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Fetuses Are People, Too?: How Images of Sonograms in Popular Culture Affect Our Conception of Fetal Personhood

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FETUSES ARE PEOPLE, TOO?: HOW IMAGES OF
SONOGRAMS IN POPULAR CULTURE AFFECT OUR
CONCEPTION OF FETAL PERSONHOOD

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Introduction

You might hardly think about it, but you know intrinsically how to qualify personhood. You know, for instance, that you are a person, that the friendly elderly woman you always run into at the elevator of your building is a person, that, though you may treat it like family, your dog is not a person; but what about a fetus?

Feminist philosopher Mary Anne Warren offers a template of five essential traits that could be used as criteria for personhood: consciousness, or the capacity to feel pain, reasoning, self-motivated activity, the capacity to communicate, and self-awareness. Fetuses possess none of these traits,¹ yet there is growing support for the “fetal personhood” movement in the United States that aims to give fetuses the same rights as people, thereby disallowing abortion on the premise that ending a fetus’s life is murder. But valuing a fetus’s life to the same extent that we value a woman’s has devastating consequences for women. The empathy we might feel for the fetus, whose likeness to a person (as defined using Warren’s proposed template) is more visual than anything else, cannot override the woman’s right to determine what happens to her body and her life.

Considering that the fetus’s physical resemblance to a person has become such crucial evidence of personhood for the pro-life movement, we have to wonder if the “fetal personhood” movement would have flourished if it were not for the ultrasound. While the technology was initially developed for use in the military (sonar detection in submarine warfare), it has become a common part of the pregnancy experience, and can be used to determine gestational age and visually

¹ Some pro-lifers argue that fetuses can feel pain, but evidence for this is lacking (see chapter 1).

monitor the pregnancy (Petchesky 408).² However, the advent of the ultrasound made the fetus visual not only to doctors and patients, but also to the “outside world.” Through the image of the sonogram, the fetus could be “extracted” from the mother’s womb and presented as an individual by pro-life groups. Its resemblance to what it has yet to become, a baby, arouses in us “almost the same powerful protective instinct as is commonly aroused by a small infant” (Warren 321). The conservative religious Right³ has relied on this emotional response to the image as one of its many tools to gain advocates who will defend the fetus’s rights as if the fetus were a person and the pregnant woman a potential murderer.

Appropriated as a symbol of fetal individualism and innocence, the sonogram image has been posted on pro-life billboards, posters, stickers, etc. However, it also appears in popular culture and, as popular culture is both a reproduction of and an influence on culture, its adoption of the image reflects this feeling of sentimentality toward the fetus we see in real life ideologies as well as reinforces a message about fetal personhood. While we may recognize conservative propaganda on the streets, we may not recognize the subtle messages we are receiving on television and in films that personify the fetus through the use of sonogram images, which are both rampant and undissected, and therefore dangerous. The personification of the fetus

² It should be noted that the ultrasound has not been determined to be medically necessary. According to Petchesky, “A 1984 report by a joint National Institute of Health/Food and Drug Administration panel found ‘no clear benefit from routine use,’ specifically, ‘no improvement in pregnancy outcome’ (either for the fetus/infant or the woman), and no conclusive evidence either of its safety or harm” (408).

³ When I talk about this group, I will sometimes just say “conservative Right” or “Right,” but in all cases I am referring to the far-right-leaning conservatives who have established themselves as a constituency with a major influence over the decisions of the Republican Party. This group is religiously motivated, and though not all Republicans identify with them, they currently dictate the party’s official stance on the abortion debate based on their Christian beliefs.

through the use of sentimentalized sonogram images is widespread in television and film; even without a conservative agenda, the use of these images benefits the conservative movement by helping confirm the fetus's personhood and potentially influencing viewers on the question of fetal personhood. Although I recognize that people can engage critically with these images and either ignore their implicit message or reject it altogether, I believe it is likely that the majority of viewers are not engaging critically, and I argue that there is a need for viewers to become more aware of these images and more analytical about their use.

The specific problem my thesis will analyze is how images of sonograms in popular culture are presented in a sentimentalized context and how the dual emergence of a sentimentalized sonogram in popular culture with the widespread use of the sonogram in anti-abortion rhetoric has created a socio-political context in which the fetus has been endowed with the characteristics of personhood, which further fuels anti-abortion legislation. I will examine several popular culture sources from recent decades, including the popular sitcom *Friends* (1994-2004), the teenage drama *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* (2008-present), the hit musical television show *Glee* (2009-present), the 2007 film *Knocked Up*, and the 2008 film *Baby Mama*. I will investigate the use of sonograms in these texts and show how the characters' responses to the sonogram image, as well as the creative choices of the director and film crew in setting up the scene, intentionally or unintentionally personify the fetus. While there are some popular cultural texts that challenge the rhetoric of sentimentalism that surrounds the sonogram, I argue that the majority of mainstream representations perpetuate the hegemonic use of the image as an

affirmation of the fetus's personhood, and that these texts appear before larger audiences. Therefore, while it is important to consider that the sonogram image is not always used in the same way across all popular culture examples, its dominant use is one that reinforces fetal personhood.

The "personhood" that is affirmed through the use of these images aligns with Warren's conception of the term. While there are many different philosophies on what constitutes personhood, I am drawing on Warren because I believe her criteria is consistent with a mainstream Western understanding of what a person is. Her criteria privileges rationality, or the development of the mind, and individualism, which are the values that are emphasized in our political view of personhood.⁴ While this view differs from a religious definition of personhood that defines "person" based on genetic humanity and the presence of a "soul," there is a disconnect between these religious values of personhood and our political values of personhood, as the religious community appeals to popular understandings of personhood in pro-life campaigns. I use Warren, therefore, because her conception of personhood is relevant not only to a mainstream understanding of the concept, but also to the way personhood is campaigned by the religious Right and the way it is reinforced through images of sonograms in popular culture.

My thesis rests upon the assumption that the fetus is not a person. I believe it is necessary to make this argument before we can effectively campaign for women's reproductive freedom, at least in this political context. As Warren explains, we are

⁴ Some feminist philosophers have approached personhood from a relational stance, and though this is relevant in terms of refuting fetal personhood, it is more of an alternative viewpoint, whereas Warren's is more mainstream.

forced to address the question of personhood before we can make any demands for abortion rights, because if fetuses are persons, abortion is murder. Therefore this rhetoric has taken priority over all other rhetorics, including a woman's right to privacy, the confidentiality of the doctor-patient relationship, a woman's right to protect her body, her right to sexual freedom, and countless other arguments that could be made in favor of a woman's right to obtain an abortion. Now that the personhood assertion has been made and persuasively campaigned by the Right, the pro-choice movement has had to focus its energy and resources on an attempt to refute it.

Though Warren's article precedes the "fetal personhood" movement, she makes an effective logical argument in opposition to fetal personhood that is still relevant today. She distinguishes personhood from genetic humanity, because to receive rights as a member of a community you must be a part of that moral community, which requires personhood and not just genetic humanity. She reasons, "to ascribe moral rights to an entity which is not a person is as absurd as to ascribe moral obligations and responsibilities to such an entity" (321). Following this logic, I wonder why, if mothers were to be held responsible for the death of their fetuses,⁵ fetuses would not be held responsible for the death of their mothers, as in if the woman died during childbirth? Expanding on Warren's thought process, ascribing to fetuses the right to live is as absurd as arresting a newborn for its mother's death.

⁵ See chapter 3 for more information on women being penalized for the intentional or unintentional death of their fetuses.

Some feminist authors have questioned the assumption that abortion is unethical if the fetus is a person. McDonagh argues that if we regard the fetus as a person, it is the State's responsibility to provide funding for abortions:

To the degree that the fetus shares the attributes of a person, its imposition of normal pregnancy against a woman's will is an invasion of her right to be let alone from other private entities... If the fetus is a bunch of alien, nonhuman cells, then the state must not omit funds for abortions from health-benefit policies or if, however, the fetus is state-protected human life, then the state must fund abortions as part of its police power, which provides law and order, a power that includes stopping human life from causing harm by intruding on the bodily integrity and liberty of others. (McDonagh in Shrage 66)

Other feminist scholars also argue that fetuses do not necessarily have a "right to life" even if the personhood argument is valid. Judith Jarvis Thomson famously argued that even if the fetus is a person, "it is no proper function of the law to force unwilling people to make huge sacrifices for the sake of other people toward whom they have no such prior obligation."⁶ Thus, the argument can be made that abortion is permissible regardless of whether or not the fetus is a person, though I will focus on Warren's attempt to disprove fetal personhood.

To come up with her criteria for personhood, Warren imagines how a space traveler would discern whether an alien being was a person or not. She points out that, from an anthropological perspective, fetuses do not show signs of personhood,

⁶ quoting Warren's characterization of her argument on page 317

as they do not have religion, art, the manufacturing of tools, weapons, etc. However she does not assume these are sufficient requirements for personhood, so she lists the five traits that she believes to be indicators of personhood (320), which I described on page 1.⁷ She concludes that fetuses are no more personlike than a newborn guppy (which seems to be capable of feeling pain), and says, “even though a seven- or eight-month fetus has features which make it apt to arouse in us almost the same powerful protective instinct as is commonly aroused by a small infant, nevertheless it is not significantly more personlike than is a very small embryo” (321). This statement is crucial to my argument. Our empathy for what appears to be personlike clouds our judgment for determining actual personhood. Warren puts it wonderfully when she says, “mere emotional response cannot take the place of moral reasoning in determining what ought to be permitted” (322). I will continue this thesis from a feminist pro-choice standpoint that the fetus is not a person, insofar as we define a person as an entity that displays personlike characteristics, and does not merely resemble a person.

This is where the sonogram comes in. The fetus’s physical resemblance to a person is reinforced constantly through the use of this image. Though we are not always passive recipients of cultural messages, we are all influenced to some extent by the things we see in the media, and the more sonograms are used in films and television shows to end an emotional scene, or create a maternal/paternal bond

⁷ Warren does not claim that these criteria are precise, nor that a being would need to fulfill all of them to be considered a person. She merely asserts that a rational person would agree that a being that did not satisfy any of these requirements could not be considered a person using a standard understanding of the word.

where one did not exist before, or influence an important decision, the more the generic sonogram image becomes an early picture of a baby and not an image of a fetus. Political messages are produced and reproduced both intentionally and unintentionally, and though we may recognize those messages that are meant to persuade us (and either buy into them or ignore them), it is the unintentional, subliminal messages that are truly dangerous (take, for example, the excess of images of heterosexuality in popular culture) because they have the potential to affect our beliefs without us being aware of the effect they are having.

I believe it is important that we address and deconstruct these subliminal messages now, because the political climate surrounding these issues is tense, and we are losing many of the rights we gained in *Roe v. Wade*.⁸ Polls suggest that the public opinion of abortion is becoming more conservative (Ertelt “The Camera Doesn’t Lie”), and recent legislation reflects this shift in ideology. Many states are making it increasingly more difficult for women to have reproductive autonomy. Though this attack on women’s freedom is obviously multi-faceted and influenced by more than just the images we see, I argue that images of sonograms in popular culture play a role in reinforcing a cultural understanding of fetal personhood and legitimizing this conception of the fetus in mainstream culture, which likely contributes to more widespread support of this viewpoint. I therefore suggest that we become more analytical in our role as consumers of popular culture; if we can increase our awareness of the implications of the image’s use, we can develop a

⁸ It is also important to note that abortion rights is not equivalent to reproductive freedom, since many women still lack access to abortion and cannot exercise their “right,” especially if they are low-income or live in an area with a lack of educational resources and few or no abortion clinics.

more critical understanding of the fetal personhood movement and of what “personhood” means.

