

# Looking at "Subversive Repetitions" for My Daughter Examining Margaret's Resistance to Becoming a Mother in the Film *Margaret's Museum*

BY SANDRA MOFFAT

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Margaret learned that having children leads to a life of misery, because her mother had little opportunity to transform the class and gender restrictions which contributed to her poverty.

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*L'auteure s'identifie à Margaret qui résiste à la maternité dans le film "Le Musée de Margaret," elle cherche pourquoi et dans quelle mesure cette identification est basée sur sa propre crainte refoulée de la maternité.*

When I conduct an autobiographical analysis of a film, I usually focus on a specific aspect of the main female character's life which has inspired me to reflect on my own life.<sup>1</sup> This article is about the film *Margaret's Museum* (1995) and how Margaret's resistance to motherhood, particularly in relation to her own mother, has helped me analyze

how I have learned to resist motherhood. I have decided to explore this topic, because for most of my adult years, I have avoided having children and now that I have a seven-month-old daughter, who I love very much, I am shocked by the extent of this resistance. My mother, who died three weeks after my daughter was born, always insisted that I would find great pleasure in nurturing a child and in the following article, I discuss what prevented me from fully appreciating her words until now. Losing a mother and becoming a mother at once has intensified my need to understand why I have been afraid of motherhood for so long.

This article begins with a brief synopsis of the film, *Margaret's Museum* and my reactions to Margaret's story, then I apply Judith Butler's "subversive repetition" concept to my analyses of mother-daughter learning, and finally, I discuss the problematic aspects of my identification with Margaret. *Margaret's Museum* (1995) was set and filmed in Glace Bay, Nova Scotia. The story takes place in a 1940s mining community. Margaret (played by Helena Bonham Carter) falls in love with Neil Currie who refuses to work in the mines. We, as audience members, follow Margaret's point of view as she struggles to survive a life which consists of poverty, unemployment, and mining disasters.

Margaret learned from her mother that having children leads to a life of misery, because her mother had very little opportunity to transform the class, heterosexual, and

gender restrictions which contributed to her poverty, the death of her son and her husband, and eventually to her own bitterness. Even though Margaret agrees to marry an ex-miner, she refuses to have children with him for fear that, in order to support the children, he will return to the dangerous mines where her brother and her father were killed. I have resisted motherhood as well, not so much for fear of losing loved ones, like Margaret, (although that partially exists for me), but mostly for fear of losing my financial and emotional independence to the demands of motherhood. My fears have originated from witnessing my mother's struggles for independence as a housewife, a mother, and eventually a single parent.

The issue of white, working-class oppression is really at the heart of the film *Margaret's Museum* and the cause of Margaret's resistance to motherhood, whereas my resistance seems to have more to do with my emancipation from heterosexist, white, middle-class norms which have perpetuated many women's dependency on men. This article then, is very much about the different social structures that Margaret and I grew up with and in what ways these social structures have shaped our ideas about having children.

I ask: how can daughters make the social changes for themselves, that were sometimes impossible for their mothers to make, without blaming their mothers for the hardships both daughter and mother might have endured (Caplan)? To work with this question, I uncover some of my affective and critical investments in Margaret's resistance to becoming a mother.

In order to do this, I re-evaluate the ways I have blamed my mother for not overcoming the various social oppressions she grappled with on a day-to-day basis. By analyzing "mother blaming" in relation to the under-valuation of motherhood (Caplan), I examine how the complex issue of agency and hegemonic power has operated in my mother-daughter relationship. With this approach, I unravel some of the unrealistic expectations of my mother that I have held for many years, which have fueled my resistances to motherhood and in turn, my problematic identification with Margaret.

## Repetitions

Judith Butler looks at the ways social norms are repeated and what is involved in displacing these normative patterns.

The task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to displace the very gender, *ethnicity, race, class, sexuality, age and ability* norms that enable repetition itself. (148; emphasis added)

I examine closely how Margaret and I learned from our mothers to repeat oppressive social norms. Butler's notion of "subversive repetition" holds promise for me, since it

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encourages me to see how my various identities have been socially constructed by the notion that motherhood is not an important occupation. I identify with Margaret's resistance to motherhood because I am afraid of motherhood. Why? I witnessed my mother's struggles with the devaluation of motherhood and I fear becoming a disrespected mother. Mothering was expected of my mother and she enjoyed it, but it did not bring her financial and emotional security. She was dependent upon my father's income and when my parents divorced, it was very difficult for my mother to develop a mean-

ingful career. My identification with Margaret then, is an attempt to subvert the repetition, to break away from my mother's predicament. Subsequent analyses of *Margaret's Museum* have made me realize that refusing to have children is not necessarily a method of freeing myself from my mother's struggles with independence just as having a child does not necessarily lead to a replication of my mother's experiences.

