Dramatising Disaster
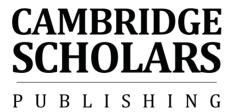
Dramatising Disaster:
Character, Event, Representation

Edited by

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EDITORS' ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

INTRODUCTION

DISCOURSES OF DISASTER

CHRISTINE CORNEA

The study of disaster is a fast-growing area of academic interest across a number of disciplinary fields. In dealing with instances of actual disaster across the world, the combined skills and methods associated with both the so called "hard" sciences and "soft" sciences are required. Statisticians are vital in probabilistic risk assessment and scenario planning, just as meteorologists, biochemists and medical scientists are essential in identifying and monitoring potential hazards. Also, attempts to reduce the risks of disaster and to increase the effectiveness of help and aid in the aftermath of disaster rely upon approaches and expertise more usually associated with the social sciences and with psychology. Further, the perception and communication of risk factors and the implementation of measures to mitigate disaster involves an understanding of the media and political processes. Indeed, extending the disciplinary boundaries in "hazards" research along these lines is recognised as an imperative in a recent UK Natural Environment Research Council report. In justifying this viewpoint, the report states that "science is of no ultimate value unless it is effectively integrated into human actions and decision-making procedures. There is therefore a major challenge in making sure that the scientific knowledge is applied effectively, requiring collaboration with other disciplines in the social and political sciences" (NERC 2007, 10). However, as much as the study of disaster looks set to expand, what is often overlooked in the field as a whole is Humanities research that pays attention to depictions of disaster in one form or another. There are, of course, overlaps between social science and humanities disciplines, but this book specifically brings the analytical and critical skills of scholars involved in film, television and media studies to bear upon depictions and representations of disaster in media texts. So, this edited collection is not only motivated by the need to showcase new humanities work that

specifically looks at disaster, but to expand even further the scope of disaster studies.

One of the most fundamental issues in disaster studies concerns the different ways in which disaster is defined and understood. In the sciences, definitions of what constitute "disaster" are highly contested, although most conceptual models are human-centred. In other words, in its most basic and practical form, disaster is conventionally understood as something that involves human populations and individual people. Traditionally, modes of classification have been event-focused and have sub-divided disasters as either "natural" or "unnatural/man-made" in origin. Thus, the earthquake, storm or flood can be understood as a sudden and natural event that acts as a catalyst for disaster by causing death or injury to people and damage to buildings and structures. In contrast are those disaster events that are clearly caused by human activity, such as major traffic accidents, industrial accidents and acts of terrorism. However, over the last few decades, it has become increasingly difficult to maintain this distinct dichotomy in the classification of natural/unnatural disasters. Along with an increasing awareness of the widespread risks and hazards associated with industrialisation, population growth, depletion of resources and the many issues surrounding anthropogenic climate change, what was once considered a "natural event" is now frequently viewed as inseparable from the "unnatural" effects of human activity. So, for example, the disastrous human death toll associated with the Izmit (Turkey) earthquake in 1999 was generally understood as the combined result of a natural, geological event, negligent building construction practices and the lack of enforcement of local building codes (see EQE International 2012). Also, scientific studies that point to the link between the increasing occurrence and intensity of extreme weather events and global warming make it questionable as to whether, for example, the death and destruction in New Orleans associated with Hurricane Katrina in 2005 can be classified simply in terms of a natural disaster (see Webster, Holland, Curry, Chang 2005).

In looking at disaster it has not only become harder to separate the natural from the unnatural causal event, but also to clearly distinguish particular events from the social, political, economic and technological circumstances of human society. A contemporary acceptance of the multidimensional aspects of what constitutes disaster is evident in the definition offered by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction as "a serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society involving widespread human, material, economic or environmental losses and impacts, which exceeds the ability of the affected community or

society to cope using its own resources" (UNISDR 2007). While this is an operational definition that is obviously designed to be both useful and flexible, it is one that moves beyond a traditional conception of disaster as the imposition from outside, as it were, of a natural or unnatural event upon a human population. Rather this is a more inclusive definition that takes account of socio-political conditions as important factors in defining disaster.

