

FRAMING FEMININITY AS INSANITY: REPRESENTATIONS OF MENTAL ILLNESS  
IN WOMEN IN POST-CLASSICAL HOLLYWOOD

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From the socially conservative 1950s to the permissive 1970s, this project explores the ways in which insanity in women has been linked to their femininity and the expression or repression of their sexuality. An analysis of films from Hollywood's post-classical period (*The Three Faces of Eve* (1957), *Lizzie* (1957), *Lilith* (1964), *Repulsion* (1965), *Images* (1972) and *3 Women* (1977)) demonstrates the societal tendency to label a woman's behavior as mad when it does not fit within the patriarchal mold of how a woman should behave. In addition to discussing the social changes and diagnostic trends in the mental health profession that define "appropriate" female behavior, each chapter also traces how the decline of the studio system and rise of the individual filmmaker impacted the films' ideologies with regard to mental illness and femininity.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In exploring the extent to which media depictions shape public perceptions about mental illness, clinical psychologist Otto Wahl asserts that, “because of the stigma of mental illness, our neighbors and co-workers and even friends are careful about revealing their psychiatric status, and mental illness remains an alien and frightening phenomenon associated mainly with the extremes we do get to see” (Wahl 101). Despite this public unwillingness to openly discuss mental illness, be it a result of shame stemming from some personal experience with it or the mere misunderstanding of the problem, there is no lack of films that have tackled the subject. But how productively has the issue been explored? Over the course of film history, characters with some form of mental illness have appeared in just about every genre imaginable. Familiar are the images of the less-than-adequate asylum of the social problem film (*The Snake Pit*, 1948) and the psychotic slasher of the horror film (*Halloween*, 1978). Mental illness has even been a source of comedy, as in the fairly recent and notorious Jim Carrey vehicle, *Me, Myself & Irene* (2000). Perhaps the cinema serves as a contemporary version of the 18<sup>th</sup> century asylum; we pay our admission fee and are granted access to the “depravity” of people with mental illness while remaining at a safe distance.

In her critique of the diagnostic processes used to identify mental illness, feminist psychologist Hannah Lerman notes that throughout history, “women have often been the primary patients” (Lerman 8) in a system where men have traditionally been the ones who create the diagnostic systems, which “reflect the times and locations

in which they are developed and used, and the values of those using them" (Lerman 6). Ultimately, this means that female behavior is subject to judgment by contemporaneous male standards of what is appropriate and therefore sane. With this premise in mind, this study will attempt to determine how films of different eras make use of various generic and stylistic conventions to depict mentally ill women in reaction to social understandings of mental illness. As observed in *Images of Madness*, through the manipulation of images and sound, "film is uniquely able to reflect the flux of mental-emotional experience with an impact similar to that undergone by a human being during a period of psychological deterioration" (Fleming and Manvell 19). That is, film as a medium has inherent advantages when it comes to the ability to represent insanity or madness onscreen, whether by serving as an objective observer of events unfolding before the camera or through the use of subjective devices to place the viewer in the mindset of a character. The way in which mental illness has been portrayed either stylistically or in terms of narrative has changed over the years based on the social climate in which the film was produced.

Works such as *Media Madness* and *Images of Madness* have considered how Hollywood film and other media outlets have traditionally represented mental illness, and the findings are that these images lead to thinking of people with mental illness as criminal or dangerous. The aim of this project is not to critique the accuracy of the mental disorders depicted; this is a task better left to trained psychologists and psychiatrists, and the territory has been covered in the aforementioned works. What this study will attempt to determine is how social attitudes towards the occurrence of

mental illness in women have been represented in film; how the mad woman's sexuality is treated is clearly dependent on the social milieu in which a particular film was produced. Therefore, the best way to approach this topic is historically, in terms of how various genres and their inherent stylistic tendencies have been utilized to characterize the mad woman.

In her work on the portrayal of women in film, particularly during the end of Hollywood's classical period, Molly Haskell writes, "The whore-virgin dichotomy took hold with a vengeance in the uptight fifties, in the dialectical caricatures of the 'sexpot' and the 'nice girl'" (Haskell vii). She goes on to say, "What the peer-group pressures of both decades—fifties' repression and sixties' license—have in common is an undue emphasis on sex; sex becomes not simply an appetite or a matter of individual taste, but the supreme, defining quality of the self" (Haskell vii-viii). These concepts suggest that female identity is amorphous and, because it is inextricably linked with sexuality, shaped by the fluid societal standards regarding sexual repression, expression, and oppression.

Beginning with the close of what is often considered Hollywood's classical period, this project will trace the shifting representation of female mental illness in cinema of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Over this 30 year period, filmmaking in Hollywood changed drastically. Following a wave of success after World War II, Hollywood's studio-driven empire began to crumble. Cultural shifts, such as the birth of suburbia and the ever-growing prominence of television, combined with the aftermath of the 1948 Paramount Consent Decrees meant Hollywood could no longer rely on its old

formula of trying to please everyone at the urban movie palace. The Paramount decision was a Supreme Court ruling that forced Hollywood to give up its control of production, distribution, or exhibition of their motion pictures. Hollywood opted for the last item on the list, which meant studios no longer owned the actual movie theaters; this loss for Hollywood was a gain for independent and foreign filmmakers who now had an outlet for their films. In addition to losing the guaranteed exhibition that owning the theaters ensured, Hollywood also had to compete with television and the postwar flight to the suburbs. To do so, the industry began exploring niche markets and more innovative approaches to film narrative and style. This in turn led to a more personal approach to filmmaking as directors were freed from the constraints of a studio system that attempted to reach the widest possible audience.

The underlying theoretical framework for this thesis will be that of cultural studies, which treats media texts as cultural artifacts and explores how those texts interact with the culture that produced them. This model of media studies is particularly useful, as it allows for the implementation of various methods of analysis, including the use of auteur analysis and feminist film studies. Cultural studies is most closely associated with Stuart Hall, who sets up a basic model of understanding media texts as being encoded with meaning by producers and received by viewers who decode the text. "It is this set of decoded meanings which 'have an effect', influence, entertain, instruct or persuade, with very complex perceptual cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioural [sic] consequences" (Hall 53). What is important to note is that "the codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical" (Hall 54).



That is, any meaning that a director of a film may have intended may not necessarily come through to an individual viewer, just as a viewer might find meaning unintended by the text's producers. As this project attempts to understand both sides of this model of textual production and reception, discussion about the director's vision for the interpretation of individual films will be included where applicable.

### Historical Perspective

As suggested by Haskell's observations, shifting societal views on women will result in changes in the type of behavior that will be labeled as mad. What remains constant in this hegemonic negotiation, however, is the tendency to explain a woman's mental affliction in terms of her social and sexual identity. An effective textual analysis of the films to be discussed must therefore stem from a discussion of how mental illness in women has historically been understood.

The very word hysteria has its origins in Greek as the word for uterus. Mental illness in women was understood to be the result of the uterus leaving its designated place in the body. Plato described the womb as "an animal which longs to generate children. When it remains barren too long after puberty, it is distressed and sorely disturbed, and straying about in the body and cutting off the passages of the breath, it impedes respiration and brings the sufferer into the extremist anguish" (Bernheimer 3). This statement not only conjures the familiar image of the fainting hysteric, but also implies a connection between a woman's inclination toward motherhood and her mental

stability. That is, procreative sex was the method by which women could return the womb to its rightful place and thus prevent madness from over-taking their lives.

Even as understandings of anatomy and mental illness progressed beyond the ancient Greeks' laughable theory, mental illness was still seen as a collection of disorders more likely to affect women than men. A seventeenth century physician explained that this was the case because "they have a more delicate, less firm constitution, because they lead a softer life, and because they are accustomed to the luxuries and commodities of life and not to suffering" (Bernheimer 4). Here, a woman's susceptibility to becoming mad or hysterical is linked not only with her biological sex, but also to perceptions about her place in life and society.

This view of the "soft" woman continued into the Victorian era; because of their particular place within the structure of a patriarchal society, women's succumbing to hysteria was paradoxically either "acceptable as an affirmative sign of her femininity," or it "could be interpreted as signifying just the opposite, a rejection of femininity as illness and a hatred of the patriarchy that defined it as such" (Bernheimer 6). It was at this time Freud began to see the unconscious as the key to understanding hysteria; sexual repression would become an important concept to emerge from his work, in which he "emphasized the repression of infantile sexual wishes as the major cause for the sudden emergence of another self" (Fleming and Manvell 65). This perhaps makes more sense than a "wandering womb," but still results in a tendency to connect a woman's mental stability (or instability, as the case may be) to her sexuality or repression thereof, depending on the cultural climate.

Psychologist and feminist Phyllis Chesler posits the following thesis concerning mental illness: "What we consider 'madness,' whether it appears in women or in men, is either the acting out of the devalued female role or the total or partial rejection of one's sex-role stereotype" (Chesler 93). Thus, "Women who fully act out the conditioned female role are clinically viewed as neurotic or psychotic" and "women who reject or are ambivalent about the female role frighten both themselves and society..." (Chesler 93). When society demands that women limit their role to motherhood, the desire to experience sex outside of that context is considered abnormal; when society allows women to explore their sexual identity and desires, the refusal to do so marks them as frigid. As cultural artifact, film has reflected these contradictory tendencies to condemn both the woman's sexual expressiveness *and* her frigidity.

Many psychologists positing a feminist critique of the mental health field have acknowledged this connection between femininity and mental illness. Lerman, for example, explores the evolution of mental disorders related to women in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM)*<sup>1</sup> published periodically by the American Psychiatric Association. Throughout her work, *Pigeonholing Women's Misery*, she asserts that while the *DSM* might be adapted to allow for more modern understandings of causes of mental illness in both men and women, this does not preclude antiquated ideas about hysteria from influencing the opinions of the individual practitioner or society in general.

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<sup>1</sup> First published in 1952, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM)* is a tool used to aid those in the mental health profession with diagnosing patients. The *DSM* contains a list of diagnostic categories for various mental disorders as well as descriptions of the behavior and criteria associated with them. The history of the *DSM* has not been without controversy; early versions of the *DSM* were criticized for "being unscientific and for encouraging negative labeling" (Dziegielewski 6) and for having a "masculine bias" (Dziegielewski 7). More recent versions of the *DSM* have included "cultural information, diagnostic tests, and lab findings" from "research studies and field trials" (Dziegielewski 6) in an effort to address these concerns and strengthen the reliability of the diagnoses contained in the manual.

More recent questions about psychiatric diagnoses of women have centered on depressive disorders and personality disorders. While it is worth noting that women are diagnosed with depressive disorders at twice the rate of men (NIMH 1), this paper focuses on personality disorders and the various ways in which they have been understood or labeled, as they better describe the type of behavior displayed by the female characters in the films to be discussed. Furthermore, because film is an inherently visual medium, personality disorders that are associated with the fracturing of splitting of the psyche afford filmmakers more interesting opportunities to physically represent a character's mindset than depressive disorders do.

*Women and Borderline Personality Disorder* by Janet Wirth-Cauchon traces how the diagnosis of borderline personality disorder (BPD) has been used historically, arguing that it has "been feminized over time" and, like hysteria, "is a complex category, describing a markedly diverse range of symptoms, and applied to an increasingly larger number of women who display what is perceived as disturbed or excessive behavior" (Wirth-Cauchon 38). Whether talking specifically about hysteria, schizophrenia, BPD or any other mental disorder, what remains clear is that historically, the diagnosis of mental illness in women has been closely linked to her social role or sexuality.

### Women and Mental Illness in Classical Hollywood

In order to understand how post-classical cinema depicted the mentally ill woman, it is first necessary to discuss how the topic of mental illness in women was

handled during Hollywood's classical period (most generally understood as the period from the 1930s through the 1950s). The 1940s proves to be the most interesting and prolific decade for these narratives, as various psychiatric and psychoanalytic theories "became well-known to the interested lay public" (Fleming and Manvell 34), resulting in part from the general atmosphere of apprehension and anxiety that surrounded World War II. Not only did psychiatry "[turn] its focus on the forces of madness that were gaining world power," but noted European psychiatrists were fleeing their countries and coming to the US, where their ideas found a receptive American audience (Fleming and Manvell 34).

This popular cultural interest in psychiatry is reflected in a number of films that involve women and some form of mental illness. Depictions of mental illness in women during this time can most often be found in two types of films: the women's film and the social problem film. The term "women's film" is not necessarily connected to any one genre or type of narrative; the key is that the story centers on women as the protagonists, rather than relegating them to the role of passive love interest. In the 1944 period picture *Gaslight*, Ingrid Bergman's character believes herself to be suffering from a nervous breakdown, only to discover that her husband is deliberately trying to drive her mad. While this particular film relies on suspense and indeed reveals that the woman is not mad but the victim of a cruel, plotting husband, many others depicted contemporary scenarios in which the mentally ill woman herself was the criminal.

In *The Dark Mirror* (1946), a psychiatrist finds himself caught in a perilous love triangle with identical twins, played by Olivia de Havilland. One is good and the other

an evil murderess. There is a crucial scene in which the psychiatrist attempts to explain the extreme difference in the twins' personalities. He explains that, "all women are rivals fundamentally" and that this jealousy concerning male attention deepens when the women in question are sisters. Thus, the "crazy" twin is such because the rivalry she has with her sister has "grown more and more bitter in her until now it's abnormal." Clearly, the male psychiatrist connects a woman's romantic or sexual life with her mental stability.

The criminal element associated with the mentally ill woman is repeated in *Possessed* (1947), which stars Joan Crawford as a woman whose unrequited love for her man drives her insane and causes her to murder him. The film opens with Crawford's character Louise in the psychiatric ward of a hospital where she is observed by two male doctors. When they discover that she was rejected by her lover, she is described as having a "persecution complex" (because she "makes no attempt to see the man's viewpoint") and "typical schizoid detachment, split personality." One of the doctors explains that the "seeds" of her conditions were always there, but "her obsession for this man made them grow." Louise herself acknowledges the link between her unrequited love and her mental state when she is proposed to by her former employer. She tells him how wonderful it is to feel wanted, because "something happens to a woman when she isn't wanted. Something dreadful."

Despite the presence of psychiatry in these aforementioned films, their depiction of the actual issue of mental illness in women leaves something to be desired. In 1948, *The Snake Pit*, also starring de Havilland, took a far more serious look at the issue,

focusing specifically on the inadequacy of mental asylums and hospitals. Therefore *The Snake Pit* is more than a women's film; it can also be categorized as a postwar social problem film, a specific type of film that attempted to tackle a broad range of social issues, albeit in a rather superficial way. Though the film does offer a grim and critical view of the abhorrent conditions in state hospitals, it remains a Hollywood product. Thus, the film's happy ending is reliant upon de Havilland's character Virginia returning home to her husband to be the wife she could not be before she received treatment to deal with her traumatic childhood. The film ends with the reunion between husband and wife, so the audience does not see what happens as Virginia assimilates back into the world outside the hospital. Without showing the initial struggles and difficulties she surely would have faced, the film creates a typical Hollywood ending in which love is enough to triumph over adversity.

