing; they argue that it becomes a metaphor for the maternal love Antoine craves; ‘the sea/mother presents no escape, so that Antoine turns back towards the camera and ends the film on a freeze-frame of irresolution’ (*ibid*).

<sup>19</sup> Paris is read by Gillain as ‘a maternal space which shelters [Antoine], protects his games, hides and feeds him’ (2000: 149).

<sup>20</sup> The concept of ‘maternal ambivalence’ has been interestingly developed in Wendy Hollway and Brid Featherstone (eds.), *Mothering and Ambivalence* (1989) and Parker, Rozsika, *Torn in Two: the Experience of Maternal Ambivalence*, London, Virago, 2005.

la trahison de la mère enferme Antoine dans sa propre trahison. La mère s'évade avec son amant, Antoine doit trouver lui aussi une évasion, il doit quitter le cercle familial qui vient d'éclater. Il est condamné à fuir dans un mouvement centrifuge qui s'emballe. Comme si la paroi du rotor venait de céder, projetant l'enfant dans l'espace et dans le vide, très loin.<sup>21</sup> (1977: 48)

He rightly emphasises the symmetry of this encounter between mother and son. In fact, this could be seen as potentially the closest we come to Gilberte's psychology; after all, the aesthetic parallel between the two, both startled and caught off guard in an illicit activity of rebellion or escape, in the shot/reverse shot is clear and pointed. The cinematographic mirroring might suggest a deeper psychological comparison; we have been readily offered insight into the emotional significance of rebellion and escape for Antoine, and we might at this stage interpret Gilberte's experience through his. Gillain, in fact, (briefly) does just this, suggesting that she might be understood as 'like her son, an imprisoned child who longs to roam the streets of Paris with her lover' (2000: 153). However, these are crumbs from the table of the expressible. Aside from this shot, the episode is framed as a significant psychological drama for *Antoine*. The fact that her 'unruly' desire, which he witnesses, is not for him *or* for the 'father' engenders further chaos as it is a betrayal of husband and son, and an affront to masculine narrative. Collet describes it thus: 'Enfin, l'adultère de la mère et le jeu du rotor, par leur contiguïté, définissent ensemble un autre Antoine. Jusqu'ici il avait cherché son visage dans les miroirs de sa mère. Désormais, sa mère ne peut plus lui donner une identité'<sup>22</sup> (1977 : 48). This is essentially a story of masculine relations; Gilberte has not stopped being his mother, nor has she literally altered the biological details of his past. What she has done is thrown into catastrophe the *myth* of origins, the patrilineal 'legal fiction' of naming and identity.<sup>23</sup> Gilberte is represented as profoundly guilty for failing to hold together Antoine's self-narrative.

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<sup>21</sup> 'the mother's betrayal immures Antoine in his own betrayal. The mother escapes from him with her lover, Antoine must also find an escape, he must leave the family circle which is about to shatter. He is condemned to flee in a centrifugal motion which carries him away. As if the wall of the rotor has given way, launching the child into space and into the void, very far away.'

<sup>22</sup> 'Ultimately, the mother's adultery and the game of the rotor, by their adjacency, jointly define another Antoine. Until this point, he has searched for his face in his mother's mirrors. Henceforth, his mother can no longer give him an identity.'

<sup>23</sup> My understanding of naming and the 'legal fiction' of paternity is informed by Sandra Gilbert and Sarah Gubar: 2000: 5.

The film's condemnation of the father is far less intense than that of the mother. The representation of Doinel's character also goes beyond the role of 'father'; he is concomitantly identified through his workspace, his interests (such as the Michelin guide), and his hobbies (he attends motor racing events in his free time). Gilberte's only passion is demonstrated through her affair, but we know nothing of any independent pastimes; conversely, she seems to disrupt (masculine) leisure time. This is particularly in evidence in the scenes that take place within the Doinels' home. A sort of masculine camaraderie is in effect between Antoine and Doinel, which operates in opposition to Gilberte. This intertwines with various spatial tensions in the domestic scenes of *Les 400 coups*. From the opening credits sequence of restless, low-angle travelling shots on the streets of Paris, seen by Collet as the viewpoint of a child running away (1977: 51), writers have identified a flowing aesthetic and phenomenological tension between confinement and freedom as fundamental to the visual poetics of the film. For Collet, this is expressed through an atmosphere of suffocation and the will to escape (1972: 82-84); for Valéry Hugotte (1994) it is a question of the young boy's indefatigable search for the spaces of release and gleeful disobedience within the panopticon of parental law. The film establishes a clear coding of inside-as-confinement, outside-as-release. The main interior sets are cramped, over-peopled and claustrophobic; camera movements are inhibited, and there is a higher instance of static shots. Outside, a lighter cinematographic touch is employed. The camerawork becomes instantly more playful; a greater variety of distances are used, the movements are markedly animated, and a lively score is introduced. It is clear that the use of space in *Les 400 coups* is an expression of Antoine's psychological experiences and attitudes. However, it is also interesting to consider the treatment of the mother in space.

The politics of space within the Doinel home underscore a familial division with Antoine and his father on one side and Gilberte on the other. In the scenes that include the whole family, the men are generally the subjects of the (static) shots. In the first scene in which they all feature, the men sit at the dinner table and talk about the passions and interests through which they transcend domestic drudgery. Gilberte exists within an entirely different axis of space to them; Antoine may be relatively constricted, and the camera, coded to identify with him, may be similarly static, but Gilberte's agitated and constant flurry of activity problematises this. She ebbs and

flows fragmentarily in and out of shot, navigating the depths and shallows of the mise-en-scène, sometimes sliced up by doorways, sometimes an isolated limb. This tirelessness is required of the 'good', passive mother, in order that she provide a seamlessly harmonious home, but she is expected to go about her domestic labour invisibly. Gilberte, who is certainly not invisible, comes to be represented as a figure of pure antagonism, obstructing masculine leisure. This is visually expressed in the scene in which Doinel and Antoine unfurl a large motor-racing banner across a room; Doinel is keen to show Antoine the banner, which is symbolic of 'masculine' leisure activities that father and son can potentially share and bond over. Gilberte emerges from behind the banner, shouting at them, and they soon roll it up again. The indication seems to be that domesticity and passion cannot coexist, especially in the presence of an overly vocal mother. Gilberte does not manage her presence and absence according to filial demands; she cannot make herself invisible when required, and does not make herself visible when desired. When she is not being portrayed as a remote and cathected sexually objectified bauble, she is reduced to caustic background noise and visual disturbance. The present mother does not match the absent fantasy; denigration of the 'real' mother is simpler than mourning the death of the illusion.

An exacting maternal ideology that militates against the representation of a coherent and complex mothering subject runs throughout *Les 400 coups*. The aesthetic and narrative mechanics of the film work to collude systematically with the male child as sovereign subject, his active engagement with culture and his movement towards acquisition of the paternal mantle of mature masculinity. The narrative corresponds to a psychological tableau-vivant of arrested oedipal development, of which the mother imago is held obsessively and bitter-sweetly at the heart, a childish finger-painting covering over the absence of the mothering subject. She is intensely desired, yet remote; the constructed idea of the good, marian mother is cherished, but Gilberte is condemned mercilessly for failing to embody it. However, the 'good' and 'bad' mothers are entirely produced by the son. Any notion of an independent subject capable of ambivalence and self-expression is closed off inside an imaginary monument within the filial psyche that is at once an altar to worship at and an effigy to burn. The figure produced, furthermore, is fractured and partial. Irigaray describes the violence of the relational representation of the mother:

Hasn't the mother already been torn to pieces by Oedipus's hatred by the time she is cut up into stages, with each part of her body having to be cathected and then decathected as he grows up? And when Freud speaks of the father being torn to pieces by the sons of the primal horde, doesn't he forget, in a complete misrecognition and disavowal, the woman who was torn apart between son and father, between sons? (1991:38)

As I have shown, Gilberte, Jocasta to the Truffauldian Oedipus, is cut to pieces visually, critically, expressively, narratively and psychologically in *Les 400 coups*.

## **Chapter 1: Conception**

### *1.0 – Introduction*

At the heart of what I have discussed so far is the fundamental proposition that the mother and child couple are paradigmatically cast in an imbalanced relation that predetermines the child as subject and the mother as object. In an even more ideologically rigid formulation of the gendered hierarchy that underlies relations between men and women, representations of this couple tend to place the son on the side of culture, action and authenticity and relegate the mother to the opposing pole of passivity and shallowness. This section, on ‘maternal products’, will look in more detail at domestic objects, the environment of the home and the mother’s place within it as represented in English and French film in this era, and will explore how a discourse of domestic spaces and commodities is used to reflect on or reinforce ideological templates of motherhood and the mother figure in the family home.

The post-war period of the twentieth century was a time of great cultural, social and economic change in France and the United Kingdom. Mass culture and mass production became hugely important social concerns and cultural themes, alongside intermeshed discourses of globalisation, decolonisation and the decline of European empires, and the cultural sovereignty of a U.S.A. seen through a pristine Hollywood lens. The rhythms of cultural, political and economic change in Europe can scarcely be disentangled; a healthy post-war economy and means of production led by American capitalism precipitated general improvement in material standards of living, accompanied by a wealth of new cultural forms and technologies that revolutionised the faces of the British and French every-day. On the other hand, the role of Britain and France on the world stage was changing, as their empires rapidly shrank throughout the mid-twentieth century, marked particularly by independence conflicts in India and Algeria. As their political global presence diminished, the cultural pseudo-empire of the United States only continued to grow. Much change, furthermore, was in evidence within the private and domestic spheres; the frequency with which accounts of this period in Europe draw on empirical measures of and metaphorising language around domestic commodities (mainly white goods, but also entertainment

technologies, such as the television) as a pre-eminently crystallising expression of societal change and progress is striking.<sup>24</sup>

Attitudes of French and British publics to this swiftly transforming culture, however, were deeply ambivalent. True enough, certain camps met these cultural and technological developments with a great deal of enthusiasm, but others, equally, responded with nostalgic anxiety.<sup>25</sup> John Hill describes these attitudes in Britain:

Mass production, it was argued, eschewed the values of individual design and craftsmanship in favour of an imposed standardisation and phoney egalitarianism of taste; while the mass media (particularly television, with its subservience to ratings and advertisers) necessarily gravitated towards the popular and lowest common denominator. (1986: 12)

Concern was expressed by politicians, artists and commentators that the commodification of everyday life and the influx of mass production and consumer culture would engender cultural poverty:

Politicians of all shades regarded affluence as cloaking real economic achievement or as late-imperial ostentation. Psychologists held 'affluence is synonymous with decadence' and character-weakening pleasures like pastel, soft toilet paper. It was virtual and artificial – bought on hire-purchase for as little as one per cent down and based on false needs contrived by advertising, [...]. All told, it was argued, private affluence came at the expense of public squalor. (Black: 2004: 86)

Mistrust of domestic commodities occurred, furthermore, on a gendered landscape. The man, as the locus of 'authentic' culture, could also be positioned as its guardian; the feminine relation to the vagaries of modernity was often seen as more susceptible and precarious. Moreover, the mother figure, in her typically domestic

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<sup>24</sup> For instance, Lawrence Black (2004: 85) uses the UK's Retail Price Index and the types of items appearing on it between the 1950s and 1960s to illustrate changing standards in typical household commodities and material lifestyles, and Cone similarly uses statistical prevalence of household commodities as an expression of societal change in France; 'By 1968 half of all French households owned a washing machine, and cars were no longer a luxury' (1997: 50).

<sup>25</sup> In this case, Henri Lefebvre's (1981: 6-9) account of the 'discourse of the optimist' and 'discourse of the nostalgic' are instructive.

situation, could be characterised as supremely primed to be both seduced and victimised by, and *part of*, mass culture and its deluge of commodities.

The ideological as well as practical consequences of decolonisation and modernity in Britain and France also had an effect on domestic identity discourses. The Algerian war was a significant moment within French self-perceptions, and was thematised by artists and intellectuals, including Godard (*Le Petit Soldat*, 1963). The effect of the collapse of the British Empire on domestic English identity has also been a subject of critical debate in recent decades. What Stuart Ward has defined as the ‘minimal impact thesis’, or the argument that the effects of decolonisation were mainly felt within the formerly colonised states whilst making little impression on British culture and popular identity, has recently been contested by a number of cultural historians.<sup>26</sup> Jeffrey Richards (2001) and Martin Francis (2003) have addressed the national identity figure of the white, male imperial hero, through its transference to the gentleman Second World War hero, and finally its mutation into a gendered and raced sense of Englishness symbolised by ‘the quiet street and the privet hedge’ (Webster: 1998: 65). In general, however, writers on end of empire cultures in Europe suggest something of a shift inwards in national identity formation, documenting multiple examples of practical, figurative or linguistic turns towards home.<sup>27</sup> Part of the shift in focus towards domestic, as opposed to global, identities also concerned anxieties over migration and cultural integrity. Bill Schwarz (1996) suggests how figurative reversals appeared to take place at this point whereby former colonisers adopted the emotional and self-symbolising standpoint of colonised subjects, feeling domestic cultures and identities threatened by immigration.<sup>28</sup> Home, in this context, came to be represented as an embattled site of national identity amongst destabilising figures of modernity.

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<sup>26</sup> For instance, John M. MacKenzie: 2001, Stuart Ward: 2001, Wendy Webster: 2005 and Jeffrey Richards: 1986, more specifically on the effect of imperial figures in popular culture.

<sup>27</sup> For example, Ross (1995) describes the pseudo-familial imagery of Algerian independence as ‘The Great Divorce’; Francis (2003) reviews critical work on the ambivalence of male domesticity in England as opposed to in the colonies, analysing how men in England consistently negotiated the boundary between home and public, and alluding to the post-war promotion of companionate marriage; and Schwarz (1996) looks at a popular perception of immigration as ‘bringing home’ the colonial frontier. It should be noted that many of these accounts underpin the complexity of these turns towards home, particularly problematized by enduring figures of imperial masculinity and the prevalence of adventure fiction, for instance. Generally, however, a trend can be noted that draws greater attention to domestic borders and cultures in the period of post-war decolonisation.

<sup>28</sup> Cultural effects of Americanisation are covered in Ross: 1995, Schwarz: 1996 and Webster: 1998 and 2005.

The nature and specific circumstances of change differed between and within Britain and France, although the global dominance of the U.S.A. provided a homogenising force. Kristin Ross describes how modernisation in France occurred at a feverish pace, and how lived experiences of change were located in the everyday; French people ‘tended to describe the changes in their lives in terms of the abrupt transformations in home and transport’ (1995: 5). In England, the reigning shibboleths of social progress were the culture of ‘affluence’ and the ‘classless society’, epitomised in Harold MacMillan’s much-famed (and much-critiqued) assertion the British public had ‘never had it so good’.<sup>29</sup> Both countries also saw a proliferation of artworks and creative thought that variously explored, celebrated and criticised the advent of mass culture and mechanical reproduction in the twentieth century. The films I discuss below are part of this zeitgeist, but other significant artefacts include British pop art and fashion culture, and the French Situationists. A turn towards the quotidian also took place within French critical theory, led by theorists such as Henri Lefebvre, Guy Debord and Roland Barthes.<sup>30</sup>

Themes of commodification in art and representation are typically gendered. On the level of public articulation, the voices that spoke the loudest about the relative merits and perils of modernity were male. Furthermore, the nature of the commodity, its sites of use and distribution, its marketing and its meaning in society, were all radically gendered phenomena.<sup>31</sup> Certain privileged consumer products have also become ubiquitous in media accounts of European modernity; the car, the washing machine, the fridge and the television have come to be particularly mythologised objects, with a special relation to the symbols and materials of everyday consumer realities. These products are also gendered, as Ross illustrates in a paradigmatic example:

The car was billed as “l’amie de l’homme” – user-friendly, that is, to soothe any anxiety provoked by the intrusion of strange huge

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<sup>29</sup> Hill (1986) and Black and Pemberton’s (2004) edited volume give excellent contextual accounts of the ‘affluent society’ and its reflection in culture.

<sup>30</sup> For example, Barthes’ *Mythologies* (1957), Lefebvre’s *The Critique of Everyday Day* (1981), Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), or reviewed throughout Lynn Gumpert’s (1997) edited volume.

<sup>31</sup> Doane has written a highly detailed and nuanced essay (1989) on women’s relation to the commodity form, particularly in relation to film and the screen image, which elaborates on the complexity of the relationship, which includes a dual movement that sees women as both *having* and *being* the commodity.

machines into one's daily life, and "man's friend" also as a conjugal partner to what were commonly billed as "les amis de la femme": household appliances. (1995: 24)

It could also be suggested that societal concerns over the mass production industry itself had an ideologically gendered dimension; 'production' falls into the language of masculine virility (connoting growth, linear progression, male-dominated workspaces, and other masculine-coded associations), whereas 'reproduction' is feminine. Mass reproduction, and the concomitant loss of identity, authenticity and individuality, were a substantial cultural concern, and, as discussed below, it would not be hyperbolic to suggest that anxieties over the 'effeminacy' of consumer culture played a part in public and artistic wariness towards it.

On a more material level, however, I also want to argue that, beyond their essential relationship to gender, critiques of modern commodities and consumer culture in the films discussed here can be used to explore specifically attitudes to the maternal. It is not just 'woman' in general who is placed at the centre of the commodified universe, but a specific and archetypal figure of woman: the middle-class housewife and mother. She is the centre of the family home and the nucleus of the palimpsestic modern arsenal of domestic goods; traditionally, she does the shopping, labours in the home and administers to the family.

This section looks at the collision between discourses on modern consumer culture and discourses on gender and family in a selection of English 'kitchen sink' and French new wave films. The first half considers the former, and specifically looks at John Schlesinger's *A Kind of Loving* (1962). This movement is often suspicious of consumer and mass culture in a way that is clearly gendered; the housewife is often a shallow dupe, threatening the authentic virility of the working-class male. A narrative of inter-generational conflict also often sets the young male protagonist against the more or less villainous figure of the older-generation mother, whose voracity for the superficial bagatelles of consumer capitalism threatens the 'good', authentic values of traditional masculinity. The situation tends to be slightly more complex in the French new wave films (after all, one of their key reactionary propositions was against the commercialisation of films, which, as the 'cinéma de papa', was given a patriarchal character); however, as critics such as Geneviève Sellier (2001) have explored, there

are strongly gendered undercurrents to the portrayal of consumerism as or against culture. Unlike the English films, *nouvelle vague* cinema tends towards investigation and collage rather than thesis. The second half of this section will look mainly at *Une Femme mariée* (1964) and *Le Bonheur* (1965), and will analyse Godard's and Varda's explorations of consumerist modernity in relation to the domestic and the mother figure.

This section explores the mother figure's relation to and the maternal nature of consumer products in film. It will also broach another facet of the 'maternal product', looking not only at the products directed at the mother, but the mother *as* product, addressing the notion of the mother as produced by discourse and ideology, and the mother's relation to mechanisation in the era of mass reproduction. I will, furthermore, consider how this interacts with maternal absence, examining the location of the self and the subject within this discourse. I have chosen these directors and groups of films because discourses on modernity, commodity culture and identity, often brought broadly into dialogue with sexuality and gender, are manifest concerns, and the existing scholarship on the films tends to reflect this. The development offered in the below chapter, however, is to concentrate on how a specific type of *maternal-domestic* femininity emerges as a particularly volatile site of criticism and contention within these discourses. I argue that, beyond the established binary gender hierarchy, there is further division at the pole of femininity in which the home and mothering women become particularly crucial artefacts in narratives of identity and modernity, and are especially open to stigmatisation. This is further consolidated by the received positioning of the point of cultural identification for these anxieties as masculine, a structure reflected throughout the films, whether critically or unconsciously.

### *1.1 – Maternal Products and the British Kitchen Sink: A Kind of Loving*

The 'kitchen sink' films are strongly invested in representing a contemporaneous, contextual reflection of English society. A major part of this was engaging with the ideas of 'classlessness' and the 'affluent society,' which became the watchwords of reigning political and cultural narratives that sought to characterise the era. Ideologies such as those expressed by MacMillan in his famous speech championed the image of post-war Britain as entering a golden age of equality and prosperity; 'affluence' reflected an abundance of material comforts for all and

‘classlessness’ suggested that this raising of living standards would engender social equilibrium.<sup>32</sup> As with most totalising cultural narratives, however, the lived realities were hardly so simple. For one thing, the discourse was not wholly practically true; despite an undeniable general rise in living standards, wealth was not evenly distributed across Britain, and cultural and economic class differences persisted, albeit in new guises (Hill: 1986: 7-9). Furthermore, affluence did not work as propaganda, as negative social connotations and counter-narratives quickly cropped up; ‘Far from anything desirable, affluence was a by-word for what seemed wrong in society’ (Lawrence Black: 2004: 87).

Reactions to affluence were multifaceted. Particularly prevalent cultural anxieties, however, concerned impressions of moral decay – the dilution, or softening, of virtuous British character. Central to these anxieties over cultural change is a discourse of consumerism:

‘Affluent’ was settled upon as ‘neither wholly neutral nor pejorative’. Galbraith concluded with the (aptly domestic) analogy that ‘to furnish a barren room is one thing, to continue to crowd in furniture until the foundation buckles is another.’ Never having had so many goods, it was maintained, was not the same as never having had it so good.’ (*ibid*)

Affluence and mass production perhaps made life *too* comfortable, and what is more, undermined the nature of the skilled workplace and the organisation of the home. Rather than appearing as neutral objects within independent moral-cultural discourse, commodities themselves are given moral personalities. I argue, furthermore, that women *in the home*, as housewives and mothers, as caretakers of future generations, are seen with particular harshness as being taken in by modern consumer culture and as catalysing its destructive and enfeebling elements. Lesley Whitworth discusses how the culture of affluence necessitated a relatively sudden change in the spending habits of traditional British housewives; they were no longer encouraged to master the art of saving, but that of spending, or the ‘art of selfishness’ (2004: 169). She argues that mothers’ skill in aesthetic judgment and discriminating

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<sup>32</sup> See, for instance, Hill 1986 or Black and Pemberton’s 2004 edited volume.

consumption took the place of the skill of ‘making do’ as the measure of their domestic competencies (*ibid*).

This abrupt turnaround in a single generation from a society of rationing to one of abundance was a cultural shock to the system, and the deep-set traditional ideology of the homemaker-mother could hardly keep step with the changes. The newly available household goods that, in a way, mechanised many traditionally perceived domestic-maternal functions, became metaphors for cultural and spiritual decay. Black notes this perception: ‘Consumerism was desiccating political passions – ‘the sound of class war is drowned by the hum of the spin-dryer’, Tory MP Charles Curran’s obituary of Aneurin Bevan noted’ (2004: 91). He further illuminates how this could even be the case within socialist-feminist circles:

Delegates at Labour’s 1964 Women’s conference wondered ‘what had become of the housewives of the past, who had known exactly what a shilling meant’ and harangued ‘gullible... housewives buying a washing machine when they did not even have a plug to plug it in.’ (*ibid*: 92)

These are some of the cultural perspectives with which the kitchen sink cycle engages. A representational affinity between women, familial domesticity and mass culture is clear and often morally didactic. It is important here to reiterate the typical viewing position of this cycle; undeniably, the films tend towards masculine identification, usually centring narratively and psychologically on young male protagonists, and often maintaining traditionally ‘masculine’ values. It has also been pointed out that they describe the English working class from something of an anthropological outsider’s perspective; Terry Lovell has argued that the ruling viewpoint in these films is the Hoggartian ‘scholarship boy’ (1996: 171-172).<sup>33</sup> This leads to a romanticised view of the working class that sees their traditional culture as unequivocally noble and pure, and consequently, understands mass culture as a polluting foreign body (Andrew Higson: 1996: 133). There was a gendered quality to this opposition, positing work as masculine and leisure and mass culture as feminine

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<sup>33</sup> Her argument is that the spectatorial model offered in the majority of British new wave films is similar to that of Hoggart’s *Uses of Literacy* (1998), which is the somewhat anthropological and romanticising viewpoint of the working-class scholarship boy, now a middle-class intellectual, returning home to the community in which he grew up, but of which he is no longer a part.

(Hill: 1986: 156; Lovell: 1996: 160). As D.E. Cooper argues on the contempt expressed by the 'Angry Young Men' that

what these writers really attack is not so much women, but a much wider target, *effeminacy*. [...] Effeminacy is simply the sum of those qualities which are supposed to traditionally, with more or less justice, to exude from the worst in women: pettiness, snobbery, flippancy, voluptuousness, superficiality, materialism. The effeminate society is one that displays all these. (1970: 257-258)

Effeminacy, therefore, includes that of reproduced consumer objects in the feminine household. It was not just that women brought more 'unauthentic' commodities into the home, that culture itself was moving increasingly into the home, or that the housewife was sharing her motherly duties with machines – household commodities themselves were seen as feminising. Psychoanalytically, the mother is a cultureless space that must be escaped in order for the child to become a producing subject. At the extreme of sexist cultural panic, could the young man shut indoors within the family home, submerged within the universe of mechanically reproduced succubi and household commodities that displace his productive faculties, fear that he will never escape the castrating mother?

These are some of the key issues at stake in *A Kind of Loving*. This film centres on Vic, a young man from a dignified and 'authentic' working-class family, capitalising on the virtues of the affluent society by progressing to a white-collar job as a draftsman. Vic begins a volatile relationship with Ingrid, a secretary at the same company, and, after Ingrid falls pregnant, he must negotiate the world of adult and family responsibilities alongside masculine ambition. The key obstacle to happiness is the fact that Vic must move in with Ingrid's mother, a caricatured articulation of precisely the sort of feminine-maternal abomination that the underside of affluence was feared to spawn; represented as an overbearing, materialistic harridan, her very presence, not to mention her aesthetic and moral influence over the home, thoroughly emasculates Vic. It is hardly novel to underscore the hard time women are given in this cycle of films; however, it is in a way, not 'too late' for the young women of these films. Older mothers or maternal figures, however, are divided along a traditional dichotomy. On one end is the 'good, working-class mother' counterpoint, found

always in patriarchal households, such as Vic's mother in *A Kind of Loving*, Joe Lampton's aunt in *Room at the Top* (1959) or *Look Back in Anger's* (1959) Ma Tanner<sup>34</sup> who may well have stepped fully-formed from the pages of Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*. Biological maternity, in these cases, is secondary to performative and moralised motherhood; they are kindly, formidable and hard-working, if weathered, yardsticks of traditional values, who seem to mother entire communities, and take little interest in material goods. On the other side of the binary, 'bad mothers' are represented as irredeemably consumed by the vapid consumerism to which they fall so easily victim. Seen from the point of identification with Vic, the film presents Ingrid's mother as the harbinger and personification of the cultural ruin of thoughtless consumption, from which it is Vic's responsibility to save both himself and Ingrid – in other words, to ensure that subjectivity remains at the seat of male power, fenced off from the incompetent influence of maternal reproduction.

The idea of femininity as a 'trap' or a threat to productive male independence is a trope of the kitchen sink cycle. Vic respects good, traditional working class values and customs; he is also moving up in the world as a producer and provider. His relationship with Ingrid, however, confounds his narrative trajectory of masculine progression. Vic's family also respects a traditional model of gender relations, in which the men are productive providers and the women skilled domestic labourers. Several key indoor scenes involving Vic's family take place at kitchen tables, where the men sit and eat the unpretentious, wholesome food served dutifully by the women. Vic clearly aspires to this image of familial harmony, claiming 'what [he] want[s] to find is a girl like our Christine [his sister, who is strongly identified with their mother]'. Finding one of Vic's soft-pornographic magazines, his younger brother – conflating marriage and sex – comments that he 'bet[s Vic] would like to be married to her'. Vic's response is to draw a clear delineation between girls one marries and girls one doesn't, uncritically echoing the sentiments described in Irigaray's discussion of the comparative 'exchange values' of mothers, virgins and prostitutes (or in this case, any women who have pre-marital sex) (1977f). Before marrying, he is free to enjoy the latter, though not obligated to respect them. Moving into Ingrid's mother's house,

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<sup>34</sup> Despite being a widow, she continues to visit and tidy her husband's grave (his final 'household') and respect his values, as well as acting as a de facto mother for the protagonist, Jimmy Porter, for whom she provides material and emotional encouragement. Even without the actual presence of a conventional patriarch, therefore, she continues to perform cheerfully the good mother role.

however, Vic enters an intense matriarchy, which proves almost literally castrating; ‘Subordinated to an all-female household, Vic loses his potency, no longer making love to his wife’ (Hill: 1986: 157). With no father figure in sight, the masculinist narratives and hierarchies that organise normative conceptions of the family and the subject are in jeopardy. As was discussed in my introduction, the mother is imaginarily precluded from authentic cultural expression and subjectivity; accordingly, in this film, the materialist matriarchy that threatens to usurp the normative way of things is a chaos of meaningless objects and petty vanities hovering over a vacuum.

The discourse of hierarchical moral difference between ‘matriarchal’ mass culture and ‘patriarchal’ authenticity is richly articulated in this film through the aesthetically contrasting interiors of the two homes. Lovell sees this as a distinct trend throughout the film cycle; ‘In the films [homes] both rough and respectable carry the aura of ‘authenticity’ by comparison with those households that have adapted to the styles and values of mass consumerism’ (1996: 166). Such a distinction, for instance, is thematised in *Room at the Top*, which addresses the negotiation of traditional working-class values, integrity and self-respect with the allure of material temptations and social climbing. Class distinctions are marked acutely within the interiors of the family homes, between the impoverished but dignified home of Joe’s aunt, a Hoggartian motherly figure whose main purpose in the film is as a repository and guardian of traditional values, and the mansion, replete with luxury and material comforts, in which Susan lives, who symbolises Joe’s social aspirations. Rather than simply living in their respective environments, the women themselves are expressions of the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ object of modern culture. Joe’s pursuit of Susan – inspired explicitly by his eagerness to reject his working-class roots – is not a romance (however disingenuous) but an expression of his erroneous devotion to the false idols of commodity culture, which proves ultimately destructive to his happiness.

The mise-en-scène within Vic’s family home is plain, but visually characterised as warm and ‘honest’. There are markedly few modern commodities; a small television set can be seen in the first kitchen shot behind Vic’s father, but is never watched; in fact, the father sits polishing the trombone he plays as part of a working-class music hall band, with his back to the television, indicating the triumph of traditional over modern leisure activities. The members of the well-sized family tend to be foregrounded, often filmed collectively in shot to underpin the image of togetherness

and harmonising values. It is, overall, a 'humanised' domestic landscape, maintained by the benefaction of a benevolent patriarch, and ministered by the 'good mother' and her daughter. Productive culture and masculine entertainments remain outside, in the subjective world of activity, whereas the home is an obliging refuge. The interior that surrounds Ingrid and her mother, however, is framed as the aesthetic and moral antithesis of the 'good home', and much of its 'corrupting' character is expressed through the visual excess of modern mass-produced commodities. The houses themselves are embedded within the discursive partisanship of tradition against modernity, authenticity against effeminacy; Vic's family live in an old-fashioned terrace, whereas Ingrid and her mother are within one of the new builds encroaching on the community. The old versus new tension is precisely the same conflict that underlies a particularly well-known scene from *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) in which Arthur throws a stone through the window of a similar new-build house as a gesture of protest against materialist modernisation, and its supposed concomitant cultural dilution. In these representations, it is young women who are seduced by the new, more materially comfortable, but supposedly morally inferior homes, and the young men who resist, championing more robust, patriarchal cultural heritage mapped to older, traditional homes.

The shots within this house are deeper, and, with only the three characters, as opposed to Vic's larger family, this device leads to the 'feminine' interior shots feeling emptier of people, but fuller of objects. The *mise-en-scène* is littered with gaudy knickknacks, in stark contrast to the warm functionality of Vic's house. However, it is not so much the presence as the nature of commodities that underpins the divide; the modern, 'feminine' household is marked by frivolity and lack of meaning. The excess of objects is largely an assembly of purposeless ornaments, effeminate floral prints and cosmetic items, cluttered incoherently together on dressing tables, mantelpieces and display cabinets. The aesthetic contrasts are even inscribed on the bodies of the respective mother figures; whilst Vic's 'good', selfless mother tends to dress with modest dignity in the home, in clothes suitable for maternal domestic labour, Ingrid's mother makes herself too visible. The curation of her flashy jewellery, horn-rimmed glasses, coiffed hair and often elaborately patterned outfits suggest that the overly-commodified modern home she inhabits is an extension of the mother's supposedly vain and superficial nature.

The first scene that takes place within Ingrid's home also features a specific and morally positioned genre of commodities: dressing for her date with Vic, Ingrid sits applying makeup and beauty products in front of a machine-cut triple mirror. We do not see Ingrid face-on, but rather through her reflection in the mirrors. Her mother, furthermore, appears behind her, also as a mirror-image rather than her 'original' self. This telling shot serves to underline two key epicentres of social anxiety over consumer culture: effeminate narcissism and reproduction, and the loss of identity therein. Mary-Ann Doane illuminates the discursive links between narcissism, one of 'the few psychical mechanisms Freud associates specifically with female desire' (1989: 31) and consumerism, which always involves the consumption of self-images (*ibid*: 30). In this film, Ingrid and her mother are not simply representative of the feminine world of commodities threatening 'authentic' culture; they are part of it.

A significant element of sceptical social narratives against consumerism, furthermore, is mistrust of mechanical reproduction, the fear in practical terms that it will undermine the value and skill of the traditional craftsman, and in ideological terms that it will erase the individuality of the self; identities too might become reproduced.<sup>35</sup> Women and mothers are perceived as particularly susceptible to the corruption of this culture, since the idea of femininity as reproduced is already culturally current (Chodorow: 1999; Irigaray: 1974). The cautionary reference to reproducibility in this scene is twofold: firstly, the fear of the impoverished reproduced commodity, and secondly, the notion that Ingrid and her mother, as deteriorating commodities, are themselves located within a cycle of reproduction. In the combined mirror image (and the two women continue to be filmed in close quarters throughout the film), it is suggested that Ingrid is in imminent danger of becoming her (already corrupted) mother. In traditional psychoanalytic thought, it is the entry of the father into this family that provides the capacity for subjectivity and linearity requisite for progression; in this film, it is Vic and his masculine heritage that can save Ingrid.

It is Ingrid's own pregnancy and movement towards motherhood that obstructs Vic's self-narrative. It is not that fatherhood does not belong in this narrative; he is aspiring to a girl like 'our Christine', in-keeping with the figure of the agreeably absent

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<sup>35</sup> A sentiment described, for instance, in Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936), and his discussion of the loss of the aura and 'unique existence' of the work of art.

‘good’ mother. Ingrid, however, is identified more closely with the lecherous, commodified images of women he enjoys. Before the pregnancy, the relationship and the flirtation with commodities is relatively manageable for Vic; the courtship runs more or less on his terms, he can ‘escape’ at his leisure, and is still easily able to sit with his friends and talk about football at work, and engage in masculine pursuits. He is able to maintain his masculinity and cultural ‘authenticity’ without much compromise; during their second date, for instance, Ingrid and her friend become distracted by a display in a shoe shop window. Vic is able to express his anger and walk away, subsequently resulting in Ingrid’s profuse apology. With Ingrid’s pregnancy, however, Vic becomes ‘trapped’ by the world she represents. The scene of his dutiful but highly reluctant proposal is almost funereal in quality, shot in markedly low lighting, with the actors’ faces in shadow, shut off in a room in view of but immediately outside the vibrant dance hall Vic has been enjoying with his friends. The drab and hasty wedding ceremony is equally morose; his entry into this type of domesticity, in other words, signifies the death of masculine freedom.

Once married, the overbearing presence of Ingrid’s mother and the looming threat that she is being reproduced in Ingrid throws the normative masculine organisation of the family into chaos. Her role as the archetypal castrating mother is almost literally in evidence in the fact that, Ingrid claims, the proximity of her mother prevents her from having sex with Vic after marriage. She emasculates Vic at every turn; during the first entry into the house, she commands the space, whilst Vic skulks sullenly behind the women, talks loudly and incessantly over him about game shows and popular television, and prevents him from smoking in the bedroom. His action of secretly stubbing the cigarette in one of the many purposeless knickknacks is a telling but futile gesture of resistance. The castrating mother, whose over-presence and actions disassemble the ideology of the patriarchal family, is a recurrent figure in the cycle, often, as in this case, obstructing masculine potency by safeguarding her daughter’s sexuality, or by over-indulging in materialism. In the most extreme instance, Colin, in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962), believes his overbearing mother to have actually murdered his father to claim (and selfishly squander) the life insurance, in a violent and subversive dismantling of oedipal patriarchy.

A particularly privileged instance in *A Kind of Loving* encapsulates the antithesis between ‘authentic’ masculine culture and the feminine home through opposing spaces and objects; this is the moment in which Vic and Ingrid compete over whether they will spend their evening attending his father’s concert, or watching television:

‘it is the traditional working-class concert of the brass band – ‘this substantial pocket of music, so untouched by the mass media’, according to Brian Jackson in his study of working-class community – which Vic is prevented from attending by his night’s viewing of television in *A Kind of Loving*’ (Hill: 1986: 155)

This sequence marks a clear binary between the authentic pleasures of traditional masculine art forms and the insipid emptiness of the feminised home. The preceding scene, in which Vic argues with Ingrid and her mother about whether they will attend the concert (Ingrid is reluctant, as she finds it old-fashioned, and would rather visit the cinema) ends with Vic decisively concluded ‘well, we’re going anyway’. The film cuts to a scene within the music hall, in which the brass band plays to an enormous audience. Each shot is full of people, emphasising the unifying ‘human’ values of this type of tradition. During the father’s trombone solo, the camera focuses on Vic’s family sitting in a row in the crowd, panning slowly along the faces of his family, until finally settling on the two empty chairs reserved for Vic and Ingrid. This image suggests an emasculating public humiliation for Vic; evidently, he has been unable to impose his patriarchal law on the new household, consequently being displaced from ‘authentic’ masculine culture into the home. This amounts to a subversion of normative patriarchal ideology; as described by Irigaray and Kristeva, social coherence is predicated on masculine genealogies, along which male subjective identities progress, and into which women are absorbed as reproductive instruments. Within the mother’s home, Vic is unable to establish himself as patriarch, and in the juxtaposed music hall scene, he is quite literally *removed from his family line*. Swallowed by the castrating mother, he, rather than she, has become absent.

The scene cuts abruptly to the television in the centre of Ingrid’s mother’s living room. In fact, they have neither attended Vic’s concert nor, as Ingrid suggested, gone to the cinema, but stayed in for a night of television; in other words, the mother has imposed *her* will. Worse still, the programme shown is one of the game shows that

Ingrid's mother characteristically enjoys and frequently talks about in her effusive but insubstantial monologues that fill the soundtrack with noise whilst the camera focuses on Vic's brooding, and for which Ingrid is also threatening to develop a penchant. Within the cultural mind-frame the film references, this type of television (facile, unintellectual and unashamedly capitalistic) epitomised the very worst of affluence.<sup>36</sup> Mistrust of television as an expression of impotent mass culture similarly occurs in several films of the cycle, and particularly in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. In the latter, Arthur's contempt for his parents, who lack any virility, agency or fierceness of class pride, manifests in images of him sneering at their frail and inarticulate forms fixed passively in front of the television as he prepares to go out actively into the world. In the former, a new television is the centrepiece of the itinerary of emasculating mass-produced frivolities, which proceeds to aesthetically and symbolically reorganise the family home. Reminiscent of Vic's stubbing his cigarette inside a feminine trinket, the scene in which Colin and his friend contemptuously tamper with the volume controls of and mock the picture on the television (a little heavy-handedly, the broadcast is a MacMillan pro-affluence speech) is a symbolic, if practically futile, gesture of defiance enacted upon the 'bad object' of effeminate domestic consumption. The television, within these narratives, becomes almost rhetorically weaponised in the cold war between 'emasculating' mass culture and patriarchal, 'authentic' subjectivity.

Despite the film's aesthetic and narrative identification with Vic, it would be a mistake to claim that it wholly sympathises with him throughout; like Ingrid, he has flaws to overcome (principally, his over-enjoyment of women and their images as commodities, as a symptom of the corrupting elements of affluent and permissive society; this is not so much a critique of the objectification of women as it is a caution against over-indulgence in objects). Nonetheless, the underlying sense is that Ingrid's mother and her consumerist household and lifestyle create a poisonous atmosphere, which catalyses the worst traits in the young couple. The consumerist matriarchy is unliveable; without the ordering influence of the patriarchal subject, the maternal-feminine family and the abundance of household consumer commodities linked with it become a reproduction of *nothing*. An object in a world of objects, selfish and

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<sup>36</sup> Black (2004: 87) also illuminates, through reference to Mary Whitehouse's 'Clean-Up TV' campaign, how television could also be connected with societal ideas of sexual perversity and moral corruption.

excessively present, the 'bad mother' is the conduit through which cultural ruin and its material trappings enter. Women are both slaves to and part of this modern world of objects which threatens to take over. Men, if they are not careful, might become its slaves; the implicit cultural anxiety of *A Kind of Loving* is that 'inside' will take over, displacing culture from the masculine outdoors. Vic, forced to sit in front of the television in his mother-in-law's home, and not even allowed his own house-key, is potentially trapped within the vapid domestic queendom of the castrating mother.

Key to the film's resolution is the unquestioned assertion that they must 'escape' the mother in order to make life liveable; furthermore, this escape must be led by Vic. It is only possible for the young couple to achieve mature happiness, create an adequate family and overcome the corrupting spectre of consumerism by making the mother forcibly absent. It is true that, as in many of the British new wave films, married life here is connected with an air of disappointment and compromise (Hill: 1986: 158-159). However, the ending of this film can hardly be called tragic. In contrast to the emotional climax that precedes it, with Vic's leaving the house, and his ultimate decision to return, the end scenes are quiet, but the communication between the couple is more sincere; compromise can also connote maturity. It is at this point, that Ingrid confesses to Vic that, despite previous defences of her mother, it was her presence that prevented her from having sex with him, even though she wanted to. Now, united against her, a more normatively patriarchal relationship can be established. Free from the overbearing influence of her own mother, and her gradual absorption into the same spiral, the implication is that Vic can now, according to the traditional oedipal model, make Ingrid more like *his* mother.

In-keeping with the patriarchal belief systems described in my introduction, the underlying ideology of *A Kind of Loving* stresses the importance of the father as the 'third term' and the containment of cultural futurity within the son. The contemporaneous influx of consumer goods and the revolutionising of production and the traditional skilled workplace in affluent Britain on some level engendered anxieties over the potency of the (figural) father. Some of the most well-known films of this cycle, such as *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, exploit the son's perspective to portray father figures emasculated and spiritually or actually killed by the same type of materialistic, selfish and mass-culture-enslaved 'bad' mother as we see here. The condemnation of these women is

extreme and partisan. Nonetheless, it is significant that this cycle so often represents the powerful mother as supremely open to the contagious moral corruption of culturally weak and castrating commodities. Through her, this rot is imagined to spread through the social fibre of the family. It is then up to male subjects to resist, because women alone are portrayed as incapable of saving themselves or defining meaningful identities; the self-ish mother's corruption is reproduced in her daughters.

The film militates against the possibility of healthy mother-daughter bonding. This feminine couple, and the modern consumer society with which it is symbolically entwined, is represented as cannibalistic and culturally barren; a veneration of the object on the borrowed throne of subjectivity. Were we to imagine the film from another perspective, through a more balanced aesthetic lens, we might conclude that several requirements of Marianne Hirsch's suggestion of the Demeter and Persephone story as an alternative narrative model of familial experience and self-identity to Oedipus are in fact met. Hirsch writes: 'Unlike the Oedipus story, Demeter and Persephone's tale is told from the perspective of a bereaved Demeter, searching for her daughter, mourning her departure, and effecting her return through her own divine power' (Hirsch: 1989: 5).<sup>37</sup> The Demeter plot centres a mother/daughter closeness and anti-patriarchal protectiveness that is given little figuration within oedipal standards, or else is represented as perverse. Even accepting the abrasiveness with which she is portrayed, Ingrid's mother's actions are generally inspired by love for and protection of her daughter from a man who, after all, clearly views Ingrid as a sexual object and does not desire an emotionally committed marriage with her. Ingrid is by no means unhappy with this maternal relationship until Vic encourages her that it is correct to be so. However, despite the empowering potential of Hirsch's proposed paradigm-shift, we should not fool ourselves that the grafting of this model onto a patriarchal framework will necessarily do Demeter justice; if Hades is heroised, after all, *she* is the villain. In *A Kind of Loving*, oedipal and Demeterian narratives conflict explosively, and the former, with its collected wealth of historical potency, wins out. From this perspective, absence is vengefully imposed on the mother figure. Ultimately, she must be forcibly exorcised from the narrative for masculine subjectivity (and culture itself) to continue. Even her illicit presence, however, though paradoxically over-visible, becomes a form of absence; through its connection with a

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<sup>37</sup> The idea is also touched upon in Rich: 1986: 238-240.

meaningless world of sterile, reproduced objects, ‘maternalised’ culture and cultural models are suggested as emptiness. The suggestion is that the mother must remain absent, because her presence in itself, other than as a conduit for patriarchal discourse, offers nothing.

### *1.2 – Variations on Theme: the Mass-Reproduction of Mothering in Varda and Godard*

As in Britain, effects of modernisation, mass consumer culture and the influx of abundantly available commodities revolutionised the physical, social and intellectual landscape of post-war France. Kristin Ross (1995) has produced a detailed analysis of processes of modernisation in France, emphasising the rapidity of change. Americanisation was a preeminent factor in shaping ‘modernised’ France, as American capitalist iconography, commodity forms and modes of production exploded into the cultural foreground, creating not just new aesthetic models, but new forms of desire. As traditional political empires slowly disintegrated in the mid-twentieth century, Americanism was increasingly prevalent as an ‘informal global empire’ (Malini Guha: 2015: 10). Certain products entered the collective imagination as standard-bearers of modernity, which, as in Britain, included the car, the television and household white goods. Henri Lefebvre cites as privileged products ‘the car, the fridge, the radio, the television [which] are allocated the following missions: expropriating the body and compensating for this expropriation; replacing desire by fixed needs; replacing delight by programmed satisfaction’ (1981: 27). An underlying image here is the insidious mechanisation of the human; rather than simply complementing, or facilitating various aspects of life, these objects can be seen as actually altering the nature of the individual and its relationship to desire. As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, furthermore, these commodities could be placed on a gendered axis, also producing differently gendered aspiration figures; the masculine-coded car, for instance, allowed man to master space, to become ‘l’homme disponible’<sup>38</sup> (Ross: 1995: 22), whereas the washing machine still defined women within the home, imaginarily reproducing an idea of the pristine American housewife,

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<sup>38</sup> ‘Available man’; in Ross’s meaning, an expression of modern man, being more or less indifferent to physical and figurative distances between the spaces in which he exists and operates. The worker becomes ‘disponible’ ‘through a recasting of his identity by means of continuous displacement’ (Ross: 1995: 40). Commodity objects such as the car and movie, in other words, allow man to transcend normative geographies and boundaries of existence.

well-off, confident, attractive and neat, which became at this time an aspirational figure of ‘hygienic self-assurance’ (*ibid*: 79) in Europe.

Iconographically, the car was connected to the extraordinary of modern culture (speed, exploration, sex appeal, adventure and often danger), whereas white goods (static by nature) were more a mark of change in ‘ordinary’, everyday life. The latter became significant in the ‘turn towards the everyday’ that was particularly popularised in France at this time.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, there are many notable French artists and critical theorists, including Godard, whose work takes a profound interest in representing and deconstructing the everyday. Ross’s analysis puts Lefebvre at the beginning of this tradition (*ibid*: 19). His *Critique de la vie quotidienne* was instrumental in establishing the everyday as an object and method of study, and in ‘elevating to the status of a theoretical concept what in the minds of most other thinkers was nothing more than the drudgery of routine’ (*ibid*). In a similar vein, Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies* (1957) aimed to plumb the discursive and imaginative makeup of a host of everyday artefacts (including wrestling matches, hairstyles, and detergents) in order to explore their underlying ideologies. His enterprise was one of ‘deciphering’; ‘The activity of the mythologist is one of decipherment, but to decipher, wrote Barthes, is always to struggle against ‘une certaine innocence des objets’ (Leak: 1994: 10). In other words, everyday life is the product of accepted consensus of various behaviours, activities and usages of material items, which are accepted not because they are neutral, but because we have rather accepted the ideologies that construct them; it is because they are deeply ideological that they merit examination. This type of approach, centralising the quotidian within cultural commentary and understanding the everyday as a principle staging ground for the interplay of tacit ideologies, became an established trend in French art and thought, and is useful and relevant context for reading the everyday, the domestic, gender and the mother figure in French cinema.

Attitudes towards the everyday in art and writing included elements of critique and celebration; it could be vibrant, rich and enlivening, but also overwhelming, superficial or dehumanising.<sup>40</sup> More often than not, responses combined a mixture of

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<sup>39</sup> The significance of the quotidian to French culture is explored from many angles in Gumpert: 1997.

<sup>40</sup> Cone describes the diverse spectrum of popular and artistic responses, including the *objets détournés* popularised by artists such as Yves Klein and Marcel Duchamp, arguing that although ‘the focus on excess, waste, and detritus might imply a negative view of the modern every-day’, in fact ‘The

feelings about the modern quotidian, an ambivalence which perhaps suitably reflected the sensory and information overload that defined incipient consumer culture. Some key criticisms of mass culture came from the Situationists and Debord in particular, whose chapter on ‘The Commodity as Spectacle’ in *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) is a moment of high vitriol against the dehumanising and degrading capacity of the commodity form;

The loss of quality so evident at all levels of spectacular language, from the objects it praises to the behavior it regulates, merely translates the fundamental traits of the real production which brushes reality aside: the commodity-form is through and through equal to itself, the category of the quantitative. (*ibid*: paragraph 38)

The question here, then, remains one of authenticity (style, or ‘spectacle’, over substance). A strong connection, furthermore, was drawn consistently between the everyday, consumer objects and spectacle, inspiring vibrant and novel artistry as well as societal anxieties over cultural integrity that addressed individual meaningfulness as well as the threat to French national identity posed by American culture.

The everyday came to be a central point of French post-war art, and is clearly prominent in new wave cinema. In an essay on the everyday and French cinema, Peter Brunette sees the centrality of the quotidian in French art-house films, in which ‘the everyday seems to function as a context or backdrop of relentless ordinariness from or against which the extraordinary – which is always composed of the ordinary, merely, perhaps, rearranged – can suddenly flash out and be registered’ (1997: 80-81) as a direct counterpoint to the Hollywood tradition, in which linear narrative drives the film, and the inclusion of the everyday is in the interest of the ‘effet de réel’ (*ibid*: 80). From the polarised characterisation of ‘action/event’ and ‘quotidian’, he also designates the former, Hollywood style as ‘masculine’ and the latter, everyday French (or more broadly, European) style as ‘feminine’ (*ibid*: 85). Given the brevity of the essay, the gendered analogy is necessarily broad and essentialising, and deeper inquiry into individual films of the new wave problematises this as an absolute distinction.

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proliferation of consumer objects that accompanied the modernization of France throughout the sixties aroused more enthusiasm than criticism among the newly thriving middle classes’ (Cone: 1997: 50).

Nonetheless, it is interesting that everyday life in French cinema is identified so readily with the feminine.

As with the British films, I argue that the everyday, the domestic, and the litany of consumer goods that shaped the surface of the quotidian, are often maternal in character. Ross defines an underlying critical assumption: 'women "undergo" the everyday – its humiliations and tediums as well as its pleasures – more than men. The housewife, that newly renovated postwar creation, is mired in the quotidian; she cannot escape it' (1997: 24). Again, women (and, I add, particularly women in the home, as traditional housewives and mothers) are perceived as particularly powerless in the face of the changing culture of the everyday, becoming the home's porous epidermis, through which modern consumerism and its ideologies seep into the domestic. Andreas Huyssen describes how (comparably to the hierarchy expressed in the British films), the proximity of women to everyday commodities was discursively accorded a moral character in early reflections on mass culture, or 'the notion which gained ground during the 19<sup>th</sup> century that mass culture is somehow associated with women while real, authentic culture remains the prerogative of men' (1986: 47). Though these reductive personifications were later problematised by various schools of thought, he continues to argue, many of their everyday tropes and figures, particularly of the 'feminising' capacity of mass culture, persisted into the twentieth century (*ibid*: 47-51).

In much of the work of the new wave, and particularly within several films by Godard and Varda, who often take a special interest in these topics, the issue of commodity objects and gender becomes reflexive. Whereas the 'kitchen sink' films tend to present partisan critiques of the cosmetic connections between women and consumerism, Godard and Varda often blend this discourse with enquiries into the state of the human in the culture of mass reproduction. These themes and questions had already emerged prominently in French critical thought, particularly through the work of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir (as discussed in Sandra Reineke: 2011: 28-29). In her novel *Les Belles Images* (1966), as well as her major theoretical work, *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949), Beauvoir was incisively critical of post-war Western consumer culture, and specifically of its address of the female body as itself a consumer object, constructing women as alienated expressions of commercialism, '[weaving] together analysis of women's experiences with economic and social

alienation and their objectification as wives and mothers' (Reineke: 2011: 19). Beauvoir sees the self-interest promoted through consumerism as something of a Trojan horse of women's empowerment and self-definition, leading ultimately to more objectification, more dependence (Beauvoir: 1949: 672).

There is, therefore, a rich critical background on which to draw when discussing consumerism and the materiality of the everyday in French culture. Substantial work has also been done on the relationship between consumerism and female sexuality (for instance, Sellier: 2001; Doane: 1989). However, it is this idea of woman-as-sexual-object that tends to be focused upon critically, rather than women in the specifically maternal ideation. My aim here, therefore, is to examine the particularity of representations of *maternal* consumerisms, and how the mother's existing pervasive identification with reproduction and objecthood blends into discourses of mass-reproduction and consumer objects with disturbing ease. The films I discuss take the figures of women *as mothers* and in the home as key points of interest in their critiques of consumerism. Already waist-deep in the symbolism of reproducibility, the mother figure often emerges at the centre of anxieties over the commodification of the human and the loss of unique identity.

