

“Something Strange is Happening in the Town of Stepford”

A Thesis on Portrayal of Women in *The Stepford Wives*
(1975, 2004)

By Kristina Dahl



A Thesis Submitted to
The Department of Literature, Area Studies, and European
Languages

UNIVERSITETET I OSLO

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
MA degree
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Kristina Dahl

<http://www.duo.uio.no/>

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Picture on the Previous Page: Paramount Pictures' cover photo for *The Stepford Wives* (2004) DVD.
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Abstract

The thesis presented works from the assumption that films produced in Hollywood are important historical documents that can provide interesting comments on changes in U.S society and culture. Through a comparative analysis of *The Stepford Wives* film from 1975 and its 2004 remake, this thesis aims to examine how changes in genre, plot and overall narrative from the original to the remake reflect public understandings of feminism, and what the lead characters in both movies can reveal about the changing roles of women in American society. My research shows that some of the modifications that were made in order to modernize the story did make the updated version more relatable to a 21st century audience and can be said to reflect a fundamental change in the perceived roles of women in American society. However, my discoveries also reveal that the changes complicated the reading of the underlying message in the remake and shifted the basic premise of the original film from addressing the oppressive nature of a deeply patriarchal society to focusing on conflicting demands of women in 21st century America.

Dedications

I would like to thank Professor Deborah Lynn Kitchen-Døderlein for giving me helpful advice throughout this process.

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1.0 STEPFORD: THE TOWN THAT TIME FORGOT

In the 2012 presidential election in the U.S., the popular press repeatedly invoked the Stepford analogy in a negative manner to describe Mitt Romney's wife, Ann Romney, as a traditional conformist wife.¹ This means that almost 40 years after "Stepford wives" became a coined term it is still frequently used in American media and everyday life to describe a very specific group of women. Ira Levin's novel, *The Stepford Wives*, was published in 1972 telling the story about the dark side of a seemingly quiet white American suburb where people lived as though it was still the 1950s. The intention was for it to be part of a reaction against the overwhelming resistance the second wave of the women's liberation movement met in the U.S. The phrase "Stepford wife" was employed as the absolute counterpart of modern liberated women and became a synonym for white women of privilege who practiced absolute conformity to gender norms and were obedient to their husbands' will. "Stepford wives" is often used to describe those women who present themselves as models of domestic obedience being docile, uniform and attractive but lacking personal thought and individuality. They belong to the private sphere, the home and the suburbs, and they dedicate their lives to taking care of the house and the family. A popular conception is that these perfect housewives are the result of years and years of patriarchal oppression and that the women the liberation movement aimed to free them. Three years after the novel was released, Bryan Forbes' produced a horror science fiction filmic adaptation given the same name and the phrase reentered social debates. The message in the film was close to of the novel and it commented on the current situation of white middle class American women who wanted to pursue a life outside the house but was denied it by a deeply patriarchal society. Almost thirty years later, in 2004, a remake directed by Frank Oz was released in cinemas but this time around the subject was the career woman and the challenges she faced in a post-feminist society. Once again, the concept of Stepford wives resurfaced and became a well-known and discussed topic in popular discourse. Most people are likely to recognize the expression "Stepford Wife," but not many knows where it came from. This thesis aims to change that.

1.1 RECEPTION

¹ Nathaniel Rich, "American Dreams: "The Stepford Wives" by Ira Levin," The Daily Beast, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/08/24/american-dreams-the-stepford-wives-by-ira-levin.html>.

Neither of *The Stepford Wives* films became instant box office hits. The original film was only shown in the U.S. and grossed a meager \$4,000,000. This is little compared to other controversial films that were released around the same time such as the Blaxploitation film *Shaft* (1971) which grossed \$12 million and the horror film *Carrie* (1976) which grossed an impressive \$26 million. One reason for why it failed to become a hit might have been because the audiences seemed to struggle with understanding the film's message. On one hand, some critics praised *The Stepford Wives* (1975) as the first American film to address the subject of feminism and the women's liberation movement directly and regarded it as "the only viable, intelligently, conceived movie about women and their future made in the past decade."² On the other hand, many others condemned it as insulting women and being demeaning towards men.³ The perhaps most surprising negative critique came from prominent feminists such as Betty Friedan who deemed it "rip-off of the women's movement"⁴ and claimed that it was parodying and flattening feminist arguments rather invoking them.⁵ Friedan's negative judgment of the film is particularly interesting considering that her book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) is supposed to be the heart of the narrative. *The Feminine Mystique* addressed the issue known as "the problem that has no name." This refers to the widespread dissatisfaction, high level of anxiety and low self-esteem that Friedan observed amongst many American housewives in the fifties and sixties. In her book she attempts to explain the cause of women's misery. Friedan basically blamed educators, Freudian psychologists, and functional sociologists for forcing women into passive domesticity and out of the public sphere.⁶ Her interpretation of the film that was meant to further the very thing she believed in shows one of the ways in which feminism is a complicated concept. Depending on people's backgrounds and beliefs, interpretations will most likely vary. I am sure that as a Norwegian woman my understanding today of the 1975 film's message about feminism is probably somewhat different from an American woman watching it in 1975. First of all there is a cultural difference seeing how I have never lived in the U.S and so I have not experienced the result of centuries of feminist influence first hand. Second, the time difference of almost thirty

² Lilly Ann Boruzkowski, "The Stepford Wives: The Re-Created Woman," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 32 (1987), <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC32folder/stepfordWives.html>.

³ Elyce Rae Helford, "'It's a Rip-Off of the Women's Movement': Second-Wave Feminism and *the Stepford Wives*," in *Disco Divas: Women and Popular Culture in the 1970s*, ed. Sherrie S. Inness (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), p. 25.

⁴ Judy Klemensrud, "Feminists Recoil at a Film Designed to Relate to Them," *New York Times* 26(1975), p. 28.

⁵ Kara Peruccio, "Big Screen, Little Boxes: Hollywood Representations of the Suburban Housewife, 1960-1975," *History Matters* (2011), p. 88.

⁶ Anna Krugovoy Silver, "The Cyborg Mystique: 'The Stepford Wives' and Second Wave Feminism," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 1/2 (2002), p. 63.

years enables contemporary scholars to see the film in a new light due to more recent changes in women's status in American society. Although the film did not become a hit at the time of its release it has become a cult classic over the years and an important historical document about the differing views on the feminist movement in the seventies.

The remake had a budget of approximately \$100,000,000 but flopped and grossed no more than \$96 million worldwide.⁷ People seemed to have high expectations of the film seeing how in 2004 it won three golden Trailer Awards.⁸ After its release in cinemas, the film was slaughtered by critics who said it was too ambiguous and contradictory to provide any serious social commentary. Another thing they reacted to was the change in genre from horror to comedy which they claimed makes it hard to take the remake seriously. The perhaps most positive response it evoked was from Roger Ebert who disliked the choice of the horror genre in the original and preferred the comedic remake: "Now here's a version that tilts the other way, and I like it a little better."⁹

1.2 THESIS DESCRIPTION

The main question I try to answer in this thesis is: "How do the structural changes from the original to the remake reflect public understandings of feminism and what can the lead characters in the films reveal about the changing roles of women in American society?" By comparing the content of the original 1975 film and the more recent 2004 remake, I will examine whether movies can be considered important cultural and historical artifacts that tell us something about the society that produces them. The structural changes I focus on are changes in mainly genre, plot and overall narrative. I also intend to examine some of the lead characters and the ways they reflect the perceived roles of women in 1975 compared to in 2004. I chose write my thesis on *The Stepford Wives* films because little scholarly work has been done on them and I find the subject of portrayal of women in film intriguing. It is also a result of my growing interest in gender and film studies with emphasis on the historical development of the role of women in American culture. I was inspired by Ida Marie Jahr's thesis "Better Not Sleep Under Water" which gave me the first thorough introduction to the concept of remakes, and "Male imitations: a look at gender performance and the representation of masculinity in The O.C" by Per Aubrey Tenden which is mainly concerned

⁷ All the numbers have been retrieved from the website www.the-numbers.com.

⁸ The Golden Trailer Award is given out based on a film's preview: the brief advertisement for the movie.

⁹ Roger Ebert, "The Stepford Wives," <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-stepford-wives-2004>. (Accessed on 28.10.2013.)

with gender theory and new definitions of masculinity. Because of limited space my research is centered on American cinema, society and culture.

1.3 SOURCES AND METHOD

My primary sources in the thesis are *The Stepford Wives* from 1975 and its remake from 2004. Film critics tend to use methods that have been developed primarily for critiquing texts when analyzing their object.¹⁰ Bill Nichols argued that scholars often tend to treat films as texts due to how “*Text* conveys a greater sense of methodological exactitude than the terms *movie* or *film*, partly because it implies that films are manifestations of certain characteristics found across a range of works that many non-film-specific methods are adept at analyzing.”¹¹ In a textual analysis it is important to focus on the individual elements such as specific scenes and themes that make up a film’s meaning, yet it is also crucial to understand the social, political, and historical framework that made up the context which affected the film’s content. Douglas Kellner emphasizes that interpreting cinematic texts should be considered a transdisciplinary exercise that “involves the use of film theory, textual analysis, social history, political analysis and ideology critique, effects analysis, and other modes of cultural criticism” and stresses how it is therefore important to “move from text to context.”¹² I have chosen to employ the method of textual analysis but also to include secondary sources such as interviews, reviews, critiques, newspaper articles and textbooks to create a more nuanced analysis and examine whether the two films can tell us something about the change in women’s social status in the U.S. from 1975 to 2004. In chapter three, which is made up of the character analysis part of the thesis, I make use of the Judith Butler’s theory on performing gender in order to examine the ways in which the characters have changed in the films.

1.4 SYNOPSIS OF *THE STEPFORD WIVES* FILMS

At first it might seem like structure and main plot the two films are quite similar. But what makes them interesting is that the female characters have been changed radically and the remake has a profoundly different ending.

¹⁰ Bill Nichols, ed. *Movies and Methods Volume Ii* (Los Angeles University of California Press, 1985)., p. 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹² Douglas Kellner, "The Frankfurt School and British Cultural Studies," in *Alternative Legacies of Cultural Critique*, ed. Jeffrey Thomas Nealen and Caren Irr (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002)., p. 43.

1.4.1 THE STEPFORD WIVES (1975)

Joanna Eberhart (Kathrine Ross), a young wife, mother and hobby photographer, moves to Stepford, Connecticut from Manhattan, New York with her husband Walter (Peter Masterson) and their two children. She experiences loneliness early on due to the Stepford women being more interested in discussing housework than having intellectual conversations. Fortunately for Joanna, she becomes friends with Bobbie Markowe (Paula Prentiss) who also finds the women's behavior suspicious. Together with trophy wife Charmaine (Tina Louise) they decide to organize a Women's Liberation consciousness-raising group. However, the sessions turn out to be a complete failure because the women of Stepford appear to have no other concerns than what cleaning products are most efficient and whether or not to use starch when ironing. When Charmaine suddenly changes and becomes subservient and compliant to her husband, Joanna and Bobbie start investigating reasons for why the women are so docile. They are frightened when it is discovered that all the women were once strong female characters quite supportive of liberal social policies.

The two friends start looking for houses elsewhere, but when Joanna comes back from the city after a very fruitful meeting with a photo gallery it is already too late. Like Charmaine, Bobbie has also changed and no longer has any intention of leaving the town. Fearing for her life, Joanna panics and Walter convinces her to go see a psychiatrist to whom she explains that she believes the Stepford men are doing something to change their wives. After hearing what she has to say, the psychiatrist advises her to find her children and leave Stepford as soon as she can. But, when Joanna returns to the town her kids are gone and she and Walter lash out at each other before getting into a physical fight. When she eventually manages to escape she hurries to Bobbie's house believing that the kids might be there. In a desperate attempt to find out if her best friend is still human, Joanna stabs Bobbie with a kitchen knife. When she does not bleed or show any signs of pain, Joanna's greatest fear is confirmed – her only ally has been turned into a robot.

Still searching for her children, Joanna goes to the Stepford Men's Association mansion and is tricked by the Dale "Diz" Coba (Patrick O'Neal), the leader of the association and the brains behind the Stepford operation. She tries to escape but is lead into a room that is an exact replica of her own bedroom. Here she is forced to confront the robot replacement which is meant to be an "improved" version of herself. The last thing she sees is the black and empty eyes of the robot before it is suggested that the real Joanna is strangled by her double with a pair of pantyhose. In the last scene the new Joanna is walking calmly along the isles in

the supermarket with the other wives and the final shot focuses on her eyes symbolizing the completion of her transformation into a true Stepford wife.¹³

1.4.2 THE STEPFORD WIVES (2004)

Successful career woman, Joanna Eberhart (Nicole Kidman), is the network president of the television channel EBS. She has just finished the promos for two new reality shows, but her life is turned upside down when one of the contestants tries to shoot her because he feels she has ruined his life. Fearing bad publicity the network fires her and as a result she suffers a complete nervous breakdown. She asks her husband, Walter (Matthew Broderick), if they can move somewhere far away and he finds them a house in Stepford, Connecticut. They are greeted by the radiant Welcome Wagon Lady Claire Wellington (Glenn Close) who shows them around their new, hyper-modern home. Joanna becomes good friends with eccentric best-selling author, Bobbie Markowitz (Bette Midler), and the colorful gay democrat Roger Bannister (Roger Bart). Together they realize that something is not right in the seemingly perfect town of Stepford where the men are techies and the women beautiful compliant servants. While the men spend most of their time in the secluded mansion that hosts the Stepford Men's Association, the women are expected to stay in the house cooking and cleaning, hang out at the Simply Stepford Day Spa exercising or attend the women's book club. At the same time they should keep their appearances flawless and wait for their husbands to come home so they can wait on them hand and foot.

When Joanna discovers that both Roger and Bobbie have been changed she storms into the Men's Club and here the dark secret of Stepford is revealed. The men have been implanting nano-chips into their wives' brains in order to make them subservient and docile. Joanna begs Walter to not go through with changing her but it seems her fate is already sealed. The next time we see Joanna is at the supermarket grocery shopping. This particular scene is almost identical to that of the original film and the audiences are led to believe that Joanna is now a perfect housewife like the rest of them.

This is where the remake truly separates itself from the original because, first of all, it turns out that Claire is the brains behind the whole Stepford scheme. Secondly, Walter could not go through with Joanna's transformation and so she has just been pretending to be a happy homemaker. Together they have secretly plotted to destroy the Stepford-illusion from within by deactivating the nano-chips implanted in the wives' brains. One by one, the women regain

¹³ "Synopsis for *the Stepford Wives* (1975)," http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0073747/synopsis?ref_=ttpl_pl_syn.

their consciousness. Mike Coha (Christopher Walken) attempts to attack Walter, but Joanna is faster and hits him on the head with a candlestick. His head falls off and the room gasps as it is revealed that Mike is a robot Stepford man. In Claire's longing for "better times", she has created nano-chips that make it possible to modify and control people's behavior and also her own ideal man. When confronted by Joanna she claims she did it in order to return to what she sees as "a time where men were men and women were cherished and lovely."¹⁴ Claire's tries to kiss her decapitated robot husband one last time and is electrocuted. The scene ends with her lying on the floor embracing the head of her significant other. Six months later, Joanna, Bobbie and Roger appear on the Letterman show to talk about their success after "outing" the Stepford community. In the final scene we see the men pushing trolleys and grocery-shopping in proper Stepford-style while receiving orders from a woman over the loudspeaker.¹⁵

From the two summaries we can see how the remake differs from the original in some key aspects. First of all, the Joanna character has been remodeled from being a hobby photographer to president of a television network. Second, an entirely new plot twist has been added in which a woman is responsible for the fates of the couples that arrive in Stepford. Third, in the original film the wives are killed but in the remake they return to their old selves. And fourth, a gay couple has been added to the story.

