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“I’d like an abortion please”: Rethinking Unplanned Pregnancy Narratives in Contemporary American Cinema

Released in 2014 and 2015 respectively, the American indie films *Obvious Child* and *Grandma* each feature a central protagonist who is dealing with an unplanned pregnancy and is pursuing an abortion. These pro-choice narratives not only challenge Hollywood cinema’s repetitive depiction of unplanned pregnancies that result in motherhood, but they critique the dominant political and societal discourses surrounding abortion and women who choose to terminate pregnancies. Tracing the history of cinematic portrayals of unplanned pregnancy, and reflecting upon how postfeminist culture has positioned the notion of choice, this paper notes the significance of *Obvious Child* and *Grandma* as films which not only feature abortion as a central theme, but utilise comedy in their navigation of a controversial subject. Furthermore, this paper argues that in their frank and positive engagement with termination as a potential resolution to an unplanned pregnancy, these films offer important attempts to destigmatise the subject of abortion.

Keywords: unplanned pregnancy; abortion; romantic comedy; feminism; postfeminism

Introduction

The notion of a “war on women” in the U.S. has been discussed consistently by prominent feminists, cultural commentators, and democratic politicians in recent history. Texts such as Susan Faludi’s *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991), Tanya Melich’s *The Republican War Against Women: An Insider’s Report from Behind the Lines* (1996), and Barbara Finlay’s *George W. Bush and the War on Women: Turning Back the Clock on Progress* (2006) examine issues surrounding women’s rights and in particular, Republican party policies which restrict these rights. More recently, following right-wing opposition to Obamacare’s contraceptive mandate and the passing of legislation to defund women’s healthcare

organisations, most notably Planned Parenthood, the phrase has been closely associated with attempts to restrict women's reproductive rights. In Planned Parenthood's 2015 - 2016 Annual Report, it was found that 96% of the organisation's services were devoted to testing for and treating sexually transmitted infections, providing contraception, and diagnosing and treating women's health issues including cancer. Only 3% of Planned Parenthood's annual services were abortion procedures, and these statistics reflect those of previous years. Yet in dominant right-wing discourse Planned Parenthood is discussed as little more than an abortion clinic or "baby killing factory" (Charles Edgar 2017), with former Governor of Florida Jeb Bush suggesting that the organisation should receive no government funding because, "they're not actually doing women's health issues" (quoted in Nick Gass 2015). Such comments demonstrate that this war on women not only manifests in political policy, but is apparent in wider public dialogue surrounding issues of reproductive agency, and it is certainly the case that by centralising the divisive issue of abortion, conservative politicians are able to justify financial cuts to women's health services on apparently moral and/or religious grounds.

Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice (ACRJ) define reproductive justice as "the complete physical, mental, spiritual, political, social, and economic well-being of women and girls, based on the full achievement and protection of women's human rights" (quoted in Loretta Ross 2011), yet left-wing responses to anti-abortion rhetoric often fail to highlight the importance of women's reproductive rights, and human rights more broadly¹. Instead, as Jeannie Ludlow notes, "pro-choice activists respond to ... challenges to abortion by invoking politically necessary and politically acceptable circumstances" (2008, 33). However, this approach simply limits discussion of reproductive rights to abortion access, and additionally, implies that abortion should be considered an option only in "exceptional" circumstances, ignoring that as of 2014,

19% of pregnancies in America end in abortion (Rachel K. Jones and Jenna Jerman 2017). “Acceptable” reasons that a woman might have an abortion include if the woman’s life is at risk, if the fetus has severe abnormalities, or if the pregnancy is a result of rape or incest², therefore rendering “all other reasons for aborting questionable at best and frivolous at worst” (Ludlow 2008, 33). Ludlow finds that “statistically ... these ‘appropriate abortions’ are rare” and that, “more common are abortions performed for economic reasons or to correct mistakes that people have made” (2008, 33). Indeed, it has been found that half of abortion-receiving women cite “unreadiness for a child or another child” or an “inability to afford a baby” (L. B. Finer, L. F. Frohworth, L. A. Dauphinee, S. Singh, A. M. Moore 2005, 113) as their main reason for terminating their pregnancy. Clearly, dominant political discussions surrounding reproductive healthcare and the morality of abortion are reluctant to engage with the lived realities and experiences of women who undergo such procedures. Furthermore, both sides of these abortion debates have failed to engage with wider issues concerning reproductive health, rights, and justice, and as a result, abortion is perhaps more stigmatised than ever.

It is no surprise then, that public attitudes towards abortion in America have been shaped by this problematic discourse. Reflecting on the political fixation on “appropriate abortions”, Tom W. Smith and Jaesok Son (2013) find that as of 2012, 83% of American adults believe that abortion is acceptable if the pregnant woman’s health is at serious risk, and 72% believe that abortion is acceptable in the case of pregnancies which are a result of rape. However, only 40.6% of Americans believe that low income is a valid reason to have an abortion, and only 41.7% believe that abortion is acceptable for any reason, regardless of circumstance. And while these figures offer some evidence of a relationship between political discourse and widely held attitudes

towards women's reproductive rights in society, it is equally worth considering that these attitudes inform, and are informed by, discourses beyond the explicitly political. Indeed for Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, film plays a significant role in the shaping of social life, as through a process of discursive transcoding, particular social discourses are transferred into cinematic narratives and consequently, "films themselves become part of [a] broader cultural system of representations that construct social reality" (1988, 12-13).

