

THE POLITICS OF HYSTERIA
IN DAVID CRONENBERG'S "THE BROOD"

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ABSTRACT

Kate Leigh Averett: The Politics of Hysteria in David Cronenberg's "The Brood"
(Under the direction of Carol Magee)

This thesis situates David Cronenberg's 1979 film *The Brood* within the politics of family during the late 1970s by examining the role of monstrous birth as a form of hysteria. Specifically, I analyze Cronenberg's monstrous Mother, Nola Carveth, within the role of the family in the 1970s, when the patriarchal, nuclear family is under question in American society. In his essay *The American Nightmare: Horror in the 70s* critic Robin Wood began a debate surrounding Cronenberg's early films, namely accusing the director of reactionary misogyny and calling for a political critique of his and other horror director's work. The debate which followed has sidestepped *The Brood*, disregarding it as a complication to his oeuvre due to its autobiographical basis. This film, however, offers an opportunity to apply Wood's call for political criticism to portrayals of hysteria in contemporary visual culture; this thesis takes up this call and fills an important interpretive gap in the scholarship surrounding gender in Cronenberg's early films.

This thesis is dedicated to my family for believing in me, supporting me and not traumatizing me too much along the way. A special thank you to Kelly, Kelsey and Virginia for inspiring me and keeping me going throughout this process. Finally, my eternal thanks to my committee for your encouragement, dedication and generosity.

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INTRODUCTION

Critic Robin Wood's contentious readings of David Cronenberg's *Shivers* (1975), *Rabid* (1977), and *The Brood* (1979) in his *The American Nightmare: Horror in the 70s* accuse the director of reactionary misogyny in the face of the sexual liberation of the 1970s.¹ As Cronenberg has come into his own as Canada's great auteur, Wood's critiques have been countered by the director, critics, and scholars who find Wood's approach biased by a political agenda.² Wood's political impetus is clear in his self-defining call to arms, *Responsibilities of a Gay Film Critic*,

Critic: One concerned in problems of the interpretation and evaluation of art and artifacts. Film critic: one who makes the central area of that concern cinema. Gay- not just the word and the fact it points to, but the words and fact asserted publicly: one who is conscious of belonging to one of society's oppressed minority groups, and who is ready to confront the implications of that for both his theory and practice.³

¹ Robin Wood, "The American Nightmare: Horror in the 70s," in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan- and beyond*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.) 63-84.

² Steven Shaviro. "Bodies of Fear: The Films of David Cronenberg." *The Cinematic Body*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.); Handling, Piers, ed. "The Interview" *The Shape of Rage: the films of David Cronenberg*. (New York City, New York: Zoetrope, 1983.); MacInnis, Allan. "Sex, Science, and the 'Female Monstrous' Wood contra Cronenberg Revisited." (*Cineaction!*, 2012.) 34 - 43.

³ Wood, Robin. "Responsibilities of a Gay Film Critic." *Film Comment*, Jan/Feb 1978. Vol. 14, Issue 1: p. 12.

This position as a gay film critic, as well as his Marxist and Freudian readings of film, are cited as discrediting factors to his understanding of the role women play in Cronenberg's films. Allan MacInnis as well as Cronenberg himself have posited that Wood is incapable of accurately reading female characters created out of heterosexual desire as a result of his homosexuality, all while disregarding Wood's overall call for socially conscious criticism that seeks to dismantle such heteronormative and misogynistic filmmaking and analysis.⁴ Scholars such as MacInnis, Stephen Shaviro, Piers Handling, and William Beard have countered Wood by nuancing Cronenberg's characterizations of his female subjects, positing that they are dynamic and active and claiming that Cronenberg's body horror dismantles traditional gender binaries.⁵ While this scholarship add layers to the discourse surrounding Cronenberg and women, as this thesis will examine, such justifications are always complicated when *The Brood* is taken into consideration. Without an awareness of the social implications Wood emphasizes, Cronenberg's monstrous mother, Nola, simply becomes a one-dimensional and irredeemable character. In part, this is why *The Brood* has lacked much of the same critical scholarship as Cronenberg's other early films. While Cronenberg may not swing in the fully misogynist direction Wood proclaims, Wood's initial aim to hold Cronenberg accountable for the social implications of his work has been lost to the defenses that followed. Five years after *The American Nightmare*, Wood was invited to provide a (and truly, *the*) dissenting view for the anthology on Cronenberg's early work, *The Shape of Rage*.⁶ In his essay, Wood does not aim to defend his claims (he stands firmly by his

⁴ MacInnis, 2012; Handling, 1983.

⁵ MacInnis, 2012; Shaviro, 1993; Handling, 1983.

⁶ Robin Wood, "Cronenberg: A Dissenting View," in *The Shape of Rage: The Films of David Cronenberg*. Edited by Piers Handling. (New York City, New York; Zoetrope, 1983.)

original position,) instead he posits a much more crucial goal: “What I wish to defend is the legitimacy of politicized criticism.”⁷ The scholarly use of such politicized criticism is imperative to a nuanced understanding of Nola’s role in not only Cronenberg’s work but greater popular culture surrounding women in the late 1970s. Additionally, to read Nola politically, it is imperative to not only understand the presentation of her births as well as her characterization as hysterical within the context of the film itself, but to examine how this hysteria speaks to gender anxiety surrounding women, family, and trauma at the end of the 20st century.

As this thesis argues, Nola is characterized by her hysteria, the manifestation of her childhood trauma in the physical form of her monstrous births. This hysteria presents Nola herself as monstrous in a specifically gendered way and exposes the film as one of many reactions in visual culture to greater discourses about women and family in 1979. *The Brood* lies at the convergence of horror, science fiction, and family melodrama. Film scholar Vivian Sobchack looks to the antichrist of *Rosemary’s Baby* and the Starchild of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (both “born” into media consciousness in 1968) to examine the relationship between these triadic genres as they align around the figure of the child in 1970s cinema,

“The contemporary genres of horror, science fiction, and family melodrama converge in their dramatization of these processes [the transformation, dissolution, and redefinition of the family’s order, meaning, and power] that test and represent the coherence, meaning and limits of the family as it has been constructed by patriarchal culture.”

Sobchack reads the convergence of these genres as a means to “narratively contain, work out, and in some fashion, resolve the contradictions that exist between the mythology of family

⁷ Ibid.

relations and their actual social practice.”⁸ This interpretation is crucial to an understanding of *The Brood*’s narrative devices as reactions to the shifting dynamics of the nuclear family in 1979. The film, while based greatly in body horror and science fiction critiques of the field of psychology, is at its heart a narrative about the dissolution of a family.

The film follows Frank Carveth (Art Hindle), who suspects his daughter Candy (Cindy Hines) is being abused by his estranged wife, Nola (Samantha Eggar). Under the care of her psychotherapist, Dr. Hal Raglan (Oliver Reed), Nola is isolated in the SomaFree Institute of Psychoplasemics, seeking treatment for childhood abuse trauma. Raglan’s Psychoplasemics therapy aims to manifest rage on the physical body as a means of working through such trauma but, as with most science fiction experiments, this therapy has a dark side: potentially causing cancerous growths on former patients. Frank investigates such claims against Psychoplasemics as he attempts to retain custody of his daughter and protect her from the potential abuse of her mother. Throughout this family drama, Nola’s mother and father and eventually Candy’s teacher (Frank’s romantic interest) are murdered by childlike, genderless creatures. The film culminates with Frank’s discovery that these monstrous creatures are manifestations of Nola’s rage, a continuation of growths that plagued her as a child now exacerbated and exaggerated to the extreme by Raglan’s therapy. In the end, Frank must kill Nola to save their child (Candy) from her brood, strangling her when she becomes enraged by Frank’s disgust at the amniotic sacs hanging from her abdomen and her display of animalistic, monstrous birth.

