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**HATING THE CRIME, FORGIVING THE CRIMINAL: *OCTOBER BABY*,  
CHRISTIAN POST-FEMINISM, AND THE CO-OPTATION OF 'CHOICE'**

A Thesis in

Media Studies

by

Emma Bedor

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The thesis of Emma Bedor was reviewed and approved\* by the following:

Michelle Rodino-Colocino  
Assistant Professor of Communications  
Thesis Advisor

Matt McAllister  
Professor of Communications

Colleen Connolly-Ahern  
Associate Professor of Communications

Marie Hardin  
Professor of Communications  
Associate Dean of Undergraduate and Graduate Education  
College of Communications

\*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School

## ABSTRACT

Traditional anti-abortion rhetoric is thought to be antithetical, even explicitly hostile, to feminist values. Post-feminist anti-abortion films, however, take many of feminism's triumphs in stride, particularly the notion that women are capable of agentic decision-making when it comes to their reproductive choices. This is nowhere as clearly illustrated than in a 2011 movie, *October Baby*. By purporting to relate the "truth-based" story of an abortion survivor, this film illustrates the ways that a post-feminist cultural context permits anti-abortion religious rhetoric to be highly marketable and lucrative. I situate an analysis of the film and the changing nature of anti-abortion discourse by providing historical context on the abortion issue, feminist gains during the twentieth century, and importantly, a discussion of the role of ultrasound imaging technology that has played a significant role in constructing notions of fetal personhood. In this way, I compare *October Baby* and its paratexts to another hugely successful, much earlier anti-abortion film, *The Silent Scream*, which foregrounded scientific and medical appeals. Conversely, *October Baby* backgrounds medicine and science and instead highlights religious and moral elements. Perhaps most importantly, *October Baby* engages in a euphemistic reframing of what "choice" entails, shifting discussions from women's agency and control over their bodies to lesser choices associated with "post-abortive healing." This is a process that I term "sidelining." In fact, the film explicitly equates abortion with criminal activity through the integration of religious rhetoric. Ultimately, *October Baby's* profitability is testament to the success of this political and activist strategy.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Women's reproductive rights once again became a hot-button issue leading up to the 2012 US Presidential, House, and Senate elections. The advances women's health advocates had made since the 1980s were under attack, leading some to accuse the conservative Right of launching a "War on Women" (Graff, 2012). One comment indicative of this "war" was Congressman and Senate candidate Todd Akin's remark in a pre-election interview that pregnancy resulting from rape is rare, because in instances of legitimate rape, "The female body has ways to try and shut that whole thing down" (Jaco, 2012, para. 3). Though Akin later recanted the statement, other political candidates and media figures echoed his argument. Richard Mourdock, a Republican Senate candidate from Indiana, noted that even when pregnancy results from rape the life created is one that "God intended to happen" (Raju, 2012, para. 4). Similarly, one representative from Michigan, Roger Rivard, went on record claiming that "Some girls rape easy" (Marley, 2012, para. 3).

These remarks reflect a conflation of pseudo-scientific knowledge, religious sentiments, and socio-cultural hostility towards sexually active women. Further illustrating such dynamics around women's reproductive rights, five of the Republican Presidential nominees signed the "Personhood Pledge," a pledge requiring that signatories "support a human life amendment to the Constitution, and endorse legislation to indicate that 14th Amendment protections apply to unborn children" (Ashley, 2011,

para. 3). This amendment neglects women's health and their right to reproductive freedom, implying that women do not and should not enjoy the right to agentive decision-making regarding their reproductive health.

In some ways, the Right wing attack on women's reproductive rights failed: Aiken and Mourdock lost their elections in the wake of criticism for their misogynist comments around pregnancy and rape (Murray, 2012). Additionally, pro-choice President Obama's re-election signals a victory for women's reproductive rights and a loss for those waging the "War on Women."

Despite these political victories, attacks on women's reproductive rights rage on. Illustrating this is the popularity of the film *October Baby*. Received particularly well by audiences in states considering anti-choice Personhood amendments in 2011 *October Baby* appeared to NARAL as "tied to an extreme anti-abortion message" (Ryzik, 2012, para. 11). Indeed it was. The American Family Association, a conservative Christian group active in the 2012 Presidential elections, sells the film on its website. *October Baby's* reviews were mixed, but its box-office success has yet to be paralleled by any other anti-abortion movie. During its opening weekend, the film earned \$1.7 million. Although it appeared in only 400 theaters, *October Baby* was the eighth highest earning film and the number one limited release film that week (Nance, 2012, para. 2). Made on an \$800,000 budget, and provided only \$3 million for marketing, even the film's directors were surprised by its success (Horn, 2012). In fact, by its September 11, 2012 DVD release date, a date laden with immeasurable patriotic significance, the film had already grossed over \$5 million (Box Office Mojo, 2012). In addition to its box office success, *October Baby* is unique among anti-abortion films in that its narrative is "truth-

inspired.<sup>1</sup>” This film is significant not only for its entertainment value, but also for its contributions to discourse that legitimates actions as unpopular and radical as banning abortion even in cases of rape and incest, and as blocking access to contraceptives.

### **Sidelining**

By imagining “choice” as understood by the pro-choice movement, as a choice between carrying a birth to term and aborting the pregnancy, *October Baby* participates in the construction of what I term “sidelining”: a euphemistic reframing of the anti-abortion position that diverts attention from the matter of abortion itself to other choices associated with what is presented as abortion’s “aftermath.” In this way, abortion is no longer a matter of whether women possess the agency to make choices about their reproductive futures. Instead choice is effectively sidelined and framed as unimportant.

The opportunity for sidelining emerges wherein viewer attention is redirected from the core issue of agentive reproductive decision making toward lesser choices that are placed at the forefront instead, particularly issues of spirituality, religion, and forgiveness in the wake of abortion’s wide-reaching, negative consequences. In fact, the film massages the meaning of “choice” by refocusing anti-abortion arguments from being *explicitly about abortion* to being about *surrendering oneself* to matters that are out of one’s hands and which are, instead, decided by a higher power. When it comes to the divinely inspired *October Baby*, wherein women are shown as being incapable decision makers when it comes to unintended pregnancies, it is not up to the woman whose body

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<sup>1</sup> *October Baby* is loosely based on anti-abortion advocate and media figure Gianna Jessen, whose story of having survived her birthmother’s abortion at thirty weeks allegedly inspired Jon and Andrew Erwin to pen the *October Baby* script (Sun, 2012).



is involved as to whether her baby will survive or its life will be terminated as the result of an abortion; instead, whether or not she chooses to try to abort, these decisions are in God's hands. This indicates the congruence of the current, post-feminist cultural context with the lack of agency afforded to women in anti-abortion media's re-articulation of "choice." Overall, the relationship between post-feminism and *October Baby*'s use of sidelining illustrates just one of many ways that women's agency is currently being subsumed by anti-abortion rhetoric.

In the context of this film, as well as other resources for what the political Right deems "post-abortive" women, the focus of the debate shifts from being about the social, medical, and economic needs of the pregnant woman to accepting and celebrating life – here, that of the unborn, even unwanted, child. In lieu of choice being about the decision whether or not to undergo an abortion procedure, *October Baby* incorporates religious rhetoric to illustrate, first and foremost, that forgiveness of others and ourselves is necessary to move on from the traumas inflicted by abortion and, second, that we all – not just unintentionally pregnant women – should privilege our spiritual faith over scientific and medical facts. This reconstruction prioritizes emotional and spiritual well being over legitimate pro-choice arguments, particularly those that first appeared during feminism's second wave. *October Baby* takes a number of pro-choice arguments into account, particularly those associated with women's access to education and careers, only to dismiss them as irrelevant or counterproductive to motherhood. This, too, illustrates the film's post-feminist sensibilities, as it is a media product that emerged in a cultural climate wherein it is assumed that men and women have the same resources and opportunities available to them. Thus, instead of taking into account structural

inequalities, what is ultimately presented as the only productive choice, the only one with possibly positive outcomes, becomes carrying pregnancies to term regardless of the circumstances of conception. In this way, pregnancy represents an embodiment of “goodness” and selflessness, whereas the selfish, unfeeling, and even cruel choice – characterized by anti-abortion films of the past as well as *October Baby* – is to end the life of a fetus.

### **Synopsis of *October Baby* and its Inspiration**

A living, breathing embodiment of abortion’s cruelty is Gianna Jessen, the “abortion survivor” on whom the film is based. As a “champion for the cause of the unborn” Jessen is well known internationally for her anti-abortion speeches and presentations (Jessen, 2011). Allegedly, while she was in utero, her 17-year-old birthmother underwent a saline abortion during the third trimester of pregnancy.

According to Jessen’s website,

After being burned alive for approximately 18 hours in the womb from the saline solution, Gianna was delivered alive in a Los Angeles County abortion clinic. Her medical records state, "born during saline abortion" ... this is what caused her cerebral palsy. (Jessen, 2011)

Similarly, the *October Baby* film, which is heavily promoted on Jessen’s website, constructs a coming-of-age story in which a young woman suffering from numerous health problems learns that she was adopted as an infant after her birthmother’s failed abortion. Devastated by the news, but wanting to understand where she comes from, college student “Hannah” embarks on a journey to discover the circumstances of her birth

and failed abortion, and central to the plot, tries to connect with the mother who attempted to abort her.

Although Hannah loves her adoptive parents, she has always possessed the nagging feeling that something is wrong with her, not just due to her extreme asthma and occasional seizures, but because of her persistent feelings of alienation and belief that she is fundamentally unwanted. Her father, a respected doctor at a local hospital, does his best to prevent her from finding out the truth about her origins. But after a particularly nasty and public collapse both of her adoptive parents, as well as her attending physician, relay the truth to her. What ensues is a spring break trip with a plan in mind, for Hannah has her birth certificate in hand and seeks to find her mother with what little information is documented on it: the name of the hospital where she was born. With the help of a crew of friends, particularly Jason, whom she has known since she was very young, and a friendly police officer who directs her to the nurse who attended Hannah's botched abortion, Hannah does eventually find her mother, Cindy. Their meeting is interrupted by Cindy's husband who comes to take her to lunch, at which point Cindy pretends she has no idea who Hannah is or what she is talking about.

Outside, Hannah's father suddenly appears and forces her to return home with him. Although she knows the truth, she is now filled with feelings of anger toward her birthmother, adoptive parents, and even herself. After explaining her situation to a priest, however, and at his urging to forgive, she finds herself able and willing to move on with her life. Hannah, now accompanied by her father, returns to her birthmother's office, where she places a note on her desk that reads, "I forgive you" along with her hospital bracelet. Cindy emotionally collapses, and in the film's concluding montage we see that

she, Hannah, and the rest of the characters central to the film's plot are beginning the healing process.

The healing that the film's characters begin to experience in these concluding scenes is the unifying thread between *October Baby* the movie and its paratexts,<sup>2</sup> many of which refer to women's "post-abortive" needs and spiritual reconnaissance. Of particular relevance to this project is not only the overtly religious rhetoric used in these paratexts, but also their role in clarifying the film's political goal of sidelining agentive choice-making and replacing it with acquiescence (i.e., giving up control for matters out of one's hands, such as finding oneself unintentionally pregnant). In fact, only through an analysis of the film *in relation to its paratexts* does this anti-abortion message become explicit. Throughout the film, though subtly articulated, it is heavily veiled through the use of religious rhetoric. This suggests the importance of the study of paratexts in general, but particularly in cases where films' political undertones are intended to motivate audiences to act politically. A film with the tagline that "every life is beautiful" at first appears apolitical. Yet as the film's narrative unfolds to explore the psychic devastation that results from abortion, it becomes clear that the message of the film is not just that every life is beautiful; rather, it is that every God-given life in utero is beautiful and therefore, we must act to protect the unborn from pregnant women and pregnant women from themselves by eliminating access to abortion. By packaging as dramatic

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<sup>2</sup> Paratexts are "proliferations" indicating the "extended presence" of films, television programs, and other media content (Gray, 2010, p. 2). Some examples of paratexts include "trailers, toys, spinoff videogames, prequels and sequels, podcasts, bonus materials, interviews, reviews, alternate reality games, spoilers, audience discussion, videos, posters or billboards, and promotional campaigns" (p. 4). For this project, I analyze *October Baby*'s promotional website and DVD special features.

entertainment what is really part of a broader political movement, *October Baby* is able to appeal to a larger market and attract a more diverse audience than would have been possible if the anti-abortion themes that dominate its paratexts were explicit in the film itself.

Considering the role of media in the multi-pronged “War on Women”, this thesis presents an analysis of the 2012 film *October Baby*, distributed by socially conservative Provident Films, as well as its paratexts (particularly its promotional website and DVD special features). My textual analysis draws upon feminist scholarship of fetal imaging and anti-abortion media to illustrate how *October Baby* marks a significant departure from a prior iconic anti-abortion film, *The Silent Scream*, yet retains similarities to it in terms of its use of sidelining. Together both illustrate that even during different decades anti-abortion films diverted viewer attention from the core issue of reproductive agency to what I claim are “sideline issues” of science and religion respectively. *The Silent Scream* relied upon fetology and ultrasound technology to persuade audiences that abortion is, without exception, wrong. *October Baby*, on the other hand, relies upon a fictional narrative and emotional appeals in lieu of scientific ones. The use of narrative affect appears as a compelling way to move audiences more so than overtly political ones. Both, however, have the same intended outcome: to sideline issues associated with agency and place the well being of the fetus at the fore.

## **Method**

I engage in thematic textual analysis of *October Baby* in order to draw interpretive claims about themes related to abortion and choice as presented in the film.

Borrowing from Owen (1984), I use primary criteria to determine what qualifies as a theme: whether and how words and ideas reappeared. Thus, as I watched and re-watched the films, and examined and re-examined its paratexts, I noted what words and messages appeared regularly throughout the films, what appeared in the films but not in the paratexts, and vice versa.

