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Resistant Melodrama:
Reading Madness and Motherhood in Michael Cohn's 1997 Film
Snow White: A Tale of Terror

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Abstract of the Thesis

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The remarkable ability of fairy tales to transgress the boundaries of time and geography make them especially receptive to become mediums through which cultural, social, economic and political discourses of an age may be examined. Michael Cohn's 1997 film *Snow White: A Tale of Terror* illustrates this by using the framework of the Grimm brother's classic tale to highlight contemporary critical thought regarding feminism and maternity within dominant patriarchal culture. Cohn's method of changing traditionally perceived female characters to address issues such as the systematic oppression of women within patriarchy and the institutionalization of motherhood is a radical diversion from the original tale, but the result creates an arena in which prevailing cultural attitudes and the status quo can be assessed and critiqued.

The issues addressed range from the examination of loss and the psychology of failure as contributing agents of feminine madness to metaphorical readings of the film as patriarchal commentary, to masculine constructs of feminine identity and their resulting negative repercussions as apparent within mothering and maternal rights. Conclusions address questioning the process of restructuring social constructs to take into account more contemporary attitudes toward feminine identity and reproduction, assessing the

impact of fairy tales and myths (and their representation within the popular medium of film) in portraying effective mother/daughter relationships, and continuing the heightened awareness of feminist issues as human issues to allow for female independence, agency and choice within a dominant patriarchal system.

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Resistant Melodrama:
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Introduction

In 1997, one hundred and eighty-five years after Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's 1812 publication of their now classic tale *Snow White*, PolyGram Films released *Snow White: A Tale of Terror*, directed by Michael Cohn. Cohn's film is a dark retelling, employing some of the more formidable aspects associated with the Grimms' tale such as vividly portrayed cruelty and graphic violence. Its credits state that it is "based on the original tale by the Grimm Brothers." Yet the film varies so substantially from the Grimms' original version not only in its plotline and character development but also in its departure from traditional narrative fairy-tale conventions (i.e. static characters and binary representations of good and evil) that the resulting film is a significantly more complex and socially relevant tale. Thus, my argument is twofold: first, in granting Claudia (the wicked stepmother figure) psychological agency and by positioning her as a daughter as well as a biological mother, the film radically severs its ties with the Grimms' version by indicating the destructive effects of grief and madness and by situating Claudia as the tale's central figure. It also positions both Claudia and Lilli (the Snow White figure) as metaphorical figures through which the effects of patriarchal gender limitations, expectations and re-evaluations can be reimagined. Second, this retelling upsets the "bad mother/good daughter" binary traditionally associated with this tale, allowing it to be considered as commentary on maternal struggle that can then be viewed in light of both maternal and feminist theory.

Cohn's reworking of *Snow White* illuminates complexities often dismissed by Hollywood films by addressing the darker, more gruesome representations of humanity in fairy tales. While I intend to argue that there are too many differences between Cohn's film and the Grimms' original tale to accept the film as an extension of the original text, I do agree that the one aspect in which the two versions are alike is in their unwillingness to gloss over uneasy emotions. The issues raised through Claudia – the denial of the female self, the masculine constructs of women and femininity, the foreclosure of both identity and agency – are uncomfortable and ugly, but their existence in the film represent an acknowledgment of the more diabolical aspects of traditional folklore. The Grimm brothers did make some alterations to reduce part of the violence when they recorded their tales; in their 1810 manuscript, for instance, it is Snow White's biological mother who is evil, an element that was changed to stepmother for later editions, and which henceforth gave stepmothers an irreparably bad name (Grimm 244n4). Their editing was particular and specific, not broad strokes obliterating anything remotely disturbing. The whitewashing of darker emotions in fairy tales is a technique perfected by Walt Disney, who did it so well he was nicknamed the "Great Sanitizer" by those who both applauded and condemned his works (Bell, Haas and Sells 7). Jack Zipes states Disney's talent in creating animated features such as his 1937 film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* did not reside in uniqueness or novelty but rather in his ability to keep antiquated views of society "still." He writes, "Instead of using technology to enhance the communal aspects of narrative and bring about major changes in viewing stories to stir and animate viewers, he employed animators and technology to stop thinking about change, to return to his films, and to long nostalgically for neatly ordered patriarchal realms" (39-40). However Cohn's film makes these uneasy and disconcerting issues central, prompting a closer examination. And while Cohn's version is commendable for its attention to these issues, its psychologically complex cinematic portrayal of Claudia, and its focus on the redefinition of women and mothers within the dominant cultural mindset, it also makes apparent that such an attempt remains troubled by the tenacious grip of patriarchal tropes which refuse to yield.

In considering emotional agency, madness, and patriarchal metaphors within the film, I begin my first argument by addressing the psychological changes made to the traditional character of the wicked stepmother and the role the resulting madness plays in defining her identity and subjectivity. The peculiarity of this film rests in its willingness to give a background and a psychological life to Claudia as a way of explaining her malevolent nature. It is important to point out that Claudia's character is not evil from the start. When she is introduced she is portrayed as beautiful but reserved. Claudia is not brimming with affection but neither is she malevolent or even unlikeable. She is, quite realistically, a bride-to-be entering her new husband's home, unsure of her reception by Lilli and tentative of the relationship that will happen between them. Claudia's subsequent evil disposition here is a consequence of madness, precipitated by grief, which implies a completely relatable and understandable human emotion, rather than the more traditionally referenced vanity or hubris, which evokes more of a "deadly sin" type of meaning. In granting Claudia a history, a family of her own and a fair array of familial problems, this reworking allows for an interpretation of her within the much larger context of determining individual female identity and the trouble of madness. Simply the fact that Claudia can suffer the loss of a child, a concept unthinkable in the original Grimm version, extends the notion that she is capable of emotional connectivity and susceptible to emotional subversion, and forces a reinvestigation of sanity as demarcated within a patriarchal framework.

I begin the examination of psychology as it pertains to this film with a look at Sigmund Freud's assertions regarding psychosis (what would now be termed "insanity") and oppression, especially as applied to women. In *Freud's Discovery of Psychoanalysis: The Politics of Hysteria*, William J. McGrath summarizes Freud's theories, stating that Freud argued that women experience hysteria as a result of overall repression and the denial of true inner emotions (156-71). Freud, who was from a Jewish family but remained notoriously atheistic in his writings, was defiantly anticlerical and anti-establishment in his politics. This unabatedly anticlerical viewpoint had significant influence in his speculations on psychosis, which was considered demonic possession in the Middle Ages. Freud argued that the severe restrictions placed on women in medieval

times (such as the complete legal, economic and physical domination granted to husbands over their wives, the inability of women to hold property or citizenship, and the denial of education and literacy for women) are still evident now because they are socially passed through the generations from mother to daughter, and by the still-permeating influence of the Catholic church. These restrictions lead to repression, or the negation and masking of their true emotions and desires for those that are more socially acceptable.¹ The foreclosure of emotion, which is essentially the denial of self, in turn caused physical tics and verbal outbreaks, often misdiagnosed by clergy as demonic possession. McGrath notes that Freud considered such repression a powerful force, and mandated the existence of what he called a “counter-will” which funneled the repression into its physical manifestations:

This emergence of a counter-will is chiefly responsible for the daemonic characteristic which hysteria so often exhibits – the characteristic...of doing the exact opposite of what they have been asked to do, and of being obliged to cover everything they most value with abuse and suspicion... [these inhibited intentions] are stored up and enjoy an unsuspected existence in a sort of shadow kingdom, till they emerge like bad spirits and take control of the body. (167)

Freud also theorized that repression occurred in cases of trauma, when memories were too painful to recount and were therefore dis-remembered and suppressed, “as in the case of the apparently irreparable loss of a loved person or because social circumstances make a reaction impossible or because it was a question of things which the patient wished to forget” (168). Freud’s theories on repression were based largely, but not entirely, on his ideas of denied sexuality in women. He acknowledged that the effects of trauma are unique for each individual (a notion I will explore in greater detail through E. Ann

¹ While hysteria is generally associated with women, Freud concluded that it could occur in men as well, since class structure ultimately dictated a hierarchy among men, with lower-class men suffering economic and political restrictions imposed by the upper class – although arguably not to the same degree as women.

Kaplan's assertions on trauma), based on the psychological health of the individual at the time the trauma occurred.

Nancy Chodorow criticizes an idea inherent, but not explicitly stated, in Freud, which is the assumption that women are not whole beings in and of themselves but rather "disfigured" or "incomplete" men. Indeed, Freud's theories of women as "castration" threats to men, and of women having "penis envy" are based on this condition of "lack." While Freud employed this concept to explain his position on human sexual development and the difference between sexual development in males and females, Chodorow points out the power which is subtly manifested within his use of the word "difference." In *The Reproduction of Mothering*, she states,

Freud's discussion of these anatomical differences is not simply concerned with *difference*—difference in this case is equated with relations of superiority and inferiority. Thus, he persistently refers to women's "genital deficiency," and sees no need to explain that a girl, on discovering her penislessness, 'develops, like a scar...a sense of inferiority.' (145, italics in original)

This "sense of inferiority" and Freud's insistence that femininity is a women's wish to be masculine forms the basis of Chodorow's argument that Freud's sexual inequality permeates to the very core of cultural and social perceptions of "worth" itself, automatically putting women under male domination in virtually every aspect (147). Chodorow asserts that this perception of female inferiority encourages a sexual division of labor in which women (as reproducers for "the economy") and women's mothering becomes inextricably linked to economic organization. In order to keep social and economic institutions functioning profitably, sexual inequality "is itself embedded in and perpetuated by the organization of these institutions," causing women to become victims of a systemically repressed socialization (34). The sexual division of labor gets repeated through the generations and becomes internalized by women; the economic system under which women's reproduction becomes the nation's reproduction essentially defines mothering as an economic institution sanctioned by patriarchy.