⁸ Vivian Sobchack, “Bringing It All Back Home: Family Economy and Generic Exchange.” In *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*. Edited by Barry Keith Grant. (Austin, US: University of Texas Press, 2015.) 175.

While Cronenberg frames *The Brood* in terms of autobiography, referencing his own divorce and custody battle, his monstrous birth film is a political reaction that cannot be removed from its social context or involvement in feminist film criticism, particularly when considering Nola's hysterical characterization.⁹ My choice to use the term "hysteria" in relation to Nola is not meant to ignore its inherent sexism, but instead to highlight how its (specifically Freudian) use is politically linked to societal perceptions of women's bodies and minds. My Freudian reading of Nola's hysteria is in response to Cronenberg's own fascination with Freud, as evidenced by his inclusion of Freud's writings in his 1976 *Rabid* (Figure 1) and his later film *A Dangerous Method* (2011) which chronicles Freud's relationship with Jung and hysteria patient turned psychoanalyst Sabrina Spielrein.



Figure 1

A Dangerous Method is as much a romantic drama about the relationship between these notable figures in psychoanalysis as a case study in hysteria as it was interpreted and observed by Freud and Breuer in *Studies on Hysteria*. Freud's observations of hysteria in four female patients in

⁹ Handling, 1983.

1895 connected the physical manifestation of symptoms such as choking, paralysis, or tremors to repressed trauma.¹⁰ In *The Brood* Cronenberg incorporates Freud's theories into his creation of a monstrous mother who is not only emotionally hysterical due to her childhood trauma, but manifests her hysteria physically through the externalization of her womb, the Hippocratic root of hysteria itself.¹¹ Through the use of body horror, Cronenberg presents hysteria in its most condensed form, embodied in Nola and her brood. While this character has been read psychoanalytically, the political implications of Freud's theories embodied in a woman in 1979 have not been addressed. Through this thesis, I show that Nola's hysteria, manifested in her monstrous births, is an extreme pathologizing of gender and not only a manifestation of Freud's theories but a reaction to women's role in evolving conceptions of family at the time Cronenberg created *The Brood*. Hysteria, as this thesis argues, is a powerful political tool that undermines women's reactions to the oppressions of patriarchal society.

Hysteria, and its applications and manifestations in *The Brood*, will be further explored in Chapter Three after *The Brood* and Nola herself have been contextualized within the politics of family and the role of women in Cronenberg's early work. As Chapter One "Politics, Family, and Film" shows, the construction of the nuclear family is challenged and takes on political weight in the 1970s based on feminist efforts, economic stagnancy, and the neoconservative beginnings of the New Right. Within this political context, films in both mainstream media and subgenres such as horror reflect the dissolution of the nuclear family through images of

¹⁰ Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud. *Studies on Hysteria*. (London; New York: Penguin Books, [1895] 2004.)

¹¹ Juliet Mitchell. *Mad men and Medusas: reclaiming hysteria*. (New York: Basic Books, 2000.)

dysfunction, insecure masculinities, and hysterical women. Chapter Two “Binaries and Balance” distinguishes Nola as hysterical within this framework by examining how she differs from Cronenberg’s other female subjects. Through an examination of Cronenberg’s typical defiance of gender binary, Nola arises as an anomaly, with her monstrous births specifically gendered as a form of hysteria. In Chapter Three “The Politics of Hysteria,” the role of hysteria in visual culture and psychoanalysis is elaborated upon, ultimately showing the power hysteria holds as a means to undermine women’s reactions to oppression and as a tool to reinforce heteronormative roles for women. Ultimately, in Chapter Four “Monstrous Birth” Nola’s particular form of hysteria, the monstrous birth, is contextualized within the 1970s as a hysterical manifestation of anxieties surrounding changing gender roles in the family. In this way, monstrous birth as a form of hysteria is shown to be a distinctly political tool that once again attempts to reinforce gender roles in the face of social change.

CHAPTER ONE: FAMILY, POLITICS, AND FILM¹²

“The feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It is about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians.”

–Pat Robertson, 1982.¹³

As exhibited at the National Women’s Conference of 1977, feminist efforts of the late ‘70s sought equality not only in the work force but also in the family.¹⁴ The nuclear family became a symbolic representation of the greater patriarchy, with feminist activists and social workers attempting to bring to light the trauma of domestic violence, marital rape, and child abuse through support groups such as Parents Anonymous, recovered memory therapy, and legislation intended to protect women and children.¹⁵ Violence against women was confronted in the legislature as well as through coalitional efforts like 1977’s “Take Back the Night” marches and organizations such as the Feminist Alliance Against Rape, prompted by NOW’s (National

¹² Within this chapter, I will be examining family politics as they appeared in the United States. This is not to disregard *The Brood* as a Canadian film. My focus is not on Cronenberg’s personal reaction to the politics of his home country but on the visual culture which *The Brood* contributes to. Cronenberg’s early horror films were produced and given funding as a means to bring Canada into the North American film market through exposure within the United States. Because of this, *The Brood* is in conversation with other American horror films and popular culture of the time and should be read alongside them; Handling, 1983.

¹³ Pat Robertson, 1982 Campaign Letter opposing the ratification of the ERA.

¹⁴ Ibid; “The Spirit of Houston: The First National Woman’s Conference.” An Official Report to the President, the Congress and the People of the United States. (March, 1978.)

¹⁵ Ofse, 1994; K. J. Jarrett *Strange bedfellows: Religion, feminism, and fundamentalism in the satanic panic*. (Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. 2000.)

Organization for Women) Rape Task Force in 1970.¹⁶ Additionally, with *Roe v. Wade*'s passage in 1973, women gained greater control over their reproductive destiny and ultimately more control within their families as a result.¹⁷ As the National Women's Conference's 21st Plank on Reproductive Freedom exhibited, this control was directly linked to women's access to not only abortions but reproductive health care overall and across racial and socio-economic lines.¹⁸ Feminist efforts at the end of the 1970s did in fact aim to dismantle the nuclear, patriarchal family and in some ways, as with *Roe v. Wade*, they were successful in bringing awareness to concepts of equality into the domestic sphere. As with any progress, however, there was resistance. Marriage and abortion were taken up by the conservative Right as a means to counter feminist progress by resisting the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment.¹⁹ "Sweetheart of the Silent Majority," Phyllis Schlafly spoke to the concerns of married, middle class and religious women who opposed women's liberation: "The Positive Woman opposes ERA because it would be hurtful to women, to men, to children, to the family, to local self-government, and to society as a whole."²⁰ Their concerns were not only social, but economic, fearing both the ramifications of divorce and that liberated women would lose the legal and financial security

¹⁶ Bruce J. Schulman, "Battle of the Sexes," *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: De Capo Press, 2001.)

¹⁷ N.E.H. Hull and Peter Charles Hoffer. *Roe v. Wade: The Abortion Rights Controversy, 2nd ed.* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, [2001], 2010.)

¹⁸ "The Spirit of Houston: The First National Woman's Conference." An Official Report to the President, the Congress and the People of the United States. (March, 1978.)

¹⁹ William A. Rusher, *The Rise of the Right*. 1st ed. (New York: W. Morrow, 1984.); Schulman, 2001.

