Sex and Sexuality in a Feminist World

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Edited by

Karen A. Ritzenhoff and Katherine A. Hermes

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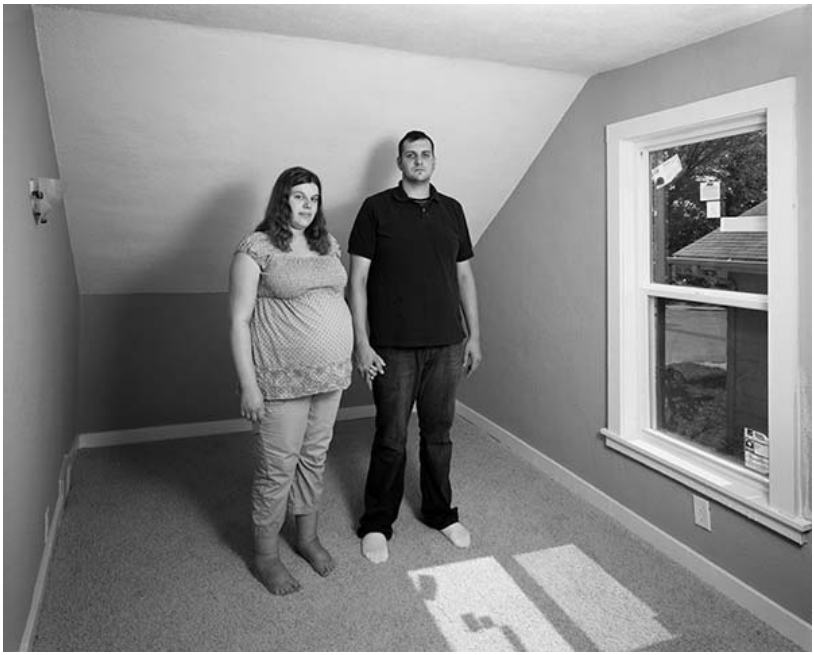

"Dara and Aaron, 17 days," from Dona Schwartz's series, *On the Nest*

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The idea for this collection came out of several conferences, organized by the Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies Program (WGSS) at Central Connecticut State University between 2005 and 2007, when Katherine A. Hermes and Karen A. Ritzenhoff co-coordinated this interdisciplinary program. The essays are drawn from a conference on "Gender, Sex and Masculinity" in November 2005 where Michael Kimmel and Don Levy were invited speakers on our campus. The first "June Bake Higgins Gender Studies Conference" in April 2006 gave the title for this edited collection and addressed "Sex and Sexuality in a Feminist World;" a subsequent conference in April 2007 covered "Gender and War." In addition to these research projects that were presented at CCSU, we solicited work by our colleagues and scholars in the field to complete the scope of this volume. We would like to wholeheartedly thank the editors at Cambridge Scholars Press who solicited this manuscript for publication.

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This book is dedicated to Michael Ritzenhoff and Dorothy Page.

lilac time

1.

it was a night of lilac stars
i was ambushed
by the scent of wild beach roses

2.

looking at the white lilac buds
you placed in
the milk bottle
before you left
they swell and spread
slowly
unfolding

i blush

Davyne Verstandig

PREFACE

NEFERTI X. M. TADIAR

What does it mean to live in a feminist world? In this collection, Karen A. Ritzenhoff and Katherine A. Hermes suggest that to live in a feminist world is to choose to engage with the vital and dynamic ideals of a political movement that has, in some ways, been superseded or at least put into question by the very world that it has profoundly shaped. The effects of historical feminist political claims on women's situations today – their access to highly remunerated formal work, their increased political representation and power in government and civil society, and the remarkable reconfiguration of their social roles, bodily destinies, and sexual agencies in popular culture and everyday life – are far-reaching and incalculable and, at the same time, grossly limited, contradictory and uneven. While individual women from many backgrounds have reached the higher echelons of corporate and state power and act as free subjects in their own personal lives, countless other women toil under grave conditions of unfreedom, violence and hardship, many reduced to serving as bodies without human subjectivity or value. Feminist struggles and ideals have generated and importantly guide transnational networks of non-governmental organizations and other transnational institutions of governance, such as the international criminal courts, even as the gender norms they help to establish and disseminate through these networks and institutions threaten to make unrecognizable, if not completely unviable, the very struggles of women in diverse contexts to live differently.