1.5 STRUCTURE

The purpose of this first chapter has been to introduce the subject and explain why I have chosen to write my thesis on this topic. I have included a section on how the films were received at the time of release to show that movies do not necessarily have to be box-office hits to be of historical importance. As was the case with the first *The Stepford Wives*, acknowledgement and appreciation might come with time. The second chapter is more concerned with providing a theoretical framework for the thesis including the differences between Hollywood and American culture, arguing why films should be studied as historical documents, placing the remake into a fitting category and theory on gender as performance. Chapter three addresses major changes in structure and narrative with particular emphasis on the change in genre from science fiction horror to dark comedy, the setting, the major plot twist, incoherence in the remake and the new minority in the second film. I aim to examine

¹⁴ Frank Oz, *The Stepford Wives* (United States: Paramount Pictures, 2004).

¹⁵ For more information on the synopsis of the two films see www.imdb.com.

the ways the filmmakers' choices have had consequences for the two films' messages about popular understandings of feminism and the feminist movement. In chapter four my main concern is analyzing some of the lead characters to examine the ways they reveal a change in the role of women in American society. I have chosen to focus on the protagonist Joanna (1975, 2004), Claire (2004), the lead male characters Walter (1975, 2004), and Dis (1975) and Mike (2004). An analysis of some of the major themes of oppression and body politics has also been included because they arguably reflect a shift in focus in the films and the ways the different stages of the women's liberation movement has impacted the content. Chapter five contains a summary of my main findings, conclusions and possible further research topics.

2.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Doing a comparative analysis of two Hollywood films requires some background information on what Hollywood is and what such films might represent. The aim of this chapter is to convey why mainstream Hollywood movies, such as *The Stepford Wives*, can be of interest to people who study North-American history and culture. I will begin with explaining the difference between American and Hollywood culture and illustrate why it might be detrimental to claim that they are the same thing. The next part builds on this and is dedicated to arguing that films should rather be considered an important part of the American cultural heritage because they can reveal certain things about the society that produces them. The second *The Stepford Wives* film is a remake of the original from 1975 and I will attempt to explain what remakes are and argue that there is more to them than being a way for production companies to make quick money. The main focus of this thesis is how women are portrayed in the two films and so the last part of the chapter focuses on Judith Butler's famous theory on gender as performance which will later be applied to the character analysis.

2.1 THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AMERICAN AND HOLLYWOOD CULTURE

Raymond Williams, the author of *Keywords* claims that "culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language"¹⁶ and because the word itself is old the meaning has changed over time. Theorists have struggled to agree on a set definition due to the complicated nature of the term and the fact that it has plural meanings.¹⁷ The first meaning is in the agricultural sense - to cultivate something – the idea of people's culture being something organic. A more recent interpretation is to put "high" in front of it and understand culture as being civilizing and building on intellectual and artistic achievements. In this sense, an example of a cultivated person is someone who listens to opera and goes to the ballet. Another more recent definition is "popular" culture, the category in which we would place films such as *The Stepford Wives*. Richard Waterhouse, drawing on famous historian Lawrence Levine, proposed a definition of popular culture for post-industrial

¹⁶ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, 2nd ed. (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1983), p. 87.

¹⁷ Tim Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (Berg Publishers, 2002), p. 12.

societies where it is considered that which is “widely practiced, watched, heard and read, generally accepted by the majority.”¹⁸

When analyzing American films it is important not to assume that Hollywood culture is equivalent to American culture. The danger of big-scale productions is that they all display similar images and stereotypes, and we begin to understand them as reality that again affects the ways we think about the world.¹⁹ Ross provides an interesting example of how many movies in the 1920s, the 1980s, and I would like to add the early 21st century based on the remake of *The Stepford Wives* (2004), portrayed women who chose careers over family as unhappy and unwomanly. Whether the “reality” the film display is right or wrong is not important. What matters is that they affect us and what member of the female audience would want to pursue a career after repeatedly seeing on screen that women who did this ended up feeling miserable.²⁰ People, perhaps especially foreigners such as myself, seem to have a tendency of thinking that what they see in Hollywood movies truthfully represents every aspect of American society. However, one should not forget that films are merely portrayals and depictions of a constructed reality. The reality we observe on the cinema screen has been shaped and carefully selected by a small elite of movie producers. One could argue that films are a way for commercial enterprises, such as Hollywood, to sell an idea of American culture to the masses.²¹ Craig et al. emphasized in their study that movies are influenced by “the writer’s view, the director’s vision, and the actor’s interpretation of the script”²² They therefore remain influenced by the opinions and ideas of individuals and do not necessarily represent an entire country.

Large studio productions have the power to confirm or challenge ideas of American life. The suburb as depicted in *The Stepford Wives* (1975) attempts to discredit the popular myth in U.S. society where the secluded suburbs have tended to represent the American dream of prosperity and upward mobility. The 2004 version focuses more on challenging the either-or mentality that a woman must dedicate herself entirely to her career or she must be a housewife. Both movies confirm that there is a clear division of gender roles in the U.S, but the underlying message is that it is unfair towards women. In this sense they also challenge the traditional separation of male and female spheres. Still, there are many aspects of

¹⁸ Michelle Arrow, *Welcome to Mhis365*, (Macquarie University: 2013).

¹⁹ Steven J. Ross, ed. *Movies and American Society* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2002)., p. 9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²¹ Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life.*, p. 13.

²² C. Samuel Craig, William H. Greene, and Susan P. Douglas, "Culture Matters: Consumer Acceptance of U.S. Films in Foreign Markets," *Journal of International Marketing* 13, no. 4 (2005)., p. 81.

American life that are not dealt with in the movies. U.S. culture is much more complex than what can be conveyed by one or two Hollywood films.

2.2 FILMS AS CULTURAL ARTIFACTS

Instead of understanding Hollywood films as correct representations of American life, they can be studied as important historical documents that provide information about social change, political debates and other current events. The question of whether analyzing American movies can be helpful when trying to decipher certain social structures in the U.S. has been asked by many scholars and professionals. Initially, people are generally more inclined to approve or condemn a Hollywood film based on its entertainment value rather than its cultural value. However, these reactions are based on experiences audiences have had with other films that have, effectively, created a vault of cultural representations with which they are familiar. When trying to establish the cultural and historical value of Hollywood film, scholars often say that they reflect or interpret what goes on in a society. Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner argued that we find films fascinating because they portray “the extremes of anxiety, tension, hope, and fear undergone” when a culture undergoes “social change”.²³ They back up this claim by referring to films after 1967 as reflecting “significant shifts in national mood and national self-image” due to social movements, losing the war in Vietnam and political controversy such as the Watergate scandal.²⁴ None of *The Stepford Wives* films are realistic in the sense that they depict American society in a truthful manner. After all, they include elements such as robots and brain-microchips. It is important to remember that movies such as these are meant to be fiction, not documentaries.

A belief amongst scholars is that more recent movies, compared to older films, are much more liberal in their character depictions. Powers, Rothman & Rothman found that female characters from 1976 to 1990 had changed significantly in terms of how they were portrayed on the screen and that they seemed to have “adopted behaviors and occupations once limited to men.”²⁵ Compared to in earlier decades, in the late 20th century it was not uncommon for women characters to be presented as successful business women. Although *The Stepford Wives* films are not studied by Powers, Rothman & Rothman, they can also be

²³ Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 7.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²⁵ Stephen Powers, David J. Rothman, and Stanley Rothman, *Hollywood's America: Social and Political Themes in Motion Pictures* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1996), p. 169.

considered evidence of this development through the Joanna character which starts out as a modest hobby photographer in 1975 and evolves into a powerful television executive in 2004.

The feminist film critic and author, Molly Haskell, stated that “Movies are one of the clearest and most accessible of looking glasses into the past, being both cultural artifacts and mirrors.”²⁶ She links this to what she refers to as “the big lie” in Hollywood where films have traditionally portrayed women as inferior to men by labelling them as “the weaker sex.”²⁷ In this respect the original *The Stepford Wives* (1975) and the remake make an interesting case study of the changing roles of women in U.S. society because in the updated 2004 version the gender roles have been reversed. The men feel emasculated because they feel they have become “the girl” in their relationships. While Haskell is saying that films do represent reality to some extent, I believe it is important to remember that when employing the metaphor of mirroring the image or depiction provided might not be an exact replica of what is being reflected. What you see in the mirror is always inverted and sometimes even augmented, scaled down, or exaggerated. *The Stepford Wives* films, perhaps the first one more than the second, make an effort to provide social commentary by employing these techniques. One can therefore conclude that while films might not be intended as exact replicas of contemporary society, they are more likely to outline or amplify important political issues, current debates and concerns in a given society.

One way of understanding the kind of power the film industry has is looking at the way cinema can make people think differently about themselves. Steven J. Ross proposed that movies have “simultaneously reflected *and* shaped changes in American society.”²⁸ Furthermore, he also claims that audiences themselves are changed by what they see on the screen because they are influenced by dominant representations of behavior and appearances. Not only do films have an impact on the ways we think about politics, they have an impact on the ways we choose to present ourselves to the world. Nevertheless, Ross also claimed that “movies do more than simply show us how to dress, how to look, or what to buy. They teach us how to think about race, gender, class, ethnicity, and politics.”²⁹ The ways they do this is by breaking down ideas such as feminism and making them into images that are easier to understand. Although deciphering the link between film and reality is a difficult task there is no doubt that Hollywood has much power in terms of what political and social causes the

²⁶ Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974), p. xxi.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²⁸ Ross, *Movies and American Society.*, p. 1.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

public should focus on. The way movies represent aspects of a given culture has consequences for how viewers perceive the society they live in. An example in the context of this thesis could be how *The Stepford Wives* (1975) seems to emphasize certain aspects of the intensely political women's liberation movement (oppression and the need for gender equality) while giving less attention to others (integration of minority groups.) After watching the movie the audiences are likely to understand feminism as more relevant to white middle-class women than African American working women due to all the lead characters being white. The emphasis in the films is a result of conscious choices made by the filmmakers and they do have an impact on the ways which the audiences leaving the cinema construct their own ideas of what feminism is. The ways films can promote certain ideologies while at the same time changing and directing what political issues people should focus on, strengthens the argument that Hollywood can be considered one of the most powerful producer and maintainers of cultural representations today.

2.3 REMAKES

A popular claim is that remakes are first and foremost made for economic purposes. In the article "What Does It Mean, Mr. Holmes?" Manchel quotes Sochacks who claimed that "film" should be understood as "a commercial product made in the context of American capitalism."³⁰ What this means is that what ends up on the screen is very much influenced by economic factors. Ever since the beginning of cinema, maximizing profit and minimizing risk has been important to filmmakers. Remakes are cheaper to produce because they enable filmmakers to make movies without having to pay for an original script. And as an additional bonus, the fame of the original film can offer free publicity for the remake.³¹ It is no secret that in the current myth-making machine we call Hollywood; how much money can be made often counts for more than what impact the film can make.³²

Despite this, remakes can be valuable to study because they often provide us with the opportunity to examine developments in one or more cultures by crossing boundaries such as time and space. For a remake to be successful, the culture of the original film it is based on and the culture in which the new version is made must vary in time as in *The Thing from Another Planet* (1951) and *The Thing* (1982), *Cape Fear* (1962, 1992) and *The Stepford*

³⁰ Frank Manchel, "What Does It Mean, Mr. Holmes?: An Approach to Film Study," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (2003), p. 70.

³¹ Ida Marie Jahr, "Better Not Sleep under Water: A Comparison of Two Norwegian Films and Their American Remakes" (University of Oslo, 2005), p. 10.

³² Manchel, "What Does It Mean, Mr. Holmes?: An Approach to Film Study.", p, 70.

Wives (1975, 2004). Or in space as happens when cross-cultural remakes are made like with the American movie *West Side Story* (1961) and the Hindi version of it *Josh* (2000).³³ Robert B. Ray suggested that a good adaptation or/and remake is supposed to be a “citation grafted into a new context and thereby inevitably refunctioned ... [and] disseminated” and not “a faded imitation of a superior, authentic original.”³⁴ *The Stepford Wives* (2004) does reflect broader changes in contemporary discourse about the changing status of women. The women’s liberation movement has resulted in new thoughts about gender roles and proposes a new way of understanding the concept of feminism through visible developments in genre, characters and themes. Remakes such as *The Stepford Wives* (2004) are also interesting because by keeping they title they encourage the audiences to appreciate the differences between the updated version and the original. In this way the film generates a sort of “double pleasure” by reminding us of the initial movie and presenting a different interpretation with new twists.³⁵

A common way of understanding the practice of remaking has been to create different categories in which each type of reworking is put. Michael B. Druxman did so in *Make it Again, Sam: A Survey of Movie Remakes*, one of the most comprehensive investigations of Hollywood’s practice of remaking. Based on his research where he analyzed remade movies that had borrowed more than one element from its predecessor, he outlined three main categories of remakes; the disguised remake, the direct remake and the non-remake. The disguised remake takes a literary property and either updates it with minimal change, or retitles and disguises it by creating new settings and characters. The new film does not try to draw attention to any earlier versions. In the direct remake a property may undergo some alterations, but the new movie does not try to hide that is based on an earlier version. Last, the non-remake usually shares only the title of a familiar property while the plot is entirely new.³⁶ Harvey Roy Greenberg further developed Druxman’s categorization to include locating directors’ personal motivation for creating remakes. He labeled the first category the “acknowledged close remake” and here the original film is replicated with little change. The viewer is informed of the previous movie’s narrative and characters and staying true to the original script is often a strong selling point. Second, there is the “acknowledged transformed

³³ Kine Engen Høglid, "From Hollywood to Bollywood: A Thesis on Film Remakes across Cultural Boundaries" (University of Oslo, 2013).

³⁴ Robert B. Ray, "Film and Literature," in *How a Film Theory Got Lost and Other Mysteries in Cultural Studies* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2001)., p. 127.

³⁵ Andrew Horton and Stuart Y. McDougal, eds., *Play It Again, Sam: Retakes on Remakes* (California: University of California Press, 1998)., p. 6.

³⁶ Constantine Verevis, *Film Remakes* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006)., p. 7.

remake” where the original film is openly mentioned as a source, but how it is mentioned varies from small screen credit to using it in ad campaigns to promote the new version. Characters, plot, time, and setting are also transformed to a greater degree than in the acknowledged close remake. Third is the “unacknowledged disguised remake” which differs quite a bit from the two previous categories. Here major alterations are made in terms of time, plot, characters, setting, and even genre. It is a disguised remake because the audience is not informed about the original.³⁷ Thomas Leitch added yet another category and presented four stances a remake could adopt; the “readaptation” ignores earlier cinematic adaptations of a well-known literary work and treat them as inconsequential; the “update” transform an original text in some obvious way, usually by creating a new setting or adopting standards of realism in order to criticize the original as dated; the “homage” pays tribute to earlier films and tries to revive them instead of trying to take their place; and the “true remake” admires its original so much it tries to annihilate it.³⁸

Placing the 2004 *The Stepford Wives* remake into the different categories is a bit of a challenge because while it stays true to the main plot of the original film, the filmmakers have added a whole new plot twist as well. The stereotypes of the characters are basically the same with perfect housewives and sloppy career women. However, one can argue that the differences between them have been enhanced and radicalized to a degree where you can barely recognize the original Joanna and Bobbie in the updated versions of them. It would therefore seem reasonable to place the remake in Druxman’s “direct remake” category because there is no doubt that the film is based on an earlier version. Greenberg’s “acknowledged transformed remake” also seems appropriate due to how visible changes have been made in plot and characters. And last, Leitch’s “update” seems fitting because in the new *Stepford wives* movie, which has been made a comedy, the filmmakers assumed that the paranoia that pervades the original film would be considered outdated by contemporary audiences.