Therefore, reflecting on the notion that "the sort of representations which prevail in a culture is a crucial political issue" (Ryan and Kellner 1988: 13), this article considers recent cinematic attempts to reshape dominant understandings of unplanned pregnancy and abortion in American culture. I begin by assessing the historical representation of pregnancy in popular cinema, and argue that in recent decades, unplanned pregnancy has featured so frequently in Hollywood films that the unplanned pregnancy romantic comedy is now a sub-genre in its own right. Noting that these rom-com pregnancies are never terminated, I then question the extent to which abortion has been presented as a viable option for the accidentally pregnant protagonists of Hollywood cinema, and I reflect upon the influence of postfeminist culture in examining how far reproductive choice exists within such films.

Contending that mainstream cinema has indeed been constrained in its portrayal of unplanned pregnancy and reproductive rights, I consider the potential of independent filmmaking to challenge such limitations, and note the significance of *Obvious Child* (Gillian Robespierre 2014) and *Grandma* (Paul Weitz 2015) as two recent indie comedies which focus on characters pursuing abortions. I argue that by reframing the pregnant rom-com heroine, and reinterpreting the mainstream cinematic relationship between pregnancy and romance, these films successfully critique both dominant beliefs

surrounding abortion in American society, and dominant portrayals of unplanned pregnancy in Hollywood cinema. I contend that both films encourage the recognition of abortion as a not uncommon experience, and both endorse a more complex, empathetic engagement with the experiences and emotions of women who choose to terminate pregnancies.

Pregnancy and Abortion in American Cinema

Abortion has been an issue relatively absent in on-screen fiction, with Gretchen Sission and Katrina Kimport finding that only 169 films released from 1913 to 2012 featured abortion as “a major plot point”, or included “an abortion provider as a primary character” (2014, 415). 110 of these films were released following the legalisation of abortion in the landmark ruling of the *Roe v. Wade* case in 1973, yet noting Hollywood conservatism, Kelly Oliver suggests that the majority of these narratives have “a scary dimension that makes them feel more like cautionary warnings than pro-choice alternatives” (2012, 87), and cites examples such as *If These Walls Could Talk* (Nancy Savoca and Cher 1996) and *Revolutionary Road* (Sam Mendes 2009), both of which closely associate abortion with misery, violence, and death.

The 1970s not only saw the outcome of the *Roe v. Wade* case, but the decade also witnessed a “new expression of American independent cinema” (Yannis Tzioumakis 2013, 31), as a number of films produced and distributed away from the Hollywood studios garnered varying levels of critical and commercial success. With the increasing visibility of an independent film culture in America throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and the subsequent popularity of indie culture in the mainstream during the 1990s, it might be expected that a subject as provocative as abortion would have been welcomed by indie filmmakers, particularly given the tendency for films which deal

with dark, challenging, or morally ambiguous themes to be considered more “authentically” indie or anti-Hollywood. Furthermore, if the diverse and inclusive indie film community places value on “the existence ... of representations of socially marginalized identities” (Michael Z. Newman 2011, 31), it is possible to argue that stigmatised women experiencing abortion should constitute such an identity.

Yet until recently, references to abortion in independent cinema have remained fairly elusive, and the few films to examine the subject have differed in their approaches. 1987’s independently made romance film *Dirty Dancing* (Emile Ardolino 1987) maturely and sensitively handles the botched abortion of a minor character; Hal Hartley’s unusual romantic comedy *Trust* (1991) follows a pregnant teenager who, after careful consideration, chooses to terminate her unplanned pregnancy; the comedy-drama *Palindromes* (Todd Solondz 2004) features a 13-year-old girl who is forced to have an abortion by her parents; and the romantic drama *Blue Valentine* (Derek Cianfrance 2010) includes a somewhat graphic abortion scene, during which the character receiving the procedure changes her mind. In terms of positioning abortion as a major theme, the comedy *Citizen Ruth* (Alexander Payne 1996) follows a poor, irresponsible, pregnant drug-addict, who finds herself at the centre of a debate between pro-life and pro-choice protesters. Newman argues that *Citizen Ruth* “is anti-Hollywood in its unabashed advocacy of a liberal stance on the most controversial sociopolitical issue in the United States, abortion rights” (2011, 44 – 45), yet it is worth noting that the film concludes with its lead character Ruth (Laura Dern), having a miscarriage rather than an abortion. Therefore Ruth’s decision to terminate her pregnancy is taken away from her, and so the film ultimately resists offering the depiction of a character who not only chooses to have an abortion, but actually undergoes the procedure.

