

Spring 2017

No More Wire Hangers: Analyzing Abortion, On-screen Representation of Reproductive Rights, and The Leonine Archetype in Pro-Choice Cinema

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No More Wire Hangers:

Analyzing Abortion, On-screen Representation of Reproduction Rights, and The
Leonine Archetype in Pro-Choice Cinema

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"It is much easier to accuse one sex than to excuse the other."

- Michel de Montaigne

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Abstract:

Granted that palpable barriers — such as the operation fee, travel costs, childcare — hardly impede on-screen characters in search for an abortion, I felt compelled to coalesce the cringe-inducing reality of contemporary reproductive restrictions into a likewise dark comedy film; So, I co-wrote and directed a coming-of-age narrative about a twenty-something-year-old girl named Evelyn, who solicits cocaine in order to pay for her overpriced abortion. Clearly, the precocious protagonist obtains her personal reasons for revenge; however, not only does Evelyn’s decision underscore a sociological correlation between criminal depravity and a dearth of resources, but also beyond her white privilege, her logic duly begs an even more pressing question to the audience — does a girl who doles out drugs for money possess the moral fiber for motherhood — or at least at this stage of her nascent life?

Even within the baby breadcrumbs of a crystallized canon, most pro-choice films tend to address abortion with a morally benevolent and relatable person; but in particular, the archetypal pattern conveys a leonine lady bearing blonde locks and a cherubic countenance that began with the iconic character Stacy Hamilton from *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1986). Coincidentally, the protagonist Evelyn of my thesis film, “Sugar Daddy,” possesses uncanny similarities to six different lionlike female heroines. However, we sought to complicate our character with an anti-heroic homage to the brash brunettes who have also sought abortions in movies with watershed gumption; and moreover, give credence to the demographic discrepancies of diversity within the breadth of on-screen abortion. Therefore, we cultivated a panoply of polemical female characters — some more likable than others — in order to mirror the moral muck mired in an even more contentious, polarized debate of life, death, and above all — girl power.

Introduction: “It’s Alright Ma (I’m Only Bleeding)”

*“While preachers preach of evil fates
Teachers teach that knowledge waits
Can lead to hundred-dollar plates
Goodness hides behind its gates
But even the president of the United States
Sometimes must have to stand naked”*
— **Bob Dylan** “It’s Alright Ma (I’m Only Bleeding)”

Chronicling the cinematic references to abortion across the scope of visual media bears striking similarities to the de facto documentation of the practice — it is a history that speaks about absence as much as it does about presence. With the ebb and flow of the tide-like political cycles, abortion has likewise oscillated to an impetus of onscreen importance. Even the President of Planned Parenthood, Cecile Richards, proclaims: “Honest portrayals about abortion in film and television are extremely rare, and that’s part of a much bigger lack of honest depictions of women’s lives, health, and sexuality,” (Richards). However, when abortion does show up on TV, portrayals of acquiring the procedure can be quite misleading — with the vast majority of fictionalized plot-lines suggesting that barriers “are easily overcome” and ultimately, not the causal reason why characters cease to terminate their pregnancies (Sisson and Kimport). Nonetheless, the conflating boundaries of Church and State as well as equating the rights of an individual to that of a “fertilized egg”¹ — deeply delineate into the most puritanical and patriarchal parts of Western culture. Evidently, with the addled outcome of the recent presidential election, public access to abortion will likely continue to taper even further away

¹ “These ideas reflect a deep lack of scientific understanding. You wouldn’t know how big a human egg was without microscopes, scientists, or medical researchers looking diligently. Nobody likes abortion, but you can’t tell somebody what to do,” (Bill Nye).

from the glib and glossy manner in which the operation is often glamorized — or even gutted — in the movies and on television.

So, why is it that nearly “40 percent of all women will end a pregnancy by abortion at some time in their reproductive lives,” but we still worldwide must fight for reproductive freedom (Trupin)? Moreover, why does abortion still pervade and provoke people as a precarious predicament — embroiled in politically correct, taboo talking points? Even just recently, the controversial tirade of a conservative belle, anti-feminist and fiscal critic of Planned Parenthood; Tomi Lahren, was suspended by her *The Blaze* boss Glenn Beck² for vocalizing pro-choice sentiment on *The View*, albeit not without pharisaical protest (Schmidt). Regardless of political persuasion, fifty-five percent of all women of reproductive age in the United States reside in locations that antagonize abortion rights; and moreover, approximately twenty-five percent of women live in countries with highly restrictive abortion laws (Women on Web). Therefore, how can a woman “find independence within dependence” if she has yet to fully receive “freedom from reproductive slavery,” — a freedom which is contingent on the “evolution of woman’s condition,” (de Beauvoir, 17, 139)?

In her bitingly bold, insightful book, *Bad Feminist*, author Roxane Gay proclaims:

“This legislation designed to control reproductive freedom is so craven as to make you question humanity. It is repulsive. Our legal system, which by virtue of the Eighth Amendment demands that no criminal punishment be cruel and unusual, affords more human rights to criminals than such legislation affords women...This debate is a smoke

² After a “wrongful termination,” Tomi Lahren has now filed a lawsuit against Glenn Beck (Martin).

screen, but it is a very deliberate and dangerous smoke screen. It is dangerous because this current debate shows us that reproductive freedom is negotiable,” (Gay, 271-273)

As Gay laments in her tragic description of “trickle down misogyny,” this bleak, heart-rending reality reveals how women can be legally forced and sociologically pressured into bearing children against their own volitions; whether they are mothers with enough mouths to feed, bold independent career women, young single girls, girls with cute boyfriends, girls with bad boyfriends, girls that were sexually abused by their boyfriends, women beaten by their husbands, women raped by men, or even in the worst case scenario — young, barely adolescent girls, raped or culturally arranged into marriage without consent (Gay, 171).

While being interviewed by Samantha Bee about the annual estimation for 10,000 custody battles between rape survivors and their child’s rapist father, Representative Debbie Wasserman Schultz proclaimed, “Right now across America, a woman doesn’t have the right to terminate her rapist’s parental rights;” so why make it legally more problematic for a woman to terminate an unwanted pregnancy if she chooses to after being sexually assaulted (Molloy)?

Recently in Costa Rica, the predominantly Catholic society has socially shunned a thirteen-year-old girl for combatting the country’s restrictive abortion laws after she was raped and impregnated by her biological father. Although the anonymous girl obtained the abortion with the Church’s permission, legislation typically renders abortions as extremely rare occurrences; and when illegally sought, they tragically become more dangerous to one’s health and safety, even leading to harsh imprisonment in theocratic governments such as Costa Rica’s. During the International Women’s Day march that took place on March 8th, 2017, a drove of demonstrators dressed up as the aforementioned girl and sauntered in a sea of signs that

screamed, “Sovereignty begins in our bodies,” “Who love does not mistreat or kill,” “The State aborts the Church,” and “Not one woman less.” Through cases such as hers and others around the world, I learned of the frightening term, “femicide,” which can be defined as “the murder of women because of their sexuality, reproductive features, and social status or success,” (Estevez). Men can coerce women into procuring unsafe abortions against their wills³, or women can be killed for seeking one out on their own.

In 2015, legal authorities discovered fourteen-year-old Chiara Paez dead, beaten, and eight weeks pregnant with traces of an abortion drug in her system underneath the patio of her sixteen-year-old boyfriend’s house in Argentina (Preskey). Hence, the impending danger of conflating an indoctrinated conscience of religious dogma with the impetus of basic human rights; and the fearful outcomes of patriarchal, hegemonic societies deciding when women can or can not choose to reproduce.

Before his stupefying win of the presidential ticket, Donald Trump claimed that “there has to be some form of punishment,” for incontinent women who seek abortions (“Donald Trump”). Likewise, during the third presidential debate of 2016, Donald Trump atrociously accused medical practitioners of “tak[ing] the baby and rip[ping] it out of the womb,” after a moderator probed about the nature of “partial birth abortions.”⁴ Correcting both the moderator and Trump on exceedingly rare “late term abortions,”⁵ Samantha Bee shouted into a microphone on her talk show *Full Frontal*, “PARTIAL BIRTH ABORTIONS AREN’T A THING.”

³ The Mexican-Spanish film *The Crime of Padre Amaro* features a priest pressuring his sixteen-year-old mistress into an unsafe abortion against her initial wishes — causing her to bleed to death. Unsurprisingly, the Catholic League was displeased by its controversial portrayal of priesthood (Catholic League)

⁴ “ It’s a non-medical term the National Right to Life Committee made up in the 90s for a procedure that was outlawed in 2003 by the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act, seen here being signed by George W. Bush, along with some of Congress’ leading women’s health experts,” (Bee, “United Nations”)

⁵ “1.3 percent of abortions happen at or after 21 weeks” (Bee, “United Nations”)

Followed by legitimate statistics and real stories, Bee launched into a scathing harangue on the intelligence and ethics of the future president: “I’m sure Donald Trump would love to outlaw it; it makes the pussies too gross and screamy for grabbing,” (Bee, 2016). Even Hillary Clinton, who despite dominating the pro-choice argument with candor and intellect, erroneously cited late-term abortions as a consequential necessity of the mother’s health being in danger — rather, “it’s almost always fetal anomalies.” According to OB/GYN Dr. Jennifer Gunter, the misconstrued nature in which both candidates spoke, regardless of their rhetorical conviction and ideological disposition, only stresses further that politicians should not “practice medicine,” (Gunter). Furthermore, men in power should not be able to “punish” women for dictating decisions over their bodies and their lives.

In her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft once stated, “Who made man the exclusive judge, if woman partake with him the gift of reason?” (Wollstonecraft, 3). Even though Wollstonecraft penned her manifesto in 1792, her inquiry eerily echoes into the partisan patriarchal crisis of today. Before Mike Pence⁶ flipped the tied vote to defund planned parenthood, two conservative female senators — Sen. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and Sen. Susan Collins of Maine — crossed party lines and voted with the Democrats. What do these actions underscore? As Sen. Mazie Hirono of Hawaii jested over Twitter, “Just in case we didn’t already have enough men making decisions on women’s health,” (Bassett).

Considering the impact of movies, media, and television, male directors such as Christian Mungiu, Mike Leigh, Emile Ardolino, Paul Weitz, and Lasse Hallström have depicted on-screen abortion and reproductive rights with powerful pathos. Howbeit, just as we need more women in

⁶ “...the day after attending a ‘women’s empowerment’ event,” (Bassett).

the three branches of U.S. government, it is about time that more women are encouraged to pick up cameras to document, broadcast, and shed light on the agency and authority of their own uteruses.

Part I: “Nobody Puts Baby In A Corner”

"So Kellyanne welcome to the hall of fame! If you want to pick up your award, it will be behind our studio — in the alley where women will be getting their abortions a year from now."

— **Samantha Bee** on Kellyanne Conway

In her book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir stated, “It is evident that maternity can be very advantageous psychologically for a woman, just as it can also be a disaster,” (Beauvoir, 42). Somehow, television and film characters hardly testify to the strenuous nature of sociological barriers — such as cost, travel time, child care, and lost work days — that can affect the outcomes of unwanted pregnancies. Moreover, rarely do we ever witness the political repercussions of women inducing their own abortions in visual narratives with cultural accuracy. Notwithstanding, a pre-House Bill 2 statistic claims how in the state of Texas, “somewhere between 100,000 and 240,000 women” of reproductive age, “ have tried to end a pregnancy on their own without medical assistance,” (Bee, “2010”). Instead, the media inflates and exaggerates the very nature of the personal decision itself (Sisson and Kimport).

Particularly, the trope of characters changing their mind at the abortion clinic — suddenly opting for the magnitude of parenthood instead — runs rampant in both film and television. For example, these flummoxed and fabricated characters frantically fluctuate in *Juno*, *Don't Blame the Kid*, *Waitress*, *Mad Men*, *Sex and the City*, *Thirtysomething*, *Masters of Sex*, *Days of Our Lives*, *Alfie* and *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*, to name a few. Even though approximately “95 percent of women do not regret having their abortions,” this timorous trope dangerously conveys that women lack the clout and control to formulate their own decisions without moiling and toiling in second thoughts (Bahadur).

Just last month, a comprehensive study by Gretchen Sisson and Katrina Kimport documents the dangerously inaccurate portrayals of abortion plot-lines on eighty-nine television shows screened between 2005 and 2015. In fact, only forty-two percent possess one barrier minimum to accessing abortion care, although most of the fictional restrictions culminate as easily “surmountable,” (Sisson and Kimport). For instance, the U.S. TV series *Shameless* reduces the fiscal complications for Mandy with a droll *Deus Ex Machina* — a bake-sale fundraiser at a bar exaggerated by the wise-cracking adolescent Debbie, who lures bystanders with the slogan — “proceeds go to a good cause” — and a panoply of false, but funny reasons (Frankel). Even in movies with compassionate dispositions towards abortion choice, such as *Dirty Dancing* (1987) and *Grandma* (2015), a wealthy character suddenly emerges who fronts the money; albeit the plot of Weitz’s *Grandma* thoroughly unfolds with the pursuit for \$630. Conversely with Penny’s (Cynthia Rhodes) abortion in *Dirty Dancing, Baby* (Jennifer Grey) easily asks “Daddy” (Jerry Orbach) for \$200; yet even when the procedure goes awry, Daddy swiftly whips out his medical briefcase, heeds to his patriarchal duties, and saves the day (*Dirty Dancing*).

Years ago, Jim Morrison infamously stated, “Whoever controls the media, controls the mind” (BrainyQuote). And as of today, the media perpetuates a dismal “under-representation of the difficulty” women endure while seeking abortions; and this portrayal, or lack thereof, “may contribute to public beliefs that abortion restrictions do not pose real challenges for women’s access to abortion,” (Sisson and Kimport).

