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● Flora Marín Murillo
Vizcaya (Spain)

Teenagers and Motherhood in the Cinema: «Juno», «Precious» and «The Greatest»

Adolescentes y maternidad en el cine: «Juno», «Precious» y «The Greatest»

ABSTRACT
Today in Spain there are many teenagers who suffer unwanted pregnancies. The extension of the abortion law and the approval of the sale of morning-after pill without a prescription have focused attention on girls under 18. The possibilities of motherhood, an unwanted pregnancy and the alternatives are variables that young women face in the real world, and upon which the discourses of films are constructed, some of which coincide with reality and some of which do not. On the big screen we can see movies like Juno, Precious and The Greatest which express different points of view about the topic of teenage pregnancy. These audiovisual texts have a direct impact on the creation and proliferation of models, attitudes and values. Their influence upon young people is evident and they form a reference alongside family and school for adopting certain patterns of behavior and assimilating socially accepted archetypes. This paper analyzes these films from a gender perspective, using the tools of both audiovisual language and textual analysis. Through this analysis, we establish that visions of motherhood and adolescent sex are constructed and identify the strategies used for the production of meaning in these films. The results show how the models and stereotypes survive under the appearance of renewed and alternative audiovisual discourse.

RESUMEN
En la actualidad son muchas las adolescentes en Spain que tienen embarazos no deseados. La ampliación de la Ley del aborto, así como la aprobación de la venta de la píldora del día después sin receta, han focalizado la atención en las jóvenes menores de 18 años. La maternidad, los embarazos no deseados y las alternativas ante estos son variables a las que las adolescentes se enfrentan en el mundo real, y sobre las cuales los filmes construyen sus propios discursos coincidentes o no con la realidad social. En las pantallas de cine películas como «Juno», «Precious» y «The Greatest» tratan bajo diferentes prismas el tema del embarazo adolescente. Estos textos audiovisuales inciden de manera directa en la reproducción y creación de modelos, actitudes y valores. Su influencia en la juventud es constatable y suponen una referencia junto con la familia y la escuela a la hora de adoptar determinados patrones de comportamiento e interiorizar arquetipos socialmente admitidos. Este trabajo examina estos filmes utilizando las herramientas tanto del lenguaje audiovisual como del análisis textual, atendiendo a una perspectiva de género. A través del análisis se constata qué visiones de la maternidad y el sexo en la adolescencia se construyen y cuáles son las estrategias de producción de sentido utilizadas. Los resultados muestran cómo los modelos y estereotipos tradicionales perviven bajo la apariencia de discursos audiovisuales renovados y alternativos.

KEYWORDS / PALABRAS CLAVE
Film, gender, adolescence, motherhood, pregnancy, sex, abortion, archetype.
Cine, género, adolescencia, maternidad, embarazo, sexo, aborto, arquetipo.

◆ Ph.D. Flora Marín Murillo is a Full Professor of the Department of Audiovisual Communication and Advertising, Faculty of Social Sciences and Communication at the University of País Vasco (Spain) (flora.marin@ehu.es).

1. Introduction

The liberalization of the abortion law in Spain in 2009 provoked controversy and protests. The controversy primarily centered on the possibility that young women under the age of 16 could undergo an abortion without the prior consent of their parents. The law was passed in February 2010 and included a modification that required 16- and 17-year-old girls to inform their parents of their decision to terminate their pregnancies except in cases in which they might be subjected to «family violence, threats, coercion or abuse».

On September 28 2009, the Ministry of Health approved another law permitting women to purchase the morning-after pill (an emergency hormone contraceptive) in pharmacies without prescription. This measure was intended to help reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies, especially among young and adolescent women, as well as lower the number of voluntary abortions.

The most recent report on the voluntary termination of unwanted pregnancies published by the Ministry of Health and Social Policy in 2008 shows a slight decline in abortions (1.27%) by the young female population for 2007-2008, reversing a years-long trend. Nevertheless, it is clear that from the 1990s to 2007, the number of voluntary terminations of pregnancies by girls under 18 rose continually despite numerous AIDS prevention campaigns and educational programs on condom use. In 2007, minors comprised 13.79% of the women who chose to voluntarily terminate a pregnancy. During this period 4,400 births and 6,273 voluntary abortions were registered for adolescents.

