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PLASTIC MAKES PERFECT: *THE STEPFORD WIVES* AND THE CHANGING
POLITICS OF THE FEMALE BODY

by

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June 2005

A thesis

presented to Ryerson University and York University

in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in the Program of

Communication and Culture

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Plastic Makes Perfect: *The Stepford Wives* and the Changing Politics of the Female Body

Master of Arts, 2009

Kathryn Schweishelm

Joint Program in Communication and Culture

Ryerson University and York University

Abstract

This thesis investigates changes in the popular understanding of feminism within mass-mediated public discourse between the 1960s and 1970s and today, specifically in relation to feminine modes of embodiment. Through an analysis of a representative popular media text of the second wave – the 1975 film *The Stepford Wives* – this project establishes how the female body was conceptualized philosophically and ideologically by the radical feminists of this era. This is then compared to an analysis of the film's recent remake and several other contemporary media texts in order to illustrate how today's popular discourse of "postfeminism" presents a contradictory conception of feminism and its relationship to the body. Finally, this thesis suggests that postfeminist discourse is problematic for its erasure of structural gender inequality and argues that the preservation of a consciousness of sociohistorical context is vital to the perpetuation of a well-grounded feminist cultural critique.

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You have to know the past to understand the present.

- Carl Sagan, *Cosmos*

Introduction:

Nipples are out. Of vogue, that is. This, apparently, is the reason finding a simple, unlined bra now presents itself as such an arduous task. Walking into any of the trendy lingerie shops, one is greeted by an array of multi-coloured molded bras, bras whose cups are fabricated with a layer of foam that maintains its shape even when not on a body. Personally, I have refused to buy these bras – they feel ridiculous to me, like a pair of potholders stitched over your chest, or two nerf footballs, or at the very least an apparatus serving some medical purpose. The body is shaped to these bras, not the other way around. I wondered often what the appeal of this foam armour could be for others; that is, until a journalist friend of mine started researching an article on this very trend and informed me that it had a lot to do with concealing nipples. Though this explanation had never occurred to me, my friend's revelation was confirmed by a glance at a *Victoria's Secret* catalogue, which loudly boasted of its new IPEX technology bras, featuring "patented graduated pads for maximum nipple coverage."

Considering its reputation for racy photo shoots and televised lingerie runway shows, it seemed to me strangely prudish that *Victoria's Secret* would show such concern for hiding the nipple. Then again, when Janet Jackson's nipple made an unannounced appearance during the live broadcast of the 2004 Super Bowl, the uproar seemed to prove that a nipple is still not just a nipple (unless it is found on a man, that is).

Nevertheless, in a culture where young female celebrities such as Paris Hilton, Britney Spears and Lindsay Lohan have recently taken up the practice of accidentally-on-purpose revealing their bare crotches to the paparazzi, why would we care about a nipple? Iris Marion Young offers one explanation: "Nipples are indecent. Cleavage is good – the more, the better – [...] but the nipples must be carefully obscured. [...] Nipples are no-nos, for they show the breasts to be active and independent zones of sensitivity and eroticism" (84).

The solution for nipples that do not obey instructions – what one vendor's website calls "rogue" nipples – is to purchase bras like the IPEX. The wearer of this type of bra is guaranteed that evidence of her nipples will be eliminated and her breasts molded into high, perfectly rounded orbs, each indiscernable from any other. As columnist Natalie Nichols observes: "The IPEX bra emphasizes cleavage while rendering a nice, round breast devoid of nipples. In other words, sexless mannequin boobs." In this, I find an unexpected commonality with the famous women flashing for photographers, as the starlets' "styling" of their genitals is likewise homogeneous; that is to say, without exception, completely waxed and hairless. Young women, it seems to me, are culturally permitted to be explicitly sexual, but, as in both examples given here, on the condition that the expression of this sexuality be in a form that is inert, sexless and plastic. Any indication of that "active and independent" sensuality to which Young refers appears to have been assiduously erased and smoothed out, so that I am reminded of Barbie, underneath whose clothes one finds a standardized, smooth,

undifferentiated plastic torso, with nipple-free breasts and only a coy V-shaped dent where her genitalia would be.

Though I was not around to experience the feminist movements of the 1960s firsthand, I found it hard to believe that this type of nipplephobia – indeed, somatophobia – was the kind of progress they had agitated for. After all wasn't the "burning bra" the movement's lasting symbol, the "ultimate image of the radical subversion of the male-dominated order"? (Young 83) What had happened culturally between those days when public bralessness was promoted and today, when bras have not just been recuperated, but seek expressly to efface the specificity of individual women's bodies? More generally, what does this indicate about the changes in popular discourse surrounding the relationship of feminism to the body between the second wave era and today?

In order to answer this last question, in the pages that follow I perform a textual and contextual analysis of several representative media texts. My concern, to use Bonnie J. Dow's phrasing, is with how these texts have "contributed to the cultural conversation about feminism [...] at different historical moments," with reference specifically to notions of embodiment (*PTF* xiv). Though at times the study of media texts has been belittled as inconsequential, Tessa Perkins argues strongly that forms of representation "play an important role in forming ideas about, and attitudes to, the world, in alleviating anxiety and even in defusing conflict – in short [...] they do [...] political work" (76). Similarly, Christine Gledhill notes that cinema is often conceived of as a place where society "talks to itself," with "social and cultural conflicts supply[ing]

material" for discussion (238). The media, then, function as sites of public discourse; in other words, "as a site in which meanings are circulated and made available, so forming the climate in which we must live our lives" (Perkins 92). Investigating these meanings and the way they structure our lives is therefore an investigation of ideology; that is, a study of "the ways in which meaning sustains relations of domination" (Thompson qtd. in Perkins 77). An understanding of relations of domination is key to any feminist critique; my examination of the selected texts seeks to uncover these ideological relations with respect to the female body and thereby to accomplish that fundamental goal of feminist media analysis Annette Kuhn describes as "making visible the invisible" (77).

To be clear, I treat feminism in the same way as Dow: "as a set of political ideas and practices – developed through feminist movements, dedicated to the progress of women and the transformation of patriarchy – that resides inside and outside of [media] discourse" (PTF xxii). Because feminism originates in the lived experience of social inequality, I regard feminist cultural criticism as having an inherently materialist dimension, with the critic's job being to maintain a connection between theory and praxis, between the analysis of representation and the material conditions of women's lives. Though more recent postmodernist discussions of the abstract fluidity of gender and identity provide valuable contributions to feminist theory, I agree with Perkins that "however much the category 'woman' is a discursive construction, this does not mean that there is not a commonality in our experience and history that cannot be theorised away" (88). My goal, then, like Perkins', is "to render the political more visible and to

[demonstrate] the continued importance of a politics of representation that is more thoroughly grounded within particular sociocultural contexts" (92).

Indeed, in order to apprehend the continuities running throughout women's lives, one needs to be able to make connections between individual experiences and to identify wider historical patterns. Therefore, assessing the greater significance of a particular media text in terms of women's politics requires not only a deconstruction of its internal meanings in isolation, but also a larger contextualization of the conditions of its production and reception. As Dow writes: "Theory [...] is vital to explaining the rhetoric of [media texts]. However, equally important is the historicization of [a text]: its placement within a cultural and intertextual milieu that influences how audiences 'make sense' of the visions of feminism it offers" (*PTF* xiv). Similarly, Kuhn comments:

"Feminist film theory may [...] operate at the levels of both text and context, and would ideally aim to delineate the relationship between the two" (71). Performing such a task is, in itself, also a form of consciousness raising as it attempts to make the systematic operation of power more apparent. Thus, as Susan Bordo writes, the goal of feminist cultural criticism is "edification and understanding, enhanced *consciousness* of the power, complexity, and *systemic* nature of culture, the interconnected webs of its functioning" (*UW* 30).

In order to address my specific research question of how popular discourses surrounding the relationship of feminism to the body have transformed, I take the film *The Stepford Wives* as my first, and main, object of inquiry. Released in 1975 and based on a bestselling book by Ira Levin published in 1972, the film is often acknowledged as

having been heavily influenced by those concepts of second wave feminism that were prevalent in the popular consciousness during its production. For example, Dow remarks: "As a film, *The Stepford Wives* both contributed to and drew from popular notions of the purpose and meaning of second-wave feminist ideology and practices" (*Miss America* 128). In fact, she affirms "the second wave of feminism is, in many ways, the subtext required for making complete sense of the film" (127). Similarly, Anna Krugovoy Silver argues that the film "is an important document of second wave feminism, and it deserves reexamination by feminist cultural and film critics" (73). Thus, the film represents a productive artifact of popular culture from which to launch a discussion of second wave feminism and its related notions of the body.

In Chapter One I provide the historical "subtext" to which Dow refers, through an explanation of the philosophical and ideological principles behind the second wave's conception of and relationship to the body. It should be noted, though, that I do not address the many critiques of second wave feminism's tenets and assumptions that have emerged in the last thirty-five to forty years; though these are highly valid in their own right, they were not yet part of the cultural landscape at this time and therefore did not exert an influence within the period I wish to contextualize.

Within this first chapter, I place special emphasis on the insights of Simone de Beauvoir for her influence on the development of radical feminism's concept of embodiment. Beauvoir has been a surprising blindspot for the (few) people who have written about the film thus far; instead, they draw connections between the film's themes and the ideas of major feminist figure Betty Friedan, possibly because her

metaphor of the automated, drone-like housewife is literalized here. Silver, for example, writes that the film "is in part a science fiction rewrite of Betty Friedan's pioneering 1964 liberal feminist polemic *The Feminine Mystique*" (60). She goes on to puzzle over Friedan's disapproval of the film, commenting it was "a surprising indictment considering the film's obvious debt to her work" (60). Similarly, Elyce Rae Helford writes that Friedan's argument in *The Feminine Mystique* is "arguably at the heart of the film's vision of feminism" (*Gaze* 146). Helford points additionally to the fact that "Levin's novel makes overt reference to Friedan, stating that she actually visited the town of Stepford as a speaker to the defunct women's organization" (147). Levin, though, also chose to open the book with an epigraph from Beauvoir and, when it comes specifically to the story's conceptualization of feminine embodiment, she arguably exerts a much stronger influence than Friedan does. Moreover, if Friedan is considered the "mother" of liberal feminism, then Beauvoir may be considered the "mother" of radical feminism, and this may, in part, explain Friedan's dislike of certain elements of the film, given its closer affinity to the perspective of the radicals. The difference between these two factions within second wave feminism is also explored within Chapter One.

Whereas in the first chapter I work on the level of context alone, in the second chapter I bring this context to bear on the film itself and into conversation with feminist film theory, particularly Laura Mulvey's concept of the gendered "gaze." In this chapter, then, I perform a textual analysis of the film, focusing on its conceptualization of feminine embodiment, and draw connections to second wave feminism's ideas about the body as discussed in the chapter before.

Having established in the first and second chapters how the historical context of *The Stepford Wives* informs the feminist discourse represented by the film, the third and final chapter acts as a sort of coda, drawing attention to how this discourse of the 1960s and 1970s has changed over time. Rather than examine a single representative text, I seek to provide a snapshot of the popular discourse of the current cultural moment and elucidate its relationship to earlier feminist conceptions of the body. Through an examination of several characteristic media texts, I call attention to the pervasive influence of what has been labeled a “postfeminist” discourse of the body, apparent especially in the rhetoric supporting cosmetic surgery and nonsurgical procedures. In this way, the previous chapters also work together to contextualize on a greater historical scale the popular discourse of today, providing a yardstick from which to measure the major changes that have taken place, or in some cases have not.

In a consumer culture that regularly encourages us to live only for the moment, to accept its rhetoric at face value, and to ignore the greater significance and consequence of our actions, I regard the vigilant preservation of an awareness of the larger social context as valuable political work. After all, as Sue Thornham affirms, discourses are “embodied not only in representations but in cultural practices,” and popular beliefs have material consequences for real people (171). Thus, “before we can figure out what to do” about these practices, writes Bordo, “we first have to learn to *see* with something other than bedazzled eyes” (TZ 16). It is my hope that by bringing ideology to light and rendering several aspects of the invisible visible, this project represents a contribution toward that goal.

I understand Woman's Liberation
Which is sweeping our Nation,
But take my advice,
It still is so nice,
To have your own man at home,
Rather than by yourself to roam.

Now girls you don't have to cry,
Make an effort, one big try
It should be your fate,
Your man to locate,
You don't want to be an old maid,
Surely you can make the grade.

- excerpt from a "A Man Around," a "poem-song"
printed in *The Partridge Family* comic book, 1972.

Chapter One: *The Female Body in the Context of the Second Wave*

Within contemporary popular culture, there is a broad tendency to characterize the women's movement of the 1960s and early 70s as coherent and unified in its development, politics and goals. The historical reality, however, is that it was anything but. Writing in 1969, Ellen Willis explains that the current movement cannot be conceived of as a "group" in the singular, "but a loose coalition of groups with varying ideologies" (6). As with any social movement that emerges out of a complex set of historical relations, people came to the issue of "women's oppression" from different backgrounds and experiences, resulting in highly divergent views on what constituted "liberation" and how that might be achieved. Describing the history and development of what is now monolithically referred to as the "second wave" in full would be a considerable undertaking, one which could easily be a separate project in itself. For this

reason, much of this history – fascinating though it is – is beyond the scope of this thesis. For the purposes of this project, it is sufficient to understand that the “second wave” is considered to have consisted of several different “branches” or “currents” of feminism.

Two major branches were commonly acknowledged in the early stages of the movement. Though unified by their commitment to improving the collective lives of women, these two currents of second wave activism had actually developed independently. Jo Freeman, an active participant in the politics of this era, notes in 1975:

The movement manifests itself in an almost infinite variety of groups, styles, and organizations. Yet this diversity has sprung from only two distinct origins, representing two strata of society, with two different styles, orientations, values, and forms of organization. In many ways there were two different movements which only in the last two years have begun to merge. (49)

These two different movements, or branches, have generally been differentiated by one’s focus on “women’s rights” and the other’s focus on “women’s liberation” or, to put it differently, one’s “reformist” orientation and the other’s “radical” orientation (51). Freeman objects to these labels, which are admittedly rather neat; however, given the parameters of my discussion, they do prove useful.

“Feminism,” as it is portrayed within the popular media of today, arguably derives in large part from the first, “reformist” branch of second wave feminism, also known as “liberal feminism.” Betty Friedan, co-founder of the National Organization for Women (NOW), and author of the best-selling 1963 treatise on the middle-class housewife, *The Feminine Mystique*, is generally considered to be the most public representative of this “brand” of second wave feminism. Freeman notes that this branch

was older both in terms of its inception date and the median age of its members (49) and that, in general, it relied on more “traditional” forms of political action (51).

Friedan and NOW approached the issue of women’s oppression from a civil rights perspective, using institutionalized racism as an analogy for the way women are systematically discriminated against as a group. In fact, NOW was said to be founded with the idea that it would be an “NAACP for women” (Howell 49). NOW’s members used this civil rights metaphor to legitimize their efforts to the media, drawing on premises that had already been granted to African Americans over the past several years, and pressing for better recognition of sex discrimination within the Civil Rights Act and Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (58). Thus Friedan and NOW predominantly agitated for equal access and rights for women within the public sphere as it already existed. Indeed, their original statement of purpose reads: “The purpose of NOW is to take action to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now, exercising all the privileges and responsibilities thereof in truly equal partnership with men” (Friedan). In other words, they sought to eliminate that Victorian notion of the “separate spheres” that had been revived in post-war North America (at least within the middle classes) and thereby abolish women’s automatic relegation to the private sphere. These goals and the rhetoric used to express them differ significantly from those of the other main branch of feminism in the early stages, that of radical feminism.

Although the comparison to African Americans allowed liberal feminist activists to define and communicate the way women were exploited, treated as second-class

citizens and paternalized in the public sphere, by the end of the 1960s certain activists began calling attention to the ways in which women were uniquely subjugated within the private sphere as well (Howell 42). Younger in age, frequently experienced with other New Left protest movements of the era, and arguably more influenced by writers like Simone de Beauvoir than Betty Friedan, these feminists began to politicize nearly every aspect of women's private life, as well as the socially defined concept of gender itself. Of particular interest was how the female body itself could be read as an expression of patriarchal power. The feminists who were connected to these ideas of women's objectification – and consequent self-alienation – represented the “radical” branch of second wavers. For these activists, women's role as objects was indicative of the problems with the larger social, political and economic system and therefore NOW's “reformist emphasis on equality and sharing the way things were” was plainly insufficient (Howell 77). In a 1969 article in the *New York Times Magazine* on the “women of the revolution,” two members of this emerging radical movement explain: “Our strategy is not for equal jobs but meaningful, creative activity. It is not to share the power but to abolish commodity tyranny, not for an equal sex role but to end the objectification and exploitation” (qtd. in Babcox 85).

Again, to imply that these two branches were absolutely discrete or that there was no conflict within each division would be inaccurate. Clearly these nascent ideas, emerging as they did within a climate of continuing social activism and public debate, could not help but interact with and be influenced by differing philosophies and methods of critique. The different currents of feminist thought and activism were in

frequent conversation with each other, even cooperating on projects at times, such as in the case of the 1970 Strike for Women's Equality, a cross-country mass protest for women's rights. However, as a general ordering principle, these distinctions have proven useful in explaining the movement's origins, as well as the way its range of participants and actions was perceived by the public.

In many ways it is not surprising that much of what has survived in the current public perception of feminism stems from its liberal branch rather than the radical. Van Zoonen notes that within the mass media – which has “a preference for simple issues with identifiable pros and cons” – several binaries were constructed early on in the women's movement (462). One of the most significant was what Douglas refers to as the “carving up of the women's movement into legitimate feminism and illegitimate feminism” (186). Those more moderate activists, such as Friedan and NOW, who made demands “for equal opportunity, equal pay, and other issues that fell easily under the rubric of public policy” were commonly portrayed as rational and reasonable (Dow, *Spectacle* 146). Those more radical activists who focused on “sex role stereotyping, oppressive images of women, pornography, sexuality, and other issues best grouped under the heading of ‘sexual politics’” were portrayed as hysterical and deviant (146).

It was this second branch, then, that seemed to provoke the most negative public reaction. This is evidenced, for example, in some of the responses to the 1968 protest of the Miss America pageant. Now frequently cited as the first major public protest of the second wave, the demonstration decried Miss America as a “degrading, mindless boob-girlie symbol” (qtd. in Babcox 34). The protesters marched with placards adorned with

slogans such as "I Am a Woman – Not a Toy, a Pet or Mascot!" They also performed guerrilla theatre and paraded a Miss America puppet, introduced as "the best scapegoat yet invented for men" (qtd. in Curtis). Chains that encircled the effigy were said to represent "the chains that tie us to these beauty standards against our will" (qtd. in Curtis). Most memorably, the demonstrators installed a "freedom trash can," into which they discarded items associated with ritualized femininity, including padded bras, girdles, hair curlers, false eyelashes, Playboys, high-heeled shoes, dish detergent, women's magazines and steno pads (Curtis; Babcox 34). In fact, it was this demonstration that inspired the "bra burner" myth that persists to this day; although bras were thrown into the trash can, they were just one of many symbols of "female oppression" cast into it, and it was never lit on fire. Robin Morgan, one of the organizers, explained at the time that the mayor of Atlantic City was concerned about bonfires, but she had assured him they "wouldn't do anything dangerous – just a symbolic bra-burning" (qtd. in Curtis).

Symbolic though it may have been, the action did seem to evoke strong reactions from the public. One writer for the *New York Times* noted that "the demonstrators [sic] draw shouted aspersions on their patriotism, moral quality and personal hygiene" (Babcox 34). One man told the picketers to "go home and wash your bras," while another shouted: "Why don't you throw yourselves in there [the trash can]; it would be a lot more useful" (Curtis). Morgan, the public face of the demonstration, received hate mail afterward, such as one letter that reads: "Dear Ugly, What right have you to disrupt the Miss America Pageant? Just because you are a frustrated female who, because of her

homely face, can never have a chance, doesn't give you the right to cause trouble. Only an insane person would do a thing like this" (qtd. in Babcox 85). Letters to the *New York Times* suggested that the women needed "good spankings" (qtd. in Howell 77). Harriet Van Horne, columnist for the *New York Post*, called the group "childish" and proposed that this kind of public behaviour could only be the result of women who had been exposed to the "wrong men," "men who do not understand the way to a woman's heart – i.e., to make her feel utterly feminine, desirable and almost too delicate for this hard world" (qtd. in Babcox 34). Van Horne concluded that "most of us would rather be some dear man's boob girl than nobody's *cum laude* scholar" (qtd. in Babcox 34).

