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The issue of reproduction has always been both something fascinating (as the mode of transgression) and terrifying. Films as Artistic Creation (1901) by Walter Booth and avant-garde Window Water Baby Moving (1959) by Stan Brakhage are the perfect example of how reproductive narrative was regulated and taken away from women symbolically. The main goal of this article is to focus on reproductive motifs in cinema's history (especially early cinema and American classical cinema) and contrast them with L'opéra-mouffe / Diary of a Pregnant Woman (1958) by Agnès Varda. I place this picture in the context of contemporary corporeal theories.

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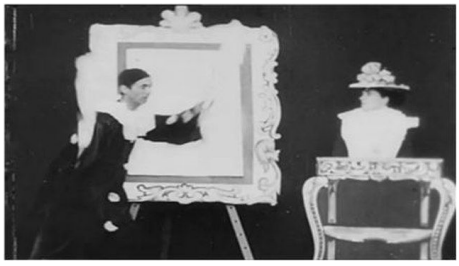
Cinematic Labor: Reclaiming Reproduction as a Female Experience

Although mother figures are a staple of many filmic narratives, their representations are predominantly abstract. Cinema alternates between focusing on their role as mothers and keepers of the hearth or, on the contrary, portraying them as possessive and domineering. Mother figures are often a function of the psychoanalytical constitution of the characters, or are treated as raw material for sociological inquiry. While the avenues are (seemingly) many, the representation of female experience – like the depiction of women in general – has ossified into a sterile, clichéd norm. In line with widespread expectation, questions of female biology or physiology are rendered taboo. Just as mass media continues, even in the twenty-first century, to substitute blue-colored liquid for blood in sanitary product commercials, so human reproduction – pregnancy and especially labor – is likewise represented in a highly stylized manner. One of the most natural of human acts, particularly in societies in which parenthood carries special significance, tends to be treated in film as something eminently abject. Were we to retrace the early decades of cinema history, we would quickly come to realize how the experience of motherhood has been stripped from women – how its generative power and social role fascinated many, but mostly terrified with its radical viscerality. In early and classical cinema, systems of control and social mores enforced strict censorship on depictions of reproduction and separated women from their bodies, but the work of many female artists highlighted the cracks in that facade. In my view, the greatest breakthrough was brought about not by the avant-garde and its bold imagery, but Agnès Varda's 1958 *Nouvelle Vague* essay *Diary of a Pregnant Woman*. Directed by a pregnant woman, the film portrayed pregnancy as an intersubjective female experience with a personal character, rather than the intersection of external discourses. In terms of representation,

not only was *Diary of a Pregnant Woman* far ahead of its time, but it even anticipated certain feminist notions that would reach the mainstream only in the late twentieth century.

Cinema's prenatal period

In Walter Booth's 1901 short film *Artistic Creation*, an artist paints body parts, which he then lifts off the canvas and constructs a woman from. Once assembled, the figure comes to life, and the painter reaches for the brush to create a baby. When he tries to hand the woman the assembled infant, she flees, and the artist turns to the camera, as if passing it to the audience. This simple trick from cinema's earliest days is proof of its ambiguous interpretation of the concept of reproduction, which film can understand biologically, as procreation, and figuratively, as creating a facsimile copy of reality. On account of its capacity to create and recreate life, the cinematic dispositive is analogous to human reproductive capabilities. Booth's short film suggests some recognition of that similarity and its attendant treatment of reproduction as metaphor, separating it from the body. Still, there is a subversive undertone here: while it is not surprising that it portrays the man as the woman's creator, because that particular narrative has been deeply entrenched by patriarchal tradition, the female character still refuses to perform the roles of mother and caregiver foisted upon her, thus renegotiating the cultural values designating her gender-specific experience.



British silent film from 1901, directed by Walter Booth and produced by Robert Paul
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Artistic_Creation_(1901)_-_yt.webm

It is doubtful that this renegotiation was intended by the makers of *Artistic Creation*, as the film strongly aligned itself with representational tendencies typical of early cinema, apparent here as visual trickery and revealing the camera's presence – customary for the Brighton School, for example. As noted by Tom Gunning in his essay on the cinema of attractions,[1] the goal was to astonish the audience rather than build a coherent, autonomous world to support the photographic mimesis. The cinematic trickery might be updated, however, and interrogated from the perspective of reproduction and its paradigmatic interpretations. This "strategic anachronism" allows us to identify at least two levels of ambivalence within the movie, which in turn enables us to problematize the presence of motherhood throughout cinema history. Primarily, interest in reproduction is followed by its substitution – genuine labor is replaced by a visual trick. The following decades showed that avoidance of representation would long serve as the representational key, as I will seek to demonstrate with the example of American cinema, which was also a model for its European counterpart. Secondly, *Artistic Creation* rather ambiguously probes the question of gender roles in the creative process. While the creator, as I mentioned, is a man, his creation is not natural (as implied by the title itself). Initially, the film reinforces the traditional narrative, rooted in the Bible, which holds that women are secondary to men, rejecting biological perspectives, but it abandons that direction later, as the woman, brought to life, refuses to care for the infant conjured from the canvas, thus undoing the chain of associations imposed by her culturally assigned role. Such "interruptions" function like the "productive pathologies"[2] of Thomas Elsaesser, which I would like to explore further here.