In response to these data, the Women's Health Observatory carried out qualitative research to ascertain the causes of this unusual increase. Among the conclusions of the study, an allusion was made to the new, more precocious and open sexual behavior of young people. It reported that in some autonomous communities of Spain the incidence of abortion in immigrant populations has contributed to an increase as high as 50% in the abortion rate. Somewhat curiously, it pointed out that although there is more sexual education information available to young women than ever, it can occasionally be very superficial and ridden with clichés. The shift in the patterns of young women's emotional and sexual ties away from a traditional boyfriend-for-life scenario has also had an impact, and girls enter into relations with the opposite sex much sooner.

Adult discourse, whether it takes place at school, in the family environment or through the media, was deemed of great importance in this context, although sexuality is one of the subjects least spoken about at home. This report also noted a significant reduction in health education in schools and warned that the media transmitted «a model of sexuality that equates pleasure with the sexual act» (2008: 594).

The representation of adolescent maternity has long been taboo in the film industry, which has only dealt with it on an anecdotal level. Spanish cinema broached the subject during the 70s, with Manuel Summer's film Adiós Cigüeña, Adiós (Goodbye, Stork, Goodbye), a comedy about an inexperienced young woman preparing for future motherhood with the help of her teenage buddies behind the back of her blissfully unaware parents.

Today women's social evolution is mainly reflected in television series. Galán (2007: 236) has studied this area of audiovisual communications and has observed that since the 1990s Spanish television series «have begun to weave issues that currently preoccupy society or reflect it, such as delayed motherhood, the importance of physical appearance, the entry of women into traditionally male-dominated professions, gender violence, the difficulty of reconciling family, professional life, etc. into their plots».

Nevertheless, during the past few years it has been American cinema that has surprised us with several more or less independent films which have stood out for having dealt with the issue of teenage pregnancy: Where the Heart is, marketed under the title La fuerza del amor in Spanish, (Williams, 2000) featuring a very young Natalie Portman giving birth in a supermarket; Riding in Cars with Boys, released as Los chicos de mi vida in Spanish, (Marshall, 2001) with Drew Barrymore as a precocious mother; as well as the more recent «Juno» (Reitman, 2007), «Precious» (Daniels, 2009) and «The Greatest», which was distributed in Spanish under the title «El mejor» (Feste, 2009).

It goes without saying that if cinema is no longer the most popular media among young people it still continues to have an important role in the transmission of social models and codes of conduct. As Imbert has observed «In contemporary culture, cinema and audiovisual discourse in general have created an authentic youth culture that embraces a wide range of imagery and has its own vocabulary of signs, fashion objects, speech and dress codes and lifestyles, as well as its own film and television heroes» (2002: 92).

In this article we analyze three films that are a part of this culture: «Juno», «Precious» and «The Greatest»,

scrutinizing the models of maternity that they propose to determine whether they suggest alternatives to maternity and what narrative strategies are employed to develop their storylines. This study of audiovisual resources takes its inspiration from authors such as Aumont (1990) and Carmona (1991) among others.

By employing an interdisciplinary method of cultural analysis and criticism and applying a gender perspective to our analysis of these discourses, we seek to gain an understanding of how social representations are articulated in a given historical and cultural context. Like Barthes (1980: 8), our intention is to expose the ideological abuse that confusion between nature and nurture constantly gives rise to throughout these stories, «hidden behind the decorative facade of the blatantly obvious» .

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2. Sexually active

In «Juno», the expression «sexually active» is used on various occasions by adolescents who find it amusing that their parents cannot imagine they could be having sexual relations.

In two of the three films analyzed it is implied, at least by the father of the girl in question, that conception took place the first time she had sexual intercourse. Both Juno (Ellen Page) and Rose (Carey Mulligan) show themselves as being sexually experienced and in both movies the girls take the sexual initiative, breaking away from old clichés such as «it was the first time» and the passive role of the woman in sexual relationships.

