

Juno, Claire, Camille: How cinema recounts the experience of pregnancy in adolescents

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Abstract

The paper proposes, through the analysis of three films, “Juno”, “Brodeuses” (The embroiderers) and “17 girls”, some reflections on the difficulties of the encounters of adolescents with their own generating capacity. The pregnancies arise from profoundly different contexts and deals with the uncomfortable relationship in becoming a woman that seems to be connected with the difficulties encountered in connection with a mother experienced as unable to fulfil a supporting role.

Motherhood is seen in some cases as an attempt to get out of this difficultly entwined relationship full of strongly felt unresolved problems and unsatisfied needs in which the pregnancies are called upon to fill, in others, a difficulty of representation in the somatic psychic is expressed. This aspect shows the difficulty of facing the changes in ones own body and its new potential, which are tested on the unconscious level during pregnancy. The films also speak of the difficulty encountered in the becoming of women and mothers when the fathers are fleeing from their function of separating elements of the mother daughter couple and exercising the fundamental function of paternal recognition of her femininity.

Keywords: adolescence, pregnancy, femininity, growth, separation

The possibility for a woman to think of herself as a mother represents the end of a journey of growth and implies the achievement of a separation from her own mother with whom she can identify at this point without fear of being englobed but sure instead of her own individuality (Argentieri, 1982, 1985) This route seems to encounter obstacles of which the various forms are seen in our clinical work and of which are in fact, a paradoxical testimony to the pregnancies of minors, who generally, as we already know, are only apparently an expression of mature creativity.

The goal of this paper is, through some use of the quotes from the films, highlight the difficulties that young girls sometimes encounter when dealing with their own creativity and the close relationship that appears to exist between this and the problems that have characterized the relationship with their own mothers.

We see this theme well illustrated in its various forms, in three films, recently released at the cinema, each of which deals with the theme of pregnancy in young women.

A few words about these films: The most successful of these three films was “Juno,” by Jason Reitman, released in 2007, which was widely publicized and distributed in many

countries. The film refers to the pregnancy of a fifteen-year-old American teenager, pregnant after her first sexual encounter, who decides to give birth and then give her baby up for adoption, choosing herself the couple in which to entrust her child. The film has a light tone and at times and certainly for those who know what profound implications there are in certain choices, it can be a little irritating. It should be contextualized however, in an atmosphere where adoption of choice is common practice, so much so that it's used in most situations.

Another film to which I refer to is "17 Girls" by Delphine and Muriel Coulin, presented at the Turin Film Festival in 2011. It tells of a true story that took place in the United States even though the film is set in France. In the film, Camille, a teenager pregnant after a casual relationship, decides to keep the baby because she is looking for something to fill a void in her life. Along with her, 16 other classmates decided to share this project of pregnancy in the hope of it making a positive change to their lives.

Finally, a French film, "Brodeuses" ("The embroiderers") by Eléonore Faucher, in which a young pregnant girl of 17, Claire, initially decides to give birth in secret and then abandon the child. She changes her mind however, after establishing an important relationship with a woman who has recently lost a child. With her Claire feels "noticed" and reciprocates in turn with affection, helping the other to overcome her grief. This is a film in which the level of elaboration of feelings is very different from the other two, and of whose complexity it will only be partially possible to present in this paper.

The body changes

If it is true that within the relationship with the mother and based on her capacity of containment and of reverie (Winnicott, 1967) that the child builds her body image and libidinally invests her body (Laufer, 2005), it's also true that the bodily changes of adolescence are associated with the relationship had with her mother and with her body (Ruggiero 2011)

But to deal with these changes is, as we said, more complicated for the girl, stuck between the similarity of her own body and with that of her mother's and the need to differentiate. On this level the advances/distances of the mother/daughter relationship is often played out, to which anorexia and bulimia being so widespread are a clear testimony. Even the daughter's pregnancy represents a time in which the issue of separation/individuation is reopened with the mother and the game of gender identity for the daughter is replayed. (Golinelli, 2007) However, if the pregnancy coincides with adolescence and the consequent difficulties caused by having to come to terms with the changes in the body, things get even more complicated.

The films that I have mentioned give clear testimony. Claire, the protagonist of "Brodeuses", puts off doing a pregnancy test for so long, that it becomes impossible for

her to consider an abortion. Though thoroughly aware that she had had repeated sexual encounters, she is determined to reject the changes in her body and not to acknowledge that which is growing inside of her even after an ultrasound scan. Indeed, there is something terrible in that which Claire confides to her friends who think that she is pregnant, when she tells them that she has a tumour growing inside of her. A reply, which expresses that in her imagination something deadly is happening to her in her belly. Also the protagonist of “17 Girls”, Camille, seems to struggle to acknowledge reality and tells a friend, who scolds her for not having immediately shared the news: “I didn’t believe it, so I didn’t say anything.” Juno, the fifteen-year-old protagonist, seems to be more aware of what is happening to her and that the pregnancy is the result of her first unprotected sexual rapport. A first sexual encounter with one of her contemporaries conducted with the innocence and naivety (of which pregnancy will be the consequence) that characterizes the relationships between very young peers who seem unable to think that out of “their” sexual relationship a child could be born. It’s a state of mind that is well expressed by her peer partner when Juno tells him that she is pregnant, he responds with astonishment, “Babies are born when our mothers or prof.’s get pregnant.” It seems to mark a separation: something that happens to big people not to them who are still small.