*Psychiatry in the Cinema* explores not just mental illness, but more specifically classical Hollywood's depiction of the psychiatric profession, especially as it relates to the treatment of women. *Now Voyager* (1942), for example, features Bette Davis as the homely, browbeaten daughter of an overbearing mother who turns to the "almost godlike" psychiatrist played by Claude Rains for help (Gabbard and Gabbard 61). This is one of several films of the 1940s that "appropriate psychiatry as an important element in women's search for identity" (Gabbard and Gabbard, 61). What is important to note is that while there have been depictions of female psychiatrists, these narratives tend to feature a woman relying on a male doctor to cure her and make her fit to rejoin society, assuming her appropriate role as a girlfriend, wife, or mother.

## Chapter Summaries

Overall, classical Hollywood's depiction of mental illness in women oscillated between a medical model like that of *The Snake Pit* and a more amorphous, melodramatic portrait of feminine hysterics, as in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), where Gloria Swanson offers an unnerving performance of a narcissistic film star's descent into madness. Hysterics and volatile emotional states are prevalent in female performances throughout the classical period, perhaps most famously embodied by screen divas such as Joan Crawford or Bette Davis, whether the woman was explicitly coded as mentally ill or not. This creates a sense that this is just the way women are, which is certainly reflective of mental health professionals' past attitudes. As Lerman asserts with regard to late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century psychology, female biology had as much to do with diagnosing a woman as any other criteria: "Whether officially labeled hysteria or not, during this period almost all ailments that women suffered were considered to be related either to her menstrual cycle or her uterus" (Lerman 80).

This is most apparent in the multiple personality disorder (MPD)—known today as dissociative identity disorder (DID)—films that emerged in the late 1950s, which are the subject of the first chapter of this project. Given the ambivalent nature concerning women's roles in patriarchal society, it is not surprising that mental illness in women has often been manifested in films about fractured or split personalities. Despite the debate in the mental health field about the validity or veracity of MPD, Hollywood used this clinical term to label the woman's mental affliction, while still managing to connect



it to her sexuality. The two films to be discussed here are *The Three Faces of Eve* and the lesser-known *Lizzie*, both released in 1957.

Ultimately these films allow for an expression of the mentally ill woman as the manifestation of the virgin/whore dichotomy. The woman's evil, sexual personality will destroy her unless she submits to the healing power of her (male) doctor, who will mold her into a demure model of femininity fit to resume her proper place in society. What sets these films apart from others of the classical period is that the mentally ill woman is not a murderer or other criminal; these films are far more clinical in their depictions of the psychiatric process, but do not cross into the realm of a social problem film. Rather than suggesting the necessity of discussing mental illness as a social issue, these films put the individual woman on display as an oddity, something that needs to be repaired.

Chapter 2 offers an analysis of two films from the 1960s that represent the changing views of mental illness with regard to female behavior. The first is *Lilith*, Robert Rossen's 1964 film based on the novel by J.R. Salamanca. *Lilith* is a film that unabashedly claims, "Somehow insanity seems a lot less sinister to watch in a man than a woman." While these words belong to the male protagonist in the novel, it is important to note that they are uttered by a female orderly in the film, implying that women somehow have an inherent connection to madness and understand the horror of it. *Lilith* is a completely destructive force who eventually causes the mental breakdown of her occupational therapist, who also happens to be her lover. *Lilith* is an interesting case in point because stylistically it begins to depart from the classical

Hollywood mode of representing the mad woman, but at the narrative level she remains an unquestionably malevolent being whose overt sexuality is the root of her mental instability.

Thus the film makes for an interesting counterpoint to Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* (1965), in which the woman's madness is brought on by her frigid virginity. *Repulsion* is a far more subjective film than any of those mentioned thus far in terms of allowing us a glimpse into the inner workings of the mad woman's mind. An analysis of these two films will facilitate discussion about the 1960s as a time of shifting social expectations concerning female sexuality, as well as a time when the Hollywood system began to break down and give way to more artistic, foreign, and independent films.

Chapter 3 discusses what are perhaps the most interesting films about women and madness: those in which her illness is not explicitly identified or diagnosed. This lack of medical diagnosis allows us to understand her insanity in relation to factors involving her femininity and womanhood. The artistic and stylistic freedom explored by filmmakers in the 1960s and 1970s provided fertile ground for portrayals of the mad woman from a more subjective standpoint than was seen in classical Hollywood cinema. American filmmaker Robert Altman had two such films: *Images* from 1972 and *3 Women* from 1977. These films are not interested in diagnosing the woman but rather exploring issues of identity, or perhaps more accurately, identity crisis, that are inextricably entwined with her femaleness. There is an interesting fantasy component to these films, which can perhaps be understood as a return to the pre-Oedipal phase

of the imaginary, which is connected to the maternal space and characterized by images (rather than words), emotions, and a blurring of boundaries.

Another way to discuss these more subjective and visually artistic films of the 1970s is in terms of the feminist response to hysteria and other psychological diagnoses in women. Altman's films portray female identity as extremely amorphous and the women often seem physically split from themselves. As is noted in a piece from the annual publication of *Themes in Drama*, "Trying to determine the meanings of this division between the woman's physical and psychic selves often highlights the theoretical division between psychoanalysis and feminism" (Redmond 37). Similar to *Repulsion*, both *Images* and *3 Women* blur reality and fantasy until we are no longer sure what the woman is imagining and what she is physically experiencing. Through their subjective camerawork, these films ask the viewer to identify with the women. What is important to note, however, is that although the portrayals of the mad women in Altman's films are more subjective, the women are still depicted as dangerous, especially to men. The question of to what extent patriarchal pressures are to blame for these women's afflictions is to be explored as well.

The conclusion for this thesis ties together the themes and issues discussed throughout. As this project moves from the end of classical Hollywood to more artistic, independent films of the post-classical period, there is a shift from an interest in curing to exploring to destroying the madwoman. What remains constant, however, is the tendency to explain her affliction in terms of her femininity and sexuality. In analyzing the films mentioned, it should become evident that no matter how the mad woman is

portrayed, her insanity remains connected to her social and sexual roles. By taking a historical approach to this topic, it is possible to see how these films are affected by the fact that over the past fifty years, sexuality has become ever more important to how women are defined not only by themselves but also by society. The shift from melodrama to horror in terms of how a woman's mental instability is portrayed in film is reflective of this social anxiety about what to do with the new breed of sexually liberated woman who now tries *simultaneously* to fill the oppositional roles of the virgin-whore dichotomy. By incorporating feminist approaches to film theory, psychology, and understanding culture in general, this project will contribute to the discussion of the ways in which women have been labeled as mad as reflected in the cultural artifact of film.

## CHAPTER 2

### SOCIAL CONSERVATIVISM AND MULTIPLE PERSONALITY DISORDER IN HOLLYWOOD FILM

The aim of this project is to examine how representations of mental illness in women shifted during the post-classical period in accordance with social understandings of what constituted mental illness. This chapter discusses how one particular condition, known at the time as multiple personality disorder (MPD), was presented to the American public in the late 1950s via two films about young women struggling with the illness. Although the condition is now known as dissociative identity disorder (DID), the term MPD will be used in its historical context throughout this chapter where appropriate. Speaking about the cyclical nature of DID/MPD's appearance in medical discourse, Hannah Lerman states, "At the end of the nineteenth century a flurry of cases were diagnosed, but then the diagnosis seemed to go out of fashion until the 1950s" (Lerman 58). No doubt the publicity of the true story of a patient known as Eve contributed to at least a heightened awareness of MPD if not an actual rise in reported cases and diagnoses. In a 35 year addendum to their book, *The Three Faces of Eve*, even Dr. Corbett H. Thigpen and Dr. Hervey M. Cleckley acknowledge that the attention paid to Eve's case led to an increase in the number of individuals coming to them over the years claiming to suffer from her same symptoms. They add, however, "other than Eve, we have seen only one case...that appeared to be undeniably a genuine multiple personality" (Thigpen and Cleckley "Addendum").

This chapter demonstrates how *The Three Faces of Eve* and *Lizzie* reflect a cultural tendency to connect the notion of split or multiple personality and female

identity. In order to do this, the chapter begins by offering a brief explanation of MPD—focusing on the controversial aspects of applying the diagnosis to women and its historical relationship to hysteria—followed by a description of the social climate of the 1950s with regard to female identity. Finally, both films are discussed in terms of not only their stylistic and narrative approaches to depicting MPD, but also their critical and social receptions.

### Multiple Personality Disorder: History and Controversy

MPD is generally understood as a disorder in which a person demonstrates behavior that some feel can only be explained by the presence of more than one personality inhabiting the same mind. For example, an individual might complain about headaches, blackouts, or the loss of long periods of time; he or she might be told by others that during these periods he or she acted in ways contrary to his or her usual nature. MPD's validity as a psychiatric condition has been plagued by skepticism, yet those on either side of the debate about the disorder's veracity can agree that MPD is "part of the history of hysteria" (Acocella 29).

Hysteria was a label applied—throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century especially—to instances of the "appearance of physical symptoms...or psychological symptoms—or both—in the absence of any evident organic cause" (Acocella 29). That is, when the physician did not know what specific ailment was troubling the (usually female) patient, the diagnosis offered was hysteria. Freud's work on the connection between hysteria, repressed desires, and the emergence of another self brought "broader acceptance in

medical circles of the idea of dual personalities" (Fleming and Manvell 64), and even without Freud specifically writing on the condition, "multiple personality was by the early 1930s diagnosed as a form of hysteria" (Fleming and Manvell 65). This link between hysteria and MPD should not be overlooked, given the historical tendency for women to be diagnosed with the former at a significantly higher rate than men.

As with hysteria and femininity, there is a strong connection between MPD and sex and the expression of sexuality. One understanding of the disorder is that "multiple personality, or 'split personality,' becomes a way of dissociating from a part of the self that which is unacceptable," and most films dealing with this subject define that self as "sexually obsessed" (Fleming and Manvell 68). Thus the "other self" that emerges is more likely to act on or reflect those desires which society deems inappropriate. Of course, what is "appropriate" is something that is culturally defined and will therefore have specific meanings for women that vary from century to century or even decade to decade.

In a 2000 review of the literature concerning DID/MPD, McAllister notes that, "Freud's theory of repressed sexual fantasies leading to dissociation has lost ground and been replaced with Janet's (1889) earlier theory that real trauma can cause dissociation" (McAllister 31). This alternative understanding of MPD pinpoints exposure to some traumatic incident (or incidents) as the cause of the disorder rather than the repression of certain desires or feelings. In the plots of both films, a single traumatic incident is identified as the catalyst to being cured, though this is accomplished in radically different ways, as will be demonstrated. While issues of abuse are of course

still investigated when a patient is being diagnosed, Lerman points out that the mental health profession has generally “moved somewhat past the view that the fact of sexual abuse is sufficient to warrant some kind of diagnosis of the young woman” (Lerman 78). One potential problem with identifying childhood trauma—sexual or otherwise—as the source of MPD in women is that it implies a certain mental frailty rendering them incapable of dealing with trauma.

Whether struggling with repressed desires or a buried memory of trauma, the MPD patient relies on the help of a psychiatrist to uncover the source of the disorder. Released in 1957, both *Lizzie* and *The Three Faces of Eve* are part of what Glen O. Gabbard and Krin Gabbard describe as the short-lived “Golden Age” of psychiatry in film; as noted in *Psychiatry and the Cinema*, “For a few years in the late 1950s and early 1960s, films reflected—however imperfectly—a growing conviction in American culture that psychiatrists were authoritative voices of reason, adjustment and well-being” (Gabbard and Gabbard 84). In the cases of *Lizzie* and *The Three Faces of Eve*, the authoritative psychiatrist is male and utilizes hypnosis in order to unlock the secrets of the patient’s past. The underlying problem is that this reinforces the assumed validity of a male dominated field deciding what constitutes mental illness in women while also promoting the absolute submission of the female mind to a man for the shaping of the desired personality.

#### Women and Society in the 1950s

Even if rarely encountered and therefore not fully understood by the medical



community, MPD was sensational enough to capture the interest of the public. It is perhaps not surprising then that the disorder itself is the star of two films during a decade when women were struggling to repress any self-satisfactory desires, instead acquiescing to domestic life and their roles as wives and mothers. The 1950s is perhaps one of the most idealized decades in American history, with regard to popular culture's nostalgic memories of happy families living blissfully in a time of innocence. For women of this period, however, life was far from the perfect television and magazine advertisements they were expected to emulate in their homes.

Beginning in 1957, Betty Friedan—a quintessential figure of second-wave feminism—spent the latter part of this decade interviewing women in order to understand what she termed “the feminine mystique,” or the “image to which we were trying to conform” (Friedan 9). Friedan also closely examined the content of women's magazines, noting that a major shift occurred from the late 1930s to the late 1940s. In 1939, Friedan notes that *Ladies Home Journal* published numerous fiction stories that featured “New Woman” heroines who did not necessarily have to sacrifice love for a career, and vice versa (Friedan 39). By 1949, however, the message being sent to the postwar American woman was markedly different: “only one out three heroines in the women's magazines was a career woman—and she was shown in the act of renouncing her career and discovering that what she really wanted to be was a housewife” (Friedan 44).

Thus the social attitudes toward women as reflected in popular culture suggested that the same women who may have worked factory jobs during World War II were

now expected to return to the home without complaint and become a soft bundle of femininity that any man would be pleased to come home to after a hard day's work. In the 10 years between the "New Woman" heroines of 1939 and the emergence of happy housewives in 1949, Friedan argues, "the image of American woman seems to have suffered a schizophrenic split" (Friedan 46). This confusion about identity, social roles, and "appropriate" desires (i.e. motherhood versus a career) would take its toll on women throughout the 1950s. That Friedan invokes psychiatric terminology to describe this situation illustrates how comfortable we are linking a woman's sense of her female identity with her mental stability.

### *The Three Faces of Eve and Lizzie*

It was against this backdrop of "desperate housewives" that these two films about young women with MPD were released. On May 19, 1956, the *New York Times* ran a brief article stating that Nunnally Johnson would be developing a screenplay based on the work of Thigpen and Cleckley, which was not, by this time, completely unknown. Their clinical report had been presented at the 1953 American Psychiatric Association convention and had "served as the basis for a magazine fiction story by Irmis Johnson called 'The Girl Who Led Three Lives'" ("Trebled" 13). About one week later another *New York Times* article announced that, "Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer will be competing with Twentieth Century-Fox in bringing out a motion picture about a woman with three personalities" (Pryor 23). Though MGM would distribute the film, *Lizzie*

would actually be produced by Bryna Productions, a small studio owned by the actor Kirk Douglas.

A book about Eve's case was released in February 1957, just two months before *Lizzie* was released in theaters. What is most interesting about the book is that Thigpen and Cleckley wrote it in a narrative style, rather than as a straightforward clinical case study, ensuring that the book would appeal not only to mental health professionals, but also to the general public. This attempt to interest the public in the "true life" aspect of the story is evident even in the introduction of the film *The Three Faces of Eve*, in which narrator Alistair Cooke explains that the story "needed no help from the imagination of a fiction writer. The truth itself was fabulous enough."

