Female Body, Gaze, Memory: Filmic Representations of Women and Family in *Pieces of April*

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Feminist film theory discusses the relationship between images of women on film in different cultural and national contexts. Examining the social and cultural meanings portrayed, women's lives are discovered in the particular context within which a film is produced. As Hilary Nelmes indicates, the traditional Hollywood film has represented the female figure in an extremely limited fashion as subordinate and passive, and providing of voyeuristic pleasure as an erotic object (277). E. Ann Kaplan also demonstrates that voyeurism and fetishism have been used to describe mechanisms of gaze upon a female screen image (120). In *Pieces of April* (2003), though the women in the Burns' family embodies the cultural meanings women bear, they play a subversive role compared to the prevalent female figure who has been represented as monolithic in the history of film.

Pieces of April is a contemporary American film about a dysfunctional suburban middle-class white family and its trouble-maker daughter, April Burns (Katie Holmes), who reunite over Thanksgiving after years of separation. Three women in the Burns' family face physical and emotional hardships to which they feel isolated and frustrated. The mother, Joy Burns (Patricia Clarkson) is the most impressive and challenging character, whose sickened body is associated with Kristevan notion of abjection. In order to control gaze, Joy intentionally makes her hidden abject body visible, and thus resists being objectified in the traditional context in which females have been seen. Toward the family reunion at the Thanksgiving

dinner, the female characters' bodies and emotions are unveiled to show their physical and emotional challenge and struggle. These female characters' emotions such as intense frustration, anger and violence reveal the reality of contemporary American women's lives under the cultural standards of the society the conditions in which they live. Especially to Joy, who faces extremely intense physical and emotional suffering, holding onto memories become her remedy, sustaining her life. She lets her son take photographs to remember the past and make memories of the present; in so doing, she defines herself and immortalizes her body and family. Feeling anger and misery at the cultural standards of society, memory-making and self-definition becomes her testing ground for agency and control. Thus, this essay will discuss female body, gaze and memory and the ways in which the film rejects essentialist ideas of women proposing the realistic issues by which they are affected.

This film focuses on a family reunion at Thanksgiving after years of separation. The setting of Thanksgiving not only plays a significant role in terms of memory-making, it also highlights the bringing together of April with both her family members and multi-cultural neighbors. She sees that this year's Thanksgiving is her last chance to reconcile with her mother. This attempt also makes her able to experience various interactions with the neighbors. When preparing Thanksgiving dinner, she finds out that the stove in her apartment is not working. Therefore, she goes out to ask several neighbors for help, to use their stoves in order to finish cooking the turkey. Through these connections to people through food, she becomes able to understand her past and explore cultural differences by having interactions with multicultural neighbors who had been strangers to her.

Thanksgiving is the North American holiday to give thanks

at the end of the harvest season, which is celebrated on the fourth Thursday of November as a traditional and familial holiday. It is becoming more multicultural in the contemporary United States, being now celebrated by diverse communities. The holiday is believed to have originated from the harvest feast among the English colonist Pilgrims of Plymouth and the Wampanoag Indians in 1621, in which they celebrated the harvest and other blessings of the past year. As family members began to live apart, Thanksgiving became a time to get together, for some, moving away from its religious roots. The standard Thanksgiving meal of turkey, cranberry sauce, and pumpkin pie, and the family gathering has grown in popularity over recent years. It became contemporary multicultural holiday in America, as "Thanksgiving dinner is one of the most important occasions for American families of all faiths and ethnic backgrounds to come together and enjoy a large home-cooked meal."[1] Gaye Poole, in his examination of representations of food in film, points the turkey especially in the Thanksgiving meal as an "emblem of family cohesion and thanksgiving- sustains them through the decades, as the refrain-like offers of a little white meat, stuffing and cranberry sauce remind us"(16). The film centers around this American symbolical family holiday in which the event as well as food itself enhances the representation of relationship among family as well as interactions with urban multicultural neighbors. Though the happy and warm-hearted image is often associated with the holiday, it seems opposite in the case with the Burns' family, as all the women in the family – Joy, April and Beth – are frustrated, angry and potentially violent living under conditions in which they are physically and emotionally challenged.

