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Abstract

The figure of the missing child is a recurrent and highly visible feature of past and present culture, the concern not only of extensive reporting in the media but also a frequent motif in the cinema, theatre, popular fiction and autobiographical memoirs. This article is focused upon the ways British feature films of the 1950s and 1960s portray the experiences of losing a child through kidnap or abduction, exploring in particular how mothers were represented. Through an examination of the complex and contradictory discourses through which motherhood and the maternal role were constituted in these films, the paper considers what they reveal about the shifting meanings of the mother-child relationship and the dynamics of gender relations in the home and post-war society more generally. The films discussed are *Lost* (1956), *Tomorrow at Ten* (1962) and *Séance on a Wet Afternoon* (1964).

Introduction

The figure of the missing child is a recurrent and highly visible feature of contemporary British society, invested with a multitude of anxieties about the risks posed to children both in their home environment and their encounters with the wider world. Such children are the regular focus of 'real life' accounts in the media, with especially intense coverage of abandoned babies (Sherr et al 2009) and children abducted by strangers (Wardle 2007). There is also extensive media attention around missing children whose mothers might be judged to be fault, as exemplified by the disappearance of Madeleine McCann in 2007 (Bainbridge 2010) and the 'kidnapping' of Shannon Matthews by her mother in 2008 (Cotterill 2011; Jones 2011). Despite the extent of reporting on such children, there are no reliable statistics although it is estimated that 230,000 children and young people under the age of 18 went missing in 2009/10 (CEOP 2011: 5). One policy initiative to address the scale of this phenomenon was introduced by the Conservative-led coalition government in May 2011, wherein a new dedicated team of experts from the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP)[1] was established to 'strengthen and lead the UK's ability to respond to missing children' (Home Office 2011). However there are already growing criticisms from children's charities about both the lack of staff and resources for this work and how the CEOP scheme will operate (Townsend 2011). What is clearly identifiable, nevertheless, is a concern amongst policy makers and charitable organizations alike that missing children are frequently the subject of abuse, criminality and trafficking and thus 'at risk' in very specific ways to what are perceived to be the dangers of contemporary British childhoods.

Explorations of the reasons why children might become missing and, in turn, what these reflect about parent-child relations, family life and society more generally can also be found in contemporary cultural productions, with the missing child featuring as the subject of representations in the cinema (Wilson 2003), theatre (Cousin 2007), novels (Morgado 2002), exhibitions (Collishaw, Emin and Rego 2010), non-fiction (O'Hagan 1995; Staff 2007) and autobiographical memoirs (Wilcox 2009). To take just one example from these different cultural genres, Kate Atkinson's novel, *Started Early, Took My Dog*, published in 2010 to excellent reviews, can be read as a modern-day fable about the lost or missing child. Atkinson's narrative is woven around Hope, adopted as a child and seeking knowledge about her biological mother, and Tracy who takes on the responsibilities of motherhood after buying a young girl in order to 'save' her from seeming neglect and abuse. As a result of her career as a police officer and professional knowledge of child abduction, Tracy's mothering is portrayed as being fraught with real and imagined fears of the ways in which she might lose 'her' child again. Alongside the experiences of these two characters Atkinson skilfully recounts multiple other examples of the ways in which the missing child, mothering and the responsibilities of motherhood intersect, resulting in children never born because of infertility, miscarriage and abortion; children abducted or deserted because of divorce and family breakdown; children who die, violently and through illness; and children who disappear into the care system. In this one novel, then, Atkinson presents many of the threats from which children and their families are understood to need protection in Britain today and her work

reflects many of the social and cultural concerns about childhood, commonly invoked through ideas of 'crisis' (Kehily 2010) or assumptions about 'a whole generation at risk' (Dekker 2009: 35).

