

Popcorn Moms:
Decoding Representations of Motherhood in American Popular Cinema,
1979-1989

by

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ABSTRACT

“Popcorn Moms” is a socio-historical analysis of the ways American commercial cinema represented motherhood in the 1980s. The study reflects on the particular social conditions of the 1980s and how they contributed to a predominantly conservative view of mother’s roles in a large number of films. The main conflict identified and considered is that between caring for children and maintaining a career. Case study chapters on *Terms of Endearment* (1983) and *Baby Boom* (1987) offer close textual analysis to deepen the broader ideological claims.

The study examines a corpus of ten films including: *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979), *Ordinary People* (1980), *Terms of Endearment* (1983), *Mr. Mom* (1983), *Baby Boom* (1987), *Fatal Attraction* (1987), *Three Men and a Baby* (1987), *The Good Mother* (1988), *Look Who’s Talking* (1989), and *Parenthood* (1989). Formal issues such as structure, mise-en-scene, star theory and genre are examined on an intra and inter-textual basis.

Findings show that though the films display significant contradictions and offer numerous potential readings of the mother characters, the dominant or preferred reading is in every case conservative. Various representational strategies were identified which either resolved narrative conflict by re-inserting mother into a traditional domestic role, or expelled her from the family. In many cases, babies were used as cinematic devices to alert women of their misguided priorities.

Conclusion poses a comparison of the films to two family centered films which employ different representational strategies: *High Tide* (1987) and *American Beauty* (1999).

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For Cecily
who loved her Mother and her Grandmother
but who never got the chance to be a Mother herself.

“But what do we do with our lives?” Adrienne Rich

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Chapter One
INTRODUCTION

I still find the opening shot of Robert Benton's 1979 film, *Kramer vs. Kramer* arresting, even though I have seen it over thirty times. The last chord of the theme music fades, and the blackness lingering from the title credits opens a space for the profile of Meryl Streep's face. Framed in the darkness, pale and sad, angular features softened by the single source of light, she is a portrait, as distant as a goddess carved in stone. When the camera leaves her face and follows her eyes, the glow from a child's lamp covered in a piece of cloth illuminates more of the scene. She is rubbing the back of a little boy. She is saying "Goodnight." And "I love you Billy." When he says "I'll see you in the morning light," in response to "Don't let the bedbugs bite," the camera retreats back to the darkness, and with only her profile on screen again, captures the pain that fells her features.

After she leaves Billy's room, Streep's character, Joanna Kramer, fixes her face – now determined, glazed - and packs her suitcase. She sits on a couch and nervously smokes a cigarette, staring into the distance. A white blouse, a khaki skirt, the faded cream fabric of the couch, plain white walls, accentuate her paleness. She could be sitting in a mental institution. The theme music plays anxiously in the background.

When her husband Ted arrives home, Joanna announces she's leaving. She's not taking Billy. She's no good for him, she has no patience. He is better off without her. She has decided she can no longer be a good mother. She has to leave before she throws herself out of a window. And she doesn't love him (Ted) anymore. As she says these words, elevator doors close between her and Ted, and she is gone for the next hour of the film.

Kramer vs. Kramer was based on the novel of the same title by Avery Corman, published in 1977. Both the novel and the film spend most of their time portraying the poignant relationship that develops between Ted and Billy after Joanna leaves. The portrayal of a man's transformation from a self-consumed workaholic to a devoted and capable single-father had great social impact in 1977,

and even more so in 1979, when the film won five Oscars.¹ But it is the representation of Joanna, the mother, with which I am concerned here.

Meryl Streep won a Best Supporting Actress Oscar for her performance, though for most of the movie she looms off-screen, physically and emotionally absent. The distanciation and idealization established by the opening shot characterizes her role through the entire film. As is evidenced in a scene in which Ted boxes away shelves full of solemn black and white photographs of Joanna, she is more a symbol than a character. Whereas the novel spent the first 50 of its 400-odd pages describing in detail Joanna's reasons for leaving, the film grants her no such subjectivity. Others speak for and about her, describing her in their terms - terms useful for the film. When she does return, and initiates a custody battle for Billy, her dialogue sounds more like an exaggeration or mockery of feminist principals than the words of a struggling parent. The film vilifies Joanna for leaving, presenting her as, simultaneously, destructively selfish and psychologically unstable. Perhaps she won the Oscar because she played a quivering wreck; the Academy historically awards women for such roles.

Joanna Kramer is represented as a Bad Mother. She deserts her family and in her absence they suffer emotionally (they both feel abandoned and responsible,) and logistically (Ted has to juggle work/childcare and loses his job). The movie disparages her described need to escape the suffocation of domestic isolation and "find herself" in therapy and work. Director Robert Benton achieves this, in part, by contrasting Joanna to a Good Mother character, Joanna's one-time friend Margaret (Jane Alexander). Margaret becomes surrogate wife and mother to Ted and Billy after Joanna leaves. She stays home with her own children, and remains faithful to her husband even after he left to have an affair with another woman with children the same ages as his own. While Joanna divorces Ted, Margaret considers taking her negligent and abusive husband back.

In the pages that follow I will continue to interrogate filmic representations of mothers in a decade in which motherhood itself was widely contested and idealized in contemporary discourses. "Popcorn Moms" is an

¹ Best Picture, Best Director, Best Screenplay, Best Supporting Actress and Best Actor.

ideological, socio-historic analysis of the portrayals of motherhood in a small corpus of films, ranging chronologically from *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979) to *Parenthood* (1989). I imagine this study as part of an effort towards a “thicker description” of women’s position and location as mother, enriching the understanding of women’s situation in broader terms. I’m interested in the myth, and ideology that surrounds an *institution* like motherhood, in a particular historical moment, and also popular cinema’s ability to portray the unique personal and emotional details of mothering.

There is much work to be done in media and cultural studies regarding relationships between family roles and popular culture. Many diligent and thoughtful scholars have paved the way. Work by E. Ann Kaplan, Lucy Fischer, Suzanna Danuta Walters, Sharon Hays, Susan Faludi, Robin Wood, Graeme Turner, Robert L. Griswold and many others grounded and inspired this paper. As Suzanna D. Walters has written, “Motherhood as ideology, institution, and experience has been a central aspect of the feminist rethinking of the family,” (p. 142). In this study, motherhood is a central aspect of a rethinking of the family on film.

Stanley Cavell’s words from *Pursuits of Happiness* convey the spirit with which I conduct this study. “...to take an interest in an object is to take an interest in one’s experience of an object, so that to examine and defend my interest in these films is to examine and defend my interest in my own experience, in the moments and passages of my life I have spent with them,” (p. 7).

Historic Context

Between the years of 1979 and 1989, the institution, the idea, the *ideology* of motherhood came under scrutiny and debate in the United States. Profound economic, political and social changes, including the rise of the New Right, the presidency of Ronald Reagan and the Second Wave of feminism, produced confusion and disagreements about contemporary roles for men and women. Resultant anxieties were often deferred to the level of the Family. With increasing divorce rates, (see Appendix A) more single-parent and dual-income families, and couples living out of wedlock, during the eighties the question of how to

define the American family, came to reflect fundamental assumptions and worldviews of antagonists. "...the issues contested in the area of family policy touch upon and may even spill over into other fields of conflict – education, the arts, law and politics...the issues contested in the realm of family life are central to the larger struggle and are perhaps fateful to other battles being waged," (Hunter, p. 176). Opinions concerning changing women's roles, the legal and social status of homosexuals, women's right to safe abortion, and the growing demand for adequate daycare prominently filled the headlines of the nation's popular and academic press. "Marches rallies, speeches and pronouncements for or against anyone of these issues mark the significant events of our generation's political history," (Hunter, p. 176).

The powerful neo-conservative movement which came to be known as the New Right, gained momentum from its origins in the fringes of religious fundamentalism in the early seventies to find widespread acceptance in popular culture by the late eighties. Characterized by leaders like the Reverend Jerry Falwell, founder of the Moral Majority, and Phyllis Schlafly, founder of the New Eagle Forum, the New Right pronounced the woman's liberation movement the downfall of America, and fought for a "return" to the "traditional nuclear family."² "A wave of cultural nostalgia swept Ronald Reagan into the White House and precipitated a vigorous attempt to turn back the clock and reinstate the traditional family,"³ (Thurer, p. 289). Schlafly, for example, vehemently opposed the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) because it would take away the "marvelous legal rights of a woman to be a full-time wife and mother in the house supported by her husband," (Faludi, p. 239). But always there were profound contradictions. Schlafly's prominence and success did not come from sitting at home waiting for her husband to enjoy her pot-roast. She was a Harvard educated lawyer, author of nine books, and a two time congressional candidate.

But such extreme conservatism required liberalism to give it shape and meaning. It was because of the penetrating influence of Feminism that such a

² I put these words in quotation because history shows that the 50's "Clever" nuclear family ideal was never a reality for a majority of Americans. (Thurer, p.xxv).

³ Quite ironic, as Reagan had been divorced.

widespread reaction saw the “culture wars” being fought on so many battlegrounds. Opinion polls from the decade show that the majority of women believed the ideas expressed by leaders of the women’s movement positively effected their lives. A “Woman’s Day” poll conducted February 17, 1984, found a majority of women from all economic classes seeking a wide range of women’s rights. 68 percent of the women said they supported the ERA, 79 percent supported a woman’s right to choose an abortion, and 61 percent favored a federally subsidized national childcare program. The Yankelovich Clancy Shuiman Poll (October 23-25, 1989 for *Time/CNN*,) found that a majority of women believed the women’s movement made them more independent, and 82 percent said it was still improving women’s lives. Only 8 percent said it made their lives worse. Other polls such as The 1990 Virginia Slims Opinion Poll (The Roper Organization Inc. 1990) indicated that many women felt that the “women’s movement” had only just begun, that more needed to be done, and that it was important to keep pushing for change. (All polls cited in Faludi, pp. 463 – 464).

This may have been partially attributed to the fact that political rhetoric about the importance of mother’s role in American society did not translate into public policy or legislation to help women, especially the poor. In the first six years of the Reagan administration, while defense spending rose \$142 billion, at least \$50 billion was cut from social programs designed to benefit women. (Coalition on Women and the Budget, pp.5-7).

In his social history of the 1980’s, *Culture Wars*, James Davison Hunter characterizes the battle over public consensus on family issues as one between Progressives and Conservatives. As he sees it, most progressives believed the patriarchal family was both the symbol and the source of inequality and oppression for women. The National Organization for Women’s 1966 founding statement of purpose read, “We believe that a true partnership between the sexes demands a different concept of marriage, an equitable sharing of the responsibilities of home and children and of the economic burdens of their support.” (Hunter p. 181). Many feminists called for changes to the dominant paradigm, stressing that the only solution was a new conception of what “family” meant. Motherhood though, was a volatile issue for feminists in the eighties. It is

important to keep in mind that terms “feminist” and “conservative” are not and were not blanket categorizations that sum up the beliefs of individuals within those culturally constructed groups. Indeed various feminists vehemently disagreed during the eighties about the correct political stance on motherhood. British-born American careerist Sylvia Ann Hewlitt, for example, saw American feminist as denying the material conditions of women’s lives, of their struggle to carry the double burden of maternal and labor-force responsibilities. She advocated for a shift from focusing on equal rights and reproductive freedom to working toward better government support for working parents. Feminist essentialist Jane Alpert also advocated for change. She wrote,

Feminists have asserted that the essential difference between women and men does not lie in biology but rather in roles that patriarchal societies have required each sex to play...However, a flaw in this feminist argument has persisted: it contradicts our felt experience of the biological difference between the sexes as one of immense significance...female biology is the basis of women’s powers. Biology is hence the source and not the enemy of feminist revolution. (Schwartz, p. 247).

But regardless of such debates, progressives did agree that the family was a place where social change, in whatever form, had to be affected in order to achieve real equality for women.

Hunter described conservatives on the other hand, as viewing perceived “threats” to the family unit as threats to their way of life, their stability, and their faith. “Conservative Catholics, Mormons, and Evangelical Protestants generally view the survival of the bourgeois family as essential, not just because it was believed to be established in nature and ordained by God, but because it was believed to foster social harmony,” (Hunter, p. 181). He quotes one Evangelical as saying, “*Much of the conflict in the modern family is caused either by misunderstanding of or by the refusal to accept the role each family member was designed by God to fulfill...it is essential to family harmony that the wife submit to her husband’s leadership,*” (p. 181).

The mother in the eighties then, became a symbol of social change and anxiety, and a representational axis around which these contentious and

passionate discourses took place. Despite competition from other media sources, especially television, and after the early part of the decade, videotaped movies, Hollywood films still functioned as sites of such consequential interaction.

Women and Work

When Joanna Kramer testified during the custody battle for her son, she described the frustration she experienced as a woman married to a man who would not allow her to work. Once free of his spousal control, she sought employment, and at the time of the trial, boasted a higher salary than her ex-husband. The film makes it clear that Ted's salary was cut when he was forced to take a position quickly after being fired from his previous job, a situation caused by the conflicts of single-parenthood. While in some senses this conflict between them reveals the difficulty of *either* parent to maintain a lucrative career while handling childcare - a common female complaint here voiced by the father as he shoulders normally "maternal" responsibilities - in other respects it highlights Joanna's selfishness. She would rather have a job than be with her child. Her desertion of her family, her villainy, is thus associated with her desire to pursue a career outside the home.

Most of the films I examine in this study consider this conflict between mothering and career. In the 1980's, this was a central concern for the demographics of men and women pursued by Hollywood studios. While these films generally supported assumptions about the importance of traditional family values and stereotypically conservative roles for men and women, statistics show that more and more women during this period were entering and staying in the workforce. Therefore more and more viewers were resistant to such preferred readings.

The image of baby boom mothers pushing strollers through suburban neighborhoods belied the fact that from 1948 to 1960 the percentage of mothers in the work force with children ages six to eighteen jumped from 21 to 36 percent, while those with children under six jumped from 11 to 23 percent. These changes accelerated in the years that followed, and by the mid- 1980's the proportion of mothers in the work force with preschool children reached almost

60 percent, one – quarter of whom worked full-time, (Griswold, p.4).

While just 23 percent of married women in 1950 with children under six worked for wages, by 1986 that figure had jumped to 54 percent. In 1950, 28 percent of women with children ages six to seventeen worked for wages, but by the mid- 1980s, that percentage had climbed to almost 70 percent. In the 1970s alone the labor force participation rate for married women with preschool children rose nearly 15 percent whereas the figure for married women with children in school went up 12 percent. By 1993, two job families compose almost 60 percent of all married couples. (Griswold, p. 222).

Major motion picture studios like Columbia, which produced *Kramer vs. Kramer*, recognized the topicality of these issues and began producing pictures depicting families in transition, and mothers in crisis. My study examines ten of these films closely, focusing specifically on the ways in which mothers are represented. I have found some significant commonalities in the representational strategies, as well as many striking contradictions. Collectively, the films reveal that maternal ideologies were in flux during this period, despite persistent retrogressive, and of course often artificial, assumptions and myths.

In *Kramer vs. Kramer*, Joanna was punished and expelled, Margaret respected. The ancient good mother/bad mother dichotomy played out in eighties films as frequently as jokes about yuppies, and concerns about extra-marital sex.

Whenever we see a period of growth in women's rights and agitation by women for equality – for expanded definitions of their own lives – we unfortunately also see a concomitant backlash against women: warnings and threats. These threats and warnings are largely raised in the familial context (e.g. a working mother will make a bad parent. (Walters, p. 226).

Research Objectives

“Something that all of the [modern motherhood] discourses have in common is anxiety-which is precisely what one would expect in a period of great transition.” (Kaplan, 1992, p. 181). In the pages that follow, I examine these eighties discourses through representations of motherhood in Hollywood films.

By discourses I mean “clusters of ideas, notions, feelings, images, attitudes and assumptions that taken together, make up distinctive ways of thinking and feeling about things, of making a particular sense of the world.” (Richard Dyer as quoted in Turner, 1993, p.107). Film must be thought of as a social practice, a conversation between industry, filmmakers and viewers, a symphony of art and commerce. “In [film’s] narratives and meanings we can locate evidence of the ways in which our culture makes sense of itself.” (Turner, 1993, p. 3). How then did these disparate attitudes and assumptions manifest in commercial familial films of the 1980’s?

I’m interested in the situations in which these films place mothers; the choices they face; the amount of agency and power they are granted; the ways they are depicted with their children, their partners and their friends; and how they are judged by the outcome of the narrative, in terms of whether their actions are punished or rewarded. In other words, to “trace the outline of the maternal heroine and delineate the narrative and mise-en-scene she regularly inhabits,” (Fischer, p. 6). Motherhood myths are, simultaneously, in constant flux and bound by social norms resistant to change. By closely analyzing these and other aspects of representational strategies, I bring the social institution of motherhood and mothers themselves into the spotlight, exposing ideological assumptions and debunking stereotypes. In an era in which television and new technologies like the VCR and cable siphoned ticket buyers from movie houses, this analysis contributes to one piece of the historic puzzle. Hollywood struggled to stay profitable, presenting itself as mere “entertainment,” all the while persistent maternal myths quietly percolated through its stories.

Core to my study are the questions: How did American mainstream motion pictures from 1979 to 1989 represent motherhood, and what trends can be found in those representations? How did Hollywood negotiate the challenges to the status quo posed by feminism, in a decade in which feminism experienced a significant backlash? How did the social shift toward conservatism and individualism characteristic of the Reagan years, manifest in these films? And what does audience reception reveal about these representational strategies, and the gap between the imaginary American family and social reality?

I focus on a group of films released in America between 1979 and 1989 in which issues of motherhood are forefront in the story. These films address the nature of motherhood and the mother's role within and outside the family, problems increasingly at issue as more women entered the workforce and men began to share more domestic responsibilities. To be clear, a certain level of abstraction is necessary in this first chapter as a means to communicate general trends in the films studied. In no way do I wish to imply that "Hollywood" functions as a monolithic force, operating under a single ideology, nor that these filmmakers were consciously seeking to undermine feminism, (with the exception, of course, of Adrian Lyne, director of *Flashdance*, *9 1/2 Weeks* and *Fatal Attraction!*). In case study chapters on *Terms of Endearment* and *Baby Boom*, I will examine in greater detail the specific conditions of production and reception which contributed to the various potential readings of each film.

But first, a description of my corpus of films, some observations about the maternal myths that organize them, and an explanation of the way these themes support my thesis.

Corpus of Films

I am interested in the intersection of film and feminism during this era, and the ways maternal representations both reflect and shape contemporary beliefs about mothers' roles in the face of social change and challenges. Therefore, my core group of films includes melodramas and comedies, which present the family in such a way as to seem somewhat "realistic."

There is much to be learned from popular materials addressing a "mass" audience. E. Ann Kaplan writes, "dominant myths/fantasies/ideologies emerge most clearly in popular commercial texts addressing a huge audience and melodrama is precisely the form which contains the ingredients for mass appeal. Second, melodrama in the modern period is the form that has always most explicitly addressed a female audience, (Kaplan, 1992, p. 11). If, as Thomas Schatz has written, "a genre film involves familiar one dimensional characters acting out a predictable story pattern within a familiar setting," (quoted in Fischer, p. 6,) it seems crucial to me to investigate the particular one

dimensionality of mothers as it operates in melodrama and comedy, two genres with rich histories in feminist film criticism.