In spite of public cognizance on the 1973 landmark Supreme Court case *Roe V. Wade* — several American citizens are unaware of the fact that abortion was not made illegal in the

United States until 1867; and what's even more alarming, this injurious injunction was mostly due to the false assumption that the surgery itself was considered unsafe (Reagan) (Nelson, 7-8). In Diana Whitman's documentary *The Vessel* — which portrays a brazen band of erudite broads who sail the seas in order to educate women on safe, homeopathic alternatives to abortion — activist Dr. Rebecca Gomperts proclaims that the polemical procedure ranks as paradoxically, the safest surgery to exist — with a mortality rate far lower than that of childbirth⁷ (*Vessel*). Contrarily when lawmakers ban or constrict the common practice, the perilous and pernicious terrors of prohibition provoke madness, mayhem, and mortality — with cringe-inducing statistics to boot. And I'm not referring to Kate Winslet's character's '50s housewife somber death in the film *Revolutionary Road* (2008). Rather, I'm discussing the real life stories that take place even in the post-*Roe V. Wade* universe — such as that of fifteen-year-old Widline's portrayed in Rachel Grady and Heidi Ewing's documentary *12th & Delaware*. After being persuaded into keeping her child by Anne, the zealous pro-life clinic worker, Widline confesses to encumbering herself with heavy lifting and vinegar drinking in order to induce a virulent miscarriage⁸; and additionally, all of this takes place after the religious institution ingratiated and drilled her with speciously invalid statistics about abortion's surgical safety (*12th & Delaware*).

Despite the fact that “50 percent of Americans identify as pro-choice,” a 2011 survey reveals that approximately “83 percent” of American adults consent to abortion when “a woman's life is endangered,” (Ronan). Paradoxically, when abortion access is legally obstructed

⁷ Over 99.75% of legal abortions in the U.S. do not cause major medical problems (Upadhyay, Ushma)

⁸ “If African American women were more likely than white women to self-induce their abortions, it had less to do with cultural differences than with lack of access to doctors and midwives, for reasons of poverty and discrimination (Reagan, 43).

or outlawed, women can either inexorably harm themselves or die⁹. Every eight minutes, a woman suffering from the health complications of an unsafe abortion will die in a developing nation. According to the World Health Organization, unsafe abortion can be defined as “a procedure for terminating an unintended pregnancy carried out either by persons lacking the necessary skills or in an environment that does not conform to minimal medical standards,” (Haddad). Yet unsafe abortion still stands as the most easily preventable cause of maternal mortality rates; and out of the 42 million abortions that occur worldwide, 21.6 million, or nearly half, are considered unsafe with nearly 47,000 women estimated to die from complications each year.

Representations of reproductive rights in contemporary cinema ranges with monumental moments such as the release of *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982) and *Dirty Dancing* (1987) to rancorous and retrograde displays such as the 2007 disastrous duo of *Juno* and *Knocked Up*. According to film critic Stephen Farber, “The subject is more polarizing than ever,” who wrote in 2012, “Hollywood has chosen to play it safe and keep abortion invisible,” — and mostly due to the disarming of dollars. In fact, it even took Hollywood over thirty years to add *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* to the Library of Congress’ National Film Registry in 2005 as the first film depicting abortion with social tolerance. In her book *Pregnancy in Literature and Film*, Parley Ann Boswell defers the absurd deviation and demonization of abortion in Hollywood, as evident in science fiction and fantasy films, and looks to independent foreign films for more feminist verisimilitude, such as *Vera Drake* (2004) and *4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days* (2007) (Boswell). Moreover, the American independent film movement would not even the empathetic playing

⁹ The the three-part 1996 thriller *If These Walls Could Talk*, the 1952 segment portrays a character who struggles to find a safe, affordable abortionist, and consequently hemorrhages to death from an illegal procedure (*If These Walls Could Talk*)

field with its European counterparts until the release of Noah Baumbach's *Greenberg* (2010), Tyler Perry's *For Colored Girls* (2010), Gillian Robespierre's *Obvious Child* (2014), and Paul Weitz's *Grandma* (2015).

Nevertheless, consider a time in which representation, good or bad, wasn't even a reality. In 1916, one of the earliest pioneers in filmmaking, Lois Weber produced the tragic narrative tale — *Where Are My Children?* — to capture a reality in which a woman selfishly aborts multiple children at the expense of her judicious husband's happiness. Despite Weber's cavalier caricaturization of womb rights, her film in itself stands oddly as a watershed hallmark in feminist cinema history — since at least someone, let alone a female filmmaker, was portraying abortion in the media. Highlighting its cultural significance, the Library of Congress added it to the National Film Registry in 1993. Not to mention, Weber can be accredited as the first American woman to direct a full-length feature in 1914 for the “Merchant of Venice,” (Dowd). As a former missionary and aid worker for the Salvation Army, Weber diligently supported ubiquitous, public access and education to birth control measures¹⁰ (Koszarski). Though with the rise of vertical integration, the syncing of sound, and the adumbrating ascension to the corporate studio systems of today, female pioneers in filmmaking such as Lois Weber and her mentor Alice Guy Blaché disappeared behind the camera; and likewise, the onscreen representation of women's issues portrayed by women themselves (The Silent Era).

Discussing Hollywood's “Backward Stance on Abortion,” writer Teo Bugbee cites the first major pre-code picture to feature abortion as *Men in White* (1934), a film noir drama in which a woman deservingly dies from the sin of her botched abortion. Following over a decade

¹⁰ “Birth controllers blamed not women, but the laws that banned contraceptives and the physicians who refused to provide them. Abortions, therapeutic and criminal both, could be avoided, they argued, through the use of contraception,” (Reagan, 37).

later, *Leave Her To Heaven* (1945) highlights the tale of an overtly sentimental woman's envy complex, which ultimately "leads her to murder her husband's handicapped brother, abort her child, and eventually commit suicide — all in the name of love,"¹¹ (Bugbee). Buttressing Bugbee's argument regarding the slow development of progress in the abortion anthology, the synopsis of *Leave Her to Heaven* shows similarities to that of political thriller *Ides of March* (2011), in which Molly Stearns (Evan Rachel Wood) commits suicide after also being socially ostracized for her abortion. Taking offense to the vilification of Molly Stearns, writer Kelsey Wallace suggests that not only women should be writing and directing more reproductive representation on screen, but also in regards to *Ides of March's* Molly Stearns, "Maybe the intern character could have the abortion and then go on to have her own political career?" (Wallace). So, because it took Hollywood over forty years to procure the indie gems of *Grandma* (2015) and *Obvious Child* (2014), does that mean, we're done yet? Not even close; and with Hulu's upcoming release of *The Handmaid's Tale*¹² literary adaptation — directed, photographed and produced by female A.S.C. Reed Morano — it looks like we are only getting started.

¹¹ "Raids of abortionists' offices became the national norm during the 1940s and 1950s" (Reagan, 164).

¹² On Monday, March 20th 2017, protesting women donned the signature *Handmaid's Tale* red robes and white bonnets at the Texas Legislature in protest for an anti-abortion law (Senate Bills 415) that forbids second trimester abortions (Lawler)

Part II: Dismantling Diversity in the Visual Representation of Reproductive Rights

We also know that when a woman stands up and speaks truth to power, that there will be attempts to put her down — I'm not going to be put down. I'm not going to go anywhere. I'm going to stay on the issues."

— **Maxine Waters** on Roger Ailes and Bill O'Reilly

Accumulatively, the appearance of abortion in cinema may seem robust in representation; but in total amalgamation, it unsurprisingly sports shortfalls in presenting diversity. If someone says that abortion is rarely visible on-screen, one could easily counter that abortion rarely ever exists as the problem of anyone else but a twenty-something-year-old, virginal white girl. However, demographics demonstrate that “47% of women have at least one child already,” when seeking an abortion,¹³; and this statistic emphatically underscores the accuracy of the white suburban mom characters in *Revolutionary Road* and *If These Walls Could Talk* who seek abortions in fiscal consideration for the children they already have (Apicella) (*Revolutionary Road*) (*If These Walls Could Talk*). In conjunction with on-screen depictions dramatized as “more dangerous” than real abortions, the characters pursuing the procedure are “portrayed as younger, whiter, wealthier, and less likely to be parenting than their real-life counterparts (Sisson & Kimport, 57).

With the second wave of feminism in the '70s, white women purported abortion and birth control at the forefront of their feminist agenda. However, women of color have argued that abortion is not always analogous to reproductive freedom. During the second half of the twentieth century, Black Nationalists groups vocalized that when poor women of color sought

¹³ The timing of childrearing has historically motivated women's decisions to terminate early pregnancies; “mothers seemed strongly motivated to avoid having two babies in diapers at once,” (Reagan, 152).

abortions or other therapeutic treatments in professional medical settings, they “were often sterilized without their knowledge,” (Nelson, 4). Even the Black Panthers vehemently opposed abortion — equating it to the likes of “genocide.” Along with the unveiling of these horrifying occurrences — such as the sterilization of African American teenager Minnie Lee Relf in 1973 — reproductive freedom in the feminist movement expanded to signify that “the right to bear children” measured in equal importance to the “right to terminate a pregnancy,” (Nelson, 4) Yet, as far as the visual depiction of involuntary sterilization is concerned, film history draws a resounding blank. However, *The Pumpkin Eater* (1964) stars a mentally fragile white woman (Anne Bancroft) who acquiesces to sterilization after her abortion procedure. Hence, Hollywood’s inclination to culturally appropriate cinema; and the contemporary impetus to rehash not only the hidden tales of the reproductive rights movement, but to also expose the stories of black history unknown to younger generations.

In The Heat of Hindering Hays

Without hesitation, Director Norman Jewison’s *In the Heat of the Night* (1967) prevails as the earliest noteworthy portrayal of abortion that ensnares itself with crime and above all, the vexing racial tensions of a rural racist town in Mississippi. In the scale of film history, 1967 marks the milestone tipping point in the disintegrating demise of the repressive Hollywood “Hays Code”; and with the release of sensationally popular hits such as *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Graduate*, and *The Heat of the Night* — stringent censorship irrevocably lost its clout in cinema (Ford). Within the antiquated “Motion Picture Production Code,” the 1956 amendment on abortion solemnly states:

“The subject of abortion shall be discouraged, shall never be more than suggested, and when referred to shall be condemned. It must never be treated lightly, or made the subject of comedy. Abortion shall never be shown explicitly or by inference, and a story must not indicate that an abortion has been performed, the word “abortion” shall not be used,” (Palmer).

So in 1967, what more of a statement could film studios proclaim than to portray abortion in tandem with the dinner-table-turning Sidney Poitier¹⁴? Depicting the tale of brilliant cop, Virgil Tibbs (Sidney Poitier) as he deals with the onus of rampant racism and a puzzling murder case, *In the Heat of the Night* conveys both the taboo and dire criminality of abortion; and through the inflation of the procedure’s illegal fee, “straightening a girl out” ultimately transgresses into fodder for the robbery and murder of local industrialist Mr. Philip Colbert. Even if abortion appears only as an appalling plot twist in the last thirty minutes of the film, its inextricable tie to the story’s progression bears resounding significance. If abortion had been duly legal and affordable during the film’s setting, “There would have been no murder, no robbery, no Tibbs-Gillespie drama, and no story,” (“In the Heat of the Night”).

Not to mention, *In the Heat of the Night*’s display of abortion betrays most of the tenets of the restricting Hays Code’s regulations. In regards to the part where “it should never be made the subject of comedy,” the prisoner Harvey Oberst (Scott Wilson) comically responds to Virgil’s inquiry about abortion locations by saying “you” would first go to the barber shop to, “Borrow Mr. Fanning’s razor and cut your throat,” (Palmer)(*In the Heat of the Night*). With the punch of proper timing, both Virgil and Harvey break out into laughter before Harvey provides

¹⁴ “Sidney Poitier became the first African American to win the Best Actor Oscar and the only one until Denzel Washington for *Training Day* (2001), 38 years later,” (“Sidney Poitier”)

Virgil the information and resources he needs. Although the wickedly nubile white girl, sixteen-year-old Delores Purdy (Quentin Dean) seeks an abortion, the abortionist is none other than a level-headed “colored gal,” whose invaluable operation costs a pretty penny — or as Virgil Tibbs begs to Harvey, a pricey place where one’s “got some real money to spread around.” Whether or not Delores ever receives her abortion remains ambiguous to the plot’s culmination of events, yet the cunning Virgil Tibbs promises to protect the black abortionist, “Mama Caleba,” (Beah Richards). And when the apparent midwife discovers that her incoming client is using blood money, she instantly displays a disgusted and mortified look on her face. To empathize her case even further, Virgil Tibbs delicately blackmails her with the warning of “colored time in jail” by pressing, “I’m not here to lay a finger on you mama, it’s the white boy I want.” Though because our abortionist shows an amicable and perceptive disposition, she consents to the clever Virgil Tibbs by providing the necessary details to lock up Mr. Colbert’s killer. Therefore, aside from showcasing the conviction and talent of Sidney Poitier, *In the Heat of the Night* defiantly resists the required punishment of abortion providers within the plotline of a masterpiece film; and moreover, audiences still have not witnessed another black abortion provider — regardless of legality and temporal setting — as compassionately demonstrated as in this movie (*In the Heat of the Night*).

***Precious* and “Runaway Love”**

Arguably abortion has been stigmatized so much on-screen that in the film *Precious* (2009), the characters avoid the avenue as even a mere suggestion. Not to antagonize the movie as a heartfelt masterpiece, although after experiencing abuse from her mother and rape from her father, why is abortion not even mentioned as a pragmatic possibility? Especially considering

that “75 percent” of Americans support legal abortion in cases of rape or incest, it seems bizarre that her social worker (Mariah Carey) doesn’t even address abortion for Precious (Gabourey Sidibe) (*Precious*) (Ronan). Even if the eponymous Precious lacks the funds necessary for the operation, director Lee Daniels steers clear of a ripe opportunity to advocate for low-income minority women — regardless of background, regardless of reasons for impregnation.

