

A-WORD, THE MOVIE: CINEMA AND THE ABORTION STORYLINE

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The 2003 “I Had An Abortion” t-shirts of author and indie filmmaker Jennifer Baumgardner may never make their way into the wardrobe department of a major motion picture studio. While the abortion storyline is not the untouchable subject it was in the days of the Hollywood production code, it is a rare film that portrays abortions as women really experience them, or that attempts the honesty and invitation to dialogue that motivates Baumgardner’s project. There’s nothing new in the superficial examination of abortion if we look at how mainstream movies regularly trivialize or typecast women, whether as insecure romantics (*Bridget Jones’s Diary*), successful women devoid of a soul (*The Devil Wears Prada*) or the means by which men insult each other. (Note the “What, you got your period?” joke in *The Departed* that forces Leonardo Di Caprio to slam the offending comedian with a beer mug.) Even though high school student Stacy Hamilton gets her abortion sans moral dilemma in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982) and we’re brought to near-tears by the compassion of abortionist Dr. Wilbur Larch in *The Cider House Rules* (1999), how “pro-choice” are these movies? In terms of exploring a common aspect of women’s reality, what remains taboo? And how much do abortion storylines enforce traditional constructs of “the masculine” and “the feminine?”

Flashback: 1950s

Author Charles P. Mitchell in his *Filmography of Social Issues* traces the abortion plot back to *Detective Story* (1951), the first major production to include such a narrative (3). Detective Jim McLeod (Kirk Douglas) discovers his wife had a back-alley abortion performed by a criminal he’s been trying to convict. As Mrs. McLeod is now unable to get pregnant, and finds herself the object of her husband’s “soul-deep loathing,” the message is plain: abortion is an unnatural act that deserves to be punished (Atkinson).

The 1959 teen movie *Blue Denim* attempts to forge new territory in exploring adolescent sexuality. Janet and Arthur are teens who have sex (the verboten act that’s suggested when the screen fades to black after they kiss). Janet discovers soon after that she’s pregnant. Arthur sends out word through a male network (namely, his pal Ernie and a soda jerk) to locate an abortionist for Janet. But at the last minute, Arthur is afraid for Janet’s life, and informs his father; they rescue her before the abortion is performed. Janet believes the pregnancy is entirely her fault and thinks marrying Arthur will ruin his life; Arthur’s parents and Janet’s widowed father facilitate her quick exit from town. Arthur, who has yet to challenge his parents on anything that matters to him, uses this moment to assert himself – he goes after Janet, and the two of them ride a train into the marital sunset (Mitchell 38-39).

Blue Denim avoids dealing with the consequences of a “back alley abortion” and buoys its characters to the requisite happy heterosexual ending. At the same

time, the story primarily focuses on Arthur's coming of age instead of Janet's situation. The thrust of the tale is about Arthur's inability to communicate with his father Major Bartley, a man who equates military values with masculinity. He makes decisions for Arthur to his son's increasing frustration, whether it's the decision to put Arthur's dog to sleep, or to send Janet away. Just as Major Bartley is a hindrance to Arthur's development, Janet's pregnancy serves as an impediment to Arthur's entry into manhood – and more so than as an obstacle in a narrative of her own (Considine 219).

