

Female Subjectivity and Feminist
Aesthetics in Revisions of the
Maternal Melodrama

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Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the help of a number of people. I am deeply grateful to Robin Blaetz for her wonderful support and insights, as well as the hours of estrogen-centered discussion that helped refine my ideas. Elizabeth Young was very helpful in getting me started and suggesting new ways to think about the films. Thanks to Justin Crumbaugh as well for agreeing to lend his transnational Almodóvar expertise to my thesis committee. The other Film Studies thesis students – Joanna Arcieri, Ariel Hahn, and Margaret Knoerzer – have also been excellent sounding boards for my arguments and a great support group throughout the whole process. Thank you to my friends who put up with my feminist rants and supported me at Senior Symposium. Finally, a huge thank you to my parents and sister, who supported me the entire way and nurtured my interest in both feminism and film.

Introduction

The final scene of King Vidor's *Stella Dallas* (1937) has been embraced by feminist film critics as emblematic of Hollywood's attitudes toward women. Stella (Barbara Stanwyck) stands outside in the rain, watching her daughter's wedding through a closed window. She clutches the cast iron fence, caught up in the emotion of the scene, despite the fact that her daughter has no idea she is there. Stella has severed her ties to her daughter so that the naturally refined young woman may enter the upper class without being held back by her lower-class mother, explaining it as a desire to be "something else besides a mother." Despite the exhortations of a policeman, Stella refuses to leave her voyeuristic post until the young couple has kissed. As soon as they do, she turns and walks away, crying but gratified to have sent her daughter off into a better world.

This image of self-sacrificing motherhood is key to the maternal melodrama of the 1940s and its inscription of women in patriarchy. Whether their daughters love them or not, women are expected to bring them up to be marriageable young ladies and, once this task is complete, disappear into the background since they are no longer useful to society. Mother-daughter relationships are constructed either as loving but finite and unnecessary, as in *Stella Dallas*, or poisonous and destructive, as in Michael Curtiz's *Mildred Pierce* (1945). Mothers in these films are completely isolated, focused solely on their daughters with very little female support or friendship.

With the fall of the studio system and the transition into New Hollywood, filmmakers began to push generic boundaries more, playing with conventions that had become stale and unrealistic. After the predominantly male New Hollywood movement settled down and became the establishment of the early 1980s, the door was opened for

women filmmakers to enter the field. Although often overlooked, a number of films directed by women and focusing on women were released in the 1980s and 1990s, such as Susan Seidelman's *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985) and Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993). Working largely outside the mainstream, female directors and their more experimental compatriots have been consistently developing new aesthetics and genres within narrative cinema.

Recent films about mother-daughter relationships make very different statements from those of the maternal melodrama. Adrienne Shelly's *Waitress* (2007), Pedro Almodóvar's *Volver* (2006), and Phyllida Lloyd's *Mamma Mia!* (2008) all portray mother-daughter bonds in conjunction with female friendship and support. Each film covers a different stage of the mother-daughter relationship, from birth to marriage, and the mothers in all three films have groups of female friends to help them in their task.

Aside from their basic plot similarities, these films are connected in other ways despite being in vastly different genres. Not only were they released in consecutive years, but they were also all extremely successful across gender. Their content would seem to have set them up as being "chick flicks," but they all managed to gain commercial success with both men and women. The most major connection, however, is the fact that all three films were authored by female or female-friendly directors.

Waitress was written and directed by little-known independent female filmmaker Adrienne Shelly, inspired by her own pregnancy.¹ *Volver*, on the other hand, was written and directed by Pedro Almodóvar, the famous Spanish director who, as a gay man, has shown a great deal of affinity and support for women in his films, many of which center

¹ *Waitress*. Dir. Adrienne Shelly. Perf. Russell, Keri. Fox Searchlight Pictures: 2007, DVD Extras.

around groups of female friends. Also, according to the theory of heterosocial bonds between gay men and straight women, he could be seen as having a view of patriarchy similar to a female director.² Finally, *Mamma Mia!* was written by Catherine Johnson and directed by Phyllida Lloyd, based on their own tremendously popular stage musical.

One of the elements of my argument that comes from this confluence of writer/directors is the aesthetic of excess. By creating an excess in production design, costume, and emotion, these directors firmly situate their films within the genre of the “woman’s film,” although only one of the three could actually be considered a melodrama. This aesthetic of excess is a means of creating a feminine visual sensibility while still following what Teresa de Lauretis refers to as the feminist “de-aesthetic,”³ the goal of which is to remove the construction of the female body as an object of the gaze. Using scenic and emotional excess, these films are able to maintain a strong sense of the visual while deflecting the gaze from the female body as an object. In this manner, the films are able to create a feminist aesthetic that is based in the domestic realm and centers around a feminine mode of communication.

The Position of Women in Patriarchal Cinema

As feminist film theorists have proven over the last few decades, mainstream narrative cinema is constructed so as to deprive women of agency. In her famous 1975 essay in *Screen*, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey systematically demonstrated how this is accomplished. She asserts that men in film possess the power

² Stephen Maddison, *Fags, Hags and Queer Sisters: Gender Dissent and Heterosocial Bonds in Gay Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).

³ Geetha Ramanathan. *Feminist Auteurs: Reading Women's Films* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2006), 11.

of the gaze and, therefore, the power to desire, especially in a fetishistic manner, which is conveyed through close-ups of body parts rather than the woman as a whole. Women, on the other hand, are constructed as the object of the gaze and connote “to-be-looked-at-ness,”⁴ robbing them of agency as they exist only to appear.

For Mulvey, the spectator can take part in a number of looking relationships. Scopophilia, or “love of looking,” is the most basic pleasure of cinema, the medium of which magnifies it into voyeurism (looking without the object’s knowledge and therefore exercising power over her). Another aspect of scopophilia is fetishism, which Mulvey says “builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself.”⁵ The third way of looking in Mulvey’s model is narcissistic. In this mode, men are able to identify with the male protagonist as their ego ideal, an echo of the mirror stage in early childhood. Through identification with the male hero, male viewers are able to feel they are taking part in his adventures, as well as objectify the women onscreen along with him. In this way, patriarchal cinema establishes men as subjects and women as objects.

Due to this construction, the position of the female spectator is quite complicated. Where the male spectator is able to identify narcissistically with the male protagonist and gaze fetishistically at the objectified female, a woman watching has nowhere to look. As Mary Ann Doane claims in her book, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman’s Film of the 1940s*, “because it relies on the image of the mutilated female body, fetishism is not

⁴ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” *Feminism and Film*. Ed. E. Ann Kaplan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 40.

⁵ Mulvey 43.

available to the woman.”⁶ The female gaze is often problematized and even punished in patriarchal cinema, so how can a film be made that is actually addressed to the female spectator?

The majority of “women’s films” produced by Hollywood are still essentially told through male eyes, as they employ the patriarchal trademarks and tools of mainstream narrative cinema. Doane states:

The films are in many ways, and certainly in their general cinematic setting, no different from conventional classical films with a male address. There is nothing strikingly ‘feminine’ about them in terms of conventions, formal strategies, point of view, etc. Yet, the sustained attempt to incorporate female subjectivity for a female subject-spectator introduces perturbations and discrepancies which are frequently not quite successfully contained by the narrative process.⁷

Because these films attempt to address a female spectator but do so using all the tools of patriarchal cinema, they pass themselves off as being progressive while firmly reinscribing women into their roles in patriarchy.

Some female and feminist/alternative filmmakers, however, have managed to develop a feminine aesthetic within conventional narrative cinema. The originary strategy of this mode is what Doane calls “the [maternal melodrama]’s strategy of deflecting signifying material onto other, nonlinguistic registers of the sign – gesture, looks, music, mise-en-scene.”⁸ As I will show in later chapters, this has been translated into an entire aesthetic of excess. One of the effects of this excess is to “differentiate the female body

⁶ Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 15.

⁷ Ibid. 34.

⁸ Ibid. 85.

from the domestic space”⁹ through an excess of mise-en-scene. The result is what Doane calls “A certain de-specularization...a deflection of scopophilic energy in other directions, away from the female body.”¹⁰ In this way, a feminist aesthetic is created, or Teresa de Lauretis’s aforementioned “feminist de-aesthetic.” Everything in the film is over-aestheticized except the female body, and this prevents the female from being the object of the gaze and allows her to have subjectivity in other ways, as I will discuss later in this essay.

The Maternal Melodrama of the 1930s and 1940s

The maternal melodrama of the 1930s and 1940s is a perfect example of a product created by Hollywood to appeal to women that actually reinforces conservative patriarchal ideals. Doane writes that, at the time, “the very speed of moving women into and out of the work force (the ‘Rosie the Riveter’ phenomenon) creates ideological imperatives which are quite explicit in the films.”¹¹ The most significant of these imperatives is to re-inscribe women into the domestic sphere. This agenda is quite evident in one of the key films of the genre, the aforementioned *Stella Dallas*. It contains all the major ingredients of the conservative maternal melodrama: the “hypersignification

⁹ Judith Mayne, "The Woman at the Keyhole: Women's Cinema and Feminist Criticism." *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*. Ed. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams (Los Angeles: The American Film Institute, 1984), 57.

¹⁰ Mary Ann Doane, "The 'Woman's Film': Possession and Address." *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*. Ed. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams (Los Angeles: The American Film Institute, 1984), 70.

¹¹ Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, 4.

of the domestic,”¹² a sensibility of excess and disproportion, and the isolation and debasement of the mother figure.

From the beginning, the film is concerned with a performance of domesticity. When Stella first meets the rich Stephen Dallas, she dresses more feminine than usual, brings a sandwich her mother made for her brother and pretends that she made it, then proceeds to clean a glass in front of him as if she does it every day. It has already been established that Stella does none of these things and is performing feminine domesticity. Once she becomes a mother, however, she becomes increasingly domestic and sacrifices everything for her daughter, Laurel. In practically every scene, she is wearing an apron or housecoat of some kind and is always sewing or doing some kind of housework. It is also mentioned many times that she makes all of Laurel’s dresses. In this way, the film constructs the domestic woman as an ideal that Stella works towards in order to become the perfect wife and mother.

The excess that is evident in Stella’s performance of domesticity translates to her performance of femininity as well. Coming from the working class, Stella has no concept of fashion or refinement, which results in her dressing quite excessively. From the time she marries Stephen, he reprimands her about wearing cheap, flashy jewelry, and it is because of her penchant for excess that he divorces her. The most telling, heart-wrenching instance of Stella’s vulgarity is one of the turning points in the film. Laurel is at a soda fountain with a group of upper class teenagers, including a boy with whom she is in love. Stella enters, having been reading magazines in her room for a while, and immediately causes a stir. She is not dressed so much as decorated, with a large bow, a

¹² Ibid. 179.

print dress, a veil, a mink stole, and an abundance of flashy jewelry. The aristocratic teenagers instantly start to ridicule her, calling her a “Christmas tree” and pointing out her ridiculous attire. Laurel, embarrassed, only looks at Stella in the mirror and hides her face in shame, eventually running out of the shop.

This scene exemplifies the type of excess that is employed in the maternal melodrama. Stella’s excessive dress and the ridicule it incurs is a perfect example of how the genre uses “the very mechanism of pathos – disproportion.”¹³ The disproportion of Stella’s attempts to dress like an upper-class woman leads directly to her daughter’s embarrassment and to Stella’s subsequent decision to remove herself from Laurel’s life so that she can move up in society. As Doane writes, “the child often stands for some sort of social ‘progress’ in contradistinction to the mother...The price to be paid for the child’s social success is the mother’s descent into anonymity, the negation of her identity.”¹⁴

This is exactly what happens to Stella and has been happening to her over the course of the film. Once she has Laurel, Stella refuses to go out with her husband and, even when she is divorced, she avoids any kind of romantic attachment. This removal of the mother’s capacity for desire is a key part of the maternal melodrama. Now that the woman has fulfilled her patriarchal duty of bringing the child into the world, she is no longer sexually desirable, as all her attention must be devoted to the child. Doane states that “Maternal desire is frequently revealed as actively resistant to the development of a love story,”¹⁵ because the mother craves the love of nobody but her child. Stella

¹³ Ibid. 76.

¹⁴ Ibid. 74.

¹⁵ Ibid. 92.

eventually pushes Laurel away by saying that she wants to be “something else besides a mother,” but the film shows this to be a lie, as she then rebuffs the man she pretended to date. As the final scene demonstrates, Stella’s only role now is that of a mother who has completed her job and who is no longer necessary to society. For that reason, she watches her daughter get married and then walks away into the dark. Through this negation of the mother’s desire and identity, an aesthetic of excess, and a hypersignification and performance of the domestic, *Stella Dallas* quite clearly instructs women in their role in patriarchy.

Another, very different, maternal melodrama from the same period is Michael Curtiz’s *Mildred Pierce* (1945). This film is more a noir/maternal melodrama hybrid, using a murder investigation as its framing device. The majority of the film, however, takes place in flashbacks narrated by Mildred (Joan Crawford) herself. In these flashbacks, the major components of the maternal melodrama are quite evident.

The hypersignification and performance of domesticity is a crucial element toward the beginning of the film. Mildred’s husband leaves her for another woman, so she is forced to take care of her two daughters herself. Because of this situation, there are numerous scenes of her in the house, baking and sewing and performing all kinds of domestic tasks. What makes this particularly noticeable and interesting is the fact that Joan Crawford was cast as Mildred. Crawford was known at the time for having a very tough, hard-edged persona, often playing sexually aggressive, manipulative women. Her performance style was very dramatic, and she had a tremendous amount of screen presence. For the character of Mildred, the film tries to harness and tame Crawford’s power, putting her in excessively domestic costumes like flowered aprons and dresses.

She is also primarily shot standing still, trapped and unmoving in a static frame. The very fact of Crawford's casting, however, allows feminist theorists to read it against the grain and see the inherent contradictions in the formula.

In the maternal melodrama, the mother's aptitude for the domestic serves only to restrict; it cannot help the woman gain agency in patriarchy. *Mildred Pierce* makes this patently clear in its portrayal of Mildred as a restaurant entrepreneur. Even though she has built herself a business – a successful chain of restaurants – in a relatively domestic field, not using skills that would be deemed inappropriate for a woman, she is still harshly punished for this foray into the patriarchal economy. From the time she begins to build herself up in the restaurant world, the rest of the film unfolds as her comeuppance for attempting to harness patriarchal power through domesticity.

Mildred's excessive success is a component of the larger motif of disproportion that is present in *Mildred Pierce*. Her "excess of female power"¹⁶ is manifest aesthetically in her costumes. As she gains power and wealth, she wears ever more intimidating ensembles in strong contradistinction to the housewife regalia she sported earlier. The most notable costume is a tremendous fur coat that makes Crawford appear to bristle and take over every room she enters. In terms of mise-en-scene, the excess is present in the abundance of mirrors and hard surfaces. Again as a contrast to the earlier scenes of a more domestic Mildred, the later scenes in the restaurant and in the beach house are punctuated by numerous mirror shots and a visual emphasis on cold, reflective surfaces. This excess of hardness seems to signify Mildred's increasing masculinization

¹⁶ Linda Williams, "When the Woman Looks." *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*. Ed. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams (Los Angeles: The American Film Institute, 1984), 24.

as she gains power. The purely “feminine” excess that remains, however, is Mildred’s love for her daughter, Veda. She is, in the eyes of patriarchy, disproportionately attached to Veda, who does not love her back and uses her to gain material possessions. Mildred will not leave Veda as Stella left Laurel, saying, “she is my life,” demonstrating a mother-daughter attachment that patriarchy cannot tolerate and punishes by turning Veda against her. Numerous layers of excess in the film, both thematically and formally, cement it in the genre and demonstrate the beliefs of patriarchy about the “weakness” that is women’s over-attachment.

