

Fade to white or stereotype: Patriarchal policing of gender norms in television and filmic representations of childbirth

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Abstract

Drawing on the examination of five feature films, including *Twilight: Breaking Dawn – Part 1*, and more than half-a-dozen popular television programmes, including *Parenthood*, *The L Word* and *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*, this work argues that dominant cultural representations foster a narrow and potentially damaging, disempowering and dehumanising depiction of childbirth. Together these works foster a dominant conceptualisation and representation of childbirth that narrowly represents childbirth, emphasising themes including ‘bitter birth’ or birth as *affliction*, a reproductive double bind affirming women’s fundamental procreative role while also pathologising their reproductive processes, and the trivialisation of women’s birthing agency through the broad failure to recognize *maternal magnificence*. This work further argues that dominant representations of maternity pervading mass media, as indicated in the examined examples, normalise patriarchal gender roles, particularly emphasised femininity, and mark gender nonconformists as deviant. The promotion of such norms is clear in contemporary cultural depictions of childbirth, including birth-related hit films such as *Knocked Up* and *The Back-up Plan*. In the last of these an important component of patriarchal gender codes is further shown to include heteronormativity.

Keywords: birth, dualism, feminist, gender, maternal magnificence, medicalisation of birth, patriarchy, trivialisation of birth

Introduction

The 1930–34 Production Code of the Motion Picture Producers and Directors of America asserts that ‘[s]cenes of actual childbirth, in fact or in silhouette, are never to be presented’.

While no such ban is recognised or imposed on today’s motion pictures, there is nevertheless an absence of meaningful representation of women engaged in childbirth. In mainstream television and Hollywood films, women’s birth projects are often reduced to either a series of supposedly comedic stereotypes (*Knocked Up*) or are simply not deemed important enough to show at all, and instead are implied in a fade to white (*The Back-up Plan*). In the case of *The Back-up Plan*, when women are shown giving birth outside of the paternalistic confines of medicalised childbirth, they are mocked as being pseudo-women or necessarily hyper-masculine lesbian stereotypes. In all of these cases we have a kind of erasure of women’s birth agency, and a policing of heteronormative, patriarchal gender norms and values. An important component of this gender shaming or accountability is linking such ‘inappropriate’ women to not only stereotypical depictions of lesbians (lesbian bating), but also mocking such characters’ interest in connecting with nature – a perpetuation of the long-standing nature–culture dualism which ecofeminist theorists believe underlies systems of oppression. More generally, mainstream television and film narrowly portray women’s births. In

a variety of programming, from *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*, *Parenthood*, *Rules of Engagement*, *Frasier*, *How I Met Your Mother*, to *Baby Mama*, *Knocked Up* and *The Back-up Plan*, birth is portrayed as a medical event that is fundamentally defined by pain and fear. Moreover, women's agency during birth is trivialised in favour of stereotypical feminine passivity. What is over-emphasised are birthing women's reliance upon others, namely their partners, parents or attending doctors. Birth is reduced to crying and screaming, followed by a celebration of the new life. What is further lacking from these representations of childbirth is meaningful recognition of the person responsible for literally creating and birthing this new life. Taken together this speaks to not only the normalisation of medicalisation and patriarchal gender roles, but also a fundamental trivialisation of women's birth projects.

Ecofeminist and gender theory

Gender polarisation plays a crucial role in cultivating disempowering conceptualisations of childbirth and women. Feminist gender theorists argue that our ideas about what constitutes men and women are the products of social construction. According to Judith Lorber (1994, p. 6), '[g]ender is a human invention, like language, kinship, religion, and technology; like them, gender organizes human social life in culturally patterned ways'. One of the principal tools of gender construction is gender dualism, or what some call 'polarisation'. Gender polarisation occurs when 'diverse aspects of human experience are culturally linked to sex difference. In this way, cultural items, emotions, social positions and needs are *either* male or female' (Aulette, Wittner and Blakely 2009, p. 49). Gender polarisation, coupled with essentialist stereotypes, gives rise to idealised forms of masculinity and femininity, which masculinities scholar R.W. Connell calls 'hegemonic masculinity' and 'emphasized femininity'. These ideal gender models are characterised by patriarchal compliance (Connell and Messerschmidt 2010, p. 219), and are generally understood as reflections of biology, rather than social conditioning and social construction. Gender polarisation forges the ideal of emphasised femininity in which women are ideally submissive, irrational, highly emotional and weak. Sexually, they are interested in intimacy and love, rather than sexual conquest. Conversely, gender polarisation forges the ideal of hegemonic masculinity in which men are authoritative, rational, unemotional, strong and tough. In this work I argue that dominant representations of maternity – particularly those in mass media – enact salient features of polarised or dualistic patriarchal gender norms and, consequently, perpetuate these oppressive concepts.

Gender polarisation does not occur in isolation. Rather, it participates in a broader dualistic logic responsible for legitimating objectification and oppression. Ecofeminist philosopher, Val Plumwood, contends that the dualistic conceptual framework – an intellectual rubric she terms 'master consciousness' – conceptualises the world and the beings within it as belonging to one of only two polarised realms: Rational, mindful *culture*, which possesses intrinsic worth, or instrumental, mindless, earthly *nature*, which possesses only extrinsic value. Oppressions from colonialism and slavery to sexism were historically justified on the basis of the master's embodiment of idealised rational human culture, subjecthood, while those linked to mindless nature were marked with nullity as objects and, thus, ripe for use by the master subject (Plumwood 1993, pp. 106–107, 111). A salient feature of this dualistic or polarised conceptual paradigm is the

preeminent identification of maleness with rational culture, and the identification of femaleness with mindless nature and the body, rather than the mind. Distorting birth as a medical event has important implications for both gender and human understanding of culture and nature. In particular, birth thus construed becomes a prop for promulgating not only gender polarisation, but also the further dualisation of culture from nature.

Conduits of social hegemony: Popular culture and mass media

Popular culture is a crucially significant terrain for the maintenance as well as the subversion of existing power structures and oppressions. Popular culture is a 'valuable index to what people commonly know, value, fear, remember, and believe' (Caputi 2004, p. 5). Moreover, it is a profoundly political realm in which competing visions of social life are enacted. Cultural theorist and sociologist, Stuart Hall (2002, p. 187), writes that popular culture is an arena – a 'battlefield' of ideas – marked by 'complex lines of resistance and acceptance, refusal and capitulation'. Here, dominant culture works to secure existing, hegemonic power relations while others work to undermine them (Hall 2002, p. 192). Thus, popular culture provides a forum for the formation and expression of not only hegemonic, but also marginalised or resistant ideas (Caputi 2004, p. 5).

We each participate (often unconsciously) in popular culture and are actively shaped by it. While the changes we undergo may not always be conscious, uniform or predictable, as we participate in forms of popular culture 'certain powers or potentialities are bolstered and thereby *realized* (literally, made real); concomitantly, others are banished, neglected, degraded, starved, undone' (Caputi 2004, p. 163). One of the most influential aspects of popular culture is mass media.