²⁰ "Why the State Budget Keeps on Growing," *California Journal* (January 1976.)

afforded by marriage. The “Positive Woman” believed that if the liberated woman earns the same as men, is equal with men, alimony and child support (as well as the financial benefits of marriage) would lose their legal value and privilege for women.²¹

Throughout the women’s movement that the “Positive Woman” opposed, the extent to which the family was conceived of as an oppressive force differed between feminist subsets. Radical feminists such as the Redstockings, younger women emerging from the Civil Rights movement and Vietnam protests, called for a complete dismantling of the heteronormative patriarchal family. Their manifesto read, “Our oppression is total, affecting every facet of our lives. We are exploited as sex objects, breeders, domestic servants, and cheap labor.”²² However, others such as Betty Friedan and members of NOW cautioned against such radical rejections of social institutions such as marriage, calling for more “serious political action” that would not alienate the general public.²³ In the end, both voices were heard, with changes coming to the nuclear family in the form of working mothers, single parents, and a rise in divorced households ushering in a new conception of family.²⁴ By 1985, half the mothers of small children held paying positions, no longer only part time jobs but long term careers.²⁵ Assisted by then-

²¹ Schulman, 2001.

²² Redstockings Manifesto (1969), reprinted in Robin Morgan, *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement*. (Vintage Books, 1970.) pp. 568-601.

²³ “Critique of Sexual Politics: An Interview with Betty Friedan,” *Social Policy I* (November-December 1970): 38-40. Reprinted in Betty Friedan, *It Changed by Life*, pp. 161-164.

²⁴ Schulman, 2001.

²⁵ Ibid.

Governor of California Ronald Reagan's no-fault divorce bill, signed in 1969, divorce rates would rise throughout the 1970s.²⁶ While 25% of marriages begun in 1950 ended in divorce, the percentage was up to nearly 50% by the end of the 1970s.²⁷ Such a rise was blamed on not only Reagan's no-fault bill but the rise of women in the workforce and feminist critique of the nuclear family.²⁸ With such shifts in the landscape of marriage by the end of the 1970s, it is easy to see why the "Positive Woman" would be concerned that the institution she saw as legal and financial protection had the potential to crumble in the wake of women's liberation.

Concerns were not only for the rights of the "Positive Woman," but also for the effect that these changes to family structure would have on children. As with many issues surrounding women and children's rights at this time, both conservatives and feminists were concerned for children but for varying reasons and with differing agendas. As an extension of the fight against domestic violence, feminist social workers and activists sought to combat child abuse as a symptom of the toxic patriarchal family.²⁹ Meanwhile, conservative movements headed by those such as Schlafly and Evangelicals like James Dobson looked to the changes in family structure and saw instability, abuse, and potential long term psychological and spiritual damage to children.³⁰ Dobson, along with Tony Perkins, Gary Bauer, and George Alan Rekers founded the

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Dana Rotz. "Why Have Divorce Rates Fallen? The Role of Women's Age at Marriage" *Journal of Human Resources* Vol 51, Number 4. (Fall 2016.)

²⁸ Schulman, 2001; Alan Gartner, *What Reagan Is Doing to Us*. 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1982.)

²⁹ Jarrett, 2000.

³⁰ Ibid.

lobbying organization Family Research Council in 1983 to combat such damage through a Christian, ultra-conservative framework that promotes heteronormative, patriarchal constructions of family. *The Brood*, as will be further examined in following chapters, presages and incorporates these culturally pervasive fears of the effect of divorce and abuse on children. Nola, a child of abuse and divorce, enacts her rage in such a way that it furthers the cycle of abuse and dooms her daughter to a similar fate. The stakes of these cycles are heightened by portrayals of children like Candy, presented as innocent and pure, as at risk of the evils of family dysfunction.

The emerging neoconservative backlash to dramatic shifts in family structure would crusade under the banner of “family values” as well as overt anti-feminism, anti-elitism and calls for a rise in national defense.³¹ Behind this backlash was the New Right, coming to redefine the Republican Party by appealing to the “Silent Majority” of working class Americans and eventually the Evangelical Right.³² The radical viewpoints of organizations like the Redstockings and WITCH (Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell) came to define the feminist movement for such neoconservatives who demonized feminists as destroyers of the American family. In its most extreme form, such demonization can be found in the viewpoints of ultra-conservatives like Pat Robertson (quoted above) that also show the impact neo-conservatism had on the rise of the Evangelical Right through the 1990s. Despite the inflammatory nature of such extreme viewpoints, blaming feminists for the dissolution of the nuclear family had concrete political and cultural ramifications. Ultimately the efforts of the New Right not only contributed to Reagan’s election in 1981 but assisted in the demise of the Equal Rights Amendment through

³¹ Schulman, 2001; Rusher, 2001.

³² Ibid.

the utilization of anti-feminist sentiment.³³ Additionally, as the economy dipped in the 1970s, the New Right had the opportunity to exploit anti-liberalism and tax reform to support a neoconservative Republican Party, picking up Evangelicals and ultra-conservatives along the way.³⁴ The tax revolts that began in California in 1978 and spread throughout the country epitomized the disenfranchisement of the “Silent Majority,” a very real financial crisis that could prop up the anti-liberal New Right and eventually lead to Reagan’s election.³⁵

The New Right showed that while conservatives put much of the blame for the dissolution of the nuclear family on feminists, they only served as one factor in the insecurities of the American working class, particularly men who were now not only working alongside women but whose jobs and careers were impacted by a stagnating economy.³⁶ As the role of women in the family shifted, naturally the role of men was shifting as well. The Sexual Revolution and Second Wave Feminism opened the door to discussions around masculinity that challenged the American notion of the man as a stoic provider, calling for a greater emotional and sexual awareness as well as a less authoritarian stance in the home.³⁷ In a 1972 interview with *Reader’s Digest*, sociologist and sex educator Lester Kirkendall encouraged men to embrace a “new masculinity” that would free them from the confines of traditional gender

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Schulman, 2001; Rusher, 2001; Gartner, 1982.

³⁶ Tony Williams. *Hearths of darkness: the family in the American horror film*. (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1996.) 247-249; Schulman, 2001.

³⁷ Victoria Ludas, “American Manpower: Work and Masculinity in the 1970s.” (New York: City University of New York, 2011.)

roles.³⁸ This “new masculinity” was also impacted, however, by the stagnant economy that made the stability of employment afforded to white, middle class men of the 1950s and 1960s a thing of the past. Although the Civil Rights and Women’s Movements both influenced a rising awareness of workplace discrimination, by the time of the US’s economy was stagnating these vary same populations were being blamed by the white male workforce that was finding it more and more difficult to find work. As sociologist Victoria Ludas asks on behalf of white men of the 1970s, “Who were they if they were unemployed? If they stayed home while their wife worked? If they were employed, but had to answer to a female boss? What was a white man in the 1970s, given the shifting circumstances of work and labor?”³⁹

The Brood offers a glimpse into an additional aspect of this new definition of not only masculinity but paternity. With the rising divorce rates came discussions over custody and the equal rights afforded to men and women following divorce. Like its contemporary, *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979), *The Brood*’s plot is centered around Frank’s battle for the custody of his child. After finding bruises on Candy’s back after a visit with Nola, Frank consults a lawyer who encourages him to consider the law’s predilection to privilege mothers’ rights to their children, even in the face of abuse. In this instance, the convergence of child abuse discourses and the new role of men in the 1970s centers on a narrative of a dissolving marriage, all dependent on an image of a “bad mother.”

³⁸ Lester Kirkendall, “Are Men Really Men Anymore? [interview].” *Reader's Digest* (August 1972.) 154-158.

³⁹ Ludas, 2011.