On the surface, *The Three Faces of Eve* and *Lizzie* might seem like typical studio clones of each other simply because they deal with the same subject matter; however, *The Three Faces of Eve* received more acclaim and overshadowed *Lizzie*. Certainly, the authenticity of Eve's story generated the type of publicity and trailers that promised audiences "the most fantastic personal story ever filmed." However, a comparative analysis of the films' varied narrative and stylistic choices in portraying the women's struggle with MPD reveals *Lizzie* to be the more interesting film in terms of its counter-hegemonic ideology, and this is perhaps why it failed to resonate the way *The Three Faces of Eve* did. *The Three Faces of Eve* reinforces the notion that the fractured housewife's psyche was caused by a failure to follow prescribed social roles, and that good mental health was achieved by accepting her place as a middle-class wife and mother. So, as problematic as *The Three Faces of Eve's* ideology is, it nonetheless

reflected the cultural milieu more so than *Lizzie*, which is the story of a single woman with no promise of a heteronormative romantic resolution.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the films' narratives is the characterization of their female leads. It is in this area that *Lizzie* and *The Three Faces of Eve* are remarkably similar; both Elizabeth and Eve find themselves overtaken by two other personalities. What is important is not necessarily the number of personalities, but what each of them represents. In both cases, the complex issues of MPD are reduced to a manifestation of the virgin/whore binary. This becomes clear when we consider how each of the personalities is depicted.

Elizabeth is introduced via dialogue exchanged by her coworkers at the museum, where she is an office clerk. One of the women is sympathetic, but the other is clearly tired of Elizabeth's complaints about headaches and not feeling well. Eleanor Parker, the lead actress in *Lizzie*, creates a character whose weariness is almost palpable. She is soft-spoken, fidgets constantly, and her reluctance to allow her coworkers to throw her a birthday party implies that she finds herself unworthy of the attention. Elizabeth eventually begins seeing a therapist, Dr. Wright, who after their first visit describes Elizabeth as "shy" and "timid," but observes in his notes that under hypnosis she reveals a "coarse, evil side, surprisingly strong and determined, and definitely antagonistic toward [the] primary subject."

The audience has, at this point, already encountered this personality. The first indication that Lizzie is emerging occurs when Elizabeth has returned home from work at the museum. She is on her way upstairs, while her aunt rambles on, extolling the

virtues of her alcoholism. Elizabeth stops and shouts, "You drunken slut!" When her aunt confronts her, Elizabeth is confused and does not remember saying anything. As she starts to undress in her room, Elizabeth is distracted by the mirror. She looks at her reflection, begins to grin, and ferociously applies makeup to her eyebrows and lips, darkening them. Parker speaks more sharply and loudly as Lizzie, and carries herself with a more erect posture. Thus Lizzie is read as an antithesis to the timid Elizabeth; she even seduces a man who works at the museum with and harasses Elizabeth. This aggressive, sexual behavior is eventually revealed to be an imitation of Elizabeth's mother, who valued fun and sexual freedom over motherhood.

In *The Three Faces of Eve*, actress Joanne Woodward also creates a distinct set of vocal and physical traits for each of the three personalities. From the introduction forward, Eve White is consistently described as being a "sweet, rather baffled young housewife," a "sweet, quiet girl," "young," and "demure." These descriptions render her powerless and non-threatening, and she is barely acknowledged as an adult. She has a soft Southern accent and her posture is such that she withdraws into herself, keeping her head down, as if reluctant to make eye contact with anyone. In a scene where her doctor and husband have come to see her in her hospital room, she clutches her robe closed in an obvious display of modesty. She asks about her daughter, demonstrating that she is a concerned mother.

Contrast this image with that of Eve Black. Her emergence is signified by a sultry, brassy musical motif and we see a physical change in the way Woodward behaves. Her Southern accent is more defined and her voice louder, making Eve's

lower class status more pronounced. When she first presents herself to Dr. Luther, Eve Black literally lets her hair down, shaking it loose from the ponytail worn by Eve White. She also takes off her nylons, dances, and flirts with her doctor. Eve Black hates the notion of Eve White being married to Ralph and is constantly saying she wishes she would leave him. Eve Black is also discovered trying to strangle their daughter, Bonnie. In all of these ways, the vivacious and overtly sexual Eve Black is read as a threat to domesticity.

Once the dichotomy of Eve's personality has been established, Lee J. Cobb's Dr. Luther explains to his colleague, "The truth is neither Eve Black nor Mrs. White is a satisfactory solution. Neither of them is really qualified to fill the role of wife, mother, or even a responsible human being. A victory for either would be disastrous, no solution whatsoever." The film has at this point established why Eve Black's overt sexuality makes her an unfit personality; the question is why Dr. Luther also sees Eve White, the meek and passive housewife, as an unacceptable solution. The model of femininity sought by Dr. Luther seems to be one that balances the two extremes Molly Haskell termed the "sexpot" and the "nice girl" (Haskell vii), so that the result is the 1950s ideal of a woman who is devoted to fulfilling the desires of her husband and looks no further than the family for her own fulfillment. Eve White is unacceptable because she is *too* passive and neurotic to satisfy her husband's sexual desires and live up to the role of dutiful wife and mother.

What this scene depicts is men literally deciding what aspects of the woman's personality would be appropriate to keep in terms of creating an ideal fit for her social

role. It is after this exchange that the third personality conveniently emerges, a pleasant woman with no memory or name, who asks to be called Jane. Once she is introduced, the narrator describes Dr. Luther as having “three inadequate personalities to complicate and confuse his search for one stable and complete woman.” This phrasing clearly figures the doctor as the center of this story; it is *his* search for the ideal female identity.

A similar situation occurs in *Lizzie*. While Elizabeth is under hypnosis, Dr. Wright is introduced to a third personality, who calls herself Beth. When discussing the case with Elizabeth’s aunt, Dr. Wright describes Beth as “a normal, lovely girl.” She is soft-spoken, but smiles and carries herself with more confidence than Elizabeth. Dr. Wright tells the aunt, “I have to try to develop Beth”; he believes that Beth is the woman Elizabeth was meant to be. Again, this is a situation in which an authoritative male is deciding what type of female behavior is appropriate and therefore which of the personalities is worth “saving.”

In order to develop these “normal” personalities, both doctors set out to uncover a traumatic event in the patient’s past that has caused some sort of mental block and fractured the woman’s psyche. In addition to this single-trauma theory, both films allude to bad mothering as the cause of the women’s disorders, again implicating a tie between failure to adhere to “proper” female roles and insanity. In Elizabeth’s case, her fun-loving mother is depicted in a flashback at the beach, where she discusses running away to Mexico with her boyfriend but laments that it can never happen because she is tied down with a child. This scene helps illustrate the mother’s

character, but it is ultimately Elizabeth's 12<sup>th</sup> birthday that is identified as the traumatic day that leads to her psychotic break. Elizabeth's aunt explains that when her mother arrived at the party drunk, Elizabeth hit her repeatedly in the chest; this resulted in her mother's collapse and eventual death. At first Dr. Wright believes it is guilt over feeling responsible for her mother's death that has damaged Elizabeth, but when he arranges for a recreation of the party to help her work through it, he finds that something far more serious happened. Another flashback reveals that her mother's boyfriend, Robin, sexually assaulted Elizabeth the night of the party when her mother died.

Eve's trauma seems tame by comparison; as a child, Eve hid from her mother under the house because she was insisting that the young girl kiss her dead grandmother. When Eve runs to her father for protection, he hands her back to her mother, saying, "Do like your mommy says." As the mother lowers her to the coffin and Eve starts to scream, the film cuts to a shot of the father. He is clearly not at ease with what is happening, but he does nothing. Brief as this scene is, it seems to reveal quite a bit about the dynamics of Eve's parents' relationship. Her forceful mother and reserved father are clearly meant to be implicated in the creation of her identity crisis as much as this kiss of the dead grandmother.

Apart from depicting the single traumatic childhood event used to explain the division of Eve's personality, the flashback to the aforementioned event is one of the only visually interesting scenes in the film with regard to character subjectivity. The film breaks with the objective style as Jane describes how crawling under her house to retrieve something brought back the traumatic memory about the grandmother. As she



describes the scenario to Dr. Luther in voice-over, the camera pushes in to an extreme close-up of her eyes and then dissolves to Woodward sitting under the house.

However, the set is designed so that the scale of her adult figure is reduced to that of a small child. This scene is one of a very few that allows Eve to narrate her own story via flashback and voice-over and it is the only one that visually creates a sense of subjectivity.

*The Three Faces of Eve* is stylistically far more conservative than *Lizzie*, which uses some interesting devices to place the audience in the mindset of the lead character. Examining some key stylistic choices in each film allows for a discussion of their ideological implications. *The Three Faces of Eve* opens with an introduction from Alistair Cooke whose authority is defined both in the opening credits' description of him as "distinguished journalist and commentator" and in his direct address of the camera. The style of the film also favors the male point of view. Cooke narrates—not Eve—and any subjective point of view shots belong primarily to the men in this film, in which her doctors and husband will look at her or exchange glances among themselves. This creates the feeling that the mad woman is the object to be studied, rather than a person with her own story to tell.

Whereas female subjectivity is an infrequent occurrence in *The Three Faces of Eve*, *Lizzie* makes great use of subjective devices to place the audience in Elizabeth's mindset throughout the film. The first time Lizzie emerges, we see Elizabeth lying on her bed. As she gets up, the film cuts to a point of view shot of her room with the camera going in and out of focus; this is juxtaposed with a close-up of her face, making

it clear that this is what Elizabeth experiences before a personality shift. Another example of this subjective camerawork occurs during a visit with Dr. Wright, during which she is hypnotized. The camera is framed on an otherwise ordinary medium shot of Dr. Wright, who is explaining the hypnosis process. When he asks Elizabeth to raise her hand, the audience sees Elizabeth's hand emerge into view from the bottom of the frame, revealing that the viewer has been situated in Elizabeth's place.

The most important scene in the film occurs immediately after Elizabeth's flashback of the rape; she runs upstairs to her room, where she sits at her dressing table facing a three-way mirror. The shot is composed so that the actress's back is to the camera as she confronts the three reflections, which act as a physical manifestation of her mental state. The film then dissolves into a strange dreamlike sequence that takes the viewer into Elizabeth's mind. She runs frantically through the museum, with a voice-over crying out "mother, mother!" Canted angles are used throughout this sequence to visually indicate Elizabeth's inner turmoil. Close-ups of Parker as Lizzie and as Beth are cut together in a shot-reverse-shot style usually utilized in conversations between two individuals; this is how the film shows the audience that Elizabeth is confronting her multiple selves and standing up to the antagonistic Lizzie. Finally, the film cuts back to Elizabeth sitting at the three-way mirror, which she forcefully slams shut. At this point Dr. Wright comes into her room to find her collapsed on the floor. She explains that she was staring at herself in the mirror with "those faces staring back" and that she had a "violent impulse to smash them, to destroy them." "And now all that's left is you," he says in reply. Though it is evident that Dr. Wright will continue

to help Elizabeth as she begins to, as he puts it, "find her own way," there is a sense in which this scene grants Elizabeth a certain amount of power and strength to begin healing herself.

Apart from their differing visual representations of the woman's MPD, one of the most important differences between *The Three Faces of Eve* and *Lizzie* is the way in which each film interprets what being "cured" means for the woman. Throughout *The Three Faces of Eve*, the goal is to find a personality for Eve that will allow her to be an ideal wife and mother. After the revelation of the third personality known as Jane, the film offers a montage that shows Eve Black, Eve White, and Jane going on with their separate daily lives. Cooke narrates, describing them respectively as the "rollicking playgirl," the "defeated wife," and the "pleasant young woman with no memory." The film thus figures Jane as the patriarchal ideal; a woman with no memory can easily be molded into the socially acceptable model of womanhood and femininity.

The film explains that Ralph has divorced Eve White because he was unable to comprehend her disorder. Therefore, in the Hollywood tradition of romantic narratives, interactions with men figure prominently in these scenes of daily life for Eve Black and Jane. Jane, however, is the only one on what would be considered an appropriate path. She is being courted by a man named Earl, but believes that as long as she is "mentally sick," she cannot marry anyone. In the final scene of the film, however, after the personalities have merged, Eve, Earl, and Eve's daughter Bonnie are shown in a three-shot in a car. They are "going home together," Eve narrates in a letter to Dr.

Luther. Thus, for Eve, mental health is defined as a return to domestic life, with the added bonus of having married “up” into the stability of middle-class life.

As evidenced by the aforementioned healing scene, *Lizzie* goes to much greater lengths than *The Three Faces of Eve* to place the emphasis on the woman’s role in reassembling her divided self. Dr. Wright is the one who brings about the traumatic rape memory through the birthday recreation, but ultimately Elizabeth’s healing comes from within, as evidenced by the scene in her bedroom in which she confronts the other personalities. The other key difference in the films’ representation of the heroines’ cures is that romance is notably absent in *Lizzie*. Though Lizzie tries to have a sexual relationship with the man from the museum, Elizabeth and Beth remain unattached, and indeed never express any interest in pursuing a relationship. There is, however, a hint of a developing relationship between Elizabeth’s aunt and a concerned neighbor who had suggested therapy in the first place. So while Elizabeth’s own narrative is devoted to resolving her inner conflict, the film still in some way suggest that having this surrogate parent couple will help undo the damage inflicted by her mother and Robin.

### Critical and Social Responses

Despite its more stylistically inventive take on the subject matter, *Lizzie* met with negative reviews that tended to dismiss the film as a lackluster melodrama. Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times* denounced it as a “foolish and generally tedious film” (Crowther, *Lizzie* 23). Criticizing the notion of the single-trauma explanation for

Elizabeth's disorder, he says, "With the insight and expedition to be found only in cheap fiction, [Dr. Wright] discovers Miss Parker was shocked by her dissolute mother as a child" (Crowther, *Lizzie* 23). This comment focuses completely on Elizabeth's mother as the source of her mental illness, ignoring the important issue of the sexual assault perpetrated by the boyfriend. Another review in *Time* acknowledged the rape, but at the same time disavowed the notion of repressed trauma, saying, "the triple trouble can be traced to an old, forgotten rape—one of those things a girl doesn't always notice at the time" ("Lizzie" 109). While this remark might be meant as an ironic comment on the melodramatic nature of the film, it nonetheless undermines the serious nature of the subject matter. Certainly it is problematic to assume that sexual trauma will result in a repressed memory or severe mental disorder as *Lizzie* suggests, but it is equally as problematic to casually dismiss the notion of repressed memory altogether. *Newsweek* discussed the film on a stylistic level, criticizing the subjective devices that make *Lizzie* stand apart from the more standard *The Three Faces of Eve*: "*Lizzie* is an exceptional story told in an unexceptional way. The onset of madness is indicated by putting the picture out of focus and turning on sour saxophone music" ("Psychiatry" 107). Ultimately, *Lizzie* was dismissed as a low-budget film that would nevertheless lead the way for other studios to try to capitalize on the phenomenon of MPD.

Many reviews of *The Three Faces of Eve* do in fact mention *Lizzie* as the forerunner. A review in *Newsweek* said that *Lizzie* "may well have made thousands of moviegoers gun shy of this subject for the rest of their lives. Now another one has appeared which is vastly superior and worth seeing" ("Newcomer's" 112). This

statement is qualified when the reviewer goes on to say that it is really Joanne Woodward's performance that makes this the case. Indeed much of the positive attention focused on Woodward's performance, though *Time's* review noted that "the script forces her to change character so often and so quickly that her meatiest moments sometimes look like rather thinly sliced ham" ("The Three" 48). This is not the only negative comment made about *The Three Faces of Eve*. Crowther praised Woodward, but concluded his review of the film by saying, "this is simply a melodramatic exercise" and "like the similar film, *Lizzie*, before it, it leaves one feeling gypped and gulled at the end" (Crowther, *3 Faces* 16). Without the benefit of fan sites and message boards that make audience reception easier to study today, one can only theorize why *The Three Faces of Eve* was able to overcome such an unexceptional critical response to achieve a status as a classic Hollywood film.