However, Christopher Bridges, mostly known by his moniker Ludacris, seized the slippery slope of controversial statistics by stating the lack of means for abortion money in his masterpiece music video “Runaway Love,¹⁵” — which not to mention, also features a majestic chorus by none other than queen Mary J. Blige. In the third segment of the video, Ludacris narrates the life of adolescent Erica (Keke Palmer) who has been “forced to think that hell is a place called home,” after becoming pregnant from unprotected sex with her sixteen-year-old boyfriend. Significantly, Ludacris does not divert the alternative option, but rather addresses it head-on with a rhyme:

“The days go by and her belly gets big/
The father bails out / He ain’t ready for a kid /
Knowing her mom will blow it out of proportion/
Plus she lives poor /So no money for
abortion,” (*Runaway Love*).

Through the mellifluous conduit of lyrical music, Ludacris accomplishes what the film and television industry incessantly refuses to nail on the head. Emphatically isolating the biological burden of maternity in “Runaway Love,” Erica finds herself on her own after her boyfriend reneges his paternal responsibility — thereby burying Erica further into a financial crisis. In the past decade, only four percent of television plotlines displayed “insurmountable” barriers to the

¹⁵ Ludacris originally asked Spike Lee to direct this music video, but he turned it down due to scheduling conflicts with *Miracle at St. Anna*; so, Jessy Terrero ended up directing the project instead (“Ludacris Digs Deep on ‘Release Therapy’”).

acquisition of abortion (Sisson & Kimport, 59). And through the heart-rending visual of a sobbing Erica, audiences realize the paradoxical crisis of unintended, premature parenthood; since if there is no money for an abortion, how can young women such as Erica possibly accrue the funds necessary for rearing a child — considering her impoverished placement in a dog-eat-dog capitalist driven society where money rules as king? What kind of life will eleven-year-old Erica be able to provide for her child, when she still exists as a child herself?

All About Kerry

Like her boss Shonda Rhimes, actor Kerry Washington has overachieved in both delicately and disturbingly portraying a panoply of empowering female characters onscreen; and in regards to reproductive rights, she has unabashedly participated in not one, not two, but three progressive portrayals. Beginning with the fifth season of ABC's hit series *Scandal* (2015), Washington's bona fide character, Olivia Pope — yes, *the* Olivia Pope — terminates a pregnancy that would have resulted in the love child of her and President Fitzgerald Grant (Tony Goldwyn); and not to mention, in the same episode in which conservative junior senator and Grant's ex-wife, Mellie Grant (Bellamy Young) performs a filibuster for Planned Parenthood, redolent with references to the eleven hour one performed by Texas Senator Wendy Davis on the ignominious House Bill 2 or "HB2," — which defectively diminished the state's abortion providers from forty-two to nineteen locations (Verica) (Terkel).

In the historical portrayal of motherhood and pregnancy in television and the movies, women in their 30s fear the encroaching, timing and ticking of their biological clocks like it is coming of D-Day. In one of Woody Allen's more heinously hollow and sexist films, *Another Woman* (1988), a successful succubus of an academic Marion, avows her loathsome regret in

acquiring an abortion years ago from the perch of her withered womb status; and the confession is almost as revoltingly offensive as the film's entire vapid stream of voice-over narration (*Another Woman*). From the more recent and genuinely funny film, *The Meddler* (2015), the character Lori (Rose Byrne¹⁶) informs her mother Marnie (Susan Sarandon) that she has decided to have her sorry ex-boyfriend's baby simply because she is "too old to get an abortion," (*The Meddler*). In *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, author Susan Faludi discusses not only the representation of biological clocks and fertility in both pseudo-studies and the media, but also how single women on television reverted "to two stock types: the coldly calculating careerist or the deeply depressed spinster," (Faludi, 171). And within the backlash of positive feminist representation in the Reaganite years, television networks hardly broad-casted single women without domesticating them in "non-threatening roles," such as in the hit series *Golden Girls*.

Even in Shonda Rhimes' first attempt to portray abortion on-screen, she struggled with swaying studio heads to give the ambitious careerist character, Cristina Yang (Sandra Oh), a proper plot-line to consciously terminate her pregnancy. Instead, another writer pitched the idea for an ectopic pregnancy that would cause Cristina to dramatically "collapse" in the hospital — which Rhimes concurred as "more interesting," (Paskin). Although once season eight rolled around the corner, Shonda Rhimes had earned enough esteem to execute her own character pitches without asphyxiating network approval; and like so, she finally gave Cristina a conscious abortion. On the show, Cristina confesses, "I wish I wanted a kid...because then this would be easy. But I don't. I don't want to make jam. I don't want to carpool. I want to be a surgeon,"

¹⁶ Oddly enough, actor Rose Byrne made two comedic off-hand references to abortion in 2015. From Paul Feig's film *Spy*, Byrne's character Rayna Boyanov tells Susan Cooper (Melissa McCarthy) that she pitied her for "standing in that abortion of a dress," (*Spy*).

(Mitovich). For the likewise well-rounded Rhimes, conveying an abortion in conjunction with a workaholic career served as less of a “political agenda,” but rather as more of a fulfillment to flesh out the realest and most “complete” world possible for that character (Paskin). Likewise, in Olivia Pope’s world, she’s an omniscient superhero; and avid audiences no longer care what her marital status is as long as she remains liberated and above all, powerful, in order to do whatever it is she needs to save the day.

Even though at this moment in the story, President Grant has publicly left his wife and has introduced Olivia Pope as his girlfriend to the public eye (so Sarkozy, right?), Olivia still decides to abort — and with solid, albeit unspoken, reasoning too. In a usually voluble show, Pope’s abortion possesses a “powerful message” in part because it is uncannily and symbolically “delivered without words,” (Samakow). Rather, we only see Olivia Pope propped on the operating table¹⁷. If Olivia keeps the pregnancy, she will be further inclined to stay with Fitz and sustain her designated role as the temporary First Lady; but the subordination of the position sickens her. As habitually the smartest person in the room at all times, Olivia Pope despises being denigrated, othered, and overlooked as the pretty wife material rather than the astute drill sergeant with a grenade for a brain. As Simone de Beauvoir once stated, “Even one child is enough to entirely paralyze a woman’s activity,” (de Beauvoir, 735). Thus, Olivia informs “Fitz” that she abhors how the public lucidly disregards her as an equal crony; and subsequently, she aborts the fetus without informing her lover (Verica).

In the fulsomely praised film — *The Last King of Scotland* (2006), Kerry Washington portrays supporting character, Kay Amin, the wife of the notorious Ugandan tyrant Idi Amin

¹⁷ Audiences hear the Christmas cadence of “Silent Night” reverberating to the sonorously sinister voice-over of Olivia’s father Eli Pope during the one minute surprise abortion scene.

(Forest Whitaker)¹⁸. After engaging in extramarital affairs with the Scottish protagonist, Dr. Nicholas Garrigan (James McAvoy), Kay becomes pregnant and desperately begs Garrigan to perform an abortion to prevent her masochistic husband from discovering her infidelity. Gravely, a series of events hinders Garrigan from punctually arriving at the abortion rendezvous, thereby convincing Kay that she will need to seek her own medical attention in the adjacent villages. Director Kevin Macdonald's film exists as one of the few major Hollywood features that pays heed, however implicitly, to the fact that the majority of unsafe abortions, approximately 18.5 million out of 21.6 million, occur in developing countries such as Uganda (*The Last King of Scotland*) (Trupin).

Unfortunately, Dictator Idi Amin's forces discover the nature of his wayward wife's actions — directly leading to her cruel demise and the revolting display of her dismembered body. When Garrigan discovers his mutilated lover, a sharp character shift occurs in which he can no longer justify abetting Idi Amin; so, he decides to try to kill him, albeit unsuccessfully. Therefore, Macdonald's masterpiece not only calls attention to the cruel nature of catastrophic coup d'états and dangerous dictators posing as diplomatic politicians, but also as a contributor to the canon of on-screen abortion, *The Last King of Scotland* sheds a plaintive light on the stories of strong, brilliant, and independent women like Kay — who surreptitiously seek the refuge to terminate their unwanted pregnancies — all the while trapped in abusive marriages or relationships.

¹⁸ Whitaker won numerous accolades along with an Academy Award for performance (“The Last King of Scotland”)

The Trial of Interracial Abortions

However, in films such as Kevin Macdonald's *The Last King of Scotland* and Charles Shyer's 2004 rendition of *Alfie*, the idea of pregnancy as a paternity test bears its own trope in interracial affairs. Unlike the tastefully executed *The King of Scotland*, Shyer's sexist remake not only bears offense to its one-dimensional depictions of masculinity and femininity, but the film also limns yet again, another scathing example of a woman, Lonette, (Nia Long) who abruptly changes her mind at an abortion clinic — like the aforementioned litany of ladies in *Juno*, *Sex and The City*, etc.; and even more stigmatizing, she lies about keeping the baby to the man who accompanies her to the appointment. Although Jude Law's Alfie breathes as a more convincing, philandering player than Michael Caine in the 1966 original, at least director Lewis Gilbert positions abortion more progressively in the antiquated version by having the impregnated character, an older mother of three, unwaveringly continue with the procedure after her adulterous affair; and not to mention, the procedure takes place during the '60s setting of the United Kingdom, thereby underscoring the gravity of illegal abortion as both unnecessarily dangerous and taboo under prohibition.

Frankly, the entire 21st-century rendition of *Alfie* ranks as a giant red flag of horrifying representation that reads as both misogynistic and misandrist at times. And yet, what ultimately classifies as unparalleled to Shyer's *Alfie* is the manner in which the film primes the audience to empathize with the lascivious title character during the moment he serendipitously discovers the existence of his infant child. Due to the lighter skin tone of the baby, Alfie's paternity translates as painstakingly conspicuous; and consequently, the film establishes skin tone and race as almost a slanderous sign of adultery. Likewise, this trope also happens in the even more retrograde

¿Qué Culpa Tiene el Niño? (2016), or *Don't Blame the Kid* — written and directed by Gustavo Loza, who, in all veracity, should stray from ever making a film with a female title character. Especially, if he feels the need to save the licentious, cold and calculating career woman through trite trajectories and misogynistic motifs of marriage and child-rearing as saving graces of moral refuge. When the insouciant ice queen Maru (Karla Souza) accuses the handsome young stranger Renato (Ricardo Abarca) of impregnating her — and then proceeds to marry him at the price of her dad's political career, she shortly discovers after childbirth that Renato can not possibly be the father — since the baby surprisingly appears to be of Asian descent. Not only do both *Don't Blame the Kid* and *Alfie* (2004) document the bashful mix-up of an unwanted baby branded by race — along with the banal change-of-heart at abortion clinic; but nonetheless, the twin films also exist as the only narratives with an abortion plotline available for instant streaming on Netflix — one step forward, two steps backwards.

In fact, when the conception of Alfie's child took place, Lonette was temporarily on a break with her boyfriend, Marlon, who also happens to be Alfie's best friend; so, she ultimately decides to keep the child despite knowing the precarious probability of paternity. Even though women do ultimately possess a legal choice in the film's setting, Lonette displays poor rationale by changing her mind, lying about it to Alfie, proposing to Marlon, and then irrevocably affecting her relationship with both men. Not only does Lonette stigmatize abortion by fluctuating last minute, but she also compromises the security of her marriage by giving birth to the child of a man she did not care about at all.

For a much more logical depiction of the adulterous abortion dilemma, look no further into the Joel and Ethan Coen's film *Inside Llewyn Davis* (2013), in which Carey Mulligan's character Jean spitfires the eponymous character with biting, brash, and brilliant dialogue:

“To be clear, asshole, you fucking asshole, I want very much to have it if it's Jim, that's what I want; but since I don't know, you not only fuck things up by fucking me and maybe making me pregnant, but even if it's not yours, I can't know that, so I have to get rid of what might be a perfectly fine baby; a baby I want, because everything you turn, turns into shit — like King Midas's' idiot brother,” (*Inside Llewyn Davis*).

To elaborate, not only does Jean speak with audaciously coarse language, but she also sears Llewyn with concise logic and proceeds to probe him about procuring an illegal abortionist. Notwithstanding its' ingenuity, the world of *Inside Llewyn Davis*, like the rest of the Coen brother canon, prevails as Caucasian — hence the need for a truthful, smart, and rational response to the conundrum of terminating a pregnancy from an affair in racially diverse cinema.

Sociological Discrepancies

Furthermore, the latest rendition of *Alfie*, *Scandal*, and *The Last King of Scotland*, all may depict an African American woman seeking an abortion, yet none convey the sociological poignancy and disenfranchised distribution of reproductive resources that statistically pervades in communities predominantly occupied by minorities and people of color.

In Lasse Hallström's *Cider House Rules* (1999), Rose Rose (Erykah Badu) serendipitously lucks out on the presence of prematurely trained medic Homer Wells (Tobey Maguire) after being raped by her father Mr. Rose (Delroy Lindo); yet the significance of the scene serves to show Homers' change of heart on the morality of abortions, rather than the

ambiguous social liberation of Rose Rose as a black woman in the pre-Civil rights era. However, in lieu of punishing the sexualized girl with death, *Cider House Rules* depicts the demise of the wayward, predatorial father. Granted the story starts with Mr. Rose as a kindred caretaker, audiences can only resolve his ethical code of conduct until witnessing his mortal separation from his pernicious paternal duties.