The shifts in conceptions of the family that resulted from feminist thinking, rising divorce rates, and the economy manifested in film in the proliferation of images of dysfunctional or divorced families.⁴⁰ Films such as *The Stepford Wives* (1972), *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979), *Ordinary People* (1980), *Scenes from a Marriage* (1973) and even David Lynch's surreal *Eraserhead* (1977) explore the dynamics of evolving conceptions of family, often bringing to light the dysfunction inherent to family structure in both an embrace and critique of the restructured and seemingly defunct nuclear family.⁴¹ Simultaneously, the horror genre became a site to explore gender anxieties in both the form of hysterical women, such as Nola, as well as insecure men, such as Lynch's stunted and paranoid patriarch of *Eraserhead*. Cronenberg's films, particularly *The Brood* and *The Fly* (1986), present images of such insecure male figures in Raglan's emasculated and traumatized male patients or Jeff Goldblum's Seth Brundle who reacts against his own perceived impotence through displays of hyper-masculinity as he degenerates into an insect.⁴² These insecure male figures were not all portrayed as feminized or impotent, sometimes instead exhibiting violence as a means to take back what patriarchal authority they had lost. As Tony Williams posits in his *Hearths of Darkness: family in the American horror film*, the insecure patriarch of the Reagan-Bush era appears in films such as Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1981) as an aggressive male figurehead who must destroy his family to control them. Williams sees this trope as a reaction to a perceived emasculation in the

⁴⁰ For a comprehensive examination of feminism's role in the moral backlash in the name of "family values" that would later incorporate the evangelical Satanic Panic, refer to Jarrett, 2000; Jackson, 2016.

⁴¹ Stacey, 1996.

⁴² Williams, 1996.

face of not only the “destabilization of the patriarchal family foundation” but also the economic recession of the 1970s which led men to seek what they perceived to be “low income ‘feminine’ servile jobs.”⁴³ The slasher genre so prevalent in the 1980s was yet another site where Williams claims that the insecurity of masculinity is enacted on screen in a similarly violent fashion. Additionally, the 1970s and 1980s saw horror films which situated trauma within the home with films such as *Carrie* (1976), *The Last House on the Left* (1972), *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *Halloween* (1978), *Friday the 13th* (1980), and Bob Balaban’s dark parody of the nuclear family, *Parents* (1989).⁴⁴ With horror films examining the role that trauma and dysfunction play within the family, the insecure patriarch and hysterical woman become politicized and allow for examinations into how gender anxieties appear in popular culture.

In the case of Nola, the image of the hysterical woman in 1979 is loaded with implications of how women are undermined by their anatomy at a time when they are seeking gender equality.⁴⁵ Nola is demonized as a “bad mother” and as the catalyst for her family’s dissolution, and thus her hysteria serves to undermine her trauma and characterize her motherhood as monstrous. Following the sexual revolution and women’s liberation, with the role of women shifting dramatically, many images of hysterical women began to take on new resonance in horror films. As will be examined in the following chapters, Roman Polanski’s

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Jackson, 2016.

⁴⁵ This is not to say, however, that female anatomy was denied as a political tool by Second Wave feminists. The essentialized idea of the female experience being defined by the vagina, as utilized by feminist artists like Judy Chicago in her 1979 “Dinner Party,” reinforces this connection between femininity and the power of the female body for generation.

Repulsion (1965) and *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), Andrzej Zulawski's *Possession* (1981), and Cronenberg's predecessor to *The Brood*, *Rabid* (1977), give culturally loaded images of hysterical women particular to their time in history. While these portrayals are not rooted in the same reactionary conservatism as the images painted by Pat Robertson or Phyllis Schlafly, they speak to many of the same anxieties. The hysterical woman of the 1970s is a woman in need of containment; by presenting them as hysterical (through sex, divorce, or motherhood) and defining them by their essential femininity, these narrative devices control women within heteronormative society. Nola's place in this trope is distinguished by her monstrous births, a form of body horror not outside the general scope of Cronenberg's work, but one that is historically laden with political implications about the power women hold in their generative abilities. While Cronenberg utilizes forms of hysteria and body horror throughout his oeuvre, crossing gender lines and defying binaries, Nola's characterization is particularly gendered when presented alongside his other subjects and within the history of hysteria's theorization.

Before contextualizing Nola alongside other portrayals of hysterical women, it is crucial to distinguish her from Cronenberg's other female characters and therefore examine how her hysteria makes a political statement outside of Cronenberg's general use of body horror in his early work. While Nola is not the only woman in Cronenberg's films to exhibit monstrous body horror, her characterization is definitively hysterical in that these physical manifestations are linked to trauma and her femininity. The hysterical quality of her monstrous births and overall portrayal denies the empowering readings available to Cronenberg's other female subjects, with her hysteria undermining her and ultimately making her nothing more than monstrous.

CHAPTER TWO: BINARIES AND BALANCE

To understand how hysteria functions in *The Brood* it is important to understand how Nola differs from Cronenberg's other female characters. While Nola is made one dimensional and abject through her hysteria, Cronenberg's other female characters are balanced and, while often utilized as objects of horror, are active, complex, and dynamic. This complexity has a great deal to do with Cronenberg's style that, in its pushing of physical and social boundaries, often breaks down traditional notions of gender. As Alan MacInnis states in his challenge of Robin Wood, Cronenberg's process is based in balance, an aversion to and a disruption of binaries that often complicate his characterizations.⁴⁶ Steven Shaviro frames this balance as a strategy of ambiguity,

“New arrangements of flesh break down traditional binary oppositions between mind and matter, images and object, self and other, inside and outside, male and female, nature and culture, human and inhuman, organic and mechanical. Indeed, the systematic undoing of these distinctions on every possible level, is the major structural principle of all of Cronenberg's films.”⁴⁷

Such balance can be seen in *Rabid* (1977) and *Videodrome* (1983) wherein the female subjects (just as the male leads) are neither monstrous nor heroic and present gender ambiguously through

⁴⁶ MacInnis, 2012.

⁴⁷ Shaviro, 1993. 115.

body horror, leading scholars such as Shaviro and MacInnis to give Cronenberg his “feminist friendly” dues.⁴⁸

Due to *The Brood*’s autobiographical nature, Nola has been relegated away from such balanced characters as *Rabid*’s Rose who, in her embodiment of a literal female phallus, is both active and feminine, monstrous and heroic.⁴⁹ In a short shot preceding Rose’s first attack, a patient is shown with an anthology of Freud’s writings and comments on the Freudian nature of her relationship with her father (Figure 1). This tongue in cheek allusion indicates Cronenberg’s direct conversation with Freud’s notion of the female phallus when he gives his female lead a penetrating monstrous growth. Rose, played by porn actress Marilyn Chambers, finds herself a victim to a plastic surgery corporation with grand ideas of developing tissue that can be altered to attach and grow to any part of the body. After a botched skin graft experiment, notably to her breasts, Rose awakes from a coma to find that she is compelled to drink blood, a feat she accomplishes by luring her victims with sex before attacking them with a phallic growth developed from her experimental surgery (Figure 2.) Rose, a precursor to Nola, is a guinea pig to scientific experiments that ultimately make her monstrous.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Cronenberg’s feminist, misogynistic, or neutral intent is not relevant to my discussion of his characterizations. As Shaviro’s quote shows, any breaking down of gender lines is just a byproduct of the director’s greater resistance to binaries. Shaviro and MacInnis’ focus on giving Cronenberg “feminist friendly” or “quasi-feminist” credibility comes in response to Wood and other feminist critiques of his work. The debate has long centered around defending Cronenberg’s intention, not focusing on the precise political implications of how gender is enacted in his films. Therefore, for the purposes of this thesis, Cronenberg’s intent is not as relevant as the visual culture he contributes to. Shaviro, 1993; MacInnis, 2012.

⁴⁹ Shaviro, 1993.