In American culture, mass media are to the human mind what running water is to the earth's surface. The isolated, infrequent splash of a single drop of water may not significantly affect the soil it touches, just as similarly isolated interaction with media may not dramatically affect human thought, but a torrential downpour, perpetually pummeling the same piece of earth, will literally leave an indelible mark. Like flowing water, mass media (which include the Internet, television, radio, newspapers, magazines, books, music, film and games) have the power to shape our most basic concepts of ourselves and our society. Mass media also have the capacity to guard against ideas that conflict with those of dominant ideologies. Thus, theorists contend that the mass media have become a central tool in legitimating and promulgating social inequality (Aulette et al. 2009, p. 335; Collins 2009, p. 303).

Feminist theorists argue that mass media legitimise and naturalise existing power and social relations. In a process and form of oppression which philosopher Iris Marion Young (2006, p. 12) calls 'cultural imperialism', dominant culture, which controls the majority of the means of production, uses mass media to publicise its ideas and ideals, while rendering invisible and/or stereotyping those of marginalised groups. Similarly, gender theorists contend that mass media are significantly involved in legitimating gender inequality 'by creating images and telling us which are valid or not' (Aulette et al. 2009, p. 336). For example, critics decry the injustice of mainstream media's stereotypical representations of blacks and Arabs. Young (2002, p. 542) writes that '[b]lacks are represented as criminals, hookers, maids, scheming dealers,' but 'rarely appear in roles of authority, glamour, or virtue'. Mainstream media also stereotype Arabs 'as sinister terrorists

or gaudy princes, and conversely ... terrorists [as] almost always Arabs' (Young 2002, p. 542). These representations are purposed to perpetuate what Gramsci (2005, p. 62) calls 'intellectual subordination' by bringing together groups marked as 'other' 'under the measure of its dominant norms' (Young 2006, p. 12).

Before moving to the relevant analysis it is worth responding to those outside of cultural studies who doubt the capacity of media stereotypes to impact human relations and behaviour. While many are under the impression that freedom is only restricted by overt, physical coercion (e.g., repressive political domination), feminists, cultural and gender theorists side with Gramsci's notion of social hegemony in recognising that as social beings, the fear of ostracism, capable of producing social and material failure, is often as powerful and coercive as direct political domination.

Conforming to pervasive norms that facilitate social interaction is a crucial component of human social life. Since it possesses the material means to perpetuate (or disrupt) dominant norms of behaviour and social interaction via its varied representations, the power of the mass media in our lives is profound. Specifically, when mass media perpetuate polarising, dualistic stereotypes, they facilitate gender 'policing', 'shaming', or what some refer to as 'accountability' (Aulette et al. 2009, p. 58) wherein media consumers are pressured to tailor their actions to suit accepted social convention. This is why many feminist, gender and cultural theorists believe media stereotypes have the power to foster oppression. Indeed, the significant social power of what psychologist Claude Steele and colleagues call the 'stereotype threat' is indicated in a 2006 University of British Columbia study that 'found that simply telling women before they have a test that women in general have less natural aptitude for math causes their individual test scores to decline' (Smith 2009, p. 136). Thus, a crucial presupposition in this work is that media representations help shape our experience of reality, and are thus worthy of serious consideration.

Bitter births and the malfunctioning female body

In her classic exploration of motherhood, *Of woman born*, radical feminist theorist, Adrienne Rich, discusses how this patriarchal conceptual framework has misshapen women's lives, by, for instance, turning the creative power of generating new life into a form of bondage. She argues that long-standing patriarchal polarities dividing mind and body, reason and emotion, 'have the power to blind our imaginations' (Rich 1976, p. 62) and foster 'moral stupidity' in the master subject (1976, p. 65). A specific feature of Rich's work is her discussion of how the domination of women is, in part, maintained via the gendering of female pain, identified as a source of affliction rather than potentially transformative. Such a conceptualisation has been, and continues to be, a function of power meant to maintain control over women's bodies.

Historically, women's bodies have been controlled by men who turned childbirth into 'a form of forced labor' wherein women 'carried the scriptural penalty of Eve's curse with them into the birth-chamber' (Rich 1976, p. 158). Radical feminist thinkers, Mor and Sjöö (1987, p. 277), trace the dominant understanding of pregnancy and childbirth as fundamentally oppressive to the implementation of the Christian notion of birth as punishment for Eve's sin – robbed of ancient knowledge of contraception and herbal narcotics, women 'now bear children bitterly'.

There is no doubt that pregnancy and childbirth are challenging experiences for most. Yet the rendering of women's creative forging and then birthing of new life as fundamentally oppressive is an interpretation fostered by a patriarchal conceptual framework. Mainstream television and Hollywood film consistently highlight themes of danger, fear and emergency in the portrayal of childbirth. In particular, the dominant representation of childbirth suggests pregnant female bodies are prone to failure, and that their pain and plight can only be remedied through acquiescence to an external authority. This is a key theme expressed in the 17 April 2009 episode of the Learning Channel's popular programme, *A Baby Story*. Toward the end of one mother's story, Dr. Sharon Kline of Overlook Hospital, in Summit, New Jersey, comments: 'When you have good pain control like [the featured woman] has, [childbirth] can be a wonderful experience ... It can even be fun. And that's nice.' The meaning of 'good pain control' in this context is not that the mother found a way to work with her body, but rather that she had access to pain-killing medications.

Despite the patriarchal presumption that women's life's purpose is to birth children, the majority of 'women in Western societies do not experience pregnancy or childbirth as a natural phenomenon' (Lorber 2001, p. 45). Rather, the female body is a problem to be solved, not a voice to be heard. Pain here is not a communicative or creative tool, but an oppressive inanity at best or a (feminine or 'God-given') curse to escape. Not only is pain the definitive feature of film and television representations of birth, it is also given little meaning. See, for instance, season three of *Parenthood*, ep. 17 (2011), when Zoe (Rosa Salazar) goes into labour. During the birth Zoe is accompanied by Julia Braverman-Graham (Erika Christensen), who is planning to adopt the baby. The dialogue emphasises the pain of birth. Zoe tells Julia:

You didn't say it was going to hurt like this. I'm going to die. It's going to kill me and I'm going to die. I can't do this.

Zoe goes on to successfully birth a boy whom she later decides to keep. Immediately after the birth there is little to no celebration of her achievement, in part because of the bitterness of not only the birth but also the fact she is planning to give up the infant. Viewed in isolation from the dominant entertainment media narrative surrounding childbirth, this scene is potentially unproblematic. Considered as part of a thematic continuum, however, the scene contributes to a creatively shallow vision of childbirth.

Rich (1976, p. 13) contends that the oppressive construction of the female body as inherently flawed, a cornerstone in the institution of motherhood, has 'alienated women from our bodies by incarcerating us in them'. This strange incarceration produces an accompaniment to the impossible virgin/whore double-bind: Women are simultaneously trained to believe that they are both supposed to give birth but also ill-equipped to give birth. We see this double-bind directly hinted at during a pivotal episode, 23, in season one (2009) of *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*. As pregnant teen, Amy, prepares to birth her son she conveys apprehension about the process. The doctor, played by an African American woman, tells her to just relax and let the natural process unfold. 'This is a natural process, you know?' Amy sarcastically asks: 'Then why do I have a big needle in my spine?' 'Because sometimes nature sucks,' retorts Anne, Amy's mother. Amy's response to the doctor highlights the tension between the dominant culture's naturalisation of female purpose

as child bearers and its simultaneous normalisation of routine medical intervention. This is further highlighted by Amy's belief that she is ill-prepared for birth because she has not taken birth classes. The scene concludes with a framing of the mother's birth as being fundamentally about self-sacrifice rather than empowering transformation. When Amy asks how much the birth process will hurt, the doctor replies that she should not think about it. When Amy asks what else she should be thinking about, Anne tells her to think about her son: 'From this point on it's all about him.' The message about birth, as portrayed in film and television, is that birth is fundamentally about someone other than the mother.

