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Dead Mothers: From Bambi to Olaf's *Frozen* Nose

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Dead Mothers: From Bambi to Olaf's *Frozen* Nose

> *Once upon a time there was an artist who never imagined ever wanting to be mother. And so the years went on, happily enough, and without her realizing it, she grew prematurely old and the eggs that once were as abundant as light in a prism, had shriveled and diminished and come to almost nothing. And even as her eggs turned to dust, she met her golden man, all smooth and supple and with a voice like dark honey, as unexpected as if he'd fallen from the sky or been given to her by a kindly crone selling apples. And so it was that the artist and the golden man fell in love. But when they tried to make a baby, no baby came and though they loved each other dearly, there was an underlying sadness to the life they made together, each moon blood red and full of tears. And then, after much effort – and they enjoyed the effort and were hard working – there came a gift, so that the happy couple made a magic baby with a singularly unlikely egg sprung to life by his ample potency. And the magic baby, born calm and wise, grew in vigor and feeling into a beloved toddling girl.*

It is to that child that this presentation is dedicated and to all the girls and women who analyze film, critically and with clarity, and who point out the *Dead Mothers*.

Dead Mothers: From *Bambi* to Olaf's *Frozen* Nose

> *A river without end, enormous and wide, flows through the world's literatures. Over and over again: the woman-in-the-water; woman as water, as a stormy, cavorting, cooling ocean, a raging stream, a waterfall; as a limitless body of water that ships pass through, with tributaries, pools, surfs and deltas; woman as the enticing (or perilous) deep, as a cup of bubbling bodily fluids …*[1]

We are born between feces and urine[2].

> *This hatred—or dread—of women cannot be explained with Freud's all-purpose Oedipal triangulation… The dread arises in the pre-Oedipal struggle of the fledgling self, before there is even an ego to sort out the objects of desire and the odds of getting them: It is a dread, ultimately of dissolution—of being swallowed, engulfed, annihilated. Women's bodies are the holes, swamps, pits of muck that can engulf.*[3]

One day when I was a child growing up in the wilds of the working-class west of Sydney, I heard a boy down the street call out to me. At first, I didn't understand what he was saying. I

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[1] Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, Volume 1: Women, Floods, Bodies, History*, trans. Stephen Conway, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, second printing, 1990, p 283

[2] St Augustine, "Inter faeces et urinam nascimur"

[3] Barbara Ehrenreich, Foreword, Theweleit, op. cit., p xiii

thought perhaps he was warning me of some imminent danger on the road up ahead, which, I guess, in a way he was: He was just calling me by name. "Muck hole", he said.

In Luce Irigaray's observation,

> *The womb, unthought in its place of the first sojourn in which we become bodies, is fantasized by many men to be* a devouring mouth, a cloaca, or anal or urethral outfall, a phallic threat, *at best reproductive. And in the absence of valid representations of female sexuality, this womb merges with woman's sex (sexe) as a whole. There are no words to talk about it, except filthy, mutilating words. The corresponding affects will be, therefore, anxiety, phobia, disgust, a haunting fear of castration. How can one not also feel them on returning to what has always been denied, disavowed, sacrificed to build an exclusively masculine symbolic world?* (emphasis added)[4]

This "masculine symbolic world" persists under the aegis of modernity: Under modernity, the care of birth and death went outside the home, to the hospital and the morgue; meanwhile the plumbing came in: no screaming contractions, no nursing the sick and the dying, no grey cadavers, but indoor plumbing and the means never to have to acknowledge the meaty mortality of us all. Thus these most profound fears are sequestered in the ordering systems of modernity – in the name of hygiene and security – and women go down the drain. The feminine as cloaca or muck-hole, is a recurring motif throughout the cleansing narratives of the 19th and

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[4] Luce Irigaray, 'The Bodily Encounter with the Mother,'1981, trans. David Macey, in ed., Margaret Whitford, *The Irigaray Reader*, Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2004, p 41

20th centuries[5] and the chain of associations persists well into the popular culture of the twentieth century: In mainstream postwar film, from Carol Reed's *The Third Man* (1949) to Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) to Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974) to de Palma's *Carrie* (1976) to Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) to Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986), to Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994), and on and on, the feminine, woman, mothers, birthing, all such recur in and through drains, sewers, bathrooms and toilets.[6] We see women giving birth to giant worms; women's lifeblood draining down the tub; women screaming in the bathroom as last refuge from a madman, a sea of blood engulfing the anxious subject; women finding horror in the sweating plumbing of a darkened basement: such as these intertextual juxtapositions of 'woman' with drains, plumbing, bathrooms and sewers extend the juxtaposition of woman and floods, women and muck – and women and monstrosity[7] – to the iconography of the movies and to the popular imaginary of post-war culture.

Which brings me to the topic at hand: the representation of mothers and mothering in children's animated film and the motifs that stand in for her habitual exclusion.

I begin and end in the snow, examining this motif as a signifier of the maternal in Hollywood children's film, from *Bambi* (1942) to *Frozen* (2013). I propose that 'snow' is a variant of the historically prevalent tropes for the feminine, and specifically for the maternal, outlined above: snow functions as a variation on *water* replete with its properties of dread and engulfment.[8] Snow as metaphor: *virgin*, *blanket*: As landscape, snow is wide open and all

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[5] Margaret Morgan, 'The Plumbing of Modern Life', *Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2002, pp 171-195

[6] Margaret Morgan, *Toilet Training*, video montage, dur. 26 minutes, 2000

[7] See Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine, Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, New York, NY: Routledge, 1993

[8] Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, Volume 1: Women, Floods, Bodies, History*,

enveloping; it suggests interiority, an intimacy, a loss of differentiation, a hushing of space: it is as much a blank canvas for the pouring on of existential identity as it is a seamless homogeneity, an enveloping cover that diminishes distinction between self and other. It invokes both purity-absence and cover-erasure.