⁵⁰ In his original critique from *The American Nightmare* Robin Wood addresses *Shivers*, *Rabid*, and *The Brood* as a trilogy based upon the thematic similarities: notably the use of women as experimental test subjects that go awry. In *A Dissenting View*, he augments this, as this theme is



Figure 2

However, there is an air of comeuppance to Rose's journey, in that her victims are often men who are lured in by her sexuality, only to then be penetrated themselves and turned into rabid beasts that spur a zombie-like plague. Much like Debbie Harry's Nicki Brand in *Videodrome*, Rose is undoubtedly a sexual object but is given dimension and agency despite her initial victimization. Both characters are played by women who are perceived as screen objects, a porn actress and beautiful rock star of the MTV generation. Their objectification, however, is ironically alluded to in both films and adds a self-conscious dimension to their characters. Marilyn Chambers is able to reverse her sexual role, penetrating the men who are helpless to resist her.⁵¹ Likewise, Debbie Harry plays a radio host who crusades against the proliferation of television in a "video killed the radio star" play on the power of media. All the while, she is

one Cronenberg continued to use in films such as *The Fly*, *Scanners*, and *Videodrome*. He maintained that the original "trilogy" is connected by their portrayals of women within this narrative. For the purposes of this thesis, I will not outline the role of women in *Shivers*, though the role of masculinities in this film is worthy of additional scholarship outside the scope of this paper. Wood, 2003.

⁵¹ This reading is one drawn from Chamber's own conception of her character, illustrating the empowerment she gains from both her porn and horror roles. "Birth Pains," documentary for *The Brood*. (Criterion Collection, 2015.)

visually provocative and feeds into the attention of the television camera. Nicki Brand, in fact, exemplifies Cronenberg's creation of a balanced female character. She is contradictory, active, and ultimately no more flawed than the protagonist Max Renn as they are both drawn to the death of their "old flesh" by one lust or another. Within these two films, the binaries that Shaviri points to are in fact broken down.

This same balance, however, has not been allowed to Nola, with even those critics who seek to redeem Cronenberg stopping short at her characterization.⁵² While a connection can be drawn between Nola's monstrous births and Rose's female phallus, with Nola's brood alluding to Freud's theories of the phallic mother through the power they afford her, Nola lacks the agency and sympathy attributed to Rose or Nicki and is instead portrayed as hysterical through her emotional excess and the physical manifestations of her monstrous births. This hysteric quality disrupts the balance Cronenberg gives his other female subjects, with Nola losing any sense of heroic redemption. As Cronenberg states himself, Nola is "unredeemingly bad."⁵³ Because of this, her final moments don't convey the same tragedy as Rose or Nicki's. Cronenberg acknowledges Nola as only salvaged by those moments "when she cries, when she's a little girl, when she's shattered, and in those moments, her evil is mitigated somewhat [...]"⁵⁴ What Cronenberg omits here is that such moments of infantile rage and sadness only add to Nola's hysterical qualities that ultimately make her the monster of *The Brood*. Nola is truly only seen in such shattered contexts, only given screen time during her therapy sessions with Raglan

⁵² Shaviri, 1993; MacInnis, 2012; Handling, 1993.

⁵³ Handling, 1993.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

or in her climactic monstrous birth. In her sessions, she reverts to her girlhood, begging for love and protection from her father or expressing deep rage and hatred towards her mother. Such volatility and raw emotion are all we see from Nola, as she is never seen mothering Candy or taking control of her own emotions. Samantha Egger plays up these shifts in emotion, the instability of Nola's psyche, through Shakespearean monologues delivered to Raglan and Frank with a dissociative affect. Nola's evil is less "mitigated" by these scenes as it is defined by them, and her "unredeemingly bad" characterization is directly tied to how her hysterics overtake and undermine her.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Ibid.

CHAPTER THREE: THE POLICIS OF HYSTERIA

While Nola is defined by her emotional hysteria throughout the film, the full extent to which Nola can be conceived of as hysterical is captured best in the final monstrous birth scene, where her rage and instability culminates with the animalistic birth of her monstrous child. This hysteria is amplified by Frank's observation of it, his disgust and hatred of Nola coming to a head when he witnesses what her body is capable of and the extent of her hysteria. In the climactic monstrous birth scene, as Frank attempts to calm Nola's rage to save their child from the brood, Nola displays the sacs hanging from her abdomen and bites through one to release the fetus inside (Figure 3). The camera lingers on a shot of Nola licking the blood and fluid off of the fetus, and when she looks up to see the horror in Frank's eyes she accuses him, "I disgust you!" Frank's disgust towards his ex-wife is a disgust towards her mental instability as well as the monstrous births that result from it. In her hysteria, she has become animalistic, irrational, and abject and Frank cannot disguise his horror at what he is witnessing.⁵⁶ In this scene her rage overtakes her both mentally and physically in a state of hysteria that is seemingly irredeemable as Frank's disgust leads him to murder her when he finds that he can no longer reason with her to save their child.

⁵⁶ This scene has become famous for the censorship issues that surrounded it and as a result, many myths have arisen around its intent and origin. MacInnis alludes to Cronenberg referring to Nola as a "bitch licking her pups," a statement which has added much fuel to the fire of Cronenberg's accused misogyny. This quote, however, originates with Samantha Eggar herself who jokingly states that during filming this scene she tried her best to make the men in the room vomit, thinking back to her childhood on a farm and the way the animals would lick their newborn babies. "Birth Pains," documentary for *The Brood*. (Criterion Collection, 2015.)



Figure 3

Nola's hysteria, culminating in this final scene, follows both the historically gendered origin of the term within the female body as well as its Freudian connotations as an emotional reaction to trauma. She is also aligned with other images of hysterical women who are defined by their irrationality, lack of reason, and excessive expression of emotion. As this chapter shows, hysteria is a term which has evolved over time yet has been continually defined by its ability to pathologize the emotions of women who are responding to their oppression. Historically, hysteria (that relating to the uterus) alludes to the notion of a "wandering womb" which has the potential to migrate to the brain and overtake women's capability for reason.⁵⁷ Though presented as a physical phenomenon as far back as 1900 BCE, the implications of this wandering, the breaking down of physical boundaries and the impact of the uterus on female reason, has evolved

⁵⁷ Pseudo-Aristotle. "Aristotle's Masterpiece, 1684." (New-York. Printed for the Company of Flying Stationer [sic]., 1817.); Jacques Jouanna, *Greek Medicine from Hippocrates to Galen: Selected Papers*. (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2012.)

over time to provide an explanation for female madness, monstrous birth, and ailments.⁵⁸ In Hippocratic medicine, hysteria results from sexual frustration or hyper-sexuality related to an imbalance of humors.⁵⁹ Similar concepts can be found in the Victorian notion of hysteria wherein the “nerves” became sites for women’s hysteria to manifest in the form of epileptic seizures, fainting spells, or emotional outbursts.⁶⁰ Hysteria, however, goes beyond the reproductive function of the uterus. It also describes an emotional state wherein women are undermined as a result of their anatomy, and the weight such anatomy holds culturally.

Freud’s observations published in his 1895 *Studies on Hysteria* describe hysteria as the physical manifestation of emotional trauma.⁶¹ Trauma, in Freudian theory, is an event which occurs in childhood, often linked to seduction either through pleasure or pain, which is recalled later in life and is at the heart of neurosis.⁶² Often this trauma is repressed and the symptoms of hysteria offer evidence to the root of trauma in order to cure it.⁶³ This approach is modelled in Raglan’s *Psychoplasms*, with repressed memory and trauma manifesting on the body. Nola’s therapy sessions, wherein she reverts to her girlhood, center around the abuse she suffered, countered by her mother’s constant denial of it. Before being killed by the brood, Nola’s mother,

⁵⁸ Barbara Creed. “The Monstrous Womb,” *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. (London; New York: Routledge, 1993); Jouanna, 2012; Valeria Finucci. “Performing Maternity,” in *The Manly Masquerade*. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2003.) 120-157.

⁵⁹ Jouanna, 2012.

⁶⁰ Mary Ann Doane. *The Desire to desire: The woman’s film of the 1940s*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987.)