Outlining a variety of social-science perspectives, Anthony Oliver-Smith reports, there is now "a fundamental agreement that a disaster is at some basic level a social construction, its essence to be found in the organisation of communities, rather than in an environmental phenomenon with destructive or disruptive effects for a society" (Oliver-Smith 1998, 181). So, for Oliver-Smith, "disasters occur in societies" (ibid., 186), and while they may be recognisable in terms of the disruption/destruction of the physical infrastructure of communities (buildings, roads, water supply, electrical grids etc.), they are also located and understood within conceptual, ideological, and cultural systems of meaning at the same time as they can work to challenge and reformulate these discursive formations. The recognition of disaster as socially and conceptually constructed also underpins what Gary R. Webb calls the "cultural turn" in disaster research at the beginning of the millennium (Webb 2007, 433). As a social scientist, Webb is most concerned with what he sees as the misrepresentation of disaster or what he calls "disaster myths;" with the mismatch, for instance, between depictions of social panic and chaos in disaster films and empirical research that demonstrates "the opposite occurs in the wake of disaster… communities are actually resilient under stress" (ibid., 436). Also, laying the blame largely upon "cataclysmic fantasies" played out in entertainment media, Charles Perrow takes issue with what he describes as a "panic model" of behaviour that impedes a proper response to disaster and risk management (Perrow 2007, 2-5). More recently, looking at the cultural codes and conventions that underpin journalistic and news media reporting of disaster, Mervi Pantti, Karin Whal-Jorgensen and Simon Cottle describe how "the 'drama' and narratives of disaster (moreover) appear to unfold through a sequence of known stages of 'acts,' each populated by a cast of disaster 'actors' who offer up expected 'performances' on the media 'stage'" (Pantti, Whal-Jorgensen and Cottle 2012, 5). While their aim is to offer an account of the role of media in the "public constitution of disasters" (ibid.), this description also implies a relationship with entertainment media. From the perspective of the film, television, or media studies scholar, this surely alerts us to the importance of bringing the analytical and critical textual

skills of our disciplines to bear upon an understanding of media representations of disaster, particularly those to be found in what might be loosely termed entertainment media. Indeed, the imagining of disaster has intensified across a wide range of media entertainment formats and genres in recent years. Themes of disaster are regularly deployed in fictional films, television drama series, drama-documentaries, comics and computer-games. This being the case, it is therefore vital that media scholars pay attention to the ways in which disaster is presented, to the figurative strategies employed, to the representational history of disaster in media, to the metaphorical resonances of disaster themes, and even to the ways in which fictionalised media texts might be understood as part of a broader discourse of disaster within certain historical and cultural contexts.

While a number of studies have recently emerged from media scholars that explicitly engage with the intersection of media and actual disasters, these tend to concentrate on media journalism and reporting (e.g. *Disasters and the Media; Covering Disaster*) or they look at media entertainment within the context of a specific disaster (e.g. *Reframing 9/11*; *Welcome to the Desert of the Real; Old and New Media After Katrina*). There is relatively little work that has actually taken a broader look at media entertainment and disaster. So, distinct from previous, more particularised media studies in this area, this edited collection is focused not upon a specific disaster or specific disaster context, but upon the wider topic of disaster in film, television, as well as the video game and comic. In addition, chapters in the collection look back to depictions of disaster from the 1960s through to the present day. The collection also widens the national (U.S.) scope evidenced in the books referenced above, to include entertainment media produced by U.K. and Canadian companies. In keeping with its remit, this collection assumes a relatively broad definition of the term disaster, which allows for a variety of analytical approaches to this topic. Here, "disaster" encompasses the representation of a natural and/or "man-made" event (e.g. hurricane, flood, nuclear explosion, terrorist attack, etc.), damage to structures and people, the dramatisation of social disruption or human response to disaster, as well as the portrayal of post-disaster worlds. Thus, the ten chapters in *Dramatising Disaster* are organised into three themed sub-sections, each preceded by a brief introduction. Overall, the collection is organised to follow a trajectory from the personalised or intensive conceptualisation of disaster to the more extensive depiction of globalised disaster and post-disaster worlds.

In media entertainment, disaster can function as a device for speculative contemplation or diverting spectacle, but it can also be

understood as a narrative strategy and mode of representation that focuses upon a variety of contemporary social and cultural concerns. A range of established film and television genres or sub-genres are prominently associated with disaster (e.g. disaster movies, science fiction, apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic, dramatised-documentary etc.) and a number of video game and comic book genres (action, survival etc.) involve disaster scenarios or are set against scenes of disaster. All these genres are covered in this collection. The collection is therefore able to offer a broad account of disaster across genre and media, as well as the opportunity for comparative analysis and exploration of the intersection of genre, disaster and discourse.

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PART I

PERSONAL IDENTITY, TRAUMA AND DISASTER

PART I INTRODUCTION

RHYS OWAIN THOMAS

The range of differing approaches to "disaster" which exists within academic debates referred to in the introduction correspond with the varying and disparate conceptions of the word that occur within public discourse and, consequently, popular cultural imaginings. The attributes which constitute disaster vary significantly, depending on who participates in the discourse, and which cultural text is consumed. Furthermore, the radius of disaster may encompass billions of people or just one person; its effects ranging from the global (or even intergalactic), through to the national and the local, and to the intensely personal. The three sub-sections of *Dramatising Disaster* correspond roughly with this tripartite framing, with the opening chapters focusing upon disaster as an intensely localised phenomenon, transecting aspects of personal identity and trauma.