The impossible nature of romance for the mother is another important element of the maternal melodrama, and it is extremely powerful in *Mildred Pierce*. Mildred and her first husband separate because he is having an affair, but they remain legally married for much of the film. During this time, she herself has an affair with an effete dilettante named Monty. Not only does her husband reprimand her for this, demonstrating the complete double standard between male and female desire, but she is also punished for it by the film itself. As soon as she sleeps with Monty for the first time, Mildred’s younger daughter, Kay, gets sick and dies tragically, her last word “Mommy.” The timing of this *deus ex machina* emphasizes that Mildred is being punished for attempting to have a romantic relationship as a mother. A similar event occurs late in the film, but this time it is a gradual double punishment. After she marries Monty, Mildred unknowingly has her business slowly taken away from her by the men around her, including Monty. Not only is this a direct result of her sexual relationship with Monty, but it also strips away all of the patriarchal power she has gained over the course of the film. According to *Mildred*

Pierce, there is no way for a mother to form any kind of romantic attachment that does not harm her or her daughters.

Finally, the relationship between Mildred and Veda is key to establishing the function of motherhood. Veda can be read as a perversion of the male ideal. She is materialistic and even sees herself as an object, eventually becoming a showgirl. In a bizarre way, Mildred has inadvertently raised the perfect daughter to serve patriarchy. Like Stella, Mildred loves her daughter more than anything in the world and, in the end, sacrifices herself for her. Knowing that Veda is responsible for Monty's murder, Mildred tries to take the blame herself before the detective can figure out who did it. Although this does not work, as Veda is too far gone to save, it conveys the message that a mother's job is to completely negate her self-value, regardless of how much love she gets in return. While its tone is quite different from *Stella Dallas*, *Mildred Pierce* is a darker side of the same story and message, exemplifying the maternal melodrama as a primarily conservative genre meant to immobilize women in patriarchy.

The Female Friendship Film of the 1980s and 1990s

The female friendship film of the 1980s and 1990s is the other component of the "maternal friendship" film that focuses my argument. While the genre has been developing since the time of the maternal melodrama, there was a surge in popularity in the 1980s and 1990s with films like *Mystic Pizza* (1988), *Steel Magnolias* (1989), *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1993), and *Boys on the Side* (1995). The major body of work on the female friendship film has been done by Karen Hollinger in her book, *In the Company of Women: Contemporary Female Friendship Films* (1998). According to Hollinger, these

films differ from the male buddy film in that they do not fit solidly within one genre, but rather make up a “recently developed subgenre of the woman’s film.”¹⁷ There are, however, many other traits that set the female friendship film apart from the buddy film.

The primary theme of the female friendship film is the establishment of a system of support between women. Many of these films are not particularly challenging to the status quo. In *Steel Magnolias* and *Mystic Pizza*, the women are all firmly situated within patriarchy, but are able to seek help with their patriarchal problems from the communities of women they have built around themselves. The films can take a different tack, however, by offering a kind of escape. As Hollinger writes, they “provide images of alternative lifestyles for women based on meaningful social relationships with other women.”¹⁸ This is evident in films like *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Boys on the Side*, in which small groups of women create quasi-utopias for themselves and generally forsake relationships with men. It is no accident that these two films, which reject the necessity of men, both have strong lesbian components. In the female friendship film, women either form friendships to help each other remain happily situated in patriarchy, or they become lesbians and establish lifestyles away from patriarchy altogether.

Even the films that are more patriarchy-oriented have a kind of feminine safe space to which the women retreat to discuss their problems. In *Mystic Pizza*, the three young women all work at the titular pizza parlor, presided over by their surrogate mother figure, Leona, the owner of the restaurant. Similarly, the women of different generations in *Steel Magnolias* gather in Truvy’s beauty parlor to discuss things like weddings and

¹⁷ Karen Hollinger, *In the Company of Women: Contemporary Female Friendship Films* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 4.

husbands. Although these feminine safe spaces exist in these films, the fact remains that they function primarily to help the women exist in their given patriarchal roles. As Hollinger writes, “their emphasis on the nurturing and psychologically enriching qualities of these relationships offer female friendship not as a route to political action and social change but largely as a means of social integration...their essentially conservative social message.”¹⁹

The other, slightly more progressive films have these safe spaces as well, but they exist on the outskirts of patriarchy, and the women rarely leave them. In *Fried Green Tomatoes*, Idgie and Ruth run the Whistle-Stop Café and establish their own utopian society surrounding it, defying the racism and sexism of the 1930s South. As the film goes on, the whole town begins to feel the effects of the café and its owners and becomes a rural ideal society. *Boys on the Side* is more separatist, as the three women travel cross-country to Arizona and set up house together on the outskirts of town, interacting with patriarchy but essentially creating their own family unit. Hollinger points out the problem with these female utopia scenarios, saying, “It suggests, instead, in the tradition of the social female friendship film, that the niches the women carve out for themselves do not so much lead them into the larger society as provide them refuge from the outside world of male abuse.”²⁰ Although all four films essentially fail at offering a realistic alternative for women through friendship, they do make use of the establishment of a female safe space, an idea that will become important in my analysis of the maternal friendship film.

¹⁹ Ibid. 237-238.

²⁰ Ibid. 161.

Another important aspect of the female friendship film is the development of a sense of self through friendship. Because female subjectivity is so restricted in patriarchy, the idea of women developing and getting to know themselves outside of patriarchy's values is a significant step. Hollinger, describing the work of Elizabeth Abel, writes, "Fictional female friends adopt roles similar to those of analyst and patient. By trying to know and understand her female friend, a woman comes to know herself, and through this self-knowledge she can begin to understand not only her friend's situation but her own."²¹ This kind of self-discovery primarily occurs in the more separatist female friendship films, because the women in *Steel Magnolias* and *Mystic Pizza* generally just discuss men and relationships rather than each other.

In *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Boys on the Side*, however, the women develop a stronger sense of themselves as independent entities. The process is, interestingly for my project, accomplished largely through nonverbal communication. This may be an effect of the films' suppression of the lesbian relationships, which are barely acknowledged. Still, though, it implies a kind of communication outside the verbalisms of patriarchy. One of the most intimate scenes in *Fried Green Tomatoes* is one that is mostly silent and entirely sensual; Idgie and Ruth have a food fight in the kitchen of the café. While their development has been mainly completed at this point, the nonverbal nature of this scene in which they communicate so much about their personalities and feelings demonstrates that this mode of expression is the most important one in their relationship. In *Boys on the Side*, this alternative communication is actually alluded to verbally, albeit in a very vague fashion. Robin (incidentally played by Mary-Louise Parker, who also stars in

²¹ Ibid. 15.

Fried Green Tomatoes), testifying on behalf of her friend in a court of law, the most patriarchal of settings, states, “something goes on between women...like speaks to like.” This explanation, of course, is not understood or accepted by the judge, but the attempt and failure to articulate it demonstrates its nonverbal, and therefore extra-patriarchal, nature. Despite the films’ failures to effectively challenge patriarchy, this establishment of a feminine mode of communication that enables development of a sense of self is a progressive step.

Because the primary focus of this paper is the analysis of motherhood on film, I must address the presence of the maternal in the female friendship film. Motherhood is primarily a component in the more assimilation-oriented films, as it requires some participation of patriarchy to exist. *Steel Magnolias* is the most notable example of a mother-daughter relationship in a female friendship film. The drama actually revolves around M’Lynn’s relationship with her diabetic daughter, Shelby, with the community of female friends there mainly to aid that relationship. Hollinger describes the film as “a maternal melodrama masquerading as a female friendship film. It uses friendships among women merely as support for what it presents as women’s ‘natural’ maternal role.”²² While this scenario does evoke an intriguing idea of a group of women raising a child together, it in fact reinforces the film’s agenda of reconciling women to their position in patriarchy.

In the end, Hollinger concludes that the female friendship film is essentially conservative because it is not political enough. She writes that they “limit [their]

²² Ibid. 80.

inspirational effect to the domestic realm of interpersonal relationships.”²³ While I agree with her assertion that the genre is more domestically oriented, I would argue that that does not necessarily make it conservative. Just because the domestic is the ideal for women in patriarchy does not mean that there is no power or agency available there, as I will demonstrate in my analysis of the maternal friendship film.

What does make the female friendship film conservative, however, is the assertion that communities of women can only function to help assimilate women into patriarchy or exist in a fantasy world entirely outside of the patriarchal system. Neither of these two extremes is ideal, as one serves patriarchy and the other retreats from it. The maternal friendship film, however, manages to find a middle ground that allows women to establish communities that help them gain power in patriarchy while living an alternative lifestyle. A key element of this process is the construction of a feminine safe space that is evident in the female friendship film. The female space and the use of nonverbal communication between women are the components of the female friendship that are the most progressive, although they remain largely overshadowed by the conservative nature of the plots. It is these ingredients that make the female friendship film an ancestor of the maternal friendship film.

Summary

In the past decade, there has been a sequence of films exploring the mother-daughter relationship in conjunction with female friendship and community. Adrienne Shelly’s *Waitress* (2007), Pedro Almodóvar’s *Volver* (2006), and Phyllida Lloyd’s

²³ Hollinger 167.

Mamma Mia! (2008) each embody a modern revision of the essentially conservative maternal melodrama of the 1930s and 1940s. In her oft-quoted book, *The Desire to Desire*, Mary Ann Doane argues that the maternal melodrama, while it contains numerous contradictions due to star persona and certain elements of mise-en-scene, functions primarily to immobilize women within patriarchy. The recent films combine formal and thematic elements from the maternal melodrama and the (also mainly conservative) female friendship film to create a new kind of maternal film.

The three directors, working against patriarchy in three different genres, attempt to create a feminine aesthetic within mainstream cinema. They do this by using an aesthetic of excess in the mise-en-scene and costumes to convey meaning in a nonverbal fashion while also deflecting the gaze from the female body. This aestheticizes the female world but simultaneously de-objectifies the female figure. In this way, the filmmakers attempt to create a true “woman’s film,” using the tools and format of patriarchal cinema to construct a new film language and aesthetic. The construction of the domestic is also of major interest, as it is a realm that is typically associated with repressive patriarchal values. In these films, the domestic has more progressive possibilities, opening up opportunities for women to gain power in patriarchy as well as helping to create a definitively female space.

In the ensuing chapters, I will analyze in depth the formal constructions of *Waitress*, *Volver*, and *Mamma Mia!* in order to assess the success of the filmmakers in reworking the maternal melodrama. I will also discuss the films’ thematic components and their relation to the two “woman’s film” genres I have previously described, in an attempt to determine just how progressive these films actually are.

Waitress

Adrienne Shelly's 2007 film, *Waitress*, does not fit into a specific genre. It contains the ingredients of romantic comedy, independent drama, and woman's film, but does not settle easily into any category. The film follows a young woman named Jenna Hunterson (Keri Russell) who works as a waitress at a pie diner in a rural area of the southern U.S. Along with waiting tables, her job is to create recipes for new pies and bake them all herself. Despite getting rave reviews for her pies, she has low self-esteem and is unable to gain any agency due to her overbearing, semi-abusive husband, Earl (Jeremy Sisto). When Jenna discovers she is pregnant, she is far from happy about it. She does, however, develop a relationship with her obstetrician, Dr. Pomatter (Nathan Fillion), which eventually becomes a full-blown affair. The affair and her pregnancy combine with the support of her friends to help Jenna learn more about herself and grow into a more assertive woman.

Along the way, Shelly uses a number of elements of the maternal melodrama and female friendship film, complicating them and combining them into what I call the maternal friendship film. By conveying Jenna's entrapment in a male-dominated culture, her struggle for subjectivity in a verbal world, her romance with Dr. Pomatter, and her conflicted relationship to motherhood, Shelly is able to make a film that conveys a feminine perspective and aesthetic within the language of mainstream cinema.

Trapped

Early in the film, Jenna's entrapment in a male-dominated world is firmly established. Earl literally instructs her in how to play the role of a loving wife, telling her exactly

what to say to him and how to show the affection he desires. Whether she actually means it or not does not matter to him; he is just as pleased as if she had said it of her own volition. He also complains that she does not listen to him, which is true, and tells her that she should remember his words verbatim. His intense focus on words while neglecting the meaning behind them shows Earl's overzealous need to enforce patriarchy. He understands that language is a cornerstone of male dominance, so he is happy as long as he feels he can control what Jenna says. Earl also controls another tool of patriarchy: money. He "lets" her work at the diner and promptly takes all her money as soon as he picks her up, telling her that she should be happy as long as he provides for her.

The mise-en-scene of the Huntersons' house signifies Jenna's entrapment as well. Yvonne Tasker writes that one of the key elements of the woman's film is the idea of the home as prison,²⁴ and this message is quite clear in the design of Jenna's house. We are first shown the inside of the house when Jenna and Earl are eating dinner. The room is very dark and tomb-like, with dark curtains drawn over the windows, letting no light in and implying that Jenna cannot get out. This effect is augmented by dark furniture and wallpaper, with only one lamp above the table. Earl himself is wearing a black shirt, making him almost blend in with his surroundings, emphasizing his association with Jenna's entrapment. As Doane puts it, Jenna's "alternatives [have been] closed off by a restrictive domestic sphere."²⁵

Jenna herself is wearing a light blue shirt, making her stand out a little but still making her an extension of the dark blue curtains behind her. Judith Mayne writes of the

²⁴ Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 141.

²⁵ Mary Ann Doane, "The 'Woman's Film': Possession and Address." *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*. Ed. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams (Los Angeles: The American Film Institute, 1984), 73.

importance of “differentiating the female body from the domestic space”²⁶ in conveying a woman’s subjectivity. The mise-en-scene in this scene demonstrates that Jenna is struggling to separate and differentiate herself from the dark house Earl has trapped her in, but as yet is unable to do so.

Jenna’s alienation in her own home is solidified when she gets up from her bed, where Earl has literally trapped her by flinging an arm across her body, and goes to the living room to hide some extra money. In an earlier scene, Earl has asked Jenna to give him all the money she made that day. Here, it becomes evident that she is keeping some of it for herself, saving up to enter a pie contest in a few months. This subplot contributes to Jenna’s early inability to gain agency; she understands that money is important in gaining power, but she is unable to fully realize her attempts to grasp it. Instead of putting it in the bank, where it would be safe from Earl, she hides the money from him, almost like a child with a piggy bank. Jenna’s understanding of the male world while unable to effectively speak its language is her predicament for much of the film.

In the scene where Jenna hides the money, the lighting is blue and cold, filtering through the dark curtains from the street. Jenna looks like a thief in her own house, a lone figure sneaking around in the dark. She hides the money under the couch, a spot where she knows Earl will not find it. We discover later that she has also hidden it in kitchen cabinets, in closets, and under beds. Because the house is an extension of her husband, she has to find tiny spots like these to make her own, definitively domestic pockets of patriarchy. In her own house, Jenna has no personhood and is more of a prisoner than a resident.

²⁶ Judith Mayne, "The Woman at the Keyhole: Women's Cinema and Feminist Criticism." *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*. Ed. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams (Los Angeles: The American Film Institute, 1984), 57.

Jenna's only escape from entrapment at home is the female "safe spaces" she shares with her friends, a key component of the female friendship film. In *Waitress* these spaces are the bathroom and kitchen of the diner. The bathroom is the site of most of Jenna's intimate conversations with her friends, Becky and Dawn (the other waitresses at the diner). The wall colors here are neutral but light, which makes the women's blue uniforms pop and differentiate them from their surroundings. There is also a strong flower motif in the room; in one two-shot of Jenna and Becky, Jenna sits on the toilet while Becky stands next to her. Above Jenna's head, there is a hanging flower vase to the right and an embroidered picture of flowers to the left. On the other side of Becky, to the left of the shot, there is another large flower vase on a shelf above the toilet paper. The presence of three different floral objects in one shot aggressively marks this space as feminine.