Bambi (1942) [Screen grab, DVD]

It is winter when the mother dies, early in the movie *Bambi* (1942). Generations have shed tears over the death scene of the protagonist's mother: the scene is a snowy, open field. Few details of the surrounding environment are rendered. We see only mother and child, a beatific scene in which the doe and her fawn exist in what might be thought of as the non-space of the mother-child dyad, their togetherness all the context needed to give their being form. The mood is somber, still, ominous, as if *it can't last forever.* Suddenly the mother's head lifts and turns from side to side as she sniffs the prescient air. We intuit the doe's acute awareness of danger, and we hear the beginnings of a dark musical score heralding the pending disaster. It is the same shards of music deployed in an earlier scene set in a sunny meadow in which Bambi finds

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trans. Stephen Conway, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, second printing, 1990, pp 283-294

himself alone: His mother's death has been hovering in the liminal spaces of the narrative since its beginning. The narrative implies that the death of the mother was always there and is the hard necessity of individuation. The lower registers of cello and viola beat out a rhythm of stalking; the rests in the music signify the unseen hunter taking aim. We see nothing but the mother, her senses alert, her very being trained to discern danger; then we hear her voice and the inexorable march of the music that portends her demise. She implores her son, "Run Bambi Run", "Keep running, Bambi", "Faster Bambi, faster!" as trumpets blast, and the orchestra surges to the terror of the scene. She brings up the rear putting herself between her fawn and the dangers bearing down on them. They run right to left, against time, as if trying to delay the inevitable juncture with the future: with the death of the mother, the good mother, the kind, gentle, self-sacrificing mother. The rendering of the landscape corresponds: With each cut from the doe to Bambi we shift from non-field, all blank whiteness, the mother's realm, to markers of land: the blackness of a fallen tree; a long shot where we see them as separate individuals traversing a rivulet; then the penultimate in this sequence, hillocks coming into view. We, the audience, are with Bambi, experiencing his first knowledge of the outside world, the place beyond *motherchild*. Increasingly, as the landscape accrues detail, the distance between mother and child widens: Then, across the musical score and to its end, we hear the shot, the fatal shot ringing out over the frozen wastes. Simultaneously we see that Bambi has arrived in a landscape replete with hills and trees, the thicket, the horizon of selfhood, if you like: he has escaped: he has passed through a tunnel-like snowdrift to the nether side. We neither see the body of the mother nor experience death from her point of view but Bambi is no longer in that open non-space that is the mother-child dyad: he is newly himself, singular – and alone in a forest of trees: he is *born* for a second time, into selfhood.

Bambi (1942) [Screen grab, DVD]

We hear the terror and despair in the abandoned fawn's at first almost accusing voice as he calls, "Mother, where are you?" His voice is tinged with the anger of a beloved child whose entitlement has been betrayed, but his incredulity quickly turns to despair and the sound of fear subsumes the rest. A chorus of snow-soft female voices can be heard singing in mourning. He wanders, panicked, willy-nilly, the voice now softer, now louder, as he moves further and then closer to us, the viewers, as if of a sudden in three-dimensional space and no longer in the depthless plane of his pre-history: Mother's dead and Bambi's tale can begin.

> *So one day, the mother, an aging artist, sat her darling down to watch the magic picture box, thinking fondly of movies full of the beauty and enchantment of the world and without the nasty demons of hyper-consumerism and violence: She recalled the misty realm of her own childhood and half-remembered Disney, old Disney: ancient favorites locked away in the back of her mind, black and white annals of post-war television gathering mental dust. And so one day she pushed play on those long forgotten scenes and behold what she unleashed: To the mother's*

> *delight, the screen was full of color, soft washes of gentle hue, sweet song, and, though in many ways more old-fashioned than she liked, there was pleasure to be had in the hand painted scenes, the multidimensional mise-en-scène, the slow pans, the simple edits, the absence of products placed, the strains of Tchaikovsky. But as she watched, movie after movie, her pleasure turned to chagrin: Time and again, like some psychosis, the mother's death was enacted: she is gone, she was killed by a hunter, shipwrecked, turned bad, never there in the first place: each one of those old movies was a vivid and colorful tale of mothers dead! What spell would be cast upon the magic child if all she saw told that mothers walked hand in hand with Death? Where was the magic to reverse this nasty matricide?*

The death of Bambi's mother is one in a long line of *muttermorde.* Movies, updating much older forms – folk tales, fairy tales, and the like – have kept killing the mother[9], sending her away, sending her mad, making her evil: From *Snow White* (1937), to *Pinocchio* (1940) to *Dumbo* (1941), to *Cinderella* (1950) to the orphaned Lost Boys of *Peter Pan* who sing a wistful lament about *Your Mother and Mine* (1953) to Wart the orphan protagonist in *The Sword in the Stone* (1963) to *The Jungle Book* (1967) to the motherless princesses of more recent Disney animation: *The Little Mermaid* (1989), Belle in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), Jasmine in *Aladdin* (1992) to the eponymous *Pocahontas* (1995). Indeed, six of eleven official Disney Princesses

[9] Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde, On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*, New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1995, pp 200-240 and Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment, The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, Vintage Books: New York, NY, 2010, pp 68-69

(Snow White, Cinderella, Ariel, Belle, Jasmine, Pocahontas) have deceased mothers; two more are brought up with both parents in absentia (Aurora of *Sleeping Beauty* and Rapunzel of *Tangled*); one has a mother only, though note-worthily, in a supportive and loving relationship (Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog*); leaving only protagonists *Mulan* and Merida of *Brave* to have relationships of any kind with two living parents. The Disney site tells us that Anna from *Frozen* (2014) is Princess-in-Waiting, soon to be adding to the list of motherless, indeed orphaned, princesses. That would make about 3 out of 4 of the girl-oriented Disney Princesses motherless. Even when the narrative overtly empowers girl—and girly—heroes, the maternal is elided at every step: The maternal is frozen out of this snow-job, making whatever liberatory virtue can be gleaned from the overtly positive role models represented among the Princesses a false choice: boyish or girly; warrior or queen; maiden or bride but never motherly and rarely mothered.