The vehemence provoked in the wider public by the demonstration arguably speaks to the highly personal nature of the values and beliefs that the radical feminists (in particular) challenged. This, of course, was precisely the point; for radical feminists, everyday aspects of women's existence that would ordinarily be labelled "personal" or even "natural" represented the exact opposite for them – something of deep political meaning. As noted earlier, while liberal activists tended to push an agenda related to opening space for women's equal participation in the public sphere – a zone that, in many ways, had already been acknowledged as inequitable – the radicals typically pushed for the recognition of the ideological significance of behaviours and practices that were until then considered purely private and personal. The now-familiar slogan "the personal is political" was consistently used to express these activists' realization that dissatisfactions and difficulties in women's individual experience did not in fact represent purely personal problems, but rather were generalizable and therefore

indicative of the larger culture's ideology at work. These feminists began to problematize and challenge traditional conventions in a multitude of areas within the so-called "private" sphere, such as sexuality, reproductive rights, marriage as institution, beauty and fashion regimes, and in fact, the very notion of "femininity" itself. Within many of these critiques, the body emerges as one of the primary sites of women's oppression. Indeed, a 1970 article by Marilyn Bender on the "eclectic movement" of the second wave observes that "[c]ontrol of her own body is women's liberation's most broadly based tenet."

This overriding emphasis on the body represents a shift in focus from a great deal of earlier feminist thought. According to Thornham, for many first wave feminist thinkers, the "female body is seen as limiting women's capacity for both equality and transcendence – an obstacle to be overcome if women are to become fully social beings with access to cultural production and the public sphere" (159). For these feminists, the immediate project was often simply to challenge the received belief that a woman's biological body was a natural hindrance to her ability to reason. For example, in 1899 Charlotte Perkins Gilman fumes that "the clearness and strength of the brain of the woman prove continually the injustice of the clamorous contempt long poured upon what was scornfully called 'the female mind.' There is no female mind. The brain is not an organ of sex. As well speak of a female liver" (149). Thus, their goals frequently centred on proving that women's minds were just as viable as men's; they could be just as rational and competent as men and therefore ought to be granted the same rights as men within the exalted public sphere. In contrast, the radicals of the second wave might

argue that there *was*, in fact, a (faulty) female mind, but it was purely an effect of the patriarchal subordination of her body. Meredith Tax writes in 1970 of

those pieces that have been taken out of our heads! The self-consciousness we are filled with! It is so painful, so physical. We are taught to feel that our only asset is our physical presence, that that is all other people notice about us. [...] We make ourselves viable by blocking out the everyday realization of how we have been emotionally deformed by our socialization. (11)

Ultimately, these different stances denote different relationships to and engagements with the Cartesian tradition of mind-body dualism that predominates within Western philosophy and theology. Elizabeth Grosz describes this dualism as “the assumption that there are two distinct, mutually exclusive and mutually exhaustive substances, mind and body, each of which inhabits its own self-contained sphere” (6). Within this scenario, the body is constructed as “something apart from the true self (whether conceived as soul, mind, spirit, will, creativity, freedom...) and as undermining the best efforts of that self. That which is not-body is the highest, the best, the noblest, the closest to God; that which is body is the albatross, the heavy drag on self-realization” (Bordo, *UW* 5). The mind/body split is also aligned with many other binaries within Western culture, such as active/passive, culture/nature, self/other, public/private, subject/object, and reason/passion. Within this arrangement of oppositions, the mind corresponds with the will, and an active, rational subjectivity, whereas the body is conceived of as nothing more than a passive object or instrument that responds instinctively. Unsurprisingly, the opposition between male and female also follows this pattern, so that “man and mind, woman and body, become representationally aligned” (Grosz 4). Margrit Shildrick notes that women are seen as

profoundly fixed to their material bodies, bodies that are thought to “contrast to the apparent self-containment of the male body” by virtue of a reproductive system that enables women “in general to menstruate, to become pregnant and give birth, to lactate” (63). In sum, these processes are “enough to suggest a potentially dangerous volatility, in which the body is out of control, beyond, and set against, the force of reason” (63). Thus, women are established as passive and incapable of reason through their close identification with the body, which is equally debased.

To generalize, then, one could characterize Gilman and the first wave of feminists as objecting not to the value-laden division of mind and body *per se*, but rather to women’s unjust and automatic exclusion from the public sphere and “a life of the mind” on the basis of their physical bodies. In other words, their main political drive was for a recognition that their bodies were no more or less of a natural impediment to the attainment of knowledge, rationality or subjectivity than men’s bodies were already assumed to be. This privileging of the mind and the public sphere arguably links this line of feminist thought more directly with the liberal arm of the second wave. Indeed, both took pains to emphasize the rationality of their demands and goals to the greater public in order to gain legitimacy. As Germaine Greer phrases it: “In the old days ladies were anxious to point out that they did not seek to disrupt society or to unseat God. Marriage, the family, private property and the state were threatened by their actions, but they were anxious to allay the fears of conservatives” (12). The decidedly radical Greer goes on, however, to aver that “in doing so the suffragettes betrayed their own cause and prepared the way for the failure of emancipation” (12). For the radical feminists,

"true" emancipation and self-realization could not come simply through enfranchisement, as the dominant culture's value system was already male-defined.

Bonnie Krep articulates this perspective in her explanation of what makes radical feminism "radical":

We, in this segment of the movement, do not believe that the oppression of women will be ended by giving them a bigger piece of the pie, as Betty Friedan would have it. We believe that the pie itself is rotten. [...] "Separate but equal" will get us nowhere; we must eradicate the sexual division on which our society is based. Only then do men and women have a hope of living together as human beings. (239)

This emphasis on the need to challenge the dichotomous nature of society itself in order to bring about liberation led logically to the development of what would come to be known as "body politics." For if, as Charlotte Bunch-Weeks famously wrote, "there is no private domain of a person's life that is not political and there is no political issue that is not ultimately personal," then the body and its regulation must gain new significance (189).

Indeed, it was through an examination of the seemingly natural and mundane practices of everyday life that the body came to be identified by the radicals as the fundamental site of women's oppression. Up to this point, femininity had largely been presented as something natural and inherent to the female sex; the behaviours and characteristics that comprised the "feminine" were thought to be timeless and eternal. If a woman, for whatever reason, was unwilling or unable to fulfill these expectations, she was diagnosed as having personal difficulties with adjusting to her "natural" role. For example, until studies like the Masters and Johnson report were released, women were

often told that they were maladjusted or neurotic if they were unable to achieve orgasm vaginally. In her famous 1970 article, "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm," Anne Koedt quotes a Freudian psychologist who explains: "whenever a woman is incapable of achieving an orgasm via coitus, provided her husband is an adequate partner, and prefers clitoral stimulation to any other form of sexual activity, she can be regarded as suffering from frigidity and requires psychiatric assistance" (38). Surgery was even proposed wherein the ligament beneath the clitoris would be severed in order to bring it closer to the vaginal opening as a means of "helping" women overcome this "frigidity" (38).

Radical feminists, through their exploration of the commonalities in women's supposedly private and individual experience, began to challenge the "naturalness" of such assumptions. In the case of sexuality, the vast majority of women could be labeled sexually deviant, even defective, if one followed the established definitions for frigidity. Armed with the information about anatomy found in studies such as the Kinsey report, the radicals argued that these sexual norms were suspiciously accommodating to men – rather than address women's distinct needs and acknowledge that female sexual satisfaction typically could not be attained through genital intercourse alone, women had been pathologized by the male medico-psychiatric establishment. It was the woman's responsibility somehow to self-correct and adapt to these outside expectations of her sexuality. For the radicals, it was considered highly emblematic of women's subordination that an invasive procedure would be proposed to surgically "correct" a woman's anatomy rather than ask men to alter their own sexual habits and preferences.

This privileging of the male perspective within sexual norms was deemed just one example out of many of the ways men's expectations and desires had long been projected onto women's bodies only to then define them as natural and essential. Women's participation in painstaking beauty and fashion rituals, which had often been attributed to a sort of innate feminine frivolity, were also now reframed as resulting in fact from women's socialization within a patriarchal culture that effected its domination over women largely through control of their bodies. In this way, "feminism inverted and converted the old metaphor of the Body Politic, found in [traditional male philosophy] to a new metaphor: the politics of the body" (Bordo, *UW* 21). Thus, the discovery of the political significance of the body within hegemonic power structures led the radical feminists to focus their critique heavily on the modes of embodiment and bodily practices that were typically endorsed by Western culture. As Adrienne Rich writes in 1976: "The woman's body is the terrain on which patriarchy is erected" (55). She later goes on to assert: "The repossession by women of our bodies will bring far more essential change to human society than the seizing of the means of production by workers" (285).

The rhetoric Rich uses is typical of the era in its conception of the female body as invaded by hostile outside forces; in this view women have been "dispossessed" of their own bodies and therefore need to "reclaim" them immediately if they hope to liberate themselves and overthrow the patriarchy. Further, the description of the female body as a "terrain" evokes the idea of the body as land. Some radicals found particular utility in this metaphor of the body as "occupied territory" as it allowed them to conceptualize

their experiences as reflective of a type of cultural and corporeal colonization. For

example, in an article entitled "Taking Back Our Bodies," Robin Morgan writes:

"Women are a colonized people, with our history, values, and cross-cultural culture having been taken from us – a gynocidal attempt manifest most blatantly in the patriarchy's seizure of our most basic and precious 'land:' our own bodies" (33).

Similarly, in a 1971 interview, Germaine Greer explains that her marriage ended after only three weeks because "[h]e was shaping me to his needs and trying to conquer me. Everything looked like the crudest form of colonization" (qtd. in Weinraub 28).

Part of what made the analogy to colonization so appealing was its ability to convey a sense of enforced alienation women felt from their bodies. Continuing with her linking of women's bodies to colonized land, Morgan writes that the natives "are forced (by a system of punishment and reward) to adopt the oppressor's standards, values, and identification. In due course, they become alienated from their own values, their own land – which is of course being mined by the oppressor for its natural resources" (33). Although not all of the era's feminists connected their thoughts explicitly to the notion of colonization, ideas like Morgan's about the experience of alienation that comes from being oppressed were strongly echoed in various ways throughout much of the writing of the second wave. Expressions of distance, disconnection and estrangement, of women feeling somehow *apart* from their bodies, predominated. Indeed, Sandra Lee Bartky notes that "from the late 1960s to about the mid-1980s, work that dealt particularly with the internalization of patriarchal norms of feminine bodily acceptability drew heavily on the concept of 'alienation'" (BP 323).

Bartky defines alienation as "a *fragmentation* of the human person and a *prohibition* on the full exercise of capacities, the exercise of which is thought necessary to a fully human existence" (323). This conception of human alienation stems clearly from Karl Marx, who argued that under capitalism, the workers are estranged from their labour and its products, and are thereby denied what fundamentally distinguishes us as human beings. But while Marx is regularly acknowledged as a significant figure in modern sociopolitical theory, the thinker who inspired the second wave's concept of alienation most directly would have to be Simone de Beauvoir.

Though published in English for the first time in 1953, years before the "official" start of the second wave, Beauvoir's existential musings on the status of woman in *The Second Sex* exerted an undeniable influence on the feminism of the 1960s and 1970s. Prominent second wave feminists such as Shulamith Firestone dedicated their writings to her, while Jo Freeman opened her "BITCH Manifesto" with a quotation from *The Second Sex*. In fact, Beauvoir's legendary pronouncement, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," has come to be regarded as an overarching symbol of second wave feminism in general (Beauvoir 267). As Linda Nicholson notes: "The initial tasks facing second wave theorists were to document the seriousness of women's oppression and develop theories to account for it. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* soon became viewed as a classic because of the elegant case it made for the depth and pervasiveness of women's oppression" (7).

In Beauvoir's work, then, the radical feminists found a theoretical framework to account for the feelings of alienation that had already been identified through their

rigorous examinations of their own personal lives. Their efforts to dismantle the damaging myth of a "natural and eternal feminine essence" were supported by Beauvoir's assessment that all human beings are ultimately defined by their *situation* – i.e. the set of historical, cultural, social and economic limits that circumscribe a person's possibilities in life (Young 29). Therefore, the homogeneity one may observe among women within a certain culture and era are not the expressions of an immutable feminine essence, but rather are a result of the similar constraints that are placed on women within a specific sociohistorical moment. As Iris Marion Young explains: "The situation of women within a given sociohistorical set of circumstances, despite the individual variation in each woman's experience, opportunities, and possibilities, has a unity that can be described and made intelligible" (29). These precepts reverberate, for example, in Germaine Greer's instructions in 1970 on how women may begin the process of emancipating themselves:

women must learn how to question the most basic assumptions about feminine normality in order to reopen the possibilities for development which have been successively locked off by conditioning. So, we begin at the beginning, with the sex of cells. Nothing much can be made of chromosomal difference until it is manifested in development, and development cannot take place in a vacuum: from the outset our observation of the female is consciously and unconsciously biased by assumptions that we cannot help making and cannot always identify when they have been made. (14)

"Feminine" existence, for Greer and the radicals as for Beauvoir, is a product of *situation*, of sociocultural forces, and not some sort of eternal and unchanging essence borne naturally by the female body.

Going beyond this general analysis, Beauvoir identifies the specific *situation* typical of women within Western, patriarchal culture as one in which woman is positioned as Other to man. The "absolute human type" is masculine; in other words, the standard, neutral, "normal" human being is conceptualized as male (Beauvoir xxi). Thus, while "the fact of being a man is no peculiarity," due to a different physiology, being a female is perceived as inherently peculiar (xxi). Beauvoir writes that man "thinks of his body as a direct and normal connection with the world, which he believes he apprehends objectively, whereas he regards the body of woman as a hindrance, a prison, weighed down by everything peculiar to it," such as her ovaries and uterus and their arcane processes (xxi-xxii). From Aristotle, who claims that the "female is a female by virtue of a certain *lack* of qualities [and therefore] we should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness," to the biblical creation of Eve from Adam's rib, woman is consistently defined only in relation to man, who is "whole" (qtd. in Beauvoir xxii). "Thus," Beauvoir explains, "humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being" (xxii). In other words, woman "is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other" (xxii). Within this construction, man is granted the qualities definitive of being human, such as subjectivity, autonomy, agency, and creativity, while woman is posited as simply an inferior other being (Young

31). To use the language of Sartre and existentialism, woman is condemned to the world of *immanence*¹ while man alone maintains access to *transcendence*.² The consequence of this situation for "the female person who enacts the existence of women in patriarchal society" is that she must "live a contradiction: as a human she is a free subject who participates in transcendence, but her situation as a woman denies her that subjectivity and transcendence" (Young 31-32). Thus, woman within patriarchal society exists in a fundamentally alienated state: born "a free and autonomous being like all human creatures," yet caught "in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other" (Beauvoir xxxv), she is denied the opportunity for self-definition and therefore the dignity of a fully realized human existence (Bartky, *BP* 323).

Although most of the activists of the second wave did not explicitly reference Beauvoir or use this type of theoretical jargon, often preferring instead the blunt language of the polemic, these concepts nonetheless can be identified as undergirding the greater part of their writings. The notion of the woman as fundamentally deformed by social roles and therefore fragmented, objectified, incomplete and thus somehow less than a full human being recurs consistently throughout the expressions of the radical feminists. Whether it be in reference to the medicalization of childbirth, women's lack of knowledge about their own sexuality or the sense of emptiness and deficiency that accompanies women's participation in beauty routines, time and again the radicals

¹ The "Being-in-itself;" that which simply exists; the "brutish life of subjection to given conditions" (Beauvoir xxxv; Bartky, *BP* 321).

² The "Being-for-itself;" reflective consciousness; liberty and uniquely human freedom (Bartky, *BP* 321).

assert that there can be no liberation if women's socially mandated alienation from their bodies (and therefore themselves) is not overcome.

Within patriarchal culture, it was argued, women have been dissuaded and otherwise prevented from gaining accurate information about their bodies, ensuring a lack of meaningful control over them. Lolly Hirsch, writing in 1975, typifies the outraged attitude of activists of the era:

The purity and simplicity of a woman's inner sanctum have been transformed by the medical profession into a mysterious, complicated territory forbidden-to-women [sic] that involves expensive, humiliating and often sadistic medical treatment, drugs, and surgical procedures. The normal functions of the human female – menstruation, ovulation, child birth, termination of pregnancy and menopause – have been designated by medicine through medical textbooks as the manifestations of disorder, dysfunction, and disease. (33)

This combination of mystification and shaming discouraged women from pursuing an understanding of their bodies; instead, male doctors, sexual partners and other "experts" had defined the norms for women's relationship to their bodies on their behalf. This was responsible, in part, for producing the alienation they felt. The radicals maintained that from this position women were unable to make informed decisions about their bodies and therefore could not possess autonomous control over their own lives and futures. Indeed, this lack of education about their bodies was deemed to be one of the primary ways by which women were oppressed; therefore, the cultivation of a knowledge and awareness of their physical bodies necessarily formed an integral part in the project of women's liberation.

To this end, in 1970 the Boston Women's Health Book Collective issued a pamphlet entitled *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, which is now considered a landmark

publication of the second wave. Expanded and reprinted by a large publisher in 1973, the book, by women for women, straightforwardly explains elements of female bodily experience across the life cycle, including but not limited to: menstruation, sexual pleasure, pregnancy, childbirth and menopause. The writers affirm the conviction that learning about the particularities of the female body is crucial to a radical process of recuperating the self, explaining: "For us, body education is core education. Our bodies are the physical bases from which we move out into the world; ignorance, uncertainty – even, at worst, shame – about our physical selves create in us an alienation from ourselves that keeps us from being the whole people that we could be" (3). Thus, according to the BWHBC, by coming to understand their bodies women reduce that sense of alienation and consequently become "fuller, more integrated female persons" (5). In other words, only with a full understanding of and connection to their bodies could women truly exercise the fundamental human right to make free choices about the shape of their lives and fulfill every liberated subject's "undefined need to transcend himself [*sic*], to engage in freely chosen projects" (Beauvoir xxxv).

Without a knowledge of how to prevent (or terminate) pregnancy, of how the reproductive cycle works, of female sexual anatomy and the right to sexual pleasure, women found themselves engaged in projects they had not "freely chosen." One of the most significant examples of this for the second wave feminists was the occurrence of unexpected pregnancies. Even with the increasing awareness and availability of birth control in the late 1960s and early 1970s, feminists of the era noted that due in part to cultural expectations many women were still finding themselves pregnant when they

did not want to be (BWHBC 3). Moreover, if they wished to terminate the pregnancy, abortion was not a safe and legal option for them in North America. This lack of control in determining whether, when and with whom they had children was identified as one of the main sources of women's oppression (Thornham 159). Motherhood, they argued, must be something that is freely chosen *by* women, it should not be something that simply happens *to* them. Educating women about their reproductive system and their unassailable right to refuse to engage in sex acts that do not meet their own terms would increase women's ability to make informed choices about when and with whom they had children and therefore prevent a feeling of being trapped and subject to forces outside their control. Indeed, the writers of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* confirm that their own increasing awareness of their bodies and sexuality "has made our pregnancies better, because they no longer happen to us; we actively choose them and enthusiastically participate in them. It has made our parenthood better, because it is our choice rather than our destiny. This knowledge has freed us from playing the role of mother if it is not a role that fits us" (3).

Establishing this distinction between motherhood as a role and as a woman's absolute identity was part of this body education for activists of the era as well. The first chapter in Jessie Bernard's 1975 book on motherhood, for example, is entitled "Mother is a Role, Women are Human Beings" (11). This title clearly recalls an iconic scene from *A Doll's House*, Henrik Ibsen's 1879 play which is often referenced for its dramatization of feminist concerns. When Nora, the protagonist, tells husband Helmer that she is leaving him, explaining she has responsibilities to herself that are also important, he responds:

"Before all else you are a wife and a mother" (Ibsen 68). Nora replies: "That I no longer believe. I think that before all else I am a human being, just as much as you are – or, at least, I will try to become one" (68). The title of the play, then, refers to Nora's realization that under the patriarchal domination of first her father and then her husband, she has been little more than a doll: not a free human being, but an object to be manipulated. Similarly, Beauvoir writes that for woman "there is from the beginning a conflict between her autonomous existence and her objective self, her 'being-the-other'; she is taught that to please she must try to please, she must make herself object; she should therefore renounce her autonomy. She is treated like a live doll and is refused liberty" (280). The notion that women had been turned into objects to serve others – whether by having to assume primary caretaking responsibility for children or satisfying male sexual desires – reappears with strong regularity throughout the radical feminists' critiques of North American culture.

For example, in her 1972 mass market book, *A Housewife's Guide to Women's Liberation*, Elizabeth Anticaglia protests that women have traditionally not been seen as each individuals, "but merely part of that large paperdoll category called Womanhood," expected to fulfill certain predetermined roles through marriage and motherhood (109). A woman's "total self," she warns, must not be "submerged in another person's needs. There must be enough in it for you so that your life totals up as satisfaction, not servitude" (106). In an entire chapter dedicated to the topic, she explains how "marriage causes the strangulation of our identity" (98). Once a man and woman are married, "[s]he belongs to him, not in the romantic way of popular songs, but in cold, legalistic

terms" and she becomes known purely as someone's wife or someone's mother (99). While the man has gained something through the traditional marriage contract, "[h]is wife has lost something, and has become part of him, a sort of extra appendage" (100). In other words, within the current social arrangement, "women surrender our identity not only as a separate name and a separate job but as a separate adult as well [*sic*]" (103). Along the same lines, Bonnie Kreps declares that "the traditional view of women and its attendant Feminine Mystique are a fraud. While they are to men's advantage in many (though ultimately not all) respects, they mean loss of growth, of full-humanness, to the woman who submits to their edicts. Such a woman will risk a loss of identity, she will risk becoming a thing" (237).