The notion of "realism" begs to be shattered. Popular response to these films was often disbelief that the realities of family life were so grossly misrepresented. "Sorry, but the ending to *Baby Boom* is even less palatable than those fake chocolate puddings for kids. It's the Hollywood message factory at its Mother-Earth worst." (Howe, *Washington Post* October 9, 1987). And yet, in the narrative and representational strategies these films employ throughout the decade, I have encountered a persistent naturalization of archaic assumptions about mothers' role and significance, revealing deep cultural anxieties about shifting gender roles. This is illuminating in both the context of the 1980's, and the present state of popular culture, where traces of these trends continue.

I looked at many films released in the eighties that in some way or another dealt with issues of motherhood. I narrowed my corpus to ten key films using the following criteria: All films take place in contemporary times in urban or suburban locations. All were produced by a major motion picture studio; and all feature recognizable stars. All are either melodramas or comedies or some combination of the two. And all of the films feature stories about motherhood in some way; mothers are central characters who drive the narrative forward. I specifically chose films that present themselves as holding a mirror up to the American Family and saying in effect, this is what you look like, this is what is happening to you. As a result, these films stimulated considerable response around family and maternal issues during the years in which they were released. Thus I was able to collect, in addition to film reviews, topical articles which use the films to illustrate points about maternal subject matter, in order to analyze reception. For instance, in an article for *Child Magazine* entitled, "When Fast Trackers Have kids: Can a Baby Mix with Business," the author wrote, "Remember the troubles that beset the high-powered business woman played by Diane Keaton in the movie *Baby Boom*...? The talents needed to nurture a child are at odds with those demanded for a fast-paced career." (Brooks, p. 88).

The films are: *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979), *Ordinary People* (1980), *Mr. Mom* (1983), *Terms of Endearment* (1983), *Baby Boom* (1987), *Three Men and a*

Baby (1987), *Fatal Attraction* (1987), *The Good Mother* (1988), *Look Who's Talking* (1989) and *Parenthood* (1989). (For production and box office data, see Appendix B).

I do not include certain films in which mothers figure prominently, such as *The Incredible Shrinking Woman*, *Sophie's Choice*, *The Color Purple*, *Tender Mercies*, *Places in the Heart* and *Witness*, or which explore complex issues of motherhood, such as the first two *Alien* films, because of their historic or fantastic settings. John Hughes 80's classics like *Sixteen Candles*, *Breakfast Club* and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* do not feature motherhood as central to the narrative, but focus on teen stories. Steven Spielberg's *E.T.* and *Poltergeist*, (in which he acted as "producer") are not included, despite their provocative portrayal of mothers, because of their generic situation within fantasy, science fiction and horror. All of these films, though and other such as *Author! Author!*, *For Keeps*, *Irreconcilable Differences* and *She's Having A Baby* factor into my findings in broader way, despite not being included in the core of films under closest scrutiny. Given more time and resources to pursue this project further, I would broaden my analysis to include these and other examples of maternal representation in the popular culture of the 80's.

I have chosen to examine Hollywood films because of their economic mandate to create narratives that appeal to a wide audience, and their widely examined complicity in the perpetuation of hegemonic belief systems - in other words, their deference to the "status quo". I am looking for the "culturally inscribed 'ways of seeing' that characterize certain historical periods," and, in their vast audiences, help shape public consciousness, (Walters, p. 16). For the purposes of this paper, "Hollywood" means films made and or distributed by a major studio (in this case Columbia, Paramount, Universal, MGM, United Artists: See Appendix B) with the intention of wide release, and with considerable marketing and distribution resources - that is, films in which business people have refusal rights over filmmakers. Hollywood films can also be defined in the negative. They are *not* independent. The representational philosophies of John Sayles, Susan Seidelman and Robert Altman, for example, evolve out of different freedoms and restrictions than those of the directors of the films examined here.

Commercial films, by financial necessity, and with historic reliability, aim to provide the audience a comfortable and identifiable depiction of family life and gender roles, satisfying the status-quo without ever presenting it as such, and always appropriating and neutralizing ideas bleeding in from the margins.

One thing that is striking, yet by no means surprising, about this group of films is its complete failure to represent the diversity that characterized American society in the 1980's. Aliens departing a spacecraft and coming across this stack of films would imagine American society as white, middle-class, heterosexual and invariably neurotic. "Under Reaganism there is a sense in which just about every social group was 'subordinate' to a dominant, white, conservative, male power block." (Feuer, p.5). In the 1980's commercial cinema was unable to represent many scenarios – single, sexualized, content working mothers; two parent families in which mothers operate on equal terms with fathers; successful challenges to patriarchal family values; and most strikingly, non-white, non-middle class, non-heterosexual, non-Christian families. Steven Spielberg's *The Color Purple* comes to mind as an exception, but was it the place of the king of mainstream Hollywood to tackle Alice Walker's black feminist tale of maternal struggle and abuse?

Feminist writers often struggle with this narrowing of the representational field. E. Ann Kaplan writes, "I assume that detailing the white middle class discourses is important as registering dominant social codes that in turn implicate (and indeed themselves construct) other classes and ethnic groups," (Kaplan, p. 184). Though I do not agree that these discourses are *dominant* in any absolute sense, I do think that the sentiments expressed in this corpus of ten films reflect ideologies of motherhood of the 1980's worthy of rigorous analysis. Of course there is something initially unsettling about analyzing so deeply movies that are so blatantly mainstream." "Their glibness and polish, their ability to excite the most accessible emotions seem to force them into a position that defies serious analysis," (Kolker, p.237). But it's that very defiance I believe, that demands a critical defiance in response.

In general these films present the mother in a state of crisis, indecision or conflict. In the cases of *Kramer vs. Kramer*, *Ordinary People*, and *The Good*

Mother, mothers are blamed for the family's troubles and expelled or punished in the end. In *Terms of Endearment*, *Mr. Mom*, *Baby Boom*, *Three Men and a Baby*, *Look Who's Talking* and *Parenthood*, mothers who left the domestic sphere or tried to raise their children on their own were re-situated in the nuclear family and "made complete" by the companionship of a man.

In the many films I watched for this study, men are often represented as experiencing profound change in their worldview, whereas women are rarely allowed to change (or if they change, it is to see that they should be mothers in the more traditional sense). The decade was especially fond of the fatherhood film in which men, assumed to be essentially incompatible with child rearing, rise to the occasion and become devoted, quintessential dads. *Kramer vs. Kramer*, *Mr. Mom*, *Three Men and a Baby* and *Parenthood* glorify the "new dad," while deeming the "new mother" problematic. The ending of *Parenthood* is especially bizarre. In the final scene all of the extended Buckman family convenes in a hospital waiting room because every woman in the family who's biologically able has given birth to a new baby. The message that mother having more babies will solve all of the family's problems, obviously has grave limitations in this era.

Female friendship is rarely represented in these films, and when it is it is often used as a device for weakening the women's character. *Ordinary People's* Beth Jarrett plays golf, attends cocktail parties and chats on the phone with her society friends when, the film scolds, she ought to be listening to and nurturing her troubled son. In *Kramer vs. Kramer* and *Terms of Endearment*, female friends of the protagonist act as deliberate foils, becoming one side of the classic "good mother/bad mother" dichotomy. Joanna Kramer's neighbor Margaret betrays her and fills in as surrogate mother/wife for Billy and Ted. *Terms of Endearment's* Emma Horton must indoctrinate to her strayed friend Patsy, divorced and childless.

These films became sites of discussion, disagreement, dismissal and identification around issues like the changing responsibilities of moms and dads, prominence of mothers in the labor force, increase of divorced and single parent households, and women's sexuality. Incorporation of that discursive interaction was crucial to my understanding of the various "meanings" of the films.

Methodology

A combination of feminist film theory, socio-historic contextualization, textual analysis and a mapping of reception through popular and scholarly criticism inform this study. In *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, (1986) Robin Wood writes,

Sociological criticism is often vitiated by an over-reliance on 'reflection theory': the overall movement of cinema reflects the overall movement of society. So long as one stresses the word "overall" I see no reason to quarrel with this...As soon as one gets to the level of specifics however, it proves far too simple: cinema is never monolithic, within the overall movement there appear cracks, disruptions, countercurrents, (p. 2).

To this point, I do two things: first, I limit the social issues studied to only those that factor prominently in this corpus of films; and secondly I complement and complicate claims made in the name of social reflection with relevant elements identified in the texts. I aim to achieve a harmony of detailed film analysis and social contextualization to avoid such simplification - or worse, "triviality." (Wood, p. 3).

The first chapter outlines some of the films' common representational strategies and maternal motifs, which affect the results which I have described. The two case study chapters offer thicker descriptions of this process, employing analysis of systems of signification like mise-en-scene, and star status, deconstructing the adaptation from novel to film, (*Terms of Endearment*), exposing the dynamic between filmmakers (*Baby Boom*) and filmmaker and actor (*Terms of Endearment*), and considering the role of genre. In these case studies, even as they support the claims made in the first chapter, I hope to dispel the notion of a "coherent text" and provide multiple potential readings. The final chapter considers this eighties trend toward conservatism in the context of two films which employ radically different representational and narrative strategies and seeks to imagine mothers on film outside of these culturally inscribed boundaries.

Most feminist film theory in the 1980's relied on Lacanian psychoanalytic tools developed in the seventies after the breakthrough work of Laura Mulvey

("Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen*. 1975,) and her followers. Calling attention to the power of cinema to position subjects differentially depending on their sex provided strong theoretical grounds for feminist attacks on Hollywood's manipulation of pleasure and desire. These early theorists initiated what has become a flourishing, essential field of social criticism. Most of the feminist authors critical to this study (Lucy Fischer, E. Ann Kaplan, Robin Wood, Marcia Palley, Sarah Harwood, and Sharon Hays,) employ psychoanalytic analysis in at least part of their approach. But as Cynthia Freeland asks in her entry "Feminist Film Theory" in the *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, "What justification does a specifically feminist theory have for adopting the patriarchal theory of psychoanalysis?...The dominant psychoanalytic focus has created a narrow framework for the analysis of subjects, pleasure, and desire, while alternative feminist accounts are not considered," (p. 2).

As my objective is to rescue the mother from the sidelines of cinematic representational strategy, I have never felt comfortable with an analytic strategy that presupposed women's starting point as "lack." As Kathleen Rowe puts it, the psychoanalytic interpretive paradigm "ties femininity to castration, pathology and an exclusion from the symbolic," (p. 41). For the purposes of this study, phallogentrism as an abstract oppressor is better understood in the social form of patriarchy.

To chart the reception of these films during the eighties, I have relied on reviews in the popular press, articles in various niche journals and magazines, scholarly critique, and interviews with directors and stars. Without access to spectator exit responses, I rely on publications from the years the films were made. Of course certain response was to "enjoy" and "not think too much." As a review of *Mr. Mom* in *People Weekly* in 1983 read, "Focus on the moments—not the muddled sexual polemics—and *Mr. Mom* can relieve people of all sexes of the tedium of their daily routines, domestic, professional or otherwise," (*People Weekly*, Sept. 26, 1983, p.12). But of course this attempt to lull movie-goers into submission under the cover of entertainment is never completely successful. As I will describe in my case studies, the contradictions within the texts of these films allowed for a variety of readings, expressed in a spectrum of reviews and

analyses. A detailed analysis of the marketing, distribution and theatrical release plans for these films is outside the scope of this project; here I focus more on the broad cultural context in which the audience and film are situated.

Finally, the motivation behind my approach is a continued interrogation of popular culture's treatment of women in all of their social roles. It is not always fashionable to maintain a feminist stance. I utilize this mix of theoretical methods to push toward complexity and "keep it political," (Wood, p.3).

Maternal Motifs

All of the films I have analyzed betray a concern to return the mother to an idyllic, domestic role, based on assumptions about a nostalgic vision of Mother. "Good motherliness" is a quality used as a moral indicator throughout the films, a standard by which all women can be measured. Ultimately these films undermine progress made by the women's movement by portraying mothers who pursue interests outside the home as crazed, depressed, guilt-ridden, regretful, conflicted, harried or lonely. In *Baby Boom*, J.C. Wiatt throws temper tantrums, puts her child up for adoption only to take her back, and finally collapses in a histrionic anxiety attack. In *Kramer vs. Kramer*, Joanna Kramer threatens suicide and moves across the country from her husband and child to find a job and a therapist. In *Parenthood*, Dianne Wiest's character, Helen, kicks her pregnant daughter out of the house only to beg her to come back, and dates her alienated son's biology teacher because he wants her to. These films exploit the anxiety located in the gap between idealized Mother and real-life mom, failing to represent the goals, let alone the spirit, of the 70's liberation movements. Box office returns, especially for *Fatal Attraction*, which grossed \$156,645,693, (boxofficemojo) showed this message struck a chord with large segments of the population, however critics might have disagreed.

An article entitled "Career Women Lash Out" from a 1988 issue of *The American Spectator* reads,

As portrayed by Diane Keaton, *Baby Boom's* J.C. is the corporate woman as high-strung neurotic, while Glenn Close turns *Fatal Attraction's* Alex into a modern Medea. The ways in which their creators reduce J.C. and Alex from confident professionals to

quivering wrecks and the barely concealed glee with which audiences are greeting this spectacle, reveal that popular culture has declared war on the professional woman, (Podhoretz, p. 28).

Baby Boom and *Fatal Attraction* are not the only films in which we can observe this "backlash". In *Mr. Mom*, Caroline Butler, (Teri Garr) is portrayed as professional as the lint on her son's infamous "woobie." Hired as an advertising executive after her husband gets laid off, she embodies the eighties traditionalist notion that motherhood and work are incompatible. In the boardroom she picks up other people's food wrappers, on the company jet she cuts her boss's meat. *Terms of Endearment* portrays the career woman unworlly Emma meets on her visit to New York as selfish, callous, unrefined bitches. Feminism these films imply, is the enemy.

The language of war is repeatedly applied to the family and motherhood debate during the eighties. Ronald Reagan was especially fond of evoking a battle cry when rallying the country to his conservative camp. "It feels as if the reinforcements have just arrived!" he proclaimed to a standing ovation from Concerned Women for America, an ultra-conservative activist group which lists among its causes "protecting the rights of the unborn, opposing school-based health clinics that distribute contraceptives, fighting to the Equal Rights Amendment, and curtailing sexual promiscuity," (*Christianity Today*, 1987, p. 35).

In *Listen America!* his treatise describing the devastation wreaked on America by the women's movement, Jerry Falwell writes that feminists had launched a "satanic attack on the home," and that he wanted to "bury the Equal Rights Amendment once and for all in a deep dark grave," (Faludi, p. 232). This battle imagery contributed to the sense that the ideological differences were creating a "crisis," and that mothers who believed that they could resist traditional roles would become casualties of the war. Though such extreme metaphors were for the most part contained to the far left and right, the clamor of battling armies trickled down to popular culture and contributed to the instability functioning in these films.

Motherhood in Crisis

The notion of “motherhood crisis” in the 1980’s can be understood through a number of different manifestations and theories. In *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, Sharon Hays describes it as a clash between an ideology of “intensive mothering” and an ideology of “personal profit.” “Intensive mothering,” dates back to the nineteenth century, when the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism dictated a clear ideological and practical separation between life in the home and life in the world...“with women responsible for one sphere and men responsible for the other.” (Hays, p. 3). Despite all of the monumental changes in the social and economic landscapes which made such separation irrelevant, this mythical mother continued to haunt the imaginary in the 1980’s. Intensive mothering describes full-time nurturing, selfless attention and expenditure of all resources on the child – stereotyped in the nostalgic construct of 1950’s domestic bliss and June Cleaver. Top selling child care manuals of the 1980’s by Dr. Spock, Terry Brazelton and Penelope Leach assume and promote an ideology of intensive mothering, providing long-term psychological effects as justification, (Hays, p. 57).

Hays demonstrates that both working moms and stay-at-home moms consider their children’s needs to be in every instance more important than their own needs, “despite the social devaluation of mothering and despite the glorification of wealth and power,” (p. 150). She writes,

There are significant differences among mothers – ranging from individual differences to more systematic differences of class, race, and employment. But in the present context what is most significant is the commitment to the ideology of intensive mothering that women share in spite of their differences. In this the cultural contradictions of motherhood persist,” (p. 150).

The basic assumptions that underly the ideology of intensive mothering function in every one of these films.

The issue of abortion, fiercely debated in the eighties, was another manifestation of this ideological conflict. “For pro-life activists, motherhood tends to be viewed as the most important and satisfying role open to a woman. Abortion therefore, represents an attack on the very activity that gives life

meaning. For pro-choice activists, motherhood is simply one role among many, and yet when defined as the only role it is almost always a hardship," (Hunter, 186). Abortion comes up in a number of films I examined as a means to distinguish "good mothers" from "bad." *Look Who's Talking* provides the least transparent and most radical example. The opening title sequence of Amy Heckerling's 1989 film, (released the same year as the Webster decision, which dealt a significant blow to *Roe v. Wade* by broadening restrictions that could be put on tax money to pay for abortions,) looks like a video that might play at a pro-life rally. Animated sperm giggle and call to each other as they race through a soft pink tunnel toward a large glowing egg. "Here I go!" they cry, "There it is!" "Come on, in here!" The sperm and later the fetus are given feisty and endearing personalities through the voice of Bruce Willis. The attribution of subjectivity not only to the child, but to the pre-child cell mass means intensive mothering must start at the moment of conception; and it colorfully animates the pro-life motto that abortion is infanticide and women who seek abortions are murderers.

Lastly this crisis can be understood through the essentialism/social construction argument. The New Right, represented in the eighties by people like Concerned Women of America's Beverly LaHaye, her friend and fellow activist Phyllis Schlafly, the Moral Majority's Jerry Falwell, and President Ronald Reagan, believed motherhood was essential to the nature of every woman. In fact it is only through the efforts of feminism that this assumption was ever held up to scrutiny and became a part of public discourse. For much of American's history women's ability to give birth and nurse their babies led to the unchallenged assumption that women's primary role in life was to procreate and rear dutiful citizens. To this day, this assumption has a tight grip on not only our society, but much of the world. In a study of 150 suburban mothers in Sydney Australia, feminist researcher Betsy Wearing found that her subjects shared five "principals of motherhood: motherhood is hard but rewarding work; a "good mother" puts her children first; young children need their mothers in constant attendance; mothering is an important but low-status job; and most importantly, that motherhood is an *essential* part of womanhood, (Cannold, p. 99).

Feminists argued that motherhood, like family and gender, were social constructions, not natural states of being. The challenge is eloquently articulated in Simone de Beauvoir's ironic tone at the end of her chapter "The Married Woman" in *The Second Sex*. "Now it is precisely the child that according to tradition should assure to woman a real independence in which she is relieved of devoting herself to any other end," (originally published 1952, this quote from 1989 edition, p. 482). Forty-four years before Sharon Hays published her book on the subject, de Beauvoir was writing about the ideology of intensive mothering. Strikingly, de Beauvoir follows the chapter on marriage with one on motherhood, and spends the first fifty pages discussing the justifications for the social necessity of legalized abortion.