It might be argued that the lack of films to feature abortion as a theme is largely

due to the historical reluctance of filmmakers to closely and seriously engage with pregnancy in general. In her comprehensive exploration of pregnancy and Hollywood cinema, Oliver observes that during the classical era “the Hays Code banned [even] using the word *pregnancy*” (2012, 207), and then during the 1960s and 70s, pregnancy was featured most prominently in horror and sci-fi films such as *Rosemary’s Baby* (Roman Polanski 1968) and *The Brood* (David Cronenberg 1979). It wasn’t until the 1990s that pregnancy came to be utilised in mainstream cinema as ‘a new form of romance that brings heterosexual couples together’ (Oliver 2012, 9), as seen in the rom-coms *Look Who’s Talking* (Amy Heckerling 1989), *Nine Months* (Chris Columbus 1995) and *Fools Rush In* (Andy Tennant 1997). This optimistic representation of pregnancy as an enlightening, unifying, and even romantic experience only gained momentum into the twenty-first century with a number of films, including *Saved!* (Brian Dannelly 2004), *Knocked Up* (Judd Apatow 2007), *Away We Go* (Sam Mendes 2009), *What to Expect When You’re Expecting* (Kirk Jones 2012), and *Bridget Jones’s Baby* (Sharon Maguire 2016). Not only do these films closely detail experiences of pregnancy, but the majority of them actually focus on unplanned pregnancies. Despite this, few address the option of abortion, and those which do tend to villainise the character to suggest such an action.

Postfeminism, Choice, and the Unplanned Pregnancy Rom-Com

Angela McRobbie argues that within the social and cultural landscape of postfeminism, whereby the aims of feminism are perceived as being achieved therefore no longer relevant, terms associated with feminist language, such as “empowerment” and “choice” are “converted into a much more individualistic discourse ... as kind of a substitute for feminism” (2009, 1). In assessing these attempts to historicise the values

of second-wave feminism, McRobbie considers “generationally specific notions of cool” (2007, 34) and argues that dominant, mainstream depictions of female sexual agency “invoke hostility to assumed feminist positions from the past in order to endorse a new regime of sexual meanings based on female consent, equality, participation, and pleasure, free of politics” (2007, 34). Consequently particular female choices are negotiated as preferable or “cooler” than others, and such distinctions accentuate the intergenerational tensions present in postfeminist culture. Furthermore, this “individualistic discourse” which arises with postfeminism, reconfigures choice as a personal responsibility, and so choice can “be deployed to punish women who have ‘made’ the wrong choices” (Ferguson in Anne Burns 2015, 95), which certainly benefits the right-wing war on women.

Given the inherent ties between the subject of abortion and feminist politics, it might be argued that if pregnancy is the consequence of a sexual choice that is “free of politics”, then in postfeminist terms, to consider an abortion would invoke an “uncool”, “undesirable option from the past” (Pamela Thoma 2009, 416). Indeed this notion is supported by the earlier discussed reluctance of left-wing politics to recognise abortion as a ‘normal’ or ‘acceptable’ experience, and thus engage with and advocate the values of second-wave feminism. Therefore, while postfeminism assumes that choice is empowering, it is apparent that women might be punished for making a choice that is considered to be socially or morally “wrong”. Furthermore as Burns argues, “some choices are taken out of the hands of the woman by virtue of being perceived as ‘already made’” (2015, 95), and there is certainly a pro-life argument that sexually active women have chosen the possibility of motherhood.

And so in many ways, the heroine of the postfeminist unplanned pregnancy rom-com is, “despite her freedom, called upon to be silent, to withhold critique in order to

count as a modern, sophisticated girl” (McRobbie 2007, 34). Indeed as Thoma argues, these films represent abortion as “a ‘bad’ ... choice that is antithetical to modern feminine subjectivity” (2009, 416). Through presenting characters who demonstrate surprise, disappointment, and even anger at being pregnant, these films indirectly acknowledge the possibility of abortion, and therefore invoke feminism through the suggestion that there is a choice to be made. However with the heavy implication that continuing an unplanned pregnancy regardless of personal circumstance, is the morally right decision, it might be argued that these films simply present the illusion of choice. As Oliver notes, “even while these films embrace a woman’s right to choose, they still expect women to choose babies and not abortions” (2012, 11), and this is not only true of mainstream, Hollywood cinema, but is apparent in the quirkier indie wood productions *Waitress* (Adrienne Shelly 2007) and *Juno* (Jason Reitman 2007), which both feature protagonists who refuse abortions, despite making it explicitly clear that they have no desire to be pregnant or to become mothers.

In *Waitress*, abortion is only briefly alluded to, before being immediately rejected by main character, Jenna (Keri Russell). Upon finding out that she is pregnant, Jenna expresses misery and regret to her obstetrician, yet before the doctor can finish explaining which services his clinic “doesn’t perform”, Jenna interrupts to tell him, “No, I’m keeping it, I’m just telling you that I’m not so happy about it.” Contrastingly in *Juno*, the title character’s initial response to finding out she is pregnant is to “procure a hasty abortion.” However, upon arriving at the abortion clinic, Juno (Ellen Page) is confronted by a lone pro-life protestor, who informs her that her baby “probably has a beating heart ... it can feel pain ... it has fingernails!” This information resonates with Juno, who leaves the clinic, and decides to proceed with her pregnancy.