The behavior of these adolescents squares with the conclusions of the previously mentioned sociological study in that «One observes a process of reconfiguration of the more traditional gender stereotypes and clichés that assign men a more active role both in worldly and sexual matters (freed of emotions) and women a more passive role in life and a sexual behavior more associated with the world of emotions» (2009: 591). They also concur in pointing out the risk factors that both films illustrate in their narratives: a girl's belief that she has some sort of natural defense against conception the first time she has sexual intercourse and the lingering romantic ideal of fusion with the love-object. This ideal places a higher importance on the emotional bond than the possible health risks or the possibility of an undesired pregnancy.

Although sex is treated as being insignificant in «Juno», toward the end of the film the plot dwells on the deep emotions she feels for the baby's father, the young and timid Paulie Bleeker (Michael Cera). «Juno» describes their romantic encounter as «magnificent».

«The Greatest» repeats this myth of romantic love even more emphatically. In spite their mutual attraction, Rose and Bennett (Aaron Johnson) do not have sexual contact until the last day of class when the Bennett finally breaks down and speaks to her for the first time. What is a first experience for him becomes a magical and unrepeatable moment for both young people; an impression heightened by the way the scene is filmed. The romantic atmosphere is reinforced by the film's soundtrack. There are relentless close-up shots of the couple kissing and their eager gestures express their passion and desire. As if that were not sufficient and the transcendence of this youthful love had not been made patent, at a given point in the film Rose offers «He was the love of my life» as the rationale for her decision to keep her baby.

Of the three films analyzed, «Precious» (Gabourey Sidibe) distances itself the most from both the romantic ideal of teenage love and the typical model of adolescence. «Precious» is an unattractive, overweight and ignorant young African-American woman. She

has never experienced romantic love and her contacts with the opposite sex are limited to her friendship with a male nurse who assists in the delivery of her baby and her relationship with a father who has sexually abused her since early childhood. In spite of these determining factors, there is still a place in Precious' imagination for romantic love. In her daydreams she constantly fantasizes about a handsome young man who finds her attractive.

3. Maternity

For centuries, motherhood has been considered synonymous with womanhood. Femininity was directly associated with maternity and the maternal instinct was considered to be nothing more than a manifestation of the force of nature. This premise obviously dismisses the differences between individuals and therefore those of its own underlying social and cultural constructions as well. As Lorena Saletti has said «Culture takes sexual drive and transforms it into a maternal impulse, assigning it a sole determined end and purpose as though it were deeper and more primordial than biology and creating a new type of association and a new myth: the belief that all women are not only potential mothers, but also mothers by desire and necessity» (Saletti, 2008: 173).

During the past few decades, the concept of maternity has been the object of heated debate among feminists. Simone de Beauvoir (1949) rejected the concept of maternal instinct and considered motherhood as an impediment to a women's development while others have advocated the acceptance of a woman's fertility as a source of power, pleasure and knowledge.

Today we would doubtless agree with Silvia Turbert (1996) when she affirms that maternity is neither completely natural nor completely cultural, given that it embraces the physical as much as the psychological, the conscious as well as the unconscious, the orders of the real, imaginary, and symbolic. It is the last of these three that is of interest to us, as it is precisely this order that the cinematographic texts that we are analyzing help to construct. A discourse on maternity is established through them, that although draped in a new mantle, continues to spring from the most traditional sources.

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In the three films studied, the mothers of the protagonists, who are by extension their maternal role models, are either absent, and therefore invisible, or present and a monster. In «Juno», the mother is referred to as a woman who has abandoned her daughter to form another family. Her absence is filled by the cactus she routinely sends her daughter as a gift every Valentine's Day.

Juno's stepmother, who is herself the biological mother of a daughter younger than Juno, assumes this role. Although in general she does not appear to be very comfortable in this role, she comes out firmly in her defense during a scene of the film in which a nurse questions her stepdaughter's ability to raise her unborn child. Her maternal instinct is oddly aroused in the very instant that another person casts doubt upon Juno's future suitability as a mother.

«Juno's» own discourse on motherhood and the nature of maternal sentiment is fundamentally grounded in a personal process of maturation.