The following section concentrates on Godard's *Une femme mariée* and Varda's *Le Bonheur* to examine the relationships between the mother figure, materialist culture and the commodification of the human. Along with *2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'elle* (1967), *Une femme mariée* is one of Godard's richest explorations of gendered commodity culture, and, importantly, centres on a young mother as a lens for viewing this world. Varda's *Le Bonheur* treats similar themes; focusing on a young married couple and their children, this subtle, deeply ironic and often misunderstood film examines the manufacturing of a mass-market ideal of happiness. I explore themes of maternal role-playing and reproducibility and the place of advertising images and commodities within the films. In doing so, I am interested in developing analysis of women and consumerism in this group of films beyond an emphasis on the sexual objectification of women and towards an understanding of how the specific imaginations of women's motherhood conditions gendered critiques of commodification.

The issue of the reproducibility of the human and the erosion of subjective identities amongst the chaotic iridescence of mass consumer culture can be usefully illuminated through the concept and practice of role-playing. Role-playing is, after all, the mass-reproduction of identities; the individual seeks recognition as a chosen ‘type’ through the performance of familiar clichés and shorthands in order to quickly communicate to the other an impression of self, based not on personal historical narrative, but on pre-digested archetype that is the mean average of countless societal commonplaces, gestures and experiences. The more perfectly the role is performed, the more ‘complete’ the actor is often considered to be. This is particularly pertinent for motherhood, which, as we have seen, is treated with a more than usual degree of rigidity. Women and mothers have a deeply ingrained cultural relationship to role-playing. This idea has an abundant heritage of theoretical formulation; particularly apt for the present discussion on the constructedness of femininity, developed originally by Joan Riviere, and later adapted by Lacan, is the concept of the ‘feminine masquerade’ (Riviere: 1929). This suggests that the traditional character of woman is an artificial mask not commensurate with the complex identity of the individual who wears it, but apparently necessary if she is to thrive within a patriarchal system. It is worth emphasising that the masquerade analogy ends at the point at which the mask can be taken off to reveal the ‘true’ individual behind it. There is no clean division between essence and artifice; ‘The problem for women, therefore, is not whether they put on the mask of femininity or not but *how well it fits*. In short, *femininity is masquerade*’ (Homer: 2005: 101). These ideas are synthesised in MacCabe, Eaton and Mulvey’s reading of *Une Femme mariée* in relation to the female protagonist:

Charlotte is nothing more than a perfect image. But this perfect image, this mask of visibility (which composed of make-up, clothes and so on, has an indexical relationship to the woman’s body) is furthermore a symbolic sign. It represents the concept of woman in a given social formation – that is, the equation of woman = sexuality. This feminine mask is the passport to visibility in a male-dominated world. (1980: 91)

In *Women on the Market* (1977f), Irigaray produces a general schema of how the various components of femininity are commodified and made to correspond to degrees of use, exchange and ‘natural’ values; the mother here is one of three

fundamental value types (the others being the virgin and the prostitute), which Irigaray appraises thus:

*As mother, woman remains on the side of (re)productive nature and, because of this, man can never fully transcend his relation to the “natural.” His social existence, his economic structures and his sexuality are always tied to the work of nature [...] But this relationship to productive nature, an insurmountable one, has to be denied so that relations among men may prevail. This means of the father and enclosed in his house, must be private property, excluded from exchange. (ibid: 185)*

Using these theories, we might surmise that traditional discourses leave the maternal-feminine subject with little flexibility within the role she is expected to perform, and little recognition as a coherent agent outside of this role. The role, in other words, is reproduced and re-printed infinitely onto generations of mothering subjects. This point is also emphasised in relation to consumerism by Simone de Beauvoir. In her passage on female narcissism, she illustrates the idea of reproduction and role-playing through the idea of the woman’s ‘double’ (1949: 665). She describes the paradox of the materialist woman’s desperate search for ‘specialness’ or ‘uniqueness’, which seems only to repeat and underscore her state of reproducibility. It is, after all, paradoxical that this ‘uniqueness’ should be conceived of as achievable through purchase and commodity objects.

The process of gendered role-playing becomes particularly interesting within the period at hand, and is a point of aesthetic and semantic fascination for Godard and Varda. With consumer capitalism, these roles and assembled clichés become purchasable commodities, to the point where the communicated character scarcely requires the presence of the human subject. In this way, for instance, a leather jacket, a pair of stilettos, an apron or a vacuum cleaner might already tell a story about a ‘type’ of person prior to the presence of the individual subject. Irigaray’s schema attributes a specific and protected value to the mother; according to this, the mother is a privately consumable object, but the idea of appraising or even contemplating her exchange value (like the virgin or prostitute) seems sacrilegious to the patriarch; ‘As both natural

value and use value, mothers cannot circulate in the form of commodities without threatening the very existence of the social order' (1977f: 185).

Nonetheless, consumer culture exploits a discursive loophole to monetise the mother figure by selling the image and role (back) to mothers themselves. This practice has been clear in advertising discourses since the twentieth century; marketers for a plethora of products, from formula and nappies to soaps, holidays and ready meals, engage extensively with the synthetic fabric of the good/bad mother narrative. They sell not only their products, but all the clichés of the ideal, serene, nurturing mother and the domestic bliss that surrounds her, whilst implying that 'without *this* product, you will fail'. Part by part, the ideal of impeccable, wholesome mothering becomes materially attainable through certain purchases. Without crossing the taboo of maternal exchange value, mothering women purchase the same image of themselves as the good mother. Were we to take these advertising messages seriously, we might surmise that these products could bear the ideology of the mother role to the extent that the mothering subject need hardly be present. It is worth mentioning that the type of ideal maternal 'object' sketched here is a different model to the sexless, shapeless, Hoggartian 'our mam'. The mother characters in many of Godard and Varda's films seem to be under pressure to play perfectly *all* of the roles in Irigaray's schema, switching seamlessly between them according to the situation. Resembling a latent desire for a Madonna in whom are happily reconciled all stages of womanhood (she is mother, daughter and wife to her son, virginal yet pregnant), these women confront expectations to be everything: mother, wife and prostitute, 'pure' and wholesome yet sexually competent and seductive.

This feminine role-playing is thematised in *Une Femme mariée*. Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier frames the narrative interest of the film as Charlotte's search for 'truth' amongst overwhelmingly vocal modernity:

trapped in the center of a whirlwind of words, gestures, things, and noises, the married Woman, in the space of a single day, turns to newspapers and to men (her husband and her lover) with equal devotion in an effort to find anything that can tell her the truth. (1972: 98)

Her actions in the film may be read, therefore, as indicative of an attempt (however irresolvable) to lift away the ‘feminine mask’. All of these sources, however, ultimately offer only instruction on how to play her existing roles more precisely. The film charts Charlotte’s efforts to exist, to distil the ‘authentic self’ from the role, yet, entirely appropriately, there is no climactic breakthrough moment; ‘the heroine plays her role out to the end’ (Royal S. Brown: 1972a: 14). Knowledge of the ‘real’ Charlotte, in opposition to the plastic feminine mask, is also a point of concern for her lovers; her husband, Pierre, muses aloud about where Charlotte ends and the ‘image he has of her’ begins. There is an underlying anxiety in both men’s behaviour towards her that they too do not have a firm grasp on the ‘real’ Charlotte. At the same time, however, they both resist any sign of a Charlotte that gestures away from the curated clichés to which they subscribe. Instances of their denial are numerous. Particularly illustrative examples include Pierre’s lifting her skirt on returning from a trip to check what type of underwear she is wearing or Robert’s criticism of Charlotte for powdering her face with too much makeup; after she refuses to change it, he comments that women ‘live for men but do nothing for them’, a remark which, in the context of the film’s overt detailing of Charlotte’s bombardment with aesthetic models of feminine desirability, must be taken ironically by the viewer. If we approach the obvious analogy between makeup and the figurative ‘feminine mask’, it is significant that Robert does not ask Charlotte to *entirely* remove her makeup, but encourages her to create an illusion (of femininity) that is not clearly recognisable as illusion. Charlotte’s role is, of course, as real as any mask, any stroke of mascara, any glamorous photo portrait; despite the characters’ efforts, artifice and essence do not separate cleanly. Charlotte’s roles as perfect wife, mother and lover are commodified and marketed to her, ‘programmed’ into daily life;<sup>41</sup> motherhood and femininity as contrived roles and societal impositions are inseparable from motherhood and femininity as experiences. The original title of Godard’s film, which used the definite ‘la’ rather than indefinite ‘une’<sup>42</sup> is more aptly expressive of the potential of these identity discourses to create a sense of a generic maternal-feminine product in place of mothering subjects.

Not only is Charlotte discursively produced through the desires and narrations of her husband, lover and son, but her ineluctable consumption of images imposes an

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<sup>41</sup> The idea of the programming of the everyday is based on the theory discussed in Lefebvre: 1981: 26.

<sup>42</sup> The change was insisted upon by a body of censors who worried that the original title implied general widespread infidelity amongst French housewives (Yannick Dehée: 2008: 81).

idealised role on her, emanating from an idea of the male-patriarchal gaze as a universal principle as well as from the male characters who represent it. In one scene, Charlotte is shown quite literally measuring herself against a timeless beauty standard; following instructions from a women's magazine, she uses a tape measure in front of her bathroom mirror to compare her own body to the 'ideal' ratios of the Venus de Milo's breasts. Yosefa Loshitsky identifies this scene as evincing how 'women view themselves and are viewed by others as sex objects' (1995: 160). More importantly, the scene (which is also mirrored later by Charlotte's cleaner, a woman dissimilar to Charlotte in age, class, profession and body shape, but who finds the same magazine and also physically measures herself) implies an *objective model* of womanhood, designed by men, that has precise dimensions, proportions and measurements against which women can (and implicitly *should*) compare themselves. In consumer culture, the aspects of the perfect feminine body can easily be packaged, marketed and monetised, and it is not a great leap from here to commodifying behavioural aspects of identity, such as mothering activities and the facilitation of domestic labour in lifestyle media and publications, or indeed the sexual gratification of husbands, which is represented in the film through Charlotte's discovery of records promising to instructive women on 'how to strip for your husband' amongst another character's possessions.

To return to Irigaray's paradigm, the 'natural value' aspect of Charlotte as a fertile, nurturing mother is fundamental to her idealised role(s). Charlotte's husband and her lover both desire a biological child with her. The idea of fathering<sup>43</sup> another man's child (Nicolas) is seen as a poor substitute for the genealogical completion of the familial image. This desire is expressed by both men in the script, as well as through the repeated visual motif of their hands stroking Charlotte's disembodied mid-section, caressing the location of her womb. Both men, furthermore, appear to assume themselves, as Charlotte's sexual and emotional partner, entitled to this element of her value; Robert, despite knowing that Charlotte is married, does not entertain the idea that she might become pregnant by anyone but him, and Pierre continues to demand of Charlotte *when* rather than *if* they will have a child, despite her lack of apparent interest in another pregnancy, and her insistence that she, after all, already has a child.

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<sup>43</sup> Here I refer to the activity of fathering as equivalent to mothering, rather than the tellingly common understanding of the term fathering as mainly biological.

Neither, therefore, recognises any significant degree of subjectivity on the part of Charlotte as a (potential) mother. In this case, Charlotte is commensurate with her Irigarian market value.

The men are, of course, also role-playing; their efforts to exert control over Charlotte's appearance, actions and choices, to ensure that they appear to and with Charlotte in a certain way, and to exploit her maternal value in the interest of propagating a familiar myth of masculine posterity, all construct a conventional performance of the husband and father. Nonetheless, though the film questions the extent to which *all* identity roles are mass-produced, the act of role-playing is more disempowering towards feminine subjectivities. After all, the roles that are being performed are scripted for a patriarchal system, which allows men more power and more choice; the 'reproduction of mothering' (Chodorow: 1999) is also the reproduction of patriarchy. Through their occupations, passions and philosophies, Robert and Pierre are shown to be quite distinct from one another, without becoming caricaturally polarised, presenting nuanced romantic and existential options, whereas there need only be one Charlotte. Rather than attesting to the character as an empowered and sexually adventurous woman, the gendered balance of the love triangle suggests her as a generic blueprint for a mass-produced design of maternal-feminine market value.

Varda's *Le Bonheur* approaches similar issues of reproducibility and the absence of subjectivity to *Une Femme mariée*, though from an apparently different perspective. In purely superficial terms, the love triangle of *Le Bonheur* is a reversal of that in *Une Femme mariée*, featuring a man involved with two women. However, given that both films are conscious of their positioning within the culture of gendered power, the results are far from mirror images. Though male role-playing is present, and sometimes abundantly clear, such as François' aspirations to picture-perfect happiness or Robert's profession as an actor and connection to Hollywood visual clichés, in all cases it is the women for whom the demands of the roles cause the most anxieties and problems. In *Le Bonheur*, Varda engages with the material facsimiles and well-worn adages of familial bliss to produce an ironic and disturbing investigation into the objectifying character of role-playing, and particularly how the pressure on women to mimic the factory-perfect wife and mother can prove destructive to the mothering subject. Varda uses the narrative and visual language of a stereotypical, saccharine

idyll, borrowing not only from received ideas on the ‘perfect’ family, but also from aesthetic tropes that construct these ideas, particularly critiquing contemporaneous women’s media that sold housewives and mothers the narrow image of their own fulfilment. As with *Une Femme mariée*, men, husbands and fathers are no less susceptible to the powers of social role-imaging, but the roles they are offered tend to be more empowered. Though scholars such as Alison Smith are right in asserting (in opposition to responses at the film’s release that mistook Varda’s deeply ironic use of romantic clichés as ‘approval’ of François’s actions) that ‘François as much as the two women is merely a puppet in the hands of the cliché’ (1998: 44), it is important, once again, that masculine and feminine role-playing according to this type continue to replicate hegemonic gendered terrain. It is therefore the reproduction, the absent subjectivity, of the idealised wife and mother that is the charged factor here.

The behaviour of the family throughout *Le Bonheur* is extremely clichéd, and uncannily over-familiar. Thérèse and François speak as if from a melodramatic script compiled from various B-movies and pulp romance novels. We have little sense of Thérèse’s character beyond her all-consuming role-playing as a Madonna-like model of domestic perfection. One deviation, perhaps, from the traditional model of the ideal housewife may be the fact that she participates in the ostensibly public workforce through paid labour, working from home as a seamstress. On the other hand, one would be hard pressed to imagine a profession that upsets the patriarchal family hierarchy less. Sewing and dressmaking fall squarely within the semantic field of nurturing motherliness, and Thérèse, unlike François, conducts her work from within the home, in a highly ‘feminine’ space, displaying a meticulously curated mise-en-scène of domestically connoted objects (a dressmaking mannequin, sewing machine and fresh flowers). Some of the childcare is shared with a grandmotherly next-door neighbour, but in general, Thérèse is able to intertwine her paid work with domestic labour; spatially, she remains primarily ‘in the home’ rather than in the workforce. Furthermore, the nature of her work is significant; during the film, she is making a wedding dress for a woman who visits with her mother. All three women seem ‘naturally’ to agree on the idea of a good marriage, wedding and dress (all relatively merged within the idolised image); François returns home during the conversation, and as Thérèse greets him, the customer is told by her mother that that is the right way to speak to one’s husband. The image for the ideal dress, furthermore, derives from a

fashion the customer has seen in *Elle* magazine. In making and selling wedding dresses – literally and symbolically from a received pattern – Thérèse is both produced by and a reproducer of the trite, pre-packaged family romance.

Varda depicts women in patriarchal culture as victims of a gendered discourse that demands their presence as objects only, but, as Ruth Hottell suggests, also as victims afflicted with a degree of cultural Stockholm syndrome: ‘In *Le Bonheur*, Varda exposes the hypocrisy of bourgeois, romantic ideas of happiness, but her heroines do not reject their own complicity in the vicious cycle designed to hide the injustices at the edges of the system’ (Hottell: 1999: 61-62). Through role-playing, the good mother model perpetuates her own subjective absence and promotes the same agenda to other women. Through the sale of these ideals and the physical commodities required to costume them amongst women themselves, a maternal ideal can be exchanged and acquired without the indignity of displaying the mother at market alongside the prostitute.

Similarly to Godard’s resistance or problematisation of definitive identity discourses, all of the characters in *Le Bonheur* are presented with an eerie lack of subjectivity. In a manner that critics have justly identified as ironic or even Brechtian,<sup>44</sup> Varda uses scripting and visual clichés to keep us at arm’s length from identification with the characters and to underpin the artificial and mimetic nature of their performance of family. We are unsettlingly distanced from any indication of motivation or psychological depth; all the characters act as if by rote. François and Thérèse’s proclamations of love and happiness are hyperbolic, and entirely generic, betraying no more sincerity of feeling or psychological realism than a pre-printed message of affection on a greeting card. The minor cast of wider family members, too, behave according to a robotic consensus; at Thérèse’s funeral, the extended relatives, in the presence of François, dispassionately discuss which of them might take custody of the couple’s young children, apparently in tacit agreement that this is the correct next step in the melodramatic plot, rather than considering the relatively atypical narrative twist of a single father.

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<sup>44</sup> For instance, Alison Smith: 1998: 44 and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis: 1990: 234. These readings directly re-evaluate initial interpretations of the film closer to its release, which took Varda’s ironic directing style literally, and saw the scripting and cinematography as peculiarly poor filmmaking on her part.

Even the film's principle bifurcation, François's affair with Emilie, begins with remarkably little bother. Though we might assume that even the contemplation of the sexual and emotional betrayal of a person with whom one has ostensibly achieved ideal happiness, of a relationship with no apparent tensions or dissatisfactions, should be a psychologically meaningful event, François is not shown to wrestle with the decision at all. The easy slide into the relationship with Emilie does not even employ the alternative cliché that François is not especially unhappy, but that Emilie offers him something different to Thérèse. In fact, the two women seem remarkably alike. The physical similarities between them seem purposeful (both are blonde, slim, feminine, stereotypically attractive), and though Rebecca DeRoo argues that 'if Thérèse corresponds to the traditional homemaker, then Emilie represents what was termed in women's magazines of the late 1950s and 1960s the 'modern woman'' (2008: 203), it is hard to agree that the film offers such distinctions between the women. DeRoo defines the 'modern woman' as 'an evolution of the housewife seen as free from the drudgery of the previous generation: she had a career, embraced popular culture and was more sexually liberated' (*ibid*), yet these factors hardly present a distinguishing cypher between Thérèse and Emilie; both work (and neither in a career that is in itself particularly subversive to the patriarchal order); both undertake housework when living with François; aside from the posters of movie stars in the background of Emilie's apartment, nothing in the film indicates that either is especially in or out of touch with contemporary pop culture or that Thérèse is not; and when François compares Thérèse's and Emilie's styles of lovemaking whilst in bed with the latter, he draws no meaningful opposition between the two as, despite initially claiming they are different, he is unable to explain how, and concedes that both women enjoy making love and are sexually open (a stance corroborated by scenes of both couples in bed together). If anything, in fact, rather than exploring one man's choice between two 'types' of wife, the film suggests that idealised images of femininity ultimately tolerate very little expression of difference amongst women.

Furthermore, as the film progresses, Emilie becomes *increasingly* similar to Thérèse, most interestingly in her appearance and environment. What few differences of appearance and style that there were between the women dissolve over the course of the film. The aesthetic progression of Emilie's flat also creeps gradually towards a tacit imitation of Thérèse's house with each of François's visits. On his first visit, the

walls are entirely white, and the rooms mostly bare, a blank issue of the product waiting to be dyed. Gradually, and with François' help, she acquires furniture, decorates with white daisies and pictures of Hollywood actors, and adds splashes of colour. After the death, the transformation accelerates; the first time François visits her again, a colour palette associated with Thérèse has begun to dominate the apartment, and the flowers have changed from daisies to an almost identical bunch of purple wildflowers to that kept by Thérèse in her sewing room. Finally, all that is left is for Emilie to physically replace Thérèse in the family home. The progression is disturbing in its subtlety; slowly, unintentionally, and parasitically, one woman usurps the place of another as wife and mother, filling the role exactly. The maternal-feminine function, in other words, has remained constant, oblivious to the expropriation of the mothering subject. Deroo's reading of the film as 'impl[ying] that romantic love is a sham for the modern woman, requiring a sacrifice of self that leads to the same destiny and drudgery as for the traditional homemaker' (2008: 203) suggests that Emilie is a younger version of Thérèse, perhaps recapturing the sexual excitement potentially depreciating in the daily customs of family life. The most biting melancholy of the film, however, is not that women expecting unique relationships inevitably fall into the monotony of the housewife and mother role, but that this role indeed exists independently of a human subject. If the film presents motherhood as unfulfilling, it is only because patriarchal culture invites it to be so entirely generic.

As a well-modelled maternal product, Thérèse becomes a swift casualty of her own radical replaceability. As Smith points out, the death scene is the only image which, taken individually, does not suggest a twee cliché of familial bliss (1998: 43). It is at this point, also, that the soundtrack breaks off into sudden, striking silence. The death has received varying interpretations, ranging from reading it as a clean amputation, as 'Thérèse has to disappear in order to avoid the appearance of an idyllic family image containing two women, and she does so unhesitatingly and discreetly' (*ibid*: 44), to a crystallising moment of patent subjectivity, which 'reinstates her position as subject and bares the messy seams for scrutiny, thus winking metaphorically at the spectator in an appeal to those who find themselves excluded from traditional texts and at the edges of tidy representations of happiness' (Hottell: 1999: 62), resulting in François's 'belated recognition of the importance of Thérèse's home maintenance and care-giving: just after her death' (DeRoo: 2008: 206), thereby

exposing the invisible but vital work the mother performs in constituting the patriarchal comforts of the happy family trope. I suggest, rather, that complete self-destruction appears as the character's single recourse to expression. Having lived as an objective image, she sees her own reproduction in Emilie. The suicide is not a capitulation to François's (society's) picture of happiness, nor a satisfying and successful undermining of this picture, but a desperate attempt at unique communication, to produce rather than reproduce meaning, for which, of course, there is no scripted response. As the singular instant that does not adhere to mass-reproduced family romance idyll, this plot point also produces a visual and sensory rupture in the representational rhythms of the film; the camerawork is shakier (introducing less stability in the image, and suggesting the presence of an individual behind the camera, a viewer with a constructing gaze), the colours become suddenly less vibrant, and the soundtrack sharply stops. Images of François cradling Thérèse's body proceed in syncopated jump cuts. The effect is disorienting, producing an almost physically felt shock in the viewing experience. The sudden, momentary shattering of the procession of mass-reproduced clichés is jarring.

Tragically, however, this action is not powerful enough to perform an Irigarian jamming of the machinery (1977b: 76) of received patriarchal ideologies. With the exception of the brief, if powerful, corpse sequence, it scarcely rattles the axles. Emilie steps into Thérèse's now vacant wife-and-mother role with minimal anxiety. The mass-produced familial idyll continues thereafter much as it had previously. Even a criticism as damning as the mothering object's self-annihilation cannot undo the pattern of the timeless role-reproduction in a single gesture. Both roads – participation or rejection – end in absence. The deeply unsettling closing sequence, in which the family, now including Emilie rather than Thérèse, walk off, hand-in-hand, through the same forest in which we encounter François and Thérèse in the opening sequence (also, darkly, the site of her suicide), in a reproduced image of family harmony, shows how Emilie has become a precise replica of Thérèse. The 'good' mother figure is a reproducible function; the ideological machinery is fully automated.

Varda and Godard are also both interested in exploring the powerfully aesthetic nature of the reproduced identity. The construction of the self – and certainly the maternal self – as a product, and a purchasable commodity, involves extensive engagement with the culture of images. Within a deluge of signs, meanings and

advertising discourses, motherhood itself potentially becomes a spectacle. Not only is the identity of the ‘good mother’ marketed piece by piece to women (whether they are mothers or not), but because mothers throughout the twentieth century generally did most of the household shopping and purchasing, mothers’ success is also measured by their skill in establishing and maintaining the image of the perfect family. The gendered advertising discourses that provide instruction on *how* this image is to be achieved at a given social moment have been critiqued by feminist scholars as manipulative and disempowering. In her work on commodity forms and culture, for instance, Mary Ann Doane describes how ‘The commodity was at least a small part of the lure tempting the woman to take a job in the first place [...] But the commodity was also activated as the lure back into the domestic space of the home in the postwar years when the threat of male unemployment was great.’ (1989: 27). In other words, it is argued that household commodities and desirable goods are leveraged in order to bait women into various social positions, in a discourse that could be seen as addressing them as a ‘national mother’ figure, who must act on the best interests of the country as the private mother is expected to act on the best interests of the child.

Motherhood and reproduction are already intimately linked in the cultural imagination (in the reproduction of children, identity, gender, values, traditions, nationalities, psychoanalytic narratives, and so forth). Much marketing towards mothers only solidifies the sense of a single, inflexible maternal ideal that these discourses establish within a given culture. The result is a mass-reproduced mother as a flat and homogenising image. This allows not for recognition of difference amongst mothers, but fabricates a linear and hierarchical spectrum at the end of the production line, along which mothering women are placed according to their degree of faults and deviations from the blueprint. Godard and Varda critique this absent maternal model-object through use of the same cultural images that form it, using various stylised techniques of montage, colour, sound editing and other strategies to suggest the feverish and ubiquitous nature of these messages and images. For both filmmakers, women’s magazines of the period constitute important cultural artefacts and points of reference in the reproduction of a certain type of woman and mother. Ross provides interesting contextual analyses of such magazines in France,<sup>45</sup> describing them as

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<sup>45</sup> Magazines aimed at specifically at a female audience, Ross explains, were ‘born in France in the 1930s, but they knew a significant surge in number, circulation, and readership in the decade following World War II’ (1995: 78).

providing ‘a veritable roadmap of the quotidian’ (1997: 22) which ‘played a leading role in disseminating and normalizing the state-led modernization effort’ (1995: 78) and, it follows, were instrumental in establishing and naturalising the objective models of femininity included therein. The images in magazines like *Elle* and *Marie-Claire* can appear at once ephemeral and timeless, superficial and palimpsestic, providing an exposition of quotidian and up-to-date trends in fashion, interior design, parenting strategies and diets, yet inserting these items into an archetypal ‘good mother’ or ‘ideal femininity’ discourse.

Both directors borrow from this aesthetic. Godard, most clearly in *Une Femme mariée* and *2 ou 3 choses que je sais d’elle*, uses a hyper-sensory mass of images of the everyday and mass media. Many commentators have likened his aesthetic to artistic practices of collaging, though Douglas Smith (2014) more aptly describes it as ‘déchollage’ (in French, the practice of peeling back posters to reveal the layers beneath, which speaks more directly to a Barthesian sensibility towards hidden meanings in everyday images, rather than a superficial mimesis). Varda’s work, on the other hand, intermingles visual references to images of motherhood, family and femininity from both high and low culture (magazines, postcards, fine art, photography and many others) to portray the aspirational feminine maternal ideal as at once instantaneous and abiding, seamlessly blending classical compositions with contemporary familiar objects.

In the films mentioned above, Godard particularly uses images relating to the female body and domestic goods and brands to collect an impression of how the mothering women in these films might witness their own detachable production as and through objects. In *2 ou 3 choses que je sais d’elle*, the domestic mothering role is often performed through commodity objects, and this performance is directed towards the camera and audience as well as to the other characters, in, for instance, the incessant positioning of brand-name cleaning products (much reminiscent of a visual interpretation of Barthes chapter on *Saponides et détergents* [*Mythologies*: 1957: 38-40]) exaggeratedly face-on towards the camera in Juliette’s kitchen, or in the final scene in which a small army of domestic products are set out and filmed in a highly contrived manner on a lawn. Charlotte and Juliette are often depicted consuming women’s magazines and the (self-)images of the ideal woman, mother and housewife they construct and reconstruct. Godard includes lengthy sequences in both films in

which the women read magazines in cafés, crosscutting images of the multitudes of women, clothes and underwear items printed in the magazines, and of the actresses, and using a variety of denaturalising shot lengths (particularly extreme close-ups), edits and montaging methods to draw attention to the printed image, the film image and the body of the actress as potentially part of the same objectifying discourse.

This is one example of how Godard exploits his medium to enrich the meditations on reproduction offered by these films. Since his famous and innovative experimentations with jump cuts during apparently conventional conversation sequences in *À Bout de souffle* (1960), Godard maintains a playful approach to traditionally mimetic film, casually undermining any ‘*effet de réel*’ in arrhythmic intervals. In *Une Femme mariée* and *2 ou 3 choses que je sais d’elle*, he employs an extensive arsenal of Brechtian distancing techniques (particularly notably, for instance, the actors talking directly to the camera in the former, the introduction of Juliette/Marina Vlady as both actress and character in the latter, and any number of denaturalising non-narrative visual motifs that break almost every rule of conventional filmic storytelling) so that the viewer is generally highly aware that the film is indeed just that, not ‘realistic’ in an escapist sense, but also very much real in its own status as a narrative commodity. As has become familiar through the work of Walter Benjamin, film is, after all, the exemplary art form for the age of mechanical reproduction. Radically alienated from any idea of an ‘original’, as ‘that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art’ (Benjamin: 1936: 215), films are endless cycles of reproduction, reproducing the indexical objects or performances in front of the camera, edited, post-produced and distributed in a homogeneous mechanical format in which no particular copy is naturally superior to another, and imperfections (the perishing of celluloid, a scratch on a disc, a poor screen resolution) are the only markers of difference. In *Une Femme mariée* the medium marries uncannily to the theme of Charlotte’s reproduced identity.

Several writers have observed the significance of Godard’s mirroring devices in *Une Femme mariée*, of which there are many examples. Godard re-cycles individual images, not exactly of the same footage, but of strikingly similar compositions, most notably in the repeated motifs of body parts and white sheets, and certain, heavily posed, physical arrangements Charlotte adopts with her lovers, such as the shots of a mouth in profile, next to another character’s ear, repeatedly whispering ‘je t’aime’.

Michèle Cerisuelo points out the mirroring structures within individual scenes, and over the film as a whole:

Certaines séquences sont construites en parfaite symétrie : Charlotte est montrée dans les bras de son mari puis de son amant, les caresses de l'un répondent à celles de l'autre. Le film commence et se termine par une longue scène représentant les deux amants dans un lit. Charlotte descend d'un taxi pour monter dans un autre, etc.<sup>46</sup> (1989: 105)

The filmic representation of Charlotte's existence, therefore, reproduces itself, underpinning the view of Charlotte as a reproduceable maternal-feminine product. Her 'narrative' itself takes the form of a cycle, imitating gendered discourses on the circularity of femininity discussed above. It is interesting, moreover, that Cerisuelo further observes: 'Le film est un modèle d'équilibre. Après l'apparition de Nicolas, la chaîne des cartons s'interrompt pour reprendre ponctuellement jusqu'à la fin'<sup>47</sup> (*ibid* : 108). Cerisuelo does not interrogate this point further, but within a gendered discourse on the particular affinity between reproduction, objectivity and *mothers*, the observation is significant. The son, Cerisuelo's comment suggests, is positioned at the structural and aesthetic centre of the film. Nicolas, therefore, constitutes a point of uniqueness, meaning and importance, around which the mother's identity and routine literally orbits. In this sense, Godard's choice of self-replicating structures in representing the mother could be read as imitating, subtly, feminist critiques of the socially constructed patterns of maternal identity as objectifying and cyclic, '*with no closure of the circle or the spiral of identity*' (Irigaray: 1974: 76, original emphasis), in which the son is the only term of progression and futurity, of a 'productive' subjective identity. The symmetrical and recurrent devices used to represent Charlotte, on the other hand, emphasise her discursive status as one among many objects that construct her identity.

*Le Bonheur* also engages with the mass-reproduction of the mother through interplays of cultural images and aesthetic narratives, asking how far these perpetually

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<sup>46</sup> 'Certain sequences are constructed in perfect symmetry: Charlotte is shown in the arms of her husband then her lover, the embraces of one correspond to those of the other. The film begins and ends with a long scene showing the two lovers in bed. Charlotte gets out of one taxi to get into another, etc.'

<sup>47</sup> 'The film is a model of balance. After the appearance of Nicolas, the chain of images is interrupted, before resuming until the end [of the film].'

self-generating clichés end up standing in for a mothering subject. Here too, the images reproduced in women’s lifestyle media are shown to be instrumental in mass-marketing a paper-doll automaton of the perfect mother and wife who performs independently of the mothering subject. Whilst, unlike in many of Godard’s films, little attention is drawn to magazines as physical objects of consumption within the film, DeRoo has presented a compelling analysis of how Varda adopts the visual language of these media throughout the film as a form of ironic critique, using ‘archival excavation of imagery from these magazines to explain how Varda applied their imagery to the subjects, characters and poses of *Le Bonheur* in order to interrogate myths of domestic harmony’ (DeRoo: 2008: 191).

Certainly, the scenes of domestic bliss seem precisely posed as if for a photoshoot from a good housekeeping magazine. Constantly serene and nurturing, Thérèse floats through the minutely orchestrated idylls immaculately coiffed and made-up, her arms always gently and adoringly open to two angelic children who never appear to cry or create mess and nuisance; she is always, nonetheless, sexually available and desirable to her husband, and seems to effortlessly generate the material ideal of familial harmony through seamless curation of beautiful objects (flowers, food, herself). These images are perfectly posed in front of Varda’s camera to suggest tableaux vivants of magazine clichés. Thérèse, like the women in these images, is performing the absent mother; the point of the narrative is that she becomes generic, and, like the models in the photos, an all but nameless figure whose purpose is to represent rather than speak. The ‘good mother’ is responsible for reproducing this image (a commodity controlled by external forces) which requires her absence; any visible notion of ambivalence on her part damages the goods.

In addition to referencing contemporary media construction of identities, critics have often commented upon Varda’s use of clichéd compositions and tropes from fine art and painting. Interesting work has been done on investigating references to specific paintings, but more pertinent here is the adoption of a general aesthetic, which, as Smith (1998: 26) and Hottell have noted, likens the film to impressionist painting in particular, using ‘a cyclical symphony of colors to complicate the implied connection between repetition in nature and the replacement of one woman for another’ (Hottell: 1999: 61). As well as the importance of the generation of a ‘cyclical’ effect through use of a marked colour palette, the choice of impressionism is eloquent. Well before

the time of filming, this style had become clichéd, connoting ‘happy days, sunshine and holidays, or on the other hand a certain celebration of the conventional which has increased with the enormous popularity of reproductions of their work’ (Smith: 1998: 36). The characteristics of impressionist art, in other words, fit the film’s themes ideally; the colours are soft and pleasing, the moods gentle, and the most typical and renowned subjects include bucolic outdoor scenes, of which scenery familial figures (often women and children) form a part. In the first scene after the titles, in which the family relax under a tree, we are immediately introduced to the motifs of pastoral impressionism, reminiscent of, for instance, Monet and Seurat; other sequences, such as the scene in which François, Thérèse and Emilie dance (between various couples) at a fête, seem to recall the composition of specific paintings, in this case Renoir’s *A Dance at Bouvival*.

The film blends these discourses, from popular media and fine art, demonstrating the deep ingraining of ‘good mother’ ideologies in historical and everyday culture. These various iconographies construct Thérèse as the finished maternal product, to be consumed by François. Throughout the first part of the film, Thérèse is shown working (unobtrusively) to ensure that the image of family happiness remains beautiful and pristine for François in particular. Sequences of her (or more specifically, her hands) performing housework are accelerated, sequenced together quickly and smoothly, and conducted to the film’s cheerful soundtrack, reflecting, perhaps, François’s romanticised view of her domestic duties. The first line spoken by Thérèse, after tidying the campsite, brushing away the ashes of a campfire (committing to something reminiscent of housework even in the outdoors) and hearing her daughter calling for her in the forest, is to instruct the child to be quiet so as ‘not to wake papa’; the idealised view of family happiness is, after all, dreamlike. Thérèse’s advice to her daughter is indicative of her work to maintain the idyllic, peaceful image for François without a hint of imperfection or fatigue (as he begins to wake up, she poses herself back against the tree, as if she has slept next to him throughout). These actions are typical of the good, absent mother, who curates and preserves the discourse of the family without drawing attention to her own efforts. François’s desire is not, however, for the individual women but for this image of happiness; the transition between the women is seamless because the story requires no present subject.

One issue in *Le Bonheur* that seems to have been overlooked as a further commentary on maternal reproduction, however, is the mirroring structures Varda uses across the film, which are semantically comparable to those used in *Une Femme mariée*. DeRoo has noted the representation of mundane perpetuity within *individual* scenes:

‘[...] for example, Thérèse’s hands roll the rolling pin back and forth several times over a lump of dough. By depicting the repetition inherent in the activity, Varda presents the tasks as dull and unfulfilling. Whereas the magazine text and images imply the woman’s responsibility and know-how, the film portrays only simple duties with no such flattering commentary,’ (DeRoo: 2008: 200)

She importantly emphasises how Varda’s translation of the still, stylised magazine cliché into the dimension of time in film problematises the image’s intended message of feminine fulfilment by introducing the (typically hidden) tedious, unsatisfying and endless monotony of labour required to maintain the ideal. However, this idea is not limited to individual scenes and sequences, but extends to the film as a whole in images, motifs and even soundtrack. The theme of reproduction and repetition is aurally expressed, for instance, through Varda’s choice of a limited and isochronally introduced score for the film. As with her visual motifs, a deliberate and powerful refusal is made of anything ‘original’ (no new music has been composed for this film); instead, Varda uses and re-uses a recording of Mozart’s Adagio and Fugue in C minor, largely reusing the theme from the fugue rather than the adagio. The choice of a fugue is an ingeniously apposite musical analogy for the film’s plot and themes. In music, a fugue refers to a composition based entirely around a repeated theme, to which small elements are added, but which is essentially a continuous, repetitive cycle. In psychiatry, ‘fugue state’ is a term indicating loss of awareness of one’s identity. Both meanings are chillingly apt for Thérèse, who becomes deeply but almost unconsciously disconnected from her subjective identity within the endless repetition of her performance of the good mother. Within the film, passages from Mozart’s fugue are used to cue the cyclical recommencement of one of several visual sequences or motifs that are used throughout the film.

In the same way that Charlotte's mirroring scenes underscore her, too, as a reproducible object in *Une Femme mariée*, the 'fugal' motifs in *Le Bonheur* draw attention to the mass-reproduced character of the domestic mother figure within familiar coded facsimiles of family happiness. This is all the more disturbing given that the mirroring sequences go on despite the replacement of the mothering woman. The film begins and ends with the family in the forest; we see them packed together in François's small van driving between the forest and the home; remarkably similar sequences of actions show a pair of maternal hands performing housework, tending to flowers (arranging or watering), ironing children's clothes (dungarees or a pink dress), cooking (kneading dough or sprinkling salt), putting the children to bed, and other elements that contribute to the stylisation of aspirational mass-produced maternal-feminine happiness. Even the most intimate and personal moments of the mother's familial relations appear reproduceable and non-specific; the fugal sequences also involve Thérèse/Emilie making love to François in the same bed, and highly similar images of motherly affection between the women and the children (who seem entirely indifferent to the replacement of the mother figure with another, marginally different copy), amounting to a writing out of the mothering subject from the idealised family story. The representation of the 'script' of good mothering as a mechanical function, with an absent subject, echoes (*reproduces*) the structure of the fugue; with each repetition, small elements are changed or added, the phrases are perhaps differently instrumented, or transposed, as the minutiae of daily activities vary slightly between the two women, but the theme (the symphonic motif, or the patriarchal fantasy of family) continues.

The films discussed in this chapter present detailed and varied explorations of motherhood and the position of women within the family home within the cultural context of capitalist mass-production and prosperous, post-war consumer society. This thriving materialist culture and the revolutionary signs, forms and discourses that accompanied it were cause for ambivalent societal responses, from excitement and pride to introspective fear over the integrity of social organisation and the meaning of the human. Whilst the thrill and power of modern production had iconographic links to youthful, Americanised masculinity and Hollywood, the mother figure in these films appears overwhelmingly connected to its underside of cultural depression and depersonalisation. In fact, the films, in differing ways, use the traditional metonymy

of the mother as the static heart of the private and public family to frame mother characters as nerve centres for cultural anxiety, whether as aggressors, victims or both. They become standard-bearers for the dehumanising capacity of commodity culture and mass-reproduction.

The 'kitchen sink' cycle tends to fantasise a good/bad mother narrative in which the mother is responsible for presenting herself as the 'authentic' object of consumption within the private home, rather than relying idly on machine-made commodities that perform her functions (the housekeeping and motherly love that bolster male productivity) to an ostensibly poorer degree. The good mothers support the archetypal patriarchs as policewomen of traditional values to ensure the perpetuation of the oedipal family narrative, and are only forceful when its norms are challenged or disobeyed (as, for example, when Vic's mother chastises him for shirking his duties towards his wife when he considers leaving her after her miscarriage, or when Joe Lampton's aunt in *Room at the Top* warns him against 'selling himself' by marrying for social and financial gain rather than love). The values, practices and even body parts that construct these 'good mothers' are relatively homogeneous within given communities and the women are generally only passive conduits for the reproduction of these values. On the other hand, the bad mothers' self-indulgence and reliance on machines for labour, love and entertainment, dismantles the mythic relations of the 'wholesome' family. The 'kitchen sink' cycle films suggest mothers' relationships to commodity objects as hugely important in determining their degree of success or recklessness in this regard.

Godard's and Varda's films, conversely, do not perpetuate the patriarchal myth of an 'authentic' sacred maternal object. Whilst the Hoggartian mother is desexualised and kept apart from exchange markets, euphemising her own taboo relationship to feminine commodity value, the mother characters in Godard's and Varda's work experience no such clear separation. Their films are more sympathetic to the ubiquitous pressures of femininity. Nonetheless, whilst not bearing the blame for its iniquities, the mothers in the films discussed are often presented as victimised by commodity culture. The perceived threat to individual identities here is more immediately universal, but the mother in her traditional position of objectification is still patient zero, if less willingly so. Furthermore, their films seek to expose how mothers themselves are part of the culture of objects. In all cases (though more

explicitly so in the French films), the relationship between the mother and the commodity is deeper than vulnerability and indulgence; the mass-reproduction of commodities is perceived to have pejorative maternal qualities. Anxiety over dehumanisation through commodities to some extent sublimates a castration anxiety over femininity, in a patriarchal system which has always discreetly read women as reproducing objects. Whether the tone of each film is one of expository critique, or ideological naturalisation, all present a culture in which mothers are treated as part of the world of objects, and in which there are right and wrong ways of subscribing to objecthood according to the desiring subject.

The positions from which these issues are contemplated in film, furthermore, underpin an Edelmanian figural Child as the typical interpretive cypher for viewing the mother figure. By this I mean to suggest that masculinist reproductive futurity is still framed as the logical point of identification for film narratives. The discourses on consumer culture and mechanically reproduced commodities all express thoughts, anxieties and questions over a social future, for which the son is the default protagonist. The good/bad mother scale generated by this normative perspective, in these discourses, becomes relative not only to the individual child, as was the case in the previous chapter, but to the entire national family, to public life and cultural identity, though, as is typical for traditional mother figures, from behind the scenes. Both seen as instruments of generic reproduction, the over-presence of commodity objects is as castrating to the masculine subject as the over-presence of the (psychological or actual) mother. In the British films, this assumption is uncritical, and the solution straightforward: productivity and culture is maintained by making the overbearing maternal object(s) forcibly absent. Godard and Varda are far more sympathetic to the mother as a self-experiencing being. Nonetheless, the mothering subject remains absent in these films insofar as her self-expression within the situation they describe seems impossible or intensely contradictory.

## Chapter 2: Gestation

### 2.0 – Introduction

My argument in Chapter One aimed to demonstrate how the subjectivity of the mother is persistently subordinated to that of the male child or cultural agent. The presence or absence of any self-interest or self-orientation in the mothering woman determines her position within a simplifying good/bad mother binary, which is easily signified in the films discussed. I have also argued that Edelman's concept of the Child and reproductive futurity can be usefully engaged to illustrate the cultural ideologies and assumptions that bolster this hierarchical positioning. In short, because the child – or, more accurately, the figure of the child – contains an imminently perfect collective fantasy of social futurehood, the mothering subject who refuses to relinquish her own agency is adversarially constructed not only as neglectful towards her individual children but as poisonous to the progress and future of an entire given culture. De-personified and consigned to reproduction rather than production, she is expected to be passive and absent.

This chapter will begin by looking at how the same discourse and ideologies stretch to address a child figure that is as yet almost entirely conceptual. Whereas family narratives often blur the general ideological properties of cultural futurity with the individual qualities of a relevant character, narratives positioned at the cusp of reproduction, involving discourses on sexual liberation, contraception, abortion and reproductive rights (all of which became hugely pertinent issues throughout Western Europe during this period), raise similar tensions between the rights and subjectivities of women and mothers and those of the child in a way that is plainly ideological. In these discourses, the discursively leveraged figure of the child is predominantly imaginary. Unlike in representations such as *Les 400 coups* and *A Kind of Loving*, in which the struggle for agency takes place between two or more existing people, in narratives of unplanned pregnancy and reproductive control, the struggle is often between an existing woman and the *fantasy* of a person (her child), which is peculiarly powerful in that it can be (and often is, within anti-abortion or abortion-sceptical rhetoric) constructed as flawless and exceptionally wonderful,<sup>48</sup> whilst the mother, like

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<sup>48</sup> This rhetorical device is referred to by Sarah Franklin as the argument that 'every fetus could be a Beethoven' (1991: 199).

all actual beings, will of course be less than perfect, and often considered even more so when her pregnancy is extra-marital or unintended.

Particularly in cases of unplanned pregnancy and unwilling motherhood, the woman in question is confronted with multiple discourses of the absent mother. Firstly, the same mantle of absence described as conditioning maternal representations in Chapter One is ready to receive her too; however she chooses to engage with this (whatever degree of capitulation or rejection), it is an external construction that she will likely have to consider should she choose to continue the pregnancy. Secondly, abortion and contraception discourses that focus on the rights and fate of the foetus (symbolised already as the 'child') erode the presence of the maternal subject from around her uterus, whether its contents are discursive or embryonic. Feminist commentators on abortion and reproductive rights underscore the ways in which legal, political and cultural arguments on these matters put the rights and subjectivity of the woman (as mother) in direct conflict with those of the foetus/child (as yet more imagined than existent). Sarah Franklin and Deborah Lynn Steinberg (1991) both demonstrate how legal and political discourses on abortion frame the mother and foetus in an adversarial relationship that necessitates the definition of a criminal and hence a victim; the foetus is personified as the victim, despite its lack of legal citizenship or expression in all other senses. Both writers describe how the foetus is rhetorically imbued with *personality*; Steinberg describes debates<sup>49</sup> over abortion reform in which 'foetal-centric' language such as 'killing', 'murder' and 'unborn children' was used (and sometimes by both sides) to emotively construct the 'victimhood' of the foetus, despite the legal inaccuracy of such phrasing (1991: 178-179). Franklin, similarly, addresses the construction in medical discourse of foetal personhood and the mother as 'host', demonstrating how a 'a clear antagonism' (rather than, perhaps, symbiosis) is set up between the two parties, in which conflict of interests is presupposed, (1991: 194) legitimating the possibility of a position that supports the rights of the foetus entirely at the expense of those of the mother.

It is clear within such constructions that the rights and citizenship of the mother seem to be in conflict with those of the foetus, or rather, I suggest, with those of an imaginary child 'provided with an entire life cycle through the construction of its

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<sup>49</sup> Her essay concerns the Alton Bill specifically, but demonstrates wider trends in British debates over abortion legislation.

developmental potential' (*ibid*: 197-198). This raises several important qualitative questions about the role of mothers and their place within society. These include the matter of to whom the child 'belongs' and who has the duty of care towards it: the mother, the father, the state, or 'society'? Any or all of these may claim an ideological stake in the imagination of the child not necessarily commensurate with their burden of responsibility for it. Abortion as a legal issue and matter of public concern, furthermore, raises clear questions over women's agency and control over their bodies, including how far the state may claim jurisdiction over reproduction and women's fertility. Feminist writers such as Steinberg argue that the legitimization of public interest in the protection of embryos 'locates the agency of the state within a woman's body' (1991: 186). An associated issue here is the problem posed to legal and political systems by the numerical ambivalence of the pregnant woman, who is strictly neither one nor two people. Abortion reform is a case in which Irigaray's theoretical advocacy of a politics reflective and respectful of gendered difference<sup>50</sup> becomes practically urgent. She argues:

One of the distinctive features of the female body is its toleration of the other's growth within itself without incurring illness or death for either one of the living organisms. Unfortunately, culture has practically inverted the meaning of this economy of respect for the other. It has blindly venerated the mother-son relationship to the point of religious fetishism, but has given no interpretation to the model of tolerance of the other within and with a self that this relationship manifests. (1990b: 39)

The discursive inadequacies expressed here have had and continue to have very real consequences for women contending with abortion legislation. This is not to say that Irigaray's thought would necessarily lend itself to conviction of the one over the other, or the rights of the woman over the foetus in abortion law (this would, after all, and quite contrary to Irigaray's proposition, be a simple inversion that would replicate the adversarial qualities of the initial standpoint); rather, it underpins the incapacity of

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<sup>50</sup> As expressed particularly in *Each Sex Must Have Its Own Rights* (1987), *The Right to Life* (1990d) and *The Culture of Difference* (1990b).

the current system to represent or account for bodies other than that of the ideal patriarchal citizen who is, and always will be, one.

Evidently, many important (perhaps seemingly theoretical) questions over maternal subjectivity are urgently crystallised in cultural and political dialogues on abortion. Within the period of interest for this thesis, furthermore, the issue of reproductive rights and associated questions of sexual liberation and women's sexual expression particularly were extremely prominent within public and political consciousness in both Britain and France. Abortion reform came to be recognised as one of the definitive issues of this era's feminism, but its significance as a vital current debate extended far beyond feminist and anti-abortion activist circles. Relevant inroads into women's fertility and (potential for) reproduction being addressed as a legitimate area of public and state interest had already been made within European countries during the pro-natalist climate of the immediate post-war years, resulting from national population decline after the world wars.<sup>51</sup> In France in particular, combatting the low birth rate became an expressly political matter, and motherhood was positioned relatively unambiguously as women's patriotic duty, leading to incentivising schemes such as the awarding of the 'Médaille de la Famille française (Medal of the French Family)' to mothers of particularly large numbers of children (Claire Duchen: 1994: 101). Maggie Allison has highlighted the specifically paternalistic nature of this rhetoric, citing de Gaulle's imploration to young French couples to 'provide him with 'millions of beautiful babies'' (1994: 224). Duchen argues, however, that although pro-natalist policy was initially somewhat effective in creating a French post-war 'baby boom', the fact that by 1967 a clear majority supported increased family planning resources suggests that 'Many of the babies born during the baby boom [...] were babies of reluctant mothers' (1994: 199). Whilst it is difficult to absolutely prove or disprove Duchen's interpretation of these figures, it seems clear that pro-natalist policies and attitudes tend to privilege the interests of imagined children and projections of collective cultural futurity even as measures to do so may prove coercive towards women and/as mothers. In this case, furthermore, it could reasonably be argued that, since reproduction is understood to be in the public

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<sup>51</sup> Works that specifically address pro-natalist culture and policies in France include Maggie Allison, *The Right to Choose: Abortion in France* (1994), Claire Duchen, *Women's Rights and Women's Lives in France, 1944-1968* (1994), Jean C. Robinson, *Gendering the Abortion Debate: The French Case* (2001) and Dorothy M. Stetson, *Abortion Law Reform in France* (1986).

interest, society and the state have high stakes in the ‘ownership’ of the child, whilst mothers are addressed as reproductive instruments rather than consensual parents with unique relationships to their children. Ann Taylor Allen describes how the pro-natalist interests of European states, and the public support provided to enshrine motherhood as a national service, precipitated questions over whether such activities might effectively ‘buy’ for the state a degree of entitlement within the management of individual families and women’s mothering:

If motherhood was indeed a service to the state, some asked, then should the state give financial support to mothers and children? In that case, did the state have the right to require parenthood, to regulate the number of children in each family, or to forbid certain people to reproduce? [...] If the state supported children financially, then *to whom did they belong?* (Taylor Allen: 2005: 13, my emphasis)

Though their cultural currency was self-limiting (by the mid-1960s, reproductive issues had quite a different role in public discourse), pro-natalist attitudes did set a precedent in post-war Europe for women’s reproductive bodies and citizenship to become a matter of public concern.

By the 1960s, attitudes towards sex and family dynamics had in many ways altered radically from those of the inter- and post-war years in Europe. Social and technological progress in relation to contraception was instrumental to a period of sexual revolution amongst the younger generation, allowing sexuality to be expressed, discussed and acted upon more freely than before. As part of these shifting attitudes, women’s demands for control over their own reproduction through access to birth control and abortion services increased. During this period, writers describe how new female cultural protagonists emerged. In Britain, for instance, Stephen Brooke compares the ‘maternalist’ politics of the first half of the twentieth century (the figure of a political mother acting within a collective, and speaking to class politics) to the figure of a more individualist ‘empowered mother-citizen, whose claim on politics was not simply about state allowances, but sexuality’ emerging during the 1960s (2011: 9). Duchén makes a comparable argument regarding French culture, illustrating a shift from the heroisation of the domestic mother figure in the post-war period to the

rise of a 'superwoman' figure at this point, who masterfully balanced traditional domestic duties with public life and paid employment (1994: 94-95).

Though this period marked a general liberalising trend in attitudes towards sex and contraception, this shift was hardly universal. Many responded to the rise of 'permissive' culture with anxiety, fear or anger, understanding it as a mark of cultural decay, loss of traditional values and diminishing social responsibility. Amongst the multitude of arguments against abortion reform was the view that 'As a form of 'permissiveness', abortion may be seen as a 'Casanova's Charter' for selfish males or, more commonly, as an inducement to the young of both sexes to promiscuity, irresponsibility and lack of respect for human life and religious authority' (Jenny Chapman: 1986: 17). Tessa ten Tusscher, similarly, argues that demand for abortion rights and other signs of women's growing sexual independence provoked a reactionary galvanisation of traditionalist right-wing patriarchal values amongst those who opposed it (1986: 76). Reproductive rights, therefore, became a vital pressure point to which many conflicting views and responses to sexual liberation and the changing position of women, motherhood and the family in British and French culture became closely attached.