These paradoxical features of the broader world in which discrepant feminisms have so much at stake highlight the incomplete or as yet unrealized character of the historical political projects undertaken in the name of feminism. Whether or not one concurs with pronouncements that feminism has outlived its usefulness or that we live in a "post-feminist" era, it would seem impossible not to contend with such paradoxical features of our transformed times and the challenges for contemporary social struggles that they betoken. The essays in this collection attempt precisely to address the vagaries of women's conditions and prospects in the present time, which are the contradictory results of not only the

accomplishments of feminism, but also its incomplete realization. In doing so, the essays point to both the intrinsic limits and unforeseen consequences of feminist struggles over the meanings of gender, sex and sexuality and the conditions of their normative performances in dominant capitalist cultures. Hence, for example, while feminist struggles to liberate female sexualities pried open many spaces of confinement and punitive discipline for women, they have also perhaps inadvertently bolstered the relationship between commodification and freedom everywhere promoted by liberal democratic states through wars and neoliberalist restructuring. Even as biologically-defined sexual roles are getting more tenuous and contingent and identity constructions appear to have become more fluid for individual subjects in neoliberal societies, sex and sexuality continue to figure prominently and decisively in state and military projects as well as various forms of social and economic enterprises across the world, in the most familiar and unexpected, even unarticulated, ways. As sex and sexuality remain sought-after realms of freedom and pleasure (targeted as sites of coercive regulation and oppressive control and honed as fundamental sites of feminist struggle), they also serve as exercises of domination and power. In this way, beyond their roles in the formation of identities and social relations, sex and sexuality figure in and impact the very conduct of world affairs.

How do we articulate these connections between feminist concerns about sex and sexuality and their lived enactments in the world? Numerous examples of the complex entanglements of feminist perspectives and aspirations and the world– or what we might better describe as the subsumption of their aspirations into new projects of exploitation – urge new critical interventions not only in our collective efforts to shape the present and the future but also, towards that end, in our efforts to understand the past. To live in a feminist world is, after all, to engage with the paradoxical consequences of feminist accomplishment as well as to grapple with the unrealized promise of feminist goals. In a feminist world, what feminist futures are yet to be imagined?

beside the river
beneath already brown leaves

a letter lay
        torn in half

hunger in its handwriting

INTRODUCTION

KAREN A. RITZENHOFF
AND KATHERINE A. HERMES

Sex and sexuality are topics that have defined feminism since its inception. What has changed is that there is now a generation of feminists and scholars who are comfortable not only to write in their own disciplines but who incorporate feminist ideas in their research. This book assembles a variety of essays, most of which were written especially for this collection, that negotiate sex and sexuality in historical contexts as well as in contemporary times. There is a common ground of history and (popular) culture among the articles. While different theories of feminism operate in these essays, feminist lenses have allowed the reevaluation of familiar topics from early religious practices to medieval literature to current films and advertising.

The authors represented in this collection range from established feminist and gender scholars to those who employ feminist theoretical frameworks in their respective disciplines. As editors our desire was to open the discourse about feminism and gender studies to scholars who are not part of the canon of women's studies per se but rather to those who explore women, gender and sexuality studies. There is a value in mixing expertise with enterprise, including new voices with old, inviting the second-wave feminists to engage with the third wave, offering a forum for emerging masculinity studies to co-exist with women's studies.

We chose "feminist world" and not "postfeminist world" in our book title, because we believe in the strength of the original feminist ideology as a political and social movement. One of the criticisms of postfeminism is that it has been depoliticized. Whether this is true is open for debate, but our authors do see a timeline between first, second and third wave feminism. There is a feminist political project that is not completed, that is rooted in ideas about universal equality and rights for women. Yet we acknowledge that there is not one feminism and that feminism is contested continuously. As an organic philosophy, redefinition is critical to maintaining its vitality and life. It grows and changes with humanity. Much of the western world as it exists today is not feminist, even if the

political elite claims it is. Yet as scholars we may choose to inhabit a feminist world, to embrace it, and to engage with its ideals in order to study the past and the present.

