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From the Editor

Amanda D'Aoust

Sensational and extravagant emotional appeal – here comes our first thematic edition on (you know you love it) *Melodrama*. Proof of its undying attraction, *Synoptique 12*'s articles each include a discussion of more recent films. The authors of this edition have all brought fresh perspectives as to how we can change our approaches to the study of this genre. It is my biggest hope that the only tears evoked from reading the following pieces will be from basking in their sheer brilliance whose creative existence serves as proof of ongoing personal battles (these authors are heroes really) against seemingly insurmountable obstacles (grad life) only to come out as survivors (where many many many others did fail) based on their own grit, determination, and self-reliance. Bravo! Extra special thanks for this edition go to Professor Katie Russell (for her moral support and for her suggestions from her Melodrama class), Lindsay Peters (for helping out with last minute editing), Anne-Louise and Sylvain (for actually submitting articles and for not bailing – Lindsay can go here, too), and to Kina de Grasse and Adam Rosadiuk (as always) for all of their pro bono tech advice/ help.

Sincerely,
Amanda D'Aoust
Editor-in-Chief (Edition 12)

Private Fears in Public Places: Network Narrative and the Post-'Smart' American Melodrama

Lindsay Peters

A comparative analysis of *Crash, Babel,* & *Syriana* as contemporary political network narratives in dialogue with the properties of classical melodrama and Jeffrey Sconce's concept of the 'smart' film which grew out of the American independent filmmaking trend of the 1990s.

In his latest book, *Poetics Of Cinema*, David Bordwell defines the network narrative as a film which:

> *opens up a social structure of acquaintance, kinship and friendship beyond any one character's ken. The narration gradually reveals the array to us, attaching us to one character, then another. And the actions springing from this social structure aren't based on tight causality. The characters, however they're knit together, have diverging purposes and projects, and these intersect only occasionally – often accidentally. (190)*

This "n-degrees-of-separation" structure is certainly not new to American filmmaking, as the work of Robert Altman serves as a definitive example of the network narrative form. As independent filmmaking flourished throughout the 1990s, however, films such as *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994) and *Happiness* (Todd Solondz, 1998) exemplified a renewed narrative trend towards "a rotating series of interlocking episodes, centering not on a central unifying character's dynamic action (as in classical Hollywood cinema) nor on relatively passive observations (as in previous art

cinema), but rather on a series of seemingly random events befalling a loosely related set of characters" (Sconce 362). This resurgence of the network narrative corresponds closely with the ever-increasing societal concern over the effects of globalization. Mainstream Hollywood was quick to absorb the trend, and soon produced a series of epic films with underlying pretensions of art cinema, using the network narrative structure. The three films which will serve as examples of this trend are: *Crash* (Paul Haggis, 2005), *Syriana* (Stephen Gaghan, 2005), and *Babel* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2006).

In his 2002 article, *Irony, Nihilism And The New American 'Smart' Film*, Jeffrey Sconce examines the late 1990s cinematic trend of "new nihilism," in which the work of filmmakers such as Richard Linklater, Todd Solondz, and Wes Anderson established an aesthetic of ironic disengagement and disaffected intelligence. By creating a genre which fused filmmaking practices of Classical Hollywood with transgressive themes of independent art cinema, these 'smart' films:

> *displaced the more activist emphasis on the 'social politics' of power, institutions, representation and subjectivity so central to 1960s and 1970s art cinema (especially in its 'political' wing), and replaced it by concentrating, often with ironic disdain, on the 'personal politics' of power, communication, emotional dysfunction and identity in white middle-class culture. (Sconce 352)*

The three films which will serve as the focus for this

paper exemplify how mainstream Hollywood responded to the 'smart' genre by widening the thematic focus from the isolated white male to far-reaching multicultural alienation, and subsequently subverted the aesthetic of blank nihilism with a conventional melodramatic fatalism.

Bordwell notes that genre convention plays a useful role in clarifying and simplifying the potential complexities of the network narrative plot (219). Each of these post-'smart' network narratives activates central defining characteristics of the melodrama in order to suffuse global political commentary with relatable, humanizing pathos. In *Meanings of Melodrama*, Ben Singer emphasizes a non-classical narrative structure as a key constitutive factor of the melodramatic form. The melodramatic tendency towards an episodic form directly relates to the network narrative structure. This proclivity for a fragmented narrative construction "results from a greater concern for vivid sensation (or 'situation') than for narrative continuity" (47). Melodrama has historically constituted an aesthetic of astonishment, focusing on a series of rapid, powerful impressions which work against the continuous causal progression of the conventional linear narrative (48). In an attempt to generate an identifiable atmosphere of pathos, these post-'smart' network narratives activate an aesthetic of collective astonishment, as the films chart intersecting personal crises within an environment of political and social unrest.

Crash, *Syriana*, and *Babel* respectively thematize how race relations, the international battle for oil, and global miscommunication affect a representative cluster of individuals; marking a return to the social politics which Sconce claims to have been displaced by the new 'smart' filmmakers. These post-'smart' epics aestheticize fundamental global political crises through a subversion of the classical Hollywood melodrama. Throughout *Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama*, Elsaesser's insights are extremely relevant to the contemporary fusion of classical melodrama with the globalized network narrative. According to Elsaesser, melodrama:

> *at its most accomplished, [is] capable of reproducing more directly than other genres the patterns of domination and exploitation existing in a given society, especially the relation between psychology, morality and class-consciousness, by emphasizing so clearly an emotional dynamic whose social correlative is a network of external forces directed oppressingly inward, and with which the characters themselves unwittingly collude to become their agents. (86)*

His argument that the sophisticated melodrama produces pathos through a "'liberal' mise-en-scene, which balances different points of view," summarizes the network narrative structure as it relates to the post-'smart' melodrama (88). The combination of Sconce's definition of the new American 'smart' film with Elsaesser's conceptions of classical Hollywood social melodrama translates to an enhanced understanding of the contemporary political drama.

This trio of post-'smart' epics amplifies the 'smart' film aesthetic of irony through the melodramatic trope of coincidence. Sconce argues that the classical Hollywood film avoided excessive use of coincidence for the sake of realism; yet the coincidence is a widely theorized device central to the classical Hollywood melodrama. In the conventional melodrama, there is an "excess of effect over cause, of the extraordinary over the ordinary," a feature which results in the prevalence of terms such as Fate, Chance, and Destiny in the narrative construct (Neale 7). According to Sconce, the consistent use of unrealistic coincidence is a development unique to the 'smart' film, which has consequently constructed a "new realism of synchronicity" (363). These post-'smart' melodramas continue the 'smart' conception that random occurrences ultimately generate meaningful insight into everyday life.

The network narrative expands from a lone protagonist to an episodic cast of characters, which corresponds to the shift from isolated incidents of coincidence to a narrative dependency on a general belief in the logic of the random. For the classical melodrama, Steve Neale argues that "time in general and the timing of the coincidence of points of view in particular are indeed crucial – not that the coincidence is always too late (though it may be, of course), but rather that it is always delayed" (11). The post-'smart' melodrama generates pathos through multiple realizations of mistiming by way of a 'too-late' temporal sensibility common to the classic melodrama.