⁶¹ Breuer and Freud, 1895.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

drunk while babysitting Candy, tells Frank in response to Nola's accusations, "Thirty seconds after you're born you have a past and sixty seconds after that you begin to lie to yourself about it." This quote is meant to show how Nola has potentially twisted her childhood memories. She seems unreliable and subject to irrational fits of rage that lead her to accuse her mother of abuse. This is just one of many references to the unreliability of Nola's memories, the root of her trauma which is constantly undermined outside of her sessions with Raglan. Her trauma is identified as not only a reaction to her recollections of physical abuse but also the undermining of her lived experience. In therapy sessions with Raglan she not only goes into fits of rage over her mother's abuse but also speaks to being deeply traumatized by her father's denial of it. In a repetition of this dynamic, both her mother and father die at the hands of her brood, with her mother as the primary target and her father passively falling into their line of fire. This dynamic also speaks to the previously mentioned tropes of the hysterical woman (the alcoholic mother) and insecure patriarch (the passive father). In *The Brood*, this pairing is displayed as a contributing factor to child abuse as a literal as well as symbolic destruction of the nuclear family.

Nola's mother goes on to show Candy photographs of Nola in the hospital as a child, covered in bumps which she claims they never found a source. Within the context of Nola's accusations, it is assumed that perhaps these were the result of beatings. It isn't until the end of the film when Nola is linked to the brood that these bumps can be seen as early manifestations of her emotional trauma. They are the psychosomatic responses to the real physical and emotional trauma she suffered at the hands of her parents. The emotional source of these growths is further solidified when Candy develops similar bumps in the final shot as a result of her traumatic attack by the brood. This final shot harkens back to the first scenes of the film when Frank discovers

bruises on Candy's body that are later revealed to have come from an early beating by the brood. Later, when Candy witnesses the murder of her grandmother, the police warn Frank to encourage Candy to remember the attack, lest she form an ulcer, a physical manifestation of her repressed traumatic memory. There is a narrative connection throughout of this cycle of abuse and trauma (following, in this case, Nola's maternal line) with the physical, hysterical manifestations of such abuse.

Hysterical manifestations of trauma are not, however, solely allocated to the women of the film. It is crucial to note that through the majority of the film such hysterical manifestations are exhibited on Dr. Raglan's male patients who produce rashes and even lymphoma in response to his treatments to bring out childhood trauma. This does not mean, however, that their hysterics are not gendered. The gendered nature of hysteria is highlighted in the first scene of *The Brood* which centers around the feminization of one such patient, Mike. Raglan plays upon Mike's father's emasculating verbal abuse and the trauma of such feminization. The film opens on a stage within Psychoplasemics' SomaFree Institute, with a role-playing exercise in which Raglan enacts Mike's father. In this public therapy session, Mike is in a trancelike state with Dr. Raglan provoking him through triggering phrases supposedly drawn from this childhood verbal abuse by his father. Raglan barks, "Why did I call you Michelle all the time, so I didn't have to be so fucking ashamed of you [...]" Mike's responses speak to the repressed nature of his rage and the trauma of this verbal abuse, "I hate you because I love you, it makes me feel guilty inside, I can't hardly speak." As Raglan becomes more aggressive, Mike breaks down and finally accesses the part of himself that can tell Raglan (his surrogate father in both this exercise and throughout the film) that he hates him. Raglan, still in character, barks at the man to "show [him.]" At this moment, the theatricality is broken as Mike's chest and face erupt in boils, which, with each shift

in camera angle, grow larger as he emotionally breaks down and the audience gasps. Having achieved the desired effect,⁶⁴ Raglan holds the man, kisses him gently on the forehead, and as the spotlights above plunge them into darkness Mike repeats over and over “Daddy, oh Daddy....” This is our first glimpse into Psychoplasemics’ real goal, to manifest rage on the physical body as a means to process trauma and ultimately heal.

Hysteria comes to represent the making visible of the invisible, as Michel Foucault describes the pathology of the unconscious, where trauma creates a permeability between the physical body and the unconscious mind.⁶⁵ This interpretation of Freud’s theories of trauma, and thereby its resulting hysteria, is at the heart of the fictitious psychotherapy cult of Psychoplasemics. In the context of Psychoplasemics rage, as a reaction to trauma, takes on physicality in a manner that mimics Freud’s observations of hysteria. Raglan’s aim is to make visible the invisible, pushing through repression to access deep rage as a means of overcoming trauma. Nola’s hysteria is rooted in the trauma she suffered at the hands of her mother that is then manifested in her own motherhood through both her emotional instability and her monstrous births. In this way, Nola embodies hysteria’s origins in the “wandering womb” and Freud’s theories of hysteria as physical symptoms manifesting from repressed trauma. Her monstrous births are a perverse expression of the dissolution of a family as a response to trauma in form of child abuse. Her hysteria (as well as Candy’s potential for similar hysterical growths) speaks directly to anxieties surrounding the effects of dysfunctional families on children, taking

⁶⁴ Raglan: “go all the way through it, go through it to the end,” a mantra repeated in each therapy session through the film.

⁶⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. (New York; Vintage Books, [1976] 1990.) 42.; Doane, 1987.

Freud's concepts into the arena of 1970s family politics. In doing so, hysteria is used as a tool to reinforce gender roles as they are redefined through critiques of the nuclear family structure. This is not the first time, however, that Freudian hysteria as a narrative device to reinforce patriarchal authority has been utilized in cinema. The political impact of these theories enacted in popular culture, cinema in particular, have been examined within the scope of film of the 1940s.⁶⁶ While the image of the hysterical woman in cinema has changed over time, its role as a tool for oppression remains consistent.

While Freud's understanding of hysteria is not directly linked to the womb itself, as he determines it can also be exhibited in male patients, the term's gendered origins in conjunction with his findings with female patients, allow for the term to be used primarily against women. Freud's use of the specific term "hysteria" creates a slippage where, in addition to its connection to the uterus, the term comes to define a set of emotional as well as physical reactions that are ultimately linked to essentialist notions of femininity. While the term has gone out of fashion in psychology due to its gendered origins, the concept of the "hysterical" woman has consistently been utilized in popular culture. As Mary Ann Doane outlines in her reading of hysterical women in 1940s films, our understanding of hysteria in women is greatly impacted by Freud's theories and practices.⁶⁷ The popularity of psychoanalysis during the midcentury led to the proliferation of such hysterical female characters in the films *Lady in the Dark* (1944), *A Woman's Face* (1941) and *The Dark Mirror* (1946).⁶⁸ These films not only pathologize women through hysteria

⁶⁶ Doane, 1987.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

but identify their hysteria with narcissism and excess. At the center of many of these plots is also the seductive relationship between the patient and psychoanalyst, a reinforcement of heteronormative relationships which seeks to contain the hysteria of these women.⁶⁹ It is crucial to note that these portrayals are not only rising out of the popularity of psychoanalysis but also from a time when gender roles are in flux. During WWII, with women filling in gaps in the workforce and taking on roles traditionally coded as male, hysteria in these films served to reallocate women to traditional female roles by defining them through their essential femininity as well as putting them under the heteronormative, patriarchal authority of their psychoanalyst. These portrayals of hysteria inform how Nola's own hysteria manifests within her therapy sessions. While her hysteria is clearly embodied through her monstrous births, her emotional hysteria is characterized by narcissistic, irrational excess (expressions coded as hyper-feminine within the context of hysteria on screen) which Raglan seeks to control by walking her through her trauma.⁷⁰ Within the context of Nola's divorce, her relationship with Raglan also takes on both a paternalistic as well as adulterous connotation, further reinforcing her lack of agency and her culpability in the dissolution of her marriage. Not only does Raglan assert his patriarchal authority over Nola (authority he soon loses control of as her monstrous births get out of hand) but the adulterous connotations of her relationship with Raglan further reinforce the cultural

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ In this way, Cronenberg uses Raglan and Nola to represent Freud's own practices with hysterical patients such as Dora, where transference between the analyst and patient is seemingly inevitable. However, while Freud's intention was to find the root of trauma to alleviate the physical manifestations of hysteria, Raglan seeks to use rage (a result of trauma) to create such manifestations. In the end, Raglan loses control of Nola's hysteria as his therapy seems to strengthen the power of her embodied rage.

belief that “out of control” or hysterical women were to blame for the destruction of the nuclear family through divorce.