For Colored Girls (2010), the film adaptation of writer Ntozake Shange's acclaimed 1975 choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*, hinges itself on the historical discrepancy of race and abortion access with more poetic writing and thespian performances. And yes, Kerry Washington stars in this film too. Not only does cost serve as an obstacle for the recent high school graduate Nyla (Tessa Thompson), but in order to preserve her public purity, she also lies to both her religious zealot mother (Whoopi Goldberg) and her licentious older sister Tangie (Thandie Newton) about the nature of the 300 dollars she requests, claiming that she needs the money for "scholarships." Detecting her phony alibi, Tangie knowingly sends off her baby sis to the sordid back alley abortionist, "alcoholic demon" Rose (Macy Gray). Even though the film sets in contemporary New York, the circumstances insinuate the illegality of abortion; and moreover, the story references the statistically increased chances of a young, poor, black woman resorting to an unsafe procedure during abortion's prohibition (Nelson, 9). After Rose botches the job, Nyla passes out on the street off-screen, and audiences do not visibly see her until she is in the hospital with the social worker, Kelly (Kerry Washington), who paradoxically embodies an infertile woman suffering from the repercussions of an untreated sexually transmitted disease.

Ultimately, the power of the scene stems from the contrite confession of Nyla's traumatic, life-threatening experience. All traces of her previously playful and puerile disposition disappear as she woefully wails:

“All I remember is tools, tables, whitewash windows, grime from age wiped over once, eyes crawling up on, eyes rolling in my thighs, metal horses, gnawing, my womb dead. Get off me all this blood bones — shattered like soft ice cream cones. I couldn't have her looking at me pregnant. I couldn't have my friends see this dying dangling between my legs; so I didn't say a thing. Not a sign or a fast scream to get those eyes off of me. Get those steel rods out of me. This hurts. This hurts me. And nobody came. Once I was pregnant. And shamed of myself.”

With a melancholic paroxysm of the most mellifluous pathos, Nyla's performance prevails with an incredulous, haunting efficacy; perhaps, this is one of the most powerful moments in pro-choice cinema. She's young, she's talented, she's smart; she has a bright future ahead of her; she beguiles her kin to acquire the abortion money; she doesn't change her mind; and even after enduring the brutal brunt of baffling, and traumatic brutality — of being left unconscious and infected in the streets — she still, nonetheless, rises, and resuscitates, with a resounding and resilient grace.

With all veracity, this movie obtains some of the best talent in the business; yet what otherwise impedes the film from pop culture infamy and masterpiece status stems solely from its poor cinematic execution — that is, despite its grossly over-inflated budget. The shot reverse shots lack symmetry. The saturated, nacreous lighting sometimes fails to match the melancholic mood. The coalescing of cuts sometimes struggles to reach full fruition. The talent scintillates

and shines on screen, while the cinematography cripples and curtails the film's overall emotional efficacy. The poetic beauty of Ntozake Shange's rhetoric graces the hapless butcher knife of Hollywood; for the wordsmiths and cinephiles alike who are watching, it is nothing short of horrifying.

In her book *Bad Feminist*, writer Roxane Gay accuses Tyler Perry of not only sludging in "mediocrity," but also of "building his success on the backs of black women," (Gay, 234). Perry may exist as one of the sole forces of contemporary African American cinema — yet not without criticism and controversy about his crude demonization of female characters and his offhand buttressing of male characters. Even in his aforementioned, feminist film, Perry adds an unnecessary string of male supporting actors that did not exist in the play's original version. Ultimately, *For Colored Girls* may obtain one of the most compelling and compassionate deliveries of an abortion account on-screen; but its contextual placement in a corrigible film, sadly erodes its overall command. And why did Tyler Perry direct this movie too?

Part III: Playing off the Choice of the Pregnant Leonine Lady

“How, then, can feminism come to grips with the aesthetic instead of either hoping it will go away or resorting to traditional ideas about canon?”

— **Rita Felski**

This may sound crazy, but basically I have boiled down the key two archetypes of the quintessential white-girl-gets-pregnant movie based on hair color. Then again, the political precedence of abortion is absurd; so therefore, it should not be a shocking surprise that life imitates art. And in the peculiar fashion people make movies, somehow we filmmakers captivate our audiences by capturing, as the *Cahiers* critics coined, “the reality of that reflection,” (Hoberman). Certainly, there are anomalous examples that do not quite fit the clichéd mold, such as the motherly matrons in *Alfie* (1966) and *My Body, My Child* (1982). People are complicated, and the mysteries of life all simply can not be deduced and tabulated into formulaic categories; yet, patterns inherently pervade the human psyche. Consequently, whether or not filmmakers consciously culled actors of blonde ambrosial curls, I have incidentally collated key examples of these almost Aryan pro-choice protagonists into a canon. Correlating their character traits, these leading ladies persuade the viewer’s choice to terminate pregnancies by eclipsing the sexual stigma of meretricious incontinence and by instead displaying poised, well-nigh immaculate, leonine grace.

Saint Stacy

The birth of the leonine archetype begins with the baby-faced, fifteen-year-old Stacy Hamilton from Amy Heckerling’s directorial debut in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982). Played by actor Jennifer Jason Leigh, Stacy exemplifies the paradigm of a sexually inchoate teenage girl; she may be initiating intercourse with older men and holding a server job at the

mall, yet she lacks the matronly maturity for motherhood at this stage in her life. She captivates audiences as cherubic and cute, but certainly not chaste in curiosity — considering the classic, coming-of-age carrot scene in the school cafeteria when her much more licentious friend, Linda teaches Stacy the rudimentary stages of fellatio. Furthermore, when Stacy becomes impregnated after initiating a fling with Mike Damone (Robert Romanus), she knows that in order for her carry on with her youth and budding independence — she will need to procure an abortion; and she does not change her mind about it either. Even though Mike falls short in fundraising his agreed half, Stacy continues with the appointment; but news of Mike’s craven abandonment spreads the Scarlet Letter to his locker — and thanks to her loyal and loquacious friend Linda — Mike, not Stacy experiences the tremoring thrust of mortification. In Heckerling’s microcosm, girls like Stacey no longer receive shame over their sexuality; on the other end of the biological spectrum, the boys are the ones who must stomach the punishment when they delude ethical duty in the school politics of Ridgemont High.

Before *Fast Times* represented the “only American film in which we experience an entire pregnancy-abortion sequence from beginning to end,” Heckerling did endure some flak from studio executives about incorporating the contentious coming-of-age scene. After needing “permission ‘from stockholders,’” Heckerling persuaded them to maintain the storyline — proclaiming the abortion as a significant example of teenagers dealing with ‘problems bigger than they are,’ (Boswell). However, the studio executives omitted the on-screen operation scene — now readily available on YouTube. Shamefully, the coerced absence consequently renders a rather awkward gap of a before-and-after abortion transition in the film’s final cut. Moreover, with punctuated stoner parodies from the iconic Jeff Spicoli (Sean Penn), Heckerling harnesses

an engaging equipoise between the variety of playful teen characters along with a trend-setting tone of comedic levity. With *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, Heckerling solidified not only her first feature within the classics of progressive, feminist cinema, but she also begot the paragon abortion archetype for the leonine leading lady.

The Lucky Penny

Chronologically speaking, Penny Johnson from *Dirty Dancing* (1987) falls next in the category of fierce, blonde she-lions aiming for a desired on-screen abortion. Granted that the film's production took place during the height of cinema's misogynistic backlash, writer Eleanor Bergstein deserves fulsome kudos for wily weaving not just the standardly safe surgical procedure into the plot; but rather, a malignantly illegal, pre-*Roe V. Wade* abortion that inextricably manifests itself into the storyline in spite of studio resistance. In order to maintain the early '60s subplot, Bergstein developed the trajectory of Baby's steamy love affair with Johnny (Patrick Swayze) as a domino effect from discovering the perturbed Penny, shaken by her pregnancy in the Kellermans' kitchen.

Compared to the guileless Baby (Jennifer Grey), Penny Johnson (Cynthia Rhodes) plays the lofty cool girl; and prior to instigating their compassionate friendship, Penny Houseman ices Baby with a blasé, classist burn — “Go back to your playpen, Baby.” Yet through her unabridged audacity and inspiring magnanimity, Baby bends her filial sphere of influence for Penny by clandestinely securing the abortion funds from her father. Even though it takes time for her dad to trust her again, audiences sympathize with Baby's moral relativism — a clear sign of her burgeoning ascension to adulthood. Flexing her matured muscles, she proves herself as a tour de force of bold temerity the moment she dumps water on Robby's pants; after discovering his

paternal involvement and abandonment in Penny's illegal predicament — she warns, “Stay away from me, stay away from my sister, or I'll have you fired.” And Penny takes notice of Baby's benevolent bravery, appreciates her assistance, and wants her to know that she “doesn't sleep around.” Penny thought Robby loved her; and Robby only further hitches himself as a moronic jerk when he thanks Baby's dad for helping Penny's abortion at the end. Up until that moment, Mr. Horseman had implicitly been making judgment calls on all of the dirty-dancin' hoe-workers — mostly in concerned consternation over his daughter's entry into the cool kids club. Yet oedipal detachments aside, by the film's end, everyone rocks out and acquiesces to having the “Time of [their] Life,” (*Dirty Dancing*).

However, the curtain of courage and love is drawn back by the film's closing quixotic dance number; yet Penny's nearly lethal abortion lingers as the sole disturbance. After all, “the guy had a dirty knife and a folding table,” leaves cringe-inducing imagery and cautionary information about the deleterious dangers of illegal, limited, and desolate abortion access. When Penny reveals the news that she can still conceive children to Johnny, the arcane exchange alludes to a tragedy that statistically never occurs within the realm of legal and medically safe abortions. But as a lionlike lady of outstanding merit, Penny resiliently convalesces from her bed-rest and resumes her daily activities — for the most part. Whereas Baby relishes her steamy romance with Johnny, the concluding scene refuses to allot Penny the same conclusion. As a result of her corrosive abortion, her character needs to be rebuffed for the sake of churning out the virginal viewers' apologetic forgiveness. In short, Penny can not sleep around for awhile; so while everyone else is getting hot, she needs to dance with the geriatric Butler to preserve

whatever purity she has left before she finds real love. After all, Ronald Reagan was president during the time of the film's release.

While Vestron Pictures pitched Proctor & Gamble to serve as the film's corporate sponsor, the company reneged their initial agreement "due to their dislike of the Penny abortion subplot." With nearly six million bucks invested, can you blame studio executives for breaking a panicked sweat? Despite the non-diegetic placement of Penny's abortion, the searing imagery emanates from the lines such as "I could hear her screaming from the hallway." However, Patrick Swayze and Jennifer Grey's onscreen chemistry created such a diversion of cult fervor that, according to internet movie database, "Thirty-nine percent of people who viewed the film did not realize abortion was the subplot." When the film screened for producer Aaron Russo, he reacted, "Burn the negative and collect the insurance ("Dirty Dancing"). Ironically saved by the grossing of over tenfold the picture's initial budget, blockbuster numbers have historically proven that if a story possesses enough star power, theatrical talent, and choreographed entertainment, then there is no need to abort a pro-choice subplot.

All He Wants is Candy

After watching *Cider House Rules* (1999), the next time I see a smart-ass guy dressed up as a gynecologist for Halloween, I am going to waltz up to him and say — "Oh, then can you perform my abortion on me then?" Since if there is anything I learned from this movie, it's that I should probably fall in love with a guy who can perform surgically safe abortions on me, you know just in case. But flippant gags aside, Swedish director Lasse Hallström's *Cider House Rules* reveres itself as an art-house masterpiece. As the film captures the life of an altruistic orphanage caretaker, Dr. Wilbur Larch (Michael Caine), the veteran gynecologist performs

pro-bono abortions on women in need; but additionally, he bestows his surgical training on a juvenile medical apprentice, Homer Wells (Tobey Maguire). However, Dr. Larch continually stresses to Homer — despite his skeptical disaccord — on the critical necessity of medically safe abortions.

In her factually unnerving book *When Abortion Was a Crime*, author Leslie J. Reagan cites, “In the early twentieth century, many children became orphans when their mothers died during childbirth or abortions,” (39). As they bury the grave of a girl-“child” — who morbidly punctured herself with a “crochet hook,” Dr. Larch laments to both Homer and baby Buster, “She died of secrecy. She died of ignorance,” (*Cider House Rules*). At this maudlin moment of the movie, it is virtually impossible to not remind oneself of the lethal horrors of hindered abortion access; and to also not want to hug Michael Caine and cry uncontrollably on his saint-like shoulders.

Certainly with *Cider House Rules*, Caine has redeemed himself from his previously mentioned role as the lascivious abortion-abetting lead in *Alfie* (1966); and although some criticize the film as abortion depicted from the agency of men, Hallström’s film still honors the bona fide code — that in spite of patriarchal oppression — women have historically “counted on men” in trying times of terminating unwanted pregnancies. Such as with the film’s exemplary character, Lieutenant Wally Worthington — documented archives reveal how boyfriends and husbands alike have assisted in not only financing, but also in actively scouring for “the names of abortionists” to perform the precariously criminal procedure (Reagan, 31).

During the last time I was accused of judging a male for his pro-life disposition based solely on sex — I simply referred to this movie as a testament that men, the once sole proprietors

of advanced medical degrees¹⁹ — have generously offered their educated expertise to help women in dire need over the course of history. When Dr. Larch justifies “playing God” to his skeptical apprentice, Homer Wells, he proclaims — “Homer, if you expect people to be responsible for their children, you have to give them the right to decide whether or not to have children,” (*Cider House Rules*).

Yet Homer’s mind doesn’t exactly change as a result of his sagacious mentorship; rather he must embark his own odyssey and engage himself with the vicissitudinous caprices of love and heartache in order to comprehend and practice what Dr. Larch preached; and who other to change his mind than a saccharine girl named Candy? After meeting her as an abortion patient at St. Cloud’s orphanage, Homer instantly draws himself towards the infectious charm of Candy Kendall — played by the youthful and yes, very lion-like Charlize Theron. Clearly entangled in “trouble,” Homer declares Candy as the “most beautiful and nicest girl” he’s ever known. However, our leonine lady of love possesses one louche flaw — she’s “bad at being alone.” And thus, she romantically betrays her boyfriend Lieutenant Wally Worthington (Paul Rudd) while he’s away on military duty; and moreover, Homer also betrays Worthington as the man who welcomes him to stay at his humble abode and endows him a job at the family apple orchard; but Candy is so kindred, compassionate, and gorgeous in classic white girl complexion. So in spite of the suspense and the chilling tension of cheating lovers, how can audiences possibly lambaste Homer’s affair with this cherubic, albeit coquettish, archetype who taught him that even angels on Earth acquire abortions?