Crash exemplifies a significant narrative dependency on irreconcilable conflict as a vehicle for generative pathos. In order to produce a semblance of narrative continuity, the film relies on recurring chance encounters between disparate characters. *Crash* ultimately forces a suspension of belief on the part of the viewer in order to follow a particular pair of narrative strands to their (unrealistic)

conclusions. A pair of police officers, one bigoted, the other idealistic in his supposed racial blindness, pull over Cameron (played by Terence Howard) and Christine (Thandie Newton), a black upper class couple; an incident which sparks two divergent narratives when the bigoted Officer Ryan (Matt Dillon) expresses his racial hostility when he sexually humiliates Christine. The subsequent narrative strands intersect once again when circumstances force Ryan and Christine to overcome their racially-fuelled differences when Ryan comes across a trapped Christine in her burning, overturned car. The idealistic Officer Hanson (Ryan Phillipe) also happens to be the first officer to come across an enraged Cameron and subsequently prevents him from blindly venting his racial frustrations in an act of aggression towards a group of police officers.

These examples of repetitive, artificially constructed encounters correspond to the melodramatic tendency to produce meaningful realism by way of random occurrence. *Syriana* generates pathos through the destruction of the family unit by way of arbitrary incidents; a narrative element which will be explored in further detail as central to the theme of domesticity which runs throughout the film. In contrast, *Babel* centers on a deliberate avoidance of excessive coincidence. The coincidental use of a single object, the hunting rifle, functions as the material means which brings the globally diverse characters together. The film begins with the rifle being sold to a family of goat farmers in Morocco; the rifle is then used by the goat farmer's two sons to inadvertently shoot an American tourist on a bus, and is then eventually traced back to a Japanese businessman who had given the rifle to his Morroccan guide as a gift. While *Crash* artificially aligns its characters for purposes of depersonalizing social commentary, *Babel*'s storylines chronicle the direct effects of individual actions, all of which relate back to a single object.

In keeping with Michael Stewart's observations on Iñárritu's 21 *Grams*, *Babel* circumvents the 'too-late' temporal structure of the classic melodrama. According to Stewart, Iñárritu's approach to the melodramatic form relies less on a generative production of pathos, than on a pervasive atmosphere of unrelenting emotional suffering and unfulfilled desire (42-43). In *Babel*, the rifle functions as a controlled yet continual source of pathos. *Babel* illustrates Sconce's concept of synchronous realism and avoids the narrative improbability which plagues *Crash* as the film posits a single object as the symbolic point of narrative conflict. While coincidence is integral to its narrative construct,

the measure with which it is used attempts to establish a realistic logic of the random.

The narrative structure of *Crash,* as the exemplar of excessive coincidence, warrants further analysis. Through its aestheticization of intertwining, oscillating victimhood amidst an atmosphere of overwhelming racial tension, *Crash* exemplifies Michel Foucault's concept of the social apparatus [dispositif]. Structural comparisons between the dispositif and the network narrative can be found in Gilles Deleuze's description of Foucault's social apparatus as:

> *a tangle, a multilinear ensemble. It is composed of lines, each having a different nature. And the lines in the apparatus do not outline or surround systems which are each homogeneous in their own right, object, subject, language and so on, but follow directions, trace balances which are always off balance, now drawing together and then distancing themselves from one another. (159)*

The narrative structure of *Crash* corresponds to the concept of the dispositif through the film's focus on the larger social impact of each individual action. Deleuze's interpretation of the lines of force and lines of subjectification which comprise the dispositif are of particular relevance to the network narrative. The line of force directs the curving aspects of the dispositif which determine what one says or sees, and creates conflict between various words and elements within the apparatus. A line of subjectification constitutes a circumvention of the line of force, causing it to turn back in on itself, instead of establishing a linear relationship with another force. This cluster concept correlates the dispositif to the repetitive nature of the network narrative.

Deleuze defines the line of subjectification as "a process of individuation which bears on groups and on people, and is subtracted from the power relations which are established as constituting forms of knowledge" (161). The individual character strands of *Crash*'s network narrative structure function as attempted lines of subjectification, as each character engages with the theme of racial conflict, which is the narrative line of force. Each character's subsequent inability to circumvent their racially-infused circumstances ensures a perpetuation of the line of force. *Crash* emphasizes each character's delusion that they have the agency to disengage from racial conflict; with the conclusion of each strand, the reality of such a futile belief becomes

apparent.

An example of the definitive contours which direct each character's actions is found in the scene which introduces Anthony (played by Ludacris) and Peter (Larenz Tate), a pair of black carjackers, into the narrative:

Anthony: I mean look at us, dog, are we dressed like gangbangers? Huh? No. Do we look threatening? No. Fact: if anybody should be scared around here, it's us. We the only two black faces surrounded by a sea of overcaffeinated white people, patrolled by the trigger-happy LAPD. So you tell me, why aren't we scared?

Peter: Because we got guns?

Anthony and Peter proceed to steal the car belonging to Jean (Sandra Bullock) and Rick (Brendan Fraser), whose subsequent trauma will formulate another narrative strand. While Anthony's words express an assertive line of subjectification against the line of force that is racial stereotyping, his subsequent actions ultimately perpetuate his socially determined categorization.

The characters of *Crash* exemplify Singer's differentiation between melodramatic and tragic characterization through their entrapment within the dispositif. Singer appropriates the theories of Robert B. Heilman when he writes that melodrama characters are 'whole' or 'monopathic': "they are defined by one-sided, unified, unchanging psychological attributes, and the problems that beset them derive from external forces" (57). Whereas the character of Tragedy is subject to internal contradictions, these characters' psychological perpetuation of the determining force of racism reinforces the static nature of ingrained prejudice.

Sconce borrows the Bordwellian conception of European art film protagonists who are "without clear-cut narrative goals, wandering as passive observers through a certain social milieu in a series of seemingly unconnected episodes," and who eventually achieve a form of epiphanous clarity (362). Accordingly, *Crash*'s atmosphere of insurmountable victimhood recalls the submissive estrangement of the classic art cinema figure, a characteristic that is also common to the melodrama. Both the 'smart' and post-'smart' films expand from the single, alienated art cinema protagonist to a rotating range of characters where only a select few prevail. The modernist protagonist's search for inner meaning draws comparisons to the Tragic characterization of the internally conflicted, existential figure, while the

postmodern network narrative suggests a melodramatic subordination to external forces.

The narrative strand which centres on Daniel (Michael Peña), a Hispanic locksmith, concludes on a sequence wherein his daughter is accidentally shot by Farhad (Shaun Toub), the enraged Iranian storeowner who believes Daniel is to blame for a break-in at his store. A mistaken purchase of blanks instead of bullets inoculates the ostensibly fatal impact of Farhad's actions. The scene effectively summarizes each character's failure to separate from the racial line of force and their collective incapacity to achieve any form of lasting social impact. *Crash* ends with the murder of carjacker Peter at the hand of the idealistic Officer Hanson, who believes he is exempt from the social apparatus of racial conflict. This final, unintentional act of racial violence represents the ultimate circularity not only of an overwhelming social crisis, but of the narrative itself.

Crash consequently aestheticizes the problematic nature of the dispositif through melodramatic characterization, as the film dramatizes the effects of individual subordination to an external social force. The superficial characterization results from the consequence of one-dimensionality which the political network narrative form is often subject to in its efforts to summarily address a universal issue. The dramatis personae of the melodrama "figure less as autonomous individuals than to transmit the action and link the various locales within a total constellation," according to Elsaesser (69). In this respect, melodramas have a "myth-making function, insofar as their significance lies in the structure and articulation of the action, not in any psychologically motivated correspondence with individualised experience" (69). While certain storylines conclude with the promise of potential change, the film's nihilistic ending ultimately promotes an atmosphere of circular futility, furthering a general sense of immobilizing entrapment through both the defining contours of the dispositif and the onedimensionality of melodramatic characterization.

