Motherhood the Inescapable: Portraying the Entrepreneurial Mother in American film—Biological Essentialism, Patriarchy/Androcentrism and Gender Polarization, in *Mildred Pierce* and *Baby Boom*

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Abstract: Visual culture is an important indicator of social values. The norms absorbed by the writers and directors of films are reflected in their work. The result provides a barometer for social progress, or its lack. In this paper, I discuss how Biological Essentialism, Patriarchy/androcentrism, and Gender Polarization are depicted in two films, *Mildred Pierce* (Curtiz, 1945) and *Baby Boom* (Shyer, 1987). I argue that the similarities between the female entrepreneurial and motherhood roles of characters Mildred Pierce (Joan Crawford) and Baby Boom’s J. C. Wiatt (Diane Keaton) illustrate the lack of true transformation in visual representations and therefore internalized perspectives of women in American society. These two films tell us that motherhood is the core identity for women and that it is inescapable.

1. Biological Essentialism, Patriarchy/androcentrism, and Gender Polarization in *Mildred Pierce* (1945)

**Biological Essentialism**

Mildred’s commitment to her children contrasts sharply with the disinterest of their father, Bert (Bruce Bennett) (Jurca, 2002: 48). Earning money to spend on her children is Mildred’s primary interest. Working in her kitchen baking cake to sell and then starting her own restaurant for which she bakes pies at home at night, removes any actual sphere of domestic space to which Mildred may “be returned” (Jurca, 2002: 33). This argument
fails to consider that whether Mildred is in her restaurant or in her home, her life is collapsed into one of unrelieved domesticity. Mildred’s kitchens are her source of income because she is good at the work and because she is bound to her children.

The movie teaches that “...because business is ultimately more natural than families, corporations endure even when the families that underwrite them fail” (Jurca, 2002: 32). Having embezzled funds from her portion of the business to maintain Veda (Ann Blyth) in luxury, Mildred is ousted from Mildred’s Incorporated, by her male business partners. Veda, mercilessly grasping and selfish, hates her mother, because she smells of “grease” and cooks for a living (Jurca, 2002: 44). Yet for Mildred, fulfillment as a parent hinges on providing everything that Veda desires. However Mildred’s success as a businesswoman has nothing to do with her being a mother—thus the film is not actually telling us that Mildred’s failure as a mother is punished by the loss of her business (Jurca, 2002: 31). Rather, says Jurca, *Mildred Pierce* seeks to demonstrate that the relationship between women and the market economy is dyadic, “...because business is so obvious and necessary, it is what women do.”

Yet Mildred is a businesswoman only to provide the means with which to care for her daughters (Sochen, 1978: 5). Thomas Pryor (quoted in Sochen) declared that the film was “unrealistic,” because someone as rational and as good a businesswoman as Mildred ought to have avoided being manipulated by her daughter, Veda. But Sochen points out that by making Mildred think first of Veda and sacrifice for her the film underlines female gender norms (Sochen, 1978: 8). Although Sochen writes that this blaming is occurs “implicitly” (Sochen, 1978: 8), Veda demonizes Mildred and excuses herself after Veda murders Monte Beragon (Zachary Scott), her stepfather, “It’s your fault I am the way I am” (Sochen, 1978: 7). This is, clearly, *explicit* blame.

Mildred possesses and acts on characteristics generally believed inherent to men, such as “hard work, self-reliance, and perseverance” (Sochen, Sochen, 1978: 8). I would add that Mildred exhibited risk-taking and vision.
Mildred is remarkable because she is not actually a ‘businesswoman’ but is instead a “businessmother,” for whom mothering must come first, according to social norms (Sochen, 1978: 8).

Understudied in Mildred Pierce is the relationship between Mildred and her two daughters, Veda and Kay (Jo Ann Marlowe). I stipulate that Veda and Kay, each of whom is only partly a whole person, represent a deconstructed Mildred. Tomboy Kay cares nothing for clothing or status. Mildred, although well-dressed and feminine, is not interested in clothing per se, nor is she ruffled by working in kitchens, waiting on people, or cleaning up. Veda expresses avaricious femininity. Mildred is interested in acquiring money and men because of what each can do.