It seems therefore that for all the protagonists things can only “happen” to an unknown body and all of them testify to the difficulty in recognizing themselves as potential mothers. It seems that here emerges a difficulty of representation of the somatic in the psychic that testifies to the difficulty in dealing with the changes in one’s own body, but also with the potentiality acquired, perhaps, on the unconscious level, it was necessary to test this by exposing themselves to becoming pregnant (we know that this is the motivation behind many young girls who have abortions). There is a verbal exchange between Juno and her father, in which at the announcement of the pregnancy, the father says: “I thought you were the type who stopped in time” and Juno replies sincerely: “I don’t know what type of I am” thus explaining the disorientation or better yet orientation that is absolutely typical of this time of life, and the fear with the lack of instrumentation of having to deal with such important decisions.

On the other hand the fact that the body changes and that the belly grows does not automatically imply that one can recognize that a child will be born. This is a complex experience to process for every pregnant woman: the transition between being pregnant and really having a baby is difficult and even more so in these circumstances.

Claire, helped by the gynaecologist, hears her baby’s heartbeat and concretizes for the first time the image of the child within her that she had not wanted to know. She does not want to look at the ultrasound, as she does not want to see herself naked, nevertheless she makes them write down the sex of the child: she does not want to

know, yet helped by another woman, she seems to approach a little more the idea that there will be a child.

Juno, at first, however, seems very uncertain: she would like to “pretend that it never happened” and explores the possibility of an abortion. She decides to keep the baby when she sees the pain of women who are waiting to have an abortion, and when she finds out that the unborn babies already have nails: therefore something that makes them not beans, as she seemed to think at first, similar to faecal contents to be freed of as soon as possible, in fact she says to her friend “I'm up to my neck in shit” when she discovers she is pregnant. As days go by the idea gradually takes shape in her mind, that it really is a child that is in her belly. At the same time though she also begins to reflect on the fact that she is not capable of being a mother. Her way of being one, at this time in her life, can only be through the idea of entrusting it to someone else that can take care of it.

Also the protagonist of “17 Girls” when she has the ultrasound and hears the foetal heartbeat is very scared and says: “I saw it and I became scared: I got frightened, I'm dying of fear...”. Here a connection takes place with the fact that there really is a child and that maybe it is something different from what had been previously thought of as something that “could help me make a change in my life,” and “thanks to which I would have somebody who would always love me unconditionally. “

Hand in hand as the pregnancies proceed and for each of them a baby is outlined in the background, there are clear differences in the functions that these children are having on the minds of their would be mothers that have little to do with mature creativity.

With Camille we are dealing with her feeling the need to fill the emptiness of a life without hope and affection, having instead a guarantee of unlimited love and also, as we shall see, the possibility of building an alliance with her peers, cementing adolescent relationships, usually based on other types of complicity that here instead are seen in 17 peer girls who are organising a parallel pregnancy.

For Juno instead the pregnancy is clearly a task beyond her capabilities, something that has happened too early in her adolescent life when she is not yet in emotional contact with her procreative ability. In a later scene she will say with clarity: “I have to take care of some things way beyond my maturity level...”

For Claire, in the end, the question is more complex and in effect more ambivalent, partly expectable due to her not wanting to act on the pregnancy until it was already too late to have an abortion, showing a desire that was impossible to realise until she felt supported by Mrs. Melikian who serves the function of a substitute mother, offering Claire a form of containment.

From mother to daughter

It seems in fact that there is a close relationship between the possibilities and modalities that the daughters have in dealing with motherhood and their emotional relationships with their own mothers.

In “Brodeuses” the director presents us with a very problematic mother/daughter relationship. There doesn’t seem to be acceptance and containment for Claire on the part of the mother, who steals cabbages from the mother’s fields so as to sell them and buy rabbit skins for her sewing work. The mother realises this that she is being robbed, but does not see what her daughter cannot afford to miss: that there is a baby on the way. And so the dream in which her mother tenderly caresses her hair in a context of tenderness and caring ends with the violent image of the mother pulling out her hair in clumps. Even when Claire tries to let her mother see the condition she’s in, the mother can’t see and Claire cries for not being noticed.