Whereas *Crash* submits to a nihilistic conclusion through its overarching attempt to summarize the impact of racism on society, *Babel* establishes a coherent narrative focus in its approach to the ongoing affliction of global miscommunication. A transitional object serves as the centering force in the narrative, which allows for a tentatively tangible conclusion in contrast to *Crash*'s encapsulating nihilistic fatalism. As previously noted, the hunting rifle is the connective element between the narrative strands, and ultimately coheres the film's

thematic exploration of the extreme consequences of individual actions.

In *Thresholds: Film As Film And The Aesthetic Experience*, Annette Kuhn analyzes the relation between the transitional object and cinematic aesthetics. The transitional object, according to Kuhn, serves as an intermediary site of connection between the interior psychical reality and the external world (401). Kuhn's emphasis on the sense of shifting time and space generated by the transitional object corresponds with the function of the rifle as the connective centre between the individual storylines. *Babel* takes Kuhn's cinematic interpretation of the transitional object as a site of negotiation of our inner and outer worlds to international levels. The rifle was originally intended as a signifier of friendship beyond the boundaries of language and culture, yet ultimately serves as the symbolic point of destructive global miscommunication.

Kuhn's arguments directly relate to *Babel*'s melodramatic properties when she suggests that the transitional object can organize the spaces of home and the liminal boundaries between home and 'not-home'. "Melodrama is iconographically fixed by the claustrophobic atmosphere of the bourgeois home and/or the small-town setting," according to Elsaesser, "its emotional pattern is that of panic and latent hysteria, reinforced stylistically by a complex handling of space in interiors to the point where the world seems totally predetermined and pervaded by 'meaning' and interpretable signs" (84-85). In the post-'smart' melodrama, a discourse on the contemporary home expresses a cultural anxiety over the shifting boundaries of the modern domestic space. Elsaesser interprets the significance of objects in the 1950s Hollywood melodrama as symbols of repression and enclosure, as "pressure is generated by things crowding in on them, life becomes increasingly complicated because cluttered with obstacles and objects that invade their personalities, take them over, stand for them" (84). In contrast to this enclosed atmosphere, post-'smart' melodramas such as *Babel* use transitional objects to symbolize a latent anxiety over the uncontrolled exposure generated by the effects of globalization and modern technology.

Each character must endure the severe impact of their respective climates of miscommunication: American couple Richard (played by Brad Pitt) and Susan (Cate Blanchett) are subject to the primitive ways of a tiny Moroccan village while waiting for medical aid; Santiago's (Gael Garcia Bernal) unwillingness to communicate with a U.S. border guard results in Amelia's

(Adriana Barraza) deportation; the deaf-mute Chieko (Rinko Kikuchi) expresses her social and emotional frustrations through nymphomania. The narrative conclusively resolves the conflicts at hand through the presence of the rifle, the tangible transitional object, which provides a symbolic point of narrative cohesion. In *Multiculturalism: Examining The Politics Of Recognition,* Charles Taylor argues that the central feature of our basic human identity is its fundamentally dialogic character (32). *Babel* obscures the dialogic relationships through which we define ourselves, as the narrative conflict emphasizes the fundamental disparity in modern human communication. According to Taylor, this development of a modernized notion of identity has led to a politics of difference, which represents the tenuous balance between universal equality and individualized cultural identity (42). Taylor's conception of the modern politics of difference translates to the network narrative form, as the post-'smart' film includes multiple points of view within universal themes of political and social preoccupation.

The postmodern melodramatic properties of the post-'smart' epic invert Elsaesser's conceptions of the 1950s melodrama as these three exemplars chronicle the contemporary cultural preoccupation with globalization. On the subject of globalization as it relates to cinema, Jinhee Choi writes:

> ***through processes of globalization, networks that connect different parts of the world become faster and more dense. Economic and cultural commodities as well as information travel the world more rapidly than ever before. But what seems to be at stake is not merely the fast circulation and distribution of goods and information around the world, but also the fact that such cultural and economic exchanges blur what we used to think of as national boundaries and identities. (310)***

The increasing permeability of identity and individual territory thematizes the construct of these post-'smart' network narratives. *Crash* opens with a meditative monologue on the cultural dependency on the private spaces of cars, concluding that car crashes are violent manifestations of a latent desire for human contact. *Syriana* and *Babel*, on the other hand, fixate on the cultural anxiety over the dissolution of identifiable boundaries which previously translated to a definable sense of self through the melodramatic trope of domesticity.

With *Babel*, modern modes of communication generate

a transient climate which replaces the claustrophobic atmosphere of the domestic space. In the post-'smart' network narrative, the absence of self determination reinforces character conflict. While each character expresses alienation from their respective homes, the narrative strand centering on Amelia, the Mexican nanny, best exemplifies this crisis. Her decision to take her American charges across the border without their parents' knowledge in order to visit her native home ultimately results in deportation after a near-death experience in the cavernous desert. Her permanent exile from her adopted home of California to her Mexican birthplace exemplifies the modern multifaceted definition of home. Whereas the 1950s melodrama characterizes the suffocating effects of bourgeois suburbanization, post-'smart' epics such as *Babel* chronicle the crisis of individual displacement amidst the ever-expanding global politics of placelessness.

Syriana contributes to the post-'smart' examination of the contemporary home through a thematic emphasis on the ongoing significance of domestic spaces and the family construct amidst the global tension produced by the international oil industry. As Elsaesser argues, the family melodrama "records the failure of the protagonist to act in a way that could shape the events and influence the emotional environment, let alone change the stifling social milieu" (79). *Syriana* depicts the ineffectiveness of a range of patriarchal protagonists, as the destruction of their families allegorizes their collective inability to achieve political impact.

The Bryan Woodward storyline begins with the accidental death of his young son at a party thrown by a fictional royal family of an oil-rich Gulf state. The accident leverages a business deal between Woodward (played by Matt Damon) and the royal family, and subsequently leads to the dissolution of his marriage. The film reiterates the theme of familial destruction when Woodward unwittingly spares himself from an American missile attack: he offers to switch to another vehicle in the prince's convoy so the family can be together, effectively ensuring their collective demise. Elsaesser's theorizations on the classic domestic melodrama correspond to the immobilizing characterization of the dispositif narrative when he writes that "the world is closed, and the characters are acted upon. Melodrama confers on them a negative identity through suffering, and the progressive self-immolation and disillusionment generally ends in resignation: they emerge as lesser human beings for having become wise and acquiescent to the ways of the world" (79). While the men of *Syriana* attempt to

effect positive change in the face of the invincible oil industry, the dissolution of their families and, in turn, their individual identities ultimately results in death or emasculation by the end of their respective narratives. The obliteration of the family structure as chronicled in *Syriana* indicates the personal consequences of global political strife through an invocation of melodramatic convention.

Syriana occasionally dwells too long on its protagonists' respective familial dynamics in an effort to construct a cohesive thematic commentary on the fatherson relationship. The perpetuation of the family structure marks a concerted effort to convey the idea that these political and social crises are generative culminations which are destined to be passed onto the next generation if they remain unaddressed. For example, the storyline which chronicles the tenuous relationship between an oil company lawyer (Jeffrey Wright) and his alcoholic father ultimately appears superfluous and inconsequential to the overall narrative structure. For the sake of this argument, however, the excessive attention devoted to domestic dysfunction effectively establishes the film as a generic example of the post-'smart' melodrama.

