

Shifting Maternal Instinct Narratives: An Evolution of the Portrayal of Abortions in Film

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Abstract: Historically, films have perpetuated negative stereotypes about women who have abortions, depicting them as villains or victims. However, over the past decade, there has been a significant shift towards more empathetic and realistic portrayals of women who choose to have abortions. This study will analyze a selection of films from different periods to explore the evolution of these portrayals. Through content analysis, the study will investigate how societal attitudes toward abortion have changed and how movies have played a role in challenging traditional notions of maternal instinct and womanhood.

1. Introduction

The portrayal of women and abortion in film and television has seen significant evolution over the years. These narratives hold a mirror to society, reflecting, reinforcing, or challenging prevailing attitudes and norms surrounding this often sensitive and complex issue. As the medium of film and television continues to evolve, so does its depiction of women who have abortions, offering diverse portrayals that range from stigmatized and stereotyped to empathetic and nuanced.

Historically, the media has often depicted abortion in ways that perpetuate stigma, fear, and misunderstanding. However, more recent portrayals have made strides in depicting the procedure in a more realistic and empathetic light, focusing on women's agency and the socio-political complexities that shape their reproductive choices. This paper aims to explore this evolution by examining the portrayals of abortion across different periods and genres in film and television.

This exploration is vital because media narratives significantly impact public perception and attitudes toward abortion. By critically examining these portrayals, we can gain insights into the cultural stories being told about abortion, their implications for abortion stigma, and their potential influence on policy and legislation. Moreover, the understanding of how these narratives have evolved can pave the way for more accurate, empathetic, and diverse representations in the future.

The relationship between cinema and societal attitudes towards abortion has been a complex interplay, revealing a trajectory of evolution, reflection, and sometimes resistance. This study embarked on a journey to dissect the portrayal of abortions in films, from their early instances to contemporary narratives.

This study employs a synergistic approach, integrating scholarly research and detailed film analysis to enrich the ongoing conversation surrounding abortion, media representation, and societal perceptions. It aspires to champion more complex and compassionate representations of women who

undergo abortions, thereby making a meaningful contribution to the discourse and fostering a deeper understanding of the intricacies involved.

2. The Shift of the Portrayal of Abortions in Films

The cinematic landscape has historically been a powerful mirror, reflecting societal values, norms, and attitudes. When observing abortion narratives in films, the progression is both evident and intriguing.

In the early days of cinema, abortions in films were portrayed with cautionary undertones, frequently correlating the act with guilt, tragedy, and moral transgressions. As detailed in the thorough analysis “Telling stories about abortion: abortion-related plots in American film and television, 1916–2013,” those films frequently propagated oversimplified narratives laced with the stigma around abortion.[1] Such films depicted abortion as perilous and violent and suggested it was predominantly a choice made by young women grappling with crises. Such oversimplified portrayals not only perpetuated stereotypes but also overlooked the complex realities faced by women considering abortion. These narratives perpetuated societal biases and misconceptions.

This trend is evident in films as early as 1928’s *The Road to Ruin*, one of the initial cinematic ventures addressing abortion. The protagonist, a teenager who opts for a termination, tragically perishes in a mysterious fire, subtly hinting at punitive outcomes for such choices.[2] This serves as a stark representation of the punitive lens through which society viewed abortion during this time. Likewise, the 1982 film *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* displays Stacy’s abortion decision through a lens of guilt, fear, and regret, with her abandonment by Damone subtly linking abortion to shame.[2] Moreover, her reluctance to disclose her abortion to her brother further fortifies the societal stigma surrounding the procedure. The 1980s, a period when debates on women’s rights and bodily autonomy gained prominence, still portrayed abortions with a layer of guilt and remorse.

In the early 2000s, the Mexican film *The Crime of Padre Amaro* presented a somber and cautionary portrayal of abortion that deeply resonated with audiences. This 2002 film underscores the grave consequences of a botched abortion procedure in a clandestine environment, leading to the tragic death of the female protagonist.[3] Such a portrayal, while reflecting the cultural and societal values of the time, also served to further perpetuate the idea of abortion as a taboo, filled with shame and danger.