On the other hand, when the mother comes to know the truth, she refuses to take responsibility for her daughter’s problem. Here too, as in the other two films we’re talking about, it will be a female figure, a sort of foster mother let’s say, who intervenes and helps the girl to recognise the reality of her pregnancy and to confront the decisions that must be made.

Mrs. Melikian in fact, notices immediately that Claire is pregnant and, although overwhelmed by her own personal grief at the loss of her son, is capable of being a mental space in which Claire can feel accepted and held.

In this context of shared creativity in the work of embroidery which they undertake together, both can give space to their pain without words: Madame Melikian can remake some contact with life (like wearing a lipstick) and Claire can, a little at a time, take note of her pregnancy and make room in her mind for the transformation in her body, even if not yet to the possibility of keeping her baby.

Dramatically expressive of a state of deep emotional abandonment and profound neglect, is, however, the situation which is collectively represented in “17 Girls” in which the protagonists seem abandoned to their fate and unconnected to any significantly supporting links.

In this context, the project of pregnancy, a planned pregnancy therefore, and not one derived from an accident, responds not so much to the desire itself to have a baby, as much as the desire to fill a void and “plug a hole”, in the same way in which, in a certainly more self-destructive mode on a subjective level, one can take refuge in various forms of addiction, from those of substance-abuse to those of internet dependence (less common in girls). On the nature of this desire and on the solution found by the sister to satisfy herself, the girl's brother, a volunteer from Afghanistan, explicitly tries to dissuade her from having the baby, saying: “Also I had a void and wanted to

change something and I found myself shooting at types who hadn't done anything to me”.

Added to this, in this case, is the fact that the project of pregnancy falls within the more general project of the adolescent group to establish itself as an autonomous entity, able to substitute and replace the authority of the family.

In an odd mix, therefore, of elements from different internal instances, some evolutionary (joining the group), others regressive, we witness the unfolding of a story in which the adolescent impotence/omnipotence has as its object the conception of children.

It's a story of great loneliness, notwithstanding the fact that it is experienced in a group: the mother of Camille, the protagonist of the film, seems overwhelmed by the fatigue brought about by having raised two children alone and too tired to provide an emotional closeness to her daughter. Camille, on the other hand, it is violently oppositional and does not seem to proceed in the sense of identification with her mother, just as she is about to become one herself, but rather in the sense of adolescent differentiation, even if it is played out on an officially more evolved ground, “I would not speak like this to my child... “. And, feeling criticized for her decision to give birth, says: “At least like this I will have the impression of having a family”.

The situation shown here is extreme, since it is closely connected with the instance of vindictive demands of a teenage group that is against the adult world with a palin genetic project, but I think that we often encounter similar situations in real life. I'm talking about children who are born with the primary function of being narcissistic objects for their parents and therefore who have to fight a lot to be recognized in their own individuality.

The situation is different with Juno who can see what is happening, also because she is not the only one to see, as the wife of the father realizes that something is wrong even before Juno talks about it and it is this stepmother who stays close to Juno as her own mother is gone, having abandoned her to have more children with another man. The story behind Juno is therefore the one that is going to be repeated: an abandonment.

But here the situation can be thought about by all the members of the family. The parents, who are really parents, in that they take charge of the girl, are close to her, trying to respect Juno's decisions and letting her make the decision whether to abort or not. It is the step-mother who accompanies Juno to have an ultrasound scan and who gets very angry when the sonographer takes for granted the fact that it would be better for the child to be given away rather than being raised by her young daughter. And remains close to her even when she expresses the fact that it may be harder than she thinks to leave her child. She doesn't replace her by offering to keep the baby, but helps her to understand the weight of her choice. At the same time she gives the girl, through her relationship with her, the chance to see, in fact, that children are not necessarily

better off with those who give birth to them, but can be understood and contented with those who really take care of them, as she does with Juno. The model here is adoption or better it is the value of the actual quality of the ties beyond those of blood. And it is an adoption that Juno thinks about also thanks to the type of American law, which being very different from ours, offers and allows free trade in this area among people. Juno, who understands that she is not ready to raise a child, testifies to her ability to be a mother, for now, just by looking for a couple who will be able to do what she and her young companion still do not know how to do, in this witnessing a very complex and multifaceted game of differences/identifications with her “mothers.”

The male role

All three films that we have been talking about illustrate very clearly how many difficulties the girls will meet in dealing with their creativity related to situations in which not only the biological fathers of the children are absent, but also, and even more significant, the fathers of the teenagers do not exercise their function and are widely fugitives. In the families of these girls the size of primary triangulation is not contemplated (Britton, 1989) in which the male figure arises as an element which helps the separation of the mother/daughter couple, so that, in these cases, the relational entanglement seems automatic. However, it is also the dimension of paternal recognition of the base of femininity that is absent, the debut of the adolescent in a world where gender identity is acquired. There are not fathers who help their daughters to see themselves as women and then with a male point of view are ready to launch them into the world of heterosexuality.