Whilst it is not the case that all feminists necessarily identify with a pro-choice position, this is generally accepted as a broadly feminist position. After all, the fundamental proposition underlying much demand for increased reproductive rights is that women's claims to their own bodies and citizenship is equal to or greater than those claims of embryos or of the state. Furthermore, a great deal of effective campaigning, lobbying and discursive framing of the issue sprang from feminist groups and writers in the UK and France.<sup>52</sup> However, abortion debates were not contained only within two opposing poles of feminists and militant anti-abortionists. Other interests had a stake in and conditioned stances on abortion reform, including religion, eugenics and class politics. Class politics, for instance, intersected

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<sup>52</sup> In France, for instance, the influence of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) on abortion discourses within feminist theory is well-documented. Concerning the history of feminist activist groups and their work on abortion reform in the period at hand, my views have been informed by, amongst others Maggie Allinson, *The Right to Choose: Abortion in France* (1994), Stephen Brooke, *Sexual Politics: Sexuality, Family Planning and the British Left from the 1880s to the Present Day* (2011), Cathy Roberts and Elaine Millar, *Feminism, Socialism and Abortion* (1978), Jean C. Robinson, *Gendering the Abortion Debate: The French Case* (2001), Dorothy M. Stetson, *Abortion Law Reform in France* (1986) and Dorothy M. Stetson, *Women's Movements' Defence of Legal Abortion in Great Britain* (2001).

ambivalently with abortion debates in both countries. A sustained – and justified – caveat, for instance, was that abortion access was unequal amongst women of different social classes and financial means (for instance, Stephen Brooke: 2011), hence abortion reforms would be less meaningful if they favoured middle-class women. The question of whether increased reproductive rights would be liberating or oppressive towards working-class women specifically also received differing responses; in both countries, for instance, Marxist and Communist groups initially opposed abortion as the ‘suicide of the working class’ (Allison: 1994: 225; similar ideas regarding the British context are expressed in Cathy Roberts and Elaine Millar: 1978: 9-11), though the issue later ‘became about the empowerment of working-class women and men and the protection of working-class families’ (Brooke: 2011: 4). The issue of eugenics and population control continued to be a further significant factor on both sides of abortion debates; as shall be shown in further detail below, substantial rhetorical shifts take place when opposing ‘defective foetuses’ to ‘Perfectly normal children’ (Steinberg: 1991:180).

Whilst further contextual detail will be given in regards to the specific political events, situations and discourses of each country below, it is not my main purpose in this chapter to engage again with these political histories alone, as there is already much nuanced and detailed work in this area. My intention is to address the far less examined area of how cultural representations in cinema interacted with, reflected or differed from contemporaneous discourses on reproductive rights. Historical commentators on the topic have sometimes acknowledged film-making as a significant site of representation within societal discourses on abortion and sexuality; for instance, Brooke argues that ‘it is possible that kitchen sink drama and issue films were as important as something like the Wolfenden Report in establishing a space for the discussion of sexual questions’ (2011: 148), citing several examples of films that foregrounded representations of abortion, and Allinson mentions the place of a documentary on abortion, *Histoire d’A* (1974) within the French debate (1994: 228). Agnès Varda’s personal involvement with feminist reproductive rights activism is also widely known. Understandably, however, these accounts go little further than recognising that film representations also engaged with these debates, rather than examining the terms in which they did so or the nature of the representations. Within British film scholarship on this period, it is generally recognised that abortion, along

with other newly prominent contemporaneous societal issues, becomes an increasingly conspicuous feature of social realist narratives. That notwithstanding, films' involvement with abortion and reproductive rights is very rarely given sustained and detailed analysis. Most commonly, mention of abortion in British film frames it as an indication of the 'gritty' realism of these films, as part of a general cultural context of 'permissive culture', working-class social hardship and increased expression of women's sexuality. There is a similar paucity of work on representation of reproductive rights in French film scholarship; even in the case of Varda – who is unusual in her position as a self-proclaimed feminist filmmaker addressing abortion as an unambiguously central issue – focus has been drawn towards those films that do not deal expressly with feminist politics and issues.

In short, how films of this period represent abortion and reproductive rights has not been given adequate attention as a specific issue, and, furthermore, one that was and remains of substantial importance to the cultural representation of women and motherhood. What is more, representations of abortion (discourses) are very far from homogenous. Comments made at the time such as 'Today people talk about a New Realism – a realistic realism, and that would mostly seem to cover swearing, talking about contraceptives, two people just up to the moment of sexual intercourse and That Long Shot of Our Town from That Hill' (Krish: 1963: 14) suggest that *any* representation of reproductive control is in itself seen as progressive, or at least a tiresome or insincere gesture towards progressivism. The articulations of these issues are in fact far more multifarious, nuanced and differentiated than this. Though the sensational 'shock value' of abortion scenes or the discussion of contraception as a shorthand for social liberalism cannot be dismissed, the films often reflect much of the complexity and ambivalence of cultural attitudes to reproductive control.

This chapter is intended to redress this gap in current scholarship on this body of films. Understanding reproductive rights as a key issue within feminist theory and practice, and as a lightning rod of family- and gender-related political discourse, my aim is to deconstruct underlying ideologies and motivations at work within filmic representations of abortion and contraception discourses, but also to examine how these films construct narratives of experiences of abortion and responses to unplanned pregnancy. Theoretical questions will be addressed concerning ideological

assumptions over gender, reproductive rights and motherhood (whose child, whose body, whose experience, whose perspective, are being privileged) as well as how film as a specific medium is well-positioned to present emotional and subjective engagements with these experiences. More precisely, I will use a selection of films to examine the nature of these representations, how they illustrate criticism or advocacy within attitudes towards sexual liberation, abortion and contraception, whose experience they represent abortion as, and whether and how far they characterise it as (necessarily) traumatic. I will further engage with the arguments on the absent mother presented so far by understanding filmic representations of pregnancy and reproductive choice as an ambivalent moment in maternal ideology, in which the woman in question is variously constructed as a mother and not.

### *2.1 – Victimhood, Trauma and Independence: Ambivalent Narratives of Reproductive Rights in Swinging London and Beyond*

In 1967, the UK became one of the first European states to decriminalise abortion to a significant degree. Abortion was not a new challenge to British law in 1967. The history of abortion legislation and the passage of the 1967 Act has been analysed often and well by historians and legal and social theorists (see in particular L. Clarke: 1989; Alvin Cohan: 1986; Keith Hindell and Madeleine Simms: 1968; Kelly Petersen: 2004 and Sally Sheldon: 1997). Since 1861, the principle law that regulated abortion was the Offences Against the Person Act, which criminalised anybody attempting to ‘procure the miscarriage of any woman’ (Clarke: 1989: 160); the law was therefore aimed at penalising the abortionist rather than the pregnant woman (though this person may have been one and the same). As this law was vague in regards to the legality of abortion when performed to save the mother’s life, it was updated in 1929 by the Infant Life Preservation Act, which ‘made it a felony to destroy the life of a child capable of being born alive, provided evidence was available that the mother was pregnant for twenty-eight weeks or more’ (Cohan: 1986: 37). Whilst this Act appears to aim at restricting abortion, its severity toward abortion after the agreed upon threshold of ‘viability’ in fact positioned the first 28 weeks of pregnancy as claimable territory for proponents of accessible abortion. This progressive reading of the law was first put into effect in the *R. v. Bourne* case, in which Mr Aleck Bourne, an obstetric surgeon, successfully defended his provision of abortion to a 14-year-old

victim of multiple rape, through arguing that the law allowed for therapeutic abortion on the grounds of protecting the woman's physical *or mental* health (Petersen: 2004: 318-319). This landmark case therefore established an available defence for medical professionals who performed abortion, and, though it remained insecure and precarious protection, meant that a relatively small number of arguably 'legal' abortions did take place prior to 1967. Nonetheless, their availability was limited and often performed at substantial private expense; dangerous and amateurish backstreet abortions remained widespread.

The 1967 Abortion Act, introduced to parliament as a private member's bill by David Steel, expanded upon and enshrined the developments of the Bourne case. It allowed abortions to be performed up to 28 weeks<sup>53</sup> into a pregnancy if certain criteria were met, according to the judgement of two doctors. Stephen Brooke summarises the stipulated conditions for abortion in the initial draft of the bill thus:

An abortion would be permitted if two doctors believed that the continuance of a pregnancy 'would involve serious risk to the life or grave injury to the health, whether physical or mental, of the pregnant woman whether before, at or after the birth of the child'; if there was a 'substantial risk' of physical or mental abnormality; if the pregnant woman's capacity as a mother will be severely overstrained by the care of a child or of another child as the case may be; and, finally, if the pregnant woman was the victim of a rape, under the age of 16, or 'defective'. (2011: 169)

As Brooke further explains, the third clause, which addressed social pressures of unwanted motherhood, was removed in later readings (*ibid*: 170-174). As was to become fairly typical of initial debates on abortion reform, therefore, the reforms at this stage mainly addressed abortion as a 'last resort' that catered for necessity rather than choice. Though the successful passing of an act that – however modestly – relaxed restrictions on and punishments for abortions represented a move toward sexual progressivism, it was not an unambiguous or definitive feminist victory, if it even can be considered a feminist victory at all; commentators have widely emphasised quite

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<sup>53</sup> An amendment later reduced this to 24 weeks.

how little interest the 1967 Act demonstrates in the rights of women per se. Sally Sheldon illustrates how the Act prioritised the legal protection of doctors as providers of abortion, rather than the rights of women as its subjects (Sheldon: 1997). She argues that representative bodies of the medical establishment, and several MPs, supported the bill precisely because it would bring abortion under medical control and surveillance, making abortion *more* ‘visible’ and changing the problem of abortion ‘from [a question of] of widespread and unquantifiable deviance, to one of isolated, identifiable and treatable individual deviants’ (*ibid*: 29). According to Sheldon, the rejection of the social clause of the original bill reflects this prioritisation of interest (*ibid*: 28). However, whilst a discourse of women’s rights is not centred in the ultimate legislation, it would be equally overreaching to suggest that it was absent from the debates; Joni Lovenduski (1986) and Keith Hindell and Madeleine Simms (1968) show how – other motives for support notwithstanding – the widespread and effective activities of feminist campaign and lobbying groups, in particularly ALRA (the Abortion Law Reform Society, of which Simms was a prominent member) were vital in the passage of the Act. The support of groups with other interests in abortion reform was beneficial to the short-term aims of feminist campaigners, though it did qualify their successes. The bill’s achievements and the attitudes they symbolised were not immutably enshrined, and abortion legislation has remained a contentious political issue in the UK, with those groups who believe the reforms went too far and those who believe they did not go far enough consistently pressuring for change in these opposing directions.<sup>54</sup>

In her study of the British public’s attitudes to abortion, however, Jenny Chapman suggests that these advocacy groups were not representative of the population as a whole, for whom abortion appeared to be a deeply ambiguous question. Chapman’s findings suggest – in broad terms – that throughout the debates, public sentiment has been cautiously pro-choice, with a majority tending to support women’s access to abortion services in ‘last resort’ cases such as those stipulated by the 1967 Act, and that thereafter public opinion became gradually more sympathetic towards social grounds for abortion, such as financial strain or marital status (1986: 8-17). Within these very generalised trends, however, a multitude of complex and often

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<sup>54</sup> The histories of pro- and anti-choice campaign groups and their continued legacies over the years following the 1967 Act is described in Joni Lovenduski: 1986.

conflicting views on the details of abortion legislation and scenarios are found; as Chapman surmises, ‘Nothing can account for variation so wide and so consistent except the existence of widespread feelings of ambivalence about the rights and wrongs of abortion’ (*ibid*: 13). The abstracted views expressed in opinion polls and empirical measures, furthermore, would likely not be entirely commensurate with the choices made in individuals’ lived experiences of reproductive control (*ibid*: 14).

Within the UK debates of this period, furthermore, abortion was rarely characterised as mainly a matter of women’s rights and choice. Much critical work has been done on exploring the various factors and interests that informed the debates, and whilst most commentators underpin the importance of examining the implications of abortion discourses for women and women’s rights (for instance, Stetson: 1986 and 2001), critics such as Brooke show how eugenic arguments relying on a general abhorrence of ‘defective children’ were in fact more persuasive in acquiring early abortion reform sympathies (2011: 161). In fact, one of the original founding members of the first iteration of ALRA in the interwar years (and its main funder), Janet Chance, was married to the treasurer of the Eugenics Society (Hindell and Simms: 1986: 271). As Sheldon shows, it was also possible to reconcile the eugenic argument to more traditional ideologies of motherhood:

Dr Michael Winstanley (Lib., Cheadle, Steel’s medical adviser for the Bill) makes the related argument that women should be allowed to abort disabled foetuses, because the woman who is forced to give birth to a disabled child will seldom allow herself to become pregnant again. Implicit here is an understanding of the role of law as being to protect and entrench motherhood, to encourage women to adopt the maternal role. (Sheldon: 1997: 41)

Given this important subtext, it is unsurprising that the Thalidomide episode of the 1950s and ‘60s is attributed with spurring greater support for abortion reform (Hindell and Simms: 1968: 273-275).

Another factor that generated further support for the bill and public appetite for reform in the 1960s (even or especially amongst those not fully supportive of ALRA’s aims) was the prevalence of illegal abortion. The removal of the ‘scourge’ of

backstreet abortion from British society was in fact stated as the bill's its principle aim (Cohan: 1986: 34). The acknowledged ubiquity of illegal backstreet abortions was evidence that illegality was an inadequate deterrent to women's acquisition of abortions, hence decriminalisation was seen as a 'necessary evil' in order to protect women's safety (Roberts and Millar: 1978: 5). Sheldon argues that, since the law was well-known to be consistently flouted and disrespected, creating an endemic problem of illegal abortion that was dangerous to individuals and problematic to the medical establishment, 'Decriminalisation would serve to bring unwanted pregnancy and abortion within the ambit of a medical control, where they might thus be more effectively monitored' (Sheldon: 1997: 22). That Roberts and Millar see this as 'perhaps the closest that the reformers came to acknowledging the demands of women to control their own fertility' (1978: 5) is paltry vindication for feminist advocates of women's freedom to choose, as it seems at best a begrudging capitulation that avoids taking an active stance on women's choice.

A further issue that has been a consistent and important factor of consideration within British abortion discourses is class. Around the time of the initial 1960s debates, Brooke illustrates how socialist politics had an ambivalent relationship with the prospect of abortion, as opinions differed over whether abortion was considered a top-down form of population control giving the elite power over working-class masses, or whether it would create space for working-class families to gain more autonomous control over their resources and household sizes (2011: 4). Indeed, the former concern was given credence by the panic expressed by some members of the political elite over rapid population expansion and 'problem families' (*ibid*: 173-176). This conflict was compounded by tensions between feminists and 'orthodox' Marxists in left wing politics over the primacy of class struggle and gender issues (Roberts and Millar: 1978: 9). The prevalence of this issue diminished over time, however, as general consensus came to understand abortion access as empowering and desirable to working-class women (Brooke: 2011: 4). The significant intersection between class and gender within abortion debates instead became equality of access. Given the limitations of abortion provision even after the initial reforms, upper-middle class women who could afford access to safe abortions in expensive clinics were in a privileged position compared to those who could not, and who may therefore be more likely to seek backstreet equivalents from untrained practitioners. The division was so distinct and

significant that some questioned whether abortion was predominantly a class issue rather than a women's issue (this is an ongoing theme in Brooke: 2011).

A final caveat that has been often critically analysed in regard to UK abortion reform is the question of the power of the medical establishment in controlling women's reproduction. Fran Amery argues that UK abortion legislation has in fact seen a generally shift 'wherein traditionally 'female' knowledge concerning pregnancy was gradually displaced by medical terminology and expertise' (2015: 555). Along with W. Fyfe (1991), she suggests that after a long process of 'discursive struggle', the medical profession, rather than women's rights activists, gained expressive control over the definition and character of abortion issues in government and, it could be argued, in public discourse (2015: 556). Though neither sees this as a result of active misogyny or opposition to women's rights, the political and cultural consequences of this process are disempowering towards women and their control over their own bodies and reproduction.

Both Amery and Sheldon (1997) further show how doctors became significant discursive figures within abortion discourses. Doctors as individuals and as representatives of institutional medical expertise came to be constructed as paternalistic figures, representing the fatherly hand of the state in providing vulnerable women with guidance and support.<sup>55</sup> This rhetorical characterisation was buttressed by the corresponding infantilising imagination of women seeking abortions as helpless, beleaguered victims. In Amery's words, 'medical control [in parliamentary debate] was legitimised by constructing women seeking abortions as 'tired housewives' in need of paternalistic guidance' (2015: 555). Despite feminist protestations that what was at stake was women's bodies and rights and that the women confronting their unwanted pregnancies should therefore have a symbolising and effective presence within decision-making processes, a sense was therefore still maintained within political and cultural discourses that (typically male, white and middle-class) doctors were best equipped to decide upon and act in women's best interests.

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<sup>55</sup> Regardless of the gender of specific doctors, the establishment itself is discursively characterised as masculine.

Unlike in almost all other medical procedures, the doctor is positioned as a figure of both medical and social wisdom who is, bizarrely, considered more able than the woman to decide upon her reproductive future (Clarke: 1989: 166; Petersen: 2004: 323; Sheldon: 1997: 24-26). The framing of abortion as an issue that was about women's protection (meted out by a paternalistic saviour figure), whilst simultaneously resisting their active participation, held significant cultural currency, to the extent that, as Amery illustrates, in later debates the anti-abortion opposition also recognised the need to engage with it. They countered the image of the benevolent father figure with the suggestion that doctors were abusing their position and the trust placed in them, characterising them as 'unscrupulous racketeers who care more about profits than the women they treat' (Amery: 2015: 558), thereby appropriating the language of the pro-choice lobby to argue that 'abortion harms women' (*ibid*: 557). Both sides of the argument, therefore, took the patriarchal fantasy of paternal knowledge and feminine helplessness for granted. Whether kindly or exploitative, the medical establishment was symbolised as a father, and an extensively powerful one; the possibility of women's agency over the maternal body was relatively precluded.

From these critical examinations into the histories of abortion and unplanned pregnancy narratives in the UK, it is clear that a multitude of concerns, assumptions and constructions helped to shape the ways in which reproductive rights were discussed and conceptualised within British society, amongst which women's rights are less conspicuous than might be expected. It is, nonetheless, women's rights and maternal bodies that were and remain the primary location of conflict within discourses of reproductive rights, although, as these nuanced enquiries into the framing of the debates demonstrate, various factors complicate this enacted conflict beyond a binary tension between straightforwardly feminist or patriarchal motivations. Appropriately, many of the issues discussed above manifest in various ways and with differing degrees of active consideration in onscreen treatments of abortion, unplanned pregnancy, reproductive control and sexuality in this period. However, whilst political debates were at times (and however consciously) able to fade women and their bodily and social presences and subjectivities from these discussions,<sup>56</sup> narrative cinema

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<sup>56</sup> Dorothy McBride Stetson's *Women's Movements' Defence of Legal Abortion in Great Britain* (2001) gives a particularly detailed account of the balance of interests within abortion debates in British politics, and the place of gender and feminism therein.

necessitated the situation of reproductive discourses within the represented experience of one or several characters. Whilst this does not mean that cultural representations were necessarily sympathetic to women's specific experiences of reproductive control and abortion, it does provide interesting material for examining how the figure of the pregnant woman is engaged with.

Sexuality is one of the definitive ongoing themes of the kitchen sink film cycle. Though an equally prominent defining interest is in the representation of characters from working-class communities, as has been critically illustrated, the motivations of the cycle's protagonists tend to privilege individual escape or freedom over class consciousness, and representations of work are minimal compared to the screen time allotted to leisure activities (Andrew Higson: 1996: 143-146; John Hill: 1986: 138). Consequently, the sexual and (to an extent) romantic pursuits of the characters tend to form the driving force of the narrative. Expressions of sexuality, in fact, supersede work and community as expressions of class; 'What is, indeed, striking about the 'new wave' films is how readily their treatment of 'kitchen sink' subjects ('working-class squalor') became attached to an opening up of the cinema's treatment of sex' (Hill: 1986: 136). In this case, references to abortion and contraception often have as much to do with experiences of reproductive control and parenthood in working-class England as they do with gender. Interest in these topics was so pervasive in this group of films that it became almost clichéd, hence Brooke's reference to a 'requisite abortion scene' in several films of the period (2011: 157). In reality, representations of attempted – let alone successful – abortions are not particularly widespread within this group of films; ultimately, a decision to continue the unplanned pregnancy is almost always made by the characters, suggesting that it is rather the frequent *discussion* of abortion that gives an impression of its prevalence.

As a predominantly male-focused genre, furthermore, (with the significant exception of *A Taste of Honey*), abortion discourses and unplanned pregnancies are often framed primarily – if not entirely – through the narrative interests of a male protagonist (Sue Harper: 2000: 111 cites several key films of the cycle as 'focus[ing] exclusively on male burdens'). Negotiating sexuality (for young men) in the kitchen sink films involves the aspirational avoidance of responsibility; unwanted pregnancy is a persistent spectre at the feast of libertinism. Regardless, few of the men manage

to outrun this looming responsibility for long, and most ultimately reconcile to familial duties. Despite the films' reputation for engaging with a liberal approach to sexuality, therefore, they generally end up consolidating traditional values; patriarchal families are reaffirmed, and individualistic or sexually 'deviant' behaviours are punished (Hill: 1986: 160). Within the 'Swinging London' films of this period, discussions of abortion and reproductive control become even more widespread, and increasingly include women protagonists. Before looking at discourses on abortion and reproductive control in mainly Swinging London films, however, it is useful to examine the treatment of backstreet abortion and motherhood as established in one of the earliest and most critically (and commercially) significant films of the kitchen sink cycle, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*.

*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* crystallised many of the most important themes of the kitchen sink cycle and British new wave early on. Based on a play of the same name by Alan Stillitoe (one of the 'angry young men'), the narrative – closely focalised by the protagonist Arthur Seaton – revolves around concerns of class, youth, sexuality and freedom. The communication of Arthur's character is ambivalent throughout the film. On the one hand, his egocentric behaviour, reckless pleasure-seeking and directionless anger are critiqued and punished by the narrative, suggesting these as cautionary qualities that map the underside of social liberalism. The director, Karel Reisz said of the film that it 'began to ask the question whether material improvements in people's lives weren't going to be accompanied by a spiritual crisis' (Reisz in interview with Orbanz, Wietz and Wildenham: 1977: 58), and described Arthur unflatteringly as 'a sad person, terribly limited in his sensibilities, narrow in his ambitions and a bloody fool into the bargain' (Reisz in Walker: 1974: 85), suggesting an interpretative possibility that figures in Arthur an array of social ills. On the other hand, however, it is difficult to ignore the potential appeal of the character's confident rebelliousness, his unflappability and working-class pride, which attach to the qualities of masculine virility and 'authenticity' similarly lauded in films such as *A Kind of Loving*. The commercial success of the film, along with the continued cultural resonance of several adages from the character's inner monologues ('Whatever people say I am, that's what I'm not'), suggest that reception of the character was somewhat divisive.

As argued particularly by Andrew Higson (1996) and John Hill (1986), though working-class values and community are major themes, the framing of the film is strongly individualistic. Within this individualised narrative, sexuality is a pre-eminently important expression of self at which juncture tensions between self-determination and socially imposed values are played out; the themes of unplanned pregnancy and abortion have a significant role in shaping the terms of this conflict. Throughout the film, Arthur balances relationships with Doreen, a young, attractive and unattached woman who may be a typically good marriage option for Arthur, and Brenda, an older woman married to Arthur's co-worker. After Brenda becomes pregnant, Arthur helps her seek an illegal abortion from his aunt, Ada, who he guesses has knowledge of self-administered termination techniques. Using materials and citations from censors and script-readers who initially vetted the film, Richards and Aldgate illustrate how the representation of abortion was a major point of moralistic contention within the original edit of the film. Comments from one examiner, for instance, include:

This is fundamentally an "A" story which gets its "X"-ness from being too outspoken about abortion, too revealing in love scenes and too foul-mouthed. [...] This shows a rather casual attitude to abortion and suggests to the young that if they get into difficulties all they need is to find a kind-hearted older woman who has had a lot of children. Provided that it is not too obtrusive it would probably be acceptable, but I must ask you to bear in mind that this film is likely to be seen by a considerable number of young people of 16 to 20 years of age, and to recognize that social responsibility is called for. (1983: 134-135)

The language used here demonstrates a clear climate of moral panic around representations of abortion. This was not a peripheral critique towards the film, as such commentaries from censors in fact led to the outcome of the abortion in the film being changed; whereas the initial intention was for the abortion to be successful, the strength of opinion from this feedback precipitated changes to the script that eventually saw the abortion failing in the final edit (*ibid*: 135-136), leaving the ultimate result of the pregnancy somewhat unresolved. Despite this mediation,

however, the film's treatment of the conditions that lead to and the attempted abortion itself are very interesting.

Significantly, this is an example of a relatively early filmic representation of abortion in which the termination is sought within the context of an extra-marital affair (in which the woman is the married party, not mistreated but unexcited in her marriage, and the man is a figure of rakish self-gratification). This narrative formulation reframes somewhat the terms of discourses on reproductive control so that women's experiences are decentred and the potential for abortion to be constructed as a question of women's self-determination is respectively limited. Regardless of whether or not it is expressly pursued, the capacity remains for reading the act of abortion in terms of respect for the husband. It is, moreover, within this context that the film touches upon an imaginative construction of the figures of the 'innocent' and the 'guilty' man, in whom are reflected respectively the imminent 'moral bankruptcy' of individualistic, 'permissive' youth culture and the traditional values of the patriarchal family. In this case, the 'guilty' man is confronted with the sordidness and the cost of the abortion, whilst the 'innocent' man is protected at least from these elements (if not always from the revelation of the affair). Meanwhile, it is the body of the pregnant woman that forms the immediate medium of punishment.

There is a degree to which the pregnancy and (attempted) abortion can be interpreted as *Arthur's* punishments for recklessness and disregard for the patriarchal order of things; we are, after all, closely aligned with his psychology and experience through the representational mechanics of the film (the broadly first-person focus of the images, as well as the interior monologue device). The unplanned pregnancy is raised as a significant plot-point within Arthur's development, and as a retributory result of his reckless behaviour. This can further be considered within the context of a pseudo-oedipal assault on the patriarchal family order; as Arthur's relationship with another man's wife undermines the cultural prepotence of the father and husband, he must endure punishment. However, though the main narrative and representational focus is on Arthur's experience and guilt, the stake of the women involved in the abortion plot are not erased. Importantly, in the scene in which Brenda first informs Arthur of the pregnancy, the motivations for procuring an abortion are led by Brenda's concerns for her own subjectivity and wellbeing. To Arthur's assumption that an

additional child (which she would presumably pass off as her husband's) would not much change her family situation, Brenda replies: 'Don't talk so daft. What do you think having a kid means? You're doped and sick for nine months, your clothes don't fit, nobody'll look at you. [One day you've got a kid] Oh, that's not so bad... but you've got to look after it for the rest of its life. You [Arthur] want to try it sometime.' In terms of the thematic development, this perspective is minor in relation to the place of the pregnancy and its aftermath within Arthur's personal narrative, yet it is notable as an indication of maternal subjectivity, and one that points to the material and personal costs of motherhood.

In the scene in which Arthur takes Brenda to have the abortion, a spirit of feminine solidarity is represented between Brenda and Ada (Arthur's aunt and the amateur abortionist, who has 'had fourteen kids of her own, and [Arthur is] sure she's got rid of as many others'). Ada behaves in a motherly fashion towards Brenda, treating her with a great deal of sympathy and tacit understanding, whilst Arthur and his fellow 'irresponsible' Lotharios are implicitly chastised. Brenda and Ada are both scornful of Arthur for not being 'careful' enough and conspiratorially lament the fact that 'men get away with murder'. During this scene, Brenda and Ada, sitting at the kitchen table, are front-of-shot, whilst Arthur stands behind, visually secondary to the narrative at this point. The bond between the women, therefore, transcends in this moment Arthur's relationship to either of them; women are united as *victims* of abortion and reckless male sexuality. However, this produces a complicated reading in terms of the subjectivity of women and mothers; whilst the women who are administering and undergoing abortions are presented as less 'guilty' than Arthur, they are also far less empowered. Unplanned pregnancies are suggested as caused by men and *suffered* by women. It is certainly possible – and important – to understand abortion in this context as at least potentially a gesture of resistance on the part of mothers (to control their family size, the conditions under which they procreate, and their material circumstances and relationship to their bodies), yet given the centrality of Arthur as the psychological source of the narrative, it is difficult to claim that the film presents a thorough identification with maternal subjectivities and experiences.

In fact, the articulation of the film almost expressly distances this passing sphere of feminine experience from the representation and audience identification. Arthur is

soon sent away from the scene of the abortion preparations. The next shots show him outside the house, agitatedly lighting a cigarette. He peers through a misty window, attempting to watch the proceedings in the kitchen; at this point, the camera aligns with his perspective, similarly watching – at a distance – the women obscured through the glass and behind various kitchen objects. The perspective is awkward and unclear. The next shot cuts to a close-up of Arthur’s face, suggesting a far greater proximity to his experience on the part of the audience. The actual process and experience of abortion are therefore represented (or rather, unrepresented) as within a somewhat arcane sphere of feminine knowledge, unknowable to men and to the masculine-coded audience. The amateur abortion technique itself is implied as ritualistic and occult, an ‘old wives’ trick’ described by Brooke as ‘the ‘*ceremony* of “bringing it off”’ with gin and a hot bath’ (2011: 157, my emphasis), furthering the construction of abortion as an undesirable and unspoken reality of women’s lives.

Whilst Brenda is preparing for and undergoing the abortion, furthermore, the film focuses intently on Arthur. As Brenda and Ada are in the kitchen, one of Ada’s sons returns home, whom Arthur persuades to take a walk with him. During the walk, they witness a drunken man throw a pint glass through a shop window; when an older, female neighbour threatens to summon the police, Arthur defends the man, in a somewhat futile gesture of class solidarity (against those who inform to the police), in a move towards re-establishing ‘authentic’ and worthy working-class masculinity, and possibly as an attempt to alleviate his guilt around the abortion and the betrayal of paternal values that engendered it. This scene ensures that the dramatic impetus of the narrative is once more centred on Arthur. Though sometimes tacitly, it is his burden and his psychological struggles that are largely foregrounded throughout most of the representation of and around the abortion. ‘Guilt’ imagery is abundant throughout this sequence. When Arthur meets Brenda outside his aunt’s house, we see a church in the background, whose choir can be heard on the soundtrack, connoting the traditional patriarchal values that Arthur has undermined, and the shop whose window is broken is a funeral parlour (the man’s rationale for the vandalism is that he wants flowers for his dead mother’s grave), connecting the theme of death to the ongoing abortion and associating it with Arthur’s unspoken guilt.

The abortion – and the scene of the broken window, onto which much of the tension is transferred – is a narrative climax of Arthur’s pursuit of individualistic pleasure, which ultimately leads to a reavowal of normative patriarchal ideals. In a capitulation to censors, the abortion is shown to be unsuccessful, and Brenda decides to continue her pregnancy, although critics justly point out that ‘what happens after that is anybody’s guess’ (Richards and Aldgate: 1983: 142). Brenda’s change of heart does not seem particularly convincing within the context of the rest of the film. However, this outcome is not given a great deal of importance within the narrative. More significant than the survival of the foetus, in fact, is the survival of the (patriarchal) *family*. As Hill points out, this cycle of films often ends up consolidating normative family values, shored up by procreation (and hence, I would add, a patriarchal idea of cultural futurity):

In three of these [films], the solution is explicitly linked to procreation: both Joe in *Room at the Top* and Vic in *A Kind of Loving* enter marriage because of the pregnancy of their partners, while Brenda returns to her husband in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* when she too becomes pregnant. (1986: 160)

At the film’s resolution, Brenda disappears from the narrative (*ibid*: 164), and her husband, Jack, returns to conclude her storyline, having arranged a beating for Arthur as a masculine punishment for the affair. The traditional family is in-tact, and Jack warns Arthur off ever seeing Brenda again. In the following scene, we learn that Arthur too has acquiesced to marriage, and is engaged to Doreen. The women in the plot are therefore ultimately absorbed into normative roles as wives and mothers, and the ‘guilty’ man is punished for trying to cheat the patriarchal system. Whether Arthur’s final gesture of throwing a stone through the window of one of the new-build family homes is interpreted as a sign of frustrated impotence or continued virility and rebellion, marriage and family seem ineluctable. In this case, the film’s representation of abortion can be seen as a counterpoint to the normative family order, a grim and dead-ended outcome of selfish sexuality and disrespect for patriarchal orthodoxy. It is important that women’s experiences of maternity, motherhood and unplanned pregnancy are addressed at all, but questions of their subjectivity and reproductive control are far from central; abortion is constructed as a regrettable part of life for

working-class women, for whom motherhood is also a strain, but the experience of the women is somewhat, though not entirely, distanced in favour of a more emotive identification with Arthur, largely reframing the representation of abortion in terms of male punishment.

The construction of abortion as *male* moral punishment for philandering is expressed with still greater clarity in the ‘Swinging London’ film *Alfie* (1966). This group of films, which illustrated an image of youth lifestyles in the capital, focused greatly on sexuality and ‘permissive’ culture.<sup>57</sup> In contrast to the kitchen sink cycle, greater interest is taken in the representation of women’s sexuality. Moya Lockett (2000: 235), for instance, suggests that the Swinging London films – to some extent – may be seen as a ‘feminine’ genre (insofar as its weight of focus is towards female characters and women’s concerns). Brooke, along similar lines, argues:

[T]hese works should also be perceived as foregrounding a new and modern form of female sexuality. [...] To be sure, traditional stereotypes existed, but what we see pushing through these films are female characters who were not simply asexual wives and mothers. They were more sexual, less dependent upon men (whether that independence was forced upon them or not) or at least less attached to men, and more independent of family. This does not mean that women were liberated—far from it. What it did was deepen the already-existing tensions about women’s roles. (Brooke: 2011: 157)

Both Brooke and Lockett (2000: 233) highlight the fact, however, that these films were generally ambivalent about ‘permissive society’ and the sexual freedom of youth, and women in particular, imagined as offered within London, representing this culture with a mixture of excitement and disillusionment. As shall be shown below, the ‘modern’ female protagonists of many of these films are often both empowered and victimised by their sexual liberation. *Alfie* is more unusual of this genre in that it concentrates on a male protagonist, yet it expresses similar ambivalence about the

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<sup>57</sup> Murphy 1992: 139-142 argues that the London represented in this film did not reflect the broader reality of people’s experiences of sexuality and culture at this time. Nonetheless, the interests of these films were part of a shift in cultural discourses around such matters.

opportunities afforded by ‘permissive society’ and its uneasy relationship with reproductive control.

Alfie, a ‘working-class Lothario’ (Brooke: 2011: 157), is in many ways a similar figure to Arthur Seaton, represented as partially suave alpha-male, partially reprehensible and callously reaping personal benefit from the ‘permissive society’ at the expense of others. Even more pronouncedly than Arthur’s intermittent interior monologues, Alfie’s narration and winking addresses to the camera establish clear identification with him and, taken uncritically, encourage initial complicity with his wildly misogynistic attitudes; the fact that these devices are often used to allow the character to discuss his opinions on and relations with women – in a deeply objectifying manner – whilst the women characters continue acting unaware of the broken fourth wall, means that the viewer is addressed in the manner of a male confidante. As in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, male promiscuity and philandering are suggested as a high-stakes game of maximising self-gratifying sexual pleasure whilst avoiding marriage, family and responsibility:

As with many of the ‘new wave’ films, the representation of husbands in the film is heavily marked by ‘castration’ [...] Indeed, to the extent that Alfie sets up home with Annie, so he too becomes ‘poncified’ (as his mates in the pub observe) and is forced to subsequently evict her. (Hill: 1986: 165-166)

Unplanned pregnancy and its concomitant responsibilities are therefore the penalties risked in the pursuit of self-indulgent freedoms.

As in the previous film, the abortion depicted in *Alfie* is sought within the context of an extra-marital affair, though in this case the characters are explicit about the necessity of the termination in order to protect the husband (whom Alfie has befriended during his stay in a sanatorium). The ‘innocent/guilty’ man paradigm is therefore once again in operation, as Alfie is responsible for arranging and witnessing the abortion, whilst the nice-but-steady, husband is protected from these unpleasant elements. The representation of abortion here is far more horrifying and explicit than that in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, and all the more so given the otherwise relatively light and comedic tone of the film. It remains, however, largely a matter of

male experience. When Lily is taken behind a curtain to have the abortion induced, the film's viewpoint remains firmly attached to Alfie, focusing on his experience and agitation as the procedure is conducted. In fact, this affords another opportunity for a to-camera monologue in which Alfie explains that his knowledge of women extends to pleasure, but when it comes to pain 'I'm like every other bloke... I don't wanna know.' Though viewers are hardly expected to condone this selfish assertion, the intimate nature of the filming style continues to privilege Alfie's experience as the significant one in confronting the punitive underworld of illegal abortion. The abortion itself is represented as supremely awful and traumatic; short of showing the process and its effects on the woman's body in explicit detail, the film does all it can to underscore the horror of the experience. We are clearly meant to sympathise with Lily, who is represented as a disempowered victim undergoing intense physical trauma. Simultaneously, however, she is also a blunt narrative instrument on which Alfie's psychological turmoil (as punishment for his rejection of normative patriarchal familial ideologies) is inscribed. When the abortion proper begins, Lily starts screaming and wailing horrifically. Alfie hits her and covers her mouth to stifle the noise, frantically explaining why he 'had to do it' whilst literally silencing her. They agree that Alfie should leave, and he goes for a walk, accompanied by the narrative attention. The identification with (a traumatic account of) women's experiences of abortion is impactful, but limited.

Similarly to Arthur Seaton's walk during Brenda's abortion, the ensuing sequence is full of guilt imagery directed at the male protagonist. As Alfie emerges from the flat, he walks past a playground full of children (similarly, in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, the scene following Brenda's description of the attempted abortion shows Arthur in a playground full of young boys playing football), juxtaposing the image of the guilty man with a joyful representation of the Child in a spirit of pointed irony. As he continues the walk, we hear church bells and Alfie chances upon Gilda (a former lover with whom he has a child) and the steady-but-decent man she has married, who are christening a new baby. Alfie's infant son is also present, and is treated with a great deal of paternal affection by his step-father. Alfie watches the christening from a distance; in a deep shot inside the church, the family and priest are in the distance, clustered around the font in a wholesome tableau of conventionally ordered familial harmony whilst Alfie, standing front of shot and

overcast with shadow, is symbolically excluded from this image of satisfaction. This juxtaposition also shifts the narrative focus away from identification with Lily and towards the development of Alfie's character.

On returning to the flat, the foregrounding of Alfie's viewpoint and experience is further consolidated. He returns to find Lily mentally and physically exhausted and curled up on the sofa. She tells him not to look in the kitchen, but he ignores her plea and comes into contact with the remains of the aborted foetus. At this point, the film becomes intimately and intensely focused on emotional identification with Alfie, fixing on dramatically lit chiaroscuro close-ups of his reaction and tensely draining the soundtrack of all noise other than his suppressed sobbing. This is the film's most striking moment of pathos, but it ultimately constitutes a revelatory moment within Alfie's character development that – in conjunction with the preceding images of familial harmony – lead him to question his lifestyle. Lily is presented as a disempowered victim; the abortion is a matter of necessity rather than choice, in order to protect the self-determining subjectivity of Alfie and her husband, rather than herself. Unlike in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, her own feelings about motherhood, pregnancy and her own body are not even passingly discussed in framing the reasons for the termination. The awfulness of the abortion sequence underscores Alfie's punishment rather than engaging seriously with maternal experiences.

Distraught, Alfie runs from the flat (abandoning Lily) to confide in a male friend. Seeming immediately calmer, he describes the experience of seeing 'this perfectly formed... *being*' and philosophises about its capacity for life and identity in a dialogue that modestly rehearses or anticipates key contentions from both sides of ideological debates on foetal personhood and viability (see Franklin: 1991 and Fyfe: 1991: 164) without taking an entirely explicit position (although Alfie's shock and guilt at having, in his words, 'murdered him' suggests a characterisation of foetal humanity). The conversation is interesting insofar as it reflects more directly than other films of the period foetus-centric discourses that have been of ongoing significance within the social politics of abortion, but it also serves to abstract the narrative from the presence of a maternal body and dissociates the abortion debate from women's and mothers' stake in it. Alfie further claims to have been crying not for the foetus ('he was past it') but 'for me bleeding self'. The representation of abortion, sex and reproductive control

in this film is generally interested in exploring dynamics between the figure of the pleasure-seeking male libertine and the imagination of the Child, with women's bodies as mute collateral and maternal subjectivities largely absent. The Child and its/his metonymic powers as productive cultural futurity, are an invisible but meaningful narrative presence, demonstrated through Alfie's personifying discourse around the foetus as an imaginatively imbued subject – reminiscent of Franklin's argument that the foetus is constructed as a 'patriarchal citizen' (1991: 201) – and the images and symbols of children that surround the abortion sequence. A choice against the Child is not just the destruction of an embryo, but the death of man's own future and culture. In this way, abortion – positioned as an inevitable outcome of intemperate male pursuit of self-gratification – forms part of a critique of the 'permissive society' in *Alfie* and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, which engenders the subversion of the patriarchal family order. As with Arthur, the abortion forms an epiphany point for Alfie, after which he pursues redemption by expecting to 'settle down' with one of the women he has involved himself with. Unlike Arthur, however, it is too late for Alfie; he is rejected emotionally and sexually, and excluded from the possibility of fulfilment through traditional family. The last scene demonstrates his loneliness and the hollowness of his self-indulgent lifestyle; however, *he* is suggested as the main victim of this.

Most of the major plot points of the film are contrived as eliciting either sympathy or condemnation for Alfie, the archetypal 'guilty' (but, it must be acknowledged, probably fairly seductive to some audiences) man of the permissive society. This is particularly significant for the film's positioning in relation to representation of abortion and reproductive control, as this and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* – along with other male-oriented films of the era such as *A Kind of Loving* and *Room at the Top* – articulate discourses of unplanned pregnancy and illegal termination primarily in relation to masculine psychologies. Unresolved as they are – Hill rightly points out that no 'compelling alternative to Alfie's philandering' is offered (1986: 165), and though the traditional patriarchal family and father figure is reaffirmed, the husband-and-father characters themselves are not particularly inspiring – the discursive tensions are placed between the individualistic male subject and the Child, in the context of productive cultural futurity. Alfie and Arthur become almost renegade Oedipus figures, their virility and potential for productivity unquestioned,

but subverted by their lack of recognition of hierarchical family order. Women – decentred from the narrative as independently expressive subjects – are not blamed as aggressors against the Child in these abortion representations, as they were in some political rhetoric, but they are presented as victims of abortion and sexual permissiveness, which are shown to corrupt the mother figure and the patriarchal family. As a result, women’s and maternal subjectivities are not a central feature of these discourses; rather, the abortion representations foreground critiques of sexual liberation that tend to reaffirm the hierarchical patriarchal family. Abortion becomes a plot device of male punishment; back-street abortions are represented as horrific and harmful to women, but abortion is moreover suggested as a sign of the dissolution of the patriarchal family, which is necessary for the wellbeing of the Child, and thereby cultural futurity.

The women who undergo abortions in these films, who are already married with families and more reminiscent of the ‘vulnerable, weary mothers’ (Amery: 2015: 557) or ‘tired housewives’ (Sheldon: 1997: 38-42) constructions that elicited sympathy in abortion debates rather than avowing subjectivity, are not typical protagonists of the sexual revolution and new female sexualities in the ‘permissive society’. On the whole, *Swinging London* is often understood as taking an interest in new forms of sexual expression largely from feminine perspectives. London, in these films, is constructed as a site of opportunity and freedom for young women, but also posing significant (moral) danger. Whilst acknowledging the frequent underlying pessimism of many of these films towards this lifestyle, Moya Luckett sees London in no uncertain terms as ‘represented as the seat of feminine power’ (2000: 235), particularly as a reactionary counterpoint to the decidedly masculine-focused ‘kitchen sink’ films. She argues:

The narratives of these films heralded a new feminine perspective marked by the importance of sexual expression to self-identity; the centrality of individualised forms of glamour to a more female-oriented public life, and London’s structural role in enabling and authorising this glamour and agency. (2000: 233)

These films engage with women’s often difficult relationships to sexual autonomy, reproductive control and traditional gender roles. Whilst the foregrounding

of female protagonists afforded more thorough engagement with women's maternal experience, however, it did not guarantee feminist sympathies, and ideologies around motherhood and the Child often persist in some form. In particular, feminist political arguments that frame abortion rights through a lens of women's self-determination are rarely presented without significant criticism.

Whereas *Alfie* and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* presented male sexuality in a destructive relationship with the ideologies of family and cultural futurity, the women-oriented films tend to explore the volatile balance of women's sexual empowerment with the politics of motherhood and the threat of unplanned pregnancy. There are several examples of films in which women's claiming control over their pregnancies and reproductive capacities is suggested as an active resistance of patriarchal control. *Prudence and the Pill* (1968), for instance, is a farcical representation of cultural tensions over reproductive rights, sexual liberation and the hypocritical repression of discussions of sex amongst the upper-middle classes and older generations, in which competing claims over women's bodies and reproductive systems creates the comedy, whilst the (relatively recently developed) oral contraceptive pill is the object at the centre of the characters' comic misunderstandings. Husbands, extra-marital sexual partners and the medical establishment (represented by doctors and pharmacists) are shown to have a role in manipulating women's reproduction, often in conflict with the women themselves, all of whom use the contraceptive pill in the interest of autonomous sexual freedom. The film uses an ironic engagement with the themes of the medical industry's stake in women's reproduction and the prevalence of traditional attitudes towards sex and gender to suggest that advances in contraceptive technology did not guarantee women's straightforward or uncomplicated sexual independence.

The theme of the medical establishment as a patriarchal and controlling figure interfering in women's reproduction is taken up more acutely in *The L-Shaped Room* (1962). At the beginning of the film, the protagonist, Jane, has made the decision to abort her pregnancy, but changes her mind as the result of a gallingly patronising interaction with a medical practitioner. This representation is substantially reflective of contemporaneous rhetoric problematising the figure of the doctor in abortion debates, and the capacity of doctors through the legal emphasis on their judgment to

‘impose on to women their own views of when abortion is permissible’ (Clarke: 1989: 166). In this case, Jane’s decision to continue her pregnancy is portrayed as a gesture of resistance or protest against external (figured as masculine) control over her body and reproduction. Similarly, in *The Pleasure Girls* (1965) the choice *against* abortion is positioned as indicative of feminist self-determination and rejection of masculine reproductive coercion. In this film, the ‘guilty man’ narrative manifests differently insofar as the continuation of pregnancy becomes Prinny’s punishment after he fails to provide the means for an abortion, having lost the money for the procedure gambling. Accusing him of ‘putting [her] on that gambling table’, Marion insists that she will keep the baby and that she does not need his input. In both these films, abortion is presented as a masculine convenience, which protects the patriarchal family order by eliminating awkward or subversive kinship possibilities such as single-mother families or unmarried parents.

However, though these are significant representations of women asserting control over their bodies, critiquing the disproportionate power of men and male-coded institutions to dictate reproductive choices within this cultural climate, and problematising a simplistic identification of abortion rights with women’s empowerment, none offer entirely satisfying alternatives to traditional patriarchal family narratives. *Prudence and the Pill*, despite being a film whose narrative is entirely centred around contraception, is bookended by a flourish of children, linking an excessive and tongue-in-cheek barrage of cliché baby images during the opening credits to the epilogue in which all of the major characters have had offspring, having finally settled into their ‘correct’ pairings. In *The L-Shaped Room*, Jane (whose decision to continue her pregnancy was in any case mainly reactionary) does not remain in the ‘halfway house’ (Hill: 1986: 167) of Others amongst whom she found acceptance as a single mother, and in fact ends up in a fairly traditional situation, in which the father figure regains narrative control (through writing, as he presents her after the birth of her child, with a book he has written about her – as discussed in the introduction, writing and naming supersede biological genealogy in normative expressions of family). In *The Pleasure Girls*, Marion succeeds in humiliating the ‘guilty’ man and asserting her independence, but the film is ultimately inconclusive about any of the women’s abilities to successfully live their resistances as a long-term alternative to patriarchy, and the final mood of the film is far from triumphant. For the

women in these films, childbirth continues to represent a point of narrative closure, precluding thorough representations of mothering subjectivities.

*Georgy Girl* (1966) and *Darling* (1965) provide somewhat more sustained considerations of the place of reproductive choice within women's independence, with nuanced and ambivalent results. Whereas *Alfie* and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* produced an absent mother insofar as maternal subjectivities were extensively secondary within the narratives, these films interact with the absent mother discourse in a different way, as characters who are emphatically subjective and assertive (Diana, the protagonist of *Darling*, and *Georgy Girl*'s Meredith) contend with the absent figure of the 'good mother' imposed by normative expectations of maternity when they become pregnant.

*Darling* is the story of Diana, a privileged, ambitious and wilful model, and her search through career, sex, relationships and other pursuits, for meaning – not happiness, exactly, but something other than the maw of desperate tedium that seems constantly to shadow her – in the height of upper-middle class society's Swinging Sixties, in which an abundance of possibilities has become a lack of all purpose. The film is structured through the narrative device of a retrospective biographical interview for a publication entitled (with obvious irony) *Ideal Woman*; the device is somewhat similar to Arthur and Alfie's monologues, though mediated by a male interviewer, hence establishing Diana in a position of lesser expressive control. Diana is a fairly typical heroine of the Swinging London genre: confident, sexually independent and 'affiliated with the media or the profession of creating images' (Lockett: 2000: 239), she is a canvas on which women's liberation is both glamorised and critiqued. This context and the focus on a female protagonist who is in many ways resistant to the traditional family narrative produce several different perspectives on motherhood to those films discussed so far. One immediately significant divergence is that the decision to have an abortion in this film is entirely based on Diana's own feelings about her subjectivity, body and desires. Hill remarks that 'Those abortions which do proceed [in films of this period] are marked in purely negative terms for their refusal of parenthood, as in *Alfie* and *Darling*' (1986: 160). Whilst it is true that both films are critical of the 'refusal of parenthood' (or affirmation of individuality, depending on perspective) and proceed to punish their protagonists for sacrificing the ideated

Child at the false altar of the self, the circumstances of the abortions divide them. Though Robert is unhappy with Diana's decision, he is nothing like so *viscerally* damaged by her decision as Lily is by Alfie's. Furthermore, there are no third parties taken into account by Diana to the same degree as Lily's husband is in *Alfie*. The film is entirely clear that the abortion is Diana's choice; having discovered her pregnancy, she flirts briefly and superficially with motherhood (or rather, the commodified idea of motherhood) on a shopping trip to buy baby things, during which she buys only a maternity dress (literally 'trying on the clothes of' the pregnant woman role). However, she soon decides that the realities of pregnancy and motherhood would too greatly inhibit her career and relationships.

The decision to have an abortion, therefore, is in this case – and unlike in *The L-Shaped Room* or *The Pleasure Girls* – an avowal of feminine subjectivity, which could be seen as Diana's resistant confrontation with the figure of the absent mothering subject. Tensions between Diana and her potential infant are already suggested even in the relatively positive shopping scene, as images of Diana enjoying herself are overlaid with and silenced by a cacophonous soundtrack of bawling baby dolls. She further realises that pregnancy would mean the 'ruination of [her] career and messing up people's lives'. In other words, motherhood, for Diana, would entail too great an erosion of self through the cultural expectations of maternal subjective absence. Of the films so far, this decision is the most in-line with the arguments of pro-choice feminist groups, as it foregrounds questions of the pregnant woman's self-determination over other possible factors. Nonetheless, the film is ultimately not encouraging as to the moral and emotional legitimacy of this decision. *Darling*, like much of the Swinging London genre, courts moralising censure within the culture of permissiveness and sexual autonomy it represents.

The film does not dwell on the decision-making process, nor the build-up to the abortion itself; shortly, we are shown a scene of Diana in a hospital bed, having undergone the procedure. Unlike the women whose abortions are represented as far more traumatic and horrific in films such as *Alfie*, *Up the Junction* and, to a lesser extent, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, Diana is an upper-middle class woman of ample means and connections. Though the film was released prior to the passage of the 1967 Abortion Act, and abortion was therefore not *freely* available, the defence

offered through the Bourne judgment meant that in practice abortions were performed by medical professionals prior to the Act. However, given the precariousness of the defence, the risk was generally compensated for through high private fees:

‘Many practitioners thus remained reluctant to carry out terminations for fear of prosecution (Harvard, 1958; Ferris, 1966). Harley Street doctors would take precautions to cover their backs by obtaining a second opinion, normally from a psychiatrist who would testify to the effect of continuing a pregnancy on the woman’s mental health.’ (Sheldon: 1997: 18)

Unlike those of the other characters, Diana’s abortion takes place in a relatively safe and comfortable private clinic, accessible to her because of her socio-economic status. There is therefore little representation of explicit physical trauma, as is common in films that involve illegally procured abortions or that suggest women (and working-class women in particular) as sympathetic victims of abortion, be it through male carelessness or poor provision of safe abortions (as in *Up the Junction*). Instead of ‘awful-ising’ the bodily horrors of abortion, however, *Darling* represents an emotional aftermath of the experience that – more directly at first, and then subtly throughout the rest of the film – suggests a painful but self-inflicted emptiness in Diana. The abortion, in fact, constitutes a narrative fulcrum, after which her self-destructive bleakness becomes increasingly intense. Her resistance to the discourse of the absent mothering subject is no such escape; though the abortion is rarely explicitly referenced in subsequent scenes, from this point on, Diana’s narrative is haunted by the absent Child.

Immediately after the abortion, Diana describes herself, in loaded language, as feeling ‘empty’. She seems generally resentful about the process as she bitterly remarks on how many ‘eager women’ are queuing for her bed, and, furthermore, apparently locates blame for the experience within her lifestyle (‘I never want anything to do with sex again as long as I live’). A potentially feminist discourse of choice is therefore undermined by a self-admonishing regret reminiscent of later anti-abortionist constructions of ‘post-abortion trauma’, which followed from the logic that even when women independently elected to have abortions they could not *really* know what they were consenting to, or be prepared for the emotional fallout (McNeil: 1991:

158). The abortion also seems to bring out a phantom maternal tenderness in Diana; at the end of Robert's visit, she bursts into tears and reminds Robert to feed her fish, heartrendingly describing them as 'poor little things' in a moment of pathos that transfers her mourning for the figure of her lost child onto another 'innocent' and helpless creature.