Building with infant incubators, Lewis and Clark Exposition, Portland, Oregon, 1905 University of Washington Special Library.

Cinema itself did not create this ambiguous approach to pregnancy and labor; it only reflected popular trends in culture and society. This is apparent in a handful of interesting phenomena that preceded its founding, demonstrating, on the one hand, profound fascination with reproduction, and, on the other, biological and gender anxiety. In the late nineteenth century, traveling exhibitions of infant incubators became quite popular with the public –drawing on a broader tendency to exploit the entertainment potential of technological inventions, especially medical ones – and were displayed in amusement parks, alongside kinetoscopes, for example. It was at the Coney Island amusement park that Martin A. Couney tried to raise money to finance his bank of incubators – initially dismissed by the world of science, they nevertheless drew considerable crowds, not least because they held real infants inside.[3] Years later, similar efforts would accompany scientific and instructional films dealing with sexual health and reproduction – not because of their particular educational value, but rather the controversy they were sure to draw. Another phenomenon involved the highly popular congratulatory cards sent to new parents. These typically featured newborns brought by storks or found in cabbage patches – Jesse Olszynko-Gryn and Patrick Ellis believe the latter influenced French filmmaking pioneer Alice Guy-Blaché, going so far as to call her 1896 debut *The Fairy of the Cabbages* an adaptation of such cards.[4] In that case, no visual trickery or clever editing was involved – the film shows the eponymous fairy daintily moving among cabbage beds, pulling out infants from behind them. This testifies to how strongly the miraculous narrative was already entrenched in early cinema. Guy-Blaché did not stop at this naive representation, and her filmography

would contain titles touching upon the female experience, including motherhood and reproduction, such as *Midwife to the Upper Classes* (1902) and *Madame's Cravings* (1907). Both depict cabbage patches, which might be an ironic commentary on her earlier illustrations of natal mythologies, but also signals the filmmaker's embrace of more realistic interpretations of the subject. Unfortunately, the path of female representation unmarred by cultural myths would remain unexplored for years, especially after the approaching classical era of cinema placed the subject of reproduction under many moral constraints. The stronger the taboo became, the more the female perspective was marginalized. In spite of the denaturalization and defeminization of reproduction, the period still saw the emergence of a variety of textual and, above all, reception-oriented avenues of renegotiating the visual modality of pregnancy and labor.

Phantom pregnancy

In classical cinema, scientific discourse clashed strongly with puritan restrictions and miraculous narratives. Introduced in the 1930s, the Hays Code was explicit in that regard: "Scenes of actual childbirth, in fact or in silhouette, are never to be presented."[5] The prohibition applied even to more detailed, medical depictions of labor, which were considered too suggestive; similar objections were raised against attaching fake bellies to pregnant female characters, which allegedly accentuated the "burden" of the condition. Hence, classical American cinema made few films explicitly related to reproduction. Although it was believed that pregnancy and labor were spousal duties, consecrating the institution of marriage, representations thereof aroused moral and aesthetic anxiety. Firstly, the realistic portrayal of labor could potentially discourage young women from getting pregnant; secondly, birth was widely considered a private, intimate female experience that men should not witness. Finally, standards of decency would

be violated by depictions of female genitalia.

Alongside strict enforcement of moral standards, efforts were made to uphold what Betty Friedan called "feminine mystique." In this case, the Production Code Administration (PCA), the office responsible for enforcing the Hays Code, overwhelmingly agreed with the positions of Christian organizations such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Legion of Decency. David A. Kirby's remark that "movie censorship organizations believed that the reality of pregnancy and childbirth turned any film into a horror film"[6] ultimately extends far beyond the question of representation, as naturalism threatened patriarchal interpretations of womanhood, including the view of motherhood as a preserve of sanctity and purity. Reproduction was stripped of anything that suggested its biological foundations, while films approaching the subject with greater frankness were met with indignation by regional and national censorship organizations, which introduced extensive changes, re-editing the material or banning them outright. Hence, filmmakers themselves began avoiding pregnancy and adjacent topics, fearing censorship and poor reception, exemplified by the failure of James Flood's pre-Code 1932 *Life Begins*,

Cross-section of the female body showing the changes that occur during pregnancy. Begins with the 'virgin' state and ends with an illustration of a fully developed fetus. Obstetric Tables, p. 1, plate 4. The illustration is from History of Medicine (IHM), http://ihm.nlm.nih.gov/images/A109169. Courtesy of the National Library of Medicine.

which loomed large over subsequent films on the subject of human reproduction and, consequently, accelerated the growing dematerialization of female biology.