That Kay dies of pneumonia illustrates the loss of this side of Mildred’s character. The timing of Kay’s illness is important. Kay is stricken while out with her father and sister, while Mildred is dallying with Monte Beragon. We conclude that Mildred was to blame. By losing Kay, Mildred is shorn of the self-reliant and lively part of her character. All that remains for Mildred to mother is the grasping, purposeless, Veda, who is ultra-feminine.

Butler (cited in Roberts, 2000) emphasizes the intermeshed correlation between the biological and the contextual, to which relationship Spivak (cited in Roberts, 2000) adds recursion (Roberts, 2000: 16). Thus, hormones and environment play roles in individual behavior (Roberts, 2000: 10-11). In Mildred Pierce biological essentialism is activated in life and society. Veda’s accusation to Mildred, “It’s your fault that I am the way I am” reframes Veda’s insufficiencies and lays them directly on Mildred’s biological and contextual doorstep.

The role of Veda’s father in determining her biological sex is apparently irrelevant. Mildred alone created Veda and her environment, bearing full and sole responsibility. Veda enacts the traditional role of the fully dependent female, for whom life is externally stress-free; the only problems Veda has are those she created herself through internal dissatisfaction with her external existence. And, according to Veda, these are not her fault, but her mother’s. As I suggested earlier, Veda is a one-dimensional and therefore exaggerated, aspect of Mildred’s personality. When Veda
murders Beragon for rejecting her, we see this feminine aspect of Mildred reacting in a stereotypically female, non-rational manner.

**Patriarchy/Androcentrism**

*Patriarchy* means a social structure where women’s access to social space and activities is restricted to male-directed norms (Rich, cited in Bem, 1993: 40). *Androcentrism* describes the simultaneous prioritizing of male activities and concerns, and diminishment of female activities and concerns (Bem, 1993: 40-41). Mildred is interested in gaining the assistance of men such as Monte Beragon from whom she purchases her first restaurant (Jurca, 2002: 36) and whose social status she purchases when she marries him (Jurca, 2002: 38). Without male assistance, Mildred would never have been able to afford to move her entrepreneurial activities outside of her own kitchen.

In 1945, concerns for the family, its values, and its smooth functioning, were considered important indicators of society’s overall health (Levey, 2001: 125-126). Mildred is presented as pragmatic and emotionally restrained. Her iron control over her feelings is lost when Kay dies, and again when Veda expresses her scathing distaste for Mildred. Emotional repression makes Mildred excel in business, but makes her an unavailable mother. All Mildred can do is to make money; her relationship with Veda is confined to the lifestyle Mildred can purchase. That Mildred’s husband Bert seeks romance with another woman, Mrs. Biederhof (Lee Patrick) can be imputed to Mildred’s lack of womanly qualities. The Pierce family’s failure is Mildred’s fault.

**Gender Polarization**
Normative displays of gender are dependent on biological sex-appropriate behavior, which must be matched to the context (Miller et al, 1997: 724). When the film opens, Mildred’s voice-over tells us that all she knows is being a wife and mother. Mildred’s home is tidy; her children are well cared for, she herself is neat. Appropriate feminine behavior, within the approved context of the home, is expressed.

But Mildred sells baked goods for profit, spending the money on her children. This undermines husband Bert’s male-provider gender role. Bert objects to Mildred’s earning and spending, which he deems are for items unnecessary to his children. This didactic attitude exemplifies patriarchal norms and expresses gender polarization, the ordering of the familial social space into one of clearly defined and ossified male/female behavior.

Even were patriarchy and androcentrism to vanish, the belief that there are only male and female, and that each expresses characteristics supposedly innate [which, as we saw, arise from biological essentialism], lock men and women into narrowly-described, polarized, social roles (Bem, 1993: 80-81). Mildred’s behavior, a social norm violation, loses Mildred her rights, narrowly defined as those of a mother. At the end of the film, Mildred, shorn of her children, her business, and her independence, reunites with Bert.