So why was *The Three Faces of Eve* more well received? Granted, the film is better acted and of higher quality in terms of overall production values, but these are easy explanations that ignore the relevance of the social climate in which the films were released. It is important to remember that Eve was a housewife; it is not difficult to imagine that this character resonated with women in a way that the single and relatively independent Elizabeth could not. As one article explains, "The case history of Eve is located in the dynamics of an encounter between madness and housewifery in the popular imagination of the 1950s" (Lloyd and Johnson 17). The public's fascination with Eve's story is evidenced not only in the success of the film, but also in various follow-up articles that were published after the film's release.

One of the most intriguing appeared in *Life* magazine in 1958. While the film implies a happy ending for Eve, later revelations about her life tell a different story. The real Eve wrote a book under the pseudonym Evelyn Lancaster (her actual name was Chris Sizemore), entitled *The Final Face of Eve*, in which she describes how she continued to struggle with her personality disorder after leaving therapy; the book served as the basis for the *Life* article. What is most interesting about this article is the way in which it describes the re-emergence of Evelyn's disorder. Earl married the "ladylike" (Wainwright 102) Jane personality—the one her doctors decided was most suited to dominate the others.

However, not long after they were married did problems arise. The article explains, "In the first place Jane was sexually frigid just as Eve White and, in spite of her outward libidinousness, Eve Black had been. She was a poor housekeeper and an indifferent cook. She was haughty and critical with Earl's friends. 'Jane thought she was too good for trailer people,' Evelyn Lancaster reports" (Wainwright 105). Furthermore, "Jane spent a great deal of time reading...and began using big expensive words" (Wainwright 106). Thus, the once satisfactory personality of Jane became problematic when she desired self-improvement through education and expressed frustration with life in the trailer park where she and Earl had settled. It is worth noting that the film elided these class issues by having Eve marry into the middle-class ideal. Though she resisted at first, Evelyn returned to therapy and Jane was eradicated; the article explains that after this last round of treatment, Earl and Bonnie "seem[ed] happy with her as a wife and mother" (Wainwright 101). This situation echoes those in the

film in which creating an ideal wife and mother seems to supercede the recovery and development of the traumatized individual.

Thanks to the success of both the book and film, Joan Acocella contends, "Eve became, for a while, the prototype of the multiple personality" (Acocella 3). Not only was Eve the model of MPD, but Justine Lloyd and Lesley Johnson argue that the film and book "coerce the details of a still-living woman with a psychiatric disorder into a kind of uber-narrative of feminine identity and ego psychology that stands for all women—most striking in their re-naming Sizemore as the essential, eternal, and biblical 'Eve'" (Lloyd and Johnson 20). A *New York Times* article that appeared in 1959, well after the film's release, supports this notion that Eve became a sort of icon of the connection between madness and femininity. The article credits sociologist Dr. Margaret Cormack with the idea that "the modern American woman now displays not the three faces of Eve, but four" ("Expert 27). In addition to their "three long-accepted roles of mother...the temptress...and the scolding shrew" ("Expert" 27), women were also dealing with the new role of a professional working outside the home. Cormack reportedly "deplored the need for mothers of young children to work outside the home" ("Expert" 27). In this article it is possible to see how powerful the impact of Eve's story was; here, the phrase is being applied to all women and once again suggesting that the fracturing of women's psyches occurs when they begin to explore beyond the boundaries of their domestic role.

Molly Haskell describes the 1950s as a decade that "ushered in the split between movies as 'entertainment' and movies as 'art,' though the division would not be officially



acknowledged until the sixties" (Haskell 234). *The Three Faces of Eve* and *Lizzie* can be seen as respective examples of this split. The objectivity, post-war sexual politics, and Hollywood characteristics (including an awkward musical number performed by Eve Black) place *The Three Faces of Eve* in a more traditional category of film style, while *Lizzie* looks ahead to the subjective camerawork and more artistic stylistic devices that would become prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s. However, despite their limited attempts at female subjectivity, both films ultimately remain ideologically problematic because of the way MPD is presented.

In cases where MPD has been considered a valid diagnosis, the splitting of the personality has been linked to specific traumas. Joan Acocella explains that this was the case with Sybil Dorsett—perhaps the most famous MPD case since Eve—whose sixteen personalities were extremely varied and linked to specific events in Sybil's life: "There was Ruthie, a baby, who split off upon watching her parents have sex. There was Peggy Lou, who came out when Sybil's grandmother died. One personality played the piano....two were men" (Acocella 3-4). Unlike that of Eve, Sybil's case history was filled with stories about horrific sexual abuse suffered at the hands of her mother; after Sybil's case became publicized, the repressed memory of sexual abuse would become an important element in diagnosing a patient with MPD. While *Lizzie* fits this diagnostic model of MPD, *The Three Faces of Eve* does not. Eve's trauma does not comparatively even seem all that traumatic to have resulted in the formation of multiple personalities; furthermore, the film seems to implicate skewed family dynamics (i.e. dominant mother and passive father) as much as the actual incident surrounding her grandmother's

death. What is key, however, is that in both films MPD is manifested in a three-way split of the personality where the woman is divided into the virgin, the whore, and an ideal mixture of the two. What this suggests is that the disorder is, as hysteria was believed to be, connected solely to femaleness rather than the actual traumas identified in the narratives.

## CHAPTER 3

### HEGEMONIC NEGOTIATION AND SCHIZOPHRENIA IN ART CINEMA

If the 1950s was a decade about conforming to an idealized image of the American family, the 1960s was a time when society started to value more individual identity. In the introduction to *Swinging Single*, Hilary Radner argues that the 1960s was a decade in which “self rather than the family [became] the primary unit of social construction” (Radner and Lockett 2). The 1960s saw the birth of second-wave feminism; the rise of counter, youth and drug cultures; as well as the publication of works such as *Sex and the Single Girl* and *The Feminine Mystique*, both of which discussed issues of female identity in contemporary society. Given the changing state of both society and the structure of the Hollywood film industry, it is not surprising that individual identity became a popular theme with directors freed from the constraints of the studio system. This chapter focuses on the particular case of female identity and how madness in women was interpreted onscreen during this time. Just as the previous chapter discussed representations of multiple personality disorder (MPD) and their relationship to the status of women in the 1950s, this chapter examines how changes in societal expectations regarding female behavior translated into films that explored issues of female identity through the specific disorder of schizophrenia. The central films to be discussed in this chapter are *Lilith* (1964) and *Repulsion* (1965); the former stands as an example of the newly independent spirit of Hollywood filmmaking while the latter represents the European art-cinema that found an American audience in the 1960s.

## The Rise of Auteur Filmmaking

Robert Ray contends that filmmaking in the postwar period was “decisively, and perhaps permanently, shaped by the auteurist critics” (Ray 141). Auteur theory originated in Europe as French critics and filmmakers began to question their industry’s “tradition of quality” in which great works of literature were adapted for the screen; these films placed emphasis on the elements of film form such as costuming and set design but were seen as lacking any sort of significant thematic depth. *Cahiers du Cinema* was a publication put out by this group of disillusioned French film critics to address the problems they saw with the state of French filmmaking. First published in 1951, *Cahiers du Cinema* led the way for audiences to distinguish between filmmakers who merely “adhered to the dominant conventions and to the script given them” and “auteurs who used mise-en-scene as part of self-expression” (Stam 85). In making this distinction and praising the work of American directors they felt were auteurs, the critics of *Cahiers du Cinema* ushered in the notion that the director is a film’s driving creative force, an idea that is today taken for granted. While this change may have begun in the 1950s, it would not be until the 1960s that popular culture would begin to recognize the shift to more personal filmmaking that placed emphasis on experimentation rather than the creation of the glossy Hollywood product audiences were used to.

Ray further argues that auteur theory “could only have arisen in a period of audience fragmentation and industry confusion” because the “shock value of auteurist aesthetics depended on the existence of a gap between popular and critical tastes that originated in the fifties” (Ray 141). Here, Ray is referencing the recognition by

Hollywood that it could no longer expect everyone to enjoy the same entertainment. Social changes were making more obvious the growing fissures in what was once considered a uniform movie going population. Both *The Three Faces of Eve* and *Lizzie* can be seen as examples of Ray's contention that postwar filmmaking had to

satisfy the new art-house, cult audience (with its tolerance for franker portrayals of the American situation) without losing the majority of filmgoers who clearly wanted more of what the industry had always produced—entertainment films predicated on the assumption that hard choices could be avoided (Ray 144).

Though *The Three Faces of Eve* and *Lizzie* are examples of films that still provided the neat narrative closure desired by audiences, this burgeoning trend toward edgy subject matter and stylization would flourish in the next decade.

One *New York Times* article supports Ray's argument about the rise of the auteur, commenting in 1965 that "one of the more promising trends in the motion picture business today is that the directors seem to be acquiring greater creative control over their films" and that the once "vague dream" of personal filmmaking was "slowly approaching reality" (Bart X11). Pointing to the breakdown of the studio system as the catalyst for this change, the article concedes that greater creative control on the part of the director does not automatically translate into a successful film. Robert Rossen's *Lilith*, which will be discussed further in this chapter, is mentioned as an example of a film that failed to "achieve aesthetic or even commercial distinction" despite the director's creative control over the project (Bart X11). The 1960s was without question a period in Hollywood history where the foray into creative expression and the search for unique approaches to storytelling were not always successful in terms of box office returns or even critical praise. However, the experimentation meant that "even the

worst of these flops, American or European, have been far more interesting than the vast majority of machine-tooled films made under conditions in which the director was a mere corporate subordinate" (Bart X11). This period of filmmaking was so interesting not only because of the stylistic experimentation, but also because the films were far less concerned with following the typical arc of a three-act narrative, complete with happy ending, than with exploring issues of identity and the individual's place in society.

### Women and Society in the 1960s

In order to understand why filmmakers were so intrigued by representations of an individual's identity, and especially female identity, it is necessary to understand the social setting of the 1960s as it pertained to women. In 1962, Helen Gurley Brown's *Sex and the Single Girl* was published. This "how-to" guide for being a fabulous swinging single was undoubtedly a revelation for audiences not quite ready to openly admit that sex occurred outside the confines of marriage. While Gurley Brown's notion that single women could—and in fact should—enjoy sex without committing to marriage before they were ready was perhaps forward thinking, her book fell short of being truly revolutionary. For example, she explains the importance of a single woman having a place of her own while offering the advice that "if you are being courted by a man, try to live near *him*" (Gurley Brown 119). She also devotes several pages to offering tips on how single women should decorate their own apartments in order to intrigue, entice, and please men.

Furthermore, Gurley Brown seems to harbor the very notion that she claims to reject: that all single women really want to be married. For example, in a chapter about how to dress as single woman, Gurley Brown explains that women should not allow men's opinions to influence what they choose to wear. This seems progressive enough, but is undone when she says, "Unless he's *the* man, it seems to me it's better not to pander to his idiosyncrasies" (Gurley Brown 176). Thus, at the core of what was considered at the time a radical work lay a hodge-podge of advice that encourages women to live on their own and support themselves, all the while assuming that eventually they will find "the one," which will mark the end of their independence and autonomy. This mindset seems emblematic of the 1960s as a decade marked by hegemonic negotiation, in which social mores were changing but had not gelled.

The following year, in 1963, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* revealed the complexities of the identity of the American housewife. As discussed in the previous chapter, Friedan's work was based on interviews with housewives collected during the late 1950s, as well as an examination of various print media, such as women's magazines, which promoted catering to one's husband and family rather than any desire to pursue work or interests outside the home. By revealing the inner conflict that this stifling of creativity and individual fulfillment produced in women, Friedan's work is often credited as one of the major catalysts of the second-wave feminist movement. The success of both Brown and Friedan's books indicates that there was a burgeoning interest in the state of female identity in the 1960s. This did not go

unnoticed by filmmakers, who explored these issues in narratives that used mental illness as a key thematic element.

### Schizophrenia as a Feminized Disorder

Though their approaches to the subject matter are markedly different, both *Lilith* and *Repulsion* feature women with schizophrenia.<sup>1</sup> This disorder is not explicitly mentioned in *Repulsion*, but as one biography explains, Polanski screened the film prior to its release for a group of psychiatrists who “described [the film’s main character] Carol Ledoux as a perfect textbook case of schizophrenia” (Leaming 64). What is problematic about this is that *Lilith* and *Carol* are polar opposites in terms of what the films imply makes them schizophrenic, but the label is applied to them both. This is more than a case of Hollywood’s tendency to paint with broad brushstrokes. Elaine Showalter states that “although the incidence of classic hysteria in women seemed to decline after the war, the new female malady of schizophrenia soon arose to take its place” (Showalter 18-19). Janet Wirth-Cauchon also describes a shift in diagnosing women with mental illness; she notes that beginning in the 1950s, schizophrenia “was defined more broadly and applied more loosely, particularly for women” (Wirth-Cauchon

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that the depictions of schizophrenia discussed in this chapter have little connection to the actual ways in which the disorder manifests itself. The “basic pattern of a schizophrenia diagnosis” includes the patient’s history of a “withdrawn or otherwise peculiar personality” before the onset of illness, as well as a period of at least one month in which the patient exhibits “frankly psychotic” behavior (Morrison 143). Behavior is determined to be psychotic if at least two of the following symptoms are present for at least one month: delusions, hallucinations, disorganized speech, disorganized behavior, or negative symptoms such as “a reduced range of expression of emotion” or the “loss of the will to do things” (Morrison 137-139). What is conspicuously absent from this basic outline of a schizophrenia diagnosis is any behavior or criteria connected to the patient’s gender or sexuality. This complicates the depictions of schizophrenia offered by *Lilith* and *Repulsion*, as both films link the main characters’ illness to their femininity and sexuality in ways that emphasize only those elements of the disorder that the layperson might find most bizarre, such as delusional behavior or hallucinations.



119). Thus schizophrenia became the new standard for labeling women as mentally ill, but the tendency to base such diagnoses on women either totally embracing the Victorian ideal of femininity (by being sexually frigid) or rejecting it (by being sexually aggressive) was still in place.

What is at stake in this definition of female madness is that once again, the specific behaviors and symptoms are almost inconsequential; these women are labeled as mentally ill because of their supposed over or under-indulgence in their feminine role. Thus, through the inappropriate or even indiscriminate diagnosing of women, schizophrenia is argued to have become a feminized illness. What is interesting to note is that the popularity of schizophrenia as a diagnosis in women waned as the diagnostic categories related to schizophrenia shifted and became more clearly defined over the years. Furthermore, these changes suggest that in fact men might be more predisposed to this specific disorder. As Lerman notes, by the 1980s, "the result of a narrower schizophrenia category in the United States [was] a greater number of diagnoses of it in males than females" (Lerman 44).