As the 2000s progressed, with films like *Juno* (2007), the portrayal began to tilt towards a more nuanced stance, though still leaning into certain ideological perspectives. *Juno* revolves around a teenage character contemplating abortion, ultimately choosing to carry the pregnancy to term and opt for adoption.[4] Juno’s decision to opt for adoption instead of abortion, while seemingly a personal choice, subtly signals the societal perspective of that era – one which still viewed motherhood as a preferred, and even morally superior, choice. The film depicts this decision as an act of selflessness, indirectly implying that preserving the unborn child’s life is the noblest path. While addressing the issue of teen pregnancy, it seems to uphold a pro-life perspective, mirroring societal conversations around abortion during the mid-2000s.

Post-2010, films increasingly displayed a more nuanced exploration of women’s experiences with abortion. A notable example is *Obvious Child* (2014), in which Donna’s decision to have an abortion is depicted with sensitivity and realism. Donna’s story in the comedy challenges the traditional stigma around abortion, demonstrating that it can be a responsible choice made by women. Donna’s frank onstage discussion about her abortion signifies a societal shift towards open conversations around this topic. The decade following 2010 also saw a rise in the “chill abortion” in TV shows like *Claws*, *Glow*, *Sex Education*, *Shrill*, *Euphoria*, *Jane the Virgin*, and *Girls*, where abortion is portrayed as a medical decision that does not disrupt the character’s life.

As societal perceptions regarding abortion underwent substantial shifts over the years, recognition of women's autonomy and rights over their bodies and lives became more prevalent. Van Ditzhuizen's study, "Dimensions of Decision Difficulty in Women's Decision-Making about Abortion: A Mixed Methods Longitudinal Study," underscores this transition. Their findings shed light on the multifaceted dimensions involved in abortion decision-making, illustrating that it is far from being unidimensional. Instead, it is an intricate web of fears, attitudes, indecisiveness, and decision conflict.[5] This nuanced understanding challenges the oversimplified narratives often circulated in the media, highlighting the need for accurate and empathetic portrayals.

In *Grandma* (2015) and *The Sacred Bonds* (2021), abortion is presented as a necessary choice, necessitated by life's complexities rather than a moral failure.[6] The 2019 film *Saint Frances*, directed by Alex Thompson, presents an unsentimental approach to medication abortion, a method increasingly adopted by US women yet seldom depicted on screen. The film shows a straightforward process as Bridget, a 34-year-old woman, terminates a surprise pregnancy, deals with the physical aftermath, and resumes her life with its various complications.[7] In *Plan B* (2021) and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019), the narrative nuances range from emphasizing the lack of access to reproductive health services to portraying abortion as a form of sisterly caretaking.

Films like *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* (2020) and *Unpregnant* (2020) present young women navigating societal and legal hurdles to access abortion services. As analyzed by Raluca Andreescu, these narratives underline women's autonomy and rights over their bodies while questioning traditional ideas of maternal instinct, thereby offering a balanced portrayal of women's abortion experiences.[8]

An interesting element that has emerged from examining film narratives is their representation of the maternal instinct, particularly within the context of abortion. Earlier narratives often portrayed abortion as being at odds with 'natural' motherhood, bolstering the notion that motherhood is an inherent instinct and that abortion goes against this nature. However, contemporary narratives have begun to challenge this notion.

The examination of portrayals before and after 2010 reveals a societal shift towards more empathy and recognition of women's autonomy, indicative of growing acceptance and understanding of women's reproductive rights. Yet, as Cordelia Freeman asserts, there remains a pressing need for more diverse and accurate portrayals, with even some contemporary 'feminist' television shows falling short of representing the varied realities of abortion access.[9]

In summary, the representation of women opting for abortions in films has significantly evolved, but there is still ample room for progress. As societal attitudes continue to transform, it is anticipated that cinematic portrayals will evolve in tandem, reducing stigma and promoting understanding and support for women's reproductive rights. Such progress is crucial in ensuring that depictions capture women's diverse experiences and realities rather than narrow, oversimplified narratives.