A young white female protagonist April lives in Manhattan with her African American boyfriend. Due to disagreements between

them, she has been away from her own family who lives in a suburban neighborhood of Pennsylvania. Her mother, Joy Burns, has been through a mastectomy due to breast cancer and is facing the threat of death. Joy seems to have become sour and harsh towards her children after experiencing the new physical challenge. Hearing of her terminal physical condition, April decides to reunite with her family by inviting them for Thanksgiving dinner. Though younger daughter Beth Burns (Allison Pill), tries to persuade her mother not to accept April's invitation; still, Joy decides to drive up to see her with the rest of the family. As Joy is under chemotherapy after the surgery, she can barely manage to travel with her family to go to April's apartment. She is constantly suffering, often feeling nausea, dizziness, discomfort and pain. She seems restless and sleepless when her husband finds her early in the morning, and she waits alone in the car on Thanksgiving to go to April's place. Her body is extremely thin and her face constantly shows fatigue on the way to New York. She vomits every time after eating. She is wearing a wig as she has lost hair from having chemotherapy. She gazes at her exhausted face in the mirror in the restrooms. Joy's body brings to mind the Kristevan notions of abjection and the grotesque, which have been historically associated with the maternal body. As the family fears Joy's body in which both life and death reside, in Kiristeva's terms, the maternal body is a type of grotesque in which reside sublimity and terror.[2]

According to the research conducted by U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in 2003, breast cancer is the most common disease affecting women in the United States. With nearly 200,000 cases of breast cancer being diagnosed, breast cancer is the second primary cause of cancer death in American women besides lung cancer. Thus, Joy's experience in the film reflects this realistic issue among American women. Joy seems unaffectionate, frustrated,

overly emotional, and sometimes unreasonably violent and cruel. Marian C. Condon, in *Women's Health: Body, Mind, Spirit: An Integrated Approach to Wellness and Illness* explains the affects that breast cancer can have on a woman's body and self-image. A diagnosis of cancer challenges a woman in the physical, emotional and spiritual domains. They face the possibility of death, and mutilating surgery such as mastectomy can largely disturb a woman's body image and sense of femininity. Additionally, going through chemotherapy, they often suffer from unpleasant side effects such as nausea, hair loss, fatigue, and a reduced resistance to infection. Therefore, "women's emotional reactions to the detection, diagnosis, and treatment of cancer commonly include anxiety, denial, anger and depression" (357-358).

Zillah Eisentein, an activist writer who has survived breast cancer, posits the disease as a political site from which she uncovers the silences used to construct women's bodies:

> Bodies are always personal in that each of us lives in one in a particularly individual way. They are also always political in that they have meanings that are more powerful than any one of us can determine. Femaleness, color, beauty, health are carved on us without our choice. We talk in the world trying to be seen through our own eyes while never ever fully able to do so. Breast cancer is one more challenge. (1)

Roseanne Lucia Quinn researches women writers' works on breast cancer and the accompanying sense of loss: "Women lose their breasts and their lives: dismembered, disfigured, diseased, ignored, dismissed, disregarded, humiliated, abandoned, betrayed."[3] She finds that the importance of women writers' accounts of breast cancer is "their exposing of the particularity of their exploitation as women burdened with breast cancer in a sexist, racist, classist, ageist, homo-

phobic society" (267-268). Thus, it is not surprising that Joy's physical change greatly harms her mental state and personality. When Joy's mother, Dottie, enjoys and praises her granddaughter, Beth, for proudly singing in the car, Joy cruelly requests that Beth stop singing. She also blames April for her cancer.