2.4 PERFORMING GENDER

³⁷ Horton and McDougal, *Play It Again, Sam: Retakes on Remakes*.

³⁸ Thomas M. Leitch, "Twice-Told Tales: The Rhetoric of the Remake," *Literature Film Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (1990)., p. 142-146.

Both *The Stepford Wives* films build on female stereotypes in order to reduce a three-dimensional reality to one-dimensional characters and construct specific images of women.³⁹ Stereotypes are a common feature in Hollywood films because they are easily recognizable and convince the audiences that they contain a “kernel of truth.”⁴⁰ In the 1975 film the modest feminist is contrasted with the perfect housewife. In the remake, however, the modest feminist has been transformed into a neurotic career-woman while the housewives go through less obvious changes. The lead female characters in the films reflect the different ways in which women have conducted their gender traditionally and that these performances have changed over time. They also reveal that some performances tend to be more socially accepted than others and that this has consequences for those who believe that the women do not necessarily have to be subordinate to men.

Discussions on what constitutes the quintessential woman often revolve around questions about how we choose to define gender. In 1987, Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman published the groundbreaking essay “Doing Gender” which soon became a core concept in sociology and gender studies. In the essay they argued that fixed understandings of natural sex based on reproductive functions were becoming more and more problematic. They also broke with scholarly tradition by claiming that to simply refer to the notion gender roles for explaining differences in how men and women behaved was no longer considered adequate. One of their main arguments was that gender had to be understood as “(...) a routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishments.”⁴¹ Theorists have tended to separate the two notions of “having” and “doing” gender by claiming that while the first one is widely understood as a static condition, the latter constantly changes as society develops. Doing gender is said to involve “a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine “natures.””⁴² From this we understand that, according to West and Zimmerman, people are not born with gender but rather that gender is produced when people enforce and repeat socially constructed norms for behavior. There is a constant pressure of living up to socially predetermined ideals of how one should do gender and society has its expectations of what constitutes feminine and masculine behavior. The differences between the two categories of feminine and masculine are supported by the dividing of women’s and men’s labor and the

³⁹ Myra Macdonald, *Representing Women: Myths of Femininity in the Popular Media* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), p. 13.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁴¹ Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, “Doing Gender,” *Gender & Society* 1, no. 2 (1987), p. 126.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 126.

separation of spheres in which the claim is that while women belong to the private (home, suburbs), men belong to the public (work, city). The authors emphasize that we are taught the appropriate gender roles from a very early age and because of this socially constructed gender differences are often understood as facts.⁴³ They also discuss how individuals are aware that punishment will ensue if they transgress these lines.⁴⁴

West and Zimmerman's work was clearly of inspiration to feminist theorist Judith Butler. She also claims gender to be something constituted through social interaction. But, unlike West and Zimmerman, Butler interprets gender as more of a choice and "a conscious, chosen performance, than something individuals just do within everyday contexts."⁴⁵ By arguing that doing gender is an act she considers it a chosen, conscious performance rather than repetition of internalized norms.⁴⁶ Relating to this interpretation of how gender is constituted, in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Inversion of Identity*, the main argument is that "doing" or performing gender means that women constantly adjust themselves and strives towards an ever-changing ideal of what it means to be feminine. Echoing Simone de Beauvoir who once said that "one is not born, but, rather *becomes* a woman"⁴⁷, Butler continues the tradition of understanding gender as not a stable category but that "the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time."⁴⁸ Like West and Zimmerman, she believes that when someone refuses to adhere to these socially constructed ideals they will be perceived as odd or abnormal by others. In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" from 1988, Butler states that there are some kinds of acts that we interpret as if they express a certain "gender core or identity"⁴⁹ and that acts like these tend to express either conformity to a socially constructed gender identity or to challenge that expectation. As I will argue in chapter four, *The Stepford Wives* films seem to embrace that performing your gender in a different way than what people might expect it can initiate both obvious and indirect punishments. Performing gender in accordance with socially and historically

⁴³ Ibid., p. 142.

⁴⁴ Per Aubrey Bugge Tenden, "Male Imitations: A Look at Gender Performance and the Representation of Masculinity in the O.C." (University of Oslo, 2007)., p. 15.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 16.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 17.

⁴⁷ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988)., p. 519.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 523.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 527.

constructed norms, on the other hand, confirms and reassures everyone that there is “an essentialism of gender identity after all.”⁵⁰

2.5 CHAPTER CONCLUSIONS

Movies, a form of popular culture, can be considered a looking glass into the past mirroring some of the developments a culture, and the people in it, has gone through. The example in this thesis is the two *The Stepford Wives* films and how they can be said to reflect the changing roles of women in American society from the mid-1970s to the early 2000s. Films made in Hollywood might have entertainment as a primary goal, yet as seen in this chapter they remain important historical documents for those who study aspects of North-American culture. Movies created in the U.S. are imbedded with historical meaning because while they might not give an exact account of every aspect of American life they provide thoughts about the society in which they are produced. Remakes made in the same country as the film they are based on have a reputation of being a result of filmmakers wanting to earn fast money and not caring as much about the end product. This is partly true seeing that shooting a remake means not having to pay for an original script and it is possible to profit on drawing free publicity from the original version. Yet, as with *The Stepford Wives* (1975, 2004), they also enable people to study the different ways a given culture has changed over time. Remakes that fall in the categories “direct remake”, “acknowledged close remake” and “update” do not try to hide that they are based on an earlier movie. What makes these categories particularly interesting to scholars is that instead of competing with the original film they aim to modernize a story or revive interest in it. *The Stepford Wives* (2004) made the descriptor “Stepford wife” re-enter social debates and it was discovered that the term still is relevant in the 21st century. The female characters in the films are presented as contrasting stereotypes and Butler’s theory of gender as performance seems like a good starting point for analyzing how women are portrayed and how these portrayals reflecting changes in women’s role in the U.S.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 528.

3.0 FILM ANALYSIS PART I: GENRE AND PLOT TWIST

My aim with this chapter is to examine how the changes in genre and plot made from the original to the remake reflect the ways *The Stepford Wives* (1975, 2004) can contribute to negotiating the meaning of women's role in American culture and finding out if the films can be said to mirror shifts in public understandings of feminism.

The 1975 film begins in medias res with Joanna getting ready to move from the city to suburbs. From her body language it seems as though moving away from Manhattan was not her idea. As the family gets into the car a man carrying a blindfolded mannequin captures Joanna's attention and she begins photographing the scenario. When her husband, Walter, gets into the car one of the children says that "Daddy, I just saw a man carrying a naked lady" and Walter responds "Well, that's why we're moving to Stepford" creating the image of the city being bad and Stepford being good. Ironically enough, Stepford turns to be where the ultimate dolls are created. After arriving in Stepford, Walter reveals his plan of joining the sexually exclusive Stepford Men's Association and Joanna says "I give up on you (...) You pretend we decide things together but it's always you, what you want. You asked me if I wanted to move out here, and I found you had already been looking at a house. You asked if I liked this place and I found that you'd already made a down payment."⁵¹ That Joanna does not feel as though she has any say in decisions that affect her life could be a reference to the vulnerable situation many stay-at-home mothers were in. With no real income of her own, except selling some photographs now and then, Joanna is actually reliant on her husband taking on the traditional role as breadwinner. The Stepford men take advantage of having control over the means and use it to silence their once strong, intelligent wives.

The 2004 remake has an introduction with a montage of short clips before the film begin. The audiences witness 1950s women dancing around and smiling while doing different domestic chores. While the clips are real footage, filmed in all seriousness, they have been used ironically to set a certain tone for the film. The combination of soft colors, classical music and women admiring kitchen appliances, gives the impression of housewives being simple-minded and dull, needing nothing more than a clean, well-equipped kitchen to be happy. The producer, Frank Oz, said that he had another introduction filmed where business women dressed in suits were walking in the streets creating the vision of Manhattan as a "woman's world." However, he discarded it because he felt it sent a negative message about

⁵¹ Bryan Forbes, *The Stepford Wives*. (United States: Paramount, 1975).

career women and this was not the film's intention. He therefore chose to go in another direction which emphasized the sense of how many people today would consider the Stepford ideals of housewives dancing around the kitchen as outdated and laughable in the 21st century.⁵² When the movie begins Joanna is introduced on a huge stage as the ultimate woman, the finished product after decades of feminist influence. The contrast between the laughing women in the clips and this fierce woman on stage suggest that the gap between women have become even greater in the 21st century.

3.1 FROM SCI-FI HORROR TO DARK COMEDY

The original version of *The Stepford Wives* (1975) is a science-fiction, horror film. While the original novel about the mysterious robot wives in Stepford was quite comedic and satiric in its critique of contemporary American society, the first cinematic adaptation is fairly sinister. The film does include elements of campy humor, most often provided by the outspoken Bobbie Markowe character, and Joanna's many sarcastic comments, but the comedy is overshadowed by the overall seriousness of the movie.⁵³ Screenwriter of the 2004 version, Paul Rudnick, approached the project of scripting the remake as doing a comedic take on the American dream and the American suburbs. Whereas Goldman, the screenplay writer of the first *The Stepford Wives* film, aimed to create an eerie kind of suspense mood, Rudnick wanted to portray the Stepford lifestyle and show how "what makes the planet so mesmerized by America and often contemptuous of it is Stepford. Having it all and yet wanting more."⁵⁴ After reading Pauline Kael's review of the first film where she questioned why the filmmakers had not attempted to bring out the comedy that was so obvious in the original novel, Rudnick felt inspired.⁵⁵ He then acted on the need to modernize the story because the angst-ridden depiction of female struggles in the original would seem outdated by contemporary viewer's standards. This led to the 2004 version of *The Stepford Wives* being scripted as a dark comedy.⁵⁶

⁵² Oz, *The Stepford Wives*, 2004.

⁵³ Vincent Canby, "Screen: 'Stepford Wives' Assays Suburbia's Detergent Set," *The New York Times*(1975), <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9D01EFDC1E30E03ABC4B52DFB466838E669EDE&pagewanted=print>.

⁵⁴ Oz, *The Stepford Wives*, 2004.

⁵⁵ Alonso Duralde, "Welcome to Summer Camp," [www.advocate.com](http://www.advocate.com/news/2004/05/11/welcome-summer-camp), <http://www.advocate.com/news/2004/05/11/welcome-summer-camp>.

⁵⁶ Kathryn Schweishelm, "Remaking *the Stepford Wives*, Remodeling Feminism," in *Film Remakes, Adaptations and Fan Productions: Remake/Remodel*, ed. Kathleen Loock and Constantine Verevis (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 108.

The perhaps most frightening part of *The Stepford Wives* (1975) is that it somehow manages to normalize the slaughtering of innocent women.⁵⁷ Because that is essentially what is happening in Stepford – the men are brutally killing their wives to prevent them from becoming liberated. The tragic ending where Joanna realizes that it is futile to fight back and surrenders suggests a bleak future for the women’s liberation movement in a culture where half the population still seems to worship 1950s values of family and marriage. This is of course a grave generalization and it is not to say that all American men wanted compliant robot wives in the seventies, but it reflects how many men in the 1970s experienced feminist activism as something threatening. The opposition the feminist movement met suggested that many husbands preferred stay-at-home wives over what they see as power-hungry career women.

The social critique embedded in *The Stepford Wives* (1975) lies in its depiction of the imagined extremities men would go to in order to preserve their male privileges.⁵⁸ It portrays the ongoing turbulence around sex roles that dominated the cultural landscape in the seventies. Making the film a horror movie seems appropriate seeing that it attempts to portray a kind of nightmarish reality for women where men are utterly superior and where women are reduced to nothing more than objects with which the men can do as they please. Some have even claimed that *The Stepford Wives* (1975) created a new genre called the “feminist uncanny” which depicts women who are “haunted by the sterility of their own domesticity,” but unlike in the woman’s weepie, they are not allowed to cry about it.⁵⁹

While the horror genre tends to play on the scary unknown, comedy focuses on what we can relate to and what we know.⁶⁰ Jeanette Winter claimed that the shift from horror to comedy was “made possible (here) by the seismic shift in the status of women.”⁶¹ The 1975 film portrays men’s anxiety about how women were gaining more independence and men’s fear about what might come after women’s liberation. The 2004 remake has shifted the focus and chooses to rather focus on the type of “superwoman” everyone recognizes and how their husbands try to “cure” them of feminism. One could perhaps say that while the 1975 film is about devolution, the men turning back the clock to strike preemptively and prevent feminist influence, the new ending in the 2004 version makes it about revolution, a new take on

⁵⁷ Sidney Eve Matrix, "'Behind the Idyllic Façade, a Terrible Secret': Technologies of Gender and Discourses of Domesticity in 'the Stepford Wives'," *Storytelling* 6, no. 2 (2007)., p. 112.

⁵⁸ Kellner and Ryan, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film.*, p. 3.

⁵⁹ Alissa Quart, "Our Bodies, Our Selves: The Stepford Wives," *Filmcomment*(2004), <http://www.filmcomment.com/article/our-bodies-our-selves-the-stepford-wives>.

⁶⁰ Jeanette Winterson, "Living Dolls," *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/jul/19/gender.uk>.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

feminism where women and men must work together to achieve the happily ever after. In 2004, the focus is not on a life or death battle of the sexes but rather on finding that middle ground from which both sexes can benefit. According to the remake, feminism has made women more independent but in their strive for success they have attempted to imitate male behavior rather than becoming successful on their own terms. The employment of the comedic genre, which purpose is to make people laugh, suggests that the updated version of *The Stepford Wives* aims to depict the fear and paranoia surrounding feminism in the original film as outdated by contemporary viewers standards. The changes made seem to reveal that the idea of what Stepford stands for, from an anti-feminist dead-end in 1975 end to rehab for unhappy marriages in 2004, has changed radically.

3.2 SETTING

As Rudnick explains in an interview included on the 2004 DVD, one must not forget that Stepford not exist in real life.⁶² The community is a mythical location created based on collective memory and is supposed to represent what the popular imagination would consider a stereotypical 1950s suburb. In other words; “Stepford represents a nostalgic escape back into an imagined past of safety and security, of unlocked houses, friendly neighbors, and the unfenced yards of small-town America.”⁶³ The suburb is the manifestation of what is commonly remembered as a golden age in the collective American memory. It represents the American dream of comfortable living, innocence, growing consumerism and hope. For men this might have been true, but they usually worked in the city and did not spend all their time in the small communities. Many women who moved to the suburbs felt trapped and experienced it as a place of exile and oppression. The film attempts to portray this through Joanna’s feelings of loneliness and isolation and by revealing that the seemingly perfect life has a darker side. Placing the action in the suburbs is symbolic and fits the overall theme of the struggles of white middle-class women because economic and social factors set up walls around suburban culture and kept the working class out.⁶⁴

Both films play on the contrast between the city, Manhattan, New York, and the suburbs, Stepford, Connecticut. The city is depicted with cold colors and presented as rather unwelcoming. In 1975 the emphasis is on noise and business while the 2004 film is more

⁶²Oz, *The Stepford Wives*, 2004.

⁶³Jessica Johnston and Cornelia Sears, "The Stepford Wives and the Technoscientific Imaginary," *Extrapolation* 52, no. 1 (2011), p. 78.

