

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



The film's title sequence, designed by Saul Bass, features a motif of paper being torn away to reveal what is underneath.



We first meet Steven Lake as he picks up a teddy bear from the ground beside a swing set.



Steven Lake then begins a series of locking gates and doors as he closes up a house.



We first meet Ann after she has dropped off her daughter in the "First Day" room of her new school. Ann walks throughout the school, which is strangely vacant, searching for someone with whom to talk about her

Who is missing in *Bunny Lake*?

by [Dahlia Schweitzer](#)

The default opening to the *Bunny Lake is Missing* DVD is not the film itself nor even the menu prompting you to select your viewing options. The DVD slides into the player and automatically begins to play, not the movie but a different movie, a preview, a preview for a strikingly similar film, also about a desperate mother. Before you even get to *Bunny Lake*, you're in *The Forgotten*. You're watching Julianne Moore express a panic that is specifically maternal, before seeing Carol Lynley create her own panic, which was clearly the inspiration for this contemporary revision.

In *The Forgotten*, you're treated to a very comparable narrative, with the exception of aliens. In *The Forgotten*, the plot twist hinges on aliens. Clearly, in 2006, they thought that was what we needed. In 1965, however, films were simpler, and *Bunny Lake is Missing* is able to explore the heightened paranoia of a mother whose child disappears and no one believes her — without having to throw in the extra aliens. Yet, with or without aliens, there is such a strong parallel between the films that when the preview begins, you think twice about if it's a tribute or a rip-off (what's the difference, really?). You wonder, before you're told what it is, if you're watching a remake of *Bunny Lake* because the parallels are that alarming. So you watch the preview and ponder the parallels, and you remember that movie with Jodie Foster called *Flightplan* (2005), where she, too, loses a daughter no one believes ever existed. You feel the desperate ache of the mother ignored, the mother no longer a mother without the child to prove who she is, and you realize that *Bunny Lake*, without the aliens, tapped into a fear and an anxiety that remains so relevant today that Julianne Moore is still desperately seeking her child.

What is about mothers with(out) children that is so powerful that we're making movies about it with the same premise forty years later? We watch, not yet having completed the preview, Gary Sinise, as Julianne Moore's psychologist, telling her (oh so compassionately, oh so patronizingly, oh so professionally) that it is totally "normal" for people to invent alternate lives with imagined friends, family, and children. The implication, of course, is that it is totally "normal" for women to get hysterical. It is totally normal for women to just "make things up." It is just as normal for women to "make things up" as it is for men to tell them that they're just "making things up." So what is not normal? It is not normal for Julianne Moore to stand up, to run away, to chase scary men in scary suits, to risk her life in order to prove that she is not making things up, that she is not "just hysterical," to be so alive and so real that she stands up to Sinise, and when she stands up to the Establishment which tells her she is wrong, it is a triumph. And we feel this triumph in *Bunny Lake*, when Ann finds her daughter, and has proved to all the smug, patronizing men that she is not just "making things up" and that she is just as real and exists just as much as they do.

Bunny Lake's opening credits, designed by the legendary Saul Bass (responsible for the titles of many movie classics, including *Psycho*, *Seconds*, *Anatomy of a Murder*, *North by Northwest*, and *The Man with the Golden Arm*), quickly establish that the movie will conceal more than it will reveal, as

daughter. More closed doors that need to be opened!



Ann and the cook, with characteristic Preminger wide-shot, characters as far apart from each other as possible.



Our first interaction between Ann and Steven Lake happens via telephone – again, separation between people.



Noel Coward, as the landlord Wilson, with his dog, Samantha. He talks about his masks. One of them is good for fertility, he tells Ann. Fertility, she says, is not her problem.

the text is exposed to us only when strips of black paper are torn away. The last shot is of the outline of a child (or a doll) in cookie-cutter fashion, stark white against stark black, leaving us with no confirmation that there is a Bunny Lake or what she may look like. In the closing credits, we see this outline again, only this time our last shot of it leaves it filled with Ann's face. She is what completes the hole shaped like a doll. She is defined by the figure of her child, by the figure of a doll. Yet at the same time, the movie ends with her victorious. She has been proved right, her paranoia grounded in fact, and her daughter retrieved. Despite this triumph, however, she is still trapped in her "role." With this succinct visual statement, Preminger defines the struggle of women everywhere.