All of the movies discussed here, are, in many ways, wonderful, finely wrought, funny, moving, complex – they were favorite movies, the best of their kind. They are highly acclaimed, Academy-Award winning, box-office successes and many are among the highest grossing US films of any kind of all time[10]. Yet the protagonists are mostly male, or when female, male identified, and almost none had a mother. Even *Dumbo's* stork delivering the baby is male and his load uncannily like a scrotum:

[10] See http://www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/adjusted.htm viewed April 14, 2015 for the 200 inflation-adjusted top grossing US films

Dumbo (1941) [Screen grab, DVD]

Why all the matricide? Feminism and psychoanalysis will tell us that our culture abjures the maternal. One may theorize the rejection of the mother by saying that we have to separate from the mother in order to individuate:

A very young child, just on the threshold of language, may recount the experience of being in utero; or she may have an uncanny fear of tunnels for some years after her difficult birth; or she may remember the specific taste of breast milk. These sensations cannot be described as memories since remembering requires a subject with a sense of time. – Rather, sensations such as these register a state before individual history begins, in what Ehrenreich calls the 'pre-Oedipal struggle of the fledgling self.'[11] The child recalls these sensations less and less as the child grows into selfhood and becomes herself; as her being fills up with life and subjectivity and recollections of herself in time; as she develops psychologically from that early state that Julia Kristeva refers to as a receptacle or *chora*[12]. In Kristeva's account of the

[11] See Barbara Ehrenreich in Theweleit, op. cit. p xiii

[12] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror, An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1982, pp 13-14

experience of maternity, "a mother is a continuous separation, a division of the very flesh."[13] For the becoming-subject who is the child, the figure of the mother occupies a liminal place, on the edges of the child's consciousness: The mother "border[s] the frail identity of the speaking being."[14] The mother is at once the comfort, protection and sustenance for the child as she grows into selfhood but also that being whose proximity must be overcome if the fantasy of finite, discrete selfhood, this "weak identity", is to be attained: In Kristeva's argument we must jettison the mother who was so interconnected with our proto-selves so that we may stand alone *as* ourselves—a selfhood so fragile that we must abandon this primary relationship. Thus, sensations like being in utero or tasting breast milk – sensations that recall an undifferentiated or interpenetrated state – must be forgotten, repressed, displaced by memory, the recollection of experience not imbricated with the mother. The mother, however, does not forget, nor does she need to, because her subjectivity was already formed when the child was in utero, when she was born from her body, when she fed from her breast. For the mother, the recollection of the loosened state of her own subjectivity during the mothering of her infant and child is part of her memories, her history. For the mother, whose subjectivity is ignored in consideration of the child's psychic growth, the state of between-ness that she may have experienced becomes unspeakable. Her witness is mute. She is neither the proper object under consideration nor does she properly forget. She is a subject who remembers her own psychic instability and that of her child in its prehistory. She is a dangerous cannon. Witness the discomfort a child will express if the mother recounts her recollection of that which the child has forgotten: 'Aw mo-om! TMI! TMI! Don't talk about that!' Witness the discomfort, a feminist art historian will display in her

[13] Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1987, p 254

[14] Kristeva, *Powers*, op. cit. p 67

too easy dismissal of the subject of mothering when discussing contemporary feminist art practice.[15] I witness my own ignorance of, and discomfort with, the subject of mothering in feminist art practice: It took me years to recognize the centrality of mothering in Mary Kelly's entire oeuvre, not just Post-Partum Document.[16] In a recent viewing of The Riddles of the Sphinx[17] that I had last seen decades prior, I am shocked to recognize the centrality of mothering to the film, having only recollected its avant-garde form. Witness too, anecdotally, that one may observe that for almost every exhibition curating mothering and feminism, there is a curator who proclaims that hers is a watershed, a unique contribution to the discourse, thus participating, along with the rest of us, in a general social amnesia about mothering and art, and mothering at large[18]. In contemporary art, the mother is erased; her memory forgotten; her voice ignored; to speak of it or her is, if not taboo, then deeply uncool. The mother is split from her child, from her culture, from herself. In Hollywood it's said that splitting makes for better drama: 'The mother had to go,' as one Hollywood writer said to me. Furthermore, these films are intertextual, making a habit of misogyny and matriphobia. In a Hollywood script, the writing of gynophobia is as easy as following the same structure as the film that preceded it; a shorthand to success in a culture still patriarchal, still sexist, and prone, to its own detriment, to repeat 'known successes', sexist, patriarchal and matricidal as they may be. This recurs with as much frequency in the Disney Princess movies marketed for girls as in non-princess movies by Disney, Pixar and Dreamworks

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[15] Discussant, 'Feminisms Without Borders' symposium, Brooklyn Museum, March 31, 2007, when asked about the absence of mothering in the exhibition, *Global Feminisms, New Directions in Contemporary Art*, replied, 'That's a matter of child care' and the discussion moved on to other topics. Cited by M. Chernick, personal communication, April 2007

[16] Myrel Chernick and Jennie Klein, (eds.), *The M Word, Real Mothers in Contemporary Art*, Bradford, Canada: Demeter Press, 2011

[17] Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, writers and directors, *Riddles of the Sphinx*, UK: British Film Institute, 1977, dur. 92 minutes

[18] In conversation with Myrel Chernick, c. 2010

– to name three major US studios – that are ostensibly for *all* children. Thus, while male and female protagonists are handled differently from one another, mothers share an almost universal fate: dead, dead, dead.[19]

Finding Nemo, a Pixar film from 2003, is exemplary: *Nemo* was winner of the 2003 Academy Award for Best Animated Feature Film and is one of the top grossing US films of all time.[20] It is replete with complex major and secondary characters, double entendres, puns, pleasurable details, fine casting, beautiful visual effects, and evident care in the construction of the animation. None the less, the gendered roles are fundamentally conventional: Male characters develop after, and through, the death of the mother. *Finding Nemo* is full of wounded men: Marlin, the clown-fish who can't tell a joke; Nemo, the boy-fish with the malformed fin; Gil, the fish with a noir character, scarred inside and out; and what drives their narrative is the dead mother:

The protagonist is a rather insecure clown fish who cannot live up to type: *for a clown, he sure ain't funny*. Yet in the prologue, he has proudly done his manly duty and found a home in which he, Marlin, and his wife, Coral, will make a family. Like a new subdivision on the outskirts of town, the sea anemone Marlin and Coral call home is adjacent to 'a bad neighborhood', what in this case is the open sea where there is no protection from predators. Marlin's enthusiasm convinces Coral and she lays a silver tureen's worth of roe in the chasm below. Enter the bad guy, from the open waters, a barracuda in search of a meal. Coral darts to the defense of the eggs she has laid and is consumed by the barracuda along with all their eggs,