This objectification, this conversion to a mere "thing," arises not only through subjection to the dictates of the role of wife and mother, but to those of "feminine" standards of beauty and comportment. Within patriarchal culture, women receive clear instructions, which Dana Densmore sums up as: "You are a woman, an object, you exist to please the eye" (207). Even if one is able to succeed to some degree in shaping one's body to these standards of femininity, "[t]hat beautiful object is just an object, a work of art, to look at, not to know, total appearance, bearing no personality or will. To the extent that one is caught up in the beauty of it, one perceives object and not person" (205). Similarly, in her article "Woman and Her Mind: The Story of Everyday Life," Meredith Tax writes: "From the earliest age a girl is deprived of a sense of herself (ego), the sense of having an identity separate from other people's evaluations of her. [...]

[G]irls are taught to see themselves as *objects* rather than subjects" (14). She describes a

scenario wherein a young woman is walking down a city street and must pass a group of male construction workers. The woman

knows that they will not physically assault her or hurt her. They will only do so metaphorically. What they will do is *impinge* on her. They will demand that her thoughts be focussed on them. They will use her body with their eyes. They will evaluate her market price. They will comment on her defects, or compare them to those of other passers-by. They will make her a participant in their fantasies without asking if she is willing. They will make her feel ridiculous, or grotesquely sexual, or hideously ugly. Above all, they will make her feel like a *thing*. (12)

Her use of the cliché of the working class male notwithstanding, Tax signifies here the way the female's own autonomous subjectivity is invaded and occluded by that of the male. As Beauvoir would put it, patriarchal culture "doom[s] her to immanence since her transcendence is to be overshadowed and forever transcended by another ego (*conscience*) which is essential and sovereign" (xxxv).

As discussed earlier, this sense of objectification and loss of autonomy was deemed particularly relevant to women's experience of their sexuality. Germaine Greer explains: "the female is considered as a sexual object for the use and appreciation of other sexual beings, men. Her sexuality is both denied and misrepresented by being identified as passivity" (15). Greer goes on to state in her typically provocative way that "[t]he vagina is obliterated from the imagery of femininity in the same way that the signs of independence and vigour in the rest of her body are suppressed. The characteristics that are praised and rewarded are those of the castrate – timidity, plumpness, languor, delicacy and preciousity" (15). Indeed, Greer asserts that according to our society, the mythical perfect woman's "essential quality is castratedness. She

absolutely must be young, her body hairless, her flesh buoyant, and *she must not have a sexual organ*" (60). She is pure sexual object, a fetish, with no subjective existence and no connection to her own sexuality; her only form of lust "equals irrational submission" (60). In other words, to enact the ideal feminine sexuality is to be "*without libido*, and therefore incomplete, subhuman, a cultural reduction of human possibilities" (69). In fact, the title of Greer's book, *The Female Eunuch*, is meant to convey this sense of women's impairment, of their having been "cut off from their capacity for action" and defined as little more than impotent, passive objects of man's will (Greer qtd. in Weinraub 28). Clearly, Beauvoir is echoed within these statements. Greer goes on to argue that this "feminine posture of passivity and sexlessness" (84) ultimately maims the female person who is obligated to take it on as it induces an estrangement from her sexuality; it is a form of women's sexual alienation, which we have seen is "itself only one manifestation of a larger alienation from the body" (Bartky, *NFA* 130).

Thus, as evidenced, the body was central to radical feminism's critiques in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Through an examination of the "personal" practices of everyday life, these feminists "recognized that the most mundane, 'trivial' aspects of women's bodily existence were in fact significant elements in the social construction of an oppressive feminine norm" (Bordo, *UW* 18). This norm was determined to be one of objectification; woman's *situation* "disposes her to apprehend her body not as the instrument of her transcendence, but as 'an object destined for another'" (Bartky, *NFA* 133). Normative femininity was therefore conceptualized as a form of self-alienation, preventing women from becoming integrated, autonomous agents capable of authentic

self-determination. Women's liberation, then, could not be achieved if these norms were not opposed and transformed; to not resist meant man would continue to formulate woman as "absolute Other, without reciprocity, denying against all experience that she is a subject, a fellow human being" (Beauvoir 253).

Chapter Two:

The Stepford Wives and the Second Wave

Though subject to continued vehement contestation and debate, it is clear that the ideas of second wave feminism had made an impact on the public's consciousness by 1972 – the year *The Stepford Wives* was published – and formed a major component of the cultural milieu at the time of Levin's writing. After all, as implied by the "poem-song" quoted in the previous chapter (also published in 1972), if even children reading comic books were expected to have a passing familiarity with "women's liberation," then it had assuredly taken some shape in the popular imagination by this point. However, as the poem-song's unconvinced tone also implies, the ultimate effect and cultural significance of feminism were far from settled, and this was no less the case in 1975 when the filmic version of Levin's bestseller was released.

Filmed in 1974 and released in February of 1975, *The Stepford Wives*, directed by Bryan Forbes, is a mostly faithful adaptation of Levin's novel. The story centres on Joanna Eberhart (Katharine Ross), a woman who has just relocated to the suburban town of Stepford from New York City with her husband, Walter (Peter Masterson), and their two young daughters. Although Walter believes Stepford will be a better place to live and raise their children than the city, Joanna is not convinced, particularly when she begins to notice odd behaviour on the part of the residents of Stepford. Aside from

Bobby Markowe³ (Paula Prentiss), another newly transplanted New Yorker who quickly befriends Joanna, all the women Joanna encounters in Stepford display eerily similar characteristics – these “Stepford wives” are all utterly devoted to their husbands and to the performance of domestic chores such as cleaning, baking and laundering. They obey their husbands’ directions with placid and docile submissiveness and seem unwilling or unable to express any thoughts or opinions that diverge from those of the men. Further, they seem never to neglect a careful maintenance of their immaculate appearances. In short, they all display tendencies of the “feminine ideal” to the extreme.

For their part, the men spend a large amount of their spare time at meetings for the Stepford Men’s Association, a group that Joanna and Bobby object to for being “sexually archaic” in its refusal to admit any female members. Eventually the two discover that there was once an active women’s group in town also and attempt to organize a consciousness raising session; predictably, however, the Stepford women are unresponsive. After Charmaine (Tina Louise), the one other woman sympathetic to the complaints of Joanna and Bobby, suddenly has a change of personality and adopts the same submissive stance toward her husband as the other women of Stepford, Joanna and Bobby begin to speculate that something or someone is transforming the women into “pan-scrubber” zombies.

Bobby and Joanna convince their husbands of their desperate need to move away from the town and begin looking for new houses elsewhere; however, before either of

³ Though her name is spelled “Bobbie” in the original novel and commentators have sometimes also adhered to this spelling, I have followed the way the name is credited in the film, and have silently altered the spelling within all quotations to maintain consistency.

them makes the move, Bobby returns from a weekend away with her husband changed into a "Stepford wife" like the rest. Realizing that her friend has been replaced by some sort of inhuman substitute, Joanna decides to take her children and leave the town immediately. Her husband tells her that their children are at the manor housing the Men's Association, but this is revealed as a trap.

When she arrives at the manor, Dale "Diz" Cobra (Patrick O'Neal), the quietly menacing Association president, tells Joanna that the men have perfected a technology that enables them to create "ideal" wives. A horrified Joanna flees from Diz, only to stumble across her own android duplicate in one of the maze of rooms in the mansion. Before the scene closes, the audience witnesses the automaton advance towards Joanna, a taut pair of pantyhose in hand with which to strangle her.

In the final scene of the film, the Stepford wives glide serenely down the pastel aisles of the local supermarket, murmuring banal greetings to one another in tranquil tones. When the audience is finally granted a glimpse of Joanna, it is clear that she has not survived and has in fact suffered the same fate as Bobby and the other women and been replaced by her own Stepford wife duplicate.

The film's opening is significant; it begins with a shot of Joanna, alone, examining herself in the bathroom mirror as she prepares to leave her family's now-empty New York apartment forever. She looks at herself contemplatively, with a troubled air, as if unresolved about something. This opening scene clearly foreshadows one of the film's most important thematic elements: Joanna's gaze.

The notion of the "gaze" is one that has become highly significant in feminist thought since the second wave, particularly within film theory. The year that the filmic adaptation of *The Stepford Wives* was released, 1975, is the same year that Laura Mulvey's extremely influential article on the gaze, "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema," was published in the film journal *Screen*. Although Mulvey's article was published after *The Stepford Wives* had completed filming, Elyce Rae Helford has argued for their complementarity; in her article, "*The Stepford Wives* and the Gaze: Envisioning Feminism in 1975," she "read[s] the pair together, as historical/cultural documents that are deeply invested in feminist discourse and use divergent yet not oppositional strategies to provide similar insights into gender relations during the height of the second wave of the women's movement" (145).

Although more explicitly theoretical than some of the public statements of the radicals described in the last chapter, as Helford indicates, Mulvey's article shares a similar political perspective and seeks to critique the same social structures. In fact, her article could be considered something of a critical manifesto in that she seeks to appropriate psychoanalytic theory as a political tool, one that will expose the ideological basis of the supposedly self-evident and natural pleasures of the cinema. She takes a structuralist position, asserting that narrative cinema has been fundamentally shaped, not just in content, but also in form, by the patriarchal society in which it developed. As a result, narrative cinema is constructed to cater to those fixations, obsessions and desires that are specific to the patriarchal unconscious. By appealing to and satisfying

these psychological preoccupations, mainstream cinema reinforces conventional power relations, especially when it comes to sexual difference.

One of the instinctive pleasures that Mulvey claims narrative cinema appeals to is a pleasure in looking, otherwise known as "scopophilia." In his *Three Essays on Sexuality*, Freud "associate[s] scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze" (Mulvey, *VPNC* 60). Freud identifies this practice as an elemental component of sexuality, providing the psychological basis for the pleasure of voyeurism. It is this pleasurable sensation of voyeurism that Mulvey claims the mainstream cinema induces. Although the cinema appears at first to be the inverse of voyeurism in the sense that a film is a performance that is publicly and knowingly displayed, Mulvey argues that the conventions that surround the sensory experience of the cinema play on the audience's voyeuristic fantasies. Aspects such as the contrast between the darkness of the theatre and the light of the screen, the spectators' separation from one another in the dark, and, most significantly, the way cinema provides the "illusion of looking in on a private world" (61) all contribute to a sense of disconnection and voyeurism that the audience finds pleasurable.

However, this pleasure in looking does not always cause the objectification of the person on screen; scopophilia can also result in identification. The "conventions of mainstream film," argues Mulvey, "focus attention on the human form" (61) and thereby also gratify a narcissistic fascination with our own likeness and self-image. This fascination is theorized by Jacques Lacan, who claims that at the same time as we develop our subjectivity and sense of "otherness" in the world we come to believe in a

more complete and capable other version of ourselves – the “ego-ideal.” This experience is reflected in the structure of the cinema, where the spectator “misrecognizes” the image of a character on screen as a perfect self.

Thus, this predilection toward scopophilia produces two contradictory forms of pleasure between which the spectator oscillates: one emerges as a result of a separation from an objectified person on the screen, and the other results from a close identification with a person on the screen. The first instinct, which finds pleasure in the contemplation of an objectified other, Mulvey – unsurprisingly – claims is directed towards the figure of the woman in traditional cinema. She affirms that this satisfaction in the act of looking aligns with the other binaries embedded in patriarchal culture, some of which I discussed in an earlier section. In a similar fashion, “pleasure in looking,” she writes, “has been split between active/male and passive/female” (62). Since this first practice of scopophilia involves taking other people as objects and subjecting them to one’s controlling gaze, it is, by definition, an active process, and therefore is associated with the male side of the binary. Thus, the female is established as its complement, the passive object of the male gaze. In fact, Mulvey argues that within narrative cinema, women “can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (62-63): the cinematic apparatus encodes women as there to be looked at and displayed, to provide erotic spectacle. This spectacle tends to “freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation” and therefore does not propel the narrative forward (63). After all, in this configuration the woman is nothing more than a titillating image, lacking the agency to advance the storyline on her own except insofar as her image provokes her male counterparts into

action. In this way, the woman's role in film – as in the culture, according to the radical feminists – is confined to that of erotic object, both for the characters within the film and for the spectators making up the audience. The female's role is constructed and legitimized by the cinematic apparatus as the passive object of a controlling, male gaze.

The second instinct, which finds narcissistic pleasure in identifying with a powerful ideal ego, is directed towards the figure of the male protagonist in traditional cinema. While the female figure's role is to be displayed as passive spectacle, the male figure's role is to control and move the narrative forward actively. Thus, unlike the female figure, who represents a one-dimensional image devoid of agency, the male figure is established as a representative of power and as someone with whom the spectator can pleasurably identify. In identifying with this commanding male figure, the spectator "projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence" (64). The camera work encourages this sense of omnipotence in the choice of edits, focus, movement, *etceteras*, which provide the illusion that the male figure has complete control over his environment as well as mastery of the female. For her part, the female is rarely depicted as performing this type of "looking." Since she does not possess any real power within the patriarchal society that gave rise to this cinema, when she does "look" within film, it does not have the cultural authority behind it to turn it into a controlling, active "gaze," as Mulvey uses the term.

Nevertheless, although the *act* of looking within the context of the cinema may be highly pleasurable for the spectator for the reasons described above, there still exists the danger that what is actually *seen* might not be so pleasurable. As Mulvey explains, "the look, pleasurable in form, can be threatening in content, and it is woman as representation/image that crystallises this paradox" (62). The danger in acknowledging and indulging the desire to gaze at the female figure is that the spectator risks being visually reminded of the threat of castration and disempowerment, since, "[u]ltimately, the meaning of woman is sexual difference" (65). The absence of her phallus is what "produces the phallus as symbolic presence" (58); in other words, the image of woman is integral to the patriarchy in a symbiotic way because it confirms the substance of man's power while also reminding him of the supposed consequences of misbehaviour.

According to Mulvey, the male unconscious has two "avenues" of escaping this castration anxiety, one based on domination and the other based on disavowal. The first, sadistic voyeurism, involves a compulsion to investigate and demystify the woman and subsequently punish or forgive her for her guilt. This avenue produces relief through domination, by projecting responsibility for the anxiety onto the female and actively punishing her for it, thereby re-asserting control. The second avenue of escape, on the other hand, can appear outside of linear time as it is focused purely on the gaze. "Fetishistic scopophilia" relieves anxiety through the complete disavowal of castration, and "the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous" (65). Thus, much like in the scenarios discussed earlier, male pleasure is ensured and anxiety is deflected either by

identifying with an active and powerful male figure who asserts control over the female, or by subjecting the female to an intense objectifying gaze.

While Mulvey's theories on the gendered gaze in cinema have been rigorously debated and disputed since her article's publication, the notion of the "gaze" has since become axiomatic within feminist film theory and therefore justifies the extended account of her originating ideas I have provided here. Her use of the concept of the gaze to expose the ways in which cinema articulates women's systemic objectification and consequent disempowerment in patriarchal society links Mulvey's theoretical discussion unmistakably with the political concerns of the radical feminists described earlier.

Indeed, although Mulvey gives these ideas a more visibly theoretical form, the use of a rhetoric linking women's liberation to sight and to acts of revealing was common in the writings of the radicals, most notably in their use of the speculum as icon. Robin Morgan, for example, writes: "Identification with the colonizer's standards melts before the revelations dawning on a woman who clasps a speculum in one hand and a mirror in the other. She is de-mystifying her own body for herself, and she will never again be quite so alienated from it" (33). Likewise, in her description of the revolutionary potential of gynecological self-help presentations, Lolly Hirsch emphasizes that it is "essential that the slides *be followed by a volunteer who demonstrates the use of the plastic speculum to view her vagina*. That moment of shared observation between women is the magic breakthrough of consciousness" (34). In these excerpts the use of sight by women to examine their heretofore "colonized," objectified bodies is conceived of as an act of empowerment, both in the literal sense that it gives them

greater control over their physical selves and in the metaphoric implication of the opening up of territories of male domination to women's view and subsequent reappropriation.

Further, it is notable that Beauvoir, too, takes up the idea of the power relations involved in looking in her discussions of the objectification of women. To some extent, she follows Sartre, who gives the famous example of a man who is voyeuristically spying through a keyhole when he suddenly realizes that someone else sees him doing so (Stone 194). While he had earlier been thoroughly engrossed in this act, he now recognizes that "he has a physical body that others can see – that he has an aspect of being a physical object as well as an aspect of being a subject" (194). This experience of being looked at as object by another threatens one's freedom as a subject, so in response "[w]e each reassert our freedom by determining to view any other person whose look threatens us as a mere object, defined by their body and by fixed properties, and so not really qualified to threaten our own freedom" (194). Returning to Beauvoir, she writes: "following Hegel, we find in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility toward every other consciousness; the subject can be posed only in being opposed – he sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object" (xxiii). In other words, in order to maintain one's own sense of subjecthood, one must label that threatening Other who looks at us as a mere object in themselves. In this way, we each set ourselves up as essential and sovereign and thereby defend against the possibility of any other subject existing, since that subject would work to objectify us.

Sartre asserts that when two people encounter one another, they each sense the other's ability to objectify them and in response they each set up this claim to essential subjectivity. Where Beauvoir diverges from Sartre, of course, is in her assertion that this relationship is not reciprocal when it is experienced between the sexes. As explained earlier, Beauvoir argues that man has set himself up as the essential, sovereign subject in relation to woman, who is the inessential object. Thus, under patriarchal culture, man objectifies woman, but woman does not objectify man in return; instead, woman has internalized the view that she is an object at the same time as she is a subject. As Young puts it: "An essential part of the situation of being a woman is that of living the ever-present possibility that one will be gazed upon as mere body, as shape and flesh that presents itself as the potential object of another subject's intentions and manipulations, rather than as a living manifestation of action and intention" (44). Woman under patriarchy is unable to contest this gaze and so its potential is internalized and she herself "become[s] at once seer and seen, appraiser and the thing appraised" (Bartky, *NFA* 134). In this way, the experience of disconnection and alienation that the radical second wave feminists identified and challenged can be conceptualized as the result of the internalization of a gaze. Young, again, elegantly summarizes this existential condition using the vocabulary of Beauvoir:

This objectified bodily existence accounts for the self-consciousness of the feminine relation to her body and resulting distance she takes from her body. As human, she is a transcendence and subjectivity and cannot live herself as mere bodily object. Thus, to the degree that she does live herself as mere body, she cannot be in unity with herself but must take a distance from and exist in discontinuity with her body. (44)

All of this is to demonstrate that while Mulvey is credited with formalizing the concept of the gendered gaze as it applies to cinema, an examination of some of the other prevalent discourses of the second wave reveals an analogous type of awareness of the significance of the gaze – in both literal and metaphoric terms – in gendered power relations. Helford, then, is apt in her judgment that whereas Bryan Forbes may not have literally developed the same type of critique of the male gaze as Mulvey, these ideas about the objectification and alienation of women through the gaze formed a part of the zeitgeist during the time they were both creating. As Helford simply writes: “the cultural changes that inspired the second-wave women’s movement emerge in Mulvey’s theoretical/scholarly conceptualization of the male gaze [as well as] in Forbes’ filmic/popular conceptualization of it” (*Gaze* 151).

Returning then to Forbes’ rendering of *The Stepford Wives*, Joanna is positioned early in the film as a woman who does not seem to fulfill Mulvey’s model of the passive female. In the second scene of the film, Joanna waits for Walter with the children in their station wagon outside their Manhattan apartment building. She is clearly in a somber mood about moving, but perks up considerably when she notices a man carrying a nude mannequin across the street, a piece of kraft paper taped over its face. She quickly emerges from the car with a camera and snaps some photographs of the scene. When Walter arrives, he chastises his wife for forgetting the dog in the apartment, commenting sarcastically: “Terrific job you did up there!” Joanna sharply replies: “I’m sorry, I thought I’d checked everything.” Walter only shakes his head in return. Their daughter then pops up from the back seats to tell him about the

mannequin: "Daddy, I just saw a man carrying a naked lady." Walter responds: "That's why we're moving to Stepford."

This early scene is significant in a number of ways. For one, this represents our first introduction to Joanna's participation in photography. We will soon discover that although Joanna represents the typical American middle-class wife in many ways – a stay-at-home mother who looks after her two children while supporting her husband's professional career – she is also a modern 1970s woman and a devoted semi-professional photographer. Her involvement in photography is one of the most significant ways in which Joanna – and her gaze – are marked as different throughout the film. Further, the appearance of the man casually toting a model of the "perfect" feminine body foreshadows what is in store for Joanna in Stepford, where she will be made to fit this imaginary ideal by literally being turned into a plastic doll that Walter may manipulate with ease. It is noteworthy as well that the mannequin's face is obscured by packing materials, for it alludes to the patriarchy's need to deny women – in the case of the Stepford men by lethal force – the capacity to look and to appropriate a powerful gaze. Additionally, Helford observes that Walter's suggestion in the scene that such spectacles are the reason he wants to leave New York City has meaning "[i]n terms of the politics of the male gaze, [indicating that] Walter seeks to control the images his female family members will see and interpret" (*Gaze* 153).