The film centres on a recurring discourse of the home throughout the narrative. Early on, the financial promise of the impending oil merger is summed up as an accomplishment which "will buy lots of homes in the Vineyard". A direct cut to the exterior of the Woodward suburban family home accompanies this offhanded comment, setting the stage for a scene of utopian domestic bliss. The thematic significance of the home continues in an exchange between Bob Barnes (George Clooney) and his son, who voices a desire for a "normal home," and subsequently expresses bitterness over the fact his parents' careers as C.I.A. operatives has precluded a conventional domestic situation. In keeping with *Babel, Syriana* establishes a discursive representation of the contemporary conception of 'home,' or lack thereof. The depersonalizing effects of global politics and industry subsequently translate to a negation of identity through an increasing sense of individual displacement.

Syriana expands the thematic significance of the domestic space as through the narrative recurrence of home invasions. Multiple confrontations between government agents and business colleagues occur on driveways and during backyard barbecues, explicitly establishing a point of intersection between sites of domesticity and issues of global political conflict. The

permeable boundaries between the home and these global crises become apparent when Barnes triggers Dean Whiting's (Christopher Plummer) home security system in order to get his attention, as he is the man behind Barnes's professional demise. This scare tactic results in a clandestine meeting wherein Barnes threatens the safety of Whiting's family, if anything should happen to his own son. While the classical Hollywood melodrama centres on the oppressive nature of the claustrophobic home, the domestic spaces of the post-'smart' *Syriana* are points of anxiety due to the ultimately tenuous construction of the family and the structures which house them.

While the classical social melodrama chronicles the domestic isolation of the oppressed individual, the post-'smart' network narrative allegorizes the modern conflict between personal identity and cultural homogenization. *Crash* activates the classical melodramatic characterization of one-dimensional exteriority to emphasize the subordination of subjective identity to the external force of racial conflict. *Babel* and *Syriana* emphasize similar ends of individual subordination through the dissolution of the home and the family in the face of global miscommunication and the omnipotent oil industry. The renewed prevalence of the network narrative in Hollywood filmmaking activates melodramatic character construct and a contemporary discourse of domestic displacement in order to dramatize the inconclusive nature of social conflict through an aesthetic of paralyzing pathos and ineffectual action.

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Edited by Lindsay Peters, Amanda D'Aoust.

Le sacrifice maternel, ou l'inévitable logique d'un mélodrame

Anne-Louise Lalancette

Through the comparative analysis of the original *Stella Dallas* (1937) and its remake, *Stella* (1990), Anne-Louise investigates the different social values concerning motherhood implicitly expressed by both films.

En 1937, le genre mélodrame au cinéma vit l'arrivée de l'un de ses plus influents représentants à ce jour. Il s'agit de l'adaptation du roman à succès d'Olive Higgings Prouty – publié en 1923 sous le même titre – réalisé par King Vidor, *Stella Dallas*. Ce récit du sacrifice d'une mère pour la réussite sociale de son unique enfant fut porté à l'écran deux autres fois, en 1925 par Henry King et en 1990 sous la direction de John Erman. Cependant, seule la version de Vidor obtint le rang de classique du mélodrame maternel et fut étudiée en profondeur par de nombreux théoriciens(nes) du cinéma. Parmi les éléments touchés au cours des ans, la scène finale du récit fut soumise à une analyse intense, principalement sous l'angle du rapport entre le spectateur et le film (écran). En me basant sur des théories déjà élaborées sur le sujet, j'entends ici faire une comparaison esthétique primaire entre les scènes finales des versions de 1937 et 1990. Pourquoi examiner l'adaptation de John Erman? L'absence de documentation académique sur la vision moderne de ce mélodrame ainsi que la différence de mise-en-scène, en fait un sujet intéressant concernant un genre trop souvent sous-estimé.

> Stella est physiquement tenue à distance du mariage de Laurel – la fenêtre devient la représentation de l'écran de cinéma où Stella projettait ses rêves de jeune femme. (*Stella Dallas*, 1937, réalisé par King Vidor et produit par Samuel- Goldwyn co.)

Avant toute chose, des résumés de l'histoire originale et de sa récente version sont de mise pour la clarté de cet article. Le film de King Vidor est une adaptation fidèle du roman, mettant en scène le personnage de Stella Martin (Barbara Stanwyck), une jeune femme de naissance modeste qui aspire plus que tout à s'élever socialement. Elle épouse Stephen Dallas, le fils d'un milliardaire déchu mais qui a su demeurer au niveau de son rang original. Stella est un personnage haut en couleur, dont les goûts vestimentaires et le chic pour attirer l'attention sont trop excessifs pour se fondre dans la haute société. Peu de temps après la naissance de leur fille, les Dallas se séparent, Stephen allant vivre à New York où il y rencontre une ancienne flamme qu'il épousera par la suite. Stella est une mère dévouée qui est prête à se sacrifier en disparaissant totalement de la vie de sa fille Laurel, afin de s'assurer qu'elle aura l'existence qu'elle aurait voulu avoir la chance de connaître.

Plus de cinquante ans plus tard, un nouveau récit apparaît, celui de Stella Claire dans *Stella* – l'absence de mariage entre l'héroïne et le père de son enfant raccourcit le titre du film. Le rôle principale, interprété par Bette Midler, a changé au même titre que son époque. Stella travaille dans un bar de la classe ouvrière, et malgré son manque d'éducation, elle n'est pas sans ressources. Sa brève rencontre amoureuse avec un jeune médecin du nom de Stephen Dallas se conclut par l'arrivée d'une petite fille qu'ils élèveront séparément. Au prise avec la crise d'adolescence de sa Jenny, Stella décide de l'envoyer définitivement auprès de son père afin qu'elle

jouisse d'un avenir impeccable. Maintenant que les grandes lignes sont présentées, passons à l'ultime scène de ce sacrifice maternel.

Dans les deux versions, la mère rejette son enfant pour le protéger de ce qu'elle identifie comme un danger à son succès futur; c'est-à-dire, elle-même et/ou son environnement social. Ce thème est récurant au sein du mélodrame maternel, où la mère doit payer sa faute (sociale ou morale) par la disparition dans l'anonymat complet. En se sacrifiant pour l'avenir de sa progéniture, la mère retrouve la noblesse de son rôle en même temps qu'elle le perd. C'est un paradoxe inévitable pour permettre à la société patriarcale de garder le contrôle. Car lorsque l'on observe ce qui caractérise les deux versions du personnage de Stella, on remarque qu'elles développent une indépendance affective et/ou financière face aux hommes. Leur rôle de mère comble une dépendance à la figure paternelle que l'on retrouve grandement dans la société nord-américaine. Dans *The Case Of The Missing Mother*, E. Ann Kaplan avance l'argument suivant, reprit ici par Linda Williams:

> Kaplan argues, for example, that the film punishes Stella for her resistances to a properly patriarchal view of the motherhood by turning her first into a spectacle for a disapproving upper-class gaze and then finally into a mere spectator, locked outside the action in the final window scene that ends the film. [1]

On pourrait argumenter que Stella Dallas s'est elle-même enfermée en dehors de la vie de Laurel mais en réalité, son rôle ne lui permettait pas de faire autrement dans le contexte d'un mélodrame, surtout à cette époque. Il en est de même pour Stella Claire, et peut-être avec plus d'emphase sur sa culpabilité. Malgré les changements sociaux et la place faite aux femmes avec l'apport du féminisme durant les années 60 et 70 aux États-Unis, la société américaine demeure patriarcale dans la structure de ses institutions, incluant la famille. La Stella qu'interprète Bette Midler est coupable d'avoir rejeté les offres de mariage et de l'aide financière du père de sa fille. Son indépendance devient une tarre qui détruit sa vie par l'entremise du bonheur corrompu de sa Jenny. Le seul moyen pour Stella de sauver la personne qu'elle aime le plus est de l'envoyer dans un environnement "normal", autrement dit une famille traditionnelle dont les membres n'agissent pas à l'opposé de l'ordre social préétablit. En voulant demeurer fidèles à elles-mêmes, les deux Stellas deviennent une erreur sociale [2] – elles sont condamnées à l'anonymat complet pour expier leur faute.