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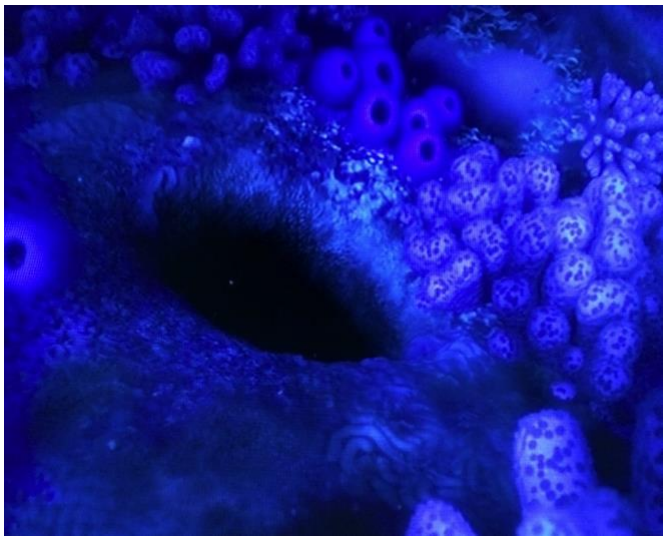
[19] Sarah Boxer, The Atlantic, July/August, 2014 https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/07/why-are-all-the-cartoon-mothers-dead/372270/ viewed August 2, 2014

[20] 53rd highest grossing US film, of any kind, adjusted for inflation, per http://www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/adjusted.htm viewed April 14, 2015

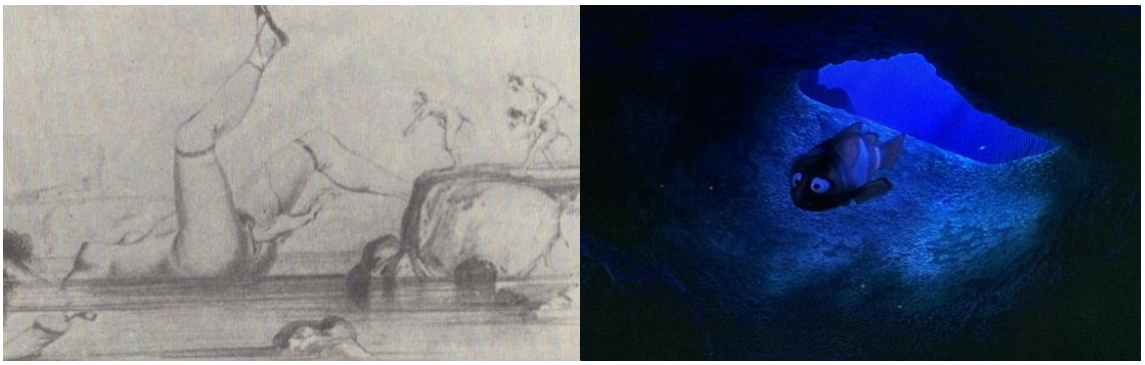
but a singleton, a solitary fish roe. The last egg glows with life, alone in an otherwise dead chasm: For anyone who has experienced infertility, this is a heart-rending moment. Marlin finds the egg and gently, tenderly, mournfully, turns its translucent orb in his fins. He is motherly in his touch, as he incorporates the now absent mother into his being. The orb cross-fades to the sun, itself a masculine motif, that is visible through the depths of the ocean and – at last – the film begins: Mom is dead, the many have become singular, and the narrative can unfold.

The film knows Marlin is a guy with average inadequacies and we share the knowledge in our observations of his many quirks and anxious mannerisms. His very name conjures his nemesis, the open sea's big fish, which he decidedly is not, and even the homophone, 'Marlon', again emphatically marks the clown fish as no Brando – inadequate, emasculated, depressive as he is. The clown fish is very much an 'every man', a figure familiar to us as a contemporary masculine antihero. The many secondary and tertiary characters provide layers of counter narrative, but the principle narrative arc belongs to Marlin and how he becomes a better version of himself: the man who can tell jokes, the man who is a good father, the man who is confident enough to find *his* family in unlikely places. There is much to be lauded in this film, and, indeed, much has been.



Finding Nemo (2003) [Screen grab, DVD]

Yet as laudable as the film may be, the unacknowledged dead vaginal form shown in the still above is telling: Nominally a "Coral" reef – herein wife, mother and landscape function interchangeably – this motif resembles less a reef than an archetypal vagina, like some prehistoric ritual form: Marlin, in order to *become*, must swim through that ovoid hole; he must go through the darkened maternal cavity that is the site of the death of his wife and most of their progeny so that he and his son may realize—give birth to, if you like—themselves, and thus conform to the conventions of misogyny of which we speak.



Theweleit, op. cit., p. 283/ *Finding Nemo* (2003) [Screen grab]

Furthermore, once the mother is dead and the guys' stories begin, the dynamics of plot are played out through waterways and sewer systems: As noted at the outset, water has been a metaphor for the engulfment, fluidity and horizontality customarily associated with the feminine, from ancient fairy tales to the tales told under modernity – and to the movies one might watch with one's children.

In popular children's cinema, when the protagonist comes to a crisis in which he (sic) must finally address a perceived character flaw or some such aspect of his subjectivity, he very often is lead through a long, wet, wild tunnel. Not exactly bodily, these fallopian-like tubes and birth-like sequences occur again and again – in the drains and sewers and waste dumps of

children's cinema. As if haunted by St. Augustine, birth and rebirth are inextricably attached to the scatological.[21] In narratives where the mother is absent, as she mostly is, the protagonist goes through a hole and down a tunnel only to come out the other end a more resolved, more complete person: The male lead must give birth to himself, (well, his mother can't do it because she isn't in the picture): The male protagonists incorporate the absent mother's birthing and give rise, *sui generis*, to themselves:

Finding Nemo employs this motif twice in the very significant scene in which the son must set himself free: Nemo has been caught by a holidaying dentist and has ended up in a tropical fish tank in the dentist's surgery. The fish in the tank are resigned to life in captivity but want freedom for Nemo. Under the tutelage of Gil, himself a scarred old fish who wants Nemo to succeed where he could not, they devise a plan to get Nemo out. Meanwhile the dentist himself introduces the scatological, muttering a phrase in local slang for defecation as he wanders into a toilet stall.[22] Gil's plan involves Nemo squeezing himself into a narrow tube and pushing, pushing, pushing, to wiggle himself up and out of the tank: Birth/defecation sequence number one. This is made all the more urgent because the dentist wants to give Nemo to his niece who is well known to the fish as a killer of any and all such fishy gifts her uncle the dentist bestows. The niece arrives, her grinning mouth full of braces, a vagina dentata open wide, as she gleefully cries, 'Fishy! Fishy! Fishy!' Fishy indeed. That the setting is a dentist's surgery is replete with innuendo, the open mouth of his human patients one displacement in a relay of substitutions: tank, tube, mouth, toilet: ocean, birth canal, vagina, anus. Indeed, once out of the

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[21] This patterns Lacan's hierarchy of the *petite objet a*, shifting from the maternal object of desire, in this case the lost mother, to the anal and scopophilic: See Jacques Lacan, 'Introduction to the Names-of-the-Father Seminar', in Ed. Joan Copjec, *Television, A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment,* New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991, p 85

[22] In this scene in *Finding Nemo,* the dentist quietly uses the Australian expression for defecation: 'gotta see a man about a wallaby' as he walks to the bathroom.

tank and into the surgery, the toilet becomes Nemo's exit to open water: in a Rube Goldberg-like sequence, Nemo ends up being flushed down the toilet, and takes a long ride through the wild and rushing waters of the city sewer system: Nemo is birthing himself by any other name. 'Daddy!' Nemo cries as he rushes headlong through the metaphors: water, waste, birth, return to home, substitutions all for the mother who has been disavowed, leaving only a cry for the father. Nemo's freedom is the very open water of the kind that was once the scene of the death of his mother. This scene of Nemo's escape to open waters, to his return and his ascension to little-manhood – his malformed fin doesn't keep him back – is rich and funny and replete with doublings and relays – but the humor is born of our discomfort with the maternal, the bodily, and the psychological transferences these anxieties put into play.

Lest the trope of the tunnel be thought of as unique to *Finding Nemo,* let us now consider a few of the many children's films in which the motif recurs: Consider the film, *Mars Needs Moms* (2011), based on the short book of the same name: A narrative overtly in praise of mothers, in which Martians steal earthling mothers because Martians need the love and organizational ability of mothers to advance the diminished motherless culture of Mars. Our protagonist is the son of one such mother, who of course does not appreciate his mother until she is kidnapped. His search on Mars for his mother entails diving head first into and passing through a long dark tunnel, emerging feces-like into a pile of waste. There he encounters female Martians to whom he tries to describe his missing mother: he mimes vacuuming, cleaning, cooking. His mother is a series of cleaning duties against which we see his 'birth' into what looks like a land-fill: Mothers, waste, tubes and pipes.

Consider *Ratatouille* (2007): The mother is absent. Our protagonist, Remy, doesn't fit in with his rat brethren: they eat rotting scraps, he is a gourmand with heightened senses of taste,

smell and aesthetics. His father wants him to use his olfactory talent to distinguish poison from food, for the benefit of the whole group. Remy has dreams of being a distinguished chef for the benefit of himself and his art. One day in search of a particularly delectable piece of cheese, he is discovered by an aged woman, in the walls of whose house the entire rat colony resides. In her fury, the woman brings out her shotgun (ageing woman with her phallus, the gun), firing willy-nilly and often, determined to rid her home of vermin at all costs—and the entire clan flees to the river. At this point, Remy is separated from the pack as it moves along the flowing waters. Clutching onto a beloved recipe book, his raft, he travels along the stream as it goes underground, unwittingly paddling toward the tunnel that merges with the sewer. As the waters pick up speed, he calls out in question, "Dad?" thereby pronouncing the privileged term, the father, at the very moment he is to plunge into the powerful flow that takes him far from the home of his prehistory and births him to the life he was meant to live: Again, watery tunnels and waste material become the vehicles through which the protagonist must pass in order to become, in order to be.

Consider *Flushed Away*: This time our protagonist, Roddy, is a rather spoiled pet rat with a plummy British accent but with neither mother nor father, he is quite alone. During an altercation with a working-class rat, Roddy is pushed down the toilet and flushed away, only to arrive, through a difficult 'birth' after many turns of the plumbing, in the sewers of London, populated by sewer rats with working class accents, through contact with whom he eventually becomes a kinder, more robust, less lonely and less classist fellow. His birth through the plumbing shows him emerging among raging sewer waters replete with toilet paper and then an orange fish that coyly asks him, 'Have you seen my Dad?' in overt reference to *Finding Nemo*, an intertextual joke we share. Roddy, still carried by the flow of the waters, tumbles over the

edge of an open drain and his body plunges deep below the surface. As he swims upward he moves through an open pair of dentures that snap to as he just escapes their bite. The dentures are gratuitous but for their signification in a relay of associations: water, waste, mouth, teeth, birth canal, *vagina dentata*. He surfaces, gasping for air, eyes closed tight, and grasps the first floating thing his hands encounter. It is long and coarsely textured and dark brown. Here we share our protagonist's terror as a visual joke: he clutches onto what might well be a floating turd and then we – he and the audience – all discover that it is in fact a chocolate candy bar. So why is our Roddy in the sewer? Why *does* the birth scene occur in the shit? And why the vagina dentata he swims through as he rises to the surface?

Allow here one conjecture which might help us understand why sometimes women can be as phobic as men when it comes to mothers: That is, maybe all that veiled misogyny and matriphobia is itself a veil, a veil for those more profound and universal fears: of our birth, our death and the excremental reminders of this every day porosity. Universally we are born and universally we die, this is the greater fear that is hidden by the nastiness of misogyny and matriphobia. Which is to say that not all abjections are created equal: Let me reiterate Kristeva's notion: the abject is that which is neither self nor other: it is not an object as such but that which marks the porosity of the human body, the gateways, the perviousness, of the human subject, and which therefore remind us that we are not as whole as we like to pretend. Kristeva is thinking of all the bodily fluids and wastes which at one moment are part of the self and at the next are outside our bodily selves but still warm with the heat of our living: shit, piss, blood, semen, mucus, vomit. But Kristeva is also talking about the maternal body and about the cadaver, these markers of our most profound porosity – in birth and in death.