Al Christie's 1938 *The Birth of a Baby* is likewise significant; after its protagonist becomes pregnant, we follow the baby's development – and subsequent birth – through a series of doctors' appointments. The film has clear educational value, as the obstetrician describes to the expectant mother what is happening with her body and the fetus, and instructs her on taking care of herself and the baby, even using illustrations from medical textbooks. The film consistently emphasizes how important the wellness of the pregnant woman is, and how regular checkups help maintain it; a subplot involves a woman who ignored her appointments and endangered her pregnancy. One of the final scenes features a rather realistic depiction of labor.[7] This commitment to realism, however, is undercut by the film's moralizing message. The protagonist is happily married and welcomes the pregnancy, which she sees as the natural crowning of her relationship. This message is later reinforced by another subplot, this one featuring a woman seeing the doctor because she wants her pregnancy terminated, a wish he lambasts her for, labeling abortion not only illegal, but also selfish and immoral. The birth of a child is a miracle, he declares, and bringing it into the world is a woman's duty, especially when there are no contraindications (whether medical or social). The obstetrician deploys Christian idiolect in his lecture, blending the healthcare aspect of his profession with ethical responsibility. *The Birth of a Baby* was screened in only a handful of theaters, but established a precedent which showed that the Hays Code could be bent if the overall message remained morally correct. The PCA suggested an official taxonomy, according to which films were either educational or suitable for entertainment, with both categories assigned specific screening venues and audiences – this allowed the PCA avoid assessing each picture's moral and ethical value but focus instead on their "exhibition

context," such as churches, schools, and lecture halls.[8] Consequently, although *The Birth of a Baby* was screened under the auspices of the American Committee on Maternal Welfare as an educational movie promoting healthcare, its impact was still massive – Olszynko-Gryn and Ellis mention critic Geraldine Sartain's assertion that it managed to abolish the stork myth and was discussed almost as widely as D. W. Griffith's 1915 *The Birth of a Nation*,[9] proving just how porous the PCA-designed taxonomy was, and the extent of public interest in more realistic depictions of pregnancy and labor.

A similar example of such representation can be found in George Stoney's 1952 *All My Babies: A Midwife's Own Story*, produced as an instructional film for midwives, especially in places with limited access to healthcare. It featured detailed depictions of medical examinations, performed with a midwife's assistance, alongside instructions for personal hygiene, managing delivery (including tying the umbilical cord and removing the placenta), and using the incubator for premature births. At the same time, the film had artistic values, manifested in sophisticated aesthetic means (camerawork, scoring, attention to framing, narration, etc.). A Black midwife in the US's Deep South, committed equally to the delivery of "all her babies," tells her tale via two protagonists: a well-off mother of two older children, and a poor woman who has already lost a baby and fears for her current pregnancy. *All My Babies* portrays both their stories in an empathetic manner, without losing its educational elements. Although screened in an official capacity as educational and instructional pictures, films like these also circulated underground, using distribution channels that operated until the 1960s.

> Whereas major studios worked closely with the censors to ensure the widest possible distribution, an itinerant group of entrepreneurial roadshowmen produced and distributed cheaply made "exploitation" films on prohibited topics, including reproduction. So-called exploiteers appropriated

> and exhibited medical footage, including of childbirth, before general audiences in theatrical venues typically reserved for entertainment films. In so doing, they challenged the boundaries between educational and obscene visual materials that medical professionals, the film industry and censor boards worked hard to maintain.[10]

The existence of unofficial distribution channels, the gradual crumbling of the Hays Code in the 1950s, and the development of medicine precipitated a more relaxed approach to depicting reproduction on the screen – Kirby claims that the turning point was the release of Jean-Paul Le Chanois' 1957 drama *The Case of Dr. Laurent* – while the PCA refused to certify the film, the Legion of Decency praised it for its "educational value," and the production ultimately received the coveted seal of approval.[11]