Despite their initial reluctance to embrace pregnancy, the protagonists of these

films ultimately believe that refusing an abortion is the morally right choice. While *Waitress* concludes with Jenna actually enjoying motherhood, her daughter acting as the catalyst that leads her to end her bad relationships with toxic men, *Juno* turns an unwanted pregnancy into a wanted baby, through Juno's decision to have her child adopted by a woman unable to conceive. Though these depictions of pregnancy initially seem somewhat unconventional, with their characters' decisions to remain pregnant despite explicit unhappiness with their situations, these films "ultimately restore the myth of motherhood" (Kristen Hoerl and Casey Ryan Kelly 2010, 375). Furthermore and in keeping with Hollywood rom-com trends towards depicting pregnancy, through focusing upon somewhat flawed women who are "fixed" by having babies, these narratives "both promote and reflect conservative family values that insist on women becoming mothers in order to live valuable or happy lives" (Oliver 2012, 11).

Within the context of a cinematic landscape which has little representation of abortion as a positive or even just necessary option, such films certainly contribute towards a dominant cultural ideology which considers abortion as morally wrong, and as a bad choice for a woman to make. Further to this, within these film "the main female characters' decisions to continue their pregnancies either ignore or background material conditions and other structural constraints outside of the individual women's control" (Hoerl and Kelly 2010, 370), and so external factors which might influence their choice are abandoned in favour of apparent morality and motherly instinct. Indeed, these films clearly demonstrate Yvonne Tasker's proposition that "choice is a central term within postfeminist cinema, although there are clear and relatively conventional (that is, limited) choices to be made by female characters in contemporary Hollywood cinema" (2011, 75).

Romance, Comedy, Abortion

As the films discussed so far have demonstrated, comedic portrayals of unplanned pregnancy in cinema have overwhelmingly been restricted to the romance or the rom-com genre. Within this context, unplanned pregnancy can be explored safely in the knowledge that heteronormative family values will be restored at the film's conclusion. Claire Mortimer offers a broad narrative structure of the rom-com, summarising "boy meets girl, various obstacles prevent them from being together, coincidences and complications ensue, ultimately leading to the couple's realisation that they were meant to be together" (2010, 4), though it is worth noting that for each decade, and with shifts in gender politics, these obstacles and complications have changed and evolved. The emergence of both unplanned pregnancy, and pregnancy outside of marriage, into the rom-com genre in the 1990s/2000s, demonstrates an awareness that modern relationships do not always adhere to the idealised hierarchy of coupling rituals (meeting, falling in love, marrying, having children), yet the genre still aims to project that these rituals are desirable and achievable, even if not in that specific order. The termination of a pregnancy seemingly disrupts these relationship rituals and the pursuit of lasting love, and indeed Hoerl and Kelly argue of *Knocked Up*, *Juno*, and *Waitress*, that "each film's early dispensing with the abortion option enables the filmmakers to get on with the romantic-comedy narratives" (2010, 370). This implies that the rom-com genre and the subject of abortion are mutually exclusive, and has the wider implication that women who terminate pregnancies are the antithesis of women who desire romantic love and want to become wives and/or mothers.

With this in mind, it is worth considering not just the uniqueness of *Obvious Child* and *Grandma* as films which centralise and destigmatise characters experiencing

abortions, but as films which rely on the familiarity of the Hollywood rom-com, and more specifically the unplanned pregnancy rom-com, in order to challenge and reframe dominant narratives surrounding reproductive politics as present in popular culture. If, as Michele Schreiber proposes, “the romance genre plays an essential role in [postfeminist] culture” (2014, 2), then it is worth considering that *Obvious Child* and *Grandma* do not just function as counterparts to the mainstream unplanned pregnancy rom-com, but offer attempts to renegotiate how this genre and postfeminist culture more broadly, engage with feminist politics and notions of choice.

Obvious Child tells the story of Donna (Jenny Slate), a twenty-something, aspiring stand-up comedian, who finds herself pregnant after a drunken sexual encounter with ‘nice guy’ Max (Jake Lacy). Despite the possibility of a romantic relationship, Donna knows that she is not prepared for the responsibility of a child, and so pursues an abortion, all the while trying to find humour in a potentially emotional situation. Similarly, *Grandma* features Sage (Julia Garner), another young, accidentally pregnant character, who is firmly aware that continuing with her pregnancy is not a viable option. However, in this instance Sage is in an on/off relationship with an immature, fellow high-school student, and so she seeks the guidance of her feminist grandmother Elle (Lily Tomlin), in pursuing and paying for an abortion. *Obvious Child* features many characteristics of a traditional rom-com, yet the utilisation of a romantic heroine who chooses to terminate a pregnancy, actively rejects the heteronormative values of the idealised nuclear family setup that are dominant in Hollywood cinema, and so the film certainly radicalises rom-com convention. *Grandma* meanwhile, could perhaps best be described as an intergenerational road movie, which rejects the Hollywood association between pregnancy and romance, focusing instead on the shared experiences of a grandmother and her granddaughter (in fact, the romantic focus of the

film is shifted from pregnant Sage to the relationship between Elle and her younger lesbian lover).

While the films contrast in their approaches to romance, both draw heavily on comedy in exploring not just the controversial subject of abortion, but the experience of being a woman in general. Given Eileen Gillooly's argument that the "most important attribute of humor from a feminist perspective ... may be its ability to challenge the dominant ideological discourse" (1991, 478), that these films rely on comedy in handling a socially sensitive and somewhat taboo women's issue, positions them as texts with strong feminist potential. Clearly these films respond to and expand upon the recent postfeminist unplanned pregnancy rom-com, and present a valuable opportunity to open up a feminist dialogue which challenges the dominant cultural understandings of unplanned pregnancy and abortion. Therefore, it is necessary to consider in closer detail, the relationship between these films, the rom-com genre, and postfeminist culture more broadly.