In the opening chapter, Liz Powell explains the way in which cancer's increasing familiarity as a subject in popular culture has been accompanied by a new set of representational codes that have opened up the fear and horror historically associated with the disease to affirmation and positivity. She looks at how this more "optimistic" mode of representation is exemplified by two successful contemporary mainstream films, *Stepmom* (Chris Columbus 1998) and *The Family Stone* (Tom Bezucha 2005), which both use cancer as a vehicle for personal redemption and family unity. However, Powell demonstrates the ways in which both films actually rely on a construction of cancer as disaster, magnifying cultural anxieties surrounding the disease and restricting the kinds of responses to cancer which are deemed culturally acceptable. Arguing that both films present cancer as a Blanchotian form of disaster articulated through the figure of traditional femininity, Powell suggests that, ultimately, the films present the responsibilities of motherhood and femininity as disastrous in their own right.

In Chapter Two, Rob Bullard examines the concept of the technological accident in relation to Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997), a film whose central and defining event is a tragic school bus accident that takes the lives of many of a community's children in a small North American town. Developing and extending ideas drawn from the

French philosopher of speed, Paul Virilio - a theorist Egoyan admires and has been interviewed by - Bullard examines how the film presents the technological accident as being paradoxically both unexpected and inevitable. As a medium, film has a long and lascivious relationship with the car crash, but the conventional cinematic thrills and spills of such incidents are undercut and underplayed in *The Sweet Hereafter*. Instead, the director uses several ingenious distancing devices to allow the audience to consider the implications of a bus crash on a traumatised local community. Bullard's application of psychoanalytical theory, informed by the work of theorists such as Slavoj Žižek, unpicks its presentation of trauma and allows him to challenge the claim by some commentators that, though popular and critically acclaimed, the film is less concerned with trauma and technology than the director's more experimental earlier films. In fact, when seen through the lens of the technological accident, *The Sweet Hereafter* can be repositioned as *the* film about the relationship between these two ever present obsessions in Egoyan's oeuvre.

Whereas Powell and Bullard's chapters focus on the deleteriously transformative effects inflicted by disastrous events on families and local communities respectively, Hannah Ellison examines the allegorical dimensions of disaster in relation to the (supposedly) routine process of being a teenager. U.S. networks The WB, The CW and ABC Family are set up to cater for the teen market and are primarily associated with programmes focussing on typical teenagers making their way through life. However, these networks have also had demonstrable success with an apparently unconnected small screen genre: apocalyptic drama. Ellison examines the relationship between the teen drama and these apocalyptic shows, suggesting a correlation in the narrative between the angst of surviving into adulthood and the angst of simply surviving. Just how is it these networks manage to equate, for instance, the problem of finding a date for prom with larger concerns over the fate of humanity and the threat of apocalyptic disaster? The fact that these shows often focus on non-teen characters in a non-teen setting also begs the question of what it is about the end of the world that fits so well alongside the teen genre.

CHAPTER ONE

DIAGNOSIS DISASTER:
CULTURAL NARRATIVES OF CANCER
AND FEMININITY IN *STEPMOM*
AND *THE FAMILY STONE*

LIZ POWELL

Reading the Cultural Narrative of Cancer

Since the late Nineteenth century, cancer has become increasingly visible within Western culture, not only in terms of rates of diagnosis but also in terms of its representation and discussion within popular culture. Central to these discourses is the use of cancer as a metaphor for cultural anxieties. Examining some of the earliest clinical discussions of the disease, James T. Patterson observes the following:

> Cancer, doctors recognized, caricatured life itself. A disease of runaway growth, it mimicked normal development, as if in some cruel mockery of human pretensions. Obscure in origin and progression, it seemed as omnipresent and as uncontrollable as other broad and impersonal forces. Such as industrialisation and bureaucracy, which also challenged the natural order. Then and later fear of cancer reflected broader social concerns. (Patterson 1987, 30)

The use of cancer as metaphor for cultural anxieties is now so familiar that it is often employed without any real interrogation. For example, in the continuing aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Deepak Chopra evokes a scientific understanding of cancer, in order to illustrate the futility of the so-called War on Terror and the need to consider alternative approaches to manage, rather than to eradicate terrorism (Chopra 2008). Echoing Jean Baudrillard's earlier descriptions of terrorism as "subterranean" and "virulent" (Baudrillard 2003, 31; 94),

Chopra evokes cancer in order to emphasise the destructive nature of terrorism and the threat it poses to society.