Nita Mary Mckinley explains that feminist critiques have historically positioned the body to be a site of control in women's lives. Contemporary feminist theory argues that women's body dissatisfaction comes from a "systematic social phenomenon." Therefore, "the perceived deviance of the female body and the association of women with the body create the context for women's body experience." This context encourages the construction of women as objects to be watched and evaluated according to cultural standards. Thus, Mckinley suggests that the prevailing cultural standards problematically placed on women's bodies, not only "deprive women of time, energy, and economic resources," but also "reflect biases of race and ethnicity, class, age, sexual orientation, and ability." It is in this context that Mckinley positions the source of women's negative body experience; it is a social construction, rather than an individual pathology (55-61). The figure of Joy signifies the abject body and disturbance theorized from feminist perspectives on breast cancer. Joy embodies the complex, vulnerable and pitiable, yet threatening being, potentially furious and violent as she constantly faces physical and emotional challenges.

The oldest child, April, has her own youth culture fashion: she dyes her hair red, and shows her own tattoos and piercing on her body, which her mother does not seem to accept. She paints her nails black and wears many accessories, including rings and black strings all over her hands, which looks very unsuitable during cooking, especially when she washes the turkey and then goes on to stuff

it by hand. Her unique yet fashionable appearance gives an image of her character as independent, subversive and rebellious. Like her excessive accessories on her body, her apartment reveals her unfamiliarity to cooking. Since cooking is traditionally considered to be a feminine act, her inability and refusal to cook seems to be her resistance to femininity and also to motherhood. In the morning when she starts to prepare the holiday dinner, her boyfriend Bobby seems to enjoy cooking, making gravy sauce from giblets, cooking stuffing, and then spreading butter on the surface of the turkey. The whole procedure seems to be smooth for him. On the other hand, April seems to be clumsy and violent when she cooks; she drops turkey on the floor after washing it, and struggles to cut onions with a petite and inappropriate knife. Irritated as she is, she ends up pushing the whole onion in and sticks long stalks of celery into the turkey without cutting them to the proper size. She violently tackles the food during cooking. When she works on making mashed potatoes, she peels potatoes impatiently, and cuts her skin open with a peeler. Then, she chops raw potatoes with all her power and tries hard to mash uncooked potatoes, finally smashing them to do so. Her unfamiliarity to cooking can be also seen in her empty refrigerator and stove which functions as shoe storage. There is nothing but a large leftover delivery pizza placed uncovered in the refrigerator, and when she preheats the stove, she opens it and takes out a pair of shoes and a pink piggy bank. It is obvious from these scenes that she is not at all familiar with cooking.

Sherrie Inness studies how cooking is consistently gendered in America. She explains women's relationship to food:

> Women's relationship to food and its preparation has been a significant form of gender socialization throughout the twentieth century (and earlier centuries), helping to unsure the subordina-

> tion of women and a gender role division of labor that exists to the present day. Women remain the individuals in the household mainly associated with preparing a meal, including grocery shopping, devising menus, cooking and serving the food, and maintaining the kitchen with all its accoutrements. The American kitchen continues to be strongly gendered as female. (1)

Inness discusses that "cooking becomes an important way to identify whether a female is sufficiently womanly, and her entire image as a 'correctly' socialized woman might be imperiled or strengthened by her relationship to food and cooking"(9-10). Thus, as food preparation has been historically associated with the female, the figure of April clearly dismisses this traditional notion of femininity.

In opposition to April, the younger daughter, Beth, is a girl who is trying to be the ideal daughter in the family. As she has a relatively overweight body, Joy critically judges and reminds her of it by saying, "why am I hard on you, Beth, when for years, you've been the daughter of my dreams? ... Apart from your weight problems, we're practically the same person."