In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich asserts that by defining motherhood as a male-dominated institution rather than a potential relationship between mother and child, the system of patriarchy has disallowed women from making the decisions that affect their own lives. Reacting to a socialist tract of 1914² which refers to reproduction and motherhood as “women’s highest and holiest mission,” Rich asserts that under patriarchy, not only are women expected to assume the “major burden of pain and self-denial” in order to ensure the success of the human race but that we should do so quietly and obediently. “Patriarchy could not survive without motherhood and heterosexuality in their institutional forms,” she writes, “therefore they have to be treated as axioms, as ‘nature’ itself, not open to question except where, from time to time and place to place, ‘alternate life-styles’ for certain individuals are tolerated” (43). Motherhood has become an expected role for women. Rich uses the timeframe of the American colonies as an example. Large families were the norm, with mothers often having anywhere from twelve to twenty-five children. An “old maid” may actually only be twenty-five years old, but she was treated with scorn since she had no way to survive economically and often resorted to living with kin and acting as household help. No other options were open to her (43). Motherhood came to mean more than just the physical ability of a woman to reproduce human life; it became the only way by which a woman could function within the economic and political framework of society, as dictated by men. Motherhood became a process of female survival – a process that has become so internalized that the female desire to have children is a given.

My purpose in mentioning theories from Freud, Chodorow and Rich is to create a framework within which the character of Claudia may be discussed. Understanding Freud’s criticisms of the Catholic Church and its oppressive patriarchal influence toward women in the Middle Ages is instrumental in examining Claudia’s character, since the film places her firmly in medieval Christian Europe. Chodorow’s evaluations of economics within patriarchal society, and the resulting cyclical and systematic division of labor forced on women through their ability to reproduce, are necessary in order to understand Claudia’s valuation of herself. Rich’s argument that motherhood has become

² John Spargo, *Socialism and Motherhood* (New York: 1914).

an institution so firmly embedded and expected in social consciousness that challenging it is akin to demanding a realignment of the planets is crucial in comprehending Claudia's pursuit of biological motherhood. Claudia is the sum of her ideological and psychological parts: to understand her is to understand the influence of dominant patriarchal authority.

Patriarchy, Madness, and Emotional Agency

Rich defines patriarchy as the “power of the fathers” – the familial, social and political system “in which men – by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male” (57). Patriarchy is the dominant mode of social organization, the very core of which is predicated on male preeminence and female subordination. By mediating female desires through masculine power, women are automatically relegated to inferior rank, unable to attain any kind of individual identity. Women's worth – indeed, their survival – thus becomes calculated specifically by the ability to marry well and the ability to produce children. Feminine identity is stifled by masculine forces which dictate politics, economics, expectations and behaviors, all directed to ensure the perpetuation of male hierarchy. Claudia is the direct result of all of these patriarchal forces combined. She has been conditioned to specifically desire two things – marriage and motherhood – and has molded her own fragile identity on the successful acquisition of both. To fall short would be to admit inadequacy and exemplify feminine failure.

Claudia's first “part” then is to be married to Frederick (Lilli's father, a nobleman). A single woman has no place in patriarchal society. Considering the suggested medieval Christian timeframe in which the film is set, by herself Claudia would have no rights, no money or property, no citizenship – essentially, no self. She has

been conditioned to know survival only through her attachment to a man such that her identity and her life become completely dependent on her marriage. Her language in the film further corroborates this: in scene two, when contemplating her marriage, she emphasizes “Tomorrow I will be a bride. A Hoffman,” literally wanting the name to define her.

She also reveals that, for reasons unknown, her mother was despised by society and she wonders aloud to her brother, Gustav:

What would mother say if she could see me now, here? Would she be happy for me? Would she smile? Or would she be angry, knowing that the world which so despised her has embraced me? (*smiling*) I do love him, Gustav. (*determined*) They will love me. (scene 2)

It is reasonable to assume from her speech that she has long since been separated from her mother (indicated by the “now”) and that she was not born into nobility (the “here”), making her marriage to Frederick doubly important because it represents both the fulfillment of one of her “duties” as well as marks her successful ascent out of what perhaps was destitution. It suggests that up until this point she has been marginalized, possibly outcast from society as well via her mother, away from any kind of assurance or protection, limited though it is, that society would grant in recognizing her as one of its own. Claudia wants into the system. That she does not know her own mother well enough to answer her questions is emblematic of what Rich calls the “essential female tragedy”— the loss of daughter to mother and mother to daughter in a society that silences mother/daughter relationships in favor of mother/son or even father/daughter ones (Rich 237). It is also representative of what Lynda Haas, in referencing Luce Irigaray³, calls the “installation of patriarchy built over the sacrifice of the mother and her daughters”:

³ Haas refers to Irigaray’s 1991 essay “The Bodily Encounter with the Mother” in which Irigaray analyzes *The Orestia*.

Because the mother's place is silently elided in traditional readings of myth, a requisite cultural taboo has also been placed on the relationship with the mother. Cultural stories of maturation and family interaction preoccupied with the son's oedipal struggle, with castration, conceal another severance, the cutting of the umbilical cord to the mother. Not until this original erasure, this matricide, is brought to light, will the relationship with the mother be brought out of silence. (Haas 195)

Since any kind of mother/daughter relationship is stifled under fraternal domination, it is appropriate that Claudia, as a product of patriarchy, has no real relationship with her mother, just as, later on, she will have no real relationship with Lilli. In light of the impossibility of her ever knowing what her mother's actual response would have been, Claudia's final statement ("They will love me") acts as her answer – and her guarantee of future success – to herself.

It follows then that Claudia's second "part" is to be a mother, specifically the mother of a son. Being a stepmother does not count; Lilli is not her biological child. Claudia must be able to bear a child on her own. Her body is the most valuable possession within Frederick's noble household; cultural discourse thereby renders it her noble/national duty to produce an heir, especially a son. This cultural internalization of patriarchal values automatically sets "male" as the default setting for gender preference in children. Both Rich and Phyllis Chesler emphasize society's preference for sons, putting an additional burden on the mother to produce the "right" child. Rich refers to the ancient text of the Upanishads and the Egyptian hymn "Aten" as expressly stating preference of sons over daughters. She also refers to the portrayals of mothers and children in art and theology as specifically mothers with sons, stating "it is the mother and son who appear as the eternal, determinative dyad" (226). Chesler asserts that the pervasiveness of ancient thought remains steadfastly interwoven in modern society. In *Women and Madness*, Chesler notices that women in modern Judeo-Christian societies are "motherless children" because "[P]ainting after painting, sculpture after sculpture in the Christian world portray Madonnas comforting and worshipping their infant sons. Catholic mythology symbolizes the enforced splitting of Woman into either Mother or Whore – both of whom nurture and ultimately worship a dead man and/or a 'divine' male child" (78). Holly Tucker, in writing about childbirth in early-modern France, claims that

since the birth of a boy was “absolutely necessary” to vital issues of succession and inheritance that “the birth of a girl was often synonymous with infertility” (80). The birth of a son represents not only Claudia’s success but the nation’s success. The only way for Claudia to guarantee not only her worth in Frederick’s household but also Frederick’s worth in the nation’s household is for her to produce a healthy baby boy.

It is not surprising, then, that Claudia suffers her breakdown immediately following the birth of her stillborn son. It is a moment of extreme sadness and grief, yet one tinged with embarrassment and shame. It is her breaking point and the beginning of her descent into insanity. Claudia’s madness is the direct result of losing her infant son because it signifies her inability to fulfill the patriarchal requirements demanded of her. She had married well, but it had taken “nine long years” to finally conceive. That is a long time for Claudia to wait for that final vindication of her self-worth, of her ultimate reason for being, but it’s virtually an eternity when considering Tucker’s assertion that a woman’s reproductive capacity was put to the test on the wedding night, and that a healthy woman was expected to bear her first child within the first year of marriage, and another child “every two years or so until she was no longer able to conceive” (1). The failure to produce a son, and the news from young Dr. Gutenberg that she cannot have another, overrides the success of Claudia’s marriage, positing Claudia as sole receptacle not only of failure but also of blame. Rich admits noticing the same machinations at work between her parents. “She [her mother] was supposed to bear him [her father] two children, a boy and a girl,” Rich states. When her mother produced two girls instead, Rich wryly notes that in doing so her mother had singlehandedly wrecked her father’s “intense, perfectionist program” – “Under the institution of motherhood, the mother is the first to blame...if anything whatsoever goes wrong...my mother had failed at one part of the plan: she had not produced a son” (222). Frederick’s reaction at the news of his dead son echoes this – after finding out that Claudia had delivered a stillborn son, he is devastated, as he had prayed for a son when she was pregnant; after learning that she cannot have another, he walks away contemplating his own misfortune, leaving Claudia to deal with her failure herself (scene 6). Considering Chodorow’s assertion that motherhood is fundamental in assuring the cyclical continuation of social and economic

systems, Claudia becomes an example of not just personal failure but also Frederick's failure and, ultimately, national failure (35). By definition, her inadequacy to successfully deliver a son and her physical inability to ever conceive again marks her as an irreversibly worthless being, a demarcation that breaks her.