According to Amanda D. Lotz, who examines third wave feminism and postfeminism in a seminal article, "work discussing postfeminism lacks a stable trajectory."[1] Postfeminism can be a necessary critique of feminist theory, but it can also be reduced in the popular media to carry an anti-feminist message or to imply that feminism is simply over and even unnecessary.[2] The essays in this book that deal with postfeminism do so in a variety of ways that reflect its fluid meaning. Third wave feminism (as distinguished from postfeminism) is often associated with critiques by women of color, women in the third world, and women who do not enjoy the white, middle-class privilege that critics say has permeated second-wave feminism.[3] Postfeminism is interrogated, because it is seen as a way to commodify and depoliticize original feminist ideals. It is seen as an antidote to radical feminism. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra write in *Interrogating Post-Feminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* that there is an urgent need to distinguish between "progressive and regressive texts" and to "develop new reading strategies to counteract the popularized feminism, figurations of female agency, and canny neutralization of traditional feminist critiques in its texts." They argue that even though postfeminism seems to offer fresh and new ways of looking at feminist issues, it simply replaces "older forms of trivialization."[4]

There is consensus amongst scholars of different fields that there is a stigma attached to feminism, as "extreme, difficult and unpleasurable" in its methods, and "shrill, bellicose and parsimonious" in its language. One scholar wonders why young women "hate" feminism, and others note that when referencing feminism it is called "the F-word," rendering it "unspeakable within contemporary popular culture."[5] In our book, we have opted not to silence feminist voices with postfeminist arguments, and

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[1] Amanda D. Lotz, "Communicating Third Wave Feminism and New Social Movements: Challenges for the Next Century of Feminist Endeavor," *Women and Language* 26.1 (2003): 4.

[2] Lotz, 4-5.

[3] R. Claire Snyder, "What is Third Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 34.1 (2008): 175, 180.

[4] Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, eds., *Interrogating Post-Feminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 22.

[5] Tasker and Negra, 3, 4; Megan Le Masurier, "My Other, My Self: *Cleo Magazine* and Feminism in 1970s Australia," *Australian Feminist Studies* 22.53 (2007): 192, quoting Angela McRobbie; Tasker and Negra, 3.

vice versa. Several essays by Suzanne Leonard, Candace Barrington, and Cindy L. White and Elizabeth Hall Preston view popular and media culture in the context of postfeminism or third wave feminism.

Now that we have legitimated the use of the word feminism in our title, let's talk about sex! There are three articles, by Michael Kimmel, Don Levy, and Karen Ritzenhoff and Cindy L. White, in this collection that discuss gender and sport as one of the areas in which one can see clearly the difference between sex and gender. Sex is both the biological assignment of organs for reproduction and the act of "making love," not only to reproduce. Our book has articles about both. Gender, as Cindy White and Elizabeth Hall Preston explain, is "a cultural and social construction: it is not a fixed or natural consequence of biological sex." They contend that neither physical nor anatomical differences between male and female bodies can be definitively established. Yet women's bodies and their sexuality are subjected to "patriarchal regulation and control." The conflation of sex, gender and sexuality in popular culture and language covers over the real differences between them.

Male bodies can also be misrepresented. There are eroticized male bodies in sports and entertainment, but there are also pervasive cultural norms that tell men they are more easily sexually aroused than women. Women are more commonly used in sexually suggestive poses, both in film and advertising, but they are also more likely to be cast as the party "in love." One of the few exceptions in classical Hollywood film is the movie *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) that has been appropriated by feminist scholarship and read against the grain. In a key scene, a group of male athletes works out in cream colored boxer shorts while being assessed by the brunette Dorothy (Jane Russell), who playfully asks them, "Is there anyone here for love?" Because her emancipated gaze emasculates them, she decides they are not suitable as sexual partners. Her counterpart Lorelei (Marilyn Monroe) bargains her youthful sexual body for diamonds. Feminists have interpreted her song "Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend" as proof of conscious commodification.[6] Sex is traded for economic security. Yet we have an essay, "Getting Nailed" by Katherine A. Hermes in which it is argued that the theme of sexual commodification is too often used to take agency away from women, especially those of non-western cultures.