¹⁹ However, male physicians were not the only ones performing abortions — “Available evidence suggests that midwives and doctors performed abortions in approximately equal numbers at the turn of the century as well,” (Reagan, 70). Despite how midwives tended to perform abortions for immigrant and working-class women, midwives and doctors possessed “comparable safety records for abortions,” (Reagan, 73-77).

Loyalty to Laura

Stephen Frears' film *High Fidelity* (2000) prevails as everything Charles Shyer's *Alfie* (2004) remake is not — both in terms of its portrayal of performative gender roles and abortion. Stylistically, the two pictures hail from the same Japanese theatrical tradition (that of course, Hollywood appropriated) of incessantly rupturing the fourth wall; and both utilize the technique in order to strategically elucidate the trajectory of the film's narrative and conveniently speed up the spatio-temporal restrictions of real life. Regardless of how akin both of these bros stand in cluelessly indulging in concupiscence sans consequence, Rob Gordon (John Cusack) wins over our hearts in *High Fidelity*; whereas *Alfie*'s eponymous character erodes with charm over time — eventually churning our stomachs with cold, manipulative nausea. Played by the devilishly dapper and self-cognizant, Jude Law, Alfie callously cloaks himself in a calculating out-take on dating. On the contrary, John Cusack's character counters that he may manage to mingle well with the ladies — specifically showing his serendipitous occasion of a shallow one night stand with the magnetic singer Marie De Salle (Lisa Bonet) — but he misses his ex-girlfriend Laura. In fact, the film obsessively revolves around their entire relationship to the brink in which audiences are forced to feel at least somewhat sorry for this sluggish, record-junkie sap. We're convinced he's pitifully being played; until Rob alas reveals that he was the one who wronged the lionlike Laura — not vice versa.

Moreover, Alfie never dwells too long with monogamous dreams; although he indulges himself to pitiful moments, his haughty disposition renders him, in the most J.D. Salinger usage of the word — a total phony. Whereas Cusack's Rob Gordon consistently calls attention to his self-destructive flaws — he downplays and deprecates himself. Repetitively, he defers to his

responsibility in ruining his relationship. He admits to his licentious affair, acknowledges his “self-righteous” claims to fatherhood; and by consistently conceding his ultimate inferiority to Laura — the audience can’t even despise him for too long at any time. After all, he’s quite hilarious, Jack Black is his best friend, and he upholds himself, albeit with supercilious superiority, with a refined, patrician musical palette. So, even when Rob Gordon expresses exasperation for not receiving an ample say in Laura’s decision to abort — he quickly follows his self-righteous soliloquy with respect towards her; she’s upheld and elevated to a conspicuous leonine caliber — only deserving of unwavering loyalty and his utmost respect.

As a result of Rob’s infidelity, it would have been risky for Laura to have a child with him; yet the film flexes with quixotic hope as Rob Gordon eventually wins back his noble nymph — who may embody the quintessential characteristics of an ambitious, nearly flawless angel, but she’s not as childishly youthful as Stacey from *Fast Times*, Candy from *Cider House Rules*, or Sage from *Grandma*. In regards to maturity level, she resembles Penny from *Dirty Dancing* — late twenties, early thirties; yet because Laura lives in the ‘90s oasis of legal American abortion, she need not worry about risking her later chances of conception. Instead, *High Fidelity* hits home with an aphoristic conclusion — that sometimes women need to wait for their boyfriends to grow up before they can start families with them. Furthermore, the legality of *Roe V. Wade* reigns as all the less risqué in *High Fidelity* — the controversial decision to terminate a pregnancy takes a backseat as almost a mere afterthought; and comparatively, its depiction wanes considerably in “dogma and high drama” to the didactic likes of *Cider House Rules* and the dangerous subplot of *Dirty Dancing* (Palmer).

In summary, Laura may have obtained the narrative screen time and agency of a supporting actor, but her paramount presence commands the attention of both her protagonist boyfriend and the viewer; and above all, she overrules obsolete notions on women who abort in film — because she can obtain a stigma-free abortion, manage her career and her man, and subsequently proceed to move on with her auspicious life. She may be blonde, perfect, pretty, but she indubitably is a queen. Thus, we regal her to the throne of yet another lionlike lady in the lexicon of pro-choice cinema.

Mumbling Florence

Before Noah Baumbach would direct another gawky coming-of-age tale for Greta Gerwig in *Frances Ha* (2012), as well as direct another youth-obsessed mid-life crisis for Ben Stiller in *While We're Young* (2014) — *Greenberg* (2010) reeks with quintessential mumblecore mania. Some scenes are nearly impeccable in adroitly achieving sheer awkwardness. The improvised dialogue permits pausal exchanges with spontaneous room for spot-on sardonic wit. It's beautifully banal, epically eccentric, and just way too tragic. And in spite of how aloof and peculiar the leading lady, Florence Marr (Greta Gerwig), acts at times — she nonetheless possesses the charming prowess to pool herself into the on-screen posse of temporarily pregnant leonine ladies.

When title character Roger Greenberg (Ben Stiller) leaves his lionlike love interest an inebriated voicemail, he confesses to her, “You’re brave — Young people are brave.” Undoubtedly Greenberg’s words resonate with piercing truth, but the paradox pervades the tone. During the time of the voicemail, Florence is spending an unnecessarily pricey night in the hospital after requesting anesthesia to sedate her “D and C” abortion. Yet, as typical to the

mumblecore movie movement, irony manifests itself in every moment possible. For instance, when Florence asks Greenberg if they can “take it slow” because of her recent relationship, the mood only transpires as more uncomfortable as she is interrogated on how her latest one-night stand was; and audiences can not distinguish whether or not her answer — “it was pretty awkward” — pertains to either the past or the present tense.

Moreover, what distinguishes Florence within the pro-choice canon of cute blonde white girls is above all, her humorous humility. She may be a droll ditz, but she definitely delineates from the one-dimensional damsel-in-distress stereotype. At times, I even wondered whether or not she truly classified as the almost cherubic, abortion-acquiring archetype; but the moment Greenberg watches her sing onstage for the first time — the mousy bumbling blonde becomes the beautiful butterfly muse; and thus, she earns her lofty leonine laurels. Seconds prior to ending her pregnancy, she confesses, “I just don’t know what I’m doing with my life.” Although when Greenberg tries informing her that she is “of value,” she retorts, “I know that, you don’t have to say it,” as she’s whisked away by a nurse in a wheelchair. Transcribed, the moment reads as much more austere than the floundering and funny way actor Greta Gerwig mumbles back her response. With her inherently witty talent to turn graceless into guffaws, it is of no surprise that Baumbach wanted to work with her again after this film. The girl has charm and game (*Greenberg*).

Most telling, Jennifer Jason Leigh — the aforementioned actor who plays the adorable Stacy Hamilton from *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* — appears in the film and even produced and co-wrote it with Director Noah Baumbach²⁰. Moreover, as the inaugural paragon of blonde

²⁰ After *Greenberg* was released, Jennifer Jason Leigh filed for divorce with ex-husband Noah Baumbach, who shortly began a relationship with Greta Gerwig. Moreover, Gerwig and Baumbach have collaborated on three projects since — solidifying the two in the indie canon with the film *Frances Ha* (2012) (Lamont).

babes who methodically handle their on-screen abortions, Stacy “bears some resemblance” to Greta Gerwig’s Florence. In an IMDb trivia note, one anonymous cinephile conveys their comparisons:

“Both are young, blonde women who are slightly overweight (by Hollywood’s standards), who experiment with sexual promiscuity, and who fall into emotionally painful sexual relationships with much-older men. Both have abortions (a fairly rare occurrence in American movies and TV shows) and emerge relatively unscathed,” (“Greenberg”).

Therefore, I am not the sole proprietor of detecting this end-of-pregnancy protagonist pattern. Even though Maggie Gyllenhaal and Amy Adams almost acted the lead role, Greta Gerwig’s selection ultimately behooved the writers. Granted how both films thematically portray abortion as a temporary and trite obstruction in women’s lives — since it is legally accessible, *Greenberg* further proves how charming, courageous, almost Aryan archetypes have been utilized to persuasively portray the tried and true tropes of protagonists who seek abortions sans crisis in cinema (“Greenberg”).

A Sage in *Grandma*’s Hands

In spite of the cynicism amongst female journalists about the sparse on-screen representation of reproductive rights — Paul Weitz’s *Grandma* (2015) testifies to the culminating, stark shattering of the feminist glass ceiling; even if hardly anyone knows about this film or if it has “6.7” stars on IMDb — it’s ineluctably epic. No longer does abortion remise to mere subplot status; alas, the cinematically rare and controversial, albeit common practice has upgraded to the long-awaited log-line. Quite possibly, the film fulsomely reaches the apotheosis of abortion incorporated as a main plot agenda — it even makes the topic in the ground-breaking

Fast Times at Ridgemont High appear like a suppressed “footnote”; and contrary to its contemporary predecessor and sibling *Obvious Child, Grandma*²¹ obtains more realistic barriers to acquiring the operation; such as cost, travel, and time — all the while packaged as the first real abortion “road movie.” Unsurprisingly, Paul Weitz wrote the role with regal Lily Tomlin in mind; and her character — a once notorious poet named “Elle,” does command almost every scene of the movie with an unprecedented caliber of humanistic fervor and ardently acrimonious anti-heroism ever so freshly evident to the pro-choice canon. Lily Tomlin has mastered the dualism of that hilarious “horrible person” who everyone wants as their wise-cracking sidekick; even her friend Deathy (Laverne Cox) says, “You know you’re not the easiest toke. That’s why we love you,” (*Grandma*).

However, Tomlin’s onscreen grand-daughter Sage (Julia Garner) does admittedly steal some of the show. Archetypally, she certainly roots in the tried-and-true cherubic countenance of leonine curls — as she visibly almost mirrors Charlize Theron’s character Candy from Hallström’s *Cider House Rules*; but as the acerbic academic’s apprentice, she learns euphemisms for “bitch, hoe, and slut,” along with knowing when to shout, “screw you, Grandma” — after Elle taunts her for not knowing who Simone de Beauvoir is²². Regardless of her youth, Sage shows promising signs of living up to her wizened name. She may be self-deprecating in her intelligence, self-doubting in her providence; but she’s steadfast in her decision to terminate her incipient pregnancy²³. In spite of her rosaceous apparel, Sage shines as the inchoate inheritor of

²¹ Both *Obvious Child* and *Grandma* not only possess abortion in the log-line and plot premise, but they also both oddly enough begin with break-ups between couples that, additionally, are not the biological parents of the soon-to-be aborted embryo.

²² The film self-reflexively alludes to the hallmark authors of 20th century feminism through Elle’s obsession to sell “first-edition” texts of Betty Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique* and Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*

²³ “Today, most abortions are performed in the first eight weeks of pregnancy. Women then and now have tended to have early abortions,” (Reagan, 154).

Elle's world-weary ways; and when the audience meets the Deus Ex Machina to the money problem — none other than the feared “bully” mother — do we realize how the pendulum gap of generations still renders the granddaughter and grandmother duo as more alike than unlike.

Moreover, *Grandma* astutely teaches audiences about the historical motifs of abortion as well as the advances of *Roe V. Wade's* legality without sacrificing too much of the film's shrewd entertainment. Although she sneers the \$630 inflated abortion fee as flat-out “highway robbery, later at the clinic, Lily Tomlin's character Elle complicity gives credence to the fact that her granddaughter will obtain a pain-free, contemporary abortion. Referencing the triumphant end of the “dark ages,” Elle confesses that her abortion hurt “like a nightmare;” yet certainly not all has changed in both biology and history. When Sage confesses to her grandmother that her torpid, insolent, kind-of-boyfriend has dipped out of his responsibility, Elle proclaims, “He'd find the money if he found out he was going to swell up like a watermelon,” — which is pertinent to the same precarious promise made by Mike Damone to Stacy Hamilton in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*²⁴. However, unlike Stacey, Sage's Grandma “beat the shit out of him.” Ultimately, *Grandma* underscores the historical verisimilitude of how older female relatives have often assisted in locating and financing for abortions; and how “helping daughters, sisters, and nieces obtain abortions was, like attending deliveries and giving advice on child rearing, part of the maternal role and sibling relationship,” (Reagan, 27). Though unlike the past, no longer does the outcry of “death before dishonor” speak true in the pristine clinics of today's legal abortion providers — that is, only for those who can afford it (*Grandma*).

²⁴ By 1988, the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement had collected only \$5 billion of the \$25 billion fathers owed in back child support. And studies on child support collection strategies are finding that only one tactic seems to awake the moral conscience of negligent fathers: mandatory jail sentences” (Faludi, 40)

Part IV: The Nasty Anti-Hero and Even Nastier Abortions

“According to the mystique, women, in their mysterious femininity, might be interested in the concrete biological details of having a baby in a bomb shelter, but never in the abstract idea of the bomb’s power to destroy the human race.”

— Betty Friedan in *The Feminist Mystique*

We live in an age where bad is synonymous with good. If someone calls you a “bad bitch,” then it’s a compliment. It means that you won’t take shit from no one — and that you “can hold your own.” So, ladies, reign in your raffish selves, soak in the antithetical glory of the gone girl, and don’t let anyone slander you as a nasty woman without heeding pride to the praise of crass courage; upend the undertones of undulating gender bias and make chaos out of malignant microaggressions — because “this pussy grabs back.”²⁵

So, as far as the pro-choice canon of cinema is concerned, why does every white blonde girl who gets an abortion resemble an innocuous angel? Somehow, the brunettes have fared better in the heat of the Hollywood night. Before Donna from *Obvious Child* admitted to being a “horrible person” and joked about toilet humor and used underwear onstage, the only noteworthy women unabashedly putting forth their rawest selves were Rizzo from *Grease* (1978) and Sally Bowles from *Cabaret* (1972). They may have exuded a candid persona of the lewd and crude, but god damnit, we loved them for it. And we didn’t care that they acquired abortions either; we just wanted them to return back to their robust, unorthodox lives of “screwing,” singing, dancing, and raising that pugnacious pandemonium of eternal, effervescent hellfire.