The first scene in the bathroom occurs when Jenna is taking a pregnancy test, with her two friends there for support. In the midst of the discovery and subsequent sympathizing, Cal, the male manager and cook, knocks on the door, wondering where they are. He and Becky proceed to yell back and forth to each other through the door, a mode of communication that emphasizes that this space is forbidden to men. Tasker asserts that the woman's film portrays a "community of women...in the 'absence' of men,"²⁷ and that is exactly what this safe space allows.

It is notable that this scene also ends with the first of many instances of Jenna making up a pie in her head. As she closes her eyes and begins to invent the pie, her friends kneel on either side of her, asking her reverently what it is made of. The tableau they set up as the camera slowly pushes in emphasizes their support for her and her one form of subjectivity. The

²⁷ Tasker 147.

importance of Jenna's pie-making is set up at the very beginning, in conjunction with the film's other "safe space." The film opens with the credits over numerous close-ups of pies being made. Dreamy piano music plays over images of apples being sliced, dough being cut, and creamy fillings of vibrant colors and textures being poured into crusts. Finally, Shelly cuts to a medium shot of Jenna standing in the kitchen, wearing her light blue uniform, stirring chocolate cream with a dreamy expression on her face as the camera moves leisurely around her. The kitchen is cluttered and there are unattractive industrial sinks behind her, but the wallpaper is yellow and floral, and a soft golden light is coming in from a high window in the corner.

The contrast between this mise-en-scene and that of Jenna's house is striking. Here, although the space is still owned by patriarchy and she is surrounded by squalor, she is in her element, completely calm and serene. The lighting also makes her stand out strongly against her surroundings, emphasizing the fact that, in this space at least, she has some form of subjectivity and self-differentiation. Here, she is in control of her own life through the power of her pies.

Struggle for Subjectivity

Jenna's struggle for subjectivity and agency is the primary conflict in the film. In keeping with the genre of the female friendship film, a large part of her self-expression is nonverbal: her pies. Whenever she is in a troubling emotional situation or feels inspired, Jenna closes her eyes and creates a new pie. She gives them names like "I Don't Want Earl's Baby Pie" and "Baby Screamin' Its Head Off in the Middle of the Night and Ruinin' My Life Pie." These names indicate that they are her way of telling her story, expressing herself through sensual combinations of flavors and colors like the one in the credit montage. Every time Jenna creates a new pie, the tinkling theme music begins to play and the camera tracks in on her face.

Shelly then cuts to a point-of-view shot looking down at the pie, while Jenna's slightly sped-up hands move around, putting in the ingredients while her voiceover describes the pie. This shot is a hallmark of the film, and with it, Shelly creates a new way to convey her character's emotional state and contributes to a feminist aesthetic focusing on nonverbal self-expression.

Jenna gets a great deal of praise for her pies, although Earl simply says that they "ain't bad." Her friends call her a pie genius and tell her she should open her own pie shop, while her obstetrician and lover, Dr. Pomatter, describes her pies as "Biblically good." He later tells her that, "What you do with food is unearthly. It's sensual," conveying that her pies are an entirely new experience for him, outside precedent and patriarchy.

The other character who really appreciates Jenna's pies is Old Joe (Andy Griffith), the owner of the diner. An old-fashioned, no-nonsense type, he wears a suit and bow tie every day, and neither Dawn nor Becky can handle him because he is very picky. His relationship with Jenna is an unusual one. He sees right away that she is pregnant and tells her so, doing the same thing later when he guesses at her affair. He also tells her about his past conquests, making himself out to be the epitome of heterosexual masculinity and, since he owns the diner, the pinnacle of patriarchy.

Despite his patriarchal appearance, Joe and Jenna have a connection. She tells him, "I don't believe for one second you're as mean as you play. You tip me better than anyone." He in turn thinks more of her than the people around her, and he first expresses it by talking about her pies. In one scene, he rhapsodizes about them:

Joe: No one makes strawberry chocolate pie the way you do -
Wednesday's my favorite day of the week cuz I get to have a slice
of it. I think about it as I'm waking up. Could solve all the
problems of the world, that pie.

Jenna: You're makin' too much of it – it's just a pie.

Joe: Just a pie? It's downright expert! A thing of beauty! How each flavor opens itself, one by one...like a chapter in a book. First, the flavor of an exotic spice hits you, just a hint of it, then you're flooded with chocolate – dark and bittersweet, like an old love affair. And finally strawberry, the way strawberry was always supposed to taste but never knew how.

The exchange between Jenna and Joe is a key moment in the film, as it articulates the power of her pies over someone who is himself very powerful. He also describes it in an unusual combination of patriarchal and sensual language. The use of the word “expert” validates Jenna’s skill as a pie-maker within patriarchal terms, affirming that it is a difficult and therefore valuable trade. When he says it “could solve all the problems of the world,” he indicates that not only are her pies valuable, but they are powerful in realms outside the little diner. Finally, Joe’s use of the phrase “like a chapter in a book” to describe the sensual experience of the pie equates Jenna’s pie-storytelling to the all-powerful patriarchal language. Because her power is based in sensuality and emotion, that does not make it inferior to the power of words, and Joe acknowledges that. He, at least, understands Jenna’s language of self-expression.

Joe is an example of the generally complex portrayal of men in *Waitress*.

Unlike many feminist films (*Thelma and Louise* is one controversial example), *Waitress* is in no danger of being called “man-hating.” Yes, Earl is a controlling, abusive lout, but he is the only completely villainous male in the film, although he is more pathetic than mean. Along with Joe, the other men in the film are Dr. Pomatter, Cal (the manager of the diner), and Ogie (Dawn’s boyfriend and later husband), none of whom is portrayed negatively. Instead, they represent a range of maleness, whether they are trying to escape

from their cookie cutter lives like Dr. Pomatter or speaking their own bizarre language like Ogie with his “spontaneous poems.” In a way, these men are trying to find their own form of subjectivity within the confines of their culture, despite being part of the dominant population. Although their issues are not the focus of the film, their presence and characterization implies that, even for men, patriarchy is far from ideal.

Jenna’s struggle for subjectivity within a patriarchal culture is at the center of the film and, along with the pie motif, it is also conveyed through a number of voiceover sequences. Becky and Dawn give Jenna a baby book as a present, despite her extreme reluctance to be a mother, and the book includes a space to write a letter to the baby.

The ensuing voiceover is quite moving and revealing:

Dear Baby, if I was writin’ you a letter, it’d probably sound something like an apology...All my life, baby, the only thing I ever wanna do is run away. What kinda mama is that? I wish I could feel other things, baby, like excitement that you’re with me now, or faith that I’ll be a good mama, even if my life ain’t such a good place and even if the world ain’t so pretty like they’d have you believe in this book. Anyway, I’m writing this letter to you...sounds more like a letter to me, don’t it? Love, Mama.

Voiceover is one of the primary filmic methods of communicating subjectivity, and Jenna’s voiceover is unusual in that it actually conveys her lack of faith in her own subjectivity. Her language is full of qualifications and questions, showing that she doubts her ability to express herself.

Jenna’s voiceover here does begin to establish more of a relationship between her and her baby, especially when she acknowledges that it seems like more of a letter to herself. In that sentence, she admits that she must accept her own personhood before she can express herself to someone else, while also acknowledging that the baby is part of her, whether she wants it or not. Kaja Silverman writes that the female voiceover is often

addressed to a man (as in *Mildred Pierce*) and that this gives the man power and subjectivity rather than the speaker.²⁸ If we apply this notion to Jenna's voiceover in *Waitress*, the fact that it is addressed to her baby (and therefore, herself), gives her all the power and complete subjectivity. In this way, Adrienne Shelly makes sure that Jenna's voiceover, however conflicted and unconfident it may seem, is entirely her own. Mary Ann Doane writes of the "instability of certain privileged signifiers of enunciation – the voice-over and the point-of-view shot"²⁹ in the woman's film, referring to the fact that the films often begin with voiceovers but they are irregular and eventually fade out. This is not the case in *Waitress*. Jenna's voiceovers are quite regular and consistent in the film. They either take the form of the pie ingredients or letters to the baby, another notable example being about her "intimate conversation" with Dr. Pomatter.

Romance

Jenna's affair with Dr. Pomatter is an element that is quite a departure from the maternal melodrama. Doane's work on *Stella Dallas* and *Mildred Pierce* shows that, in those films, mothers are not allowed to have any sexual desire. In keeping with Mulvey's model of the male gaze, the women in the maternal melodrama are constructed as objects of the gaze and therefore sexualized by the viewer, but they are forbidden from having any sexual desire of their own. *Waitress* is different; not only does Jenna have a

²⁸ Kaja Silverman, "Dis-Embodying the Female Voice." *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*. Ed. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams (Los Angeles: The American Film Institute, 1984), 136.

²⁹ Mary Ann Doane, "The 'Woman's Film': Possession and Address." *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*. Ed. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams (Los Angeles: The American Film Institute, 1984), 74.

relationship with Dr. Pomatter, but she does so *while pregnant*. This is an entirely new outlook on the maternal body and what is considered sexy.

In one scene, Dr. Pomatter comes over to Jenna's house and asks her to teach him how to make a pie, conveying that he, too, understands the power of her sensual pie language. The kitchen that we see in this scene is entirely different from the way the Hunterson house has been portrayed previously in the film. The white curtains are open, letting in a warm evening light that causes Jenna to glow in her sky blue shirt. Once again, there are a number of close-ups of pie ingredients being put together, creating the same calm, sensual feeling that was established in the credits.

While Jenna is standing there eight months pregnant, stirring her pie filling, Dr. Pomatter cannot keep his hands and mouth off of her. To him, the combination of the maternal and Jenna's power as a pie-maker is the sexiest thing in the world. When she complains that she is fat, he says "you're pregnant...there is nothing more beautiful." This scene is also the beginning of another letter to the baby, in which Jenna describes "the most intimate conversation of my life" between her and Dr. Pomatter. She says, "I was addicted to saying things and having them matter to someone," indicating that she is developing a way to verbally express herself and find some sort of subjectivity within patriarchy. She is able to communicate with Dr. Pomatter both on the sensual level, with her pies, and on the verbal level, and this helps her develop a stronger sense of self.

At the end of the letter, we see Jenna sitting in Dr. Pomatter's lap in his office. He gives her a present, which turns out to be a gold pie plate. She stares in awe at it as it glows in the sunlight, something that has been made specifically for her. The gift shows his respect for her craft and his desire to encourage her self-enunciation through her pies.

It is also representative of Jenna herself and how he sees her, as it is both functional and an object of beauty. To him, Jenna is beautiful, and he tells her so often, but he is even more attracted to what she *does*. For a male character to see a female character this way is a far cry from Mulvey's idea of "to-be-looked-at-ness." Jenna is physically beautiful, but the way she is dressed and made up throughout the film does not overtly sexualize her or aestheticize her at all. Instead, she is at her most beautiful when she is baking, lost in the sensual nature of her ingredients and the combinations she creates. Dr. Pomatter sees Jenna's beauty come through in her pies, and this is what makes the dynamics of the romance in *Waitress* unusual.

Jenna and the Maternal

For most of the film, Jenna has a very conflicted relationship to her baby. Because it is a product of unwanted sex with Earl and represents his entrapment of her, she does not want or love it. As she says to her friends, "I respect this baby's right to thrive...but no, I feel nothin' like affection." This negative feeling about her own pregnancy is very different from how maternity is normally portrayed in film, the maternal melodrama in particular. As Doane writes, "The mother, as a mother, represents a fullness, a presence, a wholeness and harmony which must ultimately be broken."³⁰ Jenna's state of mind is far from harmonious. Late in the film, she describes the baby to Dr. Pomatter as "an alien and a parasite. It makes me tired and weak. It complicates my whole life – I resent it. I have no idea how to take care of it. I'm the anti-mother." The conflicted portrayal of pregnancy in the film creates a very different

³⁰ Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 77.

image of the mother from the maternal melodrama. It is not Jenna's goal in life to raise an upwardly mobile child who is well suited for patriarchy, and she has no intention of sacrificing herself to do so.

That the film even portrays Jenna's pregnancy at all is a departure from the maternal melodrama. In *Stella Dallas*, pregnancy and birth are completely elided from the film; Stella marries her husband and the next shot is of a birth announcement in the paper. There are no scenes of Stella walking around with a swollen belly or feeling the baby kick. The film completely disregards any of the trials or rewards of pregnancy, save the child herself. In *Mildred Pierce*, the omission is less obvious, but it is still evident. The flashbacks in which Mildred tells her story start after she has gotten married and had children, again neglecting the fact that she would have been pregnant at some point in order to produce said offspring. These omissions may be due to the nature of the films' stars; the idea of Joan Crawford and Barbara Stanwyck walking around with pregnant bellies onscreen is almost laughable, and this once again points to the contradictions inherent in that genre. *Waitress* is quite different. Jenna will often exit a scene by saying, "I gotta go throw up," and often looks at her pregnant belly in the mirror. She goes to the obstetrician and details her symptoms. In the end, the pregnancy is more the focus of the film than the child herself. Shelly's decision to structure the film like this and portray Jenna's pregnancy in some detail contributes to the film's feminine perspective.

Despite Jenna's protestations that she does not want the baby, Earl is quite threatened by it once he finds out. He says, "What if you decide to love the baby more than you love me? Women do it all the time. They have the baby and then it's to hell

with the man...maybe if you promise me that you wouldn't love the baby more than you love me, you know? That you'd make a real effort to love me more...I come first, not any baby." Earl's fear is something that often happens when a baby is born – the bond between mother and baby is stronger than the one between husband and wife. His desire to prevent that from happening is consistent with his position as the enforcer of patriarchy in the film. If women love their babies more than their husbands, patriarchy loses some power over them, and male power over the means of reproduction is the very crux of patriarchy.

Earl is even more in danger of losing Jenna's love (which he does not have anyway), because he himself has a childish relationship to her. She takes care of him and cuddles him when he needs it, giving him attention when he loudly requests it and telling him what he wants to hear. At one point, after he finds her hidden stash of money, he actually kneels in front of her in a very childlike position, burying his face in her stomach and sobbing. Looking up at her, he asks her to tell him she was saving the money to buy him a present and she does, once again appeasing him with lies he requests himself. It does not matter what she actually thinks or feels as long as he gets what he wants, revealing the emptiness of language and the patriarchal structures it reinforces. Because of the childish cast to his relationship with Jenna, Earl is in even more danger of being replaced than he would be if he were just her husband.

Following this scene is another letter to the baby, in which Jenna says, "Dear damn baby...Your crib was bought with the money that was supposed to buy me a new life." This voiceover once again conveys Jenna's extreme reluctance to be a mother because of how it interferes with her plans for her life. Her feelings run counter to the

typical agenda of women in the maternal melodrama, who want nothing more than to raise a good child and be a good wife.

Despite Jenna's ambivalence about being a mother, she does convey a deep attachment to her own mother. In fact, her mother was the one who taught her how to bake pies and even came up with the odd naming tradition. Jenna says that her mother gave them names like "Car Radio Pie" and "Jenna's First Kiss Pie," indicating that she learned her language of pies as storytelling from her mother. The nonverbal, sensual mode of communication that is at the forefront of the film and Jenna's character stems from a maternal tradition of female bonding, and Jenna comes to appreciate this by the end of the film.

When Jenna goes into labor, her emotional landscape begins to change. It is this sequence where Jenna's subjectivity is finally firmly established. During a contraction, we see a straight-on close-up of her face, breathing heavily and looking around nervously. The hospital sheets behind her are light blue, the color we have come to associate with her, indicating that her own presence is becoming more powerful. Next, Shelly cuts to a point-of-view shot, the first one in the film that is not looking down at a pie. One of Doane's aforementioned "privileged signifiers of enunciation,"³¹ the point of view shot is incredibly important in establishing subjectivity. This shot in particular looks at Earl and then sweeps around to Dr. Pomatter and his wife, to whom we are introduced for the first time. The shot-reverse-shot pattern between close-ups of Jenna's face and point-of-view shots of Dr. Pomatter continues as the scene goes on, confirming

³¹ Mary Ann Doane, "The 'Woman's Film': Possession and Address." *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*. Ed. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams (Los Angeles: The American Film Institute, 1984), 74.

that Jenna is gaining more control of her own voice. As she finally pushes the baby out, Jenna screams, “I don’t want no baby, Earl!!” finally articulating herself to her husband and the world.