In addition to the adoption by both cinema and the mental health field of schizophrenia as the new female hysteria, two distinct trends characterize films about women and mental illness in the 1960s. The first is that of the asylum as a setting for romantic love. The other characterizes the woman's breakdown as something supernatural, and even horrific, that happens outside of the psychiatric discourse of the films discussed thus far. *Lilith* and *Repulsion* stand as respective examples of these trends. Though the horrific elements are not as explicit as those to be discussed in

*Repulsion*, *Lilith* in some ways bridges the gap between these two cinematic trends, as the central therapeutic relationship in the film is ruinous rather than healing.

### *Lilith*

It is important to understand the way the asylum exists in the world of *Lilith*. Director Robert Rossen accompanied Jean Seberg when she visited mental hospitals to research her role as Lilith. Of the visits, Rossen said, "What impressed me was that most of the patients were kids—boys and girls in their teens and early twenties. This in itself is a comment" (Gardner 73). Poplar Lodge, where the majority of the film's narrative takes place, reflects a trend in mental health practice that emerged in the 1960s. Many psychiatric hospitals became, in effect, havens for the disturbed upper class youth of America. Susannah Kaysen's memoir, *Girl, Interrupted*, chronicles her experience at such an institution. In his discussion of Kaysen's memoir and the 1999 film adaptation, Robert Stone notes that the 1960s was a time when "the psychiatric hospital was essentially a luxurious rest home" (Stone 48). This change is not surprising given the surge of young patients from wealthy families; mental illness was no longer something that could be associated only with poor or socially disadvantaged individuals, but it was something to be dealt with away from the prying and judgmental eyes of high society.

As Stone explains, it was during the 1960s that "America's safety net of family values gave way and the adolescent passage from child to adult became a minefield of sex, drugs, and rebellious self-destruction" (Stone 48). Young adults from wealthy

backgrounds seemed less capable of figuring out where they fit into the changing cultural landscape because “the wealth, privilege, and status of their parents produced a kind of shame that pushed adolescent rebelliousness to its furthest extremes” (Stone 48). That is, at a time when society was becoming more permissive and open to explorations of identity outside the norm, rebellion itself became a more difficult objective, especially for those who seemed to have little to rebel against.

Another important aspect of this new incarnation of the psychiatric hospital is what Stone refers to as “milieu therapy.” He explains that this concept was “the shibboleth of psychiatry in the 1960s; it had replaced custodial care. What we failed to appreciate sufficiently was this: even with all the resources and staff of our hospital, the locked doors, and the loss of privacy, the real milieu would be the other disturbed patients, and that might or might not be therapeutic” (Stone 49). Absent is the fatherly psychiatrist who cured Lizzie and Eve; the asylum films of the 1960s are more interested in how the patients interact with each other. Important precursors to *Lilith* include *Splendor in the Grass* (1961) and *David and Lisa* (1962); these were films in which interactions between patients in the psychiatric hospital resulted in curative romantic relationships.

*Splendor in the Grass* stars Natalie Wood as Deanie, a young woman from a poor family living in Depression-Era Kansas, who suffers a nervous breakdown when her boyfriend ends their relationship and leaves for college. Contributing to Deanie’s breakdown is her guilt, compounded by lectures from her repressive mother, over her emerging sexuality and desire for a sexual relationship with Bud. Deanie’s parents

eventually send her to an institution, which her father sees as a luxury they cannot really afford. While we do not see the actual development of their relationship in the institution, Deanie falls in love with and becomes engaged to another patient, Johnnie. She tells her doctor that she feels differently for this young man than she did for Bud, but that she does in fact love him.

When Deanie goes to visit Bud after leaving the institution, she wears a white dress and strand of pearls, which act as a visual representation of her being the “good girl” with whom Bud was in love but could not have sexually. He is covered in sweat and dirt from working on the farm where he is eking out a living for himself, his child and pregnant wife. One cannot help but think that if the two touch, he will soil her. This is the very notion Deanie’s mother had about Bud. Although Deanie exhibits a certain strength as she encounters Bud’s new life, she has not truly learned to deal with her sexuality, but merely to repress it. She will enter into her marriage to Johnnie the pure woman she is expected to be. Thus *Splendor in the Grass* ultimately fails to explore Deanie’s recovery process in any meaningful way, but rather relies on her engagement to a fellow patient to act as the basis for her emotional well-being and fulfillment.

*David and Lisa* tells the story of a young man afraid of being touched and a young woman locked in her own world by schizophrenia. David arrives at the mental institution a cold and untrusting person; it is clear that his wealthy family brings him to the institution not out of actual compassion or concern for his disorder, but because his anti-social behavior is embarrassing and is seen as something that needs to be fixed.

David is cold to the other patients and standoffish with his doctor; he does, however, eventually befriend Lisa, who speaks only in rhyme and is therefore unable to communicate meaningfully with others. David exhibits growth throughout the course of the film, and while their relationship is meant to be read as a positive development for both characters, the film ends with the implication that Lisa's stability is the result of her relationship with David rather than her having overcome her mental illness through therapy. Though mental institutions figure prominently in *David and Lisa* and *Splendor in the Grass*, there is a sense in which these films are actually less concerned with clinical explanations of mental illness (as in *The Three Faces of Eve* or *Lizzie*), than with romanticizing the idea of mental illness. That is, they suggest that the disorders of the female characters can be negated by entering into romantic relationships.

While the aforementioned films provide their disturbed leading ladies with a romantic "happy ending," *Lilith* is decidedly more pessimistic. The film is based on J.R. Salamanca's novel, published in 1961. That Salamanca chose to name his female mental patient Lilith is significant. As one book review explains, Lilith is a historical figure known as either "an Assyrian demon, vampire and 'night monster'; or a Jewish demon of Babylonian origin, an embodiment of female evil, best known for a legend that she was Adam's first wife" (Prescott 29). *Lilith* depicts the title character living up to her malevolent namesake; from a narrative standpoint, both the novel and the film are the story of Warren Beatty's character Vincent, who is seduced by the fantastic world of the madwoman.

The film's explanation of Lilith's madness is symbolic rather than clinical. Despite the presence of doctors and therapists in the institution, the film does not seek to understand the cause of Lilith's disorder, or show any attempt to cure her through therapy or medication. Rather, the film is interested in demonstrating how destructive Lilith is. A key motif used to achieve this goal is that of nature and Lilith's connection to it. The film opens with Vincent assimilating to his new job as an occupational therapist at Poplar Lodge and meeting other patients. The first two shots of Lilith do not even show her face; we are shown the back of her head as she looks out of her window, which is covered with a type of fencing, which indicates that she is, in a sense, a caged animal. Several characters in these opening scenes comment about the beautiful weather. It is not until the group goes on a picnic that Lilith emerges from her room. As the group stands on a bridge overlooking the river, Lilith spits over the side of the bridge and begins laughing hysterically, with the rest of the group joining in. It is at this point that the beautiful weather is interrupted by a thunderstorm. In this way, the film connects Lilith to the forces of nature. As Vincent, Lilith, and Peter Fonda's character Stephen wait out the storm together, she uses wet grass to create a painting. Stephen expresses his interest in this, and she dares him to eat a leaf. He refuses but she does. She ignores Vincent's warnings that the plant might be poisonous, thus asserting her belief that she is impervious to the dangers of nature.

In another scene, one of the doctors explains schizophrenia during a staff meeting. He explains that the disorder has been induced in "dogs, spiders, even men." He shows slides of webs spun by "normal" spiders and those spun by spiders with

schizophrenia, saying, "the mad ones spin out fantastic, asymmetrical, rather nightmarish designs." The film then cuts to Lilith's room, where we see paintings that are reminiscent of the spider webs. Starting on the paintings, the camera pans around the room, and Lilith enters the frame, staring directly into the lens. The camera continues panning and ends on strange words written on the wall, a language created by Lilith. She is thus figured as the spider and her room the nightmarish web of her own design, symbolized by her paintings and mysterious language. This scene visually establishes an important theme that runs through the film: she is predator and Vincent is her prey.

The predator/prey relationship is sexualized in various ways. After the picnic, Lilith tells Vincent she thinks Stephen is a fool. He asks her, "If he's a fool, why do you lead him on like that?" "Because I'm mad!" she replies. For Lilith, her insanity is what allows her to be the aggressor and exert power over men. In a conversation with Lilith's doctor, Vincent says "I don't think Lilith is unhappy. Most of the patients are. She has a kind of..." "Rapture?" suggests the doctor. The doctor explains, "In Shakespeare's time it often meant madness, as ecstasy and innocence did." This conversation makes two important points about Lilith's disorder. First, it strengthens the notion that madness is an inherent part of her female identity; she not only accepts it, she relishes it. Second, the doctor's definition of rapture underscores the connection of madness in women with extremes in sexual behavior: sexual passivity to the point of frigidity and the aggressive seeking and enjoyment of sexual pleasure.

Lilith's sexual aggression is evident in her pursuit of Vincent and her toying with Stephen. However, the film suggests that there are even darker sides to Lilith's sexuality. Vincent gets permission to take Lilith to a jousting tournament at a local fair. While there, they encounter two young boys selling watermelon. Lilith asks them for a piece of ice from their bucket. As she eats it, she says that it is like a diamond; one of the boys says that if it were, she would be cut up and bleeding inside. "Want to see my blood?" she asks. "Touch my lips." One of the boys does so as Lilith suggestively parts her lips. She brushes his hair out of his face, telling him that his blood is "blue, hot and blue." As payment for the ice, she asks if she should give him a kiss. "Yes ma'am," he replies and the two kiss on the lips. Lilith then grabs the boy close to her and whispers something in his ear that the audience does not hear. A close-up of his face reveals that he is disturbed by or at least uncomfortable with whatever it is that she says to him. An underlying sexual tension runs through this scene, made more disturbing by the fact that Lilith is dealing with children.

Later in the film, Vincent remembers this encounter via flashback when Lilith meets another young boy when they are shopping. As he thinks back to her interaction with the boys at the fair, Vincent quickly pulls Lilith away from the boy on the street and rushes her into a store. Once again, Lilith lives up to her namesake as a sexual aggressor. What the film does in these scenes is blend the mythic Lilith's reputation as a "child slayer" and sexual predator of men ("Lilith" 554) in such a way that the Lilith of Rossen's film is depicted as a woman whose sexuality is without boundaries and therefore dangerous.



After their day at the jousting tournament, Lilith and Vincent begin having a sexual relationship. Their scenes of intimacy are superimposed with images of water—sometimes calm, sometimes rushing rapids. Water is another motif repeated throughout the film that serves as a reminder that Lilith possesses both a calm, seductive sensuality and an uncontrollable and even destructive sexual desire. In a conversation in her room at Poplar Lodge, Lilith asks Vincent, “Do you think loving me is sinful? That I have a talent for love? If my talent for love were greater than you think, would you stop loving me?” The implications of this last statement foreshadow yet another facet of Lilith’s sexual identity that the film will connect with her mental illness.

Lilith casually implies that she might reveal to the staff that she and Vincent are having a sexual relationship should he decide to put an end to it. Both know that this would cause far more trouble for Vincent than her, and he leans in, wondering if she is serious. She says, with an air of mock reassurance, “I love *you*, Vincent” emphasizing the notion that as long as he is loyal to her, she will keep quiet. The film dissolves from her uttering these words to her walking hand in hand with Yvonne, another patient. Both know that Vincent is following them. The camera follows them as they walk toward a barn, and then cuts to a shot of an image of the two women holding hands reflected in the water. From this shot, there is a cut to Vincent throwing open the barn door, where Lilith is lying on a pile of hay while Yvonne is adjusting her clothing. Understanding that they have had a sexual encounter, Vincent throws Yvonne out of the barn, slams the door shut and calls Lilith a “dirty bitch.” She calmly replies, “If you should discover your god loved others as much as he loved you, would you hate him for

it? I show my love for all of you and you despise me." Vincent's response to this is to grab her and kiss her; this act of sexual aggression on Vincent's part can be read as an attempt to assert his control over Lilith because he feels powerless in their relationship.

That the film uses a lesbian affair as a further signifier of Lilith's mental illness is not surprising. In discussing the rise of the diagnosis of "hypersexual female" in the 1920s, Elizabeth Lunbeck asserts that the label had less to do with any actual occurrence of mental disorder in the women who were diagnosed as such than with changes in the social fabric that led to "the emergence of the independent, sexually assertive woman in American society at the turn of the century" (Lunbeck 514). This situation is paralleled in the 1960s. Having emerged from the domestic space to work and live on their own, women were also asserting their independence by expressing their sexuality outside the confines of marriage. As in the 1920s, this sexual expression might mean a rejection of heterosexual relationships in favor of same-sex relationships. According to Lunbeck, psychiatrists in the 1920s "considered failure to engage in heterosexual courtship—whether simple lack of interest or overtly lesbian behavior" to be psychopathic behavior. This made it all too easy to label a woman as mentally ill simply for refusing to let the standards of a heteronormative patriarchal society define her identity.

For Lilith, a sexual encounter with another woman is not merely an expression of her sexuality, but an assertion of her independence. Lilith believes she should have the power to choose who will pleasure her and how; this is reflected in her god analogy when she responds to Vincent's anger at discovering her and Yvonne. The traditional

balance of power is shifted in their relationship; Vincent has become completely entangled in Lilith's web, to borrow a metaphor from the film. The film does make some excuse for Vincent, however. The narrative hints at Vincent's troubled past, including a mentally ill mother and the discovery that his former girlfriend has married since his return from war. He has been weakened by these events and Lilith preys on that weakness in Vincent, as she preyed on the weakness in Stephen.

Their doomed asylum romance reaches a climax when Vincent drives Stephen to suicide at Lilith's request. Lilith confuses seeing the ambulance taking Stephen away with the memory of her brother's death. It is here that the film finally gives some notion, however vague, of what triggered Lilith's mental instability. It is, of course, connected to her own sexuality. She says that her brother "jumped" because he was afraid to love her; she tells Vincent "I wanted him to...I wanted him to love me." Here, "love" can be read as a euphemism for an incestuous relationship; the death of her brother is the fault of Lilith's predatory nature. Later, Vincent discovers Lilith locked in an observation room, in a state of complete catatonia. This, the film suggests, is the punishment for her lack of conscience, her narcissism, and her unbridled sexuality. Vincent, however, can be saved. The film ends with Vincent approaching the doctor at Poplar Lodge, quietly pleading, "Help me."

Avoiding any real clinical explanation of schizophrenia, the film applies the label and we are left to draw our own conclusions about what it is that drives Lilith's disorder. As has been demonstrated, *Lilith* goes to great lengths to connect the title character's mental illness with her sexuality. Uninhibited sexuality on the part of women is

something that has historically been used to label them as mentally ill. Susannah Kaysen discovered that “promiscuous” behavior was one of the criteria used to diagnose her with borderline personality disorder (BPD) when she was hospitalized in the 1960s. While Kaysen “admits to owning nothing but mini-skirts...and enjoying being flirtatious,” she also questions, “How many partners could a young man have before a psychiatrist called him promiscuous?” (Stone 49). This question underscores the problem with our cultural perceptions of mental illness; it is not the behavior itself but whether that behavior conforms to a person’s sexual role as defined by the dominant ideology that matters. Speaking about herself in the third person, Lilith says, “You think they can cure this fire? She wants to leave the mark of her desire on every living creature in the world....She has to do it with her body.” This is key because it shows that Lilith does not see herself as needing to be cured. She does not feel guilty about expressing her sexuality as the “good” personalities of Eve or Lizzie do, and the film punishes her by denying her a happy ending.