In «The Greatest», the mother is conspicuous by her absence. Her psychological problems separate her from her daughter and provide a justification for her complete lack of maternal instinct.

Nevertheless, it is Mary, the mother in «Precious» (played by Mo'Nique), a woman completely devoid of any maternal instinct, who takes on the characteristics of a monster. As the «normal» in our society is to have

a maternal instinct, love one's children, protect them, feed them, in short, cover all their physical and psychological needs, we regard a person lacking this instinct abnormal, inhuman, that is to say monstrous.

Isabel Baeza describes the monster as «a category that has served as a metaphor that embraces everything removed from the concept of human nature, as the embodiment of social exclusion. Monsters are beings which find themselves on the fringe of humanity, beings that throughout history have been considered and continue to be considered inhumane or inhuman. The category of monster covers the subjectivities situated outside of the naturalized norm» (2009: 57).

No one would hesitate to label the mother of Precious, a woman who sees her daughter as a rival and her children and grandchildren as a source of income, a monster. She is a mother who constantly undermines her daughter's self-esteem and manipulates and humiliates her to intolerable limits, a mother who has been witness to the abuses that her husband has subjected her to since the age of three and yet channels her feelings of hate and revulsion towards the victim. In recounting these abuses to a social worker (Mariah Carey), Mary justifies her attitude, invoking the authority of the grandmother, stating «I did what my mother told me I was supposed to do with my child» only pass the blame to «Precious», blurting out, «You've got this bitch looking at me like I was some kind of fuckin' monster». The mother of Precious is the incarnation of the grotesque and monstrous and both the director and the actress who plays the role make every effort to convey this impression without attributing a trace of humanity to her character. This monster-mother has no maternal instinct and the show of maternity that she puts on in the presence of the social worker is living proof that she can only theatrically invent the sentiments that she pours out in the interview because they are not a part of her true nature. She squares perfectly with archetypal descriptions of the bad mother: a woman insensitive to the need of her offspring, narcissist, preoccupied only with herself and unaware of her children's interests. Incapable of empathizing with them, she often uses them for her own gratification. She is unconscious of her own behavior and does harm to her children, setting them up for all kinds of future psychological problems. (Swigart 1991: 7).

Precious and Rose have no maternal role models to refer to and their mothers exist on the margins of society, in the shadows of madness and irrationality.

Of course there is the other maternal role model, the good mother. The good mother in «The Greatest» is Grace Brewer (Susan Sarandon), a woman who is incapable of accepting the death of her son and for whom Rose's future motherhood offers a sense of consolation. Grace falls apart while the father figure, Allen Brewer (Pierce Brosnan) appears to be the pillar of support of the rest of the family. The cliché of the strong and reasonable father faced with a sensitive and irrational woman surfaces once again.

In «Juno», the mother figure par excellence is the adoptive mother Vanessa Loring (Jennifer Garner), a woman whose inability to have children constitutes an empty hole in her life. She is young, attractive, has a good job, and even earns more than her husband. She is the winner who will never be happy unless she fulfills herself through motherhood. She is the very image of stability and good sense, the mother that every daughter longs to have – without doubt what Juno desires for her future child.

The rupture of her marriage will not prevent Vanessa from fulfilling her desire to be a mother. Her husband Mark (Jason Bateman) cannot be a father for the very same reason that Juno cannot be a mother: he isn't mature enough. For Juno, maternity is a combination of instinct and maturity. Someday in the future Juno may be a mother, but not at this moment in her life, and everything in the narrative development of the film points to this outcome.

In «Precious», the discourse on maternity as a natural instinct and even a woman's salvation, is stronger, if that were possible, than in the other films. As previously mentioned, Precious' only point of reference regarding maternity is her grandmother, who is portrayed in the film as having assumed the responsibility for rearing her grandchildren but incapable of exercising any authority over her daughter.

Paging through a photo album, Precious imagines the ideal mother, doting and affectionate, and she mentally grasps at this ideal. Her only maternal experience has been giving birth to a handicapped son at home on the kitchen floor while her mother slapped her about. However, against all logic, Precious is a good mother, as if no other option existed and as though apart from her studies and the basic things she has managed to achieve in life, her true reason for living was taking care of her children.