The very real consequences that women are facing due to this pervasive pro-life ideology are my motivation for writing this thesis. Abortion is and always has been a very contentious political issue. 2011 set a record for anti-abortion legislation (Gerhart), and a woman’s ability to make her own reproductive decisions is becoming increasingly jeopardized across the country as the pro-life movement gains momentum and public support. Poor women have been especially affected, as a lack of public resources (or legislation blocking public resources) and a lack of private funds has made it difficult for economically disadvantaged women to finance this expensive procedure, or even to access birth control in order to prevent pregnancy. Other legislation across the country has added restrictions on when, how, and for what reason women can end their pregnancies. Fetal personhood initiatives as well as mandatory ultrasound legislation are becoming increasingly popular; I will focus on this legislation and how it relates to my thesis in chapter 3. Considering the fact that many women have limited access to birth control, and that in many parts of the country abstinence-only sex education is the only sex education allowed in public schools, it would seem we are, as a society, enabling unwanted pregnancy. Unfortunately, public opinion seems to be shifting toward the conservative side of the pro-life/pro-choice dichotomy, giving politicians the endorsement they need to tighten restrictions on a woman’s right to choose.

My first chapter in this thesis will discuss the way sonograms are used by the conservative religious Right to gain support for fetal personhood and erase the

mother. This chapter relies on data gathered and arguments made by feminist authors writing on the same subject, a few of which I will summarize here. Rosalind Petchesky's article, "Fetal Images: the Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of Reproduction," was particularly valuable to me in constructing this chapter. Her article deals primarily with the Right's use of the sonogram to propagate their views on abortion, as well as the impact of these visual images, especially in regard to reimagining the fetus as an individual. On this same topic, an article that was very helpful for my first chapter by Carol A. Stable entitled "Shooting the Mother: Fetal Photography and the Politics of Disappearance" discusses the Right's use of "visual representations of fetal autonomy" (179) to influence ideologies on abortion.

Another valuable source that discusses the use of sonograms in the Right's campaigns for life is Karen Newman's book entitled, *Fetal Positions: Individualism, Science, Visuality*. This source not only provides more evidence of how the fetus has been personified, it also contains images that the Right has used in their campaigns. I am also indebted to Sarah Franklin's article, "Fetal fascinations: new dimensions to the medical-scientific construction of fetal personhood," which discusses all of the above topics and adds valuable insight to the way fetal personhood threatens women's personhood and citizenship rights. In addition, Lauren Berlant's article, "America, 'Fat,' the Fetus," sheds light on the way fetal personhood impacts women's status in society, and contributes to the argument that images are integral to this movement. My first chapter will provide the background information needed to understand the context in which the image of the sonogram is imbedded with

cultural values that personify the fetus and contribute to the erasure and demonization of the mother.

The second chapter is where I will analyze my primary sources and make my contribution to the scholarship. I will attempt to show that the use of sonograms in popular culture personifies the fetus and perhaps unknowingly advances the pro-life agenda. I will support my argument with theory on the pervasiveness of popular culture and its influence on society. This research will allow me to argue that the frequency of these personifying sonogram scenes likely has an influence on collective thought, and is therefore worth studying. Works that help me make this argument include “Pop and Circumstance: Why Pop Culture Matters” in *Feminism and Pop Culture* by Andi Zeisler, *Popular Culture Primer* by John Weaver, and *101 Most Influential People Who Never Lived* by Allan Lazar, Dan Karlan, and Jeremy Salter. In addition, I will enrich my analysis of these images by including sources that look at the power and influences of images themselves, and the way we receive them. *Practices of Looking* by Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright is my primary source for this. I also use Berys Gaut’s *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art* to more thoroughly examine the way cinema (and television) can evoke emotion by targeting specific senses and how the power of character identification enhances a viewer’s emotional investment. Ultimately, these sources provide a connection between images of sonograms in popular culture and the viewer’s reception of those images, and how this can translate to shifting perceptions about real issues.

My third chapter will discuss the contemporary abortion debate, with a focus on recent legislation that has made it difficult for women to obtain abortions, as well

as legislation relating specifically to ultrasounds and “personhood” initiatives. This chapter will illustrate the motivations behind this thesis topic, and hopefully illuminate the fact that the conservative Right’s campaign for fetal personhood, as well as other pro-life initiatives, is detrimental to women’s health and freedom.

My thesis will show that there is a need for analysis of these popular culture images. The use of sonograms in popular culture has an underlying political and cultural message, and just as we need to be aware of other potentially harmful cultural messages we are receiving through the media, we need to understand and analyze the meanings behind these images. They may seem inconsequential, and the messages they are sending may be unintentional, but they reflect a dangerous sentiment of fetal personhood that results in a cultural imperative to erode women’s rights.

Chapter 1: Changing the Game: The Way Reproductive Technology Allowed the Conservative Right to Promote “Fetal Personhood” and What that Means for Women

“The emotional effect and the consequent political support for anti-abortion campaigns depend in large measure on the manipulation of visual images and a nationalist rhetoric that metamorphoses fetus into ‘baby’ and leads to the rights claims entailed by that production of ‘personhood.’” (Newman 23)

In the latter half of the 20th Century, the abortion debate developed a narrow focus revolving around the question of whether or not the fetus is a person.

Whereas fetal personhood has consistently been the motivation behind Catholics’ opposition to abortion, in the past other abortion opponents spoke out for different reasons, including fear of abortion promoting women’s promiscuity, abortion as being potentially “dangerous” to the woman, and other issues that centered on the woman and not the fetus (Solinger 232). However, once fetal personhood emerged as a popular concept, the woman was no longer the main subject in the debate. Pro-choice advocates have had difficulty bringing the focus back to the woman, because if the fetus is a person, abortion is difficult to justify, therefore the personhood question takes precedence over all other possible approaches. Reproductive technology has been an influential factor in this discursive shift. The image of the fetus, made visible through reproductive technology, has been appropriated by the pro-life movement in their campaign to convince the public that the fetus is a person. This campaign has not only effectively changed the terms of the debate, it has changed the way we view motherhood by characterizing the mother as a threat

to the fetus and considering her primarily in relation to the fetus. The fetus's emergence as a person jeopardizes the mother's personhood and has dangerous consequences for women's freedom and rights as full citizens.

In this chapter, I am going to explain how reproductive technology, in particular the ultrasound, has facilitated the process through which the fetus has been transformed into a person by the pro-life movement. While "person" remains an ambiguous term, I will be using Warren's conception of personhood, as she provides basic criteria that fit into a modern Western standard of what it means to be a person (the emphasis being on the mind and rationality). I will start by examining how reproductive technology made the fetus visible by giving outsiders access to it and how this undermined whatever authority women previously had on their pregnancies. I will look at how the fetus/mother relationship has been re-constructed as an adversarial relationship, in which the fetus and the mother are separate entities and the mother is a threat to the fetus's survival rather than a nurturer as she had been previously constructed according to dominant ideology about motherhood. Furthermore, I will discuss how the fetus's visibility contributed to an erasure of the mother, and how pro-life campaigns have exacerbated this erasure by ridding the fetus of its context and presenting it as a lone being in need of protection. This will all contribute to my argument that the emergence of the concept of fetal personhood as a social concept was abetted by the development of new reproductive technology, and that the conservative Right has used the image of the sonogram to reinforce this idea of fetal personhood. I will conclude by explaining how fetal personhood threatens women's personhood and citizenship by

making their rights to autonomy and freedom from bodily harm contingent on their reproductive status.

My arguments in this chapter draw heavily on my secondary sources, outlined in my introduction. That reproductive technology played an instrumental role in framing the abortion debate and creating the concept of fetal personhood is not my own hypothesis, it is an argument that has been made by many feminist authors. My intervention into this topic occurs in the next chapter, where I expand upon the influence of reproductive technology in the abortion debate by examining images of sonograms in popular culture and the way they often reinforce the political message that fetuses are persons. This chapter provides the foreground for that argument.

Images of sonograms, increasingly sentimentalized in our culture, have become indicators of personhood. Some parents will announce their pregnancy to friends by posting their baby's first sonogram on facebook; sonograms will often be included in baby albums as the baby's "first picture"; and images of sonograms in popular culture are often included in narratives in which the characters develop an emotional connection to the "child" upon viewing the image, as I will address in the next chapter. Pro-life billboards and posters sometimes include little more than a sonogram and a few words; the sonogram image speaks for itself because, when visualized, "fetus" has become synonymous with "baby" (see, for example, figure 1.1).

The re-creation of the fetus as an individual in mainstream cultural understandings of personhood was aided by a new ability to view the fetus, made

possible by new reproductive technology. Though reproductive technologies can obviously be beneficial, they were not necessarily developed for the sake of women's obstetrical health. Some feminists have argued that male practitioners developed reproductive technologies in order to gain more control over women's reproduction (Petchesky 411). They have certainly had that effect. According to Stabile, "With the advent of reproductive technologies... doctors no longer have to rely on any information from the woman about her pregnancy" (193). While the medical profession has been managing women's reproduction in some capacity since the establishment of the obstetrics field, before reproductive technology doctors had to rely on women's experiential knowledge to acquire information about the pregnancy. Reproductive technology cut out the "middle-man" (or, more appropriately, woman) and allowed doctors to make observations about the fetus without the mother's help or input. As Stabile says, the use of reproductive technology to give male practitioners access to the fetus was a "reinscription of paternal authority" (197).

Gaining visual access to women's wombs changed the status of the fetus: formerly a private figure, blocked off from the world and contained in its womb, the fetus all of a sudden became a public figure with the advent of the ultrasound. Donna J. Haraway says, "fetuses owe their existence as public objects to visualizing technologies" (23). Petchesky argues that ultrasound technology is a powerful tool for teaching us how to imagine how many people exist in the world (Haraway 27). The world's population grows substantially once potential persons are seen as

persons. Dr. Michael Harrison, a pediatric surgeon at University of California San Francisco, as quoted by Petchesky, says:

The fetus could not be taken seriously as long as he [*sic*] remained a medical recluse in an opaque womb; and it was not until the last half of this century that the *prying eye of the ultrasonogram...* rendered the once opaque womb transparent, *stripping the veil of mystery from the dark inner sanctum* and *letting the light of scientific observation fall on the shy and secretive fetus...* The sonographic voyeur, *spying on the unwary fetus*, finds him or her a surprisingly active little creature, and not at all the passive parasite we had imagined.⁹

Dr. Harrison's portrayal of the fetus in this quote as "shy and secretive" and an "active little creature" speaks volumes for the evolution of the fetus—from an abstraction¹⁰ to a little person with an identity and zest for life—spurred by the ultrasound's "prying eye." This description of the fetus indicates that the fetus was always a person, we just were not aware of this fact until we could see it for ourselves.

This new publicity did astonishing things for the fetus's image. The concept of fetal personhood emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, aided by new reproductive technology that allowed us to "see" the fetus (Solinger 232-3). The "fetal personhood" campaign was spearheaded by the Catholic Church; later,

⁹ Harrison, Michael R. et al. "Management of the Fetus with a Correctable Congenital Defect." *Journal of the American Medical Association* 246 (1981) p. 774 quoted in Petchesky, p. 411 (italics added).

¹⁰ To clarify, when I use the word "abstraction" in reference to the fetus, what I mean is that before it could be visualized, there was no sensory evidence for its existence (for everyone but the mother), so trying to imagine it as a living being was more difficult without a visual.

Christian fundamentalists jumped on board (Copelon 28). Claims for fetal personhood led to claims for fetal rights, which, as Solinger points out, “has a secular sound,” even though the personhood assertion comes from a religious perspective (233). Again, the religious conception of personhood as determined by the presence of a soul becomes confused with Warren’s conception of personhood as a member of the moral community deserving of rights and protection by the State. Warren’s conception of personhood is the one appealed to in pro-life campaigns that try to make the fetus appear personlike through visuals and persuasive text, though their motivations for doing so stem from a religious understanding of personhood.