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[6] Maureen Turim, "Gentlemen Consume Blondes," in Patricia Erens, ed., *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 101-111; Lucy Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca, "Pre-Text and Text in Gentlemen Prefer Blondes," in Erens, 112-125.

Emasculating male athletes is still a dangerous activity, and because so much of western masculinity is constructed around sport, it remains representative of heterosexual normativity. In a decision by the Rugby Football League in November, 2008, officials took a stance against homophobia and in favor of being able to openly declare one's sexual orientation. The Stonewall organization "hailed [it] as a major breakthrough."[7] The publicity surrounding this announcement is indicative of the novelty that gay men in sports still represent, reinventing the uncovering of homosexuality as spectacle. Two essays, by Burlin Barr and Sara Nelson, discuss transgenderism and lesbianism as within the acceptable range of possibilities instead of seeing sexual orientation and gender identity as odd or remarkable. Stuart Barnett and Frederick Wasser concentrate on how masculinity has been affected by the feminist movement in the private sphere as well as in the fictional realm of action movies.

As the feminist movement has grown, sometimes unbeknownst to those benefiting from it, the need to keep developing its activist-scholarship relationship is still imperative. During our tenure as the coordinators of Women's Studies at our university, Central Connecticut State University, we were interested in moving the scholarly field towards practice. Like many such programs around the globe, we facilitated conferences, workshops, and film festivals, but not merely as events. We wanted to change the direction of our program. We decided to call it Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies, and our first act was to host a conference panel on masculinity studies. We reworked the curriculum to reflect what faculty from different disciplinary backgrounds could contribute to this growing field. By enlarging the scope we were doing something new for state universities in Connecticut, but in sync with worldwide changes. Thus, many of the essays in this volume emerged from two annual June Baker Higgins Gender Studies conferences which had themes tied to our objective of reorienting the field towards sexuality. At a time when some third wave feminists are arguing that pornography is not misogynistic and are even explicitly "pro-porn," and masculinity scholars like Michael Kimmel are declaring that pornography is all about male revenge on women and not male sexual gratification, the discussion about the interactions of gender, sexuality, and identity become paramount.[8]

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[7] "Rugby League Join Gay Workplace Equality Scheme," *Pink News*, http://www.pinknews.co.uk/news/articles/205-9696.html (accessed Nov. 29, 2008)
[8] Snyder, 187, 190.

The majority of texts in parts III, IV, and V derive primarily from these conferences on "Sex and Sexuality in a Feminist World," (April, 2006) and "Gender and War," (April, 2007). These essays, reflecting history and popular culture, are also the least theoretical, even though many employ ideas derived from anthropology and other fields highly influenced by theory. The humanist and social science methodologies complement one another, and thus feminism is a philosophical undercurrent rather than an explicit framework. The feminist world, not just the pornographic world as outlined by Michael Kimmel in "Babes in Boyland," says affirmatively "yes." Maybe it is wishful thinking but we hope our readers will be informed as well as entertained.

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the blue hour

in the blue hour
before desire stretches out beneath the skin
there is a space something like sailing
where passion holds its heat

my palm longs for your scent
cupping desire
i thirst for you
i will drink you
as day pours into night
sacred night
whispering darkness

and i will drink you
into morning
oh blue birth
waiting patiently
beneath her fluttering wing

PART I:

IMAGES OF GENDER IN POPULAR AND MEDIA CULTURE

INTRODUCTION

KAREN A. RITZENHOFF

The first two parts in our book complement each other, even though the titles do not make that immediately obvious. The essays in Part I address adaptations of feminist thought in literature, advertising and film, with a focus on the construction of female identity and the positioning of women in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. The second part deals with the construction of masculinity and identity in modern society in response to emerging feminism, second-wave feminism and post-feminism. As Candace Barrington astutely summarizes when looking at literary adaptations of Chaucer's classic *Canterbury Tales* for child audiences, three phases in feminist thought can be distinguished: she coins the first as the period between 1903 and 1965 as the origins of the women's movement and "popular feminism." According to Barrington, a second wave of feminism allowed for the reconception of women and their traditional roles as well as the reconception of topics such as rape and violence against women. She anchors this second phase between the late sixties and mid nineties. The years 2000 to the present can be regarded as "third-wave" feminism in which racial and gender diversity are strongly emphasized.