As depicted in my corpus of films, the family is itself problematic, the site of profound contradictions. It is simultaneously represented as natural and inevitable, and as a fragile, threatened and perhaps even antiquated entity. It was thought of a private space, but, as I have attempted to demonstrate, increasingly became the site of violent controversy and debate. These paradoxes "represent the continuum along which family ideology and family representations oscillate and along which the 'family narrative' is driven, (Harwood, p. 6).

The Illusion of Personal Choice

The films that I have studied exploit this notion of crisis as a narrative device to hasten and endorse the woman's return to a more traditional mother role. One of the main representational strategies I have identified is the promotion of the idea that feminism and motherhood are personal *choices*, and that women's choices can be judged, in terms of whether or not they are good mothers. In that sense, though the ideal of the stay-at-home "intensive" mother is always looming as a measure against which characters can be compared, the films did depict women often continuing to work. "Since working is a given, stories are no longer built around whether or not women have career but where it is situated on the spectrum of her life activities." (Haskell, p. 84). In *Baby Boom*, *Three Men and a Baby*, *Look Who's Talking* and *Parenthood*, mothers shifted their priorities and de-emphasized their careers yet did continue to work.

Significantly however, the work was often domesticated or pink collar, allowing for the established superiority of the male career path and power dynamic.

This subtle shift effectively transfers any responsibility for familial stability off of social and political institutions, as well as off the family as a whole, and places it squarely on the mother's shoulders. It also deflates the power of "women's liberation" by establishing that it be won at the expense other things held dear in a woman's life, (more dear, according to these films).

[The ideology] of the 1980's presents an image of beset womanhood, of striving career women suddenly faced with the deep truth of their bottomless need for hearth and home, hubby and the kids. In this age of *Fatal Attractions* and *Baby Booms*, feminist struggles and gains are reduced to the issue of personal choices, which we are now informed, have created a no-win situation; we can't have it all. (Walters, p. 199).

In *Three Men and a Baby* (1987,) modern day hedonists Peter, Jack and Michael (Tom Selleck, Ted Danson and Steve Guttenberg) come home one day to discover a baby in a basket outside the door of their most bachelor of bachelor pads. A note from the baby's mother explains that baby Mary is Jack's, and that as she is unable to care for Mary while pursuing a modeling career, she is leaving Mary in Jack's care. Though the plot deals less with the men's incredulity that Jack's lover would leave her baby than it does with the men's comic mishaps in baby-care, upon the mother's return, this issue of choice becomes central to the resolution. By *choosing* to play my three dads, (the "choice" for men and women is fundamentally different,) the men become modern day heroes. The mother, conversely, is reduced to quivering shame, a "bad mother," begging for forgiveness for leaving her child. In Roger Ebert's review he wrote, "When Mary's mother turns up, the men allow her to leave with the baby without even asking the obvious question on the mind of everyone in the audience: How could she have abandoned the baby in the first place?" In other words, how could she have made that choice, when the only acceptable choice is to abandon career for motherhood - even as dad parties away with his roommates - and limit personal options to those necessitated by the family. As in *Kramer vs. Kramer*, the mother's subjectivity is absent from the screen. Mary drops into the men's lives

and her mother is not allowed a chance to explain until the very end of the films, and even then she is presented as too guilt-stricken and confused to defend her actions.

In this way the narrative can insinuate the above-described “no-win situation” and indict feminism. The winning situation as portrayed in these films, comes with the choice to return to the nuclear family. In *Kramer vs. Kramer*, Margaret, (good mother to Joanna’s bad,) decides to take her husband back even after he left her for another woman. In *Mr. Mom*, Caroline Butler can’t wait to give up her job and return to the role of housewife even after successfully selling a major account (and fending off a lecherous boss) at her advertising firm. “Mr. Mom took on the issues of househusbandry and working mothers, but the treatment was slapstick and at the end, like all good sitcoms, the film sent mom back to the kitchen and dad on a job promotion,” (Pally, May-June 1984, p. 28). The entire crux of *Terms of Endearment* relies on this theme: Emma Horton (Debra Winger) is eighties Hollywood’s “true woman,” a woman who never considers working or even leaving the house except to search for her husband or go to the grocery store, who wants to get pregnant on her wedding night, who chokes on the notion of abortion or boarding school, and who remains with a husband despite his recurrent neglect and infidelity. Her choices are contrasted to those of the “modern women” she meets on the trip to New York that was added to the script in the film adaptation. While these women discuss abortion and nannies, she contemplates an early return to her husband and kids in Nebraska.

The device of “choice” allowed the films to portray mothers in many roles outside of the home, satisfying non-conservative members of the audience. This strategy originated in the seventies when supposedly “feminist” films like *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* (1974,) portrayed women thriving after escape from domestic isolation and abuse. Alice is allowed to pursue employment, female friendship and self-sufficiency with her son. Ellen Burstyn’s dialogue and performance characterizes her as master of her own universe – strong, confident, humorous, playful and able. She is granted and exercises agency... until the last third of the film in which those traits seem only a temporary surge of

independence, and she is reinstated in her original role as doting wife to the rugged Kris Kristofferson, and mother. The ending, as in the conclusions of *Parenthood*, *Look Who's Talking*, *Baby Boom*, *Mr. Mom*, *Terms of Endearment*, and *Fatal Attraction* re-situates the mother in the nuclear family, in this case at the expense of her personal dreams and her promises to her son.

The films position the choice of intensive motherhood as the only or best answer to the family's problems. The dilemmas in the diegesis are often the result of the woman pursuing work or interests outside the traditional sphere of maternal domesticity. J.C. Wiatt in *Baby Boom* collapses, predictably, because she is a single mother exhausted from trying to manage a house by herself, and more tellingly, crazed from too much energy spent on her career and not enough on a relationship with a man. Dianne Wiest's Helen in *Parenthood*, is also a single, working mother, and though the film aims to present her in a more equitable way than some earlier films in the decade, it can only conceive of closing the film with her giving birth to a new baby, (at the same time as her daughter gives birth,) and cementing her relationship with her son's biology teacher.

This idea of personal choice is complicated in the eighties when reproductive technologies, more advanced and available contraception, and women marrying later, did in some respects make motherhood, which in decades past had been an unquestioned foundation of women's lives, into a choice, "The fact that women should only bear and nurture children was simply a given prior to our own period...Anxiety emerges just because there is the 'question' of whether or not to mother, and of what sort of context for mothering one wants or deems essential," (E. Ann Kaplan, 182).

Summary

Though motherhood, Hollywood and the 1980's may not be terms often discussed collectively in academia, they've offered me a way to push through my own emotional reactions - those reactions which compel viewers to forget about ideology at work - and examine cultural processes through a group of seemingly forgettable films. In order to continue to expose methods of disempowering women, we must always already be in a process of interrogating those systems of

popular culture which are complicit even while appearing as innocuous as entertainment.

My hope is that this study will illuminate some of the contradictions with which women in my generation were raised. In many respects we had more “choices” than women had in previous decades. “One of the characteristics of the postmodern moment is the proliferation of subject positions that historical individuals occupy,” (Kaplan, 1992, p. 182). But this led to discourses and representations embodying contradictory ideologies. While we were encouraged to excel in school in order to pursue meaningful careers, and taught that we could “do anything boys could do,” we were, at the same time, led to believe that women who chose career over family were selfish and would end up lonely and bitter; and that marriage and motherhood, still the ultimate priorities, would naturally fulfill us as women. At the same time feminist messages indicated marriage and family were two strong walls of a patriarchal prison, and discouraged women from following the traditional path. Many women came to feel like they had no place in which all of society accepted them, not in the work world, not in the home and not in the maligned yuppie stereotype of the supermom, (who had it all at the expense of her sanity and her family’s happiness).

Many of these films had a great impact on me when I first saw them as a teenager. They affected my understanding of “family” and “motherhood” and of my position as a woman in society. Though my understanding at 14 of *Terms of Endearment* was undoubtedly very different from that of a 37-year-old black single mother, or a 25-year-old devotee of the 700 Club, Emma and Aurora Greenway became a fractional piece of my conception of motherhood.

What my research has revealed is that these films present and promote a conservative, traditionalist ideology of mothering. They all show the mother in crisis, and most depict an incompatibility between motherhood, career and happiness. More often than not, (though never outwardly) they blame feminism. These films manifested a determined ideology of motherhood, rooted in a nostalgic vision of neo-traditional domesticity, which operated in much of the decade’s familial discourse. Opposed to this was the lived experience of the

majority of American women, who increasingly wanted to, or had to work outside the home, who married later or sought divorce, who lived alone with children or with someone other than a spouse – who, in effect, saw right through the illusion of this nuclear family ideal. The cumulative, though not necessarily effective, consequence was a distortion of the complex concepts of women's liberation and of family dynamics. In this way, the films positioned themselves, in structure, characterization and narrative, to depict a return to traditional motherhood as the solution to women's "modern problems" and the salve for the family's difficulties.

Critical response often charged that these films exploited this notion of "crisis" and used it as a way to "put women back in their place." They were seen as representing mothers as conflicted and guilt-ridden in order to demonstrate that working, travelling or taking time away, created only stress and unhappiness for all members of the family. Therefore the films were able to attract segments of the audience aligned with progressive beliefs about motherhood by depicting mothers in non-traditional situations, and segments on the orthodox side by offering resolutions to conflict in conservative traditional terms. Along with the press and television, the films depicted the state of cultural change as a battlefield, pitting the stay at home mother against the working mother, allowing for the representation of the stay-at-home or more "intensive" mother as virtuous, and the working mother as selfish and unstable; making it similarly easy to resolve the narrative conflict by re-situating mother back in the home, happy at last.

I come to the subject of the representation of motherhood from both an academic and a personal perspective. My experience as a mother of two young girls has informed my analysis as much as my critical interest as a film scholar. As Raymond Williams wrote in 1958, "Culture is ordinary, that is where we must start," (Williams, p. 3). To me, this means that all art stems from the personal. Everything starts with experience and all art and all criticism must be granted an empirical perspective. In a sense, motherhood is as ordinary as anything else, as are the moral questions that surround it. In describing Hollywood's relationship with motherhood I seek to illuminate the continuous evolution of the Mother in

the cultural imagination. Film does not just reflect its social context but rather engages with it, and so these representations provide insight into why the family and mothers were foregrounded during this period, while the gains made by feminists in the sixties and seventies were fiercely challenged.

I love being a mother. My children have taught me to take myself less seriously, and to think about teaching as well as learning as a *modus operandi* for life. But I always feel the need to test the limits of expectations in my role as “mother”. The decisions I have made: to go back to work full-time, to quit my job, and to enter graduate school, attest to my need to pursue an active intellectual life outside of the sphere of my family. I want my daughters to appreciate that my inner life is just as important as theirs or anyone else’s, not only because I want them to grow up with a complete sense of self, but because I need to maintain a complete sense of self. I resist the growing swell of mommy fever that seems to have gripped the country since I have been old enough to recognize it, and yet my pride in being a woman capable of the miracle of motherhood helps define me, crystallizing a key contradiction. This study is my attempt to articulate that contradiction and consider its function in popular movies of the 1980’s.

The new conservatism was seen as a reaction to rising divorce rates, the Me-Generation and its cult of intimacy and sexual promiscuity. With Reagan’s blessing the glories of the good old days – which may or may not have ever existed – became potent myth. The resurgence of patriotic mood led to the production of films that strongly reaffirmed the centrality of the nuclear family. These films expressed nostalgic yearning for traditional values in reaction to both the domestic and the international problems that beset American politics at the same time. (E. Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders*, p. 152).



Chapter Two

TERMS OF ENDEARMENT

When I first considered doing research on cinematic representations of motherhood, the film that came immediately to mind was *Terms of Endearment*, (1983). Aurora Greenway and Emma Horton seemed to me the quintessential movie mothers; women who were allowed to really *mother* on screen, who experienced both pains and joys in family life, and who had a contentious but intense mother-daughter bond that saw them through all the hardship visited upon them in the picture. I was not alone in my love for this movie following its release in 1983. Starring Debra Winger, Shirley MacLaine and Jack Nicholson, the film was a commercial success, winning five Academy Awards and grossing \$108.4 million, more than *The Right Stuff* and *The Big Chill* combined.⁴ Based on his adaptation of the original novel, the film launched the big screen career of former television director James L. Brooks, who went on to direct *Broadcast News* (1987,) *I'll Do Anything* (1994,) and *As Good As it Gets*, (1997). It also sparked loud response in the press. "Scene by wonderful scene, *Terms of Endearment* may be the most emotionally satisfying Hollywood movie this year," (*Newsweek*). "Everybody loves *Terms of Endearment*, and Miss Winger in it," (*The New York Times*). "A more calculating and manipulative movie would be hard to imagine..." (*National Review*).

Terms of Endearment tells the story of Aurora Greenway (Shirley MacLaine) and her daughter Emma (Debra Winger); or more precisely, Emma and her mother Aurora. Their congenital attachments are the "terms of endearment" the film explores and exploits. These terms are tested and rewritten as Emma marries, has children, and moves from Texas to Iowa to Nebraska; and Aurora experiences a sexual reawakening with a retired astronaut who moves next door. The formal structure of the film follows Emma's lifespan, beginning

⁴ Boxofficemojo.com

with her infancy in the opening credits, and ending with her death to cancer. Sociologist Suzanna Danuta Walters has noted that the notion of life-cycle was popular in the 70's and 80's both in narrative work and in the social sciences. "The demarcations of a woman's life are set in stone here as moving from childhood intimacy ("bonding") through adolescence ("separating") and then to marriage and children, which supposedly bring a new form of bonding based on the daughter's new role as mother," (Walters, p. 204). James Brooks' film clearly announces each of the events Walters notes – he adds to the original story a bonding scene in which Aurora crawls into eight year old Emma's bed, and a separating scene in which Aurora and Emma fight over Emma's choice of husband. Editorially, Brooks builds narrative tension by arranging these events in opposition to the events in Aurora's life.

Emma's experiences as a mother, by nature of the script, the direction, and the acting, contrast dramatically with Aurora's. The centrality of motherhood to the narrative, and the distinct representational strategies utilized for Emma and Aurora make this an illuminating film for my study. "*Terms of Endearment* directly takes the family – its creation, constitution and regeneration – as its subject matter." (Harwood, p. 112). What I have found in my analysis, and what I failed to recognize when I saw this as a teenager, is that in its maternal or perhaps even feminine appeal, *Terms of Endearment* presents a regressive and contradictory vision of mothers. Brooks brought his comedic quasi-feminist edge from "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" to energize much of the interaction between characters in *Terms*. I still enjoy Aurora's feigned arrogance and veiled devotedness to her daughter, even as I increasingly see the manipulations of Brooks' direction. Though the focus on women's lives and the joys and trials of motherhood clearly satisfied a hunger amongst American viewers and heralded it as a progressive woman's film, *Terms*' limited vision of the mother's role ultimately linked it to other films of the decade inclined towards a conservative, patriarchal conception of family life. However, like all of the films in my corpus, *Terms of Endearment* leaves itself open to conflicting interpretations. In this chapter I will examine both what I see as the preferred reading, and the resistant readings evident in reception texts.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 1984 “the majority of women now work outside the home.” (Jordan, p. 133). A study reported in the *Monthly Labor Review* in 1983 reported that three of every five American married-couple families had at least two wage earners, (Swanson-Kauffman, p. 2). Pregnant women continued to work more than ever, comprising more than 9% of the 14 million women of reproductive age in the labor force, (Brown, p. 153). Economic necessity during the Reagan years, expanded opportunity - especially in low-level and “pink collar” jobs, and new attitudes mobilized by the women’s movement, resulted in a significant increase in the number of mothers entering or remaining in the workforce.

Within my corpus of ten films, all of the mothers except for Beth Jarrett in *Ordinary People*, Beth Gallagher in *Fatal Attraction*, and Emma work outside the home. Beth Jarrett (Mary Tyler Moore) submerged her maternal abilities beneath a silent river of pain and a superficial layer of ice (after the death of her oldest son,) which allowed her to function in her wealthy social circle, but not care for her younger surviving son. Beth Gallagher (Anne Archer) simply fulfilled one side of Adrian Lyne’s misogynist virgin/whore dichotomy - domestic angel to career-woman demon Alex Forrest (played by Glenn Close) - and was little more than a nostalgic symbol.

Emma is unique in this group of films in that she does not suffer from indecision or guilt or the “biological clock syndrome” much discussed in the yuppie eighties, and yet she confronts and defends her decision not to work in ways the Beths described above do not. She is represented as never having considered going to college or pursuing a career. This is a departure from the novel in which Emma (although unenthusiastically) pursues a degree in biology and has a job in a lab.

When Flap had gone away and her mother had called and she had peeled half the orange and not eaten it, she thought of a number of things she might do. She was a senior biology major, and there was all sorts of lab work she could be doing. She had a part-time job in a zoology lab and could always go over and prepare specimens when she wanted company. There was always company to be had in the lab. What kept her home was simply a liking for home. Perhaps it was an inheritance from her mother, for her

mother had a thousand possible outlets and never used any of them." (*Terms of Endearment*, by Larry McMurtry, p. 71)

James L. Brooks was best known for his television work on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Rhoda*, *Lou Grant* and *Taxi*. It is significant that in the early 1980's Brooks decided his first major step away from television would be a feature film about two conservative Texan mothers based on Larry McMurtry's novel published in 1975. Brooks agreed to make the picture for Paramount, but with drastic changes to the novel. So much did he change that some critics scoffed to call it an adaptation, and others wondered how he won an Oscar for best screenplay. Constance Speidel wrote in *Film Literature Quarterly*, "When I called the Washington-based novelist Larry McMurtry and asked him what he thought of the film, this laconic, politic Texan would only say, "Waall I like it." And after all, who can argue with success? Instead of thanking Larry McMurtry for "wonderful book,' as Brooks did at the Oscar ceremonies in April, he should have apologized," (p. 273).

Brooks spent four years transforming Larry McMurtry's four-hundred page novel into a script for the screen, a process he describes as torturous, (Dworkin, p. 26). In both the film and the novel Emma "respects likes and believes in what she's been set on Earth to do," (Pally, p.11). But the film defines her in stricter terms. On the night of her wedding to Flap Horton (Jeff Daniels,) Emma says as she kisses him, "I hope I get pregnant tonight." Happily uninterested in the world outside her battered screen door, Emma embodies sacrificial, intensive motherhood from wedding day to the day she dies. "Housewives are heroes too. Trouble is, *Terms of Endearment* slips fleetly from appreciation to endorsement – and that's a whole other kettle of fish," (Pally, p.11). Of course Brooks had no intention of alienating his audience by presenting an uncomplicated *ideal*. Emma is not too good to be true; she is no Stepford wife.⁵ She yells at her children in public, ignores her toddler to have a quick tryst with her husband, and talks on the phone while her children get themselves off to

⁵ *The Stepford Wives* directed by Bryan Forbes in 1975 depicted a suburban town of housewives being replaced by robots.

school. She can't keep anything clean or orderly, not her houses, her children, or herself. This is why Emma seems "real."