These different examples about the ways in which missing children are represented in fiction and constituted in policy and the media provide a useful starting point for identifying how childhood, motherhood and family life in contemporary Britain are inflected with an anxious quality of a very particular nature. However my aim in this article is to examine what might be learnt from using the missing child phenomenon as a lens through which to interrogate concerns about mothering and female identity in the recent past. To do this, I will explore how child abduction and the maternal figure were portrayed in British cinema during the 1950s and 1960s. The cinema is my focus because, as Williams (1977: 132-3) has argued, cultural resources offer a way not only of accessing a period's structure of feeling and its 'meanings and values as they are actually lived' but also of tracing early indications of social change. Such resources are, therefore, especially pertinent for exploring meanings attached to the mother of the missing child, and motherhood more generally, and for teasing out where and how those meanings show signs of tension and fracture. My argument is thus unfolded first through a discussion of the incidence and nature of child abduction in the 1950s and 1960s and its representation in film. I then situate the films in the wider social and political contexts of their production and viewing as illustration of the importance of context for analysing such cultural evidence. This is followed by a detailed interrogation of three films in which I consider the centrality of mothers and

motherhood in their narratives about child abduction and what this reveals about the norms and assumptions which informed the portrayal of post-war British society and gender relations. The paper concludes briefly by reviewing what the missing child suggests about post-war anxieties around motherhood and how these are similar to and different from those of contemporary Britain.

The missing child and representations in post-war British cinema

Reports of abandoned, lost and abducted children were regular features in the press during the 1950s and 1960s. Between 1957 and 1959, for example, *The Manchester Guardian* reported five cases of abandoned babies, while between 1950 and 1960 it featured at least one account every year of a baby being 'taken' by a stranger from their pram.[2] With one exception, reports suggested that these babies were returned safely to their mothers as were the many children reported 'missing' after wandering away while playing or visiting relatives. There were, of course, other tragic cases of children's accidental deaths and Home Office statistics indicate that eleven children were murdered between 1950 and 1965. These same statistics reveal that 222 children were abducted between 1950 and 1965.[3] There is, however, a general absence of reports in the press about kidnapping or, more specifically, ransom abductions, and no such abductions were recorded in Home Office statistics during these same years. This confirms the difference between the phenomenon of the abducted child in Britain and the infamous North American cases of kidnapping for financial gain, which, as Fass (1997) has illustrated, had been such a feature of US society and its media since the end of the 19th century. This difference is also summarized very clearly in one

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of the films about child abduction from this period, wherein a police officer

rebukes a father who claims his child has been kidnapped, saying:

> This is a baby theft. We don't call it kidnapping until money's been
>
> demanded with menaces. We've had nothing like that in this country
>
> for over thirty years (*Lost* 1956).

Between 1950 and 1965 a number of British films were released in which

the missing child was afforded a central role, either as a character or in

shaping a plot. These included *The Kidnappers* (1952), *The Divided Heart*

(1954), *Lost* (1956), *Night Train for Inverness* (1960), *Tomorrow at Ten*

(1962), *Séance on a Wet Afternoon* (1964) and *Bunny Lake is Missing* (1965).

The films feature, variously, the innocent abduction of a baby by two young

brothers who are looking for a surrogate 'pet' (Fink 2012a); a mother's

recovery of her son, following their separation during the Second World War

and his later adoption; kidnapping and child abduction by strangers; and the

abduction of a child by family members. Other films such as *No Place for*

Jennifer (1950), *Background* (1953), *Street Corner* (1953) and *The Spanish*

Gardener (1956) contain more tangential storylines about a child who briefly

goes missing as a result of problems at home although the child's act of

running away is often highly significant for the films' resolutions (Fink 2012b).