While such metaphors seem apt, their appropriation of a very personal, individual experience of a disease in order to understand much broader cultural concerns is highly problematic. Indeed, the pervasiveness of such metaphors has effectively reversed this relationship, so that the cultural interpretation of cancer can be seen to have a profound impact on the ways in which cancer is experienced at a personal level. It is this intersection between the personal experience of cancer and its place within the cultural imagination which forms the basis for the narratives of *Stepmom* (Chris Columbus 1998) and *The Family Stone* (Tom Bezucha 2005): two films which feature central female protagonists with terminal cancer. In both these films we can see the ways in which the cultural narrative of cancer functions to limit the acceptable responses to the disease, and employs it as a means to promote traditional (understood as stable) ways of living.

Though *Stepmom* and *The Family Stone* both feature a female protagonist with terminal cancer, the narratives of these films do little to explore the personal and physical experience of the disease. Rather, cancer is used as a narrative device which reveals deep set cultural anxieties regarding the stability of traditional femininity. In *Stepmom* divorced mother of two Jackie (Susan Sarandon) must not only face the prospect of her own death but must do so knowing that she will be leaving her children in the care of her ex-husband's fiancée Isobel (Julia Roberts) who is, at the beginning of the film, less than suitable for the role. Similarly, Sybil (Diane Keaton), matriarch of the eponymous Stone family, is focused less on her own pain and suffering than she is on the suitability of Meredith (Sarah Jessica Parker) as a wife for her son Everett. In both films cancer not only threatens the image of idealised motherhood through the imminent death of Jackie and Sybil, but also creates a space in which alternative, deviant, forms of femininity can be reformed. In order to fully understand the ways in which these films use cancer as a narrative device, and the potential consequences of these kinds of representations, it is first necessary to explore in more detail the ways in which cancer has historically been constructed as a cultural disaster.

Maurice Blanchot sees the twentieth century as an era not only marked, but defined by disaster. Responding to major historical events including the Holocaust and the bombing of Hiroshima, Blanchot addresses the paradoxical nature of disaster which, like trauma, eludes definition and representation. Although Blanchot does not try to develop a fixed definition of disaster, two key qualities of disaster emerge in his discussion. These are separation and imminence and, as we shall see, these

are particularly useful in understanding the cultural narration of cancer. I should point out that cancer is not a subject Blanchot address directly in *The Writing of Disaster* (1986) – although he does make reference to the carcinogenic fallout of the atomic bomb – but its deadly impact throughout the twentieth century invites it to be understood on similar terms. As Patterson notes in the preface to his historical study of the disease, "each year during the past century cancer has killed an ever increasing number of Americans… In 1985 the many forms of cancer… caused the death of an estimated 462,000 people in the United States, one every 68 seconds" (Patterson 1987, vii). Furthermore, by not being an event which is temporally and/or geographically bound, cancer arguably exemplifies Blanchot's understanding of disaster as something which evades both our understanding and our experience.

The quality of separation is evident throughout twentieth century discourses on cancer in the way that the disease has been categorised as taboo. Although cancer is a disease which has been repeatedly represented within American culture, these representations are marked by a profound silence and an absence of the often brutal physical effects of the disease. For example, Ellen Leopold discusses how individual narratives of women with breast cancer published in the 1930s did little to personalise the clinical discourses of the disease. On the contrary, they functioned as a reminder that the word cancer "still had the power to shock" (Leopold 1999, 116-117). Susan Lederer observes a similar process at work in Hollywood and, in her analysis of the 1939 Bette Davis vehicle *Dark Victory* (Edmund Goulding), observes how,

> Capitalizing on cultural anxieties but leery of box office "poison," Hollywood filmmakers selectively projected some cancers rather than others. Perhaps not surprisingly, they favoured less-offensive and more-photogenic cancers that did not visibly mutilate the characters: the characters became weak and fatigued, and died, but they did so without gross transformations of their bodies. (Lederer 2007, 96)

This unwillingness to confront the physical and emotional realities of the disease continued into the latter half of the century and, despite the rise of so-called "talk therapy," cancer remains a difficult subject to address in public (Stacey 1997, 70).