⁶⁴Michelle Arrow, *What Happened to the Revolution? Seventies Culture of Crisis*, (Macquarie University: 2013).

concerned with its hostility. In contrast, Stepford is presented with warm colors as a quiet, safe suburb. In 2004 Stepford has gone through some upgrades that reflect technological advancement such as security checks upon entrance and smart-houses but the major twist is that while Stepford is a male utopia in both films, in the remake it turns out to be the fantasy of a former career woman who suffered a mental breakdown. Deconstructing the myth of suburbia is not the main purpose of the remake. After years of feminist influence people know that life in the suburbs was not as easy as 1950s shows such as *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960) and *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963) depicted it. The setting is the same as in the original film, but 2004 updated version shifts its focus to commenting on the conflicting demands on women in the 21st century.

3.3 THE PLOT TWIST

And so I asked myself, where would people never notice a town full of robots? (...) Connecticut!” – Claire Wellington, *The Stepford Wives* (2004)

The major plot twist in the remake is that a former career woman is the mastermind behind the Stepford scheme. This changes the whole story and the basic premise of the original film. It also arguably reflects that women in the 21st century face new challenges that most women in the seventies did not encounter. It changes the purpose of the narrative from being about the exploration of housewives who are trapped in static time to depicting career women who are losing a race against the clock.⁶⁵ The housewives in 1975 Stepford spend their days washing and cleaning, and therefore they barely have time for any outside-the-house activities except for grocery shopping. In Betty Friedan’s book, *The Feminine Mystique*, she discovered that time was the most common enemy of many housewives in the 1950s and 1960s. Many American women who moved to the suburbs in the post-war period and became full-time housewives felt isolated in their homes, but as Friedan discovered they were not as content with the situation as the robots in Stepford. The consciousness-raising scene in the 1975 original film actually provides some interesting comments on the expectations many women faced in the seventies through fembot Kit’s contribution where she confesses that she did not do any baking the day before because she was too busy ironing. Although this might seem

⁶⁵ Jane Elliott, "Stepford U.S.A.: Second-Wave Feminism, Domestic Labor, and the Representation of National Time," *Cultural Critique*, no. 70 (2008), p. 54.

like a minor detail, it can also be read as a comment on the impossibility of Stepford domesticity. Her confession says that if she - a robot superwoman – does not have enough time to both bake and make her floors shine than we cannot expect any human female to do so.⁶⁶ One of the other women suggests that “if time is your enemy, try Easy-On Spray Starch” making technological advancement the solution.⁶⁷ The updated Stepford Wives in 2004 do not seem to spend nearly as much time on household chores.

In the 2004 updated version it is the professional women who are having difficulties with managing time. Claire used to be the worlds’ foremost brain-surgeon and genetic engineer. Although successful in her field, because she spent all her time on work she did not have time for her marriage and discovered that her husband was cheating on her.⁶⁸ Feeling as though she had been punished for her choices this triggered a mental breakdown. After killing her husband, Claire decided to abandon her current life and create a town where she could revive traditional 1950s values. She also created a robot in the image of her former husband because she needed a figure that other men would look up to in order to make her plan work.

The race against time is also a recurring motif in the narrative as a whole in how it becomes clear that the women are being replaced with robots after they have spent four months in Stepford. No one mentions why the timeframe has been set at four months, but apparently that is how long it takes to create the robots and gather all the information needed to make convincing replicas. The husbands then take their wives on so-called “second honeymoons” or weekend get-aways and when they return the women have changed completely becoming perfect housewives. In Joanna’s case, the change must be hurried because she discovers the men’s secret and they cannot risk her telling anyone about their scheme. At least this is the case in the first film. In the remake audiences are lead to believe that Joanna is murdered but as it turns out, she and her husband have made plans of their own.

3.4 INCOHERENCE IN THE REMAKE

When analyzing *The Stepford Wives* (1975, 2004) there is one issue that needs to be addressed: the incoherence and ambiguity in the remake. The main plot in the two films revolves around how the women in Stepford change somehow. Although Levin’s novel never truly confirms that the women are killed, in Forbes’ original adaptation it becomes clear that androids are created to take the women’s places and serve the men as subservient spouses.

⁶⁶ Johnston and Sears, "The Stepford Wives and the Technoscientific Imaginary.", p. 82.

⁶⁷Forbes, *The Stepford Wives*, 1975.

⁶⁸ Oz, *The Stepford Wives*, 2004.

The spectator is even introduced to the figure that is going to take Joanna's (1975) place and become the perfect companion Walter dreams of. Most scholars agree that the original film is a strictly pro-feminist text. Anna Krugovoy Silver argued that it "popularizes (of) some of the most persistent concerns of the women's liberation movement" in its "examination of the plight of the dissatisfied middle-class housewife, its parody of the fetishization of housework, its explicit critique of the nuclear family, and its relentless focus on the constructedness and artificiality of female beauty."⁶⁹ The tragic ending where the evil men are triumphant and the innocent women are killed enforces the message that feminism is needed to create a more equal balance. The remake follows the same narrative pattern, but something seems to have gone wrong in the making of it because the story as a whole comes across as very incoherent. Oz's version (2004) struggles to convey the basic premise of what the men do to the women and the audiences cannot be sure of whether the women are being entirely replaced by robotic duplicates or if their bodies are simply upgraded before nano-chips are implanted in their brains.

In the first part of the film it is suggested that the updated version has kept the original storyline where the men rid themselves of their wives and replace them with physically improved robots. Some examples are the Stepford wife who also functions as an ATM machine, the electrical sparks which fly from a woman's head when she malfunctions at the town hoedown, and post-transformation Bobbie's (2004) ability to keep her hand on the burning stove without flinching. Joanna and Roger (2004) are even introduced to their doubles and it is implied that they are about to be replaced. The confusion begins after what was the final scene in the original film where we witness the transformed Joanna grocery shopping and acting like all the other Stepford wives.

In the last quarter of the movie the women regain their consciousness thanks to Walter turning his back on the Men's Association and heroically rescuing the wives by disabling the nano-chips that control them. Matrix argued that, in contrast to the original film, this scene is evidence of a more humane approach where the women's lives are being spared. The men do not kill them but instead force them to go through extensive cosmetic surgery before a "Stepford Program" is uploaded into their brains.⁷⁰ As soon as the process is done, equipped with a personalized remote control, the men can begin to play with their new toys. However, Matrix fails to draw attention to the many occasions in which it becomes clear that the women have

⁶⁹ Silver, "The Cyborg Mystique: "The Stepford Wives" and Second Wave Feminism.", p. 60.

⁷⁰ Matrix, "'Behind the Idyllic Façade, a Terrible Secret': Technologies of Gender and Discourses of Domesticity in "the Stepford Wives".", p. 113.

gone through something more than the standard nip and tuck. For example, when Walter appears after he has disabled the nano-chips he admits that he could not go through with it because he did not want “a robot wife.”⁷¹ Another instance is when after becoming themselves again the wives still have superhuman strength. One of the formerly brainwashed Stepford wives is able to demolish a remote control with her bare hands. . But the most obvious clue is when it is revealed that Mike Coba, Claire Wellington’s husband, is a robot through and through. One might argue that the film’s message becomes even more confusing when Joanna asks Claire why she did not change the men too and Claire answers promptly “that’s next.”⁷² If her ultimate plan all along has been to replace all the men and women in Stepford with compliant mindless robots, then the film cannot be considered either pro- or anti-feminist but should rather be regarded as anti-human which seems a bit drastic.

The gaping plot hole has received much attention from scholars who have examined the film. It has also been pointed to as one of the main reasons for why the movie failed to become a box-office hit. I believe that there might be an alternative reading that arguably combines the two conflicting messages about what really happens to the women. Modern technology is prominent in both films, perhaps even more so in the remake. The advancements of technology in 2004 could have made it possible to transplant the women’s nano-chipped brains into robot bodies. I do not think this interpretation was the filmmaker’s intention, as I have not read anything about it in interviews, articles or film analyses. However, this reading would allow the women to become themselves again while retaining the new technological features and thus eliminate some of the inconsistency in the narrative. In an interview Frank Oz took the blame for the film’s failure.

I played it safe. For the first time, I didn't follow my instincts. And what happened was, I had too much money, and I was too responsible and concerned for Paramount. I was too concerned for the producers. And I didn't follow my instincts, which I hold as sacred usually. I love being subversive and dangerous, and I wasn't. I was safe, and as a result my decisions were all over the place, and it was my fault totally.⁷³

However, others have pointed to problems in the editing phase as the main reason for the films ambiguity. After initial negative test screenings test audiences were not happy with the ending where the women were turned into robots and so the film team had to re-assemble the

⁷¹ Oz, *The Stepford Wives*, 2004.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Capone, "Capone with Frank Oz About Death at a Funeral, What Went Wrong on Stepford, and (of Course) Yoda!!," <http://www.aintitcool.com/node/33610>.

and go back to do additional shootings which delayed the movie-making process. BBC entertainment correspondent, Tom Brook, reported that there had been difficulties on set and that the “press screening was delayed to just before the official release date, normally an ominous sign.”⁷⁴ The shooting of the film went two months over schedule and was haunted by problems on set between the cast and the director Frank Oz.⁷⁵ Alleged fights on set between the cast and the director was said to make cooperation difficult and the unfortunate ambiguity could simply be a result of rushed editing as the filmmakers wanted to finish the product as soon as possible to avoid further conflict.

3.5 THE NEW MINORITY

An example of films portraying only parts of reality is arguably found in the way *The Stepford Wives* movies focus on certain aspects of the feminist movement and avoids others to a great extent. The films portray the lives of the white middle class and largely ignore other marginalized groups. In the original *The Stepford Wives* (1975) the community is exclusively white. In the middle of the movie the Welcome Wagon Lady reveals that the town is about to get its first black family and in the film’s final scene where the transformed Joanna is grocery shopping we see an African American couple having an argument. These are the only occasions where black Americans are represented. There are at least two interpretations of the inclusion of a black minority. One is foreshadowing, where Linda represents that all African American women are headed down the same path as white women, becoming the next victim of patriarchy’s thirst for control and power. The term “patriarchy” has been commonly used to describe a system of male domination and it was often employed by feminists in the 1970s to explain the oppression of women.⁷⁶ The second interpretation is how the couple is included more as a token simply because it was expected of the filmmakers at the time. In the seventies, Blaxploitation films such as *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971) changed the negative stereotype which said that all black American citizens were “train porters, waitresses and shoe-shine boys.”⁷⁷ Including the representation of a middle-class African American couple could have been a way for *The Stepford Wives* (1975) to appeal to a larger

⁷⁴ Tom Brook, "Stepford Cast Play Down Problems," BBC News, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/3794729.stm>. (Accessed on 15.01.2014.)

⁷⁵ Nancy Griffin, "Film; Can This Film Be Fixed," The New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/06/06/movies/film-can-this-film-be-fixed.html>.

⁷⁶ Joanne Hollows, *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 5.

⁷⁷ Laurence Washington, "Blaxploitation: Blaxploitation Overview," <http://www.blackflix.com/blaxploitation/blaxploitation.html>. (Accessed on 03.01.2014.)

audience and let them know that they acknowledged that feminism was universal, and that the middle-class was no longer reserved for white people.

However, the film alienated many black and working class women by focusing on second wave feminist theories of patriarchal oppression rather than women's oppression in a capitalist society. The oppression dealt with in *The Stepford Wives* (1975) is produced from a position of power and privilege taking for granted that the women who experience it are middle class and white. Many black and working-class women at the time regarded capitalism, rather than gender, as the central cite of oppression in American society and were thus unlikely to relate to the film's central message.⁷⁸ Frances M. Beal, a black feminist and a peace and justice political activist, challenged the notion of that "The ideal model that is projected for a woman is to be surrounded by hypocritical homage and estranged from all real work, spending idle hours primping and preening, obsessed with conspicuous consumption, and limiting life's functions to simply a sex role"⁷⁹ She emphasized how the situation was quite different for African Americans by arguing that, for black women, the "white image" of women doing nothing but caring for their homes and children seemed more like an idle dream than tough reality. In contrast, they faced daily life-and-death struggles due to economic exploitation which, when compared, makes the housewife's problems appear marginal. From this it seems safe to assume that many black women would have difficulties with identifying with the lead characters in *The Stepford Wives* (1975) and it begs the question of whether the inclusion of an African American couple was just to attract a larger audience.

The 2004 remake is also most concerned with the middle class, but features a new minority. African Americans are depicted as more included than in the original film. They are in the audience in the first scene, in the "Clairobics" scene at the Stepford Spa, and in other scenes where the Stepford community is gathered. They are definitely still a minority as Bobbie (2204) points out in the Fourth of July celebration scene by shouting that: "Excuse me, am I the only one who finds this a little more than disturbing? We are celebrating our nation's birthday but there are almost no African Americans, no Native American, no Asian Americans."⁸⁰ But, the remake does not focus much on the issue of racial integration as this is more or less taken for granted. In the updated version of *The Stepford Wives* (2004) the new token minority is the gay couple represented by Roger Bannister and Jerry Harmon.

⁷⁸ Hollows, *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture.*, p. 6.

⁷⁹ Frances M. Beal, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 8, no. 2 (2008)., p. 167.

⁸⁰ Oz, *The Stepford Wives*, 2004.

Screenplay writer, Paul Rudnick, said that he decided to add the gay partners to show that “the modern suburbs are far more inclusive than Southern Connecticut was in many years past.”⁸¹ Both Rudnick and the producer, Scott Rudin, are openly gay and this is likely to have influenced the decision to include a male partnership in the narrative. In terms of relating the shift in minority to feminism, it can be said to echo the new third wave feminist advancement of “queer theory” which concerns questioning the social construction of heterosexuality being the norm.⁸² With the inclusion of a gay couple the film conveys that American society has progressed over the thirty year period and thus become more liberal, tolerant and inclusive. Still, no explanation is given for why Roger, who is more feminine than his partner, is the one who must be changed. It simply enforces the traditional idea that in Stepford “men must be men.”⁸³

3.6 PLACING THE FILMS INTO CULTURAL CONTEXT

The late sixties to mid-seventies was a turbulent era in Hollywood. Radical movements such as the Civil Rights Movement and the Women’s Liberation Movement were questioning some of the America’s most powerful social and cultural institutions and this led to a revival of the social problem and paranoia films.⁸⁴ The 1960s had created opportunities for change or even the possibility of revolution, but when the 1970s came the re-election of Nixon, the assassination of beloved leaders, and new liberations movement about personal rather than social change made it clear the government was going to resist.⁸⁵ The early to mid-seventies was a time when people were growing increasingly skeptical to the government due to controversies such as the Watergate scandal and the end of the Vietnam War. Paranoia and social problem films like *The Stepford Wives* became a way for filmmakers to express their dissatisfaction with contemporary U.S. society. The aftermath of the war had resulted in a retreat to nostalgia which forced women back to the roles of traditional housewives that idealized women who were full-time mothers and wives.⁸⁶ In times of social turmoil people tend to long for what they see as simpler times and the 1950s have become such a decade. However, nostalgic ideas in the seventies about life the fifties seemed more like popular

⁸¹ Albert Rodriguez, 2004.

⁸² Rhonda Hammer and Douglas Kellner, "Third-Wave Feminism, Sexualities, and the Adventures of the Posts," in *Women, Feminism, and Femininity in the 21st Century*, ed. Béatrice Mousli and Eve-Alice Roustang-Stoller (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2009)., p. 224.

⁸³ Winterson, "Living Dolls".

⁸⁴ Kellner and Ryan, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film.*, p. 10.