Dominant culture constructs women's birth process along a thematic line profoundly similar to the fairy-tale 'damsel-in-distress-saved-by-prince' trope. She is not only in need of assistance, but of *rescue*. In season three of *Parenthood* (2010), episode five, Nora (Kristina Zuckerman-Braverman) goes into labour for the third time in her life. Because her husband Adam is busy and inaccessible, she is forced to be aided by his brother, Crosby, whom she has not been getting along with. Crosby races Kristina to the hospital in his car, where she is soon placed in a hospital bed in the standard lithotomy position (lying down, legs pulled to the sides) and coached on when to push. When an awkward Crosby attempts to leave the labour room, a straight-talking nurse chides him for leaving his presumed partner. Hesitant to go forward without Adam, Kristina demurely echoes the nurse's dictate by asking him not to leave, but to 'stay for a little bit' and hold her hand during the final stage of her labour. Holding her hand Crosby urges her to breathe and offers moral support. To a significant degree, Crosby's role as the stand-in for his brother is the focus of this birth scene.

All of the births examined in this work normalise the medicalisation of childbirth. Unless they are the subject of ridicule, none of the mothers are shown squatting, kneeling, standing, on hands and knees, using an exercise ball, or lying sideways. They are all in the lithomy position, connected to some type of equipment. All of the births in the film *What to Expect When You're Expecting* (2012), for example, take place in a hospital. While the film places women (including women of different ethnicities) in the socially honoured role of physician, thus breaking down sexist stereotypes, it nevertheless emphasises the agency of the doctors as they coach the birthing women. Jules (Cameron Diaz) pushes at the doctor's command to 'push, push, push'. Of the film's three birth mothers, Skyler (Brooklyn Decker) has the least difficulty, birthing the first of her twins with a sneeze. Upon close examination, however, her birth normalises medicalisation as well – she has an IV in her hand and is placed in the lithotomy position.

In an episode titled 'Lacuna' (season 2, ep. 13, 2005) *The L Word* starts out with an uncommonly peaceful and non-medicalised presentation of childbirth. In the season finale, Tina (Laurel Holloman) has chosen a private homebirth and begins to labour in a birthing tub. Her partner, Bette (Jennifer Beals) supports her with loving caresses. The camera concentrates on Tina's face; her contractions are intense and she is clearly challenged, but she is in tune with her body, working with it, rather than being controlled or oppressed by it, and she agentically forges ahead in her labour process. Circumstances quickly change when the attending midwife recommends an emergency transfer to the hospital, where Tina apologises profusely for 'letting down' her partner and the baby: 'I failed you both. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.' Bette comforts Tina, assuring her she has done nothing wrong. The

medical staff then conduct a caesarean section, after which Tina names the infant and passes out from exhaustion. Tina's reaction to her birth emergency conveys the dismay one endures when prohibited, by circumstances or otherwise, from enacting one's agency, particularly in determining the conditions of a birth.

On the one hand, the scene conveys love and support despite unanticipated challenges during childbirth, where no blame can be apportioned to anyone. If such portrayals were the exception rather than the rule, there would likely be nothing to critique. Yet this scene, set in the broader context of cultural representations of childbirth, advances the dominant notion that the female body is prone to breakdown and malfunction. Consider a similar portrayal of childbirth from the second season of *Army Wives* (*Duplicity*). During birth class, Colonel Joan Burton (Wendy Davis) begins bleeding and goes to hospital where she is diagnosed with a minor tear in her placenta. As a precaution, her army obstetrician, Doctor Lang, prescribes bed rest. When Joan asks for how long, Dr. Lang replies: 'Until I feel like we're out of the woods.' Frustrated, Joan asks: 'Well when is that going to be?' Authoritatively, Dr. Lang replies: 'When I say.' Joan deferentially replies: 'Yes, Ma'am,' then looks down. Later, in *Safe Havens*, Joan suffers a hemorrhage and undergoes a medically necessary C-section. Not only does the series give its character the comparatively rare emergency birth experience, it further infantilises the mother during her interaction with the physician.

One of the most horrifying representations of childbirth occurs in the fourth installment of the globally acclaimed film series, *Twilight*, based on the book series of the same title. In the novel, the human Bella chooses to keep her pregnancy, brought about by sex with her newly married vampire husband, Edward. This decision ultimately leads to a lethal birth. Writing for the *Los Angeles Daily News*, Bob Strauss describes the birth as 'perhaps the ickiest birth scene ever filmed'. At the 2011 Comic Con convention, actor Robert Pattinson (Edward) described the birth scene as 'hardcore' and 'graphic'.

The scene in question is faithfully derived from the novel. When it is discovered her placenta has become detached and the fetus cannot breathe, Bella is moved to an emergency-room-like environment. After crying out for the infant to be removed from her, Bella soon becomes an inert body upon which mounting tortures are internally inflicted. Jacob, Bella's protector, describes it this way:

Another shattering crack inside her body, the loudest yet, so loud that we both froze in shock waiting for her answering shriek. Nothing. Her legs, which had been curled up in agony, now went limp, sprawling out in an unnatural way. (Meyer 2008, p. 351)

Bella experiences the birth similarly:

Ripping. Breaking. Agony.

The darkness had taken over, and then washed away a wave of torture. I couldn't breathe Pieces of me shattering, snapping, slicing apart.... More blackness Something sharper than knives ripped through me—the words, making sense in spite of the other tortures. *Detached placenta* – I knew what that meant. It meant that my baby was dying inside me. (2008, p. 370)

Following Bella's orders to rescue the child, Edward uses his teeth to tear the baby free. After extracting the newly 'born' infant girl, Renesmee, Jacob describes Bella as a 'broken, bled-out, mangled corpse' (2008, p. 355). Meanwhile Bella is conflicted, momentarily cherishing that she had been strong enough to 'survive' the birth. Overwhelmed with suffering, she simultaneously silently begs for not merely death, but to have never been born. 'The whole of my existence did not outweigh this pain. Wasn't worth living through it for one more heartbeat' (2008, p. 377).