Photography, by definition, requires an active gaze, and thus Joanna's role as photographer marks her as resistant, to some degree, to the feminine codes set up by patriarchal culture which dictate she remain a passive object. Cameras themselves are

frequently coded as phallic, actively pursuing and "shooting" their subjects as if hunting wild prey or "capturing" and dominating them like sexual objects. This symbolism was well-established in cinema by 1975; in earlier films such as *Rear Window* (Hitchcock, 1954) and *Blowup* (Antonioni, 1966), "the photographer's camera [is confirmed] as a scopic symbol of phallic agency and the masculine aspiration to the mastery of meaning" (Ridgman 82). Susan Sontag, writing in the mid-1970s, endorses this view also, noting: "there is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph [is to] turn people into objects that can be symbolically possessed" (14). The choice of this "masculine" vocation by Joanna, then, appears to indicate the appropriation of an active gaze that challenges patriarchal dominance. Through her own ability to objectify with her gaze and her active production of representation, Joanna seems at times to confound Mulvey's assertion that the woman acts as image while the man is the bearer of the look. Indeed, the two scholars who have commented on Joanna's relation to the gaze within the film affirm this position; Lilly Ann Boruszkowski asserts that Joanna's "power lies in appropriating the gaze rather than being subject to it" (18), while Helford more cautiously acknowledges that "Joanna does arguably appropriate the gaze in several scenes in the film" (*Gaze* 153).

One such scene takes place shortly after the family's move to Stepford. While hanging a picture in the new home, Joanna glances through the window, where something catches her attention. She moves closer and a shot through the shadowed slats of the window frame reveals the object of Joanna's vision: her neighbour, Carol, gardening in her yard. Joanna decides to return the pot Carol gave them when she

made the family a housewarming casserole, so she exits the house with the pot and prepares to cross the road. Just after she leaves her front steps, however, Joanna sees Carol's husband appear. Ted approaches his wife from behind and places his hands on her breasts. Witnessing what appears to be an intimate moment, Joanna does not turn around and return to the house. In fact, she steps a little closer and watches Ted look down his wife's blouse and give her a kiss. The shots of Ted and Carol are clearly associated with Joanna's perspective. The two are framed in a long shot that shows their entire bodies, indicating that the person viewing them is at some distance away, much like the earlier shot through the window frame. Moreover, the presence of foliage in the foreground of each shot enhances our awareness that this watching is surreptitious and voyeuristic. As Ted kisses Carol, the film cuts now to a close-up of Joanna, who smirks faintly and raises herself ever so slightly to get a better view. She watches Carol slowly step towards the house, with Ted following, before she turns around and returns to her own house. Joanna's clear participation in voyeurism here, her ability to "freeze the flow of action in [a] moment of erotic contemplation" (Mulvey, *VPNC* 63) highlights her appropriation of an objectifying gaze. But unlike the voyeurism of the male gaze, which Mulvey considers to be seamlessly integrated into the very structure of narrative cinema itself, Joanna's status as a voyeur is made explicit here, thereby drawing conscious attention to her consistent efforts to adopt an objectifying gaze as her own. This behaviour obviously transgresses the boundaries of feminine acceptability and therefore marks her gaze as disobedient and in need of discipline from the perspective of the Stepford men.

Joanna's photography, then, acts as a symbol of her work to appropriate an active gaze, of her desire "to use her vision actively to understand the world and her place in it" (Helford, *Gaze* 153). In this way, it can be read as a "freely chosen project," an expression of her attempts at self-definition. In fact, when the owner of a gallery asks her what it is she hopes to gain from the practice of photography, she replies that she wants "to be remembered," that she wants someone someday to see a piece of art and say "that reminds me of an Ingalls" – Ingalls, she explains, was her maiden name. Here especially Joanna recalls Anticaglia's statements about identity and how, upon marriage, a woman becomes "simply a reflection of her husband" (98). Anticaglia writes:

A "Mrs." has no effect on the family status; no matter how fastidious a housekeeper, how successful a teacher, how talented a volunteer leader, society still views *you* as "Mrs. Joe Smith," the salesman's wife. If your husband is a doctor, your status steps upward; a nightwatchman's Mrs. is lower on the scale. It is with *his* job that your prestige, or lack of it, lies. (100)

Indeed, Joanna's desire for self-definition and an identity separate from that of her husband is hinted at from the opening scenes of the film. In the film's first shots, Joanna is depicted alone, first contemplating herself in the mirror and then sitting in an empty apartment, gazing pensively out the window. Neither her children nor her husband are present to label her as a mother and wife, and she does not wear a wedding ring. Our first introduction to her as a character, then, is as a separate individual, and one who is immersed in self-reflection. Furthermore, several of the shots in these first establishing scenes in New York City are clearly identified with Joanna's point of view. For example, the presence of the dashboard and rearview mirror within the frame of the initial shot of the man with the mannequin unambiguously identifies the audience's perspective with

Joanna, the person sitting in the car's passenger seat. When she emerges from the car with camera in hand, these obstructions disappear from the audience's view as we look at the man and mannequin through the lens of her camera. In fact, Walter does not make his first appearance in the film for more than two minutes, during which time Joanna's perspective is established as that of the protagonist and the one with which the audience ostensibly ought to identify.

Even when Walter finally appears and the family embarks on its drive away from Manhattan, there are several shots that clearly align with Joanna's perspective. The family's journey to Stepford is depicted through a musical montage sequence, alternating long distance shots of the car driving along the highway with shots of the occupants passing time within it. In one of these shots, Walter's face is viewed in three-quarter profile, from the side and slightly behind, as he drives. His gaze leaves the road and he looks over and down toward the passenger side, as though noticing something in the front passenger's lap or the glove compartment. Turning his head further toward the passenger side, he lifts his eyes and looks directly into the camera, an exasperated expression coming across his face. The image then cuts to a shot of Joanna replacing the lens cap on her camera and putting it in the glovebox, confirming that she had just been using it. These opening shots suggest, at least initially, a degree of agency on the part of Joanna through her use of the camera. In contrast, Walter's apparent exasperation with her camera, especially when it is pointed at him, provides the first subtle clue within the narrative that Walter interprets Joanna's photography as bothersome and disruptive.

Indeed, Walter's opinion of Joanna's photography is made clear in a set of scenes that take place some weeks after their move is complete, not long before Joanna's ultimate transformation. Though she had found herself blocked for inspiration when she first arrived in Stepford, Joanna finally makes a breakthrough while looking after Bobby's children during Bobby's (doomed) weekend vacation. Stirred by these new photographs' potential, Joanna withdraws to her home darkroom to develop them, leaving Walter in charge of all the children. When he begins to protest at the responsibility, she snaps: "I amuse them seven days a week!" before obligingly suggesting a song he can sing with them. A scene later, Joanna hurries to Bobby's house to share the good news that a prestigious gallery in New York City has expressed interest in her new set of photographs. Of course, by this time Bobby has already been replaced and a shocked Joanna rushes home to tell Walter what has happened to her new friend and greatest supporter. As evidence of there being something gravely different about Bobby, Joanna offers: "her kitchen was sparkling! ... Everything in her house looked like a TV commercial!" An angered Walter responds: "Well good! ... When are things going to start sparkling around here, that's what I'd like to know ... Look, if you paid a little more attention to your family and a little less to your goddamn picture-taking...." Although Joanna interrupts him at this moment, the connection drawn is clear – Joanna's photography (or in Walter's degraded terms, "picture-taking") distracts her from what should be the focus of her energies: her home, her children and her husband.

Once again, as viewers we tend to identify with Joanna in these scenes, particularly since Walter's protests seem largely unjustified and, in fact, self-centered given Joanna's portrayal throughout the rest of the film. Although human Joanna is obviously meant to contrast to the robot Stepford wives and therefore does not display a fixation with tidying up immediately following the family's meals or visits by company, in general the Eberharts' home never appears messy beyond mildly "lived-in." Neither is Joanna shown to be neglectful or selfish around her children. In fact, one early scene seems designed to stress her commitment to her children: while organizing photographs late one evening, she hears one of her daughters crying out. She rushes up the stairs to discover a teary-eyed Kim upset about sleeping in her new bedroom. The relatively long scene depicts Joanna using Kim's teddy bear to talk to her about her feelings about the move and then comforting her until she falls asleep. Walter is absent throughout these scenes, gone to a Men's Association meeting he will not return from until Joanna is already asleep. In addition, later in the film, when Joanna knows she is in danger and has an opportunity to escape, her determination to ensure her children's safety prevents her from immediately fleeing; in fact, she is only lured to her final entrapment in the Men's Association manor by the promise that she may recover her daughters there.

Hence, although Walter is not an entirely unsympathetic character, the film's narrative does not provide validation for his complaints, preventing the audience from easily identifying with his position. Rather, the resentment and frustration he focuses on Joanna's "picture-taking" seems overdetermined, suggesting deeper issues at stake. Given the symbolism of the camera established within the film, these deeper issues can

be understood to revolve around the threat an active female gaze could pose to the dominant social status held by Walter and the other men. Joanna's adoption of the role of conscious cultural observer and independent producer of representation threatens to expose the workings of patriarchal systems of oppression and thereby rob them of their power. From a Mulveyan, psychoanalytic standpoint, then, Walter's hostility represents "a fear of castration that threatens to move from unconscious to conscious mind as feminists reveal methods of and motives for the objectification of women" (Helford, *Gaze* 150). Thus, while photography represents Joanna's attempts at self-determination and subjectivity, for Walter and the men of Stepford it is something unruly, disruptive, and deeply threatening. Like Sartre's man at the keyhole who realizes he, too, is being watched, the men's sense of essential subjectivity is threatened by Joanna's incipient active gaze, capable of – indeed, *requiring* – the objectification of other subjects in order to assert its own subjectivity. This type of gendered conflict is summarized by Beauvoir in existential terms in an excerpt that, significantly, Levin also quotes to open his novel:

Today the combat takes a different shape; instead of wishing to put man in a prison, woman endeavors to escape from one; she no longer seeks to drag him into the realms of immanence but to emerge, herself, into the light of transcendence. Now the attitude of the males creates a new conflict: it is with bad grace that the man lets her go. He is very well pleased to remain the sovereign subject, the absolute superior, the essential being; he refuses to accept his companion as equal in any concrete way. (Beauvoir 717)

In the case of the Stepford men, this refusal is so manic and frenzied that they are willing to ensure their own position of essential subjectivity through an objectification of their wives by lethal force.

An understanding of the film's logic in this way also provides an answer to repeated objections, particularly by reviewers of the film, that the men's motives are unclear or even nonexistent. For example, writing for the *Wall Street Journal*, Joy Gould Boyum complains: "The Stepford husbands have no [...] pressing reasons behind their actions." Regarding Walter's decision to transform Joanna, she jests: "Only two motives suggest themselves and neither is particularly compelling: Joanna's children wear overalls instead of blue serge jumpers and she herself has an interest in photography." Similarly, Herbert J. Gans muses in a 1975 review that "the film never discusses the men's goals or motives" (60) and so "[w]hy the men felt so threatened by women's lib is, like many other things in the film, not made clear, [especially since] Bobby and Joanna were [not] particularly militant, nor did they contest the male domination of the town or demand equality within the family" (59).⁴ Given the reading proposed above, the obvious answer to these questions surrounding rationale is that the men feel threatened as a result of an acute sense of castration anxiety. Fear of a loss of power and their superior status is arguably motivation enough for the actions of the desperate, selfish, schlumpy type of men Stepford attracts. As Beauvoir comments: "Refusal to pose oneself as the Subject, unique and absolute, requires great self-denial" (xxxi). Although most reviewers understood Joanna's photography on its most obvious level as an indicator of her individuality and self-expression, none seemed to apprehend the deeper

⁴ This last statement by Gans is rather puzzling considering that, in addition to Bobby and Joanna both admitting to having been involved with women's liberation back in New York City, the pair object loudly to the existence of the Men's Association, attempt to organize a consciousness raising group among the Stepford women and, in Joanna's case especially, demand time for themselves in order to pursue independent goals, forcing their grudging husbands to take on more responsibility within the family.

significance of her photography for the threat its associated gaze implies. Simply put, Joanna's persistent attempts to establish an active, inspecting gaze of her own makes these men nervous, threatening as it does to see right through them and expose the methods and motivations for women's objectification and thereby rob the men of their power. Although she ultimately does not succeed in her pursuit, the threat alone of this castration is enough to account for their frantic response.

Indeed, the panic and hysteria motivating the men's insistent attempts to reappropriate the gaze is evident in the scene in which Joanna is unknowingly "evaluated" by the members of the malevolent Men's Association. Apparently, one of the first steps the men take when preparing a candidate for "Stepfordization" is to visit her home under the pretense of holding an (aptly titled) "New Projects" committee meeting there. While the committee members are receiving a tour of the house, Joanna prepares tea and coffee for the guests alone in the kitchen. With her back turned to the camera as she pours from the kettle, a blurry, dark figure silently enters the frame in the extreme foreground, his arm placed up against the kitchen's doorframe as if blocking its exit. The figure remains there unnoticed for nearly ten seconds before a startled Joanna realizes someone is watching her and whirls around. Switching to her point of view, the shadowy figure is revealed to be Diz, who offers by way of explanation for his lurking: "I like to watch women doing little domestic chores." In this moment, Diz, who has already been encoded as the men's ringleader and alpha male, coolly establishes the men's intention to simultaneously reaffirm their possession of the controlling gaze and to return her to her rightful (trivial) position as its object. As Helford argues, with Diz

"speaking of [Joanna] through a third-person plural reference to 'women,' male castration anxiety is both acknowledged and assuaged by turning the active Joanna into a passive object for male pleasure" (*Gaze* 150). Joanna composes herself quickly, however, quipping in return: "You came to the right town."

The dynamics of the gaze in an important scene that immediately follows this encounter make Diz's implied goal even more evident. As the men congregate in the living room to discuss the "new projects," Joanna plays hostess to the guests, bringing them their drinks and making small talk. In one striking moment, Joanna is depicted speaking to one of the men about making a visit to his wife. Although our attention is supposedly on their conversation, the framing and deep focus is such that Joanna and the man are seen in a medium shot in the background, while another of the men in the foreground takes up nearly a third of the screen in a medium close-up, his face turned toward the camera, responding as if having a conversation. The perspective here obviously does not belong to Joanna, but rather someone seated, watching her though not interacting with her. Given the scene's establishing shot, where we glimpsed Claude, the man in the foreground, speaking to a man sitting further back on the couch next to him, we may surmise that the person whose vision guides this particular shot is that of the grey-haired man sitting in an easy chair just to the right of the other two men. Indeed, the image then cuts to a shot of Diz and the grey-haired man sitting beside each other, the grey-haired man's line of vision confirming his careful observation of Joanna.

Joanna and Walter sit down with the other men and a new establishing shot shows that the grey-haired man has begun sketching on a large pad. Soon after the men

begin their discussion, the film cuts to a shot of the artist from behind. The back of his head and the top of his sketchpad, out of focus, occupy over a third of the screen in the foreground, while Joanna, in focus, can be seen just beyond from the waist up as she politely listens to the conversation. After a moment, Joanna's eyes idly sweep over to look in the direction of the man drawing, apparently unaware of what he is in the process of doing. The image then cuts to a tight close-up of the artist, his eyes trained in her direction, his mouth only barely visible over the top of his sketchpad, which cuts across the frame horizontally. When he looks down at the paper, we see what he is drawing: a close-up of the sketchpad and his hands reveals that he is in the process of drawing an eye. A cut now to Joanna's view of the men, who are prattling on foolishly, and then to her face, as she once more looks over to the grey-haired man, who is shown again semi-obsured behind his sketchpad in close-up. A dissolve to show that time has elapsed and another close-up of his pad shows that he is, in fact, drawing Joanna and has completed most of her face. Here, his voyeurism becomes more intense, and during another tight close-up of his profile as he scrutinizes her face we hear the auditory motif used throughout the film to draw our attention to something foreboding or amiss, underlining the increasing sense that there is more to his activity than innocent, casual sketching.

The film then cuts to a close-up of Joanna's face, which, importantly, is now shot in soft focus and bathed in warm, diffused light. Anna Krugovoy Silver draws a connection between the use of soft focus and shots of the automaton wives in the film. She notes that the first Stepford wife we are introduced to, Carol, is shot in soft focus

when she brings over the casserole early in the film, as is Charmaine when Joanna and Bobby see her for the first time after her "transformation," as is also Joanna's "replacement" when she is first seen by the human Joanna (Silver 71). As Silver notes, in each of these scenes, a contrast is created between the robots, who are filmed in soft focus, and the humans, who are consistently filmed in sharp focus. She writes: "Recalling Bobby's flippant comment about 'those good old days when *Playboy* used the airbrush,' Forbes has metaphorically 'airbrushed' the robots to emphasize their status as literalization of male fantasies" (71-72). I would add the scene described above to Silver's list even though Joanna is not yet an automaton when it takes place. In fact, it is precisely *because* the Joanna who appears in this scene is still human, and not yet an automaton, that the use of soft focus is highly significant, indicating the precise moment in the film when the men embark seriously on their mission of aggressively reaffirming their "rightful" possession of the gaze and Joanna's role in relation to it.

Returning to the moment when Joanna is being drawn, she speaks very little; progressively more bored by the men's insipid discussion, she sits quietly in her seat, often looking down at her drink. Close-ups of an actress' conventionally beautiful face in repose, such as these, typically signify the erotic objectification of the woman within Mulveyan film theory; however, the power dynamics within this section and our conscious awareness of being voyeurs prevents us from easily viewing her as a simple object of aesthetic appreciation. Instead, the aggressive process of objectification itself seems to be explicitly foregrounded. The next shot, a pan from the men on the couch over to a subdued-looking Joanna, ends with her eyes drifting up and looking directly

back into the camera. The image then cuts back to a shot of the artist, the gaze of whom she seems to be meeting. This time his sketchpad takes up half the screen, blocking his face all the way from the nose down, as though in an attempt to recede farther from public view while also maintaining a voyeuristic line of sight. Another close-up of his hands shows that he has moved on to a fresh page in order to draw the elements of her face separately now, including several versions of her eyes. As the scene closes with the men continuing to bicker and blather, the attentiveness with which the artist draws Joanna is emphasized even further; in the last shot, the camera sweeps from an extreme close-up of the eye he is sketching to a shot of the real Joanna's face, obscured completely from the eyes down by his sketch book. The hasty movement of the camera here as it follows the artist's focused gaze lends a sense of urgency and even frenzy to his actions. At the end of this shot, Joanna's eyes turn again to the camera. In these recurring moments where her look meets that of the camera, the tension between subject and object is particularly strong; rather than simply apprehending Joanna purely as an erotic object, the audience is challenged repeatedly by her acknowledgement of the gaze and we consciously experience the uneasy feeling of being aligned with an invasive gaze that insists on inspecting and dominating Joanna.

Throughout the drawing scene, the artist is depicted as examining Joanna with almost medical precision, dissecting her beauty into composite parts on his sketch pad. The emphasis is clearly on her eyes, that he must ensure they are accurately and realistically recorded. Joanna's eyes, in their connection to her camera's penetrating vision, as well as the old adage "the eyes are the windows to the soul," are strongly

symbolic of her attempts at autonomous self-definition and authentic subjectivity. They signify what the men feel needs to be destroyed and then re-created under their direction; her gaze must be re-appropriated and her representation must be redefined by them. This is suggested again at the end of this scene when the artist rips out a full-page portrait of Joanna and hands it to her as a gift, reassuring her with an amiable, paternal smile: "In case you're wondering what I've been doing." Joanna, realizing only now he is a well-known magazine illustrator, shows it to Walter, who, significantly, affirms "It's very good around the eyes."

Joanna also implies, however, that the drawing is not an entirely accurate rendition of her appearance, asking Walter: "See what you missed?" She also tells the artist that she used to "gawk" at the women he drew and that he "blighted her adolescence," implying that the women he draws are impossibly attractive, disturbing all those young women who compare themselves to his images. Later in the film she gestures to the sketch, saying: "This isn't me." Thus, the suggestion is that the portrait represents a younger, or perhaps idealized, even "airbrushed," version of Joanna's appearance, one with which she herself does not identify. Boruszkowski argues that this "provides the first overt indication in the film of the discrepancy between a woman's physical reality and the ideal which men fantasize" (17). Though the women who move to Stepford are already conventionally attractive, obviously they fail in various ways to live up to their husbands' ideals, in terms of both appearance and behaviour. Beauvoir claims that for woman, "it is not by increasing her worth as a human being that she will gain value in men's eyes; it is rather by modeling herself upon their dreams" (335). In

the case of Joanna, it is clear that she is generally more concerned with increasing her worth as a human being than modeling herself according to Walter's desires; in fact, in many ways she seeks to challenge directly those very desires which dictate she occupy the role of a passive object. Of course, within the film as within the wider patriarchal culture, the men are ultimately in possession of the power and means to enforce their ideals, and this is what is effectively communicated in the final scenes depicting Joanna's demise.