Margaret was not able to avoid her mother's situation despite the fact that she resisted having children. It was her husband's desire for children which sent him back into the mines (the only source of income he had access to) and eventually to his death in a mining accident. In the end, Margaret's resistance to motherhood did not save her from losing her husband which is what she feared most. Margaret's life ended up replicating her mother's life in many ways because the mining company which dominated her family, killed many of its employees with dangerous working conditions.

A significant question for me is: how do individuals develop agency in their lives when they are immersed in oppressive social systems? I look at Butler's definition of agency in search of some ideas. She suggests that "... 'agency,' is located within the possibility of a variation on repetition" (145). Keeping this in mind, I ask: how did my mother develop agency when she was confronted with white, middle-class norms of femininity of the 1950s and 1960s which demanded that women give up their finan-

cial and emotional independence for motherhood? In other words, where could my mother find some variance from these oppressive norms when they were so prevalent? How much variance do I actually have from these norms even though I know that it is important for me to value motherhood as well as my career?

Now that *I have a daughter*, I frantically search for a way to create a different kind of motherhood than my mother had without resisting motherhood altogether. *Agency*: I am writing my dissertation as quickly as possible while my daughter sleeps. Hopefully, I can find a job when I finish school. Can I achieve some sort of balance with child care and work? I might make enough money to pay for the necessities, but I fear that my other goals of writing and publishing will be cast aside indefinitely, while my partner's high-tech multi-media career flourishes. I *remember*, my father's career successes and my mother's devalued housework and child care. Despite 20 years of feminist activism, it remains to be seen, how different I can be from this family pattern. What I am trying to uncover is how much variation I can actualize from the feminist approaches to motherhood and paid work which I have encountered.

If "... identification is an act of *repetition and remembrance*" (Fuss 34) then I ask myself: what am I repeating and what am I remembering with my different identifications with Margaret? I repeat and I remember the resentment I have felt on numerous occasions with regard to what I perceived to be my mother's lack of initiative for independence. Alternatively, I need to recognize the social constraints she was bravely negotiating (Caplan). I remind myself that in her generation, there were less options for women than there are now. I am momentarily satisfied, then I repeat and I remember, as my identifications with Margaret's attempts to resist the gender, class, and heterosexual restrictions that her mother was unable to counteract, continue.

I desire Margaret's resistance to her mother's predicament. And, I desire Margaret's desire not to have children. But, what are the ramifications of these desires of a female film character who has had far less opportunity to improve her life than I have had? Diana Fuss points out a major problem: "In colonial relations, identification can operate, at once, as the ontological privilege of the colonizer and the subjugated condition of the colonized" (14). In the following, I explore my complicity in these types of relations with regard to my growing identification with Margaret.

### **The problem with desiring Margaret's desires**

I am developing a film-viewing method which strives to include my "own histories" in my film interpretations. I do not consider myself an "objective" viewer which is often the underlying premise of spectator identification.

For example, psychoanalytic film theories often overlook the impact of the viewer's social histories on film interpretations. Alternatively, I am conducting an auto-

biographical analysis of my identification with Margaret which takes into account how my psyche interacts with the social (Walkerdine). A major advantage of conducting this sort of analysis of a film character is that there are concrete social positions within the identification process which can be explored. This is especially important if the spectator and the character come from different social locations which hold varying degrees of power.

The privileges I have had from my white, middle-class

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childhood place me in a very different position than Margaret who experienced a great deal of oppression growing up in a white, working-class family. Why then, do I identify with Margaret so strongly? There are many reasons for this identification, but for the moment, I investigate the colonial-like dimensions of this act.