Given that this range of films cannot be the subject of detailed and

sustained consideration here, I have chosen to focus upon three – *Lost*,

Tomorrow at Ten and *Séance on a Wet Afternoon* – because although they

appear initially quite different, they have many analogous strands. First they

are concerned with child abduction by strangers rather than the dangers posed to children when family relationships break down, as featured in *Night Train for Inverness* and *Bunny Lake is Missing* for example. This allows an examination of how external threats to home and family life were represented in this period and how maternal responsibilities to protect the boundaries between private and public spheres were constituted. Secondly unlike other sources in which child abduction features (such as *The Divided Heart* and *The Kidnappers*) the maternal figure in these three films is clearly located in the temporal and social contexts of 1950s' and 1960s' Britain. The narratives of *Lost*, *Tomorrow at Ten* and *Séance on a Wet Afternoon* thus also enable an exploration of the representations of post-war motherhood as well as similarities, differences and contradictions in their concerns about its meanings and practices.

Lost and *Tomorrow at Ten* can both be categorized as low budget 'B' films, although they would have been widely screened across the country. *Lost* tells the story of a baby taken from his pram, after being left by his nanny outside a chemist's shop, and recounts the search by his parents and the police to find who had abducted him. It is a thriller, shot largely on location in London and filmed in colour by the successful Rank Organisation, and it features a very glamorous female protagonist, the mother of an abducted child. The now highly praised production values of this film and their appeal to post-austerity British audiences were unacknowledged in reviews, which focused upon an absence of tension and emotional conviction in the plot (*Monthly Film Bulletin* 1956: 33). The plot of the second film, *Tomorrow at Ten*, is concerned with

the kidnapping of the young son of a widowed millionaire businessman, and the struggle by detectives to find him before a bomb, left by the kidnapper, detonates. It also belongs to the thriller genre, with the parts of kidnapper and detective played by two respected and charismatic male actors, Robert Shaw and John Gregson. Reviews for this film are also somewhat lacklustre, not least because of a regret by critics that Robert Shaw's 'chillingly effective' and 'intelligent performance' (*Monthly Film Bulletin* 1963: 122) is not a feature of the film as a whole; Shaw's character of the kidnapper dies relatively early in the film. The third film, *Séance on a Wet Afternoon*, recounts the plan of husband and wife, Billy and Myra, to abduct the daughter of a wealthy businessman so that Myra is able to 'reveal' the child's whereabouts and thus gain public recognition of her powers as a spiritual medium. It does not, however, fall into the low budget 'B' category; on its release it would have been shown as the main feature in cinemas. It is a critically acclaimed film, identified as an 'unusual thriller [with] a rare distinctive quality: real atmosphere' (*The Manchester Guardian* 1964), with Richard Attenborough winning a BAFTA for Best British Actor for his portrayal of Billy, and Kim Stanley being nominated for an Oscar for her portrayal of the medium, Myra. To date the films have received little attention in film studies or by feminist historians although *Séance on a Wet Afternoon* has been the focus of discussions of female madness and its portrayal in the cinema (Schneider 2002; Bisplinghoff 1992).

In addition to their common child abduction plots and general absence from studies of popular cinema, the films are also unusual thrillers because,

unlike the genre more generally, they afford women a significant place in their narratives (Aspinall 1983). All three films might, therefore, be equally understood as domestic melodramas because, using Marcia Landy's (1991: *passim* 266-268) definition of this genre, they acknowledge the interrelationship of the public and private spheres, recognise the increasing encroachment of the external world on the private sphere in this period and feature opposition between classes and sexes. This is especially the case in their portrayal of mothers who are often invested with significant power in the representation of the period's social and gender relations but, at the same time, are caught in a maelstrom of meanings around the responsibilities of the maternal role. To explore these meanings further, my analysis foregrounds the 'doubling' of mothers in each of the films and the way in which this doubling can be interpreted as disrupting any implicit binaries of the 'innocent' mother, that is the one whose child is abducted, and the 'guilty mother', the one who abducts a child or who is mother to the kidnapper. From this, I will argue that the films refuse to position the mother of the abducted child as 'victim' or to demonise the perpetrator of the 'crime' and that, in turn, they can be understood as reflecting what Bell (2010) has identified as the complex and contradictory terrain that women occupied in post-war Britain.