Feminist authors speak generally about pro-life campaigns that include sonogram images on billboards, posters, bumper stickers, etc.; in their arguments, they state that these images do not include any information about or visuals of the mother, and that the manipulation of the image through computer technology that enlarges and enhances it, can be extremely misleading and make the fetus seem far more developed than it is. A good example of pro-life propaganda that presents the fetus as more personlike than it actually is is the video “The Silent Scream,” which was produced in 1984 and showed the “real-time ultrasound image of a twelve-week-old fetus being aborted” (Petchesky 403). The purpose of the film was to convince audiences that during the procedure the fetus was letting out a silent scream, unheard by the world but discovered by Dr. Bernard Nathanson and the National Right-to-Life Committee who made the video. Petchesky shares some insight as to how this footage was manipulated to make their pro-life political statement:

The *Silent Scream* has been sharply confronted... by panels of opposing medical experts, *New York Times* editorials, and a Planned Parenthood film. These show, for example, that at twelve weeks the fetus has no cerebral cortex to receive pain impulses; that no “scream” is possible without air in the lungs; that fetal movements at this stage are reflexive and without purpose; that the image of rapid frantic movement was undoubtedly caused by speeding up the film (camera tricks); that the size of the image we see on the screen, along with the model that is continually displayed in front of the screen, is nearly twice the size of a normal twelve-week fetus, and so forth. (404)

In this video, as in other fetal representations produced by pro-life groups, the fetus’s supposed personhood is “verified by sonographic ‘evidence’ that it kicks, spits, excretes, grows” (Petchesky 409). The video appears to be attempting to portray the fetus as fulfilling some of Warren’s criteria for personhood, namely that it has the capacity to feel pain and the capacity to communicate.

Warren gives some perspective on its actual abilities: “a fetus, even a fully developed one, is considerably less personlike than is the average mature mammal, indeed the average fish” (321). This is, of course, irrelevant to those who believe in the religious sanctity of biological human life, but the general public may be surprised to find that the fetus cannot perform the many functions it is sometimes advertised to be able to perform. In regard to this phenomenon of projected personhood onto a non-personlike fetus, Berlant says:

The success of the concept of fetal personhood depends on establishing a mode of "representation" that merges the word's political and aesthetic senses, imputing a voice, a consciousness, and a self-identity to the fetus that can neither speak its name nor vote.

(151)

Again, fetal personhood relies on not a religious view of personhood, but on a political view to which the general public can relate.

The individual presented to the world through the sonogram is "floating free, vulnerable, autonomous, and alone."¹¹ Many authors have described it as an "astronaut": floating in space, disconnected from the mother, voyeuristic. This is a deceptive image. No fetus "simply floats, alone, in empty public space, unconnected, self-generating, and self-sufficient."¹² Even full-grown human beings function in interconnected ways and define themselves by their relationships to other human beings. The focus on individualism in our culture devalues the importance of relationships and kinship to our development and implies that we can all exist independently of each other and that we are self-sufficient beings. Petchesky references the "Hobbesian view," a cultural ideology that views individuals as "disconnected, solitary" (406). According to Franklin, "not only is the mother made invisible by these constructions of fetal personhood, but so is society and kinship. The potential for biological life completely obscures all other dimensions of human

¹¹ Hartouni, Valerie. *Cultural Conceptions: On Reproductive Technologies and the Remaking of Life*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997 p. 34-35 quoted in Shrage 91.

¹² Hartouni, Valerie. *Cultural Conceptions: On Reproductive Technologies and the Remaking of Life*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997 p. 34-35 quoted in Shrage 92.

life, and is seen as a justification in itself for the right to exist” (200). The concept of fetal personhood perpetuates this negation of relationships and ignores the fact that the fetus cannot exist without the mother.

This imagining of the fetus as a self-sufficient individual is consistent with the values of our neo-liberal capitalistic society. In a system that encourages competition and self-sufficiency and emphasizes the value of individual success over collaboration and interdependency, individuals are constructed as preceding (and not being shaped by) culture and as operating as solitary entities fueled by their own self-interest. These values and discourses are so embedded in our culture as to be invisible; using Marxism to understand the influence of production values, we see that “those who own the *means of production* are also in control of the ideas and viewpoints produced and circulated in a society’s media venues” (Sturkin and Cartwright 51). Through this particular worldview, birthed in and promoted by capitalism, the fetus can be imagined as an individual, with claims to liberty and protection from the State. Marita Sturkin and Lisa Cartwright, authors of *Practices of Looking*, remind us that “societies function by masking their ideologies as ‘natural’ systems of value or belief.” (51) We often forget that we are shaped by the modes of ideology embedded in our culture; this view that we see as unbiased truth can only be seen as such from a certain vantage point.

The fetus that has been appropriated by pro-life advocates as the face of their movement is a very specific kind of person. It is presumably male (Petchesky 406); it is bourgeois (Newman 18); and it is an outstanding citizen, as we learn from the video campaign targeting the black community that warns women they may be

aborting a pioneer in childhood leukemia research or an Olympic athlete (“Our Future”), and the Wisconsin billboard campaign that claims the aborted fetus could very well be Jesus Christ (see figures 1.3 and 1.4). The Jesus fetus billboards hyperbolize the implicit message in all anti-abortion campaigns that the fetus will be (or, for the aborted fetus, could have been) president, a prodigy, a saint, or even Jesus himself.

In this imagining of the fetus, potential personhood is conflated with personhood. This idea stems from preformationism, the belief developed in the Middle Ages that the form of a living thing pre-exists its development. In science, preformationism informed early theories of embryology, positing that “a tiny, fully formed human, or homunculus, is implanted in the sperm or the egg at conception” and that the human is therefore “‘preformed’ at the instance of creation” (Crain 4-5). According to Franklin, “Within this framework, the child was always human and complete; it merely had to grow bigger.”¹³ Franklin notes the tendency to imagine the fetus’s life in the future tense:

The emphasis upon what the fetus is going to become, upon its genetically determined development, inevitably leads to a focus upon its developmental potential as a person, as an individual human being with an entire life course mapped out for it from the moment of conception. (197)

¹³ Jordanova, Ludmilla. “Gender, Generation, and Science: William Hunter’s Obstetrical Atlas.” *William Hunter and the Eighteenth-Century Medical World*. Eds. W.F. Bynum and R.S. Porter. Cambridge University Press, 1985 p. 406-7 quoted in Newman, p. 66.

It is easy for us to make this leap from fetus to baby. The fetus's resemblance to a baby—its personlike features, its tiny movements—may evoke in us the same sentimentality and affection, or as Warren says, “protective instinct,” we feel for babies (321). Pro-life campaigns capitalize on this “protective instinct” by enlarging images of fetuses and making them as baby-like as possible, such as on the Illinois “they’re forgetting someone” billboard, in which you can see all the features of a baby: you can count the fingers, you can see its ear, nose, mouth and eyes (see figures 1.1 and 1.2). Sonograms are not usually this depictive; in many real life sonograms, especially early in the pregnancy, you may have difficulty locating the head, let alone counting the fingers and toes.

Now that the fetus can be visualized and, consequently, more easily personified, it can be regarded as a patient. It is given “an ordinary checkup” (Petchesky 409), and its needs are viewed separately from the mother's. This has contributed to a shift in the conception of the relationship between the mother and fetus. Formerly the mother was considered a nurturer of the fetus. The womb was constructed as a warm, hospitable home for the fetus that sheltered it from the cold, dangerous world outside (Stabile 186). The fetus was even referred to as a “parasite”; Franklin says: “the fetus was previously regarded as weakly parasitic, but essentially passive—‘an inert passenger’” (Franklin 193). In this imagining of the fetus, the mother is central, a nurturer, and if anyone is imposing, it is the fetus.

After the discursive shift, however, the mother/fetus relationship became adversarial. Stabile says, “visual representations of fetal autonomy in the service of New Right politics... have made possible the ideological transformation of the

female body from a benevolent, maternal environment into an inhospitable waste land, at war with the 'innocent person' within" (179). Petchesky agrees, arguing that "the pregnant woman is increasingly put in the position of adversary to her own pregnancy/fetus" (407). Her womb, once a safe haven, becomes a danger zone. During its nine months of captivity, the fetus is trapped, vulnerable, and in a constant survival struggle.

Stabile talks about two articles in Life magazine, one published in 1965 and the other in 1990, that exemplify the changing status of the mother in regard to the fetus. Both articles feature photos of fetuses, advertised as glimpses of early life, but the way the pictures are presented and the text around them are different. Though the focus is on the fetus in the 1965 article, the mother is still present: the photos show the placenta and the mother is constantly referenced. In contrast, the 1990 article has erased the mother. The photos contain "a dark, amorphous background, from which all traces of a female body, as well as any connection to a maternal environment, have disappeared. The photographs contain no traces of either the amniotic sac or placenta" (Stabile 187). The mother's presence has all but disappeared as the fetus has taken center stage.

Not only is the fetus now the main focal point, it is godlike, a hero who survives in spite of its mother's constant threat. Franklin refers to it as "the little fetus that could" (195), and says that the fetus is now portrayed not only as an individual, but an individual with free will and "even an ability to undertake responsibility for its own interests" (193). The fetus's gestation is considered to be its own feat, accomplished not only without aid from the mother, but in spite of her.

The fetus is “an agent responsible for the task of its own miraculous transformation from a kidney bean-sized encephaloid into a ‘baby’ at 28 weeks gestation where the story ends” (Franklin 195). It is the “Enlightenment Man” fighting to win against nature (Newman 67).

The Life articles show that as the generic visual representation of fetal life has morphed into the present-day sonogram image, our ability to view the fetus has come at the cost of the mother’s erasure. Petchesky says: “The technology which makes the baby/fetus more ‘visible’ renders the woman invisible” (411). She claims that when the fetus is presented as an astronaut floating in space, the mother becomes empty space (406). Newman agrees that these images change our perception of the mother:

The combination of representing the fetus as a fully formed child and suppressing the connection of the reproductive organs to the woman’s body, many feminists claim, elicits sympathy for the ‘baby’ and inhibits emotional response to the ‘mother.’ The composition of obstetrical images—a complete, undissected fetal body and a schematic, or even invisible, uterus that conceals fetal dependence on the female body, serving instead as a mere setting—constructs a narrative of reproduction in which the fetal figure is central, its context marginal. (67)

Obstetrical images alone, without being appropriated for a political cause, erase the mother by making her peripheral, an after-thought. Once these images become saturated in pro-life politics, they accomplish this erasure even more so, as Newman

says above, by “eliciting sympathy for the ‘baby.’” Stabile points out that this erasure is effective also because we live “in a society so dependent upon images” (180). The power of these images and the emotional response they elicit I will develop further in the next chapter.

The mother’s independence is precarious in this situation, as she begins to be “defined by the needs of the fetus, the little commander in her womb” (Franklin 194). Franklin says, “the emphasis is not only on fetal separateness and fetal independence, but on its ability to control the mother, rather than being controlled by her” (194). One need only think about the extent to which a woman’s pregnancy is monitored and her actions controlled to meet the needs of the fetus—whose birth defects or disorders will oftentimes be blamed on the mother doing something wrong during pregnancy—to realize that the fetus is viewed as being of primary importance in this relationship. I will discuss legislation that is happening in regard to this issue in chapter 3, but suffice it to say here that it is not difficult to discern whose life is important to the State when it denies a pregnant woman her cancer treatment for the sake of the fetus, or when it locks up a pregnant woman who is deemed a potential risk to her fetus, or when it arrests a woman for attempted feticide after she trips and falls down a flight of stairs.¹⁴ As Copelon says, “to be denied control over reproduction or sexuality is to be denied full personhood and reduced to dependence” (27).¹⁵

¹⁴ See chapter three

¹⁵ Personhood in the sense Copelon is using it here is personhood in the eyes of the law. Though women may still be persons in Warren’s sense in that they are still rational, functioning beings, they do not have full autonomy if they do not have control over their reproduction, and thus they are not full persons in society (just as children are not, and slaves were not, and freed African Americans

When the focus is on the fetus and its well-being, women are reduced to passive vessels, whose sole purpose is the reproduction of the next generation of men. Stabile says: “representations of ‘fetal personhood’ depend upon the erasure of female bodies and the reduction of women to passive, reproductive machines” (180). Even her role in monitoring the fetus has been diminished. Whereas before, “quickening, or the mother’s testimony to the movement of the unseen child-to-be in her womb” (Haraway 27) was given credence, the woman is now a “passive spectator in her own pregnancy” (Petchesky 411). The fetus has become a public concern, and the woman has been forced into a role she may not have signed up for. If a woman is defined by her reproductive capacities and valued only as a reproductive machine, she becomes an object, and therefore does not have full personhood in the eyes of society.