Anomalies

Aside from the "entertainment" mainstream and the "educational" and "exploitation" circulations, Cinema 16 in New York City, founded by Amos Vogel and his wife Marcia, was another important venue for reproduction in film. The center of the development of the avant-garde, showing experimental and European art cinema, it also screened medical and scientific films: "Cell division, sexual development and childbirth were consistently among their favourite themes."[12] Like the aforementioned practice of deliberately classifying potentially offensive pictures as educational, so certain meanings were renegotiated and challenged here, inspiring independent filmmakers. For the American avant-garde (and later the visual discourse on reproduction), the watershed moment came with Stan Brakhage's 1959 *Window Water Baby Moving*. Not only was this a radical departure from the classical narrative structure, but it also dispensed with existing approaches to portraying women in labor.

Initially, the film was supposed to be instructional, having been commissioned by the director's wife Jane's obstetrician; in the 1950s, the PCA rules for educational content were relaxed, allowing not only greater realism but also more visceral representations. While the collaborative agreement with the hospital ultimately failed, the filmmaker found himself with an unprecedented degree of moral and artistic freedom. The birth, at home, of the couple's first child was recorded by Brakhage and then heavily edited.[13] The film uses a destabilized POV and selective framing, but loses none of its literalism because of that, zooming in on the vulva and the infant's head emerging from the birth canal. These images are neither hidden nor exploited; they do not show childbirth as horror, nor did they sexualize it. While the film's emotional tone is almost euphoric, the footage itself lays bare female biology and physicality, both of which clearly fascinate the director.

Early screenings left audiences, mainly male, deeply shocked by such direct entry into the female intimate sphere and female physiology. The excess of capturing the biological nature of childbirth was accompanied by an invasion of privacy. In her essay on the director, Magdalena Podsiadło situates the film in a broader autobiographical strategy:

> These experiments with perception – which were a leading theme in his [Brakhage's] work – often involved his family, himself, and the reality around him. Alongside his tendency for self-reference, subjectivization of the image, and drawing on home-movie aesthetics, these elements constitute a clear catalog of autobiographical signals directing the viewer's attention toward the artist and his life.[14]

At this point, it seems reasonable to ask whose biography and intimate sphere was actually intruded upon here. While the director supposedly had the blessing of his wife, the question remains of whether his actions constituted an appropriation of the female experience. The feminist discourse around the film is

insightfully described by Matylda Szewczyk:

> Studying the footage, we may point to Jane's obvious involvement, almost co-authorship – after all, she also held a camera, and the essay she penned, describing the birth as it was filmed ["The Birth Film"], to some extent makes both processes equal. Here, labor and filmmaking are acts of creation the couple has equal stake in, despite their disparate contributions. On the other hand, however, critics of *Window Water Baby Moving* point to a considerable imbalance of power in this seemingly ideal arrangement. Taking a different perspective, they see Stan Brakhage in the traditional position of artist-male, a voyeur spying on an unfolding act, incorporating it into his art, symbolically appropriating and dominating it.[15]

Years later, Marjorie Keller discussed this in artistic form with her *Misconception* (1977), which used realistic sound design to prevent attempts to idealize or metaphorize the female body in labor. Despite what seems to be its extreme naturalism and commitment to subverting past models of representation, Brakhage's strategy can ultimately be viewed as an extension of the miraculous logic functioning in mainstream circulation. Hence, I would like to focus on another film which, although not as revolutionary, proposed a complete departure from previous discourses around reproduction, and thus elevated cinema onto a new level – Agnès Varda's *Diary of a Pregnant Woman* . The film deliberately avoids exploring the provocative ecstasy of childbirth, focusing instead on what I would call the "phenomenology of the pregnant body experience."

This shift helped cement its place in feminist debate on motherhood, and set the direction that many women directors, including Alice Lowe, Catherine Breillat, Julia Ducournau, and Eliza Hittman, would follow.

The female experience

For the film's potential meaning to be understood, it must first be situated within feminist discourse, in which the category of experience has become increasingly important since the 1990s, even though it had long been sidelined as potentially essentialist and too close to the patriarchal binary that associated women with what is natural and passive. This is especially apparent in the struggle over abortion rights, where freedom of choice implies the right to make choices about one's body and, by extension, with respect for individual subjectivity. Symptomatic of this particular option is the position first formulated by Susan Bordo, author of the 1995 book *Unbearable Weight*, a chapter of which is dedicated to pregnant women's right to self-determination, laying bare the double cultural standards by which the female body is treated as an incubator while the fetus acquires the status of "super-subject": "the current battle over reproductive control emerges as an assault on the personhood of women."[16] Elaborate equipment in medical offices and hospital rooms further intensifies the de-subjectification of women, implicitly indicating that the goal is not to ensure the wellbeing of the mother, but the delivery of a healthy infant, so poignantly captured by Catherine Breillat in her 1999 film *Romance*, which draws a sharp line between the sexual status of a woman prior to pregnancy and afterward, when her womanhood is reduced to her role as a mother and she is surrounded by technology designed to achieve this goal and subject her to the "rule of the father." A similar position, supplemented with an interrogation of existing power structures sanctioned by gender roles, access to knowledge, and high-level

appointments, is outlined by Iris Marion Young:

> I argue that within the present organization of these institutions and practices, women usually find such an encounter alienating in several respects. Medicine's self-identification as the curing profession encourages others as well as the woman to think of her pregnancy as a condition that deviates from normal health. The control over knowledge about the pregnancy and birth process that the physician has through instruments, moreover, devalues the privileged relation she has to the fetus and her pregnant body. The fact that in the contemporary context the obstetrician is usually a man reduces the likelihood of bodily empathy between physician and patient. Within the context of authority and dependence that currently structures the doctor-patient relation, moreover, coupled with the use of instruments and drugs in the birthing process, the pregnant and birthing woman often lacks autonomy within these experiences.[17]

Western medicine overwhelmingly alienates the pregnant woman's experience. Reproduction, or at least the symptoms accompanying pregnancy, are often interpreted in categories of deviation from the health norm; the male body does not undergo similar changes, so it is treated as the benchmark here.

Bordo's or Young's pinpointing of that particular web of social dependencies ultimately undermines the category of female experience. First and foremost, some fear that it veers too close to echoing patriarchal clichés about women being predestined for motherhood[18] and the hypostasis of eternal femininity; Bordo notes, however, that voices should not be suppressed or rejected, lest their arguments be picked up by those who oppose the individual right to make choices about one's body and, consequently, reproduction.[19]

Furthermore, experience is not pre-discursive; it does not emerge on the level of metaphysics or immanence, but is socially, historically, and culturally construed – rather than exclude power relations it exposes them, and may even provide the basis for undermining certain cultural representations.[20] Second, using the category of experience raises concerns about the essentialization of the experiences of women hailing from diverse backgrounds, in contrast to the generalized experience of the heterosexual, middle-class, white woman. While we must remain sensitive to specific historical, racial, cultural, and class contexts, the category itself is fitting, as the ability to bear children is specific to women or to people with uteruses: "At the same time, consciousness of our diversity ought not to be permitted to dilute recognition that, as women, we all have an 'authority of experience' that men lack, and that gives us 'a privileged critical location' from which to speak concerning reproduction."[21] Moreover, such reflection carries within it the potential for activism, becoming the basis for solidarity, as noted by Sonia Kruks.[22] Female experience differs from its male counterpart not only due to biological differences, but also on account of the socio-cultural factors that shape self-image, subjectivity, and awareness of one's own corporeality. As a result of the exclusion of women and the otherization it typically entails, "the knowledge flowing from female cognitive experience is situated, embodied, and inclusive, whereas androcentric knowledge is universal, objective (disembodied), and exclusive."[23] Third, using the category of experience tends to draw accusations of ahistoricism and adiscursivity. Existential phenomenology, unlike its transcendental strain, argues, however, that all experience is situated through its relationship with the body. Silvia Stoller draws on the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty to emphasize the presence within them of the category of the horizon of experience, informed by spatial and temporal coordinates,[24] as well as intentionality, indicating that each experience is

predicated upon an intention,[25] so experience does not "just" arise, but is driven by an active subject.

This position also informs feminist phenomenology and corporeal feminism, both of which are based on experientiality. Somatic norms carry within them coded ideologies of domination; at the same time, contemporary thinking tends to note that the body is itself a subject, capable of experience and cognition, in stark contrast to the instrumental approach, which dismisses it as a vessel for the mind. "Within this battle [for reproductive rights], we cannot afford, whether in the interests of theoretical avant-gardism or political correctness, to abandon conceptions such as subjectivity, authority, embodied consciousness, and personal integrity."[26] The essential premise of corporeal feminism is that both the body and lived experience are fundamentally bound to sexuality. Elizabeth Grosz, the leading figure of this current of modern feminism, construed a model of subjectivity based on corporeality, which sees the philosopher reject the linking of only one gender with the category of corporeality, the subordination of the somatic sphere to biology, and the idea of developing any sort of norm, turning instead toward existential phenomenology, with its emphasis on relationality, the importance of genuine experience, and the materiality of the body and its links to the world.[27] Grosz argues that the body is an "animate organization of flesh, organs, nerves, muscles and skeletal structure, which are given a unity, cohesiveness, and form through the physical and social inscription of the body's surface."[28] Focus ought to lie not on the body, but on biology, matter, and materiality; not on ideology, but on strength, energy, and affect; finally, not on the popular category of cultural gender, but on gender distinction, which, while "untidy and ambiguous," is still pre-subjective and irremovable.[29] Only such a perspective charts wholly new epistemologies, but distinction, and the relationships it generates, integrates us all in a continuous process of becoming. The relationship between the cultural and the corporeal,