Women Who Have Abortions

Kathleen Rowe argues that when utilised by a woman, "laughter is a powerful means of self-definition and a weapon for feminist appropriation" (1995, 3). And while it is significant that both *Obvious Child* and *Grandma* rely on humour in exploring and attempting to destigmatise a controversial feminine issue, this notion of female autonomy and self-definition through comedy and laughter is perhaps most apparent in *Obvious Child* and the character of Donna. In her role as a stand-up comic, Donna literally has the power to dictate which subjects will act as sources of comedy within the film, and her character is granted the agency to verbally define femininity in her own terms.

The film opens with a stand-up comedy performance by Donna, and her first line of dialogue begins, “I used to hide what my vagina did...”. This statement foreshadows the narrative of the film, which concerns the capabilities of Donna’s entire reproductive system, and her decision towards the end of the film, to publicly acknowledge her unplanned pregnancy within a stand-up routine. The joke which follows this opening statement is about vaginal discharge, and this immediately establishes Donna’s style of comedy as being largely focused around bodily functions, gross-out humour, excessive personal detail, and slapstick. As Geoff King notes, “grotesque and gross-out comedy are ... primarily, the preserves of male performers” (2002, 129), and so Donna immediately has the potential to be perceived as being somewhat unfeminine, yet her specific focus upon the bodily functions of women demands that her feminine credentials are recognised. As the routine continues, Donna discusses masturbation, flatulence, and vomiting, while at the same time asserting, “I have a human vagina”. If, as Hoerl and Kelly’s argue, postfeminist unplanned pregnancy films “stigmatize women who have had abortions as unnatural and unfeminine” (2010, 376), *Obvious Child* immediately works to question the parameters of ‘femininity’ at work in popular culture.

As Claire Mortimer notes, the traditional rom-com often finds humour the expense of the central couple, as ‘their conflicting personalities [are brought] into comic collision’ (2010, 6) and their supposedly ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ traits are contrasted. Yet in *Obvious Child*, the film’s “comic collision” is not necessarily that between the central couple, but between the conventional type of femininity associated with the rom-com genre, and that of Donna, who actually throws these expectations of femininity into comic juxtaposition with her own, apparently ‘masculine’ actions and behaviour. Like *Obvious Child*, *Grandma* subverts the “comic collision” at the centre of

the rom-com, however rather than humorously depicting a heterosexual romantic relationship, *Grandma* comically contrasts the knowledge, attitude and experiences of second-wave feminist Elle, with those of her postfeminist era granddaughter Sage. It is worth noting then, that *Grandma* is significantly more explicit than *Obvious Child* in its political intent, and in highlighting the issues that arise when public access to sexual education and reproductive healthcare are limited. This is largely achieved through the film's elimination of romance in the central 'reproductive' relationship, and its focus instead on the familiar feminist issues, which repeatedly concern new generations of women. The film begins with Sage arriving at her grandma's house and requesting \$600 for an abortion. Elle ensures that Sage is aware of all of her options, asking "you've put some thought into it, haven't you? Because this is something that you will probably think about, at some moment, every day for the rest of your life." With Sage's mind made up, Elle recalls the location of a free women's health clinic, and the pair make their way there. However, upon arrival Elle finds that within the decade since she was last there, the clinic has been replaced by a coffee shop, and so the women decide to go inside while they discuss their next steps.

As noted earlier, abortion is an incredibly divisive subject in American politics, though Ludlow suggests that at least in political discourse, the argument of pro-choice advocates is hindered by their reluctance to engage with "the things we cannot say" (2008, 32). Quoting a 2005 Hillary Clinton speech in which she describes abortion as an "easy way out" (2008, 33), Ludlow argues that this refusal to acknowledge the reality of abortion as a necessity for women who misuse or forget contraception and do not want children, perpetuates the stigma of abortion, and this political and societal desire to ignore the needs and experiences of women's bodies is alluded to during an exchange between Elle and the coffee shop barista. While discussing reproductive health and the

injustice of abortion costs, Elle and Sage are asked to leave the premises, with the barista stating that their conversation is disturbing him. Elle responds angrily, informing the barista that, “where you’re standing right now, there were thousands of unintended pregnancies terminated!” Unwilling to humour Elle with a conversation, the barista simply motions for her to leave, shutting down any possible elaboration on the topic, and leaving Elle to childishly pour her ‘drip coffee’ on the floor while ranting, “all coffee drips, you don’t have to say ‘drip coffee’, that is a redundancy!”

While this scene largely serves to place Elle’s liberal, pro-choice agenda in comical juxtaposition with a conservatism associated with broader society, it is equally worth noting that the loss of an abortion clinic in itself alludes to recent findings which suggest that “more abortion restrictions were enacted in 2011 – 2013 than in the entire previous decade” (Rachel Benson Gold and Elizabeth Nash, 2014). Without making direct reference to specific political positions and actions, the film acknowledges the physical removal of abortion access, offering a more subtle comment on the growing political attacks towards women’s sexual health services. Furthermore, if the replaced abortion clinic is tied to Elle’s “passed away” (McRobbie 2007, 28) second-wave feminism, it might be argued that the exchange of a site of sexual and reproductive agency, for something as trivial as coffee, hints at the hollowness of postfeminist culture. This is emphasised when upon leaving the coffee shop, an exasperated Sage informs her grandma that French press coffee in fact doesn’t drip. While feminist Elle understands the importance of women’s rights and the need for access to safe and free reproductive healthcare, Sage, a product of the postfeminist era, has an acute knowledge of coffee making methods.