In the pre-*Roe V. Wade* film *Cabaret* (1972), the quixotic Sally Bowles (Liza Minnelli) quips — “Well there goes my fur coat,” after paying a vast fine for her illegal abortion in the

²⁵ “Pussy grabs back” has transmogrified into a rallying cry against the sexual assault boasts of current U.S. President Donald Trump (Puglise).

1930s' setting of Berlin, Germany. She doesn't know whose child it is — so why even consider going through that kind of anxiety if one also has career goals that haven't been met yet? She's not ashamed to act out as her most eccentric self — however peculiar and "deluded" her disposition may be at times. Open-minded in her puerile prowess, she embodies an unconventional free spirit; albeit as best friend Brian (Michael York) says, she somewhat lacks the suave and sultry seduction of the classic femme fatale. Yet undeniably, Liza Minnelli earns her laurels in queer cinema after not only striking out flamboyant musical dance numbers, but after also teaching Brian — clearly, an oppressed gay man — what unconditional love is. Granted that the film takes place during Germany's reich of Nazi occupation, the abortion only contends as a subtle subplot compared to the ominous undertones of the encroaching Holocaust; Sally will survive, but perhaps not the newly-wedded Jewish couple of Natalia Landauer (Marissa Berenson) and Fritz Wendel (Fritz Wepper). Consequently, *Cabaret* soars as political commentary beyond its time — tackling both abortion and genocide with tragically comedic and surrealist undertones of show-stopping pizzazz and poignancy. Without hesitation, I gave it five stars (*Cabaret*).

Obviously Brilliant

As the quintessential pregnancy indie film, Gillian Robespierre's *Obvious Child* prevails as everything that *Juno* is not. There is lively music, unexpected romance, bellowing jokes punctuated by even more blundering moments of buffoonery. And above all, the film audaciously advances the anti-hero's abortion from mere subplot to full-fledged premise. Moreover, Robespierre even coordinated with Planned Parenthood while producing the film; and

the president of the organization, Cecile Richards even exalted *Obvious Child* as unprecedented within the contextual canon of on-screen abortion:

“This film is a major breakthrough — not just because it shows a woman deciding to have an abortion but because it shows her as a full and complete person making the serious decision to end a pregnancy and still having a full and fun life...One film won’t change how women are viewed by society and the entertainment industry, but it can help challenge stigma and change the conversation. A woman’s decision about her pregnancy should be respected and valued, and a film as refreshingly real as this one should be celebrated,” (Richards, Cecile)

What rings as remarkably heartfelt about Richards’ statement is that *Obvious Child* refuses to cater to an idealized notion of the perfect woman. Although its protagonist possesses a plethora of flaws, the film tackles the timorous topic of abortion flawlessly. Perhaps its’ fresh and funny take stems as a direct result of its defiant absence of an archetypal leonine lady. Jenny Slate’s character Donna shines as irresistibly cute, but crass in comedic charm — unearthing a diarrhea or toilet humor punchline every chance she gets. She’s smart, but not supercilious about it; and as a stand-up comic, she self-deprecates herself incessantly and harnesses a public persona of unabridged access to her most privy self. Moreover, she even wears navel orange crocs. In the film, Donna’s best friend (Gabi Hoffman) tells her, “What is so great about you is that you're unapologetically yourself on that stage every time and that is why people love you,” (*Obvious Child*).

As a feature film, Robespierre’s *Obvious Child* oscillates seamlessly from stringent and sad to sarcastic and sidesplitting. The spacing of scenes gives credence to the serious subject

matter, without dwelling or exhausting too much sorrow for the ill-timed circumstances. When commenting on the film, actor Jenny slate spoke about her character, “When it comes down to it, Donna is in charge of her decision. And she is by herself in that way, and that is both powerful and scary, and it’s okay for it to be both,” (Vimeo).

Unlike most sappy romantic comedies, the film simmers with raw honesty and realness while talking reproductive rights with a bang. It’s refreshing to watch women talk about taboo subject matter with a graceless guffaw; and Donna herself breathes like a living riot — spinning jokes about Holocaust survival, late nights, and the grotesque lifespan of female underwear. She’s witty. She’s crude. She’s real. Thus, instead of a blonde barbie, we alas have a human being.

In her chapter, “Not Here to Make Friends,” Roxanne details the vacant dimensionality of “likeability” and how more often than not, benevolence can beguile truth and further occult ripe opportunities for raw character dynamism:

“I am often drawn to unlikable characters to those who behave in socially unacceptable ways, say whatever is on their mind, and do what they want with varying levels of regard for the consequences. I want characters to do bad things and get away with their misdeeds. I want characters to think ugly thoughts and make ugly decisions. I want characters to make mistakes and put themselves first without apologizing for it...I want characters to do the things I am afraid to do for fear of making myself more unlikable than I may already be. I want characters to be the most honest of all things — human.” (Gay, 86).

Need I acquiesce more? Nearly the crux of Roxane Gay's charm stems from her paradoxically callous and compassionate criticism to both buttress and better gender and racial equality onscreen; but nonetheless, writers must cull the core of what makes engaging energies and egos so engrossingly complex and charming — flaws.

Although Gay's words certainly resonate with me and the manner in which I write complicated characters, there also exists a fine line between polished flawed finesse and the flagrantly offensive. Especially when considering the precarious subject of abortion, characters must be crafted and composed with issues greater than themselves in mind. A challenge, certainly, but only more fuel to fire the creative juices.

Citizen Uncouth

Within this bizarre breakdown of the abortion lexicon as either blonde or brunette, archetypes exist on both ends of the progressive and regressive spectrum of representation; but what even distinguishes these regressive films from most bad movies is that in spite of their moral muck, they still merit significance for stigmatizing on-screen abortion (Sisson & Kimport, 56). In particular, *Citizen Ruth* (1996), *Juno* (2007), *Knocked Up* (2007), and *Don't Blame the Kid* (2016) all sardonically fester as the sordid worst of the fecund lot. Apropos to the austerity of the abortion film anthology, they all bear bad news and little brains. Granted Alexander Payne conceives marvelous movies and Judd Apatow incessantly churns out ingenious work and raw talent; these accomplished male directors perhaps lacked the socially gendered insight to gestate a pregnancy movie with abortion pertinent to the way “honorary woman” Paul Weitz did. Not to say female directors and writers are excluded, because I'm giving you the stink eye, too, Diablo Cody.

Perhaps one of the most pernicious, abrasively antagonistic on-screen anti-heroes to terminate a pregnancy is Ruth from director Alexander Payne's film *Citizen Ruth*. Aside from a few affable jokes here and there, the only compliment I will deed the movie rests in the baffling and boisterously unexpected delivery of Laura Dern. After seeing her play innocent in *Blue Velvet*, I had no idea she carried the candor or conviction to play a deplorable drug addict. I just didn't like, or rather, despised her character's careless, downright inconsideration to deliver a child with drug-induced deficits into the world; but then again, the film allotted her no agency. Rather, she pillaged the screen as nothing more than a flippant farce — an inhalant crazed caricature of a woman — an ominous outline to the inherent rights and restrictive regulations of ovaries everywhere.

Citizen Ruth personally stands out as a lonely, sad failure of political satire in the otherwise laudable filmography of filmmaker Alexander Payne — whose commercial hits, *Sideways*, *Election*, *The Descendants*, and *Nebraska* happen to be some of the better of the bulk of movies I've seen in my lifetime. Yet in what I deride as *Citizen Uncouth*, Payne perilously parodies both sides to the abortion argument as inherently pharisaical, yet the crooning humanization of the pro-life crowd pervades with horrifying stigma towards women oppressed by restrictions and laws in predominantly conservative states. It's not just sympathetic, it's hyperbolically horrendous.

For instance, Payne utilizes a favorably cheerful sound design to score the pro-lifers compared to the suspenseful sounds underlying the covert movements of the pro-choice espionage clan. Although Payne spares neither side from slapstick critique, the film shallowly undermines the efforts of feminist activists who endorse abortion as a permanent legal measure.

In the mired microcosm of *Citizen Ruth*, pro-choicers pedantically flaunt feminism like a coterie of classist sapphic solipsists who contradict themselves with arrogance and sans conviction. Although bookish, they stress choice to a character unable to execute her own choices; and moreover, they hardly caution Ruth to sparing a child the grief of developmental problems from unbridled inebriation. However, they certainly do judge her for not fitting the mature mold of maternal material.

After watching the lucidly tragic tales in *12th & Delaware*, and witnessing the horror and heartache that stems from pro-life clinics dispensing incorrect information and pressuring women to carry their unwanted pregnancies to full term, Payne's film serves as a proud mockery of partisan politics without taking to heart the serious repercussions of women not being able to control their own bodies. Rather, every time Laura Dern's character claims she wants to control her body, it is not for the sake of her own volition, but rather another symptom of her selfish slippery slope to crash and burn as a washed-up drug addict. I didn't laugh throughout the movie; instead I just felt sad.

IMDb reviews oddly enough rave this film as an "underrated gem," "uncommonly mature in its centrist ideology" (Steve Pulaski), "right on the money," "a great way to come to your own decision about this issue," "effective satire," while others do contend that the tone shifts from careful satire to callous caricaturization of a weighted, polemical issue. David Sarkies from Australia stated on IMDB, "This is a disturbing movie in the way they try to make it a comedy about a person you really don't want to laugh about, " ("Citizen Ruth"). And even though I admittedly chuckled to a few jokes, it was immediately followed by nausea.

Given the previous diatribe, it should be of no surprise that I deem Ruth as the most offensively transmogrified of the blonde white girls with unexpected pregnancies onscreen. She even goes so far as to surpass *Knocked Up*'s Allison Scott, who in spite of exuding some degree of lioness grace, Scott does not even consider an abortion after just reaching the apex of her career —although frankly, the takeaway message of Apatow's searing autobiography is that the best a sluggish porn nerd comic can hope for in life is to accidentally impregnate a beautiful blonde woman at a bar (just kidding, I love the Apatows, I just hate this movie). But Scott at the very least never considers an abortion and sporadically changes her mind at a moment's notice. On the contrary, Ruth can't even make up her own mind, which is why she ultimately miscarries — a silver lining sure, albeit not without offense.

The Monkey on Your Back is Not the Latest Trend

While describing the “hungry audience of young women dying to see some movies,” apropos to the myopic market of Hollywood, Shonda Rhimes metaphorically proclaims that “in the absence of water, people drink sand,” (Dowd, 8). When I was fourteen, *Juno* (2007), was sadly that sand. In lieu of the canonized leonine angel of pro-choice cinema, audiences alas bestow upon an awkward, mousy, and witty teenage girl who spurts her own idiosyncratic quips like, “Jesus, banana, shut your freakin gob, okay?” Adorable graphics, indie tunes, and campy dialogue not only over-saturate the film's infantilized tone, but they also all occult the ominously disturbing oscillation of Juno's indecisive mind; consequently, both writer Diablo Cody and director Ivan Reitman dangerously pathologize the young pregnant teen's agency; and moreover, their mumblecore mayhem perniciously parodies and trivializes the portrayals of those who both protest and protect the affairs of America's dwindling abortion clinics.

Directed by Ivan Reitman and written by Diablo Cody, *Juno* follows the journey of its eccentric, smart, eponymous protagonist (Ellen Page) who prematurely finds herself pregnant at age sixteen after losing her virginity to, perhaps, the daintiest jock in movie history — Paulie Bleeker (Michael Cera). And in all verisimilitude, part of me yearns to like this motion picture; I want to appreciate its all-star charming cast, the high-brow eloquence of esoteric punch-lines, and the folksy phenomenon of its dulcet sound-track; but *Juno* offends beyond its sympathetic pro-life rhetoric to deed out “a precious blessing from Jesus out of [a] shitty situation.” Rather, the film runs south of mawkish; and more towards mired malignance — the mere moment the movie caricaturizes not only the adorable pro-life activist, Su-Chin, but also the abrasive and salacious stereotype of the anonymous abortion clinic receptionist. (*Juno*).

After reciting a monotonous and memorized recitation — “Please put your hands where I can see them and surrender any bombs” — without raising her eyes from her mobile device, the acerbic receptionist is hardly a warm and welcoming medical assistant. Instead, one of the most widely known scenes with abortion vilifies the volunteers of philanthropic women’s health clinics as an unapologetically hostile hostesses of lewd horror. Decked out in multiple facial piercings and heavy ombre eye makeup, the emo girl-child hardly appears to look past adolescence in spite of her boasted affinity for “pie-balls.” While pushing Juno to pawn the free flavored condom, she only appears engaged when doling out crass comments over her own sex-life; but Cody and Reitman transmogrify her even further as she demands for discreet information — “Don’t skip the hairy details — we need to know about every score and every sore.” Whereas the cute Su-Chin only needs to spit out one small, sinewy detail — “Your baby has fingernails” — in order to infiltrate Juno’s inchoate decision-making processes; and the

simple statistic reverberates in a heightened sound design transition of cheerful triumph to the movie's next scene. Moreover, Lily Tomlin's character Elle in Paul Weitz's *Grandma* (2015) references this notoriously mis-construed pop culture moment from *Juno*. When a protester barks the same exact piece of pro-life propaganda, Elle rapidly retorts back, "Not until twenty-two weeks, genius," ("Grandma"). It's Paul Weitz giving Ivan Reitman the thoughtful middle finger; and it's beautiful.