Marlene B. Schwartz and Kelly D. Brownell explain that obese people are powerfully stigmatized by society in the United States, assumed to have character flaws such as laziness, gluttony, a lack of control, and self-indulgence (200). Beth performs decent and obedient attitudes to be a perfect daughter in seeking acceptance by her parents. Her figure, a relatively round body in a black one-piece dress, as well as her ability to do domestic work well give her a more feminine and maternal image. She compares herself with April and insists on her superiority: "It's just that I offered to make the meal. But that would have been, too easy. And honestly, Daddy, what makes her think she can cook all of a sudden? I don't remember her ever being in the kitchen. Besides, I'm the one who got an A

in Home Ec." Beth is also frustrated and angry with her mother and father for planning to go to April's apartment, and she tries to persuade them out of it, though in vain. She seems to feel irritated and heartbroken that even though she performs as the ideal, she is not fully accepted by Joy. Her frustration fuels her anger toward April: "I'm just wondering if it isn't completely selfish of her. Asking us to come all the way to New York. I mean, should Mom even be traveling?" Apparently, the role she is playing in the family makes her constantly insecure and aggravated.

Seemingly temperate and affectionate Dottie is yet another vexed female, whose memory is characterized by arbitrariness. She dismisses the inconvenient past, erasing its events from her memory. Dottie who symbolizes traditional female virtue, accepts the help of her gentle and obedient granddaughter Beth, and enjoys her singing when she offers to. Though she resists subversion, in which rejects of traditional sense of femininity, and in so doing, she expresses her rejection and anger. She would forget the trouble-making granddaughter, April: "I thought she was dead." She also forgets Joy who is unaffectionate to her youngest daughter. When Joy cruelly requested Beth stop singing in the car, Dottie looks at Joy suspiciously and asks who she is: "I know who you say you are, but my daughter is kind and sweet and soft-spoken." Joy responds, "Not anymore" and Dottie turns her head and says, "Then I don't know you." Therefore, Dottie rejects and erase memory of her daughter who does not perform the way she expects to. Her remarks show her intentionality to forget when Joy admits that she has changed. Thus, these women in the Burns' family show anger and potentially violent nature.

Hilary Neroni particularly examines the violent female figure in film. She finds that American film has depended on the relation between masculinity and violence. Most of Hollywood film, such as the

gangster, the Western, the war and the contemporary action film, have been made up of various reworking of this relation. She adds, "there is an antagonism between masculinity and femininity that is both essential to the working of society and also its potential undoing"(40). Martha McCaughey and Neal King also examine the figure of angry and violent women in film, explaining that representations of violent women indicates, women are "not merely patriarchal pawns or broken promises but also possible tools in the liberation of women from racial, class, gender, and other political constraints that oppress women and deny them equal chances and equal rights"(20). Thus, representing women in the Burns' family as angry and violent, the film offers the reversed image of women traditionally and historically embodied in mainstream film in the United States.

As examinations of the scenes wherein April tackles food showed her representing a subversive character, the images of food play a significant role, particularly in symbolizing the relationships. Thanksgiving dinner makes April able to connect with her family, especially with Joy almost for the first time, despite the family discord. As April refers herself to Evette, "I am the first pancake" which is supposed to be thrown out, she never got along with her mother in the past. When her boyfriend, Bobby, shows her two small hand-painted ceramic turkey bottles for the salt and pepper, she freezes, remembering the event associated with them. She tells Bobby that "the one time she let me hold them. She [Joy] said, 'Be careful, they're worth more than you are.'" Her heart breaks though, when she finds out that the bottles cost only fifty cents, and she throws them in the trash can. Still, on the occasion of what could be her last Thanksgiving dinner with her mother, April tries to please her by cooking the meal.

Food in film can be a conveyor of various meanings. Gaye Poole,

who positions food as a facilitator of transaction in film, studies "the aesthetic, semiotic and metaphorical dimensions and reverberations of food." Food not only has direct relations to the body, but cooking is a primary human activity: "The preparation of food requires thought, labour, time, and in some cases love, it is an ideal conduit for emotional language." The food is closely related to corporeality.[4]:

> Food is fundamental to our lives and therefore ideally adaptable for theatre and film, loaded as it is with messages about survival, class, power, obligation, prestige, loss of control, restriction. Food is also something that is separate from the body but becomes the body; menstrual blood, breast milk, excrement, spittle and food are all at one time the body, then no more the body.[5]

On the way to go to see April, the Burns' family eats fast foods, while April is making a traditional time-consuming Thanksgiving dinner for them. At Krispy Kreme, even though the father reminds everyone not to eat much, Joy and his children eat a lot, and Joy intentionally ignores his word by ordering even more doughnuts. Additionally, Joy, after vomiting from eating doughnuts, also goes on to buy a variety of snacks.

