

INTRODUCTION

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In the early twenty-first century, motherhood has been marked by extraordinary cultural visibility; indeed, it has become seemingly ubiquitous in public discourse. Naomi Wolf, Susan Douglas, Meredith Michaels, Judith Warner, and other feminist authors have written high-profile books that explore experiences of motherhood in contemporary U.S. culture and criticize what they variously identify as the “misconceptions,” “myths,” or “madness” of maternal ideology.¹ The release of such books has prompted reviews, discussions, and analyses of maternal issues in the *New York Times* and *Newsweek*, on *Nightline* and National Public Radio, and elsewhere.

The publication of Lisa Belkin’s cover article “The Opt-Out Revolution” in the October 23, 2003, issue of the *New York Times Magazine* struck and exposed a national nerve connected to motherhood as it relates to women’s employment, child-rearing practices, and public policy. The author’s evidence for the “opting out” trend she identifies is primarily limited to a handful of Princeton University-educated mothers who left high-powered jobs to stay at home and raise their children. Despite the limited scope of Belkin’s investigation, “The Opt-Out Revolution” generated enormous buzz and garnered an unprecedented number of letters to the editor, while also becoming, at that time, the most emailed *New York Times Magazine* article in that publication’s history (Peskowitz 87). The voluminous and varied responses to the article signal a national interest in conversations and social change that could more fully address the needs and desires of contemporary mothers, both those who stay at home and those who are in the workforce.² Since the turn of the millennium, motherhood has been central to debates regarding other aspects of U.S. domestic and foreign policy as well, from ongoing arguments about the parenting rights of gays and lesbians to Cindy Sheehan’s stance against the war in Iraq.

Simultaneously, the figure of the mother has been put *on display*. Popular magazines such as *People*, *Star*, *Us*, and *In Touch* have repeatedly spotlighted

celebrity moms, offering visual and gossipy details of their pregnancies and early motherhood experiences. As these publications expose confirmed pregnancies or speculate about the possible pregnancies of current stars, they invite and encourage consumers to deploy critical, penetrating gazes on the bodies of maternal or “potentially” maternal women. For example, an April 2005 photograph of Britney Spears on the cover of *Star* magazine is accompanied by a caption that queries, “Britney Pregnant? Is She Eating for Two?,” blatantly urging readers to survey Spears’s body for evidence of her possible expectant status. On this same cover, readers learn that “Pregnant Demi [Moore]” plans a “Secret Summer Wedding” and faces “Her Pregnancy Fears at 42.” With a focus on the postpartum phase of maternity, the cover of a September 2004 issue of *People* declares, “Baby Love! Suddenly, showbiz comes second: First-time celeb moms talk about their brand-new lives,” and features photographs of Gwyneth Paltrow, Debra Messing, and Brooke Shields with their babies. And in a July 2006 issue, *In Touch* offers readers its “Exclusive Bump Watch!” in which it declares, “Motherhood is now the hottest role in Hollywood.”

As these captions reveal, sexual icons increasingly grab headlines through the intersection of sexuality and maternity. Shields, whose fame derives from her skin-baring Calvin Klein ads and films such as *The Blue Lagoon* (1980), and Demi Moore, whose nude pregnant body graced the August 1991 cover of *Vanity Fair* in what now seems a watershed moment in the increased visibility of pregnant bodies in contemporary American culture, stand as examples of this trend. Indeed, as B. Ruby Rich observed in 2004, in “baby-booming Hollywood . . . maternity, no longer an obstacle to sex appeal, has instead become its urgent accessory” (Rich 25). Angelina Jolie, one of the most iconic celebrity figures of the decade, exemplifies this shift. Consistently rated as one of the sexiest, most beautiful women in the world,³ Jolie is also famous as the mother of six young children, three of whom were adopted internationally. The July 2008 cover of *Vanity Fair* asserts Jolie’s sexuality as a pregnant woman, yet excludes the most visible evidence of pregnancy: her belly. A medium close-up of Jolie presents her with a sensual open-mouthed expression and a barely concealed chest. The accompanying story by Rich Cohen, “A Woman in Full,” offers readers a glimpse into why Jolie “in her second pregnancy, feels so sexy.”

Even as they intersect, however, sexuality and maternity do not suggest increased freedom for mothers, but rather continued and perhaps even greater cultural and ideological scrutiny of their bodies and activities. The summer 2007 cultural obsession with Britney Spears’s parental behavior and Angelina Jolie’s increasingly slender figure highlights the intense public surveillance that accompanies the celebrity mom.⁴ For example, the August 27, 2007, *People* magazine cover announces “Booze, Betrayal and Greed: The Battle for Britney’s Boys” and asks “Is She a Danger to her Kids?,” while

an inside feature in the same issue queries “Is Angelina Dangerously Thin?” below images of Jolie hand-in-hand with one of her children.