As noted by Hall (1980) in his work on encoding and decoding messages, the polysemic nature of media texts suggests that one person's interpretation may not align with its producer's intended meaning, or even with the interpretation of another individual. However the intention when using this methodology is not to pinpoint a singular, "correct" theme or conclusion, but rather to interpret and suggest how media texts are likely to help audiences make sense of the world we inhabit (McKee, 2001). As noted by McKee, fully explicating the relationship between a text and its meaning requires an understanding of the social context in which it is created and distributed. As such, I learned about the anti-abortion movement, pro-choice movement, and the socio-political contexts in which *The Silent Scream* and *October Baby* were created before analyzing the films and their paratexts. In total, I viewed *The Silent Scream* in full on three occasions, and watched *October Baby* from beginning to end five times.

Similar to Lindgren and Lévière (2009), determining themes present within this data (i.e., the aforementioned source material) requires being initially open to broad categories that are refined upon repeated viewings. Similarly, my goal was not to reduce all the film and paratextual content to one overarching theme, but rather to note similarities, contradictions, and nuances in all these materials (p. 398). Comparing and contrasting the themes in *October Baby* and its paratexts with themes in *The Silent*

*Scream* enabled me to conduct a more comprehensive analysis of anti-abortion media, and how its messages and themes have changed – or not changed – over time. In particular, I looked for the ways that reproductive agency becomes a sidelined issue by viewing *October Baby* and its paratexts multiple times in isolation before finally viewing a public screening of the film. During the writing of the paper, I often re-watched important scenes in the film and its paratexts. I transcribed the dialogue from *The Silent Scream*, as well as pivotal scenes from *October Baby*. As my analysis and critique developed, I continued to return to these texts to further refine my interpretations.

This project contributes to scholarship on media and the pro-life movement in several ways. First, existing scholarship on anti-abortion films has focused either on documentaries that spotlight the science and technology of abortion, such as *The Silent Scream*, or on how popular contemporary films such as *Juno*, *Waitress* and *Knocked Up*<sup>3</sup> frame choice as a form of post-feminist agency (see Givner, 1994; Thoma, 2009; Hoerl & Kelly, 2010). I consider how *October Baby* reflects and contributes to post-feminism by advancing its pro-life stance. McRobbie (2004) articulates post-feminism as the belief that feminism is not needed because sexism no longer oppresses women. In Vavrus's (2002) view, post-feminists take for granted the advances gained by feminism's first and second waves and hold the belief that "feminism" in that sense does more harm than good for contemporary women. The result is a reinstatement of "vengeful patriarchal norms" which subjugate women and which may not be critiqued because of the popular belief that feminism is no longer needed (Gill, 2007, p. 720).

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<sup>3</sup> See the Filmography for plot synopses of these films gathered from the International Movie Database (IMDB).

I also highlight *October Baby*'s narrative departure from mainstream films that depict prevarication by women about whether or not to undergo an abortion procedure. *October Baby* frames the choice to be made as whether or not to celebrate the life one has been given. Characters are hesitant to discuss abortion or even reference it by name. In this way, a film that promotes a message of women's disenfranchisement is able to repackage and rearticulate "choice" in ways that sound empowering and articulate a post-feminist logic.

### **Paratexts**

The notion of the paratext originated with Gérard Genette, a twentieth-century structuralist literary theorist, who proposed that a text "rarely appears in an unadorned state" (1997, p. 1). Thus, paratexts are those elements related to the text including, but not limited to, "the author's name, title [of the work] (possibly including an indication of the genre), preface, dedication, epigraphs, illustrations, book design in the broadest sense, interviews, commentaries, and so on—that frame the text" (Stanitzek, 2005, p. 30). In Stanitzek's view, however, distinguishing between the text and its paratexts is nearly impossible because, for starters, no text is ever entirely paratexts-free, and secondly because paratexts may exist as texts unto themselves (p. 30).

In *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, Jonathan Gray (2010) explores the relation of the paratext to media content. Gray contends that the traditional conception of a media "text," wherein a single element is considered the sum of elements unto itself, is incorrect. He argues instead that a movie or television program is only part of a text, as what constitutes the text is actually only "a contingent



entity, either in the process of forming and transforming or vulnerable to further formation or transformation... a film or program is never the entire sum of the text..." (p. 7). He suggests that the "proliferations" of any text must be taken into account to fully encompass its meaning, value, and impact, as each of these has the capacity to alter and affect the meaning of any text to even the slightest degree.

***October Baby's* paratexts.** Unlike prior anti-abortion films, media convergence and DVD technology permit *October Baby* to span multiple platforms. In addition to being a film, it also has a promotional website (<http://octoberbabymovie.net/>). This contains information about the film, its cast and crew, positive reviews, the music featured in the film, ways to promote the film on social networking sites, resources for "post-abortive" and pregnant women, and links to the Every Life is Beautiful fund. This foundation is one that raises awareness for anti-abortion crisis pregnancy centers and promotes religious rhetoric for women experiencing unintended pregnancies ([everylifeisbeautiful.com](http://everylifeisbeautiful.com)).

*October Baby's* DVD special features include film commentary by its directors, deleted scenes, a chapter on how the role of Hannah was cast, a chapter titled "Shari's Story" that also explains her casting process and real-life similarities to the character of Cindy, a chapter explaining how Gianna Jessen's story of surviving an abortion inspired Jon and Andrew Erwin to write the film's script, a chapter where numerous Christian singers and musicians praise the film's story and pro-life themes, a Facebook Q&A session with Rachel and Jason, two of the film's actors, a chapter with select interviews from the Every Life is Beautiful website and a link to the full site, a music video for the

film's theme song, "Life is Beautiful," film bloopers, trailers, and a chapter titled "Ministry Partners." Here, two videos from Focus on the Family (one in English and a second in Spanish) explain what it means to be "pro-life," and a video from the National Center for Fathering explains the importance of men's being around to raise their children. Though beyond the scope of this project, there are also many blogs, news sources, and Internet discussion boards that could be considered *October Baby's* paratexts. However, for the purposes of this study, only the paratexts that were created by the filmmakers, producers, and sponsors themselves will be analyzed. Genette contended that "any paratextual message for which the author and/or the editor assumes a responsibility which he cannot escape is *official*" (Genette & Maclean, 1991, p. 267, italics in original). Thus, for the purposes of this project, those paratexts that are analyzed are what Genette would deem "official" in the sense that they are intrinsically connected to the "text" which is the film *October Baby*.

### **Chapter Outline**

Each chapter of this thesis highlights a particular aspect of this project, moving from context to analysis to discussion. This first chapter introduces the project, provides context for the study, and explains the method of analysis. The second chapter provides context for the analysis of *October Baby* by examining its predecessor *The Silent Scream*, providing a brief history of abortion in the United States, a synopsis of post-feminism, and relating information on the Christian film industry. In order to understand *October Baby's* political efficacy, it is first necessary to explore how it represents and responds to pro-choice and anti-abortion arguments that emerged during second wave feminism and

continue to develop. By contextualizing this discussion within a framework that notes the role and emergence of the Christian film industry we see that *October Baby* represents a culmination of anti-abortion activist efforts by those who believe it is their moral duty to overturn *Roe v. Wade*.

The third chapter, ““Non Choice” in *October Baby* and its Paratexts,” asks, how do *October Baby* and its paratexts frame the notion of “choice” when it comes to reproductive agency? Through an analysis of the film and its paratexts, I suggest that there are few choices that women are framed as being able to responsibly make. Ultimately, abortion is not one of them. Cindy’s story and its similarities to Shari’s, as well as Gianna’s alleged real-life experiences, are framed as testaments to the fact that reproductive control is essentially out of the hands of women. Even when they made concerted efforts to take control of their futures both women’s abortions failed, indicating that their fates – and the fates of their unborn children – are in the hands of a higher power. Juxtaposing the story in *October Baby* with its predecessor, *The Silent Scream*, illustrates the evolution of anti-abortion film-making from foregrounding medical and technical knowledge to today, where scientific knowledge is backgrounded and faith-based appeals take center stage. This chapter also focuses on the character Cindy, who exemplifies the ways that post-feminism and the New Right co-opt of the meaning of reproductive “choice” in tandem to perpetuate harmful ideologies about women’s agentive decision making.

The last chapter concludes by reflecting on my experience as an audience member at a screening of *October Baby*, wherein I witnessed the powerful effects of sidelining as a persuasive tool.

## Chapter 2

### Context for Evaluating *October Baby*

The “War on Women” is waged on many grounds. The United States Supreme Court’s 1973 ruling in the matter of *Roe v. Wade* is often interpreted as a clear-cut victory for women, guaranteeing them medical privacy rights and thus abortion access. But as of this writing opponents of the decision are still adamantly trying to overturn it. Politicians, religious leaders, and social movement organizers continue battling to establish themselves as possessors of the high ground when it comes to controversial issues, particularly the matter of abortion. Yet as Blanchard (1994) notes, it is crucial for the longevity and health of the anti-abortion movement “to seize the high ground of the ethical/moral debate *while appealing to as wide a constituency as possible*” (p. 1, italics added for emphasis). It is not surprising, then, that arguments made by these groups are not necessarily overt or explicit in their moral, religious, or political appeals. Instead, as exemplified by the success of the film *October Baby*, any appeal is far more palatable – and will result in greater popularity and more widespread consumption – if it appears as part of an entertainment package in lieu of an activist one.

As the rest of this chapter illustrates, *October Baby* represents a culmination of anti-abortion sentiments that work cohesively to sideline women and place the “needs” of the fetus ahead of hers. This is, in large part, due to the evolution of visual imaging technology, particularly ultrasound imaging. This discussion is foregrounded by a discussion of *The Silent Scream*, another anti-abortion film that was released in 1984 and relied almost exclusively upon ultrasound imaging technology to frame its anti-abortion

appeals. This discussion clarifies the origins and evolution of anti-abortion filmmaking, of which I consider *October Baby* a culmination, for the third chapter of this project.

### **Key Moments in Debates around Abortion in the US**

The inception of anti-abortion activism did not begin as a result of the *Roe v. Wade* decision. The wording of the Supreme Court's ruling in this case, however, has significantly affected the choice of rhetoric used by anti-abortion activists, particularly due to the fact that it permits the Court's decision to be questioned using its own terms. The tenuous relationship between fetal viability and technology, which plays a significant role in the battle for abortion's moral high ground, is exhibited not only in later Judges' reflections, but also in media texts such *October Baby*. In 1973 Justice Blackmun, who wrote *Roe*'s majority opinion, proposed a trimester-based framework for determining whether the state could interfere with a woman's right to an abortion (*Roe v. Wade and Beyond*, 2006). Yet the "trimester framework" invoked by this decision, Justice O'Connor noted years later, proved to be unworkable: it was, and continues to be, contingent upon the implementation and success of medical technologies that are used to sustain fetal life (Rhoden, 1986). In essence, as technologies used to preserve the life of a fetus outside the uterus are perfected, anti-abortion activists are able to argue that life outside the womb is sustainable at earlier and earlier stages of development. Due to the fact that *Roe* did not, in fact, establish a woman's absolute right to privacy, and instead measured it against the state's interests at particular points in time determined by the level of fetal development, the line between fetal viability and when states are able to interfere in the practice of abortions becomes increasingly fuzzy. In fact, in *October*

*Baby*, the film's story establishes that medical knowledge is beyond understanding when viability begins.

Although at this time it appears that the work of fetologists has been co-opted by anti-abortion activists for political purposes, medical professionals had a decidedly positive role in the legalization of abortion during the second half of the twentieth century. During the 1950s, many actually worked alongside feminist health activists to provide women abortion access (Joffe, Weitz & Stacey, 2004). Those physicians who mobilized for reform pushed for acceptance of "therapeutic abortions," which they deemed necessary in cases of fetal abnormalities and prescription drug and disease exposure (p. 780). In many ways, despite *Roe*'s "trimester framework," the decision was initially seen as a victory for women by doctors and women's health advocates alike. Conservative Christians, however, heartily disagreed.

In the wake of the Supreme Court's ruling, overturning the court's seminal decision became "the preeminent political task of social conservatives" (Dowland, 2009, p. 610). The New Right's ideologies, while faithful to other conservative ideologies such as Second Amendment rights, the importance of militarism, and a balanced budget, initially focused upon issues surrounding the traditional family and sexuality, particularly in response to feminism and focusing upon abortion as a social problem culminating these areas (Petchesky, 1990, p. 255). For them, religion and politics are indivisible, and as such, some of the various names of the movements which reference them include religious words, such as the Christian Right and the New Christian Right. Overall, however, these are essentially the same group, possessing overlapping ideas and values,

and whose membership has been constituted primarily of Republicans since the 1980s (Herring, 2003, p. 123).

How this came to be is an important consideration, seeing as during the early 1970s even evangelical public leaders prevaricated upon the abortion issue, yet 30 years later are staunchly opposed to any sentiments labeled anti-life, and by extension, anti-family (Dowland, 2009). In earlier rhetoric, such as that of the 1970s, only a relatively small group of evangelical ministers espoused philosophies lumping abortion with other threats to “family values” traditionalism (Dowland). As Petchesky (1990) notes, the reason for drawing upon membership from fundamentalist and/or evangelical churches is that their members also seek “ideological coherence and legitimacy” and already belong to “organized networks” (Petchesky, p. 258). The anti-abortion movement is essentially religious, providing a fertile ground for the political process to become “an absolute struggle between good and evil” (p. 245). Abortion symbolizes the evils that the New Right would like to destroy, whereas the unborn fetus represents the innocent, patriotic American traditionalism they seek to protect (p. 245). These leaders connected a deterioration of traditional values to the advancement of feminism and gay rights in particular, but also noted that abortion devalued motherhood and, in turn, also contributed to the war against the family (pp. 607-608). To combat these assaults on traditionalism, films such as *October Baby* fill the void for entertainment sought by those who believe that projects developed by the mainstream, supposedly left wing media conflict with conservative views.