Because the death of her son leaves Claudia so psychologically injured and negatively branded, I argue that she is a victim of trauma. The loss of her son is a devastating experience, both physically and emotionally. She is so unable to accept his death that her grief throws her into a state of melancholy; she can't let go. She instructs Gustav to pull the body of her infant son from the fire, where he has been disposed of by the servants, saying, "Don't let them throw him away. He's mine." In lieu of a burial, which would indicate closure and a more normative process of grieving, Claudia keeps his swaddled body in a grove in the forest. She creates what is essentially a shrine where she will keep him "safe and warm," calling to mind the aforementioned male worship, and placing Claudia's grief within the boundaries of Freud's irreparable loss of a loved person.

Kaplan's theories on aging as trauma lend additional insight to understanding the complexities of Claudia's madness, especially as influenced by male-constructed definitions of femininity. Freud's theory of repression includes the repression of painful memories resulting from dramatic loss; Kaplan expands the term "dramatic loss" to include the process of aging and the bias of ageism as trauma in females. Acknowledging that aging is rarely linked to trauma, Kaplan considers aging as trauma because it results in the elderly being as vulnerable to identity crises, especially as it pertains to women. She writes, "For women, identity crises hover around bodily changes in a culture obsessed with normative ideas of feminine beauty. The core of feminine subjectivity is threatened" ("Trauma" 46). Kaplan criticizes Hollywood for being the largest perpetrator of distorted cultural female portrayals, noting that popular television programs and a plethora of ladies' journals and magazines also promote cosmetics and surgery "as the panacea against aging – that is, against the 'decline' and 'deterioration' that are the main ways of conceptualizing aging" ("Looking" 259-60). The visual middle-agedness of Claudia in the film is apparent and undoubtedly plays a role in Claudia's identification of

herself as a woman with limited time to fulfill her goals of motherhood. Age becomes a particularly sensitive issue in light of the importance placed on childbearing, an ability that decreases as a woman gets older. Additionally, the idealized mirror-image is in constant juxtaposition to the broken, weary Claudia; the mirror image is not only glowing but decidedly younger-looking. Chesler remarks that while it is part of the natural process for younger women to replace older woman as “sexual, fertile, pregnant and lactating beings,”

the overemphasis on female appearance, the early age at which female children are eroticized, the aging male’s preference for ever-younger women, and the consequent female terror or aging, together lead to a non-stop, all-female competition for the ‘fairest of them all’ prize. It is hard to grow old gracefully under such circumstances. (172)

Impending old age then aggravates Claudia’s madness: it suggests the loss of beauty (vanity, perhaps the one trait shared by Claudia and the Grimm’s stepmother), the onset of menopause (and the further reinforcement of a barren woman as useless to society), and the feelings of loss and negativity that accompany old age in social discourse. This is what Kaplan refers to as “family” trauma – the traumas of loss, abandonment, rejection, betrayal (“Trauma” 19). These are exactly the kind of everyday, gradual indignities which, accumulated over time, can cause the same kind of trauma as a sudden, dramatic loss, and that can precipitate denial and facilitate insanity.

Granting Claudia emotional agency makes her distinctly different from the wicked stepmother of the original Grimm tale; it makes Claudia human. To say the Grimms’ stepmother is cold would be an egregious understatement. In the Grimms’ original version of the tale, and as republished in Maria Tatar’s edition of *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*, the wicked stepmother is completely devoid of emotion. As the tale goes, although the stepmother marries the king when Snow White is only about a year old, there is no reference whatsoever to any relationship between the new queen and the toddler until the child turns seven, and then the only times the stepmother physically interacts with Snow White are in her attempts to kill her. In contrast, Claudia is sensitive and inviting, giving the young child Lilli a puppy as a gift on their first meeting. Where

the Grimms' stepmother is driven by jealousy and narcissism, Claudia is driven by the need to be valued and accepted, as evidenced by her declaration, "They will love me." Where the Grimms' stepmother is a static one-dimensional character, emotionally void in basically every way, Claudia is complex, capable of emotional connectivity but also susceptible to emotional subversion. Cohn specifically wants the audience to relate to Claudia in a completely new way. Initially portraying Claudia in a benevolent light creates an opportunity for the audience to have an understanding of her, to consider her humanely, and to feel her pain when it hits, almost to the point of granting her leniency and forgiveness – a tactic wonderfully effective in creating sympathy for a previously unsympathetic character.

Introducing a descent into madness as the result of irreparable loss also suggests the fragility inherent in patriarchal emotional manipulation. Claudia has been created by male domination, she has been manipulated to internalize patriarchal values as her own, only to be crushed when she falls short of the mark. Her ambition in and of itself is an ironic indicator of her fate: aggression, even when used to achieve patriarchal goals, makes her an unfit woman. There is no room in patriarchy for a woman of action, even if the purpose of the action is to perpetuate the tenets of patriarchy itself. She is what Elizabeth Bell refers to in Walt Disney's animated context as "a mixture of Lady Macbeth and the big bad wolf," the femme fatale, the threat to patriarchal order (117). What would happen if she were to be accepted? To think that an aggressive woman would suddenly become passive and docile once she has achieved her goals would be at the very least a tricky assumption. The acknowledgment of her ability to get what she wants would surely always be lying right under the surface, acting as a silent threat to a system that so fundamentally depends on maintaining the status quo. The more driven Claudia is, the more likely she is to be rejected, and the more devastating that rejection will be. She is, ironically, broken by the system that created her.

The suggestion that Claudia is primarily motivated by her desire for acceptance and the need to be a successful biological mother in order to fulfill culturally mandated requirements completely obliterates the vice traditionally associated with this tale, namely jealousy. If envy is Claudia's motivating factor, as it is in the Grimms' tale, then

surely her plans to get rid of Lilli would have begun much sooner. As referenced earlier, Lilli is about seven years old when Claudia enters her life. She is a lovely child; her resemblance to her birth mother Lilliana is already apparent. While it is inferred the relationship between Claudia and Lilli is uncomfortable, they manage to live together for nine years. Claudia's plans against Lilli don't begin until the night she loses her infant son.

It is interesting to note the timing of Claudia's labor and delivery. Claudia is singing at a party which she and Frederick are hosting at their estate; she is interrupted by Lilli's entrance, which causes the entire roomful of guests to turn away from Claudia. Lilli, now about sixteen years old and stunning in one of her mother's (Lilliana's) gowns, captures Frederick's attention so much so that he completely ignores Claudia, who becomes visibly embarrassed, grows dizzy, and is thrown into labor. It is not so much Lilli's interruption of her singing that makes Claudia swoon and go into labor but rather the shift in Frederick's attention. Claudia, though clearly embarrassed at being upstaged, is not physically affected until Frederick, whose attention is completely on Lilli, demands that the musicians play so they may dance together, leaving Claudia utterly ignored. There is more than simply a father's choice for his daughter at play here; it is an additional commentary on the fickle preferences of society. Claudia will never achieve the acceptance and respect as nobility that has been granted to Lilli by birth. As Frederick's focus shifts from Claudia to Lilli, the audience's focus is forced to follow. In preferring Lilli over Claudia, Frederick is subversively choosing culturally "authentic" nobility over "contrived" nobility, exposing Claudia as fraudulent and ultimately fruitless in her attempts to gain status and worth. Frederick is the head of his household, literally acting as a king, overseeing his lands and the people who reside within his walls. Metaphorically he is synonymous with the larger body of state and government, and of the patriarchal system of which his own household is a microcosm; he is representative of the nation at large. Once Frederick (the "nation") grants preference to Lilli ("genuine" status) over Claudia ("counterfeit" status), Claudia's position becomes dislodged, never to be regained. She is denied. It is this denial that causes her downfall, not envy. That Claudia is a pawn to be shifted about as patriarchal society dictates becomes clear.

Viewing Claudia as a patriarchal pawn not only makes her the primary focus of the tale, it removes jealousy as the primary motivating factor and places Lilli as a secondary (if not tertiary, after the stillborn son) character.

Claudia's breakdown is also the moment in the film at which the mirror reveals itself to her. Sitting atop a large vanity table and encased in an armoire carved to resemble a cloaked figure with clasped hands, the large mirror commands a physical presence even before its power is realized. Claudia reveals early on that it was her mother's, immediately investing the mirror with a psychological complexity. It is not by accident that the mirror "beckons" to Claudia for the first time (the armoire doors open on their own) shortly after she delivers her stillborn son in her private chambers. Claudia, in seeing herself in the mirror – emptied, exhausted, defeated – tries vainly to regain some visible dignity by putting cream on her sweaty face, but then takes the cream and, screaming, spreads it all over the mirror, blurring her own image to the point of erasure. She weeps in outrage, demanding to know "why this is happening to me?" Trying to erase her own image does not work, however, since she has no alternative independent identity to revert to; she has placed all of her identity in motherhood. This illustrates Chodorow's assertion that the gendered and generational portrayal of motherhood – as repeatedly renewed within a male-dominated society – creates a rigidly synoptic mindset in which motherhood is the only allowable identity for women. Chodorow writes,

Institutionalized features of family structure and the social relations of reproduction reproduce themselves. A psychoanalytic investigation shows that women's mothering capacities and commitments, and the general psychological capacities and wants which are the basis of women's emotion work, are built developmentally into feminine personality. (209)

Women are psychologically enforced to find satisfaction solely in mothering; their internalization of the systemically reinforced social structure becomes part of the feminine psyche and prohibits any other kind of self. Claudia is a direct result of this conditioning; not being a mother has never been an option in her mind.