Film studies and social contexts

One layer of my analysis is built upon the rich insights into the social and emotional cultures of British society in the 1950s and early 1960s, which have emerged from studies of post-war British cinema (Bell 2010; Burton et al 1997; Butler 2004; Fink 2011; Harper and Porter 2007; Hill 1986; Mackillop

and Sinyard 2003) and which illustrate, as Geraghty (2000) has argued so cogently, an emphasis on the vulnerability of children and the importance of the nurturing mother. In turn these studies have indicated how the different structures of class, generation and gender influentially shaped the lives of women as well as the ways in which the marital relationship, motherhood and female sexuality portrayed. In particular, analyses of films produced in the twenty years after the Second World War have revealed not only how broader social concerns were displaced onto women and the family but also how a range of genres, including melodrama, comedy and satire, 'portrayed family life as chaotic and fragile' (Landy 1991: 235). As a result they have deepened our awareness of the contradictions, tensions and complexities in what is often portrayed as a 'Golden Age' of family relationships while drawing attention to the multiple ways in which family lives were represented and given meaning .

A second layer of my argument is informed by the policy, welfare and legislative reform enacted by the newly elected Labour Government of 1945 in which an inherent concern with 'the family' and the relationship between mother and child, can be traced (British Medical Association 1946; Horder 1945). As Denise Riley (1983: 155) notes, '[t]he mother in 1945 stood side by side with her children in her own spotlight of planning and welfare'. This spotlight was infused with an anxiety about the nation's falling population in which post-war pronatalist ideas were driven by a political determination to improve the material conditions of motherhood (Finch and Summerfield 1991). At the same time psychological and psychoanalytic research and writing from

the interwar and war years were increasingly shaping debates about the

emotional needs and development of children (Cartwright 2004; Hendrick

2003; Riley 1983; Thom 1992; Urwin and Hood-Williams 1998). Dorothy

Burlingham and Anna Freud's (1942) study *Young Children in War-Time in a*

Residential Nursery and Susan Isaacs' (1941) *The Cambridge Evacuation*

Survey had indicated, for example, that it was the separation of young

children from their home and primary caregivers, rather than the experiences

of the actual war which had been detrimental to children's well-being.

The importance of mothers or a maternal figure to children's mental health

was similarly reinforced by the radio broadcasts and writings of paediatrician

and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott. The significance of motherhood for

children's emotional and psychological well-being was also central to

influential research at the Tavistock's Separation Unit in London. This

included the work on attachment and loss by the child psychoanalyst, John

Bowlby. His theory of maternal deprivation, disseminated in the influential

Child Care and the Growth of Love (1952), was to become widely drawn upon

in policy during this period and in later years, not only to substantiate the

dangers to children of mothers going out to work (Adam 1975; Richardson

1993) but also as a way of upholding the male breadwinner role (Land 2010;

Summerfield 1994).

Child abduction: questions of maternal blame and responsibility

Lost, released just four years after John Bowlby's influential account of

attachment and loss, reflects many of the post-war concerns about working

mothers as well as wider anxieties about changing gender relations in the

home and society (Langhamer 2005; Smith Wilson 2005). The film's plot is

built around the abduction of an eighteen-month old boy, Simon, and shows

the frantic search by his parents and the meticulous nature of 'modern'

detective work which ultimately leads to the child's recovery. The mother,

Ann, is portrayed as grief-stricken but she is also an active and determined

participant in the search for her son. She desperately follows all clues that

might lead to him, which include various 'red herrings' and being duped by

hoaxers who pretend they have kidnapped the child and demand a ransom for

his safe return.