La scène finale, lorsque Stella assiste en secret au mariage de sa fille, est devenue un classique du mélodrame maternel. À la fin du film, dans les deux versions, Stella est dépossédée de ce qui l'identifiait en tant que mère – sa fille – et en tant que femme – ses vêtements voyants, son maquillage et ses bijoux. Stella est devenue un personnage fantôme qui erre parmi les figurants du film. Dans la version de 1937, Stella se faufile dans la foule pour observer depuis le trottoir la célébration du mariage de Laurel. Mme. Morrison (la nouvelle épouse de M. Dallas) ayant exigé que les rideaux soient ouverts pour la cérémonie, Stella peut redevenir la spectatrice qu'elle était au début du film quand elle et Stephen commençaient à se fréquenter. À cette époque, Stella admirait les personnages raffinés qu'elle voyait à l'écran et rêvait de faire partie de leur monde. Au mariage de sa fille, le cadre de la fenêtre remplace symboliquement l'écran de cinéma où se déroule le rêve de Stella projeté sur sa progéniture. Une clôture de fer limite le terrain, augmentant l'impression que Stella est prisonnière de son sort et que son anonymat est non seulement obligatoire mais qu'elle n'a pas la possibilité d'en sortir. Elle s'accroche aux barreaux lorsque Laurel "entre en scène" avec son père, et refuse de s'en aller avant d'avoir vu le visage de sa fille – d'y voir le bonheur qu'elle espère tant lui avoir donné par son absence. En larme, elle mordille le mouchoir que Laurie lui avait tendu il y a longtemps. La foule est dispersée, et la caméra coupe en un champ contre-champ sur un gros plan de Stella, la spectatrice secrète. Malgré sa perte d'identité personnelle, Stella devient, dans ce moment, plus grande que tout ce qu'elle a été: « Her sacrifice, her very absence from the scene, nevertheless insures her transformation into an Ideal of Motherhood. » [3] La rédemption de Stella a rétabli l'équilibre social que son refus de soumission patriarcale avait débalancé. La fierté qu'elle arbore en quittant la scène n'est connue que d'elle-même et son origine ne sera pas dévoilée – elle disparaît avec Stella dans un fondu au noir.

> Stella peut s'approcher du lieu de cérémonie mais elle ne peut être vu par ceux qui s'y trouve. Cet aspect fantômatique souligne l'impression de rêve de la scène. (*Stella*, 1990, réalisé par John Erman et produit par Samuel-Goldwyn co.)

King Vidor traite cette scène à l'aide de champs contre-champs dont le cadre des plans diminue progressivement vers le gros plan du visage de Stella afin de construire un climax émotif. La distance entre les deux mondes est graduellement effacée par le rapprochement que crée le montage du visage de Laurel et celui de Stella.

Dans la version de John Erman, ce type d'approche est également utilisé mais la durée et le changement des plans sont plus nombreux – *Stella Dallas* compte 13 plans de longueur moyenne (15 secondes et plus), alors que *Stella* utilise 21 plans courts (5-10 secondes). La distance entre les personnages est aussi établie dans une mise-enscène différente. Stella arrive sous la pluie à la *Tavern On The Green* (Central Park, New York) où est célébré le mariage de Jennifer (Jenny) Claire et Patrick Robbins. Discrètement, Stella fait le tour de l'immeuble et s'arrête au niveau de la véranda d'où elle peut assister au mariage sans être vue. Contrairement à la version de 1937, il n'y a pas de foule qui entoure puis se disperse du personnage – Stella s'éloigne elle-même pour obtenir l'intimité qu'elle recherche – autre signe de l'indépendance naturelle de l'héroïne. Elle s'approche lentement du mur vitré, ne s'y arrêtant qu'à moins d'un mètre. Une lumière chaude qui émane de la pièce en contraste avec l'extérieur pluvieux et sombre, rend un effet de rêve à l'écran. Le fait que Stella ait pu s'approcher d'aussi près à travers les arbres sans jamais être vue par qui que ce soit d'autre qu'un des gardien du parc, amplifie le côté féérique de la scène. Est-ce que cette vision parfaite est réelle ou n'est-ce que la subjectivité imaginaire d'une mère qui doit s'assurer qu'elle a pris la bonne décision pour le bonheur de sa fille? On comprend que le mariage a effectivement lieu mais la composition de la scène finale garde une impression d'embellissement surnaturel. Il est peu important de savoir s'il s'agit d'un rêve ou non puisque pour Stella, cette image est ce qu'elle est venue chercher et ce que le spectateur souhaite également pour elle. Stella Claire n'a jamais affiché d'ambition sociale comme Stella Dallas, on ne la voit pas se perdre en rêverie devant un écran de cinéma. Ce fait est important puisqu'il permet de voir la Stella de 1990 autrement qu'en spectatrice passive – le traitement de la scène est à l'image du personnage, toujours plus près de l'artiste que de l'auditoire. La proximité physique de Stella par rapport à la simple vitre qui la sépare de Jenny semble représenter deux éléments: le lien étroit – physique et émotionnel – entre la mère et la fille que l'on a pu voir dans chacun des moments du film, et l'aspect personnel de son choix pour Jenny – elle n'assouvit pas ses propres ambitions mais ceux qu'elle a vu grandir en sa fille. Quand le garde la presse de partir, elle insiste pour voir une dernière fois le visage de sa Jenny – elle a toujours pu lire les véritables émotions de sa fille en la regardant dans les yeux. Rassurée sur la justesse de son choix de disparaître, Stella peut repartir le sourire aux lèvres et la tête haute. Le dernier plan du film la montre de dos, s'engageant vers la ville pour s'effacer dans la masse commune de son univers social. Alors que Stella

Dallas était gardée derrière une barrière, ne pouvant être qu'une spectatrice inactive dans le nouvel avenir de sa fille, on accorde à Stella Claire une libre proximité dont elle n'abuse pas. Elle demeure à l'écart, arrivant et repartant comme le fantôme qu'elle a choisi de rester.

À la sortie de *Stella*, les critiques ont souligné que ce sacrifice de la mère était déjà plus ou moins acceptable à l'époque de la version de 1937, et que dans les années 90 il était pratiquement impensable. Comme le formule Janet Maslin dans le New York Times, « And most important, no mother today would see the wisdom of what Stella thinks she must do for her child. Even in 1937, there wasn't a great deal of sense at the heart of this story. » [4] D'un autre côté, ce sacrifice prend peut-être plus d'importance justement parce qu'il n'est plus nécessaire de nos jours. Le choix de Stella prend un sens à la fois plus personnel et plus socialement conservateur. Il la maintient dans l'image de la mère idéale – au sein de société patriarcale – que l'on retrouvait dans les mélodrames maternels classiques comme *Stella Dallas*. Ce qui peut être interprété comme un anachronisme thématique, reste tout de même en accord avec son genre, l'évolution du récit se doit de conserver un lien avec ce qui a défini le mélodrame depuis ses origines. La célèbre scène finale a su se renouveler au même titre que le personnage principal. Le film *Stella* n'est pas un chef-d'oeuvre mais il possède certaines qualités intéressantes. En voyant son rêve de mère devenir réalité, Stella Claire demeure fidèle à ce qu'elle a toujours été: une femme travaillante qui se sacrifie pour ceux qu'elle aime sans tenir compte de sa propre souffrance. À l'image de sa prédécesseure, elle incarne la parfaite représentation de la figure maternelle. Une figure qui est en partie l'emblème du mélodrame et un tabou social encore vivant.