As the baby girl cries off screen, Jenna turns her head away, refusing to look at her. Only after the nurse prompts her repeatedly does Jenna turn her head and say resignedly, “Give her to me.” What follows is one of the key moments in the film. Jenna looks at the baby for a moment, then sighs, “Oh my God.” The camera begins to track in on her holding the baby as she repeats the phrase with more wonder, finally beginning to smile. We cut briefly to a shot of the baby gazing back at her mother as music begins to play. A shot of Dr. Pomatter and Earl shows them in extremely soft focus at the foot of the bed, talking to each other with no sound. Finally, the camera begins to revolve around the scene, Dr. Pomatter and Earl still in soft focus in the foreground. In fact, everything is in soft focus *except* for Jenna and her baby. They almost appear to have a halo around them as everything else in the world disappears.

This moment of the first connection between mother and child is something that, along with most aspects of childbirth, is completely outside of male experience and therefore impossible for patriarchal language to articulate. *Waitress* is remarkable in that Adrienne Shelly actually attempts to articulate this moment using the tools of mainstream film. It is wordless, relying primarily on music and images, disregarding the verbal language of patriarchy for this brief moment. In her essay on “Gazes/Voices/Power,” Jackie Byars discusses the “mutual gazing” between mother and child and suggests that it “expresses a ‘different voice’ and a different kind of gaze that we’ve not heard or seen

before because our theories have discouraged such ‘hearing’ and ‘seeing.’”³² It is this unique gaze that Shelly is portraying in the climactic moment of the film.

Earl makes the mistake of interrupting this mother-daughter connection, sticking his head into the frame, now in normal focus, and reminding her not to love the baby too much. Jenna looks straight at him and says, “I don’t love you, Earl. I haven’t loved you for years. I want a divorce...I want you the hell out of my life. You are never to touch me ever again. I am done with you. If you ever come within six yards of me, I will flatten your sorry ass and I will enjoy doin’ it.” As he looks at her in disbelief, she calmly returns his gaze for a moment before turning back to her daughter. Earl starts throwing a fit and yelling at her, but neither Jenna nor the audience hears what he says. The only sound is the rapturous music as Jenna stares wonderingly at the baby, taking no notice as Dr. Pomatter forcibly ejects Earl from the room. Finally, she says to the baby, “Lulu³³. That’s your name...we’re gonna have so much fun, little girl. We’re gonna have so much fun.” For the first time, there is hope in Jenna’s voice.

³² Jackie Byars, “Gazes/Voices/Power: Expanding Psychoanalysis for Feminist Film and Television Theory.” *Female Spectatorship*. Ed. E. Deidre Pribram, (New York: Verso, 1988) 124.

³³ The name “Lulu” is a topic for research in its own right. The incidences of the name in popular culture date back to the 1920s and 1930s. First, a prostitute character appeared in plays by Frank Wedekind, later made into a silent film starring Louise Brooks. This character went through many hardships and ruined the lives of all around her before meeting her end at the hands of Jack the Ripper. There is also, more benignly, “Little Lulu,” a comic strip character from the 1930s, a mischievous little girl who is the ringleader of a group of kids and usually saves the day in the end. Although it is impossible to tell which of these characters, if any, was the inspiration for Jenna’s daughter, their presence in popular culture lends the name some inherent individuality and spunk.

Finding a Place in Patriarchy

The resolution of the film centers on Jenna solidifying her new identity and agency within the patriarchal structure that had previously trapped her. The night after the birth, Jenna awakens to find Becky and Dawn in her room, telling her that Earl is refusing to pay so she has to leave the hospital. Dawn offers to let Jenna and Lulu stay with her, then the two women go and stand over the baby, cooing and singing to her. It is apparent here that Becky and Dawn are now filling the role that in “normal” circumstances would be filled by a husband. They have become even more firmly Jenna’s caretakers and support than they were before.

Becky and Dawn’s substitution for what is usually a male partner is solidified when Jenna ends her affair with Dr. Pomatter. She tells him clearly and firmly that she does not want him to continue betraying his wife for her, and that rather than drawing it out, they should just end it right there. What she is really saying, however, is that she does not need him anymore. Byars writes that the romantic “happy ending” in the woman’s film exists to “deny the possibility that a woman can live happily in the company of other women” and therefore “reassert masculine control.”³⁴ By dismissing Dr. Pomatter, Jenna shows that she is happier and better off sharing her life with Becky and Dawn. She thanks him for what he has done for her, but it is clear that she is her own person now, confident enough in her own power and voice to do without him. As she leaves, she hands him one last little pastry, a goodbye in her own language that she knows he will understand.

³⁴ Ibid. 120.

The final vision of *Waitress* is a utopian one. Jenna has been left a great deal of money by Old Joe, who visited her in the hospital before having surgery and slipping into a coma. The check he gives her comes with a card, on the front of which he has drawn a picture of her. The image of Old Joe, the symbol of retro, woman-chasing patriarchy, sitting by himself and sketching a drawing of Jenna is an intriguing one. His drawing of her implies a gaze that is much richer and more complex than the objectifying one of film. He puts effort into creating her likeness, does not just capture it within a frame as an object to be looked at. Instead, the drawing is a kind of tribute. This seemingly out-of-the-blue incident of Joe's drawing seems to imply that Joe himself has been somewhat stifled by the restrictions of patriarchy. In order to gain power and agency, he has been forced to put a damper on the creative impulses that might have made him happier. Joe's legacy, both the drawing and the money, contribute to the complex portrayal of men in *Waitress*.

With the money Joe has given her, Jenna is able to take over the diner and finally gain a foothold in the patriarchal system. She wins the pie contest she has been aspiring to, Lulu firmly in a snuggly on her chest. The final sequence begins with the customary close-up of Jenna stirring chocolate pie filling, but this time she is singing her mother's song, and as the camera pulls back we see that she has toddler Lulu on her hip. She is also now wearing a bright yellow uniform and has a large flower in her hair. What follows is an explosion of color as Shelly cuts to a close-up of a multitude of pies in different colors lined up on a bright pink tablecloth. The camera pans right, showing us all the pies and then the slices being eaten on diners' plates. Finally we see the diner in its new form – bright pink, green and yellow wallpaper in fun art deco patterns. Jenna,

Dawn, and Becky are still waitressing but are now wearing different color uniforms, showing that in this world they assert their individuality. Lulu has a dress that matches her mother's.

The stylized, lush nature of this world brings into strong relief the sensual language outside patriarchy that has been explored throughout the film. Jenna's language of colors and tastes has come into full bloom, resulting in a kind of feminist aesthetic; the mise-en-scene is heightened and rich, allowing the viewer to objectify the setting rather than the woman onscreen, at the same time communicating more in a nonverbal manner through said mise-en-scene. Everything is conveyed through images, with colors that are so saturated they are almost beyond reality. In the new version of the diner, Jenna has created a feminine "safe space" for herself and her friends. She has finally been able to channel her unique gift into helping her gain agency in patriarchy. Critics like Hollinger are conflicted about this idea of women using safe spaces to gain access to society.

Discussing *Fried Green Tomatoes*, she writes, "It suggests...that the niches the women carve out for themselves do not so much lead them into the larger society as provide them refuge from the outside world of male abuse, hostility, and neglect."³⁵ I would argue that the diner in *Waitress* fulfills both of those functions. Because Jenna controls it, it is a safe space for her and her friends, but it is also something that allows her to reach people on the outside. Winning the pie contest shows that her pies have power in the outside world as well, so the diner will allow her to gain agency for herself within patriarchy.

After struggling to find her voice and channel it effectively, Jenna has finally been able to

³⁵ Hollinger, Karen. *In the Company of Women: Contemporary Female Friendship Films*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998. 161.

make herself heard in a way that people understand: combining her language of pies with the patriarchal system in which she lives.

The final shots of the film emphasize the mother-daughter relationship. Jenna and Lulu leave the diner, now called “Lulu’s Pies” in bright neon lettering. They wave goodbye to Dawn and Becky and proceed to walk down the road together, hand in hand. The fact that they are walking rather than driving recalls Earl and his ever-present car, horn blaring to make his presence known. Here, the two are walking leisurely down a dirt road that does not seem to lead anywhere, completely free of technology and civilization, in their own mythic world. Mother and daughter literally walk into the sunset, calling to mind the tradition of male buddy movies in the Western genre. Here, the primary connection is the one between mother and daughter. Their relationship has no sense of sacrifice to it. Instead of losing herself to become a mother, Jenna has found herself in the process, and her daughter has helped her achieve her dreams and share them with her friends. The construction of motherhood in *Waitress* is a far cry from the maternal melodrama.

Conclusion

Adrienne Shelly’s *Waitress* is a combination of the maternal melodrama and the female friendship film, what I am calling the maternal friendship film. It creates a feminist aesthetic by fetishizing Jenna’s pies, thereby deflecting the objectifying gaze from Jenna herself and allowing her to build her own subjectivity without being sexualized. From her entrapment in patriarchy at the beginning of the film, she is able, with the help of those around her, to develop a sense of agency and power, which finally

comes to fruition with the birth of her daughter. Although she is conflicted about motherhood for much of the film, the moment when Jenna sees her daughter changes her, and the film itself uses this moment to articulate something that patriarchy cannot. Pregnancy and childbirth, as an entirely female experience, are not represented adequately onscreen, as the patriarchal construction of mainstream cinema is unable to convey what it has no language to describe. Working within the model of patriarchal mainstream film, Adrienne Shelly is able to make *Waitress* a feminist film that is a feminine experience as well.

Volver

Pedro Almodóvar's film *Volver (Return)* (2006) is an explicit reworking of the maternal melodrama that focuses on three generations of women and their interactions with each other. In order to analyze the film, it is necessary to look back at Almodóvar's career and the films that have similarities with *Volver*. Pedro Almodóvar is perhaps the most globally known Spanish filmmaker. His career began in the 1980s, and his first films were a major part of the Spanish *movida*, the post-Franco cultural movement based around a punk aesthetic and a critique of consumer culture. In the mid-1980s, he began to become more focused as a filmmaker, drawing heavily from his knowledge of classical Hollywood and combining it with his interest in gay and transgender issues to create his signature aesthetic.

Almodóvar's films are all very different in tone and subject matter, and a number of them focus strongly on women and female subjectivity. His fourth film, *¿Que he hecho para merecer esto? (What Have I Done to Deserve This?)* (1984), focused on an urban housewife and her relationship with her delinquent children and abusive husband. The film starred Carmen Maura, Almodóvar's leading lady since his first film, and also featured an appearance by Chus Lampreave, one of his favorite character actors. The film's most unusual and notable motif was the use of shots from inside appliances. Whenever Maura's character would be cooking or doing laundry, Almodóvar would frame her from inside the oven or washing machine, commenting on the perspective of the housewife and the importance of consumer culture. With this film, he began to establish his interest in female subjectivity.

Almodóvar's first international success was *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* (*Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*) (1988), a comedy about women who are driven crazy by the men around them. It featured a cast of mostly women, led by Maura again, with the men either off screen or docile and tractable, like the character played by Antonio Banderas. After this film, Almodóvar began to work with Victoria Abril as his leading lady instead of Maura. Of his three films with Abril, *Tacones Lejanos* (*High Heels*) (1991) is the most female-centric. A purposeful revision of the maternal melodrama, the film focuses on the conflicted relationship between a grown mother and daughter, involving the two women sleeping with the same man and the mother taking the blame for the daughter's murder of him – a direct reinterpretation of *Mildred Pierce*. In *Tacones Lejanos*, however, the mother is able to successfully take the blame for the daughter's crime, and the two reconcile just before the mother dies. With this film, Almodóvar first conveyed his desire to explicitly rework the genre of the maternal melodrama.

The next Almodóvar film that is significant for my purposes is *La flor de mi secreto* (*The Flower of My Secret*) (1995). Starring Marisa Paredes, who played the mother in *Tacones Lejanos*, the film focuses on the emotional and romantic life of a female romance writer, Leo. At one point, in the hopes of "finding herself" again, the protagonist returns to her hometown in La Mancha, where Almodóvar himself was raised. In the town, Leo is embraced by a community of women, led by her mother (Chus Lampreave again), and is able to regain a sense of self. This film is also significant in that the plot of one of Leo's novels is the exact plot of *Volver!*

Almodóvar's next film, *Carne trémula (Live Flesh)* (1997) is primarily an exploration of masculinity in crisis, but it is important for my purposes in that it is the director's first collaboration with Penelope Cruz, the star of *Volver*. She only appears for five minutes or so, but her scene is the film's most memorable, as she gives birth to the protagonist on a bus in the empty post-curfew streets of the Franco era. With this brief appearance, Cruz is established as Almodóvar's new maternal figure.

He elaborates on this characterization in his next film, another international success and Oscar winner for Best Foreign Language Film, *Todo sobre mi madre (All About My Mother)* (1999). In this ensemble film, Cruz plays a pregnant nun who had sex with an AIDS-infected transsexual. All the women (and one transsexual) in the film rally to take care of her, but in the end she dies of AIDS after giving birth to the miraculously healthy baby. While the portrayal of her character could be interpreted in both positive and negative ways, Cruz's performance in this film is a highlight, as is the focus on female bonding and identity. Since Almodóvar introduced her to the mainstream, Cruz has become a major star in Hollywood as well. She has made her career in American films playing the Latina sex bomb in films like *Blow* (2000) and *Vanilla Sky* (2001). Her very one-note persona in Hollywood adds a more sexualized cast to her roles in Almodóvar films.

After *Todo sobre mi madre*, Almodóvar made more male-focused films until he collaborated with Cruz again in *Volver*, the subject of this chapter. *Volver* also marks his reunion with Carmen Maura, with whom he had not worked since *Mujeres al bordo*. The film follows a voluptuous woman named Raimunda (Cruz) who works three jobs to raise her daughter and support her lazy husband. She, her sister Sole, and her daughter Paula,

have just returned from visiting their Aunt Paula (a brief appearance by Chus Lampreave) in their La Mancha hometown. Upon arriving home from work one night, Raimunda finds that her husband, Paco, tried to rape Paula, who stabbed him to death in self-defense. Raimunda efficiently cleans up and hides the body in the deep freezer of a neighboring empty restaurant, which she proceeds to take over in order to make some money, with the help of her female neighbors.

In the meantime, Aunt Paula has died, and Sole goes home for the funeral. When she gets back, she finds that the ‘ghost’ of her mother, Irene (Maura), believed to have died in a fire ten years ago, has hitched a ride in her car. She claims to have been looking after Aunt Paula for the last few years and proceeds to stay with Sole, posing as a Russian immigrant, metaphorically removing her power of speech as patriarchy did to her years earlier. Numerous plot convolutions follow, as Sole tries to hide Irene’s presence from Raimunda, a sick neighbor asks about her ghost, and Raimunda juggles the restaurant and burying Paco’s body. Finally, Raimunda discovers her mother’s presence and the reason for their estrangement is revealed. Raimunda’s father raped her and impregnated her with Paula; Irene’s failure to notice caused a rift between them that lasted until her husband’s death. With this plot, Almodóvar exercises another conscious reference to *Mildred Pierce*, in which a male figure sexually inserts himself between mother and daughter. By revising the maternal melodrama and combining it with ideas of female friendship and community, Almodóvar is able to explore ideas of female tradition and space, the role of the domestic in patriarchy, constructed femininity, maternity, and finding agency and power within patriarchy.