In “women’s films” such as Mildred Pierce, the universal underlying message of women’s tragic sacrifices of self for men and family went unexamined in terms of its gender-exclusivity (Sochen, 1978: 10). Mildred Pierce provides a fantasy escape for both genders: women can identify with Mildred’s hard work, sacrifices, and losses; men can fantasize about the powerful woman, while the close of the film ensures that the status quo remains unaffected by returning wife to husband (Sochen, 1978: 12). Mildred Pierce demonstrates that when women depart from their prescribed social roles, they lose everything they cherish and worked for (Sochen, 1978: 9).
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2. Biological Essentialism, Patriarchy/androcentrism, and Gender Polarization in *Baby Boom* (1987)

Biological Essentialism

As increasing numbers of women enter the professional workforce, their child-raising intensifies. Mothers spend more time with their children rather than less, leading to exhaustion (Crittenden, 2001: 20-21). Many women drop out of the ‘fast-track’ workforce into lower-paying and status jobs after having children because their mothering is not supported in the corporate world and women generally do not want to raise their children at a distance (Crittenden, 2001: 28-29). *Baby Boom’s* (Shyer, 1987) J. C. Wiatt demonstrates these mothering norms.

*Baby Boom* first presents skills like diapering as requiring learning, instead of occurring naturally (Cook, 1988: 72). As the film progresses, however, J. C.’s mothering abilities are depicted as innate. Cuddling Elizabeth and reading to her in bed are presented as a normal emergence. These scenes are supported by softer music, expressing gentleness and the growing intimacy of the mother/child bond.

J. C.’s refusal to give Elizabeth up for adoption as she originally intended maintains this position. In putting Elizabeth up for adoption, J. C. insists that she feels no guilt. But she clearly does, sharing her worries about keeping Elizabeth with a street-cleaner, who says she should not feel guilty, her career comes first. J. C., as a successful businesswoman, does not ask advice from men—that she does here, of a man whose educational level is presumably far less than her own, reveals J. C. as a stereotypical, uncertain female whose insecurities about important decisions require male input. The music swells triumphantly as J. C. comes out of the adoption building with Elizabeth in her arms. “Just don’t expect too much, okay?” she says to the baby. Motherhood is presented as a woman’s normative state, even for the degreed workaholic.
Biological essentialism specifies that behavior arises from internal realities that are unchangeable (Irvine, cited in DeLamater and Hyde, 1998: 2). A subtheme of the film is that women do not even need to be biological mothers for nurturing to set in. By quickly shifting our view from J. C. at work, in command and control, to her inabilities and incompetence with Elizabeth initially and then to her rapidly-emerging motherhood and return to competence, our focus is on J. C. as a mother. Although this path is presented as one of growth, J. C. remains a one-dimensional character. We do not see her handle single mothering and her job; instead, J. C. has changed from a dedicated corporate climber to a mother.

The message: mothering, for women, is innate. A woman can opt out of life as a business-woman, but cannot escape from her biologically ‘natural’ role as a mother. While it may take a woman years to earn degrees, and be first in her class, and know nothing whatever about parenting, it will come to her automatically, given a little time. This innate mothering capability will apparently activate the moment a child appears to be cared for. Motherhood and being a woman are inextricably intertwined, so that whether the woman bore the child herself or not is irrelevant.

This natural motherhood contrasts starkly with J. C.’s urban live-in lover Steven (Harold Ramis) who is incapable of dealing with Elizabeth. The first time he sees her in the apartment, he screams. Unable to adjust to having a small child anywhere near him, much less to playing an active role, Steven leaves J. C. alone to cope with unexpectedly inheriting the little girl. Traditional beliefs hold that women are inherently closer to their bodies than are men. The correlation of women with their bodies is a relationship of “entanglement,” while men are connected with rationality and reason. This latter way of being is deemed the superior (Jaggar, 1997: 49).

In a small Vermont town where J.C. purchases a run-down farm, Dr. Jeff Cooper (Sam Shepard), whose initials are also J. C., is Steven’s opposite. Jeff is a large animal vet, which we learn when J. C. —now living with Elizabeth in the country—collapses into the snow after having a screaming fit when her heating breaks down. Incredibly, although J. C. is overwhelmed with culture shock at living in a small Vermont
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town, has had the pipes in her house freeze, the roof develop a large hole, the heating system fail, and is running out of money to live on, she tells Jeff that all she needs is sex. Later on, when J. C. has a flat tire on her way home from a visit to the library, instead of helping her fix her tire, Jeff grabs her and kisses her. Although protesting initially, J. C. is clearly pleased by his action, making a satisfied noise of sexual awakening after Jeff has driven off, leaving her by the side of the road.