Thereafter, the representation of her lifestyle as a single woman without children involves many images of nihilistic hedonism, sadness and longing absence, whilst she, ironically, often displays more maternal instinct than ever before. Applying his analysis of reproductive futurism to the 1993 film *Philadelphia*, Lee Edelman describes how the film's final shots are replete with images of children and pregnant women as more or less a mediating apology for the dead-end destructiveness of queer sex (2004: 19). Images of children in *Darling* serve as a similar counterpoint of futurism and life, though far more punitively towards the protagonist. As Edelman himself touches upon, there are, after all, significant similarities between homosexuality and abortion in that both are seen to take a symbolically impossible position *against* the Child. The homosexual and the aborted woman (or, more generally, I suggest, those socially recognised as explicitly engaging in non-reproductive sex) are condemned as on 'the side [...] *not* "fighting for the children," the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism' (*ibid*: 3), or otherwise put, as those who take an interest in an imagined present rather than an imagined future.<sup>58</sup> To develop this, I argue that the electively non-mothering woman can be seen to occupy a queer position against the logic of futurism. The act of abortion in which the childless woman chooses to remain so catalyses this; prior to this moment, she can be imagined to represent a sort of 'Schrödinger's uterus', in whom the Child both lives and does not, but abortion (without accepted mitigating circumstances) fixes her on the side of No Future. In this inflexible and *absolute* order of meaning, all fertile women must be mothers. In accordance with this, the film increasingly identifies Diana with symbols of death and destruction.

Following the abortion, Diana decides to spend some time away from London and goes to stay with her prim upper-middle class sister in the countryside. The scene

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<sup>58</sup> Imagined in both cases because this conflict still takes place within the Symbolic.

showing Diana weeping in her hospital bed cuts abruptly to a bizarre close-up of a child – shortly revealed to be Diana’s nephew – in a gorilla mask play-attacking the camera (positioned from Diana’s perspective). The child aggressively pretends to shoot Diana, who correspondingly falls down ‘dead’. The scene is unsettling and even physically jarring – especially after the gentle and melancholic pathos of the immediately preceding sequence – in what could be seen as a deliberate gesture of severing Diana from normative narrative lucidity, following her rejection of conventional feminine self-realisation. The simulated ‘killing’ of Diana symbolises and prefigures the discursive punishment for her abortion (after all, within the logic of reproductive futurity, the rejection of the figural Child also annihilates the self), whilst the imaginary positioning of a (male) child as the one that ‘kills’ her reassures the viewer that Diana *will* be punished, and the symbolising system of the patriarchal family and the sovereign Child will ultimately remain intact. In less abstract terms, furthermore, Diana’s nephew also serves as a very present reminder of the child she does not and will not have. Having previously shown little active interest in children, she plays animatedly with and indulges her nephew, leading her sister to remark (for the purposes of melancholic irony within the film) that she is ‘terribly good with children’.

However, Diana has exiled herself from the ordered world of life, children and motherhood. She leaves her sister’s house, seems to lose interest in Robert, and the ensuing sequences show her electing for quite the opposite option, as she joins the unsympathetic, hedonistic, amoral and unequivocally ‘guilty’ Miles at ‘debauched’ parties in Paris which burst with orgiastic queerness. At these parties, which represent a death drive opposed in every way to the self-affirming principles of futurism, social order (which, as Edelman shows, centres itself on the figure of the Child) disintegrates. Gender, race, class, sexuality, kinship and other identity-naming matrices become meaningless outside of this normative framework, as the characters cross-dress, freely swap partners, and merge identities as they play a game in which they take on each other’s roles, after having watched what appears to be either a strip tease or live sex show. Regardless of what individual viewers may feel about the disruptive potential of this scene, the film encourages us to identify with Diana, whose expressions intimate discomfort and suppressed repulsion, despite her joining in with the game in order to insult Miles. Reading with the grain of the film, (and accounting for the

cinematic devices it uses to characterise the sequence as sinister and disturbing, including dramatic lighting, disorienting pacing and camera angles, and disruptive double exposure) the implication is that Diana's rejection of normative familial narratives have led her to position herself here, amongst other subversive outsiders at the very fringes of meaning and society.

Diana's dissolution deepens when she returns to London and Robert, having become aware of her unfaithfulness, leaves her, fittingly at an art exhibition displaying strikingly violent paintings (further identifying Diana and her tastes with death and destruction). Robert is in some ways a more compelling version of the 'innocent man' archetype seen in the other films, as he is associated with family (despite having left his wife for Diana, he continues to care for his children) and intellectual productivity, and is positioned by the film as the wholesome and fulfilling romantic option for Diana, in opposition to Miles' lascivious decadence, of which Robert is scornful. His major flaw, in fact, is his allowing himself to be tempted by Diana away from his family, hence the 'innocent man' becomes a victim of Diana's subjectivity and unmotherliness. Following her break with Robert, Diana (who, with rather heavy-handed irony, has been cast in an advertising campaign as 'happiness girl') becomes emotionally dependent on Malcolm, her gay photographer friend. Though portrayed more sympathetically than Miles' Paris set, Malcolm – and Diana's life involving him – is still identified with queerness and hence reproductive dead-ends. As is also the case in *The L-Shaped Room* and *A Taste of Honey*, women who reject husbands, children or both, find some palliative respite in queer kinship structures other than the heterosexual, reproductive couple-and-child; however, such alternatives are never represented as authentic possibilities and, fittingly enough, are already consigned to narrative futurelessness even as they begin. Despite Diana's hopeful protestations, therefore, we know that this non-reproductive queer (dis)solution will prove unliveable.

Increasingly despairing and hollow from her refusal of motherhood onwards, and after finding living with Malcolm no more fulfilling, Diana attempts to find redemption and meaning *as a mother*, through half-hearted efforts to inscribe herself into Catholicism or motherhood through marrying Cesare and becoming a step-mother to his many children, but these are all second rate and unfulfilling; non-biological children seem to be a reminder of loss. The film's portrayal of Cesare's offspring sees

them more as ghosts than as actual children with whom Diana can have a genuine mothering relation; filmed from Diana's perspective, they are unnamed and undetailed, often in distant long shots, their disembodied laughter sometimes haunting the soundtrack. A brief image of the children in neat file and almost ceremoniously kissing Diana goodnight before disappearing with their nurse, followed by shots of Diana eating alone in an opulent but silent and lonely dining room, only consolidates her desolate severance from maternal self-realisation. Her efforts towards motherhood, through Cesare, philanthropic politics and Catholicism, become inverted, only solidifying the outline of a lack where the Child should be, making Diana just as much negative space as the absent mother, though filled with nothing. This is visually underscored in a scene in which Diana returns to England, hoping to run into Robert at the funeral of an author they met together. Dressed in black and wearing an unusual hat that uncannily resembles a halo, she suggests an inverted and funereal Virgin Mary, further connoting her relationship to motherhood as one of death rather than life. The position of this image of her at the funeral of an author of apparently great cultural value (at which, furthermore, Robert, the 'good man' is not present after all) also further connects a choice for feminine subjectivity and against the absent mothering object with the death of culture and productivity.

Though *Darling* does position questions of abortion and reproductive control in terms of women's rights and self-determination, women who make this choice come heavily under fire in a critique of sexualities and lifestyles that resist the conventional, reproductive patriarchal family narrative. Diana's decision to have an abortion can be interpreted as a resistance against the absent mothering subject expected of this normative discourse, but the film ultimately suggests a lack of liveable possibilities outside of that framework. The absent mother, furthermore, becomes a thread around which, once pulled, the wider tapestry of discursive social meaning unravels, engendering cultural death. Unlike in several of the other films discussed, Diana is not exactly represented as a victim of abortion, and remains bodily intact, yet the trauma/punishment discourse persists metaphysically. There is no 'guilty man' who has coerced the abortion, but she is represented as a (however unintentional) self-saboteuse whose self-affirming behaviour sows her own destruction as well as that of the Child, or the subjects of social order. The discourse of punishment and anti-futurity presented in *Darling* ultimately, therefore, reaffirms traditional patriarchal

assumptions of the absent mothering subject's place within collective cultural self-narratives.

The exploration of the absent mother discourse presented in *Georgy Girl* – another female-focused Swinging London film – forms an interesting point of comparison with its treatment in *Darling*. *Georgy Girl* is another film of this genre in which have been identified ambivalent responses to 'swinging' youth culture and women's sexual autonomy; '*Georgy Girl*, *Alfie* and *Smashing Time* all look for thrills in the big city but end up endorsing homely virtues like sincerity, loyalty, friendship' (Murphy: 1992: 146). However, I would argue that this film is one of the most ambiguous of the genre in its condemnation of liberated sexuality or avowal of traditional family structures. It is difficult to agree with Murphy's appraisal of 'sincerity, loyalty and friendship' as central to the film, as every one of the major characters ends up thoroughly and insurmountably alienated from one another. Furthermore, we are surely not meant to take the film's conclusion (Georgy's concessionary marriage to the lecherous and controlling millionaire whose advances she has spent the film avoiding) as a triumphant affirmation of the superiority of traditional family, but as a dismaying last resort after all other options for happiness have failed. Unlike in the other films, there is no 'good man' or adequate father figure here through whom to offer aspirational hope, and the film is generally pessimistic about spaces for mothering subjectivities.

Georgy and Meredith jointly represent respective poles of a significant imaginary feminine dichotomy. Meredith, comparably to Diana, encapsulates the best and the worst stereotypes of women's sexual liberation; she is fun-loving, popular, stylish and beautiful, but also selfish and callous. Georgy, on the other hand, is frumpy and maternal, often overlooked as a sexual option; she is strongly associated with children (particularly through her work as a music teacher, where she and the children seem mutually to relish each other's company), and takes a mothering role towards Meredith and Jos in the flat. Comparing *Georgy Girl* and *Darling*, Luckett argues:

In some cases (*The Knack*, *Georgy Girl*), London metonymically represents Harold Wilson's new, updated state, ironically taming its women by allowing them to find sexual pleasure, preparing them for marriage and motherhood. Those who cannot be tamed, the

resolutely non-conformist girls, are cast into exile (*Darling*)' (2000: 243)

Whilst this is true of Diana, however, the claim does neatly apply to either Meredith or Georgy. Georgy is never satisfied by sexual relationships alone, and is plainly more interested in motherhood than men at any given point in the plot, whilst Meredith is neither 'tamed' nor enduringly punished. More accurate is Murphy's observation that 'Meredith's attitude to relationships and babies is displayed as callous and selfish, but her defiance of the conventions of marriage and motherhood gives the film a shocking frisson which is not quite snuffed out by the disapproval with which she is viewed' (1992: 143). In this way, Meredith offers an interesting comparison with Diana in terms of resistance of motherhood and precipitating consequences (or lack thereof), though it is likely that a relatively unscathed Meredith is only possible through a Georgy counterbalancing the narrative scales.

Unlike the other films discussed, there is no narrative representation of or around an abortion in *Georgy Girl*. Rather, discourses around motherhood and motherliness take place within the context of Meredith's decision to continue an unplanned pregnancy. After the film has amply established her as a carefree 'party girl' who expresses her sexuality freely and disregards normative standards of romantic commitment, Meredith flippantly announces that she is pregnant and suggests that she and Jos should get married because 'we don't fight, we like it in bed... and that's about it really'. Her given reasons for keeping the pregnancy are simply that she is bored and wants a change; beyond this rather unconvincing testimony, however, her motivations for her choice are fairly inscrutable, as nothing in the dialogue or any of the film's representational mechanics towards Meredith suggest that she is unhappy in her lifestyle, or that she has any desire whatsoever to be a mother. No remote equivalent, for example, is demonstrated to Diana's passing flirtation with motherhood in the shopping sequence, and there are even no familiar visual clichés to indicate lack of fulfilment in Meredith's lifestyle. The explanation seems simply to be that Meredith's unrestricted self-determination leads her to take decisions lightly.

Within the same conversation, Meredith further asserts that she could easily terminate the pregnancy, as she has 'no tender feelings towards it', and casually reveals previous abortions ('I've destroyed two of yours [Jos's] already'). Jos responds

to her comment with outrage, personifying the foetuses, which he refers to as ‘my sons and my daughters’, and asserting his paternal rights. The characters’ argument rehearses symbolising tensions within political discourses of foetal personhood and rights as described by Deborah Lynn Steinberg (1991). Though she is one of very few characters throughout this body of films to talk in this way, Meredith’s use of language around pregnancy (‘destroyed’ rather than ‘killed’, refusing to characterise the embryo as a fully imagined person and so on) is in fact far more accurately reflective of legal abortion discourse. Steinberg shows<sup>59</sup> how, despite foetuses *not* being categorised as legal persons, personifying rhetoric (such as ‘murder’ and ‘children’) is commonly used around abortion:

Homicide, or murder, therefore presupposes the full personhood of the victim. The specific legal precedent in defining a fetus has been that a ‘fetus (or unborn child [sic]) is not a legal person, and so cannot (for example) own property, but has its existence recognised by law in some ways. The fetus becomes a legal person when it is born alive’ (William, 1983, p. 290). (In *ibid*: 178)

As Steinberg further suggests, such emotive (if objectively misleading) language positions *foetal* experience at the centre of the issue, constructing abortion as ‘in the first order, something done to foetuses/‘unborn children’, and only secondarily (at most), a procedure women undergo’ (*ibid*: 180). This illogical eclipsing of an existing person by a figure whose subjectivity is, at this point, purely hypothetical, is a practical demonstration of the perceived ideological prepotency of the Child, which exceeds the (legal or social) right to being of the mother or maternal woman.

Therefore, despite the less severe legal definition of abortion as ‘child destruction’ (*ibid*: 184), the language of ‘murder’ and personhood makes more immediate sense within the ideology of futurity. Accordingly, this linguistic approach is used within the film to underscore Meredith’s callousness. Jos’s response, on the other hand, is more typical of normative assumptions of familial meaning shaped by patriarchal ideologies of the Child, though it is clear that he is not really prepared for or desirous of the realities of fatherhood (his insistence on fun over responsibility and

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<sup>59</sup> She refers mainly to the Alton Bill, but working with precedents set throughout UK parliamentary abortion debates.

scenes of him jumping on a roundabout in a playground on the way to his wedding mark him as childlike). His protests are more indicative of masculine insult to the imagination of posterity and the projection of self and subjectivity that it offers. Unborn children become rhetorically subjectified but at the expense of the subjectivity to the pregnant woman or symbolic mother, whose body and rights become little more than a vessel for the gestation of a far more fully imagined cultural future.

The symbolic struggle over the maternal body is a significant factor in Meredith's hostile feelings towards her pregnancy, as she seems to feel her-self eroded and disregarded around her newly-imposed meaning as the cathected kernel of cultural subjectivity. Scathing of fetishising assumptions around motherhood that idealise the experience of pregnancy and sublimate its abject qualities (in the Kristevan usage), Meredith instead complains of morning sickness, her changing relationship to her body and the limitations the experience imposes on her freedoms. However, this is also a discursive struggle; paying no attention to her individuality, the other characters (particularly Georgy and Jos) assume a homogenising maternal identity – commensurate with the objectifying discourse of the absent mother – for Meredith.

The iterations of idealised motherhood that structure this imagined figure (which does not, really, require Meredith's presence, but becomes inscribed over it) are particularly connotative of popular contemporaneous discourses within the work of theorists such as D.W. Winnicott. Though Winnicott's writing on motherhood aimed to create a more empowered space for his 'good-enough mother',<sup>60</sup> his constructions of motherhood also end up ossifying. His approach tends to cast mothering as a homogenised and universal experience; in much of his writing, he explicitly chooses to focus on the 'normal mother' for whom motherhood is a straightforwardly pleasurable experience, and for whom the child is very much reified. During pregnancy and early maternity, it is taken for granted that the mother (unless 'disordered') should be entirely devoted to the baby, losing all other interests:

The baby has other meanings for the mother in the unconscious fantasy, but the predominant feature may be a willingness as well as an ability on the part of the mother to drain interest from her own

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<sup>60</sup> The good-enough mother is an ongoing construction within Winnicott's work, explained, for example, in Winnicott's *The Family and Individual Development*, 1965: 17-18.

self on to the baby. I have referred to this aspect of a mother's attitude as 'primary maternal preoccupation'. (Winnicott: 1965: 15)

However well-intentioned in its advocacy of consideration and respect for mothering women, this theoretical approach (which was extensively popularised during this period) caters only to a homogenised figure of motherhood who remains idealised. Winnicottian approaches, as seemingly adopted by Georgy and Jos, as well as Meredith's midwives and maternity resources, therefore do not accommodate possibilities of maternal ambivalence and construct an inflexible mothering archetype which cannot tolerate or represent difference in mothering subjects. Meredith is *not* a formulaic 'natural mother' and does not become one, yet this rigid figure is comprehensively imposed on her. She fights against the shroud of the absent mother that is hanging over her; consistently mocking ideas of the 'spiritualisation' of motherhood which expects only pleasure in the maternal experience, and is angry and scornful of Jos and Georgy when she comes across them reading books or watching informational television pieces on childbirth, all of which are heavily characterised by such approaches. Meredith's resistance to these constructions of motherhood, even as all of the other characters are inscribing them onto her maternal body and subjectivity, brings into relief the irony of such approaches that universalise and objectify the 'natural' mother they purport to advocate for to the point that they are thoroughly unprepared for the experiences of individual mothering subjects. Jos and Georgy's joke that Meredith won't know when labour starts (as she refuses to participate in their reading about childbirth), for instance, becomes quite ironic with images of Meredith, a few scenes later, writing in pain on a hospital bed.

Murphy's comment (above) on the film's suggestion of 'disapproval' toward Meredith is fair; her aggression towards motherhood is extreme and unrelenting and the spectatorial identification with Georgy marks her in callous contrast. Nonetheless, it is also possible to interpret in her character some interesting narrative subversions. Firstly, her commitment to her own subjectivity resists the absent mother narrative, though this does position her as the 'bad mother'. More resolutely, however, her representation un-writes the paradigmatic punishment/trauma narrative that tends to condition abortion discourses in these films. Openly referring to her own abortions (in a manner, furthermore, that is merely factual rather than confessional or cathartic), Meredith's lack of apparent physical or emotional trauma rejects the moralising

structure of *necessary* and fundamental suffering for women who have abortions. She even manages to reject the absent mother discourse as she leaves her daughter with Georgy, who prefers the mothering role. Meredith's last scene shows her returning to her previous lifestyle, once again glamorous and in control of her own image, and seemingly happy, grinning as she walks by herself in the street before meeting a man. The interpretation of this shot is ambiguous; though the film and its identificatory mechanics have encouraged criticism of rather than sympathy with Meredith, there is little moralisation in the final images of Meredith, and if anything, the filming style encourages identification *with* her in this instance. Focusing centrally on Meredith face-on as she walks down the street, the scene represents men looking at her and finding her attractive, but positions them in the peripheries of the shot, thereby eschewing a Mulvey-esque male gaze and any of its supporting techniques such as the classic gendered shot-reverse-shot (Kaja Silverman: 1988: 27-28). Rather than being an object of the gaze, Meredith is in control of it.

After this point, however, Meredith disappears from the plot. The film is unusual in that it does not guarantee punishment for Meredith, but it also does not, strictly, guarantee *no* punishment; the ambiguity of her final scene is open to inscription. The possibility of a woman making a choice against the Child and visibly living happily and uncondemned invites too great a subversion of normative ideologies. To return to Edelman's arguments on the side 'not "fighting for the children"', Meredith's choice of presence over futurity positions her in a queer space, which disrupts the representational logic structured by the Child. She is not writeable after this point; she is 'exiled' *from* the narrative, if not *within* it, as is Diana. Of course, however, the film transfers the absent 'good mother' narrative to Georgy, who is excluded from any possibility of romantic fulfilment or sexual desire, to counteract Meredith's excess of the same. Ultimately, the film suggests irreconcilable distance between motherhood and desiring subjectivities. Construction as a mother polarises Meredith's social identity from her-self and exorcises any realisable desires other than those for the Child from Georgy. There is no middle ground between the two women; there is the mother and the subject, but no mothering subject. Within the homogenising narrative framework of the absent mother, that is, there is little space to approach motherhood on one's own terms.

Undoubtedly, issues of abortion and reproductive control are key concerns within English social realist cinema in this period. Within broader narrative enquiries into and representations of contemporaneous expressions of sexuality and developments in liberal youth culture, unplanned pregnancies and abortions often figure as climactic plot points and galvanising moments on which underlying concerns about the state of the traditional family and cultural productivity are condensed and urgently crystallised. In some respects, the films reflect several of the prominent concerns of societal and political discussions around abortion, such as its interaction with working-class communities, the grim hardships of backstreet abortions and unflattering characterisations of an indifferent and exploitative medical establishment. These factors are often presented poignantly, and could be construed as soliciting sympathy for women as victims of abortion and of the liberal culture that creates the conditions for it. However, such sympathy is not inherently either pro- or anti-choice, as it could be equally interpreted as a critique of the conditions under which abortions could be delivered or a critique of abortion per se. This body of films is overall not readily identifiable with any explicit position, but rather offers platforms for ambivalent explorations of abortion as an experience.

Whilst parliamentary debates and rhetorical focuses on foetal personhoods could potentially wrest discursive self-possession away from feminine and maternal subjectivities, furthermore, these films do present abortion as an embodied experience for women and represent as significant the stake of maternal bodies within this issue with a viscerality and immediacy that is visually affecting, anchoring potentially abstract concerns in the representation of experience. Where abortions actually take place in the films (as opposed to being only mooted or discussed), this impactful representational capacity is often used to underscore narratives of trauma and guilt. Whether this guilt is placed at the door of a youth culture that encourages careless sexuality (*Alfie*, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, *Darling*), or, more unusually, of a lack of provision and accessibility that forces young women to risk dangerous situations (*Up the Junction*), it is often part of a social commentary. In this case, maternal bodies and subjectivities become victimised collateral damage of broader social disorders. That notwithstanding, however, there are several occasions within these series of films in which potential spaces for maternal subjectivities, self-expression, and self-determination are suggested, either within communities of

women who offer solidarity in moments of unplanned pregnancy, or as individual women's moments of resistance to patriarchal reproductive norms, through continuing or terminating a pregnancy despite the coercive forces of male partners and paternalistic medical practitioners. The suggestion of such spaces is important, yet there is little conviction within any of these works of what may fill them; rather, the potential space for maternal self-expression ends up either disastrous or unknowable, meaning that the mothering subject remains more or less absent.

Mainly, however, these representations can be related to broader ideologies of family and motherhood; there is much overlap with Edelman's work on the Child, queerness and the death drive in that non-reproductive sex and sexual identities (whether homosexual or heterosexual) are the unliveable queer option, representing cultural death. Despite the general dislocation of child characters within the narratives, the Child figure is present throughout these discourses; normative families are represented as generally wholesome and ordered, and choices against this are often symbolically connected to images of death, figuring the destruction of the Child, and with it, metonymically and symbolically, social order, productivity and meaning. Alongside the ambivalent visual engagements with women's experiences of abortion, the Child often forms a tacit meta-discourse of cultural futurity. This futurity becomes, implicitly, the only possible logic of representation; any disavowal of this symbolic order is either firmly condemned or inexpressible.

## *2.2 – Sympathy for the Devil: Displaying and Re-Writing the Victim of Abortion in French Melodrama and New Wave Cinema*

Similarly to the situation in the UK, the story of reproductive rights in France is many-layered, tying into a long and complex intellectual history of citizenship, rights discourses and positions and perceptions of women and mothers in French society since the pre-revolution era.<sup>61</sup> Several of the issues and tensions at stake in French abortion debates are familiar from the journey towards reproductive rights in the UK and other European nations, but there are also important differences in how these demands were articulated and in what was achieved. France's history of women's

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<sup>61</sup> Sandra Reineke's *Beauvoir and her Sisters: The Politics of Women's Bodies in France* (2011) includes an analysis of women's rights and momentous political campaigns in French culture, which she contextualises within the intellectual history of the Revolution itself and the intellectual histories that led to it, developing these through the major feminist campaigns for suffrage, reproductive rights and parity.

rights is unusual insofar as it has been characterised by particularly long-standing and robust feminist political and cultural activity, yet only managed to achieve formal legal gains (in particular, women's suffrage and legalised abortion) relatively late in comparison to many other European states.

Karen Offen (1994) and Sandra Reineke (2011) have examined this curious double movement within the context of the French Revolution onwards. Both suggest that the philosophies and politics of the Revolution provided a language in which to demand rights and citizenship which could be adopted by feminists to further their cause, and to criticise the revolutionary project that had accorded fair rights to only half its citizens. Offen quotes a demonstrative example: 'It is humiliating to think that we are Frenchwomen, daughters of the land of the Revolution, and that in the year of grace 1919 we are still reduced to demanding the "rights of woman"' (suffrage activist Cécile Brunschvicg in Offen: 1994: 151). Offen links this deliberate disenfranchisement to what can be seen as a fixed image of domestic motherhood as a matter of societal health: 'The Constitution of 1791 effectively dismissed women from political life, and Talleyrand framed his programme for national education accordingly, insisting on the necessity of women remaining in domestic roles for the common good' (*ibid*: 152). When French women eventually were enfranchised in 1944-45, Offen sees it as a 'paternal gift' recognising women's patriotic contributions during the war rather than as a validation of intellectual parity (*ibid*: 161, reiterated in Reineke: 2011: 14). With a similar lack of mainstream parliamentary enthusiasm, legalisation of abortion arrived in France only in 1975. On the other hand, French feminist groups have typically been very focused and well-organised, often more so than their English counterparts (Reineke: 2011, Offen: 1994, Stetson: 1986). Such tensions are pertinent in the treatment and presentation of abortion and motherhood in French culture.

In setting the scene for enquiries into the history of reproductive rights in twentieth century France, many critics draw attention to widespread population anxieties (in particular, the toll taken by the world wars on two generations of young men), and the corresponding culture of pronatalism. A similar collection of anxieties to those in Britain, including low birth rate, decolonisation and panic over libertinism and changing sexual mores, precipitated a series of political moves that jointly sought

to stimulate population growth and to reinforce domestic ideals of the French family;<sup>62</sup> the ‘enhancement and protection of the family, the returning of the wartime army of female labour to hearth and home, and the promotion of the *famille nombreuse* was for some two decades to be the epitome of domestic success, rewarded by financial assistance and state approval’ (Allison: 1994: 223). Beyond simply promoting reproduction, it could be argued that motherhood became framed as women’s patriotic and civic duty, as Reineke describes in relation to early twentieth-century policy:

[...] the law of March 27, 1923, completed this undertaking [of legislatively discouraging non-reproductive sex through suppressing the advertising of most contraceptives] by repressing abortion itself. What is most striking about these laws is that they regarded abortion as an infraction against the state, putting population concerns above even moral considerations, and thereby using women instrumentally for French pronatalist policies. (Reineke: 2011: 13)

Some critics have contextualised this within a general trend of French politics towards understanding and addressing women as mothers (for instance, Duchen: 1994: 96). Allison gives examples of initiatives that suggested a broad political project of emphasising and facilitating women’s mothering roles within the family:

State intervention, particularly following the second world war, played an important part in revalorising maternity: the Family Code, instituted in 1939, the Family Ministry set up in 1940, later attached to the Public Health Ministry which itself became the Ministry for Public Health and Population in 1946, paved the way for prenatal benefits, family relief on income tax and the creation of the social security system. (1994: 223)

Despite the clear merits of the provision of state support for motherhood, many critics, including Allison, suggest that such projects were intended mainly to direct

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<sup>62</sup> The twentieth-century culture of pronatalism in France is well-covered ground by historians and cultural theorists. My understanding of this history has in particular been informed by Maggie Allison, *The Right to Choose: Abortion in France*, 1994, Claire Duchen, *Women’s Rights and Women’s Lives in France, 1944-1968*, 1994 and Jean C. Robinson, *Gendering the Abortion Debate: The French Case*, 2001. Allison’s article in particular underpins that, whilst such population anxieties were widespread in post-war Europe generally, they found particularly keen expression and reactions within French politics and culture (p 223).

women towards motherhood rather than to empower them within that role, and to underpin a particular vision of the French mother. Schemes such as the Medal of the French Family (Duchen: 1994: 101) in particular reinforce the imagined link between motherhood and nationalism; the symbolism of a medal as the form of the award invites comparison with accolades for military service, presenting motherhood as women's equivalent opportunity to 'fight' for the interests of their nation. Duchen even suggests that 'After the armistice in June 1940, population decline was cited as a major factor contributing to the defeat of France' (*ibid*: 96), suggesting women's mothering and reproduction quite directly as a matter of cultural integrity and nationalistic futurity. The responsibility for the nation's future and identity lay on the shoulders of its men and in the uteruses of its women. As well as practically and ideologically suppressing abortion, along with extremely severe penalties for illegal terminations up to and including execution (Allison: 1994: 225; Reineke: 2011: 13), such policy-making tendencies also took for granted women's reproduction as the legitimate jurisdiction of the state.

Some of the rhetorical trends around abortion legislation were common to the French and British cases. As has tended to be the case throughout most histories of reproductive rights, proponents of legalised abortion in France found that trepidatious or opposing parties, and particularly those whose opposition rested on nationalistic concerns, were most receptive to polemics that were couched in terms of soft-line eugenics and 'last resort' scenarios, where the life or the quality of life of the pregnant woman or foetus was in clear jeopardy, though feminists heavily criticised this for ignoring 'welfare' cases (Stetson: 1986: 282). Sympathy for these types of situations and enduring suspicion towards arguments that were led by feminist rights ideologies suggests an assumed narrative dividing women seeking abortions into deserving (otherwise virtuous women who were victims of circumstance) and undeserving (criminals whose demands for abortions resulted from a mixture of carelessness and selfishness). A further relevant area of overlap between abortion debates in the UK and France is the presence of class discourses. Class difference featured in significant ways in abortion discourses, most urgently becoming a question of accessibility and the increased degree of physical risk faced by working-class women. Not only were working-class women less likely to have the resources to cope with an unplanned pregnancy, but, whereas France's relatively late progress with abortion debates

relative to other European states meant that better-off women had the option of travelling to countries such as England, Switzerland and the Netherlands<sup>63</sup> for safer abortions, women without such means were often forced into riskier alternatives. Particularly notorious in this regard were the *faiseuses d'anges* (makers of angels), women who provided cheaper and often highly dangerous backstreet abortions. Dorothy M. Stetson underpins differences in the accessibility and safety of abortion for women of varying social classes, showing that the increased danger posed to working-class women became an important part of leftist groups' arguments in favour of abortion law reform (1986: 279). Moral panic around abortion and contraception also carried with it an added stigma for women who could not afford such means privately, as 'women were warned that they should not expect society to pay for their sexual activities' (Jean C. Robinson: 2001: 92), again suggesting the sexuality and reproductive capacities of women as a matter of public interest.

So far, these concerns are reflective of some of the broad debates around abortion in Western Europe. There are, however, important differences in the nature of strategies and expression used by reproductive rights proponents in France; as many commentators evince, French feminist groups generally made a concerted effort to anchor the debate first and foremost in terms of rights, self-determination and justice for women. Jean C. Robinson demonstrates how gender remained the key ideological site of debate for proponents and opponents of abortion reform, referencing in particular discussion of the Pelletier law:

Gender was central to the debate in 1979, and an integral part of arguments for and against restrictions in abortion. The proposed pro-natalist amendments attempted to legitimize an image of women as fecund suppliers for the nation. Women's duty was to give birth; this was presented not only as a moral and Christian imperative but as a sacrifice required for the good of the nation. [Whilst on the other side of the debate] Feminists argued that the abortion reform had fundamentally failed to protect and promote women's rights. If women were to be the autonomous beings that de Beauvoir and

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<sup>63</sup> Abortion was not, in fact, formally legalised in all of these countries at this point, but in practice safer abortions were generally known to be more accessible here.

others had imagined, then certainly the autonomy of their own bodies was imperative. (Robinson: 2001: 92)

Though there was strong sentiment both for and against, it remained clear that it was women's rights and bodies that were at stake. This forms a relevant counterpoint to the UK, in which feminist groups tended to favour a path of least resistance, focusing on the more easily winnable arguments (such as those based around foetal deformity) at the expense of a degree of discursive control of the matter as a question of women's autonomy and subjectivity. Some of the gains made, therefore, were not particularly in step with improvements of women's situations. Conversely, in France, advocacy for reproductive rights tended to be understood as primarily part of a committed feminist project. The process of abortion law reform in France and the impact of the feminist campaigns have been well-analysed critically, in particular by Robinson. Robinson concludes that, despite a cohesive feminist campaign, the legal outcomes in the 1970s were not satisfying – an 'incomplete victory at best' (*ibid*: 93). The Veil law of 1975 permitted abortions widely, but only within the first ten weeks of pregnancy, at the discretion of a doctor, and at the patient's own expense. The Pelletier law, which came after review in 1979, was similarly restrictive and, worse yet, parliamentary debate surrounding it reflected sympathy toward the concerns of anti-feminist counterarguments (*ibid*), leaving the feminist campaign in the disappointing position of having established the terms of a debate that in many ways it did not win. In regards to my interest in cultural representation, however, it is nonetheless of considerable significance that outspokenly feminist voices, narratives and discourses of resistance were conspicuous throughout this period of debate.

Commentators have cited abundant instances of ways in which feminist discourses and actions helped shape cultural and social narratives of reproductive rights, even if they did not achieve all of their parliamentary aims. Several feminist campaigning and activist organisations were established in France during the 1960s and '70s, many foregrounding reproductive rights as a key priority.<sup>64</sup> These groups participated in abortion debates in a variety of ways, sometimes through civic

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<sup>64</sup> This is not the appropriate forum in which to produce a synthesis or thorough analysis of the histories of feminist movement within France during the 1960s and '70s, but such context can be found in Sandra Reineke, *Beauvoir and her Sisters: The Politics of Women's Bodies in France*, 2011, Dorothy M. Stetson, *Abortion Law Reform in France*, 1986 and Jean C. Robinson, *Abortion Politics, Women's Movements and the Democratic State*, 2001.

institutions, such as the founder of *Choisir*, Gisèle Halimi, acting as the defence lawyer in the high-profile and landmark Bobigny abortion case, described by Allison as ‘probably the single most influential phenomenon in the struggle for the legislation of abortion in recent times’ (1994: 226). Other groups tactically favoured civil disobedience and attention-arresting stunts. The MLAC (Mouvement pour la Libération de l’Avortement et de la Contraception), for instance, openly facilitated illegal abortions, organising trips to Amsterdam and London to help women obtain safer abortions (Stetson: 1986: 282), and the MLF spearheaded the renowned *manifeste des 343* (Allison: 1994: 226), a declaration signed by 343 public figures (including Simone de Beauvoir and Agnès Varda) stating that they had personally undergone illegal abortions, and posed as a direct challenge to the government on the injustice and impracticality of existing abortion legislation. Such events were culturally impactful, and despite their legislative disappointments, the historical memorialisation they achieved is indicative of their contribution to shaping the master narrative of reproductive rights in France with a discourse that was broadly bolder and more uncompromising than in the United Kingdom.

Another feature of French feminism that has been particularly prominent is the comparatively extensive use of art and literature in the service of political expression. This trend has been extensively explored by Sandra Reineke (2011), who details feminist expression through various forms of writing, from high literature and political polemic to popular women’s magazines such as *Elle* and *Marie Claire*. Though Reineke is justifiably critical of several significant and problematic contradictions in the nature of this engagement – for instance, in the magazines’ tendency to juxtapose articles on an event like the Bobigny trial with advertisements that exploited and commercialised the female body (*ibid*: 41-42) – she convincingly argues that such popular publications contributed to an ‘imagined sisterhood’<sup>65</sup> which, despite its inconsistencies, offered a prominent and accessible space for a women-led dialogue on experiences and politics of reproductive issues (*ibid*: 53). Reineke also argues that collective feminist consciousness was developed through longer form writing. Simone de Beauvoir’s work, and in particular her bold polemic on abortion in *The Second Sex*,

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<sup>65</sup> ‘Imagined sisterhoods’ are a central theme in Reineke’s study. The term is borrowed from Pnina Werbner’s chapter ‘Political Motherhood and the Feminisation of Citizenship: Women’s Activisms and the Transformation of the Public Sphere’ in Nira Yuval-Davis and Pnina Werbner (eds.), *Women, Citizenship and Difference*, 1999.

is pertinent to the conceptualisation of reproductive rights in (and beyond) France. Beauvoir was a high-profile and outspoken advocate of legal abortion, who directly implicated herself in her politics through her actions and writing whilst bluntly exposing clandestine abortion as a commonplace experience among women:

The ‘immorality’ of women, favourite theme of misogynists, is not to be wondered at; how could they fail to feel an inner mistrust of the presumptuous principles that men publicly proclaim and secretly disregard? They learn to believe no longer in what men say when they exalt woman or when they exalt man: the one thing they are sure of is this rifled and bleeding womb, these shreds of crimson life, this child that is not there. It is at her first abortion that woman begins to ‘know.’ (Beauvoir: 1949: 517)

Her controversial chapter on abortion works at unapologetically deconstructing many underlying myths, presumptions and hypocrisies of popular contemporaneous narratives of motherhood and abortion. As the quote above suggests, publicly professed patriarchal moral standards imposed upon the maternal body in abstraction may well be covertly disregarded in private matters, not due to an arousal of sympathy for and understanding of the humanity of that body, but in the interest of patriarchal self’s own convenience. She further points out that those women who embrace the ready cultural images of motherliness and fertility are also not mindless, asocial or mechanised reproductive objects. Fitting the idealised maternal image and opting for abortion, for material or emotional reasons, are not mutually exclusive ‘It would seem that most often the couple decides to limit births after two maternities; and so it is that the repulsive aborted woman is also the splendid mother cradling two blond angels in her arms: one and the same person’ (*ibid*: 512-513).

What these emphases demonstrate, I suggest, is an Edelman-esque cathecting of the ideology of the Child at the expense of the existent citizen. The preservation of the idea, the fantasy, that one is ‘fighting for the children’ (and thereby the immortality of the unblemished cultural self) becomes an enterprise more keenly felt and highly prioritised than the lived experience of justice. Beauvoir’s argument shows how disastrous this is for the subjectivity of women as (potentially) reproductive beings and signifiers of futurity, through defining a series of ideological and experiential

contradictions in the social construction of motherhood, abortion and pregnancy that seem to make women's coherence impossible. Patriarchal discourse can (fraudulently) resolve these to its own, and only its own, satisfaction, but the woman 'feels these contradictions in her wounded flesh' (*ibid*: 517).

Beauvoir's thinking on motherhood has often come under attack for presenting an apparently disparaging and vitriolic view of female bodies and pregnancy (for instance, Germain Kopaczynski: 1994). In fact, in her chapter on 'Motherhood', Beauvoir's apparently disparaging descriptions of pregnancy tend to be counterbalanced with potentially positive experiences of it, though it is easy to see how evocative language such as describing the foetus as a 'parasite that feeds on [the woman's body]' (Beauvoir: 1994: 520) can elicit such a response, especially when she is contending with such emotive mythology as motherhood. My own interpretation tends towards a less prescriptivist reading of such passages, instead treating Beauvoir's writing contextually (for instance, Moira Gatens: 2003 and Sara Heinämaa: 2003). That is, the violence of her descriptions of women's bodies, in my view, should not be taken as the product of a timeless and abstract corporeal misogyny, but as a conscious invective about the incompatibility of a particular body with a particular societal organisation and structure. The site of injustice, in this case, is indeed the female body, but it is externally imposed; it does not seep from within. This view, furthermore, seems to be reflected in subsequent artistic representation; Varda's work, for instance, demonstrates much commonality with Beauvoir's reproductive politics whilst being radically celebratory of the maternal body, showing the possibility of understanding these descriptions as strategically contingent.

Reproductive rights, abortion and their interactions with figures and ideologies of motherhood are interesting, important and dynamic issues in France during this period. Many of the familiar concerns and rhetoric of anti-abortion, child-centred or nationalistic pronatalist mentalities are also present here, creating similar issues with the subjective absence of the mother and reducing her to an ideological function. As was reflected in the disappointing limitations of the Veil law, women's reproductive rights were a contentious project, meeting with considerable resistance. On the other hand, arguments in favour of legalised abortion that clearly presented it as a matter of women's citizenship and autonomy rather than capitulating to other (often problematic) discourses were prominent and well-organised. To this end, artists such

as Varda and Beauvoir mobilised cultural expression to explore women's situations and argue for justice.

Of course, the theme of abortion did not arrive in French narrative cinema with Varda, even if she treats it with particular prominence. This section looks at how abortion is represented in a variety of French films. To begin with, I discuss a selection of older melodramas that feature abortion as a major plot point, looking at how they portray women who undergo abortions prior to decriminalisation. Unlike in the English films, I argue that there is relatively less implicit demonization of women opting for abortion in these representations; they are more typically sympathetic victims of circumstance, and sometimes used as part of a critique of gendered social injustices. I then look at instances of abortion and contraception references within discourses on sexuality in new wave and new wave-influenced filmmaking; here, the new wave resistance to the *film-à-thèse*<sup>66</sup> style introduces new interpretative possibilities through representations of abortion that are far less dramatic or strategic. Finally, this will lead into a closer analysis of Varda's treatment of abortion, where I argue that her filmmaking aims to reconsider and rewrite set social narratives of victimhood or unmotherliness in abortion discourses. Despite its thematic frequency, and existing critical interest in abortion in French politics and literature, there is very little secondary work available currently on abortion in French cinema, nor is it a strong focal point within literature on new wave films. Even in Varda's case, her films that deal primarily with reproductive politics are amongst the most maligned of her oeuvre. In this section, I address this by mapping filmic representations onto a cultural dialogue on reproductive rights in France, and in so doing, explore its interactions with ideas on motherhood and feminine subjectivities.

Abortion debates and the project of reproductive rights reached a high point of public consciousness and momentum in the late '60s and early '70s in France, with many seeing May '68 as a pivotal moment for this movement and for the widespread expression of contraception as a feminist issues (for instance, Allison: 1994: 226). Prior to this discursive explosion, however, the issue of abortion is visible, if not as prominent. Representation of abortion in pre-new wave films and melodramas in

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<sup>66</sup> Loosely, 'thesis-film'; this is a conventional filmmaking style in which a film purports to 'say something about' a certain topic, a practice which was widely rejected by *nouvelle vague* filmmakers in favour of a more fluid and less narratively didactic approach.

France, in which abortion appears within the context of its legal and social recognition as a crime, forms some interesting comparisons with new wave representations and the English films discussed above. In the previous section, I found that most of the films I examined demonstrated at least some underlying investment in a guilt or punishment narrative around abortion, whether on the part of women or male partners. This type of moralistic construct seems somewhat less prominent in the French melodramas. Despite – or perhaps as a result of – the fiercely pronatalist rhetoric of post-war French politics, abortion is often presented as a tragic reality of women’s lives rather than a moral crime.

As emphasised above, there had been strong efforts to shape public understandings of motherhood and reproduction towards a nationalistic image of fecund domesticity in the inter- and post-war period. Such a narrative may have been very visible and imaginatively active, but commentators have argued that actual behavioural trends amongst the French public do not reflect a whole-hearted embrace of these ideologies; Duchen describes widespread public approval of increased family planning following the baby boom, suggesting that this demonstrates unhappiness with pronatalist policy (Duchen: 1994: 119), and Stetson, along similar lines, argues that the French public ‘by their antinatalist behavior had shown that they wanted to have abortion available’ (Stetson: 1986: 280). Their analyses suggest that pronatalist projects inspired amongst many women a sense of coercion rather than the desired patriotism, or, we might say, *patrie*-isation of their bodies. The flaws of pronatalist policymaking are also taken up by Simone de Beauvoir, who insists that ‘the law – which dooms many young women to death, sterility, invalidism – is quite powerless to assure an increase in the number of births’ (Beauvoir: 1993: 512). After the Second World War, there was in fact a short-lived ‘baby boom’ in France, potentially undermining this assertion. However, Beauvoir’s argument does not hinge on the ineffectiveness of the policies. She further argues that ‘‘illegitimate motherhood is still so frightful a fault that many prefer suicide or infanticide to the status of unmarried mother: which means that no penalty could prevent them from ‘getting rid’ of the unborn baby’ (*ibid*: 513); the core point is surely the unacceptable cost on the lives of women, regardless of the growth outcome on a population that does not seem to recognise them as subjects. In this light, the mother expressed in pronatalist nationalism is a fantasy, a wishful grand narrative, rather than a body of thinking

women existing in differentiated social realities. A simplistic narrative of motherhood in which demand or need for abortion diminishes in line with its accessibility also turns a wilfully blind eye to the level of risk women are willing to accept to avoid undesired pregnancy or further stigma. Alternately, it makes sense of her through a fire-and-brimstone retributionist ideology; in Beauvoir's argument, 'the hospitals are obliged to receive a woman whose miscarriage has begun, but she is *punished* sadistically by the withholding of all sedatives during her pains and during the final operation of curetting' (*ibid*: 515). In this case, anti-abortionists may prefer to imagine the horrendousness of dangerous abortions as a reflection of the inherent badness of the woman who suffers them, rather than accept that their beliefs may inflict such rude 'justice' on an individual as complex, as contextual, as guilty and as innocent as themselves.

Amongst advocates of abortion decriminalisation, much was made of the horrors of clandestine abortion with the lack of a safer option, as exemplified in the Beauvoir quotes above. In pre-new wave melodramatic films, where (illegal) abortions occur, they are often tragic and climactic plot points, or else the woman's subsequent death is treated as such. *Des gens sans importance* (1956) or *Journal d'une femme en blanc* (1965), for instance, both reach an emotional peak around the drawn-out and agonising death of a young, attractive and charming woman following a backstreet abortion. In both cases, the squalor of the environment in which the amateurish and fatal procedure takes place is depicted as a point of pathos. The women who have abortions are not demonised, but presented as tragic victims.

Moreover, unlike the generally cold portrayal of abortionists across the English films, there are some cases in which doctors who perform illegal abortions are even heroised. Released in the mid-1960s, not long before the May '68 protests, *Journal d'une femme en blanc* features as its protagonist Claude Sauvage, a young doctor contending with a patriarchal work environment, who is passionate about women's rights to contraception and reproductive freedom. The film follows the development of her relationship with a young patient suffering (and eventually dying) from complications after an illegal abortion procedure. The woman had initially approached Claude about terminating the pregnancy, but she was unable to help; key to the emotional drama is Claude's frustration at the moralising legal and social constructs that prevented her from providing the abortion more safely and competently, and her

guilt at adhering to them. The plot of a subsequent film featuring the same character, *Une femme en blanc se révolte* (1966) is driven by Claude's collecting the courage to perform an abortion for another young woman. Having initially refused, she is compelled to deliver the procedure after catching the woman preparing to visit another *faiseuse d'anges*. Claude is arrested for her actions at the end of the film, but is presented through the arrest as a defiant and tragic heroine. These films, which demonstrate strong pro-choice sympathies, were released not far from the height of reproductive rights activity, but a much earlier film, *Le Corbeau* (1943), also features as its protagonist a doctor who performs illegal abortions for women in medical need, having lost his own wife and child in an unsafe birth. In these cases, the doctors' adherence to their conscience and to moral over legal right is framed as a heroic gesture, in opposition to the narrative of criminality around abortion procedures and supported by sympathetic characters. Rather than wrongdoers, these protagonists are presented as defenders of women, moved by the experience of suffering in other individuals rather than by the abstract rhetoric of pronatalist or anti-abortionist zeal, and even the *faiseuses d'anges* are primarily suggested as a symptom rather than a source of social injustice.

Sympathy for the women who undergo abortions in these films is often developed through awareness of their social and circumstantial contexts. *Le Corbeau* is reminiscent of earlier abortion rhetoric, as Germain performs abortions specifically when the pregnancy imperils the woman's life. However, feminist critics in France later emphasised that 'last resort' instances did not constitute the majority of abortion cases: 'For according to the statistics, most abortions are carried out on women who already have children and cannot bring up any more. The 'welfare case' is the most frequent type of abortion' (Halimi: 1973: 89). The terms of anti-abortion rhetoric in general, which tend towards ideology, potentially distance the issue from such material contexts. Where it does deal most firmly in phenomena is in questions of foetal viability, which also fails to address the ongoing *practical* (material and emotional) wellbeing of the mother and child, a hypocrisy highlighted by Beauvoir:

It must be pointed out that our society, so concerned to defend the rights of the embryo, shows no interest in the children once they are born; it prosecutes the abortionist instead of undertaking to reform that scandalous institution known as 'public assistance'; those

responsible for entrusting the children to their torturers are allowed to go free; society closes its eyes to the frightful tyranny of brutes in children's asylums and private foster homes. (Beauvoir: 1949: 510)

In *Des gens sans importance*, *Journal d'une femme en blanc* and *Une femme en blanc se révolte*, women choose abortion because they cannot practically or financially support a child. None of these films, furthermore, propose an absolute antithesis between abortion and motherliness. In *Journal d'une femme en blanc* in particular, Mariette wants to be a mother but only in the circumstances she chooses and when she is financially able. Such representations in film are important as they anchor a potentially over-abstracted issue in character and context. On the other hand, these narrative justifications continue to suggest that women must be in some way victimised to 'deserve' an abortion.

Victimisation can occur on many levels, furthermore. Even in a film such as *Les Mauvaises Rencontres* (1955), in which the woman in question, Catherine, is financially and professionally successful and in no physical danger, her unplanned pregnancy and abortion are presented as the culmination of her victimisation by the seductive but chaotic and overpowering lifestyle of the Parisian upper-middle classes; she is depicted as a victim of Paris itself. We are told as much in the opening titles: 'Le film que vous allez voir est l'histoire d'une jeune fille d'aujourd'hui, jeune provinciale plongée brutalement dans la fiévreuse atmosphère de Paris.'<sup>67</sup> The film's flashback structure, accelerating us through Catherine's rise and fall in Parisian society, keeps pace with this portent. Pursuit of knowledge of her abortion is the structuring object of the film; though Catherine's story turns out to be about much more than this, inquiry into her criminal abortion is the catalysing narrative force. The film begins ostensibly from the perspective of Forbin, the officer investigating Catherine's abortion and her suspected abortionist, Doctor Danielli. Our attention is almost immediately drawn to the words 'manœuvres abortives' appearing typed on a page in close-up, setting these crimes up as the film's dramatic crux. The story progresses through Forbin's initially hostile interrogation of Catherine, and her experiences depicted in flashbacks in response to his questions. A sympathetic picture of Catherine, and her experiences with seduction, fame and abandonment in relation

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<sup>67</sup> 'The film you are about to see is the story of a young girl of today's world, a young provincial girl plunged brutally into the feverish atmosphere of Paris.'

to various men and the city itself, is built up. Viewers' increasing identification with her is encouraged through this narrative pacing, and reflected in Forbin, the initial focaliser, whose attitude towards Catherine progresses from aggressive condemnation to compassion and, finally, guilt. After Catherine has given up her information, exhausted from the investigation, Forbin reveals that Danielli has killed himself, and Catherine blames Forbin. On leaving the station, she is beset aggressively by photographers and reporters, and a voiceover states, with dark irony, that she 'remembered how a man that she had loved so much had said that she would be famous and her name would appear in all the papers and conquer this terrifying city'. Catherine is ultimately presented as victimised by the state and society (symbolised respectively by Forbin and the press) that seek to make her private body, reproductive and sexual life, public knowledge.

A feature of abortion narratives in the English films was the connection of abortion with the theme of death. In these cases, the ideological tragedy of the 'death' or loss of the imagined child was often displaced more tangibly onto other characters or symbols. In these French melodramas, there is also a clear thematic marriage between abortion and death; all of these films end with a death, of the woman who had the abortion or a man connected to her (except *Une femme en blanc se révolte*, which ends in an arrest, hence also a finality, of a sort). All of the deaths can be symbolically connected to guilt; they are, however, differentiated by their location of guilt. Whereas films like *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, *Alfie* and *Darling* frame personal immortality or intemperate sexuality (male or female) as leading to death, the positioning of abortion within social contexts suggests other sites of responsibility. Representations of death, in these cases, do less to mourn the imagined child, and more to express the unliveability of the woman's situation.

Maternal and feminine subjectivities are an interesting question in these films. Women who have abortions are often depicted compassionately, and their backgrounds and circumstances explored, but they can also be disempoweringly hyper-victimised. This can be productively considered in light of generic particularities. All of the films discussed demonstrate significant melodramatic characteristics (I have in mind particularly emotional excess, primarily domestic or

interior settings, moral dilemmas and the thematisation of suffering).<sup>68</sup> Of particular relevance is melodrama's typical foregrounding of the experience of victimhood, as noted by Thomas Elsaesser (1972: 64). In this light, despite the potential productiveness of sensitive and detailed explorations of women's experiences, such depictions of tragically beautiful young women suffering (physically or emotionally) may be more cynically understood as using abortion as another catalytic device to narrativise the spectacle of female victimhood. That said, it is also possible to understand these films more hopefully and generously through feminist theories of melodrama, which, despite acknowledging the problems of the genre such as its dismissal as low-brow (Haskell: 1974; Kaplan: 1983) or excess of feminine masochism (Doane: 1981; Kaplan: 1983b and 1992; Kuhn: 1984), see it as one of the few traditional popular genres readily equipped to interpret female experience and to approach the viewer with a 'specifically *female* address' (Kaplan: 1992: 66). As E. Ann Kaplan argues in her theorisation of melodrama, this mode offers opportunities to be both "subversive" in presenting positive female-female bonding (particularly in the Mother-child relationship), or harmonious male-female mutual love' and oppressive in its capacity to reaffirm ossifying expectations of femininity (Kaplan: 1992: 46).

I argue that, in these cases, the melodramatic conventions do help to facilitate a greater identification with women's experiences of abortion, sex and pregnancy, which run counter to the moralising patriarchal discourses of anti-abortion politics or more male-focused films. Significantly, whatever the outcome, the decision of whether to terminate or continue a pregnancy (in non-life-threatening conditions) is consistently represented as women's choice or burden; male partners, in these films, are barely involved in such processes, and are certainly not their emotional subjects. As Molly Haskell argues, the term 'women's film' is often used pejoratively to dismiss women's feelings as frivolous (Haskell: 1974: 20). However, this space can also be occupied subversively to focus on women's psychologies and female relationships independently of patriarchal commentaries or focalisation. This is most clearly present in *Journal d'une femme en blanc*. Whereas identificatory mechanisms in other films left us peering through a misty kitchen window with Arthur Seaton, this film invites

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<sup>68</sup> My understanding of the melodramatic mode and its presentation in cinema is informed by Thomas Elsaesser's theorisation of melodrama in 'Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama', (1972) and E. Ann Kaplan 'Theories of Melodrama: A Feminist Perspective' (1983b).

us inside the conspiratorial feminine space through Claude and Mariette's growing intimacy and mutual affection, Mariette's candid confiding in Claude and Claude's emotional intertwining in Mariette's private life, including her visit to the site of the abortion to dispose of incriminating paraphernalia. Claude and Mariette's relationship is essentially the film's central romance, with Claude's involvement with her colleague Pascal as a displacement of her emotional and sexual attraction to Mariette. This relationship is only consummated at the emotional zenith of Claude's concern for Mariette, and cools after the latter's death.