Female Tradition and Space

The opening of *Volver* establishes the importance of female tradition and community. The first shot shows a crowded cemetery, with women cleaning the graves as a strong wind blows everything to the left. The camera tracks left, as if being blown by the wind itself, showing dozens of these women as the credits are revealed in bright red. After showing the title on a headstone, Almodóvar then cuts to a close-up of two pictures, a man and a woman on one grave, then swiftly pulls back to reveal Raimunda scrubbing the grave while Paula stands nearby and helps her. Raimunda swears at the wind, and then she, Sole, and Paula discuss the tradition of cleaning the graves. Sole claims the women in the town live longer than the men, which is why there are so many widows cleaning that day. Then, their friend Agustina comes by to clean her own grave, as is the custom there, and the women talk some more. As Raimunda, Sole, and Paula pack up and leave, the camera lingers on the cleaning supplies in the trunk of the car.

This opening scene, focusing on a female-centric tradition, highlights the importance of women's space in the film. Although there are men buried in the cemetery as well, it is the women who take part in this tradition. The custom could be interpreted as demeaning to women because of its domestic nature and the fact that only women do it, but the film presents it as an honor and an important part of the community. As Raimunda says, they all look after their graves "like a second home." This superstition can also be read as a female celebration of their husbands' deaths. By cleaning and maintaining the graves, they attempt to contain their deceased spouses, preserving the power they have gained since losing their patriarchal masters. This reading contributes to the film's portrayal of the domestic as a source of power.

In the female community of Raimunda's hometown, there is also a strong emphasis placed on a tradition of superstition and mysticism, the discussion of which is tied to the bonding between the women. When Sole returns to the town to attend Aunt Paula's funeral, there have been whispers that Irene's ghost was looking after Aunt Paula until her death. As Sole wanders into Aunt Paula's house looking for the mourners, she sees her mother and runs away shrieking. She gets to a door, the ominous music building, and then looks outside to see a group of men standing around drinking as the music continues quietly. They look at her with blank faces, and the camera cuts quickly from group to group of them, then back to Sole's frightened face as Agustina calls her name.

This sequence, although it seems like a throwaway moment in the film, is important in communicating the difference between male and female space. These men are obviously the male group of mourners at the funeral, and they are just standing around in the sun, drinking. The ominous manner in which they are portrayed simply through a few quick cuts and some eerie music intimates that theirs is not a welcoming space. As Sole is kin to the deceased, they should be greeting her and offering condolences, but instead they just look at her blankly, almost accusingly. This brief moment conveys a great deal about the male tradition in the film. The world of men in *Volver* is intimidating and cold despite being drenched in sunlight.

Almodóvar offers a drastic contrast to the male section of the funeral in the next scene, when Agustina escorts Sole to the female mourners. First, Agustina greets her warmly, holding Sole as she cries on her shoulder and comforting her with kisses. Then, she brings her upstairs, and the two women enter a room that is filled with a murmur of

voices that is almost a hum, as if they have just walked into a beehive. The camera cuts to a high angle, almost an overhead shot of a group of women, all dressed in black, sitting in a circle on a red and white tiled floor. At first, all we can see is their feet on the tiles. Then, as Agustina and Sole enter the circle, the women all stand and converge around them, kissing Sole one by one, almost forcibly at times. The murmur of voices continues, as does the flapping sound created by the women waving their fans. Finally, Agustina declares that Sole needs to sit down.

The way this scene is constructed is vastly different from the previous scene of the men. Here, instead of low ominous music, there is a hum of voices surrounding us and, although it takes place in a dark room rather than a sun-drenched courtyard, the atmosphere is one of warmth and welcoming. Sole is overwhelmed, but she is not afraid, and the physical affection she receives, ritualized though it is, helps to calm her a bit. The scene is the film's construction of the La Mancha women "in the absence of men,"³⁶ and it is actually quite a different setting from the opening of the film. While we are introduced to female space in an outdoor, windy location, the fact that the same atmosphere can be created in a cave-like indoor space indicates that female community in the film is something that is transferable.

After this female safe space has been established in contrast to the male space, Almodóvar then ties this space to the traditional mysticism of the town. As Agustina sits Sole down, she begins to tell the story of how she found Aunt Paula's body. The hum of voices quiets as she describes the knock on her window, the voice calling her name, and the door left open so she could find the body. Although she begins as if telling the story

³⁶ Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 147.

only to Sole, she does it in a very performative manner, drawing the words out and pausing for effect as the women listen raptly. The telling of the story is obviously a tradition at these funerals, as it seems that everyone has been waiting for Sole to arrive so they can hear it. The other women also participate, asking if Agustina thinks it was Aunt Paula's ghost or "the other one." Sole watches this whole exchange in a rather bewildered manner, but it is quite evident that she is participating in an old communal tradition of storytelling and mysticism, which Almodóvar associates strongly with women.

This superstitious female community, however, is only present in the rural town. In the city, Raimunda in particular is associated with a very businesslike, no-nonsense community of women. When she decides to take over the neighboring restaurant in order to cater for a film crew and make some extra money, she briskly and efficiently negotiates with her female neighbors to obtain the food she needs. The scene begins with Raimunda walking up the street pulling the cart of food she has already purchased. Her friend Regina, a prostitute, walks into the frame, and Raimunda negotiates buying a pork roast from her. As they say goodbye, she continues walking forward while the camera tracks backward, following her. Another friend, Inés, walks into the frame and she negotiates with her as well, easily convincing her to part with the sausages and cookies she has just brought back from the country despite the woman's enthusiasm for them. Inés leaves and Raimunda continues to walk forward, satisfied and smiling. The next shot is of the menu board at the restaurant, advertising home-cooked "Spanish" food.

The fast-paced negotiations and moving camera in this scene create a strong sense of momentum, of Raimunda barreling through her obstacles. Along with contributing to

her portrayal as a tough, effective woman, it also creates a sense of the female community in which she lives. Both women are her neighbors and, although Regina is broke and only has the pork to eat and Inés is incredibly excited about her purchases, they gladly part with them as a favor to Raimunda. This gesture is not, however, only derived from a feminine sense of community and generosity. The women's actions are also very businesslike, as Raimunda promises to pay them for the food the next day, and later even gives them a profit. Raimunda's distinctive community of women – based on friendship but also extremely aware of patriarchal currency and transaction – is quite significant to the portrayal of women in the film.

This urban community comes together again when Raimunda needs to move a refrigerator to the restaurant. She has just finished paying Regina and Inés, making sure they turn a profit, and she asks them to help her transport the fridge. This is a scene that would normally be elided in a conventional film, as it does not move the plot forward and is something that could be explained with a throwaway line about the new refrigerator, but Almodóvar wants to make sure we see these women working together and managing without the help of men. The three women roll the refrigerator out the door, into the elevator, and across the street to the restaurant without breaking a sweat. At the end of their journey, Raimunda gets the two women to work with her at the restaurant making desserts and drinks. Again, a communal effort between women has been combined with a business transaction.

By setting up two very different female communities in *Volver*, Almodóvar creates a nuanced depiction of how women work together. Raimunda is able to interact effectively with both the rural, traditional group of women and the urban, mercantile

group as well, conveying that she is definitively feminine and traditional but is also able to function quite well in the patriarchal economy. Both communities, although they function in different ways, are based on a subversion of male authority through the use of typically feminine skills.

Raimunda and the Domestic Sphere

Part of Raimunda's effectiveness in the world of the film derives from her proficiency in the domestic realm. This trait is established from the very beginning, as she is the one scrubbing the grave in the opening scene. Her domestic aptitude is further developed when we see her working her three jobs, all of which are domestically oriented and menial. Raimunda's employment is nothing special; many women work such jobs simply to make a living, as she does. As the film goes on, however, Raimunda's domestic skills become central as her relationship to the domestic sphere becomes complicated.

After she and Paula have returned to their city apartment from La Mancha, there is a shot of Raimunda washing the dishes. Almodóvar places the camera directly above the sink, looking straight down. The running faucet is on the left of the frame, and Raimunda stands to the right. At the center of the frame are her hands washing the dishes in the sink (most importantly, the knife that will soon be used to kill Paco). The viewer is also afforded a rather gratuitous view of Raimunda's cleavage due to the angle of the camera, and we cannot see her face.

This shot is pertinent to my argument in a number of ways, particularly in relation to the pie shots that Adrienne Shelly frequently uses in *Waitress*. Shelly's shots,

however, were point-of-view shots, so they must be read in different ways. Second, the focus on an appliance as the center of the shot refers back to Almodóvar's early film, *¿Que he hecho para merecer esto?* (*What Have I Done to Deserve This?*), in which he framed Carmen Maura through the windows of household appliances. In that context, the shot in *Volver* seems to be commenting on how Raimunda is, at this point in the film, defined by her position in the domestic. Her breasts also figure largely in the shot, while her face does not and, although breasts exist primarily to feed infants, their major function as objects of the gaze is a sexual one. Although over the course of the film we come to reinterpret her body and perceive a kind of maternal sexuality, this shot composition indicates that, at this point of the film, in the eyes of men, Raimunda exists as a domestic figure and as a sexual object, with no subjectivity or agency.

Raimunda's relationship to the domestic becomes even more important to the plot and the visuals in the scenes following Paco's death. Raimunda gets off the bus from work and discovers Paula waiting for her. Both are wearing red, and the bus behind them is also completely red, a color Almodóvar uses prominently in the majority of his films. In this scene, it would most obviously signify death, although it takes on other meanings as the film continues. When Raimunda and Paula get back to the apartment and Raimunda finds the body, Paula tells her about the attempted rape and her use of the knife as self-defense. In the film's most obvious allusion to *Mildred Pierce*, Raimunda tells Paula she will take the blame for her, although this act never comes into play.

The next sequence is one of the most memorable in the film. Raimunda sends Paula to her room and goes to clean up the body herself. First, there is a high angle shot of Paco's body facedown on the turquoise tile floor, a pool of blood ebbing out from

under his torso. Raimunda walks into the shot and looks down at him, then rolls up her sleeves. What follows is a montage of mostly close-ups, set to tense Hitchcockian music. First, Raimunda's hands reaching for the paper towels, then an extreme close-up of paper towels being laid down over a pool of blood, quickly absorbing the crimson liquid until the screen almost fills with red. Next, the high angle shot again, as Raimunda walks around the body, laying paper towels on the blood. Almodóvar then cuts to a closer version of the same shot as she moves Paco's bloody hand and begins to scrub the floor with the towels. The next shot is a canted angle showing us the garbage can from above as Raimunda's foot opens it, revealing a bright blue liner into which she throws the blood-soaked white towels. Then, a closer shot of the same thing, the top opening again to reveal more paper towels, and the lid closes with spatters of blood on the handle and the floor around it.

We next see Raimunda mopping up the blood between Paco's arm and torso. At this point, we have yet to see her face since her promise to take the blame. All the shots have been of the cleanup process. Next, the first moving shot of the sequence follows the mop head as Raimunda wrings the bloody water out and proceeds to mop up some more. Finally, Almodóvar cuts to a shot with Paco's body in the foreground, panning up and to the right as Raimunda pulls the knife out from under him and holds it in front of her face, studying it intently.

The next shot is a revision of the dishwashing shot I discussed earlier. This time it is a close-up from Raimunda's point of view of her hands washing the bloody knife. In comparison with the earlier shot, this shows that Raimunda has become more of a subject, and the routine of washing cutlery has become an immediate necessity rather

than a routine domestic habit she repeats to maintain her place in patriarchy. She is taking the skills she has been using for years and implementing them to subvert the system instead of maintaining it.

The sequence continues with a shot of Raimunda rolling Paco's body over, and we see his face for the first time. The camera follows his body as it rolls and then continues to track in on her face, looking tired and haggard as she shakes her head and reaches to zip up his fly. The next shot begins at her elbow, looking past her into the refrigerator as she removes a shelf. It then follows the shelf as she puts it on the still-bloody floor next to a carton of orange juice and other groceries, then tracks right to Paco's body as she lifts it and begins to drag it. The sequence ends abruptly when the doorbell rings.

The attention paid in this sequence to the intricacies and minutiae of cleaning up after the murder is notable. Again, in another film, this scene would have been elided, but Almodóvar spends almost two minutes on it. He actually exaggerates the reality of the scene by focusing on the brilliant red of the blood and contrasting it with the cool greens and blues of the kitchen. By choosing to include this process, Almodóvar asserts the importance of Raimunda's domestic skills, as well as highlighting the minutiae of the female experience. As Chantal Akerman put it in an interview on her own film, *Jeanne Dielman*, "I give space to things which were never, almost never, shown in that way, like the daily gestures of a woman. They are the lowest in the hierarchy of film images...If you choose to show a woman's gestures so precisely, it's because you love them."³⁷

Almodóvar's focus on these "daily gestures" of Raimunda's life, even if they are used in

³⁷ Teresa de Lauretis, "Aesthetic and Feminist Theory: Rethinking Women's Cinema." *Female Spectatorship*. Ed. E. Deidre Pribram (New York: Verso, 1988), 179.

an extraordinary situation, lends them a significance rarely given to the domestic in narrative cinema. The script even comments on this notion. When her friend Emilio comes over to talk to Raimunda, she dismisses the blood on her neck as “women’s troubles,” and he does not give it a second thought. She and the film know that purely feminine concerns are invisible and unimportant to men.

The next sequence of importance occurs when Raimunda and Paula move Paco’s body. Here, Almodóvar begins the visual battle between red and blue in the film. The two women wear blue tracksuits, signifying that they are working against patriarchy and male domination. Paula, though, is still wearing her red shirt under a blue sweatshirt, reminding the viewer of Paco’s violation of her. Mother and daughter drag the body, wrapped in blankets, out of the apartment and into the elevator, which has a blue door. With great difficulty, sweating and breathing heavily, they get the body onto the street and around the corner to Emilio’s restaurant. Raimunda tells Paula to wait outside while she continues on with the body. She drags it into the back room, her blue tracksuit contrasting intensely with the red door, and proceeds to heave Paco into the red deep freeze. As she emerges from the restaurant, she and Paula embrace against the red doors and signs of the building.

Not only does this scene prefigure the scene of the women moving the fridge, it also emphasizes the time and effort it takes Raimunda and Paula to accomplish this task, barely eliding anything and forcing the audience to experience it with them. On top of this, the visual contrast between the reds and blues in the scene conveys the uneasy relationship the two women now have with patriarchal society. The red of the restaurant and the bus Raimunda arrived on earlier denotes their firm location in patriarchy, as

instruments of the state and of male capitalism. The women's change into blue clothing indicates that they are now working against these male societal forces, making this scene a turning point in the film.

The other major instance of the domestic in *Volver* is Raimunda's takeover of Emilio's restaurant, already established as an instrument of patriarchy. With the aforementioned help of her female friends, she is able to use her domestic skills to make money for herself and her daughter. The importance is highlighted visually numerous times, most notably in a scene towards the middle of the film. It begins with a shot from the side of Raimunda's hand dicing red peppers. Almodóvar then cuts to an overhead shot, the reverse of the shot of Raimunda washing the bloody knife. This one has her hands at the top of the frame, so it could be considered a kind of upside-down point of view shot. He then cuts back to the original side view before beginning the action of the scene, in which Agustina comes to talk to Raimunda.

The insertion of this seemingly unnecessary sequence again emphasizes Raimunda's domestic skills (the "daily gestures of woman") and their importance to the patriarchal system. Notably, she is dicing *red* peppers, implying that she has gained some sort of control of patriarchal tools and substances. The upside-down point of view shot is also intriguing, as it conveys a sense of subjectivity but in an unconventional way. It could be read as signifying that her subjectivity is now firmly against the grain of male-dominated society. She sees, and her sight is important, but she sees in a different way. By emphasizing and focusing on Raimunda's domestic skills and how she uses them to gain power in patriarchy, Almodóvar is able to create a solidly feminist aesthetic and subjectivity.