This dynamic is revisited several times throughout the film as Sage’s knowledge of modern popular culture is contrasted with Elle’s familiarity with women’s rights and

feminist concerns. Rather than portraying Sage as ignorant, these scenes highlight a generational divide, whereby postfeminist creation Sage, is removed from the potential of feminism and the value of political engagement. Through contrasting Sage's knowledge of popular culture with her inability to articulate any political awareness of the gendered procedure which she is seeking, the film highlights that "it is precisely *feminist* concerns that are silenced within postfeminist culture" (Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra 2007, 3). However, Sage does not simply demonstrate the postfeminist "erasure of feminist politics from the popular" (Tasker and Negra 2007, 5), but her character equally functions as a neutralised and sympathetic standpoint, somewhere between the potentially abrasive and ill-informed pro-life and pro-choice arguments.

The A Word

Despite *Grandma*'s arguably more explicit criticism of the current politics surrounding abortion and the representation of feminism more broadly in American culture, that is not to say that *Obvious Child* is not also progressive and actively political in its treatment of these issues. While the intergenerational relationship between Sage and Elle is the primary focus of *Grandma*, it is equally worth noting that such relationships contribute towards the political impact of *Obvious Child*. Specifically, Donna engages in frank and direct conversations about her unplanned pregnancy with two older women who have a greater knowledge of both abortion and childbirth: her doctor and her mother. Prominent political debates have failed to address the profound and personal process of reasoning which accompanies the decision to terminate a pregnancy, with Steve Jones arguing that "such discourse refers to women's rights and the rights of the unborn fetus, but too little attention is paid to the pressure such rhetoric places on individuals who consider terminating a pregnancy" (2015, 428). In *Obvious Child*,

dialogue concerning abortion places little, if any, emphasis on the political implication of the subject, and instead through the portrayal of knowledgeable and experienced women, these conversations focus on the personal and the practical. Therefore, despite no explicit discussion of politics, these depictions make a political statement surrounding which dialogues about abortion should be valued.

Donna first uses the word “abortion” when she has her pregnancy confirmed by her doctor. Sitting in the doctor’s office, Donna notices a framed black and white photograph of the doctor and her husband staring lovingly at a new-born baby. At this point, it is possible to place the doctor and Donna in binary opposition, with the doctor representing what is morally right, and Donna representing what is morally wrong. However the doctor is impartial, friendly and helpful throughout their exchange, and after informing Donna that her pregnancy test was positive, suggests that they should discuss Donna’s options. Donna responds without hesitation, “I would like an abortion please”. Worrying that she seems insensitive, Donna apologises, only to immediately repeat the request, making it clear that she has no doubts about her decision. The women then discuss the practicalities of pursuing an abortion, such as scheduling and cost, and this direct dialogue marks *Obvious Child* in contrast with films such as *Waitress*, which never features the word ‘abortion’, and *Knocked Up* which instead childishly and for comic effect includes the rhyme “shmashmortion”.

If the character of the doctor serves to offer an idealised response to a woman’s engagement with her reproductive choices, the conversation that takes place between Donna and her mother, Nancy (Polly Draper) offers an intervention against the earlier noted intergenerational conflict that has undermined contemporary activism surrounding women’s rights. Throughout the film, Donna and Nancy are framed in opposition, as Nancy consistently critiques Donna’s choices regarding her career and

romantic relationships. Although *Grandma*'s Sage and Elle perhaps offer a more blatant depiction of the tensions between feminist and postfeminist values, there is certainly evidence of intergenerational friction between Donna and her mother. However, their interactions following Donna's emotional revelation of her unplanned pregnancy bridge a generational divide, and support the notion that the concerns of second-wave feminism remain crucial for present and future generations of women. Instead of being angry, Nancy cradles Donna and details the ordeal of living during an era in which abortion was illegal, showing nothing but support for Donna, and relief that her daughter has the right to make decisions about her own life and body. Furthermore, as an abortion-receiving woman who is caring, funny, and successful, Nancy functions as a prime example as to precisely why abortion should be available and without stigma.

This is equally true of Elle in *Grandma*, who like Nancy, reveals that she had an illegal abortion during her youth. As previously demonstrated, *Grandma* is certainly political in its concern with the issues surrounding abortion, however the film is equally thorough in exploring the personal implications of the experience. Although for the most part, Sage is steadfast in her decision to terminate her pregnancy, her character is far from secure in her sense of morality, and she worries that having an abortion will impact her ability to pursue the future she envisions for herself. Acknowledging that she eventually hopes to have children, Sage tells Elle, "I want to have a family, and I want to have a baby someday, but not now ... I want to go to college ... and some people can do both but I can't." This assured dialogue, which demonstrates that Sage's choice to pursue an abortion is rational and appropriate to her situation, is sandwiched between futile worrying, clearly influenced by the dominant discourse surrounding abortion, as to whether or not she is a slut, and whether she will end up in hell. Yet significantly,

Sage's acknowledgement that she would one day like to have children, resists the argument that access to abortion threatens to eliminate traditional family values.