Released in 1964, *Lilith* represents, just as *Lizzie* and *The Three Faces of Eve* do, the transition from the old world of the Hollywood studio system to the emerging art cinema movement of the 1960s and 1970s. From a narrative standpoint, the film really belongs to Vincent; it is the story of how he is seduced by the world of Lilith, and the audience is given no real opportunity to identify with her. She could easily be categorized as a femme fatale, reminiscent of the film noir genre of the 1940s. This movement itself broke with traditional Hollywood filmmaking by focusing on the darker side of human nature and allowing women to be active rather than passive figures in

the story. The problem, however, is that the femme fatale was characterized as “home-breaking, avaricious, a sexual predator, and user of men” (Munby 193), which are descriptions easily applied to Lilith. Just as the femme fatale of the 1940s “played a role in the demonization of women’s desires for autonomy” (Munby 193), so does Lilith in this film.

With regard to the film’s portrayal of mental illness and its connection to the “normal,” actress Jean Seberg said in a 1963 article “Lilith does not have a screaming case of insanity. She’s like a camera lens going slightly in and out of focus” (Gardner 73). In the same article, director Robert Rossen said, “In *Lilith* I’m moving in the normal and abnormal worlds. Actually, you can’t tell which is which” (Gardner 73). Rossen portrays this theme of blurred boundaries visually with the use of dissolves and the superimposition of images throughout the film rather than straight cuts. Thus, while the film does not allow for subjectivity where Lilith herself is concerned, there is some experimentation with creating a dreamlike state that mimics the internal experience Vincent has as he becomes seduced by Lilith and the world she creates for herself.

Seberg and Rossen themselves brought a certain art cinema element to the project. Jean Seberg said that Rossen had “a European method of working. He’s flexible” (Gardner 73). The flexibility Seberg mentions comes from Rossen’s refusal to stick to the script when shooting—which was usually done on location, rather than in a studio—so that he could “make changes as a film progresses or as he gets to know the personalities of his actors” (Gardner 73). Seberg’s knowledge of Rossen’s “European

method" came firsthand from her previous acting experience. Before making *Lilith*, Seberg "attracted a European cult playing perverse ingénues in New Wave films" (Gardner 73), such as Jean-Luc Godard's *A bout de souffle* (1960). The notion of personal filmmaking extended beyond the director's creative control in the case of *Lilith*. Jean Seberg had at various times in her life "undergone psychiatric treatment for serious depressions" (Goodman 44) and died in September of 1979 after taking an overdose of barbiturates. Thus her statement about *Lilith* not having a "screaming case of insanity" (Gardner 73) seems in retrospect to be a comment on the affinity she felt with the character.

### *Repulsion*

The horrific nature of female madness is comparatively subtle in *Lilith*, but Roman Polanski brought it to the forefront in his 1965 film *Repulsion*. Whereas *The Three Faces of Eve*, *Lizzie*, and *Lilith* ultimately declare a sexually expressive woman an unfit and even dangerous personality, *Repulsion* marks a distinct shift, as it follows the story of a young virgin whose *fear* of men and sex is what slowly drives her mad. *Repulsion* was made in London, completely outside of the changing Hollywood system. It may, therefore, seem an odd choice to include in this discussion. However, it is precisely because it is a foreign film that *Repulsion* fits into the paradigm of post-classical Hollywood. As Tino Balio explains, "the number of theatres that regularly played art films (defined as foreign-language films and English-language films produced abroad without American financing) increased from around 100 in 1950 to close to 700

by the 1960s" (Balio 63). This was a period of time in which foreign filmmakers "enriched American film culture" (Balio 63) because they were able to secure distribution deals with Hollywood executives who wanted to capitalize on the crumbling Production Code by offering material that would have been censored in decades past. Polanski was one such auteur whose provocative work was able to find an American audience and this is why *Repulsion* is included in this discussion.

Writing about the social environment of the 1960s, David Skal explains, "As in the twenties, sexual abstinence was distinctly unfashionable; the dangers of chastity were pointedly dramatized in Roman Polanski's horror-sex film *Repulsion*, with an advertising campaign promising to reveal the 'nightmare world of a virgin's dreams.'" (Skal 288). As Skal points out, Polanski's film is commonly labeled a horror film. This is due mainly to the way in which Polanski's foreign and art cinema aesthetic allow for external, physical depictions of Carol's experience of both her reality and her fantasies. While *Repulsion* is a far more subjective film, allowing us an inside look at what the madwoman experiences, it does not create a better understanding of this affliction because her insanity is still connected to her sexuality. However, in this case it is her repression rather than expression that is to blame. Furthermore, this shift from drama to horror or thriller creates an added dimension of women as something to be feared.

Several films from the 1960s link repressed female sexuality to the fantastic or the supernatural. Ingmar Bergman's *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961) follows the story of Karin, a young woman with schizophrenia vacationing with her family after being released from the hospital; she does not want to be with her husband sexually but the

film does imply that she is interested in her younger brother who is just beginning to experience his own sexual awakening and is therefore a less threatening male figure. The disintegration of Karin's mental health is also portrayed in the fantasy she has about a spider she believes is god. In *The Haunting* (1963), a woman's breakdown comes about during a stay at a haunted house. Eleanor is a woman dissatisfied with her state in life; after caring for her dying mother, she took up residence in the living room of her sister and brother-in-law. She sees the invitation to the haunted house as a way to finally claim her independence. Eleanor's mental state is connected to the supernatural force in the house, which grows stronger as she tries but fails to control the feelings she has towards the married doctor leading the investigation of the haunting. *Juliet of the Spirits* (1965) features a timid housewife with a cheating husband. The film blurs the line between reality and fantasy as Juliet contemplates what life might be like if she followed the advice of her sexually vivacious neighbor and worried about seeking her own satisfaction.

Though Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) is about a man, it bears mentioning as an influence on *Repulsion*. Norman Bates' affliction is feminized when a psychiatrist explains at the end of the film that Norman assumed the personality of his disturbed mother. Although Norman physically does the killing in the film, the psychiatrist explains that during the murders, the "mother half" of Norman's personality took over completely as a result of jealousy when Norman become sexually aroused by another woman. Thus the female personality that attempted to repress sexual desire is to blame for the mayhem Norman created. In their praise of Polanski's film, critics drew



parallels between *Repulsion* and *Psycho* because of the ways in which the audience is subjectively positioned to identify with the mentally ill character for the majority of the film. *Repulsion* was described as a "classic chiller of the *Psycho* school" ("A Maiden" 115) and one headline went so far as to call *Repulsion* "the *Psycho* of '65" (Crowther, "Repulsion" 7).

*Repulsion* lacks the clinical explanations of mental illness found in *The Three Faces of Eve*, *Lizzie*, or even *Lilith*, limited as it is. Without explicitly mentioning any specific disorder, Polanski is able to communicate visually the mental breakdown Carol experiences. Polanski said in an interview that he was "only interested in the consistency of the girl's behavior, the *how* not the *why*, not the motivation" (Thompson X9). Where *The Three Faces of Eve* and *Lizzie* provide clear explanations for their heroine's mental illness, we can only hypothesize about what has led to Carol's mental deterioration. Once again, however, family dynamics seem a likely candidate. Carol has an unusually strong attachment to her sister, Helen, and is clearly jealous of the attention she lavishes on her boyfriend. She tries to rid the apartment of the boyfriend's presence by throwing away his toiletries, and she pleads with Helen not to leave her to go away with him. Carol is thus figured in this Oedipal scenario as a child who has yet to break away from the mother figure represented by her sister.

Polanski brings the viewer's attention to a family photograph in which Carol stands removed from a man and woman who are smiling, presumably her parents. This photo serves as the final shot for the film, as the camera pushes in until young Carol's expression fills the entire frame; her eyes are fixed on her father in an intense

gaze that suggests his presence causes anxiety for Carol. Ending the film this way implicates the unknown events of Carol's childhood in causing her simultaneous fascination with and fear of the opposite sex.

These explanations for Carol's breakdown are speculative, at best. Without a clear explanation, the audience is left to assume that Carol's sexual repression is the real problem, and the film offers plenty of evidence to support this. *Repulsion* abounds with womb-related imagery and symbolism. Carol's descent into madness begins when her sexually active sister leaves her alone in their apartment while she goes away with her boyfriend. This apartment is at first Carol's sanctuary, representative of traditional views of the home as the woman's domain. Rather than sex being part of some domestic obligation, Polanski, self-described as "sexually obsessed" (Fleming and Manvell 291), wants Carol to act like a liberated woman of the 1960s. Yet in no way does *Repulsion* feel like a progressive film. Carol is timid and withdrawn throughout the entire film; she is not mute but might as well be. Polanski also creates a clear delineation between the male and female worlds. This division is signified by the representations of the bar where the men meet to boast about their conquests, the convent near Carol's apartment, and most obviously the beauty salon where Carol works. This is an environment devoted completely to women, but unlike the convent and the presence of the nuns, it is meant to remind us that it is the job of women to be sexually attractive and desirable. In separating men's space and women's space in these ways, Polanski's films seems to demonstrate that the two are unable to come together in any sort of significant, non-sexual way.

And so Carol withdraws; as she spends more and more time in the symbolic womb space of her apartment, she begins to imagine the walls cracking and deteriorating. It is at this point in the film that reality and fantasy begin to blur together. She has a nightmare in which a man appears from behind a chest of drawers and rapes her, but real men also invade her space. This invasion begins with her sister's boyfriend, whose presence disturbs Carol. In a more physical display of the invasion of the apartment, a relentless suitor forces his way in through the locked door and Carol bludgeons him. She barricades the door, but she cannot protect herself from her fantasies. She experiences another rape nightmare and it becomes evident that the space of her apartment is no longer a haven from the world of men. The walls continue to deteriorate in her mind and disembodied arms reach out from the walls to grab and grope her. Once again, a man from Carol's real life enters the space. The landlord pushes his way through her barricaded door, attempts to rape her and is also killed. Although this murder seems justified, it is clear that Carol's repressed sexuality has made her a danger to men.

Carol's repression and frigidity are symbolized by the imagined deterioration of the walls around her, and even more pointedly so by a skinned, uncooked rabbit she leaves out in the apartment; the rotting animal is repeatedly used as a transitional shot and with the obvious cultural connections between rabbits, fertility, and sex, we have to read this as the deterioration of Carol's sexuality as a result of her refusal to give in to her primal urges. Though Carol's breakdown might seem to indicate schizophrenia, it is important to note that the implication of her sexual repression as the cause is also

connected to hysteria, the characteristics of which seem to be the root of many disorders that have been associated with women. As Lerman explains “frigidity was considered to be one of the primary symptoms of hysteria” and “in the late 1960s women were still labeled as frigid rather than nonorgasmic or preorgasmic” (Lerman 63). Lerman argues that “the latter terms demonstrate the strong possibility of change” (Lerman 63) meaning that women are capable of overcoming whatever prevents them from expressing and enjoying their sexuality.

In *Repulsion*, however, Carol's frigidity is figured as something inherent and insurmountable, as she rejects men to preserve her virginity. According to Chesler, “Virginity, one form of mind-body splitting, is the price that women are made to pay in order to keep whatever other ‘fearful’ powers they have: childbearing, wisdom, hunting prowess, maternal compassion. Of course, de-virginization via heterosexual rape is as maddening a split in female mind-body continuity” (Chesler 64). This brings us to one of the most interesting aspects of the film: the rape nightmares—or are they fantasies? Haskell asks “To what extent, if any, does Polanski ‘expose’ (that is, criticize) the plight of woman as victim, and to what extent capitalize, in fetishistic fashion, on the eroticism of her passivity?” (Haskell 346-347). These scenes are not about figuring Carol as a victim. They are shot in a fragmented way, revealing only parts of the body and never the whole woman. She does not scream audibly or fight back, and it is difficult to determine whether she is experiencing pleasure or fear. However, whether these rape scenes are a reflection of Carol's fantasies or her fears, the fact remains that because these sexual experiences are violent rather than nurturing they serve only to further the

deterioration of her mental state. Thus we are presented with a woman whose simultaneous obsession and disgust with sexuality destroys her psyche.

Through the fractured, fragmented depiction of Carol's fantasy nightmares and their blurring with an increasingly violent reality, Polanski creates a film in which the repressed woman is turned into a monster; her mental instability produces fear, not sympathy, no matter how he tries to offer a subjective position for the audience to experience what Carol goes through. This film is about men literally forcing their way into her space because she refuses to let them in. The men might get punished, but it is Carol who suffers. In fact, she meets with a fate similar to that of Lilith, completely broken down in a state of catatonia by the end of the film. What Lilith and Carol also have in common is their withdrawal into their own worlds in order to escape the oppression of a patriarchal structure that seeks to define how they should behave. This creation of an inner alternate reality is associated with schizophrenia, which is why we can discuss the disorder in *Repulsion* without it being explicitly mentioned in the film. What is interesting is the way in which the diagnosis of schizophrenia is applied to two radically different sets of female behavior. In examining *Lilith* and *Repulsion*, we see a manifestation of the tendency to place women in what Joan Busfield has called a "Catch 22" (Busfield 101) where mental illness is concerned, especially in the 1960s when social expectations regarding female behavior were changing. If women go beyond their role as passive sex object to seek their own fulfillment and gratification, then they are pathologized as a hypersexual female; if they refuse to enter into heterosexual relationships, they are labeled as frigid and hysterical.

## CHAPTER 4

### BLURRED SOCIAL BOUNDARIES AND FEMALE IDENTITY IN THE WOMEN'S FILMS OF ROBERT ALTMAN

In 1970, director Robert Altman won critical and popular acclaim with his film *MASH*, and went on to establish a filmmaking style in which “plot was subordinated to characterization and atmosphere” (O'Brien 10). One of the hallmarks of Altman's films is his use of a large cast which allowed him to layer his narratives with multiple storylines: *MASH* (1970), *Nashville* (1975), and more recent films such as *Gosford Park* (2001) and *A Prairie Home Companion* (2006) are all examples of this style. However, in the 1970s, when his film career was still in its early stages, Altman made two films that stand out remarkably from the rest of his body of work. This director who became known for capturing the essence of American culture and society explored female identity in a much more intimate way in *Images* (1972) and *3 Women* (1975). So far, the films discussed in this project have tried to link mental illness with some inherent aspect of female identity. While it is possible to see that these women have “split” due to the shifting demands of patriarchy regarding feminine behavior and sexuality, the films themselves do not really critique this, but rather place the blame on inappropriate female behavior, be it the patient's or her mother's. Altman's films differ in that they do attempt to portray the ways in which the psyches of the female characters have been fractured by the patriarchal structure. This does not mean, however, that the specter of hysteria and inherent female madness is nonexistent in *Images* and *3 Women*.

In the 1950s and 1960s, it was easier to clearly define what type of female behavior was “inappropriate” and therefore capable of being labeled with whatever

diagnosis was currently in vogue. By the 1970s, such rubrics no longer existed because rebellion against the dominant ideology was characteristic of the decade. It becomes difficult, therefore, to discuss *Images* and *3 Women* in terms of a specific psychiatric discourse such as multiple personality disorder (MPD) or schizophrenia as in the previous chapters. This chapter will demonstrate that while Altman's films may seem different on the surface, they ultimately attempt to create a new illness out of the women's liberation movement, perpetuating the notion that female autonomy is something to be feared.