On a similar note, women are also not full citizens in a society so concerned with the rights of fetuses, as women’s rights are more easily violated once they become pregnant. As soon as another “life” comes into the equation, women’s rights to bodily integrity and health can be infringed upon to ensure that they procreate successfully. Franklin says:

By its very nature, such a concept (fetal rights) threatens the bodily integrity, the individual autonomy and the right to bodily sovereignty of women. Fetal citizenship contradicts the citizenship of women; indeed, it contradicts their

were still not). The legal conception of personhood is, however, related to Warren’s conception of personhood, since full legal personhood is only endowed upon beings conceived of as being rational and capable of autonomous decision-making. When “informed consent” legislation is passed (see chapter 3), the State is making a statement that women are not capable of autonomous decision-making.

individuality. Endowing fetuses with full civil rights ironically confers upon them a status in relation to the patriarchal social contract *which women never had to begin with*. (201)

The extent of protection offered to the fetus by the State is a degree of protection that has never been offered to women, whose bodies have historically been owned, used, and raped, sometimes by men, sometimes by the State itself,¹⁶ sometimes both; but never have their rights to bodily integrity been as vehemently defended by the State as the fetus's rights are today. Additionally, Berlant argues that women who are not procreating become useless to society, which is an indicator of their lower status in our patriarchal nation. She remarks that at this time in our country, the "reproducing woman is no longer cast as a potentially productive citizen, except insofar as she procreates: her capacity for other kinds of creative agency has become an obstacle to national reproduction" (153). In this case, women are merely objects coerced into performing a function that not only puts them in danger and disrupts their lives, but also has the capacity to change the course of their lives forever as well as take away their independence. Haraway attributes women's difficulty "counting as individuals in modern western discourses" to "their bodies' troubling talent for making other bodies, whose individuality can take precedence

¹⁶ For an example of the State's raping of women, see chapter three's discussion of mandatory transvaginal ultrasounds

over their own.”¹⁷ As these authors demonstrate, assigning fetuses personhood is detrimental to women’s personhood and citizenship rights.¹⁸

As I have argued, public acceptance of fetal personhood is seriously injurious to women. The concept of fetal personhood has been aided and reinforced by reproductive technology that has allowed us to view the fetus and see its visual resemblance to a person. Stabile says: “The visual technologies used to isolate the embryo as astronaut, extraterrestrial, or aquatic entity have had enormously repressive reverberations in the legal and medical management of women’s bodies” (181). The more these images are reproduced, the more difficult it will be to shift the focus from the fetus back to the woman.

Pro-life advocates believe that the images produced by reproductive technology can be powerful tools of persuasion; as Warren says, the fetus’s physical resemblance to a baby can evoke in us the same affection we feel towards babies. This is why there has been such a push in multiple states for legislation that will force women considering abortion to view an ultrasound. Project Ultrasound, a pro-life organization dedicated to raising awareness about “the effectiveness of ultrasound machines in deterring abortions,” claims that there is a “visual

¹⁷ Haraway, Donna. “The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies: Determinations of Self in Immune System Discourse.” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 1.1 (1988): 3-44 p. 39 quoted in Franklin, p. 203.

¹⁸ Even defining the fetus as a person only after the point of viability is dangerous. Not only is the cutoff at viability totally arbitrary considering the fetus does not suddenly develop personhood at that time, it is problematic because the point of viability gets pushed further and further backward as technology advances forward (Shrage 15). According to Stabile, “‘viability’ itself is a shifting concept, subject to technological advances that may soon render the term itself obsolete” (190). Shrage points out that using viability as the cutoff point for abortion is also questionable considering that viability is the point at which the fetus could hypothetically live outside the woman’s body. Shouldn’t we, then, allow abortions after the point of viability that remove the fetus and let it live outside the woman’s body? (15) Why should the woman continue to nourish the fetus on the premise that, at this point, it could nourish itself?

connection with the baby [that] causes that innate motherly instinct of love and protection to kick in and brings her to a place of considering her son or daughter her child, not just a ‘fetus’” (Project Ultrasound). They say that 70-90% of women who view an ultrasound choose to go through with the pregnancy, though those statistics are strongly refuted by other (non pro-life) sources. Whether or not ultrasound images have the ability to dissuade women from choosing abortion, they are certainly useful tools for pro-life campaigns, as well as cultural icons that reinforce messages of fetal personhood and innocence.

For these reasons, many feminists insist we need to “create new images that recontextualize the fetus” (Petchesky 419). We need images that represent the fetus as “a part of a woman’s body and not as a discrete entity living within it” (Shrage 90). Shrage continues: “By visually incorporating the fetus into a woman’s body, it can be viewed as biologically and socially dependent and incomplete, rather than as an independent person with interests and rights of its own” (91). Additionally, Franklin points out, we need to shift the terms of the debate (204). Focusing entirely on the fetus and whether or not it is a person takes the woman out of the picture, erasing her “already fully human status” (Newman 68).

Reproductive technology has allowed the conservative Right to extract the fetus from its womb and use it as an iconography of fetal rights. Taken out of context, the fetus becomes an independent being whose life is pre-determined (and always wonderful) but whose fate is precarious when left in the hands of its mother. Meanwhile the woman has been erased; her body, her story, and her personhood have become irrelevant. By allowing us to see what had previously been hidden, the

sonogram has provided the pro-life movement with “evidence” of fetal personhood.

If we do not begin to analyze these images and recognize the consequences fetal personhood has on women’s personhood, we will soon find ourselves living in a society that discards women to save blastocysts.

Chapter 2: “That’s My Baby”: The Personification of Fetuses through Images of Sonograms in Popular Culture

At the end of every Mohawk Productions television show (which include the Drew Carey Show and George Lopez), the Mohawk Productions logo flashes on the screen, and in a few short seconds we witness something of a miracle: a fetus laughing. To be more specific, the logo is an image of a sonogram. In the sonogram (which is a moving image), we can clearly discern a head and a body. The fetus lets out a short giggle, and the image disappears. No doubt what we see on the screen *looks* like a baby, but it is not. It cannot think, feel, or interact with outside stimuli, let alone giggle. But we are accustomed to seeing fetuses presented as having personlike qualities, whether it be in a popular culture setting or in an intimate real-life setting (where a kicking fetus is imagined as a future Mia Hamm, a fetus who stays in the womb past the due date is said to be making a deliberate decision to “not come out,” and a fetus in a sonogram image is admired for its adorableness). In this context, a giggling fetus might not raise any red flags. The Mohawk logo is just one example of the way sonograms are personified on screen. Since the sonogram became a common part of the pregnancy experience by the 1980s (Goldberg 627), its appearance in films and television has become commonplace, and the fetus we see in the sonogram is now somewhat of its own pop culture icon.

The sonogram is used in a variety of genres in television and film, but it often serves the same purpose. It is a graphic representation of a milestone, serving to make the pregnancy “real” for both the characters on screen and the audience watching at home. The scenes indicate the power of visualizing technology to

transform an abstraction into a reality for all those involved. Additionally, the sonogram is often sentimentalized through the context in which it is shown—the camerawork, the music, the characters’ reactions and emotion all contribute to the construction of the image as a sentimental image. It is not presented merely as an image, but as a feeling, a feeling that is inspired by the presence of a baby. This is problematic, because when this translates to the public arena and fetuses become babies in the eyes of the law, they are endowed with the rights of persons and, consequentially, women become less-than-persons.

In this chapter I will analyze scenes from *Friends* (1994-2004), *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* (2008-present), *Glee* (2009-present), *Knocked Up* (2007), and *Baby Mama* (2008), in which this sentimentalization of the sonogram image occurs. I will show how the scenes reflect and contribute to a reading of sonogram images as sentimental images, mirroring the effect the images are intended to have through their use in pro-life campaigns. I will accompany my analysis with theory from popular culture scholars on the pervasiveness and influence of pop culture, as well as theory about the way we process images and the power they possess. Ultimately, I will argue that the sentimentalization of sonograms in popular culture inadvertently promotes a message of fetal personhood that feeds into the pro-life movement, whose use of these same images is benefitted by their sentimentalization in popular culture. I hope my thesis will contribute to an understanding of the potentially harmful use of this image and a consideration that we, as viewers, need to develop a more critical reading practice around sonogram images in popular culture.

Before I begin my analysis, it would be helpful to think about popular culture itself and the extent of its influence. The book *101 Most Influential People That Ever Lived*, by Allan Lazar, Dan Karlan, and Jeremy Salter, compiles characters—some from popular culture, some from legend, all fictitious—whose presence over the years influenced real culture and undoubtedly changed lives. At the top of its list include the Marlboro Man, who taught men across the country how to be cool and manly as well as how to suffer an early death from emphysema, and Santa Claus, who continues to teach children the values of capitalism in a world of sparkling Christmas lights and over-indulgence. The authors begin the book by saying, “We believe so strongly in the characters of television, literature, and movies that we treat them as important people in our lives” (prologue). Indeed, as first-years in college one of the first things my roommate and I bonded over was our shared love for the television show, *Friends*. I remember her admitting that she felt that the characters were actually friends of hers. This intense level of character identification contributes to an emotional investment in the characters’ lives, meaning that when the plotline is thickened with a pregnancy and the possibility of a new “character,” we become emotionally invested in the pregnancy, and we empathize with the characters’ excitement and attachment to the fetus. Already emotionally invested, we become participants in sonogram scenes, reading the image sentimentally along with our “friends,” the characters.

As children, fiction is one of our earliest teachers. Some of the life lessons we learned, the morals ingrained in us, can be traced back to specific stories (Lazar, Karlan, and Salter 2). Fiction teaches us the way the world works, and it also “helps

us deal with the real world” (prologue). Andi Zeisler, author of *Feminism and Pop Culture*, argues that “pop culture, entertainment or not, is absolutely crucial to how people understand and live in the world” (3). Additionally, the more a message or an image proliferates, the more powerful its effect (Sturken and Cartwright 133). Ninety-seven percent of American households have a television (Stelter). Hence popular culture, television in particular, can be an extremely influential medium.

Popular culture reflects reality, but it also creates it. In “Television and Health: Images and Impact”, Nancy Signorielli says, “television is our most common and constant learning environment. Its world both mirrors and leads society” (96). As the authors of *101 Most Influential People* assert, “fiction informs us about the world, but it also shapes it” (Lazar, Darlan, and Salter prologue). It has the power to privilege certain narratives, omit certain realities, and create entirely new ones. It “shapes the world because it selects what parts of the world we will see” (Weaver 57). It can be used as a tool for change, a means of persuasion, or the conductor of mass delusion. More often than not, it is used to reinforce popular ideology, as Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright write about in their introduction to visual culture, *Practices of Looking*:

Film and television are media through which we see reinforced ideological constructions such as the value of romantic love, the norm of heterosexuality, nationalism, or traditional concepts of good and evil. The most important aspect of ideologies is that they appear to be natural or given, rather than part of a system of belief that a culture produces in order to function in a particular way. (21-22)

Among those ideologies reinforced in popular culture is the idea that fetuses are persons. This message is sometimes conveyed through images of sonograms and the narratives surrounding their presence.

But television and other forms of media are merely the medium through which these images are distributed. The images themselves have power and meaning. Sturken and Cartwright argue that “we invest the images we create and encounter on a daily basis with significant power—for instance, the power to conjure an absent person, the power to calm or incite to action, the power to persuade or mystify” (10). We project meaning onto images (known as connotative meaning), due to the way the image reflects and interacts with our own experiences as well as the cultural and historical context in which the image appears (19). Though we may mistake our response to the image as a universal, natural response, “The capacity of images to affect us as viewers and consumers is dependent on the larger cultural meanings they invoke and the social, political, and cultural contexts in which they are viewed” (25); to reiterate in the words of John A. Weaver, author of *Popular Culture Primer*, “meaning or truth is never natural in its existence but constructed, and these constructions are situated within a historical context shaped by those who control the medium” (48). In this way, we can understand that the meaning we project onto sonograms may be a reflection of our personal experience with or understanding of fetal development; or, it may be the social context in which we live that embeds this image with a great deal of meaning. Our reading of these images is informed by socio-cultural forces that have taught us to read them in a particular way.