Boy Story

In abortion tales, the male bildungsroman frequently emerges as central to the plot. Abortion figures into one of the dramatic moments in the life of Father Fermoye in *The Cardinal* (1963). Fermoye, a young priest climbing the ranks of the Catholic Church, refuses the emergency abortion that will save his sister's life (Mitchell 3). Similarly, *The Cider House Rules* (1999) tracks the journey of the epically-named Homer Wells (Tobey Maguire) who must decide if he wants to inherit Dr. Larch's legacy as patriarch of the St. Cloud Orphanage, providing pregnant women with safe deliveries and abortions. In other stories, which are not necessarily about a man's rise or coming of age, fathers, boyfriends, or buddies of the boyfriend often act as the Sir Galahads of abortion: the gallant male protectors and prime movers who make abortions happen. Pregnant dancer Penny in *Dirty Dancing* (1987) is little more than the proverbial bun-baking oven. While Penny can't afford the \$250 for an abortion and cries over her pregnancy, it is fellow dancer Johnny Castle (Patrick Swayze) who assures her he'll take care of it; pal Billy who arranges it; and Dr. Houseman (Jerry Orbach) who fixes everything once the initial abortion is botched. Dr. Houseman's future dealings with Johnny show a profound disapproval of the young man whom he assumes is the father of Penny's baby. The otherwise progressive-minded Houseman stands in for a rigid morality that frowns upon men who get girls into "trouble" and then shirk their responsibilities (ie, don't marry them).

Later, when Dr. Houseman discovers he is mistaken – it is rich-kid Robbie who impregnated Penny – he promptly apologizes to Johnny: "When I'm wrong, I say I'm wrong." This feels oh-so-reminiscent of the exchange between Mike Damone and Mark Ratner in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. Mike and Mark are best friends. Mark likes Stacy Hamilton (Jennifer Jason Leigh), but Mike is the one to have sex with her. When Stacy gets pregnant, she asks Mike for a ride to the abortion clinic and half the cash for the bill. He agrees, but never shows up – with a ride or the cash. In fact, he never contacts Stacy again. Mark, however, receives Mike's sincerest apologies: "A guy doesn't do that" to one of his buds, he says, and the two friends, who briefly wrangled over Stacy, are now reconciled.

Shame Games

When abortion stories shift the focus to the woman having the abortion, men are often depicted as the moral objector or a variant of "the abortion warrior" (the

archetype of violent opposition to abortion), to quote a term from Carol Mason's *Killing For Life: The Apocalyptic Narrative of Pro-Life Politics* (12-14). But the narrative inclination to villify men is as much a faulty construction as the impetus to portray women as vessels in need of quick fixes which only the men in their lives can provide. For every helpless-and-shamed, abortion-conceding heroine, there is an ethically outraged hero. In *Blue Denim*, Arthur's friend Ernie decries abortion as "a crime... murder" (Considine 222). Likewise in the exploitation film *The Shame of Patty Smith* (1962), Father O'Brien withdraws his offer to help Patty (who has become impregnated by rape) when he discovers she's seeking an abortion – an act he calls murder regardless of the rape (Mitchell 189).

Even well-constructed and acclaimed stories such as the short film *Carrie's Choice* (2005) and the HBO movie *If These Walls Could Talk* (1996) personify the anti-choice movement with men, whether they express strong sentiments or outright violence. In the former movie, college student Carrie Owens becomes pregnant and considers an abortion. It's not a clear-cut choice for her, and she consults a number of advisors – her best friend, her grandmother, her minister, and Planned Parenthood. She includes her boyfriend Ted in the process, and later informs him of her decision to have the abortion. Ted understands the abortion is Carrie's right but makes no bones about his stance: "If you go through with this, you're on your own." In *If These Walls Could Talk*, which is a triptych of abortion scenarios taking place in the '50s, the '70s, and the '90s, a young man bursts into an operating room and guns down abortionist Dr. Beth Thompson (Cher), though he's polite enough to apologize to her patient (Anne Heche) for frightening her.

It is to the credit of *Carrie's Choice* that director Jane Clark attempts to blur the dichotomous myth of male-as-protector or male-as-warrior by including a character who matter-of-factly backs up his partner. Carrie, 17 years after her abortion, is pregnant again and in a marriage where respect and open communication are obvious. Carrie is having the baby and one suspects – had she opted for an abortion – her husband would have offered support. In contrast, *If These Walls Could Talk* isn't interested in presenting such functional relationships. However much this film creates a textured portrait of abortion issues, the focus on violence not only indulges in some male villainizing, but also appears to have a deeper intent. Cher, who directed her own segment of the film, commented on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* that she "wanted to make the abortion as unattractive and ugly as possible" (Moore). While there is a distinct and poignant pro-choice message in the film (and violence against abortion clinics is a tragic reality), the clinic story imbues abortion with an exploitative sense of horror, adding to an already-stigmatizing climate for the over one million women annually who choose the procedure (Planned Parenthood).