Rita Morena, an ex-drug addict and also a teenage mother, is one of Precious' fellow marginalized classmates. When asked what she knows how to do best, she replies «I'm a good mother, a good mother». Precious does introduce a few female role models rarely seen in commercial films, for example a lesbian

couple formed by a schoolteacher (Paula Patton) and her partner. These two women show the protagonist the affection and security that her own family has not known how to provide. One of Precious' classmates, Germaine, is also openly lesbian.

Despite its pretentions of offering less-than-traditional role models, the message of the film itself is as traditional as a Christmas story and motherhood is presented as a mentally sound and physically healthy woman's destiny.

4. Alternatives to an undesired pregnancy

When Juno was first released in movie theatres it provoked a great deal of debate. For some it pushed a pro-life message and for others it was too liberal in that it broached the subject of alternative solutions and some of its characters spoke openly of abortion.

When Juno tells Paulie that she is pregnant and plans to have an abortion, she uses the euphemism «I thought I might nip it in the bud before it gets worse». From this moment on, the treatment of abortion as an alternative is extremely simplistic and superficial. Juno decides to have an abortion and even goes to a clinic where she encounters one of her classmates waving an anti-abortion sign. This girl tries to talk her out of her plans and the argument that impresses Juno the most is that a fetus has finger and toenails. Once inside, she looks around at the rest of the women in the waiting room while she fills out forms. A rapid succession of close-up and detail shots is juxtaposed with the protagonist's gaze. Rhythmic editing is employed to transmit Juno's emotional state and make the audience identify with her. Although what we are seeing is apparently of minor transcendence (drumming fingers on a sheet of paper, a woman rubbing her hands together, others painting their nails or scratching their arms and necks – one pensive woman chewing her nails and another filing hers), all these shots together, interwoven with the amplified sound created by the gestures, create an nerve-wracking atmosphere. Juno flees the waiting room and we are given to understand that her decision not to have an abortion has sprung from this intense manifestation of uneasiness and anxiety.

In a few brief seconds the director has transmitted an atmosphere of tension and uneasiness in which the most trivial gestures appear to take on immense proportions. No reasons or arguments are offered, only flashes and impressions that chisel away at a solid determination that until this moment appeared to be natural and logical. From this point on, no one utters the word abortion. When Juno breaks the news to her parents, her stepmother asks «Honey, have you considered, you know, the alternative?» and gives a sigh of relief at her negative answer, praising her decision. Juno decides to put her baby up for adoption and chooses the parents by perusing personal advertisements in magazine she finds in a supermarket. The new alternative of adoption surges up spontaneously as a consequence of her decision not to abort.

In «Precious», abortion isn't even mentioned. Precious finds herself expelled from school when it is known that she is pregnant again. Following this, the only viable options appear to be rearing the child herself or offering it for adoption. The messages concerning these options are verbalized through two characters: the teacher and the grandmother. Her teacher advises putting both her children up for adoption, reminding her that she is only 16 years old and must continue her studies in order to build a future for herself. Her grandmother tells her that not even a dog would abandon its young and lets her know how proud she is of her.

Precious' teacher maintains a dialogue with her through her diary, attempting to refute the grandmother's arguments by reminding her that her grandmother did nothing to prevent the abuses she has suffered and trying to convince her to think of herself and her future. As Precious listens to this tirade, we share her dilemma of whether to continue the studies that give her a sense of personal self-satisfaction or raise her children by means in an interior dialogue, a device that is used throughout the film. In the end, her maternal instinct proves to be more powerful than any personal aspiration. «I want to be a good mother» the young woman tells her teacher, who replies that «Being a good mother might mean letting Abdul be raised by someone who is better able than you to meet his needs». Precious' answer to this is: «I is (sic) best able to meet my child's needs» and these words are reinforced by an image of her breastfeeding her baby.

When she learns that she has contracted AIDS through her father, the young woman declares that she isn't concerned about dying, only about raising her children. Precious is an archetypal example of the good mother.