FOOTNOTES

1 Williams, Linda. ""Something Else Besides a Mother": *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama." *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film & Television Melodrama.* Edited by Marcia Landy. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991. p.320.

-Cet extrait est lui-même une reprise des arguments de E. Ann Kaplan : E. Ann Kaplan. "The Case of the Missing Mother." p.83.

2 Doane, Mary Ann. "The Moving Image: Pathos and the Maternal." *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film &*

Television Melodrama. Edited by Marcia Landy. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991. p.287. « Stella does not commit a social error, she is that social error. »

-Inspiré du texte de Christian Viviani, "Who Is Without Sin: The Maternel Melodrama in American Film, 1930-1939."

3   Doane, p.289.

4   Maslin, Janet. "Bette Midler as a Selfless Mother in Tear-Inducing STELLA." Review of *Stella. New York Times Film Review.* 2 Feb. 1990. p.2.

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Women with Imaginary Children:
Old Gender Stereotypes in New American Thrillers

Sylvain Verstricht

Sylvain observes how traditional gender stereotypes concerning parenthood are finding new representations in a series of recent American thrillers where mothers find their sanity put into question when their children mysteriously disappear.

In Robert Schwentke's *Flightplan* (2005), Air Marshal Carson (Peter Sarsgaard) tells flight passenger Kyle Pratt (Jodie Foster) that his job is to protect passengers from crazy individuals, and that "Women with imaginary children qualify." The implication, of course, is that Kyle is one such crazy individual, suspected of creating turmoil throughout the airplane in the search for a child that some suspect may never even have existed.

This is not the first time in film history that a woman has been suspected of making up a child's existence out of thin air. The apparition of this phenomenon first occurred in Otto Preminger's *Bunny Lake Is Missing* (1965), based on the novel of the same name by Marryam Modell (written under the pseudonym Evelyn Piper). In Preminger's adaptation, Ann Lake (Carol Lynley) moves to London to live with her brother Stephen (Keir Dullea). When she goes to pick up her four-year old daughter from the first day of school, she is nowhere to be found and no one even remembers her having ever been there. Superintendent Newhouse (Laurence Olivier) is brought in to investigate and, given the lack of evidence concerning the existence of Ann's daughter, hints that the daughter may only be a product of Ann's imagination.

This occurred again nearly thirty years later in Joseph Ruben's *The Forgotten* (2004), where Telly Paretta (Julianne Moore) grieves the loss of her son who died in a plane crash, only to be told by her husband (Anthony Edwards) and therapist (Gary Sinise) that she never had a child. Her therapist suggests that she created an entire life for her son, lasting until when he would have been the age of nine, after she had actually miscarried.

Less than a year after the release of *The Forgotten, Flightplan* came out in theatres with a similar storyline. The film begins in Germany, where engineer Kyle boards a plane she helped build in order to go back to New York to bury her husband, who seemingly committed suicide. Traveling with her is her six-year-old daughter. When Kyle wakes up from a nap, her daughter is nowhere to be found in the exceptionally large double-decker airplane. Kyle creates quite a commotion on the airplane because of her panicked search for her daughter, who does not even appear on the passenger manifest, leading the crew to believe that the child never existed in the first place.

Finally, director Joe Carnahan is currently working on a remake of Preminger's *Bunny Lake Is Missing*, which was set for release in 2008. The release date has now been pushed back to 2009 since Reese Witherspoon, who was supposed to play the main role, unexpectedly abandoned the project less than a month before it was set to begin shooting.

Given that all these movies fall under the popular genre of thriller and not psychological drama, it does

Year	Title	Director	Missing character's relation to protagonist
1855-1900	Paris Exposition	(Story)	Mother
1932	Midnight Warning	Spencer Gordon Bennet	Brother
1938	The Lady Vanishes	Alfred Hitchcock	Older Woman (unrelated to protagonist)
1950	So Long at the Fair	Anthony Darnborough & Terence Fisher	Brother
1953	Dangerous Crossing	Joseph M. Newman	Husband
1965	Bunny Lake is Missing	Otto Preminger	Daughter
2004	The Forgotten	Joseph Ruben	Son
2005	Flightplan	Robert Schwentke	Daughter
2009 (?)	Bunny Lake is Missing	Joe Carnahan	Daughter

not come as much of a surprise to the audience that in every single one of them, the mother ultimately proves that she is right, that she does have a child. Still, a question remains: what can we learn about the discourse surrounding issues of maternity and paternity through these films? Unfortunately, even though their stories take place in a recent social context, they reiterate detrimental conceptions of parenthood that are centuries old: that family is the woman's concern; that biology ensures that mothers are more intimately connected to their children; that women give life and men destroy it; and that, as such, men are the most expendable in the family structure. As we shall also see, filmmakers seem to feel that they can only tamper with the mother-child bond for a minimal amount of time, and that even under these advantageous conditions they need additional facilitating elements that often fail to be realistic.

THE FILM HISTORY OF A STORY

First, it is important to point out that these recent storylines fall into a long tradition of films that go back for over seventy years. Looking at the evolution of this basic premise might give us a better understanding of how a story has been modified, and what these changes might entail in a contemporary context.

The earliest version of such a story that I have been able to track down comes all the way from the late nineteenth century. As the story goes, a woman checked into a Parisian hotel with her mother, only to be told later by the hotel management when her mother disappeared that she had never registered or been present at the hotel. It would later be discovered that the mother had caught the bubonic plague and that the staff had

hidden her existence out of fear that the truth would result in a widespread panic. This issue would be all the more important given that this story takes place during one of the Paris Expositions [1], which would have made mass panic all the more financially damaging due to the high number of tourists present in the city at the time.

Many believe this story to be an urban legend. This may very well be true. Either way, the story exists and has been circulating under different forms ever since. To better visualize the evolution of the story, here is a diagram of the Paris Exposition story followed by the different variations that have shown up in film over the years:

(Original position of table)

As we can easily notice, there is a progression in the missing character's relation to the protagonist from the person being of an older generation, then of the same generation, to finally being of a younger generation. In this latter category, we are dealing with children who are all under ten years old. As well, in each instance, the protagonist is the mother of the child in question. That the mother and not the father would be the main character does not come as a surprise considering the entire history of these films; the protagonist of every single one of them is a woman.

THE SEEMINGLY UNBREAKABLE MOTHER-CHILD BOND

In the original script for *Flightplan,* the protagonist of the film was supposed to be a man. However, producer Brian Grazer asked himself "What is the most emotionally potent?" as he puts it in the documentary

that is part of the bonus features on the *Flightplan* DVD. His answer to this question caused the filmmakers to change the main character from a man to a woman. The name for the character, Kyle Pratt, remained unchanged.