The quality of imminence is a little more complex, but is perhaps most evident in discourses around women and cancer. Such discourses have gained particular prominence within the cultural narrative of cancer and this is, in part, because cancer narratives typically "combine the masculine heroics of [such] adventure narratives with the feminine suffering and

sacrifice of melodramas. The narrative structure lends itself well to such masculine heroic epics combined with the emotional intensity of the more feminine 'triumph-over-tragedy' genre" (ibid., 10). With regards to the cultural narration of cancer, this process of gendering is perhaps most explicitly evidenced in the use of the Pink Ribbon not only as a tool for raising awareness but as a symbol with "an instantly recognizable set of meanings related to femininity, charity, white-class womanhood, and survivorship" (King 2006, xxiii). We can certainly see this influence in the narrative structures of *Stepmom* and *The Family Stone* which use the mothers' diagnoses as a catalyst for working through troubled relationships, and bringing about a happy and contented resolution in the face of death. At the end of *Stepmom* the family poses for a photograph which includes both Isobel and Jackie, who have now reconciled their differences, while the conclusion of *The Family Stone* sees everyone return to the family home all now happily paired off with their most suitable partner. That this works to code cancer with the quality of imminence is evident in the intense nostalgia that underpins these narrative resolutions.

The importance of nostalgia to both films can be identified in their use of the holiday season as a backdrop to their cancer narratives. To borrow a phrase from Mark Connelly, the Christmas *mise-en-scène* functions as "emotional shorthand" within these films, connoting a particular set of traditional values and ideas about national, as well as individual, identity (Connelly 2000, 6; 3). This is relatively subtle in *Stepmom* which uses the delivery of a Christmas tree as a catalyst for Jackie's ex-husband to express his feelings about her illness, and allowing them to resolve some of the anger and hurt they had been holding on to from the breakdown of their marriage. Furthermore, the family portrait mentioned above, is taken on Christmas morning, explicitly employing the festive backdrop as the setting for the resolution of the battle between Jackie and Isobel. However, *The Family Stone* is rather more explicit in its use of Christmas as a symbol of traditional family values and as a narrative space in which fears can be calmed and relationships can be mended – notably in its referencing of Vincente Minnelli's *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944).

Established at the beginning of the film in the use of Victorian-style picture postcards during the opening credits, the reference to *Meet Me in St Louis* becomes most meaningful when the eldest Stone daughter, Suzannah, stays up late to watch the film on Christmas Eve. Following a brief clip of the scene where Rose, dancing with her grandfather, expresses her sadness over their imminent departure from St. Louis, we cut to Sybil in bed, telling her husband how scared she is in knowing she is leaving her

family behind. As the couple embrace, Judy Garland's rendition of "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" begins a montage of various characters in states of unhappiness and confusion: Suzannah crying quietly on the sofa; Everett puzzling over the engagement ring he has bought Meredith; Meredith's sister Julie troubled by her emerging feelings for Everett; and Meredith asleep in a car with Everett's brother, Ben. Through this intertextuality, we can begin to see how the film expresses a deep nostalgia not only for a time prior to the cancer diagnosis, which has fundamentally disrupted their lives, but for the restoration of traditional family values. However, as Fredric Jameson points out, nostalgia is not so much the longing for something which is lost but for something which has never been.[1] *The Family Stone* demonstrates this, consciously or not, by using a fictional film as the reference point for its nostalgic longing. We are, therefore, confronted not only with the impending loss of the mother, but also the recognition of that which is already lost: the illusion of idealised family life. Thus the cancer diagnosis takes on the quality of imminence highlighted by Blanchot by demonstrating how the disaster is "always already past, and yet [we/the characters] are on the edge or under the threat" (Blanchot 1986).

Returning to the way in which the cultural narrative of cancer is gendered and how this contributes to the construction of cancer as disaster, it is important to highlight that the most devastating loss within both these films is the loss of traditional femininity. This loss is not, as we shall see, simply through death, but the inevitability of death in both films can help us to better understand the relationship between the cultural narrative of cancer and anxieties around feminine identities. As Elisabeth Bronfen observes, there is a long history of femininity being associated aesthetically with death. Therefore, within the Western cultural imagination, there is a symbolic link between femininity, cancer and death which invites them to be narrativised together. Furthermore, the ways in which they have been narrativised historically are marked by an important similarity. In the same way that representations of cancer and their cultural implications have been given little critical attention, aesthetic associations between femininity and death "are so familiar, so evident, we are culturally blind to the[ir] ubiquity" (Bronfen 1992, 3). We can see, therefore, how both the cultural narration of cancer and representations of feminine death both involve a profound silence. It is the precise nature of this silence, and its potential consequences to which I now turn.

The Cancerous Feminine

It is clear that notions of femininity are at the heart of both *Stepmom* and *The Family Stone*. Although the cancer diagnosis creates a significant disruption within both narratives, and emphasises the importance of re-establishing harmony within the family, it is the conflict between opposing feminine identities which provides the narrative drive. This is evident in the opening sequences of the films which work to firmly establish the tension between the idealised, traditional, family orientated image of femininity embodied by Jackie and Sybil, and the non-maternal, career-driven characters of Isobel and Meredith before the cancer diagnosis is even revealed.