Happily Ever After - After an Abortion

Like Sage, Donna is morally conflicted about her abortion, though her doubts surround whether or not she should inform the father, and her casual love interest Max, that she is pregnant and pursuing a termination. Max ultimately learns of Donna's situation during a stand-up routine, as she also informs a room full of strangers of her choice. During Donna's five-minute monologue, the camera occasionally cuts away from her performance to reaction shots of Max, and wide shots of the amused audience. Towards the end of the monologue, Max turns and leaves, and Donna's speech briefly falters as it is implied that he cannot support her decision. Therefore it might be assumed that *Obvious Child* will not achieve a traditional rom-com ending, and that Donna will be abandoned by Max.

However in the scene that follows, rom-com conventions are fully restored as Max returns with a bunch of flowers and asks to accompany Donna to her abortion, which is scheduled for Valentine's Day. If mainstream unplanned pregnancy films have suggested that through making the morally right decision to carry an unwanted pregnancy to term, women are rewarded with heterosexual romance, the traditional romantic ending of *Obvious Child* challenges the notion that women who choose abortions deserve to be punished. Although this ending is comparable to that of the mainstream unplanned pregnancy film, in that it "reasserts the centrality of heterosexual romance and heteronormativity rarely challenged in Hollywood" (Hoerl and Kelly 2010, 372), a conventional rom-com conclusion for Donna further reinforces her femininity, despite her decision to pursue an abortion.

In the film's final scene, and following Donna's abortion, the pair sit together on Max's sofa as he flicks through television channels in search of a film for them to watch. Max comments, "there is nothing but romantic comedies", to which Donna replies, "I just hate that type of film, I don't connect to it." This dialogue knowingly acknowledges that women like Donna, or women who are unopposed to abortions, have been without fictional counterparts to relate to, and this effectively situates the film as an alternative to the mainstream unplanned pregnancy rom-com. Rowe argues of the mainstream rom-com, that in "the couple's victory over the obstacles between them (as well as in the new child or new life implicit in their union) lies the utopian possibilities of a new social order" (1995, 107). However, in the case of Donna and Max, the obstacle between them is in fact the potential of a new child, and the pair are portrayed as happy in their decision to terminate this unplanned pregnancy. In presenting a female protagonist who obtains an abortion, and a heterosexual couple who successfully experience romance following this abortion, *Obvious Child's* offering of a possible "new social order" transcends the film's narrative, and presents the acceptance of alternatives to heteronormative values as a potential and positive shift in the rom-com genre itself.

The conclusion of *Grandma* similarly strives to debunk myths surrounding abortion, as represented in popular cinema and in society more broadly. Given that many of the protagonists of mainstream postfeminist pregnancy films "presume a fetus is a child" (Hoerl and Kelly 2010, 374) in their unwavering devotion to carrying their pregnancies to term, these films equate abortion with the murder of a human, therefore implying that women are morally obliged to persevere with unplanned pregnancies. *Grandma* can then be read as directly critiquing such texts for "putting in narrative form an assumption that remains contested in ... debates over abortion" (Hoerl and Kelly

2010, 374). This criticism is most explicit when Elle and Sage arrive at the abortion clinic, and are met by an anti-abortion activist and her young daughter. In a piece of dialogue which mimics that used by the lone protestor in *Juno*, the campaigner exclaims, “don’t kill your baby, your baby has fingernails!” While this statement is enough to make Juno swiftly disregard the practical and material conditions which suggest that her pregnancy as less than ideal, in *Grandma*, Elle simply responds “not until 22 weeks, genius.” Though the film certainly critiques the dominant narrative of the unplanned pregnancy film in general, this simple retort might be read as a more direct accusation towards the filmmakers of highly-praised indie hit *Juno*, of perpetuating false ideas and myths surrounding unplanned pregnancy and motherhood.

The film closes with Sage leaving the clinic having undergone an abortion, and visibly in pain, she comments that she feels like she wants to cry. Maintaining that this is a normal reaction, and demonstrating a degree of understanding, Elle responds “if you don’t cry about this, what are you going to cry about?” This simple dialogue highlights the conflicting and difficult emotions which may accompany the decision to proceed with an abortion, yet equally the film suggests that “experiencing complex emotions and having strong feelings after an abortion – even negative ones – does not indicate that a woman feels she made the wrong decision” (C. H. Rocca, K. Kimport, H. Gould, and D. G. Foster 2013, 130). As previously acknowledged, Sage is consistently shown to be morally conflicted with regard to her decision, and this presence of overlapping, even contradictory emotions, is not avoided following the abortion. It is in this sense that *Grandma* can be regarded as a film which seeks to challenge the popular perception of abortion as simply a binary political issue, and aims to encourage a more complex understanding of abortion as paradoxically, both an individual and communal experience for women who consider and/or undergo the procedure.