In the documentary *12th & Delaware*, the directorial duo of *Jesus Camp*'s Rachel Grady and Heidi Ewing capture the contemporary abortion clinics as a contentious war zone. On a street-corner in Fort Pierce, Florida, a pro-life pregnancy center opened in 1999 across the street from an abortion clinic; and although the former's agenda revolves around religious zeal, the pro-life center voluntarily beguiles countless women — who initially assume they are in the adjacent abortion clinic — into their facilities; and further, along with the strategic placement of "abortion leads to breast cancer" brochures, this rationale is propagated as altruistic. Yet deceptive entry is not where the pro-life activism ends. A vociferous priest climbs on a ladder with a microphone; belligerent men bellow and disdain the women as dumb damsels in the distress; a woman's sign reads, "A woman's world kills babies." While frightened, the abortion clinic frets over past accounts of "accidental" arson and present threats of violence and death. The baby-faced darling of Su-Chin's grammatically incorrect chant has been usurped by the real masters of persistent activism; but instead of exposing the corrosive and combative behaviors of many countless pro-life protesters, *Juno* typifies religious extremism simply as cute and courageous.

And in hindsight, avid film fans and feminists have reason to remember *Juno* as a cautionary tale of how a stylistically appealing film can get away with politically incorrect and horrifically hyperbolic depictions of abortion. Since if you think *Dirty Dancing* surpassed expectations as a box office sensation, look no further than to *Juno*. In spite of its nearly identical budget and idiosyncratic stream of offensive slurs — both racist, homophobic, and unctuous towards the accuracy of teen pregnancy — the film accrued more than half of *Dirty Dancing*'s decade long earnings with a tabulated gross of nearly \$143,492,840. Moreover, this sum was composed only six months after the film's opening weekend ("Juno").

Yet perhaps what pervades as more alarming than the winning of a 2008 Oscar for Best Writing for an Original Screenplay — along with earning three other nominations, is that Director Ivan Reitman convinced himself that, "Juno had a choice." As part of the its ten-year anniversary, the filmmaker will be hosting an all-female live reading of the film in Los Angeles on April 8th in order to fundraise money for Planned Parenthood; and further, Reitman proclaimed that "if there was any confusion about whether or not *Juno* was pro-choice or pro-life, this should settle that." Granted that this event showcases philanthropic efforts from the film's stars Ellen Page and Jennifer Garner, the commemoration will grimly glorify a film that offensively portrayed the female agency to abort as well as the compassionate volunteer effort behind clinics such as Planned Parenthood. Whereas Entertainment magazine writer Anthony Breznican muses that "the all-female cast will add an edgy new feel to the story," this event will only further venerate the morally reprehensible film as one of the few contemporary examples in which general audiences recognize abortion as a plotline (Breznican) (*Juno*). Despite all of our

eye-rolling reactions, at least woke women around the world can find peace in the event that some money will be donated for the organization, howbeit hypocritically.

Part V: The Production of “Sugar Daddy”

“If men could get pregnant, you could get an abortion at an ATM”

— HBO’s VEEP, Selina Meyer, played by Julia Louis Dreyfus

When initially generating ideas for this film, certainly more bad ones came to mind than good ones; but one in particular kept bubbling back to the surface. While creating an anti-hero, we also sought to conceptually link social deviance and a lack of reproductive resources — granted that “bribery,” theft, and crime have historically “underpinned the abortion practice;” so, what more of an effective way to demonstrate this correlation than to have our character solicit cocaine²⁶ (Reagan, 155)?

Essentially, the insane logic to sell drugs stems from desperation within insane circumstances; and it also reflects the maturity level and overall caliber of judgment of our precocious protagonist. Since if Evelyn decides to sell drugs in order to finance her abortion, should she be birthing children at this puerile stage of her life anyways? Hence, when Evelyn baits her friends into guessing what her “crafty little plan,” is, Effie’s conjecture, “What are we going to do, rob a bank?” directly prods the self-reflexive film reference to *Sugar & Spice* — a cult classic in which a pregnant teenage cheerleader convinces her squad to abet robbing banks in order to pay for her future child care. Yet Diane Weston clearly wants her child, whereas our Evelyn does not.

So, when she exclaims, “No, this isn’t *Sugar & Spice*,” Evelyn additionally calls attention to the absurdity of raising children at her age. Moreover, Diane Weston emanates from the screen as winsome and charming. Similar to the aforementioned leonine ladies who choose to abort, such as Stacey from *Fast Times at Ridgmont High*, Sage from *Grandma*, and Candy from

²⁶ Well, truthfully cocaine was chosen because it’s the easiest to fabricate on-screen; so, we used a powdered form of the vitamin Inositol that assists ovarian function — you’re welcome, actors!

Cider House Rules, they all carry an almost cherubic countenance to them; yet the latter group only appear angelic for the sake of persuading audiences that abortion does not stain one's moral fiber. Consequently, we decided to test the waters of anti-heroism in pro-choice cinema by coalescing the brashness of brunette pistols such as Donna from *Obvious Child* with the angelic, and leonine locks of the archetypal blonde pro-choice character.

However, we certainly didn't plan to cast a blonde — I serendipitously asked actor Valerie DeGroot to audition, suitably while introducing myself to her after class in the women's restroom — an adumbrating predilection for the first shot of the film, which calls attention to the historically stigmatized depiction of bathrooms and on toilets in cinema (Harris).

Moreover, I hashed out the concept with my best friend and fellow cineaste, Jamie Henschel who upped the ante by suggesting that the boy who impregnates her should be a coke dealer that refuses to pay for the abortion. In this way, we twist the tables further by manifesting a motivation for revenge and yet another barrier to money. Subsequently, I wrote the skeleton script; but as the aphoristic adage goes, writing is really just re-writing. So, in gratitude to the advent of Facetime, Jamie and I were able to write, re-write, re-enact, and revise over thirty drafts of the script over state borders. And furthermore, when it alas was time to edit, I disassembled a selfie stick and mounted the head on top of a tripod in order for us to collaborate together on each cut. Since, not only is it critical to have multiple eyes review visually woven work, but I also sincerely believe that this short film breathes as strongly as it does because it's the product of two heads put together versus one. Even on set while we were filming, our key script supervisor Taylor Berger proclaimed, "I can totally tell which lines Julia wrote and which ones Jamie did...wait, never mind, I totally can't" And she was somewhat right, because aside

from a few snarky punch-lines from Jamie and grandiloquent embellishments from me, most of the lines are blended with different combinations we conjured together — friendship, man, it is beautiful.

Moreover, I was fortunate to have Jamie fly out for, indubitably, the most intense weekend of shooting; yet still lamented not having her brilliance present throughout the entirety of production. Overall, I hope to avoid directing anything on my own again, since in order to conduct cinematography in tandem with choreographing actors, Jamie's keen eye is instrumental to catching details and devising new strategies on set. For instance, the reason why I could fool my committee members on the timely execution of Effie's flawless exit was also because I had Jamie's help to brainstorm a new ending for the character — since the actor accidentally over-scheduled our shoot. Likewise, Jamie and I met while studying under director Tom Shadyac, who taught us that directing, in a sense, resembles a constant puzzle of surprise problem-solving; so, if you think you have finished one problem, another one needs to be solved shortly thereafter, and so forth. And the more a director can trust their co-director or assistant director, the more assuaged and facilitated the production.

Yet even without the reliance of my best friend, I obtained the fortune of listening to the pivotal voices of my cast and crew as they offered their own invaluable insight to the project. Moreover, this production introduced me to not only new people, but also to the raw talent from the people I already knew. For instance, Jamie and I both had to exit the room when our friend and assistant director, Brette Robertson performed as the crazy cat bow-tie solicitor since we could not cease to interrupt her takes with our own deranged laughter. Overall, I lucked out in having some of my favorite coevals freckled in the nerdy crevices of the film department assist

with the production. In particular, the cocaine customer montage plays out as a comedic panoply of film brats. But in total, I collaborated with over forty people from pre to post-production; and in one of the changes I made to the credits in the final version, I added “script consultant” for the five individuals that read the script in advance to shooting and offered critical feedback. My thanks to all my wonderful and majestic friends is boundless. Without them, I wouldn’t have been able to create this the way I wanted to, nor would I be leaving this university with a work of art I’m truly proud of; so, this film is mine as much as it is theirs; and I’m forever grateful.

Coalescing Coke and Caucasian

Making a film in Boulder and casting non-white actors is analogous to sifting for a needle in a haystack. And during a time where representation of diversity ranks as more imperative than ever, over our dead bodies were Jamie and I going to produce an all white cast. (We may have been influenced by the dynamic likes of a core four squad seen in *Golden Girls*, *Sex and the City*, and *Girls*, but neither did we want to repeat their white-washed mistakes either.) Yet every actor who auditioned for a lead part was white, or at least white passing in the case of the insanely talented Armenian actor, Melanie Schultz who plays “Effie” in the film. So, even though we had another over-experienced and talented actor lined up for Maya, both Jamie and I decided we would need to continue searching. Since as it already was, we were disheartened that we could not create, at the very least, a fifty-fifty split of visible racial representation. Thus, we embarked the neo-realist delight of casting our friend, Soraya Latiff as Maya; and in spite of her E-Bio and International Affairs double major, she somehow was asked on set, “So, how many years have you done theater?”

Although we did not write Maya specifically as a person of color, the character’s name does attribute a homage to my favorite wise writer and phenomenal woman poet, Maya Angelou.

And in spite of writing the character with a saucy, type A, stick up her rear sort of austerity, Soraya humanized the character beyond our expectations. Since after all, Maya ultimately embodies the voice of reason, albeit with a pang of moral relativism. For instance, Maya encourages Evelyn to “call her parents and lie for money,” yet only in order to avoid the catastrophic consequences of illegally soliciting narcotics. Though the moment Evelyn confirms her cocaine endeavor by acknowledging the arrival of the source, Vivienne, Maya swiftly storms out of Eve’s abode. In the revised version, we omitted the verbiage of her thespian exit, “I don’t know what you’re up to or what this is, but I want no part in it.” Along with countless other split-second cut suggestions, my thesis advisor Geoff pointed out that Maya’s exit could work with more brevity; and thus, the omission succinctly and successfully condenses the film beat-wise. Granted that the subtext of Maya sadly abandoning her friend for the right reasons is already provided in the second shot, all the audience really needs is a simple, albeit serious line delivery — “No, I’m leaving Eve, bye.”

However, the dynamic of good versus bad deeds between Evelyn and Maya does reveal a painful truth to the nature of drug crimes in the United States. Since although the diversity ratio amongst our supporting actors bore serendipitous planning, Jamie and I deliberately casted caucasian women for the roles of Evelyn and Vivienne. Why? Because in gratitude to the Humanities minor I picked up while studying under Professor Cathy Comstock, I read Michelle Alexander’s book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* — one of the most educational, engrossing, and eviscerating sociological studies on the racially disproportionate nature of drug crimes and incarceration rates in the United States.

According to reports from the Human Rights Watch in 2000, in seven states, African Americans “constitute 80 to 90 percent of all drug offenders sent to prison;” and throughout the nation, incarceration rates for African American drug offenders ominously occult those of whites, (Alexander, 98). However, studies reveal that even though “people of all colors use and sell illegal drugs at remarkably similar rates,” discrepancies do demonstrate that “whites, particularly white youth, are more likely to engage in illegal drug dealing than people of color,” (Alexander, 7, 99). So, as far as the customers are concerned, Alexander cites that drugs markets tend to mirror the racial and socioeconomic boundaries of our country. And we intentionally wrote the line — “Well, guess it’s not just on Wall Street anymore,” to underscore the elitist demographic of a divided, relatively penalty-free, Caucasian drug market. So, when I messaged most of my friends who acted in the coke customer montage, I underscored the need of white boy material. And white boys in droves we got.

Activating the Activism

Hailing from the great state of Texas, I have tirelessly debated issues of social importance since I could log on to the internet sans supervision. Since George Bush’s 2004 winning of the presidential election, I have advocated for an end to warfare and climate change; bans on whale hunting and foie gras; revisions to factory farming, education, and gun rights; and even served and spearheaded my high school’s Human Rights Club. To anyone who knows me, it is of little surprise that I centered my undergraduate college thesis on yet another weighted social issue of contemporary contentions.

Even though I went to a Catholic all-girls high school that promoted a pro-life ideology, my classmates found it extremely ironic that pregnancy permitted grounds to expulsion; whereas

if one averted the Church and acquired an abortion without verbal admission, a girl could stay in school and graduate without anyone knowing the wiser. And this very paradox that surfaced in conversations amongst my high school alums — who nearly all regal themselves as raging liberal feminists now — inspired my first screenplay about abortion. But when I read aloud the work to my class in the much more politically progressive city of Boulder, Colorado, I still was amazed by how the polemical topic provoked, probed, and even silenced voices in the class. As a result, I scrapped my original 3400 final project idea and expanded the previous screenplay into a short film. Before shooting, my thesis advisor and fellow survivor of Catholic school, Geoff forewarned me, “There will be people that will hate your film, but that’s also more of a reason to make it.”

While in my 3400 production class, the first film I co-wrote and co-directed with Jamie about abortion, “Table Talk,” outlines some of the main motifs I would later buttress in the thesis “Sugar Daddy.” For “Table Talk,” I constructed a narrative with four women, some nicer than others, discussing their honest, guttural reactions to people they know from high school begetting babies in their twenties and what they would do, or for one girl, did, in that situation. Although our crew possessed scarce time and resources, the all female cast and the crew had such an empowering experience from filming that my takeaway from the project ultimately inspired this thesis. After filming, one actor remarked to me that for the first time in her experience as an actor, she had felt more like a person rather than as if she was playing the performative role of a girl in between takes. One crew member confessed that over a year ago, she had made the unexpected and excruciating decision to have an abortion. Although I was nervous with exploring such a taboo and sensitive subject matter under a sardonic lens, I was amazed by how

eager and energized these brilliant young women were to be a part of something that to my incredulity, resonated with them.