## **The Christian Film Industry**

Considering the financial strength of the New Right, it is unsurprising that the traditional and conservative base has been able to produce and distribute media content that satiates their desire for media reifying the ideals with which they seek to align personally and in the broader world. As early as the 1930s evangelical Christians as well as Roman Catholics were dissatisfied with the lack of morality in Hollywood filmmaking. While some fundamentalists strived to effect the changes they sought from within the filmmaking industry, others opted to nurture and grow an alternative film movement of their own wherein media products could support their teachings, fundamental lessons, and missions (Lindvall & Quicke, 2011). The strength of the industry permits a feedback loop that promotes ideas that consistent with religious beliefs about how the rest of the world should operate and what it should value.

Determining the authenticity of the religious motivation for creating this content is impossible. However, what matters is that this content is created under the façade, if not genuine belief, that it is either divinely inspired or at least congruent with God's word. In fact, since the *Roe* decision in 1973, what I deem to be the two most compelling anti-abortion propaganda films, 1984's *The Silent Scream* and 2011's *October Baby*, were produced and distributed by fundamentalist Christian organizations. Today, as the success of *October Baby* illustrates, there is no pressing need to distance anti-abortion propaganda from religious rhetoric. In the past, however, this was not the case, as even though *The Silent Scream* was, and still is, distributed by the religious American Portrait Films, it relied upon a façade of secularism to appear scientifically and medically based instead of being divinely inspired. This was accomplished by relying heavily upon the



use of ultrasound imaging technology, which was used in an attempt to illustrate just how misinformed and misguided “pro-abortion activists” and women seeking abortions were. Although *October Baby* is largely lacking in attempts to use accurate scientific and medical rhetoric, overall it serves a persuasive anti-abortion activist purpose similar to *The Silent Scream*. This film also illustrates that the choice to abort is misinformed and misguided, by showing the widespread devastation and negative consequences that result from Cindy’s botched procedure. Although her decision to terminate the pregnancy initially showed that she possessed agency, ultimately her inability to control her reproductive destiny suggests that even faith-based anti-abortion rhetoric situates women as incapable of fully realizing the consequences of their actions.

### **Ultrasound’s Role in Erasing the Mother**

For those who argue the notion of pregnant women being incapable decision-makers, perhaps because they cannot visualize the fetus, is strengthened by the integration of visual technology. While ultrasound imaging in obstetrics serves important medical functions, these images may be co-opted for religious or political purposes. After it was discovered that the technology used in maritime navigation and radar systems could be applied to medicine, ultrasound images were soon used by medical practitioners as early as the 1940s. Ian Donald, a Scottish scientist, realized their potential for picturing the fetus in utero and was thus the first to apply their use in obstetrics (Mutman & Ocak, 2008). In the 1960s, ultrasounds became officially integrated into obstetrics practice (Petchesky, 1987). Today these images may be two-dimensional, three-dimension, or even four-dimensional. In two and three-dimensional imaging, an image is creating by

bouncing sound waves off of bone and tissue. Two-dimensional ultrasounds remain the best choice in making prenatal diagnoses and gathering the most medical data (Palmer, 2009). Infrequently used for clinical purposes, and more for investigating questioned abnormalities or satisfying expecting parents' voyeuristic desires, three and four-dimensional ultrasounds (the latter giving the impression of real time movement) actually reignited anti-abortion arguments in the UK (Palmer, 2009).

### **Contributions of Feminist Scholarship**

Feminist scholarship supports the position that fetal ultrasounds create oppositional relationships between women and fetuses. Due to a mother's complete absence in ultrasound images, the fetus is placed at the medical-technological forefront (Franklin, 1991). This results in the fetishization of the fetus, making it a spectacle unto itself (Petchesky, 1987). Even more problematic, and as Palmer (2009) claims, "recent constructions of the issue suggest the relevance of a third subject – a concerned citizen who has a right and a duty to know the facts and to form an opinion on the morality of the issue" (p. 174). Drawing upon Frosh's (2001) notion of the citizen-voyeur in photography, she explains the conflation between seeing and knowing. In this way she explores "the assumptions about knowledge and vision that underpin current calls to review the gestational time limit" (p. 177). Sandelowski (1994) adds that ultrasound imaging shifts "epistemological privilege from the pregnant woman to the expectant father and to an additional category of knowers: the health professionals who obtain, clinically interpret, and control access to the fetal sonogram" (p. 239). Hence the image

of the fetus becomes a spectacle, not only for those who are physically present, but also for anyone invited to view it as media.

In lieu of fostering a better understanding of the relationship between the maternal body and the developing fetus, the work of feminist media scholars like Stabile (1993) illustrates the ways that technology constructs fetal personhood while eclipsing the role of woman or mother. Hence, her role becomes “sidelined” as her agency diminishes and the privileges assigned to the fetus grow. As it is used today, ultrasound imaging invites voyeurism, naturalizes a distinction between mother and fetus, and even problematizes their relationship as oppositional. As Stabile (1993) notes, visual technologies, particularly ultrasound imaging ones, erase the maternal body so as to represent “fetal personhood” as autonomous, separate, and even at odds with the mother (p. 180). Drawing upon Foucault’s concept of the “medical gaze,” Mutman and Ocak (2008) claim that ultrasound imaging diverges the woman’s body further from the fetus’s form; she is instructed, even disciplined, by medical technicians and doctors when it comes to her choices and behaviors during pregnancy. Further separating her existence from that of the fetus is the fact that this disciplining transpires separately from the viewing of the ultrasound image.

This discipline takes many forms, as the case of Angela Carder indicates. In 1986, Carder was ordered to undergo a caesarian section by the state of Washington. This was against her wishes, as she had been diagnosed with bone cancer not once but twice, and was refused chemotherapy because of the pregnancy. Both she and the fetus died shortly after the forced procedure (Stabile, 1993, pp. 181-182). Another woman, Pamela Rae Stewart, gave birth to a brain-damaged child who died; shortly thereafter she was charged

“with failing to deliver support to a child” (Stabile, p. 182). Her partner, however, who had sex with her against doctor’s orders and beat her, was never charged with a crime. As these examples illustrate, women are disciplined by the judiciary system for the harm inflicted upon their fetuses in utero, whose “rights” are positioned above their own.

The personhood ideology justified by ultrasound technology is relevant for *October Baby*, but indirectly. We see “discipline” transpire in *October Baby*, as the arrival of Hannah at Cindy’s law office illustrates fetal personhood as fully a realized, living and breathing notion. Although Cindy attempted to abort her daughter nineteen years earlier, the fact that Hannah survived and is now an adult suggests that Cindy’s actions were an assault on her right to a healthy life. Their relationship, it seems, will never be anything more than oppositional, the embodiment of the conflict of fetal isolation from its mothers rights as transpires during ultrasound imaging on a daily basis.

Earlier anti-abortion rhetoric, however, made direct use of medical visualization, as the 1984 film *The Silent Scream* illustrates.

### ***The Silent Scream: Foregrounding the Fetus, Shooting the Mother***

*The Silent Scream* is a twenty-eight minute film featuring the suction abortion of a twelve-week old fetus through ultrasound imaging. Formerly an abortion provider, the film’s narrator, Dr. Bernard Nathanson, became adamantly anti-abortion ten years prior to the film’s release. To influence policymakers, the film was sent to all members of Congress, Supreme Court judges, and incumbent President Ronald Reagan, who received a gold-plated copy at a private White House screening. Publicly endorsing the movie, Reagan suggested that if it were shown to every Congress member, “they would move

quickly to end the tragedy of abortion” (MacDonald, 1985, para. 2). Praised by pro-lifers and condemned by pro-choicers, then vice-president of the National Organization of Women (NOW) stated that “anti-choice people are trying a new emotional appeal that is forcing [pro-choicers] to rethink our point of view. The debate has become much more inflammatory” (MacDonald, 1985, para. 3). Despite serving a blatant political agenda, the film was distributed to colleges, high schools, and even broadcast on television (Givner, 1994).

*The Silent Scream*, which because of its reliance on scientific and technological appeals may appear apolitical and even atheological, is actually distributed by Christian film distributor American Portrait Films. The company’s mission states that

In America today, two distinct cultures exist: one which rejects the values upon which our country was founded, and one which supports them. American Portrait Films firmly endorses traditional Judeo-Christian values. We provide the best in Christian educational videos for creationism, creation science, facts on abortion and anti-abortion education, abstinence videos and more than 100 others.

(American Portrait Films, n.d.)

Not only does this mission statement align with the objectives of the New Right, particularly its emphasis upon ensuring and protecting an American return to traditional values, it is explicit in arguing that traditionalism and evangelism are intrinsically connected. Though promoted as intending to educate, with this mission in mind it is difficult to see their films as apolitical, despite *The Silent Scream*’s insistence that it is purely relaying medical facts to audience.

Despite being somewhat graphic in nature, *The Silent Scream*'s widespread distribution occurred due to the presumption that the bloody images portrayed on the screen were "real." This is because the film's narrator, Dr. Nathanson, repeatedly claimed that scientific, technical, and medical advances – all of which are assumed to be "impartial" and used as rhetorical tools in the film – prevented it from misrepresenting the true nature of abortion. In the film's opening scene, for instance, Nathanson explains that it is these advances that "have convinced us that beyond question the unborn child is simply another human being, another member of the human community, indistinguishable in every way from us." The assumed "us" he references is members of the medical and scientific communities and, as a result, the truth of these sentiments ought to be assumed by members of the less-knowledgeable public, the film's assumed audience, as well. The happy era that Nathanson describes, one in which scientific, hence "verifiable," truth trumps seemingly outdated, unscientific notions of female agency is one "in which the fetus can be rightfully considered and treated as... second patient." He then invokes the physician's pledge to do no harm to their patients and, as such, doctors must preserve the fetus's life. All of this, he explains throughout the film, is made possible through the implementation of ultrasound imaging: "And so, for the first time, we are going to watch a child being torn apart, dismembered, disarticulated, crushed, and destroyed by the unfeeling, steel instruments of the abortionist."

### **Perspectives on Fetal Development and Visualization**

Whether fetuses experience pain is a question that medical science continues to return to, and is a question directly related to anti-abortion arguments. Yet based upon

Nathanson's remarks in isolation this question seems definitively affirmative, because if the fetus felt neither pain nor fear, how could abortion be medically or morally wrong? Though the debate continues, it is established that inferring experiences of pain in the way Nathanson does through the use of ultrasound imaging is actually a mistake (Derbyshire, 2008). Critics charged the filmmakers with altering images of the ultrasound, with using camera tricks that sped up and slowed down the images to make their message and narration more persuasive (Petchesky, 1987). These conversations continue, however, as *The Silent Scream*'s viewers and voyeurs are encouraged to gaze upon these mediated images and make moral judgments.

Facilitating audience formation of these judgments is Nathanson's narration. While the film's persuasiveness results from its incorporation of scientific "facts," it would have had a diminished effect if devoid of Nathanson's narration. Without his interpretation and explanation of the action, the film would have been devoid of the political and rhetorical impact that led to its success (Condit, 1990, p. 87). In other words, making the invisible visible is not enough to be a persuasive argument against abortion. Context is necessary for images or action presented on the screen. *The Silent Scream* provides this by having Nathanson describe the abortion procedure as he perceives it to unfold; he refers to the fetus as a child and interprets its opened mouth as a chilling scream of pain and fear.

Historically, it was at the time of quickening, when a woman felt the fetus move inside her, that a pregnancy was deemed viable. Today ultrasound imaging brings a fetus to life far before this developmental stage (Taylor, 2007). These images seek to compensate for the "realness problem" or the fact that, in Linda Layne's (2000) view, it

is impossible to view fetuses directly without such technology. But as Mutman and Ocak (2008) ask, even viewing the form of the fetus does not solve the questions of we truly see: “An embryo? A fetus? A baby? A small human?” (p. 25). In their view, a combination of medical, biological, and familial discourses intersect to answer these questions of when “the birth of the human” begins (p. 25). This is a question that *The Silent Scream* also seeks to answer with a definitive correlation of visualization with existence. Likewise, Hannah’s face-to-face encounter with her mother in *October Baby* shows that she, too, is and always was “real,” and that even as a fetus possessed the capacity to become a full-fledged person, despite her mother’s choice to stifle her.

### **Ultrasound in *The Silent Scream***

Ultrasound technology is central to *The Silent Scream*’s method of persuasion: an overtly scientific, hence “logical,” mode of appealing to its viewers. Upon *The Silent Scream*’s VHS release in 1984, it touted scientific evidence that demonstrated why abortions should be prohibited. “Now for the first time, we’re going to see a film made with real time ultrasound imaging of a twelve-week abortion,” the film’s narrator and director, Dr. Bernard Nathanson, tells viewers prior to showing footage of an abortion procedure. Utilizing scientific and technological advancements to show that medicine had proven that fetuses deserved the same respect as other living persons, Nathanson positions his film as being medically correct due to its use of scientific “facts.” Rather than describe abortion procedures, Nathanson plays “real-time footage,” which requires him to interpret and explain the action on the screen for audiences. In this way, *The Silent Scream* possesses an overtly scientific appeal due to the seemingly unquestionable nature



of scientific findings. Less than ten minutes of the film features discussion or images that are not related to the medical field of fetology. In fact roughly nine minutes of the film depicts ultrasound images, moving or still, indicating the film's intrinsic reliance upon scientific fact. In addition to these images, Nathanson also shows viewers models of fetuses during various developmental stages, and talks viewers through the abortion procedure using said models.