⁸⁵ Arrow, *What Happened to the Revolution? Seventies Culture of Crisis.*

⁸⁶ Hammer and Kellner, "Third-Wave Feminism, Sexualities, and the Adventures of the Posts.", p. 222.

conceptions of a mythical time period than a realistic rendering of an era that had passed.⁸⁷ Levin created the fictional suburb of Stepford to address this subject in particular – reminding people that if retreat to 1950s suburban life also meant reinstating traditional gender roles it would result in a new, and perhaps worse, feminine mystique. And this time the women would not be able to escape. He seems to suggest that if the only alternative is living in the past then maybe the time is right for embracing the feminist movement.⁸⁸ He discredited the myth of suburban America by displaying a more destructive side of it and accentuating that life being perfect in the suburbs was nothing more than a false façade. The original *The Stepford Wives* (1975) attempts to eliminate the fear of feminism that was so prevalent in the decade and deconstruct the myth that suburban America is perfect, an idea that had been in the popular imagination since the 1950s. Much like Betty Friedan tried to do in 1963 when she published *The Feminine Mystique*, but *The Stepford Wives* (1975) was able to reach out to a greater audience and decipher what the feminist movement was trying to say. Many people were afraid of feminism simply because they did not understand what it was and what it intended to do. *The Stepford Wives* attempted to translate the abstract concept of feminism by depicting some of second wave feminisms most important concerns and show that the typical feminist was neither hostile nor unappealing.

There are clear references to feminism in *The Stepford Wives* (1975.) An example is the consciousness-raising scene where Joanna and Bobbie feel that the women in Stepford need a forum in which they can discuss their personal lives and concerns. After some persuasion, and even a little blackmailing, they are able to gather a group of women. Joanna begins the session by saying that she thinks her husband, Walter, sometimes cares more about his profession as a lawyer than he does about her. Charmaine follows up on this by admitting that she believes her husband, Ed, never loved her at all and that he only married her because “she looked right.” So far, the meeting is going as planned. However, when one of Stepford wives named Kit joins in, her major confession is that she did not have time to bake anything last night because she was so busy ironing. Starting out as a discussion on private thoughts and shared concerns, the session turns into something that resembles a televised Easy-On spray starch commercial. This is absolutely crucial because it reveals that the Stepford women are completely devoid of thought and feel no need for liberation. The men have deprived them of having a mind of their own leaving behind nothing but an empty shell of who these women

⁸⁷ Sherrie S. Inness, ed. *Disco Divas: Women and Popular Culture in the 1970s* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003)., p. 2.

⁸⁸ Rich, "American Dreams: "The Stepford Wives" by Ira Levin".

used to be and therefore they are no longer able to participate in discussions where they are expected to think for themselves. One could even say that The Men's Association, through use of specialized knowledge and modern technology, has found a way of inverting the consciousness-raising process and create brainwashed robot-wives that embody the ideal post-World War II woman.⁸⁹ This scene tries to convey that feminism wanted to enlighten women through peaceful means and discard the myth of all feminists being loud protestors. This scene has been replaced with a superficial book club in the remake suggesting that this is no longer a major concern for 21st century women.

Some scholars argue that the old way of making films in Hollywood has been replaced with “chewing up old narrative styles in favor of faster editing, time compression, and a visual palette of increasingly baroque special effects, all designed to keep the audiences in a dazzled stupor.”⁹⁰ *The Stepford Wives* (2004) appears to confirm this claim seeing how the filmmakers seem to have been more concerned with how they were going to make the film a box office hit than focusing on the message they wanted it to send. There are many grand scenes in the remake that took longer to shoot than what the director, Frank Oz, had planned. An example is the extravagant ballroom scene at the end of the film. In an interview on the 2004 DVD Oz said that they had to continue filming all night because it was hard to get the actors to dance in sync.⁹¹ Because they took the time to perfect scenes, but failed to convey the basic premise of what happens to the women one could say that what is shown on the screen became more important than the underlying message in the updated version. The plot holes and incoherence makes the film more difficult to analyze than its predecessor which is quite straightforward. However, in my attempt to understand its mixed messages I narrowed it down to two possible interpretations; the remake can arguably be read as a pro-feminist text or as a part of a new backlash against the women's movement in American cinema.

The U.S. women's movement experienced what some called a “genderquake” in the 1990s a new generation of feminists revived feminist scholarship and activism.⁹² Third wave feminism arose out of a critique of the second wave and is often referred to as “a younger generation's feminism, one that rejects traditional – or stereotypical – understandings of feminism and as such is antithetical or oppositional to its supposed predecessor, the second

⁸⁹ Elliott, "Stepford U.S.A.: Second-Wave Feminism, Domestic Labor, and the Representation of National Time.", p. 41.

⁹⁰ Wheeler Winston Dixon and Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, *21st-Century Hollywood: Movies in the Era of Transformation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), p. 7.

⁹¹ Oz, *The Stepford Wives*, 2004.

⁹² Susan Archer Mann, "Third Wave Feminism's Unhappy Marriage of Poststructuralism and Intersectionality Theory," *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 4(2013), p. 56.

wave.”⁹³ Scholars have claimed that the remake does offer some pro-feminist remarks. First of all, it does provide evidence of the progress women have made since 1975 in its depiction of the Stepford women having been CEO’s and executives, positions formerly reserved for men, before they were domesticated. Other point to parallels between The Stepford Program (the program the women must go through to change) and 21st century obsession with plastic surgery. Joanna’s (2004) failures of living up to the Stepford ideal of housewifery functions as criticisms of how there still seems to be a patriarchal status quo in America. However, these messages can be hard to spot due to the employment of the comedy genre.⁹⁴ The ambiguity in *The Stepford Wives* (2004) is reflected in the difficulty of establishing whether the remake is a pro-feminist or antifeminist backlash text.⁹⁵

Sherryl Vint claimed that the depiction of the miserable career women in *The Stepford Wives* (2004) was a part of a “new backlash” in Hollywood films.⁹⁶ The prefix “new” was added to separate it from the backlash thesis Susan Faludi’s proposed in the 1980s. The old backlash theory demonized the liberation movement and claimed it to be the sole reason for women’s misery. Hollywood caught on and began to vilify feminism in films such as *Fatal Attraction* (1987) and *Surrender* (1987) where they featured femme fatales who had succeeded in the professional world, but who felt unfulfilled and were now desperate for a husband and children. Feminism was thus proclaimed a false ideology to which women sacrificed motherhood and marriage, and therefore personal happiness, in pursuit of work and independence.⁹⁷ The backlash tried to convince the public that feminism had caused all contemporary social, personal and economic problems and similarly to preemptive strikes, antifeminist backlashes have tended to surface whenever the possibility that women might achieve equality have seemed real.⁹⁸ These movies thus portrayed housewives as the true women and career women as vengeful monsters. Claire Wellington created Stepford because the disappointments of being a successful professional woman made her long for what she deemed “a better time” in which “men were men and women were cherished and lovely.”⁹⁹ She wanted to “turn back the clock. To a time before overtime, before quality time, before

⁹³ Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier, eds., *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century* (Pennsylvania: Northeastern University Press, 2003), p. 5.

⁹⁴ Matrix, ““Behind the Idyllic Façade, a Terrible Secret”: Technologies of Gender and Discourses of Domesticity in “the Stepford Wives”.”, p. 114.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 118.

⁹⁶ Sherryl Vint, “The New Backlash: Popular Culture’s “Marriage” with Feminism, or Love Is All You Need,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 34, no. 4 (2007), p. 161.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 162.

⁹⁸ Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women* (New York: Crown Publishers Inc., 1991), p. XX.

⁹⁹ Oz, *The Stepford Wives*, 2004.

women were turning themselves into robots.”¹⁰⁰ It might seem as though her character fits the old backlash idea where real women chose family life over success, but the employment of the comedy genre indicates that film has a different agenda. It does not try to vilify feminism as a bad ideology, but instead uses exaggerated stereotypes to emphasize that the traditional conception of feminism is outdated in postmodern American society.¹⁰¹ Claire’s retreat to nostalgia and ongoing rant about better times in her final monologue comes across as comedic because most women in the 21st century find the idea of wanting to return to a 1950s way of life completely absurd.

3.7 CHAPTER CONCLUSIONS

The primary concern of feminism has never been to make women better than men but rather to eradicate the inequality between them and better the situation of women in American society. Where the original film relied on horror to show the tragic current situation for women, the remake of *The Stepford Wives* (2004) has been made a comedy. The remake comes across as ambiguous in the sense that it does not seem to take a pro- or anti-feminist standpoint. Yet, despite obvious holes in the narrative, the updated version does offer comments on some of the ways in which women are now expected to be superior both in the private and the public sphere and how this puts new pressures on them. The primary concern is still the white American middle class even though African Americans have been integrated to a greater extent in the 2004 version. The remake also offers an interesting comment on heterosexuality as the norm in relationships by introducing a gay couple.

The first film about Stepford wives was released at a time when the second wave of the women’s liberation movement was one of the most powerful forces that contributed to reshaping American society.¹⁰² The movie thus attempted to change the contemporary perception of feminism as a force of evil and challenged the traditional notion that women belonged in the home. Providing a conclusive answer to what the remake is trying to say about popular understandings of feminism has proven to be a difficult task. My interpretation is that the remake tries to get across that most people believe feminism has been a force of good which has made the situation for many women better in the 2000s, but this is often lost in all the changes that have been made to update the content. Production problems the filmmakers encountered are also partly to blame for the incoherence in the movie. In real life,

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Vint, "The New Backlash: Popular Culture's "Marriage" with Feminism, or Love Is All You Need.", 161.

¹⁰² Kellner and Ryan, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film.*, p. 136.

there is much evidence to support the claim that women are still being oppressed whether it is in the workplace or in the home, but as the film shows at least now they have the opportunity to enter the public sphere and even dominate in certain areas.¹⁰³ The main consequence of feminism is that unlike women in 1975 who did not feel as if they had enough choices, it appears as though women in 2004 sometimes feel they have too many.

¹⁰³ See Dicker and Piepmeier, *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century*. for detailed outline.

4.0 FILM ANALYSIS PART II: CENTRAL CHARACTERS AND THEMES

Tim Edensor claims that “Performance is a useful metaphor because it allows us to look at the ways in which identities are enacted and reproduced, informing and (re)constructing a sense of collectivity. The notion of performance also foregrounds identity as dynamic; as always in process of production.”¹⁰⁴ Contrasting images of women presented in *The Stepford Wives* suggest that there has been, and still is, a debate in American culture regarding what role women should have in society. The two Joannas perform their gender in ways that are influenced by contemporary feminist ideas and the wives in Stepford perform it according to traditional gender conventions. This is reflected in what they wear, how they act and how they present themselves to others. There are arguably two main separations of groups in the films; men versus women and traditional housewives versus modern liberated women. The remake also adds a third dimension where the ruthless man is pitted against the sensitive man, perhaps echoing late twentieth-century demands for a new way of defining masculinity.

The characters I have chosen to focus on are the protagonist Joanna Eberhart (1975, 2004) and Claire Wellington (2004.) I have included some notes on the most featured male characters, Walter Eberhart (1975) and Walter Kresby (2004) and Dale “Diz” Coba (1975) and Mike Coba (2004), as well in order to provide examples of how the changes in the lead male roles also affects what the women signify in the films. I will look at two of the films’ most important themes, patriarchal oppression and body politics, to see whether *The Stepford Wives* (1975, 2004) can be said to reflect that women face a new set of obstacles after almost thirty years of feminist influence. Drawing on aspects of theory on gender as performance my aim is to provide an analysis of characters that might result in a better understanding of why the two Stepford wives films can be considered relevant cultural artifacts that offer insight into the changing roles of women in American society.

4.1 JOANNA EBERHART (1975, 2004) – THE MODERN WOMAN

The first *The Stepford Wives* film praises the modern liberated woman and depicts what happens to her as unfair and discriminating. In the 1975 version, Joanna is a character the audiences are meant to sympathize with. She is the representative of second wave feminism radiating aspiration and hope for all American women but she is crushed by the Men’s Association, an analogy for a deeply patriarchal society. At the same time she is depicted as a

¹⁰⁴ Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life.*, p. 69.

very ordinary woman with whom many women in the seventies would be able to identify. She is a stay-at-home mother with two kids and a photography hobby which she wishes to pursue and be remembered for. While she reveals that she “dabbled in women’s lib” when living in New York, she is definitely not portrayed as a fanatic.¹⁰⁵

Joanna is plain but pretty and although she smokes, wears pants and drinks whiskey she is rather feminine compared to the dominating images of feminists in popular media at the time. Her mentioning of “maidenform bonfires” is an allusion to the radical feminist protest against the Miss America Pageant in 1968.¹⁰⁶ After this event the media began evoking language such as “bra-burning” and describing feminists in a negative manner calling them unattractive and abrasive. Reporters did not seem to care about the fact that no bras were burned during the demonstration. Joanna is very natural reflecting the “I Am Woman” mindset and we see this in how she wears her hair down, does not put on much makeup and refuses to wear restricting garments such as bras and stockings.¹⁰⁷ The observation that feminists at the time saw items like girdles and stilettos as something holding women back gives the scene where it is implied that Joanna is strangled with a pair of pantyhose by her double a quite powerful symbolic meaning. The creative and intelligent part of Joanna is killed by her domesticated double suggesting that women who were forced into a life of domesticity lost a part of themselves. The qualities of the Joanna character suggests that the filmmakers were trying to create a new image of the feminist woman as more likable portraying her as fashionable and liberal rather than unappealing and radical. The viewer cannot help but to feel compassion for her as her fear grows and she begins to doubt her own instincts. When she expresses to her concern about the men doing something to their wives to her psychologist she says “if I’m wrong I’m insane, and if I’m right it’s worse than if I’m wrong.”¹⁰⁸

Even though Joanna is the protagonist of the film she is a passive character with no chance of changing her destiny. Laura Mulvey argued that since the beginning of Hollywood films, the portrayal of women has served the erotic pleasures of men and that a woman’s place has been as “bearer, not maker, of meaning.”¹⁰⁹ One of her main arguments is that that

¹⁰⁵ Forbes, *The Stepford Wives*, 1975.

¹⁰⁶ Bonnie J. Dow, "Feminism, Miss America, and Media Mythology," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 6, no. 1 (2003), p. 128.

¹⁰⁷ «I Am Woman» is a song by Helen Reddy from 1975 that has been labelled the unofficial anthem of the women’s liberation movement.

¹⁰⁸ Forbes, *The Stepford Wives*, 1975.

¹⁰⁹ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Feminist Film Theory*, ed. Sue Thornham (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 59.

the tradition has for long been to portray females as passive and males as active characters meaning that men are the ones who make the narrative progress. She blames this on Hollywood being a patriarchal institution that seeks, first and foremost, to please the male gaze. Nonetheless, the objectified and passive image of woman still poses as a threat to male viewers. The men in Stepford find liberated women such as Joanna threatening and replace them with beautiful, fetishized fembot wives in order to reassure their own masculinity.¹¹⁰

In the 2004 film, there is little of the updated Joanna (2004) that resembles her predecessor. This time around she is a successful career woman working as president for the EBS network earning almost “six figures more” than her husband - a big change from stay-at-home-mom and aspiring photographer. From the updated Joanna character it becomes evident that the remake is much more dependent on exaggerated stereotypes than the original film. The result of this is that instead of identifying with Joanna (2004) as she is introduced, or even sympathizing with her, the female audiences in the 2000s are just meant to recognize her. If anything one is more likely to be annoyed with her forced upbeat way of talking, her typical business woman short dark haircut and the “dress-suit” which covers her in black from head to toe. Joanna (2004) mimics masculine behavior in order to represent the common misinterpretation of all modern feminists as power-hungry “Manhattan career bitches” who want to be not equal to, but better than men.¹¹¹

In both films, the Stepford scheme works because the women gradually begin to doubt themselves suggesting that they internalize a piece of the Stepford mentality. 1975 Joanna begins to doubt her own intuition and 2004 Joanna find herself questioning whether she has become the wrong kind of woman. After getting in a fight with her husband, Walter, he says “Jesus Christ Joanna, you were fired! Your kids barely know you and our marriage is falling apart. And you whole attitude makes people want to kill you. It makes people try to kill you.”¹¹² As the narrative progresses the audiences get to know that under the tough exterior Joanna (2004) is vulnerable like many other women in the 21st century, torn between old and newer notions of what it means to be a woman.