In these final scenes, we realize that the Stepford men, expressing what one reviewer describes as "idealistic insanity," are fully prepared to destroy the real women in order to install their own representations of them instead (Calloway). Although Joanna already knows that something terrible is happening to the women of Stepford, she refuses to leave town without her children and is conned into believing they are being held at the Men's Association manor. As she enters the building to retrieve them, the spectator becomes aware once again that Joanna is being stalked. High-angle shots that seem to look down on her as she enters the dark foyer convey the sense that she is being observed even in what appears to be a vacant building. Shadows from the rungs of the staircase banister are projected on the wall, reminiscent of bars. Joanna is, in fact, now trapped and will soon be "replaced."

Upon realizing this, she runs frantically through the maze-like corridors of the mansion, looking for an escape route. Behind one of the doors she flings open she finds an exact replica of her bedroom at home, containing even the family dog that had gone missing several weeks earlier. As she looks around in confusion and disbelief, a

close-up of her profile depicts her squinting as her eyes focus on something off camera. She gasps and the camera begins a suspenseful twenty-second long pan, slowly following her line of vision to the source of her horror: her automaton double, who turns to smile pleasantly, revealing opaque black glassy eyes.

Ostensibly the robot's eyes are unfinished; in an earlier scene Diz tells Joanna that her snooping forced them to rush their process and therefore they were not entirely ready for her. However, given the film's thematic use of the eyes as guarantors of the self and potential tools of empowerment, the symbolism here is particularly chilling and is meant to mark the automaton as clearly *not* the real Joanna, no matter how much she may resemble her physically. As Joanna had frantically explained to her psychiatrist earlier in the film: "There'll be somebody with my name and she'll cook and clean like crazy, but she won't take pictures and she won't be *me*."

Although she advances toward Joanna in the scene's last shot, we do not actually witness Joanna's murder by her double, so there is a slight sense of mystery in the concluding scene in the supermarket as the audience anticipates seeing Joanna and what has happened to her. Among the women of Stepford wheeling their shopping carts around the store, we see Charmaine and Bobby, the two former resisters transformed earlier in the film. As Bobby begins to steer her cart around a corner, the camera focuses on a pink sunhat at the other end of the aisle. As the figure beneath the sunhat comes into view and then turns to greet Bobby, we realize it is Joanna, outfitted in the same frilly feminine clothing as the rest of the women and speaking in the same mild tones. In the final shot of the film, Joanna selects an item from the shelf, places it carefully in

her cart, and blankly pushes it towards the stationary camera. As she approaches, her face blurs and goes out of focus, only to come back into focus in an extreme close-up of her vacant eyes. This last shot neatly echoes the first shot of the film, in which Joanna had examined herself actively and self-reflexively, and therefore serves as a clear confirmation that this indeed is no longer the real Joanna. No longer the nascent active subject identified as so threatening by the men earlier, Joanna has now undergone the ultimate objectification. As Mulvey might put it, the castration anxiety she provoked in the men has been resolved through her utter demystification and violent punishment, followed by her replacement with a comforting object of fetish.

This ending is a source of some distress and confusion – both for reviewers of the time and contemporary academics alike. The fact that Joanna does not ultimately survive has often been read as both satisfying male fantasies and slamming the plausibility of feminism's goals. Reviewing the film in *Esquire* in 1975, John Simon writes: "Its one interesting feature is its being peddled in some quarters as a feminist picture because one of the wives is *almost* smart enough to avert her doom! The film will do very little for women of any sort" (176). Betty Friedan herself walked out of a special screening of the film for feminist "opinionmakers," stating: "I don't think we should help publicize this movie. It's a rip-off of the women's movement" (qtd. in Klemesrud). Another woman at the screening, Linda Arking, fumed: "I couldn't believe the film. It dumps on everyone – women, men, suburbia. It confirms every fear we've ever had about the battle of the sexes, and it says there is no way for people to get together and lead human lives" (qtd. in Klemesrud). Even Helford, who argues for the film's

polysemy, observes that "the narrative ends on an entirely pessimistic note" (*Rip-Off* 38). Indeed, it is this "pessimism," the fact that Joanna's efforts to escape are finally proven futile, that seems to be responsible for many of the negative reactions to the film. As Boruszkowski explains: "There is a happy ending in the fictional world. The patriarchy, reinstituted, reigns supreme" (19). She goes on, however, to question: "But what about the ending in the viewer's world?" (19) Here she suggests a distinction that is often lost in the other responses to the film – that of the difference between the literal meaning of the ending within the film's narrative and the spectator's experience of witnessing it.

This is a difference that may be illustrated through reference to the filmmaking strategies of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, a German contemporary of Forbes'. Traditionally, one of the greatest criticisms leveled against the body of films directed by Fassbinder is that they are overly pessimistic. Although his films supposedly seek to raise awareness about certain fundamental issues of contemporary society and to motivate the spectator to bring about real change, his characters are frequently depicted as utterly and hopelessly complicit in their oppression. Films such as *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (1972) are often targeted by feminist critics as nihilistic exercises in depicting suffering without offering any positions of resistance or even hope. For Fassbinder, however, this was not the point. For him, the need for resistance and change is not communicated so much through the narrative itself as through the spectator's *experience* of watching the film. He readily admitted that the pervasive pessimism in his films was a conscious aspect of his filmmaking, a political tool that he used in his

attempts to shock the spectator into recognizing the true conditions of her life. In other words, Fassbinder saw it as a form of consciousness raising. As he declared:

Never mind if a film ends pessimistically; if it exposes certain mechanisms early enough to show people how exactly they work, then the ultimate effect is not pessimistic. I never try to reproduce reality in a film. My goal is to reveal such mechanisms in a way that makes people realize the necessity of changing their own reality. (qtd. in McCormick 24)

I do not suggest that Forbes necessarily had the same degree of awareness and political intention in his use of pessimism within *The Stepford Wives*; however, the effect is the same and the comparison to Fassbinder revealing. By depicting Joanna's efforts at resistance as ultimately thwarted and unsuccessful, Forbes dramatizes the persistent challenges to achieving agency and self-determination as a female within patriarchal culture. Though Joanna strove to establish an active female gaze capable of the same free agency as the male characters Mulvey describes, in the end, she lacked the greater cultural authority behind her actions to support this. In this way, the film can be read as highly sympathetic to the claims put forth by second wave feminism, particularly those of the more radical segment, which claimed that all women would continue to be oppressed unless society itself was reorganized. Thus, the pessimism of the film's ending is not necessarily incommensurate with the rest of the film if it is seen as acting as a type of consciousness raising, provoking further recognition within the spectators and thereby reinforcing the film's general critique. In fact, Silver observes that the film's narrative bears strong similarities to the consciousness raising, or CR, novel: "like the CR novel, *The Stepford Wives* includes a consciousness raising scene, and, more important, is

structured around the awakening of the protagonist's consciousness and her realization of her own personal and political oppression" (74).

This reading complements Helford's argument in her 2006 article where she posits that there are moments within the film where Joanna approximates the position of a feminist film critic (150). She writes: "Though Joanna cannot attain a truly active stance in the film according to the sexist psychoanalytic structures explored by Mulvey, she can, like Mulvey, point to them, challenging male characters' pleasures and thereby, symbolically, male viewers' pleasure in seeing films through the uncontested male gaze" (150). On a narrative level, Helford points to Joanna's retorts to Diz as an example of how Joanna identifies – and thereby critiques – the men's source of power even at the same time as she is not able to evade it (150-51). The camera work performs a similar function, Helford argues. She notes:

During scenes in which the camera traps and objectifies Joanna, the viewer is positioned to participate in the male gaze and, hence, to identify with the men of the film. Because the men of *Stepford* are all antagonists, either the film takes misogynistic glee in Joanna's demise (and, metaphorically, the death of second-wave feminism as presented in the film) or it encourages viewer discomfort in being identified with the gaze as a form of consciousness raising, sharing Mulvey's goals. (151)

As I argued earlier, throughout the film the audience clearly is invited to sympathize with Joanna as the protagonist; hence, when our gaze is aligned with the men working to objectify her the experience is unsettling and ominous rather than seamless and reassuring. This productive disruption of filmic "suture" is exemplified most clearly in the portrait scene described, where Joanna repeatedly acknowledges and confronts the

artist's intense gaze and thereby encourages spectatorial discomfort with our positioning as voyeurs, much like Helford suggests.

From this uneasy position, it is difficult for a spectator to derive satisfaction from the human Joanna's replacement by a hollow physical representation; indeed the distress that arises within the audience from witnessing this final outcome acts ultimately to reinforce the critical stance taken by the radicals of the era, as well as Beauvoir. After all, the android duplicates represent nothing less than the height of traditional femininity within patriarchal culture. In fact, Boruszkowski draws attention to how perfectly the automata demonstrate the Freudian definition of "normal" femininity: "all the characteristics that Freud assigns to women – narcissism, masochism, passivity, great need for love, lack of a sense of justice, envy, and general inferiority – delineate the mold into which the Stepford women are cast" (17). The process of being "transformed" into one of these Stepford women, then, is one of induction into ideal femininity, a homogenizing process that involves an unavoidable loss of humanity. As I have already described, the idea that normalization is in fact tantamount to a death of self was stressed frequently within the writings of the era's radicals. It is therefore especially appropriate that human Joanna's death results from strangulation with a pair of pantyhose, one of those tools of female oppression thrown by the Miss America protesters into their Freedom Trash Can; in order for Joanna to enact normative femininity, the film implies, her authentic self must die. Mirroring second wave complaints of "identity strangulation," Joanna and the other women find themselves quite literally strangled and suffocated by the norms they seek to resist.

Thus, in their role as passive, man-made erotic objects, the android wives of Stepford represent the perfectly normalized female specimen of the radicals' nightmares. They represent what Greer calls the culture's "reigning deity, the female fetish" (60). Of this fantasy female, Greer writes: "Her dominion must not be thought to entail the rule of women, for she is not a woman" (60). Similarly, in a paper that pre-dates her seminal article on the male gaze in cinema, Mulvey comments:

The message of fetishism concerns not woman, but the narcissistic wound she represents for man. Women are constantly confronted with their own image in one form or another, but what they see bears little relation or relevance to their own unconscious fantasies, their own hidden fears and desires. They are being turned all the time into objects of display, to be looked at and gazed at and stared at by men. Yet, in a real sense, women are not there at all. The parade has nothing to do with woman, everything to do with man. The true exhibit is always the phallus. Women are simply the scenery onto which men project their narcissistic fantasies. (*Mr. Jones* 56-57)

Indeed, the terror of finally becoming a Stepford wife may be understood to be the terror of the total internalization of the male gaze, of submission to a process of objectification.

The Stepford wives' basic status as fetish objects is made immediately apparent by the contrast in their exterior appearances from the imperfect human women.

Although some, like Susan Brownmiller, object that Joanna herself "looks altogether too Stepfordian from the very first scene," the robot women are nonetheless primarily distinguished from the human women through visual cues. Beyond the differing ways in which they are shot by the camera, their clothes, make-up and hairstyling mark their dissimilarity. Brownmiller and others are correct to note that Joanna and Bobby are also conventionally attractive, slender and wear make-up from the very beginning of the film; however, it is worth pointing out that this is likely more of a result of the

constraints of Hollywood filmmaking than anything else. Even so, Bobby and Joanna's make-up is spare, whereas the androids' make-up is heavy and polished, accentuated by conspicuous false eyelashes. In fact, after Bobby is transformed, Joanna calls attention to how much more make-up she now wears, exclaiming: "You never even used to clean your kitchen, much less wear make-up!" Additionally, Joanna and Bobby's lightly styled hair contrasts with the carefully set coifs of the automata. Joanna's in particular is worn very long and loose, in what was considered a modern style for the time, while the Stepford women generally maintain stiff and dated blow-out and bouffant styles.

Perhaps the greatest visual distinction made between the two groups of women is in terms of their clothing; while the androids are very rarely seen in anything other than crisp dresses and aprons, Joanna and Bobby regularly wear pants and shorts with midriff-baring or low-cut unstarched shirts. The few times when Joanna is shown wearing a dress, the garment is clingy and revealing of body shape, whereas the androids show a frequent preference for those modest, frilly, floor-sweeping maxi dresses that were popular in the 1970s largely as a result of fashion's Victorian revival, a revival that takes on a definite additional significance within the context of *The Stepford Wives*.

Further, it is evident that Joanna typically does not wear a bra; in fact, her small chest is something that is "corrected" in her replicate. In contrast, when Bobby is transformed, she draws attention to the fact that she is wearing a bra explicitly, grabbing her breasts and gushing: "How 'bout the shape? Padded uplift bra! It's true what they say in the ads." The bra, of course, is one of the most highly charged symbols of

feminism, an item that, as mentioned earlier, while not burned, was certainly thrown into the Freedom Trash Can as a symbol of female oppression. Like the other normalized housewives, post-transformation Bobby embraces such symbols cheerfully, contentedly putting them to work in "enhancing" her shape to fit the ideal.

In short, although the robot replacements are modeled on the original women so as not to arouse suspicion, part of the process of "improving" the wives involves altering their physical appearances to bring them closer to the patriarchal feminine ideal. When Joanna confronts android Bobby about her new look, she simply explains: "I just want to look like a woman," adding that her husband works hard and deserves not to come home to a slob. According to Bobby's formulation, "looking like a woman" is not only a highly important objective to realize, it also implicitly requires meeting a definition set out by her husband. Here she reflects Greer's assertion that "woman tailor[s] herself to appeal to a buyers' market; her most exigent buyer may be her husband, who goes on exacting her approximation to the accepted image as a condition of his continuing desire and pride in her" (35). Indeed, the robot wives reflect the radicals' assertion that enacting "feminine beauty" requires of woman that she regard her body as a passive object to be decorated and admired from the outside, or as Bartky puts it, as an "ornamented surface" (*Foucault* 132). Needless to say, second wave feminists had objected to this type of relationship to the body as untenable and alienating.

The bodily objectification represented by the automaton wives is especially noticeable when it comes to their sexuality, which is as thoroughly homogenized as their

appearances. In one scene, Joanna and Bobby accidentally overhear one of the Stepford wives having sex with her husband. From upstairs they hear her breathlessly enthusing: "Nobody's ever touched me the way you touch me. You're the best, Frank. Oh God, are you the best. You're the king, Frank. You're the champion, Frank. You're the master!"

In another scene, described earlier, Joanna witnesses her neighbour obediently and serenely enter the house after her husband signals his intentions by slipping his hands over her breasts. These segments make evident that the Stepford wives have been programmed, unsurprisingly, to serve their husbands' desires alone, to affirm their virility and masculinity (admittedly to comically absurd lengths) and to submit to sex whenever their husbands please. Though the wives blandly assert that their sex lives have never been better, it seems clear that they operate as sexual objects rather than sexual subjects (Silver 72). In fact, they seem to literalize what Greer refers to as "that plastic object of desire whose image is radiated throughout the media" (261). That image, Greer observes, is ultimately of a doll: "weeping, pouting or smiling, running or reclining, she is a doll. She is an idol, formed of the concatenation of lines and masses, signifying the lineaments of satisfied impotence" (60). Like this mythical woman of desire, the robot Stepford wife is a castrate or eunuch. As detailed earlier, this is to say that she is a pure sexual object, a fetish, with no subjective existence. Without a libido, her only form of lust "equals irrational submission" (60). The authors of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* confirm this as an ideal imposed upon them in their lived experience as women, writing:

we have suffered by this characterization as passive creatures, noticeably in relation to our sexuality. We are not supposed to be interested in sex – that's for men. We are not supposed to admit it if we are – that's dirty. The ideal woman *responds*, she does not *initiate*. (26)

Indeed, the sexuality exhibited by the Stepford wives is completely circumscribed by these expectations of the feminine ideal, defined as it is by passivity and a lack of any subjective involvement.

In fact, Greer's use of the term "doll" is fitting in that the androids, as pure objects, represent little more than sophisticated sex toys. An object cannot make any sexual demands of its own; the androids have no independent desire, curiosity or preconditions for reciprocation – they can only reaffirm the competence of the men. The men are thereby freed of any pesky sense of responsibility they may otherwise have for the women's pleasure, allowing them to engage in a fundamentally self-centred sex act, an act better defined as masturbation than intercourse. It takes the notion of "the utter passivity and even irrelevance of the vagina" (Greer 41) – that is, the concept of an active male performing acts upon a passive female – to the furthest extreme, so that "sex becomes masturbation in the vagina" (43).

This may be read as the men's response to the anxiety provoked by radical feminism's unambiguous emphasis on a woman's equal right to sexual pleasure and to ultimate sovereignty over her body. Additionally, feminists such as Greer and the authors of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* complained: "Our culture puts a tremendous emphasis on genital sex, but what is much more important is feeling good about the totality of your own body" (BWHC 32). Rather than accommodate women's newly identified

needs, the men retreat even further into their solipsism, guaranteeing that female sexuality can pose no threat by replacing real women with fetish objects always already determined by the men's own desires. In the bedroom, the robot women are unreserved and receptive to all advances, while in public they present pristine appearances and demure attitudes, reproducing the reassuring binary between madonna and whore that feminists had identified as so problematic for women's sexual expression.

In contrast to this, the real women present a much more unmanageable female sexuality for the men, one described by Silver as "aggressive and disruptive" (72). Early in the film, when Walter asks Joanna if she has ever "made it in front of a log fire," Joanna pointedly replies: "Not with you...." Later she explicitly acknowledges to Bobby that she did not lose her virginity to her husband. Further, when Walter mentions to Joanna that he "would like to christen every room in the house before I pay off the mortgage," Joanna replies sarcastically: "Just finish the dishes first." Walter makes an overt connection here between the financial stability he provides and the sexual gratification he expects in return; Joanna, however, ignores this expectation, essentially directing him to perform a domestic chore and cooperate with her as a peer. Hence, unlike the automata, who recognize their husbands' privilege intuitively and therefore acquiesce to their sexual demands without question, the human women tend to mock and otherwise challenge the basis of that authority in itself.

Most significantly, as Silver points out, the human Charmaine, Bobby and Joanna all vocalize criticisms of their husbands' sexual attitudes and behaviours (72). When they first meet Charmaine, she laughs with Joanna and Bobby about her husband's

sexual experiments, revealing to them with amusement that he had a "rubber suit" made for her in England. Of course, although Bobby cackles at the awkward kinkiness of this, the moment also foreshadows Charmaine's impending replacement by a real "rubber" android. In the same meeting, Charmaine bawdily jokes that the only tennis partners she has left in the town are "two teenaged boys with permanent erections." Bobby hoots that maybe she should send them to her house, but Charmaine gamely responds that she would be "lost without them." This sort of candid banter amongst the human women of Stepford is also suggestive of the ways in which they are sexual subjects rather than simple objects.

It is notable too that after Charmaine is transformed her husband has their tennis court torn up, visibly confirming that she will no longer be "playing around" with young and libidinous men. As a representative of ideal femininity, Charmaine's body is now passive and inert; the physicality of sport, which requires an active body moving out into space with intentionality, does not align with the dictates of patriarchal femininity. Similarly, our first glimpse of Bobby in the film is of her bounding exuberantly through a field of knee-high grass, animatedly hollering an introduction to Joanna. Once she is transformed that characteristic boisterousness is gone, replaced by, as Silver phrases it, "a gliding figure" who makes only small, purposeful movements, now taking up "only as much space as a woman should" (72-73). Like all the other Stepford wives, Charmaine and Bobby's "normalized" comportment reflects the claim made by many feminists that "the space available to [a woman's] movement is a constricted space" (Young 33). Young links this situation directly back to women's

bodily objectification, asserting that the root cause of women's inhibited and disconnected movements is "the fact that feminine existence experiences the body as a mere thing – a fragile thing, which must be picked up and coaxed into movement, a thing that exists as *looked at and acted upon*" (39).

Of course, radical feminists argued that women's bodily objectification was most acutely evidenced by women's lack of control over their own reproduction. The issue of abortion, in particular, represented a central issue in "the early radical feminist agenda" because "without it there could be no such thing as sexual freedom or self-determination for women," according to second waver Alice Echols (qtd. in Silver 69). As elaborated earlier, without the ability to choose whether and with whom to have children, a woman would not be able to fulfill every human subject's need to engage in freely chosen projects and accomplish fundamental self-determination. The nature of their selves, rather, would be forever determined by the things that "happened to" their bodies. Within the film, the women's ability to reproduce is also brought entirely under the control of the men; the replacements cannot have children because, as androids, they are not organic, biological beings. As Silver observes: "the film's emphasis, then, is not on women's choosing *not* to have children, but rather on women's losing the choice to *have* children" (70).

The women's incapacity to reproduce is highlighted during the scene in which Joanna confronts Bobby about her daughters' location. Desperate and frustrated with her inability to focus Bobby's attention, Joanna grabs a large kitchen knife and cuts her own finger, explaining to Bobby: "Look, I bleed. When I cut myself, I bleed. Do you

bleed?" When Bobby responds to this action with only a mild puzzlement, tutting "why, look at your hand," Joanna settles the question herself, growling "no, you look!" before thrusting the knife into Bobby's abdomen. As anticipated, Bobby does not bleed. Silver writes: "The symbolism here is overt: Joanna proves Bobby's nonhumanness and nonfemaleness by striking her in the part of the body where Bobby would carry a child" (70). She continues: "Though she looks like the perfect woman, cleans and has sex like the perfect woman, Bobby is in fact a sterile, unnatural nonwoman" (70). Silver then goes on to connect Forbes with that controversial subclass of radical feminism known as cultural feminism, a strain that is often seen as essentialist for its emphasis on celebrating women's "natural" characteristics, including especially their reproductive capacity. However, the symbolism of this moment, and the androids' relationship to menstruation in general, is more complex than this. Most obviously, this moment is easily also a reference to Shakespeare's famous line, found within the speech given by Shylock on the equal humanity of Jews: "If you prick us, do we not bleed?" Here, Bobby does not bleed as she has been utterly dehumanized and objectified, her solidarity with Joanna and the other women therefore extinguished.