> Jim: We were worried, honey. Are you okay?
>
> Joy: I'm good, honey. I'm great, I feel fine. I'm the excited one now.
>
> Jim: Really? Why is that?
>
> Joy: Well, let's see. I have Fritos, Cheetos…
>
> Jim: No, Joy…
>
> Joy: Oh, Timmy—Snowballs, a Nutter Butter.
>
> Jim: That's enough, stop it. It's not right, not now, not when April is hard at work making all your favorites. Not when she called to check the ingredients of a certain recipe.

The family's choice and discussion over food give suggestive messag-

es about their relationships. Though the father, Jim's consideration and April's good intensions are neglected. Contrary to the women, the men in this film are emasculated and controlled. They seem to be rather weak and submissive. The father is not respected, and the son plays a submissive and supportive role during the trip, helping mother even when she needs marijuana. More, her inconsiderate attitudes such as craving Krispy Kreme and providing family with various junk foods indicate that Joy has given up on playing the maternal role traditionally associated with affection and home-cooked meals.

Particularly for April, turkey brings her to discover and get to know her neighbors who were previously strangers to her. As Peter Hedges, the director of the film remarks, the film's concept is about a girl going around to borrow a stove from people of different ethnicity and culture who are not normally together on Thanksgiving. By the interactions with neighbors of multicultural backgrounds through food, she finds out about other people's lives and learns from the experience. Food plays a significant role in helping people to express their emotions effectively, and the multicultural relationship with neighbors leads April toward mental growth and reconciliation. She explores the ways in which she can negotiate differences, for the interaction with multicultural neighbors enables her to be aware of her background and identity.

The African American couple and the Chinese family are the most helpful and influential to April. In the beginning, she finds both parties very difficult to communicate with, but later she discovers them to be completely different than she had expected and she is able to appreciate them. Living in an urban city, they are people with whom April would normally not have any connection, due to their differences. She first asks to use the oven in the room of the

African American couple, Evette and Eugene. After knocking in the door, when April tells her that she has a "problem," Evette responds to it with prejudice over the young white girl.

Woman: Who is it?

April: Hi, I'm in 3C. I need some help.

Woman: Help?

April: Hi. I have a problem.

Man's Voice (From inside the apartment): Who is it?

Woman: It's the new girl in 3C. She says she's got a problem.

Man's Voice: What?

Woman: Problems, Eugene. The girl's got problems. She's white, she's got her youth, her whole privileged life ahead of her. I am looking forward to hearing about her problems.

(Woman laughs long and loudly, as April stands there perplexed.)

At first, Evette puts prejudicial assumptions on her because whiteness as racialized category is entitled to socially constructed meanings such as goodness, intelligence and rationality.[6] Ruth Frankenberg in *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* asserts that race shapes white women's lives. Though socially and historically, white people have been considered themselves as "nonracial or racially neutral," she insists on the significance of looking at the " 'racialness' of white experience." As a white woman herself, she positions white women's lives as sites for the reproduction of racism and challenges to racism, as whiteness is "a location of structural advantage, or race privilege … a 'standpoint,' a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society," and she also refers to whiteness as "a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed"(1). Due to the so-

cially constructed meanings of whiteness, Evette imposes upon her the essentialist notion of her as being privileged. Though, soon after Evette discovers April's intention to invite her sickened mother on Thanksgiving, she becomes sympathetic and willingly offers her help. Evette puts off her own cooking until later, and lets April use the oven for two hours while April finds another oven to continue roasting. After asking several people in vain, the Chinese immigrant family finally helps her to finish cooking. Though they have inconvenience in terms of verbal communication, she manages to make herself understood.