Given this representation of childbirth, the question remains: What will it *mean* to viewers? Whether the genre is horror, comedy or drama, audience interpretation is ultimately complex and fraught with variation. Yet one gets a sense of the meaning of this film from reading Kavita Varma-White's column on Today.com. The author writes that the frightening character of the birth scene in *Twilight: Breaking Dawn – Part 1* functions to ward girls away from sex and, therefore, pregnancy. Varma-White admits she was 'horrifyingly transfixed' by the book *Breaking Dawn's* treatment of a vampire birth, complete with 'cracking ribs', 'loads of blood', a 'baby busting out' of the mother, and 'a vampire-fang C-section of sorts'. The film's childbirth scene, she predicts based on (then) early reports, will be terrifying enough to make people 'want to stay FAR AWAY from having a baby, not to mention making one'. This commentary is significant in that it recognises, from the perspective of a self-described fan of the *Twilight* series, how media consumers relate fantastical stories to the 'real' world. With this in mind it becomes clear that many viewers will experience the film's gory, violent birth – which has little to no relevance to real life – as somewhat indicative of the real thing. In fact, Stephenie Meyer, the author of the book series, suggested that the graphic and terrifying scene was inspired from her own experience giving birth. Speaking to MTV News in 2010, she related the disturbing birth scene in the book to her own experience, and hoped the film version would be 'every bit as awful' as the book version. 'I know it freaked people out, but for those of us who have been through childbirth a couple times, it is a scary, terrifying experience. This is just taking that to an exponential power, and I love going there' (*Huffington Post* 2011). This rendering of childbirth, placed within the broader cultural context of bitter birth themes, produces a cultural education that may cause many to narrowly view the capacity to birth new life as an *affliction* – a fate best endured with the aid of medical intervention and/or paternalistic rescue. This critique does not deny Meyer's understanding of her birth, but it does question the contribution her creative work makes to a broader cultural narrative which conceptualises childbirth as a fundamentally oppressive and life-denying experience.

A surface-level inspection of the identification of birth with pain may yield a quizzical rebuke: Isn't it only natural that pain would be so forcefully associated with birth? Yet there is good reason to recognise that the 'commonsense' association of childbirth with pain is significantly gendered. Consider, for instance, the fact that many do not immediately associate professional athletes, such as those in the National Football League (NFL) or the National Basketball Association (NBA), with pain. Yet many top-performing athletes regularly undergo profound physical suffering in order to accomplish their desired objective of winning games and establishing their individual athletic greatness.¹ For example, the future Hall of Fame professional football player, Jason Taylor, endured grueling agonies to attain glory, acclaim and fortune. Without ignoring the gendered nature of such behaviour or applauding it, one should note some of what Taylor endured during his 15-year career

to understand the different ways in which pain can be interpreted. During his lauded career with the Miami Dolphins, Taylor came close to having his leg amputated, he played multiple games with a catheter running from his armpit to his heart, endured a blood-oozing calf for months at a time, and, quite relevantly, utilised epidurals during his 2006 football season to cope with a herniated disk in his back. The very same year he used epidurals to play on Sundays he won Defensive Player of the Year (Le Batard 2013).

The difference between professional athletes and birthing women has much to do with what is emphasised, and what is relegated to the background. Hegemonic masculinity involves the denial of vulnerability and an investment in the appearance of imperviousness. So, while pain is regularly emphasised in American cultural conceptualisations of childbirth, talent and triumph are emphasised in ideas about professional athletes.² There is nothing to prevent an alternative understanding of birth that emphasises the talent and triumph in birth. Instead, the dominant culture continues to emphasise pain and suffering, to the near *exclusion* of alternative understandings. The gendered character of the matter is clear when one considers that while male athletes are routinely expected to transcend (or perhaps even use) pain to fuel great, widely touted successes, the pain of birth is viewed as purely oppressive. Failure to distinguish between suffering as a potentially transformative process (as most normal instances of birth appear to be) and pure affliction, involving inane agony, allows childbirth to become a prop for reinforcing dualistic gender stereotypes. In particular, the conceptualisation of women's pregnancy and birth as debilitating allows for the perpetuation of the gendered ideology that women cannot overcome significant challenges without aid from men or masculine institutions, rather than indicating the immense potency of female biology. The patriarchal nature of this conceptualisation is clear from the fact that American culture does not similarly interpret the pain experienced by men in a variety of facets of life, including professional sports.

Denied dependency: Birthing mother as nature

In a patriarchal conception of the world, the salient thesis that females are inferior to males fosters institutions and perceptions of female birth as a necessarily disempowering, dangerous process which requires male guidance and rescue. Traditional patriarchal religion, for example, views mothers as passive receptacles in possession of an entity that God created. In addressing God, Augustine (1998, p. 186) describes his fetal self as having inhabited his mother's womb, but having been 'created' in the womb by God. Quite specifically, Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas believed women's reproductive capabilities denied them access to rational thought. These capabilities also made women prone to weakness and sin (Tuana 1993, p. 12). Informed by the fundamental belief that women, like nature, needed to be transformed and essentially transcended, men actually conceptualised women's bodies as obstacles to be overcome in order to secure new life and humanity itself. This persistent patriarchal concept is illustrated in the early Catholic Church's promotion of the idea that 'in intercourse the male deposits in the female a homunculus, or "little persons", complete with soul, which is simply housed in the womb for nine months, without acquiring any attributes of the mother. The homunculus is not really safe, however, until it reaches

male hands again, when a priest baptizes it, ensuring the salvation of its immoral soul' (Ehrenreich and English 1974, pp. 8–9). In this narrative, suffice to say, men draw on their identification with rationality to enact creative agency, while women are identified with nature, thus justifying their devalued, instrumental status.

An updated and secularised vision of this narrative was normalised in an advertisement that ran during prime time on Superbowl Sunday, 1 February 2009. The Cars.com advertisement relays the life successes of David Abernathy who, despite his prowess in nearly all aspects of life, remained clueless about car buying. The ad begins with Abernathy's birth, with his mother on her back amid a sea of equipment and male doctors. While showing an image of a baby being delivered from his mother into the hands of the physician, a voice-over notes that when Abernathy was born he is said to have congratulated the doctor on a perfect delivery. The ideal birthing woman, the ad arguably suggests, is one who is passively acted upon by authoritative men. Like the understanding promoted by the early Catholic Church, the advertisement presents the infant as being housed in the mother's womb, awaiting the salvation of a doctor-priest. The mother's procreative powers are almost entirely unacknowledged; new life's dependency on her body and person is denied. Instead, she is merely an instrument to the master subject's own goal. This Cars.com advertisement perpetuates the gender dualisation of reason (male) vs. nature (female) by portraying the mother and the organic birth process as fundamentally unintelligent, imperfect, flawed, and without agency. Meanwhile, the medical doctor uses birth as a prop to perform hegemonic, patriarchal masculinity; in acting upon and controlling the female body, he displays *his* creativity, intelligence, agency and triumph. The implication, it seems, is that masculine technology, manifest in medicalised childbirth, is conceptualised as 'the master artist of human generation'.

A similar denial of women's procreative powers and maternal agency is expressed in a February 2013 Ameritrade commercial, which promotes the company's online trading tools as smart and unsurprising. A man is shown experiencing a variety of unexpected events including having triplets, discovering his house was built on an ancient burial ground, and needing a new transmission for his car. The commercial starts out in a hospital delivery room. The voice-over states: 'Surprise, you're having triplets,' as two nurses pile babies into his arms. The mother is almost absent from the commercial – her body frames the bottom half of the screen, so she is literally part of the background. Rather than highlighting her as the subject the narrator focuses on the man 'having' triplets. Such an advertisement is rather unremarkable in the sense that maternal birthing agency is regularly rendered invisible in mainstream mass media representations of women's birthing projects.