Stepmom begins as Isobel, who has woken up late, attempts to get her boyfriend's children, Anna and Ben, ready for school. While Ben is nowhere to be found, Anna is sat on her bed, furious with Isobel for forgetting to wash the purple shirt that she had planned to wear that day. After Ben appears in one of the kitchen cupboards Isobel chases and wrestles him to the floor to try and dress him for school, at which point there is a knock and the door and Jackie enters. The children are delighted and immediately run to her as she sarcastically comments that Ben "seems to be having a lot of fun" and points out that they are late. She then patronisingly informs Isobel that she will "handle it from here" before taking the children to school. Once in the car, Jackie enters into a playful but nurturing dialogue with her children, advising them on the importance of using their words to express themselves accurately while still managing to joke about the planet Uranus and the hokey-pokey. This family orientated tableau is immediately juxtaposed with a scene featuring Isobel working at a photo shoot for a gentleman's tailor.

The Family Stone opens with Meredith attempting to handle an urgent business matter on her mobile phone while Christmas shopping with Everett. Although only brief, this scene effectively establishes Meredith as a cold, unemotional - and therefore unfeminine - character who does not fit the mould of the romantic heroine. Her dialogue is reminiscent of Charles Dickens' Ebenezer Scrooge as she refuses to sympathise with the person of whom she is demanding a finished report before the end of the day, stating "I don't care if it's Christmas Eve, she can have Monday off." Even when Everett forcibly takes her phone and hangs up, she produces another mobile device from her handbag and omits to offer the sales person any festive good wishes.

What begins to emerge in these opening sequences is a deep-rooted anxiety regarding the nature of femininity and how it should be contained.

The conflict between the two women bring into question the perceived borders of feminine identity and, in so doing, evokes what Barbara Creed has termed the monstrous feminine. According to Creed, the blurring and/or crossing of borders is a central theme in representations of woman-as-monster. Developing this further, Creed identifies three categories of borders which typically cause the most anxiety: The border between the natural and the supernatural, the border between good and evil and "the border which separates those who take up their proper gender roles from those who do not" (Creed 1993, 11). The crossing of the border between proper gender roles is perhaps all too obvious in the characterisations of Isobel and Meredith as non-traditional, less-than-ideal female successors in opposition to Jackie and Sybil. As Meredith exclaims towards the end of the film when she stands in front of her boyfriend's family disheveled and humiliated, "I know what you see. Meredith: the spoiled, crazy, racist, bigot, bitch from Bedford. That's what you see when you look at me!"

Through the characterisation of Isobel and Meredith as monstrous deviations from the ideal image of femininity, and the pressure this puts on Jackie and Sybil, we begin to see how the cancer diagnosis brings to light underlying concerns with the stability of female identities and the threat this poses to the American family. The extent of cancer's threat, however, is only fully revealed through an examination of the seemingly ideal Jackie and Sybil. As a result of their diagnoses, these two women are also forced to deviate from "proper" gender roles, and thus also become monstrous: an effect which is noted, although not necessarily in this context, by Peter Bradshaw in his review of *The Family Stone* for the *Guardian* in which he writes,

> We've had King Kong versus Godzilla. We've had Alien versus Predator. We've had Freddy versus Jason. But for sheer horror, nothing would beat Susan Sarandon from *Stepmom* versus Diane Keaton from *The Family Stone*: the battle of the 100ft courageous mothers with cancer, laughing with hard-won, life-affirming wisdom through their tears, flailing at each other with their claws through the streets of Manhattan as the people scream and flee. (Bradshaw 2005)

Here we begin to see how the characterisation of Jackie and Sybil draw on both cancer and femininity as inherently abject in order to narrate both as cultural disasters.

Drawing on the work of Julia Kristeva, Creed argues that the female body is made abject through the acknowledgement of its maternal functions and its role in the monstrous process of procreation, pregnancy and birth. Both films implicitly acknowledge this association through the narrative focus on, and constant referral to Jackie and Sybil's roles as

mothers. In *Stepmom* this is particularly notable through the distinction that is made between Jackie as Anna and Ben's biological mother and Isobel as potential stepmother. However, in *The Family Stone* the monstrous feminine is made explicit when Meredith presents each of the family members with a framed photo of a younger, pregnant Sybil.