Yet even a notion of a hierarchy of abjections and the need to establish autonomy may provide too simple a justification for the death of the mother. Bracha Ettinger[23] posits a 'psychic common cloth', an archaic link between the girl infant and her m/Other. As a model for psychic development, the maternal, and the imbrication that comes within the mother-child dyad, is a threat to the privileged models of the later Oedipal drives and the formation of sexual difference that inform the individual's access to patriarchal culture. Modeling selfhood on the multiple, the imbricated, the interwoven, the interpenetrated that is the pre-Oedipal phase of being confounds the splitting and individuating of subjectivity. And the knowledge of this phase, forgotten by the child, is borne and carried by the mother who remembers: This forbidden memory is what is jettisoned when the mother is killed in narrative film: In a masculine symbolic order, a psychological model that does not rest upon individuation and separation and contest, is a dangerous thing: and that model is what exists in the form I have called *motherchild*. Thus this 'common cloth' is jettisoned over and again at the movies my daughter and I watch.

But the mother returns: dare one say the obvious: she is not only a pod to be discarded, a husk, an old skin left in the fork of a tree, a first phase discarded by the rocket in space, the mother is a human being, to invoke another text, the mother has agency and volition, though to judge by the majority of animated children's movies, you'd never know. Here are a few shocking exceptions: There's Myazaki's girl hero in *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988) whose parents might be banal—and they do transmogrify—but who are both very much alive. And then there's *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) in which the father is gone but beloved, and the mother is warm, kind and supportive. And then there's *Brave* (2012), in which Queen Elinor has a rather complex

[23] Bracha L. Ettinger, "*Fascinance* and the Girl-to-m/Other Matrixial Feminine Difference," in Griselda Pollock, ed., *Psychoanalysis and the Image*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, p 71

and sometimes conflicted but always loving relationship with her daughter, Merida, who, although strongly identified with her father, ultimately loves her mother back. It is remarkable that this is one of the very few films in which the mother character has a name, a speaking relationship with another female character, her daughter no less,[24] and an independent narrative arc that is crucial to the greater resolution of the entire film.

So, the mother does return and the returned mother figure is 'coupled' with other female characters; the mother is adoptive; she is the girl herself; the mother is queer and strange and weird and hybrid. These are mothers by any other name: I'm thinking of the third movie of the Shrek franchise in which all the fairytale princesses rise up, led by Fiona and her ageing mother. I'm thinking of how the eponymous Matilda (1996) from the Roald Dahl movie chooses an adoptive mother, Miss Honey, who is kind and bookish and single and who loves her. I'm thinking here of the character Dory in *Finding Nemo* (2003): Conspicuously voiced by out lesbian celebrity and comedienne, Ellen DeGeneres, Dory is *different*: opposite color, wrong size, goofy, queer, nice, polyglot, forgetful of proper time and place, she hardly retains the name of the father or the son but her circular meanderings save the day. In the end, she occupies the place, if not of the mother, then the m/Other.[25] Thus when Marlin comes to recognize Dory's worth, he too participates in a different set of relays and exchanges that confound the otherwise too neat, heteronormative plot resolution of *Finding Nemo* (2003). His family is made up of himself, his son and Dory who is not coded as a wife but as an autonomous, but loving and queer, almost avuncular, figure. Interestingly Disney is working on the sequel, *Finding Dory* for 2016. Some pundits find that this queerness at the heart of *Finding Nemo* (2003) applies to

[24] See Alison Bechdel, *The Bechdel Test*, retrieved from *http://bechdeltest.com/* February, 2015

[25] Bracha L. Ettinger, op. cit., p 80

Disney as a whole. Indeed, Disney has been described as "an organization that is probably one of the most pro-homosexual organizations in the country."[26] It used to be that Film Studies and Cultural Studies theorists would analyze movies in this way – now the Christian right—with very different motives—is doing the work. Which brings me to *Frozen* (2013), an animated feature that Kevin Swanson[27] believes may be indoctrinating young children into lesbianism and bestiality.

Snow. Snow, blanketing, making everything indistinct, is water in another form. I argue that in the death scene of Bambi's mother, the snowy landscape corresponds to Bambi's undifferentiated prehistory, and that the landscape gains definition as Bambi learns of his mother's death and his profound singularity in the world; the physical landscape doubling the psychic one. Of course, snow is not fluid, so something else is at work here too. We may be snow blinded and numbed and disoriented by its covering ubiquity. And snow is any other name for cold shoulders and ice-queens and frigidity, for the rigid and unyielding form of a woman not interested, the dated descriptors when men had the dictionary. Women know maternal love is warm and wet and fuzzy: Snow and the maternal in juxtaposition only make sense from the paternal point of view: the wife-mother-ice-queen may seem to reject an adult man's romance because she seems to be entirely taken up with her great amour, the child. Perhaps then it was jealousy that hunted and killed Bambi's mother: Ancient drives that express the desire to be rid of she who doesn't need us, of she who can multiply and create anew her beloved, the child, and herself.

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[26] Kevin Swanson, quoted in "'Frozen': Pastor Claims Disney Film Indoctrinates Homosexuality, Bestiality," THR Staff, *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 12, 2014, retrieved from http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/audio-disney-frozen-pastor-kevin-swanson-homosexuality-bestiality-687939

[27] Ibid.

Seven decades after *Bambi* we have seen that the motif of water is still commonly figured to mark out the feminine: So what of the snow in *Frozen* (2013), so full of cold shoulders and ice-queens to freeze the hearts of right-wing pundits and homophobes: *Frozen* is a coming of age story for a pair of sister princesses, the elder of whom, Elsa, has an unusual talent, an unexplained magic power: Elsa can freeze things with her hands. Sometime during their childhood, their mother suffers a watery death: She is shipwrecked in the stormy and engulfing sea, along with their father, the King, but not before he has 'cast a spell' on his eldest daughter by indoctrinating her to believe that her magic, her *difference*, is something to be repressed. Ultimately however the narrative parts ways with convention. The story shows Elsa's point of view and 'true love' turns out to be the relationship between the two sisters, the breach so taboo to Kevin Swanson, our preacher turned cultural theorist.