between the inside of the body and the outside, involves constant motion and, consequently, the sustained disruption of oppositions entrenched in culture. The openness of this embodied concept makes it particularly applicable to descriptions of female aesthetic experience (including its cinematic aspect) and art created by women.

Diary of a Pregnant Woman

L'opéra-mouffe, as Varda's film is known in the original French, is neither an unmediated portrayal of a pregnant woman's life, nor of labor, but features throughout it several more or less obvious parallels with pregnancy. The title is taken from Rue Mouffetard in Paris, and Varda's early short can be read as a poetic essay on the street and its neighborhood, consisting of nine micro-chapters, each with a title and a sung verse. The film's peculiar prologue, however, suggests it be read through the lens of pregnancy. In the opening shot, we see a naked woman, sitting with her back toward the camera, on which an illustration of a curtain is then superimposed (later bookended by an intertitle with the word "curtain"). Subsequent close-ups leave us with no doubt as to her condition, now seen in profile: her heavily pregnant belly takes center frame, while her face remains off screen. With a dissolve, the belly becomes a pumpkin, which is then sliced open by a grocer. We find ourselves on Rue Mouffetard, but the director, using a variety of visual devices, suggests that the image is not self-sufficient: she emphasizes fractures and reflections (the pumpkin cut open and scooped out, a reflection of the street in a cracked mirror), underscores with the first sung verse how all references to the street are ultimately superficial, and deploys a number of audiovisual modifications – speeding up or slowing down the footage, or abandoning diegetic sound in favor of music, song, and onomatopoeic images.

The prologue is followed by a series of nine short chapters or episodes, such as "On Lovers," "On Nature," and "On Some People." From the vignettes, several themes emerge, including the contrasts and binaries that define human life (youth and old age, desire and repulsion, love and loneliness), and specific forms of visual representation which, aside from those mentioned above, include haptic close-ups of human faces and the rich textural details of different objects, often depicted in cross-sections laying bare their internal structure (the inside of a pumpkin, a board with the rings of the tree it was made from, a slice of lemon, etc.).

The subject of pregnancy is explored most vividly in two of the vignettes: "On Pregnancy" and "On Anxiety." The former presents a series of images: a dove in a glass sphere, then a smiling young woman running in slow-motion, half a cabbage with a fresh shoot growing out, and a newborn baby doll, placed inside the belly of a drawn figure, like a seed inside an apple core. Most of these visuals can be poetically but still comprehensibly tied to the growth of a fetus inside a mother, developing from and bound to her, but still separated from the outside world by the physical border of the belly.

> The pregnant subject, I suggest, is decentered, split, or doubled in several ways. She experiences her body as herself and not herself. Its inner movements belong to another being, yet they are not other, because her body boundaries shift and because her bodily self-location is focused on her trunk in addition to her head. This split subject appears in the eroticism of pregnancy, in which the woman can experience an innocent narcissism [...]. Pregnant existence entails, finally, a unique temporality of process and growth in which the woman can experience herself as split between past and future.[30]

The above words by Iris Marion Young can not only interrogate these images, but also help make sense of the puzzling sequence with the running woman. While it is hard to read into it a direct commentary on pregnancy, it does carry some connotations with womanhood (the experience of the female body's reproductive abilities), corporeality (the body in flux, explored with a subtly erotic curiosity), and mobility (the physical effort of locomotion and the mental effort related to balancing between past and future). Similar images appear in "On Anxiety," which is dominated by two distinct visual flows – in one, a cracked egg appears among smashed lightbulbs, and when a chick soon begins to hatch from it, it is placed inside a glass; in another, again in slow-motion, we see a woman with a large belly, carrying bags filled with groceries, taking heavy steps, testament to her exhaustion. The experiences of fulfillment and joy, even bliss, which dominate the previous vignette, and could, to paraphrase Sally Gadow, be described as "experiencing one's own bodily being in an aesthetic mode,"[31] are here replaced by the eponymous anxiety, effort, and perhaps even fear of labor and delivery itself.