Valerie Walkerdine and Helen Lucey who conducted an extensive study on mothers and daughters from working-class and middle-class backgrounds suggest:

While we are not saying that the fictions and fantasies about the colonized are the same as the those about working class, we

are saying that there are similar processes going on. What fantasies therefore exist of working-class women? Simultaneously as threat and desire? (39)

To work with Walkerdine's and Lucey's challenge, I look at how my imaginary selves play a central role in my identification with a film character (Stacey). I re-evaluate how I have learned to "imagine" individuals who have less privilege than I do. What fantasies of working-class women am I conjuring up when I say I want to be like Margaret? How might these fantasies be threats and how might they be desires?

I learned from my mother how to become "middle-class." Class background often defines how mothers are expected to teach their daughters and this can become an integral aspect of mother-daughter learning:

Working-class mothers have to be watched and prevented from being authoritarian, while bourgeois mothers have to nurture and promote rationality at all costs, especially since they and their children are to be the normal individuals who do the surveillance. (Walkerdine and Lucey 42)

How much surveillance exists in my identification with Margaret? And, in what ways have my viewing and life histories played a role in my interpretations of Margaret? In other words, how much of my identification with

Margaret involves my desire to control her situation because I have learned to fear it?

One way of minimizing some of my middle-class surveillance of Margaret, is to look closely at my own oppressions and privileges so that I do not perceive Margaret as "trapped in ideology" while I "have access to a higher truth" (Walkerdine and Lucey). This is easier said than done. A great deal of feminist film criticism tends to embrace this sort of critically distanced approach (Kaplan; Doane; Fischer; Flitterman-Lewis) and I have internalized this powerful discourse.

I argue that particularly with identification, the so-called "objectivity" that is supposedly a result of critically distanced analyses, replicates structures of hierarchy and hegemony. How can I analyze my identification with Margaret in such a way so that I continuously work with the complex and often painful relationship between the psychic and the social instead of pretending it doesn't exist? (Walkerdine). Moreover, in Butler's words, how can I subvert the repetitive norms which insist that film viewers do not need to examine their own investments in the narratives that they criticize?

Margaret's character reminds me how difficult it is to bring about structural changes. The film *Margaret's Museum* specifically demonstrates how oppressive class, sexuality, race, and gender norms repeatedly and viciously inflict themselves upon individuals from generation to generation. I strongly identify with Margaret because she strives for social change by courageously facing the problems she has grown up with. I, on the other hand, have learned to intellectualize my problems by projecting them onto others who have had less privilege than I have had.

My mother did not tell me that I should avoid having children because motherhood will limit me substantially. Instead she told me repeatedly that I would probably regret my decision (which I have held for many years) not to have children. She never really discussed the day-to-day difficulties she experienced with child care especially the part about possibly sacrificing my independence for a child. As Paula Caplan has suggested, the hard work of mothering is frequently not revealed:

Precisely because mothering is supposed to come naturally, few mothers tell their children how difficult it can be.... In a culture in which mothering is generally undervalued, chances are slim that anyone outside mother is going to teach children how much effort and uncertainty are involved in the job. So both daughters and sons grow up thinking mothering is supposed to be easy. (87)

I want to change my attitudes towards motherhood, but I strongly believe it is exploitive for me to co-opt Margaret's poverty so I can fantasize about perceiving motherhood differently. This form of identification manifests itself in my desire to control Margaret's situation. I do not want her to have children, because I perceive motherhood as

limiting her ability to change her material conditions. When I analyze her choices in this critically distanced mode, I admire her for refusing to get pregnant. However, I suppress my own desires for motherhood when it comes to my identification with Margaret in order to adhere to my "middle-class" education; an education which has taught me to keep my visceral desires well-hidden especially when I am intellectualizing the predicaments of individuals who have less power than I do.

I fear the pain that Margaret might endure if her refusal to have children is only based on the inadequacy of her social conditions. However, instead of owning this pain for myself, I project it onto Margaret, as I have learned to do. And then, I criticize her social circumstances as if they have nothing to do with me.

### Conclusion

Finally, I reflect upon my new life as a mother. My daughter is so curious about the world around her and while breastfeeding, changing diapers, and holding her close to me, I have realized more than ever the importance of mothering. I also realize how difficult it is to balance child care and paid work. My need to completely divorce myself from my mother's struggles has begun to dissipate since I have experienced some of the difficulties she was faced with. Fortunately, I have had much more socially sanctioned support than my mother had to pursue a career as well as motherhood.