Even with "science" and "models" on his side, numerous criticisms were leveled at *The Silent Scream* and Nathanson. Some insisted that his claims about fetal development were grossly exaggerated, and that the ultrasound images had been misconstrued as he interpreted their meanings for audiences (Gelman & Miller, 1987). To combat these accusations, Nathanson released another film in 1987 titled *Eclipse of Reason*. This film, also a documentary, employed a slightly different approach than its predecessor: where *The Silent Scream* avoided showing blood and gore, save for a few jarring shots of aborted fetuses in buckets, *Eclipse of Reason* embraced abortion's visual horror. As a result, the abortion featured in this film was markedly different than its precursor. Here, a 30-week abortion was filmed using a fetoscope in addition to a camera at the woman's feet. In this way, viewers were shown bloody fetal material as it was pulled from the woman's body and reassembled on a table. Pro-choice activists, particularly medical professionals and Planned Parenthood representatives, claimed that this film was also intended to have "shock value" (Gelman & Miller, 1987). Unlike most abortions, they insisted, this one was undertaken at a particularly late stage in fetal development. Due to this, there was widespread doubt that it would become as widely distributed or shown as its predecessor because of its graphic nature. Ultimately, it was

not, but *The Silent Scream* continues to be used and distributed today. Its availability in libraries, on the Internet, and even on YouTube for viewing is testament to the widespread affects it has had.

Similarly, *October Baby*'s multi-channel distribution illustrates the ease with which a piece of propaganda can infiltrate the media market. It, too, has many special features available for streaming on YouTube, and utilizes websites – which were unavailable during the 1980s – to promote its anti-choice messages. While *October Baby*'s rhetoric, much like that of *The Silent Scream*, is essentially about the matter of abortion, also has infiltrated and affected broader cultural conceptions and imaginings of choice by de-emphasizing the role and importance of the woman involved and prioritizing the rights of the unborn “patient”.

### **The Persuasive Functions of Expertise and Conversion in *The Silent Scream***

As a former abortion provider, Dr. Nathanson speaks with authority on the matter of abortion. Not only is he a licensed medical practitioner, his knowledge – assumed to be far greater than that of the film's average viewer – renders him a seemingly trustworthy source of information as he introduces himself as possessing “passing experience in matter of abortion” since attending medical school during the 1940s. He explains that at that point, the medical sciences had not developed enough to create the field of fetology. In regard to the fetus, he claims his cohort was unsure whether it qualified as human or a person. But, he adds, this question was satisfactorily answered during the 1970s, when “the science of fetology exploded in the medical community... by means of the introduction of great new technologies such as ultrasound imaging...

which today constitute in fact the corpus of the science of fetology.” It is clear from the outset of the film, then, that the arguments and images presented in *The Silent Scream* are coming from an authoritative source on science and technology. Throughout the film, in fact, Nathanson demonstrates his command of medical jargon, repeatedly integrating vocabulary borrowed from the field of fetology yet without providing explanations for its meaning. Additionally, he characterizes himself as possessing the authority of the converted: once an abortion provider, his firm grasp of the true “facts” of abortion have caused him to change his ways.

The rhetorical appeal of *The Silent Scream* is two-fold: although it relies almost exclusively upon science and technology to create persuasive arguments about the viability of fetuses and the dignity of human life in utero, it paradoxically supports these claims through emotional appeals that appear predominantly in the form of “conversion tales.” As Branham (1991) notes in his analyses of *The Silent Scream* and its sequel, *Eclipse of Reason*, of paramount importance to their persuasiveness is the role of the convert: the doctor, nurse, layperson, even Nathanson himself, a former abortion provider and supporter of abortion rights. As Branham claims, conversion tales are what the entire *Silent Scream* film is structured around: “The fetal images and the descriptions and data which frame them are portrayed as having induced the transformation of those who testify, a process to be replicated for the implied viewer” (p. 2).

Moments before Nathanson plays the ultrasound footage of the abortion for viewers, he emphasizes the efficacy these images already played in converting other medical “experts” to adopting anti-abortion attitudes:

This film was made at an abortion clinic. The physician who performed the abortion was a young man who was working in two different abortion clinics at the time. He had already done close to 10,000 abortions in his young life. When he was asked to attend the editing session, to view the film, he was so appalled at what he had done that he left the room momentarily, came back to finish the editing, but never again did another abortion. The young woman who used the real time ultrasound camera was a feminist and a strong pro-abortionist. But she too was so moved by what she saw at the editing session that she never again discussed the subject of abortion.

In addition to possessing extensive knowledge of medicine, which positions him as scientifically and morally correct in opposing abortions, Nathanson's testimony demonstrates that logic is enough to dissuade even the most strong-minded feminist from being "pro-abortion".

According to Branham (1991), *The Silent Scream* and *Eclipse of Reason* are persuasive not only because of their graphic descriptions and depictions of abortion, but more importantly because these images are contextualized in narratives. As Condit (1990) previously noted, the film's effectiveness results from its narrative:

Simply stated, if *The Silent Scream* had really been silent, it would have had no rhetorical impact. The majority of audiences could not have interpreted the film on their own, let alone read it as the violent murder of a small human baby. Once the commentary is provided, however, we almost unavoidably experience the full emotional impact of what we have "seen." (p. 87)

This is why the presentation of many of the film's images, from barely discernable images in a fetal ultrasound to jars containing pickled, aborted fetuses, relies upon commentary for placement (Condit, 1990). Thus, the conversion tales that Nathanson describes in *The Silent Scream*, and interviewees describe themselves in its sequel, structure abortions as being part of a larger story of knowledge acquisition and the changes it has wrought (i.e., persuading them that abortion is wrong and/or immoral). Yet these emotional appeals play second fiddle to the film's greater emphasis upon science and technology. In fact, it is precisely the fact that this film relied upon them almost exclusively that it gained such widespread attention.

As the following discussion of *October Baby* illustrates, however, reliance upon scientific and medical knowledge is no longer necessary to ensure the marketability and popularity of anti-abortion films. In fact, it is due to their euphemistic reframing of choice as completely unrelated to women's agency that their popularity in a post-feminist cultural context is ensured. It is crucial to keep in mind, though, that contemporary anti-abortion films do still integrate medicine and science so as not to appear entirely non-secular. They do, however, impose pseudo-science, which is still backgrounded against a forefront of religious appeals.

### Chapter 3

#### “Non Choice” in *October Baby* and its Paratexts

The early anti-abortion film *The Silent Scream* did not dwell on women’s reproductive choices apart from serving as a means to persuade pregnant women and doctors not to “choose” abortion. This was accomplished through medical-scientific appeals, designed to illustrate the inhumanity, even murderous nature, of pregnancy termination. Though seemingly apolitical, a number of contemporary popular films also touch upon the abortion “issue,” and even perpetuate a similar ideology that unplanned motherhood is morally superior to aborting a pregnancy. Romantic and indie comedies, written and directed by the likes of Judd Apatow and Diablo Cody, are produced and distributed with the intent to entertain, not invoke political action. However, their constructions of “choice” also result in the sidelining of whatever reproductive agency female characters may have initially possessed. This is accomplished by glossing over abortion as a decision for these women, who, without much consideration, appear to “choose” to carry their pregnancies to term despite the adversarial conditions in which they must do so. In essence, their ability to make agentive choices about their lives is stunted because they do not expend much time and energy in choosing the path that appears to be the lesser of two evils. Instead of fully realizing –indeed, being conscious of-- their decision-making ability (whether that means aborting their pregnancy or deciding that they *want* to have a baby), the protagonists in these films fail to treat their pregnancies as requiring serious reflection.

To illustrate this claim, consider recent mainstream films screened in multiplex theatres (in contrast to *Silent Screams*'s distribution) in which fictional characters face unintended pregnancies, such as *Juno* (2007), *Knocked Up* (2007), and *Waitress* (2007). All three perpetuate the aforementioned ideology that unexpected pregnancy is worthy of embrace regardless of the circumstances of conception (which, in these films, include sexual assault, drunken hook-ups, and high school sexual experimentation). All three also stigmatize abortion by portraying the termination of pregnancies as “non-questions” and essentially glossing over any prevarication on the expecting mothers' behalves as they determine whether or not to carry the pregnancy to term. Hence, any discussion or decision to abort their pregnancy would deviate from the “natural” choice of embracing birth, even in unplanned and unwanted circumstances. In this way, accepting their unplanned pregnancies becomes an “assumed choice” for all three of these films' protagonists (Hoerl & Kelly, pp. 375-376). Their decision-making abilities become sidelined, as none choose to fully explore or investigate alternatives that are available to them. The cultural context in which these films and *October Baby* emerge illustrates the congruence of post-feminism with anti-abortion messages. In effect, while these women may not have wanted to become parents or get pregnant, the only feasible option they believe they have is to carry on with it anyway. As a result their lives and relationships, romantic and otherwise, are improved.

Yet representations of “choice” and the sidelining of agency shift in the film *October Baby*. Here abortion is framed as morally repugnant and contradictory to post-feminist sentiments about women's proclivities toward motherhood. But of particular relevance to *October Baby*'s story, in this case the revulsion that is felt in regards to

Cindy's "choice" to abort Hannah is that she survived the procedure anyway. As a result, the rest of the film's characters must cope with, and learn to move on from, her bad decision. In this way, by illustrating the consequences of choice rather than engage in full-fledged discussions of what actual agency entails, *October Baby* represents a new effort on the part of the religious Right: to co-opt, and obviate the need for, discussions of choice as it relates to reproductive agency. Instead, a new rhetoric of choice is introduced that emphasizes the celebration and embrace of life in all its forms. Unlike *The Silent Scream*, which overtly positioned abortion as a choice, *October Baby* represents an initial effort on the part of the New Right to subsume the rhetoric of choice, just as they have co-opted the rhetoric of other left-wing movements of the past (e.g., civil rights, feminism, etc.) (see Rodino-Colocino, 2012a).

Before comprehensively illustrating this point by engaging in a discussion of the relationship of post-feminist sensibilities to discussions of choice and reproductive agency, an introduction to *October Baby* as a film is in order. Not only does this movie advance post-feminist arguments, it also is an important instance of how post-feminist culture feeds the rhetoric of the New Right. The remainder of this chapter describes the narrative of the film and its key themes.

### ***October Baby*: A New Christian Film, A New Anti-Abortion Message**

*October Baby*'s presentation of anti-abortion messages is influenced by the current political and religious social climate, whereas early anti-abortion films at least appeared to be motivated by advances in science and technology. While *The Silent Scream* gained recognition for its depiction of facts through supposed documentary



filmmaking techniques, *October Baby*'s success marks a significant departure from this strategy. Its dramatic narrative, although claiming to be based in truth, contains religious and moral appeals in lieu of scientific ones. Hence, its success – monetarily and culturally – signifies the end of scientific and technologically driven anti-abortion argumentation. Instead, this film's widespread success indicates the effectiveness of religious appeals, and its paratexts clarify its anti-abortion themes.

Distributed by mainstream Samuel Goldwyn Films as well as Provident Films, a subsidiary of Sony that specializes in socially conservative movies, *October Baby* seeks to be both a niche religious and mainstream apolitical movie. The film constructs a coming-of-age story in which a young student (Hannah) learns that she was adopted as an infant after her birthmother's failed abortion, which resulted in her birth and the birth of her twin brother who later died. Her adoptive parents hid this from her for nineteen years before she collapses and they feel forced to inform her that her maladies result from the trauma of the botched procedure. Devastated by the news, but wanting to understand her history, protagonist Hannah embarks on a journey to discover the circumstances of her birth and her mother's failed abortion. Along the way she is guided by a number of characters who serve as (patriarchal) mentors: her childhood best friend, Jason, with whom she romantically reconnects; a police officer who drops trespassing charges against her; and the nurse who attended her mother's failed abortion attempt. Ultimately she does find and confront her mother, who has remarried and has a young daughter. Devastatingly for Hannah, she also pretends to have no idea who Hannah is or what she is talking about. Shaken, Hannah returns home and is comforted by a priest who encourages her to forgive her mother. Hannah is finally able to do so and, as a result, she

and the other characters who were all traumatized by the abortion in their own way are able to begin the healing process. This even extends to Cindy, Hannah's birthmother. While she served the function of a selfish villain throughout the film, in the end we see her cry as she confesses her abortion to her husband.

### ***October Baby's* Reception**

The film's reviews were mixed and often differentiated along ideological rather than aesthetic grounds. Reviews from conservative media outlets and anti-abortion groups were largely positive. The Fox News cable network praised the film as visually striking, family-friendly, good for a date, thought provoking, and "a game changer":

Hollywood needs to be reminded that there is a large market for wholesome films that help people... American families are craving alternatives to Hollywood's films. *October Baby* is an unconventional portrayal of reality, forgiveness, love, and life... Finally, we have a movie we can all get behind. (Nance, 2012, paras. 22-24).

Pro-life media figures had high hopes that the film would prove a useful tool in the abortion debate, as had *The Silent Scream*. Radio personality Brad Mattes, who hosts a daily pro-life segment, repeatedly shared his favorable view of the film and noted the significance of *October Baby* in the abortion debate:

My hope is that *October Baby* will be a significant catalyst in educating and engaging others with the fundamental truth that each and every life is valued and cherished, no matter what the circumstances surrounding the birth... I believe this film will be pivotal in winning more hearts and minds to the mindset that innocent

human life is sacred. Every life matters... With the tide changing across the country in favor of life, the film's timeliness couldn't have been more perfect (Ertelt, 2012, para. 12).

*Christian Post* guest columnist Thom Rainer (2012) acknowledged that "as expected, some members of the [liberal] press have taken shots at the movie in their reviews, but those snide remarks had little to do with the movie. The real issue at stake is the rights of the unborn" (para. 1). Slightly less partial, and perhaps speaking to pro-choice audiences, is Goldstein's (2012) review, which claims that the "faith-based, anti-abortion drama is poignant, no matter which side of the debate you fall on" (para. 1).