There's no mother per se, yet Frozen abounds with motifs that are powerful enough to upset the fairytale apple cart: It is written with strong, capable, young women and a masculinity that is partial, fragmented and anxious about the status of its phallic substitutes. Though the narrative sets up the anticipation, turns out the female characters don't need men. The very being of the character of Elsa confounds the conventions of patriarchal power: she is drawn to neither father, nor neighboring prince, nor bureaucrat nor merchant, nor husband. And she has her secret power, hidden only by the thinnest of barriers, a pair of delicate gloves. It is her touch that is of consequence: Her power is haptic, not scopic. As a child, to the delight of herself and her younger sister, she would use her special power to concoct wintry playgrounds, ice-skating rinks and exquisite indoor snowscapes, all within the vast and otherwise rather empty halls of the palace in which they lived. Elsa even conjured an animated snowman named Olaf. In this, the snow of *Frozen* parallels the snow of *Bambi*: Each corresponds to the arrested period in the

children's lives before entering the adult world of order, propriety and historical time. The snowy field of their life is plenitudinous, without boundary or constraint. Though the girls have access to language—they speak—they play outside the bounds of the symbolic order, and their pleasure is pre-sexual delight. The play between the sisters is without instrumentalization; and is replete with what Bracha L. Ettinger[28] calls "asymmetric mutuality", each girl as joyous as the other: their play exists outside the normal strictures of the watchful parent, guardian or servant, outside duty or inhibition. Elsa occupies the positions of mother-father-older sister-younger and it is the very fluidity of the positions she occupies that first confounds convention.

Elsa uses her magic as if to toss the younger Anna in the air. The scene is uncanny: These are the sorts of rough-and-tumble games, albeit without the magic, a man might play with his son. In this she unwittingly takes the place of the father. When an accident occurs during their play and Anna almost freezes to death, Elsa suffers consequences far in excess of her unintentional mistake: "Elsa, what have you done?" her father intones accusingly. Ostensibly for their safety, the King orders that the *Frozen* sisters be kept in isolation, essentially imprisoned in the palace and split from the entire community of their mythic alpine town. They are also forbidden contact with each other – for the rest of their childhood. The once joyous song, "Do you wanna build a snowman?" becomes a melancholy refrain. The king forbids Elsa the use of her powers, commanding her to "Conceal it. Don't feel it". The interdiction has the severity of tone of Bambi's father who finds the wandering waif in the snow and booms, "Your mother can't be with you anymore". That is, the snow is a state before the "name-of-the-father,"[29] a

[28] Bracha L. Ettinger, op. cit., p 72

[29] Alan Sheridan, translator's note, in Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis; The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Book XI, trans. Alan Sheridan, ed., Jacques-Alain Miller, New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998, pp 281-282

place of openness without differentiation, a place prior to the symbolic order. For Bambi, that *non-place/non-time* is the mother-child dyad and for the *Frozen* sisters it is their unbound relation to each other in early childhood. Bambi's mother is killed in order for Bambi to exceed this *non-time/non-space.* In *Frozen*, Elsa suffers a psychic death: she is split from her sister and she is made to become a doubling of herself: the official, controlled, state-sanctioned, proper self as ordered by the wishes of her dead father. Elsa's punishment is self-imposed, since Anna's 'cure' after the accident involves complete amnesia of her prehistory with Elsa. In this we may observe the maternal return: Elsa is like the mother who sets the boundaries but who none-the-less remembers that diffuse state of being that was the time of mothering in the infancy of her child, precisely that which the child must forget and of which the mother, or in this case, Elsa, must never speak: Elsa's *need* to repress her talents and to withhold her memory of a plenitudinous childhood imbricated with her sister's, that she created with her special haptic abilities, puts her squarely on the side of the maternal.

As in many fairytales, upon reaching adolescence their world changes. When Elsa comes of age and is to be coronated Queen of Arendell, it is as if she is already a mature woman, matronly one might say, with hair more white than blonde, solemn, dignified, with the proper bearing of a head of state, again transgressing, by being, *in loco patris*, the displacement of the dead king. Now Elsa has come to age fearful of her powers, believing them to be dangerous and therefore to be hidden from herself as much as from her community, her subjects, her sister. She has been taught that the delight she felt as a child in the magical snow was harmful and wrong: playing with the snow, she was playing with fire; feeling delight in power, she was wreaking havoc on the proper order of things. Throughout her coronation, Elsa is anxious about revealing her (repressed) self and as the celebrations wear on, she finds it increasingly difficult to suppress

her powers. Her sister provides the breaking point: enamored of a handsome prince she has met that day, her first day beyond the palace walls, Anna announces to her sister, the Queen, that she is engaged to marry. Elsa is incensed at her younger sister's impetuous *joie de vivre*—for all its naivety and for all the uninhibited exuberance that Elsa can never allow herself to feel. The sisters quarrel, Elsa's glove comes off, and suddenly, her hand exposed, she uncontrollably freezes everything in her sight, including the town of Arendell. Elsa is at once appalled and furious; the townsmen call her "Monster!" and Sorceress!" and she flees to the highest peak of the surrounding mountains.

The mood changes with the scene: we see a vast range with high and ragged horns barely discernable for their blanket of snow. As strains of piano introduce the song, "Let It Go", the animated feature simulates an aerial arc shot—of a tiny speck on the vast bank of white. Gradually we discern that the speck is a figure, and that the figure is Elsa, smiling, strangely relaxed: The snow and ice become a place of liberty and peace and joy and feeling—all that Elsa has learned to repress. Here too the expansiveness of the snowy landscape invokes a place outside of the ordering strictures of the law of her father, the king. Elsa has become anything but numb.

On Elsa's case, her refusal of the order of the king produces not psychosis or monstrosity but rather a state I see as aligned to Ettinger's notion of the *matrixial*.[30] Ettinger's model for psychological development privileges the child's prehistory, what she describes as "trans-subjective coexistence", of prenatal and early infant bonding between the mother and especially the girl child. She argues that this matrixial early state provides a very different model for the developing self from those models privileged by Freud and his successors: The matrixial phase

[30] Bracha L. Ettinger, op. cit. p 78

emphasizes intersubjectivity, multiplicity, and co-existence, values very different from those that come of Freudian (and post-Freudian) models that privilege individuation, singularity, the drives stemming from sexual difference, and the splitting of the self from the other, and what for Lacan is the 'symbolic'.[31] Here in *Frozen* the two sisters unbounded in their childhood occupy the same plenitudinous non-space as that between/within Bambi and his mother: Of course, as I said earlier, snow is not fluid, so something else is at work here too, in both Bambi and Frozen: Snow and the maternal in juxtaposition only make sense from the paternal point of view: the wife-mother-ice-queen may seem to reject an adult man's romance because she seems to be entirely taken up and with her great amour, the child, or in the case of Elsa and Anna, with their love of each other.