In both instances, not only are the images literally associated with reproduction important, but so are the connotations of functioning during pregnancy. For Varda, alongside physical change, the experience of pregnancy entails a shift in the sphere of relations between the individual and their immediate environment, and the world beyond. Hence, additional commentary on the condition is offered by other vignettes, even though, at first glance, they seem to be mere snapshots of life at an ordinary street market. While descriptions built on emphasizing being-in-the-world do not apply exclusively to the perspectives of pregnant women,[32] the experience in this case is so intense that it brings about significant changes in the body and, consequently, in the perception of the self and its surroundings. The body is no longer something natural and

transparent:

> A pregnant women needs and takes up much more space, which, we ought to note, runs contrary to prevailing social expectations for women, who are required to make themselves small and limit their movements [...]. The growing pregnant body renders all past practices of handling it unfeasible, impractical, prompting the expectant person to devise new ways of handling oneself. Pregnancy also requires the relearning of the use of public, private, and even intimate spaces.[33]

Pregnant women have a different perception of their own bodies, their mobility, their physical capabilities, and are ultimately compelled to form new habits:

> the boundaries of my body are themselves in flux. In pregnancy I literally do not have a firm sense of where my body ends and the world begins. My automatic body habits become dislodged; the continuity between my customary body and my body at this moment is broken. In pregnancy my prepregnant body image does not entirely leave my movements and expectations, yet it is with the pregnant body that I must move.[34]

Due to these changes, pregnant women grow much more mindful of themselves and their presence in the world, which often precipitates anxiety about the wellbeing of the fetus, and how they are perceived by those around them. Varda's film has several depictions of observation: people looking out of their windows or toward the camera. Sociologist Honorata Jakubowska argues that this is a fairly typical experience for pregnant women, who are often touched or observed by strangers, as their condition seems to shift the boundary between their own privacy and intimacy and the public perception of their pregnant body.[35]

More important to female experience, however – if only on account of the alienating thrust of modern medicine – is self-perception and profoundly increased relationality with what is inside and what is outside. Iris Marion Young says that: "Pregnancy roots me to the earth,"[36] and goes on to describe the mode that the female subject functions in as "a dialectic."[37] A similar dialectic emerges in Varda's portrayal of relationships with the world and the perception of shifting corporeality; after all, the director's effort to shift the boundaries associated with classical cinema (depicting a naked pregnant woman) and broaden filmmaking by trying to capture the experience of pregnancy and reclaim it for typically female discourse, is likewise dialectical.

This particular line of inquiry was not immediately picked up by other female artists. The following decades saw the emergence of subgenres like gynaehorror or maternal horror – from *Rosemary's Baby* (1968, dir. Roman Polański), through *The Brood* (1979, dir. David Cronenberg), to *Grace* (2009, dir. Paul Solet) – serving as outlets for male anxiety related to reproduction, which itself becomes a source of terror. Contemporary women's cinema seems to be rediscovering the formula Varda first proposed, and reclaiming stories of pregnancy and labor. In her 2016 *Prevenge*, Alice Lowe uses dark humor to interrogate the bond between a mother and her unborn child, and her shifting place in the world; in *Titane* (2021), Julia Ducournau portrays childbirth as an amalgam of pain, ecstasy, and the destruction of the female body; in the 2011 drama *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, Lynne Ramsay explores the anxieties of pregnancy and postpartum depression. Similar examples abound, with human reproduction portrayed in a multidimensional manner and featuring depictions of the female experience that preserve the subjectivity of women; all the films mentioned above are, at their core, horror films, but they refrain from showing female biology as hellish.

Here, "artistic creation" is replaced by purely "female reproduction."

1 See: Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Films and the (In)Credulous Spectator," in: *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Films*, ed. Linda Williams (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

2 See: Thomas Elsaesser, "The Mind-Game Film," in: *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, ed. Warren Buckland (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 13–41.

3 Erin Blakemore, "Baby Incubators: From Boardwalk Sideshows to Medical Marvel," *History*, September 12, 2018, www.history.com/news/baby-incubators-boardwalk-sideshows-medical-marvels (accessed August 30, 2021).

4 Jesse Olszynko-Gryn and Patrick Ellis, "'A Machine for Recreating Life': an Introduction to Reproduction on Film," *The British Journal for the History of Science* vol. 50, no. 3 (2017), 387.

5 David A. Kirby, "Regulating Cinematic Stories About Reproduction: Pregnancy, Childbirth, Abortion and Movie Censorship in the US, 1930–1958," *The British Journal for the History of Science* vol. 50, no. 3 (2017), 460.