Reel Slippery

Though movies will appear to forthrightly demonstrate pro-choice leanings, a closer examination reveals, as Anne Elizabeth Moore wrote for *The Progressive*,

“a huge gulf between the way women commonly experience abortion, and the way we see it in film.” Abortions – whether taking place in “back alley” period pieces, or post-Roe America – are devastating events with extenuating circumstances, and rarely presented as a fact of life. While the real-life women of Baumgardner’s documentary *I Had An Abortion* (2005) tell truthful accounts of their abortions without sensationalism, film heroines in fictional narratives seek abortions because of extreme scenarios: they long to have a child but the fetus is defected (*The Choice*, 1981); they were raped (*The Shame of Patty Smith*); or they have married violent men and refuse to raise the child with them (*The Godfather II*, 1976) (O’Conner).

Elsewhere, protagonists are teens who are not necessarily punished for their abortion, but are nonetheless discouraged from exploring their sexuality. Stacy in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* is a ready-made example. After experiencing two unfulfilling sexual experiences and an abortion at the age of 15, she comes to the less-than-groundbreaking realization that she wants romance, not sex. The film contains a darker message than teen movies such as *American Graffiti* (1973) as it presents a provocatively rushed transition of its characters into messy adulthood. At the same time, its subversive potential to ask new questions about teen sexuality is buried under a tidy ending, in which Stacy embarks on a “passionate love affair” with traditionalistic Mark Ratner – and one in which intercourse is significantly missing.

In examining the reasons characters have abortions, the example of Candy Kendall (Charlize Theron) in *The Cider House Rules* stands apart. Candy has an abortion because she simply does not want to have a child; however, this singular case of realism is softened when Candy says, “I really would like to have a baby one day. I really would.” This line echoes Penny in *Dirty Dancing* who, while convalescing, enthusiastically says, “I can still have children.” It’s as if Hollywood cannot fathom an audience that would be able to relate to a heroine who is good-hearted and vibrant, yet doesn’t want to have children. Or rather (on a more disturbing note), it knows its audience too well: with the sizeable strength of the anti-choice movement (and the well-documented poll results that show a majority of Americans have some degree of moral discomfort with abortion), the film industry is putting its money where the least-offending mouth is (Fudge, 51).

A Sister Grim

Vera Drake (2004) presents a compelling case of the nuances of narrative intent and audience interpretation. The film, directed by Mike Leigh, portrays the life of a housekeeper who moonlights as an abortionist in 1950s London (when abortion is still largely illegal, except for a mental-health exception provided for women who can pay for expensive procedures.) The abortion-seekers here are predominantly the urban underclass, pregnant women in desperate straits. In Vera’s own words, her girls “need help. Who else they gonna turn to? They got no one. I help them out.” These women include ones who are poor or alone in England; they are single, adolescent, or already have too many children. When

Vera comes to their homes to perform the procedure, she is reassuring and competent like a jovial midwife; the women she visits are varied in their reactions to the abortion, whether they are ashamed, scared, aloof, or impatient. The one rape victim who seeks abortion – Susan Wells – is fortunately affluent and able to afford the pricey abortions that are made available at private sanitariums.

Vera is aware that she's breaking the law, but not that she's committing a crime, and offers her assistance free of charge. When the teenage Pamela Barnes becomes violently ill from an abortion that Vera has performed, the authorities come after her, and Drake emotionally collapses. Vera is not a political agitator, but an altruistic woman providing a needed service for the women in her community who are not ready – economically or otherwise – for motherhood. The law wins in the end, and Vera goes to jail for two and a half years. In prison, she meets other abortionists who are more stoic about their situation (or rather, unswerving about the fact that once they're on the outside again, they'll continue to perform abortions). It's evident at the end of the film that the patterns set forth by the narrative will repeat: abortion will remain illegal; abortionists will bootleg their services; women will get sick (or die); and the wealthy will have their loopholes.

