

# Women with Imaginary Children: Old Gender Stereotypes in New American Thrillers

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Sylvain observes how traditional gender stereotypes concerning parenthood are finding new representations in a series of recent American thrillers where mothers find their sanity put into question when their children mysteriously disappear.

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In Robert Schwentke's *Flightplan* (2005), Air Marshal Carson (Peter Sarsgaard) tells flight passenger Kyle Pratt (Jodie Foster) that his job is to protect passengers from crazy individuals, and that "Women with imaginary children qualify." The implication, of course, is that Kyle is one such crazy individual, suspected of creating turmoil throughout the airplane in the search for a child that some suspect may never even have existed.

This is not the first time in film history that a woman has been suspected of making up a child's existence out of thin air. The apparition of this phenomenon first occurred in Otto Preminger's *Bunny Lake Is Missing* (1965), based on the novel of the same name by Marryam Modell (written under the pseudonym Evelyn Piper). In Preminger's adaptation, Ann Lake (Carol Lynley) moves to London to live with her brother Stephen (Keir Dullea). When she goes to pick up her four-year old daughter from the first day of school, she is nowhere to be found and no one even remembers her having ever been there. Superintendent Newhouse (Laurence Olivier) is brought in to investigate and, given the lack of evidence concerning the existence of Ann's daughter, hints that the daughter may only be a product of Ann's imagination.

This occurred again nearly thirty years later in Joseph Ruben's *The Forgotten* (2004), where Telly Paretta (Julianne Moore) grieves the loss of her son who died in a plane crash, only to be told by her husband (Anthony Edwards) and therapist (Gary Sinise) that she never had a child. Her therapist suggests that she created an entire life for her son, lasting until when he would have been the age of nine, after she had actually miscarried.

Less than a year after the release of *The Forgotten*, *Flightplan* came out in theatres with a similar storyline. The film begins in Germany, where engineer Kyle boards a plane she helped build in order to go back to New York to bury her husband, who seemingly committed suicide. Traveling with her is her six-year-old daughter. When Kyle wakes up from a nap, her daughter is nowhere to be found in the exceptionally large double-decker airplane. Kyle creates quite a commotion on the airplane because of her panicked search for her daughter, who does not even appear on the passenger manifest, leading the crew to believe that the child never existed in the first place.

Finally, director Joe Carnahan is currently working on a remake of Preminger's *Bunny Lake Is Missing*, which was set for release in 2008. The release date has now been pushed back to 2009 since Reese Witherspoon, who was supposed to play the main role, unexpectedly abandoned the project less than a month before it was set to begin shooting.

Given that all these movies fall under the popular genre of thriller and not psychological drama, it does

Year	Title	Director	Missing character's relation to protagonist
1855-1900	Paris Exposition	(Story)	Mother
1932	Midnight Warning	Spencer Gordon Bennet	Brother
1938	The Lady Vanishes	Alfred Hitchcock	Older Woman (unrelated to protagonist)
1950	So Long at the Fair	Anthony Darnborough & Terence Fisher	Brother
1953	Dangerous Crossing	Joseph M. Newman	Husband
1965	Bunny Lake is Missing	Otto Preminger	Daughter
2004	The Forgotten	Joseph Ruben	Son
2005	Flightplan	Robert Schwentke	Daughter
2009 (?)	Bunny Lake is Missing	Joe Carnahan	Daughter

not come as much of a surprise to the audience that in every single one of them, the mother ultimately proves that she is right, that she does have a child. Still, a question remains: what can we learn about the discourse surrounding issues of maternity and paternity through these films? Unfortunately, even though their stories take place in a recent social context, they reiterate detrimental conceptions of parenthood that are centuries old: that family is the woman's concern; that biology ensures that mothers are more intimately connected to their children; that women give life and men destroy it; and that, as such, men are the most expendable in the family structure. As we shall also see, filmmakers seem to feel that they can only tamper with the mother-child bond for a minimal amount of time, and that even under these advantageous conditions they need additional facilitating elements that often fail to be realistic.

### THE FILM HISTORY OF A STORY

First, it is important to point out that these recent storylines fall into a long tradition of films that go back for over seventy years. Looking at the evolution of this basic premise might give us a better understanding of how a story has been modified, and what these changes might entail in a contemporary context.