3. Reasons Behind the Shift in Portrayal of Abortions in Films

The evolution in the portrayal of abortions in cinema didn't emerge in isolation. It is deeply rooted in broader societal, political, and cultural transformations that have unfolded over the years. There are several key factors contributing to this shift.

From the early 20th century to the present, societal views on women's rights have undergone substantial evolution. Initially, portrayals of abortion in cinema, exemplified by films such as *The Road to Ruin*, echoed and perpetuated societal biases, casting abortion in a negative light. These depictions reflected the constrained understanding and acceptance of women's reproductive rights prevalent at the time. However, watershed legal rulings, notably *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, which recognized a woman's legal right to an abortion, marked a turning point.[1] This landmark decision

catalyzed a legal transformation and ignited a wave of public discourse concerning women's reproductive rights. Such dialogues have significantly influenced how abortion and related themes are represented in films, marking a shift in cinematic narratives over time.

Between the 1930s and the 1960s, the film industry in America was bound by the Motion Picture Production Code, commonly known as the Hays Code. This set of moral guidelines explicitly forbade the depiction of illicit relationships and sexual perversions, which, under its broad definitions, included topics like abortion.[10] Once the code's influence began to wane in the 1960s and was eventually abandoned in the late '60s, it paved the way for filmmakers to tackle subjects like abortion more openly.[10]

With the progress of medical science, abortions became safer and more accessible. As the risks associated with the procedure decreased and it became more commonplace, the portrayal of abortion in films also evolved, shifting from a life-threatening act of desperation to a medical decision.

The rise of feminist movements in the 20th century, advocating for women's autonomy and rights, had a profound impact on societal norms. Their efforts to destigmatize abortion and champion women's rights to make choices about their bodies inevitably permeated the film industry, leading to more nuanced portrayals. Nevertheless, despite these evolving narratives, the need for more diverse and nuanced portrayals that accurately reflect the complexity of women's experiences and decision-making processes around abortion is still pressing.

It's essential to recognize that films are products of both artistic expression and commercial interests. As societal attitudes shifted, so too did audience expectations. Filmmakers, recognizing the importance of authentic representation and responding to audience demand, began to portray abortion in a more realistic and empathetic light. Streaming platforms further encouraged this shift, opening up opportunities for diverse storytelling and easing content restrictions. Films like *Obvious Child*, *Never Rarely Sometimes Always*, and *Unpregnant* provided realistic and balanced depictions of women's experiences with abortion, effectively challenging traditional narratives and stereotypes. Moreover, independent filmmakers, less tethered to commercial interests, also played a role in bringing diverse narratives to the fore.

The influence of religious beliefs on societal norms and values cannot be understated. As religious institutions and their interpretations played pivotal roles in shaping public perceptions of abortion, they indirectly influenced its portrayal in films. However, as secular perspectives became more widespread and diverse religious viewpoints emerged, cinematic narratives started to reflect this pluralism.

In conclusion, the shifts in cinematic portrayals of abortions are a confluence of various societal forces. From landmark legal decisions and medical advances to religious beliefs and the rise of feminist movements, a multitude of factors converged to shape the nuanced portrayals we observe in contemporary cinema.

4. The Impact of Filmic Portrayals of Abortion on Public Perception

While films reflect societal beliefs, they also play an essential role in shaping them. Cinema, with its visual and emotive power, creates an immersive experience that can deeply affect viewers, making it an influential medium for molding public perception. Films are more than mere entertainment. They are powerful tools for shaping public perception and societal attitudes toward critical issues like abortion.

The 2007 film *Juno*, written by Diablo Cody, stands as a testament to the influence of cinematic portrayals on public perceptions surrounding abortion. Since the film was released, it has been categorized as a pro-life narrative by some critics and even inspired proposed legislation such as the "Juno Bill." [11] Yet, amidst the backdrop of increasingly restrictive abortion bills passed in states

such as Alabama and Georgia in 2019, Cody remarked in an interview that she might have chosen to tell a different story had she known the socio-political landscape would shift so drastically. Cody's reflection underscores the impact and responsibility of film narratives in shaping public opinion. Her experience suggests that filmmakers, perhaps unintentionally, can find their work resonating differently based on the prevailing socio-political climate, thereby influencing public perception in ways that may or may not align with their original intentions.