None of the Joanna characters are able to become comfortable with the Stepford way of life. Joanna (1975) tries to organize a consciousness-raising group to bond with the female inhabitants and she gladly plays hostess for the Men’s Association, but unlike 2004 Joanna she does not change herself to be like the other Stepford wives. Joanna (1975) fails at

¹¹⁰ Elyce Rae Helford, "The Stepford Wives and the Gaze," *Feminist Media Studies* 6, no. 2 (2006)., p. 149.

¹¹¹ Oz, *The Stepford Wives*, 2004.

¹¹² Ibid.

housewifery at two occasions and thus shows that not all women find fulfilment in performing household chores. It is therefore wrong to force them into a life they might not want. The first occasion is the family's very first trip to the supermarket where Joanna runs around frantically searching for the right products. When seen in contrast to her grocery shopping after the "change" one becomes aware of how the real Joanna is gone. The android that has replaced is an empty shell that resembles her, but every aspect of Joanna's personality is gone. Another instance is when she is serving breakfast to the whole family plus Bobbie's kids and seems to have no control over the situation. When Joanna (1975) is working on her photography, on the other hand, she is calm, collected and seems genuinely happy. In the original film Joanna is meant to represent the enlightened modern woman's need for pursuing activities outside the home because, just like men, they have hopes, dreams and aspirations beyond cleaning and baking. Yet, this is not accepted by the men in the Stepford community and because she is educated and has learned to question authority and patriarchy, this makes her a threat.

Joanna's (2004) two attempts at fitting into the Stepford community's conception of femininity and womanliness are different because she makes a conscious effort to live the Stepford way. She plays the part of the perfect housewives on two separate occasions but her performances in the two accounts are very different. First, she tries to live the Stepford way in a desperate attempt to become happy and to save her marriage. She puts on pastel clothes and a frilly apron, bakes cupcakes and dusts furniture, but she has kept the rigid hairstyle and sarcastic tone of voice and her act is not very convincing. As Bobbie and Roger comment "You look like Betty Crocker... At Betty Ford."¹¹³ It is clear that she never really seems to get comfortable with the role she is playing. The sight of Joanna (1975) failing at housewifery might have been a way to make her more relatable to the female audience in the seventies. The character became a way for the filmmakers to confirm that it was normal for women to want more out of life than what could be found inside the four walls of the home. Kidman failing at the same thing in 2004 is depicted as comedic because for many 21st century women, and men, being able to bake five hundred cupcakes is not what makes you a real woman.

In the second instance Joanna (2004) exploits her knowledge of traditional "proper" femininity as a strategy for survival. Her performance of gender is reminiscent of Joan Rivière's notion of womanliness as masquerade which Butler discusses. The main argument is that "women who wish for masculinity may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety

¹¹³ Oz, *The Stepford Wives*, 2004.

and the retribution feared from men."¹¹⁴ The suggestion here is that women act according to cultural stereotypes of femininity to “conceal her masculinity from the male audiences she wants to castrate”¹¹⁵ In the performance of a lifetime Joanna changes her hair, puts on a sparkling dress, speaks softly – and voila – she is accepted by the men purely based on appearances. They even react with applause upon her entrance at the ball suggesting that she has finally become a true woman. Her performance in the second account is strikingly different to the first one and this underlines the elusiveness of the notions of femininity and masculinity. One suggestion for why Joanna (2004) is never able to truly become a Stepford wife in the first instance is that she is still herself but playing the part according to how she believes the men want her to act and not how she feels a woman would perform gender in 2004. If Butler was right in claiming gender to be an act rather than a state of being, then one can argue that the remake of *The Stepford Wives* depicts this through the character of Joanna who consciously adjusts her behavior and in the end overthrows the patriarchal rule in Stepford.

Some would perhaps argue that 2004 Joanna is a much more active character than the 1975 version of her. Throughout the film she makes conscious choices that eventually enable her to escape the Stepford nightmare. She is the protagonist and we get the sense that she pushes the action forward. Then again, Joanna is utterly reliant on her husband Walter to destroy the Stepford scheme and we do not know which one of them came up with the plan. Even though Joanna might be the lead female character, Walter is the one that makes the happy ending possible and based on this one can conclude that Joanna remains a passive character in the remake as well. Myra Macdonald noticed that one of the strategies used in American film in order to not activate castration anxiety in the male audiences was to either punish the women perceived as a threat (in the 1975 film Joanna is killed in order to restore the patriarchal order) or reintegrating them into a romantic relationship with a male character (Joanna (2004) and Walter’s marriage is saved).¹¹⁶

4.2 CLAIRE WELLINGTON (2004) – CAREER WOMAN GONE HOUSEWIFE

Claire feels as though she has been punished for being a strong successful career woman and so she decides to perform her gender in accordance with traditional gender roles. She is

¹¹⁴ Joan Riviere, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 10 (1929).

¹¹⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge 2007), p. 70.

¹¹⁶ Macdonald, *Representing Women: Myths of Femininity in the Popular Media*, p. 27.

always impeccably dressed and carries herself like a true lady. However, she turns out to be the evil mastermind behind the scheme of creating enhanced super-wives. In the remake we are therefore faced with a female oppressor – a complete shift from the premise of the 1975 original where exclusively men are portrayed as the bad guys. This twist further complicates reading the film as a pro-feminist text because it argues that power turns women into monsters or causes mental breakdowns, a reading that does not really benefit the feminist cause. However, an alternative interpretation could be that if the remake, like the original, aims to critique the current situation in America then the new narrative could suggest that patriarchy is still so strong in the U.S. that even the strong women who try to conform to rules created by a male-dominated society end up being corrupted by it.¹¹⁷

One interpretation of the Claire character is that she is supposed to represent the way many modern women have internalized a piece of the Stepford mentality obsessing with always having to be perfect. In relation to this, the emphasis on how her husband cheated on her with her 21 year old research assistant could be a reflection of a contemporary fear of aging. This is not addressed in the original film as some of the town's inhabitants, such as the Welcome Wagon Lady, are elderly. Advertising and media in the 2000s has a tendency of constructing aging as a process that must be feared and avoided for as long as possible because it is perceived as loss of value.¹¹⁸ The way Claire blames herself for her husband's deceit is another indicator of how modern American women might have internalized a piece of the Stepford mentality. Claire is presented as a monster, but she can also be considered a victim of conflicting societal demands that women face. The consequence of the changing roles of women sparked by the feminist movement is that women in the 21st century face new challenges and feels as though they have to choose between a career and family life. Through Claire the movie portrays women who are torn between, and ruined by;

"two sets of expectations for women. There are those made possible by industrialization—individuality, successful accomplishment, equality. Then there are those born of the patriarchal tradition—the public domain belongs to men, wives and their services belong to their husbands, and family life is the responsibility of women."¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Matrix, "'Behind the Idyllic Façade, a Terrible Secret': Technologies of Gender and Discourses of Domesticity in 'the Stepford Wives'." , p. 116.

¹¹⁸ Macdonald, *Representing Women: Myths of Femininity in the Popular Media.*, p. 194.

¹¹⁹ Michele Hoffnung, "The Motherhood Mystique," in *Shifting the Center: Understanding Contemporary Families*, ed. Susan J. Ferguson (California: Mayfield, 1998)., p. 277-291.

On one side there is feminism saying that women should strive for success and shatter the glass ceiling. On the other, there are inherently patriarchal social structures from which there seems to be no escape. Through Claire, the remake could be trying to convey that making the modern woman choose between being a housewife or career-woman will inevitably lead to her demise.

Another interpretation of the purpose of the Claire character is that she is meant to be the embodiment of traditional 1950s American values and that her death could be an allusion to the death of the very traditional American ideals she tried to uphold. The movie then appears to encourage us to appreciate the changes made since the seventies, regard them as progress and look forward rather than dwell in the past. *The Stepford Wives* (2004) tells us that while successful career women might have nervous breakdowns, those who try to conform to traditional conventions end up dead. The complete breakdown part is not found in the original movie suggesting that women in the early 21st century face new dilemmas that women such as the original Joanna were never exposed to. Even Friedan, having actively worked for getting women out of the home and into the work force in earlier decades, admitted that after women in the late 20th century had successfully entered the public sphere they suffered from a new identity crisis and new “problems that have no name”.¹²⁰

4.3 THE HOUSEWIVES – THEN AND NOW

In terms of performing gender, the Stepford housewives are perhaps the best examples of the ways in which femininity can be considered an act. As Johnston and Sears point out, the men have programmed these robots and “all their performances are similar in appearance, manner and articulated values which illustrates the repetitive nature of idealized gender identity constructions.”¹²¹ Although perhaps more subtle, the housewives have also gone through a transformation from the first film to the remake. First of all, they are no longer former feminists but used to be CEOs, judges and executives. Second, while they still share a love for soft colors, the wardrobe of the Stepford wives has been upgraded whereas in 2004 it includes pants and shorts as well. The frumpy look of the 1975 film has been abandoned and replaced with light feminine summer dresses. Ira Levin, the author of the book, mentioned that he was surprised by the choice of floor-length dresses in the 1975 movie because when writing the novel he had imagined the wives in more revealing clothes enhancing men’s sexual

¹²⁰ Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women.*, p. IX-X.

¹²¹ Johnston and Sears, "The Stepford Wives and the Technoscientific Imaginary.", p. 85.

objectification of women.¹²² He might have been more pleased by the remake's interpretation where most of the dresses never go below the knee and corsets were used to create "waistlines that looked like 1950's bud vases."¹²³ Costume designer for the remake, Ann Roth, created the costumes with the intention that "I wanted the audience to look at the women and think 'where did she get those clothes, that face, those toenails, those feet?' " and "I wanted not smart, not hip, nothing that vaguely said TriBeCa or SoHo or the Lower East Side or Paris. I wanted dopey pretty. Do you know the phrase 'roundheeled woman'? Well, like that."¹²⁴ The change in costumes seems to suggest that the feminist movement also has had an impact on popular fashion. This created need for a change in the depiction of traditional housewives to make them more appealing and relatable to 21st century audiences.

If the death of Claire Wellington (2004) represents 1950s values being outdated, than the wives regaining their consciousness in the end could be a way for the film to convey that the traditional concept of housewives is also considered passé in the 2000s. It is therefore interesting to notice that since the updated version of the movie came out in 2004, the fascination with the Stepford housewife stereotype seems to have experienced a revival. After the release of the first film, three made for television sequels based on the original story were produced. *Revenge of the Stepford Wives* (1980), *The Stepford Children* (1987) and *The Stepford Husbands* (1996). When "Stepford wife" first entered the American vocabulary it stood for submissive, compliant women who dedicated their lives to pleasing their husbands and taking care of the home. Although common in the 1950s, after decades of feminist influence one would perhaps think that such women have ceased to exist. I have chosen to look at three examples of women who could be placed in the "Stepford wife" category in the 21st century. These groups of women reveal that the concept is still relevant in American society, but also that the definition has been modified to fit contemporary ideas of housewives.

4.3.1 REAL-LIFE STEPFORD WIVES

On the website www.stepfordwives.com a group of women who call themselves "The Stepford Wives Organization" have created an open blog where they share recipes, fashion tips, and provide more general information on "how to please your man." Some of their latest

¹²² Ginia Bellafante, "Dressing the Post-Feminist Stepford Wife," The New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/06/01/nyregion/dressing-the-post-feminist-stepford-wife.html>.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

blog posts includes titles such as “WHR (Waist to Hip Ratio) The Stepford Rules of Attraction” and “How To Cure A Feminist: “I Think A Man Completes Me.”” An example of what kind of content is in the blog can be found in the post called “Why You Should Beat Your Wife?” where the female writers clearly state that while they are against physical punishment, they do accept other kinds of penalty.

“Some of us occasionally get lectured by our husbands. Georgina and Sici get variations of corner time when they do something to displease their husbands, but none of our guys participate in any form of CDD (Christian Domestic Discipline.) I suppose we believe it’s a little too close to physical abuse in one hand, and we vigilantly police ourselves to be well-behaved and accommodating wives at all times anyway. Before we do anything questionable, we always ask our husbands if it’s okay to do it first, and all they have to say is either “no,” or “it would displease me if you did.” And that would be the end of it. No further explanations need to be given.”¹²⁵

Many contemporary women would perhaps react to this way of life as archaic and old-fashioned. Archaic was actually used in the 1975 film to describe the Men’s Association and their view on the role of women. From this abstract it appears as though these Stepford ladies insist on being treated like children with timeouts and having to ask for permission and the most disturbing part is that they seem to prefer it that way. There is an uncanny resemblance to how the men in Stepford controlled their wives, but here the women are willingly giving up their autonomy and thus submit to the very patriarchal structures feminism has tried to tear down since the first wave in the early 19th century. Yet, on their FAQ page where they are asked whether they are against feminism their response is a definite “We are not. Feminism fought to gain equality, opportunity, legal rights, and most importantly, *freedom* for women (...) freedom means we are equally free to accept feminist ideas as we are to reject them. (...) Now please allow us to make our own decisions and live by the choices we have made.”¹²⁶ Their interpretation of feminism is that it has been a force of good in the sense that it gives them the opportunity to choose for themselves what kind of lifestyle they want to pursue. And they are not wrong; it has been claimed that an important part of third wave feminism is that women should have the right to choose their own paths. These 21st century Stepford wives also defend their choice of lifestyle by claiming that when feminists try to force an egalitarian

¹²⁵ The Stepford Wives Organization to The Stepford Wives Organization, 2013, <http://www.stepfordwives.org/diary/2013/06/why-you-should-beat-your-wife/>.

¹²⁶ to The Stepford Wives Organization, <http://www.stepfordwives.org/diary/frequently-asked-questions-faq-about-stepford-wives-organization/>.

vision of utopia on others they commit the same crime they have charged men with for so many years.¹²⁷

It is always hard to prove the validity of websites like these, so I decided to send an email to the Welcome Wagon Lady, Irene Snowden, to see if the blog was authentic. She responded promptly and from the correspondence I was able to gather that the women are between 30 and 35 years old and that no African Americans are included in the group. I also asked whether it was hard to maintain the Stepford lifestyle with only one income per family and Irene responded that “No, because in our sphere, men are expected to be the breadwinners, so they have to overachieve that much more. Plus we don't spoil ourselves or spend money unnecessarily (meaning, on ourselves). So that definitely helps.”¹²⁸ However, while this way of life might work for these women, only a small percentage of American women today would be likely to accept this type of lifestyle. From the FAQ page and comments made on the blog it becomes clear that many readers, mostly female ones, have a hard time believing that it is real. Another point is that most women today could not pursue this way of living even if they wanted to. With today's economy in the U.S., most households are reliant on two incomes and so for many women to stay at home with the children is not really an option. This shows that housewives as exemplified in the 1975 film still exist in American society today. However, unlike in the sixties and seventies where this was often considered norm, today it is more of an exception.

4.3.2 A MORE LIBERAL DEFINITION

Moving on to a perhaps more liberal interpretation of the Stepford stereotype, in television there are many series that rely on the well-known and discussed housewife versus career woman dichotomy and some of them have become extremely popular. It is worth noticing that series such as *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012) have become incredibly successful. The setting is Wisteria Lane in the fictional suburb Fairview. The immense fan base the series has gotten shows that Americans are still fascinated by what goes on in America's seemingly quiet suburban front yard.¹²⁹ *Desperate Housewives* also appears to provide explicit references to Levin's novel by situating the women in the small town of Fairview because in the 1972 book Joanna and Walter live in Fairview Lane. Second, in the pilot episode in season

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ See Appendix I.