If paranoia is viewed as an ontological problem, as a search for the validity of one's existence, and paranoia is seen as a primarily female condition, we can understand why this narrative is repeated over and over and appreciate the significance of *Bunny Lake is Missing*. Ann is like Antigone centuries before, and like the women at the heart of *Flightplan*, *The Forgotten*, and many other similar stories. These women are seeking their place in a society constructed to oppose them. Without a child to link them to their community, who are they? Do they even exist? What does a woman become when her child disappears? What does a woman become when her child never existed? What is a woman if she is not a mother and a wife?

We know that in cinema, as in life, the male looks, the female is looked at. The male does, the female simply is. In film, the role of the woman in the narrative usually has something to do with her physical appearance and her seductive capabilities. When she is part of the movie (which is not always) she tends to serve extraneous roles that delay or complicate the male's journey, something against which he reacts or a problem he solves. During the rare occurrences when she is

“the central character, she is generally shown as confused, or helpless and in danger, or passive, or a purely sexual being.”[1]
[\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

Laura Mulvey quotes film director Bud Boetticher, known for his classic B westerns, who argues,

“What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents...In herself the woman has not the slightest importance.”[2]

In herself, she does not exist, she is not *seen*—much as when Julianne Moore in *The Forgotten* confronts her husband, and he says, “Do I know you?” Without her child to define her, he no longer knows who she is.

In his film, *Bunny Lake is Missing*, director Otto Preminger makes us examine our conventional expectations about hetero-normative relationships and the role of women in contemporary cinema/society. There are many elements to this film that suggest interesting ideas about the role of motherhood in society, and the rules of society when they come to women and families, and even the very notion of women existing, and how that existence is defined. The implied incestuous relationship between Ann, the protagonist, and her brother, his implied homosexuality, the presence (or lack thereof) of Ann's child, and the various bizarre couplings throughout the film create a cacophony of social commentaries that are almost impossible to decipher neatly. One way of looking at the film and especially at the dynamic between Ann and her brother is by considering Judith Butler's *Antigone's Claim* since Antigone was another maligned woman with complex relationships with the men in her life. Butler makes a series of points that deal both with the concept of incest and the idea of a woman alone against the world — arguments which I will refer to for a deeper understanding of *Bunny Lake is Missing* and for considering what Preminger may be saying about women and mothers in contemporary society.



Ann goes back to the school to collect Bunny. But Bunny is missing!



Ann talks with the other mothers and staff, but no one knows anything.



Ann even asks the other students. They don't know anything.



Stephen, "behind bars" at the school, having arrived on the scene.



Ann and Stephen, playing the part of husband and wife, talk to one of the teachers in a typical Preminger wide-shot.



Now it's Ann who is separated by visual space.

Released in 1965 and based on Evelyn Piper's book of the same name, this film tells the story of the unmarried Ann Lake whose illegitimate daughter, Bunny, disappear shortly after their arrival in London, where they have moved to set up house with Ann's brother Stephen, who is at first implied to be her husband. Ann has dropped Bunny at school, but when she goes back in the afternoon to collect her, there is no record that she was ever there. The police investigation takes a turn away from routine when all of Bunny's things have also disappeared from the house, and suddenly we (and the police) wonder if Bunny even exists, a theory that gains momentum when Stephen begins to discredit Ann's state of mind. Ann's useless hysteria about her daughter's disappearance continues in the background of the script, until she remembers that one of Bunny's dolls is in a repair shop and may be the one item of her daughter's that has not disappeared. In a sudden show of strength, assertive for the first time in the film, she races off to the shop, where Stephen finds her and knocks her unconscious after destroying the doll.



Ann and Steven questioning the former headmistress of the school who resides in the school's top floor. Eccentric is an understatement. Actress Martita Hunt, as the former headmistress Miss Ford, was known for her role as the mad, reclusive Miss Havisham in the classic period piece *Great Expectations* (1946). Type casting here?