Both Brooks and McMurtry consider themselves adept at portraying the inner lives of women. "Though often praised for my insights into women, I'm still far from sure that I know what women are like," McMurtry writes with false modesty, "but if my hunches are anywhere near accurate, and if I'm not idealizing her, then Emma is what women are at their best," (Preface to the 1989 second edition, p. 7). In an interview for *Ms.* magazine in March, 1984 Brooks says, "Every girl I know said her mother drove her up a wall. And I'd say, 'She drives you crazy, so why the hell do you go over there every Thursday night?' Then I realized the truth – which is that this is the abiding relationship in your lifetime... You can do whatever you want with it, but it happens to be the truth," (Dworkin, p. 28).

In interviews Brooks often mentioned "truth". His concept of truth however, verged on nostalgia. John Lithgow, who has a small but significant role as Emma's lover Sam Burns, wrote in his "Diary of an Itinerant Actor" for *Film Comment* that the director attempted to recreate scenes from Norman Rockwell paintings when art-directing the filming in Iowa, (p. 30). Like Ronald Reagan and Beverly LaHaye, James L. Brooks believed that "true womanhood" existed somewhere in an idealized past, and that the only way to recuperate that trueness, that purity, was to recall a golden age of yesterday, repealing the changes to women's lives they found threatening.⁶

When asked in an interview for *Film Comment* to respond to charges that his movie was disturbingly manipulative, Brooks responded that he delivered nothing but straightforward honesty. "We don't ask [the audience] to feel sorry for anybody. We don't jerk tears. And it's not sugar-coated either. I think we serve truth, and I think we serve comedy. Truth first, comedy second," (Turan, p. 22). Brooks insisted that he uncovered this truth out in the real world, during five months of research talking to women of all ages in Texas. "So much of the movie came from the research I can't tell you," (Turan, p. 20). Though the novel

⁶ Beverly LaHaye is founder of the ultra-conservative Concerned Women for America.

is proudly rooted in Texas, the film's truth, Brooks decided, should speak to all American women. "What I started to find in River Oaks (Texas) were the things that were distinctly American. And I wanted the picture to be more about America than Texas," (Turan, p. 21).

Brooks' extra-textual insistence that he wanted his movie to mean something to all Americans makes the ideological implications of his representational strategies all the more pronounced. He also articulates, without intending to, the arrogant side of Hollywood's economic incentive to appeal to a wide audience. If Brooks believed *Terms of Endearment* spoke to a whole generation of women, how did they, and everyone else in the audience, respond?

Reception

As I have noted, *Terms of Endearment* performed successfully at the box office. Its reception from critics however, ranged from audience-savvy adoration to unveiled contempt. This range exposed the film's textual contradictions and demonstrated the lack of control any film has over its own readings, even a film with as determined a preferred reading as *Terms of Endearment*. The emotionally charged tone of many reviews proves how provocative maternal representations could be during the early part of the decade.

Some responses picked up on this idea of truth. Critics often judged the film's effectiveness by how realistically they thought the relationships were depicted. "Anyone who has grown up in a family will recognize Winger's amused tolerance for her mother's behavior; impatience tempered by years of love and devotion," (Cheney, p. 54) "... hackwork cheats about human truths, and so Aurora is, for comic purposes, either over-dependent on or excessively mean to Emma..." (Simon, p. 54). Others considered its socio-historic accuracy: "Some recent American movies have been trying to re-write post-war history, others to interpret it afresh. *Terms of Endearment* – as poorly written, edited, designed, lit and acted a film as I've seen this year – pretends that nothing of consequence has happened in American over the past 3 decades. This abstract quality of the film may be at the root of its popularity," (French, quoted in Harwood, p.113).

Reflecting on the 1984 Oscar nominations for *Film Comment*, feminist critic Marcia Pally described what she considered the more dangerous aspects of the affective realism:

The Motion Picture Academy has traditionally regarded itself as cinema's designator of quality, rewarding films for their topicality and penetrating point of view. But there's an underside to what the industry is calling progressive: a perspective that's conservative, often reactionary, and its surrounding gossamer of hard-hitting realism – just the things the pundits applaud – makes the business even more insidious...We can be seduced by the presence of complex, gritty "truth." As a film appears to tell it like it is, we come to trust it, to lower our skeptical guard and see it as a reflection of ourselves. Believing it, we're more apt to believe the "message" it peddles, (p. 28)

Though Pally raises a poignant question about the film's ideological motivations for "telling it like it is," she risks getting trapped in a media-effects argument. It may be persuasively argued that *Terms of Endearment* furnishes us with examples of mother/daughter interactions that contribute to our understanding of our own affiliations. This of course is part of my reason for including it as a case study. Yet the spectrum of reactions found in the criticism refutes any notion that the film peddled a single message. Rather, the complexity and interconnectedness of all of the potential meanings points to its significance in the intersection of cinema and family ideology during the eighties.

Much of the reception debated the merits of the film's depiction of the bond between Aurora and Emma. Their relationship mobilized particularly uneasy and contradictory discourses, in part because their closeness "worked against the [patriarchal] grain of familial ideology," (Harwood, p. 114, my addition). Often, the closeness of mother and daughter produced a repulsed reaction clearly brought on by anxiety in male writers. John Simon complained in the *National Review*:

In one typical sequence mother and grown daughter are exchanging confidences while lying prone side by side in the same bed. In back of their heads their legs can be seen intertwining in a sensual game of footsie. If this sort of thing chills you as it does me, you might as well hotfoot it out there and then," (p. 55).

Feminist writers on the other hand, sometimes described the relationship as not close enough. "This is supposedly a movie about not just a daughter, but a mother-daughter relationship. Maybe the male director didn't feel completely at home with the subject, for he hasn't dealt with it directly at all between Aurora and Emma. Throughout the movie they yell at each other, talk on the phone and giggle a little, but nothing particularly deep seems to flow between or even inside them," (Maxson, p. 4).

Aurora and Emma

There are two primary competing readings of the Aurora /Emma bond which can be supported by the text. To wade near the shore of psychoanalysis, the death of her father at such an early age (she was about eight,) and the infantilization of her mother, (represented by her multiple attempts to crawl into her crib/bed) prevented Emma from completely disengaging from her mother when she got married. (Here we can identify the film's address to a white middle-class audience; the understanding that mother and daughter would separate at the time of marriage does not apply to many ethnic groups). The film often suggests that the ties between Emma and Aurora are stronger than those between Emma and Flap. In one particularly revealing scene, Emma speaks on the phone with her mother while Flap lies dejectedly in bed where they had been making love. Brooks frames the shot with Flap in the foreground moping and Emma in the background speaking intimately with her mother. This intimacy especially bothers Flap as it comes the day after Aurora boycotted their wedding. Emma is able to get Flap to speak to Aurora and she quickly hangs up so she can attend to him, but the interruption is salient. Aurora continues to come between them, and as much as Emma is a doting wife, her loyalties to her mother are binding. "Emma, a beleaguered yet somehow radiant young woman...remains in her mother's orbit long after marrying Flap Horton, whom Aurora despises, and bearing him three children," (Maslin, p. C 18). Therefore, this reading implies, Flap is somewhat justified in going out and seeking other lovers, and even in refusing to fight for his children when Emma dies.

Another reading suggests that the mother-daughter bond transcends romantic love, or that romantic love is little more than a sharp path to motherhood. While the women's romantic relationships – with Flap and Garrett – prove unreliable and painful, the two women always have each other. “ In the film's opening scene, Aurora awakes her infant daughter Emma to make sure the baby hasn't succumbed to crib death, and this mother-daughter dynamic persists long into Emma's adulthood,” (Maslin, C18). “Difficult, vain, judgmental, Aurora has the makings of a monster. But if Emma finds her a pain sometimes, she also loves her,” (Ansen, 92).

Emma and Aurora also, this reading would continue, have other women, namely Emma's childhood friend Patsy Carpenter, and Aurora's maid of twenty-three years, Rosie. Analysis of the representation of the female friendships in *Terms of Endearment* is another element of the film informed and complicated by consideration of the adaptation from novel to screenplay. In the novel, as Constance Speidel notes, “Rosie and her husband Royce's problems weave in and out of Aurora's machinations, adding an element of drama to the otherwise frothy story,” (p. 271). Brooks diminished Rosie's role to little more than furniture at Aurora's house, (much as he did with Aurora's Texan oilman Vernon Dalhart played forgettably by Danny DeVito). In the novel, McMurtry richly described both Aurora's and Emma's love of Rosie, but the only time Aurora turns to her longtime friend and housekeeper in the film is when she learns of Emma's cancer.

Patsy Carpenter appears in every one of McMurtry's Texas trilogy with Emma, (*Moving On*, 1970, *All My Friends are Strangers*, 1972, *Terms*, 1975). The novels create a dense relationship dynamic between four recurrent characters – Emma, Patsy, Flap, and a character who does not appear in the film, the true love of Emma's life, Danny Deck. Emma also has a good friend in the novel named Melba, who befriends her soon after she learns of Flap's infidelities. But again, Brooks chooses one representative friend and reduces her to suit his purposes. (Melba does appear in an early version of the screenplay but never made it into the final cut.) In the most superficial sense women rely on and bond with each other, but the film limits and problematizes the opportunities for female friendships. Patsy may be physically present during many of the scenes

Brooks created to signify key moments in Emma's life -the night before her wedding, the night she announced she was pregnant, the day she moved, her trip to New York, and her funeral - but the cinematic representation of their friendship is fraught with conflict. Patsy becomes more Emma's foil than her friend. She constantly looks to her for approval, and never fully receives it. She calls her other friends "jerks" and tells Emma before she dies, "You're my touchstone." The audience is encouraged to understand Patsy as the one who never quite gets it right.

It is in a sequence featuring Emma and Patsy that the film's anti-feminist ideology boldly announces itself. Following Emma's diagnosis with cancer, Patsy invites her to come to New York for a visit. Brooks most blatantly associates Patsy with the depravity he sees in modern women during the New York sequence. Divorced and seemingly childless (though she has a child in the novel and in early versions of the script,) Patsy dates "Jews" with fancy cars, wears shoulder pads and Armani suits, and slicks her hair back. Even the very first time I saw the film the growing distinction between the friends' appearances struck me as indicative of their diverging alliances. During this particular segment, hair, makeup and wardrobe styling symbolically set the two women apart.

Patsy takes Emma to the River Café to introduce her to some of her New York friends. "Not like you and I are friends," she qualifies before they get there. Inside the restaurant Emma, in slouchy eggplant-colored knit separates, meets Patsy's polished and glamorous city friends. After failing to pronounce "Lisbeth's" name correctly, Emma settles into a comfort zone talking about her children. "Are you going to wait till she's in school before you go back to work?" one woman, Jane asks, admiring a picture of two year old Melanie. When Emma replies that she "never really worked", the table falls silent. The women stare at her, unable to conceal their shock or their disapproval. The shooting script describes it as "A half-beat of silent, shocked reaction." Till Jane says "firmly and democratically", "Well! That's ok." Meticulously coifed and professionally suited, these women are surely headed back to their own jobs after lunch, and the scene makes clear where their (apparently injurious) priorities lie.

Once these “well-groomed, seemingly sure of themselves contemporaries” (script) had been sent off in their taxis, Emma gets a chance to denounce the misguided women and remind the audience of who really knows what’s important in life. Gesticulating into the wind, with the river at her back, Emma incredulously lectures Patsy about how three of the women had told her about their abortions, two are divorced and one has her little girl in boarding school because she has to work for her job. One has a nanny, and oh, one even had yeast infection! Soon after, Emma cuts her trip to New York short to return to her family in Nebraska.

Not surprisingly, this scene sparked reaction. Susan Dworkin in *Ms.* magazine dismissed the “shallow caricature of New York working women,” (p. 280). The conservative *National Review* quipped “And there is throughout Emma’s best friend Patsy, who first has a marriage in Los Angeles to allow for some Hollywood jokes, and then unaccountably lives in New York where she can take the moribund Emma on a vacation for some New York jokes,” (Simon, p. 54-55). Feminists reacted angrily. “If you had any doubt that you’re not only supposed to applaud and admire Emma’s life but assume her choices as your own, a few scenes make the prescription patent...The contrast screams: who will rear the next generation of children if you women are spending your afternoons at board meetings and your days off buying Ralf Lauren suits at Barney’s; who will tuck the kids in at night if mothers expect to have sex lives too?” (Pally, *World of Our Mothers*). Robin Wood calls the scene “one of the ugliest moments in recent Hollywood films,” and continues, “Yet again, the alibi of realism masks ideology: the insidious purpose of [the] film is to suggest that the only alternative for a woman to being a ‘good’ wife/mother is to be duplicitous or fashionably desensitized,” (p. 206).

Later in the film, when Emma’s cancer has progressed to a point where she must make decisions about what to do with her children, Emma adamantly refuses to let them go with Patsy. She assures Flap that “Patsy really only wants to raise Melanie,” solidifying Patsy’s characterization as shallow and selfish. Emma’s knowledge that “she really doesn’t want the boys” condemns Patsy even more than Brooks’ earlier association of her with the monstrous women from

Manhattan. Emma even lies to Patsy before she dies, presumably to spare her feelings. When Patsy tearfully begs, "Is it terrible to say that I just can't stand to see your mother get her hands on that little girl? I'd just love to raise that little girl." Emma transfers the blame to her children. "I'd let you. But Teddy couldn't spare her." Thus while there is ample interaction in the plot between women, and while the "terms of endearment" refer more to female relationships than to female-male relationships, the notion that female bonding offers a challenge to *patriarchy is problematic*. There is enough to produce an ideological split and satisfy audience members who are looking for either kind of fulfillment, but not enough to conclude that the film promotes pro-women, anti-patriarchal readings.

Flap's negative characterization, solidified by Jeff Daniel's passive and puerile performance, provides further justification for the power of the mother/daughter bond. "As written, Flap is an indistinct character. It's never quite clear why Aurora can't stand him, or why Emma can," (Maslin, Nov. 23, 1983, p. C18). As in *The Good Mother*, a deliberately unsympathetic representation of the father facilitates audience identification with the mother. In that film, Anna Dunlap's (Diane Keaton) ex-husband's cold, calculating and uncommunicative demeanor prohibits him from ever finding favor in the audience. Diametrically opposed to her new lover played by Liam Nelson, he was uninterested and uncaring sexually. In *Terms of Endearment*, Flap is dopey, negligent, thoughtless, and uninterested in his wife's desires. Despite her protests, Flap accepts a job offer in Nebraska and packs for the move, all while Emma is in Houston because she caught him having an affair with one of his students. Flap's deficiencies justify Emma's decision to let Aurora raise the children after her death. In fact when she asks him in the hospital, Flap admits he doesn't want the children. "I never thought I'd be the kind of man to give up my kids."

Complicating these readings is Emma's brief affair with Sam Burns, the "married unavailable older Iowan" as Aurora describes him. Brooks' distilling down of the novel's multiple affairs for both women is telling. In McMurtry's hands, Emma had a number of affairs, turning toward adulterous companionship for warmth once she realized her relationship with Flap had disintegrated

completely, and he was busy sleeping with various graduate students. Brooks isolates the fatherly Sam Burns and allows Emma one spree of independence "to avoid the Pollyanna pitfall," (Pally, May/June 1984, p.11). John Lithgow's Sam charms the audience by approving of Emma's parenting of her children and taking care of her financially. His sweet innocence and articulated guilt over their adulterous affair contrasts him sharply with the reprehensible Flap, and even the irreverent Garrett. Thus Brooks can allow Emma an affair, deflecting attacks that his protagonist is too good to be true, but maintain a sense of "ideal womanliness" by having her choose someone innocent, sweet, and, by nature of his wife's "disc problem," almost virginal.

The transfer of the children from Emma to Aurora is another of the film's elements which triggers multiple readings. Passing the children through the female line almost recalls the central themes of Marleen Gorris's *Antonia's Line*, in which a matriarchal extended family thrives outside of patriarchal confines. Emma and Aurora's bond surely survives to the end of the film in the way that none of the other relationships do. In the quiet, touching scene of Emma's death, Emma and Aurora share a final deep look of love. Aurora is able to silently say goodbye. There is no question of their love for each other. Flap on the other hand, has fallen asleep. He has to be roused by the nurse to learn of his wife's death.

But another way to read this ending is that Emma had to be eliminated in order to re-establish Aurora in a traditional nuclear family structure after so many years of living alone. The anxiety around Aurora may be considered in the context of her post child-rearing - and maybe even marriage - age. She both contributes to a re-definition of the grandmother role and offers potential for imagining a post-patriarchal life. Here again, consideration of the adaptation is instructive. In the novel, McMurtry characterized Aurora as infinitely resistant to social expectations. Brooks bends her to those expectations as the film progresses.

Following her sexual awakening through her affair with Garrett Breedlove (Jack Nicholson,) and her maternal re-awakening following Emma's diagnosis with cancer, Aurora is prepared to be the nurturing, selfless mother she could not be with Emma, (the mother, incidentally, who gave the film what little female

spunk it had). "Aurora will enter patriarchy through her renewal of motherhood, *repressing her anarchic womanliness...*" (Harwood, 117). *Ellen Seiter writes,*

Aurora presents a problematic figure because she is unmarried. Throughout the film, Aurora creates disruptions. The film's narrative can be seen as a process of recuperating Aurora into a 'normal' relationship with a man within a family. The story redeems Aurora as a mother at precisely the same time that it redeems her as a woman, by finally replacing her within the family as the one who cares for the children," (quoted in Walters, p. 203).

Garrett, ultimately established as the "hero" - a role implicit in his identification as an astronaut - by travelling to Nebraska to visit Aurora, now takes the role of father to Aurora's mother and easily replaces Flap. Some critics complained of a lack of closure due to the unorthodox arrangement, while others had no doubt as to the meaning of the ending. "[Garrett] is hooked, and will doubtless marry Aurora and be father to her motherless, and, owing to Flap's incompetence, quasi-fatherless children," (Simon, p. 54). In either case the film encourages the audience to associate their sadness and sympathies over Emma's death with an endorsement of her life's choices. "Our critical armor down, the finale pierces our hearts. In the last scenes, mom's devotion to Emma...gets roped into the rallying around Emma's domestic virtues," *Pally June 84*, 28). Therefore from the female assertion exuberantly displayed by Aurora earlier in the film, and drawn from her characterization in the novel, all the women are ultimately incorporated safely into patriarchal order, or in Emma's case, expelled.

Structure

In some ways, analytical focus on the film's proximity to "realism" deflected critique away from the ideological implications of its formal structure and the significance of its massive popularity. Robin Wood notes that in Hollywood "the structure defines the limits of the ideologically acceptable, the limits that render feminism safe," (p. 202-3). Brooks' conservative orientation manifests most clearly in the structure of his script, and the choices he made in his adaptation.