The hysterical woman of the mid-to-late Twentieth Century is often one defined in terms of sexuality and marriage, institutions that were culturally shifting and creating space for gender anxiety. Following the sexual revolution and the critiques of the nuclear family made by feminists of the 1970s, hysteria becomes a potent political reaction to women’s shifting roles in society as they move out of the heteronormative confines of domesticity. Cronenberg’s own *Rabid* presents a hysterical woman overtaken by her sexuality, made masculine and then monstrous in the midst of sexual revolution through her vampiric blood lust and female phallus. Looking back to 1965, Roman Polanski’s *Repulsion* presents an image of an isolated and sexually repressed woman who, over the course of several days, drives herself insane as a result of her desires for and phobias of men. As Robin Wood alludes to in his critique of *Rabid* such hysterical women, those whose sexualities overwhelm them, are reactions to anxieties over how women will function in world where they are given greater freedom of sexual expression.⁷¹ Hysteria in this case is a tool used to undermine women’s free expression of sexuality by showing this expression as a loss of control over their desire. This device reflects many of the same anxieties as the films of the 1940s, and thus reinforces women’s place in heteronormative society.

⁷¹ Robin Wood, [1979] 2002.

CHAPTER FOUR: MONSTROUS BIRTH

Nola's hysterics are therefore historically gendered; her monstrosity is enforced and further tied to her femininity in Cronenberg's choice to not just show Nola as emotionally hysterical but to have her hysteria manifest in the form of monstrous birth. Yet despite Wood's call for considering social context, even a decade after the film's release critics had not seriously taken into account the implications of what hysterics means in the context of *The Brood*. In 1993, Barbara Creed began a discussion of Nola's hysteria in her *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* by examining Nola as the embodiment of the monstrous womb.⁷² Her psychoanalytic reading of Nola places her within the larger context of monstrous birth narratives, with the abject female body serving as a site of horror due to its generative power. Creed posits that Frank and Nola's marriage dissolved due to Frank's disgust at Nola's mothering functions.⁷³ This reading, however, does not address the emotional connotations of Nola's hysteria. While Frank is disgusted by her monstrous births, they serve to only reinforce the hysterical quality of her character overall. To take Creed's reading one step further, it is important to understand not only what monstrous birth means in terms of psychoanalytic theory but also what its political implications have been historically. As the previous section outlines, hysteria can function as a political tool to control women. This becomes all the more potent when connected to maternity. With anxieties surrounding the evolving family appearing in visual culture of the late Twentieth

⁷² Creed, 1993.

⁷³ Ibid.

Century, monstrous birth speaks directly to such reactions and the crucial role of motherhood to this discourse.

Nola's hysteria, so intrinsically linked to the dissolution of the nuclear family in both her parents' and her own divorce, is manifested in her creation of monstrous children. The brood comes to represent a perverse image of the power women hold within the family as a result of their generative abilities. Throughout the film, there is conflict between the power women hold both culturally and legally as mothers and the representation of such mothers as hysterical and abusive. Frank's lawyer reminds him of the court's inclination to award custody to mothers, despite the signs of abuse that Candy exhibits. When questioned by Raglan about the bruises on Candy's body, Nola denies abusing her child with the blanket statement "Mummies don't hurt their children," that only "bad Mummies, fucked up Mummies" would do such a thing. This perception goes beyond Cronenberg's film, and is reinforced in other films of the time such as *Kramer vs. Kramer*. The concept of the bad mother, not just the hysterical woman, becomes political as the family is politicized. Cronenberg encompasses this concept of the bad mother through his creation of a mother made monstrous through her hysteria, and whose hysteria manifests itself through birth. The idea of motherhood, and therefore monstrous birth, as political is nothing new. Cronenberg's monstrous mother only contributes to a lengthy history of folklore that speaks to the powerful conception of maternity in many culture.

Scholars have identified the prevalent monstrous birth narratives of medieval and Early Modern Europe as examples of gender anxiety appearing in folklore as well as of how women were able to leverage monstrous birth to gain marital or reproductive control. The concept of hysteria, deeply ingrained in medical practices and religious beliefs, allowed for a cultural acceptance of monstrous births as fact. Narratives of women influenced by their imaginations,

emotions, or sin showed how such influences could lead to the birth of monstrous creatures. The acceptance of these narratives within dominant power structures such as science and the church reinforced a cultural perception of women wherein hysteria could be used as tool to gain control over women within the patriarchal family structure. It also, however, offered women control within this family structure through the power afforded them by these beliefs. David Cressy looks to the story of a lower-class Tudor woman as a means to examine how monstrous birth offered an alternative to infanticide when women were left with no other reproductive choices.⁷⁴ As Cressy explains, Agnes Bowker became pregnant most likely as the result of a rape by her employer. After a failed suicide attempt, Bowker, with the assistance of her midwife, stages a monstrous birth that catches the attention of the Catholic Church. During the Reformation, the Catholic Church was seeking stories which manifested the devil in the everyday lives of followers as a way to keep them within the Catholic faith. Bowker's tale served a political aim for the church, exhibiting how her sin led to the birth of a monstrous demon. On the other hand, secular authorities defended her as a victim to the advances of men as a way to combat the Catholic interpretation. At the center of this, Bowker was able to cover up the likely infanticide of the baby she conceived out of wedlock while evading punishment and was even given a laying-in period.⁷⁵ Likewise, Valeria Finucci examines Italian literature as a means to understand how monstrous birth was used to reinforce gender roles, often giving women power and sexual

⁷⁴ David Cressy. "Agnes Bowker's Cat: Childbirth, Seduction, Bestiality, and Lies," in Cressy, *Travesties and Transgressions in Tudor and Stuart England*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.) 9-27.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

satisfaction in their marriages.⁷⁶ In the context of Early Modern Italy, women held a great deal of power through the performance of maternity, especially during the time in which they could express their will over their fetus. Fears over the power of female hysteria in the form of imagination or an imbalance of humors were most potent when concerning pregnancy, as such hysteria could impact the child and therefore the patriarchal line. Women, in this case, were able to utilize hysteria as a means to marital satisfaction by leveraging the weight of their generative power.⁷⁷ Most notably, monstrous birth narratives that arose from Elizabethan England speak to the gender anxieties that arose from discourses surrounding the power of the Virgin Queen.⁷⁸ Monstrous birth narratives became extremely popular in Elizabethan broadsides, according to Ross Hagan, as a means to reinforce gender roles. Monstrous births were symbolic of the influence of sin and the fragility of the female soul. At the heart of this scholarship is the fact that the generative abilities of women both gave them power over those reliant upon it and defined them within the societies of which they were a part. Defining the causes and results of hysteria in medical and religious texts offered a way of controlling one of the most unpredictable and powerful social constructs: the family.⁷⁹ Turning our attention back to the late Twentieth Century, we can see the anxieties surrounding family arising at this time also expressed through monstrous birth narratives, this time reinforced by film.

⁷⁶ Valeria Finucci. "Performing Maternity," in *The Manly Masquerade*. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2003.) 120-157.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ross Hagan. "A warning to England: Monstrous birth, teratology, and feminine power in Elizabethan broadside ballads." *Horror Studies Journal*, vol. 4 no. 1. (2013.)