This pleasure-reaction on J. C.’s part is important: while still with Steven, they decide to make love and the camera leaves them just as they agree to intimacy, shows precisely one minute pass on the clock, and then returns to the couple, who have finished and are already dressed. Moving from Steven’s sterility, J. C.’s reaction to the earthy, sexual, Jeff is also stereotypical. A sexually inactive woman forced to submit to sexual attentions from a man would naturally enjoy the experience because of previous “suppression” of her real desires (Frye, 1997: 92). What women who have not had satisfying sex in over a year need is to have their biological drives [which we recall are thought to be the primary controller of women’s behavior] satisfied by male control and domination. Predictably, J. C. and Jeff become involved; Elizabeth calls him “Dada.” Although women may think they want a superb education and high-powered jobs, what they actually want is biologically-driven: sex and motherhood. Further, only a man can satisfy these needs.

Women are stereotypically associated with more earthy qualities, and are believed closer to nature, than are men (Ortner, 1997: 18). These natures are relentlessly stereotyped in Baby Boom. J. C. is either a corporate employee or a mother. Elizabeth [a girl child] is an imposition. The succession of nannies J. C. interviews range from a Muslim woman; a woman having a nervous breakdown; a German ne-Nazi; an intellectually inferior young woman who is as ignorant of parenting as is J. C. herself.

While an in-depth examination of these two male characters is outside the scope of my present study, the
yawning gulf between Steven and Jeff, how each relates to J. C. and Elizabeth, and what this tells us about gender roles, should be investigated. The characters of Steven and Jeff offer a most interesting contrast to one another. The urban, business-oriented Steven finds apparent satisfaction in a one-minute round of lovemaking, and is presented as pathologically adverse to Elizabeth. Jeff, the large animal doctor, however, is quite comfortable with the child and with physical relationships. From this, we conclude that men who live rurally and are comfortable around animals—are closer to nature than the urban male—make better family men.

Patriarchy/Androcentrism

At the beginning of the film J.C.’s boss says that because a man can have a wife, he can “have it all.” A woman, because she is a woman, cannot have it all. The heterosexual gender roles preclude J. C. from having a wife at home to help her. This perspective privileges heterosexuality. But J. C. assures her boss that she does not “want it all.” Because men control of the social space, they become the standard. “Humanity is male,” as Beauvoir eloquently writes. Women’s needs are considered as long as the woman is indistinguishable from a man (Bem, 1993: 73). As J. C. becomes a ‘natural’ mother, she shifts away from this male standard, and her career is put at risk.

Crittenden cites a Catalyst study whose results showed that only one-fifth of women who have an M.B.A. have children, whereas fully seventy percent of men with an M.B.A. have children. Like many women in the United States, J. C., with an M.B.A. from Harvard, has chosen to forego children. J. C.’s life is controlled by her bosses; her access to the high-powered world and her position in it are dependent on the goodwill of men.

Women who need to work fewer hours in order to provide care for their children and spend time raising them are penalized. Once Elizabeth is part of her life, J. C. cannot spend every waking second at her job and is quickly deposed by her hand-picked male assistant Ken (James Spader), who has no family obligations. Worse, J. C. loses her high-
powered account and is told patronizingly she can accept a vastly-less important account if she wishes to remain employed. Her dignity and worth compromised, J. C. resigns.

Of the women who earned an M.B.A. from Harvard in the 1970s, fully twenty-five percent had vanished from the workforce entirely by the 1990s, because of the advent of a child (Crittenden, 2001: 34). However, J. C. differs from most American women entrepreneurs, falling into the 7.3 percent who are not married (Devine, 1994). J. C.’s M.B.A. puts her in sync with most female entrepreneurs, who are increasingly likely to have at least four years of higher education beyond high school. In 1975, 5.1 percent of women had more than sixteen years of schooling, rising to 9.2 percent in 1990 (Devine, 1994: 23).