As flames flicker in his eyes and the doll's face melts, we realize that it is actually his state of mind which we should be questioning, and maybe Ann was right all along. After Ann is sent to the hospital, where Stephen urges sedation because of all the stress Ann has recently been under — and because of the child she has "invented" — he returns to the house to kill his niece, who has been locked in the trunk of his car the whole day. We discover that it was his jealousy over his sister's attention that has fueled his insanity, and he completely regresses into the role of a child, which is what Ann has to mimic when she finds him after escaping the hospital. She manages through a series of childhood games to distract him from killing Bunny until the police superintendent finally arrives at the scene. The policeman finally ascertained that Stephen has been lying, and therefore realizes, as we already have, that there may have been more to the story than he at first realized.



The dramatic lighting only serves to enhance the creepiness of the scene's atmosphere.



Ann and Steven conferring, while Steven rests on the toy horse. Steven's childlike qualities are emphasized throughout the film, and he is shown several times near or on a swing-set. The black column of the door further enhances the separation between the two characters.



If you didn't know better, you'd be sure they were husband and wife.



Ann flanked by two police officers. Sitting below them in the frame, her weakness is emphasized by Preminger's camera. Laurence Olivier plays the chief detective.

In the original book, the villain was the old headmistress from Bunny's school, but Preminger found that solution "arbitrary" and "uninteresting."^[3] It is his new solution, combined with the fact that he also eliminated the original character of the child's father from his film adaptation, which focuses our attention on the unconventional brother/sister dynamic and Ann's single mother status, emphasizing the social theme that, as Preminger himself stated in connection to the film,

"If you do not conform to the rules of society, the law does not protect you."^[4]

There is a strong element of being outside society throughout the film, unprotected by the social system that excludes that which is "other." After all, aren't women inherently outside of the social system? Religions traditionally discriminate against women, but so does almost everything else. Even in the United States, considered by some to provide a fairly open playing field for women, the Equal Rights Amendment still cannot get passed. Women are ignored or, at the very least upstaged, in almost every traditional arena. Butler writes that the public sphere (that which is inherently masculine, i.e. government, community, state) only acquires its existence through interfering with the happiness of the family, creating as a result a virtual confrontation with womankind in general.^[5] The simple act of not being married sets Ann apart from every other character in the film, at the mercy of her brother, patronized and disbelieved by "the Establishment." Without a child, she has no purpose. To further accentuate her isolation and vulnerability, there are no other women in the movie with whom she can fight or bond. There is no sense of a "female community." Ann is the only woman in the film that seems at least halfway capable. The teachers at the school lose their students and misplace information, the owner of the school appears completely mad, and the nurse at the hospital allows Ann to escape. It is to the men that she must turn to find her daughter.

Hegel, as cited by Butler, argues that one only becomes an individual on the condition that one belongs to the community, and that when one acts criminally, one does not act as an individual.^[6] Only when one belongs to the community, when one obeys societal rules and expectations, does one truly exist — and one could ask how much, even with a child and a husband, does a woman ever exist? At least with both, she is part of a socially sanctioned unit. Without a husband or, significantly, a child, Ann does not have a chance at existing, and Stephen, as a homosexual and criminal, most clearly is also not a member of the community. When her child disappears, Ann as a woman has no other reason to be seen, and inasmuch as there is no record of her child, there is also no record (on the ship's logs, for instance) that Ann has existed. Without a child, there is no proof of her life, much less that her life had a purpose.

It is only at the end of the film, when reunited with Bunny, that the police superintendent wishes them both a good night, "Now that you exist." The implication is that the message is meant for both mother and daughter. Once the daughter has been recovered, she and her mother are visibly present. Ann, like Antigone, has been defined through the

"power of the mother, one whose sole task...is to produce a son."^[7]

Without the child, there is no mother. Without mother, there is, in turn, no child. At the close of the film, it is Ann whose face fills the cut-out figure in the credits. It is Ann whom we lost and re-found.

In order to accentuate Ann's place of isolation, Preminger also goes out of his way to imply an incestuous relationship between Ann and Stephen, setting the two of them further outside the community. In drawing a comparison between novel and film, as Esther Sonnet notes, the book *Bunny Lake is Missing* focused more on the social critique behind Ann's (in the book called Blanche) journey, Preminger's



Bunny's things are missing from the apartment! Even her passport is gone!