Constructed Femininity and the Gaze

A large part of the feminist aesthetic of *Volver* is Almodóvar's persistent comment on constructed femininity and demystification of the female form. Through makeup and costume, Almodóvar constructs Raimunda as a voluptuous and alluring woman. She always wears low cut shirts and form-fitting skirts, and Penelope Cruz has admitted in interviews that she wore padding on her rear end to heighten Raimunda's maternal curves.³⁸ Numerous characters even comment on Raimunda's body. Regina says, "With your cleavage and my mojitos, we'll make a fortune," and at the end, Irene comments on her breasts for absolutely no reason, asking if she had work done. These explicit references to Raimunda's curvy figure in the script highlight what the audience has already noticed due to Almodóvar's costuming.

Despite the intense sexuality of Raimunda's body, there is no romance at all in the film. Raimunda's relationship with Paco ends with his death early in the film, and the only sexual activity between them occurs when he tries to have sex with her, she says she is too tired, and he ends up masturbating lying next to her, the camera focusing on her exhausted face. There is an opportunity for romance in the film, as the man who runs the film crew and arranges Raimunda's catering services seems to be interested in her. At one point, she tells him to stop looking at her "like that," and he goes away. After that scene, it is never addressed again.

This complete dismissal of heterosexual romance in the film would seem to be in keeping with the traditions of the maternal melodrama, in which the mother is not allowed to desire. In *Volver*, however, the construction of desire is different; it is not the

³⁸ Karin Luisa Badt, "Returning to Life: Talking with Almodovar, Penelope Cruz, and Carmen Maura at Cannes" (*Bright Lights Film Journal*: 2006), 54.

case that Raimunda is not allowed to have desire and is punished for doing so. Instead, she simply chooses not to, as her daughter and her community of female friends are more important and rewarding for her. In her review of the film, Marsha Kinder discusses Raimunda's relationship to desire, saying, "Raimunda may not express sexual desire, yet the vitality of Cruz's stunning performance keeps her resilient sexuality alive...it is a sexuality rooted in motherlove and maternity and not dependent on men."³⁹ By offering up the possibility of romance and allowing Raimunda to dismiss it, the film allows her to have desire and once again privileges her choice and subjectivity.

Almodóvar also comments on constructed femininity by working to demystify the female body in the film. At one point, there is a brief shot of Raimunda sitting in her room, applying her makeup. By showing this process, the film suggests the constructed nature of female beauty. In a characteristic Almodóvar scene, he demystifies the female body even further by showing Raimunda on the toilet. Again, this scene would have been elided in a conventional film, as it is something that is not normally shown unless for dramatic or comedic effect. Additionally, in this scene, Raimunda smells her mother's characteristic farts, about which she proceeds to have a detailed conversation with Sole and Paula. Not only has Almodóvar shown a sexualized woman on the toilet, he has now also discussed female flatulence at great length. In *Volver*, the female body is sexualized, but Almodóvar reveals that beauty to be partially constructed and also reduces the female body to the biological, removing the mystery that surrounds the female form in classical cinema and building what might be called a feminist aesthetic.

³⁹ Marsha Kinder, "Volver" (*Film Quarterly*: 2007), Issue 60 Vol. 3, 9.60.

The major component of the feminist aesthetic in *Volver* is the manner in which Almodóvar constructs the gaze. In a central scene in the film, Raimunda sings a song that her mother taught her as a child. Geetha Ramanathan describes singing a song as “a conventional filmic placement for a woman,”⁴⁰ and in classical Hollywood, the woman singing has provided the primary opportunity for objectification. In films like *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946), female stars like Rita Hayworth perform songs in nightclub scenarios and display themselves for male enjoyment. The gaze is an objectifying one, and it is firmly placed in the possession of the male character.

When Raimunda performs in *Volver*, the looking relationships are quite different. First, the only reason Raimunda sings at all is because Paula has never seen her perform and she wants to give her a treat. They are at the wrap party Raimunda is hosting for the film crew, so Raimunda goes over and asks the musicians to play with her. Unbeknownst to her, her mother is hiding in Sole’s car, having tagged along to get a glimpse of Raimunda and Paula. When Raimunda starts singing, the shot construction is very telling.

The song begins with a close-up of the guitarists’ fingers that pans left to focus on Raimunda’s face. She starts to sing, her eyes filling with tears, looking off screen to the left. The next shot is of Paula and Sole watching her, indicating that they are the ones for whom Raimunda is performing, already a departure from conventional female performance in film. Then, Almodóvar begins to play with the shot construction a bit. He cuts back to a medium shot of Raimunda singing with the band and then, instead of cutting back to Paula and Sole or to other audience members, he cuts to a close-up of

⁴⁰ Geetha Ramanathan, *Feminist Auteurs: Reading Women's Films* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2006), 171.

Irene rolling down the car window, looking out with tears in her eyes. He then cuts back to a close-up of Raimunda singing, getting very emotional, and then looking slightly off screen left again. Next is another shot of Irene, looking slightly off screen right, which creates an eyeline match between the two women, although we know Raimunda does not see her mother. Raimunda then looks even more left and a tear falls from her eye, and the next shot shows Irene looking startled and moving back into the car. This way, Almodóvar visually tricks the viewer into thinking that Raimunda is looking at Irene and has spotted her in the car. After showing Raimunda again, however, he cuts to a long shot of the car in between two people's bodies, indicating that she cannot see Irene at all. Finally, he cuts back to the close-up of Raimunda as she finishes the song, and the last shot of the scene is of Irene lying on the car seat crying.

With this scene, Almodóvar places his female protagonist in a situation that is conventionally one of extreme objectification for women. Instead, he makes it quite clear that she is performing for her daughter in particular, and then establishes the primary gaze between Raimunda and her mother. Once again, we have the “mutual gazing between mother and child”⁴¹ that was evident in *Waitress*, constructed as the primary gaze in the film. This looking relationship is a drastic departure from the conventional construction of the female as the object of the male gaze, and it is a key element of Almodóvar's feminist aesthetic in *Volver*.

⁴¹ Jackie Byars, “Gazes/Voices/Power: Expanding Psychoanalysis for Feminist Film and Television Theory.” *Female Spectatorship*. Ed. E. Deidre Pribram (New York: Verso, 1988), 124.

Levels of Maternity

Perhaps the most complex component of *Volter* is the layering of mother-daughter relationships. We have Raimunda's relationship with her own mother, Irene, and her relationship with her daughter, Paula, as well. The relationship between Sole and Irene is also portrayed in the film, as well as the troubled quest of Agustina to find out more about her own mother. Analysis of all of these relationships on their own, however, would be lengthy and most likely not contribute more to my argument, so I will leave them alone for the time being.

The transgenerational examination of motherhood surrounding Irene, Raimunda, and Paula makes the film particularly important to the genre of the maternal friendship film. The basis for comparing *Volter* to the maternal melodrama is that it is a self-acknowledged revision of *Mildred Pierce*, one of the archetypal films in the genre. References to the 1945 film abound. First, on a plot level, as I have already discussed, *Volter* involves a daughter murdering her mother's husband, with whom she was sexually involved (although this time it is unwilling on Paula's part), and the mother's decision to take the blame. Almodóvar's film, however, portrays the mother-daughter relationship as much more benign and productive than *Mildred Pierce*, in which Mildred and Veda's relationship is toxic and results in both their downfalls. Instead, Raimunda shelters Paula and tries to make her feel better, and Paula does the same for her. When Raimunda discovers that Irene is alive, she and Paula storm out of Sole's apartment and walk down the street. Tears stream down Raimunda's face, and Paula walks alongside her, rubbing her arm and looking at her with a concerned expression on her face, even taking out tissues for her. Paula then suggests they go back and talk to Irene, and

Raimunda reluctantly agrees. Here, the film demonstrates a healthy mother-daughter relationship of mutual caring and support. Paula is able to comfort and advise her mother as well as receive said comfort, making their relationship vastly different from that of Mildred and Veda. *Volver* also revises *Mildred Pierce* in that Paula does not seek out Paco's attention. Veda seduces Mildred's husband, Monte, and the two of them run off together, but here Paco tries to force himself on Paula, making the murder a case of self-defense rather than a crime of passion. Raimunda volunteers to take the blame for the death, but due to her ingenuity and resourcefulness, she never has to follow through on that promise as Mildred does.

Almodóvar also refers to *Mildred Pierce* visually, particularly in his use of mirror shots and shots through glass. The mirror shot is extensively used in Michael Curtiz's film, emphasizing the hardness of the film's world. Mirror shots are also a trademark feature of the noir genre, from which *Mildred Pierce* borrows heavily. Almodóvar chooses not to use a film noir filming style, despite the mirror shots, and instead gives us an explosion of bright colors that is a major departure from the stark black and white of noir. Finally, the shot composition of *Volver* is different in a major way from its predecessor. Mary Ann Doane asserts that the women's film "functions quite precisely to immobilize,"⁴² and *Mildred Pierce* literally immobilizes Joan Crawford. In the majority of shots, she is standing completely still, as if trapped by the frame. In *Volver*, on the other hand, Penelope Cruz is constantly moving, going in and out of the frame on her own speed, or walking rapidly so that the camera follows her, as in the scene in which she negotiates with her neighbors. Instead of immobilizing her, the film is driven *by* her;

⁴² Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 19.

she is the guiding force of momentum behind the story and the camera. By creating visual allusions to *Mildred Pierce* with his mirror shots but then departing from the earlier film's style to create a more exuberant, energetic aesthetic, Almodóvar emphatically and overtly reinterprets a major maternal melodrama.

Volver's three generations of mother-daughter relationships makes for a complex portrayal of motherhood. As discussed above, Raimunda and Paula's relationship is characterized by their ability to mutually help and support each other, moving easily between the roles of mother and child. This element is also implied in the relationship between Raimunda and Irene. Visually, Irene is portrayed as almost childlike; she is always hiding under the bed when Raimunda comes over to Sole's apartment, and their first reunion occurs when Raimunda peers under the bed and sees her mother lying there, looking like a frightened child. Irene emerges, and the two stand looking at each other, the bed between them as a reminder of the sexual molestation that came between them.

After Paula comforts Raimunda and tells her to go back, the next scene is the cathartic reconciliation between Raimunda and her mother. The scene begins with the two women walking down the street as the camera tracks backward, framing them from the front. Raimunda is wearing a crimson sweater and her mother is wearing a light blue one. These colors have been at war for much of the film, but in this scene they come together as the physical proximity and affection of the women brings them to an understanding. The use of a two-shot here also emphasizes the reconciliation between the women, as they are never in the same frame during the previous meeting scene but rather framed in a rapid shot-reverse shot pattern. The visuals of the catharsis scene emphasize the growing closeness between Raimunda and her mother.

The scene also resolves their relationship on a plot level. Irene explains her reappearance and apologizes profusely to Raimunda for not seeing that her father was molesting her, implicitly apologizing for not protecting her. She was not able to do what Raimunda did for Paula, and she says she has “been in a living purgatory.” The scene ends with the camera tracking slowly back from the two women sitting on a bench. Raimunda leans over and cuddles up to Irene like a child, her head on her shoulder, finally feeling safe in her mother’s arms.

By creating three generations of mother-daughter relationships, Almodóvar is able to create a much more complex portrayal of motherhood than the film’s predecessor, *Mildred Pierce*. Irene and Raimunda’s relationship examines the failure of a mother to protect her daughter from a malevolent patriarchal figure and the subsequent breakdown in communication. As a result, Raimunda has become stronger and is able to protect her own daughter from the same patriarchal aggression. In *Volver*, motherhood is portrayed as an intergenerational relationship that develops from mother to daughter and is, on the whole, productive and nurturing.

Finding Agency in Patriarchy

The resolution of *Volver* is much more open-ended than that of *Waitress*. It does not look into the future, offering us a clear utopian picture of its characters’ lives to come, but it does end on a positive note, situated firmly in its world of female solidarity. One option the film gives Raimunda is that of becoming a permanent restaurant owner. In one scene, she enlists Regina’s help in driving out to an isolated area and burying the deep freeze containing Paco’s body. On the way, the two women make a business deal in

which Regina gets to work the bar at the restaurant, essentially becoming a partner.

Although it is not alluded to again, this scene implies that Raimunda is creating a career for herself with the support of her female community and will therefore have a safe space and a form of agency in the patriarchal system.

The film also offers a subtle resolution of the Paco matter. Towards the end of the film, Raimunda, Paula, Irene, and Sole all go out to a river for a picnic. This happens to be the river where Raimunda buried Paco, as it was his favorite spot. Irene reminisces about how they used to come there on family picnics, but now the river is almost dry, symbolizing the loss of Raimunda's childhood and of her love for Paco. As Raimunda and Paula stand apart looking at the river, Paula notices the grave marker Raimunda carved on a tree. She looks at her mother, who nods and pulls her close, demonstrating the kind of nonverbal communication I discussed in the chapter on *Waitress*. Although this is the only incidence of it in *Volver*, it is still present as a key element in female relationships.

In keeping with its portrayal of intergenerational transference and development of relationships, *Volver* also hints at a future for Paula. After their stop at the river, the women go back to their hometown to spend some time at Aunt Paula's now-empty house. In a brief shot, Almodóvar shows Paula on an exercise bike, the same bike that was used by Irene while she took care of her Aunt Paula. Young Paula sits there on the bike, pedaling away, and then just smiles to herself. The shot is very short and seemingly insignificant, but it conveys Paula's similarity to her grandmother and hints at a future in which she will carry on the ideals of maternity and femininity embodied by Irene and

Raimunda. The tradition of a mutually supportive and caring mother-daughter relationship will continue with Paula.

Finally, Irene's fate at the end of the film is to be a mother once again. Agustina visits the family at dinner and tells them more about her cancer treatments. Although Irene hides during the conversation so Agustina will not know she is alive, she decides to go and take care of the lonely neighbor. She appears to Agustina as if a ghost, and the superstitious woman believes that she is there to take care of her. Irene gives her the shot she needs and puts her to bed, acting for all intents and purposes like a mother with a child. We then see her watching an old movie on television and knitting. The movie she is watching is Luchino Visconti's *Bellissima* (1951), an Italian Neorealist film about a mother who forces her daughter to audition for a beauty contest. This plot echoes Irene's teaching Raimunda how to sing for the child singer competition, and it recalls the persistent trend of the objectification of children in beauty contests leading to rape by the father. Irene smiles knowingly as she watches, indicating that she now knows better than to make her daughter into an object.

Immediately after, as if reading her mother's mind, Raimunda comes over from across the street. She tells her mother she missed her and asks if she is going to stay and take care of Agustina. When Irene says yes, Raimunda protests that she has so much to tell her, alluding to Paco, and Irene replies that they will see each other every day. This remark, combined with an earlier comment by Raimunda about her nostalgia for Aunt Paula's house, implies that Raimunda may return to the town rather than staying in the city and running a restaurant. It is here that the film does not offer a complete resolution. It is entirely possible that Raimunda may choose to stay in the city and run the restaurant,

gaining agency for herself in a patriarchal world and carving out her own safe space in the city. She may also choose to return to her maternal hometown, retreating from the intense patriarchal values of the city and living with the traditional community of women with whom she was raised. Either way, she will have a group of women surrounding her to help her flourish and raise Paula well. In *Volver*, the options for resourceful women like Raimunda are plentiful, whether she wants to gain power in patriarchy or exist happily in a safe matriarchal society. At the end of the film, Raimunda is given the power of choice, which is the ultimate agency and the crux of feminism.

Conclusion

With *Volver*, Pedro Almodóvar returns to a genre he has visited before: the maternal melodrama. In his 1991 film *Tacones lejanos*, he created a rather simplistic retelling of *Mildred Pierce* with a more positive twist at the end. His second revision of *Mildred Pierce*, *Volver* creates a much more layered and complex reinterpretation of the form and themes of the maternal melodrama, making it fit perfectly into the category of the new maternal friendship film. By establishing a strong sense of female tradition and space, Almodóvar conveys the shaping influence of communities of women and the ways in which they can work together to great effect. His protagonist, Raimunda, is a dynamo of feminine action; she is efficient and effective and uses her domestic skills to subvert patriarchy when it is necessary to protect her daughter and gain agency for herself as an entrepreneur. Although she is portrayed as beautiful and vibrant, Almodóvar exposes the constructed nature of female beauty and demystifies the female body, but implies that this does not make her any less beautiful. Her beauty stems from her own sense of self and

her relationship with her daughter and does not depend on male appreciation, making it a truly feminist sexuality.