Conclusion

Obvious Child and *Grandma* present alternative unplanned pregnancy narratives, which depict abortion as a sometimes crucial, and not necessarily negative female experience. Both films draw upon and subvert conventions of the 'feminine' rom-com genre, and of the recently popularised unplanned pregnancy film, and invoke the experiences of different generations of women, in order to offer relatable and familiar representations of femininity, while simultaneously normalising the instinct to not want to persevere with pregnancy. Importantly, both films acknowledge the emotional and material implications of having children, and offer level-headed characters shown to be making informed and rational decisions about their ability to both carry a pregnancy to term, and to raise a child.

Following Ludlow's contention that "in the public domain, pro-choice narratives are particularly rare; an online search reveals hundreds of abortion 'horror stories' and poems attributed to women who regret their abortions and only a few sites dedicated to pro-choice narratives" (2008, 37), *Obvious Child* and *Grandma* attempt to reconfigure dominant cultural perceptions of abortion, by offering pro-choice narratives in which abortion is not associated with trauma, fear, or cruel intentions. Though it is worth acknowledging that these films contribute towards a wider cultural movement to encourage more complex engagements with the issue of abortion of reproductive rights, particularly online. For example in 2014, abortion counsellor Emily Letts filmed her own surgical abortion and uploaded the video to YouTube, in order to demonstrate that "there is such a thing as a positive abortion story" (in Heather Wood Rudolph 2014). Also in 2014, filmmaker, writer, and long-time Planned Parenthood supporter Lena Dunham led the 'Lena loves Planned Parenthood' campaign, in which celebrity women

posted selfies of themselves wearing campaign t-shirts on Instagram, with the intention of showing support for the work that the organisation does. And in 2015, the Shout Your Abortion campaign encouraged tens of thousands of women to share their experiences of abortion on social media with the #shoutyourabortion hashtag.

However, while *Obvious Child* and *Grandma* highlight the realities of the cost of abortion, framing their protagonists as being unable to afford the procedure independently, it is worth acknowledging that both Donna and Sage come from middle-class, highly educated families, and both are in the position to ask close family members for financial support. Although practical in their references to the material conditions of their leading characters, and in the representation of these circumstances as valid reasons to pursue an abortion, it might be argued that these films take for granted the notions of choice and reproductive justice, failing to critically engage with how factors including (though certainly not limited to) race, age, geography, employment, education, community, and environment, might impact upon reproductive healthcare access. Furthermore, it is worth noting that both Donna and Sage are portrayed as having access to contraception (specifically condoms), and that their pregnancies are the result of incorrect/inconsistent use, rather than the result of a lack of access to contraception and/or sex education. And while this certainly does not delegitimise the characters' decisions to terminate their pregnancies, this portrayal reiterates that the concerns surrounding reproductive 'access' in these films, is limited to the availability of abortions services rather than with the wider availability of reproductive healthcare. Notably, Donna and Sage are supported by their mother and grandmother respectively, and both of these maternal characters are highly esteemed academics who themselves have had abortions. These characters maintain the fact that "mainstream discourses about women's reproductive options have ... revolved around the interests of wealthier,

whiter women who organized the liberal feminist movement during the Second Wave” (Hoerl and Kelly 2010, 377).

That “black women are three times as likely as white women to experience an unintended pregnancy [and] Hispanic women are twice as likely” (Susan A. Cohen 2008, 3) is not reflected in the unplanned pregnancy comedy film, whether mainstream or independent. In fact, Hoerl and Kelly suggest that the media is more likely to position expectant minority women “as systemic social problems” (2010, 376), rather than as vehicles for humour, which suggests a prevailing discomfort surrounding women of colour and unplanned pregnancy. Despite their progressive agenda, that these films fail to acknowledge the reproductive disadvantages of minority groups and equally, that they don’t examine the broader importance of access to women’s healthcare (not just abortion facilities), demonstrates a continued resistance within popular culture, to thoroughly engage with issues surrounding both reproductive rights and reproductive justice. Therefore, although *Obvious Child* and *Grandma* offer alternatives to the Hollywood mainstream in their positive engagement with abortion as an acceptable conclusion to an unplanned pregnancy, these films have maintained an association between women’s choice, specifically reproductive choice, and social and economic privilege.

Notes

¹ Loretta Ross expands upon the definition of reproductive justice offered by ACRJ, elaborating that “reproductive justice is a positive approach that links sexuality, health, and human rights to social justice movements by placing abortion and reproductive health issues in the larger context of the well-being and health of women, families and communities because reproductive justice seamlessly integrates those individual and group human rights particularly important to marginalized communities. We believe that the ability of any woman to determine her own reproductive destiny is directly linked to the conditions in her community and these conditions are not just a matter of individual choice and access. For example, a woman cannot make an individual decision about her body if she is part of a community whose human rights as a group are violated, such as through environmental dangers or insufficient quality health care. Reproductive justice addresses issues of population control, bodily self-determination, immigrants’ rights, economic and environmental justice, sovereignty, and militarism and criminal injustices that limit individual human rights because of group or community oppressions” (2011).

² Some republican politicians such as Dewey F. Bartlett, Stephen Freind, Henry Aldridge, and Todd Akin have argued against abortion access, based on the belief that the female body is unable to conceive during rape. Additionally, republican Richard Mourdock has expressed the religious belief that all pregnancies are intended by God, even if those pregnancies are a result of rape.

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