Dominant televisual and filmic depictions of childbirth not only normalise the medical control of childbirth, they fundamentally trivialise it. This *trivialisation* occurs when one fails to sufficiently acknowledge *maternal magnificence*, appropriately honouring the birthing woman's inherently glorious creation of new life. Given that one of the few universal values is the recognition of the inherent worth of persons, it is only fitting that those principally responsible for creating and birthing such beings be recognised for doing so. *Baby Mama* (2008) joins other representations in centering the protagonist's birth on pain. As Angie Ostrowiski (Amy Poehler) goes into labour

she is shown rabidly grabbing at patients and staff as she is wheeled into the delivery room. This expresses the essentialist stereotype that women are excessively emotional and irrational, and that the womb is a source of such conduct. There her obstetrician, Dr. Manheim, tells a dry joke and coaches her to push. Meanwhile Kate Holbrook, who propositioned Angie to be a surrogate mother, faints during Angie's labour. Of the works examined, the closest to direct recognition of *maternal magnificence* takes place in *Parenthood*'s 'Nora' episode, when family patriarch Zeek Braverman enters Kristina's room at the hospital and says: 'Way to go Kristina!'

At times, popular representations of birth go beyond failing to recognise maternal agency, by facilitating the appropriation of the mother's birth glory. In season seven of *Rules of Engagement* (ep. 100, 2012), viewers look on as Jeff and Audrey Bingham (Patrick Warburton and Megyn Price) join Brenda (Sara Rue), the surrogate mother of their child, during her labour. She is characteristically lying down, legs up, with a doctor coaching her breathing and pushing. As with *Baby Mama* the doctor engages in irreverent banter, in this case discussing baseball with Jeff as Brenda copes with painful contractions. Brenda's birth is portrayed as nothing short of a painful chore. When the doctor 'delivers' the baby, Brenda says: 'Oh, thank God I can drink again.' After hugging the surrogate, who is lesbian, Jeff turns to the obstetrician and says: 'Hey doctor, way to go!', much as David Abernathy (Cars.com ad) reportedly congratulated the doctor. Such popular portrayals use childbirth as a prop to indicate the agency of others, be it that of the doctor or the male birth attendant. The mother is thoroughly backgrounded and her creative achievement is co-opted.

Body loathing and 'birth disgust' in *Knocked Up*

The commercially successful comedic film, *Knocked Up* (2007), uses childbirth to perpetuate two particular dualisms relevant to gender and the culture/nature divide. Staring Seth Rogen (Ben), *Knocked Up* spent eight weeks in the box office top ten (Hollywood Reporter) and has grossed more than \$218 million worldwide – nearly \$150 million in the US alone. The film also earned \$117 million in US DVD sales, accounting for more than six million copies sold (The Numbers, *Knocked Up*). In the film, alcohol and poor judgement lead 'slacker' Ben and sexy, career-oriented Alison (Katherine Heigl), to a sexual encounter. Two months later Alison experiences morning sickness and realises she is pregnant. Despite her dismay at having conceived with Ben, whom she finds crass and immature, Alison decides to go through with the pregnancy. It is worth noting that the film continues the widespread trend in mainstream television and Hollywood film of almost immediately dismissing the option of abortion. The only mentions of abortion come from Alison's mother (who fears the ill-advised pregnancy will harm her daughter's career in television) and from one of Ben's friends. In both instances, the idea is immediately dismissed as unthinkable. This is also the case in *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, when Rosie Brennan (Anna Kendrick) becomes pregnant after having a sexual fling with an old high school friend Marco (Chace Crawford). Rosie does not initially see Marco as a serious partner, nor does she view the pregnancy as being well-timed. It goes without saying that had Alison had an abortion, *Knocked Up* would not be what the writers intended it to be. Nevertheless, the fact that abortion continues

to be treated dismissively is noteworthy and problematic, for both films might have easily included at least a meaningful conversation about the option of abortion.

The practice of denigrating the body, regarding it as an impurity best overcome or subordinated to the 'mind, soul, spirit or will' is a consequence of the mind/body dualism central to master consciousness (Caputi 2007, p. 32). The denigration of certain bodies that deviate from idealised humanity – historically identified with the male body – has been an important tool of oppression and control of women. Indeed, Rosemary Mander (2004, p. 35) identifies the concept of 'pollution' – the notion that automatically escaping fluids are dirty and unclean – as historically used by men to exert control over woman's birth process. Such a paradigm of mind/body dualism and pollution is enacted and promulgated throughout *Knocked Up*, where pregnant, birthing and non-sexualised female bodies are dirty, disgusting, and, at times, horrifying. In one scene, Alison is confronted by her bosses about her increasingly apparent pregnancy. They tell her that it turns out 'people like pregnant' and, consequently, she will continue hosting her entertainment programme. One of her bosses is surprised at the appeal which pregnancy holds: 'It just grosses me out when I know that people are pregnant. Cause I think about the birth, everything's so wet.' To this, Alison's other boss indicates that he wants her to interview pregnant celebrities, with the proviso that she not discuss the dirty details of birth.

Reducing childbirth to painful 'nastiness' is not limited to *Knocked Up*. Arguably, it reflects birth disgust when Kate faints during Angie's labour (*Baby Mama*) and in *Rules of Engagement* when Audrey urges Jeff to look as Brenda gives birth, only to be revolted when she herself looks, turns and vomits. Birth disgust is explicitly expressed in *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* when Amy asks her sister to record her birth. Ashley responds: 'Amy I do not care to see you that up close and personal. I do not want to see the baby actually being born. No one does. It's just a conspiracy by video camera manufacturers. No one really wants to see the baby on camera until he's clean and smiling about three years from now.'

Knocked Up suggests that childbirth is a form of 'vaginal sacrifice'. In one scene, Alison faces an uncomfortable encounter with Jody, a woman from Ben's circle of slacker friends. After indicating she heard Alison was pregnant, Jody comments:

Aren't you scared? The way it's gonna come out. It's gonna hurt a lot, I bet; your vagina. That's so sick.

Alison responds with awkward silence. To this is added a scene in which Alison describes childbirth as requiring her to 'sacrifice' her vagina.

Birth disgust reaches its climax during one of *Knocked Up*'s birth scenes, when Ben's friend, troubled by screaming and moaning, races to the labour room to offer assistance. Upon entering he is horrified by the sight of the baby crowning in Alison's vagina. Disturbed, he rushes back to the waiting area where he explains to his friends: 'I shouldn't have gone in there. Promise me you won't go in there.' Similarly, in a later scene Ben ventures into a literal 'no man's land', looking at Alison's vagina as she begins to birth her baby. He is shocked and perhaps frightened by the sight, so when Alison asks what things look like, Ben emphatically replies: 'You don't want to see it.'

These scenes suggest two prominent ideas: 1) it demeans pregnant women's bodies as ugly for failing to fit emphasised femininity's physical beauty norm; and 2) that pregnancy and childbirth transform female genitalia (specifically the vagina) from objects of sexual desire, to organs of horror and revulsion. Arguably, this devaluation of both the beauty and significance of the source of human life is a product of dualistic logic's backgrounding or denied dependence. Backgrounding occurs when the 'master' subject denies its dependence on the contributions of the other, often precisely the very beings it most relies upon (Plumwood 1993, pp. 49–50). The symbolic transformation of the creation of new life – a power long entitling deities to be worshipped and to receive absolute commitment – into a detestable, dirty event evoking body derision, is perhaps one of the most egregious examples of backgrounding possible.