Yet *October Baby* received a generous amount of criticism as well. *The New York Times* published a scathing review of the film, recognizing how "slickly packaged" its anti-abortion agenda was in comparison to other faith-based movies (Catsoulis, 2012, para. 1). *Slate* contributor Libby Copeland (2012) wrote that the film was "perfectly of-the-moment and demonstrates how anti-abortion and anti-woman messaging often overlap" (para. 4). She added that the film provides more than "a cultural critique of abortion... offering a portrait of modern womanhood with its priorities all messed up – women choosing careers over family, aided and abetted by abortion, contraception, and sexual licentiousness" (para. 2). Copeland also considered the film's characterization of Hannah's birthmother in particular, and how its portrayal

of a self-involved, career-minded woman is a useful distortion... because it implies that women's reasons for seeking abortion are so flimsy they'd collapse if only women thought them through. If you subscribe to the most black-and-white view of conception, if you support personhood bills and believe abortion at any

stage is so blatantly wrong that only someone morally suspect or self-deceiving could get one, the caricature of a modern woman dizzied by ambition is the perfect candidate for the description. (para. 8)

Cindy thus illustrates the perils and pitfalls associated with second wave feminist gains. Fundamentally, her choice to undergo an abortion is the final straw in an array of what are framed as “poor” choices having to do with her priorities and sexual relationships. All in all, these work cohesively to make her the “distortion” that Copeland (2012) describes.

*October Baby*'s truth claims spring from science, though presumably pseudo-science, to construct the physical effects of abortion on the film's main character.

Hannah's health problems are presumably caused by the fact that Cindy attempted to abort her nineteen years earlier, and her resulting physical maladies range from seizures to depression and asthma. But the questions and choices she and other characters are confronted with have naught to do with making decisions about pregnancy. Rather, they have to do with choosing to forgive others for their transgressions, choosing to forgive themselves for the errors of their ways, and choosing to privilege faith over facts.

This third choice is perhaps most important of the three and is vital to understanding *October Baby* as a political and religious text: it indicates that this film, unlike *The Silent Scream*, foregrounds faith and backgrounds medical knowledge. Thus, Hannah's journey of self-discovery as she comes to a state of growth and maturity is ripe with moralistic references to, and integrations of, quasi-religious rhetoric. In these ways choice as it relates to abortion becomes, in the context of this particular film, not merely a “non-choice”: in effect it is an entirely omitted choice. The one woman who was able to make a choice regarding her reproductive future (i.e., Cindy) *chose* to have an abortion;

yet the outcome of that decision was out of her hands, as Hannah and her brother were still born alive. In lieu of Cindy having reproductive agency, a higher power interfered and made the decision on her behalf to have the children survive the procedure. Thus Hannah became a “miracle” baby, having survived the abortion relatively unscathed compared to her brother. In essence, the message is that women are incapable decision makers when it comes to their reproductive health, and the interventions of men are necessary to promote morality and faith-based decision-making. Thus, choice, as it relates to abortion as a medical procedure, is downplayed in *October Baby* unlike *The Silent Scream*, where it is played up.

### **Forgiveness of Others**

Unlike anti-abortion documentary *The Silent Scream* and mainstream pro-life films *Juno*, *Knocked Up* and *Waitress*, which depict expecting mothers’ limited prevarications about whether to undergo an abortion procedure, the most explicit “choice” made in *October Baby* concerns forgiving Hannah’s birth mother for her crimes against her unborn child. Forgiveness also appears in the film as a spiritual journey. *October Baby*’s rephrasing of “choice” indicates a new direction for anti-abortion propaganda; no character chooses to undergo an abortion during the film, but dealing with abortion’s emotional consequences requires healing through religion. Though a film where abortion is a catalyst for the plot, *October Baby*’s narrative obviates opportunities for choice to be made about abortion: Hannah’s mother Cindy already made the choice to have one nineteen years ago. Yet she “gave birth” to Hannah, an event nurse Mary deemed a “miracle.” Cindy’s naïveté, youth, and desire for a career motivated her to

abort her pregnancy. As the nurse who attended the procedure tells Hannah, Cindy had said in no uncertain terms, that “she had to go to school, she had to have a career, and she knew she couldn’t do that with a baby so this was the only way.” As a result, Hannah has only one choice of her own to make: whether or not she will forgive her birthmother.

This notion of choosing forgiveness is articulated most plainly at two separate points in the film: first, during a conversation Hannah has with a friendly police officer, and second with a Catholic Priest. The police officer initially arrested Hannah and Jason while trespassing in the abandoned hospital where she was born, looking for clues about her mother and the circumstances of her birth. Forgiveness for Hannah’s literal trespasses comes easy to the arresting officer after Hannah explains her for being there, her search for her birth mother (or in this case, her abortion mother). The officer seems touched, and later we learn through Nurse Mary’s story that he knew Mary due to the numerous threats the abortion clinic where she once worked received. The officer forgives Hannah by dropping the trespassing charges against her and her male friend/budding love interest. As they prepare to leave the precinct, he leaves them with these parting words: “To be human is to be beautifully flawed ... You know, life isn’t always black and white, so hate the crime, not the criminal.” In other words, crimes, not people deserve hate. Easily overlooked, though imperative to note, is that abortion is not a crime. Here, however, we hear and see a call to action for the reframing of it as such. In the context of an anti-abortion film, or world or state where abortions are permitted, the only possible means of preventing future abortions would be to make them illegal. Even if *October Baby* is unable to directly effect such a change at the legislative level, this indicates its intent to

criminalize abortion culturally. This is clarified at a later point in the movie, which shows the film's interdenominational – though still explicitly religious – intent.

The salience of religious and faith-based culture to *October Baby* is reaffirmed near the end of the film. After being forced by her father to return home before getting all the answers from her mother that she desired Hannah, after confessing that she is actually a Baptist, converses with a priest in a Catholic church<sup>4</sup>. He encourages her to reveal what is so profoundly troubling. She tells him:

Hannah: I'm trying to figure out how to let go of things...I can't figure out how to let go of the fact that I feel hatred for myself and others. There, I said it...Well three weeks ago I found out that my entire life is a lie. So I went on a trip. I thought if I went that I would get all these answer. And somehow when I got back I would feel different. But I don't. My parents aren't really my parents. And my real parents tried to abort me. And I have a brother, I had a brother. He died shortly after the, uh... I'm angry at my parents for not telling me sooner and making me think I was just like everybody else. I'm angry at my real mom for not wanting me. Why didn't she want me? What's so wrong with me? I found her, and she still doesn't want me. And I feel guilty. Part of me feels like he should be alive and I shouldn't. I wonder if he would have been a better person than me, what he would have been like. I just hate myself for feeling this way.

Priest: I see... because we have been forgiven by God, we should forgive each other. In Christ you're forgiven, and because you're forgiven, you have the power

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<sup>4</sup> Ironically, it was opposition to abortion was the only social issue uniting Evangelicals and Catholics in the decades since the *Roe* decision (Herring, 2003).

to forgive, to choose to forgive. Let it go. Hatred is a burden you no longer need to carry. Only in forgiveness can you be free. Forgiveness that is well beyond your grasp or mine, forgiveness that you can't find on a trip or even in this cathedral. But if the Psalm shall set you free, you will be free indeed.

This conversation has a visibly positive effect upon Hannah, who leaves the church smiling. Hence audiences are shown that through forgiveness she will be able to free herself from the burden of hate.

Taking the priest's words to heart, Hannah returns to her mother's town once more. While she is out of the office, she leaves her hospital bracelet alongside a note on her desk: "I forgive you." Upon discovering it, her mother begins sobbing and crumples to the floor. Only by choosing to forgive, and as a result, moving on and celebrating the life she does have, is Hannah able to heal. Yet the consequence of this storyline illustrates the way that reproductive choices are sublimated in *October Baby*. By having this discussion of "choice" (though that choice relates to forgiveness and not abortion) transpire within a religious context makes it so that the absence of discussion of Cindy's agency seems natural. The scene naturalizes this absence, and thus serves the broader function of making it appear normal that discussions of choice focus on topics other than abortion. This way, choice has been co-opted within an interdenominational context.

While Hannah's conversation with the priest transpired in a Catholic church, in the last scene of the film we return to Hannah's fully Baptist family once again. After moving into her new college dorm, she hugs her parents goodbye and begins to walk away, holding hands with her new beau. Suddenly she stops, and runs back to her father. "Thank you," she says as she hugs him. He asks what she is thanking him for. "For



wanting me,” she replies. Here, again, reproductive choice is sidelined as the rhetoric of choice is replaced by a new choice: having her parents want her while her birthmother did not. However, the consequence of not wanting, based upon the actions of her mother, would have been to end her life. Thus the focus shifts once more from the woman who seeks an abortion, to fetal rights.

**How paratexts sideline ‘choice’ and frame forgiveness. *October Baby*’s**

paratexts also reify the move from “choice” as it relates to reproductive agency to other choices that are more in-line with anti-abortion activism. These include interviews with the film’s stars and makers, a music video for the film’s theme song, information on the Every Life is Beautiful fund, and promotional videos. While most of *October Baby*’s paratexts present religious resources that promote alternatives to abortion, this last one in particular illustrates the film’s religious theme but also is illustrates the continued relevance of ultrasound technology to anti-abortion rhetoric. On the film’s DVD, a video “extra” created by the conservative, pro-traditional-family group Focus on the Family<sup>5</sup> interweaves arguments about what a pro-life position entails with messages of forgiveness for women who experience unexpected pregnancies. On the screen appear men, women and children of all ages and ethnicities. Their words overlap as they relay the following:

God created mankind in his own image.... From the formation of a child’s first, tiny cell, to life’s final breath, all life has dignity and value. Because each and

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<sup>5</sup> One of Focus on the Family’s primary concerns is building “a Christian media empire” in addition to inserting Christian perspectives in popular political discourse (Klemp, 2007, p. 530).

every one of us is made in the image of god. *And that is why when we talk about being pro-life it's not just about a political issue.* It's a world view, it's a life view, it's a way of looking at each human life that transcends culture, class, race, age and opinion, knowing that we are each uniquely created in the image of God. The sanctity of human life is deeply rooted in scripture and modeled through the life of Jesus Christ.... Let us see people as God sees them. See their needs. And have mercy on them because every person is made in the image of God. Don't be silent in the face of injustice, but be a voice for those who cannot speak for themselves. *May we not pass judgment on the woman facing an unexpected pregnancy, but surround her with support, helping her to see the child growing inside her as a unique person with a life as valuable as her own...* Let us rejoice in the image of God, as expressed through various skin colors, and ethnic traditions. Refusing to tolerate racist attitudes that mock the one that created us. Let us choose to see those who disagree with us as God sees them: treating them with respect and dignity while helping them to open their eyes to see the beauty and value of life. That is what it means to be pro-life. This is why we need to be a voice. (Italics added for emphasis)

Though the rhetoric in the video is entirely devoid of technological or medical sentiments, one of Focus on the Family's initiatives, the Ultrasound Option Program, provides grants for ultrasounds and sonography training for crisis pregnancy centers. They aim to serve communities with high abortion rates and claimed that as of the year 2011, this project had saved 100,000 babies from abortion (Option Ultrasound: Revealing

Life to Save Life, 2011). This clarifies that emotional appeals are foregrounded while technological ones are backgrounded, not just in the film, but its paratexts as well.

### **Forgiveness of Self**

This notion of forgiveness as choice extends beyond forgiving others who have wronged us. In fact, it is only through her forgiveness of others that Hannah is able to forgive herself and begin to heal and move on. As she tells the Priest, she feels enormously guilty, “like [her brother] should be alive and [she] shouldn’t... if he would have been a better person than [her], what he would have been like...” Only by forgiving her birthmother for trying to abort her, and her adoptive parents for keeping the truth from her, is she able to forgive herself and begin to heal.

In the film’s concluding montage we see that Hannah is not the only one who has been able to forgive herself and begin the healing process. Nurse Mary, too, who attended Cindy’s botched abortion and subsequent labor, and who related the entire story to Hannah, is clearly recuperating herself. Hannah had been given Mary’s home address by the aforementioned helpful police officer gave Hannah Mary’s home address, who was initially hesitant to invite the girl in. Upon realizing and remembering who Hannah is, however, she relates her memories of what transpired that day at the clinic; Mary notes

[Your mother] tried to convince me that she was making the right decision, but you know she was really trying to convince herself. She told me she didn’t even know the fella. Didn’t know his name. Met him at a bar and had a night together, and then he was gone. I listened... Nodded. Told her I understood... Halfway through, well, something must have gone wrong... the doctor was telling her that

it had been a failed attempt... For him [that was normal]. There were things that happened there, terrible things, things they had me do... It was tissue, that's what they told us. It was tissue that couldn't survive. Non-viable tissue. Your mother came back the next day. She said she wanted to finish the procedure, that she had to go to school, she had to have a career, and she knew she couldn't do that with a baby so this was the only way. I took one look at her and I knew she was in labor... Your brother came first... Hannah, your mother was carrying twins, and your brother came first, and I'll always remember him. He was so teeny. He was less than a pound, and he was damaged. His arm was missing, completely gone, torn off during the failed attempt... I saw the pain, and I didn't see no tissue. I just saw the face of a child. But you were the big surprise. Nobody knew about you, not even your mother. And you came out, just big eyes, beautiful.

At this point in the film, it is clear that Mary no longer works alongside any abortion provider. She, like the converted "feminist" and former "abortionist" described by Nathanson in *The Silent Scream*, seems traumatized by uncovering the gory truth behind what constitutes abortions. Here, however, the "horror show" of abortion is presented aurally and visually instead of purely visually. She sounds and appears nearly as shaken recounting the experience as Hannah does hearing it for the first time. After the story is over, she rises from her chair and exits the room, leaving Hannah to show herself out. In the film's concluding montage, however, we see her working in the maternity ward of a hospital, holding a newborn baby, smiling as she has found happiness again. Her ability to heal is seemingly motivated by her confession of her role as an abortion nurse to Hannah, one of her "victims," whose life proves that she had never really been dealing

with “tissue” at all. At this point, she has chosen to privilege their religious faith over any trust of scientific and medical knowledge, despite her training. This is important, as it signifies that there are representations of the medical field and knowledge in the film. However, even more important, is that medicine appears subordinate to God and His will, which is understood by Mary and communicated by her choice to abstain from working in the clinic any longer.