#### Female Identity in "The Me Decade"

"Let's talk about me." In 1976, writer Tom Wolfe proclaimed this request to be the legacy of the 1970s, which he called "the me decade" (Wolfe 132). Such a narcissistic statement might first seem to be incongruous with a decade remembered as a time of great social change and liberation. Overturning the dominant social structure does, after all, require a communal effort. However, the communities that were demanding these changes were formed precisely because individuals were claiming identities that were deeply rooted in the personal. Feminists, gay activists, and people of color were all striving either to stake claim to their place within patriarchal ideology or to overturn it completely, and needed to join their respective efforts to do so. Thus the 1970s was a decade in which individual identity—and turning inward to explore that identity—became all-important.

Wolfe ultimately declares this trend a “luxury, enjoyed by so many millions of middling folk” (Wolfe 165) and his essay questions the validity of focusing on the self. With regard to women, he says, “one’s very existence as a woman—as Me—becomes something all the world analyzes, agonizes over, draws cosmic conclusions from, or in any event, takes seriously” (Wolfe 153). For Wolfe, the women’s movement is not about social change, but rather an excuse for women to be self-centered. His rather contemptuous view of the individual search for identity during the socially turbulent 1970s seems indicative of the ways in which the dominant ideology of white, heterosexual patriarchy attempts to devalue any movement that threatens its authority.

For women, the exploration of self was manifested in the women’s movement, which was by the 1970s a reality of the culture, as “literally hundreds of local women’s groups had taken root across the country” (D’Emilio and Freedman 311). It is important to recognize, however, that there was not always agreement on *how* to better the position of women in society. Feminism is a term that encompasses a broad range of ideological positions when it comes to female identity and the place of women in the patriarchal structure. As the women’s liberation movement grew from theory in the 1960s to actuality in the 1970s, feminists found themselves divided over issues such as race, class, and sexuality. As a result, the idea of a cohesive women’s movement morphed into women’s movements characterized by the claiming of not only identity as woman, but also identity as African American, lesbian, etc.

Therefore, to say that Altman’s films are about feminism is misleading. Rather, they seem to be a reaction to cultural feminism, which divorced itself from the radical



politics that argued for “the obliteration of all socially determined gender roles” (Fudge 64). Cultural feminism was instead based on “the belief that women will be freed via an alternate women’s culture” (Brooke qtd in Ringelheim 753). Linda Alcoff defines this category of feminism as an “ideology of a female nature or female essence reappropriated by feminists themselves in an effort to revalidate undervalued female attributes” (Alcoff 408). That is, some women felt that the way to claim power was not through overthrowing patriarchy, but through recognizing inherent gender differences and celebrating the feminine.

Because “cultural feminism developed not simply as a tactic for battling the antiwoman line in a sexist world, but as a way to detour around it without violent revolution” (Ringelheim 754), it was more easily mainstreamed and its aims to some extent softened. This leaves cultural feminism open to critique by more radical forms of feminism because cultural feminism allows the patriarchal structure to continue to exist. However, whether defined by patriarchy or celebrated by women seeking an alternative ideology, difference leaves open the possibility for othering. As will be shown in the analysis of the films in this chapter, any claiming of autonomy by women, even if not seen as truly radical by comparison, remains threatening.

### Robert Altman and the New Hollywood

The emerging independent spirit of filmmaking discussed in the previous chapter was in full swing by the 1970s. For all of the artistic and stylistic innovation of this period, though, there is some question as to how “new” the new Hollywood really was.

Robert Ray argues that the cinema of the 1970s was “superficially radical” but “internally conservative” (Ray 296) in part because audiences had “simultaneous impulses toward irony and nostalgia” (Ray 267). This makes sense if we think about the 1970s as a time when social upheaval with regard to boundaries of individuality, politics, and sexuality left people wanting some sense of security. Thus films such as *The Godfather* (1972) or *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) were popular because they took the conventions of familiar genres such as the gangster film and the western and depicted them in what seemed like a different way. Ray offers Robert Altman as an example of a filmmaker who “worked almost exclusively within standard genres whose conventions he discredited”; for example, *MASH* is a war movie, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* is a western, and *3 Women* is a soap opera (Ray 267).

Some of the ways in which these films of the new Hollywood seem different include their “open and lyrical mode of story telling; a persistent perception of social identity as fragile, fractured, and fragmentary; and a critical reflexivity about the nature of narrative communication itself” (Self viii). Films such as *Images* and *3 Women* are decidedly anti-narrative, focusing instead on style, atmosphere, and characterization. American filmmakers utilizing these techniques in the 1970s were capitalizing on the audience’s fascination with European art-cinema films that in the 1960s had “worked their way to the top of the box-office lists” (Ray 269). In retrospect, however, films of this period seem as ideologically conservative as those from classical Hollywood. For example, *The Godfather* turns the gangster film into a male melodrama in which women do not do much more than play the role of passive love interests. *MASH* is an

anti-war war movie, but the female nurses are portrayed only as objects of ridicule and sexual lust.

This is not to say that the new Hollywood ignored the women's movement completely. In her 1977 article "Hollywood Flirts with the New Woman," Jane Wilson discusses Hollywood's attempt to offer new representations of women. Gareth Wiggan, who in 1977 was the vice president of production at 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, said that "there is now a marked preference for movies about relationships between people. And if you want to do movies about relationships between people, you can't just have men. Women are people too." (Wilson 1). Thus Hollywood executives embarked on a number of projects intended to reach a female audience unwilling to accept old stereotypes. Wilson questions the extent to which these stereotypes are actually subverted and she discusses Altman's *3 Women* as an example of a film whose success at doing so is questionable.

If Altman is a director tackling the issues of the "new woman," we have to ask what is at stake in his exploration of female identity. One article suggests that "his preoccupation with the role of the woman in society...is rooted in his childhood" (Demby 1). Altman, whose father was often away, was raised in a predominantly female household by his mother, sisters, and grandmother. He explains that this environment provided him insight into the ways in which "women have been subjugated in our society" (Demby 17). He goes on to say that as a result of this, "they've had to become manipulative. They have more disguises and facets than men. Those are the kinds of things that interest me..." (Demby 17). While these comments exhibit a certain

sympathy Altman has for the place of women within the dominant patriarchal ideology, the analysis of *Images* and *3 Women* will demonstrate that he ultimately fails to provide any reason for the audience to feel sympathetic toward the female protagonists in either film.

### *Images*

Helene Keyssar describes *Images* as a film about “one woman’s relationships—and especially her sexual relationships—to three men, a young girl, and to herself” (Keyssar 210). Altman toys with the notions of identity and ambiguity in the very casting of the film. Susannah York plays Cathryn and Cathryn Harrison plays a young girl named Susannah. The three men in the film are Hugh (Cathryn’s husband) played by Rene Auberjonois, Rene (her dead lover) played by Marcel Bozzuffi, and Marcel (Susannah’s father and another of Cathryn’s lovers) played by Hugh Millais. This rotation of actual and assumed identities speaks to the interchangeability of the men in Cathryn’s mind. This in turn contributes to the inability of the viewer to know at any given point whether the men are alive, dead, present, or a figment of Cathryn’s imagination. The film’s narrative structure also contributes to the blurring of fantasy and reality. *Images* opens with Cathryn’s voice-over reading a story she is writing about a young girl in a magical kingdom. Throughout the film, we hear various pieces of the story, which is based on an actual children’s book written by Susannah York (Self 154). As with the casting, we see this art-cinema crossing of the boundaries between real-life and fiction.

The voice-over narration of Cathryn's story sometimes coincides with the events of the film. For example, when Cathryn and Hugh are driving through the countryside, we hear her description of the creation of the Land of the Ums, which is "like an emerald." This matches the visual depiction of the landscape through which they are driving. Another instance occurs when Cathryn goes for a walk in a wooded area and we hear about the young heroine's encounters with magical creatures in the forest. In this way, Altman shows how "within the violent disorder of her fears, Cathryn's artist persona retreats from the confusion of realities into the children's tale *In Search of Unicorns*" (Self 154). By narrating the children's story, Cathryn is able to feel a sense of control that she is lacking in her real life.

Altman's comment about women having more "facets" than men is demonstrated in the visual design of the film. One way this is accomplished is through the motif of glass imagery. Cathryn's image is often reflected in mirrors and shots of glass wind chimes are used as transitional devices. The visual style of the film externalizes Cathryn's internal experience of fragmentation in other ways as well. For example, when Cathryn and her husband arrive in the country, Cathryn stands on a cliff that overlooks their house and sees herself driving up to the house. The Cathryn by the house looks up to see a figure standing on the cliff. From this point forward, the viewer can never be sure of what is real and what Cathryn is hallucinating. Throughout the film, "the literal image of herself terrifies Cathryn" (Self 155). One night Cathryn wakes up and when she looks in the bed, rather than seeing her husband, she sees herself,

completely nude with a sly smile on her face. She starts screaming, clearly distraught at being faced with this brazen presentation of her own sexuality.

Cathryn's anxiety about her lack of control is played out through her relationships with the men in the film. When her husband is called back to the city on business, their neighbor Marcel comes to the house. He asks Cathryn, "How did you get rid of him?" She replies, "I just thought him away like I thought you here." As Marcel begins to undress, Cathryn stabs him and leaves his body on the floor. Her calm demeanor afterward suggests that Cathryn realizes this was not a real event but a fantasy she created in an attempt to feel the same sense of power she has as the narrator of her children's story. What this scene also demonstrates, however, is the extent to which Cathryn has become incapable of dealing with reality and must retreat into a world of fantasy.

There is another key scene in which her dead lover, Rene, appears to her and they have a conversation that might help explain Cathryn's instability and anxiety in terms of her sexuality and femininity. Rene and Cathryn debate whether or not she was ever actually pregnant. She insists that she was and he tells her that she is incapable of getting pregnant. She replies that there is nothing wrong with her and he agrees saying, "No, I don't suppose there is anything wrong with you...physically." Her reply is strange: "You're trying to say I don't want children aren't you?" Here, the film underscores the connection between motherhood and a woman's mental state. Rene says that there is nothing wrong with Cathryn physically, implying that there is in fact something wrong with her mentally. Cathryn immediately associates his implication

with her status as a childless woman, which evokes the ancient Greek notion that mental illness in women stems from their failure to fulfill their biological destiny through childbearing. Cathryn goes on, talking to herself but directing it at Rene, "All I ever wanted from you was a baby." In the same breath, she says of her husband, "I wanted a baby for you, for me, for our marriage. I am not a cheat, I did not cheat." This scene is indicative of Cathryn's guilt over breaking one social code by taking a lover and cheating on her husband, in order to uphold another—that of creating a family unit.

In addition to seeing physical manifestations of her adult self, Cathryn is forced to confront her identity as child through the character of Susannah. Near the end of the film, Susannah asks Cathryn if she looked like her when she was younger. Cathryn tells her that she did and asks why Susannah wants to know. Susannah replies, "Because I think, when I grow up, I'm going to be exactly like you." This disturbs Cathryn and she quickly leaves the room. Later, as Cathryn drives Susannah home, Susannah asks Cathryn what she would do when she was alone as a child. Cathryn replies, "I used to go for walks, tell myself stories, play in the woods." Cathryn then asks Susannah what she would do if she went away. Susannah replies, "Tell myself stories, play in the woods. I'd make up a friend." In echoing Cathryn's words, Susannah reinforces the idea that the boundaries between her (the child figure) and Cathryn (the mother figure) are nonexistent. This indication that Susannah and Cathryn are one in the same is troubling from a feminist perspective because it suggests that the female identity is fixed in youth and women are incapable of growth.

If, through the matching of voice-over description and visual images onscreen, Cathryn is capable of conjuring up the fantastical images she describes, perhaps we can read the entire film as a manifestation of her overworked imagination. Or perhaps the concept of a cohesive female identity is as elusive or fantastic an idea as the fabled kingdom in her story. Just as her young heroine is searching for fabled unicorns, Cathryn seems to be searching for a way to reconcile her past and present; she has obviously cheated on her husband, but seems determined to make her marriage work. The question is whether or not she can in fact play the role of the wife and be happy in doing so.

With both her voice-over narration and the continuing appearance of another Cathryn throughout the film, *Images* demonstrates that Cathryn is a woman who is literally split or fractured. Cathryn recognizes that this is not the way she should be or wants to be. The film ends with Cathryn having a conversation with her double image, saying that she knows how to get rid of her. She runs this doppelganger off the road so that she falls over a cliff. When she returns to her home in the city, however, her double is there and the final shot of the film shows Cathryn's husband lying at the bottom of the ravine. Is this another paranoid fantasy or has she really killed her husband? Altman's blurring of past and present and reality and fantasy make it nearly impossible to say for sure, as the film's play with the visuals allows for several interpretations of events. What is clear, however, is that this is another case in which the mad woman is a danger to those who know her in a sexual sense.



Ultimately, *Images* is a film about implications rather than explanations for the woman's erratic behavior. In one scene, Marcel describes Cathryn as "schizo" when she first rejects and then reciprocates his sexual advances. Aside from this casual reference to schizophrenia, the film itself does not mention any specific mental illness associated with Cathryn. In a 1977 interview, however, Altman described Cathryn in the following way: "She had nothing to turn to. She's one of those women who don't have to work or aren't allowed to work....She has no children. What's she supposed to do? She turns to painting teacups or children's stories just to occupy herself and she becomes schizophrenic" (Demby 17). While he uses the specific label of schizophrenia, what Altman is indirectly suggesting is that the source of Cathryn's madness is her lack of identity as defined by career or family. Without a role to play, she does not know who she is; therefore, *Images* can be read as an argument that the lack of defined boundaries with regard to gender identity destroys the individual's sense of self. This is a notion that Altman further explores in *3 Women*.

### *3 Women*

Feminist film theorist Kaja Silverman discusses *3 Women* as a film representative of "the moment at which feminism first intersected decisively with alternative cinema, film theory, and psychoanalytic theory" (Silverman 101). Her analysis of the film focuses on the "troubled relationship to language" (Silverman 127) possessed by the three female protagonists and thus offers a framework on which to build a reading of the film in which female autonomy is achieved through a return from the patriarchal

realm of the symbolic to the maternal space of the imaginary. The terms “imaginary” and “symbolic” are derived from Jacques Lacan’s reading of Freud and the Oedipal complex. The symbolic represents the world of language into which children are initiated when they leave the world of the mother, which is characterized by images and the blurring of boundaries. Gabbard and Gabbard explain that “Since language is the only means by which we structure the world, and since the Oedipal crisis is only resolved by assimilating the patriarchal values by which this structuring takes place, the child acquires a controlling awareness of sexual difference along with the Symbolic order” (Gabbard and Gabbard 181). That is, the move from the imaginary to the symbolic is not only about gaining language to enter into society, but also about learning the ways in which the dominant patriarchal structure is based on clearly defined gender roles.