As Evette's remarks suggest, the body is racialized and it becomes a target of discrimination in the film. When Joy sees her boyfriend who is bleeding from a street fight, she stares at him and Beth even screams at him, feeling endangered. The family leaves the front of her daughter's apartment after seeing him and the neighborhood. April's white ex-boyfriend takes on an African American name after she breaks up with him. On the other hand, indifferent to the differences of the racialized body, April seems to find inner value; she has told her father that her African American boyfriend reminds her of her father. Furthermore, when she explains the history of Thanksgiving, April considerately alters the story, being apprehensive for the Chinese immigrant family. These negotiations by encountering different beliefs and cultures as well as interpersonal challenges and difficulties are made over her attempt to invite her family for Thanksgiving dinner. Thus, as Poole discusses, "food's physicality, its corporeality makes it a versatile and eloquent site for the articulation of meanings." Through food, "resentment, love, compensation, anger, rebellion, withdrawal" is effectively represented both implicitly and explicitly. It can also be a perfect conveyor of the messages that are "strong, and sometimes violent or subversive" (3).

Another significant theme in this film is remembering and memory-making. The title *Pieces of April* seems to suggest fragments of memory of April shared by the Burns' family members. Joy recollects, talks about the past, and taking the photograph of her body and family. The body is again an important motif in memory-making. In the Burns family home, there are many family pictures hanging on the walls. The pictures in the house memorialize the days when Joy was healthy and cheerful. With her name, the fact that she is feeling unfortunate and shows abusive attitudes toward her children appear ironic. The main purpose of the family's Thanksgiving trip to April's place is memory-making for Joy. During the trip, Joy often tries to recalls the past and takes photographs. In one scene, Timmy takes a picture of Beth, who is unprepared and unwatchful, gets angry at him, but Joy tells her not to: "Beth, it's for me when I'm old, so I can always remember this day." She subjectively orders her son to take snapshots of her body and family to include in her album. Especially, by taking and showing these "self-portraits," she becomes an active agent in situating and interpreting her body as she wants others to see.

Judy Weiser positions photographs as "footprints of our minds, mirrors of our lives, reflections from our hearts, frozen memories we can hold in silent stillness in our hands – forever, if we wish"(1). She argues that people think, feel and recall memories through imagery, by symbolic and visual representations. These representations in photographs are a language that can be understood with descriptions from the person who produced them. She states that, "language constructs reality," and "artistic representation is a language, and certainly it communicates as well words about our thoughts, feelings, and relationships"(6). Zillah asserts that, "breast cancer makes women fear their bodies and hold them dear at the same time." She

also says that "death makes me rethink my memories and it makes new memories," which accounts for Joy's behavior in the film.[7] In this way, Joy immortalizes her body and family through saving them as memories in the form of photographs. She consistently talks about recalling and making memories. Her persistence in recollection and memory-making with the family seems to be her only source of power to live when physically facing death.

Joy tries hard to think of a nice "beautiful memory" with April, but she does not come up with one. As she becomes frustrated about the fact that she does not have a good memory with April, Joy suddenly smashes the dashboard and gets out of the car. Jim is surprised by seeing her acting emotionally and violently. She crosses the road to go in the opposite direction, and attempts to hitchhike to go back. She tells him about her bad experience with her trouble-making daughter, but Jim encourages her to see April to make "a good memory":

Joy: It's shitty, Jim. All I can remember is the petulance, the shoplifting, the fire in the kitchen.

Jim: Which was an accident.

Joy: Was it an accident the way she used to light matches and throw them at Beth? Or the time she used a lighter to trim Timmy's bangs?

Jim: Joy, come on.

Joy: I mean, the drugs, the ingratitude! She bit my nipples whenever I tried to breastfeed.

Jim: Sweetie, come on.

Joy: No wonder there's cancer. She's the cancer. I tried, okay. But I can't go, I can't. I can't—I can't have another bad experience with her.

Jim: It won't be like that. You don't know that. It's the whole

point of going. We're making a memory.