Maternal scrutiny has been created (if not fabricated) and showcased on daytime television as well.⁵ As Miriam Peskowitz details in her book *The Truth Behind the Mommy Wars*, in November 2003 *Dr. Phil* aired a program titled “Mom vs. Mom,” which perpetuated a false binary⁶ by pitting “working mothers” against “stay-at-home” mothers and divided its largely female audience into two camps seated on opposite sides of the aisle (33). According to Peskowitz, the show’s two experts, Heidi Brennan (a public policy advisor for the Family and Home Network) and Joan K. Peters (author of *When Mothers Work: Loving Our Children Without Sacrificing Ourselves* and *Not Your Mother’s Life: Changing the Rules of Work, Love and Family*), reported that the conversation during taping was very “compelling,” and extremely “attentive to all the complex issues of parenting” (33). Yet, when the show finally aired, the “relatively careful” conversation the experts had witnessed and participated in was replaced with a “heavily edited show” featuring an audience full of mothers insulting one another. In effect, the *Dr. Phil* show opted to construct a spectacle of combative mothers rather than airing the original conversation which, through the inclusion of many voices, spoke to the need for real change in our social structure regarding mothering and domestic policy.

Another noteworthy if carefully constructed media moment of the early twenty-first century that acknowledged this need for transformation occurred when Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi put motherhood on display on the steps of Congress. On the occasion of her own history-making swearing-in to become Speaker of the House of Representatives in January 2007, Pelosi stood on the House floor of the Capitol surrounded by children and grandchildren, calling for substantive reform and legislation to help parents and families.⁷ The enormity of this image in the political landscape was matched during the course of the 2008 election season, when we repeatedly witnessed Hillary Clinton flanked by her daughter and mother as she ran to become the first female Democratic nominee for president of the United States,⁸ and Governor Sarah Palin, John McCain’s vice-presidential running mate and a mother of five, facing both intense praise and criticism for seeking the second-highest office in the land while raising five children, including a baby with Down syndrome and a pregnant seventeen-year-old daughter.⁹ And motherhood became visible on another one of the world’s biggest stages when, in the course of its coverage of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, NBC devoted airtime to the stories of athletes who balance the demands of Olympic competition with their responsibilities as mothers, including forty-one-year-old swimmer and five-time Olympian Dara Torres and thirty-three-year-old soccer player and three-time Olympian Kate Markgraf.¹⁰

It was this type of remarkable maternal visibility—and the scrutiny that is its inevitable companion—that inspired our focused consideration

of motherhood in popular culture. In recent years, it appeared that a critical mass had been reached: mothers and motherhood were being discussed, admired, criticized, and desired with greater and more spectacular frequency. A dominant, influential purveyor of this omnipresent maternal visibility is the American film industry, particularly Hollywood, which we define as the moving image entertainment industry centered in and around Los Angeles, California, including all of its products—films, of course, but also all related extrafilmmic materials, such as publicity and advertisements. We sought to chart the evolution of American commercial cinema's maternal discourse over the last century, intending to use our investigations to account for the "new" popularity of motherhood and maternal images in the twenty-first century. What we discovered, however, was a striking consistency in Hollywood's constructions of motherhood. Although the recent pervasiveness of maternal discourse may seem unprecedented, mothers have always been central figures in mainstream American films and the culture surrounding Hollywood. From Lillian Gish's iconic mother in *Intolerance* (1916) overseeing the emergence of different civilizations, to the way that motherhood redeems the protagonist's otherwise excessive behavior in *Erin Brockovich* (2000), the representation of motherhood on-screen and in related discourse has served an ideological agenda. Indeed, Hollywood's fascinating "misconceptions" of motherhood suggest that hegemony is maintained through the management of maternity. Mothers reproduce dominant ideology (quite literally), yet also become ready targets if they fail to uphold prevailing notions of "good" motherhood. Thus, Hollywood mothers are repeatedly demonized or deified (often through death).¹¹ This limited repertoire of maternal portrayals all too often serves misogynistic and conservative ends. Hollywood has, with relatively few exceptions, foregrounded a youthful, white, middle-class, heterosexual paradigm of motherhood, to the exclusion of other possibilities. For almost a century, it has mobilized particular constructions of maternity in the service of the status quo.