Enforcing the dualistic order: Hollywood holding mothers accountable

In *Knocked Up*, birth is used as an opportunity to reprimand women who deviate from the script of emphasised femininity, with the woman's passivity at its core. Alison, the birthing mother, is called a 'control freak' by her doctor for attempting to assert her agency over the birth process. She is first denied her request for a natural birth free of an epidural for pain; then, when she asks for an epidural later in the pregnancy, she is denied once more. At one point she is literally silenced as the male nurse asks her to quieten her labouring process, so as to not disturb other labouring mothers. At another point in the birth scene, the mother indicates her desire to ensure her birth is a special event, to which the doctor retorts: 'If you want a special experience go to a Jimmy Buffet concert.' This brief 'humorous' retort acts as the patriarchal cultural hegemony's fundamental denial of the attempt to take possession of one's birth or to interpret it as a fundamentally glorious feat. Fearing that her autonomy has become an obstacle to her fetus's life, the expectant mother resigns herself to absolute submission before the doctor: 'Do whatever you have to do.' The perfect birth, the message seems to be, can only come about when the natural process is thoroughly objectified and disavowed. The creative mother becomes a patient, a spectator, an agentless body acted upon, saved almost always by male-initiated technological intervention. Such representations perpetuate gender polarisation and thus domination by ridiculing gender transgression as an immoral threat to the life of the mother's child. Moreover, the implied message is that mothers wishing to ensure the safety of their newborn children must come to terms with the reality of femininity, namely its submissive, irrational and highly emotional character, and allow men or women identified with the male sphere of rationality and technology to take control. Rather than presenting it as an opportunity for potent self-assertion, the film uses birth as a prop to perpetuate patriarchal gender norms.

Similar themes are enacted and expanded upon in a later popular birth-related Hollywood film, *The Back-up Plan* (2010). The film debuted at number one at the Friday box office, on 23 April 2010, and remained in the top five spot through its opening three weeks. As of March 2011, this has been CBS Films' highest-grossing film to date (Box Office, CBS). At one time, the film was also ranked number one for DVD rentals, online rentals and DVD sales at Blockbuster (PR News Wire). According to The-Numbers.com, the film's theatrical release grossed more than \$77 million, with

over 37 million in the United States (US) alone. The film also earned more than ten million in US DVD sales, accounting for more than 670 000 DVDs sold (The Numbers).

In *The Back-up Plan*, Zoe (Jennifer Lopez), gives up on finding the man of her dreams and decides to start a family on her own, by being artificially inseminated. After the insemination Zoe meets Stan (Alex O'Loughlin), with whom she quickly falls in love, before learning that she is pregnant. While the relationship develops, Zoe starts attending a support group called 'Single Mothers and Proud', which comprises a diverse, multi-ethnic and multi-age group of single women. The patriarchal conceptions underwriting the film are clear from the way it portrays the group in contrast to the heteronormative ideal. Instead of celebrating the group's cutting-edge diversity and promotion of feminine solidarity, the film presents the group of gender non-conformists as oddballs who have given up on men and, therefore, normalcy. Deeply desirous of patriarchal, heterosexual 'normality' herself, Zoe feels out of place and unsettled among the women. Throughout the film, the single moms' group, acting as a caricature of gender-resistant women, is arguably used as a springboard to launch a comedic but overtly patriarchal moral tale of the pitfalls and buffoonery of disavowing heteronormativity.

In one of the first scenes with the single mom's group, Zoe asks a young mother who is breastfeeding her child how old the 'baby is'. In response the daughter, who is not a baby at all, responds: 'I'm three years old.' Shocked, Zoe represents mainstream patriarchal discomfort with mothers' proud, unflinching use of their breasts to nourish their children; particularly when such activity occurs beyond the American norm of breastfeeding only very young children. In this early scene the film stereotypes strong women who are clearly rebuking heteronormativity and gender polarisation. The full-figured meeting leader is presented as a foolish hippie goddess worshiper. The woman touches a piece of artwork representing a feminine figure as she tells Zoe the group's name is Single Mothers and 'Proud'. A key figure in the support group, Lori, enacts physical and behavioural tendencies identified with 'masculinity' and is presented as a key comedic foil. She has short dark hair and wears cut-off tee-shirts that display a tattoo near her bicep. Simply put, Lori is depicted as the lesbian stereotype. Viewers are given the distinct sense that Zoe is deeply disappointed at having found herself in a position where she must give up on what she calls the dream of finding 'the one', and must now turn to a group of female outcasts who are determined to have children without 'penis partners', as the group leader calls them. Later in the film medicalised birth is identified with the 'happily ever after' of patriarchal heteronormativity.

Specifically, the film draws on the homophobic association of lesbianism with dirtiness to mark homebirth as a filthy, feminine-forsaking enterprise. This is clear in the scene in which Zoe and the other members of the single moms' group are invited to join fellow member, Lori (the stereotypical masculine lesbian), for her homebirth. Uncomfortable with the group and the invitation, Zoe and Stan arrive with the intention of saying hello, offering well-wishes and leaving as soon as possible. But the two are quickly swept into a lampooned communal birth environment in which the initial stereotypes of the women in the mothers' group are elaborated. The group leader beats a drum and chants as she escorts Zoe to the birth room. Zoe is soon trapped in what is best described as a rite of passage into a parody of matriarchy. The room is aglow with candles and filled with the sound of

women singing together. Zoe enters the birth room to find Lori sitting in a kiddie pool, legs spread and bearing down as she is supported by two women at either side. Zoe looks on, disturbed, as the group leader comments: 'I know. Isn't it amazing how the human body can just open up like that?' Amid Lori's loud cries due to contractions, the other women work to create a sacred space for the birth process by singing. Despite her attempt to escape, Zoe is forced to stay in the room because she has unsuspectingly become Lori's 'focal-point'. More than backgrounding maternal magnificence, here it is actively mocked. Failure to deride such revolutionary representations of childbirth puts at risk patriarchy's fundamental conceptualisation of women as passive and requiring direction from external male-identified authority.

At this point, the film deploys a series of dualisms including culture/woman(nature), mind/body. First, the birthing mother has a bowel movement in the water. (One of the women fishes it out with a small net.) The birthing mother is presented as angry, demanding and ridiculous. With her mouth open wide the mother makes what can be described as goat-like sounds. She reaches out and grabs Zoe. In addition to crying out during contractions she begins to scream for a mirror to see the baby. Forced to bring the mirror, Stan enters in time to join Zoe in witnessing the baby's birth. Both cry out in shock. Zoe passes out, falling into the contaminated kiddie pool. Homebirth, the organic features of birth and feminine power are marked as bizarre, disgusting, dirty, and, if we read between the lines, unattractive.

Just as the mother of *Knocked Up* is maligned for being too assertive in demanding a natural birth process, the homebirth mother in *The Back-up Plan* serves as a warning to women who wish to break ranks with patriarchal gender norms. In exchange for asserting her power to give birth without the aid of patriarchal medical intervention, the mother is depicted as an uncivilised, snarling 'man-woman' who defecates in the birthing pool. The implication seems clear: Women who fail to conform to heterosexist gender and sexual norms provoke homophobic revulsion; they become filthy lesbians. Indeed, the scene draws on the fear of contamination to instill terror in the film's main character, Zoe, about both non-medicalised and female-centered birth. The failure of the film's central character, Zoe, to so much as mention the possibility of having a non-medicalised birth indicates that the homebirth scene clearly and decisively serves as a forewarning of the absolutely unacceptable character of birth alternatives that do not conform to patriarchal and heterosexist masculine ideals.