At the same time, however, Ann's maternal devotion and distress at his

loss are juxtaposed against her challenge to the normative 1950s' nuclear

family of breadwinner husband and dependent wife and mother (Davidoff et al

1999). Ann is an independent and glamorous dress designer, married to an

American man working at the American embassy. Her glamour is reinforced

through the many different outfits that she wears in the film, each of which

signals the 'New Look' of 1950s' fashion (Hopkins 1963) and speaks to the

yearning of many women in the post-war years for the resources to achieve

such style (Steedman 1985). Ann's affluence is represented through the three

staff, nanny, housekeeper and maid, who are employed to maintain her stylish

modern home and life-style and provide care for her only child, Simon, while

she is at work. Notably Ann is not at home but in the workplace when Simon

is snatched and, moreover, cannot be contacted because she has left her

office to have dinner with clients without informing her husband or the

domestic staff of her plans. The potential critique that we might read from this characterisation of Ann is reinforced in the film through her meeting with a journalist who, rather than publicising Simon's disappearance as Ann had hoped, writes an article headlined: 'Can a career woman ever be a mother?'

The representation of Ann's seeming challenge to the norms of motherhood and her rejection of the domestic sphere might be interpreted, then, as popular culture reflecting a wider conservative view of women's place in post-war society. This is a mother who, by her absence from the family home and refusal to take on the role of full-time mother, has failed to protect her child. As such, she is constituted as not entirely blame-free for his abduction or for the difficulties of finding him. Moreover her disruption of the period's gender relations is also marked by her refusal to accede readily to the authority of her husband or the police in their search for the abductor. Some of the concluding scenes of the film, for example, see Ann striding along a cliff top path to find the woman who is suspected of taking Simon, with her husband and four police officers stumbling along behind her.

However the film's positive portrayal of her confident negotiation of the boundaries of public and private life and her determination to understand and drive the search for her son illustrates a less than ready acceptance of the normative femininity and gender conservatism assumed to be prevalent in this period (Bell 2010). As a 'modern' wife and mother, in the 'modern' world of post-war Britain (Bell-Williams 2007; Coneckin, Mort and Walters 1999; Geraghty 2000), the representation of Ann's identity can be understood as

both a highly temporal construction and one which is unstable and in flux. In addition her character and actions point to political and social tensions around women's place, in the home and the workplace, which would come to be played out in the 1960s (Hall 2000). This is reinforced further by the film's multiple examples of women working outside the home.[4] In their employment as shop-assistants, car mechanic, telephonist, secretary, bus conductress, ice cream seller and police officer, these women foreground how domesticity and motherhood were not the only dimensions of women's lives in this period. Such instabilities around the constructions of female identity in *Lost* are, therefore, instrumental in leaving open the question of whether Ann is guilty of the failure to protect her child by not being a full-time mother and the extent to which she and her son are innocent victims of the dangers posed by any encounter with the wider social world.

The question of the innocence of the abducted child's mother is played out rather differently in my second film, *Tomorrow at Ten*. Here a kidnapper takes and imprisons a young boy, Jonathon, the son of a millionaire, and then demands a ransom for his return. With its predominantly male gaze and strong cast of male actors, the film has no agentic female characters like Ann. The abducted child's mother is dead, having been killed in a car accident; his nanny serves little purpose in the plot; and the detective's wife is portrayed as a domestic paragon, waiting with unquestioning patience for his return home. Nevertheless what can be traced in the film's narrative are the ways in which it draws upon a nineteenth-century idealisation of mothers as the 'angel in the home' (Kaplan 1992) as well as post-war psychological and psychoanalytic

understandings of the relationships between mother and child. When combined these different discourses of motherhood carry particular weight in the film's concern with the moral and social responsibilities that mothers had for maintaining a home in which children could be securely raised and protected.

These views of motherhood are exemplified by the boy's dead mother, who is represented as a powerful absent presence in the home. She features in a large portrait which hangs over the hearth in the living room, symbolically the core of home and family life. Each of the different characters who enter the room remark upon the portrait and the detective, Parnell, uses it and its idealised evocation of maternal womanhood, as a device through which to interrogate the kidnapper, Marlow. Looking up at the portrait, Parnell asks him:

> Did your mother ever have her portrait painted? …Put your mother in that frame. Does she have the same poise, the same elegance, the same dignity? Are you proud to look up and see her there judging you? Is she ashamed of you?