Another context that is influential in our reading of these images is the context in which it is shown, the scene on the screen. According to Sturken and Cartwright, “The medium itself, whether that medium is a voice or a technology like television, has a major impact on the meaning it conveys” (155). For example, “Even the medium of your voice, through conventions such as accent, loudness, pitch, tone, inflection, and modulation, encodes messages with meanings that are not inherent in the content of the message” (155). A sentence can have a very different meaning when spoken in a different tone, as can an image on a screen when shown in a different light. Sonograms are not sentimental or subliminally political just by being on screen; they are made that way because of how they are presented, through the context of the scene.

In this chapter, I am going to analyze five popular culture texts: three scenes from the television shows *Friends* (1994-2004), *Glee* (2009-present), and *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* (2008-present), and two films, *Knocked Up* (2007) and *Baby Mama* (2008). I chose these texts because they are all widely popular and therefore pervasive and influential. They are all fairly recent or, in the case of *Glee* and *Secret Life*, still running. Though *Friends* was on the air decades ago, re-runs are constantly played and young people are still tuned in. The fact that the *Friends* scene I am analyzing is from the first season (1994) indicates that the sentimentalization of sonograms on television is not a new phenomenon, though it is clear that this is becoming more of a trend in popular culture. While the genre of these shows/films varies from comedy to drama to something in between, the way images of sonograms are used in them remains constant, as does the demographic watching:

these films and shows are aimed mostly toward young people, specifically women (the same demographic more likely find themselves dealing with an unwanted pregnancy). Finally, I chose these pieces because they are not explicitly political or seem to have a stake in the abortion debate. *Friends* shows no evidence of a political agenda; if anything, *Glee* tries to promote liberal values; the other three are centered around reproduction, and therefore it is possible they carry an intentional pro-life message, but while *Secret Life* might be suspect, *Knocked Up* is crude and definitely not targeted toward a conservative audience, and *Baby Mama* seems to be an apolitical comedy which, I will argue, actually provides a counter-reading of sonogram images. The fact that these popular cultural texts do not come across as propaganda, and are most likely not even intentionally sending any sort of political message, means that any political message that gets through is going to be subtle and therefore probably unquestioned.

This un-awareness happens all the time when we process ideological messages. Sturken and Cartwright argue that “ideology is a much more pervasive, mundane process in which we all engage, *whether we are aware of it or not*” (21, italics mine). We, the viewers, are often unaware of the messages we are receiving. At the same time, the producers may be unaware of the messages they are sending: “A dominant meaning can be the interpretation that an image’s producers intended viewers to make. More often, though, it can be the meaning that most viewers within a given cultural setting will arrive at, regardless of the producers’ intentions” (56). The end result is that “these messages reach viewers who... do not fully realize that these messages may impact upon them” (Signorielli 96).

I do not mean to say that this is the inevitable outcome, that as consumers of media we are pitiful sponges soaking up subliminal messages while making permanent indents in our couches. Although I believe viewers are influenced by these images and the media and may not be aware of the effect the images are having on them, I do not want to deny that viewers have the capacity to be critical, that they can engage with the images and influence their meaning. Stuart Hall argues that there are three positions viewers can take to decode cultural images: those who take the dominant-hegemonic reading “receive the dominant message of an image or text (such as a television show) in an unquestioning manner”; viewers can engage in a negotiated reading, in which they “negotiate an interpretation from the image and its dominant meanings”; or they can take an oppositional reading, “either by completely disagreeing with the ideological position embodied in an image or rejecting it altogether.”¹⁹ Sturken and Cartwright conclude that the act of viewing and receiving messages is complicated, and varies depending on the person and the context:

If we give too much weight to the idea of a dominant ideology, we risk portraying viewers as cultural dupes who can be ‘force fed’ ideas and values. At the same time, if we overemphasize the potential array of interpretations viewers can make of any given image, we can make it seem as if all viewers have the power to interpret images any way they want, and that these interpretations will be meaningful in their social world. In this perspective,

¹⁹ Hall, Stuart. “Encoding, Decoding.” *The Cultural Studies Reader*. Ed. Simon During. New York and London: Routledge, 1993. p. 90-103 quoted in Sturken and Cartwright, p. 57.

we would lose any sense of dominant power and its attempt to organize our ways of looking. Meanings of images are created in a complex relationship among producer, viewer, image or text, and social context. Because meanings are produced out of this relationship, there are limits to the interpretive agency of any one member of this group. (56)

With this in mind, I cannot make assumptions about the way images of sonograms are affecting viewers, because not all viewers are passively accepting these images using a dominant-hegemonic reading. However, I do believe I can assume that there are a large number of viewers who are taking this reading, and that therefore this message is getting through, undetected, to a large audience. And given the way the image of the sonogram has been appropriated by pro-life groups and imbued with political sentiments, how the audience interprets the image is influenced not only by the scene on the screen but by its dominant cultural meaning. It is important to take this into consideration during my analysis of these popular culture texts.

The first text I will analyze is a scene from *Friends*. *Friends* is without a doubt one of the most popular sitcoms of the past few decades. It ran for 10 years, from 1994 to 2004. The series finale was watched by 52.5 million Americans, making it the fourth most watched series finale in television history (Boyer). Although it has been off the air for 8 years, the sitcom continues to be a widespread favorite. *Friends* references in everyday conversation are common; among the right demographic, you can throw out a *Friends* quote and your conversational partner will finish the sentence for you, because so many of us have seen them all. As a *Friends* devotee, I have indeed seen all the episodes, but one episode is of particular interest to me.

This episode is season 1 episode 2 entitled, “The One with the Sonogram”. At the heart of the episode is baby (fetus) Ben’s first sonogram, and the audience’s first glimpse at Ross and Carol’s unborn child.

In “The One with the Sonogram”, Ross discovers that his lesbian ex-wife Carol is pregnant with his child and she is planning on raising the baby with her new partner, giving Ross the freedom to choose to what extent he would like to be involved. Ross is clearly overwhelmed by this news, but he decides to meet Carol (and her partner Susan) at her doctor’s appointment. There, he and Susan get into an argument when Ross brings up the question of how big decisions will be made, such as who will name the baby, and Carol and Susan indicate that they have already made that decision and that Ross’s last name is not going to be included in the baby’s full name. The argument escalates and as the doctor begins to administer the ultrasound, Ross turns to exit, saying he doesn’t think he can be “involved in this particular family.”

He stops, however, at the sound of the fetus’s heartbeat. He turns around, mesmerized by the sonogram on the screen (which we, the audience, can also see), and joins Carol and Susan at the bed, clasping hands with Susan. His apprehension about their arrangement seems to disappear as the three of them share this emotional experience. The camera once again turns to the sonogram screen and zooms in slowly for the audience. Meanwhile, we continue to hear the heartbeat, and the characters’ emotional awe is transferred to us through the use of sound and imagery. This sentimentalization of the image, as well as the sonogram’s ability to solve the characters’ serious disaccord, is where I will focus my analysis.

This scene does many things to emphasize the fetus's personhood, the audible heartbeat being the first. Secondly, the image on the screen very clearly shows a head and a body; the fetus certainly resembles a baby, though, as I discussed in the first chapter, mere resemblance is not a valid indicator of personhood. The characters' exclamations—"Oh my god" (Ross), "Look at that" (Susan), "I know" (Carol)—indicate their witnessing of something magical: the glimpsing of the fetus through technology that has made the (formerly unseen) fetus visible. The camerawork suggests intimacy: we are brought closer to the image as the scene ends, leaving us, the audience, alone with the fetus. This is similar to the way editing techniques are used in pro-life campaign images and videos to make the fetus more personlike; as with all media, the presentation of the image can be just as important as the information itself. Finally, the audio in the scene is powerful: the only noise you can hear at the end of the scene is the fetus's heartbeat, which is accompanied by the image. Carol and the rest of the characters have disappeared from the screen.

The camerawork is important to focus on here. The camera is a powerful tool for eliciting emotions, in this case and in all media. In chapter 6 of *A Philosophy of Cinematic Art*, the author, Berys Gaut, discusses emotion and identification in cinema. He emphasizes that the movement of the camera "can focus attention by moving towards something, add to the dynamic impact of a scene and ground a sense of quasi-personality, which draws the viewer emotionally into the film [or television show]" (249). In addition, the camera has the advantage of being able to get really close to a character's face, so the audience can view the "flow of emotions

across a face, emotions that would have likely escaped an observer in real life and so reveal aspects of reality that were hitherto unseen. The use of this technique is a strong factor in producing emotions in the audience, and is particularly important... in fostering identification with a character through the reaction shot” (249-50). In this scene in *Friends*, the camera brings us closer not only to the characters’ faces, whose expressions speak volumes, but also to the image of the fetus itself, lingering there at the end of the scene. In effect, the audience becomes a character staring at the image and developing an attachment to it.

One recurring theme this scene illustrates is the narrative of the biological father becoming suddenly attached to the fetus upon viewing the sonogram and being inspired to take on a fatherly role he had formerly been reluctant to perform. The pregnancy suddenly becomes “real” to the father once he can see the fetus, in the same way that the fetus became real to the world and developed individuality and personhood once the mother’s womb became visibly penetrable with new reproductive technology. Ross had been ready to walk out on being a father, but this one image changed his mind. The image had this kind of power over Ross because he personified it; he saw the fetus and his brain registered “that’s my baby,” and from that realization an attachment grew. This is the same epiphany that pro-lifers pushing “informed consent” legislation expect women to have when they are forced to have an ultrasound prior to getting an abortion (see chapter 3).²⁰

²⁰ However, as women point out in regard to the law’s extreme condescension toward them, they do not need to see a sonogram to inform them they are pregnant; they generally are already full cognizant of this fact. This “epiphany” that fathers on television have is not totally relevant to women’s experiences with their pregnancies.

In this episode of *Friends*, the sonogram image not only inspires Ross to be a father, it also unites the three characters, which is quite a feat. The characters were previously arguing and their disagreement was enough to prompt Ross to turn and exit the room, but the image dissolves their differences and brings the three to a silent accord. Anyone who knows these characters' backgrounds knows how unlikely it is for Ross and Susan to hold hands affectionately, but that is exactly what happens in this scene. Their love for the fetus transcends their hatred for each other.

This accomplishment could not have been achieved by a mere fetus. In this case, the fetus is not a fetus; it is a baby, or at least the idea of a baby. Ross and Susan toss aside their differences due to their shared love for their soon-to-be child. This gesture suggests that the love we have for a child is more important than and will overcome all issues, a theme that is present in many popular culture narratives (including *Knocked Up*). By imploring us to ignore economic and real life circumstances while romanticizing parenthood, this theme reflects and propagates a naïve optimism (the belief that it will all “work out”) we are psychologically prone to employ (Sharot). This naïve optimism is also present in pro-life logic: the assertion that “everything happens for a reason” and the idea that love will conquer all permeates pro-life rhetoric, that implores even women who are raped to consider that all children are a blessing. This kind of narrative, though certainly not exclusive to pro-life ideology, promotes an oversimplified and romanticized view of real life hardship, which can be applied to an unplanned pregnancy situation.

This scene in *Friends* is a very powerful example of an image of a sonogram in popular culture that is sentimentalized by the characters and the camerawork. The

fact that *Friends* was and continues to be such an influential television show and that many viewers have developed attachments to the characters means that millions of people watched that scene and felt (at least a fraction of) what Ross and the other characters were feeling. When a sonogram becomes so iconographic, it becomes politically persuasive, even if no one behind the scenes was trying to be political or persuade us of anything. Scenes like these normalize viewing the sonogram image in a sentimentalized way, which is likely to contribute to a troubling acceptance of fetal personhood philosophy.