These films mark an interesting starting point for a consideration of attitudes towards abortion in French cinema. Even those films released substantially prior to the heyday of the French reproductive rights movement generally present a sympathetic portrait of women who have abortions, with little evidence of moral panic or blanket condemnation. However, the women are also primarily sympathetic *victims*. Compassion is solicited at the expense of agency. At best they are presented as weathering their surroundings rather than mastering them. Abortion is, furthermore, always dramatic and often final. The increased focus on women's experiences and psychologies creates opportunities for the woman or mother to be more than an objective narrative function (for the man or the child) and foregrounds women's bodies as the site of ideological tensions in reproduction discourses. Ultimately however, such understanding is decoupled from a trajectory of empowerment. Melodramatic abortion discourses tend to offer reproductive subjects in a state of perpetual tragedy.

Within the new wave, articulations of and approaches to abortion representations are often markedly different to those of the melodramatic imagination. It was not that more conventional abortion discourses disappeared from film in the new wave period or around the social-sexual upheavals of May '68, even amongst young directors. *La Chamande*, for instance, made by a young director in an 'old-school' style, continues to position abortion within a story of a self-centred woman who must 'learn a lesson' about herself and ultimately identify the 'good' man from the guilty. Within the work of the new wave itself, however, there is increasing evidence of a movement away from set narratives of abortion and reproduction. Sex, youth culture and relationships are major themes of the new wave in general, and Geneviève Sellier contextualises this engagement as itself a form of protest or 'reaction against the puritan hypocrisy

of the society of the 1950s, marked by familialism, birth-rate panic, and the repression of contraceptive methods' (Sellier: 2008: 6). These political inclinations were performed stylistically through the films' 'turn[ing] increasingly to the everyday, the self-evidently, defiantly "meaningless" – at least vis-à-vis the always "meaningful," always fully functional details of tightly constructed stories – as part of their rebellion' (Brunette: 1997: 81).

In this vein, issues of contraception and abortion as part of youth experience are expressed not only as commonplace but also as not *necessarily* identity-defining or deeply traumatic decisions. Many new wave films have a tendency to treat abortion, where it occurs, with a defused openness and sang-froid that sets them apart from the high passions and sweeping pathos that tend to characterise much abortion discourse on both sides, in fiction and politics. This can be further understood in light of the new wave's general contempt for the *film à these* (the 'message picture' or 'social problem film'). The term identifies conventional filmmaking in which films are 'about' a certain issue, often providing narrative conclusions and solutions. Peter Brunette argues that, in the absence of such *thèses*, new wave films often do not seem to be 'about' anything; 'In terms of narrative, there is often little "payoff" to these films, and viewers coming to them for the first time from a diet of hyped-up American movies sometimes complain that "nothing happens."' (*ibid*: 80). Abortions, accordingly, are no longer central dramatic turning points within traditionally structured narratives. They become more 'context' for filmic explorations than dramatic 'text'. On the whole, the new wave women who undergo abortions are not in mortal peril, and there is little narrative apologia for their choices, as was a staple of the melodramas; any sense of condemnation here would be located primarily at the site of reception rather than articulation. Though this dampening of moral didacticism is not entirely universal (in some cases, there is still evidence of plotting abortion onto a traditionalistic moral spectrum), there are more instances of abortion in which women are not presented as either helpless victims or callous egotists. Reproductive decisions are choices as meaningful or as meaningless as any other action taken by the new wave's catalogue of youths philosophising over magazines and cigarettes, as Godard famously labelled them, the 'children of Marx and Coca-Cola'.

This discursive neutrality (the resistance of high drama and set responses) also extends into the imminent political content of abortion representations. Unlike in films

such as *L'Une chante, l'autre pas* and *Journal d'une femme en blanc*, reproductive control is not usually portrayed as a historically grounded question of rights and autonomy strongly experienced within women's bodies. The characters themselves, furthermore, do not generally politicise abortion or pregnancy. Across the new wave canon, it is rare to find female characters who take an interest in contemporary politics, compared to instances of politically engaged (if haplessly so) men, particularly in Godard's cinema. Abortion, for them, is not a radical gesture, simply a fact of life; unwanted pregnancy can happen to any women, particularly considering the contemporaneous novelty of contraceptive devices.

Though many of the new wave films that feature abortions do so less dramatically and rarely construct victim-heroines, there is not a universal lack of ideology concerning unwanted pregnancies and contraception. A pertinent example here might be Claude Chabrol's *Les Cousins* (1959). Chabrol was a prominent new wave director, though he was also more renowned for thrillers and genre cinema than his contemporaries. *Les Cousins* replicates some familiar discourses on abortion, morality and more generally motherhood. The film's protagonist is Charles, a sheltered, provincial young man who moves in with his cousin, Paul, in Paris whilst they are both studying law at university. Charles eventually becomes a victim of Paul's debauched and hedonistic 'Nietzschean' (Ross: 1995: 1) lifestyle. Paul and his friends live a philosophy of reckless decadence that revolves mainly around abundant sex, drinking and raucous parties, facilitated by Clovis, a simpering and highly sinister fixer-cum-pimp. The mise-en-scène of Paul's apartment, an aesthetic expression of his character and worldview, is festooned with curated totems of masculine virility and the suggestion of death: weapons, hunting trophies and military art line the walls. The atmosphere is one of patriarchal hubris, and the group of male friends are also cruel and lecherous towards women, whom they treat as conquests.

The abortion narrative occurs early in the film and is bookended by shots of Charles writing to his mother. The preceding shot of Charles at his desk fades to black, and the accompanying maudlin music is cut abruptly short by a grating doorbell. A young woman, Geneviève, whom Paul has slept with, has discovered she is pregnant and arrives at the flat in tears. Clovis treats her throughout with sneering contempt, Paul with a self-serving and insincere show of concern. The two men proceed to

casually coerce the distressed woman into having an abortion. Françoise Audé describes the scene:

‘Tout est montré : la fuite de Paul devant l’idée de paternité (ou de mariage) et le cynisme avec lequel il manœuvre la jeune femme. La décision – et l’argent – sont le seul fait de l’homme. La situation est inique, au moins a-t-elle le mérite d’être limpide.’ (Audé: 1981: 47-48)<sup>69</sup>

She is quite right; the scene makes it abundantly clear that both men have only Paul’s interests at heart, and that they do not see Geneviève as a subject, much less an equal being, but understand her incipient maternity as a tiresome obstacle to their self-indulgence. Men in general in this film are (critically) constructed as the subjects of sex, and women the objects. The composition of the shot also sets Geneviève up as a manipulated victim; distraught and upset, she is seated, in close-up, between the two men, who loom over her from both sides, a hand on each shoulder. The oppressive closeness of their presences, along with that of the camera, trap her from all sides, collapsing her physical and existential possibilities. They immediately begin manipulating her towards having an abortion; Clovis describes it as just a ‘mauvais moment’ (a bad moment), and when she protests that she ‘can’t’, Paul finitely asks what other choice she has, before collecting a handful of money from across the room, which he hands to Clovis to arrange the abortion. The panning shot of the money in Paul’s hands is drawn-out, and markedly dark and shadowed.

This scene relies again on the construction of abortion as female victimhood as archetypal ‘guilty’ men like Paul prey on female sexuality and exploit methods of reproductive control to avoid practical or moral accountability. Coerced into an abortion that she does not seem to want, Geneviève is clearly suggested as a victim. Any deeper identification with her is withheld as an expression of Paul’s callous disregard for others and for paternal responsibilities. The abortion is in fact the first (and one of the most significant) concrete narrative expressions of Paul’s dissolution and his nihilism, signs of which have been, until this point, mainly suggested or symbolic. The abortion, however, becomes the expressive nucleus of the web of death

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<sup>69</sup> ‘Everything is shown: Paul’s running away from the idea of fatherhood (or of marriage) and the cynicism with which he manoeuvres the young woman. The decision – and the money – are the sole remit of man. The situation is iniquitous [unjust], but at least it has the merit of being clear.’

and pleasure imagery that surround Paul. Similarly to the scenes of Miles' 'debauched' parties in *Darling*, an abortion here gathers the threads of meaning behind the spectacle of self-annihilating pleasure, anti-futurity, sex, death and violence.

This absence of reproductive maternity and fruitfulness represented by Paul is contrasted with its over-presence for Charles, who is 'too close' to his mother. Despite her lack of presence as an actual character in the film, Françoise Audé has identified Charles' mother as a pivotal force in the narrative: 'Au centre des trois premiers films: la mère'<sup>70</sup> (Audé: 1981: 46). Throughout his time with Paul, Charles regularly writes letters to his mother, naively and innocently describing mundane details of his day. Of course, the mother's absence as a character and lack of a responding voice marks her as a psychological force, a distant Jocasta, rather than a subjective being. In-keeping with patriarchal anxieties concerning the excessively present mother, critics have identified this attachment as a definitive feature of Charles' character. Audé writes that Charles 'Egaré dans la société dorée du cousin parisien Paul (Jean-Claude Brialy) qui l'héberge, Charles n'a pas rompu le cordon ombilical'<sup>71</sup> (*ibid*), and Sellier links this relationship with emasculation:

'In the end Charles dies much more from his incapacity to dominate the feminine that is in him (attested to by his uninterrupted epistolary dialogue with his mother and his painful fixation on Florence) than from the involuntary gunshot fired by Paul, which the film absolves with a final shot of his face, crushed with sadness.' (Sellier: 2008: 106)

These readings are reasonable, but slightly incomplete. If maternal attachment were the primary problem, it would follow that Paul's complete detachment from motherhood would be somewhat redemptive, and this is certainly not the case. Charles' clinging to his mother certainly marks him as childish, but his death (shot accidentally by Paul after having put a single bullet in the revolver his cousin likes to posture with) is possibly better described in a passing phrase in Audé description of the film's closing scene: '[Paul], frappé par le *sacrifice de l'innocent*, tombe à

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<sup>70</sup> 'At the centre of [Chabrol's] first three films: the mother.' *Les Cousins* is Chabrol's second film.

<sup>71</sup> 'Lost in the gilded society of his Parisian cousin Paul (Jean-Claude Brialy), who puts him up, Charles has not cut the umbilical cord.'

genoux'<sup>72</sup> (Audé: 1981: 47, my emphasis). His vulnerability and attachment to the mother in fact identify him with the 'innocent child'. The film therefore rematerializes the established trope of displacing an intangible 'death' (abortion) onto a tangible one. This trope itself mainly operates within a critique of Paul's character.

Geneviève's victimisation is not as spectacular as that of the women in the melodramatic films, and the film is not making a point 'about' abortion in the same way as these films. Nonetheless, *Les Cousins* imports some received ideological meanings and connotations of abortion representations to efficiently indicate features of Paul's character. Overall, the representation of abortion is used to elaborate and psychologise Paul rather than as a text *per se*. *Les Cousins* is also both a very early new wave film, and unusually dramatic in its treatment of reproductive issues (in comparison with later films), though it treats the issue without quite the high passions, structural orthodoxy or spectacle of suffering of the more melodramatically styled films. Chabrol's film therefore begins to demonstrate some of the disruptive approach to set responses to abortion discourses that would become more typical of the new wave, but demonstrates how such stylistic progression is not entirely clear-cut.

In other cases, residual ideological meanings around abortion may be suggested more subtly and ambiguously. Truffaut is an interesting case in point here. As demonstrated in my introduction, Truffaut's films as a whole are not generous towards the mothering subject. However, their references to abortion are perhaps surprisingly neutral in style. In *Les 400 coups* and *L'Homme qui aimait les femmes*, the male protagonists allude to their respective mothers' unsuccessful attempts to abort them in utero. Given the psychological centrality of the mothering object to the content and character of both films, it is difficult not to read this as a further expression of oedipal rejection identifying with the son-as-subject. The inclusion of this will to abort should certainly be taken as further elucidation of the relationship and tensions between mother and son. Interestingly, these statements are also some of the clearest representations of maternal desire, however negative; the films fail to show us anything of how the women desire *as* mothers, other than as a numinous bauble of filial contemplation, and their antagonisms can otherwise seem gratuitous. Yet, this

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<sup>72</sup> '[Paul], struck by the *sacrifice of the innocent*, falls to his knees.'

knowledge indicates some desire for independence. Subjective readings of the mothers in these moments are limited, but possible.

The question remains, however, how abortion is morally constructed by these films, if it is so at all. Truffaut's representation of abortion has been connected by certain critics with 'murderous mothers'; 'The thwarted desires of Madame Doinel, Madame Morane (and possibly Madame Truffaut?) to abort their sons are realized on screen through the repeated murders of men by women' (Holmes and Ingram: 1998: 123). Writing that the mother in *L'Homme qui aimait les femmes* 'also walks up and down in front of the adolescent Bertrand, just like Gilberte in front of Antoine in *Les quatre cents coups*, as if he were sexually neutral or even non-existent (as both adolescents would have been if their respective mothers' abortion attempts had succeeded)' (Allen: 1985: 188), Don Allen also makes the case more loosely for some active malice on the part of the mother. Such interpretations do not consider subjective possibilities beyond the child-as-subject's paranoid fantasy of the mother as a devouring monster, a violent succubus whose mouth is so full of her victims that she cannot speak or explain herself. The first comment, furthermore, only bears out through a rather excessive exercise in intertextuality. Undeniably, Truffaut's oeuvre is more interconnected and self-referential than most. However, there are no murderesses in these films themselves, and projecting the allusions to abortion outwards across all of Truffaut's films to create a metaphorising and continuous moral fabric perhaps oversteps this. In fact, these interpretations assume a level of drama concerning abortion representations that is not really reflected in the films themselves. Antoine and Bertrand's mentions of their mothers' unsuccessful abortion attempts are narratively and stylistically cool and matter-of-fact. They are not climactic or explosive revelations, and quite different from climactic episodes of female violence such as, for instance, Catherine's murder-suicide in *Jules et Jim* (1962). In *Les quatre cents coups*, Antoine reports this knowledge as one detail amongst many in response to the psychiatrist's analysis of him and his relationship with his mother. The film is, as ever, deeply critical of Gilberte, but the attempted abortion is a symptom of her lack of ideal maternal qualities rather than an originating source of guilt. The straightforward and unembellished way in which Antoine presents the information also suggests that his situation is not uncommon. In this case, it is not so much abortion that is at the root of the child's suffering as it is the unwilling mother.

Another director to treat abortion with a non-morally charged and casual frankness that disrupts mainstream abortion narratives, is Godard. A good example of this practice is *Masculin Féminin* (1966), as contraception, sexuality and youth culture are amongst the film's most important concerns. Setting itself up under what Joel Haycock calls the 'sign of the sociologist' (Haycock: 1990), the film promises, and then deliberately fails to deliver, an ethnographic enquiry into a generation of young Parisians in the age of the pill, the jukebox and the Vietnam war, ultimately accepting the improbability of finding meaning in such a task, and the non-existence of the 'Française moyenne' [the average Frenchwoman].<sup>73</sup> The film is light-hearted and irreverently elusive in tone, taking absurdist turns that create an ironic distance from the absolute sincerity of its protagonist, Paul. Much has been written about the representation of gender in the film. At the time of its release, it was received as an exploration of contemporary sexuality and of a femininity reminiscent of what Sandra Reineke defines as the 'modern woman' whom the aftermath of the war newly allowed 'to work and live independently and to enjoy a first glimpse of female sexual freedom' (Reineke: 2011: 12). A review from near the film's release suggests a similarly and distantly drawn character:

Of all those girls, for whom love is apparently no longer a problem (or at least, this is the way they act; only one leads us to understand that she is still chaste, and she is not the least charming), of all these young women whom we want to believe on their word (the word of Godard more than their own; they make love without comment – in order for us to know what they are thinking, what they are really feeling, we would have to have a female Godard), in the midst of these girls who apparently have no complexes, and in the midst of a few other young men who are more or less, like the girls, seen from the outside, Jean-Pierre Léaud stands out as the image of the young man for all times – nervous, worried, unhappy, despondent. (Mauriac: [1966] 1972: 71)

In its opening titles, the film famously suggests its alternative title as 'Les Enfants de Marx et de Coca-Cola' (The Children of Marx and Coca-Cola). This in

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<sup>73</sup> Joel Haycock's essay 'The Sign of the Sociologist: Show and Anti-show in Godard's *Masculin Féminin*' 1990 provides a detailed examination of the film's use and subversion of sociological framing.

itself has provided a framework for gendered criticism of the film. Phillip John Usher, for instance, suggests that the phrase could indicate either that the entire generation are half-Marx, half-Coca-Cola, with dual inheritance, or that the men are children of Marx and the women the ‘daughters of Coca-Cola’:<sup>74</sup>

‘En effet, tout dans les personnages de Paul et de Madeleine semblerait concourir à faire croire que les enfants de Marx sont les hommes—Paul est un ouvrier au chômage qui s’intéresse à la politique et qui finit par travailler pour le compte d’un institut de sondages, tandis que les enfants de Coca-Cola sont les femmes—Madeleine est une chanteuse de musique populaire qui dit appartenir (c’est curieux!) à la “génération Pepsi”.’ (Usher: 2009: 99-100)<sup>75</sup>

He points out other ways in which this reading is problematised, but it remains an interpretative possibility. It has also been rightly pointed out by Douglas Morrey (2005: 50) that the men are generally in control of the dialogue, a hierarchical model in no small part encapsulated in Paul’s role as an interviewer for a sociological survey company. In each of the extended dialogues between a man and a woman, the man tends to ‘interrogate’ the woman, often relatively aggressively and with undertones of condescension, from behind the camera on her thoughts politics, sex and other matters. The women, in close-up, are often visually cornered or trapped, and any effort to do more than respond (to return a question, or to lead the conversation) is hard-fought and met with resistance from the men. Furthermore, the women are, without exception, reluctant to engage in political discussion or venture their opinions, whilst the men are free and vocal with theirs. Morrey’s interpretation of this contrast follows: ‘The overriding implication, then, is that all these women are hopelessly *superficial* when compared with the political awareness and emotional depth of the male characters’ (*ibid*). However, I contend that the exact opposite is true; the women’s unwillingness to offer private thoughts when coerced, on someone else’s terms, is surely indicative of a preservation of the integrity of emotional depth rather than a lack of it. The men,

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<sup>74</sup> This phrase is also used in Richard Roud: 2010: 28.

<sup>75</sup> ‘In effect, everything in the characters of Paul and Madeleine seems to want to convince us that the children of Marx are the men – Paul is an unemployed worker who takes an interest in politics and who ends up working for a survey company, whilst the children of Coca-Cola are the women – Madeleine is a pop singer who (crucially) claims to belong to the ‘Pepsi generation’.’

on the other hand, are endlessly superficial and performative with their political characters, their rhetoric unmatched in their actions.

We are, after all, hardly meant to take Paul as seriously as a revolutionary as he takes himself. Despite his humourless self-perception as a left-wing activist, he is unaware of ongoing strikes, his sporadic engagement in civil disobedience (mostly through graffiti and chalking) is juvenile and futile, and the most genuine passion he demonstrates is in response firstly to happening upon two men kissing in a toilet stall, and subsequently becoming enraged when he realises that a film he is watching (a bizarre Bergman-esque porn parody) is being projected in the wrong ratio, rather than anything more meaningfully political. The 'Sons of Marx', therefore, is as tongue-in-cheek and as dubious a title as the 'Daughters of Coca-Cola'. Moreover, despite Paul and his friend's Robert's copious proclamations of their militant posturing and supposed political awareness, both characters seem in practice far more interested in sex than in strikes, and their relationships with the female characters in fact drives the substance of the film. Here too, however, sex is a rather performative matter, and the characters seem to spend more time talking about it than engaging in it. Robert and, in particular, Paul also appear naïve and sophomoric in regards to matters of contraception and sexuality compared to the women, who seem to hold a private realm of knowledge. In one scene, Paul and Madeleine's friend Catherine discuss the formers' sex life. Catherine explains to him that Madeleine is scared of falling pregnant, and reveals some of the contraceptive practices that the women have discussed amongst themselves. Elisabeth was brought a 'scoobydoo'<sup>76</sup> by an 'Air France guy', but Madeleine is a little shocked by it and scared to use it. Despite the varying degrees of conservatism within the reactions, contraception and the risk of pregnancy appears in this scene as a substantial sphere of feminine knowledge, which women discuss away from the male gaze (and its camera), whilst Paul, in comparison, appears naïve and uninitiated.

Sexuality, therefore, is marked by gendered difference in this film. For Paul and Robert, their sexualities are performative, public and loudly pronounced; for the women, it is quieter and less discursive, composed not just of pleasure but also concerns around contraception and unplanned pregnancy. The body might be mainly

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<sup>76</sup> This is difficult to translate. It could refer specifically to a diaphragm, or be a general euphemism for female contraceptive devices.

an object of visual and sensual enjoyment for the men, but for the women it also represents risks and complexities; the imagination of motherhood weighs on them in a way that fatherhood does not on Paul and Robert. Abortion is also a part of the same private female knowledge and concern around contraception, though the topic is not introduced until the final scene. The tone with which abortion is discussed is, again, decidedly un-dramatic. Before considering this, however, it is interesting to look at how Godard plays with narrative structure to erase, disorder and disrupt set discourses, including that of abortion and pregnancy. Royal S. Brown describes an anecdote in which Godard discusses his filmmaking: ‘When French director Georges Franj once apparently asked Godard, during a debate, whether he would not agree that a film had to have a beginning, middle, and end, Godard’s reply was, “Yes, but not necessarily in that order.”’ (Brown: 1972: 10). The film has the feel of a cubist painting; it contains recognisable shapes and perhaps an overall theme, but the image is fragmented and distorted into something pleasingly unfamiliar. The film declares itself meticulously, in its sterile and taxonomical choice of language in the title and its promise of a neatly ordered and numbered sequences, and proceeds to void this controlled tidiness, showing itself as messy and peripatetic in form and content. Joel Haycock describes this stylistically contrary disorder:

The irregularity of these title numbers undercuts the subtitle’s comically confident tone, countering its assertion of precision with a more tentative and arbitrary quality: single shot sequences 5 and 6 do not warrant a title, but single-shot sequence 9 for some reason does (the film gives a reason). The numbering also counters the arrangement of the fictional scenes, introducing a disorder that the narrative fiction does not have. (1990: 53)

As well as narrative expectations, Godard’s structural irreverence also challenges anticipated emotional responses in his audience. Mainstream cinema, after all, tends to exploit certain formulae regarding pacing, climax and dramatic tension, often following traditional comedic or tragic models. *Masculin Féminin* flouts these rules, and the results are both amusing and jarring. At various points, Paul wanders obliviously into what could be narrative climaxes of other films (the wife who shoots her husband at the café, the protestor who borrows Paul’s lighter to set himself on fire, and the man who stabs himself after threatening Paul with a knife, to name just a few

darkly ludicrous examples), yet the ‘anti-narrative’, to borrow Brown’s term (1972: 11), ambles on at its same aimless pace. When the film reaches what should be its own climax – Paul’s death – not only is the event abrupt and unanticipated, but we actually ‘miss’ it. In one scene not overly dissimilar to some that have preceded it, Paul’s voiceover reflects on the inability of his surveys to reveal social truths. In the next, Madeleine is sitting at a desk in a police station, being interviewed about his death. He has apparently fallen from a high rise building whilst trying to take a picture. There is some interpretative uncertainty over whether Paul’s death is a meaningless accident or suicide over his unrequited love for Madeleine; ‘if it was a suicide, we could read that fact back through the story, highlighting those moments that perhaps foreshadowed it. But if it was a “stupid accident” as Catherine says, then the narrative takes an Absurdist turn’ (*ibid*: 70). Given the film’s commitment to futility, the latter seems most fitting, but it is more important that this is left unresolved.

It is at this point, after the anti-event of Paul’s death, that the question of abortion is raised. We have previously learnt that Madeleine is pregnant with Paul’s child. After interviewing her about his death, the police officer asks what she will do next. Madeleine replies ‘I’m not sure. I don’t know... Elisabeth mentioned curtain rods... I’m not sure.’ As Phillip John Usher points out, ‘La question du fonctionnaire aurait pu s’interpréter comme “Comment allez-vous vous en sortir, comment pourrez-vous continuer votre carrière?” mais Madeleine pense tout de suite au choix avorter/garder l’enfant’<sup>77</sup> (Usher: 2009: 98). Of course, this is not quite true; she is not ostensibly debating *whether* to abort her pregnancy, but *how*. Nonetheless, it is the matter of pregnancy and motherhood that occurs to her as the most pressing matter. Her tone is undramatic and straightforward, and there is no suggestion of a narrative of either victimhood or guilt. It is worth underscoring, also, that the film was released some years prior to the decriminalisation of abortion in France, yet Madeleine mulls this measure over in front of a law enforcement official with a sense of only a practical rather than a moral or jurisprudential dilemma, suggesting substantial dissonance between a public patriarchal narrative in the law (the myth of correlation between criminalisation and prevention) and the lived realities of young women in regards to abortion, as well as a divergent set of priorities and ethical mapping between those

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<sup>77</sup> ‘The officer’s question could equally be taken to mean “How will you get by, how will you continue your career?” but Madeleine immediately focuses on the choice to abort or keep the child.’

who legislate on unwanted pregnancy and those who experience it. Structurally, the positioning of this scene also unravels the set chronology and emotional trajectory of familiar abortion narratives. Like many of the films I have discussed, abortion and death are juxtaposed, but this is the only instance in which the death comes first, subverting the causal moral narrative. Madeleine's consideration of abortion is also not connected with either punishment or extraordinary suffering on her part; the film is not brought to a dramatic close, it simply drifts away. The idea of abortion is thereby de-dramatized and removed from a rigid moral matrix, and returned to feminine experience, not to 'women' as a homogeneous group, but to the experience of an individual subject.

Of course, Godard resists giving any overt sense of Madeleine's specific feelings about pregnancy or motherhood, of whether she is, for instance, afraid of single parenthood or concerned for her career. However hapless a figure he is, Paul remains the psychological focus of the film. A later film, Luc Moullet and Antoinetta Pizzorno's *Anatomie d'un rapport* (1975), performs a similar undoing of mainstream abortion narratives, but feminine subjectivity here is more obviously at stake. The film is post-new wave, but clearly influenced by it. Sam Di Iorio (2005) has documented Moullet's engagement with, inspiration by and ultimate split from the *Cahiers* group. Moullet came to diverge from Bazinian tenets over the definition of cinematic realism, but not its importance (*ibid*). One of the new wave characteristics he pointedly carried forward was its resistance towards the *film-à-thèse*:

[...] he reserved the greatest contempt for the *film-à-thèse* ("Fuller," 73). "Message" pictures like *Les Sorcières de Salem* (a Sartre-scripted adaptation of *The Crucible*) or the West German anti-war film *Kinder, Mütter Und Ein General* were criticized for starting from preconceptions rather than concrete situations. (*ibid*: 82)

Like *Masculin Féminin*, this film is not precisely 'about' sex or abortion in a political sense, but these are themes of narratively non-partisan exploration. The film is also radically meta-cinematic; a long passage at the ending of the film shows the two directors and lead actress arguing about the ending of the film and disagreeing over mistakes they have made in style, meaning and execution. Boundaries between Moullet and his character are unclear and constantly shifting, and the film's structure

and pacing is sporadic and unconventional. We are therefore never allowed to think of this film as a straightforward 'message' piece.

The film concerns an unnamed couple played by Moullet and Christine Hébert. Experiencing a sort of masturbation-based sexual awakening whilst abroad, she tells him that she has never really achieved orgasm through their intercourse. The film depicts snippets of the couple's arduous process of renegotiating their sexual and emotional relationship, her slightly clinical efforts to educate him in the sexual practices she enjoys and his reluctance to learn them. Both characters are treated quite humorously; his hysterical lamentations of emasculation and effusive odes to penetrative sex point to the ridiculous theatre of patriarchal masculinity, and her single-minded enthusiasm for her new-found sexuality employs similar comic exaggeration, as in an extended scene in which she covertly masturbates on a park bench. After some time, she eventually agrees again to penetrative sex on one night, but still does not achieve orgasm. She decides to abort the resultant pregnancy, not wanting a child from a sexual encounter to which she agreed only reluctantly, and that she ultimately did not enjoy.

The film therefore connects desire and *jouissance* with subjectivity in a way that could almost be considered Irigarayan; her abortion is a refusal of absent motherhood. Her sexual and reproductive decisions articulate a process of self-actualisation and subjectification that disrupt a patriarchal narrative. This disruption is represented narratively and formally as the characters and film negotiate the presence of conflicting subjectivities. Of course, Moullet and Pizzorno do not raise this as a conscious political project in the plot; Moullet was far more interested in the expressive properties of style than those of dialogue. One interesting choice in the filmmaking is that this film is the only one I have discussed that has a male protagonist and also democratises sexuality, creating narrative and visual space for women's subjectivities away from the presence of a bemused or scopophilic male gaze. This is done through shots of the female lead alone, or in exclusively feminine scenes such as that in which she and a friend sit together smoking and chatting about experiences of travel and sex with non-intrusive camera movements and distance. Another scene shows a group of women, one with a baby, socialising. There are several close-ups of the women and baby, but the camera movements are soft rather than abrasive, participatory rather than dominating. Unlike films such as *Masculin Féminin*, these

scenes offer an image of female bonding and mothering that is neither voyeuristic nor numinous.

The abortion itself is framed and described without excessive drama. It is not a non-event; she does not experience it as emotionally or physically neutral, but also not as inherently traumatic or as an irredeemable scar on her identity. She is clear that the unwanted pregnancy and the abortion are her experiences; abortion in this case is very much a matter of women's autonomy, with no implication of rhetorically mitigating factors. As would have been common at the time, she joins a coach trip of women who travel to London for abortions or even sterilisation. On returning, she describes the experience, pacing casually around with her hands in her pockets. She describes the diversity of the women on the trip, the procedure itself and the probing questions they were asked, a shopping trip, and various difficulties with the coach company. The experience seems fairly gruelling, yet she is never portrayed as a helpless victim; whatever the tribulations, they are hers, and she is the subject of her experience. It would be a mistake to claim for this film any overt feminist intentionality, as it is deliberately non-didactic. Equally, however, it contests the notion of a set narrative or experience of abortion, especially one that requires a victim and/or a villain. On the other hand, it should be mentioned that a degree of perhaps necessary political engagement with France's abortion legislation is sidestepped by allowing the character to have her abortion abroad, an option which may have been beyond the means of many working-class women at the time.

Though, as we saw with Chabrol and Truffaut, some more perpetuated ideologies around abortion, pregnancy and motherhood do persist in and beyond the new wave, these films overall do much to challenge set narratives of victimisation; subversion is not exactly the right term, as it implies greater political intention, but they poke fun, disregard or throw out such tropes. More precisely, they do away with the presumed need of abortion discourses to be adversarial; what was apparent in enquiries into English films, French melodrama and public political rhetoric was that most of these narratives assumed either guilt on the part of the woman undergoing abortion (in which case the child, however actually realised, was the victim), or produced a mirror-image counter-discourse in which the woman was a perfect victim (in this case, the aggressor would be the state, men, doctors or poverty). The new wave's anti-thetic neutrality and stylistic resistance to tropes and identikit structures

problematizes the need to express experiences like abortion as oppositional at all, defusing the perceived necessity of trauma for the victim, whether the mother, the imagined Child, or the pro-natalist futurity of the social nation. This changes the conceptualisation of the various traditional interconnectivities between motherhood, femininity and subjectivity, unpicking the knots of orthodoxy that destine women to motherhood, and mothers to silence. In this way, the absent mother whose relation to the Child precludes any recognition of self, is resisted. On the other hand, we might ask what has happened to these autonomous women's own mothers. Control over pregnancy is a subjective gesture, but there are markedly few, if any, positive models of mothering, and here the mothering subject once again disappears. The young women of the new wave, born of and parented by Marx and Coca-Cola, are orphaned from their maternal-feminine genealogies. Were such representations to be included, it is questionable whether greater political engagement could have been entirely avoided; the rejection of the *film-à-thèse* importantly removes abortion from the guilt/victimhood narrative, but it also precludes representation of injustice or action toward change.

The most prominent director of the period to aim to subvert and reconsider social abortion narratives whilst engaging centrally and explicitly with the historicised political material of contraception and women's rights is, of course, Agnès Varda. Varda is considered an outspoken feminist in her creative and personal life; critics have been intrigued (if not always necessarily convinced) by her ideas of writing 'film *in the feminine*' (Flitterman-Lewis: 1990: 40, original emphasis), an enterprise with much in common with the ideologies expressed in the written work of Cixous and Irigaray towards exploring disruptive patterns of articulation and aesthetics to represent the specificity of feminine experience. Varda was also a dedicated feminist activist, particularly regarding reproductive rights; along with Simone de Beauvoir, she was one of the signatories of the famous *manifeste des 343*, and she participated in major protests concerning abortion rights, such as those around the Bobigny trial, as well as being a highly visible life-long advocate for women's rights. Her 1977 film, *L'Une chante, l'autre pas* is amongst her most explicitly politically engaged work. Following the lives of two women, Suzanne and Pauline (later, Pomme or 'Apple'), during the 1960s and '70s, the film tells a story of the women's movement in France over this period. Having both experienced injustices as the result of France's

comparative torpidity in terms of abortion reform, both characters, like their director, are active participants in this movement, Pomme through cultural expression as a feminist singer, and Suzanne through her running of a family planning clinic, as well as both women's participation in general polemicism and protest. Unlike any of the other films discussed, therefore, this film is unambiguously partisan, and also, importantly, focuses on an active and self-aware response to victimhood rather than dwelling almost entirely within the moment of trauma itself, as was the case with the melodramatic films.

Along with the majority of Varda's more politically engaged works, *L'Une chante* has received frequent critical dismissal since its release. Whilst her films – in particular, *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962) – that are more typically new wave in style, and which similarly resist the *film-à-thèse* ethos and aesthetic, are widely praised as cinematically masterful, *L'Une chante* was often considered by reviewers as stylistically naïve and disappointing. It was not that critics disliked what Varda was saying (indeed, the feminist message in itself proved relatively popular), but that she was so obviously saying it. Reviewers dismissed the film as a 'sentimental cotton-wool fantasy' (Pym: 1978), overly cheerful and a stylistic 'disappointment' in its lack of dramatic tension (McCormick: 1977/1978: 48), or simplistic (Audé: 1977) and 'corny' (McCourt: 1977: 39). More sustained enquiries have sometimes concluded similarly, including Sandy Flitterman-Lewis's rejection of the film for providing no *articulative* feminist counter-structures to support its feminist narrative interests: 'although Varda's more avowedly feminist films, such as *L'Une chante, l'autre pas* (*One Sings, the Other Doesn't*, 1977), are quite explicit in their concern with women's issues, they fail to offer a serious challenge to dominant structures of representation' (Flitterman-Lewis: 1990: 215). Such easy rebuffs were the ruling assumptions around this and other of Varda's similar films for some years after the film's release, and it is only relatively recently that critics have returned to this 'lost' work, applying different methods in order to challenge the auterulist purism under which *L'Une chante* cannot hold up to scrutiny, and to reconsider such work as objects of critical value (for instance, Bénézet: 2014; DeRoo: 2009; Hottell: 1999; Ince: 2013).

There is much of merit in these more recent reconsiderations of Varda's overlooked body of films. Delphine Bénézet and Kate Ince's application of contemporary phenomenological film theory to Varda's work is a highly productive

area of inquiry, which shall be returned to in my final chapter. Moreover, Ruth Hottell's analysis of feminine spectatorship and Rebecca J. DeRoo's Brechtian approach in regards to *L'Une chante* specifically do much to valorise the film's visual techniques on their own terms. However, these approaches also have limitations of their own. Whereas earlier analyses praised the spirit of the film's politics, but criticised its enunciation, the new approaches seem almost to focus on salvaging the film's stylistic integrity to the exclusion of its political content. Hottell and Alison Smith's (1998) Mulvey-esque readings of the film's challenge of the male gaze are convincing, but do not address the film's specific engagement with the politics of motherhood, whereas DeRoo's essay, though equally valid and sophisticated, verges on using a Brechtian reading to almost apologise for the bluntness of Varda's political invective, suggesting that it can be valorised only through connection with this device. In other words, approaches to the film so far have produced a dialectic tension of focus between style and content, whereas it is my argument that these form an irreducible political whole. I suggest, rather, approaching the film as Varda describes it, as 'docu-dream' (Varda, in interview with Narboni, Toubiana and Villain: 1977 in Kline: 2014: 80); that is, not to feel obliged to compare it to her other, more highly regarded films which are dissimilar in style and intent (to transpose these criteria is to have already deemed the film a failure). We should instead address the film as what it is: a historical and phenomenological reflection on a feminist movement, told through the personal experiences of two characters, which is often experimental in style, but which is also a deeply partisan political treatise on abortion, motherhood and femininity.

By the end of the film, the characters have both had abortions and had children; both have had and lost romantic relationships with different men, and both have had careers and families, with their concomitant frustrations and pleasures. Varda represents the interplay of motherhood with women's lives as a continuum rather than an episode, and foregrounds throughout the experience of the feminine or mothering subject and the vital quality of self-determining maternity. The film is narrative fiction, and the characters just that, but Varda also weaves in documentarian aspects to her film to ground its representation specifically within the French feminist movement of the 1960s and '70s. This allows Varda to raise social issues around abortion through her film, both in terms of landmark events around abortion reform and in terms of the everyday inequalities and hardships faced by women in need of abortions. From the

outset, Suzanne's reason for needing an abortion hinges on her financial situation, indicating one of the 'welfare' cases that were the most common motivations for illegal terminations. In a relationship with Jérôme, a struggling and married photographer, Suzanne already has two children (undermining any perceived dichotomy between abortion and motherliness), but she and her partner do not have the resources to support a larger family. Equally, however, Suzanne cannot afford a safe abortion. Having not told Jérôme about the pregnancy, she confides in Pomme, who procures money for an abortion from her comfortably-off middle-class parents under false pretences. Pomme intends to help Suzanne have a safe, legal abortion in Switzerland (clearly at some expense), though we later find out that, in her difficult circumstances, Suzanne used most of the money for basic material needs for her family, and instead got her abortion from the risky and illegal *faiseuses d'anges*, becoming infertile as a result of infection after the procedure. There is no gratuitous representation of anguish, and the sad outcome of the abortion is related some years later, through dialogue rather than visceral visuality, but through this episode, Varda suggests the commonplace sacrifices and dangers faced by working-class and financially non-privileged women in particular who are forced to make difficult choices between familial wellbeing and personal safety, between survival and criminality.

Pomme's story is also used to demonstrate commonplace issues and experiences around abortion at this time. In particular, through her we see a trip arranged for French women to have abortions abroad (in the case in Amsterdam), of the type organised by the MLAC. Throughout the film, Varda surrounds the professional actors and their characters with non-professional extras more or less representing their own lived experiences (women at a shelter in Toulon, the *Orchidées*, the episodes in Iran, and others); the trip to Amsterdam is one such example. In an interview, Varda describes participating in these collective abortion trips during filming, living, filming and sharing experiences and connections with other women there:

Anyway, I made other kinds of trips in this film. Like the several collective abortion trips we made to Amsterdam that were really hard, even for me and even if we laughed a lot . . . Certain of the women who were there talked with me and we exchanged addresses.

And afterwards I went to see them in France. (Varda, in interview with Narboni, Toubiana and Villain: 1977 in Kline: 2014: 87)

The relatively complex and nuanced emotional experience she describes is reflected in the final film. At no point during the Amsterdam episode does the mood of the film commit entirely to either pain or joy. As Valérie Mairesse plays a defiantly cheery and politicised Pomme in an Amsterdam café where the group – the ‘collective’ or ‘family of women’ as Varda describes them (*ibid*: 85) – sit together, some having had their abortions, others waiting, the film uses several sensitive close-ups of the women. Many appear dejected, but none defeated. The experience clearly weighs heavily on most of them, but they are not required to ‘perform’ their pain or conflict as traditional narrative or political rhetoric expects. The use of non-professional participants of such trips allows the women to be understood as private subjects whose experiences and emotions are ongoing and complex, rather than as public ciphers for a single straightforward and modal narrative of victimhood. In this way, Varda prevents Pomme’s politicisation from undermining the possibility of trauma, but she also does not dwell on it overly or exclusively, and mixes these shots with other moments of laughter and friendship amongst the women, anchoring the discourse to representations of agency and subjectivity.

A further significant moment of Varda’s hybridisation of fiction and historicised documentary occurs at her representation of Bobigny; the Bobigny trial was a landmark moment within the French women’s movement’s campaign for abortion law reform, and within the context of the film, it is also a personal turning point for Pomme and Suzanne, who encounter each other here for the first time since Suzanne’s abortion in 1962; it is therefore a catalysing moment in the development of their friendship as well as an electrifying point of feminist history. In this scene, Gisèle Halimi, the defence lawyer in the case and a widely renowned and respected feminist activist (she was a co-founder of the organisation *Choisir* and another signatory on the *manifeste des 343*), plays herself in a Varda’s recreation of the protests.

Both of these scenes therefore use ‘real’ figures to add a sense of gravity and political grounding to the representations of experiences that are based in the social hardships and legal injustices of criminalised abortion. However, these documentary-style devices are blended seamlessly with rhapsodic fantasy, through the fictionalised

friendship of the two women, or through Pomme's denaturalised musical episodes, in particular the diegetically disruptive song she performs on the boat trip in Amsterdam. The meeting of realism and anti-realism is purposefully unresolved, and both seem to exceed the narrative frame. In this way, Varda 'democratises' the representation of the French women's movement, creating the impression of a heterogeneous and irreducible collection of experiences that belong differently to herself, her crew, her characters, her audiences and the thousands of women with lived relationships to reproductive and maternal injustice. The perspective offered on the reproductive rights movements therefore becomes at once highly shared and highly personal, but the fluid, non-abrasive movement between the different forms of expression makes this a pleasurable contradiction rather than a point of tension. Through this, furthermore, Varda offers a challenge as to the purpose of cinema and its place within politics (to document, to imagine, or something else entirely), whilst refusing to take a binary position. This multiplicity of representation, furthermore, contributes to a subversion of abortion narratives themselves; as complex subjects, women undergoing abortions are neither helpless victims nor largely unaffected. The experiences of many of the women in the film are difficult but not disempoweringly so – the women are shown to have within them the solutions to their difficulties, and Varda's focus tends towards activation rather than trauma.

The lack of extended depictions of the traumas of illegal abortion and other experiences of gendered oppression that motivate the women to fight for change, however, have led many commentators to accuse *L'Une chante* of being too saccharine and optimistic (for instance, Audé: 1981; McCormick: 1977/1978; McCourt: 1977; Pym: 1978). The relationship between the two women themselves has also often come under attack for being too straightforwardly 'happy', as exemplified in Ruth McCormick's comment:

When we see the characters relaxing at the end, we're happy for them, but not particularly moved, since we haven't really ever been party to their struggles, which, in the interest of a sunny vision of the world, have only been hinted at. We're not even sure why these women should in fact be such good friends; what we see of their relationship is chatty, polite and superficial. (1977/1978: 48)

It is interesting that Varda's representation of an unambiguous female companionship should be so often treated with suspicion. The accusation of 'superficiality' is particularly telling; after all, patriarchally-modelled mainstream cinema and artistic culture has tended to leave little room for depictions of platonic female relationships to be honest and simple. Representations of healthy female relationships are rare in patriarchal culture – more paradigmatically, they either feature smothering, brutal mothers (prototypically figured in the various evil queens and stepmothers of *Snow White* and other such folktales), toxic and repressed lesbians (like the spectral and possessive Mrs Danvers in *Rebecca*) or are simply deadly (the doomed camaraderie of *Thelma and Louise*, which literally cannot survive patriarchal society). Should we wonder, therefore, that as straightforward and open a relationship as Pomme and Suzanne's is treated with such suspicion? Mainstream cinema has produced an extensive and prominent tradition of masculine 'buddy' movies that do not demand similar tensions or hidden cannibalistic depths of sinister intention from male friendships, yet the depiction of female-female bonding has been utterly estranged from mutual joy.

Furthermore, many critics have also seemed to feel unfulfilled or cheated by the lack of the *spectacle of suffering* in the women's experiences, which are only suggested in the film rather than scopophilically gorged upon. McCormick demands 'Do these women ever really suffer?' (*ibid*: 48), and John Pym complains that 'Everything goes too smoothly in Varda's lyrical world [...] One longs for something to go wrong, for something to affect these two charming, good-looking women' (Pym: 1978: 13). Feminist movements are of course motivated by a desire to resist sexual injustices, making the suffering of women plain in the process, yet this has never come entirely at the expense of the senses of joy, community and sisterhood that has always and continues to draw women to the fight. Furthermore, I do not accept that it is entirely the case that the film aims to imply that any of the women (whether the lead characters or the non-professional extras) have taken their experiences entirely in their stride or have not suffered – this is abundantly implied, but suffering does not occupy the throne of feminine focus; surely, such a story of traumatised heroines is familiar enough that we can read it between the lines of representation. What such critical perspectives rather seem to experience as an unsatisfactory lack is the absence of the almost pornographic masochism of spectacularised female suffering that so often

characterises cinematic representations of feminine and maternal identities, desiring such images of women as powerless objects rather than narrative subjects. As well as that of female friendship, Varda is rewriting a received narrative of female victimhood; if things appear too easy, if critics feel we are too distanced from the characters' anguish, or question the absence of desperate misery, it is because we are not being asked for pity. Varda distances her viewers from identification with suffering, because masochism is too easily and habitually solicited in relation to women characters. Pomme, Suzanne and countless women like them are not happy *because* of the negative things they experience, but in spite of them. Perhaps the difficulty of their experiences never gets much beyond subtext, but what the critical appetite for representations of female suffering seems to forget is that pain is neither the only nor the most significant way of experiencing femininity or motherhood. Hardship is clearly present in the lives of both protagonists, but the film focuses on the empowerment of resistance that hardship inspires, rather than languishing in the moment of objectifying trauma.

Theorists of female spectatorship have consistently critiqued mainstream cinema's problematic identification of femininity with objecthood and masochism, within genres that typically privilege male and female experience (amongst the most prominent of such theorists are Mulvey: 1975 and Doane: 1982). Therefore, whereas identification with the onscreen masculine subject is an empowering association, identification with female victims or visual objects invites in the viewing subject an understanding of the feminine self, or the femininity within self, as passive and suffering. In *L'Une chante*, Varda uses distancing techniques to resist spectatorial absorption by this commonplace. Rebecca J. DeRoo's article on the film's Brechtian techniques is compelling and innovative in reimagining the film's anti-naturalistic musical episodes as purposeful artistic choices rather than stylistic naivety:

Whereas critics have targeted Pomme's specific skits and lyrics as unrealistic or as a simplification of feminist issues, this simplification and anti-naturalism was in fact deliberate—intended to catalyse viewers' reflection rather than straightforward acceptance of the material. Varda seeks to avoid a single feminist framework, adapting an open-ended Brechtian form with friction

between music, image, and text to present multiple feminist perspectives for audiences' consideration. (2009: 257-258)

DeRoo's analysis of the presence of Brechtian techniques within the film is in itself convincing. However, the article is stylistically-focused and DeRoo tends to concentrate on Varda's inclusion of music and avant-garde performance art as direct generic subversions of Hollywood musicals, typically one of the most sentimental and gratuitously gregarious of mainstream filmic genres, to engage the audience within feminist thought and debate (which, she rightly points out, is in itself not unitary or homogeneous). In particular, she looks at musicals' formulaic representations of heterosexual romance, and suggests Varda's subversive appropriation of the genre as a commentary on this in particular:

Rather than perpetuating a myth of the 'American courtship ritual' that typically ends well, as Altman (1989, p. 27) describes Hollywood musicals, Varda portrays the women's personal and political struggles, placing her musical numbers in pared-down settings with minimal costumes in contrast to Hollywood song-and-dance spectacles. She inserts political and social commentary in the least likely place—the musical numbers, which typically represent a utopian ideal and serve as entertainment and escapism. (*ibid*: 252)

However, DeRoo's concentration on the 'what' and 'how' of Varda's Brechtianism somewhat overlooks its 'why', the specificity of the commentary Varda is producing and the narratives she is contending with and deconstructing. DeRoo's interpretation of genre subversion could suggest the film as a critique of the Hollywood musical genre as easily as it could a political reflection on a feminist movement, but the former would be misrepresentative of the film's nature. Varda does not appropriate Brechtian interjections at random, but applies such devices disruptively at crucial moments within some of the most uncritically naturalised social narratives of women's reproductive experiences. Particularly prominent moments within the film to this end are Pomme's musical responses to her abortion and, later, her desired pregnancy. Such maternal experiences, within cultural representation and political discourse, are moments at which the silencing figure of the absent mother looms largest over the feminine or mothering subject; pregnancy and motherhood,

after all, represent some of patriarchal societies' most ossifying and non-autonomous discourses. Set emotional responses may therefore be anticipated to such occurrences within film. It is at these moments, however, that the film draws us back from naturalising narrative and performs its stylistic subversions, jarring its viewers from uncritical thought through multi-sensory disruption of music and often bizarre visuals and avant-garde costumes.

In the first instance, these scenes are, as argued by DeRoo, undisguised politics, which the film impresses colourfully by unshackling them from the conventions of narrative. Varda herself more or less confirms this interpretation in an interview excerpt: 'I put everything in the songs. A tactical decision. No one listens to "discourse." No one reads an encyclopedia. What's lived, sung, felt . . . I thought that this would make a stronger statement, more effective.' (Varda in interview with Narboni, Toubiana and Villain: 1977 in Kline: 2014: 84). The distancing devices therefore aim to catalyse critical thought, but they also, I argue, do more than simply disrupt. The film is also using stylistic experimentation to deconstruct and rework a set narrative of gender and reproduction, and this requires unfamiliar articulation. That is to say, the stories that Varda is interested in telling here – of female friendship without pathology, of abortion without guilt, death or persecution, of motherhood without absence – are largely unprecedented. Her deliberate eclectic esotericism of style is an effort at mapping uncharted space in which such stories can be told and explored on their own terms. The legitimacy or even value of considering this in any sense a 'feminine' is debatable, but it does contribute to working around or away from set narratives, which are in this case gendered and maternal. Though it is of course overreaching to suggest that *L'Une chante* is a flawless piece of filmmaking, this film does break important and significant ground in contesting a strongly ingrained political and social narrative of abortion which retains the feminine and mothering subject at its centre.

## Chapter 3: Delivery

### 3.0 – Introduction

The explorations in the previous chapter around representations and discourses of reproductive autonomy and abortion in film offer instructive ways of thinking about motherhood. The films presented an ambivalent and nuanced mixture of attitudes to women undergoing abortion, variously comprising sympathy, pathos, denigration and empowerment. The breadth and richness of responses to reproductive discourses, and in many cases the lack of overt partisanship, is testament to the complexities and ambiguities of these issues, particularly as the films interweave them with wider narratives and developed characters in a way that more clear-cut, polarised rhetorical invectives do not. Nonetheless, these representations are all reacting, with various degrees of criticism or complicity, to a central master narrative of motherhood that makes certain that abortion is a challenging issue because it is rooted in the marbleisation of the child as the sovereign and uniquely protected figure of culture and futurity. This ideal child has, in turn, an ideal mother, who is a numinous object of this discourse, the raw material for subjectivity rather than subjectivity itself. Any representation of abortion is in some degree affected by this symbolic construction of the child.

The exposure of these formative ideologies and critiques of how they construct a limiting idea of motherhood is important work. However, these particular interactions do not exhaust expressions of motherhood. The mummifying fantasy of the mother-as-object/child-as-subject relation, as manifested in Western European culture, presupposes a certain kind of mothering body that reflects the imagined national body, a protectionist and narcissistic image of the future authorised by the voices in power. What this means is that these ideologies are directed at certain types and groups of women who are perceived as potential ‘ideal’ mothers to fit and perpetuate this self-reproducing narrative. The hubristic mirror of cultural futurity is certainly patriarchal (it is built into the flesh of the ‘ideal’ mothering object who is the bland medium of the cultural subject’s self-reproduction), but it is also racist and classist. Whilst women who benefit from the achievement of reproductive *rights* (the ‘desirable’ mothers of hegemonic fantasy) fight their expressive and subjective absence from dominant culture as incumbent captives of the reigning maternal

discourses that indenture them as ‘ideal’ mothers and demand too much control over their reproduction and identity, a discourse of reproductive *justice* is more needful for those mothers who are absent because their images are scarcely even allowed entry into the polis. Politically speaking, reproductive rights address the need of women to control their reproduction through accessibility of contraceptives and abortion services; in England and France, reproductive rights movements have tended to be led by white women. Thinking on reproductive justice largely originates from North American women of colour, and addresses the need of women whose ability to ‘choose’ is already limited by the state (because of race, class, disability or other reasons) for support (material and otherwise) to allow them to control their mothering activities and identities.

In answer to the limits of who is addressed by reproductive ‘choice’, some feminist thinkers look at mothering and family policy through a lens of reproductive justice. Though the movement originates from North American intersectional thought, the principles can be productively applied more broadly as a way of thinking about the suppressions and limitations of motherhood in Western societies and cultures. Zakiya Luna and Kristin Luker give an informative overview of reproductive justice and its intellectual and jurisprudential history as ‘simultaneously demand[ing] a negative right of freedom from undue government interference and a positive right to government action in creating conditions of social justice and human flourishing for all’ (2013: 328). The central proposition of this perspective is that the right to not mother, and to self-limit one’s own reproduction, must be matched by the fair provision for all women to appropriate resources that allow them to mother the children they do have in comfort and dignity. Whilst those women whom the nation addresses as its ideal mothers are compelled towards maternity through restrictions on contraceptives and pronatalist incentivising policies, women who do not reflect this fantasy (particularly women of colour and women from low-income backgrounds) often find their ability to mother obstructed, whether by absent, inadequate or inappropriate state support for their children or, in extreme cases, through coercive sterilisation initiatives (details of such cases are given in Hill-Collins: 1999: 126; Petchesky: 1980: 667-668; Ruhl: 2002: 37; Smith: 2005: 126-130). Because they are more likely to be in contact with governmental institutions, such women’s pregnancies and mothering practices are also more likely to come under surveillance from the state

(Smith: 2005: 125). Because of such difficulties, healthcare professionals may assume that less privileged women who become pregnant want abortions, unlike their privileged counterparts who, it is presumed, *should* want children. The oppressions of patriarchal mothering ideologies are therefore many-edged, necessitating fluidity and breadth in its counter-discourses.