The earliest version of such a story that I have been able to track down comes all the way from the late nineteenth century. As the story goes, a woman checked into a Parisian hotel with her mother, only to be told later by the hotel management when her mother disappeared that she had never registered or been present at the hotel. It would later be discovered that the mother had caught the bubonic plague and that the staff had

hidden her existence out of fear that the truth would result in a widespread panic. This issue would be all the more important given that this story takes place during one of the Paris Expositions<sup>1</sup>, which would have made mass panic all the more financially damaging due to the high number of tourists present in the city at the time.

Many believe this story to be an urban legend. This may very well be true. Either way, the story exists and has been circulating under different forms ever since. To better visualize the evolution of the story, here is a diagram of the Paris Exposition story followed by the different variations that have shown up in film over the years:

*(Original position of table)*

As we can easily notice, there is a progression in the missing character's relation to the protagonist from the person being of an older generation, then of the same generation, to finally being of a younger generation. In this latter category, we are dealing with children who are all under ten years old. As well, in each instance, the protagonist is the mother of the child in question. That the mother and not the father would be the main character does not come as a surprise considering the entire history of these films; the protagonist of every single one of them is a woman.

### THE SEEMINGLY UNBREAKABLE MOTHER-CHILD BOND

In the original script for *Flightplan*, the protagonist of the film was supposed to be a man. However, producer Brian Grazer asked himself "What is the most emotionally potent?" as he puts it in the documentary

that is part of the bonus features on the *Flightplan* DVD. His answer to this question caused the filmmakers to change the main character from a man to a woman. The name for the character, Kyle Pratt, remained unchanged.

The booklet that is part of the *Flightplan* press package is itself very telling in its mention of this stage in the preproduction process. It states that Grazer was “intrigued by Dowling’s draft but had an immediate idea for adding a whole new layer to it: rather than have a traditional male lead as the script called for, Grazer suggested something completely different. He came up with the notion of casting [...] Jodie Foster [...] as the strong, yet mysterious, personality at the centre of the story’s suspense.”<sup>2</sup>

Grazer’s vocalized feelings are very revealing of conceptions of motherhood that are still current. Slightly disturbing is his insinuation that the change from father to mother would add a layer to the story, as if a father’s relationship with his child would be any less involving. Of course, Grazer’s assumption is not new in the history of ideas on motherhood. He is only exemplifying a conception that may have been best articulated by Georg Hegel in 1821 when he said that the “Woman’s whole sphere is within the family, and hence for her the renunciation of individuality is final and complete. Man’s sphere, on the other hand, is only accidentally the family.”<sup>3</sup>

Of course, Hegel’s argument emerged from a socio-cultural context where only men were involved in political and professional areas, leaving the domestic area to women who would stay at home and take care of their children. In such a context, it is evident that children may develop a deeper connection to their mother. However, almost two centuries later, Kyle does not embody this earlier notion of motherhood. She is a hugely successful engineer who has contributed to the building of the world’s largest commercial passenger airplane in history. Undoubtedly, such a high position would require countless hours of work where she would need to share domestic responsibilities with her husband – his profession remains unknown – yet she still carries on her back the weight of old-world conceptions of a privileged relationship between mother and child.

There is also irony in Grazer’s assertion that such a change in the protagonist’s gender would suggest something completely different. There is little doubt that anyone would argue that action heroes are typically played by male actors; however, as I have demonstrated,

every single tackling of this particular storyline has involved a female protagonist. In this particular context then, would exploring the father-child bond not become the most interesting route?

Similarly, the entire premise of the plot of *The Forgotten* serves to superficially touch on the mother-child bond. A reviewer for *L’Écran Fantastique* might be naively generous when he claims that the film is “doubled with a wonderful metaphor on the bond that unites a mother and her child.”<sup>4</sup> More astute is The National Post’s Katrina Onstad, who dares to tackle the film’s sexist implications. She claims that “there’s something disturbing in *The Forgotten*’s vaguely prissy portrait of ideal motherhood. Telly embodies the martyrdom and sacrifice expected from mothers; she is valorized for giving up everything – even her sanity – to love her son. A father, implies the script, could never be so selfless.”<sup>5</sup>

*The Forgotten* attempts to explain this different treatment between mother and father in its resolution, by claiming that the mother could not ever completely lose the memory of her child since he lived inside of her for nine months. The rationale seems to be that to forget her son would be the equivalent of forgetting herself, and that this impossibility is what enables her to maintain her memory even after the memory of all the other characters – even her husband – has been successfully erased. On the DVD audio commentary, one of the filmmakers states “This is the primal connection: right in the womb.” Such a statement is dangerous because it renders the father biologically incapable of developing a relationship with the child that is as equally solid as that of the mother.