More significantly, though, the scene reinforces the concept that the robots represent the patriarchal vision of the ideal feminine body – the ideal woman does not bleed. Greer explains: "we still have a marked revulsion for menstruation, principally evinced by our efforts to keep it secret" (50). A woman, she writes, "hopes she is not sloppy or smelly, and obligingly obliterates all signs of her menstruation in the cause of public decency" (39). Similarly, the authors of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* observe: "We also

learn that a woman's bodily functions are mysterious and slightly smutty. For instance, an ad for sanitary napkins says: 'When you have your period, you should be the only one who knows.' There is something shameful about our bodies" (26-27). Kate Millett, too, writes that menstruation "is largely a clandestine affair, and the psycho-social effect of the stigma attached must have a great effect on the female ego" (47). Radical feminists of the time, then, often pointed to the ways in which menstruation is viewed as a shameful, dirty and disturbing occurrence and therefore something to be diligently hidden from public awareness, a burden to be "borne and belied" (Greer 84). These writers attribute this belief not to any innate sense of secrecy or shame within menstruating women, but rather a patriarchal culture that defines woman as Other. The penalties that exist in such a culture for those who do not conform to expectations stem from "a fear of the 'otherness' of woman," writes Millett (46), and result in the "poisoning [of] the female's own sense of physical self" (47). Certainly, a large part of this taboo involves also an aversion to intercourse during a woman's period. This sexual "inconvenience" for the men is eliminated by the women's replacement with dummies, representing yet another way in which the Stepford women's sexual availability is ensured by the men.

Joanna's decision to stab Bobby is also significant for Boruszkowski, who contends: "The knife wound is traditionally a symbolic castration. Here it can have no effect on Bobby since she's already been castrated/mutilated – she has nothing more to lose" (18). Again, this strongly echoes Greer's claim that castratedness is the essential quality of the ideal feminine being within patriarchal culture. Bobby has nothing more

to lose because there is nothing left of herself, of her own subjectivity, within the homogenized object that has replaced her – “she no longer possesses a ‘self’ to defend” (18). The new Bobby perfectly represents the “female impersonator” Greer argued femininity required women to be (61), and the existential impossibility that radical feminism sought to challenge.

In this way, the Stepford women’s status as plastic objects of fetish is highlighted once more. Far from self-realized subjects, the robots are objects for others’ consumption; like the neatly packaged products they select from in the film’s supermarket finale, the wives, too, are interchangeable commodities, “manufactured and packaged to attract and please the consumers, men” (Boruszkowski 19). They represent the highest feminine ideal to which women are taught to aspire within patriarchal culture, but will also never be able to meet. After all, this ideal woman who does not age, or bleed, or desire her own sexual pleasure is finally nothing but an image, not something that can be replicated by actual human women living in chronological and biological reality. In fact, the radicals would assert that it is the very impossibility of attaining this supposed goal that ensures (human) women’s perpetual bondage and disempowerment. The automata, however, exist not as human women but as the *representation* of women, a perfect version of the patriarchal ideal. The Stepford wife embodies what Greer labels the “Eternal Feminine” – she fits Greer’s 1970 definition of this archetype exactly:

She is the Sexual Object sought by all men, and by all women. She is of neither sex, for she herself has no sex at all. Her value is attested by the demand she excites in others. All she must contribute is her existence. She need achieve

nothing, for she is the reward of achievement. She need never give positive evidence of her moral character because virtue is assumed from her loveliness, and her passivity. (58)

Indeed, in many ways, the Stepford wife forms the perfect symbol for the politics of the second wave as they pertained to the body. The Stepford wife is literally a "live doll," the very metaphor many of the radicals used to characterize the status of women within patriarchal culture. Whether it be in relation to her appearance, sexuality, comportment or reproductive ability, the Stepford woman's body is thoroughly homogenized to meet the norms of patriarchal femininity. Further, the horror within Forbes' film comes precisely from its heroines' eventual submission to these norms, a practice that would otherwise be considered natural and desirable. Like the radical feminists, the film makes the case that normative femininity requires that woman exist in a fundamentally disempowered state, one in which her objectified position as Other to the essential subject, man, prevents her from ever achieving self-definition or authentic subjectivity. The sense of self-alienation that results from this existential *situation* is felt acutely within women's everyday experiences of and relationship to their bodies, according to the writings of the second wave radicals. As a "feminist, science-fiction allegory," (Silver 74) the film renders this political stance in terms of a polarized conflict between the men who, as representatives of the patriarchy, aggressively reinforce a universal feminine ideal, and the women who desperately try to escape the total annihilation of self that would necessarily accompany their enactment of that same patriarchal ideal.

Furthermore, within the film the body acts not only as a site of contestation over autonomy and female agency in the literal sense, as in the case of the wives'

appearances, but also in the metaphoric sense, as in the case of the gendered gaze of the cinema. From this latter perspective, the dialogue between Bobby and Joanna in the stabbing scene takes on added significance. Though Joanna demands that Bobby "look" at her bleeding, it becomes clear that Bobby does not understand her intentions and therefore can no longer really "see." Joanna's comprehension of this is what motivates her to stab her friend, angrily ordering her to look at her situation. But Bobby cannot see the significance of this either, and Joanna cannot raise the consciousness of someone who does not have any. Foreshadowing Joanna's own replicate and its set of solid, unfinished eyes, android Bobby's gaze possesses no agency and poses no threat to the patriarchal order. Her impotent, newly feminized nature is summarized uncannily by Beauvoir: "Shut up in her flesh, her home, she sees herself as passive before these gods with human faces who set goals and establish values. [...] The lot of woman is a respectful obedience. She has no grasp, even in thought, on the reality around her. It is opaque to her eyes" (598).

"From what she eats for breakfast to the way she cleans her home, today's woman lives in a state of near-constant empowerment," said Barbara Klein, professor of women's studies at Oberlin College and director of [a new] study. "As recently as 15 years ago, a woman could only feel empowered by advancing in a male-dominated work world, asserting her own sexual wants and needs, or pushing for a stronger voice in politics. Today, a woman can empower herself through actions as seemingly inconsequential as driving her children to soccer practice or watching the Oxygen network."

- "Women Now Empowered by Everything a Woman Does," article from satirical newspaper, *The Onion*, February 19, 2003.

Chapter Three:

The Female Body in the Context of Postfeminism

In 2004, nearly 30 years after the original film's release, a remake of *The Stepford Wives*, directed by Frank Oz, appeared in theatres. The notion of making another explicitly feminist film this time around, however, was rejected nearly out of hand by the film's screenwriter, Paul Rudnick. In an interview included on the film's DVD issue, he comments:

Both the novel and the film were a response to kind of a first wave of feminism [sic] in America in the '70s. What one of the wives in the original film does that her husband finds terribly threatening is that she practices photography as a hobby. And the husband really found this quite an assault on his manhood. And I thought, well, we've come a *certain* way since then! So, I was fascinated by the updating we've been able to do.

In Thomas Leitch's discussion of the rhetoric of film remakes, he theorizes four different stances a remake may adopt towards its originating text (45). Rudnick's judgement that significant changes were clearly necessary in order to modernize the story of the original *Stepford Wives* indicates that the 2004 version fits Leitch's category of the "update" remake. Leitch explains:

Updates are characterized by their overtly revisionary stance toward an original text they treat as classic, even though they transform it in some obvious way, usually by transposing it to a new setting, inverting its system of values, or adopting standards of realism that implicitly criticize the original as dated, outmoded, or irrelevant. (47)

Rudnick's comments would suggest, then, that when it comes to the story of *The Stepford Wives*, gender relations have progressed to a point where the original's angst-ridden depiction of feminist struggle is noticeably – even laughably – dated by contemporary viewers' standards, provoking the need for updating.

Though Rudnick has the same tendency to minimize the symbolism used by the first film as its original reviewers did, he does have a point. In the decades that have passed since the first film's release, the concept of feminism has become much more well-established within popular culture and the mainstream media. Whereas in 1975 Judy Klemesrud remarked that *The Stepford Wives* was "one of the first films to deal with feminism in any manner," by 2004, feminism's precepts could generally be considered familiar to the wider viewing public (29). Rosalind Gill affirms this, noting: "One of the things that makes the media today very different from the television, magazines, radio or press of the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s, is that feminism is now part of the cultural field. That is, feminist discourses are expressed within the media rather than simply being external, independent, critical voices" (PMC 161). Gone, we are assured, is the hysteria and anxiety, the silly moral panic over the potential threat that feminism could pose, replaced now by a mature and principled acceptance of feminism's claims to legitimacy. As a result, the remake's move away from eerie suspense to a loud, "campy, farcical tone," can be interpreted as a product of the filmmakers' reasonable assumption

"that the dangers inherent in Stepford's sinister imagining are well-past, just as the goals of the 70s women's movement are far behind us" (Martin).

However, in his discussion of the revisionary aspects of film remakes, Leitch also observes that remakes "establish their value by invoking earlier texts whose potency they simultaneously valorize and deny through a series of rhetorical maneuvers designed at once to reflect their intimacy with these texts and to distance themselves from their flaws" (53). Therefore, he suggests, the act of disavowal – "that is, the combination of acknowledgment and repudiation in a single ambivalent gesture" – is essential to the rhetoric of the remake (53). Interestingly, though Leitch refers specifically to remakes in film, for many feminists this rhetoric of disavowal is a significantly more accurate model of the changes that have taken place in terms of feminism's representation within contemporary media as well; while the tidy narrative of feminism's success and evolution into a hegemonic force in its own right is a highly recurrent idea within popular discourse, feminist activists and academics typically are not the ones propagating it. Indeed, many of their sentiments diverge sharply from this popular vision of coherent and widespread progress. Gill is representative when she writes: "it would be entirely false to suggest that the media has somehow become feminist and has adopted unproblematically a feminist perspective. Instead, it seems more accurate to argue that the media offers contradictory, but nevertheless patterned, constructions" (PMC 161). These patterned constructions form a widely influential paradigm, one that arguably informs both Rudnick's understanding of contemporary feminism and, by extension, the particular manner in which the story of *The Stepford*

Wives is remodeled. Indeed, the fact that Rudnick can rationalize his major revisions to the narrative with such confidence is more revealing than the actual content or execution of this second film, since what these "necessary changes" ultimately speak to is the clear shift in rhetorical strategies between 1975 and 2004 within mediated public discourse about feminism.

This modified contemporary discourse can be summarized succinctly as being the essential expression of postfeminism. "Postfeminism," though referred to often in both popular and academic environments, is a term whose definition is still highly contested. Gill determines three broad senses in which the term is used today: as a signal of an epistemological break within feminism as a result of its engagement with "difference"; as a sign of a historical, temporal shift to a new era with unique and different concerns; and as a descriptor for a kind of anti-feminism or backlash against feminism (GM 249; PMC 148). Against these conceptions, she argues for an understanding of postfeminism as a "distinctive sensibility," composed of several identifiable interrelated themes (PMC 147). Central to this sensibility is a particular mode of address, one that indicates an acknowledgement of feminism at the same time as it dismisses it. It is this contradictory style of rhetoric, and the consistent pattern of its oppositions, that characterizes postfeminism as a sensibility for Gill.

In general, Gill's position is shared by other feminist media scholars, who also point to an increasingly dominant rhetoric of disavowal within mainstream discourse about feminism; Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra describe this discourse as one of "double address" (108), while Angela McRobbie refers to it as one of "double

entanglement" (255). Regardless of the terms used, these theorists all identify a popular discourse that acts to undermine the feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s, "while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism" (255). More specifically, as Imelda Whelehan writes, this discourse of postfeminism can be identified in the way feminism within the popular culture is often "at one and the same time credited with furthering women's independence and dismissed as irrelevant to a new generation of women who no longer need to be liberated from the shackles of patriarchy because they have already 'arrived'" (3). Thus, through a series of rhetorical maneuvers, postfeminism "positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force" (McRobbie 255).

The plausibility of postfeminist discourse depends, then, on a subscription to the notion that over the past 30 years the ideals of second wave feminism have been progressively adopted by the culture and therefore its goals have effectively been attained. The degree to which one may accept this claim in turn depends upon the definition of "feminism" being assumed. As discussed earlier, if one considers the second wave to be very roughly divisible into two major branches, the liberal and the radical, the liberal arm of the movement is heavily preferred over the radical arm within contemporary media representations of the "meaning" of feminism. Arguably, the media has shown a preference for publicizing this branch of feminism because it is easiest to incorporate within the larger culture's existing set of values. In contrast with

radical groups, who advocated a kind of wholesale reconstruction of the system of power itself and were against the idea "that women should be integrated into the male world so that they can be 'just as good as men'," the goal of liberal organizations such as Friedan's NOW was mostly to accomplish just that: an "integration of women into the main fabric of society" as it already existed (Kreps 238). By defining feminism to mean a type of liberal feminism, the media may present women's inequality as fundamentally an issue of access: eliminate the social barriers to the public sphere for women and any inequality is also eradicated (Dow, *PTF* 38). This working definition of feminism presumes that "given the same opportunities as a man, a woman's success or failure from that point on is solely a matter of individual choice and/or ability" (38). However, as Dow notes: "This presumption, serving as the 'essence' of feminism, requires the least ideological adjustment from men and from the culture at large (and, concomitantly, the most adjustment from women themselves)" (88). Further, this means of course that "the most radical aspects of feminism, those centered in sexual politics and a profound awareness of power differences between the sexes at all levels and in all arenas" – and therefore a greater structural critique – are absent (88).

This is the feminism that postfeminism invokes as having achieved its objectives and having ensured women's autonomy, a claim that gains credibility from the publicized inroads that have, in fact, been made in terms of opening space for women's participation in work outside the home, for example. Of course, the degree to which even liberal feminism's goals have been attained is highly debatable; nevertheless,

within the logic of postfeminism, second wave feminism means liberal feminism and liberal feminism has been entirely successful in its aims.

According to this postfeminist discourse, feminism's legacy is now evident in a woman's life in the way she "is entitled to define herself, express her beliefs, and make her own life" (Wolf qtd. in Dow, *PTF* 216). To the extent that women reflect a type of feminist empowerment, it is expressed through the individual decisions and choices they make freely now on their own behalf. Women may breathe easy with the assurance that they may structure their individual lives as they personally see fit and that their decisions are essentially self-determined. Thus, as McRobbie observes, "what is proposed is a movement beyond feminism, to a more comfortable zone where women are now free to choose for themselves" (259). Indeed, Gill asserts: "The notion that all our practices are freely chosen is central to postfeminist discourses, which present women as autonomous agents no longer constrained by inequalities or power imbalances whatsoever" (*PMC* 153). To put it in Beauvoir's terms, women are no longer doomed to act as man's Other, having finally gained the status of essential subject in their own right.

Hence, the message conveyed by postfeminism is that feminism's triumphant success has guaranteed that all choices made by women are now fundamentally autonomous. For this reason, these choices, regardless of how they are manifested, must not be subject to the same generalizing assumptions made about women's behaviour in a "pre-feminist" era. Within postfeminism's liberated climate, then, anything is possible, even choosing to withdraw from the public sphere altogether or taking on

what might have once been labeled sexist or objectified positions; since such decisions are now freely made, they cannot have resulted from exploitation or subjugation. In fact, by virtue of them being made from a position of independence and rational self-interest, they are in themselves proof of feminism's rich success.

This postfeminist rationale has appeared with increasing frequency in the mainstream media. As early as 1989, for example, the *New York Times* published an opinion editorial about women leaving the workforce to raise children entitled "Women Must Respect the Choices of Women." In it, the author claims: "The operative word here [...] is choice. For the first time in history, many women can use it freely and truthfully" (Molinelli). In a similar 2003 piece about well-educated women exiting the workforce entitled "The Opt-Out Revolution," one woman explains: "Women today, if we think about feminism at all, we see it as a battle fought for 'the choice.' For us, the freedom to choose work if we want to work is the feminist strain in our lives" (qtd. in Belkin 49). And in a 2005 *USA Today* article titled "Hip, Happy Housewives," the writer comments: "Younger women today, many of whom have boomer moms who tried to balance career and kids, say they have nothing to prove. They know women can reach the top in the workplace, so they'd just as soon spend some time at home" (Jayson). Tasker and Negra note that this attitude is communicated particularly strongly in many films of the late 1990s and 2000s, which frequently "stage the choice to arrive at the traditional as 'empowered' and the 'best' option" (108).

Hence, within postfeminism, the mantra "feminism is choice" comes to be read in the reverse, with any and all individual choices made by females being inherently

feminist and therefore empowering. Or, to use a different second wave slogan, “the personal is political” – that is, of course, “the idea that what women viewed as personal, individual problems could be traced to the political status of women living in a male-dominated and male-defined society” – is turned around so that the political is expressed by the personal (Dow, *PTF* 209). In this way, Dow argues, “a set of political ideas and practices is transformed into a set of attitudes and personal lifestyle choices. Feminist politics become feminist identity. Feminist identity, in turn, is defined by appearance, by job, by marital status and by personality, not by political belief or political practice” (209). Feminism becomes an identity one cultivates *within* the status quo based on the choices one makes and how they are framed rhetorically.

This feminism defined by, as Dow puts it, “enlightened self-interest” (211) is the attitude lampooned by the spoof news article quoted to begin this chapter, which mockingly elaborates on “a new strain of feminism [that] has emerged in which mundane activities are championed as proud, bold assertions of independence from oppressive patriarchal hegemony.” The self-serving aspect of postfeminist rhetoric is parodied also in a recent episode of the CBS sitcom *The New Adventures of Old Christine* when the main character, Christine (Julia Louis-Dreyfus), considers getting cosmetic surgery. When she tells her ex-husband of her plans to visit a surgeon for a consultation, he challenges her: “I thought you were a feminist.” Christine responds: “Yeah, exactly, that’s right, I am. So I don’t need some *man* telling me I can’t have plastic surgery to look good for my *man*.” Later, when she arrives for her appointment, she rationalizes to the receptionist: “I’m doing this for me. It’s all about *empowering me*

as a *woman*." She reveals the shallowness of these self-affirming statements, though, when she becomes distracted by the receptionist's breasts, stopping mid-sentence to ask her: "What size are those? Did you get those here?"

In fact, the example from *Old Christine* is doubly revealing for it not only satirizes the rhetoric of postfeminism in general, like the *Onion* article does, but also points to the particular consequences this rhetoric has in terms of popular conceptions of the body. In this way it serves to highlight the mass-mediated discourse about the relationship of feminism to the body that is prevalent today and how it differs from that of the second wave. Indeed, postfeminism's distinctive emphasis on expression through individual choice is played out especially clearly in terms of the body, where women are exhorted to express their autonomous selves through a body they actively choose. This development is understandable when one recognizes the essential role that notions of self-government and the significance of personal choice occupy in the discourse of postfeminism. Again, these concepts arguably became central to postfeminism because they were the second wave ideals that could most easily be incorporated into the status quo, aligning as they did with other prominent contemporary discourses, the outlines of which are provided briefly in what follows.

The concept of "choice" may be seen as key not only to feminist discourse, but also to the dominant discourses of late modernity in general (Askegaard, Gertsen, and Langer 798). In contrast with early modern Western societies, where one's social identity was in large part fixed by birth and by particular institutions, identity is best understood these days, according to thinkers such as Anthony Giddens, as an

independent, self-directed accomplishment. As Valérie Fournier explains, the individual is “constituted as an autonomous subject, with a responsibility, and an interest, in making up him/herself in certain ways (e.g. healthy, happy, self-actualized)” (58). Self-identity is no longer a given, then, but rather is “a reflexive project that each individual must undertake by him- or herself, but in interaction with other human beings and with the institutions of society” (Askegaard, Gertsen, and Langer 797). The individual choices a person makes become crucial in such a scenario as they will be read as constitutive of the self by the rest of society. Moreover, as Anne Cronin observes, “within this politics of choice, we have *no choice but to choose* if we are to express ourselves as individuals, and self-expression is the cornerstone of [such] politics of identity” (279).

The notion of the reflexive self is supported also by the discourse of consumer capitalism, which promotes the idea of an authentic inner self that can (and should) be expressed successfully through consumption practices and mediated symbolic materials. Llewellyn Negrin elaborates: “Whereas in the past, individuals were seen to have an identity apart from the goods they possessed, in the present era, one’s identity is defined in terms of the image that one creates through one’s consumption of goods” (111).

Joanne Finkelstein affirms this, noting that in modern society, “we have fused together the capacity for conspicuous consumption with the presentation of personality” (5).