⁷⁹ Valeria Finucci, 2003; Ottavia Niccoli. "'Menstruum quasi monstrum': Monstrous Births and Menstrual Taboo in the Sixteenth Century," in E. Muir and G. Ruggiero, eds., *Sex and Gender in Historical Perspective*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990.) 1-20.

Within the context of North America in the late 1970s, the re-emergence of monstrous birth narratives is obviously quite different from Early Modern Italy or Elizabethan England. However, the concept persisted that women's reproductive abilities held political power when confronting shifts in gender identity. Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* is especially useful in politicizing monstrous birth narratives of the 1970s. *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) derives much of its horror from the claustrophobic gaslighting of its main character. Drawing from the same concept as his earlier film *Repulsion*, *Rosemary's Baby* isolates the main character within her apartment, as she tries to keep her sanity while those around her undermine her authority over her body and her mind. Her hysteria derives more from her emotional state than from her body's ability to generate a monster. Rosemary's narrative has been read politically, her pregnancy compared to the struggle of women in pre-Roe v. Wade America.⁸⁰ Rosemary lacks control over her body, with both the men around her as well as her parasitic fetus feeding off of her and driving her insane. As with Nola, Rosemary's monstrous birth is a reflection of her hysteria as a consequence of undermining, where memory and identity are called into question. They differ, however, in that while they are both one dimensional (Rosemary the martyr, Nola the monster) Rosemary is still afforded a satisfactory outcome where she gains a level of control, perhaps because she leans into and even exemplifies the domestic ideals of motherhood.

Nola's hysteria most closely resembles that portrayed in Andrzej Zulawski's 1981 *Possession*. Zulawski's film encapsulates hysteria in a myriad of ways, setting a frantic pace, and utilizing monstrous birth and monstrous sex as a metaphor for divorce. Setting the two films side

⁸⁰ Karyn Valerius. *Rosemary's baby, gothic pregnancy, and fetal subjects*. (College Literature: 32, (3): 116. 2005.); Lucy Fisher. "Birth Traumas: Parturition and Horror in *Rosemary's Baby*." *Dread of Difference* (2). (Austin, US: University of Texas Press, 2015.)

by side, the plots are strikingly similar and speak to the power that the image of hysterical women held in media portrayals of divorce at the time. Anna (played by Isabelle Adjani) seeks a divorce from her husband without giving a reason, a seemingly irrational whim. After neglecting her child and abandoning her husband for an adulterous affair with a monster, she and her husband (Mark, played by Sam Neill) engage in several viscerally jarring verbal and physical attacks all the while screaming in tones that become inhuman. During this time, Mark looks to replace Anna with her doppelganger, found in their son's peaceful and maternal teacher (the same romantic interest Frank fixates upon in *The Brood*.) In the climax of her hysteria, Anna miscarries her monstrous child in the Berlin underground, shrieking like an animal and violently throwing herself against the floor and walls (Figure 4.) Ultimately, Anna's hysteria destroys both her and her husband, completing the metaphor for the destructive consequences divorce.



Figure 4

Both Anna and Nola are “bad mothers,” whose husbands seek to replace them with the conventional maternal figures of their children's teachers, they are hysterical in their irrationality and delusion and ultimately that hysteria manifests in the form of a bloody, monstrous birth. The

message is the same as well, with divorce portrayed as a dissolution of not only a marriage but the concept of family at its most basic level. Presenting the women of these films as hysterical serves to gender this issue, placing the blame for the dissolution of family on the shoulders of women. Nola's monstrous birth is not only a reflection of a long-standing archetype, it is indicative of how hysteria comes to define the fears we hold as a culture surrounding the role and power of women.

CONCLUSION

By analyzing Nola's particularly hysterical characterization and the role that her monstrous births play in such a portrayal, one can position her within the greater scope of not only Cronenberg's work but also within the visual culture surrounding family near the end of the 20th century. Monstrous birth in the context of 1979 offers a means to examine the perception of women as instigators in the dissolution of the nuclear family and the shifting gender roles of the 1970s and 1980s that arose from not only Second Wave Feminism but also economic stagnancy and the resulting emergence of the New Right. As stated in "Politics, Family, and Film", this created conditions for a backlash that presented feminism as the enemy of family values.

This thesis has only begun to touch on the wealth of political implications found in *The Brood*. It is my hope that by contextualizing Nola within Cronenberg's work, as well as alongside other portrayals of hysterical women in film, she can be addressed as more than a complication to Cronenberg's oeuvre. *The Brood* comes at a pivotal time in the history of feminism and, in many ways, speaks as loudly to the discourses that would come in its wake as the politics of 1979. The crusade to restore "family values" that would intensify in the 1980s and 1990s would eventually evolve into a series of moral crises that would later be identified as the Satanic Panic.⁸¹ This panic, as examined by social historians, was built upon not only evangelical

⁸¹ Jarrett, 2000; Ofshe, 1994; Debbie Nathan and Michael Snedecker. *Satan's Silence: Ritual Abuse and the Making of a Modern American Witch Hunt*. (New York: Basic Books, [1995], 2001.)

fearmongering but also feminist efforts to prevent child abuse and the recovered memory movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s.⁸² The latter was based on the efforts of social workers and psychologists to reveal oppression in the form of childhood abuse and incest, tied directly to the notion of female oppression occurring on both the macro-scale of patriarchal society and in the micro-scale of the nuclear family.⁸³ The inflammatory nature of the Satanic Panic that would result in a proliferation of false accusations of abuse would later discredit much of the well-intentioned recovered memory movement, framing feminists once again as menaces to family and children.⁸⁴ The role of hysterical women in the popular culture that arose from, and contributed to, the Satanic Panic is deserving of contextualization within the contentious conversations around false memory therapy and the perils of new age psychological practices of the time. With the Satanic Panic encompassing anti-cult sentiments, new age psychology, and child abuse, *The Brood* becomes a rich opportunity to explore the early appearances of such connections in visual culture. It is also useful in understanding how the image of the hysterical woman plays into the demonization of women, feminists in particular, in the aftermath of the Satanic Panic.⁸⁵ Within this context, *The Brood* speaks to many of the factors that would give rise to this strange and convoluted chapter of North American history as well as the further ramifications of the battle over “family values” that we see in contemporary American society.

As Wood tried to make so abundantly clear in his reading of Cronenberg’s oeuvre, the characters give insights into contemporary socio-political conditions. His peers disregarded

⁸² Jarrett, 2000; Ofshe, 1994.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ofshe, 1994.

much of the wide-reaching implications of his reading, but as this thesis has demonstrated through an analysis of *The Brood*, there is good reason to look closely at the political weight of such characters. As I write this in 2017, similar social and political conditions to that of 1979 are culminating in America. It is, therefore, crucial to continue to critically examine the images of women proliferated throughout visual culture. In her book, recent book *Divided We Stand* (2017), Marjorie Spruill draws connections between the social influences that led from the rise of the New Right in the 1970s and 1980s to the election of Donald Trump in 2017. More importantly, she centers this discussion around the politics of women and the family as an evolving narrative of conflicting ideology that has shaped contemporary American culture.⁸⁶ Her book offers a means to further interrogate powerful images of women and family, images that can be implemented in politically polarizing ways. Within the scope of this history, the trope of the hysterical woman requires in-depth analysis as a tool of oppression and censorship. With this in mind, and pursuing political criticism, further scholarship on the horror films that come out of this new administration would benefit from a close look at the role of women and the family. Within this thesis, building on the feminist psychoanalytic critiques of Doane and Creed and answering Wood's call for political criticism of Cronenberg's work, I have strived to create the opportunity to further explore the feminist implications of such misogynistic applications as hysteria and monstrous birth in contemporary cinema.

⁸⁶ Marjorie Spruill, *Divided We Stand: The Battle Over Women's Rights and Family Values that Polarized American Politics*. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017.)

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