Although scholars may disagree on the exact time frames of such different periods in the development of feminist thought, there is a strong sense that we are currently experiencing a postfeminist phase in contemporary western thought. While women in a global context still struggle to fight for their rights to decide who to live with (or from whom to legally separate), how to choose one's sexual partner and one's sexual identity, and how to protect oneself and one's children from arbitrary domestic abuse, beatings or rape (for two recent documentaries on such international issues look, for example, at *Sisters-in-Law* about two female judges in a rural community in Cameroon or *Breaking the Silence: Rape in Congo* about female victims of rape in wartorn Africa, both distributed by *Women Make Movies* in New York), new narratives are emerging in popular culture that suggest a shift in priorities: instead of women being depicted as enslaved domestic boy-toys and man's arm candy (such as

women robots in the original version of the *Stepford Wives*), post feminist storytelling may focus on the career woman who is unable to keep her humanity intact because she is distracted by her own ideas of success and perfection. In her opening essay to this collection, Suzanne Leonard provides an original textual interpretation of these two filmic adaptations of the *Stepford Wives* and contrasts the original movie with the 2004 remake.

Leonard contends that "sexuality in a postfeminist age" is gauged by women who are too motivated to further their own career and neglect husband and children in the process while being replaced in their domestic traditional chores by an increasingly techno-savvy household where appliances rule themselves – and thereby the family members – automatically. According to Leonard, "the original *Stepford Wives* relies on an admittedly heavily essentialized vision of organic qualities of the female body in order to offer its critique of patriarchy's attempted cooptation of these natural processes. Yet, this attitude is repositioned, reappropriated, and almost completely upended through a postfeminist lens in the 2004 remake of *The Stepford Wives*." Cindy L. White and Elizabeth Hall Preston also develop a feminist historiography by analyzing the depiction of gender and sport in advertising. This is an analytic lens that resurfaces in the essays by Don Levy "On Becoming a Man, Becoming a Fan" as well as the co-authored article by Ritzenhoff and White on "Sports and Sexuality" in Part II of the book.

White and Preston argue how the femininity of women athletes has been called into question by participating in sports. Often media images of female athletes show them as overly "feminized" in order to ward off the stigma of lesbianism and/or make sure they don't threaten the masculine domination of sports in general. White and Preston explain how advertising campaigns are crafted to ensure that female athletes look as if they are still available for male sexual consumption. The question is posed whether corporate ad campaigns such as Nike's *Athlete* campaign co-opt authentic feminism for commercial purposes: "For several decades, feminist scholars have suggested that campaigns like these are more complex than they appear and debated the larger question of whether ads such as these co-opt and (therefore) dilute feminism by portraying consumption as a preferred and logical alternative to political action." The argument is based on the insight that advertising is "a central force in capitalist society" and that "its purpose is to put commodities at the center of social relations and to reinforce our understanding of ourselves and others in relation to consumer goods." The authors distinguish between consumers who applaud a supposedly more gender equal representation of

empowered athletes in these advertising campaigns with radical feminists who are appalled by the de-politicized messages that are furthered by corporate sponsors to promote their own products and costly gear, supposedly needed to become fully emancipated and successful in one's sport.

The idea that popular culture can be seen as a mirror for shifts in identity constructions in the twentieth century is pervasively argued in all three essays. And the sense is also shared that as gender and sex are more broadly regarded in complex ways – the first being culturally manufactured whereas the second is biologically determined – one of the accomplishments of the women's movement has been to diffuse these distinctions. Sexuality and sex are no longer seen as uniform entities that are determined by birth. These tropes are being broken up, allowing for ambiguous and more fluent interpretations in contemporary society. Although "the athletic body and the idea of 'athlete' have been associated with the male body in particular, and athleticism has been constructed in masculine terms," as White and Preston argue, women are redefining their bodies in a more contemporary discourse, thereby freeing themselves from the socially imposed restrictions on their gender. "While advertisement emerged as a key cultural site for the (re)production of gender constructions over the course of the twentieth century," write White and Preston, "it is by no means unique in linking sex, gender, and sexuality: women have always been defined by their bodies and their sexuality, and the body is a key site of patriarchal regulation and control."