On top of this examination of female beauty and power in patriarchy, Almodóvar explores mother-daughter relationships using three generations of women. These relationships are based on protection and mutual support, offering a positive rejoinder to the toxic mother-daughter relationship in *Mildred Pierce*. Finally, through the support of these productive and healthy mother-daughter relationships and the communities of women around them, Raimunda, Irene, and Paula are able to find places for themselves in patriarchal society. Like *Waitress*, *Volver* demonstrates how the forms and language of patriarchal narrative cinema can be harnessed to create feminist films.

Mamma Mia!

My analysis of the third film will take a different approach from the previous chapters. Phyllida Lloyd's *Mamma Mia!* (2008) is not an art film that can be read as a carefully crafted text. Instead, I will examine it more on the level of mass art. Jane Feuer, in her discussion of the Hollywood musical, defines mass art as attempting to "capture on celluloid the quality of live entertainment."⁴³ When *Mamma Mia!* was released in the summer of 2008, it was a tremendous box office success, grossing \$144 million in the United States and smashing *Titanic*'s record as the top-earning film of all time in the United Kingdom. In an era when the movie musical is no longer a common genre, for a pop musical like *Mamma Mia!* to be as successful as it was is unusual. Part of the film's success can be attributed to the fact that its source material is one of the longest-running musicals in Broadway history. Aside from that, however, the film's audience consisted of many who had not seen the show and included men as well, a testament perhaps to the growing power of the feminine film.

Mamma Mia! is a musical based on the songs of the 1970s pop band ABBA. Its largely comedic plot centers on the wedding of a young woman named Sophie (Amanda Seyfried). Raised by her mother, Donna (Meryl Streep), she has grown up without any idea of her father's identity. Before her wedding, she reads her mother's diary and invites the three men her mother dated the year she was born to the wedding, assuming that one of them must be her father. The three men--Sam, Bill, and Harry--arrive, each with his own perspective on his relationship with Donna, and chaos ensues. Thrown into the mix are Donna's old friends and former backup girls, in a disco act called "Donna and

⁴³ Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*. 2nd ed. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 2.

the Dynamos,” Rosie (Julie Walters) and Tanya (Christine Baranski). Sophie has two female friends with her as well, and the two female trios are often set up as parallels in the storyline. The action is all set on an island in Greece, where Donna owns and runs a small hotel. The primary conflict, aside from the mix-up about Sophie’s father(s) is that Donna does not want Sophie to get married; she wants her to go out and live her own life first, and at the same time is reluctant to let her only daughter go.

One of the most remarkable characteristics of the film as a phenomenon is the casting of Meryl Streep as Donna. Streep is one of the highest-regarded serious actresses of all time, holding the record sixteen Oscar nominations and being generally beloved. She is best known for her roles in intense dramatic films like *Sophie’s Choice* (Alan J. Pakula, 1982) and *The Hours* (Stephen Daldry, 2002). Playing the lead role in a fluffy musical comedy like *Mamma Mia!* was a huge departure from her usual films and star persona. As film critic A.O. Scott puts it, “There is a degree of fascination in watching an Oscar-winning Yale School of Drama graduate mug and squirm, shimmy and shriek and generally fill every moment with antic, purposeless energy.”⁴⁴ Scott sums up one effect Streep’s presence has on *Mamma Mia!*; because such a dramatic actress is relaxing, we can relax and have fun as well.

The musical genre has been the focus of scholars for many decades. Most agree that its primary concern is to bring together disparate elements, always signified by a heterosexual romantic couple at the center. The couple’s gradual unification over the course of the film symbolizes the formation of a stable community surrounding them,⁴⁵

⁴⁴ A.O. Scott, "Movie Review - Mamma Mia!." *New York Times* 18 July 2008
< <http://movies.nytimes.com/2008/07/18/movies/18mamm.html>>.

⁴⁵ Feuer 15.

and it is partially from this perspective that I will examine *Mamma Mia!*. The other component is one that is seen in both *Waitress* and *Volver*, and in the maternal melodrama in general: excess. The musical is, by definition, excessive since it creates a world in which breaking out into song and dance routines is normal. Most musicals do this by attempting to integrate the songs into the diegesis, either through the conceit of the “backstage musical” or by using specific cues to bring in the songs and signal our movement into the diegesis of song.⁴⁶ *Mamma Mia!* is unique in that it does not attempt to excuse or camouflage the musical numbers at all. Instead, the characters break into song seemingly out of nowhere. This lack of subtlety conveys that the filmmakers do not care about integrating the songs and dances to achieve the feeling of utopia.

On the contrary, the film is almost aggressively excessive and feminine. When the title appears onscreen, it is written in silver glitter and a shimmering sound effect is played. In this way, the film adopts a Third Wave feminist usage of “girliness,” taking ownership of the quality and driving it to exaggeration, leading many to dub the film “cheesy” and “over-the-top.” This characteristic allows us to compare the musical to the maternal melodrama by virtue of their similarly excessive aesthetics. On a plot level, *Mamma Mia!* can be seen as a reworking of the maternal melodrama in its choice to focus on the mother-daughter relationship rather than on romance. It also privileges female sexuality and creates a strong community of women in which men are largely unnecessary. On an aesthetic level, the way the film plays with conventions of the musical genre and focuses on female subjectivity allows us to read it as a feminist film.

⁴⁶ Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 26.

Utopia and Community

A major convention of the musical that is present in *Mamma Mia!* but adapted in a feminist manner is the construction of a utopian world. In his article, “Entertainment and Utopia,” Richard Dyer asserts that the musical attempts to construct “what utopia would feel like.”⁴⁷ *Mamma Mia!*’s construction of utopia is immediately apparent in the film’s setting on a Greek island. Not only is this location idyllic in itself, the majority of the film was shot on a soundstage rather than on location, so the sunlight and colors are all extra bright, creating an even more exaggerated sense of the utopian.

The musical’s construction of utopia relies on the establishment of a stable community. *Mamma Mia!* is intensely focused on the tight-knit community at Donna’s hotel. There are almost no scenes that occur outside of the hotel and its island. Aside from our primary characters, the main inhabitants of the island are the people who work at Donna’s hotel, a literal Greek chorus that contributes to the musical numbers and provides extras for dramatic scenes. They are essentially the townspeople of the island, and Donna is their matriarch.

Not only is the community in *Mamma Mia!* led by a woman, but she surrounds herself with women as well. A strong emphasis is placed on Donna and her friends as a unit. When Rosie and Tanya first arrive, the three women run to meet each other and do their “Donna and the Dynamos” routine (“Dynamos! Dynamite! Sleep all day and wha-boom all night!”), establishing their importance as a group. The support they provide for each other is evident at numerous points in the film, particularly in the “Chiquitita” number. Donna has just encountered her three ex-boyfriends for the first time and is

⁴⁷ Ibid. 18.

quite upset, so Rosie and Tanya sing her a song to make her feel better. They pamper her with makeup and perfume, using traditionally feminine tools to make her feel beautiful and safe. In this scene, their power as a unit is made evident.

The potency of Donna and her friends then spreads to the whole island, making the community that is an archetypal part of the musical solidly feminine. To continue to cheer Donna up, Rosie and Tanya begin to sing “Dancing Queen,” and Donna is soon jumping on the bed in youthful glee. She leaps into the air in slow motion and does a split just as the first chorus begins, creating a sense of giddiness in both Donna and the audience. The three of them then slide down the banister and dance across the courtyard, the choreography making it appear as if they are going to take flight at any moment. As they pass, the women working at the hotel (members of the “Greek chorus”) stop what they are doing and join them. The ever-growing group continues to dance across the courtyard and across the island. When they emerge from the hotel gates, there is a shot in blurry slow motion, once again as the chorus begins. Donna leaps into the air, waving her feather boa and leading the crowd of women. The next shot shows the women dancing and skipping along with the beautiful view of the bay behind them, adding to the utopian character of the scene as the women’s excitement spreads. Even a little old woman carrying a bundle of sticks throws down her load and yells in jubilation, running to join them. Eventually, the entire female population of the island is dancing down to the docks as the men applaud from afar. Once they are on the dock, the women finally begin to dance in unison, indicating that they have come together as a community. Here, Lloyd uses a number of long shots to convey fully the size and power of this group. They all point at Donna as the leader and she cannonballs into the water in slow motion,

followed by the rest of them. This number is one of the most important in the film, as it solidly establishes the strong sense of female power in the community of *Mamma Mia!* and conveys that power to the audience through the energy of the song.

Indeed, the emphasis on female community is so pronounced that, when the three fathers arrive, they are immediately relegated to the outskirts. First, instead of giving them real rooms, Sophie hides them in the goat house, indicating that they do not belong in the safe space of the hotel. Then, when Donna discovers them, she ejects them and they retire to Bill's boat, where they remain for the rest of the film. Their bonding song with Sophie, "Our Last Summer," occurs outside of the main hotel space as they sail around the island. The community of men that forms between them is confined to the outskirts of the filmic space, and they therefore have no power in the female community that exists at Donna's hotel.

Female Subjectivity and Sexuality

Another component of *Mamma Mia!* that is important to its feminist slant is the premium it places on female subjectivity and sexuality. From the very beginning, the narrative is established from Sophie's point of view. The film opens with her voice singing "I Have a Dream," and then shows her mailing the wedding invitations to her three fathers. Just before Donna is introduced, the film establishes her narrative voice as well. To tell her friends about her possible fathers, Sophie reads from Donna's old diary. This emphasis on Donna's written record of her life indicates the importance of her subjectivity, as well as her ability to harness patriarchal language, although she generally communicates in other ways. Throughout the film, Phyllida Lloyd also uses point of

view shots from Donna and Sophie's perspectives. The most notable occurrence of these shots is when each woman encounters the three fathers. The camera shows Sophie's point of view as it swish-pans from one man to the next, conveying her distress at being unable to sense who her father is. When Donna first looks at the men, the next shots are clearly from her perspective as she peers up from under a trapdoor. First, the camera pans up Harry's body from his feet and, once it reaches his face, the shot dissolves to what he looked like back when Donna knew him. With Bill, we see a shot of the tattoos on his knees and then cut to a still-dissolving shot of him in the past. Finally, we cut right to a shot of Sam in hippie garb, indicating that we are now firmly situated in Donna's point of view. With scenes like this one, Phyllida Lloyd emphasizes Sophie's and Donna's subjectivity in the film.

In keeping with this focus on female subjectivity is the film's emphasis on female subjectivity. Again, the reading of Donna's diary establishes her position as a desiring subject, and this is made more explicit when Tanya asks Donna if she is "getting any." Donna, holding a phallic drill in her hand, proceeds to tilt it upward, turning it on so it makes a whirring sound. The three women laugh and Donna jokingly says, "Down, boy!" This indicates that, although she is not in a sexual relationship, Donna does have a power to desire that is equivalent to that of a man.

A couple of scenes later, Donna's sexual frustration and desire is made more explicit in the film's titular song. Having secretly spotted her three exes hiding in the goat house, Donna begins to sing about the resurgence of her desire for Sam. She proceeds to climb all over the goat house, hoping for "just one look" of him, again emphasizing the female power of the gaze and the male as object. The sexual nature of

her gaze is made extremely explicit when, lying on the roof of the building, she sings, “There’s a fire within my soul” and puts her hands over her groin. This choreography makes it very clear that her love for Sam is quite sexual in nature. With this number, *Mamma Mia!* makes the feminist statement of portraying a middle-aged woman as a sexually desiring subject.

The sexual power of older women is also conveyed in Tanya’s big number, “Does Your Mother Know.” Tanya, who has been married many times, is portrayed as a model of constructed femininity. The other women constantly remark on her plastic surgery, her cosmetic products, and her clothes. She is an expert at the feminine masquerade, constructing herself as an object of the gaze to get what she wants. In this scene, she is propositioned by a young man Sophie’s age who has been making eyes at her the whole film. Backed up by all the young women at the beach, she sings to him, “boy, you’re only a child,” deflecting his advances while displaying herself as an attractive but powerful woman. She does high kicks and dance moves that highlight her sexuality all the more because of her age. At one point, she shouts to the young men on the beach, and they proceed to dance for her and all the young women, performing for them instead of the other way around. Eventually, she joins them and dances with a number of the young men, displaying her power as they fawn over her. Finally, at the end of the song, she blows on one of the men and they all fall down onto the sand, communicating their submission to her sexual power. In this number, the idea of an older woman as a sexually desiring subject is taken a step further and portrays the older woman as a sexually powerful figure.

Donna's other friend, Rosie, is also a sexually independent and desiring older woman. An extremely successful cookbook author (once again, using domestic skill to gain power and success in patriarchy), Rosie describes herself as a "lone wolf" and expresses no desire to settle down. Toward the end of the film, she, too, sings a song about her sexuality. She begins "Take a Chance on Me" as a whisper in Bill's ear, licking her lips and looking him up and down to convey that she is expressing her sexual desire for him. He begins to move away, embarrassed, but she shoves him down in a chair and proceeds to climb on the table and draw attention to herself, stalking predatorily towards him while everyone cheers her on. The majority of this number is staged for comic effect, with Rosie climbing up a drainpipe in pursuit of Bill, but the fact remains that Rosie, like Donna and Tanya, is expressing her sexual desire despite being a middle-aged, menopausal woman.

This depiction of the sexuality of older women is a revolutionary quality in *Mamma Mia!*. The reason older women are generally considered unattractive is that, because they are post-menopausal, their sexuality is no longer useful to patriarchy. Since they cannot bear children, patriarchal culture seeks to make them invisible and restrain their sexual power in that way. By spending significant time and energy portraying the sexual desires and attractions of older women, *Mamma Mia!* makes a truly feminist statement.

The privilege of desire in the film is not limited to the older women. At Sophie's bachelorette party, the young women in attendance also express an active sexual desire. When they spot the three fathers, who have unwittingly wandered into the event, they begin to sing "Gimme Gimme Gimme" and converge en masse on Bill and Harry. They

grab them and proceed to tie them to poles, dancing around them and groping them.

Although this scene is brief and the men eventually escape, it conveys the presence of an active sexual desire in the young women of the film. By establishing female subjectivity as the dominant viewpoint and privileging female sexual desire, *Mamma Mia!* is able to invert the typical gender dynamics of the mainstream Hollywood musical.

In order to truly invert the power dynamics of desire, the film refrains from sexualizing the female body and instead turns the gaze on the men. For the majority of the film, Donna wears loose overalls that do not display her body in an overtly sexual way. She dresses purely for comfort. In Sophie's case, this task would seem to be more difficult, as she is the young female and therefore more obviously an object of the gaze. The filmmakers do, however, manage to make her look beautiful without showcasing her body as an attraction. They dress her in flowing shirts and skirts that make her look feminine but do not display too much, and her bathing suits are functional, floral print one-pieces that call very little attention to her body as an object to be displayed. Between these wardrobe choices and the marked absence of fetishistic camerawork, the film is able to portray its female characters as sexually desirable without constructing them as objects of the gaze.

The males in the film, in turn, are the ones who are most objectified, although often in a humorous manner. Stellan Skarsgard, who plays Bill, has said that the three fathers are "the bimbos of the film." As if to make this point, the only nudity in the film is a brief shot of Skarsgard's naked rear end as he wanders around his boat and Rosie looks on approvingly. The previously discussed songs, "Gimme Gimme Gimme" and "Does Your Mother Know," are also evidence of the objectification of men in the film.