Through these questions, the figure of the deceased mother is presented as a moral arbiter of Marlow's actions while her abducted son becomes an innocent victim of his greed. In particular she is used to signify the moral responsibility of all mothers for their children's actions and, by extension, the actions of society more generally.

These questions of maternal responsibility are similarly explored through the portrayal of Marlow, the kidnapper, and the relationship he has with his own mother. Marlow's envy of the affluence enjoyed by the kidnapped boy's family as well as the detective's disparagement of the quality of his clothes, mean the audience is made acutely aware that he is unlikely to have a mother to 'match' the one in the portrait or to have a similar family background to the child he has abducted. However, as Marlow talks, the disparity between his own mother and the 'angel in the home' becomes ever more evident. When asked if his mother had ever given him a toy golly, like the one he had given to the child he had abducted, Marlow replies bitterly, 'It was a present she bought in a pub, stinking of drink and I had to thank her for it.' And when the police visit his parents in the night club they run, this unsympathetic portrayal is reinforced still further by the seedy surroundings in which Marlow's mother is located and her evident lack of interest in why the police might be looking for him. It is, therefore, the emotional impoverishment of mothering that Marlow received as a child and the material poverty of his adult life that are held out as the explanation both for his sense of self, what the detective describes as 'the weakness under that self-assurance', and his envy of all that the kidnapped boy's family possessed. In this film, then, it is arguably the kidnapper who is also a victim, while his mother is judged to be guilty of failing to provide the secure loving home he needed as a child. She is not the 'good mother' identified in this period by Donald Winnicott (1964: 34) as one who in 'managing her relation to her baby *on her own* … is doing the best that she can do for the child, for herself and for society in general' [original emphasis].

Yet the stress placed in the film on the privilege and power enjoyed by the kidnapped boy's family complicate the binaries of guilt and innocence still further. After the kidnapping, Jonathon's father assumes that he can 'buy' the boy's return and use his 'crony' network to ensure more police time is spent on the case, much to the anger and disdain of the detective in charge of the case. The kidnapped boy's family, and by implication the child's mother, are thus not entirely blameless parties since it is their wealth and conspicuous consumption which are presented as having played some part in the sense of resentment and injustice that drove Marlow to kidnap Jonathon. The film's portrayal of child abduction is not, therefore, constituted through the challenges posed by the 'new woman' to motherhood and gender relations in the home and the public sphere, as it was in *Lost*. It is rather that *Tomorrow at Ten* offers a different interpretation of 'modern' society in which 'old' forms of class privilege, patriarchal authority and inherited wealth are critiqued for their potential to impact adversely upon the social democratic ideals of post-war Britain.

Child abduction: maternal shadows and loss

The ways in which the tensions between past and present, 'old' and 'modern' come to shadow the attribution of guilt and innocence is equally striking when we look at the representation of women who have abducted a child. The woman who takes Simon from his pram in *Lost* is not portrayed as unequivocally guilty. Her tragic personal history, in which her husband has been drowned at sea and she has miscarried their child, are used to explain her actions and to throw into question the extent to which she can be blamed.

Such a representation of baby kidnappers was not uncommon. As Fass (1997: 140) has argued:

> the picture of the infant kidnapper as a deranged mother aching for a child in her arms … remained a prevailing criminal diagnosis in such cases … and has become generally absorbed into popular culture as well.

This understanding is played out in *Lost* when, after the baby is returned, the abductor explains to her doctor: 'I know I did wrong but he looked so lovely in his pram. I was lonely'. As such there is an implicit assumption in the film's resolution that a biological need to mother, her 'baby hunger', drove the woman's actions and that she was not, as a result, entirely culpable. This is reinforced in the final words of the film, spoken by the police inspector to the doctor, where there is a degree of sympathy and compassion expressed for the abductor whose own child was irreversibly 'missing': 'I'm afraid we'll have to charge her you know, but we'll do the best we can'.