Raced and classed hierarchies are subtextual to the discourse of ideal motherhood. Patricia Hill-Collins shows that ‘in periods of profound social change eugenics philosophies implicitly shape public policy. Some women emerge as more worthy ‘mothers of the nation’ than others’ (Hill-Collins: 1999: 119). She demonstrates how the behaviour and policy-making attitudes of states can organise to coerce some types of motherhood and penalise others, and how middle- and working-class white women, black women and undocumented migrant women are all affected differently by this scale of ‘desirability’ (*ibid*). Though the sovereignty of the discourse and principle of ‘choice’ has been an important platform for white feminists targeted by pronatalist duress, it is frequently ineffective for or at worst actively damaging to women whose social relationship to choice is already limited by factors other than gender; as Rosalind Petchesky (1980) suggests, in her early critique of reproductive choice politics which negotiates both liberal and Marxist approaches to feminism and maternity, one’s decisions about whether to mother, continue a pregnancy, attempt pregnancy, or not, do not occur in a vacuum, but are rather mediated by a complicated and multifarious network of social positionings, restrictions and contexts which produce the conditions of that choice. Andrea Smith has also instructively shown how the pro-choice and pro-life categories that tend to structure white and middle-class feminisms do not meaningfully communicate the diversity of feeling about abortion in other communities, explaining that ‘while the pro-choice and pro-life camps on the abortion debate are often articulated as polar opposites, both depend on similar operating assumptions that do nothing to support either life or real choice for women of color’ (2005: 120). Beyond discursive incoherency, furthermore, it has been well-documented that the contraceptives that facilitate this highly prized ‘choice’ for certain women have at times been engineered through the subjugation of the less privileged women on whom they are tested (Hill-Collins: 1999: 126; Petchesky: 1980: 670-676; Smith: 2005: 130). Such factors are made even more pernicious by the racist eugenic potential of abortion and

contraception as discussed in the previous chapter in relation to this and to foetal disability.

Thinking through the lens of reproductive justice as well as reproductive rights is abundantly useful and illuminating in considering the many complexities and tensions in how our societies construct motherhood, and such perspectives are politically, legally and culturally exigent. The salient principle for this chapter, however, is reproductive justice's attention to the heterogeneous experiences of mothering that exist within a given culture, both in the margins of and within that culture's dominant narratives of motherhood and femininity. Such narratives are, of course, particularised between cultures, but there are undoubtedly comparable ways in which French and British pronatalist policies and child-centric ideologies present exclusionary practices and narratives towards certain groups of women, in particular women of colour and low-income women. Applying both reproductive justice and rights sensibilities to maternal narratives therefore help us to explore the following questions: who is the 'desirable' mother, who is excluded and why? Who is held in place and who has no place? And finally, how do mothering subjects speak back from these various positions of alienation? A fluid approach is needed in addressing the expressive possibilities of mothering subjects and deconstructing the hegemonic patriarchal fantasies and ideologies that imaginatively constrict mothering identities.

There are various ways in which the insights offered by reproductive justice and rights can help to deconstruct representations of motherhood in film. In the first instance, they are instrumental in producing critiques of the various subordinations, ideologies and expectations to which women are subjected in cultural identity narratives and constructions of motherhood. Filmic and cultural representations, moreover, have an important place within the process of asserting heterogeneous mothering subjectivities and experiences. It is important to deconstruct the underlying prejudices that are perpetuated within media narratives of motherhood, but film is also a medium through which artists have resisted such narratives and represented untold stories of mothers who have been silenced, invisible or disguised in normative cultural constructions. This chapter, therefore, looks at *mothering in the margins*, focusing in particular on counter-discursive representations of mothers that exceed the typifying frame of the patriarchal child-as-subject's idealised mothering imago. Unlike in my previous chapters, I will be considering French and English films alongside each other

and will be using broader corpus parameters, including films that are not associated with the cinematic movements on which I have focused so far. Whilst I shall make reference to national cultural specificities where relevant, it is in the spirit of multiplicity that it seems appropriate to adopt a more fluid approach to ‘borders’ for this section. Many of the films on which I concentrate below also thematise diasporic identities or explore spaces outside normative cultural centres, spaces which can be described or at times productively re-appropriated to shape dissenting expression. The films described here are therefore more meaningfully defined by cultural difference than belonging.

This chapter explores how filmmakers approach mothering subjectivities from these margins. A range of marginalised mothering experiences will be engaged with, including the intersection of race, motherhood and family in white societies (including films that deal with both migrant kinships and interracial parenthood), the presence of queer identities within familial discourse, and, in the concluding part of the chapter, feminist mothering and the use of film to develop counter-cultural expressions of maternal subjectivities. There are clearly myriad specificities at work here that should not be dismissed, and it is not my intention in these analyses to impress reductive commonalities between these films or suggest a homogeneous ‘Otherness’ from which a single discourse gelatinously emerges. Rather, I aim to explore some of the very different strategies, expressions, narratives and styles used by different filmmakers and from different subject positions to speak back to the same homogeneous centre against its maternal fantasy. After all, the absent mothers who have been held at bay by this patriarchal imagination must inevitably embody themselves endlessly differently in dismantling the vapid construct in its entirety. I also do not mean to suggest, however, that any one of these films constitutes a perfect antidote to a cultural master-narrative of mothering; rather, these representations are interesting *because* they are always in excess of themselves. It is this space of excess, the margins of cultural self-narrations in which the imaginations of motherhood spill over, to which we should look for subjective possibilities.

*3.1 – Whose Lineage is it Anyway?: Black Motherhood, Queer Communities and Exclusionary Practices in the Ideology of the Child*

Given the rigidity with which they have always governed and prescribed ‘indigenous’ women’s mothering identities, it is hardly surprising that white European ideologies of family have been radically unaccommodating towards racial difference. As was discussed in Chapter One, the disintegration of empire over the course of the mid-twentieth-century precipitated waves of cultural change across Britain and France as migration flowed increasingly back towards the metropolises. Though imperialist rhetoric had spent years constructing a familial image amongst colonised territories, with a romanticised and paternalistic figuration of the relevant European culture at its centre, the individuals who migrated in this direction were confronted with a society altogether more hostile and exclusionary than such narratives suggested, threaded through with racialized anxieties over white European identities (Webster: 1998: 26; Camiscioli: 2009: 47-48). Erik Bleich (2003) has written an interesting comparative analysis characterising the policymaking attitudes of Britain and France in issues of racism and migration. Though pointing out several similarities in the problems both countries face with racism, he suggests that the former has tended towards a multiculturalist model, whilst the latter favours universalism; ‘While France maintains a strict color-blind code, Britain has accepted a number of race-conscious policies’ (Bleich: 2003: 7-8). He summarises the respective positions as follows:

British policymakers have largely accepted the categories of race and ethnicity; they have conceived of racism primarily in “color” terms and have devoted the majority of their energy to fighting access racism; and they have strongly identified their problems of racism with the North American context. By contrast, prevailing French frames have downplayed or denied the categories of race and ethnicity, they have focused more on expressive racism and on anti-Semitism, and they have rejected the North American analogy because of its perceived irrelevance to understanding France’s domestic context of racism. (*ibid*: 14)

The multiculturalist and universalist models are of course more political statements of intent than representations of consistent attitudes amongst the British and French publics, and it is bluntly apparent that neither model is anywhere close to eliminating racism within those countries. Nonetheless, such models contribute to relevant context on how race is discursively formulated within these cultures.

The French principle of universalism in particular has been well-documented by scholars. The project of universal citizenship, and the idea that anybody can be ‘assimilated’ into French society under certain conditions of cultural receptivity and shared values, is rooted in the ideals of revolutionary republicanism that characterises Frenchness as an achievable aspiration for each individual, rather than a blood-and-soil essence. Elisa Camiscioli, however, in her fascinating analysis of intimacy and immigration in early twentieth-century France, dissects the ‘curious interplay of universalism and particularism in French Republicanism’ (Camiscioli: 2009: 4) to show how migration and racial difference tested and often exposed the limits of these universalist ideologies. As she describes it, Republicanism would hold that Frenchness was an ideal rather than an essence, and through its cultural ambassadors and instructors, ‘the power of the French language, the Republican school system, the soil, and French women [ought to be enough] to render immigrants culturally similar to the French’ (*ibid*: 17). In practice, the enthusiastic admittance of whomever desired it into this shared project of identity tended to collapse at the limits of white European passing. New citizens were only admitted into the imagined culture if they brought nothing of their own with them; and the less ‘similar’ the transnational luggage appeared to be in the first instance, the more closely it was scrutinised. Herrick Chapman and Laura Lavine Frader also address the relationship between universalism and racial (in)equality in France, explaining how the idea of French universalism was to separate religion, race and ethnicity from citizenship (2004: 2). Though such republican discourse hardly eliminated the visibility of these categories in practice and in social attitudes, it ended up – intentionally or not – providing a script which contained responsibility for racism within the failure to ‘integrate’ rather than the failure to include. Needless to say, neither the universalist nor the race-conscious approach has ever produced satisfying results in execution, and racial inequality and cultural prejudice has persisted throughout both societies. Too much difference and too much sameness within identity discourses both ultimately produce an excess of prejudice and alienation, and never more so than when those discourses are mainly operated from the inside out by the centres of power. Despite their different models, both the French and British state have tended to see migrants and people of colour as a passive ‘problem’ or exploitable and temporary labour solution rather than subjects of their own experiences, with whom to productively consult and cooperate.

Racial difference within French and British society is of course a complex and multivalent subject. Specifically relevant for the present chapter, however, is the intersection of race and family life in both countries. My focus is also especially on black mothering and family identities, since such identities are subject to particular extremes of visibility and invisibility in French and English cinema during this period. As Camiscioli argues, the private family can be seen as a ‘microcosm of the state’ (Camiscioli: 2009: 8). This microcosm is also designed as the state wishes to reproduce itself. In historical moments in which anxieties over birth rates, population and labour power are current within a given nation, an obvious and logical solution would seem to be relaxing attitudes towards immigration in order to bolster a dwindling population with a robust one. However, in contemporary society as much as in the period at hand for this thesis, the paradoxical coexistence of pronatalist attitudes and policymaking alongside refugee crises, border protection and hostile social and institutional attitudes towards migrants and also citizens of colour demonstrates how such anxieties were never really about birth rates. It is demographic panic that announces itself behind the more neutral euphemism of ‘population’. The professed nobility and needfulness of the ideology of futurity that insists upon the suppression of the mothering subject precisely in the interests of the child wears ever thinner as it becomes increasingly clear that only certain children qualify for such protection. The idea of legacy is little more than an immortality fantasy that necessarily carries with it the terms of its own impossibility (the imagined future it is always in excess of experience), but it seems enough to exclude the radical Other in the present.

Camiscioli’s book links the question of migration to that of reproduction within France, focusing on the end of the Third Republic in the early to mid-twentieth century. She describes how migrant bodies were sought by the state to fill two national needs: labour power and what might be thought of as ‘birth power’. On the other hand, she gives abundant evidence of a racialized hierarchy of reproductive ‘desirability’ determining which groups of people were considered suitable for each function. White migrants from European countries with high birth rates were positioned firmly at the top of this fantasy of self-reproduction, which furthermore proved the theory of universal citizenship within its own narrow parameters. Camiscioli describes:

[T]he surplus population of Africa and Asia – and the potential labor source of the colonies – first had to be dismissed as a possible solution to demographic decline in the metropole. Pronatalists therefore employed the language of contemporary demography to imagine buffer populations of white Europeans untouched by both the benefits and the dangers of civilization. The Italians, Spaniards, and Poles formed a pool of potential immigrants with “traditional” values that promoted high birthrates, but whose whiteness did not threaten the racial integrity of the French household. (Camiscioli: 2009: 16)

She argues that black migrants, on the other hand, were politically perceived as a temporary palliative solution to lacking labour power, which would eventually be alleviated by stimulating the birth rate (*ibid*: 47-49). Similarly, in the UK, black workers from the British colonies were actively solicited to fulfil certain labouring roles in post-war Britain, yet they too were exploited as a ‘temporary’ population by the state. As such, black family lives were not materially supported, or incorporated into the national imagination. Wendy Webster has written a brilliant analysis of experiences of race, home and identity in post-war Britain that deals intimately with these issues. Within her account, she details how British society’s organisation of work and home amongst migrant communities militated towards the erasure of autonomous family life, arguing that ‘Post-war concerns about rebuilding family life did not extend to migrants, whose families were split up in various ways’ (Webster: 1998: 36). She describes how the types of work most widely offered to migrants tended to be gender-segregated (*ibid*: 33-40). Migration itself also scarcely accounted for the mobility of family units, and young migrants were dominantly perceived in terms of individual labour capacity, rather than as social and contextual people positioned within a network of kinship dependencies. Black men’s social and sexual lives were somewhat visible, though often through the extremely aggressive lens of white men’s territorial possessiveness over white women (Schwarz: 1996: 73-74), but, Webster demonstrates, the intimate and family lives of black women were all but erased (1998: 59-65). This obstruction of family life was further compounded by the organisation of housing. Webster describes how the accommodation of young black workers in the UK would often be defined by work (extending the gender segregation), and that they

frequently faced open expressive and access racism from white landlords, making it far more difficult to establish fulfilling private lives (*ibid*: 37-40). These attitudes suggest a strongly raced subtext to the ideology of futurity and the child; the ideology that claims to be ‘fighting for the children’ (at the expense of mothers) is not in fact interested in fighting for *all of* the children, but only those that fit a certain self-image; the cultural futurity prized in the image of the child is white. Migrant labour is incidental to supporting this future, but is not included in it. That is, the labour is desired without the labourer. Within twentieth century periods of high migration, families of colour were disintegrated through social and cultural organisation to isolate futurity and legitimised reproduction within white culture.

It is an enduring effect of this racially hierarchical homogenisation of the national family within the cultural imagination that the experiences of black characters, and black motherhood in particular, have typically been drastically underrepresented and marginalised within European art and cinema well into the twentieth century. It is certainly possible to conceive of a ‘white gaze’ that is operational throughout a great deal of French and English cinema’s constructions of race and society during the 1960s and 1970s. Within the groups of films I have discussed so far, black characters are largely incidental, often unnamed and rarely, if ever, protagonists. This gaze is decidedly Othering and exoticising, locating black characters at and as the limits of white space. This Othering operates differently in regards to individuals and communities. As Webster writes, the social construction of young black men often portrayed them as rootless drifters moving through white society without connection to a stable sense of ‘home’. She describes how ‘images where white women were rendered either as black men’s whores, or as victims of their incapacity for familial and domestic life – pregnant and then abandoned’ were common, as was ‘portrayal of black men as rootless and adrift’ (Webster: 1998: 48-49). Though, as Webster further points out, the interactions between culture, migration and home are part of a very complex and subtle matrix of identities and social constrictions and contingencies, the white gaze tended to perceive this idea of transience as something more essential.

Transient black male characters move incidentally and fleetingly through white narratives and images. In *Masculin Féminin*, though Paul’s narrative is frequently girded by interloping episodes, the scene with the two black men and white woman on

the metro is perhaps the most obscure and the most strongly visually and symbolically identified with movement and instability. Even the more sympathetically and well-realised characters are largely defined by nomadism and impermanence in the lives of others. In *A Taste of Honey* and *The L-Shaped Room*, for instance, despite the likeability of Johnny and Jimmy as characters and their catalytic importance for the films' protagonists (both white women), it seems taken for granted by the teleological force of the plots that they can neither be nor participate in narrative endpoints. In fact, Webster cites Jimmy in *A Taste of Honey* as archetypal of the racist cliché of the black male drifter: 'In *A Taste of Honey* the black man depicted is a sailor, his presence in the film always foreshadowing his departure as he wanders from place to place' (*ibid*: 49). She links this with the white cultural prejudices prevalent at the time that identified black men with incapacity for family life. It is worth noting that the film does not portray Jimmy's departure as his own choice, a fact overlooked by Webster; if anything, he seems far more emotionally invested in the relationship than Jo, and it is the demands of work that compel him to leave, rather than any peripatetic inclinations or lack of commitment. It is therefore possible to produce a more contextually aware reading of this film than Webster suggests, yet the resultant symbolic associations with instability and rootlessness still persist.

Whilst it is possible to read Jimmy as a sympathetic victim of circumstance (in other words, to recognise the various social factors that preclude him from home and family life with Jo), in most cases this symbolic tension is far more pernicious and hostile, as in films such as *Joanna*, the Parisian party in *Darling* or even Jane's first meeting with Johnny in *The L-Shaped Room*, where the racist imagination locates the obscuringly caricatured figure of the black man at the boundary of the comfortable, the familiar and the homely, indicating that the protagonist (more often than not, a young white woman constructed as vulnerable and impressionable) has crossed to an 'outside' of normative society and its familial structuring logic. In this way, the 'white gaze' consolidates itself at the centre of culture, to the exclusion of the Other it oppresses, by ensuring access to an intelligible discourse of family for itself only. Black characters are in this way often constructed at a distance by the white gaze as 'outside' and isolated from family relationships, looking both forward and back – they are given no futures and no pasts in these narratives. In the very few examples in which images of black family life do occur (usually in English films rather than French, in

which such representations are all but absent), the viewpoint is markedly exoticising. Webster describes a plainly racist image of black families' lifestyles apparently current amongst white commentators in England in the post-war period:

Huxley's portrayal of black life as "hugger-mugger" marks a particular moment in race discourse in the post-war period, when in the early 1960s attention began to turn to black reproduction and black family life, which was represented as domestic barbarism in opposition to Englishness. (*ibid*: 45)

This same stereotype is visible in English fiction films, in images of large families cohabiting closely in small London flats, usually identified with moods of festivity, noise and music. In Joan Littlewood's *Sparrows Can't Sing* (1963) – a comedy about a man supposedly lost at sea for several years who returns to find his wife has remarried – for instance, during Charlie's jubilant return to the East End, he walks into one such crowded flat and joins in with the dancing and music-playing which is apparently perpetual. In *Georgy Girl*, Meredith and Jos's makeshift wedding at the town hall is preceded by another ceremony attended by a black family, similarly large and identified with celebration (which the three protagonists proceed to jokingly mimic). This facile and stereotypical image of the large family, identified with festivity and joy despite a lack of material comfort and privilege, becomes a cipher through which white protagonists passingly express such characteristics within themselves and flirt with uninhibited 'Otherness'. Leora Auslander and Thomas C. Holt, in their examination of the legacies of 'minstrelsy' in European culture, demonstrate how such 'love and theft' images from the white gaze reduce black identities:

In the case of minstrelsy, a displacement function clearly existed wherein desired but repressed, imagined but distorted aspects of black life and character were symbolically, indeed sometimes literally, put on – on stage, in street parades, and even enacted during riots. In the process, the whole of black life and character was colonized, that is, blacks became *only* song, dance, and sexuality – in a word, "joy." (Auslander and Holt: 2003: 163)

The reverse of this simplistic identification as ‘joy’ was a polar symbolisation of white fears; ‘At the same time, blacks took on those aspects whites feared – the flip side of what they desired – the dangerous, the lustful, the bestial. Like the two sides of a coin, the contrary images of the Janus-faced black were mutually constituting’ (*ibid*). Within the film images, accordingly, other examples of incidental black characters position them as figures of the ‘underside’ of society, associated with poverty or crime, as evidenced in films such as *The Pleasure Girls*, *Joanna* and *Sapphire* (1959), which focus on criminality, and *Up the Junction* and *Cathy Come Home* (1966), in which dispossessed black families are used to express the hardship of the white protagonists’ current situations.

These few simplistic images therefore have everything to do with the exoticising and narcissistic taxonomies of the normative white imagination, and very little, if anything, to do with the experiences and self-representation of black family lives in England. In all cases, furthermore, mothers are radically absent. Whether the images are of the rootless outsider, or the incomprehensible family, there are few substantial images at all, let alone positive, nuanced or subjective ones, of black motherhood to be found in French or English cinema during this period. This absence is also not the same as the white patriarchal subject’s inattention to the subjectivity of his own mother, but rather his policing of his own idea of private and national families along a series of axes that refuse to admit difference within this familial fantasy that is formed in his own image. Clearly, much of these cinemas’ superficial engagement with race is conducted through a myth-making white lens. It is therefore important at this point to consider theorisations of how racial difference produces heterogeneous specificities of experiencing nation and culture and, vitally, of how these experiences of difference can be communicated aesthetically and affectively in film through alternative paradigms of visibility and looking (or, of presentation and perception).

An important inquiry into the cultural complexity and incommensurable multiplicity of the nation is Homi K. Bhabha’s work on cultural hybridity in *The Location of Culture* (1994). His writing on these areas is extremely conceptually rich and informative, but particularly pertinent here are his ideas on marginal identities (in particular women and colonised peoples) whose ‘supplementary’ experiences ‘add to’ but do not ‘add up with’ the dominant discourse of national identity (*ibid*: 161-164). In Bhabha’s thinking, new perspectives create new ‘times’ of the nation (*ibid*: 153).

We can therefore think of a given culture, city or nation as a living palimpsest of experiences and models of perception deconstructing and reconstituting shared objects, events and phenomena in different ways. Such perceptual alterity is also suggested in Auslander and Holt's essay, 'Sambo in Paris: Race and Racism in the Iconography of the Everyday' (2003), which examines intellectual and affective difference in encounters with racialized objects in Paris. They examine the presence of what they call 'sambo images' (highly racist and stereotyping representations of blackness originating from North America) in public and private spaces in France, and how differently they can be seen according to one's global, local and cultural positioning. They argue not only that people of different backgrounds respond differently to the same objects, but that their backgrounds may also determine *which* objects and images become visible or go unnoticed. Everyday life therefore becomes differently visually constituted according to racial identity.

These themes are also often echoed within critical race film theory, and applied in various ways. Whilst heterogeneous experiences of seeing and being seen in encounters with a given dominant culture can of course be alienating and corrosive, theorists also emphasise the culturally productive elements of Otherness and the potential value of different perceptive paradigms for producing empowered self-expressions. Fatimah Tobing Rony (1996) uses the visual model of the 'third eye' to discuss identification and Otherness in relation to cinema. She suggests the existence of a 'double consciousness' for spectators of colour encountering a dominant cinema almost entirely identified with whiteness, in which the only images of racial difference are reductive, caricatured and shallow; 'The veil allows for clarity of vision even as it marks the site of socially mediated self-alienation. [...] The movie screen is another veil. We turn to the movies to find images of ourselves and find ourselves reflected in the eyes of others' (Tobing Rony: 1996: 4). Because these paper-thin racist images are impossible to identify with, the viewing subject projects themselves onto the white hero, whilst at the same time remaining uncomfortably conscious of their positioning as Other, and their constitution as such through the same gaze that constructed the 'straitjacketing' (*ibid*: 5) figures of blackness in the first place. She goes on to argue, however, that the distance created by this 'third eye' can be critically appropriated in a deconstructive and self-affirming approach to cinema, aiming to

use the experience of the third eye to address the dilemma so eloquently outlined by [Frantz] Fanon: although the non-white child nourished on stories of *Tarzan* cannot grow up forever identifying with the white explorer, what does one become when one sees that one is not fully recognized as Self by the wider society but cannot fully identify as Other? I believe that understanding how the “native” is represented in film – how ethnographic cinema forces us to “see” anthropology – is crucial to people of color currently engaged in developing new modes of self-representation. (*ibid*: 6)

This theory of the double-identification of the black subject amongst white-dominated culture, as well as the identification of the black cinema viewer with the white hero (the concept of heroism itself being racialized as white throughout much twentieth century film in Europe and North America) is set out in detail in Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). More recently, critical race film theorists have complicated ideas of identification, and moved towards an emphasis on the identification of white viewers and cultural consumers with black characters and culture, and how this constitutes a problematic ‘appropriation’ of identity.<sup>78</sup>

Critical race theory has also produced highly influential perspectives unpacking the resistant and expressive potential of re-appropriating Otherness.<sup>79</sup> bell hooks’ essay on the ‘oppositional gaze’ (1992) is a brilliant account of black women’s experiences of and in cinema. Beginning with a description of the politics of the gaze and the power of looking (always a defiant gesture from the position of the subjugated, which can incur punishment but also yields its own pleasures), hooks asserts that ‘The “gaze” has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally’ (hooks: 1992: 248). She goes on to indicate the specific position of invisibility experienced by black women spectators, whose gender is often left out of blackness, and whose blackness is often left out of their gender; ‘Just as mainstream cinema has historically forced aware black female spectators not to look, much feminist film criticism

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<sup>78</sup> This trend is explained well, for instance, by Jean Wyatt (2004), Leora Auslander and Thomas C. Holt (2003) and Gerald Sim (2014), who also critiques this emphasis on identity discourse analysis in favour of a materialist approach.

<sup>79</sup> As well as hooks’ writing on cinema, the collection *This Bridge Called My Back* (Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa eds.: 1983) Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands = La Frontera* (2007) are excellent examples of this.

disallows the possibility of a theoretical dialogue that might include black women's voices' (*ibid*: 256-257). Through citations and interviews, she discusses differing reactions to this alienation in film; some rejected, some became complicit, and many found film viewing in some respect a painful experience: 'For black female spectators who have "looked too deep," the encounter with the screen hurt. That some of us chose to stop looking was a gesture of resistance, turning away was one way to protest, to reject negation.' (*ibid*: 253). She goes beyond this, however, to suggest that 'resistance' is far from the only possible use of the black feminine gaze, 'Manthia Diawara's "resisting spectatorship" is a term that does not adequately describe the terrain of black female spectatorship. We do more than resist. We create alternative texts that are not solely reactions' (*ibid*: 261). Like Tobing Rony, therefore, hooks (whilst never failing to acknowledge the seductiveness of colonising identifications with dominant cultural figures) presents a powerful argument on identifying structures, not only turning alienating distances into critical ones, but also using the space of non-representation and absence as an area of rich creative freedom. The process of asserting black identities in film and visual media, however, are not always straightforward, as described by Stuart Hall in 'Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation' (1989). In this essay, Hall describes how black identities are negotiated through different 'presences': 'Présence Africaine, Présence Européenne, and the third, most ambiguous, presence of all – the sliding term, 'Présence Americain' (Hall: 1989: 74). He describes the effect of each of these presences, and asks what it means to express oneself from this position; 'What recent theories of enunciation suggest is that, though we speak, so to say 'in our own name', of ourselves and from our own experience, nevertheless who speaks, and the subject who is spoken of, are never exactly in the same place' (*ibid*: 68). He characterises two different approaches taken in constructing a cinema of identity (in this case, a Caribbean cinema). The first position does the following:

[D]efines 'cultural identity' in terms of the idea of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. [...] This 'oneness', underlying all the other, more superficial differences, is the truth, the essence, of 'Caribbeaness'. It is this identity which a

Caribbean cinema must discover, excavate, bring to light and express through cinematic representation. (*ibid*: 69)

The second approach, however, recognises cultural identities as constantly engaged in a process of “‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’” (*ibid*: 70). Within this view, there is no ‘homecoming’, because the imagined and longed for home no longer exists as it did, and whether ‘an *origin* of our identities, unchanged by four hundred years of displacement, dismemberment, transportation, to which we could in any final or literal sense, return, is more open to doubt. The original ‘Africa’ is no longer there. It too has been transformed’ (*ibid*: 75). The second position is the only one that recognises the truly traumatic experience of colonialism, the non-superficial damage done to cultural identity, and the systems by which ‘colonial subjects’ and their descendants are not only cast as Other but also come to see themselves as Other; ‘The ways we [colonial subjects] have been positioned and subjected in the dominant regimes of representation were a critical exercise of cultural power and normalisation, precisely because they were not superficial’ (*ibid*: 70-71). The appreciation of both of these approaches, Hall argues, is important in the project of establishing a self-representative cinema.

Beyond critiquing films that draw on objectifying stereotypes, as described above, these rich and compelling ideas on cinema, Otherness and black identities are extremely important in approaching the relatively few films from this era that centre black characters. Particularly interesting for the discussion at hand, moreover, is the presence of the mother within Hall’s theory. He draws a psychoanalytic analogy between the imagined African past and the relation to the mother as the point of origin that cannot be returned to, strongly reminiscent of the nostalgic ‘wholeness’ of a Lacanian Imaginary; ‘The past continues to speak to us. But this is no longer a simple, factual ‘past’, since our relation to it is, like the child’s relation to the mother, always-already ‘after the break’. It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth’ (*ibid*: 72). This idea of home and origins can often be projected onto representations of individual mothers in relation to diasporic and migrating identities, making the African mother into ‘Mother Africa’. Hall is, it should be further noted, very much aware of the problematics of expressing ‘Présence Africaine’ in such general terms, in which the specificities of the vastly different cultures of an entire continent are elided to produce political unity in an imagined community:

The great majority of slaves were from Africa – already figured, in the European imaginary, as ‘the Dark continent’. But they were also from different countries, tribal communities, villages, languages and gods. African religion, which has been so profoundly formative in Caribbean spiritual life, is precisely *different* from Christian monotheism in having, not one, but a proliferation of gods. [...] The paradox is that it was the uprooting of slavery and transportation and the insertion into the plantation economy (as well as the symbolic economy) of the Western world that ‘unified’ these peoples across their differences, in the same moment as it cut them off from direct access to that past. (*ibid*)

Within the imagination of displacement, however, mothers often symbolise fixed points connected to home. As Wendy Webster emphasises, the family and mothers carry very different connotations for women according to one’s race and relation to dominant culture: ‘The first [white] view emphasizes patriarchy and sees the family as a main site of women’s oppression. The second [black perspective] emphasizes colonialism and racism and sees the family as a main source of support in resistance to it’ (Webster: 1998: x-xi).

Such ideas on displacement, visibility and maternal connections to home are present in François Reichenbach’s *Un Cœur gros comme ça* (1961), a semi-documentary style film<sup>80</sup> about a gifted young Senegalese boxer, Abdoulaye Faye, living in Paris to pursue his career. The film allows us an intimate insight into Abdoulaye’s experience, psychologising public and private spaces from his perspective (the streets, the boxing gym and Abdoulaye’s bedroom appear and reappear to map his city), and the film uses intermittent, thoughtful voiceovers in which he talks sensitively about his passion for boxing, his feelings about the city, his desire to find a partner, and other intimate issues. This intimacy with Abdoulaye’s perspective also exposes us to structures of Otherness – not in marking Abdoulaye as Other, as the white gaze does to people of colour, but rather in making this gaze itself visible and showing its Othering practices. One scene, for instance, shows Abdoulaye

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<sup>80</sup> The filming style is explained thus: ‘Nous avons tourné ce film avec une camera clandestine et des micros caches. Les interprètes complices ou occasionnels de cette entreprise ne savaient souvent pas quand, où, comment ils étaient filmés.’ [‘We shot this film using a hidden camera and microphones. The actors and extras often did not know when or how they were being filmed.’]

walking in the street near his home, followed by a group of white children and stared at by older white women who stand on doorsteps and lean out of windows. In his voiceover, Abdoulaye is amused and finds their fascination with him 'curious'. In a following shot, Abdoulaye returns this gaze, leaning out of his window on the top floor to watch them watching him. This ironic reversal of the dominant gaze, similarly to hooks' suggestion, is not 'resistant' so much as reconstructive; filming from Abdoulaye's perspective, the film shows how the Othering gaze is as exotic to Abdoulaye as he is to it.

The film's close identification with Abdoulaye highlights and denaturalises the socially alienating structures at work on him. Apart from the reactions described above, this alienation is articulated through his particularised relationship to space and cultural objects and how this positions him in relation to generalised ideas of Frenchness and his access to the images that construct and bolster the imagined community of Paris, in the process contesting the self-proclaimed 'colour-blindness' of French society. When Abdoulaye arrives in Paris, he appears impressed and keen to explore its culture. The sequence involves clichéd shots of central Paris and chanson-style music, but Abdoulaye's train only passes through the centre, travelling beyond to the less salubrious outskirts in which he will stay. Mamadou Diouf describes such outskirts and *banlieues* as a continuation of colonising space, its 'lost territories' of cultural conflict;

These blighted spaces of questioned and qualified belonging emerge as extensions of France's colonial mission (indeed, the failure of this mission) in its compromises and revisions, its violence and paternalism, and its selective and limited economy of knowledge where absence legitimates the smooth and fluid narrative of the Republic's fraternal universalism, its nationhood, its citizenship, and its moral and socio-cultural codes. (2012: 32-33)

Such episodes show how the city space is differently constructed by race. In her work on mobilities in cinematic Paris and London, Malini Guha makes a relevant comparison between the flâneur, who becomes the indivisible 'man of the crowd' in the city, and the migrant, who is defined by visibility and who crystallises the city's globalising currents and tensions, 'the often uncomfortable affinities, continuities and

frictions between imperial past and global present that come to surface through the depiction of a number of migrant mobilities' (Guha: 2015: 10).

The differences of visualisation and exposure are further articulated in other images within the sequence depicting Abdoulaye's explorations of Paris. The sequence offers a cheery stream of cliché and popular images of Paris, and shows Abdoulaye engaging with the city as a tourist, visiting parks and the Arc de Triomphe, climbing the Eiffel tower and having novelty photos taken. However, in the middle of these touristic cultural clichés, Abdoulaye visits a museum containing a collection of objects and images documenting France's colonial histories. The soundtrack mutates from the airy chanson to something more sinister as the camera focuses on colonial figurines and racializing imagery. This demonstrates at work both Guha's connection of migrant mobilities to the visibility of globalisation and Auslander and Holt's account of difference of perception according to lenses of racial identity. Whereas in other films, the white gaze will either not see such objects, or will interpret them as entertainment or even signs of national pride, our identification with Abdoulaye invites the white viewer to see them as he does, as painful reminders of imperial violence and alienation. These symbols cannot then be disconnected from the images of the Parisian everyday that surround them, from the shot of the French flag flying over the Arc de Triomphe.

All of the episodes above mark Abdoulaye's experience as one of liminality, both participating in and standing apart from dominant culture. He is, moreover, particularly exposed to racializing constructions in public spaces. It is here that the scenes of Abdoulaye at home, in his small one-room apartment, become extremely significant points of identity and intimacy. The private room is, essentially, the location of Abdoulaye's intimate voice; most of his voiceovers, expressing his thoughts and feelings on various subjects in a spontaneous and unscripted manner, are visually grounded in this space, accompanied by shots of Abdoulaye on his bed or interacting with his possessions. It is therefore a principle site of self-articulation.

The *mise-en-scène* of Abdoulaye's room is also meaningful, and the pictures he keeps on his walls and in photo albums are richly connected to his personal and familial identities, his fantasies, imaginative life and desires. The pictures are recurring motifs in the film; they comprise pin-up magazine images of white women, publicity

and action shots from Abdoulaye's boxing career, and two personal shots, which appear to be of him as a child and of his mother in traditional Senegalese clothes. The variety of images eloquently indicates the complexity of Abdoulaye's subjectivities, at once European, Senegalese and personal, desiring cultural belonging and individual recognition. And it is the mother, above all, who embodies his identification with 'origins' and a timeless sense of home. This is further consolidated by his letter-writing to his mother. He writes to her twice; both scenes are visually juxtaposed with the photo collections, and both letters describe the strangeness of Paris as a city (the noise and the cold). These letters are another location of voice and intimate identification. Though often alone in the Parisian streets, the maternal figure places him within a storied nexus of identities, histories and desires. Nonetheless, the mother is materially absent from the film but for the picture, and never writes back. As well as placing Abdoulaye within a familial context, therefore, the absence of the mothering subject serves to underscore his relative isolation within French culture. However, this is not the same maternal absence as it is for the white protagonist, who 'gets beyond' his mother by tethering her within a certain narrow locus of the ego; this is an absence altogether more melancholy that echoes the sadness of displacement within a culture that obfuscates self-determination of black family identities and sees little use for its mothers.

The themes of diasporic identities and enforced estrangement of black (colonial) subjects from mothers and culture in France is critiqued even more powerfully in Ousmane Sembène's *La Noire de...* (1966). Sembène adapted the film from his earlier short story of the same name, though the film, unlike the story, is set after Senegalese independence. According to Nancy Virtue, it is also 'generally considered to be the first feature-length African film' (Virtue: 2014: 557). Though not a 'French' film, therefore, it is important to include this film within this corpus for its discourse on Frenchness, family and motherhood from a migrant perspective within France. The film's portrayal of Diouana, a young Senegalese woman lured to France by her employers (known only as Madame and Monsieur) to find herself trapped in domestic slavery, has been widely analysed as an allegory of imperial violence between France and Senegal. However, relatively little attention has been paid to the specific importance of Diouana's relationship with her mother. Dayna Oscherwitz (2015), for instance, focuses on the 'postcolonial allegory' produced between Diouana and

Madame, whilst Lyell Davies sees Diouana's story as both personal and global tragedy (2015: 105). Most discussions of the film also focus substantially on the symbolic positioning of Diouana's suicide within the allegory. Whilst Davies reads it as a disappointing expression of futility, arguing that '*Black Girl*'s depiction of Diouana's self-destructive death serves as a distressing statement about the failure of Africa to gain genuine independence' (*ibid*), the more common interpretation of the suicide is as an 'an act of defiance against the system that oppressed her, not as a sign of weakness' (Amadou Fofana: 2012: 182). Moussa Sow's reading of the film, meanwhile, goes the furthest in gendering the cultural allegory, highlighting the film's 'contestation of male domination' as a 'move taps into an endogenous African *culture of matrilinearity* and crystallizes the enunciation of a filmic discourse that gives meaning to a historical past' (2015: 86, my emphasis). These discussions of the film's powerful cultural and symbolic meanings are enormously significant and should not be understated. It is my purpose here, however, to account for the film on a more intimate level as a representation of displaced mothering and black familial identity in France.

The ways in which Diouana relates to ideas of home and motherhood are multi-faceted and extremely interesting. Firstly, the presence of her own mother is important. The mother appears in person in two scenes throughout the film, both times in the village in Dakar, once before Diouana's departure for France and once after her death, when Monsieur arrives to return her belongings. Both appearances of the mother are powerful, but do not tend to receive much critical attention. Nancy Virtue does mention the scene, but only refers to the mother passingly and only in the context of the whole community:

In the film, none of the characters encourage Diouana to go to France as they do in the short story. When she rejoices at having found work in France, she is met with silence. Yet, at the same time, nor does anyone try to prevent her from leaving. Even her mother agrees to let her go, merely advising her, in Diouana's words, "to be brave." (2014: 562)

This first appearance occurs, in flashback, after Diouana is first offered a job by Madame. Thrilled to have found what she assumes will be prestigious work, Diouana

runs through the village, excitedly announcing to everyone she sees ‘J’ai du travail chez les blancs!’<sup>81</sup> She takes a carved wooden mask from a young boy who is playing with and holds it to her face as she dances around the village. When she reaches her mother, however, her childish excitement dissipates to something more serious. She kneels in front of her mother to tell her about the job. We see the mother only from behind, in an over-the-shoulder shot that shows her back and her headscarf, but not her face. Diouana remembers that she threw down the mask and told her to be brave. As Virtue points out, she does not try to influence Diouana either way in regards to the job. Instead, she becomes a powerful cultural and emotional figure, in her strongly Senegalese appearance and her invocation of courage. Nonetheless, Diouana, enamoured by the anticipated glamour of the new job, does not fully consider her reaction at this point, and instead buys the mask back off the small boy (whom most critics assume to be her brother, though the relation is somewhat unclear in the film) to present as a gift to Madame. In contrast to Diouana, who becomes initially seduced by Madame’s promises (implicit and explicit) of material luxury, and who westernises her clothes and hair, rejecting her Senegalese identity, the mother becomes a figure and keeper of cultural power, from which Diouana is roughly severed when she physically and symbolically moves into Madame’s house.

It is worth noting, furthermore, that once Diouana migrates to France, she is seen as neither mothered nor mothering. Apart from demonstrating a clear disregard for the bond between her and her mother, the French couple’s essential imprisonment of Diouana precludes her entirely from further interpersonal relationships of any nature. She is also cruelly misled about the work she is expected to perform in France, believing her role will be something like an au pair, mainly caring for Madame’s children. When she arrives, however, what we see is cramped and suffocating shots of Diouana cooking and cleaning alone in the small kitchen of the couple’s flat, wondering in voiceover where the children are. By the time the children do appear, it has become painfully evident that Madame has no respect at all for Diouana as a person. Rather, she is considered an inanimate tool by Madame, to support her own mothering activities. She is therefore in a similar situation to the undocumented Latinas in the United States described by Patricia Hill-Collins as ‘mothers for hire’ (Hill-Collins: 1999: 126). Across global contexts, it is the case that ‘women of the

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<sup>81</sup> ‘I’ve got a job with white people!’

desirable group, middle-class White women have long depended on the labour of poor women and/or racial/ethnic women to fulfil the less desirable aspects of social motherhood' (*ibid*). Friendless, unprotected by social institutions and legal structures, and displaced from the support of family and community, Diouana has few resources available to her to resist Madame's maternal enslavement. The scenes crystallise, furthermore, the different meanings of 'home' and motherhood for white middle-class and black migrant women in France.

Between the two physical appearances of the mother, a third maternal presence/absence becomes the dramatic fulcrum of the film. Having become disabused of her illusions of glamour and privilege in France, and begun to enact protest against Madame (refusing to eat or work), Diouana receives a letter from her mother. In the letter, the mother laments that her health is deteriorating and reprimands Diouana for selfishly enjoying herself in France whilst not sending home any money to support her family. However, as both women are illiterate, the communication is mediated by others on both sides. Diouana recognises that the voice in the letter cannot be her mother's, and is instead that of the village public letter-writer (played by Sembène). Unable to write herself, Monsieur then appropriates Diouana's response; he first asks her what she wants to say, but when she remains silent, makes up a generic response himself. The verbal 'communication' between mother and daughter therefore becomes impersonal and inauthentic, prising an ever-increasing distance between them. Unlike for Abdoulaye, then, maternal letter-writing as an access to identity and origin is impossible for Diouana. It is through this falseness of language, this thorough and brutal severance, this theft of the mother/daughter relation, that Diouana becomes fully aware of both her oppression and her remaining power. It is after this point that Diouana consolidates her resistances with new purpose, moving from passivity (remaining in bed, being untidy and withholding labour) to action in her forms of protest.

In the scene after Diouana becomes visibly upset by the alienation of this letter-writing, Madame's son, Philippe, demands that she play with him and pretends to shoot her. Ignoring him, she takes the mask she presented to Madame from where it hangs on the wall, declaring 'Cet masque est à moi'<sup>82</sup> and shutting herself in her room.

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<sup>82</sup> 'This mask is mine'

Several critics emphasise the metaphoric and allegorical significance of the mask; though Madame displays it – as she does Diouana – as an exotic trinket indicative of her own worldliness, perhaps a colonial spoil to which she assumes herself entitled, Diouana reclaims it as an affirmative gesture of her cultural identity; ‘The recuperation of the mask that Diouana had offered as a gift to her bosses could be interpreted as a symbolic repossession of her cultural wealth, which can only find its full meaning in the African space’ (Sow: 2015: 89). The mask becomes a source of symbolic struggle between Senegalese identity and French imperialism, which is literally enacted between the bodies of Diouana and Madame as they physically fight over the object. It is after this point, and after rejecting the money offered to her by Monsieur, that Diouana decides to kill herself, declaring in her voiceover ‘never will I be a slave’. Though critics have marked the importance of the mask and sometimes the letter in Diouana’s ‘journey to nowhere’ (Davies: 2015: 105), but to the ‘nowhere’ of knowledge, and the activation of resistance, Diouana’s mother has not been fully appreciated within this discourse. Whilst Davies is aware of the rich meanings associated with the letter scene, he sees it as representative of Diouana’s connection to her Senegalese community as a whole:

In Sembène’s work, written documents often symbolize the disenfranchisement of Africans and their arrival is the trigger for dramatic turns of events. While, in contrast, the spoken language and the oral circulation of rumors are frequently depicted as empowering. [...] while migrants who undertake the kind of journey travelled by Diouana may experience the trauma associated with feelings of dislocation or loss, for those who are left behind in the home country the departure of friends or family may also be experienced as a traumatic loss. (*ibid*: 106-107)

The letter does symbolise such a connection, but it is at the same time equally important as an expression (or non-expression) of the displaced relationship between mother and daughter. Similarly, Fofana projects the matrilineal force and imagery onto the mask; ‘As the only thing familiar and that she can relate to in the foreign environment where everything else reminds her of not belonging, the mask is part of her and symbolizes a silent witness of her experience. It is her umbilical cord to home’

(2012: 181). Whilst this is not an unconvincing metaphor, the mask should not be seen as an abstracting surrogate for the mothering relation, as Fofana risks suggesting.

Virtue and Davies have also emphasised the young boy – who ends up holding the mask in front of his face and pursuing Monsieur out of their village like an accusing spectre – as symbolising the potency of Senegalese culture and its power of resistance against French colonialism. Virtue argues that the final image of the brother with the mask represents the consciousness that ‘frames the new face of Senegal’ (2014: 565), and Davies – whilst advocating the potential advantages of border-crossing and hybridity – claims that ‘Sembène views the hybrid identity Diouana possesses by virtue of her overseas migration as being less powerful than the purer African identity attained by her young brother when he raises the African mask to his face’ (2015: 110). Regardless of their attitudes to the symbolism itself, therefore, both critics see the personification of Senegalese culture in the figure of the male child. Yet there is more to unpack here in the symbolic and lived relationship between Diouana and her mother, in terms of cultural representation and as an expression of the experiences of migration and family. With their voices and self-expression being attacked from all sides, Diouana and her mother both powerfully and independently use silence as their main source of resistance; having no meaningful language of their own (in this field, patriarchy and whiteness speak for and over them), they both choose not to speak at all and instead use their bodies, their silence, their privacies as their statements of self, protecting their identities for themselves; though the women are cut off from communication with each other, these gestures link them across isolating cultures.

Aside from the exchange of a few pleasantries when Monsieur collects her from the harbour, Diouana barely speaks aloud at all in the scenes in France. As demonstrated through the letters, after all, language here becomes meaningless; it is only an instrument of distortion applied by the oppressor. On this point, I disagree with Davies on the empowerment of oral culture as opposed to writing, as it is verbal communication in its entirety that is rejected by Diouana, and silence that is reclaimed as a site of empowerment. Whilst Diouana’s voiceovers during her domestic imprisonment in France – which, as Virtue correctly points out are constructively political in their inviting ‘a greater critical distance on the part of the viewer’ (Virtue: 2014: 561) – eloquently communicate from her own perspective Diouana’s experience, her increasing consciousness of the political realities of her situation, and

her dissenting and subjective voice, they are powerful because they are kept private and therefore exist in a space of non-complicity. Instead of using language, which binds her and empowers the oppressing other, Diouana expresses her subjectivity and power through her body. First using something like bell hooks' 'oppositional gaze' back at her enslavers in place of speech in answer to their demands and questions, she then becomes creative and active. She stops wearing the cast-off dresses with which Madame bribed her and dresses again in Senegalese clothes (much like her mother's). She removes her wig and brushes out her natural hair before, in the final scene before her suicide, putting it back into twist braids. Her refusal to provide corporeal labour, and her rejection of her apron and Monsieur's money, also makes her body the principle site of conflict but also of protest. All of these gestures articulate her reclamation and assertion of Senegalese identity on her own terms.

What I am focusing on here as Diouana's strategies of corporeal resistance and self-expression are her actions and increasingly prominent affirmation of her Senegalese identity prior to the suicide. The suicide itself is a point of tension in discussions of the film. Fofana and Virtue frame it as troubling affirmative, 'an act of resistance against her enslavement' (Fofana: 2012: 183), or a transformation of 'this self-destructive act into an act of self-determination' (Virtue: 2014: 561). Davies, on the other hand, sees the suicide as 'distressing' and pessimistic, but makes this judgment entirely in the context of the relationship between Diouana and Madame as allegory for that between Senegal and France (2015: 105). It is hard to agree with Virtue and Fofana that the gesture of suicide should be taken as satisfyingly triumphant; such a reading, after all, is in danger of replicating disturbing commonplaces around masochism and self-sacrifice as primary forms of women's self-expression and protest. On the other hand, Davies' view risks a different reductive trope in its conflation of the female body with the nation state (such as the identification of women with 'mother earth' described in Irigaray: 1977d: 31-32). Taken as a matter of Diouana's subjectivity and experience, her suicide is not a victory. Nor is it a logical progression of her previous bodily resistances, as these are self-affirming rather than self-effacing; the suicide constitutes an interruption to this narrative rather than its inevitable climax. The narrative of progressive bodily protest, however, does continue regardless, but is transferred to Diouana's mother.

The mother's political usage of silence is also extremely powerful. Travelling to Diouana's village with her possessions, Monsieur is led by the local schoolmaster to Diouana's mother. He offers her Diouana's wages (which they never intended to pay to her, and were offered only after it was already too late), presumably having made assumptions about how much she valued money and her daughter based on the letter. However, Diouana's mother does not take the money, but turns her back on Monsieur and walks away. This is the first and only time we see her face, and it is a powerful image. Like Diouana, her mother recognises that money and language both represent and consolidate the power of the oppressor. Her bodily gesture, her appearance, and her silence demonstrate to Monsieur that his knowledge and expectations of the world are weak, ill-fitting and insufficient here, and that her relationship with her daughter is something for which he is entitled to neither ownership nor understanding. The film's portrayal of the displaced mother/daughter relation therefore provokes both sadness and hope. The individual experience of separation and the forced estrangement from familial relations in patriarchal imperialism is movingly shown, but Sembène's positioning of the mother figure as a source of strength and inspiration for Diouana, as well as an individual abundantly capable of resistance and expression in her own right, is extremely compelling.

Within these narratives of migration and displacement, black subjects in France appear isolated, Othered and excluded from kinship. The distortion of these characters as familial subjects is consolidated through a taxonomising white gaze that does not incorporate them within the imagined national family, and of which the films are highly critical. Within these estrangement representations, mothers can offer an affirmative identity. Whilst there may be apparent discursive similarities here with the invisibilising oedipal fantasies of mothers as origin stories in the self-narration of white patriarchal subjects, it would be a mistake to assume that the Eurocentric ideology of the Child and futurity can necessarily be projected universally in the same way. Whilst the latter's immobilising cathecting of the mother is an exercise in narcissism *from the cultural centre of power and excess*, the interweaving symbolisations of mothers and origins within diasporic imaginations should be understood within their specific social positionings. Of course, it is important to remain critical of the persistent capacity for abstraction of mothering subjects inherent in any metaphorising discourses of motherhood. However, in these cases, mothers,

sons and daughters are *all* objects of absenting practices, marking the absence of mothering subjects as mournful rather than aggressive. European patriarchal culture deliberately elects the white child over his mother, but its ideology of futurity simply has little regard for black kinships, and therefore either passively or actively suppresses possibilities for specificity, participation or self-expression.

Such racist futurity has a long and appalling history within Western Europe, and is significant in the treatment of both black and mixed-race subjects within majority-white cultures. Claude Blanckaert (2003) has produced a sobering summary of the brutal history of various pseudo-scientific ideas that shaped perceptions of ‘miscegenation’ or ‘*métissage*’ in twentieth-century France, showing how the ‘viability’ of mixed-race children was questioned and mapping a pervasive climate of white supremacy. Chapman and Frader argue that after the Second World War, such explicit biological racism was widely condemned, but was substituted by more insidious forms; ‘Post-war racism has therefore commonly taken a more cultural form, as reflected in the conviction of Jean-Marie Le Pen and many of his National Front supporters that beliefs and mores of non-European immigrants are too entrenched and incompatible with Frenchness to qualify them for the privileges of full citizenship’ (2004: 5). Such expressions of racism cloy to the ideals of Republicanism by insisting upon the paradox that the impossibility for certain races of acquiring enough ‘Frenchness’ does not undermine the universal accessibility of citizenship to those who can prove themselves ‘French’ enough. This spurious apologia, unconvincingly attempting to pass itself off as rational fact, can scarcely disguise its hand-wringing anxiety over the collapse of an imagined cultural and personal *athanasia*. The child and the culture it embodies, herein, are timeless; according to the racist patriarch, the national future is ‘myself, but more’ rather than a restlessly adapting body of infinite difference. If the imagination of the child is the narcissistic image of immortality, then difference means death.

In Britain, too, particularly during end-of-empire culture, hostility towards interracial couples seems to have stemmed from misplaced feelings of threat and self-preservation. Bill Schwarz, for instance, describes a trend of white men in England becoming increasingly possessive over white women:

At this moment, an underlying socio-sexual dynamic to the situation becomes clear. Very crudely, the language of white masculinity embodied all the attributes of activity, control and (when confronted with the black presence) refusal. The invocation of the fantasised figure of the white man *in itself* speaks, by its very terms, this refusal. But it is driven by the (equally fantasised) conception of white womanhood, victimised, prey to the rapacious and uncontrolled appetites of black men. In this period, the debate on race became locked into such assumptions at a profound level. [...] In popular life, all the evidence suggests that relations between blacks and indigenous whites were harmonious until the moment when black men started dating, or appearing to date, white women - a shift which triggered the full gamut of reaction, from official sanctions to beatings. (1996: 73-74)

These relationships therefore seem to be understood as an injury to white British identity itself. The sexist hierarchy of men as agents and women as passive and vulnerable is also projected onto this imagined conflict, leading to an excess of hostility against black men, who are seen as aggressors. Webster also frames British racism and the resulting social segregation and separation of black families during the post-war period within the context of a perceived 'threat to home' (1998: xii). She also describes how 'Government policies made distinctions between all white immigrants as "suitable immigrants" and black migrants as "the colour problem"' (*ibid*: xiii), echoing the racist hierarchies of French pronatalism. In a period that prioritised the child and the rebuilding of the national family home, therefore, it was clear who could or could not be part of that family.