It is at this precise moment, at the apex of Claudia's vulnerability, that the image in the mirror becomes animated. After Claudia demands to know why this is happening

to her she hangs her head and cries, but looks up when she hears her name uttered by a whispering voice. She watches in amazement as the reflection of her gaunt face, sheeted with fatigue, transforms into an image of her that is ideal, radiant and glowing. The beautifully shimmering image speaks with her voice. The conversation between the Claudia and her reflected image illustrates the image's immediate and controlling influence over an exhausted and uncharacteristically doubtful Claudia:

Image: There. (*image runs its hands over its own face caressingly.*) You are beautiful.

Claudia: (*imitating movement*) Yes.

Image: Your face is perfection.

Claudia: (*hesitant*) Is it?

Image: I will always tell you the truth.

Claudia: Yes.

Image: There is so much to envy.

Claudia: (*nodding*) Yes.

Image: They have always envied you.

Claudia: (*puzzled*) They?

Image: Your enemies.

Claudia: Who? (*scene cuts to image of Lilli*) (scene 7)

This exchange is revealing in that it further reinforces both the inadequacy of jealousy as the prime motivating factor while presenting to Claudia a revised, although false, image of herself. The Grimms' stepmother has always been understood as the jealous party; her narcissistic vanity and jealousy over Snow White's beauty has traditionally been the reason for her demise. But here, jealousy actually has to be introduced to Claudia. She is not so vain as to think that her beauty cannot be lost, hence her doubtful response "Is it?" She also agrees with the image's statement that there is much to envy, although what is being envied remains ambiguous. Is the image suggesting there are several qualities in Claudia worthy of envy, and Claudia is agreeing with this? Or is Claudia thinking of her own desire for acceptance, and acknowledging her own envy of Lilli not for her beauty but for her noble position in society, which Claudia so desperately wants? Her confusion at "They have always envied you" indicates a reversal of envious parties; she has

previously not given any thought to whom might be envying her. When Claudia asks the mirror-image who her enemies are, the scene cuts to Lilli, inferring envy on Lilli's behalf. Perhaps this is because Claudia represents a sexual relationship with Frederick, a relationship which Lilli cannot have with him. Sexual rivalry between the two is suggested early in the film when Lilli is still a child, but remains unsupported and becomes largely overshadowed by Claudia's pregnancy and ensuing madness.

What is disturbing about this exchange is how desperate Claudia is to have any kind of redemption, so much so that she willingly accepts whatever the image has to say as truth. She is quick to accept the mirror image's guarantee that it will never lie to her. However, when the image states "I will always tell you the truth," it prompts the question, who is the "I"? Claudia's outburst of frustration and despair is not only relevant because of the loss she had just suffered, but also threatening because it challenges the validity and the hierarchical nature of the patriarchal system which has demanded too much from her. It suggests that Claudia now has doubts about the cultural and social hierarchy she has so badly wanted into for such a long time.

From this viewpoint, Claudia and her reflected image may be described through what Kaplan explains as the theory of split subjectivity and Lacan's "mirror" phase. Lacan described an individual's realization of his or her own subjectivity and the formative function of the "I" as the "mirror" stage because it marks a turning point in an individual's (specifically, a child's) mental development, depicted by the moment in which a child sees himself/herself in a mirror and has an epiphany of self-recognition (Borch-Jacobsen 46-9). Kaplan explains that the mirror phase operates on the unconscious level, marking the subject's entry into the symbolic, or "Imaginary". She argues that this subjectivity is really a split one, because it involves an individual's (again, primarily a child's) attempt to define himself/herself as a distinct being while still clinging to an identity associated with a dominant figure, namely, the mother ("Motherhood" 30). While Kaplan uses the split-self theory to explain formations of child/adult identities, it is useful here to describe Claudia's descent into madness. Claudia's self is split into two entities, each warring with the other. The broken Claudia becomes childlike in her grief, on the verge of demanding her own independence while

still hesitant to be completely severed from the only structure she has known. The reflected image – the symbolic “mother,” appropriately, considering the history of the mirror itself – has come to “guide” her. The golden image reflected in the mirror – the “I” – can then be interpreted as Claudia’s own long-internalized patriarchal values, now materialized as the “ideal Claudia” to detract her from challenging what has remained unquestioned and to get her back into the folds of patriarchy; in other words, to keep Claudia from rocking the boat. The image is a distorted fairy godmother, so to speak, luring Claudia away from the taboo desires of feminine individuality and independence and back into the system structured by oppression and inequality. Claudia, not strong enough to follow through on her passionate demands, or perhaps too well conditioned by dominant cultural values to effectively pursue them, does not challenge the image but rather falls under its tutelage. The mirror image, as the voice of her internalized oppression, successfully regains and maintains control, as evidenced by the ensuing multiple occasions throughout the film in which a struggling and downtrodden Claudia looks to the radiant image for guidance. What could have been Claudia’s successful attainment of self is thwarted when her identification with the mirror “mother” prevails.

Claudia is also representative of what Haas has referenced as Irigaray’s “the other of the same” – a woman “whose identity is her motherhood...drawn by the patriarchy who is ultimately a residual, a defective man, an object of exchange in a male market” (194). Referring to the Freudian assumption that women are not complete entities in themselves, Haas criticizes the order in which women’s identities are distinguished exclusively by their maternal function and asserts that “women must become self-defined in such a way that we are not satisfied with sameness, but instead construct an otherness and difference that finds a place in social order *and* symbolic representation” (194, italics in original). In demanding to know why this is happening to her, and why she must endure such suffering, Claudia has what could be considered an epiphany at the peak of her exhaustion and frustration; she is aware of the sheer magnitude of the injustice dealt her – if only for a fraction of an instant – and of her unwavering acceptance of it up until that point. If she were to demand a restructuring of her own identity, this moment would surely be its genesis. But seeking a redefinition of femininity based on women’s

construction of themselves, as opposed to male construction of women, poses a direct threat, since patriarchy is reliant on the specific social order based on male power. Accordingly, the mirror-image seeks to stop Claudia's construction of an alternative identity, a task which it successfully accomplishes.

Once under the manipulation of the image in the mirror, Claudia manages to regain her composure, creating the outward appearance of normalcy while practicing the witchcraft and supernatural methods promoted by the reflected image. Under its tutelage, Claudia becomes a skilled sorceress and formidable enemy. When Claudia learns from the reflected image that Gustav did not follow her orders to kill Lilli, and brought back not Lilli's heart but a wild boar's, her haunting form pursues the tortured Gustav, driving him to suicide. Claudia's control over certain aspects of nature becomes apparent when she uses spells to fell trees and creates windstorms, earthquakes and cave-ins as methods to kill Lilli in the forest. One of the most disturbing scenes is the one in which Claudia, holding Gustav's heart, transforms into an old crone: Gustav's heart becomes the poisoned apple destined for Lilli. Claudia's metamorphosis is presided over by the reflected image. Claudia, writhing and gasping under a shroud-like sheet, is guided by the image, which states "Don't be afraid. I'll take care of you."

In *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze*, Kaplan asserts that Hollywood, in needing "a shield between itself and social criticism," employs the use of supernatural forces to function as a mechanism for "revealing the gap formed by the inadequacy of science and social institutions" (123). Instances of the supernatural in film could arguably be construed then as symbolic of the tension in an individual's subconscious, or as a way of seeking a solution when the empiric nature of science cannot satisfy the ominous but intangible demands of society. The supernatural forces in this film, emanating from the mirror in the image of Claudia herself, illustrate the impossibility of individual feminine desire in any form as being independent from the hierarchically male society in which it has been formed. If the reflected image is to be understood as the guide that prevents Claudia from questioning the system, it can also be understood as commentary regarding the severity of female limitations. If Claudia pursues acceptance within society, then she does so as an instrument of patriarchy, thus

sacrificing self. However if she pursues the redefinition of her feminine self, she does so as an outcast, thus sacrificing her acceptance by society. Either way, she is unable to function within her culture. As Kaplan notes, “If [a female character] refuses to be ‘normalized’ in a patriarchal system it is at the cost of hysteria and paranoia; the refusal of Oedipus may be liberating, but it liberates one into what is socially defined as ‘madness’” (121).

After her initial interaction with the mirror image, Claudia regains her composure. She gives the outward impression of sanity but inwardly becomes obsessed with obtaining the goal of motherhood, this time through witchcraft and supernatural means. Under the tutelage of the image in the mirror, Claudia proceeds to bring her son back to life:

Claudia: (*crying*) Why does she [Lilli] live?

Image: While your child lies cold and still.

Claudia: What?

Image: Take back the child and give him life.

Claudia: How?

Image: Steal the father’s seed. Bathe the child in the father’s blood.

Claudia: Frederick’s life for his. (scene 16)

Claudia’s willingness to sacrifice Frederick for her son reiterates the immense pressure on women to fulfill the filial demand of a patriarchal society to produce a male heir, and the overriding importance of the son over the father. It is an act of outstanding desperation. From Claudia’s perspective she must save her son, since paradoxically he is the only one who can save her; his existence confirms her survival within patriarchal guidelines. It also recalls Chesler’s division of women into either Mother or Whore, perversely marking Claudia as both in this instance, since Claudia must perform as a Whore in order to fulfill the role as Mother, and maintains the worship of a male figure, be it a dead adult male or a divine male child.