Another song, “Lay All Your Love On Me” contains a dance in which the men are put on display. The number begins as a love song between Sophie and Sky, but then a group of men burst out of the water and begin dancing along the dock in flippers. They line up and begin posing rhythmically, flexing their muscles in a very masculine way, but then start to dance in a much more ridiculous and effeminate manner, waddling around and doing high kicks. With the men posing athletically in swim trunks, the film recalls a number in Howard Hawks’s *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), in which Rosalind Russell sings surrounded by oddly passive athletes training in briefs. *Mamma Mia!* takes it a step further, however, and makes explicit the ridiculous nature of masculine posturing. By portraying aggressive masculinity as laughable and constructing men as the object of the gaze, *Mamma Mia!* is able to invert the looking relationships of patriarchal cinema.

A Mother-Daughter Romance

The most crucial component of *Mamma Mia!* as a revision of the maternal melodrama is its use of the musical genre to portray the mother-daughter relationship. As previously stated, the primary objective of the musical is to unite a heterosexual romantic couple and, in doing so, solve all the issues of the narrative and establish a stable community. In *Mamma Mia!*, instead of a heterosexual romantic couple, the mother and daughter are at the center of the narrative conflict. Sophie and Sky are already united at the beginning of the film and, although Donna and Sam do get married at the end, their union is almost an afterthought to the more central reunion of Donna and Sophie.

Donna and Sophie are established as the central “couple” of the film most noticeably during the song, “Super Trouper.” At Sophie’s bachelorette party, Donna and the Dynamos (Rosie and Tanya) come out onto a stage wearing old disco outfits and a great deal of makeup and perform the song as a special treat. As in *Volter*, the usual filmic construction of a woman performing for men is altered to a mother performing for her daughter. The self-conscious nature of Donna’s performance of “Super Trouper,” from the costumes and lighting to the shot of an old woman pressing the play button on a stereo, highlights the fact that it is something that has been knowingly constructed for the gaze of others. It is Donna’s gift to Sophie as she offers her a piece of her history and an expression of feeling in their own language.

The shot construction of the song makes it quite clear that Donna’s performance is directed at Sophie. In the early part of the song, before the music begins in earnest, the Dynamos sing “somewhere in the crowd there’s you,” and on the final word Donna looks directly at Sophie and winks at her. We then cut to Sophie’s delighted but confused face as she waits for the music to start. This combination of shots suggests the mutual gazing between mother and child that Jackie Byars describes as expressing a new kind of subjectivity and conveying a sense of equality.⁴⁸ Because their gaze is shared, it is not an objectifying one that places one party in a dominant position. In this setup, Donna is not subjecting herself to an objectifying gaze, but is instead creating a means of nonverbal communication with her daughter.

⁴⁸ Jackie Byars, “Gazes/Voices/Power: Expanding Psychoanalysis for Feminist Film and Television Theory.” *Female Spectatorship*. Ed. E. Deidre Pribram (New York: Verso, 1988), 124.

The extent to which this performance is *not* directed at men is made clear when the three fathers arrive at the party. As they climb the stairs, there is a comedic exchange in which they hear the song and one of them says, “Our song,” to which another replies, “your song?” and the third claims, “It’s my song!” This brief dialogue conveys that the men all see themselves as more important to Donna than they actually were. It has already been established that “Super Trouper” is for Sophie and Sophie alone. When the men intrude on the party and stand to the side watching, Donna immediately gets uncomfortable, indicating once again that this performance is not a typical one meant for the male gaze. When the song is over, Rosie even tells the men to leave, verbally communicating that, although they watched it, this performance was not meant for them. The construction of this song as a performance by a mother for her daughter conveys the film’s privileging of the mother-daughter relationship at the center of the narrative.

The importance of the mother-daughter bond in *Mamma Mia!* would seem to be undermined by the fact that the plot is driven by Sophie’s quest for a father. At the beginning of the film, she says that, “when I meet my dad, everything will fall into place,” expressing her desire for the typical patriarchal family unit. Over the course of the story, however, she becomes fed up with the three men and learns to value the bond she shares with her mother. Donna is well aware of Sophie’s culturally constructed desire and expresses to Rosie and Tanya her frustration with the patriarchal system. She states, “I’ve done a great job with Soph all by myself, and I won’t be muscled out by an ejaculation!” Although this line is meant largely for comedic effect, it succinctly points out the flaw in the patriarchal logic that the father should be the head of the family. Mothers are the ones who carry and give birth to the child, so they should have more

agency in raising their offspring than the fathers. *Mamma Mia!* makes it quite clear that a mother and daughter pair does not need a father figure around to complete the family unit.

There is a significant amount of conflict between Sophie and Donna over the course of the film. The primary subject of contention is the fact that Donna does not want Sophie to get married at such a young age and would rather she go out and lead her own life. This desire alone is a major departure from the formula of the maternal melodrama and the woman's film in general. In the patriarchal system, young women are encouraged to get married and have children right away, in order to inscribe them firmly into the patriarchal order and prevent them from becoming too independent. The fact that Donna encourages Sophie to do the exact opposite conveys the film's feminist ideals.

After they fight about their differing goals for Sophie's future, Sophie and Donna reunite to prepare for the wedding. Here, watching her fix her hair in the mirror, Donna sings to Sophie once more ("Slipping Through My Fingers"), but this time it is not in a conscious performance. Instead, she is simply expressing her thoughts, and Sophie does not seem to hear her. The song continues over scenes of Donna helping Sophie get ready; she bandages a shaving cut on her leg, blow dries her hair, and paints her toenails while holding her in her lap. The images in this scene, like some we have seen in *Volter*, serve to demystify the female body and expose the constructed nature of femininity. This scene is also filmed in a relaxed, meditative way, as Lloyd uses a constantly moving camera that floats smoothly and easily around the pair. The camerawork combined with the smooth music and calming blues of the room make this scene the most relaxing of the

film, and its soothing atmosphere conveys the sense of calm and safety that is created by Donna and Sophie's relationship.

Partway through the song, the music fades out as Donna fixes Sophie's train. The two are framed in a mirror shot and Sophie turns around to ask her mother if she is letting her down by getting married so young. After Donna reassures her that she will love her no matter what, Sophie pauses a moment and asks her mother to give her away at the wedding. The question of who will give Sophie away has been tossed around for much of the film, as all three of the fathers have offered to do so, confusing Sophie terribly. By asking her mother to give her away, she is conveying that their relationship is the primary one in her life, despite the stipulations of patriarchal custom. When Donna tearfully agrees, Sophie turns back around and the two women sing together, their faces close and blissful smiles on their faces. This clearly constructs them as the primary couple in the film and signals that, by defying patriarchal strictures about their relationship, they have come together once more. By situating the mother and daughter as the primary couple of the film according to the conventions of the musical, *Mamma Mia!* privileges the mother-daughter relationship and creates what is essentially a mother-daughter love story.

Alternative Arrangements

The resolution of *Mamma Mia!* presents many alternatives to the patriarchal system. The three men, upon learning that Donna does not know which one is Sophie's father, decide to share her as a daughter. They accept that they will each "have a third" of her, and this arrangement is actually presented as more beneficial to them than the typical family setup. This way, Bill is free to travel, Sam can focus on Donna, and Harry,

as a gay man, can have the child he thought he would have to live without. By setting it up so that Sophie will have three fathers, the film implies once again that the father as an individual is less important to a child than the mother.

Alternatives to the patriarchal system are evident in the final situations of all the major adults. Harry has finally admitted that he is gay and has found love with a young man on the island, signaling that homosexuality is a viable alternative. Bill will continue to travel, perhaps having a sexual relationship with his fellow “lone wolf,” Rosie. Tanya, on the other hand, will most likely continue her method of using her looks to marry rich men and obtain the material possessions she desires. All of these are presented as perfectly sensible methods of building a life outside of conventional patriarchal structures.

The most notable alternative the film presents is also its most explicit inversion of the maternal melodrama. Sophie decides at the last minute not to marry Sky, but instead to just travel the world with him and enjoy their time as young people. After this development, Sam then proposes to Donna and they get married instead of Sophie and Sky. This situation is a complete inversion of a film like *Stella Dallas*, in which the mother sees her daughter get married and then fades away into the background, gratified that she has performed her patriarchal function. Here, not only does the daughter *not* get married, but the mother then takes her daughter’s departure as an opportunity to restart her own life as a sexual being. The relationship between Donna and Sam is portrayed as extremely sexual in nature, evident when they kiss for the first time and Donna moans gutturally, saying “I do, I do” in a sexual voice. Here, the film once again portrays a

post-menopausal female sexuality and also allows a mother to have a sexual life outside of producing children for patriarchy.

Mamma Mia! concludes in a rather fantastical manner. The closing scene begins with Sophie standing on the dock, silhouetted against the twilight sky, singing, “I Have a Dream,” the song from the beginning. The song continues to play over images of her bidding goodbye to her three fathers before her mother walks her to the boat and the two say goodbye in silhouette. Donna stands at the end of the dock as the three men walk up behind her, and the boat carrying Sophie and Sky pulls away across the shining water. The final shot of the film is a medium shot of Sophie in the boat, a mysterious light shining on her face as she sings the title words of the song before the boat drifts out of the shot.

This final scene, while it leaves us in the realm of pure fantasy, instills in the viewer a sense of hope for a more progressive future. The image of Sophie facing the ocean, singing, “I have a dream,” carries a lot of weight in juxtaposition with the alternatives to patriarchy the film has offered us. We are left with the idea that this feminist utopia that the film has established is a dream that can be achieved. Sophie’s dream as she goes out into the real world is to carry with her the sense of strength and female camaraderie that she has gained through her relationship with her mother and her upbringing in this community. Although it is pure fantasy, the ending of *Mamma Mia!* implies that the feminist world it creates could someday be a reality.

Conclusion

Mamma Mia!, aside from its sizeable box office, is not generally considered a significant film. It is not a highbrow art film by any means, but I believe it does have some significance in its aggressively feminine portrayal of a mother-daughter relationship and the community of women that surrounds it. It constructs a utopian community led by Donna and, with numbers like “Dancing Queen,” clearly conveys the sense of female power in this society and places men firmly on the periphery. The film also makes a major statement by focusing on the sexuality of post-menopausal women, who are generally considered unattractive by patriarchy. Finally, it strongly privileges the mother-daughter relationship, constructing Donna and Sophie as the central couple in the film. By using the genre of the musical, which is always about the union of a heterosexual romantic couple, to portray the relationship between a mother and daughter, *Mamma Mia!* essentially creates a mother-daughter romance, implying that relationships between women are just as crucial, if not more so, than those between men and women. In this way, we can read *Mamma Mia!* as a mainstream version of *Waitress* and *Volver*, confronting many of the same issues, like female subjectivity, mother-daughter relationships, and communities of women as safe spaces within patriarchy, in a very different mode.

Conclusion

In mainstream Hollywood today, the portrayal of women indicates that not much has changed since the days of the studio system. Male-oriented blockbusters like Michael Bay's *Transformers* (2007) explicitly objectify the female lead; in one scene, the camera tracks up Megan Fox's body as she bends over a car engine wearing a short skirt and a midriff-baring tank top. Robert Rodriguez's and Frank Miller's *Sin City* (2005) features a scene in which Jessica Alba, playing a stripper, dances with a lasso. The camera slowly tracks in on her and proceeds to move up her body as she writhes and tosses her hair about. These films fit perfectly into Laura Mulvey's model of the male gaze, and there are many that join them in that category.

Films geared toward female viewers (young viewers, especially), like the ubiquitous *Twilight* franchise (2008, 2009), convey negative messages about romantic relationships and function to punish female desire. The male lead, Edward, is consistently withholding his affections from Bella, and at one point even says that he hates her "for making me want you so badly." This and other lines sprinkled throughout the two films indicate that all the pain Bella goes through is a result of her desire for Edward. The films also portray her as a generally passive victim, constantly fainting and being rescued by Edward or other male characters. The *Twilight* franchise conveys highly conservative messages about female desire and agency to its impressionable preteen audiences.

Female filmmakers, when they work in the mainstream, are often the ones perpetuating these messages, as Catherine Hardwicke does in the first *Twilight* film. With Kathryn Bigelow's Oscar win for *The Hurt Locker* (2008), the public eye has

recently been focused on women who direct films geared to a more general audience. Bigelow's success, however, is a function of the fact that, as a war film with no women in it, *The Hurt Locker* completely evades all of the questions of female subjectivity I have been discussing. Essentially, her position as the first woman to win a directing Oscar is due to her directing an action film, which indicates that a woman will not be winning that award again any time soon, and certainly not for a "woman's film." Female filmmakers who actually focus on women are largely restricted to the realm of independent art cinema. Jane Campion has consistently directed visually innovative films that explore female subjectivity in depth, such as *The Piano* (1993) and *Bright Star* (2009), and Nicole Holofcener has become known in the independent industry for making films that focus on groups of women, such as *Lovely and Amazing* (2001) and *Friends with Money* (2006). Despite their critical acclaim, neither of these women has made headway in the mainstream due to the fact that their films are primarily about women.

Currently, the "women's film" generally takes the form of an updated version of the female friendship film discussed by Karen Hollinger, which I discussed in relation to *Mystic Pizza* (1988), *Steel Magnolias* (1989), *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1993), and *Boys on the Side* (1995). The newer female friendship films either cater to female audiences while still reinforcing patriarchal codes, like *Sex and the City: The Movie* (Michael Patrick King, 2008) or they explore important ideas of female subjectivity and friendship, like *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (Ken Kwapis, 2005). Either way, the majority of these films are considered "women's films," and are therefore seen only by women, limiting the amount of change they can inspire in Hollywood as a whole. More aggressively political women's films, such as the often-discussed *Thelma and Louise*

(Ridley Scott, 1991), are branded with the “radical feminist” label and often do not even offer an escape from or solution to the position of women in patriarchy. In that particular film, the only way the women can resolve their situation is to drive off a cliff.

The three films I have analyzed – Adrienne Shelly’s *Waitress* (2007), Pedro Almodóvar’s *Volver* (2006) and Phyllida Lloyd’s *Mamma Mia!* (2008) – approach women’s films in a different way. The directors, two women and a gay man who is known for his attention to female subjectivity, create a new subgenre of the women’s film that is popular across gender. The reasons for these films’ popularity with both men and women are not always clear. *Volver* was able to reach male viewers because of its Almodóvar pedigree, since he is considered a major auteur of our time, and Penelope Cruz is a very popular actress in the United States. *Waitress* was a different story, as Adrienne Shelly was relatively unknown despite the media coverage of her murder, and there were no major stars to draw attention to the film. Still, it has become a favorite among men and women alike, intimating that there is something in it that speaks to both genders. *Mamma Mia!* was hugely successful across gender despite being aggressively girly and feminine. Its camp aesthetic and focus on the sexuality of older women would seem to exclude any kind of male interest, but something, whether it was the star power of Meryl Streep or the popularity of ABBA, drew men to the theaters to see it. *Mamma Mia!*’s tremendous success can be read as a sign that the mainstream is open to films that focus on women if they are marketed correctly.

My analysis of these three films has determined that they are essentially feminist revisions of the maternal melodrama. Somehow, despite using tropes and conventions of the women’s film, Shelly, Almodóvar and Lloyd have managed to make films that appeal

to both genders while still exploring female subjectivity and creating a new feminist aesthetic. By working within and against the language, these films are able to speak to more viewers than experimental film, and my hope is that their construction will enter the mainstream and eventually break down the patriarchal nature of Hollywood.

Now, it is possible for one to interpret these films as isolated incidents, as they are so far removed from each other geographically and financially. One could simply say that they are three films in a similar mode that happened to be released in the same few years, and that there is nothing to be made of them as a unit. I prefer to view them as the beginnings of a movement, a new brand of feminist cinema in which filmmakers make the women's film into something that appeals to both genders while simultaneously working to create a new language of cinema. If this does indeed become a movement, it could possibly lead to the dismantling of the patriarchal structure of cinema, although we would not see the results of such a transformation for years to come.

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