To begin to understand *3 Women*, it is necessary to first discuss each of the three characters and her place in this imaginary/symbolic binary system. Shelley Duvall plays Millie, who without question begins the film in the realm of the symbolic. She talks incessantly, writes in her diary every night, and her favorite game is Scrabble® because it provides her the opportunity to “learn a lot of new words.” What is problematic about Millie is that while she uses language, no one actually listens to her. Millie wants to be defined in terms of her feminine role; she talks constantly about dating men and she defines her identity in terms of “cooking, clothing, and decorating skills in the image of *Ladies’ Home Journal* and *Redbook* and her desire to be noticed sexually and domestically” (Self 69). This desire for domestication is out of vogue in

the 1970s, however, and thus Millie is seen as archaic and insignificant by those around her.

Willie, played by Janice Rule, is the pregnant wife of Millie's landlord Edgar. Willie does not speak for the majority of the film and thus represents the pre-Oedipal space of the imaginary. Willie communicates through her paintings, which are not confined to the canvas, but also take the form of murals that cover walls and the bottom of a swimming pool in her apartment complex. The paintings portray a feminine identity that is "reptilian, repulsive, and defensive before the image of the phallus" (Self 52), which is represented by images of snakes. One of the few times Willie seems content is when she goes to Edgar's shooting range and fires the gun at her own paintings of the snakes. She displays the artwork with bullet holes in the bar she and Edgar run. These images communicate Willie's disgust with the patriarchal order and her desire to destroy it; this is compounded by the fact that she is pregnant. Though Willie does not speak, her cold and withdrawn demeanor indicates that she is not content. Rather than a celebration of her femininity, the pregnancy seems to be a reminder that she has submitted, or been forced to submit, to phallic power.

Sissy Spacek's character, Pinky, moves between the realms of the symbolic and the imaginary. She begins the film acting childlike, immediately forming an attachment to Millie when she begins working at the geriatric rehabilitation facility with her. Pinky is completely captivated by Millie and her lifestyle. She wants to emulate and please Millie, until the night Millie brings Willie's husband, Edgar, home after going on a date with him. Up to this point, Millie represented a mother figure to Pinky, and she is

disturbed by the thought of the maternal ideal being spoiled by the predatory and cheating Edgar. When Pinky begs Millie not to be with Edgar, Millie lashes out and tells Pinky that she wants her to move out. Pinky leaves their apartment and jumps off the balcony into the pool.

Willie is the one who discovers Pinky floating in the water and cries for help (this is one of only three instances in which she speaks). In her concern over Pinky, Willie finally exhibits the maternal instinct one would normally associate with a pregnant woman. When Pinky emerges from her coma, her personality changes and she is, in a sense, "reborn." She has broken from the mother figure she wanted Millie to be, and enters the realm of the symbolic. In doing so, she assumes Millie's identity, which is demonstrated in several ways. For example, she no longer wants to be called Pinky; early in the film she tells Edgar that her real name is Mildred but that she hates it. After coming out of the coma, however, she becomes angry when Millie calls her Pinky and yells, "How many times do I have to tell you my name is Mildred?" Pinky also begins sleeping in the bed on Millie's side of their room and writing in Millie's diary. The most important change involves Pinky's association with men. Her presence is accepted by the men at the apartment complex who rejected Millie, and she also begins spending time with Edgar.

As Pinky enters the world of the symbolic, Millie begins taking on a mother role. She visits Pinky in the hospital and fusses over her when she comes home, which Pinky resents even though earlier in the film she craved this type of attention from Millie. Thus their relationship is representative of the child breaking away from the maternal in

order to enter the realm of the symbolic. Millie does not, however, fully become the mother figure of the imaginary because she carries her own experience of the symbolic. Her simultaneous anger and concern about Pinky's changed personality can be read as her critiquing her own previous behavior. Millie sees that Pinky successfully attracts sexual attention where she failed to do so and she wants to protect Pinky from the consequences of this new sexualized identity.

Pinky's time in the symbolic realm is short-lived. Altman inserts into the film a non-linear dream sequence that contains images filtered through a wave-motion machine. Various shots are superimposed to create a nightmarish vision of amorphous female identity. For example, there is a still image of the twins who work at the rehabilitation facility with Pinky and Millie. Pinky was fascinated by the twins, asking Millie, "Do you think they know which one they are? Maybe they switch back and forth." Thus, for Pinky, the twins represent fluid identity and a lack of boundaries. This is paralleled in her appropriation of Millie's identity following her coma. There is another important set of images that could not logically be remembered by Pinky but nonetheless exist in her dream. A shot of Willie crying at the window outside of Pinky's hospital room is followed by a similar shot of Millie crying. What is significant is that the women's reflections in the window are doubled, so we see two faces. This suggests the fracturing or fragmentation of Millie and Willie's identities.

When she awakens from this dream, Pinky is frightened and seeks comfort from Millie, who lets her get into bed with her. Thus there is a return to the mother/child relationship, only now both are willing participants. The same night, Edgar enters their

apartment and tells them that Willie is in labor. When he says that she is alone, Millie and Pinky immediately leave to help her. Millie delivers the baby while Pinky looks on from outside the house, frightened by the scene before her. The scene is made more disturbing when the baby, a boy, is stillborn. Pinky was supposed to have gone for the doctor and when Millie discovers that she has not done so, she slaps Pinky. Her hands are covered with Willie's blood from the childbirth and the blood is transferred to Pinky when Millie hits her. Thus the three women have been connected in the death of the male infant.

The final scenes of the film, which immediately follow the childbirth scene, take place at the bar owned by Edgar and Willie. Pinky is sitting behind the counter, chewing gum and reading a magazine. A deliveryman tells her that he needs a signature, and she says, "I'll get my mom." Millie comes inside to sign for the order and the deliveryman comments on Edgar's absence, saying, "It sure is horrible what happened to old Edgar." In a cold, monotone voice Millie replies, "Yes, it was a terrible accident, we're all grieved by it." The deliveryman makes a final statement about the irony of Edgar, a trained stuntman who was "so good with guns," dying as the result of an accidental shooting. The implication is that the women have killed Edgar and the film ends as Millie and Pinky join Willie on the porch of the house behind the bar.

Thus the film leaves the three women in a literal and figurative no man's land, where they create "a longed for family relationship (mother, daughter, and granddaughter) that effectively seals off the world that has treated each so ferociously" (Canby D13). On the surface, such an ending might seem empowering. The return of

all three characters to the realm of the maternal can be connected to the notion of cultural feminism. Alcoff explains the belief by cultural feminists that "female energy...needs to be freed from its male parasites, released for creative expression and recharged through bonding with women. In this free space women's 'natural' attributes of love, creativity, and the ability to nurture can thrive" (Alcoff 408-409). *3 Women* certainly ends with the creation of an environment free of the predatory and destructive male force of Edgar as well as his infant son. The problem, however, is that this all-female space seems far from the positive and nurturing ideal conceived of by cultural feminism. In her critique of *3 Women*, Jane Wilson asserts that the film "speaks powerfully of Altman's own apprehension of female nature as it impinges on him in his dreams, of its freaky, dangerous vacancies, its pathetic struggles for fulfillment, and its guilt-inspiring, unwelcome creativities" (Wilson 11). By examining the ending more closely, it is possible to see that Wilson's claim has some validity, no matter what Altman's intentions may have been.

Altman has described the implied death of Edgar as the end of the male species; he says, "The male is gone. The death of the male child was as much a murder as the death of Edgar" (Demby 17). While Altman goes on to explain that he does not see the disappearance of men as detrimental, his extra-textual comments do not negate the fact that in the film, the female realm of Millie, Pinky, and Willie is understood to be dangerous to men. In destroying the patriarchal order symbolized by Edgar, the women ensure their own survival. Their survival, however, depends on the creation of a social structure in which women "control the power and yield to each other's

domination" (Keyssar 242). This assertion of power is most evident in Millie. Though the people around her do not take Millie seriously because of her obsession with domesticity, the film argues that she finds her place in the role of mother. By the end of the film, her tight-fitting, brightly colored clothes used to attract the attention of men have been replaced with a drab, shapeless housedress and she wears her hair pulled back into a bun. No longer easygoing and frivolous, she has become a stoic matriarch. The film ends with her giving orders to Pinky and Willie to come inside the house and help make dinner. The drastic change in Millie's personality is indicative of the fear that a society in which women have all the power will be just as oppressive as patriarchy. Therefore, the film's representation of the feminist ideal of creating self, rather than accepting the definitions offered by dominant ideology, is mitigated by the fact that the three women at the end of the film provoke fear rather than sympathy for their plight against patriarchy.

Even without the label of specific psychiatric disorders to explain the breakdown of the women, both *Images* and *3 Women* manage to create portraits of female identity as unstable. What makes these films frustrating is that both show how patriarchy is an oppressive force, but the women trying to live outside of its boundaries are still figured as dangerous. For example, Cathryn struggles to come to terms with her female identity by confronting the sexual relationships that have threatened her marriage and by extension her identity as a good wife. While the shooting of Rene and the stabbing of Marcel are imagined, Cathryn's break with reality results in the death of her husband, and she is thus left alone with the double image of herself that she finds so



threatening. In *3 Women*, Edgar's sexual relationship with each of the women is the catalyst that ultimately drives them to each other. In killing Edgar, the women cement their bond as a new family, but the final impression of their self-contained social order is that it is oppressive and eerie rather than warm and loving. While these are purposefully ambiguous films that defy concrete explanations, Altman nevertheless leaves the viewer with the impression that the boundaries that define male and female identity, and therefore social roles, are best left in place because the alternative could be more frightening.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

Within the patriarchal structure of Western society, women are relegated to the role of “other.” The historical lack of open discourse about the differences between men and women—and the biological ones such as menstruation and childbirth in particular—has arguably contributed to a certain mystique surrounding femininity. Mystery, however, easily translates into misunderstanding, which becomes reason enough for labeling female behavior as crazy, mad, or insane when it does not fit with the socially prescribed norm. It is not surprising, then, that for so long the realm of psychoanalysis conceptualized hysteria as “the illness of the other, typically of the feminine other” (Bernheimer 1). Janet Wirth-Cauchon notes that in 1975, hysteria, “or histrionic personality disorder, as it was called in the *DSM-III*” was the “third most-discussed category” (Wirth-Cauchon 72). Though the films discussed in this project portray mental illness through the discourse of multiple personality disorder (MPD) or schizophrenia, the tenets of hysteria lay at the heart of these diagnoses because of the ways in which the illnesses are connected to the women’s expression or repression of their sexuality.

From the socially conservative 1950s to the permissive 1970s, this project has argued that insanity in women has been linked to their femininity. More specifically, women have been diagnosed with various disorders as the result of their failing to live up to what society has defined as their “appropriate” roles. Of course, what is appropriate in the 1950s is very different from what is appropriate in the 1970s, and

thus we are left with the problem of women being unable to escape the scrutiny of the patriarchal order. The specific disorders used to label women as mentally ill is often inconsequential and a matter of what was fashionable at the time. Edward Shorter explains that “psychiatric illness tended...to be classified on the basis of symptoms rather than causes” (Shorter 296), which has contributed to the fluidity of diagnostic categories from decade to decade and even country to country.

Though stylistically varied, the films discussed in this study are indicative of the societal tendency to label a woman’s behavior as mad when it does not fit within the patriarchal mold of how a woman should be. The *Three Faces of Eve* and *Lizzie* reflect a postwar anxiety about the role of women in American society. In both films, the complex issues of MPD are overlooked in favor of reducing the woman to a virgin/whore binary system, with a third personality emerging to be shaped by doctors into an appropriate functioning member of society, and more specifically, into a woman who can be a good wife and mother.

*Lilith* also features a woman with a sexually aggressive personality, but the significant difference is that Lilith is unapologetic about her sexuality. The film ultimately punishes her by denying her the happy ending afforded Eve and Lizzie. This unforgiving attitude toward the sexualized female can be seen as the immediate reaction to the emerging women’s liberation movement that manifested in the single woman putting her own needs before the social requirement of marriage. Coming out of this cultural shift that was moving toward an attitude of sexual liberation, *Repulsion*

warns of the danger of the woman repressing or denying her sexuality. Her insanity is depicted as something horrific to be feared.

Cathryn in *Images*, on the other hand, *is* sexually liberal at a time when it is accepted, but her inability to reconcile her enjoyment of her sexual identity with her desire to play the role of wife and mother leads to the fracturing of her psyche. <sup>3</sup> *Women* acts as a cautionary tale with regard to the women's movement that had taken hold by the 1970s. Both films avoid the clinical discussions of specific disorders found in the films from the 1950s and 1960s, and instead argue that if women begin to define their identities themselves, it leaves open the possibility for the violent destruction of the patriarchal order.

In addition to tracing the changes within the psychiatric community and popular culture with regard to common diagnoses for women, this project provides an explanation of Hollywood's own breakdown as the classical studio-system gave rise to more personal filmmaking. One of the results of filmmakers' experimentation with style and narrative was to offer a more subjective view of the mentally ill woman by externalizing her internal turmoil. We might assume that this subjective positioning would allow the audience to sympathize with the woman. However, though the visual representations of fantasy offered by Polanski and Altman might be more interesting to watch, it is ironically Eve and Lizzie who emerge as the most sympathetic characters in this analysis. Though their narratives are more traditional and problematic in the sense that the woman is an object to be studied and fixed by the father-doctor figure, Eve and Lizzie are not the threatening murderesses found in the later films.

Due to the decline of the studio control, the relaxing and eventual disbanding of the censorious Production Code, and the general atmosphere of social change, the era of post-classical Hollywood seems an especially appropriate starting point for a discussion about the ways films frame femininity as insanity. However, the portrayal of mental illness in women has continued into more recent decades. In conjunction with the social backlash to feminism, we began to see depictions of the mad woman as pure evil in films such as *Fatal Attraction* (1987). In terms of genre, crazy women figured most prominently in psychological thrillers, where they served to disrupt the status quo of the normative family. Films such as *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* (1992) and *Single White Female* (1992) deal with disturbed women who attempt to destroy and appropriate the identities of women whose lives they envy. These themes might seem similar to those in Altman's films, but here there is no interest in exploring the mad woman's identity; rather, she is nothing more than a villain to be destroyed.

These films emerged at the beginning of what was termed by former President George Bush and Congress as "the decade of the brain," calling for a focused effort in understanding various neurological and mental disorders. While science may have been interested in developing new drugs to treat mental illness, the social atmosphere was one that resulted in 1992 being termed by a *Time* article as "The Year of the Killer Woman-of the vixen, nanny, or best friend who uses sex as the appetizer for destruction" ("A Few" 58). The villainous women in these films are reflective of the fears of not only men, but also women struggling with striking a balance between

career and family. Thus mental disorders in women are still being connected to the idea of the feminine as an “other” to be feared rather than understood.

The conclusion we can draw from considering the films of post-classical Hollywood and these few more recent examples is that female identity continues to be inextricably linked with social and sexual roles. Women must perform a careful balancing act, neither fully embracing their femininity nor rejecting it, in order to avoid being labeled mentally ill. While psychologists have suggested that “the male role might be oppressive not only for women, but also for men” (Prior 47), the mental disorders associated with men have tended to stem from the external forces of drug and alcohol dependence. Without minimizing the plight of individuals struggling with these disorders, it does seem necessary to point out that they are not explicitly gendered in the way that hysteria, or any of its descendants, is. No matter what the specific diagnosis, to discuss mental illness in women is to discuss the inherent nature of female identity and what it means to be a woman in the patriarchal structure.

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