However, if in *Bambi* the snow is the mother's demise, in *Frozen*, we see the ground shift: Elsa experiences snow as a product of her own power and that a power connected to sibling love: eschewing the world that refuses her, she rebuilds an icy Eden, once crafted for herself and her younger sister, but which she now claims for herself alone, a woman in isolation—that is, without the diminishment of society—a woman who is able to come into her selfhood, her pleasures, her talents. She saunters and smiles in the sheer gown of her own invention, its cape icily bejeweled and shimmering, its skirt split to the thigh. However her taste, in the narrative it is hers alone: she chooses for herself with the demeanor of one who is comfortable with her embodied self and who revels in flaunting herself, onanistically, for her own pleasure. But her ice palace is a smooth glass, a mirror, a reflection of an impossible imago, a place so crystalline and perfect it can and must be shattered. It is her goofy, earth-bound, joyous opposite—her sister—who does the shattering by returning her to the fold of sisterly love. Interestingly,

[31] Jacques Lacan, op. cit., pp 279-280

however, it is the character of Elsa who dominates the post-movie merchandising, the figure with whom little girls most often identify.[32]

The film is replete with castration anxiety, and a masculinity that is contingent, fragmentary and anxious about its status: This begins with the opening scene viewed from below the frozen surface of a lake which is then suddenly penetrated by the knives of the ice men, in a rhythmic dance to the song they sing. One of the icemen is our supporting male character, Kristof. Kristof manifests a particular kind of parodic masculinity: he fetishizes the lacquered finish on his sled; he shares 'everything' – and here is the sexual innuendo that Swanson[33] named bestiality – with his 'best friend', the reindeer, Sven; he is somewhat unkempt and foul smelling, though good-natured and well meaning. Kristof is in need of being rescued by Anna on several occasions: from a pack of wolves, from a snow monster, from the general fate of the community. In contrast, the role of Handsome Prince, who would typically save the day by giving a princess True Love's Kiss, is a conniving scoundrel who is ignominiously shipped back to his own kingdom and not before Anna punches him in the face and sends him into the water of the bay—to the crowd's enthusiastic applause. Olaf is the male sidekick, a living snowman, plaything and friend, created by Elsa when she and Anna were children. On the mountain she recreates him, but he lacks a nose, his phallus, until Anna shoves a carrot into his face. Sven the reindeer is constantly trying to eat his nose, the carrot-phallus, or baby unicorn as Olaf first refers to it. Olaf has other body problems throughout the film: his body parts break up, are rearranged, disordered, separated, penetrated by icicles, melted by the warmth of the hearth. Buried in the snow, he

[32] Ellen Byron and Paul Ziobro, 'Elsa Dominates Anna in 'Frozen' Merchandise Sales; Soup, Mouthwash, Dolls and Dresses; Elsa Has Powers and She's Pretty,' *Wall Street Journal*, November 14, 2014, retrieved from http://www.wsj.com/articles/elsa-dominates-anna-in-frozen-merchandise-sales-1415131605
[33] Kevin Swanson, op. cit.

mistakes Kristof's legs for his own, crying repeatedly, "I can't feel my legs!" Olaf is nominally male but as soft as melting snow: he is sentimental, emotional, sweet, sings show tunes, longs for a holiday in the sun: he is weird, if not queer. What *Frozen's* different male types share is their ambiguity and their contingency to the *female* leads whose Happy Ever Afters reside with sisterly love and solidarity.

Frozen (2013) [Screen grab]

Perhaps the shattering glass and ice in the narrative of *Frozen* is the meta-arc of this movie and the ice palace stands in for the glass ceiling: *Frozen* is the first Disney film in its history written by a woman, Jennifer Lee, who also codirected the film with Chris Buck. This fact makes me feel like a flatfooted essentialist.

If Hollywood film typically repeats a successful movie formula over and over again then we may yet see greater numbers of nuanced roles for girls, women and mothers. Geena Davis sadly recounts that this too was the promise of *Thelma and Louise* (1991) – a promise that never came to pass. The enormous financial success of *Frozen*[34] however may bear more fruit, so to speak. That remains to be seen. Children's films and animated features with significant roles for mothers and women have multiplied in the second decade of twenty-first century and will further this inquiry: *How to Train Your Dragon* 2 (2014), *Maleficent* (2014), and the forthcoming

[34] Nancy Byron and Paul Ziobro, op. cit.

Finding Dory (2016) to name a few. How these films impact the psyches of young children is outside the scope of this analysis. I can say, however, that the prevalence of misogynist tropes in children's film of the past has not dampened the spirits of generations of feminists. My concluding question, then, is: what would they do, if they were encouraged?

> *Once upon a time there was a girl child born wise and calm. In time the girl child grew tall. With her long thin fingers and wide hands, she made fine music of her own invention, striking chords and plucking strings and whistling and blowing into pipes and recorders with abandon, a piper who piped away all unhappiness and filled the world with delight and passion. After thirteen magical years, she reached great heights and depths: Tall, she had grown quite dark, and handsome too in her way. But her mood grew darker still, and storm clouds hung upon their sunny skies, and so with lips she blackened dark with gloss and a surly scrutiny she applied to all things, she slumped about her castle as if enchantment were only ever of the wicked kind. Every now and then the sun would filter through but for the most part the days were dark, and her parents were never sure if and when the storm would break and a torrent of invective be unleashed. They may have cringed a little in the shadows of the castle but they never went away, only ever waiting for the music of those earlier, happier times. Still the girl looked and looked about her, reading, watching, saying little but grunting quite a lot. One evening they heard again the shrill tunefulness of their whistling girl and the moon shone brightly upon her glowing face, her pursed lips, her shining eyes: She stared directly at them for the first time in many a moon: She declared she'd seen all the*

pictures of dead mothers, older than Grimm, as old as Odysseus, and that there could be no more. She sat down at the computer, still whistling, and began to write.