The booklet that is part of the *Flightplan* press package is itself very telling in its mention of this stage in the preproduction process. It states that Grazer was "intrigued by Dowling's draft but had an immediate idea for adding a whole new layer to it: rather than have a traditional male lead as the script called for, Grazer suggested something completely different. He came up with the notion of casting […] Jodie Foster […] as the strong, yet mysterious, personality at the centre of the story's suspense." [2]

Grazer's vocalized feelings are very revealing of conceptions of motherhood that are still current. Slightly disturbing is his insinuation that the change from father to mother would add a layer to the story, as if a father's relationship with his child would be any less involving. Of course, Grazer's assumption is not new in the history of ideas on motherhood. He is only exemplifying a conception that may have been best articulated by Georg Hegel in 1821 when he said that the "Woman's whole sphere is within the family, and hence for her the renunciation of individuality is final and complete. Man's sphere, on the other hand, is only accidentally the family." [3]

Of course, Hegel's argument emerged from a socio-cultural context where only men were involved in political and professional areas, leaving the domestic area to women who would stay at home and take care of their children. In such a context, it is evident that children may develop a deeper connection to their mother. However, almost two centuries later, Kyle does not embody this earlier notion of motherhood. She is a hugely successful engineer who has contributed to the building of the world's largest commercial passenger airplane in history. Undoubtedly, such a high position would require countless hours of work where she would need to share domestic responsibilities with her husband – his profession remains unknown – yet she still carries on her back the weight of old-world conceptions of a privileged relationship between mother and child.

There is also irony in Grazer's assertion that such a change in the protagonist's gender would suggest something completely different. There is little doubt that anyone would argue that action heroes are typically played by male actors; however, as I have demonstrated,

every single tackling of this particular storyline has involved a female protagonist. In this particular context then, would exploring the father-child bond not become the most interesting route?

Similarly, the entire premise of the plot of *The Forgotten* serves to superficially touch on the mother-child bond. A reviewer for *L'Écran Fantastique* might be naively generous when he claims that the film is "doubled with a wonderful metaphor on the bond that unites a mother and her child." [4] More astute is The National Post's Katrina Onstad, who dares to tackle the film's sexist implications. She claims that "there's something disturbing in *The Forgotten*'s vaguely prissy portrait of ideal motherhood. Telly embodies the martyrdom and sacrifice expected from mothers; she is valorized for giving up everything – even her sanity – to love her son. A father, implies the script, could never be so selfless." [5]

The Forgotten attempts to explain this different treatment between mother and father in its resolution, by claiming that the mother could not ever completely lose the memory of her child since he lived inside of her for nine months. The rationale seems to be that to forget her son would be the equivalent of forgetting herself, and that this impossibility is what enables her to maintain her memory even after the memory of all the other characters – even her husband – has been successfully erased. On the DVD audio commentary, one of the filmmakers states "This is the primal connection: right in the womb." Such a statement is dangerous because it renders the father biologically incapable of developing a relationship with the child that is as equally solid as that of the mother.

Again, such simplistic reasoning is nothing new in the history of thoughts on parenthood. In his attempt to reverse the usual conception of women as inferior to men, Ashley Montagu ended up further imprisoning women in traditional roles, saying that they find the most ultimate fulfillment in motherhood. Needless to say that men did not fare any better in *The Natural Superiority of Women* (1952), where he claimed that "[maternal] functions have made women more humane than men and that the mother-child relation is the paradigm for all human relationships. Woman, a creator, fosters life; man, a mechanizer, destroys life." [6]

Maybe most disturbing is that, in all three of these films, Montagu's argument finds perfect exemplification. I have already established that the hero of each of these three films (or should I say heroine) is a woman; what I have not yet pointed out however is that the

enemy in each of them also happens to be a man. In *Flightplan*, the person responsible for kidnapping Kyle's daughter is Air Marshal Carson. In *The Forgotten*, the person responsible for the disappearance of Telly's son is actually an alien, but this alien finds its human form in the skin of male actor Linus Roache. Finally, in *Bunny Lake Is Missing*, Ann's daughter has been abducted by her uncle Stephen.

On the DVD commentary for *The Forgotten*, when the father tells Telly that they never had a child, one of the filmmakers compares the father to the one in Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), adding that the audience should at that point ask themselves "Is he a facilitator or is he just afraid of [Telly's] emotionality?" The comparison with a horror film is especially interesting since *The Forgotten*, like the two other films, seems to reinforce the idea that danger always clouds the non-nuclear family. This theme has long been a staple of American horror movies, where families – and especially women – are often punished for the lack of a strong father figure. As pointed out, *Rosemary's Baby* is a classic example of this, since in the film a father sells his baby to the devil in exchange for a successful acting career. Other quintessential examples are William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973), where a single mother sees her child become possessed by the devil, and Richard Donner's *The Omen* (1976), in which a father – unbeknownst to his wife – exchanges the stillborn she gave birth to with another child, unaware that it is the devil's child.

Similarly, the absence of a strong father figure can be noticed in all three thrillers under scrutiny here. In *Flightplan*, Kyle is a newly widowed mother whose child goes missing while she is taking a nap aboard an airplane. *The Forgotten* is the only film to present us with a nuclear family, but it is very quickly dismantled when the father's memory is erased and he forgets that he ever had a child. His wife then takes off in a search for the truth with another man (Dominic West) whose child has disappeared under the same circumstances. It is interesting to notice that the other father, Ash Correll, is also a single parent, though this is most likely the case in order to set him up as a romantic alternative to Telly's husband. The filmmakers and deleted scenes support this assessment, as if Telly's husband needed to be punished for having had his memory erased without his own knowledge or consent. When Telly meets him again later, his memory has been further tampered with and now he does not even remember ever having been married to Telly. Through this narrative progression, Telly does end up as a single mother who, the ending

suggests, might be able to stabilize her family situation anew by becoming a recomposed family with Ash and his daughter. The film fails to explain what has become of her husband after their memory has been rectified. He is not even present in the epilogue of the film.

The heroine of *Bunny Lake Is Missing* can be best compared with the mother in *The Exorcist*: she pays an excessive price for being a single mother. Preminger himself was apparently well aware of this connotation. When *Village Voice's* Andrew Sarris asked him why he was so invested in this project, he answered that he "was interested in the problem of an unwed mother attempting to establish the identity of her child." [7] It would be intriguing to know why Preminger believed that a mother would have more difficulty than a father in proving the existence of her child, but of course this question will now remain without an answer. Preminger's view is particularly fascinating because it goes against the typical notion first vocalized by Thomas Hobbes in 1642 that authority over children is by nature maternal because "the identity of a child's mother alone is certain […]." [8] In 1740, David Hume agreed with Hobbes when he argued in *Treatise of Human Nature* that "men labor under a considerable disadvantage, since the paternity of a child is virtually impossible to ascertain." [9]

Still, Preminger proved that he had the finger on the pulse of the nation when it came to disapproval of unwed mothers as the film triggered informal denunciation of its representation of a single mother during its initial release. [10] A decade later, French critic André Moreau recognized that the film was dealing with a social problem and that the message was "if you do not conform to society's rules, the law will not protect you." [11] Ultimately, the collective message of these films becomes that children are the responsibility of women, but that they still need a man to keep them out of harm's way.

LESS TIME, MORE IMPLAUSIBILITY

Despite their best attempts to destroy – or at the very least test – the mother-child bond, screenwriters realize that to maintain any sort of credibility, they must limit their story to a minimal amount of time. Already in the context of 1960s London for *Bunny Lake Is Missing*, critic Andrew Sarris recognized that

once a doubt is raised about the child's very existence, it is clear that the doubt cannot be sustained for much longer than twentyfour

hours, the records and witnesses to human existence being as extensive as they are. Consequently the action has to be confined to one day at the most, and the melodrama works because the mother is too hysterical to wait through a night, and her hysteria adds to the suspicions of the authorities that she is unstable enough to fantasize a child into being. [12]

In *Flightplan*, the main action is confined to the time it takes for a plane to travel from Berlin to the East Coast of Canada. Once Kyle wakes up from her nap during which her daughter disappeared, the film seems to take place in real time, except for an indeterminate amount of time where Kyle has been knocked unconscious. Logic tells us that this interruption must have only lasted a few minutes; otherwise, the airline personnel should have been more worried about Kyle's condition than they were. Instead of providing her with medical care, they simply have a therapist sit next to her so that she has someone to talk to when she regains consciousness. If this period of time is only a few minutes long, it would however mean that Kyle's nap would have lasted almost ten hours, an amount of time that seems improbable. So *Flightplan* is only able to sustain its own storyline in a situation where time is condensed to a questionable degree.