Again, such simplistic reasoning is nothing new in the history of thoughts on parenthood. In his attempt to reverse the usual conception of women as inferior to men, Ashley Montagu ended up further imprisoning women in traditional roles, saying that they find the most ultimate fulfillment in motherhood. Needless to say that men did not fare any better in *The Natural Superiority of Women* (1952), where he claimed that “[maternal] functions have made women more humane than men and that the mother-child relation is the paradigm for all human relationships. Woman, a creator, fosters life; man, a mechanizer, destroys life.”<sup>6</sup>

Maybe most disturbing is that, in all three of these films, Montagu’s argument finds perfect exemplification. I have already established that the hero of each of these three films (or should I say heroine) is a woman; what I have not yet pointed out however is that the

enemy in each of them also happens to be a man. In *Flightplan*, the person responsible for kidnapping Kyle's daughter is Air Marshal Carson. In *The Forgotten*, the person responsible for the disappearance of Telly's son is actually an alien, but this alien finds its human form in the skin of male actor Linus Roache. Finally, in *Bunny Lake Is Missing*, Ann's daughter has been abducted by her uncle Stephen.

On the DVD commentary for *The Forgotten*, when the father tells Telly that they never had a child, one of the filmmakers compares the father to the one in Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), adding that the audience should at that point ask themselves "Is he a facilitator or is he just afraid of [Telly's] emotionality?" The comparison with a horror film is especially interesting since *The Forgotten*, like the two other films, seems to reinforce the idea that danger always clouds the non-nuclear family. This theme has long been a staple of American horror movies, where families – and especially women – are often punished for the lack of a strong father figure. As pointed out, *Rosemary's Baby* is a classic example of this, since in the film a father sells his baby to the devil in exchange for a successful acting career. Other quintessential examples are William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973), where a single mother sees her child become possessed by the devil, and Richard Donner's *The Omen* (1976), in which a father – unbeknownst to his wife – exchanges the stillborn she gave birth to with another child, unaware that it is the devil's child.

Similarly, the absence of a strong father figure can be noticed in all three thrillers under scrutiny here. In *Flightplan*, Kyle is a newly widowed mother whose child goes missing while she is taking a nap aboard an airplane. *The Forgotten* is the only film to present us with a nuclear family, but it is very quickly dismantled when the father's memory is erased and he forgets that he ever had a child. His wife then takes off in a search for the truth with another man (Dominic West) whose child has disappeared under the same circumstances. It is interesting to notice that the other father, Ash Correll, is also a single parent, though this is most likely the case in order to set him up as a romantic alternative to Telly's husband. The filmmakers and deleted scenes support this assessment, as if Telly's husband needed to be punished for having had his memory erased without his own knowledge or consent. When Telly meets him again later, his memory has been further tampered with and now he does not even remember ever having been married to Telly. Through this narrative progression, Telly does end up as a single mother who, the ending

suggests, might be able to stabilize her family situation anew by becoming a recomposed family with Ash and his daughter. The film fails to explain what has become of her husband after their memory has been rectified. He is not even present in the epilogue of the film.

The heroine of *Bunny Lake Is Missing* can be best compared with the mother in *The Exorcist*: she pays an excessive price for being a single mother. Preminger himself was apparently well aware of this connotation. When *Village Voice's* Andrew Sarris asked him why he was so invested in this project, he answered that he "was interested in the problem of an unwed mother attempting to establish the identity of her child."<sup>7</sup> It would be intriguing to know why Preminger believed that a mother would have more difficulty than a father in proving the existence of her child, but of course this question will now remain without an answer. Preminger's view is particularly fascinating because it goes against the typical notion first vocalized by Thomas Hobbes in 1642 that authority over children is by nature maternal because "the identity of a child's mother alone is certain [...]."<sup>8</sup> In 1740, David Hume agreed with Hobbes when he argued in *Treatise of Human Nature* that "men labor under a considerable disadvantage, since the paternity of a child is virtually impossible to ascertain."<sup>9</sup>

Still, Preminger proved that he had the finger on the pulse of the nation when it came to disapproval of unwed mothers as the film triggered informal denunciation of its representation of a single mother during its initial release.<sup>10</sup> A decade later, French critic André Moreau recognized that the film was dealing with a social problem and that the message was "if you do not conform to society's rules, the law will not protect you."<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, the collective message of these films becomes that children are the responsibility of women, but that they still need a man to keep them out of harm's way.