The gift has a profound effect on the family, who are moved, not only by the thoughtfulness of the gift from someone they had previously thought of as cold and uncaring, but also by its symbolism of the disaster which has befallen them. The medium's unique capability to confront the spectator with the "real death which each of us undergoes every day, as each day we draw nearer to death" (Christian Metz 1985, 84) provides a visual representation of the way in which Sybil's terminal diagnosis forces her to confront her own mortality. This is, of course, reinforced by the juxtaposition of the young and beautiful woman in the photograph with the older Sybil who holds it. Thus, Meredith's gift goes some way to capturing the very personal disaster of cancer. However, the threat cancer poses cannot be separated from the cultural disaster that is signaled by the monstrous feminine that marks the image. Interestingly, Sybil reveals that the image is of herself when she was pregnant with Amy. This causes a moment of confusion as Meredith assumed it was Everett but it seems, from the emotional reaction it generates, that this makes the image somehow even more significant. It is as if, by being pregnant with one of her daughters, the photographic Sybil becomes a symbol not only of the (abject) separation of disaster but also its eternal imminence: the promise of life symbolised by the pregnant female body, is continued in the body of the now grown woman while all the while being haunted by the inevitability of death. A quality Blanchot describes as "disaster as return" (Blanchot 1986, 4).[2]

While the primary concern within these films, as I have discussed them here, is the stability of traditional notions of femininity, it would be reductive to not also consider how masculinity plays into these narratives. Indeed it is necessary to do so in order to fully understand the potential consequences of the cultural narration of cancer as a threat to femininity. In a study of the effects of cancer on the families of female patients, Laurel Northouse found that a woman's illness has a significant psychological and physical impact on their partner. Discussing her findings she states that "many husbands expressed frustration at their inability to 'fix' the situation or to alleviate their wives' suffering" (Northouse 1996, 165). Without diminishing the very real emotional difficulties faced by those whose wives or partners are diagnosed with cancer, within the cultural narrative of the disease this can be interpreted

as an emasculating process which reinforces an understanding of cancer as disaster.

The emasculating effect of the cancer diagnosis is most explicitly registered in *The Family Stone* when Jackie confronts Everett with her illness on Christmas morning: "I'm sick honey, and you can't fix it. Not even by getting married." The implication here is that Everett's desire to marry Meredith is an effort to compensate for his inability to save his mother. His lack of agency is symbolic of the failure of (masculine) science to cure Sybil, and he sees the only suitable alternative as making the transition from son/boy to husband/man.[3] In contrast to the way in which the film dwells on concerns around femininity, this moment of crisis in the film's representation of masculinity is quickly resolved as Sybil puts the responsibility to restore order back on herself: "I need you to do me a favour and not try to be so perfect. I'd hate to see you miss out on something because you had a picture in your mind or you thought you could change something you can't. I'd hate to see you not find what you really want. " However, rather than being an acceptance of Everett's non-heroic masculinity, this serves as a reminder to Everett that it is more important to wait and find a woman who performs her proper gender role.

In *Stepmom* Jackie similarly takes responsibility for her ex-husband's sense of helplessness and his fear of losing her. When he asks her in a moment of emotional openness, "what are we supposed to do without you?" she replies, "you'll be fine, you're a great father… I just never gave you the chance to realise it." Here Jackie effectively takes the blame for Luke's anxiety, and she expresses the same guilt on several other occasions including when she has to miss Ben's favourite spaghetti and meatball night in order to start treatment at the hospital; when she is too ill to take him to a birthday party; and when she is late to pick him and his sister up from school. In each case, this guilt is the result of not being able to fulfill what is understood as her proper gender role, highlighting once again how cultural discourses use cancer as a lens through which to view the disaster of failed femininity.

It is important to note that it is not just failed femininity that is framed as disastrous, for, as we have seen, these films are unable to sustain the image of idealised femininity. Rather, it is the cultural narration of femininity more broadly which is disastrous. This is revealed towards the end of *Stepmom* when Jackie invites Isobel to meet her in a bar. Jackie begins the conversation by admitting to Isobel that she once lost Ben, a mistake that Isobel had made earlier in the film while she was looking after the children and working in Central Park. Although meant to comfort Isobel, this admission works to undermine the image of idealised

motherhood presented at the beginning of the film. In the conversation that follows, then, Isobel expresses her fears of not being able to embody an image of femininity that never actually existed:

> **Isobel:** I never wanted to be a mom. Well, sharing it with you is one thing. Carrying it alone the rest of my life, always being compared to you... you're perfect. They worship you. I just don't want to be looking over my shoulder for the next 20 years knowing that someone else would have done it right. Done it better. The way I can't.
>
> **Jackie:** What do I have that you don't?
>
> **Isobel:** You're mother Earth incarnate.
>
> **Jackie:** You're hip and fresh.
>
> **Isobel:** You know every story, every wound, every memory. Their whole life's happiness is wrapped up in you, don't you get it?