Vera Drake echoes the trope of the male moral objector in that the antagonist is The Law – incarnated by a parade of doctors, police officers and judges. What's new is the psychological close-up of the abortionist, a development that's received a warm welcome from the Christian press. A reviewer at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops noted the "great acting," and another writer at the *National Catholic Reporter* ascertained that "pro-life audiences will find themselves powerfully moved" (Riddick; Cunneen). Much as former NARAL president Kate Michelman packed her 2005 memoir with the most extreme scenarios of abortion to appeal to a politically-wavering audience, so has Mike Leigh created pro-choice-esque sympathy via a hyper-virtuous abortionist.

Don't get me wrong: I'm a fan of Vera Drake. She even looks like my grandmother. And like my grandmother she is happily benevolent, puts family first, cooks all the meals, and lends an empathic shoulder no matter how exhausted she is. Except, my grandmother (a real life, bona fide woman) was known to complain every now and then or lock herself up in her room for some me-time. Vera exhibits none of these momentary lapses of self-sacrifice. She is all giving all of the time, and treads dangerously close to the stereotypical woman-as-merry-martyr. Not only is Vera a housekeeper for a number of upper-class employers, she cleans her own house, cares for a husband, two grown children and her disabled mother, makes tea for sick neighbors, plans parties, and squeezes in a few abortions before dinner. Vera is very visible in the story, but at the same time she's invisible: she does not exist so much as her selfless actions exist – that is, until the patriarchy calls her in for questioning.

At this point, it is not only Vera who unravels. The members of her family, so dependent on Vera for their well-being, begin to emotionally topple over like dominoes. Director Mike Leigh avoids taking a political stance on reproductive rights, but the work can be viewed favorably by both camps in the “abortion war.” Pro-choicers will experience it as a drama that highlights the injustice of a law that prohibits safe abortions for all. Anti-choicers will see a well-intentioned but misguided woman who has born the brunt of her sins and is now poised to achieve salvation.

Eternal Sunshine of the Ungendered Mind

Missing from a great majority of abortion narratives are the realities that our popular culture resists acknowledging. Planned Parenthood’s website notes that of the nearly 1.3 million women who chose abortion each year, the most common reason for terminating the pregnancy is decidedly less traumatic than movies would have us believe: the woman is not ready to become a parent (Planned Parenthood). And while it’s true that film like *If These Walls Could Talk* include characters who express relief and no regret after their abortions, these characters are relegated to the briefest scenes. This is the story that Hollywood isn’t moved to tell: that matter-of-fact, morally untroubled women everywhere have abortions without self-questioning or shame; it is straightforwardly the best decision for them to make.

Movies such as *Carrie’s Choice* investigate a range of attitudes in making the choice of abortion – it’s not an obvious plan of action for Carrie who puts extensive research into her decision. The questions raised in the film are intelligent and dialectical, and wind their way to a realistic denouement when Carrie tells her friend Jasmine that she has no regrets. It is the kind of pro-choice assertion that marked the activism in the early days of *Roe v. Wade* (Fudge 51). Then, women spoke frankly about their illegal abortions, before the anti-choice movement (consolidating its numbers and introducing moral arguments) obscured the simple truth that abortion is a reality that affects women of all colors and creeds, a necessity to women so long as women are, well, people. While some films have inched toward this notion in varying degrees, it seems the genre to drive home the point hasn’t been widely explored yet for abortion stories. It’s the genre that will challenge male / female categories altogether: *A Cider House Rules* with an all-women cast, a *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* starring a male Stacy Hamilton. Such re-imaginings of the gender element would tell stories of autonomous people who don’t function according to constructs, but behave as a community of individuals who take care of each other and themselves.

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