We see this also in the hit series *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*, which entered American teenagers' lives in 2008 and continues to entertain this demographic. The season 1 finale had 4.5 million viewers, most of them adolescent girls (Catlin). Of all teenage dramas, *Secret Life* is definitely a top contender for most pro-life plotline. Sonograms aside, the show is the poster child of non-realistic happy teenage pregnancy television. The female high school characters, who always seem to be pregnant, are supported in all their endeavors by their wealthy parents, and once the baby comes it is back to prom they go, except with an adorable kid waiting at home. Like a lot of shows on the air today, *Secret Life* makes teenage parenthood seem trendy.

It also makes a good case for the personification of fetuses in sonograms shown on television. In season 3 episode 10, pregnant Adrian brings home a sonogram photo and shares a moment with her father. The dialogue goes as follows:

ADRIAN: I can't believe I can already see my baby, it's so exciting. Or it would be if I were ten years older and married.

ADRIAN'S FATHER: But it still is. This is a baby.

ADRIAN: Yeah. My baby. This is the first time I've really felt like I'm having a baby... I can't believe that's my baby.

Meanwhile, in a different house, Ben, the father, stares at his own photograph of the sonogram and talks it over with his friends. Like Adrian, he comes to realize that this is all really happening.

BEN: I can't believe that's my baby.

FRIEND: Yeah, well. Did you pass out?

BEN: My knees got a little weak but yeah, I'm just glad I was there. Or near there anyway. I missed all that with Amy. But that wasn't my baby. This is my baby. This is my little guy, or girl, or guy. I kind of hope it's a girl. Yeah I hope it's a girl. I have a feeling it's a girl.

...

BEN: You know what? I'm gonna marry her. I'm gonna do what you said and I'm just going to accept that this is my fate and I'm gonna marry Adrian and learn to love her.

Both these scenes play out a familiar narrative: the sonogram makes the baby "real." The characters come to a realization ("I can't believe that's my baby") upon staring at this photograph that there really is a baby coming. They are bonding with the fetus in the photograph, which, to them and to the audience watching at home, is much more than just a fetus. This photograph makes the fetus visible, prompting its viewers—the characters on the screen as well as those of us watching

at home—to see it as “real,” suggesting that reproductive technology has the power to make what was formerly an abstraction into a real person.

However, while Adrian’s and her father’s reaction is arguably appropriate (though we might wonder why Adrian’s father is so overjoyed that his daughter is about to be a teenage mother), Ben’s is a bit over the top. His assertion that he is going to marry Adrian is impulsive and seemingly out of the blue, especially considering the fact that he is apparently in love with his ex-girlfriend Amy, who also just had a baby. His friends react accordingly, and advise him that this is not the right way to try to win over Amy. Regardless of his deluded reasons behind making the statement, his sudden urge to marry Adrian, a girl he does not love, is prompted by the sonogram image. This image has clearly affected Ben strongly, enough so that he considers making a life-changing decision, supposedly on behalf of the baby-to-be.

In this scene, Ben’s reaction to the sonogram is similar to Ross’s reaction in *Friends*. Both characters feel like fathers for the first time, and both experience a drastic change of heart in terms of their role in the baby’s life. Both sonograms are imbued with enough power as to emotionally stun these characters; both, therefore, show fetuses that have been personified by the characters on screen, sending a message to the audience at home about the fetus’s personhood. The audience’s emotional investment in their favorite characters’ lives pulls them into the scene and produces a connection between the audience and the fetus, further solidifying the fetus as a future baby and not merely a fetus. Viewers may not be aware of the

message they are receiving, but if they are taking the dominant-hegemonic reading, they are uncritically consuming a promotion of fetal personhood.

The third and final television show I am going to analyze is *Glee*. The popular musical television show is currently in its third season. Seasons 1 and 2 averaged around 10 million viewers (Andreeva; Gorman), and 26.8 million viewers tuned in to see the post-Superbowl episode in 2011 (Seidman). As a musical comedy-drama, *Glee* created a whole new genre of television and acquired a devoted fan base comprised of teenagers and adults entertained by the PG high school plotline and musical numbers. Though not an explicitly political show, *Glee* does seem to attempt to send some political messages, notably the promotion of equality and diversity (which debatably comes off as tokenism, but that is a different discussion). *Glee*'s diverse cast includes gay and lesbian characters as well as mentally and physically disabled characters, and though there are criticisms to be made about the way these characters are represented, the producers seem to be attempting to make a statement about acceptance and equality that does not quite align with conservative values (especially when we consider the range of sexual orientations on the show). However, in *Glee*'s sonogram episode, there are definite, if unintentional, conservative messages being sent about fetal personhood.

In the first season, Quinn, a cheerleader and, ironically, president of the abstinence club, gets pregnant with football player and glee singer Finn's baby (although later we find out Finn is not really the father). The unexpected pregnancy causes a lot of drama and stress for the young couple, who ultimately decide adoption is their best option. In episode 10, Finn struggles dealing with that decision

because he feels distraught that the baby will grow up never knowing how much he loves her, so he sings to get his emotions out. As he is belting “I’ll Stand By You” by the Pretenders on stage, alone in the theater except for Kurt accompanying him on piano, there is a scene shift in the middle of the song, and suddenly he is in his room at home, singing his heart out to a moving sonogram on his laptop screen. The song progresses uninterrupted, and the scene shifts back to him at the stage, then back to him on his bed, though this time he is gently touching the screen of his computer with the sonogram still on it.

The powerful song, with its touching lyrics and Finn’s beautiful voice, is enough to give goose bumps to those of us with a soft spot for music. Gaut emphasizes that we should not underestimate the ability of music to alter our feelings: “music in film is central to its emotional impact, achieving greater emotional precision through its associations with words and images” (299). Finn’s despair and devotion is conveyed through his heartfelt rendition of this song, with lyrics such as “nothing you confess could make me love you less” and “take me in into your darkest hour, and I’ll never desert you.” The audience cannot help but feel compassion for this poor distraught teenage boy, letting out all his emotions through song, stroking a computer screen that contains a pictorial representation of his musical inspiration.

To him, this is not just a fetus on a screen; this is a baby he loves. The fact that the lyrics in the song are addressed to a fully-fledged person, that they convey the feeling of unconditional love for another human being, indicates that what we are seeing on the screen is not a fetus but a small person. *Glee* is uniquely adept at

sending this message too because it incorporates music, and music is a key element in affecting emotion. This scene is also powerful because Finn is a character who is easy to identify with; a teenager who is suddenly thrust into a world of difficult decisions and regrets, Finn is present in a lot of us who have had to deal with things we were not yet ready for. Because it is so easy to sympathize with him, it is easy to feel what he is feeling and join him in the personification of the fetus on his computer screen. It is also interesting to note that all of these shows with primarily female demographics have male characters that “step up to the plate” and feel a sense of duty and attachment to the fetus upon viewing the sonogram. We might wonder what sort of message this is sending to young women about the men in their lives: that they will change their minds and do the right thing once the pregnancy is far enough along that they can see an image of the fetus and have an opportunity to fall in love with it. If these shows provide a template to follow, all unattached pregnant women have to do to get their men to commit is get an ultrasound.

Friends, *Secret Life*, and *Glee* are all very different shows, but their use of the sonogram image is the same: they sentimentalize it, reinforcing a very common but subtle political message that says the fetus inside the woman’s womb is a little person. The same can be said for *Knocked Up*, the 2007 hit film starring Katherine Heigl as Alison, the unexpectedly pregnant protagonist and Seth Rogen as Ben, the immature deadbeat whose childish disregard for consequences results in Alison’s pregnancy. In addition to analyzing the use of sonograms in the film, one might question the possible pro-life sentiment of the plot. Like any film about an unwanted pregnancy, the protagonist’s decision to go through with the pregnancy means

something in itself, but Alison's decision is especially meaningful because it is completely unexplained. Every other character in the film urges her to choose abortion; her career as a journalist, which is taking off, would be jeopardized by a pregnancy; it is clear that Ben is the last person she would want to raise a baby with; and she shows no signs of being happy about this or wanting a baby. She is crying from despair when her pregnancy is confirmed in the doctor's office, and she is crying on the phone when she tells Ben she has decided to keep it. Her decision indicates that she believes she has some sort of obligation to go through with the pregnancy, as well as the faith that everything will work out (which it does). In this case, it is entirely possible the screenwriter and/or producers are trying to send some sort of message. At the same time, the characters' recreational drug use and the film's general crudeness indicate that it was not made for a conservative audience, which is perhaps all the more reason to be skeptical of its subliminal conservative message.

In the film, images of sonograms are used to mark the fetus's growth. At 16 weeks gestation, 24 weeks, and 28 weeks, a sonogram image appears on the screen as a bridge between scenes. It appears as if we the audience are looking at the screen in the doctor's office ourselves. It is given no context; Alison's presence is completely missing. This presentation of the fetus as a lone being mirrors the pro-life's appropriation of this image and, like the pro-life propaganda, it accomplishes the same erasure of the mother and establishment of the fetus's individuality that I discussed in chapter 1. By introducing the fetus as separate from Alison, it is constructed as a character in the film, and therefore, a person.

These sonogram images that are shown periodically throughout the film are moving images. You can clearly see the head and deduce that the image is supposed to represent a baby. The images invoke a sense of anticipation, reminding us that the end result of all this madness will be a baby; the baby is growing regardless of the chaos in the movie created by Alison and Ben's unstable relationship. This presentation of the fetus as removed from the woman's body is indicative of society's general representation of fetuses as innocent persons who exist in their own environments, separate from the mother and her problems.

To many of us, sonograms are markers of growth. Expectant parents who pass around pictures of sonograms want to share with the world the growth of their babies, just as a parent might take out photos of their actual baby and say "this is her at 6 months, this is her at 1 year, etc." and the polite viewer might exclaim, "Look how big she's getting!" Using sonograms to mark growth in the same way we use baby pictures to mark growth indicates that the growth of this being begins before the birth, that age 0 is not age 0, but rather a continuation of an already growing baby. By using sonograms as markers of time and growth, *Knocked Up* reinforces this message. I think it is more powerful than any message getting sent through the arguably pro-life plotline, precisely because the personification is covert; it is easy to question Alison's decision, as it is so obviously questionable, but it is not as easy to detect the way the images of sonograms in the film personify the fetus growing inside the protagonist.

The last text I will analyze, the 2008 comedy *Baby Mama* starring Tina Fey and Amy Poehler, provides an alternative to the dominant use of sonograms in

popular culture. It deviates from the common narrative of sonograms having tremendous power and being incredibly meaningful; its use of sonograms actually seems to mock this popular representation. Despite the fact that the pregnancy in the film was not only planned but engineered through the use of reproductive technology and surrogacy, the ultrasound technology is not romanticized. The sonogram is not used as a tactic to draw in the audience and create an emotional scene. On the contrary, the sonogram is presented as what it is: an often grainy and difficult to distinguish photograph of a fetus. I include this film in my analysis to acknowledge that not all uses of sonograms in popular culture function the same way, and that, thinking positively, it is in fact possible to imagine incorporating this image into popular culture without personifying the fetus. However, as I said before, this representation of the sonogram image is not the dominant representation, and more viewers are more likely to be exposed to images of sonograms that reinforce an ideology of fetal personhood.

In the film, Tina Fey plays Kate, a hardworking, single woman in her late 30's who has given up on the fantasy of meeting the right man and starting a family; she just wants a baby. Due to the lengthiness and difficulty of the adoption process and her apparent infertility, she decides to hire a surrogate. Unfortunately for her, Angie (Amy Poehler) the surrogate turns out to be incorrigible "white trash" who needs a parent herself and who, all the while, is lying to Kate about the pregnancy so she and her boyfriend can get paid. The sonogram picture Kate is given early on is actually a sonogram of a squirrel, because "That's all I [Angie's boyfriend] could find on the Internet." Though Kate is excited by the photo, it definitely does not look like a baby;

it does not really look like anything at all. Here we see an alternative, non-sentimentalized example of the use of a sonogram image in a popular culture context. Instead of showing us an image that resembles a baby, and personifying that image, this scene pokes fun at the sonogram, suggesting that what we tend to get all worked up and emotional over could easily be a photo of a squirrel.