Speaking on behalf of dominant culture, the film's main characters react with derision and reproach. Following the birth scene, Zoe and Stan are shown walking away from the perplexing homebirthing madness. They exchange sober observations:

'Everyone says it's so beautiful. I thought it was terrifying,' says Zoe.

'I don't ever want to see that again.'

'You want to see ours, right?'

'I don't know baby, we just shouldn't have seen that.'

The tone of the film suggests a profound response to the rhetorical question: 'Isn't it amazing?' The mother-centered and homebirth movements, including their representative films such as *Birth as*

We Know it and *The Business of Being Born*, indicate that birth is amazing, and women are capable of doing it along with many other things. In contrast, *The Back-up Plan* provides the converse position that not only is it *not* amazing, it is disturbing. The clear message is that such ‘cultic’ behaviour is socially unacceptable and reprehensible.

Cultural policing of gender nonconformists around birth is also evident in television. Originally aired on 15 November 2010, episode nine, ‘Glitter’, season six of CBS’s popular, award-winning sitcom, *How I Met Your Mother*, opens with a pregnant Lily Aldrin telling her friend, Robin Scherbatsky, the movie they had previously agreed on would be too violent for her developing baby, so she chose something different for them to watch – a video of a waterbirth. When Lily runs the video, Robin immediately reacts with horror, screaming out in terror. Here the terror of birth reaches a heightened pitch. In what may be theorised as a reaction to women’s efforts to attain birthing autonomy, dominant culture seems determined to demean birth non-conformity, such as the waterbirth being depicted. Thus the joke is that non-medically controlled births are far more disturbing than a run-of-the-mill violent action movie. One may theorise that Robin’s scream is the sound of patriarchy horrified at maternity reconceived of as women’s project.

An even earlier mocking of women-centered approaches to childbirth was presented in a 2003 episode, ‘Match Game’, of the popular television series, *Frasier*. As two of the main characters, Niles and Daphne, confront childbirth they are introduced to the idea of having a doula, a mother-supporting birth assistant. They soon meet a doula named ‘Harvest’. Her name, symbolising connectedness with nature, is meant to invoke immediate condescension. She is presented as a naïve proponent of natural birth. She comes equipped with a support staff that includes a masseuse, a shaman and a drummer; speaking in a wispy voice she further articulates a policy of ‘a drug-free birthing environment’. Daphne hesitantly decides to adopt Harvest as her doula against the judgement of her female friend, Roz, who is nonplussed at the idea of a non-medicalised birth process: ‘No drugs?’ When Daphne asks how painful birth is, Roz replies: ‘Would you have a tooth pulled without Novocaine?’ Circumstances change, however, when Harvest later plays a video of her client’s 18-hour birth. Upon pressing ‘play’ we hear the birthing mother screaming out in agony, to which Harvest replies: ‘Look at Cindy glow.’ We then hear Cindy call out: ‘Mother of God! Kill me!’ Daphne responds by turning off the video, noting: ‘I’ve seen enough. I’m having my baby the way God intended: in a hospital, numb from the waist down. Now take your incense and your voodoo stick and get out.’

In a breath, non-medicalised, woman-centered childbirth is labeled masochistic, irrational and thoroughly naïve. The episode manages to enforce long-standing patriarchal definitions of female biology as fundamentally oppressive, like a rotten tooth in need of extraction. As such, the medicalised conceptualisation of childbirth as pathological is upheld. This episode further uses a stereotyped depiction of the growing women-centered birth movement as a prop to perpetuate a patriarchal conception of proper humanity as being confidently divorced – polarised – from ‘nature’. In doing so it undercuts a movement that not only aims to support the empowerment of birthing women, but also one emphasising the fluidity of nature and culture, and the need for humans to forge a relationship with nature based on respect and inter-relationality.

Returning to *The Back-up Plan*, what is perhaps most remarkable about the film is that it not only lampoons homebirth, but juxtaposes such a representation of homebirth with an idealised medicalised birth. The mockery of non-medicalised, female-centered birth sits in stark contrast with Zoe's medicalised birth, which acts as the 'and-they-live-happily-ever-after' conclusion to the film. Zoe's birth scene, which is very short compared to the homebirth scene, proffers an emphasised feminine ideal in which the mother is passive in relation to patriarchal masculine authority. She is lying inert on a hospital bed wearing a hospital gown, surrounded by nurses and medical technology. None of the women members of the single moms' club are present. This is not inconsequential. Indeed, before the labour begins, Stan insists that Zoe believe him when he says he's 'in, and not going anywhere'. She agrees and they hold hands. The doctor then commands Zoe: 'Alright, now push. It's time to push.' Zoe cries out and begins to push. Her partner Stan begins to coach: 'Breathe, breathe, breathe.' Here the scene fades to white, then shows Stan rocking two babies. The scene, in short, crystallises gender polarity in heteronormative relationships and promotes feminine passivity to male control. Despite the film's emphasis on Zoe's desire for a child, the birth project through which such life comes to be has literally disappeared; as if to say 'there is nothing to see here, nothing worthy of depicting'.

In contrast to that of the homebirth scene, medicalised birth becomes the proverbial rite of passage solidifying patriarchal gender relations between mother and father. Before the focus shifts to the labour, Zoe symbolically relinquishes her rebellious 'no man needed' motto, claimed in the beginning of the film. Stan enacts hegemonic masculinity by coaching his utterly passive partner, Zoe, who herself enacts emphasised femininity. But there is more. As culture critic Henry Giroux (1994, p. 201) notes, the selection, arrangement and sequencing of information is deeply influenced by and connected to beliefs and values: 'Implicit in the reordering of knowledge are ideological assumptions about how one views the world, assumptions that constitute a distinction between the essential and the nonessential, the important and the nonimportant.' We have as much to learn from what *The Back-up Plan* fails to show us, as from what it does show us. The absence of any substantial detail of the labour process backgrounds the natural world, with which the body – particularly the female body – has long been identified. The film metaphorically exalts the mind, conceptually linked to the medical professionals, the technological machinery, and the coaching husband, asserting control over the female body. This brief, idealised depiction of a passive mother giving birth under the control of patriarchal medical supervision is put forward against the backdrop of unruly gender and sexually non-conformist women communing with nature and other women. The message is clear: When women conform to heteronormativity, relinquishing autonomy for patriarchal masculine control, birth runs smoothly and everyone lives happily ever after.

The return of *Jaws*

The Back-up Plan can also be interpreted as a new adaptation of the patriarchal myth of domination of the feminine featured in the classic horror film, *Jaws*. According to cultural theorist Jane Caputi's (2004, p. 23) interpretation, *Jaws* 'is the ritual retelling of an essential patriarchal myth – male vanquishment of the female symbolized as a sea monster, dragon, serpent, vampire, or some

other creature, administering a necessary fix to a society hooked on and by male control'. Caputi contends that the *Jaws* myth, in which the shark mythically identified with the archetypal 'terrible mother' is ritually destroyed, is meant to instill in viewers a fear of primordial feminine power and to encourage its elimination. This motif, however, finds itself perennially retold in an effort to preserve notions of male superiority (2004, pp. 23–24).