The current exchange between Hollywood and independent cinema has produced some encouraging interventions in the range of Hollywood's maternal representations, though the increasing fluidity between these two modes of production has tended to collapse the differences that have made them distinct. Four entries in this collection, by Madonne M. Miner, Elaine Roth, Mary M. Dalton and Janet K. Cutler, suggest the possibilities that some independent films offer. However, the often close connections between Hollywood and independent cinema preclude the latter from providing a ready "solution" to Hollywood's problematic constructions of motherhood: for a reading of an independent film that ultimately reinforces the ideological underpinnings of Hollywood's maternal paradigm, see Mary Kate Goodwin-Kelly's chapter.

Notably, there have been few sustained scholarly inquiries into cinematic representations of motherhood, a conspicuous oversight given the

pervasiveness and cultural significance of this figure. Only two monographs, both of them excellent, have focused on cinematic mothers: *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* by E. Ann Kaplan (1992) and *Cinematernity: Film, Motherhood, Genre* (1996) by Lucy Fischer. A wide range of feminist film critics has pursued the topic in shorter formats, including Mary Ann Doane, Linda Williams, Barbara Creed, and Kaja Silverman. We contribute to this ongoing debate about the representation of motherhood in mainstream cinema by bringing together a broad range of approaches, building on the study of genre (especially melodrama) and psychoanalysis that formed the basis of earlier work. In particular, *Motherhood Misconceived* includes cultural studies approaches that locate the ideology of maternity in specific historical contexts, such as the publication of significant books on the topic of motherhood. For instance, Mike Chopra-Gant's chapter discusses *Generation of Vipers* (1943), a popular book maligning mothers, while Tamar Jeffers McDonald takes up Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Also addressed is the impact of major historical events or trends, as when Mark Harper connects the relationship of the cold war to maternal space, or Heather Addison charts the rise of consumer culture.

Despite the volume's emphasis on historical context in the analysis of specific manifestations of screen motherhood, we are asserting the ubiquitous and ideological nature of mainstream cinematic constructions of the maternal—and arguing that Hollywood has remained remarkably static in this regard. Therefore, we privilege a thematic rather than a chronological organization. Our collection first considers the spectacle of pregnancy; then analyzes the mother-daughter relationship, especially as it intersects with female sexuality; registers the vilification of mothers as predators, narcissists, or absent victims; and finally surveys instances in which cultural anxieties have been displaced onto marginalized maternal figures.

Part I considers how a cinematic focus on the pregnant body works both to contain, but occasionally also to liberate, female characters. Examining *Fargo* (1996), Mary Kate Goodwin-Kelly highlights the film's visual fixation on the pregnancy of its police chief and considers the ways this conspicuous, if unspoken, obsession with the chief's impending maternity affects and in fact undermines the film's representation of her authority. In the second chapter, Tamar Jeffers McDonald uses historical analysis to contextualize *The Thrill of It All* (1963) in relation to the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, and illustrates how then-current anxieties about the role of stay-at-home wives, the pros and cons of employment for mothers outside the home, and contraception and birth control played out in a script involving a female protagonist's shift from television spokeswoman to pregnant stay-at-home wife. In the final chapter of this section, Madonne Miner situates *Sugar & Spice* (2001) as a kind of hybrid heist film/teen picture, arguing

that while conventional male heist films consistently work to exclude and eliminate team members, *Sugar & Spice*'s strategic performance of pregnancy functions to disrupt generic conventions and, albeit to a limited degree, encourage principles of expansion and inclusion. Ultimately, each of these chapters deals with films in which pregnancy or the pregnant body is a central narrative or visual concern.

In Part II, Heather Addison, Gaylyn Studlar, and Elaine Roth consider the mother-daughter relationship, especially as it has been articulated between adult children and their mothers and deployed to regulate female sexuality. Focusing on motion picture fan magazines as evidence, Addison argues that early Hollywood embraced the rhetoric of the consumer age, urging "modern mothers" to remain as youthful and attractive as their daughters. Studlar contends that the multifaceted discourse created around two early Hollywood stars, Mary Pickford and Joan Crawford, and their mothers, functioned to contain these stars' sexuality by deflecting public perceptions of gross immorality. Finally, Roth examines the complicated dynamics between a single mother and her two teenaged girls in *Gas, Food, Lodging* (1992), an independent film that derides neither mother nor daughters for their sexual desires.