Critics often complained that Brook's script lacked coherence. "We go from episode to barely related episode, everything geared to the comic or tearjerking payoff of that particular segment," (Simon, p. 55). "The film covers several decades in their lives, from one death to another, with a series of extended vignettes that would serve in another movie, as mere introductions," (Cheney, p. 54). But in many sequences, the very coherence of the construction contributes to potential meanings. Editorial choices translate into poignant restrictions on character development, restrictions that deliberately impact the character's agency and narrative progress.

After Flap moves the family from Iowa to Nebraska so he can take a position as Head of the English Department (for "about the same money" as he made at the community college in Iowa,) Emma goes to campus for a doctor's appointment with her two year old daughter, Melanie. They stop in the English Department office to say hello to Flap, and find Flap's graduate-student mistress, Janice standing there. Struggling with the stroller, Emma chases Janice through the building out into the courtyard. "Are you the reason we came to Nebraska?" is all Brooks gives Emma to say. She does not yell, she does not cry, she does not get angry and she does not think of a way to get even.⁷ Frustrated yet seemingly resigned, Emma returns to the doctor's office with little more than a dejected sigh. As soon as the impact of the scene hits the audience, the plot diffuses it. While Emma worries if the doctor's secretary will let her know if Flap calls, the doctor discovers two lumps in her armpit.

Meaning often lies in the sequence of images not just in individual frames (Sturken and Cartright, p. 20). Significantly Emma calls her mother immediately after seeing the doctor. Therefore the point is made again that her emotional support comes not from the men in her life, but from her mother. However the tone and content of the conversation are equally significant. Emma asks her mother's opinion of the doctor's insistence that she come in and have the lumps taken out, and then cheerfully puts Melanie on the phone. She never mentions the confrontation with Flap's mistress, or the realization that her husband moved

⁷ Unlike *She-Devil* in which Roseanne Barr's character sought ultimate revenge on her cheating husband.

her to a state in which she has no ties or interest so that he could be with another woman.

With nothing more than one fleeting scene in which she asks her husband, "What's her name?" while placing a casserole in front of him, Emma does nothing about her discovery of the extent of Flap's betrayal, and the plot moves on to her hospitalization and decline to cancer. Linnette Maxon writes in *Hera*, "This is a bit too neat for me, giving Emma a wonderfully convenient means of avoiding having to do anything. She needn't be given any choices, to leave or to try to work things out with her husband...as the only thing left for her to do is die," (p. 4). By subsuming discovery of the monstrous extent of Flap's selfishness and infidelity under the cover of her cancer, Brooks robs Emma of an opportunity to voice her feelings about what Flap has done and how much he has hurt her. As she did when Flap failed to come home at night, claiming the next morning to have fallen asleep on the library couch, or as she did when Aurora boycotted her wedding, Emma remained silent. Just as her character did in *An Officer and a Gentleman* when she learned her friend had tried to trap a man into marriage, Debra Winger spoke out loud and clear against other women, in the scene at the River Café, and in betraying her distrust of Patsy. But when it came to speaking up for herself against the men in her life, she fell silent.

Another element of Brooks' structure forces comparison of the affairs of mother and daughter. Midway through the film, Aurora's sexual fireworks with Garrett Breedlove "the astronaut" are contrasted with Emma's quiet midwestern escape with "Sam Burns from the bank." Twin extramarital affairs were part of what heralded this as a 'breakthrough film' about mothers and daughters. "*Terms of Endearment* presents itself as a work responsive to the Women's Movement – a film that moves decisively away from the demonized and desexualized mothers that typified films of an earlier era...In large part this reading is based on the fact that an older woman – a mother – is shown to be sexually active while still retaining her maternal orientation," (Walters, p. 203). On the other hand Aurora's affair was seen by critics as a way to properly tame and feminize her. "It is only after her affair with Garrett...that she stops nagging and endlessly phoning her daughter...She becomes a truly sympathetic character only after she

relinquishes control to the man...In that sense the classic narrative strategy of recuperating the wayward woman is reproduced," (Walters, p. 204).

The film portrays Aurora as simultaneously dependent on and resistant to the social codes that give shape to her life. She dutifully maintains a gaggle of suitors to keep up appearances as a wealthy widow, but abuses and despises them. "Aurora Greenway (MacLaine) is a well-to-do Boston bred widow who has acquired a spacious Houston home, a Renoir in her bedroom and a living room full of inappropriate suitors whom she treats with affectionate hauteur, like pets," (Ansen, p. 91). Her adventurous affair with the astronaut begins when she deserts her circle of admirers gathered to celebrate her birthday. After a disastrous first date, Aurora invites Garrett to bed. She is the pursuer wearing an intimidating, uncivil suit of armor. But once penetrated the armor falls and the softer side of Aurora can be revealed – both to elevate Jack Nicholson's Garrett, and to comfort an audience unaccustomed to untamed women. Emma's affair, on the other hand, begins in a grocery store with her two boys and a purse without enough money, and evolves slowly into hand holding over lunches in quiet cafes and eventual lovemaking. While Aurora's entire being is transformed and energized by her affair ("It's fan-fucking-tastick!" she exclaims to her stupefied daughter,) Emma's time with Sam only sweetens and mellows her.

The parallel construction evidences the importance of the film's system of narrative address. The parallel scenes attempt to portray both women's perspectives, as well as illustrating their enmeshment. No other film in my corpus is as committed to depicting the mother-child dual subjectivity, (*Ordinary People* does emphasize the son's subjectivity, but it is not a dual subjectivity in the same sense. His perspective affirms the condemnation of the mother). The structure also is buttressed by the film's genre conventions. Brook's desired comedy, most successful in the scenes featuring MacLaine and Nicholson, and the melodrama which almost completely overshadows it, combine, as was the case in many eighties films, to facilitate appreciation for and acceptance of the character's progress through the narrative.

Stars

Finally we must consider the cast of *Terms of Endearment* as another system of signification. As Richard Dyer demonstrates in his influential work *Stars*, the construction and conceptualization of a star's total image is distinct from the character he or she plays in a film. Therefore the extra-diegetic representation of the actor in film magazines, newspapers and on television, and in the roles previously played, all contribute to a sort of mini-mythology which influences the audience's understanding of that actor in a particular role. In *Terms of Endearment* for example, "much was made of MacLaine's and Winger's rivalry, particularly over their credits, in an extra-textual attempt to rupture their intense fictional relationship," (Harwood, p. 113). The constant state of change in the extra-textual sources also means that an actor's signification is never determined, but remains constantly in flux. Watching Ronald Reagan in *Knute Rockne All American* in 1989 for example, provoked very different reactions than a viewing in 1940 would have, regardless of the viewer's background or political leanings.

Terms of Endearment's widespread popularity can be partially attributed to the fame of its leading stars. The casting of Jack Nicholson as a lewd yet good hearted ex-astronaut in a role wholly created by Brooks for the screenplay is a phenomenon worthy of an article unto itself, so layered are its potential meanings. Here however, I will focus on the mothers.

Much of the reception material I collected for this chapter addressed the film's leading actors. "Brooks could not have pulled it off without his remarkable cast," David Ansen mused in *Newsweek*, (p. 91). Again opinions varied widely about the caliber and value of the performances, but within such variation there was a consistent determination that the stars were of central importance to the meaning and significance of the film.

Shirley MacLaine

Shirley MacLaine's outspoken public personality, family relationships (she is the sister of Warren Beatty,) political involvement (she was a delegate from California for Robert Kennedy at the Democratic National Convention,) anti-war activism, and New Age spirituality complicated and enhanced her turn as Aurora

MacLaine therefore brought her long history in the cinema, the theater and the public stage to the role of Aurora Greenway. A star in the true sense of the word, her image evoked memories of her dancing, singing, acting, speaking out, praying and romancing. Some worshipped her for it. Janet Maslin wrote of her performance in *Terms of Endearment* "Miss MacLaine has one of her best roles in Aurora and her performance is a lovely mixture of longing, stubbornness and reserve," (Maslin, Nov. 23, 1983, p. C18). Later, in reviewing 1988's *Madame Sousatzka* in the *New York Times*, Maslin describes her as "formidable, caustic, and defiantly eccentric." Vincent Canby conversely lambasted MacLaine for pursuing public ambitions. Apparently threatened by her diverse talents and remarkably unencumbered creative output, he criticized her personally, outside of any consideration of her performance in the film. "...outspoken feminist and sexual revolutionary (well sort of), author, on first name basis with all sorts of people in and out of government...deep thinker about reincarnation, Miss MacLaine has sometimes seemed too busy creating a public character to be able to create the fictional ones that are a performer's profession," (Canby, quoted in Harwood, p. 113).

Brooks and the studio executives at Paramount most likely counted on such controversy to pique interest in the film. When asked by Kenneth Turan in *Film Comment* how he felt about the possibility of Oscar nominations for his film he replied, "It's hard to imagine Shirley, Debra and Jack without nominations..." (Turan, p. 23).

Debra Winger

If Shirley MacLaine's presence in the film connoted a sexual confidence infused with feminist vigor, Winger's came to signify an acceptance of a modern conservatism. Following roles in *Urban Cowboy* (1980,) *Cannery Row* (1982,) and *An Officer and a Gentleman* (1982,) in which she played women "waiting – first for rejection and then for salvation," from the men in their lives, (Pally, May-June 84, p. 29,) Winger's reputation with her fans and with studio executives soared, while her credibility with feminist critics suffered.

One might say that Winger, having learned to oppress herself in *Urban Cowboy*, has gone on to dedicate her career to the oppression of other women...Winger as star has become the indispensable 80's woman, a major focus for the return to the good old values of patriarchal capitalism and the restoration of women to their rightful place," (Wood, p. 207).

Winger's characterization of Emma Horton resembled too closely those in her previous films for critics to accept it as mere coincidence. In *Urban Cowboy*, she stood up to her macho and insecure husband (John Travolta) and dared to ride the mechanical bull as well as he did, only to give it all up to prove her love for him. In *An Officer and a Gentleman*, arguably her most regressive role, Winger at first displayed a coy and independent spirit, but once in love with Zach Mayo, Richard Gere's character, she lost her sense of self and even deserted her childhood friend to please him. "Emma, by the way is no exception to the roles Debra Winger usually plays. With five films in the past four years she has been rather a balm to the boys," (Pally, May-June 84 p. 29).

But Winger's star persona was as replete with contradiction and complexity as her on-screen portrayal of Emma. In interviews, Winger swore and talked about sex as easily as she mused about how much acting meant to her. Speaking with Lynn Hirschberg for *American Film* in 1988, she described the stickiness of life with her son Noah, "You know, I used to say I loved feeling sticky and sweaty because it meant I was either f—king or working. I guess sticky has a whole new meaning for me now," (p. 20). She characterized herself as a rebel and resisted inquiry into her private life, and yet she discussed candidly her emotional highs and lows as a result of her career. She told *American Film* that following the success of *Urban Cowboy*, "I was in such a warped place: I was living in one room at the Chateau Marmont and writing poetry and sticking it up on the walls with Band-Aids. My dog Pete was sleeping in the bathtub and I was sleeping with Jack Daniels," (Hirschberg, p. 23). John Lithgow described her as "a little field mouse," but hinted at her overly critical and nasty demeanor with people with whom she didn't get along. (p. 29).

"It's hard to find an accurate precedent for Winger's appeal: she's a sex symbol without the usual glamorous trappings of the part, as life-size as the girl

next door if the girl next door happens to be a Marlboro-smoking Jewish wildcat," (Ansen, Michael and Friendly, p. 92). This extra-diegetic bad-girl image made Winger acceptable as a woman who played regressive, submissive, ultimately self-sacrificing contemporary heroines. Her husky voice and wild hair help free her from the image of a stereotypical dutiful wife or "stay-at-home-mom." Her careless giggle and deep searching eyes, so often in close-up in Brooks' film, give her an appealing personality and humanity which translates into a sort of sanction for her choices. "Finding her sass palatable, we swallow the rest," (Pally, May-June 1984, 29).

Summary

There is a moment in *Terms of Endearment* when Emma and her three kids pull into Aurora's driveway in Houston after the long journey from Nebraska. She had packed up and left after discovering Flap with Janice, the graduate student. Emma leans on the front door looking into the backseat as Aurora fusses over her grandchildren. For a moment, Tommy, her oldest and most sullen, looks up at his mother with need, longing, fear and vulnerability all furrowed beneath his eight-year-old brow. She looks back at him fondly and gently shrugs, as if to say, "I'm doing the best I can." The look chilled me each time I watched the scene, so dense with the love between a mother and child did it seem to be. The moment was filled with anxiety and foreboding about what lay ahead for mother and son, but the look seemed to relieve it somehow of its hopelessness.

Such quiet moments contributed to my initial embrace of the film when I first saw it in 1983, and when I saw it on video many times between then and the first time I watched it as part of my research. Though I did not stop being moved by their look, I began to turn my attention to the ideological impulses perhaps lingering behind it. *Terms of Endearment*, like so many other films in my corpus, addressed sensitive issues affecting audience members in a myriad of abstract and perhaps indefinable ways. Like *Kramer vs. Kramer* it tapped psychic anxieties about the instability of family life during its historic moment, and presented possible comfort.

What I have attempted to reveal in this analysis, is that this “comfort” was draped over a tenacious infrastructure of American ideals promoting an understanding of the family that was at its core nostalgic, regressive and resistant to feminist ideals. The significance of the look between Tommy and Emma, however, and the remembrance that the movies often couched their ideology in surprisingly nuanced and powerful ways, contributes to an appreciation of the textual importance of “Hollywood” films, and the complexity of maternal mythology in the 1980s.



Chapter Three

BABY BOOM

While Emma Horton was getting married, having babies, and following her husband from one low-level teaching job to the next, J.C. Wiatt was completing her undergraduate degree at Yale and her MBA at Harvard. While Emma had a guilty rendezvous with her hesitant lover and worried about picking her kids up from school, J.C. power-lunched with her boss, assuring him she ate, slept and breathed her work, and - regarding children - that she didn't "want it all." J.C. is *Baby Boom*'s protagonist, played by Diane Keaton. When we first meet her she is known as the "The Tiger Lady" of her Manhattan management firm, and she appears to have gone through the same dehumanization training as the women Emma met at the River Café. *Baby Boom* - released in 1987, the same year as *Wall Street* and one year before *Working Girl* - presents a satiric critique of American middle-class lifestyle trends embodied most efficiently in the character of the New York yuppie. What's striking about this unlikely comparison between *Baby Boom* and *Terms of Endearment* is that both films ultimately portray their protagonists as embracing and embodying the same value system, ideologically essentializing motherhood and determinedly segregating women's sphere of influence from men's. ⁸

Baby Boom, like *The Good Mother*, was often recommended to me in early discussions about my ideas on motherhood and cinema. It had made an impact on the imagination of my generation, if not to the same degree as other motherhood classics like *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, *Sophie's Choice*, *The Color Purple* and "Murphy Brown". Somehow I had missed *Baby Boom* and *The Good Mother*, both starring Diane Keaton, when they were released in 1987 and 1988 respectively. Seeing them for the first time in 2002, my analytical experience has been different than with those films I saw when they first came out - before I began watching as a film scholar, a feminist, and a mother.

Without any sentimental memories of seeing *Baby Boom* in the theater, I was surprised when I responded emotionally to certain scenes. I could not attribute feelings of endearment, sorrow or tenderness to latent memories from my youth. When I cried watching Ted Kramer read a note to Billy from his absent mother in *Kramer vs. Kramer*, I could partially understand my reaction as compounded by memories of my tears in 1979. But a softening of my critical eye watching J.C. fall asleep holding a baby on the night before she plans to give her up for adoption could only be explained by my raw response – maternal, scholarly, a mixture of both. Any sense of identification I felt toward the mother character I had to accept as immediate and directly attributable to the text. Therefore, despite a significant historic and critical remove I could imagine what viewers like me might have been experiencing when seeing the film for the first time. However, that same historic and critical distance positioned me to identify the film's ideological machinations and recognize its formal and thematic connection to other films about motherhood in this period.

I was surprised to find that many women my age profess fond memories of *Baby Boom*. Box office returns do not indicate such popularity. Though it did reasonably well, due to its high-profile cast of Diane Keaton and Sam Shepard and its timely subject matter, *Baby Boom* grossed under \$27 million, hardly a smash hit compared to other 1987 releases *Three Men and a Baby*, (over \$167 million) and *Fatal Attraction*, (over \$156 million). This box office discrepancy says something about late-eighties audiences. The year's highest grossing films (*Three Men* and *Fatal* surpassed *Beverly Hills Cop II*, *The Untouchables* and *Lethal Weapon* among others) featured puerile men talking over the role of mother, and career women being demonized for threatening the perfect American family.

However, it didn't take many viewings of *Baby Boom* for me to recognize its significance to my project. The film uses as its central narrative thrust the perpetual debate about the incompatibility of motherhood and work; and, without meaning to, evidences Sharon Hay's described conflict between the

⁸ It should be noted that in 1987, 5.6 million single American women were working while raising children

ideology of intensive mothering and the ideology of personal gain. Like many other films of the period it takes a reactionary, neo-traditionalist, nostalgic view of motherhood. But indicative of the "culture of irony" developing through the decade, it satirizes while it supports and alternates between distancing and subjectivity when representing the main character. The film *does* reposition the mother back into the nuclear family and remove her from the male realm of corporate power, but it does so while allowing her entrepreneurial independence, sexual fulfillment and sense of self. While offering a resolution similar to that of *Mr. Mom*, *Look Who's Talking* and *Parenthood*, (woman chooses man and motherhood over career) it resists a preferred reading, instead leaving itself open to multiple interpretations and contradictions. Positioning itself generically within comedy, and parodying eighties stereotypes, it potentially challenges the ideologies of intensive mothering and personal gain, while at the same time potentially endorsing them. The casting of Diane Keaton as J.C. Wiatt adds further complexity to the text as her previous roles and star personae contribute considerably to the layered meanings of the film. These conditions of production and reception caused the film to become an active site of discursive interaction.

Meyers and Shyer

Baby Boom was created by Nancy Meyers and Charles Shyer, who previously collaborated on the relationship comedies *Private Benjamin* and *Irreconcilable Differences*. Financial difficulties and interruptions from another Goldie Hawn project – *Protocol*, (as well as a lousy script,) precluded *Irreconcilable Differences* from having any discernable impact. But despite the crass intellectual and aesthetic level on which they worked (Pauline Kael said of them, "Meyers and Shyer aren't movie-makers – they're glorified sitcom writers,"), both *Private Benjamin* and *Baby Boom* sought to participate in current cultural discourse about changes effecting women's roles. The differences between their vision at the very end of the seventies and that at the latter half of the eighties are worth considering.

while only 900,000 men were doing the same (Kaplan, p.188).

In *Private Benjamin*, Goldie Hawn plays Judy, a spoiled, overprotected princess whose life veers into the unknown when her husband dies on their wedding night. Suddenly robbed of the one thing she had always wanted, she flees her controlling parents and unwittingly joins the army. As Private Benjamin, surviving the rigors of basic training, Judy discovers in herself a courage and independence she never knew she had. These lead her, in the final scene, to abandon the seductive, adulterous French doctor who wants to marry her - a decision which would have been incomprehensible to her at the beginning of the film. Her self-discovery leads her to symbolically fling her wedding veil into the wind and walk off into an uncharted, independent future. Discussing the film after its release in 1980, writer/producer Nancy Meyers recalls, "It was very important to me that she walk out of that church. It was important to write about women's identity, and how easily it could be lost in marriage," (Faludi, p. 124). The scene recalls the ending of *The Graduate*, (1967), but without the man there to hold her hand. Judy's going it alone, by choice.