Another woman whose religious faith now trumps her former trust in medicine is actress Shari Rigby, who plays Cindy’s birthmother. Her real-life experiences add more legitimacy to the film’s framing of abortion as a needless tragedy and horror. On the *October Baby* promotional website, Shari reveals private information about her experience with the film and motherhood:

Well, I’m a post-abortive woman, and that’s my past. When I struggled having [my son] there was a lot of emotions that ran through my mind. That maybe I wouldn’t be able to have any more children again. Maybe, maybe this was the way God was punishing me in some crazy way, or maybe something else was taking place. Having Levi was an opportunity to really make it right, and children are such a representation of beauty and life and love. There is nothing more innocent than a child looking into your eyes and touching your hand, and that’s what makes the day worthwhile. My name is Shari and I play the birthmother in *October Baby*.

The information Shari shares in these brief interviews are teasers compared to the information she shares in an interview on the *October Baby* DVD’s special features. Here

she, in addition to the film's directors, shares her experience when she was sent the film's script:

Shari: Jon emailed me the script and of course I was so excited I think I sat down that very night. I got to the point of the birthmother and, um, I was so overwhelmed. I started crying over it because the story actually had been truly written for me. And Jon and Andy didn't even know my back-story at all.

Jon: And uh, she read it, and uh literally called me back just weeping, uh, about the script and said how did you know? And we said what are you talking about? And she said, um, twenty years ago I was working in a law firm, which is very similar to the story. She said she was in a relationship, she found out she was pregnant, and she decided to have an abortion.

Shari: It was easier to get rid of the child, to not be questioned again, rather than to have a child and be looked upon at that time like another failure. And so many times, uh, I think especially as young women, we carry that, um, that burden that we're going to look like a failure, that it's shameful. And um, you know, you can hide a secret for a long time of abortion unless you verbally speak about it... We went into it, and I remember the cameras rolling, and I just – right as I walked into the room I just knew that – I just knew that the Lord was with me, and that it was just complete healing. And the moment that I slide down that door and that I'm crying and I'm feeling that, that wasn't acting. That was my moment with God and him with me to say, it's ok. It's over and you've been forgiven.

As this interview reveals the choice to forgive herself, and thus be forgiven by God, is more important than the fact that she made a choice to have an abortion in the past. Not only is her agency sidelined, this emphasizes the move of choice from being about sexual and reproductive health and women's decisions and futures to instead focusing upon faith and God's intention.

### **Privileging Faith over Facts**

*October Baby's* incorporation of religion and religious rhetoric makes it unsurprising that faith in God is privileged over faith in scientific or medical facts. As Nurse Mary's monologue indicates, for example, "When you hear something enough times, somehow you start to believe it. It was tissue, that's what they told us. It was tissue that couldn't survive. Non-viable tissue... I saw the pain, and I didn't see no tissue. I just saw the face of a child."

Unlike the priest and police officer that Hannah also encounters, and whose monologues are interspersed with quasi-religious rhetoric about faith, Mary is unique in that she is the sole character who speaks about abortion in medical, scientific, and technical terms. Even so, however, she still provides a faith-based critique of abortion providers, the "science" of abortion and, by extension, Hannah's mother. In this way, her conversation with Hannah shows that in the broad scheme of themes, more important than Cindy's decision to terminate her pregnancy was that a miracle was about to transpire, that being the birth of a wide-eyed, beautiful baby. Hence, her position is unique in that her function as a character is to bridge the gap between faith and fact. Yet her experience with Cindy caused her to lose trust in medicine, and as these quotes

indicate, she could no longer believe in what science told her. Rather, she believed that there was nothing that was “just tissue;” that tissue that she had previously been unbothered by was now a child. This reflects the faith-based view on abortion, one that perceives abortion as a “non-choice.”

On the *October Baby* DVD, the notion of absence as it relates to abortion makes a rather surprising appearance. Abortion has certainly been discussed and debated in the public arena for years, even predating *Roe v. Wade*. This is not the impression left by the film’s paratexts, however, some of which underscore just how overlooked abortion as an issue is in the United States. One of its chapters contains interviews with Christian singers and bands, wherein those interviewed speak of their admiration for the Erwin brothers, who wrote and directed this film. One interviewee in particular, Francesca Batellisti, reveals that she believes that abortion “is such a topic in this country that is not talked about enough anymore, and I think so many people have given up on it ever changing.” Mark Hall, presented as the lead singer of Casting Crowns, echoes Batellisti’s sentiments:

And the plot unrolls and I’m thinking all the time no talks about this. No one talks about this. The issue of abortion alone, much less an abortion survivor... And in this story you meet the person. That has never happened in a movie that I have ever seen, or a television show that I have ever seen. You deal with the issue and this invisible victim... I am now an *October Baby* activist. I’ve gotta be a part of it.

Although the figures are sketchy, data from the early 1980s suggests that there may be roughly 400 abortion survivors each year. Hence, surviving an abortion is statistically



akin to being struck by lightning (Dunigan, 2012). Much in the same way that the New Right attempts to co-opt the rhetoric of choice, here we see an attempt to co-opt the public discourse on abortion in its entirety. Abortion is an issue that is far from absent in the public sphere, but *October Baby* does shift where audience and public attention is usually focused – that being the woman who seeks an abortion – and instead focuses us upon the lives of supposed “abortion survivors”.

Gianna Jessen, a noted figure among anti-abortion activists, is one such person who claims to have survived her birthmother’s attempted abortion at thirty weeks. An interview on the DVD’s special features reveals more specifics of Jessen’s past. Like Rigby’s, her testimony is interspersed with commentary by the films writers and directors:

Jon: And I heard someone speak, Gianna Jessen, who is an abortion survivor...

Andrew: We were just broken and moved by her story, and we didn’t even understand that there was such a thing as an abortion survivor and didn’t think about... I mean, I guess you kind of assume.

Jon: It’s a tough issue to look at, and uh, but we thought this needs to see the light of day. But just to see the life in her, to see how beautiful her life was, was just mind-blowing. She has one of the most wonderful spirits and lively spirits I’ve ever seen.

Gianna: I feel more alive now than ever. But I’m adopted, and I have what I consider to be the gift of cerebral palsy which was caused by a lack of oxygen to my brain while I was surviving an abortion. So thought it is a fictitious story it

was based on a true story. It really does happen... the few of us that made it out of clinics into hospitals are rare and few.

The feminist notion that abortion is, and ought to be, an issue centered around agentive decision-making by women is completely subsumed by the fact that the film and many of its paratexts instead present the personhood of the unborn fetus as the center of attention. If we assume that Jessen and other “abortion survivors” are being honest about the circumstances of their births, then the New Right is successfully replacing choice as it relates to abortion with choice as it relates to faith and healing.

The sidelining of agency and replacement of “choice” as integral to abortion rhetoric with choice as decisions to heal and forgive others closely align with aspects of post-feminist culture. In particular, as Gill (2007) and McRobbie (2004) describe it, a crucial aspect of post-feminism is that women are supposedly unencumbered when it comes to making decisions related to their sexual and reproductive health. This premise is affirmed in the *October Baby* film, as it appears that Cindy was empowered to make the initial choice to terminate her pregnancy. However, it is only after disentangling the confluence of religious rhetoric with post-feminist conceptions of choice do we see that Cindy’s choice was far from freely chosen. She actually possessed little agency, and the outcome of the procedure was not the one she wanted. In sum, as the rest of this chapter indicates, her lack of choice existed under the guise of choice, central to a post-feminist cultural contexts.

### ***October Baby's* Post-Feminist Choices: The Problem With Cindy**

Post-feminism claims that the social advances of women since feminism's first and second waves comes at an expense: that feminism is to blame for women's dissatisfaction with their lives due to their removal from their traditional, "natural" states as caregivers and mothers (see Gill, 2007 and McRobbie, 2004). In many ways, *October Baby* fits the bill of what could be described as a post-feminist film, particularly by illustrating how the contradictory notions of agentive decision-making and neo-traditionalism are seemingly able to flourish simultaneously. Only upon closer inspection, however, do we see that this is merely a façade: there is no agency given to the film's female characters and their choices are consistently eclipsed by the film's overarching emphasis upon the importance of conservative family values. In essence, there is no true "choice" when it comes to abortion; in the narrative of the film as well as the world at large, abortion has and always will result in disaster, death, and devastation. Instead we must acknowledge that every life, even fetal life, is beautiful, meant to be, and worthy of embrace.

As Gill (2007) notes, feminism – or at least discourses associated with feminism – are very much a part of the cultural field today, particularly in media content. That is to say that feminist sentiments, voices, and opinions frequently appear in media but are not necessarily labeled as such due to feminism's widespread acceptance. Feminist gains of the first and second waves, however, did not mark the end of feminism's evolution; today we inhabit a mode of feminism which some have dubbed "post-feminist" (McRobbie, 2004; Gill, 2007; Genz, 2009; Braithwaite, 2004). Central to this era are notions of

“choice” when it comes to women’s bodies and agency. As McRobbie (2004) notes, in a post-feminist world we can choose the kind of life we want to live. Individuals

must become reflexive in regard to every aspect of their lives ... Choice is surely, within lifestyle culture, a modality of constraint. The individual is compelled to be the kind of subject who can make the right choices. By these means new lines and demarcations are drawn between those subjects who are judged responsive to the regime of personal responsibility, and those who fail miserably. (p. 261)

The salience of “choice” to both post-feminism and *October Baby*’s narrative renders the film increasingly worthy of critique. At first glance it may appear that the anti-abortion rhetoric appearing in the film is outdated, even “pre-feminist.” However, a nuanced study of the portrayal of Cindy, Hannah’s birthmother, illustrates the ways that the film’s rhetoric is actually quite up-to-date in terms of cultural relevance. Thus, I engage in an analysis of the film that aims to provide a nuanced look at how reproductive agency and other matters of “choice” are framed in the film.

According to Gill (2007), central to post-feminism is the idea that “all our practices are freely chosen” (p. 153). As a result, women are “autonomous agents no longer constrained by any inequalities or power imbalances whatsoever” (p. 153). The veracity of this claim is contested, however, by McRobbie’s (2004) notion of “double entanglement.” An important aspect of post-feminist contexts, she claims that neoconservative values embodied in traditionalism can exist simultaneously as discourses associated with “neoliberal sensibilities” concerning choice and freedom in sexual relationships (pp. 255-256). Gill builds on this claim, adding that it is precisely this double entanglement that qualifies our cultural context as post-feminist, due to the

interconnectedness of feminist and anti-feminist discourses in media content. In *October Baby*, female characters including, but not limited to, Cindy maintain a façade of agency. Yet while qualities about her or choices she makes may at first appear agentive, closer analyses reveal that she only exemplifies the contradictions inherent in post-feminism and double entanglement. This is particularly clear when considering her lack of agency over her body when it comes not only to her abortion, but also the circumstances that she felt necessitated it.

### **Post-feminist Sexuality and Reproduction**

Cindy's sexuality is an issue in *October Baby* not only because she becomes pregnant, but also because it seems that her promiscuity caused the pregnancy. As Gill (2007) notes, the scrutinization of women's bodies is perhaps the most widespread aspect of a post-feminist culture, wherein "femininity is defined as a bodily property rather than a social, structural or psychological one" (p. 149). Although she goes on to discuss how in a post-feminist media context, femininity requires a "sexy" body in lieu of a more maternal and nurturing one, *October Baby's* Cindy exemplifies the contradictions inherent in post-feminism's double entanglement. On the one hand, as Gill (2007) notes, central to analyses of post-feminism's relationship to sex is women's supposed ownership of their sexualities, as media representations, particularly in advertising, have created "a new figure to sell to young women: the sexually autonomous heterosexual young woman who plays with her sexual power and is forever 'up for it'" (p. 151). Cindy, who is described as sexually loose by Nurse Mary, thus exemplifies some of the post-feminist criticisms aimed at women who choose to engage in sexual relationships.

Cindy also exemplifies all that is wrong with second-wave feminism. Nurse Mary's recollection of Cindy's fling with a stranger serves to shame second wavers and feminist victories like embracing sexual freedom and empowerment. Cindy embodies the second wave in other ways; she is a highly educated professional woman (a lawyer), who chose to bear a child after her establishing her career. Mary's recounting of Hannah's conception may also counter second wave feminist activism around rape: Cindy may have been victim of assault. When it came to the man who impregnated her, after all, Cindy had met him at a bar and did not know his name. In fact, the way that Mary describes Cindy as not knowing her partner's name, that she hadn't known him longer than a night at the bar, leaves open the possibility that she may have been the victim of sexual assault while drunk. Troublingly, the fact that little is made of Cindy's night with a stranger is indicative of a cultural context in which alcohol consumption plays a large role in characterizing women as "deserving" of whatever negative outcome they might experience (Meyer, 2010). These rape myths frequently appear in the media and result in victim blaming (O'Hara, 2012).

Yet another related myth perpetuated by members of the Right requires that women make the best of bad situations (i.e., unwanted pregnancies), even in cases of sexual assault. Hence I echo Rodino-Colocino's (2012b) claims about the brand of feminism touted by former Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin ("Palinite feminism"), and apply them to my interpretation of *October Baby*. Importantly, and related to the notion of "choice," Palin created a unification between anti-feminist discourses about reproductive agency with a move toward what she and others believed was a new brand of conservative feminism. This, perhaps, is nowhere near as clearly articulated as her

involvement with the Susan B. Anthony List, particularly her invocation – though not explicitly stated - that even in “less-than-ideal circumstances” (i.e., cases of rape, sexual assault, etc.) women were capable of juggling the outcomes of these events (i.e., pregnancies) and still feeling empowered to pursue their dreams (Rodino-Colocino, 2012b). For *October Baby*'s Cindy, the implication is that she ought to have persevered through her “less-than-ideal circumstances” in lieu of taking advantage of second wave feminism's promises of careers and postpone-able motherhood.