Miriam Wayne's research paper, "Burying Abortion in Stigma: The Fundamental Right No One Wants to Discuss. Abortion Portrayal on Film and Television," provides further insights. The author examines how film and television representations of abortion perpetuate stigma and misconceptions surrounding the procedure.[11] Wayne's call to action for the entertainment industry is to depict more nuanced and authentic plotlines to challenge abortion stigma and negative societal perceptions. This source fortifies our research by emphasizing the critical role accurate and empathetic portrayals of abortion in film and television can play in societal perceptions. As societal attitudes continue to evolve, it is anticipated that the depiction of women who undergo abortions in films will also progress toward greater empathy and accuracy. Such an evolution will contribute to reducing stigma, nurturing understanding, and advocating for women's reproductive rights.

Over the decades, as movies began showcasing abortion experiences with more nuance, they helped de-stigmatize the procedure. For instance, the portrayal of abortion as a chill decision in recent films and TV shows emphasizes that it's a medical decision that doesn't necessarily derail a woman's life.[7] Such depictions fostered a more informed and compassionate dialogue around the topic. Films that present counter-narratives to traditional beliefs, such as the inherent maternal instinct often juxtaposed against abortion, play a crucial role in challenging and reshaping these norms. By presenting diverse narratives, cinema can inspire viewers to re-evaluate deeply ingrained beliefs.

Movies like *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* and *Unpregnant* not only provide a realistic portrayal of women's experiences but also shed light on the barriers they face in accessing abortion services. By highlighting these obstacles, cinema raises awareness, prompting discussions on the need for societal and legal reforms. Movies, especially those that gain significant traction, can influence public policy by raising awareness about pressing issues. Films that highlight the challenges women face in accessing abortion services can galvanize support for policies that make these services more accessible.

The evolving cinematic portrayal of abortion reflects a broader spectrum of experiences, enabling various audience members to see their experiences mirrored on screen. This inclusivity fosters empathy, helping viewers understand diverse perspectives and realities. This includes showcasing supportive environments, normalizing open conversations around the subject, and highlighting the complexities that accompany the decision. In doing so, cinema can reduce stigma, foster understanding, and promote support for women's reproductive rights. These portrayals have the potential to inspire dialogue, influence public perception, and effect societal change regarding abortion.

The relationship between filmic portrayals and public perception is cyclical. As societal attitudes change, so do cinematic representations. But these new depictions, in turn, influence the public, creating a feedback loop that continually reshapes societal norms and values.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the examination highlighted a discernible shift in cinematic portrayals. Earlier depictions were largely punitive and cautionary, embedding abortion within webs of regret, fear, and tragic consequences. However, the post-2010 era, marked by films like *Obvious Child* and *Never Rarely Sometimes Always*, has been more empathetic, capturing the nuances of the abortion

experience and emphasizing women's agency. This shift is not merely a coincidence but mirrors broader societal changes, driven by factors ranging from political and legal reforms to advancements in women's rights and medical science.

By juxtaposing film narratives with evolving societal perceptions, we have showcased cinema's power as both a reflection and an influencer of public opinion. Moreover, by pinpointing where films falter in accurately representing abortion, this study underscores the importance of nuanced, informed, and empathetic storytelling, particularly concerning contentious issues.

The primary constraint of this research is the predominant focus on American films, which may not encapsulate global perspectives on abortion. Moreover, while we've delved into the reasons for the shift in portrayal, there is a myriad of nuanced socio-cultural factors that might not have been exhaustively covered. Future research might extend this study's scope to include international cinema, offering a more holistic picture of global perceptions and representations of abortion. Finally, with the increasing influence of digital platforms and series, understanding their role in shaping abortion narratives would be an enlightening avenue to explore.

In conclusion, the dynamic evolution of abortion portrayals in cinema underscores the medium's profound influence and inherent responsibility. As societal attitudes continue to evolve, there is a hopeful anticipation that cinema will increasingly embrace its role as a catalyst for empathy, deeper understanding, and active advocacy in the realm of women's reproductive rights.

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