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## Projections of Pregnancy: Art as the Voice for the Unheard

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The fine line that young women navigate in relation to pregnancy and the potential to be pregnant, is beset by forces pulling in different directions – from within relationships and outside of them, from peers, from families, and from society. As Gemma Chan's character in Dominic Savage's Channel 4 TV drama "*I am Hannah*" so expressively summarises:

*"What we've been told from our teenage years to our 20s [is that] the worst thing that can happen is to get pregnant, your life will be over...and then suddenly it like switches from "don't get pregnant" to "you better get pregnant or you've missed your chance" and that change happens in like five years, in your 30s, and it's like "what the...?"*

When it comes to vocalising fertility concerns, Hannah is an empowered contemporary protagonist, in an arguably liberal society. For many young women today, the ability to speak so candidly isn't possible. What role do the arts play in providing a voice and platform for the challenges faced by the burgeoning adolescent population in relation to fertility?

To help answer this question, we're holding "Watch Talk Think" film screenings and interdisciplinary panel discussions at the Foundling Museum this spring, complimenting the museum's current exhibition "Portraying Pregnancy: From Holbein to Social Media". Across three different decades and continents, the films capture the fertility journeys of young female characters which illustrate the tensions articulated by Hannah – from the experience of being unexpectedly pregnant, through to the disconnect between phases of life where the potential and desire to conceive are imbalanced. The films are punctuated by moments of strength and can be pervaded by tragedy, but each illuminate aspects of the real lived experience of young women around the world.

Cristian Mungiu's Palme D'Or-winning 2007 film, "*4 Months 3 Weeks and 2 Days*", is set in 1987 during the Ceaușescu communist dictatorship, and follows the journey of Otilia as she helps her university friend and roommate Găbița procure an illegal abortion. The film is gritty, honest, and uncomfortable to watch. Yet once it begins it's hard to look away. The right to termination of pregnancy is still a contentious issue steeped within a political and religious quagmire across the world, with abortion recently decriminalised in Northern Ireland, but access to services under threat in many states in the US, for example. While debate continues, this film provides a horrifying insight into situations where the option of termination is wanted but there is no access for vulnerable young women.

The forced silence and fear under the Ceaușescu regime permeates "*4 Months 3 Weeks and 2 Days*," creating an atmosphere of extreme isolation. As the film's title highlights, Găbița reaches the point of seeking abortion relatively late, a symptom of denial, a consequence of having no legal access, and thus compounding her torment

through enforced lies and concealment. Her naïveté and vulnerability make the manipulation by Mr Bebe, the backstreet abortionist, even more disturbing.

Otilia's emotional turmoil takes centre stage during a dinner party scene. Having made huge sacrifices to help her friend, she's silent yet screaming at a level that drowns out the chatter. Despite this, the frivolous conversation continues and the pain is unnoticed – 'ignorance is bliss' so the saying goes. In a society gagged by fear, cruelty and exploitation thrive. Where there is stigma, trauma, and shame, too often young women are left with limited opportunities to discuss or make sense of their experiences. As Otilia states, "We're never going to talk about this."

The on-screen absence of the father of this pregnancy, and the power imbalance between Mr Bebe and Otilia and Găbița have uncomfortable resonances with so many situations where men have disproportionate control over fundamentally female issues. This was recently encapsulated in the notorious photograph, ten years after this film's release, of President Trump's male advisors watching him sign the executive order that banned US-funded international NGOs from providing abortion, or even information about it.

Our film series shifts to The Americas, where Cleo also finds herself unexpectedly pregnant in Alfonso Cuarón's award-laden masterpiece "*Roma*" (2018). This young indigenous domestic worker in 1970s Mexico City fills the silver screen with her quiet power and stoicism, despite much of her world unravelling around her. With its remarkable cinematography and black and white palette, "*Roma*" is a film defined by contrast. Driving the narrative is the emotional turmoil resulting from male abandonment, as we see both Cleo and her employer, Sofia, left to fend for themselves by their partners.