¹²⁹ Matrix, ""Behind the Idyllic Façade, a Terrible Secret": Technologies of Gender and Discourses of Domesticity in "the Stepford Wives".", p. 110.

one, Bree's son complains about his mother always serving overly extravagant cuisine and exclaims "I'm not the one with the problem, all right. You're the one who's acting like she's running for Mayor of Stepford."¹³⁰ The series features four women who represent different stereotypes but remain good friends. Like the 2004 remake of *The Stepford Wives*, the series relies on dark comedy to bring forth the frustrations many modern women experience as they try to conform to traditional notions of women's roles. The genre also contributes to creating narratives about domesticity and gender to which the modern woman can relate.¹³¹ Bree Van de Kamp (Marcia Cross) is the Stepford wife of the group. She is a devoted perfectionist, a great cook and keeps the house spotless at all times. But, unlike with the original Stepford women and the women behind the blog, we are introduced to Bree's flaws as well suggesting that she is only human and that women should not put so much pressure on themselves to be conformist. The page limit of this thesis does not allow for a detailed analysis of the television show, but it can be used as an example of how "Stepford wife" characters are most certainly not a thing of the past in American mass media.

4.3.3 A COMPLETELY NEW DEFINITION

In the aftermath of the 2004 remake, an entirely new group of Stepford wives has developed. These are the women who can be found in television shows such as *The Real Housewives of Orange County* (2006-present). This particular series became so popular in the U.S. that no less than five additional versions have been produced (New York City, Atlanta, New Jersey, Beverly Hills and Miami.) It is a reality show that follows the lives of rich housewives and the show tells us is that in the 21st century, the very definition of housewife seems to have changed. The series convey that in the 2000s, being able to not work is considered more a privilege or a luxury than the norm. The women portrayed are no longer middle-class but rather upper class, they still live in the suburbs but they do not do housework (nannies and housekeepers are necessities) and they spend most of their days shopping, hanging out with friends or getting massages at a spa. Although far from the original description and the 1975 film, the new definition does have parallels to the Stepford wives in the remake. We never really see the women in Stepford doing much housework such as cleaning. Their time is spent on baking, joining the town's book club and doing "Clairobics" at the Stepford spa. This fascination with so-called 21st century housewives has even spread to other countries such as

¹³⁰ Charles McDougall, "Pilot," in *Desperate Housewives* (American Broadcasting Company, 2004).

¹³¹ Matrix, "'Behind the Idyllic Façade, a Terrible Secret': Technologies of Gender and Discourses of Domesticity in 'the Stepford Wives'"., p. 111.

Sweden and Norway. Both countries now have TV shows called “Svenske Hollywoodfruer” and “Norske Hollywoodfruer” (Swedish and Norwegian Hollywood Wives) which tells the stories of Scandinavian women have married rich American men and live in the U.S. embracing the upper-class housewife lifestyle.

These three 21st century versions of housewives – from very conventional to extremely liberal – can all be said to have parallels to the housewives portrayed in either the 1975 original version or the 2004 remake and proves that the Stepford wife analogy remains relevant in the 21st century.

4.4 THE MALE CHARACTERS

Looking at the two most important male characters, Walter Eberhart (1975), Walter Kresby (2004), Dale “Diz” Coba (1975) and Mike Coba (2004), can be advantageous when trying to understand what forms of oppression women were faced with in the 1970s compared to in the 2000s. A generalization that could be made is that while Stepford wives are docile, submissive and eager to please, the typical Stepford husband is nerdy, conniving, immodest and inconsiderate. The 1975 Walter character starts out as an easy-going man seemingly content with his life. Nonetheless, as the film progresses he develops into an oppressor of women just like the other Stepford men and helps enforce traditional the patriarchal values. He is a plain looking lawyer who works 80 hours a week and the audiences get the impression that he is not too happy about Joanna’s photography and her lack of enthusiasm about domestic chores. When she comes home after visiting the newly transformed Bobbie she is visibly upset but Walter does not share her concern. Instead he begins criticizing her and saying things like “When are things gonna start sparkling around here, that’s what I’d like to know. (...) Look, if you paid a little more attention to your family and a little less on your God damn picture taking...” Here he reveals double standards because up until this point he has presented himself as a liberal man, but deep down he wants Joanna to conform to conventional gender roles. Joanna repeatedly complains that Walter always makes important decisions without consulting her, and as the action progresses we become aware that he is about to make the ultimate decision of life or death on her behalf. Up until the point where she is replaced, Walter has only been able to exercise influence on Joanna, now he can control her completely and she will be forever in his service. One can argue that although the women undeniably suffer most to fit the Stepford ideal, the men must also be adjusted. Over time, the Stepford mentality changes the men as well by encouraging them to succumb to the

temptation of replacing their wives with robots. Playing on their insecurity and traditional understandings of manhood, the Stepford Men's Association recruits husbands that feel inadequate and threatened by their wives' pursuit of happiness and personal growth via profession. The longer Walter stays in Stepford the more dissatisfied he seems to become with his current situation and when the opportunity presents itself to "fix" his wife, hence eliminating all his problems, he is not about to turn it down.

2004 Walter appears to have many of the same qualities as his 1975 predecessor although he works as a vice president for the same network as Joanna and not a lawyer. He also changes after spending some time in Stepford and is tempted by the idea of a wife that will wait on him hand and foot. Because their marriage is falling apart he actually considers going through with the scheme. In the scene where he seems to realize that Joanna is always going to be the same old stubborn, independent woman it looks as though he has made up his mind. Nonetheless, as in all good romantic stories, love conquers all and Walter ends up saving not just his wife, but all the women in Stepford. He becomes the hero by firmly stating that his wife is "not a science project" and that he does not want to be married to "something from Radio Shack".¹³² When he realizes that he does not want a fembot wife he also acknowledges that although feminism has been a challenging social re-alignment, it has resulted in a change for the better.¹³³ In stark contrast to the earlier version, he is not afraid to show vulnerability through his love to Joanna. While 1975 Walter was the typical oppressor, 2004 Walter is the savior - a drastic change for a period no longer than about thirty years.

If Joanna (1975) is supposed to represent the product of modern feminism, then Dale "Diz" Gribble (1975) can be said to be the product of conventional patriarchy. In the 1975 version he is a former Disney employee who used to work with animatronics and he is the man behind the whole Stepford operation. Unlike the rest of the men he is quite good-looking, adding to his superiority over them and he is presented as very mysterious. For one thing, we are never introduced to his wife (if he even has one). He is the kind of charismatic leader that has the ability to string other men along in his vision of a world of separate gender roles and extreme 1950s traditional values. We never get to know exactly what generated the need for such a radical solution as replacing women with robots. The only answer Dale gives to this question is a vague "because we can." The fact that something as innocent as pursuing photography in leisure time was considered a crime punishable by death is of course an exaggeration. But the symbolism embedded in it is more important than the literal meaning. It

¹³² Oz, *The Stepford Wives*, 2004.

¹³³ Winterson, "Living Dolls".

depicts men as not just opposed to women having careers but to them pursuing anything that is not in the family's interest. From this it seems as though Levin and Forbes were trying to emphasize the unfairness of life in Stepford (hence, in American society) where men are privileged to do whatever they want just because they are men.

Mike Coba (2004), now Claire Wellington's husband, is much like the earlier version in terms of characteristics. He appears to us as the perfect gentleman; handsome, elegant, well-spoken and charming. Yet, there is something eerie about him and we understand why when it is revealed that he is not a human being. He is a robot; a fictional character made in the image of Claire's ideal man. The transformation from mastermind to simple pawn indicates a change in men's social standing as well. In fact, all the Stepford men are nothing but pawns in Claire's larger vision. Walter Kresby and Mike Coba reflect different, and some might say even new, definitions of masculinity and manhood. In his thesis on the television series *O.C.*, Per Aubrey Bugge Tenden argues that masculinity, like femininity, should be considered unstable and changing emphasizing how it is now common to talk about masculinities in the plural.¹³⁴

In the two films, the characters of Walter and Joanna are good examples of the ways notions of femininity and masculinity can change over time. When Walter decides to turn against the Men's Association and save his marriage rather than follow in the footsteps of the others he is considered weak by the rest of the men for not having the guts to transform his wife. However, to the audiences this "softness" does not mean that he is less masculine; rather it suggests that in 2004 masculinity can be defined in a new way. Mike says that Walter's failure to change his wife is a shame. Joanna, on the other hand, disagrees and exclaims "no, that's a man."¹³⁵ What Joanna is saying here is that most 21st century women will prefer a man that sees her as equal and is capable of handling conflict rather than men who choose the easy way out. In the 1975 original film the oppressive element is men and institutions formed by a male-centered society. The 2004 updated version addresses the same issue of how society, which is inherently male-centered, can be oppressive but adds another dimension where women become oppressors as well representing new pressures put on them by society.

4.5 MAJOR THEMES: OPPRESSION AND BODY POLITICS

¹³⁴ Tenden, "Male Imitations: A Look at Gender Performance and the Representation of Masculinity in the *O.C.*", p. 12-13.

¹³⁵ Oz, *The Stepford Wives*, 2004.

The Men's Association is the avatar for patriarchy. Its main goal is to make bright, intelligent women into mindless obedient housewives. While the first film focuses on social oppression in a strictly patriarchy versus feminism dichotomy, the remake adds another dimension where oppression is also explored on a more personal level. Both films separate between the private spheres, represented by the home and the suburbs, and the public spheres, which are work and the city. They try to depict how women have traditionally been placed in the first category and the unfairness of categorization on the basis of gender. In 1975, men believed that opening up the public sphere to women meant giving up some of their masculine advantages.¹³⁶ Having women entering the work force during the Second World War was acceptable because men had to serve in the army. But upon their return many expected women to gladly resume the roles of happy homemakers. The message conveyed by the film is that women who want a role outside the home are deficient within the value system of the Stepford community – here serving as an analogy for 1970s America – and therefore they must be confined to the home by force. In the remake, however, the lines seem to have been blurred. At first sight one might think that the general message it conveys is that women belong in the home, but the seriousness of this claim from the original film has been replaced with exaggeration and satirization of it as an outdated ideal. And in the updated version the women are able to overcome the oppressive force that Joanna (1975) became a victim to suggesting that women have become powerful enough to refuse being patronized. Joanna (2004) is fired from her job as network president and suffers a nervous breakdown, but at the end of the movie she is back on top as the producer of the documentary “Stepford: The Secret of the Suburbs.” Her friend, Bobbie, undergoes the transformation and is believed to be lost forever, yet she makes a fortune on a new bestseller *Wait until he's asleep then cut it off*. The men, on the other hand, have been placed under house-arrest in Stepford and in an ironic twist the; while the last scene in the original film was a shot of the robot wives grocery shopping, the final scene in the remake shows us the men doing the exact same thing, although perhaps a little less gracefully.

Metaphors are employed in the films to underline some of the ways in which the oppressive forces women are faced with have changed over time. One example is how marriage is an oppressive institution in the 1975 film, while it is a liberating force in the remake. When Walter (1975) confines Joanna to her bedroom after she threatens to take the kids and leave Stepford. He guards the door to make sure she cannot escape and thus turns

¹³⁶ Edie Phillips, "Anatomy Need Not Be Destiny," <http://otal.umd.edu/~vg/jpf96/jp08/womenlib.html>.

marriage into a prison guard-captive relationship and depicting it as an oppressive institution for women. Joanna's rebellion is therefore on behalf of all women against oppressive patriarchy and it is encapsulated in domestic violence when she hits Walter over the head with a fireplace poker. The updated version seems to follow the same pattern when Joanna (2004) is dependent on Walters help to get out of the house. After she proclaims that she is picking up the kids from camp and says to Walter "we're getting out of here. With or without you" she attempts to open the door. The smart house, however, refuses to open it and she becomes frustrated when she realizes she is not able to let herself out. Walter knows the code and allows her to leave creating an image similar to how a guard would be in control of a prisoner's movements. But, in the end it is her marriage that saves Joanna from being transformed because she and Walter understand that being married means being equal and compromising. In the 1975 film, one could say that in Stepford, to the modern liberated woman, marriage is a death-sentence with a four month waiting period. In the remake the love between husband and wife proves stronger than the external oppressive force which represents outdated traditional values, and in the end marriage is celebrated because it represents love and cooperation between man and woman.

The perhaps most symbolic example of patriarchal oppression and sexism in the 1975 original film is when Joanna and Walter are hosting the Men's Association and Joanna is in the kitchen making coffee. The camera is angled so that we observe her from the doorway when suddenly Dale Gribble blocks some of the view. He stands there and watches her for a while before he says "I like to watch women do little domestic chores." To which Joanna sarcastically replies "You came to the right town." Because we are now seeing the action from a male perspective, the audiences see Dale as blocking the entrance to the kitchen. However, for Joanna he is actually blocking the exit, exercising power over her and making it so that she cannot leave the room without his permission. This scene depicts what Pat Mainardi argued, in *The Politics of Housework* (1968), that housework was an intensely political issue because it reinforced the popular notion that women belonged to the private sphere thus keeping them from the away from the public.¹³⁷ In 1975, Joanna is repeatedly seen as hemmed by walls, staircases, etc. symbolizing her entrapment in the private sphere. In the scene where she arrives at the Men's Association in search of her children she is filmed from above creating the sense of her being the prey and the men being the hunter. The remake has abandoned the emphasis on the politics of housework, because in the 21st century this is

¹³⁷ Patricia Mainardi, "The Politics of Housework," in *Making Sense of Women's Lives: An Introduction to Women's Studies*, ed. Michèle Plott and Lauri Umanski (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc, 1968).

not considered that big of an issue. This claim is made despite of arguments from more recent scholars who say that women still usually remain responsible for the organizing of the household on a daily basis. This includes women taking responsibility for most household chores even when working full-time jobs.¹³⁸ Instead the remake employs another metaphor for oppression in the remote controls the men use to exercise power over their wives. After the micro-chips have been disabled and the wives are again their old selves, the camera zooms in on a woman crushing the remote control meant for her perhaps symbolizing that women in 2004 have taken control over their own lives.

The term “body politics” became widely known during the women’s movement in the 1960s and 1970s due to feminist battles over abortion and birth control in order to gain control over their own reproductive rights.¹³⁹ This notion of the female body being a contested political site is at the heart of the original *The Stepford Wives* film. The men in the Stepford Men’s Association murder their wives and replace them with robots that generally tend to have larger breasts and smaller waists. To the men this “36-24-36 *Playboy* physique” is considered more attractive than their wives’ natural bodies.¹⁴⁰ The body is often used in cinema to distinguish mothers from sexual beings.¹⁴¹ When Joanna (1975, 2004) goes looking for her children we feel her motherly love and concern. Although the fembots look like the women they were modelled after, they can never love in the same way. Because do not have a mind of their own they are basically life-size dolls with which the men can do as they please. Kathy Davis claimed that “(...) feminist scholars have shown that the “anti-body bias” masked a distinctively masculine fear of femininity and a desire to keep the female body and all the unruliness which it represented at bay.”¹⁴² The men in Stepford want their wives to be feminine; however they also want to be in control of that femininity to make sure it benefits none other than them. Silver is also concerned with this issue and states that “Second wave feminists articulated a woman’s ability to control her own body as a fundamental right” and she links this to women having the right to choose for themselves whether or not they want to have children.¹⁴³ The 1975 film most obviously addresses the theme of body politics in the scene when Joanna stabs Bobbie with a kitchen knife to find out, once and for all, whether she still is human. In a desperate effort to get Bobbie’s attention Joanna exclaims that “Look, I

¹³⁸ A.J. Cherlin, *The Changing American Family and Public Policy* (Urban Inst Press, 1988)., p. 171.