This insight relates to Karen Ritzenhoff's article on the films by Michael Haneke and his most recent remake of his own originally German movie, *Funny Games*, released in the United State in the Spring of 2008. In this film, Haneke also describes a somewhat postfeminist phase in a media- saturated society where women and men are treated equally in the home – with equal violence. In his dysfunctional tale of arbitrary crime in the affluent white American suburbs, Haneke breaks with the norms of conventional thriller narratives where the evil assassins are pursuing an attractive female and chase her down due to their own repressed sexual desires. Instead, the German-Austrian filmmaker shows an emancipated homemaker who is beaten, tortured and abused by two white, upper-middle-class males with perfect polite manners who are not interested in her physical beauty. They have her take her clothes off, comment on her body with irony and ask her to get dressed again without approaching her. The body of the middle-aged woman is no longer attractive and can thereby be casually and un-emphatically discarded, according to the sick logic of the murderous psychopaths. The two young men in their prime are

alienated from any human compassion due to boredom and saturation of excessive media images that deliver non-stop access to and of violence into people's domestic sphere. Violence and sexuality are separated in this dark tale of human compassion-gone-havoc. The fact that the young murderers refuse to take advantage of the attractive housewife (cast in the US version with the star actress Naomi Watts) serves to show how detached they are from their masculinity and humaneness. Reading *Funny Games* as a postfeminist text allows one to illustrate the trap in which women may find themselves: caught between being empowered to independence but still violated – just on different terms with the same impulse of brute force that may be seen in competitive, classically male team sports.

Cindy White and Elizabeth Preston state a key sentence in their article on the depiction of women in sports advertising that can serve as the justification for writing this book and assembling the many responses to its title: "The boundaries of gender are narrowly drawn, and closely linked to sex and sexuality." In this regard, the four initial essays of our collection begin to offer different perspectives and responses to this central issue in modern capitalist society.

THE SCIENCE OF STEPFORD: TECHNOLOGIES OF SEXUALITY IN A POSTFEMINIST AGE

SUZANNE LEONARD

The story told in Brian Forbes dystopian *The Stepford Wives* (1975) is surely by now a familiar one: Manhattan transplant Joanna Eberhart (Katharine Ross) and her family move to the town of Stepford, Connecticut only to discover that the wives inhabiting the mythical town of Stepford are not *quite* human. Rather, they are compliant, perpetually sexually available, intellectually vacuous, and perfectly well-coiffed. To Joanna's confusion and eventual chagrin, the Stepford wives make no secret of the fact that their concerns revolve around homes, children, husbands, and the intricacies of playing hostess to the perfect afternoon pool party. Behind that mystery lays, of course, an even more sinister reality, namely that these women's husbands have turned previously successful and accomplished women into automatons who almost perfectly approximate their original counterparts, but lack these women's previous intellectual, emotional, or psychological capacities.

Throughout the film Joanna works valiantly to start a consciousness-raising group (an effort rendered almost laughably unsuccessful when it devolves into a conversation lauding the wonders of Easy On Starch Spray), to continue her attempts at amateur photography, and to understand why her closest friends are morphing into unrecognizable women before her eyes. By the end of the film, in a scene straight out of a gothic horror tale, Joanna too becomes a victim of this nefarious plot. Hunted through a gloomy Victorian mansion that houses the town's Men's Association, Joanna horrifyingly discovers her replica (a woman with bigger breasts and a smaller waist) who murders her with a pair of pantyhose. In fact, Joanna is killed by a mechanical literalization of her "perfect self." In the film's final, iconoclastic scene, the robot Joanna joins the other Stepford wives, all of whom float seamlessly through a grocery store in long floral dresses and matching hats, muttering pleasantries to each other. This horrifying vision of female homogeneity closes the film,