As the film and pregnancy progresses, Cleo's strength, self-control, and maturity develop despite increasing social and financial insecurity. This is in stark contrast to Fermin, her boyfriend, whose physicality, strength, and threats are superficial traits, failing to disguise his cowardly and evasive behaviour. A striking scene juxtaposes a small army of men training in martial arts against the young, pregnant, isolated woman looking on from the margins. Her inner strength is revealed to the viewer, but is unseen and ignored by the men, as she achieves a yoga-like pose in the background whilst those in front totter and tumble.

We are again reminded of the precariousness of the situation of so many young women in relation to pregnancy and motherhood. Depending on where one lives, the law may bring some accountability (at least financially) to men, but this only goes so far. Similarly to "*4 Months 3 Weeks and 2 Days*", this movie draws attention to a gender-based asymmetry at all levels when it comes to pregnancy and children. For the most part, men are physically stronger, they earn more, they're more likely to own property, and they're more likely to be making the policies. Whereas the emotional, psychological, hormonal, physical, and financial burdens of birth control, pregnancy, abortion, labour and parenting are typically borne by women. Despite similar power imbalances between Sofia's middle class existence and Cleo's role as a live-in maid, they share a powerful camaraderie, beset by adversity yet drawing on each other's strength, through to Cleo's labour and beyond.

Having considered Hannah's observations about the perils of becoming pregnant when young, we move onto her comments about the desire to *be* pregnant and not necessarily being able to in the final screening, comedy-drama "*Private Life*" (2018). Tamara Jenkins' film is set in contemporary New York and has a lighter touch but equally challenging themes. Taking a very modern look at pregnancy, "*Private Life*" centres on the journey of Richard and Rachel, a middle-aged couple struggling to conceive and also finally brings us a sympathetic male character! It's full of pertinent issues: infertility, *In Vitro* Fertilisation (IVF), and adoption to name but a few. But one of the most interesting aspects of the film is the concept and ethics of active transfer of fertility potential from a young woman to an older woman, specifically egg donation from Richard's (non-biologically related) niece, Sadie.

The rules around egg donation, as with much fertility-related regulation, vary widely from country to country, ranging from being prohibited through to huge payments to egg donors with 'desirable' traits. In an uncomfortable moment, Richard and Rachel flick through potential egg donors as one might dating profiles. It reminds us of the artificiality of making high stakes choices based on a catalogue of young women, who are being perused for their beauty and academic achievements. Although Sadie donates for altruistic reasons, she's also financially hard-up and struggling to find meaning in her life. We're shown the painful and constant injections, the side-effects, the repeated visits to the doctors, the psychological strain, and the weight of expectation. It shows the possibility for commodification of fertility where young women possess the potential desired by others, but at a significant toll to themselves. Sadie's egg donation brings us back to topics of agency and empowerment, ethics of reproductive health, and informed choices freely made.

Of course Găbița's, Cleo's, and Sadie's journeys cannot convey the whole breadth of experience of pregnancy and fertility for young women, but they do touch on some of society's contradictions, conflicts, inequities, and the precariousness of so many young women's situations. Despite the contrasts in the films, watching them together, against the backdrop of the "Portraying Pregnancy" exhibition, helps us to talk about realities of young women's lives that don't necessarily make it into everyday conversation. Through film we're shown scenarios where young women have displayed remarkable maturity and made difficult decisions in societies where their power is limited. The arts continue to serve as a tool for advocacy for those young women who still remain without a voice today. Let's not follow Otilia's instructions, but instead ensure that society and the creative, academic, and health sectors do keep talking about challenging topics, and that young women continue to be empowered to take part in and to lead these conversations.

Conflicts of interest: RB curates film events under the banner of "Watch Talk Think" and receives no remuneration. This spring's series of film events are in partnership with the Foundling Museum and MARCH centre, at LSHTM. Details of the events and panellists are available here: <https://watchtalkthink.com/forthcomingevents/>