Abortion is not an option in «The Greatest» either. Having just finished high school and with a university career on the horizon, Rose opts for motherhood although she has no without money or family support. Her motives are as neatly put as the logical conclusion of any romantic story of true and only love. During a party, she tells her boyfriend's father «I was in love with him and that's why I am going to have this baby.

I was in love with him for four years. I hardly knew him but everything was exactly as I had imagined it would be in my mind and I'm going to have this baby because I believe that he was the love of my life»[1].

5. Conclusions

«Juno», «Precious» and «The Greatest» are all low-budget films, although the third features several well-known actors. They have been and still are box-office successes and have won various awards. All three can be classified as independent films and all three recount intimate family dramas.

«Juno» and «Precious fall» back on the device of using the protagonist's voice as narrator, a method meant to consolidate the public's identification with their heroines.

All three utilize a classic narrative structure that incorporates flashbacks to flesh out the important details of the story. «The Greatest» is the most conventional of the three in terms of the cinematographic language employed. Typical documentary filmmaking conventions such as handheld camera work, tracking shots and unstable images combined with other more sophisticated and contrived techniques are used in «Precious».

The three stories use these devices to weave a concept of maternity, pregnancy, and its alternatives into a fresh new package that conceals the most traditional of myths and models.

The portrayal of sex in the films squares to a large degree with what the experts are reporting: stories of very young girls with sexual experience who take the initiative in their relationships and respond to stereotypes that adolescents can deeply identify with.

We must point out as positive the fact that these films undermine certain myths such as the impossibility of a girl getting pregnant the first time she has sexual intercourse and that some of them offer the twist that the boy, rather than the girl, was the virgin. Nevertheless, they reinforce other conceptions that are very likely to generate adolescent frustration: the ideal of romantic love and the idea that one's first sexual experience is magic. Even in Precious, in which everything is drenched in sordidness, an imaginary white prince appears as some type of sublime goal.

All three films construct a discourse on maternity tailored to all the social and cultural conventions of patriarchal society. Although feminist theorists have spent years discussing this concept and have made great strides in deconstructing it, all three stories analyzed present maternity and the maternal instinct as being a question of nature. Although it may share the same suppositions as the others, «Juno» is the only film that qualifies the maternal instinct as a sentiment that must grow as a woman matures.

Although in the three cases studied the pregnancies are undesired, few options are presented. Only «Juno» raises the possibility of abortion, although it is rejected almost immediately without solid arguments.

Adoption is the most developed alternative in these stories and apart from rearing the child, it is the option given the greatest consideration. The only requisite is having family support, whether it comes from one's own or another family or in the form of some kind of institutional support.

We must keep in mind that the young girls in these films belong to what we could categorize as dysfunctional families. Even in the most extreme situations, a possibility of a girl following her own instinct, in this case to bear a child that was initially unwanted, depends entirely upon the support that such an adolescent can muster. Precious finds this support in her teacher and her friends and Rose through her boyfriend's family.

We cannot obviate cinematography's influence in the creation and consolidation of our social consciousness. In response to the question of whether cinema is essential to the construction of gender equality, Arranz (2010: 23) answers her own question by citing the power of this media to restructure and disseminate symbolic capital in the configuration of social reality. For this author, «the naturalization of the portrayals through which these types of relationships are presented is the key to their enduring success». It has been our intention to demonstrate the naturalization that occurs in the construction of the models of maternity proposed by the films we have analyzed, which obfuscates their social and cultural constructions from the viewer under the guise of the natural.

These socially-shared audiovisual texts, as Pilar Aguilar (1998: 70) well notes, «are transmitters of wisdom, data and knowledge, etc. We speak of the basic frameworks of our personality: of our capacity to symbolize, of the maps of our sentiments and emotions, of our perceptions, of our hierarchy of values…». We share this author's conviction in pointing out the need for the educational system to confront these realities and to equip young people with the necessary tools for interpreting them by means of richer and more complete audiovisual discourses that provide other models and points of view.

Notes

[1] Dialogue from «The Greatest» that appears in this article is a translation of the Spanish language soundtrack.

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