Isobel then goes on to imagine Anna's wedding day and confesses "my fear is that she'll be thinking, 'I wish my mom was here.'" To which Jackie replies, "and mine is that she won't."

In this exchange the cancer itself becomes almost irrelevant against the constant pressure to achieve an image of ideal femininity that is faced by both women. However, its imminence provides the catalyst for the discussion. Significantly, Isobel uses Anna's future wedding day as an illustration of her fears; an image of female maturation which echoes the photograph of the young pregnant Sybil in *The Family Stone*. It is through this image that the true disaster of femininity if revealed as neither woman is able to satisfy the demands of idealised motherhood. This is emphasised in Jackie's conclusion that "I have their past, and you can have their future." This, on the surface seems to suggest a compromise which allows both women to fulfill their idealised role, but Blanchot states that "the future, as we conceive of it in the order of lived time, belongs to the disaster" (Blanchot 1986, 1), and, in this instance, that disaster is femininity itself.

A Crisis of Positivity

By using the loss of the idealised mother to lament the loss, or more accurately the impossibility, of traditional femininity, *Stepmom* and *The Family Stone* illustrate what Aimee Carrillo Rowe and Samantha Lindsay have termed white femininity in crisis. Examining the ways in which the perceived crisis of masculinity of the latter half of the twentieth century

(and beyond) positions femininity, Rowe and Lindsay posit that "white femininity's contemporary cultural production revolves around the central question of her 'loyalties'" (Rowe and Lindsey 2003, 183). What we have seen in the two films discussed here is how the cultural narrative of women and cancer puts a very firm emphasis on a woman's loyalty to her children and to the image of traditional femininity.

The films discussed here are just two rich examples of how the cultural narrative of cancer functions to promote a particular kind of female identity and the potential impact of such a narrative on individuals who experience cancer on a personal level should not be underestimated. In one of the many self-health books aimed at developing a positive attitude towards the experience of breast cancer, Elisha Daniels and Kelly Tuthill explicitly refer to the kinds of loyalties mentioned above:

> This is a fragile time emotionally, and you have to think or yourself first. You just do. Except, of course, if you have children at home. Then you have to think of them first... Try to pull it together and let your children see your strength. (Daniels and Tuthill 2009, 7)

We begin to see, therefore, how the kinds of narratives presented in *Stepmom* and *The Family Stone* form part of a very rigid structure for the experience of cancer and the affect of this borne out in psychological studies of women with cancer and their families. For example Northouse observes how,

> The majority of husbands had to make changes in their work schedules to accommodate new responsibilities in household management and child care. Husbands had to balance these competing demands with pre-existing family stressors that were evident prior to the cancer diagnosis. Some husbands reported a decrease in social and recreational activities, as they had to direct more of their energies to maintain the day-to-day inter-workings of their families. (Northouse 1996, 166-177)

Without wanting to diminish the distress caused by a cancer diagnosis to spouses, or other family members, Northouse's study reveals the underlying inequality that leads to the distress described: if men and women shared the childcare and house-keeping responsibilities equally prior to the cancer diagnosis, the physical, and by extension emotional, impact of the disease would be reduced.

The overt sentimentality of films like *Stepmom* and *The Family Stone* and their somewhat unsophisticated use of familiar character types and narrative tropes may prevent them from being considered cinematic masterpieces. However, these aspects of the film convey powerful cultural

messages regarding the experience of cancer and femininity and are, therefore, worthy of critical interrogation. As Samantha King observes, the positive, cathartic experience depicted, and promoted, within these kinds of text, is not borne out in research of people's actual experience of cancer. However, "the heterogeneity of these experiences does not easily penetrate the dominant discourse on the disease and the approach of the cancer establishment to it" (King 2006, 102-103). Both films fit within this dominant discourse which limits the kinds of responses to cancer which are deemed culturally acceptable and work to silence less positive alternative narratives. Moreover, as we have seen, this restrictive response to the personal disaster of cancer is used to promote equally restrictive ideas regarding the construction of female identities.

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Notes

[1] Jameson discusses this phenomenon in relation to filmic representations of the 1950s in Chapter 9 of *Postmodernism: or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Jameson 1991, 279-296).

[2] A similar effect is created in Stepmom when Jackie uses recent and old photographs of herself with her children, along with other treasured items to create unique Christmas gifts for Anna and Ben.

[3] It is widely acknowledged that science, and medicine in particular, is intensely masculinised in Western culture due to its association with notions of rationality, investigation and heroism. Dorothy Brown provides a useful discussion of how this can be identified in both the "patterns of interaction" within medical practices and the ideology which underpins them (Broom 1995, 104-106). Jackie Stacey also highlights how the field of biomedicine has, historically, been dominated by the male gaze (Stacey 1997, 101-103).