Mike Featherstone refers to this new reflexive, consumerist conception of self as the “performing self,” explaining: “Within consumer culture individuals are asked to become role players and self-consciously monitor their own performance” (189). This

performance extends to the body: "Appearance, gesture and bodily demeanour become taken as expressions of self, with bodily imperfections and lack of attention carrying penalties in everyday interactions" (189). In other words, "[t]he individual is increasingly seen as responsible – not just for its behaviour – but also for the appearance and workings of his or her body" (Askegaard, Gertsen, and Langer 800). The body is therefore not seen as fixed at birth, but is yet another product of one's efforts and the choices one makes, particularly in terms of consumption. This is reflected, for example, in an ad for the dermal filler Restylane (see fig. 1), where the woman depicted "defines herself" in terms of the set of cosmetic products she chooses to consume. Thus, the body and self are understood within late modernity as the conscious creation of a rational actor, of an "autonomous and sovereign subject, free (but responsible) to invent him/herself" (Fournier 58).

Bordo describes this construction of identity as one of "plastic possibility and weightless choice, undetermined by history, social location, or even individual biography" (UW 250-51). Indeed, the notion of "plasticity," she observes, is one of the dominant paradigms of our age, citing the cultural "intoxication with freedom, change, and self-determination" (245). These "fantasies of rearranging, transforming, and correcting, [...] of limitless improvement and change" are applied just as feverishly to the body, which is presented not as a finite material, but as a form of cultural plastic, an object that individuals can, and should, work to perfect (UW 245).

This, then, is the greater cultural context within which postfeminist discourse hails its subjects as autonomous individuals whose empowerment is expressed through

their exercise of choice. Given the ideological stance of the original *Stepford Wives*, one would be forgiven for anticipating that its comedic remake might spoof and thereby critique this discourse, particularly its rhetoric surrounding the body; however, as indicated earlier, this second film is also a product of its time. Thus, rather than commenting on the contemporary popular discourse about feminism, the 2004 remake replicates it, apparently uncritically. In the process, it effaces what was arguably at the heart of the original film's story of human women's replacement by perfect androids – that is, the political significance of the actual *body* of the Stepford wife.

Within this second film, Joanna (Nicole Kidman) is reimagined as a tightly wound, shrill Manhattan careerist. She is president of a large television network that produces reality shows centred on the battle of the sexes, contests in which the women seem always to come out on top. Walter (Matthew Broderick) is now depicted as Joanna's subordinate, a "lowly" vice president who feels outdone by his tremendously successful wife. After her unexpected firing from the network, however, Joanna experiences a nervous breakdown and she and Walter move the family to Stepford as a way to save their marriage, which Joanna blames herself for having neglected. For its part, Stepford is no longer a sedate and traditional New England village, but a wealthy and conservative gated community.

As in the original, Joanna meets and befriends Bobby (Bette Midler) – now a caustic author of bestselling self-help books – soon after her arrival in Stepford. Instead of Charmaine, Joanna is introduced to Roger (Roger Bart), a campy, gregarious gay man who often embarrasses his uptight, Republican partner. As expected, Joanna's

newfound allies mysteriously begin conforming to the Stepford ideal, including first Roger, whose transformation translates into his becoming more reserved and serious, and then Bobby. Eventually, Joanna is lured to the Men's Association, where her as-yet-lifeless body double is deliberately revealed to her and, in the scene's final shot, she and Walter are lowered into a secret underground room, where we understand he will have her changed. As in the first film, the next time we glimpse Joanna, she is placidly pacing the aisles of the Stepford supermarket, clad in a frilly, pastel dress and high heels, her conversion marked most clearly by the transformation of her previously short, severe, dark hair into a long, delicate, blonde mane.

Unlike the original film, however, the story does not end here with Joanna's tragic demise. In the subsequent finale, it is revealed that Mike (Christopher Walken) – the remake's equivalent of Diz – is, in fact, a robot replacement himself, a creation of his jilted and maniacal human wife Claire (Glenn Close), a former neuroscientist and genetic engineer. It is Claire, then, who is ultimately behind all the android replacements populating the town. Further, we learn that Walter had a change of heart and never actually went through with Joanna's transformation; rather, the couple cooperated in faking it so that they could escape and go on to free the other women, and Roger, by somehow de-programming them. Finally, in a coda tacked on to the end of the film, the recovered Joanna, Bobby and Roger giddily recount their ordeal to Larry King on his televised talk show.

In the interviews included on the DVD release of the remake, the film's writer, director and actors try, at times, to position the film as an example of social commentary;

whatever commentary exists, however, it certainly has very little to do with a critical assessment of gender ideology. Indeed, nearly every hint of feminist critique present in the original film has been disavowed within the cartoonish remake, where all the (pre-transformation) female characters are portrayed as hyper-successful in the public sphere and victorious in the mythical battle of the sexes. In this way, the film reflects the popular discourse of the contemporary moment and its muddled message about the nature and influence of feminism today.

Most significantly, the second film clearly reflects the postfeminist assumption of fundamental gender equality and its corresponding emphasis on individualism. The ultimate challenge for this version's Joanna is not to overcome endemic, structural gender inequality, but to learn to make individual, personal compromises in the interests of romantic love. As director Oz explains: "The movie's about the acceptance of imperfect love [...] The heart of it is about this couple trying to work things out, and I think we can all relate to that" (qtd. in Fine). Conflict or resentment in a marriage or personal relationship, according to both postfeminist logic and the remade film, have nothing to do with larger structural inequalities and expectations, but simply with human flaws, which are universal. Indeed, when Joanna is confronted with Walter's unhappiness, she blames herself for their marital problems and in response makes concerted attempts to fit into Stepford's ideal long before her supposed transformation. The film, Nina K. Martin observes, repeatedly implies that "gender troubles are to be overcome by personal changes made in order to solidify the institution of marriage – an institution that does not need to be further criticized or questioned." In fact, during her

interview with King at the film's "happy" ending, Joanna affirms the lesson she has learned in the importance of acceptance and compromise in marriage. Displaying a short hairstyle once more, though this time of a considerably softer blonde colour, Joanna smiles benevolently at her husband standing offstage and explains: "we're doing just great because now we know for sure it's not about perfection. Perfect doesn't work." Thus, within the film relationships of domination are portrayed as isolated, individual occurrences, an interpersonal problem rather than a societal one, solved through flexibility and compromise. In this fashion, writes Martin, what was in the original film a "threat to *all* women" becomes in the remake "a more localized and specific threat toward highly successful *people*, women and men, who overshadow their geeky spouses in both ambition and ability."

This viewpoint is perhaps made most apparent in the inclusion of a gay male couple in the new Stepford. Although the partnership's addition is interesting for its representation of changing social mores, including a "Stepford husband" ultimately works to uphold the atomized notion of power communicated by postfeminist discourse. Within the film's logic, the domination of a stereotypically effeminate gay man by his more butch male partner is functionally equivalent to the domination of a heterosexual woman by her husband, a baffling suggestion when one considers the larger structures of power supporting each male oppressor's actions. From a greater social, structural perspective, both gay men are already oppressed by a still homophobic patriarchal society; thus, the subjugation they are capable of enacting on one another, though real, is significantly different in kind from that which a heterosexual man is able

to exploit. Moreover, the reasons why the more “feminine” partner in the gay couple would be singled out for correction is presumed by the film to be self-evident, so that the cultural roots of such an assumption are left completely unexplored.

Hence, the desire for a perfectly subservient mate is presented in the second film not as a product of male anxiety, but simply the result of an individual spouse feeling stifled, overshadowed or otherwise dissatisfied with their partner. Indeed, the ultimate villain of the remake is not men’s collective desires at all, but rather a solitary lunatic, a female no less, who reveals – with a further sweep of egalitarianism – that according to her plan even the men would eventually have been replaced by robots too. Such gestures of equivalence indicate especially the lack of political significance the film assigns to the gendered body.

In fact, in terms of the body, there is a certain irony to Kidman being chosen for the lead role, since she has increasingly come under media scrutiny precisely for her “excessive” dependence on Botox and other facial procedures. An issue of *Radar* from late 2007 (see. fig 2), for example, features an image of Kidman’s head digitally fused onto a Barbie’s body on the cover, with the accompanying headline: “Help! I Can’t Move My Face!” If there was any awareness of Kidman’s cultural status at the time of filming, however, it does not seem to have been satirized or otherwise acknowledged in any way.

Indeed, the body is one of the most obvious sites through which gender difference has continuously found expression, and yet the awkward remake avoids this theme entirely. In fact, the second film cannot seem to even make up its mind about

whether the Stepford wives are robots with transplanted brains, or surgically altered women with nanochipped brains, or some other option. The Stepfordized Bobby places her hand in the flame of a stove's element and feels no pain, and one of the other wives literally functions as an ATM and dispenses dollar bills, yet when Walter sneaks into the men's secret room in the finale, he seems able to reverse the changes to the women simply by corrupting the computer programs guiding their sets of implanted nanochips. This incoherence likely stems from the film's well-publicized production difficulties, which included repeated reshoots after test screenings; at the same time, however, this convoluted jumble of messages may be seen as actually reproducing postfeminism's attitude toward the body – albeit unintentionally – by literally reflecting the rhetoric of bodily plasticity and infinite malleability described by Bordo.

Although the remake unfortunately does not address the postfeminist body in any decipherable way, it should be clear from the discussion earlier that the conception of the relationship between feminism and the body implied in postfeminism's rhetoric of choice is starkly different from the one put forth in the second wave. Bordo sums up this opposition when she observes that whereas in the late 1960s and 1970s the "imagination of the female body was of a *socially* shaped and historically 'colonized' territory," postfeminist discourse essentially treats the body as "a site of individual self-determination" (UW 21). As already elaborated in the first chapter, the objectification of the body was identified by the radicals as one of the primary means by which women were oppressed within a resolutely patriarchal culture. To endure this objectification meant existing in a state of alienation, cut off from any genuine capacity for agency and

self-determination. Thus, in the original version of *The Stepford Wives*, the male gaze was depicted as an aggressive, colonizing force, with the eventual internalization of its standards portrayed as tantamount to an annihilation of self. In sharp contrast to this, postfeminist discourse regards the objectified body as a primary vehicle of self-expression, a medium through which to convey one's authentic self to the world. This bodily objectification is not experienced as something imposed from the outside against one's will; on the contrary, the body is an object of the manipulations of one's *own* free will. The only gaze involved, then, is one's own, assessing reflexively whether or not the body is expressing the authentic self accurately.

Though this rhetoric is not clearly foregrounded in the garbled 2004 version of *The Stepford Wives*, its predominance may be demonstrated through an examination of other characteristic contemporary popular texts. It is conspicuous, for example, in a recent article in the women's fashion magazine, *Elle*, written by their "beauty adventuress," Holly Millea. In the piece, Millea expresses a persistent sense of bodily dissatisfaction that is nearly identical to the one described by second wave radicals such as Dana Densmore. Millea writes: "My whole life I've been pear-shaped. The only way I could thin my lower half was by going to extremes. Speed, diet pills, liquid diets, starvation, barfation, over-exercise-ation – all ending in self-loathing lamentation" (292). Eventually, she says, she gave up trying because she had to direct her efforts towards finding a career; plus, she notes: "I got tired of my body begging me to let it be what it wanted to be – biggish" (292). Throughout the article, she writes of her body in these alienated terms; her body is an infuriating, resistant object, made of curves she needs to

"conquer" and fat cells she refers to as "the bane of my existence" and, simply, "fat fuckers."

While Millea's description of her lived relationship to her body is very similar to the one described by members of the second wave, where she differs from them is in her reaction and proposed solution to this "self-loathing lamentation." For Millea, the answer (and the implied "beauty adventure") is to get plastic surgery; more specifically, liposuction to expunge finally those "two pounds of squatter cells I've spent my entire life trying to evict" (294). Of course, Millea is writing for a mainstream women's beauty and fashion magazine, and therefore the promotion of normative body ideals is still not altogether surprising; what is striking, however, is the rhetoric used to support her adoption of these ideals. After Millea has the surgery, she reviews the results:

Honestly, although I sucked out a couple pounds, I now weigh more than usual. But the extra weight doesn't bother me one bit because I'm in proportion now. I sold my medical scale on eBay. I know I'll catch hell for this, but I wish I'd lipo'd ages ago – it would have spared me years of self-criticism and dieting. Then again, I hadn't yet met the man of my dreams [her doctor] – the one who put my body and sense of self into proportion. (296)

Millea's repeated use of the word "proportion" here is noteworthy as it serves to equate the attainment of physical symmetry (in itself a highly slippery concept) and the attainment of a balance between her inner self and her body's expression of it.

Simultaneously, she avoids anticipated charges of vanity by indicating her ultimate motivation was to accomplish this mystical "proportion," not simply to be thinner.

Thus, the suggestion is that the surgery helped to correct an imbalance – her body was not adequately representing the subject inhabiting it and so it needed to be adjusted.

Most significant, however, is how this action is framed by Millea as ultimately an *empowering* one since, after all, it released her from that impossible cycle of bodily dissatisfaction and self-abuse. Of course, her newly “self-actualized” body is proportionate in one other obvious, but unspoken, way: it more closely approximates cultural ideals now (her goal, in fact, was to reduce her thighs enough that she could fit into a size *six*). However, any normalizing pressures that may have been responsible in part for her negative feelings in the first place are evaded in favour of a rhetoric of self-affirming, even defiant, individual choice. Bordo notes that through these types of rhetorical maneuvers “a nearly total inversion is effected, and the normalized body becomes *the* body of creative self-fashioning, even the body of cultural resistance” (Foucault 197-98).

It is no coincidence, either, that two of the advertisements that appear facing the text of Millea’s article are for cosmetic nonsurgical procedures – one for Botox and the other for Juvéderm (an injectable gel). Needless to say, the postfeminist rhetoric of individualism and self-expression espoused by Millea serves commercial imperatives well. In fact, her rhetoric is mirrored by these advertisements, particularly the one for Botox (see fig. 3).

“Botox,” a brand name for Botulinum Toxin Type A, is a potent “neuromuscular toxin” that temporarily weakens or paralyzes muscles by blocking nerve signals (ASAPS). Botox’s use as a wrinkle-reducer is by now so well known that the ad appearing in *Elle* need not even explicitly state the serum’s function. Rather, it features a woman demonstrating three different facial expressions, with the tagline, “It’s all about

freedom of expression... ask your doctor about Botox Cosmetic." A nearly identical ad appears in a recent issue of Oprah Winfrey's decorating magazine, *O at Home* (see fig. 4), only the woman depicted in this version is older, presumably indicating an attempt to reflect the different age demographic each magazine reaches. In either case, the ad campaign's reference to "freedom of expression" is likely, on some level, an attempt by the marketers simply to deflect the reputation Botox has gained for producing frozen, expressionless faces. In doing so, however, it makes use of the same rhetoric as Millea and postfeminist discourse in general, urging the reader: "Don't hold back! Express it all! Express yourself by asking your doctor about Botox Cosmetic." Quite explicitly, the ad likens expressing oneself – i.e. externalizing one's thoughts, feelings and beliefs – with making physical alterations to one's body (or simply asking a doctor about the procedure to do so). Further, the word "freedom" invokes notions of fundamental autonomy and the postfeminist claim to personal choice made independent of undue outside influence.

The connection being drawn becomes even more clear in a separate (and bizarre) marketing alliance for 2008, an election year in America, between Allergan – maker of Botox – and the League of Women Voters. The advocacy group and Botox are aligned in a vague "initiative" referred to as "Women on Film, Empowerment & The Political Process," with actress Virginia Madsen employed as its spokesperson (see fig. 5 for a screenshot from the webpage). Upon visiting the campaign's website, we are told that the two organizations "teamed up to encourage women to express themselves through

the political process and by making choices about how they live.” A statement from Madsen available on the website clarifies further (sort of):

Today’s women have so many ways to express themselves. [...] One thing we all have in common is that we have more choices available to us today than ever before – choices that the generations before us didn’t have. [...] The campaign encourages women to express themselves openly and honestly – something I do in both my personal and professional life – and underscores the importance of making educated, informed choices about life and beauty. [...] This year, I can think of no better way to express myself than to take an active role in the political process and encourage others to do the same. [...] I encourage all of you to exercise your freedom and express yourself in your own unique way, this year and every year!

Though the statement attributed to Madsen does little to elucidate on what, exactly, the campaign involves, it does emphasize the heavy investment in postfeminist discourse and logic within Botox’s advertising. Madsen stresses the importance of women expressing their political will and ensuring their own interests are served by participating in the upcoming election, and throughout her statement she affirms generic notions of democratic choice that seem implicitly to refer to voting rights. At the same time, however, she advocates for a more vague, general right to individual expression and freedom of choice, one that includes her “treatment” with Botox, which she “approached [...] as I do all things in my life – I informed and educated myself, and made the right decision for me.” In a dizzying fashion, then, the campaign equates the significance of informing oneself about and carefully considering political candidates with the significance of informing oneself about and carefully considering beauty procedures. The expression of one’s individual choice through the electoral ballot is rendered equivalent to the expression of one’s individual choice through the purchase of

a consumer product. Finally, this relationship is made utterly transparent in the video message from Madsen, which ends with the slogan: "Register, vote and be heard – it's all about freedom of expression." With the repetition of Botox's print tagline here, the equivalence between voting and using Botox is made entirely explicit. Within postfeminist discourse, the differences between these two activities, particularly in terms of communal engagement, are erased as all individual choice is said to be equally self-affirming and empowering, regardless of the realm within which it may be expressed.

Again, this reflects that "conflation of feminist *identity* with feminist *politics*" observed by Dow, where agency often amounts to little more than commodity fetishism (PTF 207). As bell hooks notes, this highly individualist conception of feminism means that the "movement can embrace everyone, since it has no overt political tenets. This 'feminism' turns the movement away from politics back to a version of individual self-help" (qtd. in Dow, PTF 212). Furthermore, it provides a type of defense to protect the actions one does choose to take as automatically feminist and therefore unassailable. This is suggested in the clip from *Old Christine* referenced earlier: immediately after telling her ex-husband about her surgery consultation, Christine tries to pre-empt any criticism by solemnly declaring: "Don't say anything! My body, my choice." Christine's use of a second wave slogan that referred to women's right to abortion in order to rationalize her right to cosmetic surgery is a cause for laughter within the show, but the moment parodies a pattern that is very real within cultural discourse.

Indeed, the television show's satirizing of postfeminist discourse specifically in relation to cosmetic surgery is fitting, as this rhetoric is increasingly being used not just

to promote products like Botox, but also to normalize other, more invasive, cosmetic surgeries. For example, the Canadian French-language fashion magazine *Clin d'Oeil* recently devoted an issue to a "plastic surgery special," consisting of a set of articles extolling the powers of various injections and procedures with which to "sculpt" the body. Among the advertisements appearing within the issue is one promoting breast enlargement surgery for a local plastic surgeon (see fig. 6). The tagline for this ad simply reads: "C'est ce que je veux!" ("It's what I want!"). Much like in the *Old Christine* parody, cosmetic surgery is presented here as an act of self-affirmation, a bold expression of one's inner desires. The implicit suggestion is that such desires are self-generated and therefore to actualize them is an act of self-love and empowerment. In this way, postfeminist discourse is taken up as a means of rationalizing expensive, elective surgery which might otherwise be seen as conformist, framing it instead as autonomously chosen, a matter of personal preference alone and therefore unimpeachable. In fact, the phrase "It's what I want" bears a striking similarity to "I'm doing it for me," the phrase Bordo identifies as so often wielded to defend the choice to have cosmetic surgery nowadays (TZ 32). As Bordo writes: "In these constructions, 'me' is imagined as a pure and precious inner space, an 'authentic' and personal reference point untouched by external values and demands" (32).

Of course, as Bordo's comments imply, the one glaring, unresolved contradiction to such a claim is the uniformity of the vast majority of changes made to bodies through cosmetic surgery: breasts are plumped, thighs are slimmed, noses are reduced. With such a priority placed on individual preference and autonomous choice, one would

expect to see a wild eclecticism in terms of bodily self-expression; instead, the opposite seems to be true. As Mary Rogers puts it: "Rather than customizing their bodies, [...] many people [are] standardizing them" (123). In other words, most procedures, regardless of the rhetoric used to support their undertaking, result in highly normalized bodies. Thus, while such surgeries may be an understandable and even practical choice for a person to make on an individual level, on a general, cultural level, they do speak to contemporary processes of normalization. Bordo refers to this arrangement as one of "free choice under pressure": the final decision remains up to the individual – no one has a gun to anyone's head – but, at the same time, it would require willful blindness to ignore the coercive power of cultural norms.

The compelling and continued influence of cultural norms is exactly what is overlooked in descriptions of the modern reflexive self, and by extension postfeminist discourse, says McRobbie. She objects:

[They are] inattentive to the regulative dimensions of the popular discourses of personal choice and self improvement. Choice is surely, within lifestyle culture, a modality of constraint. The individual is compelled to be the kind of subject who can make the right choices. By these means new lines and demarcations are drawn between those subjects who are judged responsive to the regime of personal responsibility, and those who fail miserably. Neither Giddens nor [Ulrich] Beck mount a substantial critique of these power relations which work so effectively at the level of embodiment. (261)

McRobbie's point is clearly evidenced, for example, in the ritual drawing and redrawing of the lines of bodily acceptability in the glossy tabloid magazines that are currently popular. Within these magazines, the bodies of celebrities are regularly inspected and critiqued in highly objectified terms. The cover of a recent issue of one of these

magazines, *Life & Style Weekly* (see fig. 7), reads simply: "BEST AND WORST NEW BODIES," alongside photographs of people – all women – whose celebrity status is made secondary to a scrutiny of their bodies at the level of object alone. Four out of the six celebrities featured are singled out for specific body parts in isolation – their "crazy boobs" or their "scary arms," *etceteras*. This sort of visual breakdown of acceptable and unacceptable body parts serves to legislate the parameters of bodily norms and desirability.