“substitution of a brother for menopausal hysteric [the original villain of the story] channels the film into a claustrophobic figuration of individual psychosis, childhood regression, repressed desire, and the taboo of incest.”[8]

Similarly, in considering *Antigone*, Butler writes that incest is intrinsically linked to aberration, a “specter of social dissolution...at the heart of the norm.”[9] The horror with which incest is frequently met, is

“not that far afield from the same horror and revulsion felt toward lesbian and gay sex and is not unrelated to the intense moral condemnation of voluntary single parenting or gay parenting.”[10]



Ann, as “little girl,” is talked to by a paternal-seeming detective.

Preminger did not hold back from emphasizing just how far outside the limits of the societal norm Ann has gone. In addition to the film’s implications of incest, there is also perhaps worst of all, her status as a single parent. When the police superintendent discovers this, the terrified Ann asks him if this revelation will mean that he will no longer search for Bunny. Worse than all her other transgressions is her unmarried state. The only thing left to tie Ann to “the Establishment” is her child. And without that, like *Antigone*, the “only kind of recognition she can enjoy is of and by her brother,” a recognition which Preminger intentionally plays with, first with his implications that the two of them are married and later, in a particularly disturbing moment, when Stephen, naked in the bath, smokes what seems to be a post-coital cigarette delivered to him by Ann.



Again, the composition implies a level of intimacy more typical to lovers than siblings.



In one of the oddest scenes in the movie, Steven smokes in the bathtub while chatting with his sister.



She perches on the edge of the tub in complete intimacy and comfort.

Perhaps this is Preminger’s way of demonstrating that regardless of whether or not there is a sexual component to the sibling dynamic, kinship is still removed from the domain of the social, a “relation of ‘blood’ rather than of norms.”[11] The more closely intertwined the two of them are, the further removed Ann and Steve are from any socially approved community. It is when Ann stops following Steve and asserts her independence from him that she finally begins to exist for us in the film. It is by dividing their bond that she gets closer to being recognized, closer to finding her daughter, and closer to becoming part of society. This gives her another interesting parallel with *Antigone*, who also has a relationship with Oedipus (her brother and father), whom she follows loyally but this “following turns into a scene in which she leads him,”[12] a turning point in the play, and also in *Bunny Lake*. Before the film even begins, Ann has a history of following Stephen, most recently to London and then throughout his attempts at an investigation, passively trailing behind him, until she remembers Bunny’s doll in the toy repair shop. When she races off, it is Stephen who follows *her*, and the entire energy of the film flips; he becomes more feminine, more childlike as she becomes more masculine, more active, more *real*.



Steven consults with the detective while sitting on the swing set.

Butler also writes that *Antigone* takes the place of nearly every man in her family.[13] By not marrying, Ann does the same, both mother and father to her child. However, these parts of herself are fragmented at first since Stephen plays the role of father through his guise as uncle, but after he is disqualified, Ann is left to play both parental roles. Interestingly, as a warning, Butler writes that

“alternative kinship arrangements attempt to revise psychic structures in ways that lead to tragedy, figured incessantly as the tragedy of and for the child.”[14]



Back in the horror-style lighting of Miss Ford's domain.

Preminger clearly agrees. In *Bunny Lake*, the tragedy of Bunny's disappearance is a direct result of the “alternative” relationship between Ann and Stephen. Interestingly, at the end of the movie, Ann is still clearly unmarried, still without any male love interest. In this way, like Antigone, Ann “fails to provide heterosexual closure” as she and her daughter exist together, no husband or father figure in sight. In other contexts, this would almost prove *her* homosexuality. At the very least, it proves her contempt for societal expectations.

This subversion of typical gender roles is extended within the dynamic of Ann and Stephen. When Antigone speaks to Creon, she

“becomes manly; in being spoken to, he is unmanned, and so neither maintains their position within gender and the disturbance of kinship appears to destabilize gender throughout the play.”[15]



The landlord, showing off his whip collection.

A similar transition occurs when Ann finally stands up to Stephen, and he in turn becomes childlike. Up until this point of the film, Ann has been virtually childlike. (What kind of mother loses their child? Clearly a woman who is useless in the ways of the world.) But now, through her aggressive and independent behavior (she does not seek police support), Ann assumes, if not the role of the law, the role of a *man*, her newfound masculinity accentuated by the contrast of Stephen's regression to childhood.

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Ann and the detective conferring at a bar.

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The detective begins to realize some inconsistencies in the story.