These shifts between the character's innocence and guilt are played out in other ways too. As suggested earlier, this is a film which places a significant visual emphasis on emerging ideas of modernity and the 'new woman', not least through its portrayal of women as active in the workplace and as enthusiastic consumers of the fashionable clothes and make-up which were slowly to become available in post-austerity 1950s' Britain (Kynaston 2010). Thus the woman who abducts Simon can also be understood as a character who, with her dowdy, old-fashioned clothes and home on the very edges of a coastal town, represents an 'out-of-time' and 'out-of-place' female figure. As

such her transgressions extend beyond the abduction of a child; by living in the past, she has also failed to respond to the changes of a modern, urban Britain and, more especially, to the shifts in women's gendered identities.

The third film of my discussion, *Séance on a Wet Afternoon*, is similarly concerned with the gendered transgressions of women who abduct children and the ways in which past experiences can damage mothers and haunt their relationships in the present. Again the figures of two missing children, one dead and one alive, are woven through the film's narrative although the focus is predominantly upon wife and husband, Myra and Billy, and Myra's determination to abduct a child. This centring of the narrative upon a woman, as abductor, proved to be problematic for Bryan Forbes, the film's director. He struggled to find an actor willing the play the part of Myra, indicating the possible challenge that such an act posed to the meanings of motherhood and women's gendered identity in the early 1960s. Notwithstanding this, Kim Stanley's 'genuinely superb performance' (Monthly Film Bulletin 1964: 104) is one of the outstanding qualities of *Séance on a Wet Afternoon*, although the film's profound disruptions of the norms of gender relations and 'the maternal', evoked by the unsympathetic portrait of Myra's antagonistic relationship with Billy and her indifference and lack of empathy for the abducted child's plight, may offer one explanation why Stanley was not awarded the Oscar for which she had been nominated.

What drives the plot of *Séance on a Wet Afternoon* is Myra's desire to be publicly recognised as a legitimate medium after years of being personally

and professionally confined by the gloomy and claustrophobic Victorian edifice of a home which she has inherited from her mother and in which, as a result, she feels compelled to stay. This home is the locus of Myra's weekly séances, wherein she attempts to make connections between the living and the dead, and where her troubled identity and unhappy relationship with the past are played out. In being emotionally tied to this corrosive space, Myra remains equally bound to her deceased mother and the controlling but ultimately unsuccessful aspirations she had for Myra's career as a medium. As Myra explains to camera, 'Sometimes when I used to be very tired [as a child], she used to say, never mind precious, it'll all be worth it.' And so, like Marlow in *Tomorrow at Ten*, Myra is portrayed as being emotionally 'damaged' by an uncaring mother who failed to care, nurture and protect her child. Similarly Myra's mother, again like Marlow's, becomes constituted as a guilty maternal figure not only in this child abduction scenario but also in Myra's childhood and adult life more generally.

It is, however, Myra's own inability to mother which emerges in the film as the crucial dynamic in disrupting the boundaries of maternal guilt and innocence. Her child, Arthur, was still-born but, throughout the film, Myra refuses to acknowledge that she was never able to experience mothering her son and she creates, instead, an imaginary childhood for him in which she 'remembers' their relationship and what he said and did before his death. These 'memories' shape, in turn, her conversations with Billy about the abduction and the nature of the contact she claims to have with Arthur during her séances. The representation of Myra thus foregrounds her emotionally

and psychologically damaged past and the two unhealed losses in her life, those of her childhood and her child. These are acted out in the relationship between Billy and Myra through her alternating need for love and reassurance, and rage when her actions or ideas are questioned. It is only in the concluding scene of the film when she recreates the opportunity she never had to hold her son, by making the shape of a baby in her shawl and gently rocking him, that Myra can affirm her loss in ways which rejected the 'very matter of fact and depersonalised' approach to perinatal loss in the 1950s and 1960s (Cameron et al 2008: 338). It is in this moment, too, that the audience begins to appreciate the complicated nature of any judgements that might be made about Myra's actions.