The remaining sections chronicle the all-too-frequent presentation of mothers as the source of horror or as scapegoats for wider cultural anxieties. They complement the focus on the pregnancy stage highlighted in Part I by offering a series of close readings of films featuring mothers who have moved onto the project of raising children—with potentially disastrous consequences, according to the logic of the films. In Part III, Mike Chopra-Gant uncovers a tellingly negative history of the now-ubiquitous term "mom" and examines the figure of the vitriolic and self-serving "mom" in post-World War II Hollywood films. In his analysis of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), Mun-Hou Lo argues that the figure of Mrs. Bates, more than simply functioning as one of the most famous "bad moms" of all, encourages the film's spectators to repudiate homosexuality through violence against the maternal body. In the third chapter of Part III, Mark Harper examines the apparatuses of paranoid surveillance that surround the "cold" mother figure in *Ordinary People* (1980) and finally eliminate her from the nuclear family. Kathleen Rowe Karlyn maps out the connections between Second and Third Wave feminism, Hollywood, and constructions of motherhood as she investigates the role of the mother as a source of history and knowledge in the horror *Scream* cycle (1996–2000).

The ideal of good motherhood (white, middle-class, devoted, selfless, and so on) becomes the yardstick by which women are judged; deviation from this pattern is justification for disparagement—or at least suspicion. Mothers can be denigrated for any number of choices or behaviors that are identified as inadequacies or excesses, such as pursuing careers or otherwise

being inattentive to the needs of their children.¹² Indeed, what Linda Williams has said regarding films of the 1930s and 1940s films might be said of Hollywood cinema more generally: “The device of devaluing and debasing the figure of the mother while sanctifying the institution of motherhood is typical of ‘the woman’s film’ in general and the sub-genre of the maternal melodrama in particular” (Williams 300).

In Part IV, Aimee Berger, Janet K. Cutler and Mary M. Dalton remind us that devaluation and debasement are often a function of identity markers such as class, race, and gender. Berger’s investigation of the cinematic representations of Southern white working poor mothers and her identification of the frequency with which these representations link the poor white Southern mother with maternal neglect lead her to conclude that this displacement of anxiety about maternity locates white poverty as a regional rather than a national problem. In her chapter, Janet K. Cutler examines cinematic representations of black maternity, comparing the John Stahl and Douglas Sirk versions of *Imitation of Life*, 1934 and 1959, respectively, to the autobiographical documentaries *Suzanne*, *Suzanne* (1982) and *Finding Christa* (1991) made by Camille Billops and her husband James Hatch. Cutler demonstrates how Billops and Hatch’s personal, nonfiction works present a view of motherhood and mother-child relationships that contradicts the image of a self-sacrificing black maternal figure embodied by the “Mammy” figure of 1930s–1950s commercial cinema. Finally, Mary M. Dalton undertakes an analysis of *Transamerica* (2005) and its unusual journey of discovery, in which a preoperative transsexual woman learns that she is the father of a teenaged boy and slowly builds a maternal relationship with him. Both the film and Dalton’s chapter raise the possibility of moving beyond portrayals that demean or criticize mothers, suggesting new ways to consider motherhood in popular culture.

It is our hope that further scholarly writing on maternity in cinema will continue this trajectory, spotlighting and examining alternatives to Hollywood’s persistent “misconceptions” of motherhood such as the nontraditional maternal figures who can be found in some independent cinema. We also wish to note that this volume owes a substantial debt to the large body of feminist film theory that grounds a number of our chapters. Such theory is one of the dominant and invaluable discourses of the film studies discipline, and our volume draws upon it repeatedly, regardless of the extent to which its use is explicitly foregrounded. Finally, though a major goal of our collection is to critique the maternal ideology of mainstream Hollywood films, we also want to acknowledge the pleasure that such films afford and that the institution of motherhood yields. As film fans, mothers, and daughters, we seek not to lessen the joys of maternity or of film viewing, but rather to improve our understanding of Hollywood’s role in constructing and reinforcing specific ideologies about motherhood.

NOTES

1. See *Misconceptions: Truth, Lies, and the Unexpected on the Journey to Motherhood* by Naomi Wolf, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women* by Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels, *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety* by Judith Warner, *The Truth Behind the Mommy Wars: Who Decides What Makes a Good Mother?* by Miriam Peskowitz, and *Motherhood Manifesto: What America's Moms Want—and What to Do About It* by Joan Blades and Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner.

2. Meg Wolitzer's *The Ten Year Nap* (2008) is a novel exploring the interconnected lives of a handful of women from the so-called opt-out generation. The book, to some degree a product of the culture of Belkin's essay, has garnered a fair amount of media attention itself.

3. In November 2004, Jolie was *Esquire* magazine's "Sexiest Woman Alive"; she was featured on the cover of *People Weekly's* annual "100 Most Beautiful" issue in 2006; and in 2007, a British television show, "The Greatest Sex Symbols," named her as the greatest sex symbol of all time.