Joy: You're not listening to me. I have too many memories!

Jim: A good memory. We're making something good.

Joy is nervous about meeting April, since she fears being disappointed by her yet again. They have a dysfunctional relationship, which makes Joy fear facing April and being exposed to her potential psychological violence. Both Joy and Beth determine that "April is the problem." Joy even blames April for her illness and insists that she has no "good memory" of April. Being persuaded by Jim for the sake of making of a good memory with April, she continues the trip to New York.

In the car, she listens to the headphones and dances to the music by a singer named Smack Daddy. Smack Daddy's music makes her feel positive and alive, reminding her of good memories. She talks about sexuality and focuses on physicality when she talks about herself. She also implies here that her physical change makes her feel inferior as an abject woman:

Joy: The thing about Smack Daddy is, you know with him, it's no one-night stand, that it's forever. Millions want him, but it's as if he's only singin' to me…baby. Age doesn't matter. He doesn't care that I'm old and sick and falling apart. He sees my soul. He's not fickle. He's there for me.

Beth: Like Dad?

Joy: Well, your father can't sing. But Smack Daddy—man alive, is he sexy, which … it does lead to this whole sexual thing. I mean, it does bring up some sort of nice memories.

Listening to his songs makes her forget about the abjection of her body. She carries a photo album and shows, explaining about the pictures in it of her body. The pictures record her from when she was very healthy and energetic. She keeps the pictures of her naked

body from the waist up, showing her breasts before the mastectomy, and on the next page she has the pictures of them after the surgery. As it is painful to see, Beth and Jim attempt to prevent her from showing the pictures to Dottie, but Joy does not listen to them and introduces the picture as a "favorite" picture, commenting, "Look how the light and how the arm is." Surprised at the picture, Dottie cannot face it and looks away from "the self-portrait" of Joy's body.[8]

Weiser discusses the nature of the self-portrait: "how we see ourselves is how we define ourselves; how we choose to represent our identity is how we hope it will be known by others,"[9] adding:

> The term *self-portrait* loosely encompasses any photographic presentation dealing with the perception of oneself by oneself, whether actual or metaphoric. Self-portraits differ from other pictures of us in that the creation of a true self-portrait is not affected by anyone else. They are pictures of us- of our bodies or of something that we feel stands for us. We have control of all aspects of image-making, from beginning idea to finished image. Because they are pictures of the self, made by the self, they have the potential to be powerfully self-confrontational and undeniable.[10]

In this sense, Joy is an active agent in her image-making. Showing self-portraits in her album gives her control over the way in which she wants her body to be seen. By presenting her picture, she exercises control and power over her abject body. Seemingly, the act is not to objectify her image but rather to have subjectivity over her image. Joy consistently pursues "good memory," as to live each day, memory is significant for Joy. It gives Joy energy to continue to live even though her physical condition is critical. She has lost control over her material body, though instead she attempts to regain control by any means. Deborah Caslav Covino's analysis of abject

woman and one's subversive and liberating power may shed light on Joy's desire for subjectivity.[11]

> The abject woman becomes a subversive trope of female liberation: she speaks an alternative, disruptive language, immersing herself in the significances of the flesh, becoming willfully monstrous as she defies the symbolic order. The abject woman abandons her oppressive confinement to the category of the beautiful, reforms her association with the grotesque, and contests her expulsion from the sublime. (2)

By taking and collecting photographs for memories, Joy tries to own the gaze, which is traditionally that of the male. In addition, she looks at the mirror in the restrooms multiple times, facing herself, gazing at herself. She literally faces fear and the weakness of her abject body, which is the act of trying to capture control.

Besides symbolizing control, gazing self helps her to recall memory of April. At one time, Joy looks at herself in the mirror and sees a girl who is scolded by her mother and left alone in the restroom. It reminds Joy of April when she was a child. By looking at this mother-daughter relationship, she comes to see herself and the past. Kaplan's idea of mutual gaze may account for meaning and relationship within this gaze. According to Kaplan, the initial gaze takes place in the mother-child relationship, which is called mutual gazing. On the contrary to patriarchal subject-object gaze that reduces one to submit to the other, this is of a mutual relationship (135). It happens in one restaurant's restroom on the way home to Pennsylvania after she decides not to meet April, though she changes her mind by this experience. The mutual gaze reminds her of a memory with April when she was a child and she again goes back to her house to reunite with her daughter.