6 Ibid., 472.

7 Publicity material for the film used the slogan "See a baby born before your very eyes!" See: Olszynko-Gryn and Ellis, "'A Machine for Recreating Life'," 398.

8 Kirby, "Regulating Cinematic Stories," 461.

9 See: Olszynko-Gryn and Ellis, "'A Machine for Recreating Life'," 398.

10 Ibid., 397.

11 See: Kirby, "Regulating Cinematic Stories," 463.

12 Olszynko-Gryn and Ellis, "'A Machine for Recreating Life'," 398.

13 Brakhage would return to that particular subject in his 1961 work *Thigh Line Lyre Triangular*.

14 Magdalena Podsiadło, "Amerykańska awangarda. Marie Menken, Stan Brakhage, Jonas Mekas – trzy przypadki autobiograficzne," in: *Historie filmu awangardowego. Od dadaizmu do postinternetu*, eds Łukasz Ronduda and Gabriela Sitek (Warsaw–*Kraków* : Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej – Fundacja Krakowska Alternatywa – Fundacja Okonakino – Korporacja Ha!art, 2020), 113.

15 Matylda Szewczyk, "Momenty kryzysu. Stan Brakhage i Marjorie Keller o doświadczeniu porodu," *Artmix*, January 8, 2011, http://archiwum-obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/artmix/19921 (accessed January 17, 2022).

16 Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley–Los Angeles–London: University of California Press, 1995), 72.

17 Iris Marion Young, "Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation," in: idem, *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 47.

18 The findings of Sara Ruddick, recapitulated by Joanna Bednarek, seem particularly interesting in this context: "Ruddick retraces 'maternal thinking,' emphasizing that although the majority of care work is performed by women, this connotation is not driven by any particular female attributes – mothering, although often rooted in emotion, is rather work requiring a specific set of abilities, advanced competences that can be developed by a 'mother' irrespective of gender. […] 'Love […] does not provide the answers. Mothers must *think*.' […] Ruddick also emphasizes the denaturalization of the category of 'mother,' noting that one becomes a mother when one takes on the duty of care; there is no natural continuity between the work of pregnancy and labor (although Ruddick does not deprive either of their significance) and care work. In this sense, every mother is an adoptive one." Joanna Bednarek, "'Nie nasze dzieci'. Naturalizm, reprodukcyjny futuryzm i potworne macierzyństwo," *Etyka* no. 57 (2018), 104–105.

19 See: Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 95.

20 See: Annemie Halsema, "Experience," in: *Symptoms of the Planetary Condition: A Critical Vocabulary*, eds. Mercedes Bunz, Birgit M. Kaiser, and Kathrin Thiele (Lüneburg: meson press, 2017), 53.

21 Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 94–95.

22 As cited in: Halsema, "Experience," 53.

23 Natalia Anna Michna, *Kobiety i kultura. O doświadczeniu w filozofii feministycznej* (*Kraków*: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2018), 219.

24 See: Silvia Stoller, "Phenomenology and the Poststructural Critique of Experience," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* vol. 17, no. 5 (2009), 709.

25 Ibid., 712.

26 Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 96.

27 See: Elizabeth Grosz, "Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray in the Flesh," *Thesis Eleven* vol. 36, no. 1 (1993).

28 Elizabeth Grosz, "Bodies–Cities," in: idem, *Space, Time, and Perversion* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 104.

29 See: Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2005), 171.

30 Young, "Pregnant Embodiment," 46–47.

31 "Sally Gadow has argued that [...] we also at times experience our bodily being in an aesthetic mode. That is, we can become aware of ourselves as body and take an interest in its sensations and limitations for their own sake, experiencing them as a fullness rather than as a lack. While Gadow suggests that both illness and aging can be experiences of the body in such an aesthetic mode, pregnancy is most paradigmatic of such experience of being thrown into awareness of one's body." Ibid., 51.

32 According to Joanna Bednarek, who draws on a variety of positions offered by women philosophers, it is characteristic for the ethics of care, itself female in spirit, "a different logic shining through the cracks and gaps in patriarchal rationality – one based on relationality, closeness, continuity, and honesty, with oneself and with others." Bednarek, "'Nie nasze dzieci'," 103.

33 Honorata Jakubowska, "Doświadczenie ciężarnego ciała jako ciała przekraczającego granice – studium socjologii ucieleśnienia," *Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej* vol. 12, no. 4 (2016), 103.

34 Young, "Pregnant Embodiment," 50.

35 See: Jakubowska, "Doświadczenie ciężarnego ciała," 104.

36 Young, "Pregnant Embodiment," 52.

37 Ibid., 54.

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