Even *The Forgotten,* which dabbles in science-fiction and benefits from aliens who have access to incredibly efficient memory-erasing technology, cannot compete for an extensive period of time with its mother figure. There is only a three-day period between the moment that Telly is told that she never had a son and the one where she finally defeats the alien who kidnapped him. It seems that screenwriters believe that even the most technologically advanced beings one can imagine could not successfully break the mother-child bond.

Because of its rather silly storyline, *The Forgotten* seems the most probable to become the subject of ridicule. However, it becomes interesting to read through the reviews of all three films and realize that they all share a similar lexical field. In *Bunny Lake Is Missing*, critics felt that "the development of the story [was] often very fuzzy" [13] and that it resolved itself through "an implausibly elaborate caper by a conveniently psychotic character." [14] For *Flightplan*, after the suspense has been built, critics wondered "through what twist director and screenwriters [were] going to get out of this web" [15] and felt that from that point on "events spiral towards the ridiculous." [16] *The Forgotten* did however fare the most

poorly critically, its screenwriter getting denounced for "trying so hard to mask the truth along the way that he no longer knew how to offer an explanation that was the littlest bit plausible in the end" [17], others adding that the film "[cheats] all over the place and [provides] a solution that is able to account for everything because it never has to make sense." [18] These criticisms are not the exception, but rather the norm in reviews of all three films. Issues concerning the fuzziness, implausibility, and ridiculousness of the plot come up again and again across different publications. It is as though filmmakers were unable to come up with a realistic way to destroy the mother-child bond. It is true, as Rick Groen judiciously points out in his review of *The Forgotten*, that "Realism isn't always required, but logic is essential." [19]

In order to even attempt to separate mother and child, each film requires at least one facilitating element that ranges from the convenient to the unrealistic. In *Bunny Lake Is Missing*, questions concerning the sanity of the mother can only be raised because Preminger has successfully isolated her. [20] She has only very recently moved to London from the United States, so that no one in this new city can vouch as to the existence of the child except for Ann herself.

In *Flightplan*, it would have been difficult to explain how a child could have possibly disappeared aboard any existing commercial passenger airplane; there is simply not enough space for a child to realistically get lost. So for the child to believably disappear, the filmmakers had to create an airplane of such proportions – a double-decker – that no such plane even exists in real life. Even within the world of filmmaking such a plane never existed. The crew built each level one after the other, shot the scenes accordingly, and connected them in post-production through the use of special effects. So, even in the filmmaking world, the two levels never existed simultaneously.

Finally, as has already been discussed, *The Forgotten* requires the most extreme suspension of disbelief from its viewers. In an attempt to explain how a child could have possibly been erased from family photographs – not to mention his own father's memory – the screenwriter requires the help of aliens from outer space who seemingly have access to all technology that would enable them to erase all traces of the existence of a child. Even within these far-reaching conditions – or maybe especially because of them – the screenwriter is not able to maintain any sense of coherence. When Telly rips off the wallpaper in Ash's office to reveal that it used to be his daughter's bedroom, which has the

effect of triggering his memory, a film critic from *Mirror* wittily remarked "Funny how the same extraterrestrial villains who went through the trouble of eliminating all Internet data of the deadly air tragedy and destroying every hard document on file – not to mention the arduous task of brainwashing everyone who has ever come into contact with the children – cut corners when it came to a simple home improvement." [21]

Given that even memory-erasing aliens cannot compete with mothers, it is hard to see how fathers could fare any better. How can they be considered as equally important as mothers when they are deemed expendable as soon as comes the time to ascertain their child's existence? Such representation of parents in film undermines both sexes in their fight for equal rights: it reifies that mothers are naturally more responsible for their child than fathers, confining women more to the parental role than men; and, at the same time as it tells men that their children are more likely to suffer harm if they are absent, it also tells them that they are ultimately expendable because only mothers are truly connected to their children. Such conflicting messages are constantly sent to fathers. They are told that they must take more responsibility in the family life on one hand, yet they are also being told that they are not as important as mothers. If we wish for societal changes to ensure that men and women are treated equally in their role as parents, filmic texts, and all others, will have to reflect these attitudinal shifts as well. Otherwise, we will never be able to truly transcend the sexist stereotypes that have clouded our judgment for too long.

FOOTNOTES

1 There were five Universal Expositions held in Paris between 1855 and 1900.

2 *Flightplan.* Touchstone Pictures, 2005. 13.

3 Agonito, Rosemary. *History of Ideas on Woman.* NY: A Pedigree Book, 1977. 159-160.

4 Bargain, Erwan. "Mémoire effacée." *L'Écran Fantastique* 257 (Septembre 2005). 71.
-The original French quote reads "[…] doublée d'une magnifique métaphore sur le lien qui unit une mère à son enfant."

5 Onstad, Katrina. "Forget-Me-Plot." *The National Post* (24 September 2004). B1-2.

6 Agonito, Rosemary. *History of Ideas on Woman.* NY: A Pedigree Book, 1977. 562.

7 Sarris, Andrew. *Confessions of a Cultist: On the Cinema*, 1955/1969. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970. 214.

8 Agonito, Rosemary. *History of Ideas on Woman.* NY: A Pedigree Book, 1977. 95-96.

9 Ibid., 121.

10 Sova, Dawn B. *Forbidden Films: Censorship Histories of 125 Motion Pictures.* New York: Checkmark Books, 2001.

11 Moreau, André. *Télérama* 1342 (4-10 octobre). 33.
-The original French quote reads "[…] si vous ne conformez pas aux règles de la société qui vous entoure, la loi ne vous protégeras pas."

12 Sarris, Andrew. *Confessions of a Cultist: On the Cinema*, 1955/1969. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970. 213.

13 Moreau, André. *Télérama.* (Issue, date and page unknown.)
-The original French quote reads "[…] le déroulement de l'histoire, souvent très confus."

14 Sarris, Andrew. *Confessions of a Cultist: On the Cinema*, 1955/1969. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970. 213.

15 Socias, Sébastien. "Flight Plan." *L'Écran Fantastique* 265 (Mai 2006). 79.
-The original French quote reads "[…] par quelle pirouette metteur en scène et scénaristes vont se sortir d'un tel guêpier."

16 Barnes, Jonathan. "Flightplan." *Sight & Sound* 15:11 (November 2005). 61.

17 Rezzonico, Philippe. "The Forgotten: Un dénouement à oublier." *Le Journal de Montréal* (25 septembre 2004). WE 59.
-The original French quote reads "[…] avait tellement tenté de masquer la vérité chemin faisant qu'il ne savait plus comment offrir une explication à peu près plausible à l'arrivée."

18 Stone, Jay. "The Forgotten will make you spill popcorn." *The Record* (24 September 2004). 8.

19 Groen, Rick. "Forgetting to play by the rules." *The Globe and Mail* (24 September 2004). R2.

20 Moreau, André. *Télérama*. (Issue, date and page unknown.)

21 Rowland, Sarah. "The Forgotten." *Mirror* (23 September 2004). 35.

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