The reanimated baby is clearly meant to be horrific. Claudia’s child is not a healthy, robust infant; he visibly resembles a moving corpse. There is a Frankenstein-esque perversion in Claudia’s attempt to bring the baby back from death which

emphasizes the grotesqueness inherent in her manipulation of the natural order. Similar to the sensations conveyed by Mary Shelley's infamous work, Claudia's successful experiment on her son produces hesitation because it subverts not just physical axioms but also spiritual ones. Marina Warner, in describing Luigi Galvani's work in 1786 in which he reanimates a frog's corpse with the use of electricity, acknowledges its ineradicable impact. She writes, "For after [Galvani's] work, a different metaphor was needed to convey God's activity, that divine effect on human clay that Michelangelo had conceived...[t]here, God the Father touches his creation with his finger as if running a current through [Adam]...Electricity and vitality were indeed mysteriously interwoven" (4). In entering this territory, Cohn tests the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable behavior, questioning to what extent grief is tolerated and justified, and at what point must the mourner either return to daily life or be rendered unfit for society. Grieving the loss of a child is one thing; attempting to reinvigorate the dead flesh is far more troubling. Claudia's actions further illustrate how haunted she is by grief and how incapable she is of moving through a cathartic grieving process, further positioning her as a victim of melancholy as well as trauma.

In considering patriarchy, its overwhelming domination of women and its forced command over motherhood, Adrienne Rich states the problems evident for women most eloquently:

Motherhood calls to mind the home, and we like to believe that the home is a private place...We do not think of the laws which determine how we got to these places...the art which depicts us in an unnatural serenity or resignation, the medical establishment which has robbed so many women of the act of giving birth, the experts – almost all male – who have told us how, as mothers, we should behave and feel. We do not think of the Marxist intellectuals arguing as to whether we produce "surplus value" in a day of washing clothes, cooking food, and caring for children, or the psychoanalysts who are certain that the work of motherhood suits us by nature. We do not think of the power stolen from us and the power withheld from us, in the name of the institution of motherhood. (274-75)

Claudia, as a result of these patriarchal forces, does not see how her identity has been defined by the will of the state. She does not realize that how she should "behave and

feel” has been subversively dictated to her, she knows only that she “wants” to marry and be distinguished by a man’s name. She does not see how her desires have been forfeited and replaced with patriarchal dogma, or how she has internalized her worth as measured by “surplus value”; she only knows that her desire to be a mother to a son exceeds all other desires to such an extent that it eclipses any other possible identity. In affording Claudia genuine emotion and psychological depth, Cohn allows for her to be representative of the destructive power of male domination and masculine manipulation. To reduce a woman to her uterine capability is to guarantee insanity when the “production” does not occur. Claudia’s breakdown and resulting madness evidences the dangers of essentializing womanhood and femininity to such a harsh degree, and illustrates the damages of such feminine injustice.

Melodrama and Metaphor

In contemplating representations of mothers in film, Kaplan discusses her reasons why melodrama is a genre especially useful in evaluating issues of gender and femininity due to its connection with the rise of modernization and its popularity as a form of cultural production (“Motherhood” 59-61). She uses the term “maternal melodrama” to reference both the number of modern films which specifically look to address women’s issues and the increasing number of women actually writing and creating the films. According to Kaplan, maternal melodrama is then “representational of women’s challenge to dominant culture,” depending on its “complicit” or “resisting” elements (60-61). A complicit melodrama, Kaplan argues, will systematically continue to uphold longstanding patriarchal values, specifically supporting the mother as a “paternal function,” while a resisting melodrama will manifest on some level an awareness of

gender as a social construct and will look to challenge traditional assumptions (81, 131-32).

Cohn's *Snow White* is an example of Kaplan's maternal melodrama; it is the result of American modernization and is sculpted in response to the particularly unique 20th century demand for challenging previously accepted social forms, precipitated largely by feminist movements. Issues such as the redefinition of marriage as an egalitarian partnership, the ability of a woman to accept or reject motherhood, and the formation of a feminine identity separate from masculine constructs are all challenged within this film. The film has within it a maternal melodramatic duality of sorts, containing characters who illustrate both complicit elements, as manifested through Claudia, and resistant elements, as manifested through Lilli. I want to argue that while Cohn's film is undoubtedly resistant, it is this duality which permits an examination of Claudia and Lilli as metaphorically conflicting patriarchal figures.

Reading Claudia and Lilli as opposing metaphorical figures, with Claudia as symbolic of traditional patriarchy and Lilli as symbolic of contemporary feminist thought, allows this version of *Snow White* to be viewed in an entirely new dimension. Claudia has completely accepted patriarchal demands as her own goals; she wants a man's name to validate her, she needs to be married, and she must have a son. She has been specifically, and successfully, shaped to want what paternal culture has deemed essential for women. Claudia, then, is representative of traditional patriarchy, and her motivations within the film seek to maintain that order. In contrast, Lilli does not base her identity of self solely on marriage and motherhood. While Lilli does not diametrically oppose Claudia, she does offer an alternative, more contemporary representation of feminine independence and desire. She is not immune to the influence of male hierarchies but she does not necessarily bend to masculine will: if she marries, for instance, it will be with her approval, as evidenced in her acceptance of Dr. Petyr Gutenberg's marriage proposal, and for the purposes of love and partnership rather than the quest to be defined by a name or the procreation of children. Pitting Claudia against Lilli then becomes more than just a struggle between a stepmother and her stepdaughter; it becomes a battle between contrasting mindsets. Cohn's characters metaphorically represent the combat

between status quo ideology and the feminist call to deconstruct dominating mindsets to allow for more egalitarian culture.

Tendencies of complicit melodrama can be read through Claudia. She exemplifies the “incompleteness” that Kaplan argues comes from “[a woman’s] positioning in patriarchy as object, not subject” (“Motherhood” 81). Building on Freud’s condition of women’s physical “lack” of male genitalia, Kaplan parallels this physical lack to the lack of women’s position within the patriarchal symbolic order, stating that “women are represented as seeking for identity/wholeness either via romantic love or via identification with children” (85). Similarly, Haas asserts that although a woman is “the mirror into which men look to find their ‘other’ and thus their identity, she has no identity of her own” (196). Claudia manifests these values. She seeks to “complete” Frederick’s household as his wife and bearer of his child but is in herself “incomplete.” She has been conditioned to accept only certain positions allowable to women; she does not seek to overthrow those images nor does she look for independence. Instead she is influenced by her reflected internalizations-made-visible to pursue socially mandated goals at any cost. In seeking the mirror-image’s guidance, she is calling upon her own incorporations of cultural commands to keep her from becoming distracted. Claudia cannot comprehend any other kind of identity, and she seeks patriarchal guidance. She does not know how not to follow dominant guidelines.

Tendencies of resistant melodrama can be read through Lilli. Lilli is also a direct result of the patriarchal system; she is nobility by birth, and is invariably headed toward marriage and motherhood as well. Yet the movement and dialogue constructed around Lilli suggest her motives and persona are starkly different from Claudia’s. Lilli is undoubtedly more independent in her thoughts and actions than Claudia is. For example, early in the film, young Lilli openly displeases Frederick by being late for Claudia’s initial arrival and by ignoring Claudia when Frederick introduces her. On the night of Frederick’s and Claudia’s wedding, Lilli throws wine in Claudia’s face during a ceremony to bless their wedding bed. These examples of retaliation by a young Lilli foreshadow a new generation of women resentful of being restricted by old cultural norms. Lilli is also educated, with Frederick monitoring her daily studies; Claudia’s

education is unknown. Lilli's initial love interest, Petyr Gutenberg, asks for her approval of marriage before he approaches Frederick, indicating a generation in which both men and women look to create a more egalitarian marital relationship. When Lilli is cast out into the forest, her initial fear of the band of outcast men turns to empathy as she learns of their respective pasts and the torture many of them suffered at the hands of Crusaders and "civilized gentlemen," indicating her awareness of injustice and oppression on those marginalized by patriarchal society. Indeed, her love interest changes from Dr. Gutenberg to Will, one of the outcast men, inferring an acceptance based on individual virtue instead of culturally dictated status. When Lilli returns to her home – and the "system" – there is the indication that she brings with her a questioning of the patriarchal code and the assumption that her generation will not demurely acquiesce to the long-prevailing guidelines. She does not necessarily openly resist her position but it is evident that she ushers in a shift in prevailing cultural thought and structure.

By running a complicit and a resistant melodrama concurrently, Cohn structures in the film a narrative not only of conflicting individual characters but of conflicting modes of thought. The resistant narrative emerges as the dominant commentary by the end of the film, when Lilli kills Claudia in what can only be described as a violent and bloody battle. Haas has argued in a different context that such negative representation is detrimental to independent women because it acts as a cautionary tale, inadvertently supporting "the focus on the necessary sacrifice/punishment that culture dictates to mothers who would be subjects in their own right" and bolstering the demonization of female characters who join "a host of other rebellious women who die in their attempts to defy cultural codes" (197-98). This reading, however, would really only apply if Claudia were an independent and progressive figure, eliminated for promoting the collapse of an old structure and the emergence of a new one. What Haas does not take into account is the possibility that a female character may be misperceived. Claudia does not represent independent women, just the opposite – she represents generations upon generations of oppressed women, silenced by dominant male hierarchies, driven to madness and given no option but to resort to violence. The victory of Lilli over Claudia is significant in that it presupposes a scenario in which old ideas are dislodged by the contemporary demand

for more modern and less oppressive social structures. The film resists traditionally held views by exaggerating the complicit plot, opening up what Kaplan defines as

a space for critical appraisal of *how* women are constructed or positioned in a particular scenario...It has nothing to do with valuing the *masculine* sphere over the *feminine*: rather, it distinguishes texts in relation to how far they serve to better women's situations on all levels, in a specific historical context. [...] It is a matter of distinguishing some texts that at least recognize certain discursively constituted female positions as *oppressive* as against those that simply validate the structure. ("Motherhood" 125, italics in original)

Cohn's film is a resistant text that upsets the status quo. It does not suggest, "see what happens when women strive for independence," but rather, "see what happens when archaic traditions go unquestioned."