This regulatory dimension is equally apparent in an advertisement for GMC pickup trucks printed in the 2008 "swimsuit edition" of *Sports Illustrated* (see fig. 8). The two-page spread features a bikini clad female model posing seductively in a hammock on what appears to be a beach. Her appearance would seem to fulfill patriarchal body ideals exactly: she is young, thin, white, blonde, tanned and, with her direct but nonthreatening gaze outwards and slightly pursed lips, appears sexually available. Nonetheless, a line beside her bent arm draws attention to a written critique: "Elbow too pointy." At the bottom of the page, further context is provided through the tagline, which reads: "Expect perfection." The scenario is repeated in another ad from the same campaign that appears a few pages later, only this model has a small freckle noted on her hip. It could be said that the advertisers are attempting to be droll through a weak attempt at irony, but even so this does not mitigate the lesson being taught in *how* one ought to look at a body. As in the previous example, we are encouraged to separate bodies into component parts that may then be assessed in terms of cultural ideals. No one is beyond this dissecting gaze, we learn; even those whose bodies appear already to

enact the dominant ideals successfully may be improved in some small way to bring them closer to "perfection," the attainment of which should be our ultimate goal (or "expectation"). Furthermore, it is the female body specifically that is established within this campaign as the natural object of an appraising gaze. Given these ads' positioning in a magazine heavily aimed toward men, the gaze here is unambiguously set up as male; however, it is clear from the examples from tabloid magazines – traditionally considered to be aimed toward women – that this male posture of inspection and judgement in relation to female bodies is to be adopted equally by women themselves.

As McRobbie's statements suggest, through these sorts of popular texts we are clearly taught what the "right" choices for our bodies are already considered to be, particularly for those who identify as women. Similarly, Bordo cautions to be wary of cultural notions of unfettered bodily plasticity and self-expression: "one cannot have *any* body that one wants – for not every body will *do*. The very advertisements whose copy speaks of choice and self-determination visually legislate the effacement of individual and cultural difference and circumscribe our choices" (UW 250).

This situation is exposed especially well by John W. Jordan in his examination of the limitations of the rhetoric used to support cosmetic surgery. Jordan notes: "The contemporary industry has constructed a popular image of plastic surgery as a readily available and personally empowering means to resolve body image issues, on the presumption that any body can become a 'better' body" (327). In order for a surgeon to agree to operate, however, the patient must be able to demonstrate psychological health and thereby guarantee that this surgery on an otherwise healthy person is being

undertaken for rational, valid reasons and will somehow make the body "better." In our culture, this is typically effected through the use of what Jordan terms "wrong body rhetoric" (339). This rhetoric involves the applicants (like, for example, Millea in the article cited earlier) making the argument that "although they are comfortable with their inner self and psychologically stable, their outer body gives a false and harmful impression to others and threatens their emotional health" (339). According to their testimony, their body is "wrong" because it does not reflect the self and therefore causes undue emotional stress, a situation that can be remedied by making the body "right" surgically.

Jordan observes that these rhetorical strategies are nearly identical to the ones taken up by amputee "wannabes" – a group of surgical applicants "who desire amputation of one of their healthy limbs in order to make their bodies 'whole'" (329). The wannabes identify a specific limb or location of the body that, although healthy, is "wrong" and therefore deserves correction. Like other applicants, they seek not to cure a physically unwell body, but the psychological distress caused by the disharmony between their bodies and their inner selves, a goal that is in other cases accepted as a rational justification for surgery. In their cases, however, they are roundly denied surgery as their requests are read as signs of other psychological problems and therefore to operate would amount to mutilation. What this indicates, argues Jordan, is that "[a]lthough the fulfillment of body image desires is a much heralded and carefully constructed feature of plastic surgery discourse, including those messages coming from

the medical community, this plasticity is available only to those who fit within a particular ideological perspective on what constitutes an appropriate body" (348).⁵

Through this example it becomes evident that, in spite of all the rhetoric of creative self-fashioning and body-self correspondence, the practice of cosmetic surgery typically acts as a process of normalization. This is not to say that cosmetic surgery is *inherently* normalizing, but that the way it is institutionalized and put into use ensures this is the case – after all, if the only motivations that are accepted as rational, sound justifications for desiring surgery are those that would bring the patient in closer alignment with cultural norms, then the only surgeries that are ultimately performed are those that are normalizing to some degree. As Jordan observes: "The farther an applicant's desires are from socially sanctioned body images, the more reluctant surgeons are to make those desires real" (341).

As McRobbie has protested, this normative dimension is often lost in discussions of the modern reflexive self and its echoes in postfeminist discourse, despite the fact that social norms typically play a crucial role in the individual's own decision-making process. Although one's status and identity are less fixed by outside determinants within modernity and therefore are considered products of one's autonomous choices, individuals are still acutely aware of the social acceptability of certain choices over

⁵ Along the same lines, several observers have noted that although some women see female genital mutilation as their only chance at a "normal" life, this practice has been made illegal in many jurisdictions with little mainstream opposition on the basis that "fitting into a cultural milieu by using risky and potentially disabling surgery should not be permitted in the best interests of the individual, whose first-order desires need to be regulated, effectively, by the second-order values of the state" (Heyes 107). In contradiction to this, however, in North America several types of cosmetic surgery currently may be performed on the vagina, including the "unhooding" of the clitoris. I return to notions of ideologically appropriate and therefore culturally acceptable female genital surgeries in my conclusion.

others. In other words, one anticipates the reaction that one will get from others for having made a specific choice, and this helps to constrain the particular choices made. Hence, as Bordo observes: "there is a disciplinary reality that is effaced in the construction of all self-transformation as equally arbitrary" (UW 254). To a large extent, then, one could conceptualize the modern self not as *self-creating*, but as *self-monitoring*.

This type of self-monitoring has been identified by many theorists as a hallmark of postfeminist culture and the primary means by which normalization is currently effected. In explaining this phenomenon, many feminist scholars have found particular utility in appropriating elements of Michel Foucault's conceptualization of modern power. While a thorough explanation of this framework is beyond the scope of this project, what is important to understand in this context is that, for Foucault, "modern (as opposed to sovereign) power is non-authoritarian, non-conspiratorial, and indeed non-orchestrated; yet it nonetheless produces and normalizes bodies to serve prevailing relations of dominance and subordination" (Bordo, UW 26). Central to Foucault's analysis of the operation of modern power is the idea that power is not something in the possession of a discrete individual; rather, it "operates through networks, discourses, and institutions [in a] capillary model" (McLaren 96).

Significantly, Foucault uses the metaphor of the gaze to explain this development. He illustrates the effects of the gaze through a well-known comparison to Jeremy Bentham's designs for the Panopticon. In brief, Bentham's design for a prison includes a central tower with a circle of cells surrounding it. Each cell has a window at the front and back, thereby creating a backlight that allows the guard in the central

tower to see what the inmates are doing at all times. The inmates are isolated from one another, but always are aware of the potential that they could be observed from the tower. The important aspect is the *potential* for being watched – the inmate can never be sure exactly when he is being watched and when he is not, so he can only assume he is *always* being watched and police his own behaviours accordingly. Thus, “there is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself” (Foucault 155). Power works in a similar fashion within modern societies, argues Foucault, so that “prevailing forms of selfhood and subjectivity are maintained not through physical restraint and coercion, but through individual self-surveillance and self-correction to norms” (Bordo, *Foucault* 191).

Hence, many of the activities our consumer culture lauds as examples of independent self-creation may in fact be considered instances of self-correction, especially when they can be seen clearly to bring individuals closer to norms of bodily acceptability that have long existed, particularly for women. Indeed, many theorists point to the gender bias evident in the discourses of self-management prevalent within popular culture, which seem to hail women disproportionately as “the pre-eminent subjects of this new ethic” (McRobbie 262). “To a much greater extent than men,” Gill observes, “women are required to work on and transform the self, regulate every aspect of their conduct, and present their actions as freely chosen” (PMC 163). Gill notes the shift this represents from prior conceptions of the operation of patriarchal power,

describing it as having moved "from an external, male judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze" (151). She continues: "It can be argued that this represents a higher or deeper form of exploitation than objectification – one in which the objectifying male gaze is internalized to form a new disciplinary regime" (151-52). How new a phenomenon this internalization of the male gaze really is could be debated; what is certainly new, however, is the way in which this internalized gaze is framed rhetorically in relation to feminism within popular culture.

Both the discourse of the radicals of the second wave and the discourse of postfeminism could be said to posit some form of internal gaze that carefully monitors the appearance and behaviours of an objectified body. Where the two diverge so sharply is in their interpretation of this gaze. Second wave feminism views this gaze as having originated outside the self within a patriarchal culture, and therefore it represents an oppressive, colonizing force of normalization. Postfeminist discourse, on the other hand, portrays this gaze as emanating from one's inner, authentic self and therefore it represents a liberating force of self-expression and creativity. If one accepts the straightforward evolution of feminism as set forth by postfeminist discourse, this development should be a cause for celebration for second wave feminists, indicating the success of their attempts to expel the male gaze from the collective psyche of women. As a result of these feminist forebears' achievements, proclaims postfeminism, women are finally able to make choices from a place of authentic self-determination.

By now, though, it should be obvious that I find this logic highly suspect, particularly when one examines the way this fundamental freedom of choice is put into

action. As Gill astutely notes, within popular culture postfeminist heroines "seem compelled to use their empowered postfeminist position to make choices that would be regarded by many feminists as problematic, located as they are in normative notions of femininity" (162). When it comes to the body, these normative choices are in no way expressed solely within the realm of physical appearances. Ariel Levy, for example, recently identified a modern female sexual identity she labels the "female chauvinist pig." The increasing number of women whose behaviour places them under this heading may be considered the correlate of male chauvinist pigs; that is, "women who make sex objects of other women and of [themselves]" (4). This development should not be surprising, however, given a popular culture where strippers and porn stars (whose job, Levy notes, is to *fake* arousal) are increasingly being positioned as the main educators and erotic role models for women and, in fact, as demonstrating our only culturally intelligible form of "emancipated" female sexuality (20-26). Average women are therefore fashioning themselves as equally commodified sex objects, says Levy, albeit with the caveat that their performance is an expression solely of their own liberated self-interest. Gill confirms these observations, noting: "Girls and women are invited to become a particular kind of self, and are endowed with agency on condition that it is used to construct oneself as a subject closely resembling the heterosexual male fantasy found in pornography" (PMC 152). Gill goes on to quote a *Guardian* column by Janice Turner where Turner sardonically marvels: "The sexually liberated modern woman turns out to resemble – what do you know! – the pneumatic, take-me-now-big-boy fuck-puppet of male fantasy after all" (152).

As Turner's derisive tone signals, the problem with postfeminism's rhetoric of self-determination and autonomous choice is that it is persuasive only in a profoundly narrow, individualized context; when examined in a broader perspective, the distinct similarities among women's "free" choices become evident. Unless one is to believe that the majority of women's authentic selves just happen to be nearly identical, the homogeneity of their choices speak to cultural patterns and the continuing operation of norms of female bodily acceptability. Postfeminist discourse, however, asks us to believe these patterns are indeed meaningless, that since feminism has been declared a success already, it really must be some sort of coincidence that women largely continue to "choose" the same bodies that have long been presented as ideal by patriarchal culture. As I have tried to highlight, postfeminist discourse is regularly drawn on in this way to justify cultural practices and modes of embodiment that would have been unequivocally labelled normative – or indeed in the case of Turner's "fuck-puppet" analogy, decidedly Stepford-esque – by the supposedly outdated second wavers.

All of postfeminism's logic falls apart, though, if one rejects its first premise that feminism has been "completed" and instead, to paraphrase Levy, one questions: why is this the new form of empowerment and not what it looks like: the old objectification?

(81) If gender inequality truly *does* still exist, as it surely does, then postfeminism's rhetoric is revealed as in fact serving mostly to maintain the (sexist, consumerist) status quo. Its suspiciously familiar internal gaze, then, is the same one identified by Beauvoir and the second wave radicals after all; it was not women's experience of body alienation that had changed, it was just the rhetoric framing it. A notorious quip by cosmetics

mogul Helena Rubenstein comes to mind: "There are no ugly women, only lazy ones."

Within the logic of postfeminist liberation, it would seem there are no ugly women, only unempowered ones.

History repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce.
- Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*

Conclusion:

Upon receiving news of the impending remake of *The Stepford Wives*, Maureen Dowd speculated in a 2003 column that, in fact, "[t]he real chiller is that the evil husbands in the original did not need to murder. They just needed to wait. In the long interval between the two movies, women have turned themselves into Stepford wives." Or, one might say, women have become convinced that to do so qualifies as an expression of autonomy and empowerment in itself, particularly when it comes to forms of embodiment. Indeed, it seems that the difference between the body envisioned by Stepford's second wave feminism and the one envisioned by postfeminism has less to do with the actual body itself and more to do with the rhetoric that surrounds it. Women's bodily alienation and objectification continue to exist in various forms; now, though, they are not thought to be antithetical to self-determination, but, perversely, the very proof of it. Whereas earlier this traditionally feminine mode of embodiment was regarded as an indication of the systemic operation of power, now we are to regard it as an opportunity for creative self-fashioning and independent expression. Bordo sarcastically mocks this notion: "By this logic it would be a sorry day indeed if women were to become content with the way they look. Without all those defects to correct we would lose an important arena for the enactment of our creative agency!" (TZ 40)

According to postfeminist logic, “creative agency” must be the driving force behind, for example, the steady rise in demand for aesthetic surgeries such as cosmetic genitoplasty – that is, elective surgery on the (female) genitals, most commonly a reduction to the size of the labia minora. The authors of a recent article on the topic in the *British Medical Journal*, for instance, report an increasing amount of patients who “uniformly wanted their vulvas to be flat with no protrusion beyond the labia majora” (Liao and Creighton 1091). A (male) surgeon who actually performs the procedure, which is purely aesthetic and has no benefit in terms of function, explains: “Women want their vaginas nice, neat, small and symmetrical. For women, confidence and beauty is power” (qtd. in Egan 162). While it may well be true that the women who undergo such surgery do gain a greater sense of well-being as a result, this should not negate the question of why these women felt so deficient in the first place, and why they might each independently define a “nice” vagina as one that is “neat, small and symmetrical.” Feminist scholars like Bartky would suggest that the satisfactions attained from such a surgery must be understood as ultimately “repressive,” meaning they “fasten us to the established order of domination, for the same system which produces false needs also controls the conditions under which such needs can be satisfied” (NFA 138-39). In other words, patriarchal culture – in collaboration with consumer capitalism – *produces* the disorder for which it proposes a remedy (Thornham 168). Indeed, given that the women who undertake genitoplasty typically bring in images taken from advertisements and pornography to illustrate the desired final result, it seems clear that a process of standardization is occurring, of self-correction to a

perceived set of bodily norms (Liao and Creighton 1091). To be able to read cultural practices in this way, however, requires reference to larger systems of domination, something which postfeminist rhetoric is incapable of accommodating.

Within postfeminism, there is little acknowledgement that outside pressures exist, let alone exert any influence on the decisions individuals make; everyone is “doing it for me.” Importantly, this framing of all decisions as nothing more than reflections of individual caprice results in a significant “reprivatization,” as Lois McNay terms it, of issues that were only recently brought out of the realm of the “personal” and politicized by the second wave (Gill, *PMC* 153). Thus one of the dangers of postfeminist discourse and its rhetoric of individualism and fundamental autonomy lies in the way it evacuates any notion of larger structural, social inequity, making it difficult to perform critique and identify oppression.

At the same time, this emphasis on individualism validates a disengagement from collective action, since every personal choice is already affirmed as feminist and politically meaningful. There is no discussion, however, of how the feminist empowerment expressed by, say, getting Botox, works to empower women as a *group*. This is not to diminish the significance of individualism and personal choice to the feminist project, but to point to the fact that this cannot comprise the entirety of a political movement either. Dow explains:

Certainly, feminism is about agency in many ways, and women’s right to make choices to better their lives is central to feminist ideology of all stripes. But feminism is also a collective politics, and it recognizes that the exercise of agency by individual women does not substitute for nor even necessarily contribute to

the subversion of patriarchy or the expansion of choices for women as a group.
(*Miss America* 145)

Moreover, as Dow implies, within these discourses of self-expression and self-creation, any awareness of the material resources necessary to participate in such "empowerment" is effaced also (*PTF* 213).

Thus, the sea change in popular feminist discourse becomes apparent by way of a comparison to the feminism of the second wave, revealing the abandonment of almost any notion of systemic inequality within the contemporary rhetoric of "feminist empowerment." To make this comparison is not to set up one "authentic" original feminism against which modern versions inevitably fail, but rather to expose the significant contradictions and distortions within the existing rhetoric by way of reference to another era's paradigm, particularly since this era is the one to which postfeminism implicitly sets itself up as the successor, the inheritor of its many advancements. Furthermore, this is not to argue either that a return to the second wave's conceptual paradigm of the body is wholly sufficient to bring about improvements in contemporary women's relationship to their bodies. Bartky writes, for example, of the need for the feminist community to cultivate a "revolutionary aesthetic of the body" via the nourishment of a new collective gaze of the Other (*NFA* 140), while Cressida J. Heyes proposes that feminism must create active ways for individuals to respond alternatively to the psychic needs generated by our relentlessly scrutinizing culture (110).

Nevertheless, the very first step to improving women's lived relationship to their bodies is to (re-)learn to see with something other than bedazzled eyes. Though the "old" feminist discourse has been rightfully criticized over the years for its major blindspots, like Bordo, I believe that its insights still offer the "critical edge of systemic perspective" (UW 32). I regard such a perspective as a crucial countermeasure to the present neoliberal media culture where privatization and the mythology of individualism prevail and where, as Dow observes, we are regularly told "feminism is always about *women*, not *patriarchy*" (Miss America 145). The systemic focus of the critical standpoint of the second wave ensures some awareness of the greater significance of our personal choices and permits us to make vital inquiries concerning *on whose terms* our satisfaction and well-being are ultimately dependent.

After all, women continue to account for over 90% of the consumers of cosmetic surgery and nonsurgical procedures, an industry that grossed over \$13 billion (US) in America in 2007 alone (ASAPS). Finance companies like Doctors Say Yes offer medical loans for plastic surgery procedures and advertise in women's magazines like *Cosmopolitan* (see fig. 9). Only a systemic critique would prompt us to investigate this pattern and ask why the supposed expressive, democratic possibilities of cosmetic surgery are taken up by one gender so disproportionately, as well as to take note of the enormous amount of money dependent on women's bodily dissatisfaction, and to consider the material consequences of the dominant ideology of the body. Thus, to preserve a consciousness of context, as I have tried to accomplish in this project, is to preserve the capacity to identify larger patterns, an activity that is intrinsic to the

practice of any systemic critique. From this perspective, it seems that the new and improved Stepford probably should have looked a lot more like the old Stepford than the makers of the remade version were willing to acknowledge. What the original *Stepford Wives* understood, like the radical feminists of its time, was that cultural patterns exist and are meaningful rather than idiosyncratic, and that when it comes to the disciplinary demands placed on women's bodies, only those sculpted from plastic ever make it to perfect.

Foundation to even my skin tone each morning
Blonde to highlight my hair every two months
Restylane® to plump my lips twice a year
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RESTYLANE.CA

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Fig. 1. "Define Yourself." Restylane advertisement.

Fig. 3. "It's All About Freedom of Expression." Botox advertisement.

POP ★ POLITICS ★ SCANDAL ★ STYLE

RADAR

DECEMBER/JANUARY 2008

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The World's Worst
Movie Pitches
Stupid Secret Santa Gifts

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Inspiring Rogues,
Renegades &
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SEXY MONEY**
Confessions
of a Teenage
Grifter

I, FABIO
The King
of Beefcake
Bares
His Soul

**TAB HEIR
SUES MOM!**
The Bizarre
Family Feud
Over the
Enquirer
Fortune

NICOLE KIDMAN
All Dolled Up

Fig. 2. "Help! I Can't Move My Face!" Cover of Radar Magazine, 2008.

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Fig. 3. "It's All About Freedom of Expression." Botox advertisement.

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And ask your doctor about JUVÉDERM™ too!

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Fig. 4. "It's All About Freedom of Expression." Botox advertisement.

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Fig. 5. "Freedom of Expression Through Film." Website screen shot.

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Fig. 6. "C'est ce que je veux!" Breast enlargement surgery advertisement.

Fig. 7. "Best and Worst New Bodies." Cover of Life & Style Weekly, 2007.

Fig. 8. "Expect Perfection." GMC advertisement.

Fig. 8. cont.

DoctorsSayYes.net

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We've assisted over 18,000 satisfied customers nationwide. Allow us to help you as well!

Fig. 9. "Doctors Say Yes." Cosmetic surgery financing advertisement.

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