Conveniently and predictably, J.C.’s sacrifice for Elizabeth is portrayed as a beneficial opportunity. The applesauce recipe that J. C. created out of boredom during her first winter in Vermont comes to her financial rescue. J. C. will find happiness with the vet, and remain in the country, be both a mother and a businesswoman. Indeed, J. C.’s entrepreneurial success emerges only because she adopted Elizabeth and did the right thing—prioritized mothering. J. C.’s sacrifice is portrayed as liberating. Unhappily, this scenario fails to reflect reality for most women.

The film is careful to make J.C.’s sacrifice of the career she worked for appear cost-free, and as a clear gain. However, the movie does not show her successfully handling corporate partnership and motherhood. Instead she is in the arms of the child-welcoming vet, in the small town, on her farm. In patriarchal terms, femininity is a state of motherhood. Not that there is anything wrong with being self-employed and successful in business. However, as J. C. has dropped out of the urban corporate world, the status can remain safely quo and nothing has to change in order to meet the needs of mothers who work.

The film pointedly refuses to learn possible lessons, and worse, to recognize that there are lessons to learn. This is amply illustrated by contradictory statements from J. C.’s
boss. At the beginning of the film he says that because a man can have a wife, he can “have it all.” His perspective seems to change at the end of the film, to an acknowledgement that even a [business] man cannot have it all: “I don’t even know how many grandchildren I have.” However, this apparent awareness failed to translate into any responsive action. Rather than be awakened by J. C.’s situation with Elizabeth to learn how many grandchildren he has, and/or to change the organizational structure to ensure the needs of working mothers are met, he does neither. He does nothing.

Unfortunately, women who give up or lose their positions because of family responsibilities may not fare as well as J. C., who was conveniently provided with resounding success in the end of the film. Gould (cited in Ehlers and Main, 1998) reports that in between 1982 and 1987, American women moving to self-employment nearly doubled, from 2.6 million to 4.1 million. Rather than provide security and stable earnings for women with children, however, these microenterprises ensure that women remain isolated from mainstream businesses. By effectively shutting women out of male-run organizations, women are precluded from higher incomes and the system remains gendered (Ehlers and Main, 1998: 426).

While J. C.’s entrepreneurial success may be intended to inspire women, in reality, a single mother is apt to experience poverty—and so do her children. In 2000, nearly one-fifth of all American children living only with their mothers were impoverished (Crittenden, 2001: 200). Education is no guarantee of securing a decent standard of living for single mothers and their children. Crittenden shares the story of a lawyer who was left with two small children after her divorce. Her law firm insisted that she increase her billable hours or resign. In order to parent her children, this attorney consulted and mediated for the courts, working only occasionally over a two-year period; she barely escaped needing to apply for welfare. Only when she remarried did her standard of living, and that of her children, improve.

In Upton v. JWP Businessland, 1977, the Supreme Judicial Court found for the organization which dismissed a working mother when she refused to work vast amounts of
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overtime, including Saturdays. The Court stated that “at-will” contract employees can “be fired for any reason at all or for no reason,” provided that no “clearly established public policy” is flouted (Crittenden, 2001: 261). However, this policy appears to have changed. Removing J. C. from the important account today would violate the law. The federal government prohibits discrimination for what is termed “gender stereotyping” and family responsibilities (“Current”, 2006). Women who have children—or men who are the primary caregiver for children—cannot be “demoted, or stripped of responsibilities” after either becoming pregnant or having a child.

Gender Polarization

Masculine and feminine identities as distinct and as categorized to men and women respectively (Korabik, cited in Lansky, 2000: 491) are emphasized in the film. Indeed, J. C., the only female character embodying stereotypical male characteristics such as assertion, self-confidence, single-minded devotion to work, and rational thinking, transforms into a stereotypically feminine person by merely inheriting Elizabeth. When Elizabeth is unexpectedly thrust into J.C.’s life and must come to the office, J. C. loses all her so-called masculine qualities, continuously apologizing for Elizabeth’s behavior and her presence.