The father of Claire, for example, does not seem to offer the support that would be necessary for his daughter to be able to mediate the difficult relationship with her mother, nor on the other hand is he able to build a couple with the mother herself to which Claire could draw inspiration. For Claire the male issue is a thorny one. The father of her child, not by chance a married man, a representation of her oedipal guilt and especially of her rivalry with the mother. The theft of the cabbages with which the film opens exemplifies the oral theft, which is the matrix of the following theft of which the pregnancy is an explicit expression.

In the film, however, things evolve, and in conjunction with the building of the relationship with Mrs. Melikian there appears, even if only in the background, a father figure who is as capable of appreciating the daughter: Lacroix, the famous tailor who recognizes the creativity of the girl. And he does it through the woman's mouth, making it clear that it is from the female figure that the recognition of the male role starts.

Furthermore, a figure of a potential boyfriend is defined in Guillaume, who seems to be able, after getting over the pain and the guilt of the death of Mrs. Melikian son, to come

closer to Claire with trust and to be accepted by her. A father and husband are present at least in perspective.

Also in the film “17 Girls” a dimension of triangulation is absent in which the children are the children of a couple and not the children of just women. Here the males are perceived as purely inseminators and male object, useful to becoming pregnant but explicitly excluded from the bond with a child, who is experienced as a narcissistic extension of the self, able to fill the void inside and fix the link to the homosexual group (not in the sense that homosexuality is carried out, but in the sense that it is a group in which homosexuality is the place at which these adolescents seem to have stopped before actually reaching a maturity that involves having come to terms with their identity gender).

Beyond the cinematic representation, which also refers to a news item, we wonder how many pregnancies involving even more mature women are not born out of, more or less explicit dynamics of this type. Children born from parthenogenesis, sperm donors, that carry out their task in a less aseptic way than at clinics in which this practice is official. Concrete examples of the inability to draw deep on the theme of “where do babies come from” with a permanently unconscious antique fantasy of the myth of the single parent.

Also in this case, there are no father figures present as a point of reference for the girls, in as much as they are either absent or not able to empathise with them. In the film the only truly significant masculine link is that which has incestuous connotations, with the brother with whom Camille seems to have shared the sense of emptiness and lacking, resulting from a disadvantaged family life.

In Juno, the partner to which the protagonist is tied to with feelings of affection and who in a way is somewhat clumsy in his attempts to be close to her, is, however, anyway excluded from any decision relating to the pregnancy. Those Juno retains for herself without hesitation, even if after a botched attempt to involve the partner. As if the child was hers for better or for worse and not the result of a liaison between a couple in which decisions should be taken on the continuation about the pregnancy and the plight of the child. He, on the other hand, still surprised to have been able to father a child, tells her: “Do as you wish, my little wizard”

Perhaps in this case the boy is unable to offer himself as a father, just as Juno cannot think of herself in terms of a mother. Nevertheless, in the course of the film, he is apparently able to learn how to be a good boyfriend, considering that in the beginning he appears to be little more than a child. He and the girl seem, with the help of a complicated but generally more favourable environment, able to possibly evolve and become a couple, that maybe, one day in the future, would be able to have children in a conscious way.

Unlike the other girls Juno has a much more supporting father figure. In fact her father, without setting an example and, indeed, pointing to the difficulty of doing as much, due

to the fact that he had had a failed marriage, points out however to Juno his trust in both his wife and her when he says he will support them forever. And it is this trust in love that the girl will testify to when she decides to give the baby up for adoption to the woman to whom she had promised it to, convinced that she will love and help it grow because she is able, on a psychological level and not merely biological, to be a mother.

The epilogue

Juno's baby will be born and the representation shown during the birth in the film will be truthfully realistic, witnessing something that will surely remain as a deep pain, not just physically, forming part of the story of this girl and this pair.

She and her boyfriend will come together to mourn the abandonment of the child that will be delivered to the designated parents. The story will pick up where it should not have been interrupted, with a young couple sharing happy moments and preparing for the future.

Perhaps, we as psychoanalysts who often know more stories like this, can ask ourselves about the happy ending that is proposed here with some simplification and reflect on both the adopted child and the mother who left it.

The situation that appears to have a better perspective is that of Claire, more adult and knowledgeable, who had been able to also assume responsibilities towards the “foster mother” and possibly to start to build as we said a couple with Guillaume. Here a part of the journey seems to have been done and the bonds were built on a foundation that will allow for evolution. A place in the mind of a mother has been found and the possibility to think of an interior space, able to accommodate its own child, seems to have materialized.

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