Defining this film as a resistant melodrama encourages reading Claudia and Lilli as patriarchal metaphors – Claudia as representative of traditional patriarchy and Lilli as more contemporary feminist thought – especially when considering their fight scene and Claudia's exceptionally gruesome death. The physical struggle between Claudia and Lilli is symbolic of the psychological struggle between the two modes of thought, and of the stubborn resistance of an older mindset to acknowledge the demand for change. The fight scene between Claudia and Lilli adeptly illustrates what Kaplan asserts is the moment of the unconscious becoming conscious, the moment at which

a 'female' discourse manifests itself, not in any return to some 'essential' femaleness, but in the very processes of struggle against dominant discourses that position women in oppressive ways; it emerges, that is, in the 'gaps' of patriarchal hegemony discovered in the moments of struggle, disruption, rebellion. ("Motherhood" 16)

This film acts as resistant melodrama specifically because of its adaptability towards feminist discourse, which finds its outlet in Lilli. The moment of change, which Kaplan defines in a different context, as the moment in which "the unconscious is becoming conscious" (16), occurs not with Claudia's death or even with Claudia's and Lilli's

physical fight, but before that, when Lilli first enters Claudia's chambers. Claudia's room is now filled with mirrors in all shapes and sizes, covering the walls and stacked along the floor. Lilli, before even seeing Claudia, begins to smash them. While none of the mirrors have the supernatural powers of Claudia's magic mirror, Lilli's act of smashing them represents the obliteration of the reflected (false) image, the shattering of the medium through which women have been identified only as objects and the context through which Claudia's subjectivity – and choice – are stifled. James M. Mellard argues that within patriarchy, women have no choices. Using Lacan's argument that women – particularly married women – exist within a social contract in which choice is a paradox, Mellard writes,

As subjects within the cultural Symbolic of a patriarchal society, what choices have women? How can a woman oppose patriarchy when, in the phenomenon Jacques Lacan...calls the 'forced choice,' its very structure coopts her opposition?...The notorious Freudian question, What does a woman want? might be better put as What does a woman do? If historical abuses of women were not problem enough, then the pervasive double binds trapping their actions seem more than enough to drive women mad. (129)

Recalling Lacan's mirror phase, Claudia does not "choose" to identify with the mirror image/mother inasmuch as she is given no other option, since the alternative of demanding "self" would have thrust her out of society and back into the margins. Because at this moment in the film Lilli is attacking the mirrors, and not Claudia directly (yet), I read this not as a dismantling of Claudia as a Lacanian figure but rather as an attack on masculine methodology – a symbolic feminist disavowal of the means through which internalized patriarchal values may be further rendered visible. If the mirror is the context through which women's choices are foreclosed, then Lilli's actions in destroying them indicate the necessary destruction of the patriarchal framework to allow for alternate feminine agency to exist.

In addition to the characters' physical struggle, this challenging of the patriarchal structure is readily apparent in the characters' language. During their exchange, Claudia states to Lilli, "I felt you stir, the moment you took your first breath. It was like a knife in

my heart.” In keeping with the sentiments of the original tale, Claudia’s words indicate her recognition of her failed plan to exterminate Lilli and of Lilli’s emergence from the grave (“I felt you stir”), as Lilli breathes again (her postmortem “first breath”) after being poisoned by the apple. Claudia’s words about Lilli’s existence being a “knife in her heart” are also eerily prescient, foreshadowing the events which follow. However, a symbolic reading suggests a dislodging of the existing hierarchy. If Claudia is symbolic of patriarchy, and Lilli is symbolic of a feminist social consciousness, then metaphorically their dialogue suggests the rumblings of discontent against patriarchal oppression through the ages, and the persistent, warring effort it has taken for patriarchal structure to remain dominant for centuries. The confrontation between Claudia and Lilli transforms into a clash between tenets of traditional patriarchy and the demand for cultural restructuring to include non-masculine definitions of femininity and womanhood. The institution of patriarchy (the “I”), sensing an uprising or any threat of retaliation (the “you”), acknowledges that it has, from the beginning, been aware of the slightest hint of opposition (the “first breath”), and has been fighting to maintain its position as paramount cultural format (“knife in my heart”) ever since. The fact that Claudia and Lilli are even fighting each other is evidence of the “gap” Kaplan references; their battle is the spot in which the film’s commentary that social, political and economic structure must be renegotiated emerges.

Claudia’s explosively violent and bloody death occurs at the hands of Lilli. As Lilli smashes various mirrors, Claudia appears, holding her now-reanimated swaddled infant son. Lilli remarks that she’s seen what Claudia’s done to Frederick, whom Lilli found bound and gagged, severely injured but still alive. Claudia replies her actions against Frederick were “for my son” and indicates to the horrified Lilli that “he is alive in this room.” Lilli, armed with a crossbow, points it at Claudia, whose belittling smile reveals the grotesque crooked teeth she had when she appeared to Lilli as an old crone in the forest. Claudia smirks and replies, “Oh, dearie. Don’t point that thing at me. Someone might get hurt.” Claudia assaults Lilli by slamming her head into a mirror and cutting her cheek with a shard of the mirror’s glass, commenting “That’s better.” She tries to choke Lilli but is distracted by her son’s cries; Lilli retaliates first by thrusting a large iron

candelabrum in Claudia's direction, causing fire to erupt in the room, then by grabbing a dagger and lunging toward Claudia. The reflected image, hidden until now, calls out to Claudia of the impending attack; an astonished Lilli drives the dagger into the image in the mirror instead. The human Claudia bleeds, and blood pours from the mirror as Claudia pulls the knife out of her reflected image. Claudia ages instantly, repeatedly asking, "What have you done to me?" As Claudia gazes into the now cracked mirror, it explodes, sending daggers of glass into Claudia's face and body. The room is now completely engulfed in fire; both Claudia and the image are seen writhing in the flames. Distorted voices are heard screaming in pain. Claudia dies, as does her son, buried under fire and debris as the room collapses.

Regarding Claudia's infant son, his death here is assumed rather than witnessed, since no one saves him and he cannot survive without Claudia. His second death is appropriate when viewed within the framework of patriarchal metaphors; if Claudia represents a woman bound by traditional patriarchy, and the film seeks to resist this, then it is fitting that the son perishes with Claudia, suggesting that her line will die with her, thus allowing a new order (as symbolized thru Lilli) to emerge. A juxtaposition of reanimated children exists, since Lilli and the infant son are both children who are brought back from death. Their stories are paralleled. The death of the infant son precludes Claudia's first attempt on Lilli's life, both the infant and Lilli are hidden in secrecy within the forest, both are represented in death – the dead infant is still wrapped in his bloody birthing shroud, and Lilli is enclosed in a glass coffin – and both return, alive, to Claudia's chambers. Yet noticeably, each child's reanimation is framed in such a way as to encourage one and abhor the other. This also supports a metaphorical reading. Since Lilli is the heroine, the reanimation of her flesh is encouraged because she is integral to the film's success as resistant melodrama. The infant son is symbolic of an order which needs to end, thus his survival is neither expected nor wanted.

The imagery used in Claudia's death scene is graphic and disturbing, but is in keeping with the metaphors inferred thus far. That Claudia's son is only alive within the walls of her chambers suggests that the patriarchal values which Claudia has tried to uphold, however distortedly, are headed for change: when Claudia dies, her values – as

manifested by her son – will die with her, indicating the creation of a space in which a new cultural structure may be examined, beyond the limits of traditional patriarchy. The fact that Claudia uses the mirrors as literal weapons, such as when she drives Lilli's head into a mirror, evokes her use of the mirror as a figurative weapon all along via the controlling reflected image. Certainly, Claudia's use of a glass shard from the shattered mirror to slice Lilli's beautiful pale cheek references the Grimms' vain and jealous stepmother's resentment of Snow White's beauty, but it also illustrates the satisfaction on behalf of oppressive social institutions when revolutionary forces are thwarted, or at least themselves injured. Having the flesh-and-blood Claudia bleed when the mirror image is stabbed reemphasizes the connection between the two, particularly bolstering the view that the mirror image is the materialization of Claudia's systematically internalized patriarchal values; when the institution of patriarchy is attacked, so is Claudia.

It is also highly significant that it is Lilli who kills Claudia. Diverting from the original Grimms' tale, in which the stepmother dances to her death in red hot iron shoes at Snow White's wedding, and crucial in keeping with the film's symbolic representation of patriarchy, Lilli's destruction of Claudia continues the metaphor of contemporary feminine consciousness attacking the masculine structure of dominant society in an attempt to deconstruct repressive social concepts of feminine identity and gender ideology. It suggests the time for archaic patriarchal values has passed; a new ideology of femininity and gender cannot be considered until the oppressive structure of traditional patriarchy is dismantled. That Claudia's death is so remarkably violent indicates the extreme arduousness inherent in breaking centuries of the systematic oppression of women.