With the sole exception of J. C. whose ‘male’ status is quickly replaced by ‘feminine’ behavior, all the women in the film play traditional, supporting roles. In her office, J. C. is accompanied by a satellite of women, who exist solely to support her success. Notably, J. C. has only one male assistant, Ken. Predictably, as J. C. slips from possible partner [high] to mother [low] status, Ken gets the promotion. In J. C.’s home, Steven sits supinely while J. C. struggles to learn diapering. Steven’s contributes by reading recipes and asserting his male control over Elizabeth by demanding she go to sleep. The message: men control women.
Additionally men are superior to and more desirable, than women. The adoptive parents prefer a boy and will 'settle' for Elizabeth. When the opportunity for corporate gain presents itself, in this case when J. C.’s ‘Country Baby’ is successful, the major account that she landed and then lost at her job, Food Chain, wants to buy her out. Only then does Elizabeth—or rather what she represents—become important to the male corporate heads. Kindness toward Elizabeth will win favor with J. C., whose assumed maternal pride will cause her to think emotionally, rather than rationally, about their offer.

The Food Chain executives evince benevolent sexism, where men's concern for women results in protective stances that will maintain male dominance and control (Glick & Fiske, 1996: 491-492). They tell J. C. that she has “taken Country Baby as far as she can,” and needs them to take purchase her business. J. C.’s statement that their treatment of her is “water under the bridge” as long as the offer for Country Baby is high enough provokes patronizing and thoroughly offensive laughter.

Predictably, J. C. rejects the six-figure salary, the apartment, and perks. “I am not the tiger-lady anymore...I don’t want to make those sacrifices...nobody should have to...,” says J. C. In making a justificatory speech, rather than simply saying 'no,' J. C. presents stereotypically feminine behavior. Even though J. C. statements imply that her decision to leave the corporate world was cost-free, J. C. made a value-laden choice between motherhood and her career. Because she has left her job and the corporate world she has indeed sacrificed the life she initially said she wanted.

While I agree with Cook (1988) that rejecting the offer illustrates independence and is thus worthy of applause (p. 73), this decision is not as triumphant as Cook suggests. That J. C. also chooses a relationship with Jeff not only repeats the traditional film ending where the woman selects domesticity, but underscores the structural barriers and limitations a working mother faces. Only when women think and behave like men are they equal in the corporate world (Crittenden, 2001: 29-30). Faludi (cited in Gauntlett, 2008) emphasizes that Baby Boom exemplifies the “...backlash against women’s liberation and women’s careers”.
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The unwavering commitment to a corporation that demands all of a person’s time requires a mother to behave like a father. Even when J. C. enjoyed relative strength with ‘Country Baby,’ an organization valuable to men, she does not negotiate a return to corporate employment on her own terms as a single mother, but chooses to opt out. Gender-inequity in corporate America is safe because even when mothers have an opportunity to perform as equals in the male world, they really prefer not to.

3. Conclusions

I discussed Mildred Pierce (1945) and Baby Boom (1987) by applying three gender theories, Biological Essentialism, Patriarchy/androcentrism, and Gender Polarization, to each. Despite the decades between Mildred Pierce and Baby Boom, the roles of women who are mothers remain disturbingly ossified. The subtheme of each film, and its visual culture, depict motherhood as natural to women. Indeed, this vision is so strongly internalized that the core identity of the principle women in the two films I discussed is constricted within its confines. Mildred, a biological mother, cannot escape the consequences of failing to nurture properly. Becoming a self-made successful businesswoman to provide for her daughters after her husband Bert deserts her is not morally courageous but amoral. Mildred’s punishment is total loss—both daughters and her hard-earned business. And she is returned to former husband Bert.

Forty-two years later, J. C. Wiatt, not even a biological mother, loses her pending partnership and years of hard work to be treated like a businessman, by inheriting a small girl. Understandably unwilling to accept a demotion, J. C. flees with Elizabeth to the country. The film departs from the reality for most single mothers in providing J. C. with a home-based business that reaps enormous financial rewards. Although J. C. has the opportunity to return to the
corporation that demoted her, she prefers to retain control of her business, and remain with Jeff, who is not afraid to be a dad to Elizabeth. The problem of handling successful single parenting while working for a corporation is avoided and gender inequity unchallenged. And the lesson we learn is that motherhood is inescapable.

References


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