Where *Tomorrow at Ten* illustrated the ideological power of the absent presence of the mother in the home, *Séance on a Wet Afternoon* points to the emotional and psychological effects of refusing to acknowledge the equal power of a child's absent presence, offering thereby a differently inflected understanding of what might be at stake when parents lose a child. Unlike Simon's mother in *Lost* and Jonathon's father in *Tomorrow at Ten* there are no opportunities, other than in the 'spirit world', for Myra to actively acknowledge her missing child. He remains 'lost 'and she remains unable to imagine another life for herself without him. This absence of female agency in the film is reinforced equally through the portrayal of the abducted child's mother, Mrs Clayton, played by the archetypal 1960s' actor, Nanette Newman. Despite epitomizing many of the popular ideas about womanhood, style and fashion in the 1960s (Conekin 2010), her passivity and

acquiescence in her husband's decisions regarding the recovery of their daughter offer few points of connection to the opportunities for women's independence and more egalitarian gender relations that run through *Lost*. As a foil to the character of Myra, Mrs Clayton is immediately recognisable as an innocent mother but her innocence, motherhood and femininity are largely one-dimensional and offer no challenges to a normatively gendered view of family life, in which women are dependent care-givers in the home and their identities defined by their marital status. In such ways, *Lost*, *Tomorrow at Ten* and *Séance on a Wet Afternoon* suggest the constant ebbs and flows in understandings of mothering and womanhood that were being negotiated throughout this period and the shifting emphases afforded to the importance of marriage and motherhood in representations of a female sense of self.

Concluding remarks

When combined with other studies of the representations of women in 1950s' and 1960s' British cinema (Bell 2010; Bell-Williams 2007; Geraghty 2000; Williams 2002), these three films about child abduction extend understanding of not only the complex and contested meanings of motherhood but also the concerns that imbued those meanings. Similarly they reinforce the assertion by Harper and Vincent (2007) that cinema in this period reassured audiences that the familiar emotional landscapes were still there while providing fleeting images of other possibilities. But what might be claimed with regard to the differences from and similiarities to a contemporary structure of feeling in which the figure of the missing child predominantly reflects concerns about

the risks and dangers facing children as well as the disappearance of innocent childhoods (Higonnet 1998; Holland 2006)?

On the one hand it might be argued that there are few similarities with present-day concerns. These post-war films about abduction were not driven by fears for children's safety, *per se*, but by anxieties about motherhood and the different ways in which children and childhoods might be 'lost' as a result of mothers' dual role in the home and the workplace, their poor physical care, their lack of love or their inability to nurture (see also Fink 2011; Fink 2012b). But, on the other hand, the differences may not be as striking as such an emphasis initially suggests. The concern with maternal responsibilities for children's care and protection that runs through all three films remains equally powerful today as women seek to balance expectations that they play an active part in the labour market and engage in the contemporary culture of intensive parenting (Shirani *et al* 2012). Similarly, as flagged in my opening comments, analysis of contemporary media reporting about the disappearance of Madeleine McCann (Bainbridge 2010) and the 'kidnapping' of Shannon Matthews (Cotterill 2011; Jones 2011) has illustrated that the ways in which class and gender intersect continue to inform the constitution of a mother's 'guilt' when a child goes missing. It is possible, therefore, to see that although the portrayal of the missing child figure in 1950s' and 1960s' cinema was embedded in a temporally specific structure of feeling about mothering and children's well-being, anxieties about mothers and motherhood remain a powerful feature of contemporary Britain's structure of feeling around family lives as do the contradictory norms and values through which

judgements of maternal 'innocence' and 'guilt' continue to be played out when

a child goes missing.   .

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