### **Cindy Versus Hannah**

Cindy's story illustrates that making the “wrong” choice is a punishable offense: not only is she remembered as being promiscuous, possibly a binge-drinker or drug user, she receives no sympathy from Mary, who admits that she only goes through the motions of appearing sympathetic to her troubles. In this light, the “hate the crime and not the criminal” line uttered earlier by the police officer takes on new significance: it illustrates the incongruity of women's empowerment and Christian notions of forgiveness, much in the same vein as Sarah Palin's anti-feminist feminism. It also illustrates that the film draws a parallel between criminal activities and abortion. There is no justice for Cindy, who is seen as much of a criminal as the strange man who seems to have sexually assaulted her. Due to this, she is a villain who illustrates the Right's attempts to blame victims in cases where sexual assault results in pregnancy, in line with Akin and Mourdock's claims. The view that Mary appears to possess is that Cindy's “choice” to sleep with a man she met at a bar was truly was a freely made one. Hence, the negative outcomes and attitudes resulting from her decision to abort does, in essence, highlight

post-feminism's double entanglement problem: even though Cindy made a choice to undergo an abortion, her choice was a "bad" one.

The singular opportunity Cindy is given to explain her reasoning for seeking an abortion, and revealing whether she was indeed a victim or, possibly, an un-maternal nature, goes unused. Audiences are left to guess at the reason that Cindy squanders the brief opportunity to explain to Hannah the circumstances surrounding her failed abortion attempt. Whether it was her husband's appearance in her office, or whether she is cold, unfeeling and entirely unsympathetic to Hannah, is never explained. This latter option, however, may in fact be the more likely of the two, clearly paralleling the "backlash" thesis. Susan Faludi, author of *Backlash* (1991), was one of the first to note the anti-feminist discourses circulating in popular about women and work, particularly career-oriented women. During the 1970s, she notes, media and advertising promoted the notion that women were successful in the working world and had accomplished the liberation they had sought to achieve. Yet Faludi adds that this "pseudofeminist cheerleading" of working women abruptly ended during the 1980s (p. 77). At that point, backlash against feminists and feminist advancements emerged in the media. Exemplified by the film *Fatal Attraction*, Glen Close's unmarried, homicidal title character is desperate to have a child at thirty-six. According to Faludi, movie's themes at this time typically depicted women as "good" or "bad." The good, stay-at-home mother was often the victor in scenarios where she was pitted against the independent, career-oriented woman. In this way, "Hollywood restated and reinforced the backlash thesis: American women were unhappy because they were too free; their liberation had denied them marriage and motherhood" (p. 113).



In *October Baby*, Hannah's "bad" birthmother is, unsurprisingly, punished with extreme emotional duress. Not only is she shocked when confronted at the office by her aborted daughter, she also collapses tearfully upon being forgiven by her. Finally, shown in her own home, she cries as she tells her husband about her unplanned pregnancy and the ensuing abortion.

Cindy is not the only character who illustrates that choices women in the film are presented with are, in effect, actually non-choices. The woman who adopted Hannah is an entirely ineffectual character throughout the film, frequently appearing alongside her husband but always deferential and comparatively quiet. Instead, Hannah's adoptive father dominates the conversation in nearly scene in which he appears, and forces Hannah to abide by his will even though she is, in effect, an adult herself. In fact, whenever Hannah is faced with a decision to make, her actions are guided by the men around her: her father, her childhood friends, various police officers, doctors, and even a Catholic priest. Whether she is truly incapable of making choices on her own is never revealed, as she is deferent to their preferences, advice, and the rules they impose upon her. Thus, in a way, even her journey in the film was a non-choice: she was pressured by Jason, her childhood friend and, by the conclusion of the film, also her boyfriend, into joining his group during their spring break trip south.

In effect, throughout the film Hannah is, in fact, simply along for a ride of non-choices, a fetishized abortion survivor. Only in the conclusion, after being advised by the priest that it is okay to forgive her mother and herself does she make any active choices. However even forgiving her mother is, essentially, a non-choice, as holding a grudge

against her for the rest of her life would be crippling and comparatively unattractive to moving on with her life.

Cindy's function in the story is unique, however, in that her portrayal is comparatively one-dimensional considering that her presumed "choice" to have an abortion was the catalyst for the entirety of the film. She illustrates the double entanglement inherent in post-feminist contexts as well as the hostility toward agentive women most clearly noted in backlash theses. Stripped of autonomy, hence sidelined, she reminds us of the absent woman in *The Silent Scream*. Voiceless and serving a narrative function, she illustrates why the women of the second wave were wrong and why abortion is a punishable, "criminal" offense.

In sum, the post-feminist representations of "choice" in *October Baby* are indicative of the times in which we live: operating under the misguided assumption that equality between the sexes means that structural inequalities and harmful circumstances need not go questioned. This is why, as analyses of popular films *Juno*, *Knocked Up* and *Waitress* indicate, the prevarication about whether or not to carry a pregnancy to term becomes unnecessary. *October Baby*, however, takes this a step further by preventing the pregnant woman from ever voicing the reasons she *did* at least attempt to make a choice to abort, although her choice failed. For whatever structural reason, whether it is God's will or a cultural emphasis on embracing unintended motherhood, *October Baby* is nonetheless a popular film that indicates the bleed from mainstream anti-abortion messages centered around notions of choice and agency into what was initially a niche, non-secular film. While Cindy's autonomy is sidelined, Hannah is fetishized; neither woman is agentive.

## Chapter 4

### Conclusion

The following is an account of a public screening of *October Baby* that I attended:

On a snowy evening in February, 2013, the Calvalry Baptist Church of State College, Pennsylvania sponsored a free showing of *October Baby* at the downtown's historic State Theatre. The turnout was impressive, particularly considering the impending snowstorm and one attendee's corresponding prediction that the crowd would be sparse. Roughly 75 people were in attendance. After greeting one another in the lobby groups of friends, families, students, children, and couples made their way into the theater itself. Most congregated in the middle rows of the 500-person room, though some elected to watch from the upstairs balcony. While waiting for the movie to begin, audience members collected post-abortive informational packets that were prominently displayed in the lobby. To introduce the show, two formally dressed, college-aged women walked to the front of the theater. One introduced herself as Chelsea, the President of Penn State's Pregnancy Resource Clinic<sup>6</sup>. Chelsea thanked the crowd for coming, and praised members of her organization who helped fundraise for the film. She warned the audience of the film's "controversial" subject matter. Chelsea concluded by inviting attendees to call on the Pregnancy Resource Clinic in times of need: "We would love to walk alongside you during that healing process." Chelsea passed the microphone

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<sup>6</sup> Penn State's Pregnancy Resource Clinic is a student club affiliated with the anti-abortion Pregnancy Resource Clinic, a Christian non-profit serving the State College area since 1984 (Mylin, 2013).

to the club's Public Relations chair who thanked us for coming. Moments later the room went dark and the film began.

The audience's response to the film was extremely positive: they laughed at the appropriate moments, gasped at Hannah's initial collapse and the reveal of her origins, and cried with Cindy and other characters as they struggled to heal from their pasts. At the end of the movie they cheered and clapped loudly, staying seated to watch Shari reveal her true story during the credits. Chelsea returned to the front of the room, again thanking us for coming. She let us know that the film had been based on the true story of Gianna Jessen, an abortion survivor and activist, and invited all of us to attend her upcoming talk at the Pregnancy Resource Clinic's annual fundraising banquet.

This project represents an initial inquiry into the conflation of moralistic, quasi-religious, and political sentiments with anti-abortion activist intentions, yet engaging in a critical analysis of *October Baby* has been no easy task. As my experience at its public showing illustrates, for many the film possesses numerous positive qualities. Whether audience members enjoyed it due to a catharsis it induced, or purely its entertainment value, I will never know. The fact that it moved many to tears, however, is undeniable.

I have the utmost respect for women when it comes to their agency, reproductive or otherwise. Ideally, I believe that every woman should be able to make the unencumbered decision whether or not to undergo an abortion if she finds herself experiencing an undesired pregnancy. Abortion is a legal right and, in my view, there is no room for religion in the law. If the film's themes had not violated this precept, I might not have taken issue with it. Unfortunately, however, due to its grotesque characterization of women who choose to abort, and the consequences of abortion itself, I have felt

compelled to analyze this movie due to its undeniable relationship with neo-conservative, oppressive values. All in all, whatever entertainment value the film possesses for me is overshadowed by its thinly veiled, anti-woman, anti-choice sentiments, which contribute to the “War on Women”.

Of the many conclusions drawn from this study, perhaps the most significant is that anti-abortion films have learned to background medical-scientific appeals and foreground faith-based ones to make anti-choice arguments more palatable. As evidenced in *October Baby*, choice is framed as learning to forgive others and oneself for the errors of their ways. Faith, in lieu of science, is the only surefire way to heal.

The faith in God possessed by the film’s more sympathetic characters obviates the need for agentic decision making. As prior research on the relationship of post-feminism to reproductive agency demonstrates, abortion is framed as a non-choice because it is incompatible with the popular portrait of young womanhood. Yet in *October Baby*, non-choices exist for a vastly different reason: it is out of one’s mortal hands what the outcome any choice (especially an abortive one) will be. Not only, then, is abortion a non-choice, but reproductive agency becomes an entirely sidelined issue. Instead, as the character of Cindy illustrates, what is ultimately considered at the forefront are issues of fetal personhood and the relationship between mortality and spirituality. Due to this, Cindy serves as both a post-feminist and New Right rhetorical tool, whose “selfish” choice to have an abortion and continue developing her career, in lieu of embracing motherhood, renders her worthy of criticism. Cindy seems to have paid dearly for the sins of second-wave feminism. As Mary tells Hannah, Cindy got the career she always

wanted. Audience members are left with the aftermath of her decision, however, which illustrate the price for making her dreams come true.

It is worth emphasizing that *October Baby* constructs a tale of why second wave feminists were wrong. Cindy never has the opportunity to defend her choice to pursue her education and career; only in the paratexts do we see Shari relay her real-life story. As a character she is sidelined, just as she is in real life. Beyond the fact that terminating her pregnancy was easier than carrying it to term, Shari never contextualizes or supports her decision to abort. Instead, audiences are presented with a tale of remorse and regret. Cindy and Shari are indictments of the second wave women who made morally wrong choices. By extension, the way to prevent such mistakes from being made in the future is by preventing, hence criminalizing, abortion.

Due to the fact that Hannah's father is a respected doctor, medicine is not entirely absent from the film. Yet technology, science, and medical knowledge are eclipsed by *October Baby's* religious appeals. Nurse Mary, for instance, insists that now she knows better than to believe that what she helped abort was just "tissue;" and as Hannah's father tells her near the film's conclusion, he is "learning to trust God again." In sum, whatever scientific appeals exist are backgrounded in the film, entirely absent in its paratexts, and instead what are foregrounded are faith-based non-choices entrenched in religious rhetoric. In fact, we may even choose to look at *October Baby* as a coming-of-age story for *The Silent Scream*. As of this writing, medically documented proof is unnecessary when making claims about abortion's effects or its number of "survivors". This movie represents a filmic version of junk science where facts are not needed; whatever claims are presented as valid are without support yet go unquestioned. This in itself is a

significant departure from *The Silent Scream* and its utilization of (manipulated) findings from the field of fetology. Both films do share, however, a respect for pseudo-science as professed by patriarchal figures of authority.

The conclusions drawn from this study highlight the danger of anti-abortion media content in post-feminist contexts. Agency and choice become sidelined and rendered unimportant concepts in such a cultural climate, instead permitting faith in God and religious rhetoric to be placed at the fore in importance. Operating under the post-feminist assumption that equal rights are afforded to both sexes is entirely incongruent with the notion that abortion access continues to be restricted in increasingly detrimental ways. A film like *October Baby*, however, illustrates the permissiveness of this cultural context in fostering misleading notions of what constitutes equality.

Of particular significance to this project has been the role of *October Baby*'s paratexts: its DVD special features, promotional website, and Every Life is Beautiful website. While I analyzed only those deemed "official" (i.e., created by the film's producers), many Internet chat rooms, reviews, blogs, discussion boards, YouTube videos, and other proliferations of paratexts permit further analysis of the film's reception and broader cultural significance. As the State Theatre screening indicates, public showings of the film do, in fact, contextualize it as part of a broader anti-abortion movement. Further analyses of the film and its unofficial paratexts would make for interesting future research. There are a number of ways that further research can expand upon this project. For instance, if one seeks to investigate the impact of the film upon the ministries and religious groups it targets in Internet promotion, ethnographic research into the groups who view it or churches that integrate its themes and sermons could prove

helpful. Researchers investigating media effects may wish to explore questions of the film's efficacy as a political tool: does it alter viewers' perceptions of the abortion question? Or is it, as many reviewers claimed, a dramatic and moving film despite its propagandistic element and political message? What is vital to remember is that *October Baby* is not marketed as a niche film for a small sect of already-anti-abortion viewers. Its availability for streaming on Netflix and borrowing from Redbox is indicative of the story's mass marketing despite – or because of? – its narrative and story. An interesting ethical question is whether films or other for-profit media content should share disclaimers about where their profits are going.

Considering the profitability the non-niche films *Knocked Up*, *Waitress*, and *Juno*, all which deal with abortion yet refrain from marketing themselves as “abortion films,” it is unsurprising that *October Baby*'s production team engaged in a similar strategy by marketing their film as non-denominational. Instead, as reviews of the film suggested, it was said to be moving regardless of one's religious or political persuasion. Thus, we see some bleed from popular culture into non-secular films; at least when it comes to dealing with abortion in movies, what works for blockbusters and mega hits also finds a home in *October Baby*. Based upon the comparison of *October Baby* and its predecessor, *The Silent Scream*, I hazard the guess that future films with anti-abortion themes will take a lesson from this movie's success: they, too, will tone down political, religious, and anti-abortion messages in the film itself so as to draw as large a potential audience as possible. Yet when producing paratexts for the film, they will take the opportunity to make them explicit. Thus, unlike films like *The Silent Scream*, “logic” and “science” will not be used to persuade audiences, or at least will not serve as an



introduction to the “pro-life” point of view. Instead, dramatic and emotional narratives, exemplified by *October Baby*, will pave the way.