### LESS TIME, MORE IMPLAUSIBILITY

Despite their best attempts to destroy – or at the very least test – the mother-child bond, screenwriters realize that to maintain any sort of credibility, they must limit their story to a minimal amount of time. Already in the context of 1960s London for *Bunny Lake Is Missing*, critic Andrew Sarris recognized that

*once a doubt is raised about the child's very existence, it is clear that the doubt cannot be sustained for much longer than twentyfour*

*hours, the records and witnesses to human existence being as extensive as they are. Consequently the action has to be confined to one day at the most, and the melodrama works because the mother is too hysterical to wait through a night, and her hysteria adds to the suspicions of the authorities that she is unstable enough to fantasize a child into being.*<sup>12</sup>

In *Flightplan*, the main action is confined to the time it takes for a plane to travel from Berlin to the East Coast of Canada. Once Kyle wakes up from her nap during which her daughter disappeared, the film seems to take place in real time, except for an indeterminate amount of time where Kyle has been knocked unconscious. Logic tells us that this interruption must have only lasted a few minutes; otherwise, the airline personnel should have been more worried about Kyle's condition than they were. Instead of providing her with medical care, they simply have a therapist sit next to her so that she has someone to talk to when she regains consciousness. If this period of time is only a few minutes long, it would however mean that Kyle's nap would have lasted almost ten hours, an amount of time that seems improbable. So *Flightplan* is only able to sustain its own storyline in a situation where time is condensed to a questionable degree.

Even *The Forgotten*, which dabbles in science-fiction and benefits from aliens who have access to incredibly efficient memory-erasing technology, cannot compete for an extensive period of time with its mother figure. There is only a three-day period between the moment that Telly is told that she never had a son and the one where she finally defeats the alien who kidnapped him. It seems that screenwriters believe that even the most technologically advanced beings one can imagine could not successfully break the mother-child bond.

Because of its rather silly storyline, *The Forgotten* seems the most probable to become the subject of ridicule. However, it becomes interesting to read through the reviews of all three films and realize that they all share a similar lexical field. In *Bunny Lake Is Missing*, critics felt that "the development of the story [was] often very fuzzy"<sup>13</sup> and that it resolved itself through "an implausibly elaborate caper by a conveniently psychotic character."<sup>14</sup> For *Flightplan*, after the suspense has been built, critics wondered "through what twist director and screenwriters [were] going to get out of this web"<sup>15</sup> and felt that from that point on "events spiral towards the ridiculous."<sup>16</sup> *The Forgotten* did however fare the most

poorly critically, its screenwriter getting denounced for "trying so hard to mask the truth along the way that he no longer knew how to offer an explanation that was the littlest bit plausible in the end"<sup>17</sup>, others adding that the film "[cheats] all over the place and [provides] a solution that is able to account for everything because it never has to make sense."<sup>18</sup> These criticisms are not the exception, but rather the norm in reviews of all three films. Issues concerning the fuzziness, implausibility, and ridiculousness of the plot come up again and again across different publications. It is as though filmmakers were unable to come up with a realistic way to destroy the mother-child bond. It is true, as Rick Groen judiciously points out in his review of *The Forgotten*, that "Realism isn't always required, but logic is essential."<sup>19</sup>

In order to even attempt to separate mother and child, each film requires at least one facilitating element that ranges from the convenient to the unrealistic. In *Bunny Lake Is Missing*, questions concerning the sanity of the mother can only be raised because Preminger has successfully isolated her.<sup>20</sup> She has only very recently moved to London from the United States, so that no one in this new city can vouch as to the existence of the child except for Ann herself.

In *Flightplan*, it would have been difficult to explain how a child could have possibly disappeared aboard any existing commercial passenger airplane; there is simply not enough space for a child to realistically get lost. So for the child to believably disappear, the filmmakers had to create an airplane of such proportions – a double-decker – that no such plane even exists in real life. Even within the world of filmmaking such a plane never existed. The crew built each level one after the other, shot the scenes accordingly, and connected them in post-production through the use of special effects. So, even in the filmmaking world, the two levels never existed simultaneously.