Later, while on the way to Angie's next ultrasound, Kate starts rambling about what she is anticipating seeing on the screen:

KATE: I hope the baby's in a good position so we can see its little profile
'cause I would really like to get one of those print outs to hang over my desk.
Do you think it could look like me? Could the baby look like you at 18 weeks?
What if it has little tiny glasses?

This is another example of where, through satire, the film critically engages with the idea of personifying a sonogram. Like many pregnant women, Kate looks forward to displaying the picture on her desk, so everyone can join in on her excitement about the fetus's growth. But she makes a mockery of the personification of this image by wondering aloud if the fetus could look like her. This film is a refreshing break from the shows and films that use images of sonograms as emotional fodder for the audience without providing any appreciation or critique of the way these images have become over-sentimentalized and personify the fetus. *Baby Mama* allows us to imagine an alternative to the norm, a popular culture representation of sonograms that makes no political statement and does not contribute to a hazardous cultural reading of sonograms as indicators of personhood, but instead uses humor to bring attention to what may be a problematic use of the image.

With the exception of *Baby Mama*, all of these popular culture texts sentimentalize the image of the sonogram and personify the fetus, but what does this mean for public consciousness? I can suggest that these films and shows have an impact on public thought and opinion and I think, given what we know about the popularity of these kinds of media and given what we have learned about the power of fiction and character identification, as well as the power of images themselves, it is fair to assume that this subliminal, unintentional message about fetal personhood is getting across to the public, but without a study I cannot prove that these images do in fact have an impact. Nancy Signorelli, in "Television and Health: Images and Impact," implores the academic community to do further research on the impact of images:

The most obvious lack of information... is in the area of effects: we know very little about how these images impact upon our behaviors and conceptions about the world. We need to be able to ascertain if the images to which people are continually exposed on television do impact upon their ideas.

(112)

Though Signorielli is focusing only on the impact of health-related images, her point is very relevant to mine: further research is needed in order to prove that there is a connection between the images we see on television and our ideas and behavior in real life. My research is limited in that I was not able to conduct a study to prove a correlation between images of sonograms and popular thought on fetal personhood; however I am confident that my analysis persuasively argues that these images send a message about fetal personhood and that message is likely received by the viewers

of the media I've analyzed. Chapter 3 will illuminate why it is vital that we not take the dominant-hegemonic meaning of these images and instead question them and consider what fetal personhood really means, and how this fits in with the reality of women's lives.

Chapter 3: 2012 Going on 1972?: The Real Impact of “Fetal Personhood” on Women’s Lives

“In many contemporary technologically mediated pregnancies, expectant mothers emotionally bond with their fetuses through learning to see the developing child on screen during a sonogram (Rapp, forthcoming). And so do fathers, as well as members of Parliament and Congress (Hartouni, 1991; Franklin, 1993a).”-Haraway 27

In 1987, a woman named Angela Carder had a court-ordered caesarian section. She had survived cancer twice; this time, while pregnant, she discovered she had a lung tumor. Though potentially harmful to the fetus, chemotherapy and radiation were her only option if she wanted to live, which she did; unfortunately, the fetus, at twenty-five weeks gestation, was too premature to be delivered. Angela, along with her parents, husband, and obstetrician, decided to go ahead with the treatment, but the hospital administrators, weary of the political controversy surrounding fetal rights and their potential liability, decided a court needed to be involved, so they scheduled a hearing to determine whether or not an attempt should be made to save the fetus. In spite of the doctors’ judgment that Angela would likely not survive a C-section, in spite of Angela’s wishes not to have the surgery, and in spite of the fetus’s low chance of survival, the court decided in favor of attempting to save the fetus. The fetus died two hours after the surgery, followed by Angela two days later (Thornton and Paltrow).

The hospital may have learned its lesson from the court proceedings that followed (and concluded with a settlement to Carder’s family and a change in

hospital policy to respect the decisions of its pregnant patients), but the country unfortunately did not. There are frequently more shocking cases where a fetus is accorded more rights than the woman in whose womb it resides. Women continue to have to fight to get their cancer treatment, and women continue to be arrested for endangering their wanted or unwanted fetuses (Paltrow).

Last year in Iowa, Christine Taylor, a mother of two who was late in her second trimester, fell down a flight of stairs after a distressing conversation with her estranged husband caused her to become lightheaded. A trip to the emergency room ended with her arrest for attempted feticide, because, in Iowa, it is illegal for a woman to attempt to terminate her pregnancy after the second trimester (law officials were mistaken about her gestation, which is why the case was thrown out). Despite the fact that she did not intentionally throw herself down the stairs, it was her confession to the nurse in the ER that she had not always been sure she wanted to have the baby that led to the breach of patient-doctor confidentiality prompting her arrest and two days in jail, followed by a three week investigation (MtJoy).

At least thirty-eight states have fetal homicide laws, and at least twenty-three states have feticide laws that apply to the earliest stages of pregnancy (“Fetal Homicide Laws”). A “reckless behavior” law that passed recently in Utah criminalizes behavior that could potentially harm the fetus. The law has serious implications and a lot of grey area. It is not a stretch to suggest that the law could apply not only to women who intentionally (or unintentionally) throw themselves down the stairs, or those who engage in drug use during pregnancy (which courts

often penalize harshly),²¹ but also to a woman who takes medication that is speculatively harmful, fails to put on a seatbelt, jumps on a trampoline, has a few glasses of wine, the list goes on. In thirty-eight states, the best bet for a pregnant woman to stay out of jail in case of a miscarriage is to stay in bed for nine months.²²

The popularity of this kind of legislation indicates that the fetus has become a person in the eyes of some state legislatures. By only July, 2011 had set a record for anti-abortion legislation, and the hits keep coming (Gerhart).²³ In addition to a lot of very creative restrictions on the state and federal level that make abortion difficult to obtain for all women and virtually inaccessible to poor women,²⁴ two prominent trends have arisen in legislation: personhood initiatives and ultrasound laws. I see the increase in ultrasound legislation and the increase in the use of ultrasound images in popular culture as inextricably connected. The way ultrasounds are presented in popular culture affirms the pervasive conception of the sonogram as a powerful image that can alter beliefs and conjure bonds that did not exist before, while legislating mandatory ultrasounds in order to obtain an abortion relies on this same belief about the power of sonograms. If ultrasounds were merely a medical

²¹ The common conception that illegal drug use causes stillbirth or miscarriage is not backed by significant evidence according to leading research: "Carefully constructed, unbiased scientific research has not found that prenatal exposure to any of the illegal drugs causes unique or even inevitable harm. This research is so clear that that (sic) courts and leading federal agencies have concluded that what most people heard was 'essentially a myth.'" (Jack and Paltrow)

²² Although that is not recommended by doctors and could also potentially result in a "reckless behavior" investigation.

²³ For an up-to-date list of the choice-related laws state-by-state, visit the NARAL Pro-choice America site and take a look at their interactive map: <http://www.prochoiceamerica.org/government-and-you/state-governments/>

²⁴ The Hyde Amendment prohibits federal healthcare programs like Medicare and Medicaid from covering abortion. In addition, more than a dozen states now restrict private-insurance coverage of abortion (Hass). According to Planned Parenthood, unplanned pregnancy costs the country \$11-12 billion per year (Richards).

procedure, there would not be such an investment in them as an abortion deterrent. Additionally, perhaps if ultrasounds were not depicted in such an emotionally saturated way in television and films, they would not be understood as being such an impactful experience. The sentimentalization of the sonogram image and the ultrasound experience in popular culture informs an understanding of ultrasounds as an integral part of the bonding experience between parent and child (fetus); this social construction of ultrasounds as sentimental technology that conjures bonds and “proves” the fetus’s personhood legitimizes ultrasound legislation, obscuring the condescending and violating nature of these laws. For that reason, we need more critical reading tools to better question what purpose images of sonograms are serving when we see them in public spaces and on television and in film.

Ultrasound legislation and personhood initiatives (measures to establish the zygote as a legal person) are also interrelated. Mandatory ultrasounds, masked as “informed consent,” are intended to convince the woman that the fetus she is about to abort is in fact a person (this, in addition to shaming her and establishing the State’s authority over her body/decisions). The fetal personhood concept not only relies heavily on the sonogram image, it gained a certain cultural legitimacy following the advent of the ultrasound due to new visual “evidence” of personhood. Popular culture treating fetuses as persons makes fetal personhood digestible to the general public,²⁵ while romanticizing the ultrasound experience. The trends of

²⁵ When I speak of the general public, I am referring to the sector of the States that does not hold extreme political or religious views. I am not talking about religious conservatives, whose views of fetal personhood have already been dictated by their religion, nor am I including pro-choice activists, who are also generally un-persuadable. I am speaking of the demographic viewing these

ultrasound legislation and personhood initiatives can be read as intertwined with the sonogram's popularity in the media as technology that shows evidence of "life." Given this relationship of mutual reinforcement, sonograms being presented as they are in popular culture may have dangerous consequences for women in the real world, which is what I will present in this chapter. I cannot begin to comprehensively examine the whole spectrum of the erosion of women's reproductive rights in the United States and how restrictive legislation affects women's access to abortion in one chapter; that would be a much larger project than I have the ability to undertake. Consequently, I will focus on the most recent personhood legislation and ultrasound legislation, touching also upon other restrictive legislation that justifies itself based on claims of fetal personhood, and I will provide examples of the effect this legislation is having and the possible future effects. I will hopefully be able to shed some light on the seriousness of the situation women are facing, and how important it is that we question any and all implications that fetuses are persons, no matter where those messages are coming from and how harmless they seem.

Personhood measures became popular in 2010, though the first personhood initiative was introduced in Colorado in 2008 and rejected by 73% of voters ("A First Look Back"). If a personhood law were to pass, a zygote (the single cell that forms when the sperm fuses with the egg) would be a legal person. Personhood measures are often attempted through ballot initiatives, which allow regular

shows/films from a non-decisive, non-activist point of view, who are either apathetic to the abortion debate or whose opinions have not been set in stone.

citizens to add their cause to the ballot if they acquire enough signatures. The growing support for such initiatives is frightening because the fate of women's rights is at the mercy of the voters in a conservative state, and, as polls indicate, American opinion on abortion is shifting to the right, with more Americans identifying today as pro-life than pro-choice (Ertelt "The Camera Doesn't Lie").

No personhood bills have been made into law yet, but many have come close. Recently, a personhood initiative was shot down in Mississippi by 55% of voters ("Mississippi's 'Personhood Amendment' Fails at Polls"), which means that 45% of Mississippi voters think a zygote is a person. The Virginia House passed a personhood bill with a vote of 66 to 32 ("Virginia House Passes Two Restrictive Abortion Laws"). In Oklahoma, a Personhood Act was approved by Senators in February and is now headed to the House, where it is expected to pass (Murphy). In addition to the many state legislature initiatives and ballot initiatives, personhood measures are being attempted at the federal level as well.

Defining a zygote as a person can have extra legal consequences not necessarily intended by the legislation. It would likely ban the morning-after pill as well as some kinds of birth control such as IUDs, which can prevent implantation; it would affect in vitro fertilization; and it may cause confusion in other situations, such as how many "people" can be in a school gymnasium or an elevator at a time (Baumman). Even without personhood laws in effect, women who have miscarried or had stillbirths have been charged with murder in states like Mississippi and Alabama (Diamond); the Christine Taylor story is not an anomaly. A "chemical endangerment" law in Alabama has prosecuted dozens of women; some have been

charged with murder (Randall). Bei Bei Shuai of Indiana has spent the last year in jail awaiting trial for “attempted feticide and murder” after an attempted suicide resulted in her baby’s death. If convicted, she will spend forty-five to sixty-five years behind bars (Pollitt).