In an attempt to drain the blood necessary to revive her son, Claudia drags Frederick to the family chapel and proceeds to hang him upside-down on the life-size crucifix, back-to-back with the figure of the crucified Christ. In evoking crucifixion and the Christian belief of salvation through Jesus' death, Claudia is literally offering Frederick as sacrificial lamb so that her son may live, further reiterating the preference for the son over the father in the process. However, here the crucifix is inverted. This in itself raises difficulties, since interpretation often relies on a person's individual religious

influence. An upside-down crucified figure may mean an inversion of the significance of Christ himself. Where Christ is revered as a martyr, the inversion may indicate a traitor. Christ's death delivers salvation to those who seek forgiveness, but its inversion suggests the damnation of the heretical. Extreme occult groups go so far as to claim an inverted cross as satanic. Yet alternately, Saint Peter was famously crucified upside-down, as per his insistence that he was not worthy to die in the same position as Jesus; in this regard an inversion signifies humility. At the risk of sounding preferential, I assert that Claudia's inversion of the crucifix leans more towards the defiance of a pious submission to a paternal deity than to humility. It is as if, in a brief – although contradictory – moment of clarity, Claudia realizes how she has been driven to madness by the institution of patriarchy, and looks to exact retribution from her persecutors, namely church and state. At the very least her actions indicate the performative nature of Christian idolatry and the power of spectacle, and suggest the upheaval that follows.

Although Frederick hangs on the inverted cross, it is Claudia's death which functions as a means of prophecy, indicating that it is not the destruction but the resulting revelation that is essential. Slavoj Žižek offers a transformative insight regarding salvation. Referencing a different work in which Žižek comments on revelation through crucifixion, James M. Mellard writes, "Žižek does offer a way out [of modern-age subjectivity], [but] it oddly, paradoxically, is offered not by Christ but by the femme fatale of film noir. Because, as Lacan claims, woman in the guise of the femme fatale functions as one of the Names of the Father, she offers to a subject at least a possibility of locating himself 'within the texture of symbolic fate'" (238). Žižek makes possible the idea that revelation can occur through an imperfect character, therefore marking Claudia as a harbinger of transformation. The inverted crucifix, when interpreted through tarot, supports this assertion. Similar to the death card in a tarot deck, it is not literal death that is indicated but rather the opportunity which exists only as the result of momentous change. This image is a direct representation of the Hanged Man card in a tarot deck, which in tarot divination signifies circumspection and discernment, wisdom, and the reversal of the mind (Gray 174). While it is doubtful that the implied change of mind is on Claudia's behalf, the invocation of the Hanged Man figure within the narrative of the

film, placed specifically as it is in a scene which precedes Claudia's defeat, prefigures change through Claudia's death and the possible cultural alterations made feasible by Lilli's victory.

According to Kaplan, melodrama is her preferred film genre for discussing women's issues because of its wide appeal to a mass audience, and because modern melodrama has always explicitly addressed a female audience – due in part, in Kaplan's estimation, to its roots in nineteenth-century women's writing ("Motherhood" 10-11). Cohn's film fits particularly well into Kaplan's subcategory of expressly maternal melodrama; a genre which allows Cohn to structure his film as a study of women's issues while allowing for a metaphorical duality within the film itself. Reading Claudia and Lilli as "complicit" and "resistant" figures, respectively, with each representative of a particular mindset, allows Cohn's film to be read as a social commentary, with implications reaching far beyond the borders of the Grimms' original tale. In positioning his characters accordingly, Cohn's film not only affords a space in which such discourse can take place, it also offers evidence of the persistence of fairy tale myth in contemporary discourse.

Breaking the Binary: Cohn's Approach

To address the second half of my argument, which is the disruption of the "bad mother/good daughter" binary traditionally associated with this tale and the interpretation of the film in light of maternal theory, I begin with Cohn's unorthodox approach in representing Claudia and Lilli. The bad mother/good daughter polarization generally associated with the Snow White tale is blurred in Cohn's film from the beginning. As previously noted, when young Lilli and Claudia first meet, Lilli is outwardly dismissive while Claudia is potentially likeable. The portrayal of neither one as being clearly "good"

or “bad” dismantles the more stolidly defined characterizations put forth in the Grimms’ tale. Haas, in discussing the considerable lack of (specifically Disney) films which actually portray mother/daughter relationships, asserts that this good/bad polarization has persisted through time because male domination is dependent on women turning on each other. She refers to Irigaray’s statement that “The relationship between mother/daughter, daughter/mother constitutes and extremely explosive kernel in our societies. To think it, to change it, amounts to undermining the patriarchal order” (197). A similar expression is found in Rich, who mourns the loss of the mother-daughter relationship, which she terms “the essential female tragedy” (237). Referring to the religious mystery of Eleusis, based on the mother-daughter myth of Demeter and Persephone, which was the spiritual foundation of Greek life for two thousand years, Rich asserts that recognition was once placed on the mother-daughter relationship but has been replaced largely by father/daughter representations, as in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, and by mother/son relationships, as in *Hamlet*, and the tale of *Oedipus* (237, 238). The good/bad binary exists because all other mother/daughter relationships have been foreclosed. Representing Claudia and Lilli in a nontraditional fashion thus obscures previously assumed (or absent) mother/daughter positions, and creates characters whose early inclinations to serve in explicitly “good” or “evil” roles are not precisely delineated.

Rich also proposes that “the woman who has felt ‘unmothered’ may seek mothers all her life” (242). Claudia may be placed in this category. It is revealed that her mother is gone, insinuating that Claudia was privy at some point to a maternal relationship, but what is not known is the nature of her mother’s absence (death? exile?) or how long she has been absent. Claudia’s aforementioned musings on whether her mother would be happy or angry about her impending marriage to Frederick suggests her mother has been gone for so long that Claudia doesn’t know her mother well enough to answer her questions. Claudia’s mirror-image then carries a double identity; in addition to acting as the materialization of her internalized patriarchal values, it also represents the mother she seeks, which would also account for why she follows the mirror-image’s advice so unquestionably. Rich’s argument that many daughters live in a rage also becomes applicable to Claudia, as it positions her as a victim of her own mother’s actions:

A mother's victimization does not merely humiliate her, it mutilates the daughter who watches her for clues as to what it means to be a woman. Like the traditional foot-bound Chinese woman, she passes on her own affliction. The mother's self-hatred and low expectations are the binding-rags for the psyche of the daughter. (243)

While not enough is known about Claudia's mother to accurately measure her influence on Claudia, that she would have been victimized by the same institution that has molded Claudia is a fair assessment. It is apparent that Claudia has suffered the consequences of her mother's actions by her desire to be accepted by patriarchal society, indicating she has, at the very least, been marginalized. Her mother, in causing Claudia's marginalization, "passes on her own affliction" – Claudia is "mutilated," looking to a victimized woman to find what it means to be a woman. The reflected image offers her the kind of maternal relationship that has been lacking.

Alternatively, while Lilli is quite literally left motherless from the beginning, she is not "unmothered" in the same sense as Claudia. Lilli's mother, a very pregnant Lilliana, dies in the beginning of the film as the result of a carriage accident; Frederick delivers his daughter. Lilli therefore only knows her mother from stories that Frederick and Nannau, the nursemaid, tell her, and from Lilliana's portrait which hangs in the hall. However, Lilli is not lacking in either attention or guidance. Nannau is represented as nurturing young Lilli; no such reference is granted for Claudia. Lilli also clearly identifies with her father, and as such her identity is not as easily susceptible to the same bruising as is Claudia's. Whereas Claudia has incorporated within herself the principles of femininity as dictated by dominant society, Lilli has internalized the predominantly masculine characteristics of independence and confidence. As a child, she is represented as mischievous, (she hides from Nannau and plays tricks on her), sometimes bold (she questions Frederick on why he's marrying Claudia) and even rude (as illustrated in her initial treatment of Claudia when she first arrives). As a teenager Lilli is undoubtedly independent; she opposes Claudia's suggestions that she is still a child, and resists when Claudia offers her a dress. Yet even though Lilli does not exhibit the qualities generally

associated with femininity, Frederick states how proud he is of her. While it seems contradictory of Frederick to appreciate traditional (feminine) qualities in his wife but independent (masculine) qualities in his daughter, he illustrates Rich's man who is in a position to strengthen his daughter as she is not a threat to him:

A man often lends his daughter the ego-support he denied his wife...he may simply feel less threatened by a daughter's power, especially if she adores him. A male teacher may confirm a woman student while throttling his wife and daughters. Men have been able to give us power, support, and certain forms of nurture, as individuals, when they choose; but the power is always stolen power, withheld from the mass of women in patriarchy. (246)

Frederick is firmly rooted in Rich's definition. There is no information given on how he and Claudia met or how their relationship developed, but in choosing Claudia as his wife he makes evident his preference for a traditional male-dominated marriage, one that Claudia ambitiously welcomes. However his influence on Lilli is indisputable. Lilli adores Frederick and has a close relationship with him; he in turn instills in Lilli attributes such as independence, tenacity and integrity, attributes that are traditionally associated with sons rather than daughters. It is as if Lilli is the son Frederick doesn't have; as a result she is a blend of feminine and masculine qualities. In this light, Claudia's introduction into Lilli's life becomes more of a distraction than anything else: Lilli neither needs nor wants mothering from Claudia, and Claudia has no use for a non-biological child, as that does not advance her maternal cause. They serve no practical purpose for each other. Metaphorically, however, their early hostilities serve to heighten the tensions as the years pass, in anticipation of the battle between them.