Finally, as has already been discussed, *The Forgotten* requires the most extreme suspension of disbelief from its viewers. In an attempt to explain how a child could have possibly been erased from family photographs – not to mention his own father's memory – the screenwriter requires the help of aliens from outer space who seemingly have access to all technology that would enable them to erase all traces of the existence of a child. Even within these far-reaching conditions – or maybe especially because of them – the screenwriter is not able to maintain any sense of coherence. When Telly rips off the wallpaper in Ash's office to reveal that it used to be his daughter's bedroom, which has the

effect of triggering his memory, a film critic from *Mirror* wittily remarked “Funny how the same extraterrestrial villains who went through the trouble of eliminating all Internet data of the deadly air tragedy and destroying every hard document on file – not to mention the arduous task of brainwashing everyone who has ever come into contact with the children – cut corners when it came to a simple home improvement.”<sup>21</sup>

Given that even memory-erasing aliens cannot compete with mothers, it is hard to see how fathers could fare any better. How can they be considered as equally important as mothers when they are deemed expendable as soon as comes the time to ascertain their child’s existence? Such representation of parents in film undermines both sexes in their fight for equal rights: it reifies that mothers are naturally more responsible for their child than fathers, confining women more to the parental role than men; and, at the same time as it tells men that their children are more likely to suffer harm if they are absent, it also tells them that they are ultimately expendable because only mothers are truly connected to their children. Such conflicting messages are constantly sent to fathers. They are told that they must take more responsibility in the family life on one hand, yet they are also being told that they are not as important as mothers. If we wish for societal changes to ensure that men and women are treated equally in their role as parents, filmic texts, and all others, will have to reflect these attitudinal shifts as well. Otherwise, we will never be able to truly transcend the sexist stereotypes that have clouded our judgment for too long.

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## FOOTNOTES

1 There were five Universal Expositions held in Paris between 1855 and 1900.

2 *Flightplan*. Touchstone Pictures, 2005. 13.

3 Agonito, Rosemary. *History of Ideas on Woman*. NY: A Pedigree Book, 1977. 159-160.

4 Bargain, Erwan. “Mémoire effacée.” *L’Écran Fantastique* 257 (Septembre 2005). 71.

-The original French quote reads “[...] doublée d’une magnifique métaphore sur le lien qui unit une mère à son enfant.”

5 Onstad, Katrina. “Forget-Me-Plot.” *The National Post* (24 September 2004). B1-2.

6 Agonito, Rosemary. *History of Ideas on Woman*. NY: A Pedigree Book, 1977. 562.

7 Sarris, Andrew. *Confessions of a Cultist: On the Cinema, 1955/1969*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970. 214.

8 Agonito, Rosemary. *History of Ideas on Woman*. NY: A Pedigree Book, 1977. 95-96.

9 *Ibid.*, 121.

10 Sova, Dawn B. *Forbidden Films: Censorship Histories of 125 Motion Pictures*. New York: Checkmark Books, 2001.

11 Moreau, André. *Télérama* 1342 (4-10 octobre). 33.

-The original French quote reads “[...] si vous ne conformez pas aux règles de la société qui vous entoure, la loi ne vous protégera pas.”

12 Sarris, Andrew. *Confessions of a Cultist: On the Cinema, 1955/1969*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970. 213.

13 Moreau, André. *Télérama*. (Issue, date and page unknown.)

-The original French quote reads “[...] le déroulement de l’histoire, souvent très confus.”

14 Sarris, Andrew. *Confessions of a Cultist: On the Cinema, 1955/1969*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970. 213.

15 Socias, Sébastien. “Flight Plan.” *L’Écran Fantastique* 265 (Mai 2006). 79.

-The original French quote reads “[...] par quelle pirouette metteur en scène et scénaristes vont se sortir d’un tel guêpier.”

16 Barnes, Jonathan. “Flightplan.” *Sight & Sound* 15:11 (November 2005). 61.

17 Rezzonico, Philippe. “The Forgotten: Un dénouement à oublier.” *Le Journal de Montréal* (25 septembre 2004). WE 59.

-The original French quote reads “[...] avait tellement tenté de masquer la vérité chemin faisant qu’il ne savait plus comment offrir une explication à peu près plausible à l’arrivée.”

18 Stone, Jay. “The Forgotten will make you spill popcorn.” *The Record* (24 September 2004). 8.

19 Groen, Rick. “Forgetting to play by the rules.” *The Globe and Mail* (24 September 2004). R2.

20 Moreau, André. *Télérama*. (Issue, date and page unknown.)

21 Rowland, Sarah. "The Forgotten." *Mirror* (23 September 2004). 35.

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*Edited by Lindsay Peters, Amanda D'Aoust.*