¹³⁹ Kathy Davis, ed. *Embodied Practices: Feminist Perspectives on the Body* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1997)., p. 4.

¹⁴⁰ Boruzkowski, "The Stepford Wives: The Re-Created Woman".

¹⁴¹ Macdonald, *Representing Women: Myths of Femininity in the Popular Media.*, p. 192.

¹⁴² Davis, *Embodied Practices: Feminist Perspectives on the Body.*, p. 5.

¹⁴³ Silver, "The Cyborg Mystique: "The Stepford Wives" and Second Wave Feminism." p. 69.

bleed. When I cut myself I bleed. Do you bleed?" The reference to blood is ambiguous; one interpretation is that Joanna is establishing that if the women do not bleed then they are ipso facto, not human. Another is more concerned with reproductive abilities and refers to the lack of menstruation in terms of how these robots are not, nor will they ever be, able to bear children. The latter argument is strengthened by the piercing of the womb, often known as a symbol of fertility, and it becomes clear that the men have taken away every aspect of the women's free will – even control of their own bodies and reproductive system.

When considering how important the theme of the female body is in the original film, and not to mention who is in control of it, one might wonder why the updated version seems to be less concerned with the issue. The scene with Joanna and Bobbie has been changed completely and instead of stabbing Bobbie in the womb to confirm her suspicions, Joanna witnesses that she holds her hand over the stove without flinching or burning. The women are still victims of oppression because their bodies are subjected to unnatural change against their will, yet the film fails to convey what kind of process they go through and so how they become submissive housewives remains a mystery. The 2004 wives are not killed, they survive the Stepford experience. Furthermore, making a woman the perpetrator and placing her in the position previously held by the Men's Association complicates the subject. Claire Wellington is not looking to create robot women who cater to her every need. In her own twisted way she believes she is helping and perhaps even saving them so that they do suffer the same fate as she did. She is obsessed appearances and the women looking perfect – even when exercising they are expected to look impeccable in heels, makeup and dresses. Orenstein suggests that this alludes to women in the 21st century becoming their own Stepford husbands and enforcing a conformist definition of femininity on themselves.¹⁴⁴ This also coincides well with Joanna's (2004) contemplation over whether she has indeed become the wrong kind of woman. Instead of pointing to the men as the bad guys the film blames modern women's own obsession with perfection as their ultimate enemy. This obsession can also be said to be reflected in popular television shows like "The Swan" and "Extreme Makeover" where contestants are willing to go through any kind of cosmetic surgery to achieve that ideal beauty.¹⁴⁵

4.6 CHAPTER CONCLUSIONS

¹⁴⁴ Cathrine Orenstein, "Stepford Is Us," *The New York Times* (2004), <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/06/09/opinion/stepford-is-us.html>.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

Twenty-first century American women might have difficulties relating to the first *The Stepford Wives* film because they are facing new problems due to decades of feminist influence with particular emphasis on the increased equality. Making a newer version of the original *The Stepford Wives* therefore required updating the characters and themes so they would coincide better with audiences in 2004. These updates reveal that women have come a long way since 1975 because they now hold positions such as television executives, CEOs, and genetic engineers. Men also seem to have adjusted better to the idea of women entering the public sphere reflected in how Walter ends up saving the Stepford women instead of doing like the other men and changing his wife. The women return to their old selves and the film seems to say that the Stepford stereotype is a thing of the past. However, there are women who would describe themselves as true Stepford wives in the 21st century and so the concept can still be considered relevant. What separates them from the premise of the 1975 original film is that they are more an exception than the rule. In addition to this, the definition of Stepford wives has been adapted to fit a more modern America in which appearances and money count for more than following tradition. The main themes discussed in the chapter; oppression and body politics, help underline the changes that have had to be made when remaking the film almost thirty years after its first release. Patriarchal oppression, which is the driving force of the first film, has been replaced with oppression by a society that is caught up with an idea of perfection. At the end of the second film when Joanna is back in the city and her marriage is better than ever she says that “We’re doing just great because.. Because now we know for sure it’s not all about perfection. Perfect doesn’t work.”¹⁴⁶ Also, the focus on, and importance of, the female body as a site of politics in the original has in the remake been reduced to a comment on modern beauty ideals.

¹⁴⁶ Oz, *The Stepford Wives*, 2004.

5.0 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Hollywood has always been extraordinary in its duality. It is a commercial industry and so profit is of course important, but so is reaching out to, engaging and educating the audiences. This thesis works from the assumption that films produced in Hollywood do not provide an exact depiction of reality, but they can serve a purpose as important cultural artifacts and historical documents that tell us something about the social climate of the time in which they were produced. The images presented on the screen are a result of a careful selection process by filmmakers who aim to please the audiences while at the same time addressing contemporary cultural debates. Analyzing an original Hollywood-produced film and its respective remake which crosses temporal borders thus enable us to look at specific changes made in the films and relate them to greater changes that have occurred in American culture. *The Stepford Wives* films do arguably reflect some aspects of public understandings of feminism, the changing roles of women and the challenges women face in American society in two distinct decades. Comparing the structure and main characters in the original and the remake can therefore provide interesting insight into the ways Americans perceive the still debated issue of equality between men and women.

Although *The Stepford Wives* (1975) received much criticism from feminists and other scholars at the time of release, it has become a cult film over the years. Today it is often regarded as symbol of second wave feminism because it deals with many of the same concerns that were fundamental to the movement. Some examples are society's oppressive patriarchal nature, the unfairness of forcing women into the private sphere and the female body being a political site. *The Stepford Wives* (1975) attempted to refute the negative perception of feminists by portraying the protagonist Joanna as an ordinary woman who only wished to have the same opportunities as men and be able to pursue activities outside the home for the sake of personal fulfilment. It shows the resistance these women met in a culture that was built on deeply patriarchal social structures where women have traditionally been restricted to the private sphere.

Almost thirty years later, an updated version was released in cinemas and anticipations to the remake were high. The setting of the suburban America remained the same but the action was moved to the 21st century. This was emphasized in the trailer and critics therefore expected it to mirror progress in the roles of women after decades of feminist influence. However, many expressed disappointment with the result due to an incoherent

narrative and major changes in the film's structure that seemed to complicate the reading of it. First of all, a major plot twist was added to the new version of *The Stepford Wives* (2004). In the remake, a former career-woman gone housewife is the mastermind behind the Stepford operation. This is a big change from the original film where creating Stepford was a way for the Men's Association to force women back into the home symbolizing a retreat to nostalgia in the seventies. Second, the wives also regain their consciousness at the end of the second film and the movie becomes confusing because it fails to convey what really happens to the women. The incoherent narrative and the ambiguous plot twist make it a difficult text to analyze because it opens up for multiple readings. One interpretation could be that it does attempt to depict the positive outcome of decades of feminist influence where women have entered the realm of work and become successful CEOs and executives. In the end Joanna, the career woman, survives and Claire, the homemaker, dies which could be interpreted as a symbol of the notion of men and women belonging to separate spheres being archaic. The film takes basic equality for granted and depicts a world where gender roles have been reversed to point out that matriarchy is not necessarily better than patriarchy. In this sense it seems to say that true equality can never be achieved until men and women learn to cooperate instead of competing. An alternative reading is to understand the film as a part of a "new backlash" in American media which employs comedy to claim that old perceptions of feminism are outdated. The shift in the represented minority from African Americans to gays suggests progress in American society in terms of tolerance and inclusion and alignment with new third wave feminist concerns. However it could also simply be a result of personal choices made by screenwriter, Rudnick, because he wanted to portray the suburbs as being more liberal in the 21st century.

From my analysis of the two movies I found that the genre and structure in the original *The Stepford Wives* (1975) help underline the film's allegiance to the feminist cause in the seventies. It addresses public understandings of feminism as scary and unknown, but encourages people to embrace it because the consequences of resisting might be disastrous. One can perhaps argue that the film serves as a cautionary tale to both men and women telling men that women will never willingly accept being subjugated (the only way to domesticate them is to kill them) and telling women to be careful because some men will go to extremes to preserve traditional gender roles. The remake proved harder to decipher due to the major changes in genre, plot, and overall narrative. Some elements seem to reveal a positive change in public perceptions of feminism that emphasizes tolerance, inclusion and that cooperation

between men and women is always better than one group dominating the other. However, due to the employment of the comedy genre it is sometimes hard to take the film seriously and it becomes difficult to read. It presents women who have made it in the public sphere suggesting that feminism has reached its goal and that equality has been achieved. Then again, the plot twist is that a woman has created Stepford to escape her former life as a successful career-woman because it only led to disappointment. And throughout the film, Joanna goes back and forth between resisting the Stepford mentality and submitting to it while she is constantly contemplating whether she has become the wrong kind of woman. It also does not provide any references to feminism which its predecessor did on several occasions. The message of the film seems to have been lost in production problems and focus on what is displayed on the screen rather than what audiences can learn from the movie. I began writing this thesis thinking that I would end up with a final conclusion in terms of how the remake of *Stepford Wives* would reflect a change in popular understandings of feminism. However, as I continued my research I found myself agreeing with reviewers and scholars in that while the film does provide some interesting social commentary on new pressures women face three decades after the release of the original film, it remains a difficult text to analyze. Perhaps the film's intended message will become clearer with time. It is not impossible seeing how this happened to the first *The Stepford Wives* movie which received its cult status long after the initial release.

With the analysis of characters in the original *The Stepford Wives* (1975) and the remake this thesis aimed to examine the ways the changes made could indicate a change in the roles of women in American society. The perhaps most obvious evidence of progress is found in the protagonist Joanna who is transformed from a modest feminist with a photography hobby in 1975 to a powerful television executive in 2004. Although both women have adopted what is often considered traditionally masculine traits that separate them from the hyperfeminine wives in Stepford, the 1975 Joanna is a relatable character (at least to white middle class women) while 2004 Joanna character is an exaggerated stereotype. What the remake seems to propose with this change in character is that women have successfully entered the public sphere in the 21st century. In fact, all the wives living in Stepford are former top of the ladder career women suggesting that it is more accepted for women to hold top positions in work life in the early 2000s than was the case in the seventies.

The character Claire Wellington, a former brain surgeon and genetic engineer who suffered a mental breakdown, is not found in the original film. The adding of her character as

the brains behind the Stepford operations is an interesting move by the filmmakers because it changes the entire premise of the original film by replacing a patriarchal oppressive institution (the Men's Association) with a woman who claims she only wants the world to be more beautiful. My interpretation of the Claire character is that she is meant to represent the new pressures women in 21st century America must deal with due to conflicting demands of a society still adjusting to change. Women are encouraged to pursue careers and become professionals, but at the same time they are expected to raise families, tend to the house and keep their husbands happy. Her death at the end could perhaps reflect popular ideas about the 1950s way of life being outdated in contemporary America. The Stepford women regain their consciousness and probably return to their old lives (although this is not specified in the movie) and Joanna gets a happy ending saving her marriage. Stepford wives thus cease to exist in the updated version and this could indicate that this group of women is considered a dying breed in the U.S. However, other media forms such as the internet and television series can confirm that the housewife appears to still be very much alive although some modifications have been made to fit her into the contemporary context.

The male lead characters also provide some interesting comments on what men consider the proper roles of women should be in the two decades. This is perhaps especially the case for Walter (2004) whose character effectively redefines masculinity. In 1975, Joanna's photography hobby and lack of interest in housework is considered reason enough for her husband to kill her. He does not want an opinionated spouse but rather a compliant wife that caters to his every whim. In 2004, Joanna is a powerful executive, superior to her husband in many respects, and still Walter cannot go through with the making her into a Stepford wife. He realizes that his love for her includes her imperfections and this trumps his desire for an obedient partner.

My most important discovery is that, according to the remake, women have become more equal and independent in the 2000s. By comparing the main characters in the original *The Stepford Wives* film and the 2004 updated version we see that the boundaries between male and female realms have been blurred. The new version seems to depict a more tolerant and inclusive America and women fighting for equality is no longer the movie's main concern. Basic equality seems to have been achieved because women have become powerful leaders (Joanna and Claire) and men also become victims of the Stepford transformation (Roger and Mike.) The ending of the first movie is a tragic one where Joanna (1975) is strangled by her robot replacement representing the silencing of women who refuse to

perform their gender according to traditional understandings of femininity and masculinity. Joanna (2004), on the other hand, saves her marriage and gets a happy ending back on top after exposing Stepford to the world. The new conclusion emanates a greater sense of hope for a future where men and women can accept each other's imperfections and learn to cooperate instead of attempting to dominate.

My analysis of structure and characters in *The Stepford Wives* films could perhaps provide a starting point for scholars who wish to examine the impact the feminist movement has had on Hollywood. An interesting further research topic could be looking closer at the portrayal of gender, and not just women, in the two films because the movies do provide interesting comments on the male characters as well. Because of limited space I was only able to briefly touch on this subject by addressing the issue of Walter representing a new type of masculinity. Another possible further research topic, that I would have liked to pursue myself, is placing the films into a larger context in terms of how Hollywood has portrayed women historically. I found that analyzing only two movies tends to limit what claims one can make about film reflecting larger changes in American society. Looking at the ways depictions of lead female characters have varied in Hollywood films from, say, the 1920s to the early 2000s would perhaps create an opportunity to do a more detailed study and reveal greater changes in the roles of women before, between and after the release of the two films.

The first movie was made when the second wave of feminism was at its peak. Some would claim that the remake was produced in a social climate influenced by third wave feminist concerns. Scholars have argued that we are currently entering a fourth wave of feminism which emphasizes technological advancement, new forms of mass media such as the internet, increased intersectionality and the "exclusionary nature of mainstream feminism."¹⁴⁷ If a pattern is developing, then perhaps twenty years from now we will find ourselves sitting in cinemas watching and analyzing a brand new remaking of *The Stepford Wives*.

¹⁴⁷ Munro, Ealasaid, "Feminism: A Fourth Wave?," <http://www.psa.ac.uk/insight-plus/feminism-fourth-wave>.

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APPENDIX I: EMAIL CORRESPONDENCE WITH IRENE SNOWDEN FROM THE STEPFORD WIVES ORGANIZATION

Email sent 06.02.2014:

To whom it may concern,

I am a Norwegian student at the University of Oslo writing a thesis on portrayal of women in *The Stepford Wives* (1975, 2004). I am using your blog as evidence of how real Stepford Wives exist in the 21st century and was hoping you could answer a few questions.

- 1) How old are the women who are in the Stepford Wives Organization?
- 2) In the original Stepford wives film the Stepford community was strictly white middle-class. Are women of color included in your group?
- 3) You say that your primary aim is to be good housewives. Is the emphasis on staying home with the children taking care of the house or staying at home in order to please your husbands?
- 4) According to most critics, the original Stepford Wives film is a pro-feminist text which aims to critique the current situation in 1975 America where women were forced into the private sphere against their will. What is your interpretation of this aspect of the film?
- 5) With today's economy in the U.S., is it hard to maintain the Stepford lifestyle with only one income per family?

If you could answer these questions I would greatly appreciate it.

Best Regards,
Kristina Dahl

Email received 07.02.2014:

Hello, thank you for writing.

1. 30-55
2. No.
3. Staying at home to please the husband
4. <http://www.stepfordwives.org/diary/stepfordwife-com-guide-to-the-stepford-movies/>
5. No, because in our sphere, men are expected to be the breadwinners, so they have to overachieve that much more. Plus we don't spoil ourselves or spend money unnecessarily (meaning, on ourselves). So that definitely helps.

Good luck with your project!

best,
Irene