It is crucial to contextualize *October Baby* in a broader socio-political climate. The New Right does not exist in a vacuum, nor does its political efforts. Hence, in addition to considering the film through a framework of backlash as posited by Susan Faludi, one must also consider that there continues to be an ongoing struggle for women to procure and secure reproductive rights at this very moment in the United States and internationally. *October Baby* does speak directly to anti-feminist discourses that emerged in response to *Roe v. Wade* and other related decisions. Yet backlash does not do enough to describe the current state of politics. The notion that there is a “War on Women” has merit. I hope that feminist media scholars will explore additional turns in anti-abortion activism, the Christian film industry, and films containing anti-abortion messages. I hope they consider how backlash works together with attacks on women’s reproductive rights. Exploring representations of choice and sidelining strategies are crucial for this important intellectual and political work.

The present analysis illustrates that the original tropes found in early anti-abortion films have not disappeared. Rather, new tropes have been added to them. According to the Right, abortion is still murder, murder is still a crime, and thus those who undergo abortions are morally bankrupt. Hannah – like Gianna Jessen – is the twenty-first embodiment of Nathanson’s silent scream, now grown-up and representing the trauma of lives aborted. Physically afflicted and emotionally scarred, she represents the horror of abortion, but the horror is slickly packaged so as to invite viewer empathy. Hannah is

more than a survivor: she is also a call to arms for others to protect the lives of the unborn.

## Filmography<sup>7</sup>

Townsend, C., Robertson, S. & Apatow, J. (Producers), Apatow, J. (Director). (2007).

*Knocked Up* [Motion Picture]. United States: Universal Pictures.

Ben Stone (Seth Rogen) is a 23-year-old slacker who is in the process of establishing *FleshOfTheStars.com*, a website that lists the exact moment in time at which nude scenes with famous actresses occur in films. Alison Scott (Katherine Heigl) is a responsible young woman who works at E! Television Network. Although she is on the career fast track, she lives in the pool house behind her sister Debbie's home, and plays an active role in helping her and her husband Pete raise their daughters.

Alison and Ben find themselves at the same club where she is celebrating her promotion at E! with her sister. They begin drinking together, and she invites him back to her pool house. The next morning, they learn that they have very little in common. Eight weeks later, Alison begins feeling very sick and comes to the conclusion she is pregnant, and she contacts Ben. She tells Ben she is pregnant and that she has decided to keep the baby. Ben's initial response of shock and anger mixed with Alison's frustrations creates tension, resulting in Ben agreeing to take Alison to the OB/GYN to confirm the pregnancy.

After the pregnancy is confirmed, Ben says he will be there to support Alison and help her through it. She and Ben begin spending more time together and become very close. Ben awkwardly but sweetly proposes to Alison, saying he just wants to do the right

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<sup>7</sup> All plot synopses were retrieved from the films' respective IMDB web pages on April 4, 2013.

thing. Alison is touched by the gesture, but thinks it's too soon for marriage. Meanwhile, Debbie begins to suspect Pete's late night jaunts out of the house to see a band for his record label, are really a cover for an affair. But when she tries to prove this, she later discovers Pete's actually part of a fantasy baseball league. Debbie refuses to speak to Pete thereafter.

On the way to the gynecologist's office, Ben and Alison begin quarreling. She kicks him out of her car onto the road, and heads to the doctor's alone while blaming her hormones. Ben walks the rest of the way to the gynecologist's; Alison still doesn't want to see him and asks Ben to leave. Alison says she doesn't want to end up like Debbie and Pete, they have a heated exchange, and Ben storms off.

Fed up with their respective situations, the two men take off for a road trip to Las Vegas, where they indulge in psychedelic mushrooms and watch Cirque du Soleil. While hallucinating, they have a revelation: They should be back in LA taking responsibility. Debbie and Pete's reconciliation is evident at their daughter's birthday party, but when Pete confesses to his wife about have done mushrooms, Alison hears and refuses to speak to Ben, who tries to reconcile. Ben goes out to get a job as a web designer, gets a decent apartment, and sets up a baby room in his apartment, all the while spending less time partying with his friends and more time reading the books he purchased with Alison about pregnancy, that he'd lied to Alison about having read.

Alison goes into labor and tries to get a hold of her doctor. Unable to contact him, she calls Ben, who takes her to the hospital where the two reconcile, and they joyfully welcome the birth of their daughter. A few days later, Alison, Ben, and the baby are

heading back home. They decide to live in Ben's new apartment, and the end credits show the young family living happily ever after and celebrating their daughter's first birthday.

Halfon, L., Malkovich, J., Novick, M. & Smith, R. (Producers), Reitman, J. (Director). (2007). *Juno* [Motion Picture]. United States: Twentieth Century Fox.

The film opens with Juno (Ellen Page) staring at a recliner while drinking from a gallon container of Sunny-D bug juice, telling us, "It all began with a chair", after which we see a flashback of Juno and her best friend, Paulie Bleeker (Michael Cera), who's sitting naked in a recliner, waiting for Juno, who removes her underwear and sits down on him [the extent of the sex scene to keep it PG-13].

Smart, fast-mouthed Juno then goes into a convenience store to take a pregnancy test. Judging by her conversation with Rollo the clerk (Rainn Wilson), this is her third test today (hence her drinking all the Sunny-D to produce urine). The third test shows the same result as the previous two: positive. Juno calls (on her hamburger phone) her best friend, Leah, who takes a few minutes to fully comprehend Juno's situation. We see a funny clip of Paulie getting ready to train with the track team, wearing his trademark head and wrist bands. As he exits the house, he sees Juno, who tells him the news.

Paulie supports Juno's decision to abort the baby; Juno goes to a women's clinic for an abortion, where she bumps into classmate and lone anti-abortion protester Su-Chin, who robotically tries to dissuade Juno from having an abortion. Out of all the arguments, the one that Juno finds remotely interesting is that her baby might have fingernails by now. She encounters a snarky receptionist who tries to give her boysenberry-flavored

condoms. Juno eventually decides against the abortion. She meets up with Leah and the two discuss adoption and how to break the news to Juno's dad and step-mom, Mac and Bren (J.K. Simmons and Allison Janney).

Juno breaks the news to her folks, who while disappointed are supportive. Juno tells them she wants to give the baby to a couple she and Leah found in Penny-Saver. She also lets them know who the father is (Mac: "Next time I see the Bleeker kid, I'm going to punch him in the wiener"). Mac goes with Juno to visit the prospective parents, Vanessa and Mark Loring (Jennifer Garner and Jason Bateman). Vanessa can't have children and is very excited by Juno's offer. The couple's lawyer seems prepared to negotiate an open adoption wherein Juno is updated on the child's development after birth. However, Juno has no interest and would rather have a closed adoption. The couple seems taken aback by how nonchalant Juno comes off, despite her less-than-polite attitude.

While using their upstairs bathroom, Juno bumps into Mark, who is looking for something. Inspired by Mark's Les Paul guitar, the two discover compatible tastes in music and movies. Mark used to be in a rock band, though now he makes his living writing ad jingles. The two jam for a bit on the guitars, before Vanessa frustratingly interrupts so they can get back to business. The meeting concludes with Mark and Vanessa agreeing to pay for Juno's medical expenses.

Juno visits Paulie, and Paulie says that the two should get their band back together after Juno delivers. He also tries to suggest that the two should get back together as a couple, which Juno tries to play off, to Paulie's disappointment. She suggests he try to get together with Katrina De Voort, but Paulie doesn't like the idea, claiming Katrina and her house always smell like soup. Throughout, Paulie supports Juno's decisions and quietly

tries to help her any way he can, while Juno doesn't pay much attention to Paulie's support, relying more on her parents, as well as the Lorings.

Juno goes with her mother and Leah for an ultrasound, at which the technician makes judgmental, condescending remarks about Juno's situation, whereupon Bren tells her where to put her comments, to Juno and Leah's amusement. Juno makes a few visits to the Lorings, mostly unexpected, where Mark is usually the only one home. The two begin hanging out, watching bad horror flicks and listening to music. We can see a chemistry forming between them. Eventually Vanessa comes home and Juno shows them pictures from the ultrasound. In a later scene, we see the Lorings in the baby's future room: While Vanessa tries to figure out what to put on the wall, we sense that Mark isn't enthusiastic about being a father, When Juno comes home, Bren warns her about going to see the Lorings so much, especially while Vanessa isn't there, since it isn't appropriate. Juno shrugs off the advice. Juno later spies Vanessa at the mall, where she sees how great she is with the children of friends. The two notice each other, and Juno lets Vanessa feel the fetus.

At school, where she has to deal with being The Pregnant 16 YO, Juno is given nasty looks. She and Leah eat lunch by the school's trophy case, while Leah goes on about a few topics: One is her crush on a teacher, an older-guy thing she has; the other is Paulie asking Katrina to prom. While Juno denies she has any feelings for Paulie, later that day she confronts him and they quarrel. Paulie holds most of the moral high ground, claiming that Juno is acting immature, and how heartbroken he was when Juno claimed they were never a couple.

Juno makes another visit to the Lorings, where she and Mark listen to All The

Young Dudes, which Mark says he danced to at his prom. The two slow dance to it in the basement, where Mark tells Juno he's leaving Vanessa. Juno is shocked and tries to convince him not to. While Mark believed Juno would be happy about the news, he learns that above all, Juno wants the baby to be raised in a loving family. Juno is about to leave when Vanessa comes home, sees that Juno is crying, and stops her, wanting to know what is going on. Mark admits that he isn't ready to be a father. Vanessa tells him that he needs to grow up and accept that he isn't going to be a rock star. The two quarrel as Juno sees herself out. She goes home and talks to her father about her need to know that people can be happy with each other. Mac tells her that she'll know she's in love when she finds the person that loves her for her, no matter what situation she's in; she arrives at the realization that that person is Paulie.

As the Lorings discuss their pending divorce, Juno rings their doorbell and leaves them a note: "If you're still in, I'm still in". She then buys a ton of orange tic-tacs (Paulie's vice) with Leah, and leaves them in Paulie's mailbox, to his amusement. After school, Juno goes to Paulie's track practice and tells him she's in love with him. (He's the one that accepts her for her, always looking at her face -- not her belly -- when they talk). Juno calls him the coolest person she knows, and says that he doesn't even have to try (Paulie: "I try really hard, actually"). They kiss while Leah teases from afar that it might induce labor.

At home, Juno's water breaks, and the family rushes to the hospital. Juno desperately wants a shot for the pain, referring to it as a Spinal Tap, after which she gives birth to a healthy baby. While she didn't want to disturb Paulie at his track meet, after winning his event and realizing Juno wasn't there, Paulie figures it out and rushes to the



hospital, where they decide not to see the child after the birth. Paulie lies next to Juno and holds her while Vanessa goes to the nursery to hold her new baby. Vanessa asks Bren how she looks, and Bren sweetly replies, "Like a new mom: scared shitless."

Afterwards, we see Juno's wrapup, in which she reiterates that it all began with a chair, and ended with a chair (Vanessa's rocking chair). We see the baby's room, where Vanessa has put Juno's note on the wall. Bren finally adopts a puppy, having refrained up to now because while she loves dogs, Juno is allergic. Juno rides her bike over to Paulie's, where she talks about falling in love, then having babies, and how it didn't end up in that order for her. The two play *Anyone Else But You* on the guitar, after which they kiss.

Bauer, R., King, T., Renfrew, D. & Rose, J. (Producers), Shelly, A. (Director). (2007).

*Waitress*. United States: Fox Searchlight Pictures.

Jenna (Keri Russell), a waitress living in the American South (though the movie was actually shot in and around Canyon Country, California), is trapped in an unhappy marriage to a jealous, controlling, and abusive man named Earl (Jeremy Sisto). She works in Joe's Pie Diner, where her job includes creating the unique pies of her life, such as the "I Don't Want Earl's Baby" pie (aka Bad Baby pie) she invents after her unwanted pregnancy is confirmed. Jenna longs to run away from her dismal situation, and is hiding money to do so. Her only friends are Becky (Cheryl Hines) and Dawn (Adrienne Shelly), her fellow waitresses, and Joe (Andy Griffith), the curmudgeonly diner owner who encourages her to escape from her bad marriage and begin a new life elsewhere.

Jenna's life changes dramatically after she meets her OB/GYN, Jim Pomatter

(Nathan Fillion), a Connecticut transplant who has moved to the small town to accommodate his wife, who is completing her residency at the local hospital. Jenna and Jim embark on a passionate affair, and eventually Jenna thinks of him as not only her lover, but best friend as well.

Jenna begins to keep a journal, addressing her thoughts to her unborn child. Between these entries and the various pies she creates, the audience witnesses her innermost hopes and dreams, concerns and fears, and slowly growing feelings for the baby she insisted she didn't want.

Reluctant mother Jenna instantly falls in love with the baby girl she names Lulu. When Earl reminds Jenna of her promise earlier not to love the baby more than she does him, she gains the strength to tell him she hasn't loved him in years and will no longer put up with his possessive and abusive ways and wants a divorce. In retaliation he refuses to pay the hospital bills, and she is abruptly discharged.

As Becky and Dawn are helping her prepare to leave the hospital to live with Dawn and her husband until she can formulate a plan for her future, Jenna remembers an envelope Joe had delivered to her when he too was admitted as a patient. In it she finds a handmade card with a sketch of her, a check for \$270,450, and a message urging her to start fresh.

As she departs from the hospital, Jenna ends her relationship with Jim and begins her life anew. An epilogue shows Jenna winning a pie contest and as the new owner of the diner where she worked, now called Lulu's Pies, serving brightly colored pies to her customers and friends. The final shot shows her walking home with toddler Lulu (played by Shelly's actual daughter, Sophie).

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