As the photograph has a significant role, symbolizing memory-

making, the film ends with a consecutive display of snapshots at Thanksgiving dinner. It starts from Joy's unexpected visit to April's room: the picture of April surprisingly looking at her mother as she opens the door; both of them getting close; holding one another; Joy looking at both April and her boyfriend Bobby affectionately; Dottie walking in; Beth walking in; Jim happily coming in; Timmy putting a helmet on the Chinese girl's head; Evette showing Joy the cranberry sauce April has made with her.

After showing these snapshots, Beth and April get together with their foreheads close, smiling and holding each other, expressing reconciliation among sisters. Joy affectionately looks at the turkey ceramic salt and pepper shakers, which reminds both Joy and April of the past Thanksgiving when they were at odds with one another. The family picture also comes out very differently compared to the one the Burns family took on their way to April's apartment in New York. In the previous picture, it took an irritatingly long time for the self-timer to work to take the photograph, family members were distant to each other and they were smiling superficially and artificially. Mentioning the absence of April in the family snapshot, Joy had critically remarks, "since when was she in the picture?" The photograph at the Thanksgiving dinner comes out very differently. In this family picture, April is in the center and everybody is close to each other, including her boyfriend. They are naturally smiling and April is holding everyone with both of her arms opened.

Family photographs are important as they are records of "lumps of experience, rites of passage, grains of poignancy and promise: all of these turn us into artists sorting through life in search of shapes and events which our cameras will turn in to symbols and allegories."[12] They are "taken to immortalize a rite, an event, a possession, a family relationship," which is "a set of visual rules that shape our

experience and our memory."[12] Weiser positions memory as part of the body kept in the form of visual representation:

> Memory is part of the body as well as the mind, and thus in reconnecting people with their feelings or doing something to help them change, we cannot work solely with the brain. Nonverbal and sensory-based techniques seem the best choices for working with those parts of ourselves that are essentially unconscious and that use a primarily symbolic nonverbal language of representation and communication. (8)

Thus, the change in the family photographs effectively shows the relationships of the Burns' family.

On the occasion of the family reunion at Thanksgiving, the female characters' bodies and emotions as well as the physical and emotional challenges are represented. The female characters with intense emotions provide subversive as well as realistic contemporary image of American women, compared to the traditional and eroticized filmic female figure. Thanksgiving is symbolically and effectively used to explore and represent the female characters' bodies, lives and relationships. The women in the Burns' family reject essentialist notions of women in the American film history. Joy, by owning the female gaze, embraces herself and her daughters. That said, the film also discloses the burden of female body from the abjection that is based on cultural standards. The film illustrates the reality of hardships experienced by sickened and physically challenged people, which Joy confronts by owning both the gaze and self-identification. Therefore, the film contributes to a deeper understanding of women's bodies and lives as well as the meanings that women bear in society.

Notes

1. Katz and Weaver 395
2. For maternal body and grotesque, see Covino 8-11
3. Quinn discusses that Audre Lorde "realized that the attitude towards prosthesis after breast cancer is an index of this society's attitudes towards women in general as decoration and externally defined sex objects."
4. Gaye 1
5. Gaye 4-5
6. For meanings of racialized whiteness, see Zillah 140
7. Zillah 3
8. Weiser states that the photos of the people taken by others may well suffice as stand-in's for self-portraits as long as people feel they are truly representative.
9. Weiser 121
10. Weiser 19
11. Covino's idea of the abject woman is drawn from works of Patricia Yaeger and Mary Russo, whom she considers to rehabilitate the female body for the feminist aesthetic.
12. On family photographs, see Hirsh.

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