The connection between the *Jaws* myth and *The Back-up Plan* was made explicit in the film's publicity campaign. The film's official synopsis, repeated in Internet discussions of the film (Taylor Blue), describes the previously discussed water birth scene as having done to 'kiddie pools what *Jaws* did for swimming in the ocean'. It is worth noting here that I first learned of this film and its treatment of birth when I saw a television advertisement for the film during the 2009 Superbowl – one of the most widely viewed televised events in the US. In the advert the film's publicity team again chose to emphasise the horror of home water birth. The ad featured the main characters' terrified reactions to the water birth referred to in the synopsis. The overt implication is echoed by Stan when he says: 'I don't ever want to see that again ... we just shouldn't have seen that.' Here Stan's terrified reaction represents patriarchy's fear of feminine potency; fear of the dissolution of fragile gender polarities. Whereas *Jaws* represented feminine power unleashed in ocean waters as a terrifying danger, the water-birthing mother of *The Back-up Plan*, too, represents female power in childbirth, unleashed from patriarchal control. Unconstrained female power is, according to feminist theorists, a constant source of fear within patriarchal structures.

There is much to suggest that the male mind has always been haunted by the force of the idea of *dependence on a woman for life itself*, the son's constant effort to assimilate, compensate for, or deny the fact that he is 'of woman born'. (Rich 1976, p. 11)

Rich (1976, p. 68) quotes De Beauvoir as having written: 'It was as Mother that woman was fearsome; it is in maternity that she must be transfigured and enslaved.' Thus, the institution of motherhood was constructed in order to turn maternal power – a power over life and death – 'into a source of powerlessness' (Rich 1976, p. 68). This transfiguring of maternal power into powerlessness is ritualistically enacted in birth comedies.

In her analysis of masculinity and childbirth in comedic Hollywood films of the 1980s and 1990s, film and media scholar Shira Segal contends that birth is generally represented as a medically controlled event. Not only is birth presented as an 'anti-feminist project' (Segal 2007, p. 1), it serves to highlight the inadequacies of the dominant model of masculine selfhood: Despite expectations associated with dominant masculinity, men are unable to remain unemotional and in total control during the birth event (2007, p. 15). Thus both birthing mothers and accompanying men find themselves in the shadow of institutionalised medical authority, which is representative of 'ultimate masculinity' (2007, p. 15):

Birth functions as the extreme of men's estrangement from the female body new fathers in comedy often regress to a child-like, boy-state; birth works to highlight men's misunderstanding and alienation of the female procreative experience. Not only is femininity, in all its reproductive force, deemed as outside the realm of men's work, masculinity itself is mocked as unattainable for comic figures such as the doctor ..., as well as the inadequate partners (2007, pp. 7–8)

This point is illustrated in the way Stan's character becomes very uncomfortable when Zoe's doctor repeatedly uses the word 'vagina'. Similarly, during Brenda's labour in *Rules of Engagement*, Jeff is disturbed at the doctor's mention of Brenda's 'vagina'. Only within patriarchal gender boundaries that systematically marginalise female sexual and reproductive potency would women's birthing agency be met with such fear and bewilderment.

Moreover, the film's treatment of home water birth acts as a forewarning to those women gravitating to the counter-hegemonic narrative of women-centered birth: Subverting gendered norms comes at a heavy price. The scene suggests that in a social order which sexualises and, more generally, idealises feminine passivity, weakness and utter reliance on men, the kind of feminine power displayed in non-medically controlled birth is the ultimate turn-off, the renunciation of femininity itself – a woman acting like a man. Conversely, Zoe's birth offers female viewers the patriarchal vision of birth in which women are passively coached by fathers and delivered by doctors. She, then, is the desirable and (heteronormative) woman.

Conclusion

Dominant mass media representations of maternity, such as those featured in Hollywood blockbusters *Knocked Up* and *The Back-up Plan* and television programmes such as *Rules of Engagement*, use childbirth as a prop to transmit patriarchal gender roles. Uniquely, *The Back-up Plan* uses planned homebirth to hold accountable those women who dare to transgress emphasised femininity. In particular, we see the continued usefulness of the 'deviant', i.e. non-feminine, and 'filthy lesbian' trope in holding women accountable for transgressing gender polarities. More generally, the salient theme running throughout such materials is the warning that women who assert their agency during birth rather than acquiesce to masculine medical professionals or institutions, be it in the hospital or at home, run the risk of having their femininity called into question. More generally a variety of films and television programmes facilitate the normalisation of medicalised childbirth, including the narrow emphasis on the dangers and pain associated with childbirth. Such programmes do not provide creative alternative renderings of birth, including homebirths or those taking place at birth centers. Moreover, the collective failure of these diverse programmes to sufficiently emphasise the inherent magnificence of forging and birthing new life is problematic. Certainly, childbirth is a challenging and (for most) profoundly painful experience; yet so too are a variety of other arguably less significant activities including professional athletics, which are not so limitedly portrayed as centering on pain. Indeed, whereas pain and suffering are overemphasised in childbirth, they are unhealthily backgrounded among professional football players, for example. Both cases are marked by extremes. Yet when the pain and suffering of such players is brought into focus, it is still often contextualised as having a purpose, namely the exertion of agency in the pursuit of a laudable goal ultimately resulting in glory. The critique within this article may be summarised to question where the context is for the challenges experienced by those engaged in bringing into being a form of life which virtually all people agree is something of inherent value. So the issue really is not merely the inclusion of pain in birth representations, but rather the exclusion of valuable context to, and alternative meanings about, such challenges. As they stand

presently, dominant cultural representations of childbirth reinforce the ancient patriarchal view that women are destined for bitter births.

Whatever one may believe about the true ‘natural’ order of gender and processes such as childbirth, our failure to recognise the way in which our experiences and cultural representations are coloured by conceptual predispositions (lenses) predisposes us to what Bertrand Russell describes as the ‘tyranny of custom’ and what Gramsci understands as ‘commonsense’; failure to recognise the conceptual underpinnings of all accounts of experience and knowledge condemns us to intolerable apathy. Indeed, even those incisive critics of custom, Gramsci and Russell, perhaps unknowingly perpetuated androcentrism (male-centeredness). How we understand the unique female capacity to form, nourish and birth new life, will be determined by the conceptual framework guiding our perceptions. Thus, the challenge before us is to envision alternative ways of understanding the world and our place in it – particularly, visions of pregnancy and birth that emphasise women’s agency and accomplishment, at least as much as pain and dependency.

Notes

- 1 During the 2012 National Basketball Association (NBA) championship, Miami Heat player, Mike Miller, scored a record seven three-point baskets while playing in obvious pain. When not playing in the game, Miller lay sprawled on the court to alleviate his back pain. During the game he often ran in an awkward, hunched-over manner, due to the pain.
- 2 In reply it might be said, however, that athletic accomplishment and birth are fundamentally different. As a student once postulated, ‘the baby is going to eventually come out no matter what’. The underlying idea seems to be that athletic accomplishment involves talent, whereas birth involves natural processes on autopilot. This view is mistaken: Most would acknowledge that great athletes, for instance, are not merely talented, but also naturally gifted. But their inherent athletic ability does not prevent us from honouring their accomplishment. Arguably this is similarly true of women who rely on given biological processes, but must also draw on inner strength and agency to birth new life.

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