In 1987, Nancy Meyers and her partner, writer/director Charles Shyer, sat down for another interview, this time to talk about *Baby Boom*. Meyer's tune had changed remarkably. "I don't see women having it all and achieving great things." she said, "I don't see them in the corporate world," (Faludi, p. 129).⁹ Whereas Judy Benjamin had started out claiming to want nothing more than marriage and motherhood and ended up striking out on her own, *Baby Boom*'s J.C. Wiatt starts out an animal in Manhattan corporate culture and ends up a baby food maker with a mobile over her desk. Meyers and Shyer represented Judy Benjamin as evolving from an unimaginative daddy's girl to a rebellious and courageous self-respecting woman. They portrayed J.C. Wiatt metamorphosing from her company's "Tiger Lady" into a contented house cat. In that sense their films reflected the growing conservatism that eclipsed the potential for progressive change effected by the activism of the seventies.

⁹ Both quotes from Susan Faludi's interview with Nancy Meyers and Charles Shyer, Feb 1988.

Themes

Baby Boom opens on a morning commute in midtown Manhattan. Skyscrapers gleam in the sun, towering over the rapid flow of pedestrian traffic. Clutching *Wall Street Journals* and wearing business suits and walkmen, dark-suited women march along, energized by the white sneakers worn over their stockings and the throngs of other women rushing beside them. This is a nod to the image, common in the eighties, of industrious capitalists rushing to work.¹⁰ A female voice, satirical and glib, narrates the scene.

Fifty three percent of the American workforce is female. Three generations of women that turned a thousand years of tradition on its ear. As little girls they were told to grow up and marry doctors and lawyers, instead they grew up and became doctors and lawyers. They moved out of the pink ghetto and into the executive suite. Sociologists say the new Working Woman is a phenomenon of our time.

The satiric tone of the voice-over and the exaggerated images (the women, scurry as they might, simply can not walk fast enough) announce the film's intention to dissect this so-called phenomenon of the working woman. The voice over ends, "You might take it for granted that a woman like that has it all...Never take anything for granted."¹¹ Thus the film also announces its own superiority. It knows what we don't about this subject. The "phenomenon" is just that - a wonder, a marvel for the senses - a novelty to be parodied. So, even as it features the story of a working woman - its marketing value and claim to hipness- it does so with a comic remove, positioning it to tear down the notion that women can have it all.

The notion of women wanting to "have it all" threads persistently through this film and through many of the other films I have studied. It promotes the idea, which gained wide acceptance in the Reagan-era, that women wanted *too much*. "One of the mainstay efforts to demonize the feminist movement and feminist goals is the regular stories in the media about women who have found

¹⁰ This scene was satirized at the end of *She-Devil* when Roseanne Barr's character marches down a crowded New York avenue flocked by an army of her Vesta Rose employees.

¹¹ The same could easily have been said about Alex Forrest (Glenn Close) in *Fatal Attraction*.

happiness after they have stopped trying to 'have it all'" (Cannold, p. 101). By implying that "supermoms" or "Tiger Ladies" wanted it ALL, the media insinuated that advances for women were synonymous with selfishness, greed, insensitivity and guaranteed failure. Critical reception to *Baby Boom* often addressed this idea. "The film raises a serious issue: a woman can, if she chooses, grittily combine motherhood and career success. Such a theme deserves better than the mildly amusing treatment it gets here," (O'Brien, p. 602). "No one can have it all," J.C.'s boss Fritz (Sam Wanamaker) reminded her on more than one occasion. Though of himself, he stressed, "I'm lucky I *can* have it all."

"Having it all" in these films means something very specific: a successful combination of a high-profile, high paying job; a partner, (preferably of the opposite sex and inclined towards marriage); a child; and the time and money to look, act and feel successful at all times. This media construct, like the nuclear family, came to represent an ideal to which people could aspire. But, like the figure of the supermodel which shrunk to impossible proportions in this decade, the ideal (as presented in the media) was almost always unattainable, and even in films and television shows this ideal was critiqued rather than attained by female characters. "Can one attend to the bottom line and clean a baby's bottom? Can one be both a material girl and a maternal girl? Or, to phrase it in a popular cliché, can J.C. Wiatt, *have it all?*" (Denby, p. 91). Thus the notion of having it all came to equate with women's sacrifice: in not being able to have it all, and in the constant reinforcement of the terms, they were represented as giving up too much to reach their goals. This comes up in conversation three times between J.C., and Fritz, in the beginning, middle and end of the film in key moments in the plot. In all three, melodramatic tension replaces comedic levity.

When the camera finds J.C. in the sea of commuting yuppies, she is first off the curb at the walk sign, huffing exasperatedly as an elderly couple blocks her path. She passes a colleague on the steps to her office in the towering Seagrams Building and shakes his hand so firmly he cramps up. J.C.'s efficacy in the office is confirmed when, over lunch, Fritz offers to make her a partner. This is the first scene in which Fritz explains to J.C. that she will have to sacrifice her

womanhood in order to succeed in the company. The script describes him as “uncomfortable” as he says,

J.C., you know that normally I don't think of you as a woman, but in this case, I do have to look at you as a woman slash partner...do you understand the sacrifices you're going to have to make? A man can be a success and still have a personal life. A full personal life. My wife is there for me whenever I need her. She raises the kids, she decorates, I don't know what the hell she does but she takes care of things. I guess what I'm saying is, I'm lucky I can have it all.

To which J.C. replies, “Is that what you're worried about? Forget it. I don't want it all. (laughs) I don't.”

That night, after a tryst with her investment banker boyfriend (Sam Ramis) lasting exactly four minutes, and interrupting her *Forbes* magazine, J.C. gets a call from British social services. It's a bad connection, but she makes out that she has inherited something from someone who died, a distant cousin Andrew she met once some twenty years ago. The film makes no reference to other members of J.C.'s family. Like the lonely enigmatic initials that stand in for her name, she is alone without family or background to fill out the picture of her life. She goes to the airport expecting a piece of jewelry or a check, and instead discovers Andrew has willed her his eleven month old daughter.¹²

When J.C. discovers the “million dollars” she inherited is in fact living, breathing Elizabeth, (Kristina and Michelle Kennedy,) she is faced with that which she worked her whole life to avoid. The unapologetic manipulations of the film's formal structure liken it to *Three Men and a Baby*. In both the maneuverings of the script face self-absorbed, materialistic “young professionals” with their own misguided priorities in the form of an infant. “No, no no! You see I can't have a baby.” J.C. tells the woman from British social services. “I can't have a baby because I have a twelve thirty lunch meeting.”

The lunch meeting at the Pierre hotel is of course one of the most important of J.C.'s career, a meeting that, if successful, could guarantee her

¹² No mention is made of Elizabeth's mother, we are left to assume she died with Andrew in the unexplained accident.

partnership. Dragging Elizabeth like a piece of luggage, she clamors into the hotel lobby and desperately scans the crowd for her prospective client, the chairman of a massive food retailer called the Food Chain. Seemingly oblivious to the drastic turn her life has taken, doe-eyed (upside down) Elizabeth does not utter a sound until J.C. literally checks her at the coatroom. Howls drift over to the table where J.C. tries desperately to distract her guest with tales of her achievements at Sloan Curtis and Co. IBM, Kodak, General Motors, all the big clients ask for her, she chatters nervously. "I went to Harvard and Yale and I DON'T have children." But he looks skeptical and the now infuriated attendant drops the baby in J.C.'s lap. Immediately she stops crying.

Elizabeth cries only one other time in the entire film, at an adoption agency in the arms of a gross caricature of a Bible-belt farmer's wife. The film carefully establishes her adoration for and comfort with her new "mother". This is an important part of making motherhood as alluring as possible. From the moment they meet at the airport, Elizabeth sweetly calls J.C. "mama."

Baby Elizabeth becomes the narrative vehicle which drives J.C. out of the high-powered working world of men and parks her safely in the feminized domestic sphere. *Baby Boom*, like other "perfect-baby" films of the late 80's, such as *Three Men and a Baby*, *She's Having a Baby*, and *Look Who's Talking*, portrayed a child so agreeable, that J.C. (and the audience) had little choice but to fall in love. Molly Haskell writes, "In *Baby Boom*, *Raising Arizona*, *She's Having a Baby*, *For Keeps* and *Three Men and a Baby*, gurgling, picture-perfect newborns come to rescue selfish, work-oriented men and women from the evils of feminism and the me-decade," (p. 84). These films feature infants who can not ask tough questions (*Kramer vs. Kramer*,) attempt suicide (*Ordinary People*,) move across the country (*Terms of Endearment*,) or try to touch your boyfriend's penis (*The Good Mother*). These babies never age and they rarely cry, (or if they do it's just the filmmakers' excuse to get an icon of masculinity like Tom Selleck to coo softly and show his "feminine" side). As Haskell writes, "They are chosen for optimum cuteness: past the wrinkled peach stage and before the terrible twos, they virtually cry out to be held and touched," (p. 85). The babies in these films

are narrative and ideological instruments employed to alert the “parent” in question of the harm of his or her yuppified ways.¹³

The film wastes no time in softening J.C. to her new charge. One long night together, a cough, and a fever turn the heartless corporate shark into a nurturing caregiver. Suddenly a cozy glow and soft focus replace the hard lighting of the opening scenes. J.C.s black striped suits become fuzzy white sweaters and cream colored coatdresses. The camera nonchalantly pans over a teddy bear on her fax machine. At the adoption agency, her denial of guilt sounds as feeble as the support she received from the cashier at FAO Schwartz: “You’re right J.C. you need to pursue your career. Little Elizabeth will be just fine with another family-\$1700 worth of clothes and toys, I’d say she got a pretty good deal.”

J.C.’s growing commitment to Elizabeth following her decision to legally adopt is constructed by the filmmakers as both an opportunity to parody Manhattan-style intensive mothering (she goes through a number of stereotyped nannies, discusses infant enrichment classes with other mothers in the park, and brings Elizabeth to the Better Baby Institute where they flash flashcards and encourage physical training,) and a narrative parallel to her waning popularity at the office. She is often late for work, misses important meetings and arrives one day to find Ken (James Spader) with his feet up on her desk.

When Ken contemptuously countermands her authority she explodes, only to be summoned to Fritz’s office mid-tirade. Fritz tells J.C. he is taking her off the lucrative Food Chain account (the one that she brought in) and is giving it to Ken. Shyer contrasts the corporately situated Fritz – sitting in a black leather chair framed before dark vertical blinds filtering white light like prison bars, with the now more earthy and gentle J.C. – in softer focus, and framed by the warm browns of the office wall behind her.

“Swallow your pride J.C.” Fritz scolds, as tears well in her eyes. Then he patronizes her, “You’ve been on the fast track a long time kiddo, it’s ok to slow

¹³ In *Baby Boom* and *Three Men and a Baby* the protagonists are not biological parents, they receive their little life-changing packages from the Stork himself. But narratively they become much more maternal and attached than a nanny for instance, as portrayed in *Mary Poppins* or *The Sound of Music*.

down.”¹⁴ J.C. accepts his condescension with a bowed head and a slight nod - the Tiger reduced to a field mouse without a squeak or a roar. “I thought I was going to be a partner,” she sniffs feebly, and does not argue when he accuses her of going “soft.” The camera cuts between them, from one close-up to another, dramatizing the exchange. The conspicuous contrast to the normally fast moving camerawork codes this scene as melodramatic, not comedic, and signifies the slowing down of J.C.’s life. She packs up her desk and, accompanied by a swell of formulaically melodramatic music, leaves the building. The scene ends with her sobbing bitterly on the steps of her building, as business-people flutter by.

Meyers and Shyer’s treatment of their heroine’s response mirrors that in other films. Many of the mothers I have studied are characterized, *despite* otherwise fiercely independent personalities, to be passively resigned in the face of mistreatment. Why doesn’t J.C. protest the sexist inequity that will cost her a job she worked years to build and maintain? Wouldn’t the corporate animal who was about to become partner fight to keep her job? Wouldn’t she claim sexual discrimination before giving up the fight? But the film allows her nothing more than a resigned glance at Fritz and a defeated pout outside her office building. This maternal defeatism recalls Keaton’s role in *The Good Mother* when she accepts the court’s decision to take her daughter away and retreats into herself, giving up her lover, her passion, her self-knowledge. In that film she naively accepts the imprudent advice given to her by her pessimistic lawyer and accepts the patriarchal bias of the court and the legal system he represents. She turns away from her lover, the one person who might advise her well, the man who opened her up to herself after her first stifling marriage, and the only man who knows what went on between him and her daughter. In *Ordinary People* Beth silently accepts Cal’s confession that he no longer loves her; and in *Terms of Endearment* Emma reacts equally passively upon discovering her husband’s mistress had prompted his moving the family all the way across the country.

In a sense, “The film’s content celebrates individuality but the style suppresses idiosyncrasy at every turn,” (O’Brien, p. 602). Ted Kramer (*Kramer*

¹⁴ This portrayal of Fritz as something of a paternal figure is complex, as Sam Wannamaker played Judy

us. *Kramer*) found himself in an identical situation when his boss fired him because his commitment to his son interfered with his work. But instead of giving up, Ted found a new job in twenty-four hours. Ted is represented as powerful and in command of his situation even when faced with the loss of his job, and possibly his son, in the looming custody battle. This command attributed to Ted is not granted to J.C. When Fritz demotes her, she immediately quits, buys a white Jeep Wagoneer and a 62 acre estate in Vermont, and accepts the implication that she must change for the corporate culture, rather than fighting to get corporate culture to change for her. Meyers and Shyer created a similarly muffled protagonist in their film *Protocol*. To appease the executives at Warner Brothers they changed their character (Goldie Hawn) from a scatterbrained waitress who becomes a politically wise diplomat to a scatterbrained waitress who becomes a national sweetheart and a media spectacle. Charles Shyer recalls, "It was the beginning of the Reagan administration and they didn't want anything that might be seen as an anti-Reagan movie," (Faludi, p. 130). This lead Susan Faludi to comment, "A woman who thinks for herself apparently, could now be mistaken for a subversive," (p. 130).

But even as the representational strategy employed for J.C. may be read as conservative and retrogressive, it presents significant contradictions. Out from under the thumb of her dictatorial boss, J.C. has the autonomy to do what she "wants." She purchases in one day an expensive car and a country estate with sixty-two acres of land. Seemingly alone in the world, she answers to no one as she drives off with her daughter in search of new adventures. And the challenges and joys she experiences as a result, are her own. Still, this is a Hollywood fairytale. How feasible an option did the film offer for struggling corporate moms... "American women who are having difficulty reconciling those maternal urges with the desire to succeed in a career will be relieved to learn there's a workable solution. Just do as Diane does: buy a 60-acre farm, fall into Sam Shepard's arms and become a fabulously successful entrepreneur. That wasn't so hard, was it?" (Kohn, p. 65).

Benjamin's heartless father in *Private Benjamin*.

Reportedly, Meyers and Shyer based their script on what they learned interviewing Nadine Bron, a New York management consultant with an MBA. Likes James L. Brooks, Meyers and Shyer claimed their film was based on truth, on the experience of women in the same situation as the protagonist. But rather than give up and move to the country, Nadine Bron had started her own money management business, and established a balance between marriage motherhood and career. She told Susan Faludi in 1988, "Well I know it's Hollywood and all, but what bothered me is that the movie assumed that it is the only way – to give it all up and move to the country." (p. 132). As she viewed it in 1988, the problem was not women wanting to go home, but the male business world refusing to admit the women on equal terms. "Society has not been willing to adapt to these new patterns of women," She explained to Faludi, "Society punishes you," (p. 132). Thus she notes the extent to which this and other films of the 1980's marked a return in the cultural consciousness to a rigid polarization between work and motherhood.

Reception

On 62 acres of green fields and apple orchards J.C. found entrepreneurial inspiration and significant success as a natural baby food manufacturer. She also found romance, (satisfying expectations of the genre and critical for J.C.'s transformation) in the local veterinarian, Dr. Jeff Cooper played by Sam Shepard. David Denby growled,

The conventionality of Meyers and Shyer's wisdom is infuriating. We're meant to understand that J.C.'s terrific business career is based on the denial of her womanhood. Raising a baby, on the other hand, makes her a woman for the first time and a better person – she can accept sex and love. The filmmakers assumptions about what people need could come close to enforcing mediocrity," (Denby, p. 92).

Denby's comments reflected the sense that the film's intention was to dispel the notion that single career women could be happy, contented and fulfilled without adopting traditional female roles of wife and mother. In his

estimation, it traded one myth for another, promoting a nostalgic, idyllic conception of woman and motherhood.

The film takes great care to initially code J.C. as a cold, self-consumed, working machine - a yuppie with penis envy and a Cinderella complex. In the office she barks orders at assistants, secretaries and young associates. "She stares down her superiors and then pumps herself up for the morning's work like a linebacker before the big game," (Denby, p. 91). She instantly cancels dinner with her boyfriend when the boss asks if she's free, and opens a meeting with a struggling client warning, "Ever hear the expression good cop, bad cop?"¹⁵ The night before Elizabeth appeared at the airport, J.C. told her boyfriend Steven "I'm just not great with living things" when he suggested an Akita as a partnership present.¹⁶ Her sheets in New York were grey flannel with thin white stripes, just like her well-tailored suits, and her furniture was black leather and chrome. The unexplained substitution of her name for messianic initials labeled her as a woman dismissive of conventional gender differences and one willing to sacrifice herself for her job. Of course, as the narrative ultimately resolves itself in classical terms, she sacrifices herself for her child.

The absurd exaggeration was not only a means to parody the excessive eighties lifestyle that had become popularized by gourmet take out food, BMW advertising and the popular television series *thirtysomething*, but a set-up for the radical change J.C. would undergo when she became a mommy. The transparent three act structure:

Tiger Lady ⇔ **Working Mother** ⇔ **Country Domestic Mom**
paved a linear path through the narrative from denial of womanhood to recognition of dormant maternal needs and desires. In Vermont J.C. wears soft, loose fitting clothes in cheery colors. Her aggressive march becomes a relaxed stroll, lopsided by the baby permanently fixed on her hip, and the grey flannel sheets get replaced by lace and flowers.

¹⁵ This scene, in which J.C. awes everyone at the meeting, did not make the final cut.

¹⁶ The Akita is the official dog of *The Yuppie Handbook*.

Different critics interpreted this radical lifestyle change and rapid acceptance of a dialectically opposed self-identity in various ways. Suzanna Danuta Walters asserts that *Baby Boom*, along with *Fatal Attraction* also released in 1987, makes a clear connection between good women and mothering and bad women and work. "Diane Keaton in *Baby Boom* lets us know the deep dissatisfaction of women at work and lays bare the budding mama lurking behind every gleaming corporate desk. These films are meant to speak to us, the daughters of feminism. They are warnings, pleadings urgings: Don't become the women your mothers fought for you to be," (p. 6).