As a cinematic tradition that continued to broadly underrepresent black characters or to represent them poorly, the portrayal of interracial couples and romances in English and French films at this time is notably sparse. The few films that do foreground romantic relationships between white and black characters often focus on representing hostile social attitudes faced by such couples. These narratives also tend to include a pregnancy as a dramatic or meaningful plot point, supporting the idea that it is 'miscegenation' anxieties over the figure of the child that are the driving force of such aggression. Claude Bernard-Aubert's *Les Lâches vivent d'espoir* (1961) (the

title of which is somewhat embarrassingly, if tellingly, anglicised as *My Baby is Black!*) is one such film, featuring as its protagonists a black man, Daniel, and white woman, Françoise, as they fall in love and negotiate the racism and prejudice of French society. The film, which was also marketed to an English-speaking audience and dubbed by actors with American accents, was received poorly, and compared unfavourably to the new wave; ‘the film’s pretentious approach sums up all the least likeable aspects of the younger French cinema, coming perilously near at times to unconscious parody’ (review in *Monthly Film Bulletin*: 1961: 44). The film’s artistic failings notwithstanding, however, it is clearly intended to be politically conscious and critical of pervasive social racism.

The protagonists, Daniel and Françoise, meet as students in Paris. Much of the film concentrates on the passionate romance between them, described in long sequences of the couple walking around the city and spending time together in Daniel’s apartment. These scenes are overlaid with voiceover exchanges between the couple, representing real or imagined conversations, in which they express their love for each other, but also relate concerns over whether their relationship can withstand the racism of the society in which they live, particularly given their differences of background and experience. This racism is portrayed consistently throughout the film in a variety of situations, from people who stare at them in public spaces, to racial slurs and expressive racism, to institutional racism amongst the police, to the representation of a violent attack by a group of young white men against the male partner of another interracial couple like them. Of particular note, however, is the reaction to Françoise’s pregnancy. Telling her parents that she is pregnant with Daniel’s child, they react with blunt racist outrage and insist that she ‘get rid of it’. Françoise responds in shock that abortion is a sin, but her parents believe it is not when the child is a ‘dirty stain’, as they describe it, and continue to exert pressure on her, which Françoise resists, focusing only on the love and affection of her relationship with Daniel. Through the parents, however, the film expresses the hypocrisies of abortion discourses described by theorists of reproductive justice: that the ideology that considers a white couple’s termination of a pregnancy morally unthinkable offers no protection at all to any other child or couple. This exposes the very narrow and barbed limits of the narrative of ‘fighting for the children’; not only are the needs and existence of many children and families ignored by this narrative, they are actively assaulted. Reproductive futurity is

not, as it declares itself, a demonstration of active compassion for the vulnerable (children), but a *project*, full of design and eugenic purpose, that seeks to fulfil itself by any means, any coercion and any violence necessary.

In *Lâches*, the final shot is triumphant. The couple, reconciled over the differences that have previously divided them and now wearing wedding rings, kiss and walk in the street together, pushing their baby in a pram. The film's conclusion is somewhat simplistic in its apparent suggestion that familial and romantic love can rather easily overcome the oppressions and violences of dominant culture, and that such aggressions are in fact relatively superficial, yet it does frame motherhood and reproductive autonomy as forms of resistance against these pressures. In other films, social anxieties over race and 'miscegenation' and the violence they produce are shown to run much deeper. One such example is Basil Dearden's *Sapphire* (1959). The plot of the film is shaped around an investigation into the death of Sapphire, a university student living in London. Sapphire is a young and attractive woman, and the investigating officers seem to immediately identify her with the stock figure of the innocent and sympathetic female victim. However, once the arrival of Sapphire's brother, Dr. Robbins (who is black), reveals that Sapphire was in fact a mixed-race woman 'passing' as white, the attitudes and presumptions of the officers change entirely. Through the representations of Sapphire and the family of her white boyfriend, David, the film engages with issues of racial tension and prejudice in English society.

Though Sapphire is obviously the same person, the revelation seems to split her into two separate identities – the 'innocent' young white woman and the fetishized black woman – showing how perception of colour entails a huge baggage of constructions and stereotypes and again suggests different experiential models of vision. Several of these stereotypes involve prejudiced ideas about the sexuality of black women. Webster discusses the construction of black sexualities in 1950s and '60s England, arguing that, whilst miscegenation fears tended to focus on relationships between black men, imagined as 'only wanting one thing' (Webster: 1998: 49), and white women, seen as either 'victims' or 'whores' (*ibid*: 50), black women's sexuality was usually less visible. This lack of attention has, in part, to do with the social understanding and valuation of the white mother as the reproductive vessel of cultural futurity (*ibid*: 60). White women's sexual relationships with black men was, in this

light, seen as obstructing their predestined roles as mothers of the nation; ‘While maternity was generally seen as a woman’s main biological drive and a sign of her maturity, completion and fulfilment, it was regarded very differently when it was associated with miscegenation’ (*ibid*: 52). The disregard of this ideology for black mothers and their children, however, meant that the sexuality of black women was not as prevalent an issue. Where it did appear, however, Webster argues that it was either seen as a ‘solution’ to black men’s sexuality, ‘to ensure that black men kept away from white women’ (*ibid*: 60) or else was ‘constructed as entertainment and titillation for white voyeurs’ (*ibid*). The latter is certainly true of Sapphire; having learnt of Sapphire’s parentage, the investigating officers begin to ‘rediscover’ various facts and belongings that seem to confirm their impressions of black femininity. In their first sweep of Sapphire’s room, they find a locked drawer containing lingerie, a red petticoat and a photograph of Sapphire dancing. Initially presented as a mystery incongruous with their identification of Sapphire as ‘innocent’, after meeting Dr. Robbins, one of the inspectors picks up the same skirt and (appallingly) comments ‘red taffeta under a tweed skirt... the black under the white alright.’ This change in reaction articulates both the stereotyping of and prejudice against black women, and the remodelling of perception according to the ‘knowledge’ of race.

*Sapphire* depicts a climate in which prejudice is rife and race is seen as strongly essentialising. Black characters are shown to face racial abuse in many aspects of life, but it is specifically Sapphire’s pregnancy that is ultimately revealed to have catalysed murderous racist violence. In the final scene, the murder case is solved as David’s sister, Mildred, reveals herself as the killer. Having harboured a great deal of racial hatred throughout David’s relationship with Sapphire (whom the family knew was mixed-race), Mildred had stabbed Sapphire in a moment of racist panic and outrage after the latter, who seemed keen to befriend her partner’s sister, intimated to her that she was pregnant.

In her violence and her wider attitude towards Sapphire, Mildred becomes an embodiment of the aggressive futurity that imagines itself as ‘fighting for the children’. It is telling, after all, that the main points at which her hatred for Sapphire is consolidated are closely interwoven with her own children. The murder, in Mildred’s xenophobic imagination, appears to be a gesture of ‘sanitising’ her own family against the influence of difference and Otherness. During the investigation, for

instance, Mildred's children are rejected by a friend's parents, and realise it has something to do with the perception of Sapphire. Mildred tells them not to call her 'auntie', insisting 'she's nothing to us and she never was'. The specific phrase that triggers Mildred's murderous violence, furthermore, is Sapphire's invocation of her children: 'give the twins my love and tell them they'll have a new little cousin soon'. Finally, her confession is provoked by a similar incident, as Dr. Robbins absent-mindedly handles a toy doll belonging to Mildred's daughters; following an intense series of shot/reverse shots between Mildred and Dr. Robbins holding the doll, Mildred snatches the toy from him, screaming 'get him out! I don't want his hands on my kids' toys. I don't want him near my kids. I don't want his dirty hands on my children. Tearing up my family, they're mine.' In this film, therefore, racial violence against black women is represented as specifically shaped by ideological constructions of motherhood and the figure of the child that presuppose and reify whiteness. Maintaining her family as 'hers' means destroying the Other who does not present a desired mirror of narcissistic reproduction. She also seems to experience the idea of Sapphire's motherhood as a threat to or devaluation of her own, particularly in her status as a figure of 'suitable' national motherhood in her implicit panic, expressed in the above incidences and particularly her extreme reaction to Dr. Robbins touching the doll, that Sapphire or her brother's blackness may somehow 'tarnish' her own daughters through social or physical contact. It is clear, therefore, that whilst this child-centric ideology justifies its oppression of women's freedoms and subjectivities purely on its claim to be 'fighting for the children' (in other words, that women's and mothers' sacrifices are worthy and necessary ones), it is perfectly amenable to the destruction of certain children or individuals whose simple existence challenges its narcissistic ideal. This 'fight' therefore becomes all too literal once it is furnished with an imagined enemy in a given Other.

These films' representations of interracial relationships explore the hostilities of dominant French and English culture toward racial diversity, driven, as I have argued, by protectionist and homogenising anxieties over a fantasy of the national family and the self as symbolised within it. In these cases, the narratives take place at the point of collision between the dominant culture and its designated Other. Some films, however, seek to represent spaces outside of normative family narratives, in both the figures they contain and the structural possibilities of family and relationality they offer. In a

few English social realist and Swinging London films, such ‘queer kinship spaces’ are suggested in which women whose mothering or reproductive choices do not meet the ‘desirable’ mould of futurity can find community and solidarity. Such cinematic spaces queer conceptions of family in their amassing of figures from the various borders and outsides of normative reproductive society, often including solitary black men cut off from family, unmarried pregnant women and, in the most straightforward Edelmanian sense, gay men and lesbians who are positioned in direct opposition to the fantasy of reproductive futurity as its negative reflection. The queer collectives in these films forge their own communities and kinship models, but are not recognised by or welcomed into the reproductive centre. As Webster argues, there were many ways in which mothering bodies and reproductive individuals were pathologised in this era:

Many British writers and professionals remained immune to the influence of Freudianism and continued to frame their accounts in a medico-moral language with a much longer history, focusing on bodily rather than mental health. Within this white female bodies were pathologized in a variety of ways according to class, race, age, disability, sexuality and marital status. [...] Black bodies were pathologized as primitive, animal and dirty in ways which made no distinctions of sex, class, age, disability, sexuality or marital status. (Webster: 1998: 100-102)

All such pathologisations operate in the interest of protecting the fantasised integrity of the national family, cultural future, and the homogenised and cathected figure of the mother that ensures the coherence of all of it.

Queer familial spaces in these films potentially offer, therefore, productive opportunities to think through alternative discourses to the stricture of cultural futurity and its absent mothering subject. Such creative flexibility and queer explorations have the capacity, furthermore, not only to reshape ideas of motherhood to include difference, but also to create breathing space for those women already inside the gilded cage of mainstream motherhood discourse in which they might express themselves in more personal and heterogeneous forms. Unfortunately, however, such queer kinship solutions in this era of cinema are not destined to last; as we saw in the fleeting happy cohabitation between Diana and Malcolm in *Darling*, these are only passing utopic

moments that offer a palliative happiness in retreat from the ‘real world’, always stalked by the spectre of its return. On the other hand, whilst the ‘inevitability’ of the return to the normative family is generally assumed, films such as *Darling*, *A Taste of Honey* and *The L-Shaped Room* do leave us wondering why this should be so. In all of these films, the queer spaces of respite constitute the most positive and encouraging points in the narratives. The persistent sense of predestined brevity around these situations seems compelled more or less entirely by the abiding ideologies of the child, motherhood and the family, as narrative justifications for their collapse or abandonment tend to be flimsy and unsatisfying, often leading the viewer to question why they could not in fact have continued. Despite their ultimate capitulation to normative moral and practical constructions of motherhood, therefore, alternative and queer expressions of family often seem far more inviting, and the return to the ‘straight’ world of normativity is in contrast often marked by defeat and disappointment.

A relatively high-profile film that offers engagement with such marginal mothering identities is Tony Richardson’s *A Taste of Honey* (1961), adapted from a play by Shelagh Delaney. The film’s protagonist is Jo, a teenage woman who becomes pregnant after a brief love affair with a young black sailor. Though certainly present, the issue of racism is less centralised than in *Sapphire* or *Lâches*, and is most obvious in Jo’s mother’s shocked reaction to learning that the father of Jo’s baby is black, as well as Jo’s childish fetishisation of Jimmy. Jo’s encounters with maternal institutions, furthermore, also show how her mothering identity is neither represented nor anticipated by dominant culture. The fact that baby dolls offered by a maternity nurse Geoff visits (on which expectant mothers are meant to practice holding) seem all to represent white children is only one of many small invisibilising gestures that erase and homogenise motherhood. As in several of the other films discussed that deal with non-normative mothering, furthermore, it is assumed that abortion may be an appealing option for Jo as an unmarried woman. After finding out that she is pregnant, Geoff tells her ‘you can get rid of babies before they’re born, don’t you know’, assuming that it is lack of knowledge rather than desire that has been the preventative factor. Jo is aware of the possibility, but has rejected it; in this case, therefore, the choice to mother becomes the expression of affirmative identity and resistance of normative cultural narratives of mothering.

Jo is in many ways an ‘outsider’ of dominant familial discourse, and her family background also presents complexities. In a prefiguration of Jo’s own situation, her mother, Helen, also became pregnant with her after a brief romance with a man during her teenage years. Though she has raised Jo as a single parent, Helen is presented as a frustrated and neglectful woman resenting Jo for the youth she now lacks. Unreliable and unmotherly, moving with Jo between small and dingy flats and constantly escaping bailiffs and landlords who demand rent and chastise Helen’s promiscuity with men, it is easy to see how Helen could be constructed as an easy archetype of the ‘bad mother’, displaying all of that figure’s formulaic traits of selfishness and emotional gelidity with over-pronunciation. Terry Lovell describes how Jo compensates for her un-motheredness by locating the maternal qualities Helen lacks in other characters, and specifically in Jimmy and Geoff (a gay art student), both of whom are domestically skilled (1996: 173). In Lovell’s view, the *mise-en-scène* of domestic spaces, and the metonymic properties of food as nurture and care, become expressive of mothering identities and practices; ‘[Jimmy’s] well-ordered galley produces substantial meals, whereas nothing except coffee comes out of Jo and Helen’s squalid kitchen’ (*ibid*). Shots of Geoff cooking, ironing, cleaning and decorating the flat he and Jo share during her pregnancy are even more strongly representative of this dynamic.

However, Helen is not as straightforward a ‘bad mother’ figure as those that tend to appear throughout the rest of the ‘kitchen sink’ cycle. Whilst she can hardly be called likeable, the film’s identification between Helen and Jo does invite possibilities for nuance and sympathy in its representations of the ‘bad mother’. Lovell further suggests that the ‘temporalities of the film are rhythmic and cyclical, and it is not perhaps too fanciful to invoke here Julia Kristeva’s concept of ‘woman’s time’’ (*ibid*: 176). The possibility of reading maternal narrative structures, of the kind suggested by Kristeva, Irigaray and Chodorow in their theories on the culturalisation of mothering as a self-reproducing cycle across generations, is an attractive one. Whilst most of the masculine-focused films of this canon present a progressive oedipal journey towards maturity and understanding that moves away from the mother, *A Taste of Honey* ends where it began, with mother and daughter, only tensely and uneasily reconciled, alone together in an unstable domestic situation. Not to mention that Jo has, with a certain sense of inevitability, repeated the pattern of her mother’s

youth in her unintended pregnancy. As in the work of the feminist theorists, this cyclic structure is a critical and condemning expression of ossifying cultural constructions of motherhood, in which mother and daughter cannot escape each other as reflections of their own entrapment. Neither can they actually enjoy each other, since this imposition of a specific maternal identity precludes their autonomous subjectivities, meaning that they are unable to relate to each other as anything more than the maternal ideals they both fail to be. Through the film's close identification with Jo, however, it is possible to build a more nuanced understanding of both women's situations (as different points on the same circle), reading Helen's 'bad mothering' as a product of the rigid discourse that constructs and denigrates her, of societal organisations that designate women's mothering with no regard for their subjectivities.

Regardless of such interpretations, however, the film shows that the relationship between Jo and Helen becomes unliveable. In further retreat from the exhausting pressures of normative reproductive society, Jo establishes an unconventional domesticity with Geoff. Given that the relationship is platonic, the biological father of the baby is absent, and that Geoff's sexuality in any case precludes him from reproductive futurity according to the rigidity of conventional imaginations of family during this era, their domestic and familial situation lies on a queer social fringe. This queer space, however, is presented as very liberating for both characters. Within it, they are free to creatively define their kinship, naming each other various as friends, 'sisters', mothers, partners, or indeed leaving aside altogether existing relational models to allow the familial pattern to express itself. Both have experienced rejection by mainstream culture and society, and as a result have become literally, as well as symbolically, 'homeless' (whilst Jo and her mother 'flit' insecurely from bedsit to bedsit, Geoff has been evicted as a result of his sexuality). Within the shared house, therefore, both discover and co-create a space of mutual acceptance and affection, which becomes the only set in the film to really resemble a 'home'. Notwithstanding a few (quickly and sensitively resolved) arguments, the relationship between Jo and Geoff is the film's strongest expression of familial reciprocity, love and, indeed, enjoyment. The encouragingly creative queerness of the kinship they establish, in which they both intend to help raise and care for Jo's child, suggests the transformation of the space 'outside' normative imaginations of family into a productive critique of oppressive ideologies of motherhood.

This is all the more reason to wonder, therefore, why the film seems committed to Jo and Geoff's lack of a viable future. Despite the evidence of adaptability and fluidity in their relationship, its ultimate dissolution seems preordained. It is unclear exactly why the film ends with Jo returning to her mother and Geoff leaving, or whether we're supposed to feel that this is a positive reconciliation, but there is something tragically inevitable about Geoff's departure. John Hill sees this the film's ending as an ambivalent return to business-as-usual:

Accordingly, he must be exiled once more by the film's close while Helena assumes her 'proper role' as a mother. [...] This does, of course, avoid a conventional resolution in terms of a submission by the female characters to the male, or a re-imposition of the 'normality' of the patriarchal family. But what also undercuts this as a positive resolution is its association with compromise and a fatalistic acceptance. For what reunites mother and daughter is the repetitive cycle whereby Jo has, in effect, lived through the errors of the parent. (Hill: 1986: 166)

Whilst Jo and Helen's situation does not incorporate them into the centre of patriarchal culture (in their lack of father figures), their mire of mutual disappointment and unhappiness in their location on its outside still supports the reification of traditional family by presenting alternatives as non-satisfactory. It is not the queerness of Geoff and Jo's relationship in itself that threatens this convention, but rather than fact that it is experienced as so rewarding, and the suggestion that 'outside' of dominant expressions may not be such a bad place to be after all. Geoff's melancholy choice to leave, however, seems motivated by an internalised and self-annihilating indenture to this same ideology of futurity that erases him and his desire from reproductive society; a defeat not forced upon him, but implicitly accepted as inevitable.

It is no accident, furthermore, that his departure is framed by an excessive presence and symbolisation of children. The pervasiveness of children throughout the film has been commented upon by Andrew Higson, who seems to read them as a sort of Bacchanalian chorus, representing 'hope, the future' (Higson: 1996: 146), and by Lovell, who contests this view:

Higson's claim that the children 'represent the future' is therefore misleading. They may be linked to the child which Jo, emotionally still a child herself, is carrying. But also in a stronger sense they represent the past: the childhood, as well as the childishness, of the young people of the story, and an earlier, more 'authentic' way of life which has been lost. This link, clearly drawn in the play, is obscured in the film. (1996: 173-174)

In a way, this is true, since, as I have previously argued, ideal images of the future tend to be based in utopic fantasies of lost 'golden ages' of the past, and the ideological figure of the child represents the timeless self, perfected but not precisely 'changed'. However, as far as Lovell intends the final scene with Geoff, and the endless children playing around the bonfire, as an expression of lost childhood and a distant anterior of innocence and 'authenticity', this is less convincing; after all, English society has *never* recognised nor provided a home for the queerness of children. As a queer subject, Geoff cannot return to an originating 'authenticity' that never existed, or was never symbolised, within the 'straight' national family. Geoff is therefore cut off from familial self-expression from above and below. The children who frame and obscure his exit, erasing him from shot and symbolisation, are a leaden pronouncement of his disconnection from reproductive futurity, and hence from participation in normative culture's discourse and performance of family. Despite Helen and Jo's clear mutual dissatisfaction with each other's mothering identities and the productive harmony achieved between him and Jo, Geoff leaves out of a vain commitment to the assumed primacy of genealogical integrity, to the benefit of no one. The mythmaking force of the figural child as constructed within the patriarchal imagination becomes a non-substantial but powerful and all-pervasive agent. Despite the absence of an actual father figure, for whom this figure is built and maintained, Geoff seems to erase himself on behalf of an abstract paternal superego that holds him as Other. We are left to ask why a space of queer kinship that could potentially include these characters as autonomous mothering or familial subjects, albeit outside of a (damaging) cultural centre, should be so hopeless a project after all.

Similarly, a space of queer respite is presented and subsequently dissolved (for equally little purpose) in Bryan Forbes' *The L-Shaped Room* (1962). In this film, the protagonist, Jane, also relies on the material and emotional support of a temporary

queer community of outsiders before reintegrating into a somewhat more mainstream situation. The tissue of separation between the inside and outside of cultural inclusion seems more porous for Jane than it is for most of the other residents of the house in which she rents the eponymous l-shaped room, as their Otherness is more permanently embodied. Jane's situation as a pregnant and single woman newly places her in tension with mainstream patriarchal culture, but everything else about her (she is a young, attractive, well-spoken middle-class white woman) suggests social privilege. Though she arrives in London as a migrant, her Frenchness glamorises rather than estranges her. As the film's focaliser, Jane brings the cultural centre along with her; initially overwhelmed, intimidated and disoriented by her surroundings, the house, its occupants and her own unplanned pregnancy, it is clear that this is an area of being that is outside of Jane rather than she outside of it. We are disposed to identify with her perspective throughout the film as her feeling of being lost amongst the 'outsiders' becomes one of solidarity and mutual understanding, before she ultimately leaves the boarding house. Most of the other tenants, however, are not able to leave. The boarders include two female sex workers, Sonia and another Jane, Johnny, a migrant from the West Indies (who it is implied might be gay, as he is in the book on which the film is based, though this is never addressed explicitly in the film), Mavis, an older lesbian and retired music hall performer, and Toby, an unsuccessful writer and more mainstream character providing a more traditionally palatable romantic interest for Jane. Aside from the heterosexual couple, the tenants, 'whose dominant characteristics are rootlessness and sexual 'abnormality'' (Hill: 1986: 167), are tied to the house in its symbolic capacity as a queer fringe of dominant discourse and as a material sanctuary, as aggressively prejudiced accommodation practices prevalent in this era of British society would likely have excluded them from many housing options.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> The discrimination against black tenants by landlords in post-war Britain is notorious. Taking place within the same decade as the film's release, high-profile and infamous examples such as Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech (Powell himself being a former housing minister) and the appallingly racist 1964 Conservative electoral campaign in Smethwick and the contexts of prejudice that enabled are clear articulations of racist attitudes underlying British culture during this period, and how closely they were linked to home and housing, drawing on the imagery of domesticity, invasion and neighbourhood (the events are discussed in Clayton Goodwin, 'If you want a nigger for a neighbour, vote Liberal or Labour', *New African*, Issue 433, October 2004, pp 40-42 and Andrew Crines, Tim Heppell and Michael Hill, 'Enoch Powell's 'rivers of blood' speech: a rhetorical political analysis', *British Politics*, Vol. 11(1), April 2016, pp 72-94). The film was also released several years prior to the decriminalisation of homosexuality in the UK, meaning that the sexual practices of almost all of the characters in the house would have been socially illegitimate.

As much as Jane comes to enjoy the queer kinship and solidarity of the home and its transitional family, and as much as she needs these after her resistant decision to have and mother her child alone, she and Toby retain an access to the centre, a traditional narrative progression, that the others do not. The different symbolic relationships to motherhood become particularly interesting between the representations of Jane and Mavis. Mavis is presented as a maternal figure, whose qualities of care and affection towards Jane and the other younger characters position her as the de facto mother of the queer household. Mavis 'outs' herself to Jane in a conversation between the two women that takes place in the former's room, in which Jane asks about her family. Mavis replies that she hasn't got any family, but refers to a 'friend' with whom she had 'a real love match'. Jane assumes a male pronoun for the 'friend', but her surprised reaction to the picture to which Mavis directs her, and Mavis's rather shy and worried utterance that 'it takes all sorts, dear' indicate that the partner is a woman. Given the trepidatious and threadbare state of LGBT rights in the early 1960s, it is unsurprising that even this cautiously executed 'revelation' (in which we see only Jane's reaction rather than the photograph itself, and the script stops just short of being entirely unambiguous) is framed, from Jane's perspective, as startling.

We do not learn what has happened to Mavis's partner (the well-established inexpressibility of same-sex romances perhaps requires no narrative justification), but Mavis is portrayed as alone and, sadly, lonely. In this scene, Mavis is pictured writing Christmas cards to distant figures, reminiscing about the 'good old days' and offering to take Jane to an English pantomime (an invitation inevitably not taken up), as well as remembering her absent lover; she is, in other words, surrounded by immaterial and ghostly symbols of affection, whose invocation marks her solitude all the more strongly. It is here that the film marks queer 'unbelonging' to established discourses of reproductive futurity differently to the other films. Whereas *A Taste of Honey* and *Darling* drew attention to the exclusion of the queer man (and, in *Diana*, the heterosexual woman who had chosen against motherhood) through an excessive and accusatory presence of children, Mavis is differentiated by their absence. The vigour with which women are culturally symbolised as mothers and women's sexuality as primarily reproductive means that Mavis's apparent loneliness suggests her as a mother of absent children and sets limits on her maternal relation to Jane. John Hill emphasises this dismissal; 'Although it is possibly the film's intention to imply the

virtues which the house can provide [...] it is clear that it can function as no more than a halfway house. For both the 'role models' of female independence which it supplies are explicitly marked as unsatisfactory' (1986: 167). Despite the attractiveness of the welcoming and affectionate community of the house – a queer alternative pushing at the seams of a homogeneous mainstream – an unspoken discursive dogmatism of the patriarchal family ensures its ephemerality.

Following this, the film's narrative endpoint turns out to be the consolidation of the traditional family, as Jane returns to her parents in France, and possibly of the heterosexual couple (Toby and Jane are not together at the end of the film, but the final shot of a note left by Jane on Toby's typewriter suggesting that the story in which he has 'authorised' the events of the film 'would be marvellous with an ending' implies hope for the heterosexual future) shortly after the birth of Jane's child. Whether Jane simply returns to her parents or manages to establish a lasting relationship with Toby, she is returning the child to the rule of the father in one way or another. As Judith Butler asserts in her work on queer kinships, 'thinkability' and state recognition, mainstream society's debarring of certain forms of kinship and (sexual) identity from self-imagination and expression at a symbolising level can also make lived experience painful or in some respects impossible; 'If you're not real, it can be hard to sustain yourselves over time; the sense of delegitimation can make it harder to sustain a bond, a bond that is not real anyway, a bond that does not "exist,"' (2002: 25). The film ultimately seems to conform to this notion of the implicit and inevitable unviability of not-already-symbolised kinships.

Whilst Jane returns to something resembling the centre of culture, therefore, Johnny and Mavis remain outside of it, in their 'queer space', without validation for their kinship structures (there can be no question of a 'marvellous ending' for them). Hill underpins the overt traditionalist moralism of this ending:

The speeches of both lesbian and prostitutes are linked to an abandonment of God, so it then becomes appropriate that Jane should secure a 'redemption' by giving birth to her child on Christmas Day. [...] The 'holy family' so secured, she is now able to return to her home in a submission to the law of the 'father' (he

has sent her the ticket) and abandon the social and sexual irregularity which characterises the house. (*ibid*)

Despite the film's relative contemporaneous progressiveness in its sympathetic representations of characters belonging to this 'social and sexual irregularity', and its enlivening portrayal of a queer familial space (whilst it lasts), Hill is justified in pointing out how this is ultimately overcompensated for in such an abrupt return to the centre, which even draws directly on the mariological imagery of ideal motherhood, of the type described by Julia Kristeva in *Stabat Mater* (1987). Even this excessive apologia, however, was insufficient placation of the currents of contemporaneous critical scorn towards the film's representation of heterogeneous social identities. One reviewer, writing in the *New Statesman*, expressed a mocking umbrage as follows:

'Takes all sorts, dear,' says the wrinkled old lesbian trouper to the pregnant young French girl in what must be the understatement of the week. In the basement of a seedy Notting Hill boarding-house, two tarts entertain; a penniless would-be author taps away somewhere in the house's belly; through a thin partition at attic level a Negro trumpeter hears every spasm of Leslie Caron's morning sickness. [...] I was just able in the early, establishing stages to hope that some egregiously ordinary lodger might show his face and paces, say something straight, dull and – within the terms of the piece – devastating. (John Coleman: 1962: 752)

The sentiment is echoed by Francis Wyndham, who similarly summarises 'The bed has bugs in it and the house is inhabited by an avaricious landlady, an unsuccessful writer (in the book he was Jewish), a homosexual Negro, two prostitutes and an old Lesbian actress (Cicely Courtneidge – whatever next?)' (Wyndham: 1963: 40). Such critics seemed flatly annoyed and even unconvinced by the excess of Otherness presented in the film, as if there were so few lesbians, black men and unmarried mothers in 1960s England that it is impossible that any of them might have known each other, or that those rejected from normative society might in fact seek each other out in solidarity and build their own communities. The reviewers' appeal to the 'ordinary' further presupposes the heterosexuality and whiteness of the audience itself, assuming that figures of Otherness should always be points of spectacle rather than

identification, and complaining of feeling taxed by a two-hour encounter with a supporting cast of timidly indicated queer characters, with little imagination of the excessive burden of identificatory heterosexuality thrust almost constantly upon the queer viewing subject of mainstream cinema.

However, such normative responses to the film do not universalise its reception, and its directorial intentions in the ending (whether or not it is meant as 'restorative') are no more sovereign. We can, after all, queer the interpretation. It is certainly possible to see in the film's resolution not a victorious or fulfilling reaffirmation of the patriarchal family but an obstruction of creative and self-expressive alternatives by this very discourse. The counter-cultural community in which Jane finds herself is, after all, much brighter, much kinder and much less oppressive than the staid and dreary society of the father from which she emerges and to which she returns via this queer interlude.

The subversive joy of the house's creative space is demonstrated in one of the film's most resonant scenes; as the characters cheerfully socialise on Christmas day, Mavis (on the encouragement of the others) appears dressed in drag as an officer of the British army and performs a rousing musical hall song, 'Take Me Back to Dear Old Blighty', as the other characters laugh and sing along. The image is a joyfully queer parody of British masculinity and the values and images of nationalism that challenges such ideological narratives through deconstructive irreverence and play with gender identities. It is at this apex of jubilant critique and queering of ideas of family and patriarchal mainstays, however, that the ideological presence of the child cuts back through, as Mavis's song is literally interrupted by her realisation that Jane has gone into labour. After this point, the 'holy family' of masculinist imagination is reinstated in its customary station of supremacy, and there is no question of Jane's returning substantially to this home. After all, within the presiding logic of reproductive futurity, children cannot exist within this space. As viewers detached from the contextual social restrictions of the film, however, we should ask, why not? For films such as *The L-Shaped Room* and *A Taste of Honey*, it seems impossible to take the representation of queer kinships – including the figure of the single mother, who is in her own way a sexual Other according to the norms of patriarchal dogma – beyond fleeting suggestion. However, alternative possibilities of mothering and familial connection are presented only as obstructed rather than as inherently flawed,

and both films begin to indicate the potential pleasures and opportunities for creative models of self-expression of mothering subjects offered by such spaces.

The films discussed in this section all approach representations of mothering relations and subjects that are for one reason or another located at the margins of dominant expressions of ideological mother and child discourses in English and French culture. As described by theorists of reproductive justice, such marginalised identities constantly collide with a multitude of practical, institutional and expressive social barriers that inhibit their mothering practices and ability to self-articulate as autonomous familial and reproductive subjects. The representation of heterogeneity introduces new axes to the binaries of presence/absence and ideal/denigrated mothering along which white heterosexual women's reproductive choices are catalogued. Whilst the latter group's identities as mothers are exactly prescribed to the point that the desired imago forms a shroud over their autonomous subjectivities, other groups are prescribed only into non-existence. The films addressing these spaces of representational absence in motherhood discourse illustrate many of the forms these social barriers take. On the other hand, however, film also offers a productive opportunity for explorations of and identification with counterdiscourses of motherhood and family. The symbolisation of characters whose mothering identities are rarely recognised by dominant cultural imaginations can confirm both their exclusion and their presence. Such representations make the margins an embodied and affectively 'real' place, rather than the vague and shaded anti-regions that set the limits of the expressible. The films tend to resolve in fury or in dejected resignation, which could suggest the shoring up of social boundaries. On the other hand, a non-teleological approach, following bell hooks, invites the incipient interpretation of counterdiscursive representations as expressive spaces capable of creation as well as protest, therefore offering opportunities for mothering subjectivities beyond the determinations of dominant ideology.

### *3.2 – Embodying the Absent Mother in Feminist Film Practice*

What I have shown throughout this thesis is that the absence of the mothering subject is thoroughly and multifariously constructed in filmic representations of family, femininity and maternal relations. Representations of women who mother or women who are pregnant or otherwise symbolised as always-already mothers are so

thickly encumbered with the simplistic and objectifying storytelling of ideal mothering (which accounts only for the subjectivity of the patriarchal man-child at the centre of culture) that complex or autonomous mothering identities struggle to emerge and rarely endure. These representations are reflective of a dominant culture of patriarchal self-narration that, short of radical intervention, offers little room for the creative identities and self-articulations of mothering subjects. In this final section, I examine select approaches to such radical interventions in filmmaking. I look in detail at the intellectual and artistic strategies used to create expressions of mothering experiences that resist or dismiss received ideologies and their culture of maternal silence, and also ask what role film can play in articulating mothering subjects as desiring and embodied agents on their own terms.

Unlike in previous chapters, the films I considered for this section were mostly essay or art films. The particularities of intent and style mean that they clearly reach a largely different audience to and have a different set of possibilities and limitations to the films previously discussed, which are aimed at more commercial markets. It is also certainly not my intention to suggest that such critical discourses and interventions into the normative machinery of motherhood ideologies operate *only* in the avant-garde fringes of cinema and visual arts or are not possible in commercial filmmaking; this is far from the case. On the other hand, such experimental filmmaking can act as a laboratory in which the most intense reactions between dominant culture and radical critique, practice and aesthetics, can be demonstrated and tested, producing an abundance of possibilities for deconstructive expression, and it is this richness that makes them compelling subjects of analysis for this closing section. The two films I chose to focus on in particular are a short art film by Agnès Varda, *L'Opéra Mouffe* (1958), and Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's essay-film, *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977). These films deal intricately with experiences and ideas of motherhood from explicitly feminist perspectives. The directors of these films are unambiguously and publicly associated with feminist movements and thought, and the films have clear feminist purpose and awareness, which are applied politically and aesthetically. Experimental modes of expression and filmmaking are used to approach the untold stories of mothering identities, and traditional narrative forms and patterns are rejected or disregarded to suggest new ways of talking and thinking about motherhood from the inside and the outside of the discourse.

In response to the erasure of the mother as a body and a personality in patriarchal discourse, these films seek to articulate various intellectual, emotional and corporeal experiences of motherhood with a self-consciousness and self-interest disallowed by Oedipus. The thinking on maternal identities and bodies produced by feminist theorists offers an illuminating dialogue with these concerns, and an ongoing theme in this section will be how film as a specific medium can be used to symbolise a phenomenology of motherhood alongside a purely intellectual discourse of subversion. However, whilst representing and taking ownership of mothering bodies is a significant part of affirming the presence of mothering subjects in culture and society, it is important to be mindful of the capacity of some strains of corporeally-focused feminism to cathect, essentialise and reduce female biology in this process. Elizabeth Grosz's (1994) 'corporeal feminism', for instance, despite a compelling argument for the cultural-historical contingency of women's bodies and emphasis on the importance of women's bodily self-definition, proceeds to over-valorise women as biologically homogeneous, erasing a great deal of difference in women's lived experiences of anatomy, sexuality and fertility. Some of Irigaray's later work, similarly, is over-literal about the political usage of the 'female body', as in her essay, *So When are we to Become Women?* (1990e), in which she identifies reproductive technologies as a mechanical monster of patriarchy for the modern age, continuing to produce women's motherhood rather than empowering reproductive identities. Replicating such limitation as is imposed by patriarchal ideology, only differently transposed, these theoretical distortions should be avoided; mothering bodies must not be idealised, but particularised. There are endless 'bodily encounters' with the mothering self and Other, and the *incorporation* of affective experiences of motherhood should expand rather than generalise its subjective discourses.

In this chapter, my close readings of the films look at how artistic techniques are used to elaborate expressions of mothering subjectivities that break down stereotypes and received non-autonomous narratives of mothering relations, why these avant-garde techniques have been chosen and how effective they are in elaborating complex mothering subjectivities. The mothering body will be an ongoing focus within this exploration, particularly in regards to Varda's film, and I will use a combination of ideas from second-wave feminist theory and phenomenological film theory to look at how these films' usages of the body can be read as representations of affective

experience in a wider feminist discourse on motherhood and mothering. Whilst most of the previous films discussed were extensively dominated by the figural construction of the ideal child-as-subject, these representations explore how women can be related to and relate to themselves as mothers outside of Jocasta, Lilith<sup>84</sup> and the Madonna. But since mothering is a relational experience, where is the Child in this? Still present, but not the only presence; there are ways in which mother and child do not and should not have complete understanding of one another. Positioning themselves entirely outside of the good/bad mothering axis (and exposing its very immateriality in doing so), the films discussed here suggest the possibility of mothers whose presence as selves does not threaten or erase the capacity of the child to become an individual subject; unlike the patriarchal presumption of the mothering relation as oppositional (in order for the child's triumphant development into subjectivity, the mother must disappear as a subject, or else her insistence upon subjectivity marks the humiliating defeat and destruction of the child and the future), this suggests that there is room for two. Mothers and children can both exist meaningfully to themselves without competition from the other. The mothering relation can also exist differently for all that participate in it, without mastery.

As discussed in Chapter 2, Agnès Varda is perhaps the most prominent European director to consistently thematise motherhood across her films. Beyond simply taking an interest in mothering characters and the political positions of motherhood in society, Varda also uses her filmmaking to represent motherhood as a subjective experience through style as well as content. Whereas some later films, like *L'Une chante*, were criticised for appearing to be *feminist* rather than *feminine*, her early works in particular, including *L'Opéra Mouffe*, have tended to be received as convincingly stylistically 'feminine'. Alison Smith, for instance, argues that '*L'Opéra-Mouffe* (1958) proves clearly enough that her idea of a 'woman's visual vocabulary' was quite sophisticated early on' (1998: 92), and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis similarly argues that '*L'Opéra-Mouffe*, a seventeen-minute "subjective documentary" made in 1958, is the first achievement of this motivation to find a cinematic language expressive of

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<sup>84</sup> The myth of Lilith is used by Sandra Gilbert and Sarah Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* as the archetype of the 'female monster'. She is active, desiring, un-maternal and non-submissive, and as a result is banished and demonised. Gilbert and Gubar use this as an allegory for the dismissal and vilification of women who do not conform to societal prescriptions of femininity (symbolised, in their words, by the 'angel in the house'). The condemnation of feminine self-interest makes this figure also pertinent as a model of the 'bad mother'. (Gilbert and Gubar: 2000: 34-35).

[Varda's] own particular voice' (1990: 226), in this case expressing her experiences of pregnancy in non-patriarchal language. Ideas on Varda's 'filmmaking in the feminine' have much in common with Irigaray's arguments on feminine specificity and the importance of establishing a non-patriarchal voice in politics, law, philosophy and cultural expression. Arguing that patriarchal organisation of society and language has regulated, appropriated and erased femininity and distorted the expressive relations of any experiences outside the very narrow templates of the dominant imagination, Irigaray argues:

unless we limit ourselves naively – or perhaps strategically – to some kind of limited or marginal issue, it is indeed precisely philosophical discourse that we have to challenge, and *disrupt*, inasmuch as this discourse sets forth the law for all others, inasmuch as it constitutes the discourse on discourse. (1977b: 74)

Irigaray therefore encourages the disruption of normative and presumptive modes of expression and cultural communication that are based in and perpetuate certain typified manifestations of 'knowledge'. Possibilities of self-articulation extensively define possibilities of being and being recognised in society. Therefore, the refusal to be structured and limited by 'normalised' artistic forms, narrative structures and ontological grammar is one highly effective way in which women are able to better explore and assert themselves as complex subjects, as Varda could be said to be doing through her films.

In the cases of both artists, however, over-enthusiasm for a loosely-defined 'femininity' of style on the part of commentators on their work should be treated with suspicion; the imagination of a holy grail of authentic feminine expression is surely a misleadingly essentialist and reductive pursuit that, in presuming femininity to be a buried but retrievable whole, sees identity as unrealistically timeless and singular. There is no *general* feminine articulation that can account for all women, or indeed all experiences of mothering. Instead, the artistic work that is being praised here should be read as opening up creative spaces for feminine and mothering subjects to articulate diverse experiences of being that do not have to be regulated by the same familiar narrative patterns, cultural images and clichés that shape dominant prescriptions of motherhood. Such stereotyping discourses are so widespread that they are able to

appear objective and inevitable. The stylistic experimentations explored by feminists such as Varda and Irigaray do not inherently ‘feminise’, but challenge this appearance of objectivity and expose dominance as a contingent discourse rather than a product of social truth. Sabotaging the propagandist machinery of master narratives and the naturalising artistic conventions that support them – which permit only a few experiences as ‘real’ – critical counter-expression is used to build spaces of representation in which mothers and women can be present as endlessly different subjects without having to pay tribute to external objectifying discourses on their identities, or to take such stereotypes as seriously as they take themselves. Of course, Varda’s films are ‘women’s films’ – as she herself stresses, she is, after all, a woman (Varda: 1965: 14) (quoted in Ince: 2013: 613) – but what she suggests are subjective possibilities, not monolithic essences, of mothering experiences.

Varda’s film work is interested in both motherhood and pregnancy, both of which are communicated as embodied experiences. In contrast to many of the romanticising constructions of maternity familiar to Christian or European psychoanalytic discourses, which make motherhood a largely spiritual undertaking or include the body only insofar as it belongs or is relevant to the child, Varda accounts for motherhood in ways that are sensory, physical and intellectual. Different mothering bodies, including her own, feature throughout and are used creatively in her work. With her documentary *Daguerrotypes* (1976), for instance, Varda made a film about her local community based entirely in the eighty metre radius from the flat in which she was looking after her infant son (Ince: 2013: 610), suggesting a narrative geography of maternal care-giving and an intersubjective space of creativity therein that includes but is not dominated by the child. In her short film *Réponse de femmes* (1975), she makes overtly political use of the contested body in patriarchy, using a range of women actors whose dissenting voices and eloquent bodies demonstrate the diversity of feminine subjectivities and demand a culture of respect for difference. In *L’Une chante*, Pomme also draws extensively on her own body and the political tensions that are inscribed upon it in her art, as Varda does in her wider film work. Interestingly, the film shows that Pomme’s performances are often misunderstood as essentialist rather than tongue-in-cheek, anticipating reactions that would be received by the film itself.

*L'Opéra Mouffe* also uses the body and sense experience as central devices in its counter-discursive representation of mothering subjectivity. Made whilst she was pregnant and interested in exploring that experience in art, the short film uses stimuli from the local area (the rue Mouffetard in Paris) and fantastical images to produce a subjective account of pregnancy, motherhood and their place in everyday society. Flitterman-Lewis describes her filming process around the rue Mouffetard; 'In the course of this she became an ordinary fixture of the Mouffetard quarter, as common as the vegetable and shellfish hawkers, the Baudelairean flaneur absorbing and observing Parisian street life' (1990: 226). Varda's physical presence as the 'unseen, pregnant filmmaker' is important in establishing an embodied viewpoint, to which the filmed subjects react (Ince: 2013: 612), and the filmed bodies, including the pregnant actor (who is not Varda), significantly create a corporeal consciousness in the film, but it is also an intersubjective viewing experience that implicates the bodies of the audience as well as those on the screen. The images offered tend to invite perceptual rather than narrative comprehension, foregrounding the viewer's subjective reaction to the film as much as Varda's subjective account of her pregnancy. There are many affects suggested in Varda's various portrayals of maternity and motherhood, and no 'right' way to respond to them; her filmmaking is highly personal, but not jealously so – it invites participation and can change with each reception.

Varda's use of sense and the body can be interestingly considered alongside critical work on phenomenological film theory. Substantially influenced by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophies of perception and being,<sup>85</sup> interesting work has been produced over the 1990s and 2000s that reflects on the capacity of film viewing as an embodied and intersubjective experience, in contrast to more conventional understandings of the viewer as a detached master of an intellectual relationship embellished onto a unidirectional visual plane. For many writers interested in the phenomenology of spectatorship, a particularly intriguing avenue of enquiry is the capacity for a focus on perceptual encounters to collapse (though not entirely merge) distance between subject and object, or self and Other; 'it is this mutual capacity for and possession of experience through common structures of embodied existence,

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<sup>85</sup> My own understanding of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology has been informed by *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) and the essays 'An Unpublished Text by Merleau-Ponty: A Prospectus of his Work', 'The Primacy of Perception and its Philosophical Consequences' and 'Eye and Mind' in *The Primacy of Perception* (1964).

through similar modes of being-in-the-world, that provide the *intersubjective* basis of objective cinematic communication' (Vivian Carol Sobchack: 1992: 5).<sup>86</sup> As such, films that focus on sense may be more readily able to disarticulate the suggestions of mastery coded into much conventional filmmaking. Emphasising the embodied participation of the individual viewer in the film experience through highly personal sense responses<sup>87</sup> can also work well as a resistance of dominant hierarchies in cultural representation, and are therefore potentially useful as a tool for deconstructing received narratives, including those of gender and motherhood, as it is antithetical to the notion of objective 'truth'. As Jennifer Barker describes:

To apply Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh to film theory is to contest the notion of either an ideal spectator, who accepts a meaning that is already intended by the film, or an empirical spectator, for whom the meaning of the film is determined solely by personal, cultural, and historical circumstances. Flesh insists on a spectator who is both at once, who joins the film in the act of making meaning. (2009: 27)

Barker and another key theorist in the field, Laura U. Marks (2000), have also written on *how* tactility and touch can be communicated in film, particularly through camerawork and the viewing body (*ibid*: 32-39) and 'haptic' images. Haptic images are those which address themselves to the extra-visual senses before becoming visually intelligible. In Marks' description, 'haptic media encourage a relation to the screen itself before the point at which the viewer is pulled into the figures of the image and the exhortation of the narrative. Haptic identification is predicated on closeness, rather than the distance that allows the beholder to imaginatively project onto the object' (Marks: 2000: 187-188). Though it may be tempting for feminist interpreters to apply an Irigarayan focus on touch too literally here in order to position such filmmaking as a satisfyingly diametric counterpoint to the type of mastering and ocular-centric gaze critiqued by Mulvey in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), it is important to acknowledge that there is nothing inherently or inevitably

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<sup>86</sup> Theoretical work on intersubjectivity and cinema through application of phenomenology is explored in depth in Jennifer Barker: 2009, Laura U. Marks: 2000, Steven Shaviro: 1993 and Vivian Carol Sobchack: 1992.

<sup>87</sup> In *Touch* (2002), Laura Marks reflects this in her writing by interweaving personal responses to the films she discusses into her theoretical writing.

‘feminine’ about such practice or theory. Though phenomenology and feminism can combine in productive and interesting ways (as shown by Barbara Kennedy’s *Deleuze and Cinema: The Aesthetics of Sensation*: 2000), as Marks asserts ‘Though [...] the use of haptic images may be a feminist strategy, there is nothing essentially feminine about it’ (Marks: 2000: 188). In her monograph *The Skin of the Film* (2000), Marks in fact applies her interpretation of haptic images to transnational cinema and the cross-cultural communication of sense experiences. Beyond being strictly gendered, therefore, we could look at the participation of the body and perception in filmmaking as a productive way of exploring embodied experiences of all kinds that exceed the logocentric expressive strategies of a given culture, including absent discourses of motherhood. Tactile filmmaking can be used well in this way to communicate the experience of the Other, as it can challenge received knowledge, destabilise images and suggest new and different ways of experiencing stories and objects.

Varda’s early work, including *L’Opéra Mouffe*, has tended to receive more sustained and favourable critical engagement than films such as *Le Bonheur* and *L’Une chante*. Within discussions of *L’Opéra Mouffe* specifically, the presence and significance of the maternal body has been interpreted in various ways. Sandy Flitterman-Lewis recognises its thematisation, but dismisses any notion of corporeality as essentialist:

*L’Opéra-Mouffe*’s importance for feminists lies not so much in the fact that it is a film both from and about the body of the woman (an essentialist trap, to be sure); rather, it is the emphasis on subjectivity as point of view – on the structuring function of “the look” – that makes this film a significant landmark in feminist cinema. (1990: 227)

The emphasis on subjectivity is certainly justified, but the implication that this is incompatible with any sense of embodiment, or that any political use of the body in film is inherently generalising, is less so. Rather, Varda’s film plays with ideas of subjective bodies and heterogeneous perceptual experiences of being-in-the-world as part of a deconstructive approach to the normalising gaze. More recently, Kate Ince has considered Varda’s use of corporeality more closely, and has applied a phenomenological approach to her work, including *L’Opéra Mouffe*. She argues:

Consistently privileging looking and embodiment, and living her woman's body as "the agent and agency of intentionality" (Sobchack 1992, 73), Varda's filmmaking may best be understood, I would contend, as a performance of feminist phenomenology deriving from her woman-subject's desire, experience, and vision, a carnal *cinécriture* she has now developed and refined for more than half a century. (2013: 227)

Ince's recognition of the phenomenological richness of Varda's work is important. However, it is my view that this specific account of its uses tends to overstate the 'purity' of such techniques as expressions of feminine experience; Varda's style of embodied filmmaking can certainly suggest the presence of experiences that exceed mainstream identity narratives, but such encounters do not exist entirely separately from dominant cultural discourse. Varda's phenomenology of motherhood works because it interacts in such an interesting way with this discourse, not because it wants to (or indeed, can) stand apart from it to give some more 'authentic' account of mothering subjectivities. Furthermore, both interpretations largely overlook the fundamental irreverence and playful irony of Varda's representation of mothering bodies. After all, it is usually a mistake to take Varda too seriously; similarly to the issue of female friendship in *L'Une chante*, audiences are often used to cultural representations of women's experiences and motherhood that are relatively over-earnest and humourless (excessive suffering, or a kind of solemn, sacred joy available to the good mother). Varda in fact tends to poke fun at the seriousness of conventional images of women and motherhood reminiscent of Joan Riviere's notion of 'feminine masquerade' (1929). This notion of performative femininity, as 'masquerade' or 'mimicry', and its potential for playful rather than violent subversiveness, is further developed by Irigaray, who writes:

There is, in an initial phase, perhaps only one "path," the one historically assigned to the feminine: that of *mimicry*. One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it. [...] To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit

herself – inasmuch as she is on the side of the “perceptible,” of “matter” – to “ideas,” in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make “visible,” by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. (1977b: 76)

Varda often makes films from an ironic distance from the images of pregnancy and motherhood she and her actors are performing, though this tongue-in-cheek attitude is not always recognised. In making critical use of the gaze and the body, *L'Opéra Mouffe* does not attempt to replace one essentialist discourse with another, but – quite conversely – light-heartedly dismantles the idea that it is at all possible to encapsulate the idea of motherhoods as a single experience. Like Pomme's absurdist and exaggerated performance art, *L'Opéra Mouffe* uses highly subjective and perceptual expressions of mothering experiences alongside images that are more or less drag performances of pregnancy and motherhood, accentuating the stereotyping and reductive qualities of the narratives that are inscribed onto that same subjective body, with a knowing wink. I argue that, rather than one or the other, it is this playful and ongoing dialogue between the clichéd image and the ineffable complexity and abundance of lived experiences that characterise Varda's depictions of motherhood.

Some critics have identified the fundamentally comic tone of most of the vignettes of *L'Opéra Mouffe*; Delphine Bénézet describes it as ‘an irreverent and playful piece’ (2014: 15), and Flitterman-Lewis in fact underpins the significance of the film's title as a play on ‘l'opéra bouffe’ (in French, ‘comic operetta’) (1990: 238). What has not yet been fully developed, however, is Varda's use of filmic bodies and sense expression as instruments of subversive critique and irony in the film. As is richly described in Kristeva's work on the maternal abject and sacred, many of the most deeply ingrained cultural images of pregnancy tend to either over-cathect or over-denigrate (Kristeva: 1983; 1980a; 1980b; 1980c). Many of these constructing processes are also profoundly visceral, whether ‘the ear, the tears, and the breasts’ that are the only permitted accesses to the holy Virgin Mother (1983: 142), the ‘maternal’ fluids of menstrual blood and faecal matter that crystallise the terror of the fragile body, or the corporeal cleansing rituals that protect against defilement (Kristeva: 1980b). The meeting-points between femininity and phenomenology may therefore be

anticipated as addressing these extremes, yet Varda uses haptic images, sensation and the body in unexpected ways to suggest that none of these are comprehensive or definitive; throughout her work, motherhood can be pleasurable, sad, frightening, strange, painful, funny... anything but definitively fixed.

*L'Opéra Mouffe* uses images that are wordlessly familiar as symbols and suggestions of motherhood to convey the typifying and magisterial discourses that seek to dictate mothering identities, but with bizarre twists to suggest a picture of mothering subjectivities that are more strange than sacred. Some of the images she uses are intricately composed references to classical artistic representations of motherhood and femininity in general. The sequence 'les amoureux'<sup>88</sup> in Part One is mostly made up of shots of a young couple together in bed and around their small, run-down house, using gentle and intimate shots of their naked bodies that imply a lucid tactility. One shot in particular in this sequence is particularly rich in detail and allusion; in a room which is both architectural and feral, including plastered walls, a dirt floor and bare, skeletal trees, the woman lies prone and naked on a bare iron bedframe with her back to camera. She holds an unframed mirror in her hand and gazes at her own reflection, with apparent contempt for the look of the camera. At the very edge of the shot, on top of a stack of rusted and dilapidated household appliances, a crude skull and crossbones is drawn on a piece of wood. The entire tableau is suggestive of Renaissance still lives depicting Vanity. Etymologically indicating 'emptiness' as well as conceit, Vanity is classically symbolised through the image of a young woman absorbed by her own reflected beauty, oblivious to the symbols of death and decay that surround her. Common motifs include mirrors, skulls and rotting fruit. Varda's composition draws on this traditional iconography in a modernised context, particularly through her use of rust in place of organic decay and graffiti in place of a human skull. The meeting between Renaissance painting and images of contemporary poverty in the rue Mouffetard is striking, demonstrating how women and women's bodies are simultaneously at the centre of timeless objectifying discourses and the domestic and material pressures on women in modern society. Classical images of Vanity clearly comment on female beauty as hollow and fleeting, and condemn women as bearers of the gaze or possessors of their own bodies. Given that *L'Opéra Mouffe*, from its opening shots of the pregnant woman and close-ups of

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<sup>88</sup> 'The lovers'

her belly and breasts, establishes the film in the context of the maternal as well as the feminine, we could also extend Varda's *Vanity* tableau as a critique of cultural discourses, from Freud to Winnicott, on the narcissism of the pregnant woman specifically. Varda's images are rich in such allusions, but her non-standard embellishments – such as the decrepit domestic appliances – denaturalise the cultural symbols and bring to the surface the ridiculousness of the persistence of such objectifying and prescriptive discourses in society.