Reading the film through Kaplan's theory of the "missing mother" further emphasizes Kaplan's criticism that in addition to marginalizing mothers, Hollywood portrays mothers in severe ways. Explaining the "missing mother" as the "silenced mother", Kaplan states that mothers in film fall primarily into one of four basic paradigms – the Good Mother, the Bad Mother or Witch, the Heroic Mother, and the Silly, Weak or Vain Mother ("Feminism" 468). Kaplan explains that "each paradigm is assigned a moral position in a hierarchy that facilitates the smooth functioning of the

system” (468). It becomes implicitly understood then that none of these categories grant a mother independence or agency. Understandably, in allowing only limited representations of mothers, Hollywood films often fail to adequately portray the complexities of motherhood. Claudia’s character illustrates Kaplan’s frustration with this severely limited portrayal of mothering, since Claudia does not easily fit into any of the categories. She is the Good Mother in that she is completely invested in her child, but her ambition and placement as central narrative figure suggests Bad Mother. While Claudia as Heroic Mother is debatable, she is within the definition of the Weak Mother, through her subservience to the mirror-image, and Vain Mother (for obvious reasons). Haas suggests that a woman’s perception of her own motherhood is reduced to a negative version of herself, since a mother’s identity is relational to female subjectivity via male authority: “her inability to...transcend the mirror in which she sees herself as the dim reflection of the ‘good mother’ locks her into a deadly narcissism more conducive of self-hatred than self-love” (204). Claudia, as a mix of Kaplan’s paradigms, is perhaps better defined as being trapped in a self-propagating cycle: wanting to be more than the reflected mirror image suggests, but unable to summon the resiliency to oppose it, desiring love and acceptance but only able to seek it through channels of denial.

Cohn’s film is not part of the cinematic body of works which Kaplan targets in her complaint regarding Hollywood’s limited representations of mothers. Cohn’s portrayal of Claudia as a mother riddled with complications and his choice to position her as central character clearly defy the Hollywood standard of keeping mothers categorized and silent. One can argue against this, since, especially in fairy tales, evil mothers are rarely silenced; in fact they are often the ones who propel the plot. In Cohn’s film this is undeniably true, without Claudia there would be no narrative. However my defense is this: Claudia is not central because she is evil. Rather, she is central because she is ubiquitous. She is every woman who has ever been oppressed, dominated, humiliated or shamed by a patriarchal society. She is every woman who has ever been commanded to replace her own desires with those deemed desirable by church and state. She is every woman whose worth has ever been measured not by the strength of her mind or the depth of her passions but by the copiousness of her uterus. Cohn does not make her the central

character so that she may be hated and despised; he makes her the central character so that she may be recognized in the faces of women who are our mothers, our daughters, our sisters, and ourselves, who continue to live within skewed, misogynistic societies.

This is not to say that the more conventional trope of the missing and/or silenced mother isn't evident, on the contrary. One of the film's contradictory aspects is this juxtaposition of the more traditionally expected representations of mothers with the departure from the norm in its presentation of Claudia. Most obvious is the representation of Lilliana, Lilli's biological mother, who is "sacrificed" at the beginning of film, portraying her as the stereotypical good but dead mother, perpetuating the allure of Kaplan's Heroic Mother as idealized martyr. Also, Claudia's mother is removed from society and silenced through marginalization: a silence which is problematic since not enough is known of Claudia's mother – not even her name – to theorize about her to any substantial degree, except that she is absent, demonized and replaced.

Cohn's *Snow White* serves as a representational need for feminine/maternal restructuring within society. Haas argues that "if we wish to subvert this order [of woman as a defective man] woman must become self-defined in such a way that we are not satisfied with sameness" (194). Cohn's film, and the elements of feminist thought as evidenced through Lilli, calls for such a redefinition. As an example of resistant melodrama, Cohn's film offers a redefinition of femininity – one parallel with, instead of oppressed by, masculine presence - through Lilli. Its concurrent use of complicit and resistant narratives allows the story to unfold from both Claudia's and Lilli's individual points of view, giving the audience an insider view of each character's perspective. It also clearly delineates their fundamental incompatibilities since their identities stem from radically different origins. In scene 4, a frustrated Claudia asks an increasingly defensive teenage Lilli, "Why must we struggle so?" In retrospect, this question borders on the moot if not the ridiculous: it's like asking hot oil why it doesn't like water.

Conclusion

In his essay “Feminist Fairy-Tale Scholarship” Donald Haase chronicles the rise of feminist scholarship in the 1970s, particularly as it materialized between feminist scholars Alison Lurie and Marcia R. Lieberman. Lurie argued that that fairy tales can advance the cause of women’s liberation because they depict strong females, and maintained that strong female characters were found not only in the popular classic tales but also in the larger and more representative body of work comprised of hundreds of lesser-known tales. Lieberman, on the other hand, argued this point, stating that only the well-known stories, especially the ones popularized by Disney, had any bearing on feminist scholarship because they were the one to infiltrate culture (1). Haase explains that such exchanges are crucial because in order to address them, scholarship must explore not only the content of the fairy tale but also the process of canonization and the male-dominated control of feminist fairy-tale tradition. In looking retrospectively at the beginnings of fairy-tale scholarship, he writes, “Ultimately, there would be the development of an increasingly nuanced view of the relation between gender and fairy tale, a view that avoids insupportable generalizations about the genre as a whole and does justice to the complexity and diversity of the fairy-tale corpus and the responses it elicits” (2). For Haase, who admits that the Lurie-Lieberman debate seems simplistic in view of issues that have emerged since, fairy tales must continue to be the subject of scholarly research because of their ability to provoke critical debate (31).

Indeed, the allure of fairy tales lies in the fact that their malleable nature presupposes them to all kinds of revisions, and allows for contradictions to exist. In her introduction to Tatar’s *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*, A. S. Byatt reminds us that even the most revisionist modern stories and films stay within the path of the traditional fairy tale, acknowledging the public’s ongoing curiosity with the Grimms’ tales, where they came from and what they mean:

We should be aware of what stories can do to the way we put the world together. We live in a world very far from woods, castles and gibbets. We live in a world of urban myths – alligators in sewers, grandmothers on car roofs...and a burgeoning virtual world of gossip and storytelling, real and fantastic, on the Web. (Byatt xxv)

The dominant ideology of what it means to be a “mother” and “female” has not changed so much over time as to render these tales obsolete. In fact, it is quite the opposite. Kaplan finds that certain paradigms which repeat over time do so because they strike an essential chord: “When a myth has such persistence, one can assume it touches something basic in the white, middle-class cultural unconscious” (“Motherhood” 15). Fairy tales prove to be an especially attractive medium for social commentary because of their adaptability to social and cultural alterations. Stories of good and evil, victory and vice, and fortune and misfortune still persist; only the names have changed.

Cohn’s use of fairy tale structure and film medium is an exceptionally powerful pairing, one that Kaplan favors to represent the relationship between images of women on film and the realities of women’s lives in the context of the time in which a film is produced. She writes:

Film offers a meta-terrain where questions about women, the unconscious, the social imaginary and women’s discursive construction can take on different valences than they may take in either the social or natural sciences, or medicine. In this way, film pushes feminist studies to develop new theories, or to challenge accepted male theories of aesthetics and entertainment. (“Feminism” 2)

Cohn’s film, by setting contemporary feminist thought in a repressed pre-discursive space, is an anachronistic approach that privileges a retelling which exists outside of history, but which represents a return to the grim, more diabolical tone that was often found in early fairy tales. Cohn’s *Snow White* resists the urge to sanitize what Chesler calls the “secret histories of embattled female relationships” (“Inhumanity” 167). Chesler argues that fairy tales are hardly off the mark when it comes to detailing the real lives of actual women around the world who even today remain subject to hideous living conditions and the whims of both male and female relatives. She points out that economic

and social dependence on a dominant male continues to keep women as rivals and competitors, stating

Today, Thailand remains an impoverished country in which female children are routinely sold, kidnapped, or tricked into prostitution. They no longer belong to a single ruler, but to any and all bidders in the global harem.

Harsh fairy-tale-like female rivalries still exist in countries where husband-based extended families, child-marriage, child-prostitution, arranged marriages, polygamy, concubinage, and intractable poverty once existed or still do. (176)

Fairy tales are remarkable in their ability to transcend geographical borders; it is because of this particular trait that Cohn's retelling is relevant not just as applied to a western mindset but to a global one. Cohn's film is a decidedly American retelling of a European tale, released in 1997 but set in the Middle Ages, dealing with feminist issues than can be found just as easily in Salt Lake City as in Kabul. It is perhaps more accurate to say that Cohn's film doesn't return to darker issues, it unveils the issues that never went away.

The uniquely 20th century combination of industrialization, the rise of feminist movements and the phenomenon and resulting widespread popularity of film has culminated in an environment ripe for cultural change. Kaplan states that the 1990s in particular represent "a painful transitional period" in which the concept of "mother" for most women has become "one of the most subordinated and fetishized positions" ("Motherhood" 219). Cohn's film is a reaction to the heightened awareness of contemporary feminist issues, and works to displace "the old negative mother-position in the patriarchal unconscious that has hitherto encompassed us all" (218-19). This impassioned call for the thoughtful reassessment of femininity in general and motherhood in particular is best articulated by Rich:

The changes required to make this [change] possible reverberate into every part of the patriarchal system. To destroy the institution is not to abolish motherhood. It is to release the creation and sustenance of life into the same realm of decision, struggle, surprise, imagination, and conscious intelligence, as any other difficult, but freely chosen work. (280)

Cohn's film answers Rich's call by becoming part of the ongoing movement to challenge patriarchal cultural attitudes and perceptions necessary for progression.

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