E. Ann Kaplan suggested the popularization of motherhood as a choice for young women was in part a result of the feminist movement's encouragement of careers outside of the domestic sphere. "The late-twentieth century reification of mothering now not as duty (women no longer have to mother) but as in itself fulfilling, is something new. Films begin to image satisfaction in mothering and the choice of mothering over career," (Kaplan, p. 194). And feminist journalist and cultural critic Susan Faludi noted, "An unintentionally telling aspect of *Baby Boom* is its implication that working women had to be strong-armed into motherhood," (p. 132).

Genre

Generically, *Baby Boom* drifts between parody, slapstick, romantic comedy and melodrama. Shyer seems comfortable parodying easy targets – the yuppie in the first half of the film and the flannel clad Vermonter in the second. But when the plot moves toward complex motherhood issues his direction steers the film into melodrama. It seems that in spoofing New York City and satirizing already widely satirized late-eighties white, middle-class lifestyles (*The Yuppie Handbook* for instance was published in 1984), the comedy comes easily. But he does not spoof motherhood itself, or even J.C.'s apparent emotional yearning for motherhood.¹⁷ Like *Terms of Endearment*, the film instead implicitly endorses it,

¹⁷ *Parenthood* and *She-Devil* on the other hand did deal satirically with some maternal issues

becoming part of eighties Hollywood's "explosion of kiddie promotion," (Haskell, p. 85).

A similar segregation of comedy and melodrama characterizes Meyers and Shyers' 1984 movie *Irreconcilable Differences*. Drew Barrymore plays the daughter of a Los Angeles couple who fight so viscerally and who are so self-consumed that she goes to court to divorce herself from them. Though the fighting and the lifestyle excesses of the parents (Shelley Long and Ryan O'Neal) are portrayed comedically, the daughter's angst permeates and nullifies the comedy. The parental and especially maternal neglect thematically marks the film as tragi-comic, and the film ends with a sense of profound discouragement about the state of American motherhood, and the perceived risk to children.

Likewise, in *Baby Boom*, the portrayal of a woman being tugged in two directions, faced with having to make significant sacrifices, is not itself funny. The comedy is meant to stem from the parody, Keaton's comedic performance, and Elizabeth's constant reaction shots. This historic inability of comedy to address motherhood is the subject of Lucy 'Fischer's chapter "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child: Comedy and Matricide" in *Cinematernity*. She quotes Martin Grotjahn who explains the elision of the mother from comedic texts as a result of her saturation in taboo. "It is difficult to distort the relationship to the mother in a way which makes us laugh," (p. 114)

Still, *Baby Boom* is for the most part constructed as a comedy. Nancy Meyers and Charles Shyer consider themselves comedy writers, and the film was certainly marketed as such – its tagline read "An Unexpected Comedy." Indeed it is almost tempting to speculate that this period was unique for its high number of comedies about motherhood. But closer inspection reveals that the majority of these films focus less on mothers than they do on babies or fathers- either dealing with wives who want to be mothers (*Raising Arizona*, *She's Having a Baby*) or taking on the role of mother themselves (*Mr. Mom*, *Three Men and a Baby*, *Look Who's Talking*, *Parenthood*).

Keaton does her best slapstick in the Vermont scenes, when confronting the perils of owning an antique home without the help of a condo maintenance team. While idyllic on the outside, her house, (bought sight unseen out of the

pages of the *Sunday New York Times*) slowly falls apart inside. An awe-shucks local plumber, the only one in town, plays against her frantic comedy as she discovers she needs a new roof, a new well, and a new heating system. Lucky for her he is friends with the local veterinarian, and when she faints after a particularly explosive hissy fit, he brings her to him. Thus the Tiger Lady lies prone for the object of the veterinarian's (Sam Shepard's) gaze. She awakens, a single mother in distress, and responds to his Gary Cooper charm with a tearful confession that she's desperate for city life, and even more desperate for sex.

Dr. Cooper becomes part of the film's romanticized vision of the country. Unlike J.C.'s narcissistic, work-obsessed New York lover, Shepard's character loves animals and children, is kind to everyone, and embraces small-town life. As he says to J.C. "I'm not going anywhere."

In many films of the 1980's – *On Golden Pond*, *Fatal Attraction*, *She's Having a Baby*, *The Good Mother* as well as *Baby Boom*, the country is represented as a place of security, peace, and escape from the anxieties and competitiveness of the city. Molly Haskell saw this yearning for a Norman Rockwell nest as a "talisman against the isolation we feel as upwardly mobile adults," (Haskell, p. 84). The country, unlike the city, invites self-expression and a shedding of inhibitions. In the films mentioned above, the country harbors a revelation of "truth," whether narrative or character driven. This idea of the country as a "green world" was originally conceived by Norbert Frye in his work on Shakespearean comedy. Though Frye imagined a green world to be a liminal space removed from constricting social expectations defined and enforced in the city, modern variations may be considered in the films mentioned. For instance, in *Baby Boom* the move from the city to the country also potentially symbolizes a gender differentiation. The country can be read as representing purity, honesty and the feminine, while the city connotes hypocrisy, falseness and masculinity. Significantly in *Baby Boom*, the move to the country also represents a move from the outside world of work to the enclosed world of the domestic. E. Ann Kaplan writes, "This pre-modern Thoreauvian world still haunts the American imagination despite it being an archaic representation," (1992, p. 195).

Diane Keaton

The casting of Diane Keaton as J.C. Wiatt lent industry credibility to the film and helped mark its situation within *romantic* comedy. In a few of the early scenes Diane Keaton's performance vaguely recalls her roles in *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan* with Woody Allen, (though for the most part, the direction and performance tend more toward self-conscious over-statement). In *Annie Hall* Keaton played the eponymous lead character, charmingly embodying the warmly insecure and eagerly evolving mid-westerner turned New Yorker. She was ditzy and silly and laughed easily at herself. Shyer obviously aspired toward a comedy with the wit and nuance of Woody Allen. But the overly conceptualized *Baby Boom* rarely allows for real freedom of expression, and Keaton's performance is stifled under didacticism and formula.¹⁸

Like many cinephiliacs, I can not watch Diane Keaton without thinking about Woody Allen and Michael Corleone. Keaton starred in the first two *GodFather* films, in 1972 and 1974 as Kay Adams, Michael Corleone's beautiful and initially innocent wife. She also preceded Mia Farrow as Woody Allen's muse and lover and starred in numerous films with him, *Men of Crisis: The Harvey Wallinger Story*, *Play it Again Sam*, *Sleeper*, *Love and Death*, *Interiors*, *Manhattan*, *Annie Hall*. In *Shoot the Moon* (1982) and *Mrs. Soffel* (1984) she played mothers.

As Kay was in *The Godfather*, Diane Keaton is often cast as a character innocent of what lies ahead, yet open to new experience and able to fend for herself. She is daring and courageous even while being openly shy and nervous. I think audiences respond to Keaton because she seems always to be looking for something, yet something intangible with which to complete herself. In many roles she experiences an awakening. In *Mrs. Soffel*, directed by the Australian Gillian Armstrong, (*My Brilliant Career* (1979), *High Tide* (1987)) Keaton is Kate, the wife of a prison warden who falls in love with a dangerous and seductive outlaw played by Mel Gibson. The constraints of her role as wife and mother in turn of the century Pittsburg society depress her. When the film opens she is bed-

¹⁸ The dialogue follows the shooting script almost to the word.

ridden and ill. But at the time the notorious criminal and his brother enter her husband's prison she emerges back into the world of her family, and finds herself magnetically drawn to the inmates' cells. Soon she falls passionately in love with Gibson's character. Mrs. Soffel aids in the inmates escape from her husband's prison and leaves with them, transgressing the boundaries of class and the responsibilities of mother and wife. It is in the scenes after their escape that Keaton looks the most alive, her cheeks flushed, eyes aglow as they run from the law. She never regrets having left her family, much as Gillian Armstrong's protagonist in *High Tide* did not so much regret her decision to leave her daughter as she did her daughter's inability to understand.

In this and other roles, most notably *Annie Hall*, Keaton exudes a vibrant sexuality and independence underneath her seemingly nervous exterior. These contradictory and appealing traits are emphasized in both *Baby Boom* and *The Good Mother*, and seem to be part of a larger theme also inherent in films like *Look Who's Talking*, and in Diane Wiest's character in *Parenthood*. That is, films begin to recognize a profound conflict in the lives of single mothers. As mothers, society sees them as chaste and "responsible," devoting all of their affection to their children. But as single women, society encourages them to pursue marriage, which means, in most cases, having sex. Sex is therefore a more public issue than it is for married mothers, and a complicated aspect of the decade's representations of motherhood.

Keaton embodied self-knowledge without self-obsession (Shirley MacLaine,) sensuality and intelligence (unlike the submissive Debra Winger) and sophistication. If she was someone who connoted self-awareness and a desire to be awakened, she was mostly represented as someone making daring, rewarding choices. Critics of *Baby Boom* in most cases defended Keaton from the otherwise trite film. "If there were justice in the world of entertainment, *Baby Boom* would be unwatchable. But Diane Keaton gives a smashing glamorous performance that rides over many of the inanities," (Kael, p. 109). "Keaton has her best comic role since *Annie Hall* and rings all the bells. It's less a performance than a polished merchandising job: Diane Keaton Inc. Very Mod Mirthmaker," (Kauffman, p. 25).

J.C. and Dr. Cooper have their first night together after they meet at a town dance. She arrives in a flowing dress with a relaxed, small town smile, carrying Elizabeth. He holds Elizabeth and wins her over with a little flower, as J.C., besotted, admires him. It is significant that they consummate their relationship on the night he first sees J.C. with Elizabeth. He accepts her as a mother; her motherhood is part of her his attraction to her, and he likes children. He represents the missing piece needed to complete their family, to fix “the problem” of the single mother that so worried Hollywood in the eighties.

The morning after, J.C. dances and sings to herself in the kitchen. Wearing a glowing expression and a white bathrobe, she has all but extinguished the Tiger Lady. Therefore the film suggests a serious conflict when J.C. receives an unexpected phone call from Fritz. Dr. Cooper and Elizabeth are in the kitchen when the call comes in. They look at each other skeptically as J.C. reacts excitedly to Fritz’s news. And when she explains that Food Chain wants to buy her baby food company and that she is going back to New York to consider the deal, they both appear doubtful and depressed. The camera volleys from Jeff’s reaction to Elizabeth’s to make clear that J.C.’s new family is against the idea. Already they team up to keep her home, and Shyer treats the kitchen like a country haven, the blue checked curtains flicker with morning sun and bunnies (yes bunnies) hop in the grass outside. E. Ann Kaplan writes, “North American culture seems ready to critique its drive for more money, more markets, for aggressive, ambitious pursuit (see for example, a film like *Wall Street*). But it seems unable to find a way to do this without returning (especially in *Baby Boom*) to earlier American myths about nature as better than the city, the family as better than single life.” (Kalplan, 1992, p. 198).

J.C. arrives at the Seagrams building and assumes her former Tiger Lady posture, but her face is softer and her smile sincere when she says hello to former secretaries and assistants who welcome her back. A slow tracking shot observes every step as J.C. makes her way to the conference room. Shyer wants to make sure the transformation is clear. Keaton emits a calm and a confidence that contrasts her earlier stressed and impatient neurosis.

J.C. is greeted warmly by the men who only recently betrayed her. No longer a mommy struggling to find babysitters and arriving twenty minutes late for meetings, she is someone with something these men want. The power dynamics in the boardroom therefore shift in J.C.'s favor, a shift indicative of the film's support of her lifestyle. When she was working eighty hours a week and insisting she did not want children, her career controlled her. After accepting motherhood and heterosexual coupling away from the city, she regained power for herself. Still, dramatic tension is created in the script by the possibility that J.C. might be tempted to accept the offer. For months she had been insisting that she wanted to return to New York and the deal is conspicuously generous. Furthermore, a certain amount of ironic tension could be read as stemming from the film's critique of the corporate culture of greed the potential deal represents.

Food Chain offers J.C. three million dollars to buy the company, as well as an annual salary of \$350,000. Her legs shake uncontrollably under the table, linking this with the earlier scene in which Fritz first offered her a partnership. David Denby saw this involuntary twitch as a clue to the character's masked weaknesses. "Part of our pleasure of course comes from knowing that J.C.'s air of mastery is something of a put-on (under the mahogany table her toe is tapping uncontrollably). Keaton makes us see that J.C.'s super-confidence is indeed a confidence trick," (Denby, p. 91). But it only took a few steps in the empty hallway outside the conference room for J.C. to quell her excitement and recognize what the deal would cost *her*. In an audience-gets-privileged-view-of-character's-thought-process scene parallel to the earlier one in which she rescued Elizabeth from the adoption agency, J.C. decides to pass on the offer. She stands before the stunned table and delivers the speech the whole film has been waiting for. Here J.C.'s voice replaces the female voice of God of the opening scene. J.C. tells the men seated around the conference table exactly what was important in life, just as Debra Winger's Emma preached to the supplicant Patsy. "You see I'm not the Tiger Lady anymore." She explains. "I have a crib in my office and a mobile over my desk and I really like that. And you know all those things you said I'd have to give up? Well I don't want to make those sacrifices, and the bottom line is, *nobody* should have to."

Shyer frames J.C. in a position of superiority and advantage, as she stands before the long table of board members. She explicitly states her reasons for choosing motherhood and country life, but does so by identifying herself with *all* working mothers. Her speech implicitly suggests that women can not have successful careers in the city without making damaging sacrifices, but that in the country and the domestic sphere (she makes her baby food out of her house) women can strike a balance. In case her transition from Tiger Lady to housecat was not understood by some members of the audience, J.C.'s monologue ends by drifting into a reverie about her feelings for Dr. Cooper and Elizabeth's happiness in Vermont. So even though it gives J.C. a voice, the film does not let her use it to strengthen her position or question the patriarchal structures that betrayed her. Instead, she uses it to reinforce a classical scenario with an 80s neo-traditional twist. Women, one reading would follow, should get out of the boardroom and find their fulfillment in their own sphere, on their own feminine terms.

For her article "Diane Keaton Chucks her Powerhouse Corporate Job in *Baby Boom*" (*Glamour*, 1987) Charla Krupp interviewed Meyers and Shyer. They insisted their ending liberated J.C., that she gave up a little to get a lot. But they are prepared for the accusation that that J.C. wimps out by dropping off the corporate track. "Only the archest of feminists would think that." Meyers complained. "J.C. didn't give up, go home and get fat (like Shelley Long's character in *Irreconcilable Differences*). She's in effect saying to her employer, I'm going to work in a way that's most comfortable for me, not most comfortable for you." But Krupp responded with the question, "what progress will women make in the Fortune 500 if we all quit to start our own businesses?" (Krupp, p. 349).

Baby Boom has "the frantic, fairy-tale logic of a '30's comedy. For all its topical swipes at Yuppie parenting rituals, at heart its vision is as rosy and old-fashioned as anything dreamed by Louis B. Mayer. It's not just J.C. but the movie that wants to have it all-and every which way. Having told us that J.C. can't have it all the movie rewards its heroine with a bounty worthy of Santa Claus – man, money and motherhood in a Norman Rockwell setting to boot," (David Ansen, p. 84).

Summary

Who can say what makes a woman's life complete? These are issues mothers continue to deal with, and have in many ways always dealt with. But what was different in the 80's was that the issues became public and political and the media participated aggressively in the struggle. Ideological struggles over definitions of "the family" played out in Hollywood as well as Washington D.C. In some sense Meyers and Shyer's progression from *Private Benjamin* to *Baby Boom* reflects Robin Wood's observation in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* that "the precariousness of what was achieved in the 70's can be gauged from the ease with which it has been overthrown in the 80's," (Wood, p. 206). As I have described, much explanation for the conservatism which characterized many eighties discourses and representational strategies focused in part on the anxieties resulting from the social upheavals of the late sixties and seventies liberation movements. But *Baby Boom*, like *Parenthood* and other late eighties comedies like *She-Devil*, resists simplified classification as "conservative" because they resist fixed meanings. *Private Benjamin* limited its potential readings by, ironically, the open-endedness of its ending. We know Judy has found herself, at least partially, and is going out to search for more. This was a film that feminists applauded and conservatives abhorred. *Baby Boom* on the other hand, invited a myriad of interpretations. The formal and inter-textual elements of the film make its potential meanings problematic. Therefore while it is striking to note the degree to which Meyers retreated from the feminist cause, I found it was more instructive in the case of *Baby Boom* to attempt to account for some of the many meanings potential in the text. Those "meanings" did not remain in the text itself, but existed of course, in a complex extra-textual life. Elayne Rapping, writing in "The Progressive" in 1995, complained,

In the Reagan/Bush era, Hollywood put itself in the service of phony either/or motherhood vs. career debates that have so mired us in political confusion lately...one was either a Bad Miserable Single Mother or a Good Blissful Mother and Wife, (p. 37).

Baby Boom was part of that “phony” or rather media-constructed debate. In my understanding of both the diegetic and extra-diegetic elements of the film, I again see the conservative definition of motherhood as the preferred reading, though not the only one.



Chapter Four

Summary and Significance

By the 1980's a new wave of conservatism – political, religious, deeply hostile to the gains made by women in the 1970's - was moving across the country. Although an ever-increasing majority of families in the United States do not fit the nuclear pattern, the ideology of the patriarchal family system was again ascendant...The working mother with briefcase was, herself, a cosmetic touch on a society deeply resistant to fundamental changes. The 'public' and the 'private' spaces were still in disjunction. She had not found herself entering an evolving new society, a society in transformation. She had only been integrated into the same structures which had made the liberation movements necessary. It was not the Women's Liberation movement that had failed to solve anything. There had been a counter-revolution and it had absorbed her. (Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*, Introduction to 10th anniversary addition, 1986, p. xiv).

Though Adrienne Rich's language of 1986 falls rather immoderately on contemporary ears, her assertion that cultural expectations for women in the 1980s often proved regressive and disdainful of changes brought about by the progressive movements of the previous decade, allies with the ideological commonalties I identify in my corpus of films. In the ten films included in my study, I found a consistent tug toward traditionalism, a deeply imbedded insistence on envisioning mothers in classical terms, even within narratives that relished modern women's lived transgressions to that fabricated ideal. Rich's words reveal the influence of the nostalgic vision that characterized many representations of family life during this period, and the contradictions inherent in that vision. She also indicates the extent to which "cosmetics" or images

functioned in an era of increasing media saturation to vie for a measure of influence over public opinion. Ronald Reagan was not called the “prime-time president” for nothing.

Rich evokes the trope of combat as did other writers of the time, such as James Davidson Hunter (*Culture Wars*), Susan Faludi (*Backlash*) and Jerry Falwell (who claimed feminists had launched a satantic attack on the home)¹⁹. This antagonism and extremism reflects the anxiety that surrounded familial discourse during this time. As I have detailed in earlier chapters, a myriad of social changes contributed to various anxieties. These anxieties manifest in the often conservative and sometimes manipulative representational strategies employed by these films. Of course, anxiety about family breakdown was not unique to this historic moment. What was unique about the eighties was the extent to which image production participated in the construction of a social ideal. “Nostalgia for a lost family tradition that in fact never existed has prejudiced our understanding of the conditions of family in contemporary society,” (Hareven, p. 86). This study focused on the point of contact between the social and the cinematic as it functioned in representations of motherhood.