As well as fine art imagery, *L'Opéra Mouffe* engages abundantly with the more general cultural metonymy between motherhood, fecundity and 'nature'. Kristeva describes how women, in their maternal capacity, are seen as 'a threshold where "nature" confronts "culture"' (2000: 177), positioning mothers as numinous conduits through which their sons, husbands and other patriarchal subjects can commune with the origin and the 'natural'. As a vessel rather than subject of such transcendentalism, and fixed at rather than passing across its threshold, such associations tend to suggest that mothers' experiences of their bodies (to the extent to which they matter at all in the patriarchal imagination, which is usually only to the extent that women can be minimally incentivised to continue to perform as mothering objects) as the 'natural world' should be serene and satisfying, an assumption Varda describes being imposed on her during pregnancy:

*L'Opéra Mouffe* was a short film about the contradictions of pregnancy. I was pregnant at the time, told I should feel good, like a bird. But I looked around on the street where I filmed, and I saw people expecting babies who were poor, sick and full of despair. (Varda and Gerald Peary: 1977)

However, the personal phenomenology of pregnancy that Varda's 'nature' images indicate is quite different from this cliché of biological harmony, and at the same time quite different from a reactionary Beauvoirian interpretation of pregnancy as a parasitic assault (Beauvoir: 1949: 512). *L'Opéra Mouffe* uses extensive imagery of fruits, vegetables and other plants, and it is the exploitation of such motifs as cultural metonyms of motherhood and fertility that have led some critics to accuse Varda of essentialism, such as Flitterman-Lewis, who claims 'Because [...] the film's project is the treatment of pregnancy from a woman's point of view, it appears to support a

biological definition of woman, one that, through the glorification of female bodily functions, suggests an essentialist ideology' (1990: 216-217). However, Varda is questioning and critiquing such associations rather than celebrating them, and a consideration of their haptic qualities can help to illuminate this process.

The film uses a wide array of close-ups of natural objects, which meet the definitions of haptic film put forward by Marks and Barker as images that privilege texture and reciprocity over intellectual mastery; 'The ideal relationship between viewer and image in haptic visuality is one of mutuality, in which the viewer is more likely to lose herself in the image, to lose her sense of proportion. When vision is like touch, the object's touch back may be like a caress, though it may also be violent' (Marks: 2000: 184). A sequence in *L'Opéra Mouffe* titled 'du sentiment de la nature'<sup>89</sup> begins with an extreme close-up of an intricately textured piece of wood; the camera moves smoothly and sensuously along the grain and settles on the image of half an orange in place of a knot in the wood. The soundtrack changes from lucid chanson to erratic, experimental jazz, and the next shot shows shaky and blurring close-ups of flowers with egregiously phallic stamens. Other close-ups in this and the following section ('de la grosse')<sup>90</sup> include a halved red cabbage spinning to reveal the labyrinthine patterns of its insides, a dove trying to walk out of a spherical glass vase and the same halved cabbage which has sprouted a new stalk from its centre. Filmed in denaturalising extreme close-ups that address the viewers' tactile senses, through which we 'come to the surface of ourselves' (Barker: 2009: 36), these passages foreground experiences of embodiment. However, the senses evoked through the images, shapes and movements fluctuate between 'caressing' (*ibid*: 32) smoothness, restlessness and tension. The images themselves are also tinged with the strange and unexpected, encouraging us to readdress the bizarreness of everyday 'natural' objects through their being slightly out of place or recontextualised. Whilst the film's organic objects and attention to embodied perception references the social prescription of maternity as a single, uniform experience conforming to certain self-important imaginations of the 'natural', the syncopation and playful wrong-footing of those images marks any sense of pregnancy's predictability as elusive.

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<sup>89</sup> 'On the feeling of nature'

<sup>90</sup> 'On pregnancy'

From the beginning of the film, in fact, Varda parodies the discursive continuum between maternal bodies and natural flora. The opening close-ups of the pregnant body are juxtaposed with a shot of a pair of hands cutting and scooping out a pumpkin, with gestures that are neither violent nor graceful. The collocation presents an amusing commentary on such imaginations of motherhood, sardonically suggesting that, if maternal bodies are to be likened to plants, then the sensations of vegetables are not so straightforward either; like pregnancy, 'nature' is not necessarily sacred or transcendent, but can also be strange, ordinary, undignified or funny. The images jar, but are more unexpected than unpleasant. Varda's subjective representation of maternity reaches out towards spaces that are different to the erasing bleach and cleanliness of the sacred and the disgust of the abject; her images twist the familiar, and the resulting strangeness can easily be experienced as amusing rather than disturbing or uncanny. Despite its sensitivity to some of the more serious and painful issues surrounding contemporary familial life, such as the sequences concerned with poverty and alcoholism, as in *L'Une chante*, the various subjectivities of mothering are never entirely defined by bliss or suffering. As well as demonstrating the complexities and ambivalence of an individual encounter with maternity, the range of affective suggestions with which the film teems foreground the embodied subjectivities of the filmed mother, the director and the viewer, emphasising mothering and maternity as complex and infinitely heterogeneous experiences. There is no singular 'correct' way to respond to the film, just as there is no simple or predictable way to experience maternity. Light-heartedly returned to in the final shot, in which a pregnant woman buys a bouquet from a florist, smells the petals of a rose, and then starts to eat the flowers, clichéd motifs of sentiment are consistently undermined by the surprising. *L'Opéra Mouffe*, in short, presents a view of motherhood and pregnancy that never stays still, and any symbols or assumptions that begin to suggest how it 'should' feel or be approached are quickly subverted or outpaced. Varda's use of the maternal body in this process does not replicate the essentialism of master motherhood discourses by suggesting another 'truth' that can be better communicated through tactility than vision; rather, the film takes the mothering body as the primary site of this cultural objectification and uses it as an eloquent instrument of subversion to disrupt any such ossifying discourse, affirming maternity only as a subjective and fluid identity.

Made almost twenty years after Varda's short film, and described as 'one of the first British films to apply new feminist film theory to film practice' (Kaplan: 1983: 171), Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977) is an artistic essay film that deals with similar issues to the former. Like *L'Opéra Mouffe*, this film uses a critical synthesis of prevalent objectifying cultural discourses on motherhood alongside experimental aesthetic techniques and conscious feminist politics in order to produce a deconstructive commentary on the situation of motherhood and the experiences of mothering subjects in contemporary society. The 1970s was a curious decade for British cinema in general and for women's filmmaking in particular. Following the proliferation of social realist and Swinging London films in the '60s (which, though not always roundly lauded, were still seen as characterising English film), the '70s have tended to be written off by commentators as offering relatively little of value and – increasingly struggling to compete with Hollywood – producing mainly low-brow genre films and carry-on-style sex comedies.<sup>91</sup>

At the same time, however, beneath this widely disparaged commercial cinema are some interesting avant-garde subcultures, including experimental feminist filmmaking. Of course, women's filmmaking can hardly be said to be widespread in the '70s; throughout the decade, only one feature-length film was solo directed by a woman in England. This was Jane Arden's disturbing and brutal *The Other Side of the Underneath* (1972), a radical commentary on conceptions of women's madness from a feminist and anti-psychiatry perspective. On the other hand, feminist filmmakers also worked on shorter and collaborative projects. The London Women's Film Group was active in this decade, and in 1978 made the film *Rapunzel, Let Down Your Hair*, which used essayistic elements, animation and parody to retell the story of Rapunzel in the style of a noir, a melodrama, and finally in the context of a group of contemporary feminists in order to explore the imagination of women as mothers, witches and sexual property in patriarchal society, and represent reproductive issues and mother-daughter relationships with a feminist articulation. Mulvey and Wollen's collaborative work also comprises several landmarks of feminist cinema, amongst which *Riddles of the Sphinx* is highly significant.

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<sup>91</sup> Amy Sargeant's otherwise thorough *British Cinema: A Critical History* (2005), for instance, is dismissive of the 1970s as a difficult period for the British film industry, producing little of artistic merit. Robert Shail discusses and attempts to redress this tendency in his edited volume *Seventies British Cinema*: 2008.

Mulvey herself is widely recognised in scholarship as a leading figure within critical film theory, and her best-known essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) is seminal within feminist and psychoanalytic film theory. The theories presented within this essay are by now highly familiar across many fields of academia; they have been thoroughly developed and critiqued, including by Mulvey herself,<sup>92</sup> but remain extremely influential throughout discussions of gender, the gaze and cinema. Briefly put, Mulvey argues that mainstream approaches to filmmaking tend to be produced by and to further naturalise patriarchal forms of desire:

The magic of the Hollywood style at its best (and of all the cinema which fell within its sphere of influence) arose, not exclusively, but in one important aspect, from its skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure. Unchallenged, mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order. (Mulvey: 1975: 16)

Emphasising the centrality of scopophilia within cinematic pleasures, she describes how women onscreen are traditionally positioned as visual objects of desire, whereas male characters perform the dual roles of idealised surrogate agent for the viewing subject and euphemistic legitimiser of his<sup>93</sup> otherwise unchecked and naked voyeurism; ‘the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification [...] Hence the split between spectacle and narrative supports the man’s role as the active one of advancing the story, making things happen’ (*ibid*: 20). Implicit within Mulvey’s argument, then, is the question of how cinema would ‘look’ (in both senses) were it not to imitate the psychology of patriarchy, and what radical interventions could be taken to reprogramme the basic grammar of filmmaking away from hierarchical voyeurism. In *Riddles of the Sphinx*, Mulvey and Wollen experiment with just this. They make innovative use of colour, camera movement, cinematography, soundtrack and narrative structure in order to destabilise normative expectations of spectatorship and decouple their representation of women and motherhood from dominant stereotypes and discourses. In my analysis, I am interested in examining how the filmmakers use film creatively to challenge assumptions around motherhood

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<sup>92</sup> I am thinking specifically of ‘Afterthoughts on “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” inspired by King Vidor’s *Duel in the Sun* (1946)’ (1999).

<sup>93</sup> For Mulvey, in this context, the position of the viewing subject is inherently masculine, regardless of their gender.

specifically and constitute out of this disruption an embodied mothering subject who is part of a complex social nexus, moving from absence to presence.

The film is divided into seven distinct numbered sections, which form a symmetrical or 'circular' structure (Greeley: 1990: 220). Segments 1 and 7 are relatively brief close-ups of objects associated with puzzles and mystery being manipulated. The first is a pair of hands turning the pages of a book titled *La Mythe de la Femme*,<sup>94</sup> and the last a puzzle in which a bead of mercury reaches the centre of a small maze. 2 and 6 show Mulvey sitting at a desk, first talking to camera about the myth of the Sphinx as an allegory for the treatment of women and mothers in Western society, and then playing back and listening to a recording of her speech. 3 and 5 are highly conceptual, abstract sequences filming 'Stones' and 'Acrobats', and the middle section, 4, is the longest segment and, composed of a series of 13 360-degree circular panning shots that represent moments in the life of Louise, who is the mother of an infant daughter, it more closely approximates a narrative, though is still markedly experimental in style.

The Sphinx is a carefully chosen figure, rich in timeless layers of meaning, that fulfils framing, structuring and allegorising purposes in the film. The use of a feminine mythological figure is typical of a now well-established tradition of feminist writers re-appropriating such archetypes of femininity as a critique of or pun on Freudian developmental models and the emergence of Oedipus as the sovereign subject of psychoanalysis. The trend can be seen in Marianne Hirsch's (1989) exploration of Persephone and Demeter as a template that might provide a more nuanced and intimate account of women's developmental psychology than an unlucky series of embittered non-Oedipuses and unexplained Jocastas worshipping at the altar of a phallus-father-god; it is also represented with great poetic elegance by Helène Cixous in her depiction of Medusa: 'We have been frozen in our place between two terrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss. [...] All you have to do to see the Medusa is look her in the face: and she isn't deadly. She is beautiful and she laughs.' (1975: 68-69). Such strategies bring to the surface the structuring patriarchal prejudices of prevalent cultural archetypes and identity narratives, revealing the anxious and fragile king behind the curtain. Beautiful, monstrous or other-worldly and inscrutable, figures such

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<sup>94</sup> 'The Myth of Woman'

as the Sphinx, Jocasta and Medusa are women as sketched by male would-be heroes, and are more shadow puppets of patriarchy than anything to do with the multitudes of feminine and mothering subjects who live in the world. The banishment of the mother as a subjective presence in Western culture, as discussed in detail in my introduction, is a topic well-covered by feminist theorists, and often takes the shape of an ‘exmatiation’ (Irigaray: 1974: 43) that alienates women from their sense of identity and self-value, as ‘the dramas of individuation demand of her such a violent rejection of the mother, and by the mother, that in the hatred of the loved object a woman immediately finds herself in a known and intolerable country’ (Kristeva: 1987b: 172). The figures of feminine archetypes often, therefore, become estranged husks in patriarchal culture; the strategy employed by Cixous, Hirsch and Mulvey and Wollen imagines what those figures’ texts might look like had they not been scrubbed out of culture with such consuming paranoia.

The significance of the Sphinx specifically is explained by Mulvey in her to-camera address in section two (‘Laura Speaking’). The Sphinx is a character from the Oedipus myth, and the filming of Mulvey’s exposition is cross-cut with images from classical art of the Sphinx posing her riddles to Oedipus outside the city gates. Mulvey explains the appropriateness of the Sphinx as a narrator for this film; she sees it as a questioning rather than answering voice, representing the ‘mystery of motherhood’. As an archetypal absent mother, the Sphinx’s position outside the city indicates her exclusion from culture; talking in riddles, she challenges the order and kinship that structure life inside the city. Mulvey describes the Sphinx’s narration as a ‘voice off’ rather than a ‘voice over’: one that speaks from the position of exile rather omniscience, and problematises rather than explains. Teresa de Lauretis, in an essay that also interrogates the position of women in cinema, frames the myth similarly:

Suppose we were to ask the question: what became of the Sphinx after the encounter with Oedipus on his way to Thebes? Or, how did Medusa feel seeing herself in Perseus’ mirror just before being slain? [...] Medusa and the Sphinx, like the other ancient monsters, have survived inscribed in hero narratives, in someone else’s story, not their own; so they are figures or markers of positions – places and topoi – through which the hero and his story move to their destination and to accomplish meaning. (1999: 83)

In both cases, the Sphinx is seen as an embodiment of the frustrations experienced by women and mothers whose voices are silenced, misinterpreted or ignored, but also as a device by which they may nonetheless be able to continue to speak in those voices, at greater volume.

The section following Mulvey's discussion of the Sphinx, 'Stones', is composed of a series of shots of ancient architecture. A shaky and blurry look of the camera moves through a city, and films pyramids and sphinx models, as ancient structures, and contemporary tourists around them. The electronic score is unnerving, mysterious and cold, and the camerawork is constantly unsettling. Lynne Greeley interprets the images as inexplicable and occult, as the 'amateurish quality of the photography is vaguely reminiscent of home films of supposed UFO sightings, as though either the Sphinx or the spectator is an alien' (1990: 221). The sequence is certainly suggestive of alienation and unfamiliarity, but the connection with home videos of paranormal phenomena is vague, and has little obvious bearing on the film's themes. The incredibly creative and dynamic use that Mulvey and Wollen make of cinematographic techniques, rather than pointing to a different field of substance or symbolism as Greeley suggests, seems to me to rearticulate the plot and ideas expressed by Mulvey in the previous scene in a different (visual, sensory, wordless) language.

The images of stone sphinxes in this section are grainy and often indistinct. Enough intelligible visual information is given so that we understand the context of the sequence as the ancient monuments, but the distant, mastering views of the sphinxes transmute from image to texture, fragmenting the sphinxes into incomprehensible parts, foregrounding the texture and movement of the heavy film grain rather than the indexical object it describes, or filming the grey surfaces of the objects so closely that we lose the fiction of their wholeness and intelligibility amongst pure haptic visuality. The film uses restless or jarring camera movements, irregular zooms in and out and double exposure to make sure that our understanding is constantly challenged, that the sphinx never appears simple or entirely knowable as the object with which we are familiar. The viewing experience is unsettling throughout; abrasive transitions between long shots and extreme close-ups, and between clear and haptic imagery, create tension and discomfort. Marks describes

such fluctuation as a violent movement that makes the viewer aware of the fragility of their position as mastering subject:

Violence may occur in an abrupt shift from haptic to optical image, confronting the viewer with an object whole and distant where she had been contemplating it close-up and partial. Haptic visuality implies a tension between viewer and image, then, because this violent potential is always there. Haptic visuality implies making oneself vulnerable to the image, reversing the relation of mastery that characterizes optical viewing. (2000: 184-185)

The images are and are not what they depict, as we lose our orientation in a coherent discourse; we are no longer confident of the meaning of the sphinx or our ability to understand the other. They become like Marks' haptic images: 'images that are so "thin" and unclichééd that the viewer must bring his or her resources of memory and imagination to complete them. The haptic image forces the viewer to contemplate the image itself instead of being pulled into narrative' (*ibid*: 163). Like Mulvey's speech, therefore, this sequence encourages us to question received knowledge, and to look differently at familiar symbols and discourses. Given the metaphoric resonance Mulvey has introduced of the sphinx as symbolic of the erasure of the mothering subject, the segment is also suggestive of thinking differently and creatively about motherhood as a discourse, encouraging us to challenge absenting veneers of presumption and stereotype. Beyond the invocation to question, however, the sequence also helps us to identify with or as a subject within an oppressive and alienating culture. The haptic images, pronounced camera movement and electronic music give the sequence a thick sensory quality that absorbs us in an embodied response. We feel estranged from ourselves, unintelligible in a foreign and hostile land. This section shares with us the experience of being an alienated and incommunicable subject (the sphinx, the mother) in a subjugating culture, with more visceral force than Mulvey's traditionally delivered lecture. The reframing of the ideas is significant as it suggests discursive excess around expressions of motherhood, and uses cinema's subversive possibilities to do this.

The film's middle section, 'Louise's story in 13 shots', again reimagines the sphinx from a different perspective. Rather than academic analysis or abstract, non-

verbal expression, this segment considers the modern sphinx through thirteen shots of Louise and her personal and social experiences as a new mother. The sphinx's 'voice off' is present throughout these shots, sometimes as non-diegetic speaking, sometimes as repeated words and motifs in the musical score that give it a *chora*-like quality (Kristeva: 1974: 26), sometimes as fragmented text appearing in intertitles, but is always partial and resistant of definitive meaning. Though part 4 is the most 'narrative' section of the film, its cinematographic technique and stylised aesthetic set it firmly apart from conventional cinema. Each of the thirteen shots is articulated through a slow, steady circular pan. Action occurs all around the camera, and characters move in and out of shot at erratic distances and intervals, as if ambivalent to the look of the camera – and the look of the camera, similarly, is indifferent to individual human figures, never amending the consistency of its pace or movement according to voyeuristic impulse.

The choice of circular panning shots and other structuring techniques is worth considering further. Circularity as a metaphor has been used by feminist theorists such as Irigaray and Nancy Chodorow to describe the condition of women as mothers in patriarchal imagination and society (Irigaray: 1974: 76; Chodorow: 1999). However, though it may be considered to loosely reference such ideas, it would be simplistic and essentialising to suggest anything inherently 'feminine' about this shot style. Similarly, the structuring devices used are certainly subversive but do not *automatically* constitute 'filmmaking in the feminine'. Greeley (1990: 222-223) and E. Ann Kaplan (1983: 174) both point out Godardian similarities in some devices. Certainly, Godard uses similar structures of episodic sections, symmetrical structuring and fragmentation in *Vivre sa Vie* (1962), *Une Femme mariée* and *Masculin Féminin* respectively. However, this does not mean that similar aesthetic subversions cannot be leveraged to produce a commentary on femininity and motherhood. The key point of the film's articulations is that they are used in this case to deconstruct traditional cinema's complicity in naturalising the mothering object of patriarchal ideology. In particular, the steady, rotational movements of the camera puts into practice Mulvey's critique of the genderedness of mainstream cinema, which, in her theory, entrenches sexism through identification with the male body and character as subject and of the female as object. Such is also true of the child-centric objectification of the empty mothering body. The aesthetic organisation of the thirteen shots, however, makes

identification with a specific body or character impossible; this is narratively unanchored spectatorship in which we identify our bodies only with the look of the camera, mechanical rather than human, and nothing legitimises or euphemises our voyeurism. This allows us to take a critical distance from the practiced trope of approaching the mother as object through tacit identification with the son-self-subject.

The Louise cycle of *Riddles of the Sphinx* is also significant insofar as the film's Lacanian interests are concerned. The film's engagement with Lacanian motherhood discourse often attracts attention from critics discussing the film. The early shots, which have no dialogue and in which Louise's face is not seen, imagine Louise as entirely centred on the mother-child dyad. Taken in earnest, the first two shots may be seen to confirm all of the worst presumptions of Lacanian developmental psychology and its subjectively absent mother. After the intertitle fragment, 'Perhaps Louise is too close to her child. How much longer can she reject the outside world, other people and other demands? Her husband often', the first shot takes place in the kitchen, as Louise tidies, prepares food and feeds the baby. The shot feels oppressively tight to the objects (tea towels, pots and pans, the oven, cookery equipment) inside the relatively small kitchen. Louise is at first holding the baby, before feeding her apple slices in a high chair, and her own body is awkwardly fragmented; we never see her face or head, perhaps resembling the non-personified and continuous maternal body of Lacan's imaginary, as Louise blends into the nurturing objects she is using. The second shot, taken inside the infant daughter's room at bedtime, uses similar strategies of compression and disembodiment. However, it is important to recognise that Mulvey draws on this discourse knowingly and critically in order to refute rather than comply with it. In *Visual and Other Pleasures*, she insists that 'Psychoanalytic theory is thus appropriated here as a political weapon, demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form' (Mulvey: (1975: 14), and, despite the initial kneejerk resistance described by Greeley from feminists who found the presence of Lacan at all intolerable (Greeley: 1990: 218), Lacanian ideas seem clearly used in this case to describe the mothering imago of patriarchal imagination. In fact, the film is praised by B. Ruby Rich for going beyond Mulvey's critical writing in this respect:

In defense of [*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*], she does show that psychoanalysis provides a useful tool primarily for

analysing the status quo, which is patriarchal. Whereas perhaps what one wants to say is: how can we go *beyond* it rather than just analyzing it. And in fact she herself has already begun that next step by making *Riddles of the Sphinx*. (Rich in discussion with Criton et al: 1978: 116)

In fact, everything about these early shots – the suffocating mise-en-scène, the colours, the fragmented body, the eerie, droning electronic score with the chant-like voice of the sphinx imitating the routine of the day in staccato pieces – suggests a dismal parody of the expectations of motherhood set out by the schools of thought delivered into culture by psychoanalysts such as Freud, Lacan and Winnicott. Louise appears in the first two shots only as a generic mother or nurturing object rather than as ‘Louise’, the mothering subject. The ‘maternal environment’ of these shots is disturbing rather than comforting, subtly exposing the grotesqueness of the psychological paradigm according to the mother whom it erases.

As we move through the thirteen shots, however, the Lacanian Imaginary imagery begins to dissipate. As this happens, Louise emerges more clearly as a heterogeneous subject, and we increasingly see her face and hear her voice. Though it is plausible that this could be interpreted as in some way reflective of the entry into the Symbolic, it must be borne in mind that for Lacan, this process turns the maternal object into the Crocodile-mOther of unknowable desire as the developmental paradigm sides inevitably with the child. This is not the case in the film; there is no painful schism or anxiety-producing absence, and the relationships between Louise, her daughter, and her own mother are not hierarchical but the relation of separate subjects. Following shot 3, in which Chris leaves, the shots move beyond the domestic and increasingly represent the mothering subject within social and political realms as well as the home, showing how Louise’s identity is formed between all of these areas (and more). As a single parent, Louise finds a job as a switchboard operator and takes Anna to a day-care centre, where she meets and develops a strong friendship with another single mother, Maxine. By the final shot, it seems evident that Louise and Maxine have also become partners. At work, Louise and her female friends and colleagues with children face institutionalised discrimination as their employers make no provisions for their mothering identities, particularly as they offer no onsite day care. Louise becomes increasingly politically aware, taking a leadership role amongst

her colleagues and, along with Maxine, becomes interested in unionisation. The film therefore offers nuance and heterogeneity to its representation of motherhood, showing that it is as complicated a subjectivity as any other, and far from isolated from political activity. The mother, therefore, does not fade away as an impersonal, psychologically absent function within the mental life of her child; subjectivity becomes equally communicable rather than hierarchical.

Several of the shots, furthermore, represent Louise as a social subject and show her amongst various communities of women; this includes the other mothers and staff at the day care centre, her work colleagues and social circle, and her intimate life with Maxine. Particularly interesting is shot 10, 'Visiting Mother'; this scene shows Louise, Maxine, Anna and Louise's mother relaxing in the latter's garden. Feminist thinkers such as Irigaray (1990b; 1991; *ES*: 1987 in particular), Kristeva (1978) and Adrienne Rich (1986) have produced a great deal of work on the suppression of female genealogies and the difficulty of mother-daughter bonding in the society of the patriarch. Rich describes how the state of cultural destitution in which patriarchy places the mothering subject through both intention and neglect, cultivates rivalry and hatred between women and their mothers:

"Matrophobia" as the poet Lynn Sukenick has termed it is the fear not of one's mother or of motherhood but of *becoming one's mother*. [...] Matrophobia can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mothers' bondage, to become individuated and free. The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr. Our personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mothers'; and, in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery. (1986: 235-236)

Given the cultural prevalence and familiarity of representations of toxic mother-daughter relationships, it seems likely that the viewer might project just such a narrative onto the intertitle leading into shot 10: 'no longer needs to keep Anna to herself. But by sending Anna to stay with her mother, Louise has brought herself back into her own past. They'. After all, the patriarchal laws that compel women to assume the role of their husbands' mothers also assures them that their own maternal continent

is a bad place to which to return, and even some branches of feminism, for their own reasons, end up urging women to escape it. However, the intertitle is cut off before posing an actual value judgment of its own. In fact, the various maternal relations shown in shot 10 do not resemble the emotional intensities suggested by such typical narrative constructs of motherhood and mothering relations. The shot is quiet and relaxed, with a pleasing colour palette. The women interact fluidly with each other; at various points, Louise and Maxine look at photos together, presumably from a family album, Louise's mother interacts affectionately with Anna and helps her water a tomato plant, Maxine takes a toy wheelbarrow and plays with Anna, and so on. Finally, Louise watches her mother interact with Anna before returning to Maxine. Following the intertitle, she appears to be reflecting in some way on her relationship with her mother, but it is difficult to assign a simplistic emotion to her expression. The entire shot, in fact, neither regurgitates the familiar narrative of latent mother-daughter hostility nor over-romanticises feminine-maternal spaces. Like all of the communities of women into which Louise enters, it is represented as diverse, subjective, and often supportive and enjoyable, but not as a reductive panacea for the structural oppressions exercised over mothering subjects.

The final 'community of women' emerges in the thirteenth and final shot of Louise's story, 'Museum', and develops an imaginative layer alongside the more concrete communities we have already seen. The circular shot films several artefacts in the ancient Egyptian wing of a museum; Louise and Anna eventually appear from the distance, looking at the objects together. The Sphinx's voice-off speaks poetically throughout, creating a feminist allegory about a model of a sphinx in a box and the cryptified language it speaks, which seems lost but familiar. The voice-off refers throughout to 'she', but it is deliberately ambiguous whether 'she' refers to Louise, Anna, another woman or women, or no one. In any case, the presence of Anna and Louise in the visual and auditory context of the shot suggests a timeless abundance of women whose relations of themselves and to each other have been systematically repressed and mystified. The voice-off blends fantasy and cultural allegory with personal memory. This includes a passage in which 'she' sees her mother in bed with her friend. 'She' initially feels scared and worries that her mother will be angry, but in fact the mother smiles, and 'she' begins to better understand 'something her mother had tried to explain to her earlier'. The speech seems to subversively reference Lacan's

theory of the mOther's desire; the child's initial anxiety could signify this pattern, but whilst for Lacan this is the beginning of the depreciation and alienation of the mother, here it precipitates greater intersubjective understanding between a mother and daughter. The 'something' that was not understood earlier, after all, is subjective desire, and its recognition by the daughter (in her mother and herself) positions them both as individuals, who can relate compassionately to but are not simultaneous with each other, rather than confirming the Lacanian model in which the child then struggles against the mother to become the unique subject.

Like *L'Opéra Mouffe*, *Riddles of the Sphinx* subverts objectifying discourses of motherhood by deconstructing their supporting manifestations (Lacanianism, arcadianism, and so on), exposing their inaptitude as expressions of the *experiences* of mothering, and of the mothering relation as lived intersubjectively. The Louise section of Mulvey and Wollen's film complicates abstract idealisations of motherhood as a function within the imagination of the child-as-subject by showing the lived experiences and practices of mothering as inextricable from socio-political life, and by representing the mother as a complex, desiring subject, but one whose status as such need not intimidate or inhibit her child. This rejection of hierarchical subject/object relations (inevitably favouring the child and the masculine) also operates at the level of articulation. The use of circular shots is deconstructive, and makes impossible the heavily ideological forms of gendered identification that Mulvey critiques in her theoretical work. In fact, the style of filming makes *any* identification difficult. The decidedly non-anthropomorphic<sup>95</sup> movement of the camera means that we have no surrogate, and also relieves the female bodies of their assignment as special visual objects. This clearly has interesting implications for the gendering of the gaze. More pertinently, however, this affects the possibilities for thinking about motherhood as it does not align the viewer with the child. As I have argued throughout this thesis, the child is, after all, deeply culturally formulated as the ideal subject through which ideas of self are often mediated, and this leads to mothers in film being endlessly cathected in their objectification through such implicit aesthetic and narrative identification with this figure. Mothers therefore tend to be explained as poor or

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<sup>95</sup> Feminist film theorists have linked the 'anthropomorphism' of the visual mechanics of classical cinema with gender; 'Moreover, insofar as the apparatus is anthropomorphized (insofar as the camera is associated with human sight and the tape recorder with human hearing), it assumes a paternal shape' (Kaja Silverman: 1988: 28).

perfect objects in relation to the effects of their behaviour on this child-self-subject rather than as legitimate selves. The Louise shots, however, do not simply transfer identification from the child to the mother, but resist such identification altogether, creating an equality of presence between the characters (mothers and children), the viewer and the filmmaker (represented by the camera), in which none dominate. This moves the film towards *intersubjectivity*, in which all figures are entitled to personhood, without necessitating conflict, and in turn, presents the possibility of representing mothering relations as intersubjective.

*L'Opéra Mouffe* and *Riddles of the Sphinx* both directly apply feminist theory on motherhood to filmmaking, resulting in representations of mothering subjectivities that feel creative and compelling, affirming a wealth of possibilities for expressing and experiencing motherhood, without universalising. Both films invoke cultural commonplaces and conventional narrative and aesthetic mechanics of symbolising motherhood only to draw attention to their insufficiency as expressions of mothering relations and experiences. Furthermore, rather than violent ruptures of a thick and potent machinery, these deconstructions quite often resemble a conspiratorial waving away of the mist, letting the spectator in on the joke that those who use the feminine mask, and all the drag artists of ideal motherhood, know: that such images have always been chimerical. Instead, these films place motherhood always in excess of its external discourses. Their embodiment of the mothering subject is not done through a sleight of hand trick, replacing the king of hearts with the queen in the blink of an eye, positioning a mother as the subject of narrative at the expense of all other subjects and keeping hierarchical structures intact. Rather, Varda and Mulvey and Wollen make thoughtful and creative use of the richness of film as a medium to call the viewer to critical awareness through vision, sound and touch in order to reconsider the presence of mothering subjects and bodies in the world. Of course, it must be kept in mind that, as experimental art cinema, these films are able to be extremely bold and innovative, but will inevitably address a more limited audience than commercial fiction film. If understanding of mothering subjectivities is to progress more widely, then feminist ideas on content and aesthetic should filter through to mainstream screen media. In this case, what these films offer is the possibility of representing and thinking about motherhood intersubjectively. The stricture of good/bad mothering models results from the assumption of mothering relations as adversarial: the fiction that there is only

*one* available subjectivity over which the mother and child are in competition in the symbolic. Removing representation from this dogma means inviting the possibility of multiple complex stories, responses and personalities that, like mothering relations, need not inevitably end in tension. Reconsidering the position of the figural child as the 'natural' storyteller, focaliser and point of subjective empathy and identification in mothering relations is an important foundational act in the recognition of such intersubjectivity.

## Conclusion

In 2017, a new adaptation of Margaret Atwood's 1985 dystopian feminist novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, was aired on television across the world.<sup>96</sup> Compelling and well-made, the show was consistently praised by international audiences, critics and awards panels. What is particularly striking about the impact of this series, however, is how a work of screen media resonated profoundly with contemporary political imaginations, and was received by viewers across the world as offering a powerful arsenal of images and language through which to express anger at the treatment of women in today's societies. Set in the fictional (but disturbingly familiar) Republic of Gilead, the adaptation vividly and bitterly depicts Atwood's vision of a USA taken over by an oppressive self-styled puritanical regime in the midst of a global population crisis. The few remaining fertile women are forced into sexual and reproductive slavery and distributed as property amongst the elite class of patriarchal 'Commanders' to conceive children that will be raised by their Wives. Particularly chilling is how the fertile women (Handmaids), whilst being tortured, controlled, imprisoned and mentally and physically abused, are constantly told how 'blessed' and lucky they are, under the auspices of reverence for motherhood as a woman's (only) sacred duty and destiny. Though Atwood's novel has been in print for over three decades, and another film version of the story was released in 1990, the 2017 series has had a particularly strong cultural impact not only because of its quality, but because of its timeliness. The advances of online platforms and social media have made film and television and its cultural discussion widely accessible to a global audience, and, in an era in which much of Europe is united in anxiety over the resurgence of far-right political groups and nationalist sentiment, humanitarian and refugee crises, and international repercussions of political tensions in the USA, it is not hard to see why so many commentators have held this recent work up as a grimly telling articulation of ongoing issues of society and gender.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Originally aired on the American channel Hulu, the series was broadcast by Channel 4 in the UK and OCS in France.

<sup>97</sup> To give a few examples from France and the UK, for instance: Jessica Valenti, (2017), 'The Handmaid's Tale is timely. But that's not why it's so terrifying', Sam Wollaston, (2017) and 'The Handmaid's Tale review – no television event has hit such a nerve', both in *The Guardian*, Christopher Hooton, (2017), 'At the 2017 Emmys, political art caught up with political sentiment' in *The Independent* and Isabelle Mougere, (2017), '« La Servante écarlate », la série qui dérange l'Amérique de Donald Trump' [“The Handmaid's Tale”, the series that upsets Donald Trump's America] on *TV 5 Monde*.

The problems the series depicts concerning the treatment of women are all deeply rooted in the fixed idea of women as mothers, and in a specific construction of motherhood. The idealised figure of the child is consistently eulogised, culminating in a scene set in a golden banquet hall at an international reception, in which the ‘children of Gilead’ are paraded in front of foreign ambassadors to demonstrate the nation’s most valuable ‘product’ as well as its strength and posterity. Whilst the Handmaidens are forced into biological motherhood (their awful treatment justified as a question of the national good), social mothering is the strict ambit of the Wives, who are positioned as ideal moral ‘mothers of the nation’; all the women, however, are expected to sacrifice their autonomous desires and identities to the ideological project of the nation as manifested in ‘its’ children. The series presents maternal oppression in terms that are viscerally extreme and unambiguous. As one commentator wrote in *The Guardian*, however, it is the timelessness of the underlying issues that make the representation so powerful:

Much of the show feels familiar in today’s political climate: children being wrenched from their parents’ arms at borders. A lesbian tortured in order, she’s told, to cure her unnatural appetites. Women forced to carry pregnancies after they’ve been raped. [...] And after watching seven episodes, what’s been keeping me up at night isn’t the explicit horrors as much as how the show surfaces women’s fear of what everyday sexism really means. (Valenti: 2017)

The institutionalised sexism described in *The Handmaid’s Tale* – state control over reproduction, oppression and regulation of sexuality, limitation of women’s freedoms, the reduction of women’s identities to maternity, and the absolute subordination of women to children – are, after all, the issues at stake in this thesis. The precise political manifestations of such problems have of course changed since the passage of the UK Abortion Act in 1967 to the publication of Atwood’s novel in 1985, to the international and intersectional feminist movements of 2017, yet the underlying prejudices and ideologies that motivate them are similar. The 2017 adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, furthermore, is an important recent example of how representations in film and television can be used to powerfully engage with contemporaneous issues of maternal sexism. Since the series first aired, feminist campaigners in countries around the world, including numerous states in the USA

(Hauser: 2017; Loughrey: 2017), Poland (Stolworthy: 2017) and Ireland (Loeb: 2017), have used the iconic red and white Handmaids' costumes depicted in the show to make visual statements during demonstrations protesting bills aimed at restricting women's reproductive rights and access to abortion.

As well as reporting on these demonstrations, British and French media have similarly drawn upon the rich political symbolism of the series in order to criticise domestic instances of reproductive injustice, using the implicit or direct comparison 'like something out of *The Handmaid's Tale*' to succinctly communicate their sentiment to their readership.<sup>98</sup> Writing in *The Independent*, for instance, Laura Bates used precisely this phrase to condemn the pharmaceutical chain Boots charging excessively for emergency contraception: "We would not want to be accused of incentivising inappropriate use, and provoking complaints, by significantly reducing the price of this product," the company wrote. It's like something out of 'The Handmaid's Tale'" (Bates: 2017). In France, a writer for *Slate* similarly used the series to frame a critique of the pronatalist policies of the far-right political party Front National, who, under the leadership of Marine le Pen, reached the second round of the presidential election in 2017 (Bouazzouni : 2017). More general interactions with cultural sexism have been mentioned too; Kayleigh Dray, writing in *The Stylist*, for instance, praises the show's unapologetic depiction of menstrual blood as 'important for the world of TV because menstruation is so rarely shown on screen' (Dray: 2017). The content of the show and these demonstrations of its reception clearly indicate that issues around motherhood and sexism continue to resonate in collective social consciousness; the 2017 depiction of the mothers of Gilead as women whose mothering subjectivities are held in tension with a society that oppressively imposes upon them its own rigid fantasy of motherhood and idolises the figure of the child-as-future, has struck a nerve. This not only shows how the issues at stake within this thesis continue to be crucial questions for contemporary feminist thought, but also points to the capacity of screen media as powerful discursive spaces in which to

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<sup>98</sup> For instance, Laura Bates, (2017), 'Boots is charging women high rates for the morning after pill because they think we might use it 'inappropriately' if it's cheap' in *The Independent*, Hadley Freeman, (2017), 'Why not just ban women? The Republican dress code is straight out of the Handmaid's Tale' in *The Guardian*, Dorothee Barba, (2017), 'The Handmaid's Tale: de l'intérêt d'envisager le pire' ['The Handmaid's Tale: on the interest in imagining the worst'] in *France inter* and Nora Bouazzouni, (2017), 'Pourquoi « La Servante écarlate » nous fait-elle si peur ?' ['Why does "The Handmaid's Tale" scare us so much?'] in *Slate*.

articulate, explore and criticise social constructions of motherhood. As has been shown throughout this thesis, film can be used both to normalise and to challenge such constructions.

I began this thesis with the premise that the imagination and figure of the child – as described emblematically in Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) – is accorded a privileged position as the ideal subject of culture, and that this construction of the child-as-subject generates the supportive and subordinate mother-as-object. This oppression of the mother specifically as a by-product of the reification of the child had, I felt, been given insufficient critical attention, and it was one of the aims of my thesis to investigate this idea further. It was also my contention that this hierarchical ideology would condition representations of family in French and English cinema, through implicit identification with the (imagined) child-as-subject, and that this could be instructive in understanding the considerable absence of mothering subjectivities within the body of films at hand. At the conclusion of my research, I still believe this to be a fair evaluation to some extent; that is to say, the bodies of films that I have studied for this dissertation have tended to demonstrate this pattern itself, or else a critical awareness of it. In many cases, however, I encountered a great deal of nuance and complexity in relation to this idea. Many of the films, and particularly those that focused on masculinity and male protagonists as ruling concerns, were largely complicit with and enforced the hierarchy of sons over mothers, reaffirming the imagination of mothers as either supportive objects with little sense of self, or obstructive presences to be overcome (with both paths structured on the subjectively absent mother as its ideal). This was largely the case for the representation of mothers in the films discussed in my opening case study and in Chapter 1.1, which demonstrated the persistence of such ideology, and could be said to enact it prescriptively. However, a further outcome of my research that was both surprising and encouraging was the substantial number of films that engaged with the same ideological pattern as *description*, and produced critical readings of the social objectification of mothers and motherhood. This was exemplified particularly through my discussion of Godard and Varda in Chapter 1.2, whose films presented the same discourse of maternal objectification in order to engage with it critically and ironically. As was demonstrated, these critiques are not straightforward, and boundaries between irony and complicity are often very

ambiguous. Nonetheless, this strain of self-awareness added an interesting and important dimension to such representations.

In Chapter 2, I looked at film representations that engaged with the theme of abortion and, in some cases, with issues of reproductive rights. This was an important area of investigation as, despite the considerable social significance of reproductive rights and the wealth of legal and political scholarship addressing the topic, remarkably little attention has been paid to how these issues are dealt with and represented in cultural media, and particularly in film. As the intercontinental ripples of dissent in response to *The Handmaid's Tale* show, the various struggles over reproductive freedoms remain hardly resolved today. It was also important to develop my ideas on motherhood through looking at representations of pregnancy and abortion because this is a particularly significant discourse in which the subjectivity of women and mothers is pitted more or less directly against that of the *idea of* the child (as opposed to a manifest representation of an actual child). This quite clearly seemed to be the case within the political polemic of reproductive rights, and my research into the abortion debates in France and the UK suggested this polarisation between the personhood of women (as mothers) and that of as-yet imagined children as a formative ideological tension in both of these dialogues.

Given the extent to which scholarly and political discussion of abortion tends to focus on these poles, my expectation was that the same moralising binary would inform film representations of abortion. What I found, however, was that the films told quite a different story. Notwithstanding a minority of films that demonstrate a clear pro-choice feminist agenda (which are significant in their own way), the majority of film narratives of abortion were in fact far more ambivalent and nuanced than I expected. The ideology of the child-as-subject was certainly still present in many cases, and usually manifest in the theme of punishment for the privileging of the self and sexual desire over the order of futurity and family, but this usage was directed at men as well as women characters. Though the most prominent voices in abortion debates tend either to roundly condemn women who terminate pregnancies or to lionise choice, such definitive attitudes were rarely evident in the film narratives. In the vast majority of cases, some (and often a substantial degree of) sympathy was demonstrated toward women characters undergoing abortions or making reproductive decisions; such decisions were, furthermore, almost always within the contexts of

wider narratives and characterisation rather than acting as leading events. The pertinent question instead emerged as one of victimisation and its uses and excesses within these representations. Overall, however, mothering subjectivities were not as absent as I expected from representations of abortion, or at least not in the way that I expected. Whilst prominent political and social debates on abortion continue to be largely organised by the polarity of pro- and anti-choice, often operating within an abstract ideological discourse, my findings in this chapter demonstrate how cultural representations have tended to offer a different representation of abortion and reproduction *as experience* rather than as a moral question. Within this, there remains an important issue of absence and agency relating to the depiction of female suffering, yet it was both important and interesting to see how, during a key period for reproductive politics in both countries, representations in film related imaginations of abortion, unplanned pregnancy and (through these) motherhood that were subtler and more nuanced than suggested by broader political invectives.

In Chapter 3, writing on ‘mothering in the margins’, I looked at films from my period of study that engaged with various representations of mothering subjectivities that were in some way ‘outside’ of dominant ideological discourses of motherhood (as demonstrated in my introduction and first chapter), as well as overtly feminist filmmaking that problematised this discourse through the assertion of a mothering subject *per se*. This is an area in which substantial progress has been made in the decades since my period of inquiry; to take only the past few years, pioneering television shows such as *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Orange is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013 – present) have demonstrated how screen media can offer rich, challenging and non-homogenising representations of mothering relations and identities, as well as the high level of enthusiasm amongst contemporary audiences for such representations. Of course, this is not to say that more conventional ideological imaginations of motherhood are no longer visible in popular screen media (far from it), but rather to demonstrate an increasingly visible deconstructive trend toward such ideas. For the films from my period of study, the productive possibilities of representations of marginalised mothering subjectivities seemed more limited; kinships of Otherness are frequently absent from the British and French film canons of the time, and where they do occur, their narratives are often characterised by social struggle and erasure, pervaded by a sense of preordained impossibility, and often by figural or literal death.

As explained within the chapter, this can be illuminated through the ideology of the child-as-subject and reproductive futurity, and can instructively articulate the exclusivity and prejudices of this discourse. Whilst productive expressions of resistance occur in glimmers (which, whilst contextually radical, generally do not manage to produce lasting counter-discourses), these representations were highly useful and interesting in describing the problem of absent mothering subjects from a different perspective, indicating the excesses and erasures of dominant motherhood discourses and building a powerful awareness of the complexities and plurality of mothering subjectivities within and across cultural experiences. This deconstruction and diversifying of mothering identities extended to Chapter 3.2, for which I looked at active applications of feminist theory to filmmaking practice and representations of mothering subjectivities. As purposefully intense sites of critique, experimentation and creative expression, these films are rich in representational possibilities and engage in a meaningful and self-conscious way with heterogeneous experiences of mothering subjectivities; however, this avant-garde intensity also limits their commercial appeal and mass-accessibility in comparison with narrative cinema. What is underpinned throughout Chapter 3, however, is the importance of disengaging from an adversarial and hierarchical understanding of mothers and children in which only one can be a subject, in order to move towards articulations of maternal narratives in which mothering and mothered subjects can both be present.

What has emerged from this research project, then, is a complex picture of (the absence of) mothering subjectivities in English and French film in the 1960s and 1970s. On the one hand, my research certainly confirmed a trend amongst some films toward privileging the child or young man as sole cultural subject, making the mother absent through dismissing her as an object, according to the entrenched narrative stereotypes of the 'good' or 'bad' mother. On the other hand, coexistent with this more expected pattern was a substantial body of cinema (crossing various genres and movements) that recognised the absence of possibilities for mothering subjectivities in cultural representation and in society, and engaged thoughtfully with this problem. Despite the fact that the absence of mothering subjects remains a thoroughly pervasive theme, therefore, it is a theme presented far more critically, when taking this body of cinema as a whole, than I had at first anticipated. Many of the films describe various problems of expression and self-realisation faced by mothering (or potentially

mothering) subjects in their contemporaneous societies and cultures, and some even go further by engaging in a representational struggle between absence and self-articulation, pushing towards redefinitions of narrative and aesthetic organisation that allow for richer mothering presences. Through further research, it would be interesting to see how much and how little has changed in the intervening forty years. Instances of screen media that represent mothering subjects as complex characters, or that represent parenting outside of the married heterosexual couple, are increasing, but there remains much work still to do. What I hope to have contributed in this thesis is a critical analysis of some of the endemic ideological obstacles surrounding the representation of mothering subjectivities, as well as demonstrating some of the counter-strategies against this absenting imagination.

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## Filmography

- 2 ou 3 Choses que Je Sais d'Elle*, 1967, directed by Jean-Luc Godard, France, Argos Films, Anouchka Films, Les Films du Carrosse
- Les 400 Coups*, 1959, directed by François Truffaut, France, Les Films du Carrosse, Sédif Productions
- Alfie*, 1966, directed by Lewis Gilbert, UK, Lewis Gilbert and Sheldrake Films
- Anatomie d'un Rapport*, 1975, directed by Luc Moullet and Antonietta Pizzorno, France, Les Films Luc Moullet
- À Bout de Souffle*, 1960, directed by Jean-Luc Godard, France, Les Films Impéria, Les Productions Georges de Beauregard and Société Nouvelle de Cinématographie
- Le Bonheur*, 1965, directed by Agnès Varda, France, Parc Film
- Cathy Come Home*, 1966 [television film], directed by Ken Loach, UK, BBC
- La Chamade*, 1968, directed by Alain Cavalier, France and Italy, Les Films Ariane, Les Productions Artistes Associés and Produzioni Europee Associate
- Cléo de 5 à 7*, 1962, directed by Agnès Varda, France, Ciné Tamaris and Rome Paris Films
- Le Corbeau*, 1943, directed by Henri-Georges Clouzot, France, Continental Films
- Les Cousins*, 1959, directed by Claude Chabrol, France, Ajym Films, Société Française du Cinéma pour la Jeunesse
- Un Cœur Gros Comme Ça*, 1961, directed by François Reichenbach, France, Les Films de la Pléaïde
- Daguerrotypes*, 1976, directed by Agnès Varda, France, Ciné Tamaris, Institut National de l'Audiovisuel and Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen

*Darling*, 1965, directed by John Schlesinger, UK, Joseph Janni Production, Vic Films Productions and Appia Films Ltd.

*Une Femme en Blanc se Révolte*, 1966, directed by Claude Autant-Lara, France, Arco Film, S.O.P.A.C and Société Nouvelle des Établissements Gaumont

*Une Femme Mariée*, 1964, directed by Jean-Luc Godard, France, Anouchka Films and Orsay Films

*Georgy Girl*, 1966, directed by Silvio Narizzano, UK, Columbia Pictures Corporation and Everglades Productions

*The Handmaid's Tale*, 2017-present [television series], created by Bruce Miller, Canada, MGM Television

*Histoires d'A*, 1974, directed by Charles Belmont and Marielle Issartel, France

*L'Homme qui Aimait les Femmes*, 1977, directed by François Truffaut, France, Les Films du Carrosse

*Journal d'une Femme en Blanc*, 1965, directed by Claude Autant-Lara, France, S.O.P.A.C and Société Nouvelle des Établissements Gaumont

*Jules et Jim*, 1962, directed by François Truffaut, France, Les Films du Carrosse and Sédif Productions

*A Kind of Loving*, 1962, directed by John Schlesinger, UK, Vic Films Productions

*The Knack... and How to Get It*, 1965, directed by Richard Lester, UK, Woodfall Film Productions

*The L-Shaped Room*, 1962, directed by Bryan Forbes, UK, British Lion Film Corporation, Romulus Films

*The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, 1962, directed by Tony Richardson, UK, Woodfall Film Productions

*Look Back in Anger*, 1959, directed by Tony Richardson, UK, Woodfall Film Productions

*Les Lâches Vivent d'Espoir*, 1961, directed by Claude Bernard-Aubert, France, Athos Films, Groupement des Editeurs de Film and Lodice

*Marnie*, 1964, directed by Alfred Hitchcock, USA, Universal Pictures, Alfred J. Hitchcock Productions and Geoffrey Stanley

*Masculin Féminin*, 1966, directed by Jean-Luc Godard, France and Sweden, Anouchka Films, Argos Films and Sandrews

*Les Mauvaises Rencontres*, 1955, directed by Alexandre Astruc, France, Les Films Marceau

*Mildred Pierce*, 1945, directed by Michael Curtiz, USA, Warner Bros

*News from Home*, 1977, directed by Chantal Akerman, France, Belgium and West Germany, Institut National de l'Audiovisuel, Paradise Films, Unité Trois and Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen

*La Noire de...*, 1966, directed by Ousmane Sembène, Senegal/France, Filmi Domirev and Les Actualités Française

*Now, Voyager*, 1942, directed by Irving Rapper, USA, Warner Bros

*L'Opéra Mouffe*, 1962, directed by Agnès Varda, France, Ciné Tamaris

*Orange is the New Black*, 2013-present [television series], created by Jenji Kohan, USA, Tilted Productions and Lionsgate Television

*The Other Side of the Underneath*, 1972, directed by Jane Arden, UK, Bond

*Le Petit Soldat*, 1963, directed by Jean-Luc Godard, France, Les Productions Georges de Beauregard, Société Nouvelle de Cinématographie

*Philadelphia*, 1993, directed by Jonathan Demme, USA, TriStar Pictures and Clinica Estetico

*The Pleasure Girls*, 1965, directed by Gerry O'Hara, UK, Compton Films and Tekli British Productions

*Prudence and the Pill*, 1968, directed by Fielder Cook, UK Twentieth Century-Fox Productions

*Rapunzel Let Down Your Hair*, 1978, directed by Esther Ronay, Susan Shapiro and Francine Winham, UK, BFI

*Riddles of the Sphinx*, 1977, directed by Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, UK, BFI

*Room at the Top*, 1959, directed by Jack Clayton, UK, Romulus Films, Remus

*Réponse de Femmes: Notre Corps, Notre Sexe*, 1975, directed by Agnès Varda, France, Ciné Tamaris and France 2

*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, 1960, directed by Karel Reisz, UK, Woodfall Film Productions

*Sapphire*, 1959, directed by Basil Dearden, UK, Artna Films Ltd. and The Rank Organisation

*Smashing Time*, 1967, directed by Desmond Davis, UK, Partisan Productions, Selmur Productions

*Sparrows Can't Sing*, 1963, directed by Joan Littlewood, UK, Carthage Films and Associated British Picture Corporation

*A Taste of Honey*, 1961, directed by Tony Richardson, UK, Woodfall Film Productions

*L'Une Chante, l'Autre Pas*, 1977, directed by Agnès Varda, France, Ciné Tamaris, INLC, Institut National de l'Audiovisuel, Paradise, Population and Société Française de Production

*Up the Junction*, 1968, directed by Peter Collinson, UK, BHE Films, Crasto

*Vivre sa Vie*, 1962, directed by Jean-Luc Godard, France, Les Films de la Pléiade and Pathé Consortium Cinéma