The more fetal personhood is accepted by the general public and turned into legislation, the more tragic stories such as Shuai’s—whose suicide attempt was prompted by her boyfriend telling her he had a wife and family and was leaving her—will become commonplace. There have been and continue to be many casualties of the fetal personhood movement. Putting the focus on fetuses and their lives-to-be takes the focus away from women and the lives they already have. Putting the fetus on-screen, as a public figure to be oohed and ahed at by the characters on-screen and the audience at home, and establishing its personhood in such an influential and widely proliferated medium, allows fetuses in the real world to be more easily personified.

As I demonstrated in chapter 2, sonogram images in popular culture are highly sentimentalized and send an implicit message about fetal personhood. That same message is being sent explicitly to women by lawmakers through the enforcement of mandatory ultrasounds. These laws have been termed by legislators as “informed consent” laws, with the justifying rhetoric that women “have the right” to have all the information before they make a life-changing decision. As he signed an ultrasound bill into law, Governor of Virginia Robert F. McDonnell said: “Women have a right to know all the available medical and legal information surrounding the abortion decision before giving legally effective informed consent.” (Kumar)

Proponents of the laws often compare pregnant women to cancer patients, arguing that “just as we wouldn’t deny a cancer patient access to vital X-rays,” women shouldn’t be denied the chance to view an ultrasound (Mattes). Apparently “not denying” and “forcing” are synonyms in this political rhetoric: without the law, a woman who chooses to have an ultrasound would certainly not be “denied” said ultrasound; with it, a woman who does not want to have an ultrasound would be forced to anyway. Depending on the state, she may also have to listen to her doctor read a state-mandated script designed to dissuade her from having an abortion and shame her if she chooses to do so,²⁶ she would likely have to listen to the fetus’s heartbeat and hear her doctor describe its internal organs, and she may even be subjected to a transvaginal ultrasound, which, as many objectors have pointed out, is akin to the state quite literally raping her by forcing doctors to insert an object into her vagina without her consent.²⁷ The law is even more appalling when one considers that women who are pregnant as a result of rape would still be forced to have that procedure, so that she can be properly “informed” about her pregnancy.

The Supreme Court determined as early as the 19th Century that it is illegal to force someone to undergo a medical procedure without that person’s consent

²⁶ For example, in South Dakota, doctors must tell the woman that “the abortion will terminate the life of a whole, separate, unique, living human being” and, until recently, they were also obligated to tell her that she “had an ‘existing relationship with that unborn human being’ that was protected under the Constitution and state law and that abortion poses a ‘known medical risk’ and ‘increased risk of suicide ideation and suicide.’” (Sheppard) State-mandated scripts are dying out as judges rule that it is not okay for doctors to have to provide false information to their patients, however state interferences into the doctor-patient relationship continue to be rampant.

²⁷ The recently enforced mandatory ultrasound law in Virginia was re-written to make the transvaginal ultrasound optional after the outcry about the state raping women (Democratic delegate David Englin ironically pointed out that “object sexual penetration is a serious sex crime in Virginia”) (Bassett). The transvaginal ultrasound is still mandatory in Texas, no matter how far along a woman is in her pregnancy (Richards).

(Denniston). In our “liberty and justice for all” society, this seems like a given. But, as fetal personhood erodes women’s personhood and citizenship rights, women are no longer afforded that right. Mandatory ultrasound measures began to be introduced a few years ago and are picking up speed today. Twenty-four states have some sort of ultrasound requirement (Kumar). Many of these states also have mandatory delay laws, meaning a woman who wants an abortion has to visit with her doctor, have an unwanted ultrasound, and then come back at least twenty-four hours later to get the actual abortion so she can have “reflection time.” Women who work or already have children, or women who live far away from the clinic,²⁸ are severely inconvenienced by these kinds of laws. In addition, the longer an abortion is delayed, the more risk involved with the procedure, and the more likely there will be health problems as a result (Branch). Legislators who posit that these laws are there to “protect” women are seriously misguided.

Pro-life groups insist that ultrasounds change women’s minds. Life News says that 80% of women considering abortion choose to continue with the pregnancy when they view their ultrasound (Mattes), but abortion providers say that is not what they see in their clinics. In fact, the few studies that have been conducted on women’s reactions to seeing a sonogram pre-abortion showed no evidence of women changing their minds upon viewing the image (Pappas).

²⁸ Due to the forced closing of clinics due to their inability to meet impossible state requirements (known as “TRAP” laws), a lack of funding, persistent threats and violence against abortion providers, or other reasons, there are less and less clinics that provide abortion services. In South Dakota, for instance, there are no abortion providers, so “Planned Parenthood flies a doctor in from out-of-state once a week to see patients at a Sioux Falls clinic. Women from the more remote parts of the large, rural state drive up to six hours to reach this lone clinic. And under state law women are then required to receive counseling and wait 24 hours before undergoing the procedure” (Sheppard).

Ultimately, it would seem the laws do not accomplish their explicit goal, although they do perhaps accomplish some implicit ones. As feminist author Amanda Marcotte writes: “the laws are both about putting obstacles between women and abortion, and most importantly, forcing unwilling doctors to convey the legislators’ intent to shame and harass women for getting abortions.” So while evidence shows that mandatory ultrasound legislation do not greatly impact women’s decisions about getting an abortion (suggesting that these images may not be powerful in this context), my concern is that the treatment of sonograms in popular culture may be impacting the way voters think about fetal personhood, which can lead to a tacit acceptance of this kind of legislation.

It is relevant to point out here that popular culture has its bright moments for women’s choice. After the Virginia bill became law, late-night comedy shows like the Daily Show and Saturday Night Live did segments ridiculing the law and its abhorrent disregard for women’s constitutional rights. Their shows, plus other media and activism, ignited an echoing protest that convinced Governor McDonnell to amend the law to make the transvaginal probe optional. Though it was a small and not at all satisfactory victory, it is refreshing to see popular culture send such an effective and rallying pro-choice message by using humor to point out the absurdity of this legislation. Popular culture does not always just mirror real life, hopelessly regurgitating harmful ideologies; sometimes that mirror can be held up to provide a much needed critique.

Regrettably, in most other popular culture contexts, the message being sent is that ultrasounds are a powerful and necessary way to make parents realize that

their fetuses are, in fact, people. The ultrasound makes the pregnancy “real” to the characters, as well as getting them excited and emotionally invested regardless of the circumstances of their lives. That is what “informed consent” is all about. Pro-life activists and legislators want women to “have all the information” before they make this decision; they want them to see the fetus and have an opportunity to have the emotional experience that popular culture teaches us they should be having (though apparently, according to clinic data, they are not successful on that front). Popular culture both “mirrors and leads society” (Signorielli 96, quoted also in chapter 2); it is time to ask, where is it leading us?

The answer is that it is leading us toward becoming a society in which women are no longer full citizens, or full persons for that matter. A woman’s right to be protected from bodily harm is not relevant in this kind of society; her body is not even hers. Her body belongs to the State, and is regarded merely as a vessel for bringing the fetus into the world. The more public opinion shifts toward thinking the fetus is a person, the more women will suffer; the more doctors will be coerced by the law, punished by lawsuits and possibly jail time, and threatened with violence for performing abortions;²⁹ the more clinics will be forced to close and rural and poor women will be out of options;³⁰ the more children will be born into

²⁹ According to Sheppard, “Since 1993, eight doctors have been assassinated at the hands of anti-abortion extremists, and another 17 have been the victims of murder attempts.” And these statistics do not include nurses and clinic workers who have been victimized, or doctors’ families who have been the target of threats.

³⁰ Hass offers some statistics on the reality of the availability of abortion services in the US: “The number of Planned Parenthood affiliates has been cut in half since 1987, to fewer than 100. Almost 90 percent of counties in the U.S. and 98 percent of rural counties have no abortion services. Many clinics in states where local physicians are pressured not to perform abortions now fly in doctors from out of state to provide abortions.” (Hass)

unfortunate economic circumstances; the more desperate women will seek dangerous alternatives; the more children will lose their mothers to self-performed or back alley abortions gone wrong, or imprisonment for the attempt; the more drug-addicted women will avoid treatment to avoid arrest; the more women who suffer miscarriages and stillbirths will be accused of murder; and the more hate and shame women will experience for making their own choices. Fetal personhood is not a concept to be taken lightly, and the sentimentalization of sonograms in popular culture is not a phenomenon we can shrug off and fail to critically engage with. Women cannot afford it.

Conclusion

When I began writing this thesis, I had no idea just how relevant it was about to become. Ultrasound and personhood legislation, though not new, became a widespread, serious threat only very recently. Women's reproductive rights have been at the forefront of the Republican primary election this year, with each candidate promising to be more regressive for women's rights than the next. It is likely to be a decisive issue in the general election this fall. The further along this project progressed, the more pertinent the discussion became.

While our country continues to function (barely) on politics of polarization, the conservative constituent appears dead set on treating the fetus as a person, and they have support from pro-life democratic legislators as well. There are many factors behind the fetus's rise to personhood status, including, of course, the pervasive influence of religious institutions and the vast amount of money spent on pro-life campaigns, but there are a few very important factors that are often ignored, such as the new reproductive technology that gave the campaigns their iconic image, and the subtle but powerful influence of that image's use in popular culture.

Personhood, a moral concept with no conclusive definition, has been explored and debated by theorists, but not given enough serious and logical engagement by the general public. How we conceive of personhood should be determined by critical thinking about what it means to be a person, not by what we are told to believe, or what we think we see on a sonogram. It is essential that we re-visit this question from both an analytical standpoint and a standpoint that takes into account the implications of regarding the fetus as a person for women's safety

and autonomy. A world where women are slaves to zygotes seems like a dystopian work of fiction, but as history has taught us, horror can seep into reality when blind ideology takes the place of empathy and reason.

It has become normal to view sonogram images sentimentally, as though they were early photographs of a baby, and to view the ultrasound experience as an important, emotional experience for expecting parents more so than a medical procedure. Scenes in television and film that build up the sonogram as a powerful image that affirms a pregnancy as “real” and indicates the presence of a growing person, teach us to read the sonogram this way. Regardless of whether the producers are intending to send a message about fetal personhood, there is a definite message being sent and, knowing what we know about the influence of popular culture and the subtle impact of images, this message is likely being received by a number of viewers.

It is difficult to separate the sonogram image from the meaning it has been given by the conservative Right. The figure we see in the sonogram is saturated in subtext; the image stands for fetal innocence, individuality, separateness from the mother, and self-sustainability. The fact that the image leaves out the fetus’s environment and makes no reference to the mother makes the image adept at promoting pro-life ideology, and it does this on its own. When it is given a sentimental context in a scene with characters we relate to and whose lives we are invested in, the message is strengthened and so are fetus’s chances of being taken seriously in the public arena and in a court of law.

As I discussed at the end of chapter 2, the research that is missing here is a study to determine the concrete effects of continual exposure to images on behavior and thought. It would be interesting to find out if there is a strong correlation between viewing these scenes and feeling sympathy for the pro-life cause or identifying more strongly with statements about fetal personhood. Such a study would be simple enough to conduct; however, since this was not a psychology thesis, I was unable to pursue that kind of research.

Reflecting on the messages in popular culture is essential to understanding all cultural norms and addressing political effects of that ideology. Popular culture can be detrimental for brewing harmful mass ideology, but it also has the potential to be subversive and critical. For every trend, there is a counter trend. *Baby Mama* provides an example of an alternative way to use the sonogram image without sentimentalizing it. Furthermore, media can be intentionally rebellious and incendiary, such as the satirical backlash against the Virginia ultrasound law on comedy shows that prompted a change in the law. Whatever power an image has we bestowed upon it, and we have the capacity to take that power away.

Women should not have to be the casualties of extreme politics and imposed religious morality in a supposedly secular country. Male legislators, who will never be pregnant, should not be making these decisions. Their constituents need to let them know they cannot abuse half the country and still get elected. Fetuses may have a voice in the picketers outside women's healthcare clinics and the conservative politicians giving speeches on their behalf, but they do not yet have a vote. Now, more than ever, we need to use ours.

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