Molly Haskell wrote in *Ms* in 1988, “Not since the late forties have movies pushed home, hearth and motherhood with such fervor,” (p. 84). Considering the films examined in this paper that might have led to that pronouncement: *Terms of Endearment*, *Mr. Mom*, *Baby Boom*, *Fatal Attraction* and others like *She’s Having a Baby* or *For Keeps*, one can see her point. But the reasons for that “push” in the eighties were, of course, profoundly different than those in previous eras. Beyond feminism’s exposure of the feminine and suburban mystiques as a trap, (Haskell, p.84;) changing household economics that made two-career families a necessity; the rise of consumerism; the failure of government to work towards better child care options; sexual concerns brought on by AIDS, advanced contraception and increasing numbers of single mothers, name just a fraction of the issues that contributed to this retreat toward the sanctity of home and family. Though it is clearly evident that, as Sharon Hays points out in *The Contradictions*

¹⁹ Quoted in Faludi, p. 232.

of *Motherhood*, the ideologies of intensive mothering and personal gain clashed painfully during this period, it can also be argued that as the ideology of personal gain and greed seeped into more and more aspects of American life, there was a natural turn toward the comforts and security of family, whatever that “family” might have looked like.

Because many of the salient strategies identified in the body of my study were so ubiquitous as to become naturalized, comparison with films that employ very different styles of representation may help to illuminate my key claims. Briefly I posit a comparison with a film made independently in a foreign country in the heart of the eighties, and one made twenty years after the start of the decade in a commercial American context.

High Tide

High Tide was released in Australia in 1987, the same year *Three Men and a Baby*, *Fatal Attraction*, *Baby Boom*, and *Wall Street* were released in the U.S.. Directed by Gillian Armstrong, who also created *My Brilliant Career* (1979) and *Mrs. Soffel* (1984,) *High Tide* provides a rich comparison to the films already discussed. It’s generic situation within melodrama, its contemporary setting, and its narrative focus on the expectations, contradictions and responsibilities of motherhood in a multi-generational framework make it an effective comparison. Keeping in mind the different conditions of production experienced by an independent, Australian, female director, we can deepen our appreciation of familial ideological influences operating in Hollywood in the 1980s. Some of the tensions described in previous chapters play out in the film, but striking differences exist in the way the film imagines and positions the mother.

Judy Davis plays Lilli, a precocious backup singer for an Elvis impersonator who gets stuck in a small coastal town when her car breaks down and she can not afford to fix it. From the start, Armstrong depicts Lilli as tough and irreverent. She challenges those around her, disobeying orders and smirking rather than apologizing. The first shot connects her to the open road and to movement - yellow highway lane lines whiz beneath the mounted camera. Unlike most mothers, represented in the context of a domestic space, Lilli is associated

with travel imagery, in both the beginning and ending of the film. Driving like a maniac, she refuses to follow behind her surly bandleader, Lester.

Unable to release her car from the shop, Lilli rents a trailer in a “caravan park” and befriends a young girl who lives there. They first meet when the girl, Ally, finds Lilli drunk in the beach restroom. Ally and her shy boyfriend carry Lilli home and help her into her caravan. Infantilized and uninhibited, Lilli appeals to Ally. She is positive and liberated in a way Ally, cramped by the domineering insecurities of her guardian Bet, (Jan Adele,) is unused to. Later, in the tight confines of the park’s laundry room, (a stereotypically domestic and maternal space,) Lilli realizes Ally is her daughter. Bet, now revealed as Lilli’s former mother-in-law, assumes Lilli has come to take her daughter back, and on more than one occasion threatens to kill her.

Through numerous confrontations with Bet, and later Ally, Lilli is allowed to explain her reasons for abandoning her daughter and closing herself off to the possibility of a reunion. Unlike *Kramer vs. Kramer*, the film does not condemn Lilli for her actions, it does not judge her; rather it depicts her subjectivity, as well as Ally’s, and in many scenes, Bet’s. Whereas Sylvia, baby Mary’s mother in *Three Men and a Baby*, returns after leaving and, wracked with guilt, apologizes for her actions, Lilli stands up for herself when attempting to explain to both Bet and Ally why she gave her baby away.²⁰

Her husband John had died suddenly, leaving Lilli alone to care for the new baby and deal with her loss. She became incapable of functioning, and much like Joanna Kramer, and to a certain extent Beth Jarrett in *Ordinary People* and Ann Dunlap in *The Good Mother*, she realized she could no longer be a stable caregiver. But the film gives Lilli a vocabulary not available to screen mothers in the Hollywood films I examined. When Ally asks how she could have stopped loving her, Lilli replies,

I didn’t just stop. I stopped myself. I prevented myself. I didn’t love anyone. I mean, I didn’t *choose* to stop loving you it just happened.

²⁰ In that sense it could be compared to Camille Billops’ moving documentary, *Finding Christa*.

determinedly starts the engine, opening a strong possibility that she might really leave. Armstrong then cuts to Ally waiting vulnerably in the restaurant. Finally Lilli appears at the table, placing her hands softly over Ally's eyes as if to say "surprise, it's me". In last shot mother and daughter hold hands across the table, smiling through their obvious fears. "Thus the film leaves us in limbo, without the moral or narrative assurance that the family circle has been permanently restored," (Fischer, p. 224).

High Tide may be read as containing a sense of nostalgia for "normal" or at least harmonious family life. Ally keeps her father's surfboard and loves surfing because he did. She asks her mother about their past and whether she had loved her father. But the film does not envision anything like an idyllic nuclear family. And much like Marleen Gorris's *Antonia's Line* (1995) and even Steven Spielberg's *The Color Purple*, (1985,) the film encourages the audience to imagine women living happily together on their own terms. Of course, this film was made in Australia, so ideologically the American Dream is not necessarily at play. But as a measure of comparison, the characterization of *High Tide's* Lilli offers an alternative vision of maternal representation.

American Beauty

Twenty years after the Academy awarded a Best Picture Oscar to *Kramer vs. Kramer*, it celebrated another film about a family in trouble. *American Beauty*, (1999) directed by Sam Mendes and written by Alan Ball, (who went on to create the television family drama, "Six Feet Under"), also won five Oscars, including Best Picture. Twenty years later the good mother/bad mother dichotomy still operated at the center of the family narrative. Twenty years later, pursuit of a career was still represented as destructive to a healthy and nurturing mother-child relationship and cohesive family unit. But the very point of *American Beauty* was to confront the concept of the ideal family, and to explode not only the myth of the existence of that ideal, but the reasons American culture holds these ideals so dear.

Like many eighties films I have studied, *American Beauty* was marketed as a film about life and family, but actually revolves around the male characters.

most centrally an ill-fated father played by Kevin Spacey. Spacey's character, Lester Burnham, narrates the film from an enlightened and detached position, (as the film opens, he announces he will soon be dead). The privileging of a paternal perspective links this film to others such as *Kramer vs. Kramer*, *Ordinary People*, *Three Men and a Baby* and *Parenthood*. The fact that so many Hollywood "family" dramas were told through the voices and minds of male characters is something I did not fully appreciate before embarking on this close study. For me this was as unsettling as realizing at the end of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, that the entire story had been told by a group of men reconstructing it from found materials.

American Beauty focuses on two single-child suburban families, the Burnhams and their next door neighbors, the Fitts. Whereas *Baby Boom*, *Fatal Attraction* and other films like *She's Having a Baby* romanticized suburban domesticity in the eighties, *American Beauty* makes clear from its first shot which zooms in tighter and tighter to the smallness of the Burnham's manicured yard, that it plans to discredit the suburban myth. Carolyn Burnham (Annette Benning) takes her career as a residential real estate broker seriously, though she is portrayed as inept and foolish - the limitations of her worldview evidenced by her adoration of the local real estate "king" played by Peter Gallagher. She is coded as superficial, selfish and non-maternal from the very beginning of the film. She yells at Lester for making her late for work and sneers at her teenage daughter, "Jane honey are you *trying* to look unattractive?"

Dinner table scenes, which clearly reference earlier ones in *Ordinary People*, (the stillness of the camera, the solemn drapes blocking light, and the relentlessly direct angle are strikingly similar,) reveal the tension between the three members of the family. Like *Ordinary People* the film represents the mother character as willfully denying the obvious unhappiness of the other members of her family. Carolyn dismisses Jane when she requests different music at the table, and on many occasions screams at Lester. The motif of the dinner table scene, common in family films (consider *Moonstruck* and *Radio Days* in the 80's) is used as cinematic shorthand to manifest the hypocrisy of the family ideal, in this case carefully constructed by image-conscious Carolyn. While

the outside of the house is picture perfect, the people inside despise and torture each other.

While Carolyn Burnham works, drives a fancier car than her husband and enjoys unlimited freedom in her (failing) marriage, her neighbor Barbara Fitts (Allison Janey) remains metaphorically imprisoned in her home. The wife of a marine, Colonel Fitts (Chris Cooper,) Barbara enjoys no such freedoms. Portrayed in near catatonic state, Mrs. Fitts speaks only when spoken to, moves carefully as if to avoid disturbing the molecules in the air around her, and stares ahead, subsumed within her own damaged psyche. If self-absorbed Carolyn (imdb boards label her a "Superbitch" and "bitch-on-wheels") is the film's Bad Mother, Barbara Fitts compliments her as an unerring Good Mother.²¹ She has devoted her life to the care of her family and their house; she has sacrificed herself for them without voicing resistance.

In this sense, Barbara Fitts may be *American Beauty's* most startling and subversive character. By taking the Good Mother ideal to a dangerous extreme, the film attacks the myth itself, in a sense replacing the robots of 1975's *The Stepford Wives* with a tragic living martyr. *American Beauty* challenges rather than perpetuates the familial myths discussed in the body of this study. Lester Burnham is shot at the end of the film leaving Carolyn a regretful widow, Jane a wounded daughter, and Barbara Fitts the wife of a murderer. There is no resolution proposed for the two families, rather a sense that the very idea of resolution is part of what fuels the empty myths of American "beauty".

As did James L. Brooks, Nancy Meyers and Charles Shyer, the creators of *American Beauty* stressed their film's *realism*. In the special commentary filmed for the DVD version, Alan Ball and Sam Mendes both discuss the film's proximity to reality as one of its greatest strengths. Even the cast boasted about its realism. Kevin Spacey remarked, "I was struck by how real [the script] felt in terms of the way it depicted the relationship, it was honest, that was one of the reasons why it was so funny." The desire on the part of filmmakers to work towards this abstract authenticity, and the assumption that viewers demanded such "realism" connects

²¹ Imdb is short for the Internet Movie Data Base - www.imdb.com.

American Beauty thematically to films like *Kramer vs. Kramer*, *Ordinary People*, *Terms of Endearment* and *The Good Mother*.

But the “realism” imagined by Sam Mendes and writer Alan Ball, as well as their celebrity cast, is generically encapsulated in a late-nineties mixture of melodrama, parody and “black comedy.” Genre conventions, intermingled and tested, create a materiality that is more a manipulation of the audience’s narrative expectations than a verisimilitude of suburban family life.²² David Edelstein noted in an article for *slate.com*, “The hairpin turns from farce to melodrama, from satire to bathos, are fresh and deftly navigated, but almost every one of the underlying attitudes is smug and easy.”²³ Like so many of the films in my corpus, typed characters facilitate the narrative and yet sever any potential for true realism (as impossible as that might be to define). As a black comedy, however, the film more closely resembled later films like Ang Lee’s *The Ice Storm* (1997) and Todd Solondz’s *Happiness* (1998). These films attempted to exploit the darker fringes of melodrama and comedic tradition in order to expose the myth of the American Dream and the nuclear family as a lie disguising great pain and hypocrisy.

Thus I have found that many of the themes and trends salient in cinematic representations of motherhood in the eighties persevered in the late nineties. Mothers remain largely symbolic in the narrative and traditional maternal ideals continue to haunt the cultural imaginary. The notion of motherhood in crisis continued to characterize representations of mothers who worked outside the home. Good/bad mother dichotomies played out in various narrative forms, (this theme is interestingly explored in *White Oleander* (Warner Brothers, 2002)). And fathers characters still often eclipsed mothers in feature films about the Family.

²² When will filmmakers admit to themselves and their ticket buyers that cinema is not *live action*...despite Andre Bazin’s theories that cinema could embalm a moment and capture slices of life, popular filmed entertainment, featuring mega-stars and made by hundreds of professional image makers, can not in its present form approximate reality. Yet this quest for realism survives the changing tides of cinema’s tradition.

²³ <http://slate.msn.com/id/35005>

But the two films compared above make evident many notable and important differences in their representational strategies. The ideal nuclear family does not operate with the same politically charged didacticism that it did in the Reagan era, rather it becomes a target of criticism, a great lie to be laid bare. The notion that returning the mother to a domestic, subservient role would remedy the familial conflicts brought about by social change fades under an ironic distancing, a resistance to such fabricated resolution.

And yet *American Beauty* may be read as representing desire for the nuclear family, and perhaps even for maternal sacrifice. It revolves around the assumption that audience members expect the nuclear family to be restored. There is still a strong belief in the American imaginary that the "perfect family" can exist. These films offer an intriguing perspective on ways in which this belief gets continually perpetuated in mainstream commercial cinema.

To End with a Vision

Perhaps what's most striking about analyzing American cinematic representations of motherhood is what's missing. What is NOT represented in the films I studied are mothers' personal fears and dreams, involvement with other members of their extended family, the subtle repercussions of actions and decisions, the passion and the love, and the struggle for women of all different classes and cultural backgrounds living in that era. Where are the films celebrating women's magical ability to bring another being into the world, the biological and physical marvels that set women apart from men and children? Where are the films that envision mothers energized by a full and balanced life, a life in which the combination of child rearing and participating in the labor force leads to a rich appreciation for living? I end this study with a vision, a glorious chance to imagine motherhood on film that is equal and celebrated, appreciated like fatherhood and childhood, beautiful, messy and joyful and difficult. I imagine films which deeply explore the intricacies of a mother's worldview, pursuing a Complex Subjectivity unique to the maternal. Perhaps some day the vision will be realized on the silver screen. There is still much work to be done.

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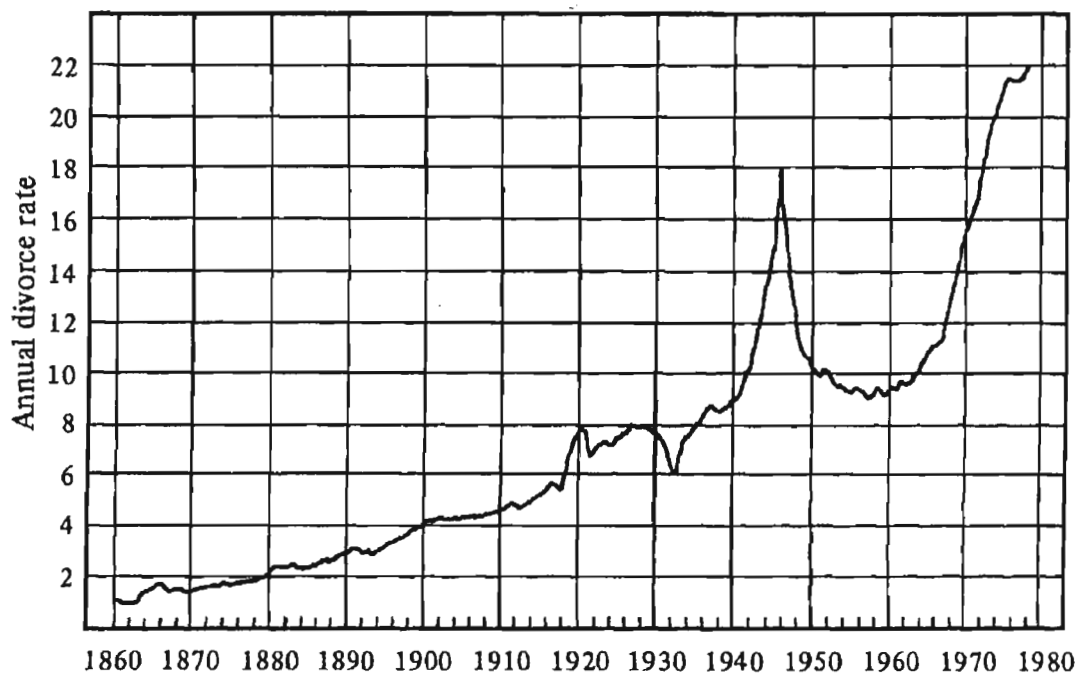
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Appendix A

United States Annual Divorce Rates, 1920-1978

From *The Trends: Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage* by Andrew Cherlin, 1981.



Sources: 1860-1920, Paul H. Jacobson, *American Marriage and Divorce* (New York: Rinehart, 1959), Table 42; 1920-1967, U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, Vital and Health Statistics, series 21, no. 24, *100 Years of Marriage and Divorce Statistics* (1973), Table 4; 1968-1978, U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, Vital Statistics Report, Advance Report, vol. 29, no. 4, supplement, *Final Divorce Statistics 1978*, Table 2.

Figure 3 Annual Divorce Rates, United States. For 1920-1978: Divorces Per 1,000 Married Women Aged 15 and over; for 1860-1920: Divorces Per 1,000 Existing Marriages.

Appendix B

POPCORN MOMS

Production and Box Office Data

<u>Year</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Director</u>	<u>Studio</u>	<u>Stars</u>	<u>Gross \$ million</u>
1979	<i>Kramer vs. Kramer</i>	Robert Benton	Columbia	Meryl Streep Dustin Hoffman	106,260,000
1980	<i>Ordinary People</i>	Robert Redford	Paramount	Mary Tyler Moore, Donald Sutherland, Timothy Hutton	54,766,923
1983	<i>Terms of Endearment</i>	James L. Brooks	Paramount	Debra Winger, Shirley MacLaine	108,423,489
1983	<i>Mr. Mom</i>	Stan Dragoti	MGM/20th Century Fox	Michael Keaton, Terri Garr	64,783,827
1987	<i>Fatal Attraction</i>	Adrian Lyne	Paramount	Glenn Close, Ann Archer, Michael Douglas	156,645,693
1987	<i>Baby Boom</i>	Charles Shyer	MGM/JA	Diane Keaton, Sam Shepard	26,712,476
1988	<i>The Good Mother</i>	Leonard Nemoy	Touchstone	Diane Keaton, Liam Neilson	4,764,606
1987	<i>Three Men and a Baby</i>	Leonard Nemoy	Touchstone/Interscope	Ted Danson, Tom Selleck, Steve Guttenberg	167,780,960
1989	<i>Look Who's Talking</i>	Amy Heckerling	TriStar	Kristy Ally, John Travolta	140,088,813
1989	<i>Parenthood</i>	Ron Howard	Universal/Imagine	Steve Martin	100,047,830