4. At the time of this writing, morning shows, twenty-four-hour news channels, and online blogs were discussing the subject of "pregorexia." Much of the discourse on pregorexia, a term used to describe women's "excessive" efforts to control their weight during pregnancy, often through diet and exercise, attributed an apparent increase in this phenomenon to thin celebrities and the media attention they garner during their pregnancies. In an article titled, "Pregorexia: Does this bump look big on me?," which appeared on the *TimesOnline* website, Catherine Bruton wrote, "According to some experts, images of svelte celebrity mums-to-be such as Nicole Kidman and [Nicole] Richie with their "barely-there" bumps are inspiring expectant mothers to diet and exercise to excess to stay slim during pregnancy and speed the departure of those post-baby pounds." An article pursuing the same topic and titled "Pregorexia' Inspired by Thin Celebs?" appeared on CBSNews.com.

5. A recent example is the case of Nadya Suleman, a single, unemployed mother of six who gave birth to octuplets in early 2009. Suleman has been an object of intense fascination—and criticism—as daytime news programs have questioned her decision (and even her right) to use *in vitro* fertilization to produce her large family. See especially the Ann Curry interview with Suleman, broadcast on February 9, 2009 on the *Today* show.

6. Peskowitz astutely observes, "Currently there is no room in our cultural vocabulary to talk about mothering and work in any but the most oppositional and mutually exclusive terms, and as a result, all this work that women do remains invisible" (74).

7. Meanwhile, websites such as MomsRising.org and the zine *Hip Mama* speak to the needs and struggles of contemporary mothers, including working and lower-class mothers who are all too often overlooked or made invisible by dominant media coverage.

8. In the concession speech that she delivered on June 7, 2008, after losing an incredibly close primary race to Senator Barack Obama, Senator Clinton told supporters and the nation as a whole, "I ran as a daughter who benefited from opportunities my mother never dreamed of. I ran as a mother who worries about my

daughter's future and a mother who wants to lead all children to brighter tomorrows. To build that future I see, we must make sure that women and men alike understand the struggles of their grandmothers and mothers, and that women enjoy equal opportunities, equal pay, and equal respect."

9. The *New York Times* described Palin's candidacy as "the Mommy Wars: Special Campaign Edition. But this time the battle lines are drawn inside out, with the social conservatives, usually staunch advocates for stay-at-home motherhood, mostly defending her, while some others, including plenty of working mothers, worry that she is taking on too much" (Kantor and Swarns).

10. *Sports Illustrated* also ran a feature story by Michael Farber, titled "Mother Load," about U.S. athletes/mothers competing in the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, China. In this article, Melanie Roach, Olympic weightlifting competitor and mother of a seven-year-old boy, recalls meeting other athletes/mothers, including Dara Torres, in the Olympic Village. In a quote about that meeting that speaks to the conflicted feelings and the social scrutiny that many mothers experience, Roach said, "[When I came back] I struggled with the idea that I was encouraging moms to leave their children to pursue their dreams, but then I realized the opportunity I had to inspire other athletes not to put off having children . . . I think we've shown women can come back stronger, physically and sometimes mentally."

11. The year 2007 saw the emergence of a number of films dealing with the inadvertently pregnant woman or teen. *Waitress*, *Knocked Up*, and *Juno* each explore the trials facing protagonists dealing, in their various ways, with unplanned pregnancies. Perhaps because the narratives of these films did not overtly demonize these maternal figures, at least some of the films themselves have been criticized for their glamorization of unexpected pregnancies, particularly teen pregnancies. In particular, *Juno* was singled out as making teen pregnancy appealing. On CNN's *AC360*, Anderson Cooper, investigating an apparent "Pregnancy Pact in Gloucester, MA" involving seventeen teenaged girls at a single high school who reportedly agreed to get pregnant, interviewed a psychologist who blamed Hollywood for essentially advocating teen pregnancies. The guest psychologist identified the most "insidious" cause of the teen pregnancy trend as "celebrity baby bliss" or the ubiquity of media representations of celebrities with babies. The supposed "pact," first reported in *Time* magazine, was covered on MSNBC, the *Today Show*, CNN's *Inside Edition*, and NPR's *All Things Considered*, among others. Like *AC360*'s coverage, much of the report considered the role that Hollywood played, through films such as *Juno* and *Knocked Up* and the glamorization of the teen celebrity Jamie Lynn Spears (whose pregnancy and early motherhood were the object of much attention), in making teen pregnancy seem attractive to teens.

12. Absent or working mothers have paid the price in notable films such as *Imitation of Life* (1934; 1959), *Mildred Pierce* (1947), *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* (1992), or *American Beauty* (1999).

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