However, I still need to look at "subversive repetitions" for my daughter so that I can teach her about the class, race, sexuality, and gender oppressions individuals experience to varying degrees. I continue to work diligently with my feminine, heterosexual, white middle-class locations in order to see how I have learned from my privileges to project my fears of motherhood onto female film characters such as Margaret. I have been so preoccupied with trying to control motherhood that I failed to acknowledge the extent to which I have actually feared it.

Also, I have harshly criticized many mothers (including my own mother) for making motherhood the central focus of their lives. Instead of placing so much emphasis on resisting motherhood by devaluing it, I need to be continuously aware of how the social systems I live with in Canada often prevent mothers from balancing child care and work and/or being paid for looking after their own children. (This is not necessarily the case in other cultures. See Rantalaihi and Heiskanen.)

I have been taught to separate the psychic aspects of my mother-daughter relationship from the social aspects of it and this has led to my exploitive identifications with Margaret. Alternatively, I insist upon the following point: "identification is always inscribed within a certain history; identification names not only the history of the subject but the subject in history" (Fuss 165). Both these histories need to be examined simultaneously in order to avoid an identification process which takes advantage of those with

less access to social change.

Suddenly I am a mother instead of a daughter but that does not mean that my history with my mother has disappeared. In fact, quite the opposite has occurred for me. I feel much more aware of the conflicts and the love that my mother and I experienced together. By looking closely at how motherhood has been psychically and socially constructed for and by my mother and myself, I want to continue to make some of the changes that she was unable to make, without blaming her for the social forces that mitigated against her. By using an autobiographical method of film engagement, I have been able to gain a better understanding of how my resistances to motherhood have originated from very different social structures than Margaret's. Consequently, I feel much more prepared to teach my daughter about social inequities and social change. My daughter is crying now, I must go.

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<sup>1</sup>In my current doctoral research I develop a critical autobiographical film viewing method which can be used by audience members to understand the social formation of their identities in relation to films. In order to outline this method, I discuss in my dissertation how I use my imagination, affective and critical responses as well as my social locations to analyze the politics of representation in films such as *Little Man Tate* (1991), *The Piano* (1993), and *Margaret's Museum* (1995).

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## RACHEL ROSE

### Farm Song

The April hills are hung with alder breath.  
Among the evergreens, each bare-limbed mauve  
breath mingles with my mother's breath.

She starts before it's light. She does not rest,  
working to keep pace with those budding groves,  
those April hills all hung with alder breath.

The farm dog follows, nipping at her dress.  
The flatulent cows shift, steaming at the trough.  
Their wet sighs mingle with my mother's breath.

She kicks the top clean off a deer mouse nest.  
The dog whines for the mice cupped in her glove.  
The April hills are smudged with alder breath.

She tosses baby mice into his mouth.  
On two legs he catches them in joyous gulps. His ropes  
of panting slaver mingle with my mother's breath

As both her hands vacate the broken nest.  
Each mouse is blindly swallowed, sacrificed for bulbs.  
Each April hill is hung with this: bereft  
mauve breath, ghosts of pollen, mingled with mother's  
breath.

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## ERINA HARRIS

### excerpt from "the 82 short poems of eliza" (a child born with blue skin)

poem xxxiii

In the light of sickle moon, a woman.  
As she combs her daughter's hair.  
Her fingers find their way  
amongst unruly strands, find their own image  
in shape, in tentative beauty, in the strength  
of the small blue hands  
the same as her own  
only smaller. And blue.

These little hands steal themselves back  
from mama, in the night  
and creep in at dawn to pull from a mother's  
sleeping  
a blue child's dreams.

Elliot decides mama pulls her whole life,  
this way and that  
as mama brushes a blue tangle tame.  
She will ensure that her hair is never combed  
and rarely clean.

The light on mama's face speaks  
to this blue child says  
*who'd have thought ... such a child*  
and ... *to think what becomes of us*  
until the child is no longer here has left her hair  
behind.

Perhaps mama is still speaking to her, still  
stares at the promise:  
tiny fingers stained with the hope of blueberry  
& violet  
as Elliot stares out past the indifference of  
daisies,  
her head bobbing under the brush under the  
influence  
of beauty.

When she doesn't want you to see her  
Elliot just stands out in the fields, in front of the  
sky.  
Watch the blue disappear into the blue in an  
instant.

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