For “Table Talk,” I kindled the nature of the decision to abort as both ineluctable and individualistic. Moreover, my co-writer and I attempted to antagonize three out of four of the core characters with crude behavior and callous remarks. Yet, we realized the film disengaged the audience with our overloaded affinity for the too abrasive at times anti-hero. When procuring a feature film of any kind, anti-heroes can adroitly operate and engross viewers with more realistic depth and dimension than in short films. So when it came time to write and shoot “Sugar Daddy,” we individualized our characters into personality archetypes to compensate for the engaging equilibrium in a concise duration. To offset the acerbic vulnerability of our anti-heroic Evelyn, or “Eve,” — whose Biblical name also bears no accident, we constructed Effie as the asinine party animal, Claudia as the aloof enabler, and Maya as the uptight ethics code officer. Thus, we decorated these divas with their own set of flaws to dynamically humanize them as well. Yet in regards to our pregnant protagonist, we deliberately designated Evelyn as clearly the crassest and most clueless of them all; but not without irony and juxtaposition. She may be rushed and immature in decisions, but she declares from the beginning that she wants an abortion; hence we establish agency without oscillation. Despite her consistent stream of cursing, she cajoles her cronies with two-dollar words such as “convalesce,” “exasperation,” and “lethargic.” And when my actor attempted to dodge peculiar words she struggled to pronounce, I chided her to learn the lines, as she was my “Nabokov,” who needed that additional angle of wit and intelligence in order to highlight her humanity.

Unlike “Table Talk,” I invited both male actors and crew members to assist with the project. When Billy MacDonald was the only male on set and offered to assist in the unloading of heavy equipment, Jamie retorted, “You don’t have to be the hegemonic male on set, Billy.” Although intimidated at first, I’m convinced he enjoyed himself by the weekend’s passing. Overall, the supportive presence of my male colleagues meant the world; and I certainly had a blast while directing some of them in the cocaine customer montage as well. Thematically, the fish-eye renders a metaphorical distortion of the male-female gaze reversal — a homage to what author Laura Mulvey theoreticized in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” (Mulvey). And because I studied Women and Film under Professor Melinda Barlow, I knew I needed to address the gendered other with hyperbolic visuals and fast lines. For instance, when the drug dealer, Vivienne, threatens to slice her employee with her “shellac nails,” we wanted to also dramatize the power-play of cultivated femininity even in a world of visual gendered expectations. Take the prominent background tapestry of the manicured hands printed over verdant bushes as another example. Given our study of surrealism and filmmaker Luis Bunuel in film history, Jamie and I intentionally usurped the conventionally masculine image of the body-less hand and instead signaled an emblematic and effeminate version of the classic image within cinema’s criterion collection.

We Got the Beat

When also wishing to address the barriers of abortion access, we initially wrote more interruptive obstacles than we had shot for the final product. Perhaps the most prominent omissions were scenes with the boyfriend Blake and another with Evelyn’s religious pro-life parents. For the latter, we had set up the mother and father to enter the premises unexpected, to

see the cocaine operation, and punish their daughter's pregnancy and avert her agency by "saving the precious life" of the embryo. To evade her parents' oppressive oversight, Evelyn distracts them briefly, takes a hidden stash of money, and escapes for the abortion clinic. Initially, I figured that this scene would demonstrate the source of our anti-hero's deviance and also evoke empathy from the audience for the angry twenty-year-old; yet low-budget student filmmaking can only handle so much.

Moreover, Geoff has not only advertised to our classes to respect the word "short" in "short film," but to also present a tight set of "Save the Cat" beats. Meaning, that film rhythm and story structure needs to avoid as many messy and unnecessary diversions as possible. For example, another abortion barrier that we omitted was a follow-up exchange between the clinic secretary and Evelyn in the final scene; after Evelyn drops her "baby-sitting money" on the table, the secretary meant to respond with, "I'm sorry, we don't have another appointment available for two weeks due to a recent overload in patients." Not only would this have concluded the film on an ambiguous, albeit desolate note, but it also would have exaggerated and risked the tight equi-pose needed for endings. Furthermore, short films ultimately showcase a proof of concept, and if we were to develop this idea into a feature, Jamie and I would demonstratively exacerbate the stakes and also extend the dynamism and depth of each core character. But two short films on reproductive rights is plenty for now!

Cinematography

In 2014, Professor Martha Lauzen of San Diego State University reported that 95 percent of all film industry cinematographers were men (Dowd). Just to strike comparisons, the U.S. Congress sorely shadows that 5% margin of representation with women representing nearly 19.4% of the U.S House of Representatives today. As a feminist filmmaker, it's crucial for me

to be able to conduct and choreograph my own cinematography; and therefore, I need to duly comprehend a bare bones understanding of how cameras operate. Certainly, the perfunctory mechanisms of machines may bear little philosophical or conceptual fascination compared to say, the likings of a Kurt Vonnegut novel, but the manner in which phi phenomenon and persistence of vision produce the phantasmagoric illusion of deceiving our retinal processes with the mirage of motion — is truly spectacular. Not to mention, I'm somewhat of a self-declared “control-freak,” and wanted to ensure that I obtained the shots I wanted. However, I also learned that in spite of my credentials, I am still a rookie capable of making mistakes along the way. Filmmaking is a constant endeavor of a learning process; and although I normally stray from utilizing absolute language, you can never be bored because you will always learn something new every single time you are on a film set.

In regards to camera operation, I did away with tripods for the most part and found them to be bulky and tedious time constraints; although there were certainly times in which I wished I had used one — then again, hindsight is twenty-twenty. Furthermore, since I relished the handheld style of *Grandma* (2015), photographed by Tobias Datus — and enjoyed the stylistic evolution of the mobile camera in film history, I went solely handheld and utilized a shoulder rig for the majority of the scenes. For anyone interested in conducting their own handheld camera work, I would suggest to start lifting weights now. Wollstonecraft and de Beauvoir mention sexual dimorphism as causal origins for the socially othered inferiority of the historical rights of the female sex, but if a weakling like me can operate fifteen to twenty pounds of camera equipment all day — dam gummit, you can do it too.

The Whole Nancy Botwin Thing

Admittedly, our script sports a superfluous amount of arcane pop culture references. Certainly, we tried to curtail them to the best of our ability for the sake of narrative expediency; but we frankly just got too attached to many of the jokes. And while ping-ponging on whether to nix or keep a line, Jamie and I mutually came to the conclusion that our characters reflect the perfunctory way in which we ourselves orchidaceously cite cinema and television shows into our everyday conversations²⁷. However, we decided that if we were going to maintain some of the lines, that we would also reference hallmarks that either honored feminism or showcased our film brat education.

In regards to the cutaways, I generated those in order to explicate and elucidate juxtaposing moments of oneiric interiority.²⁸ For the “whole nancy botwin thing” cue, the suburban mom image sears the screen as not only an alternative life choice, but also as a “Total Woman” nightmare. Margaret Atwood once stated, “...In our society, a ‘housewife’ is viewed as a relatively brainless and talentless creature,” (Atwood). Yet we spun the narrative by alluding to feminist Jenji Kohan’s popular TV series *Weeds*; and that goes without saying, Kohan has also successfully interpolated abortion on-screen with waves of rioting humor on her other show *Orange Is the New Black* — where the character Tennessee, a former meth-head who found God in prison, creates her own faux cemetery for all her unborn children on Mother’s Day²⁹(Kohan).

²⁷ When we received flak from some readers about the plethora of unnecessary pop culture references, Jamie and I referred to the successful writing of Ryan Murphy’s television series *Scream Queens* in order to justify our woven web of outside sources; and when one of our actors told us that the script reminded her of the television show — we were, like, totally honored.

²⁸ Although I had not seen it yet prior to production, *Don’t Blame the Kid* also uses the device in the same way — however, the film offensively portrays abortion and birth-control

²⁹ The episode directly cites Chapter 4, “Where Have All the Criminals Gone?” of the book *Freakonomics* and extrapolates its data about how the 1973 passing of *Roe V. Wade* “attributed” to the dramatic decrease of crime rates in the 1990s — the time where most of the unwanted children who were aborted would have been of “prime crime

My favorite cutaway in the entire film segues from Evelyn's grim joke — "It's this or we grab a wire hanger from my closet." Suddenly, the gory image of a blood-smeared Evelyn surfaces the screen; and not only do we allude to the cult visual of *Carrie* (1976) and the classic verbiage of *Mommie Dearest* (1981), but also more emphatically, the contextual delivery underscores the statistical correlation between abortion criminality and women utilizing domestic utensils such as wire hangers to terminate their own pregnancies. When Jamie and I witnessed images of posters preaching this line during the International Women's March on Washington on January 21st, we both experienced chills along with increased momentum to perfect our passion project to the best of our amateur abilities. The striking similarity to our film was more than uncanny. Instead, as an icon of injury, the symbol of wire hangers has become ubiquitous to propelling the momentum of women's reproductive rights.

Revision

With the first cut of the film, both Jamie and I felt mixed in regards to our conclusion. We had hastily edited in chronological order, thereby leaving little time and attention for the ending prior to the 4500 submission deadline. Also, we each possessed our own interpretations on how the ending's tone should thematically unravel. Given the comedic absurdity of the film's beginning, I had initially planned to accompany the abandoned clinic part with a voiceover narration from an unreliable narrator, and even went so far as to cast a voice actor and record it. Yet in the end, Jamie and I unanimously decided to forgo the funny and finally shift the tone to that of stringent seriousness. After all, it's no laughing matter that 76% of all abortion clinics have closed down in the United States since 1991 (Sullenger).

age. Moreover, "These were children who, if their mothers were forced to have them, would have grown up poor, and neglected and abused — the three most important ingredients when one is making a felon."

However, that observation is not to deem the coalescing of abortion and comedy as impossible; Paul Weitz managed to swing a sardonic scene in which a barista kicks out Lily Tomlin's character Elle out of a coffee shop where "thousands of unwanted pregnancies were terminated." After she rancorously protests the closure of a pro-bono abortion clinic, hits on another woman, and dumps out the redundancy of "drip coffee," she exits the scene with both slapstick humor and a refined poise of rebellion. It's truly impossible to top Tomlin, so why bother?

Additionally, a study conducted by Gretchen Sisson and Katrina Kimport reveals that out of the 89 abortion plot lines that have occurred on television shows between 2005 and 2015, only four plot lines portray the plight of a character who faces abortion obstacles due to restrictive laws, cost, or location. Consequently, the study suggests that television erroneously captures the acquisition of abortions as accessible. Considering the "280 new restrictions on abortion access and provision" that U.S. policymakers have placed since 2010 — and even more recently, Mike Pence's horrific vote to advance the state-wide defunding of Planned Parenthood — we knew we needed to underscore this issue (Guttmacher)(Mascaro). So, when my I presented the ending predicament to professor David Gatten, he brilliantly suggested a superimposed montage of de facto headlines over the closed abortion clinic scene. Sans the phantasmagoric display, viewers were somewhat bewildered on whether or not Evelyn had arrived to a closed clinic; and with the new addition, not only do we elucidate the nature of her location, but we also accentuate the sheer and shocking horror on the state of reproductive right access in this country as of today.

Conclusion

"How will the fact of being woman have affected our lives? What precise opportunities have been given to us, and which ones have been denied? What destiny awaits our younger sisters, and in which direction should we point them?"

— Simone de Beauvoir

Ultimately, I hardly expect all human beings to acquiesce with the aforementioned argument; nor do I expect all artists to fledge full tour de force into funneling out engaging films with abortion, reproductive rights, and humanized anti-heroes. It's heated stuff — (and trust me, there will be burned bridges at your local Catholic parish). Yet I do expect all of humanity to coincide with choice — especially considering the appalling alternative of crochet hooks and wire hangers.

Furthermore, women should not only be able to have control over their bodies, but they should also be able to seize the reigns of their rights rendered in the media. If this paper argues anything, it is that more women should be encouraged to make movies — because when more women make movies, doors will collectively open to represent issues that have been socially, biologically, and culturally gendered as “other.” Moreover, female characters will flex and breathe on-screen with more flesh and breath, and likewise with less one-dimensionality. Historically, Hollywood has been hegemonically dominated by men. Since 2009, Kathryn Bigelow stands as the only female to win the coveted Best Director Oscar, and no woman has ever accrued the Academy Award for Best Cinematography in a motion picture. Yet as journalist Patrick Ryan proclaims in USA Today, “There is reason to be hopeful for 2017...noting that 66 features with female directors are expected this year,” (Ryan). So, what are we waiting for, ladies? Let's get to work.

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Acknowledgements

Thank you Mom and Robert, for supporting my dreams and believing in me — even at the expense of your own sanity.

Thank you Jamie, for being such a stellar film collaborator and best gal friend, answering my obnoxious onslaught of phone calls every single day, and offering to read drafts of this paper before it was even finished. You're the Matt Stone to my Trey Parker.

Thank you Layne, for your profound insight, sociological skill set, and your grammar scanning eyes. If it weren't for your audacious world travels, I would not have known squat about Costa Rica. I love you and keep kicking ass.

Thank you Rea, for being my partner in crime and metaphorical Prozac in my pocket, offering your home as a film set, and coaxing me with carb infested meals and free Starbucks coffee throughout this tiring thesis process. You are a gem.

Thank you Geoff, Melinda, Kerry “Kare Bear,” and David — for being fierce queens, reading a rather lengthy BFA thesis and providing thoughtful feedback and compassionate support. I couldn't have conjured a better scholarly squad.

And I know you can't read this, but thank you Babs — for being my four legged marshmallow pillow of a fluffy princess. I'm so glad you have no teeth and horrible Stockholm Syndrome. Really, you're the best cat and I promise your film debut is coming soon.

Above all, thank you to everyone who worked on “Sugar Daddy” and helped to bring this passion project into full fruition. I love all of you beautiful human beings.