

# Feminist Criticism of Unplanned the Movie

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## Introduction

Feminism has often been understood to focus on disrupting the hegemonic domination which suppresses women. However, for many people, feminism is the expression of the ideal that all oppressed people should be liberated. According to feminist critic, Sonja K. Foss, "From this perspective, feminism constitutes a movement that challenges an entire structure of domination of which patriarchy is one part... Feminists who want to eradicate the ideology of domination that characterizes our culture define feminism as the effort to transform an unhealthy and dangerous system of domination into one that is life affirming and nurturing." (Foss, 2018) Feminist critics look for rhetorical artifacts which seek to disrupt the dominant hegemonic narrative. The purpose of this essay is to analyze a recent artifact which challenges a dominant ideology prevalent in our culture in order to see how the artifact disrupts the narrative and examine the ways in which advocates of this opposing ideology can continue to provide an alternate viewpoint.

## The Hegemonic Ideology of Abortion

It may seem controversial to describe the ideology of abortion as hegemonic. However, there are several reasons to do so. First, abortion has for the last forty-six years received special legal

treatment which allows for the procurement and practice of abortion but additionally has received special legal status akin to a right. (Gruber-Miller, 2018) Second, not only have abortions been considered legal for several decades but also abortion providers have received both federal and state funding. Planned Parenthood, the largest provider of abortions in the U.S., received \$528 million in fiscal year 2014. (Parenthood, Planned, 2015) It is important to note that the so-called Hyde Amendment prohibits the direct funding of abortion through federal dollars, however this revenue accounted for more than forty percent of Planned Parenthood's revenue for that fiscal year. Further, consideration and approval of Supreme Court Justices and Justice Department officials are thoroughly interrogated regarding their stances on abortion. Those who disagree in principle with abortion are pressured to affirm that they consider current legal precedent as "the law of the land". When one considers abortion in-light-of these facts, it is clear to see that the ideology of abortion is hegemonic in our culture.

## Unplanned

*Unplanned* is a film written and directed by Cary Solomon and Chuck Konzelman and based on the book with the same title by Abby Johnson. (SOLI DEO GLORIA RELEASING, 2019) Pure Flix distributed the film for theatrical release in the United States on March 29, 2019. *Unplanned*, is the real-life narrative of Abby Johnson's rise from volunteer escort for women seeking abortion to becoming one of Planned Parenthood's youngest clinic directors in the nation and the events which subsequently led to her abandonment of that position and to her prolife advocacy. The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) awarded the movie a controversial R rating. (Harper, 2019) Due to this rating, many TV channels and large media platforms refused to allow Pure Flix to advertise on their platforms. Consequently, the film had a limited opening of only 1,060 theaters nationwide for its opening weekend in which it grossed \$6.4 million and finished fourth at the box office. It was so successful that an additional 456 theaters

were added for its second weekend and as of April 25, 2019 it has grossed in excess of \$17.5 million. (Box Office Mojo, 2019)

## Analysis

To analyze *Unplanned*, this essay uses the feminist method of rhetorical criticism. The nature and function of strategies used to disrupt dominant ideologies can be discovered with feminist criticism. In this essay, our focus is on identifying strategies used to challenge a hegemonic construction of abortion-rights and advocacy, particularly as it relates to the providers, its advocates and opponents, and the abortion procedures themselves. I argue that the movie presents an alternate behind-the-scenes view of the abortion industry which seeks to transform the way America perceives abortion. It does this by challenging the stereotypes and misconceptions surrounding abortion. First, it confronts the concept that fetuses are pre-human and therefore it is acceptable to end their lives. Next, it challenges that abortions are safe and rare. *Unplanned* also contests the stereotypes surrounding prochoice and prolife advocates. The film continues its disruption tactics by disputing the motivations behind Planned Parenthood's upper management and the operation of Planned Parenthood clinics.

Feminist criticism uses several disruption tactics of which this film relies primarily upon "multiple perspectives", "reframing", and "juxtaposing incongruities". We will be exploring the ways in which *Unplanned* uses these strategies to disrupt the stereotypes and misconceptions of the ideology of abortion.

### Misconception: The unborn fetus is not a person

A common misconception of the abortion ideology is that the unborn are pre-human. Thus, the unborn child is dehumanized and labeled as a "fetus". *Unplanned's* disruption strategies attack this belief head-on. The film does this by making use of "multiple perspectives". Generating multiple

perspectives on a subject allows a rhetor to make clear that the dominant perspective is not the only one available. (Foss, 2018)

One scene towards the beginning of the movie shows the viewer the perspective of a so-called D&C abortion in which the gynecologist inserts a suction catheter into the mother's uterus and suctions the unborn child out of the womb. In this scene, the gynecologist performing the abortion asks Abby Johnson to use the sonography equipment to display an image of the fetus so that the doctor could better target the child with his suction device. The doctor tells Abby that the child will move which is why he uses sonography to get a better view inside the uterus. Through the use of computer-generated imagery (CGI), Abby and the viewers watch as the unborn child wiggles and squirms to get away from the device which is trying to rend it limb from limb. The image of the unborn child is not simply that of a clump of cells it is of a small child. This visually connects the viewer to the understanding that the unborn is just as human as they are.

In another scene the clinic director, Cheryl, asks Abby to meet her in the P.O.C. room. In a conversation with Renee, another clinic employee, Abby discusses the room's name.

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*Renee: Do you know what P.O.C. stands for?*

*Abby Johnson: ...Products of Conception?*

*Renee: No... Pieces of Children.*

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Once inside the room, Cheryl tells Abby that she wants to promote Abby to be the next clinic director. While this discussion is occurring, the viewer is given a perspective of the scene in which clinical technicians are matching tiny arms and legs to an equally tiny torso. The technicians do this to ensure that no body parts are left behind in the woman's uterus to cause an infection. The visual image of

piecing together body parts shows a perspective of the unborn as person which is vastly different from the dominant view that the unborn are not people.

Another strategy used to disrupt the dominant ideology of abortion is “juxtaposing incongruities”. This is a strategy in which the rhetor juxtaposes categories which are usually considered mutually exclusive. (Foss, 2018) *Unplanned* does this in a scene in which several of the Planned Parenthood employees throw a baby-shower for Abby Johnson in the breakroom of the Planned Parenthood clinic. This rhetorical tactic forces the viewer to reconsider their views on the personhood of the unborn.

### Misconception: Abortions are safe

One of the strategies used to disrupt this misconception is “reframing”. Reframing is the process of shifting perspective to view a situation from a different vantage point. (Foss, 2018) Through a flashback, Abby Johnson recalls a time earlier in her life when she had received a medication abortion using the popular abortifacient RU486. As she picks up the pill at the front desk, Abby is counseled that the medication will “gently remove the fetus from [her] uterus.” As her recollection of the events progresses, Abby is struck with agonizing pain. She struggles to her bathroom and finds that she is hemorrhaging massive blood clots. Eventually Abby Johnson collapses and spends the next eight hours alone on her bathroom floor in agony believing that she was going to die. Using this reframed perspective, *Unplanned* provides a different way of viewing abortion as unsafe.

*Unplanned* also uses multiple perspectives to further disrupt this narrative of safety. In another scene, a teenage girl sits in the post-op recovery area after having received a surgical abortion. The girl is an acquaintance of Abby’s and consequently Abby checks in on her only to find that she is severely hemorrhaging and sitting in a pool of her own blood. Abby and the other medical staff react quickly and get the girl into an operating room. When Abby declares that she is going to call 911, Cheryl, the clinic

director emphatically tells her no. The director of the clinic makes it clear that the patient's safety is not above the image and reputation of the clinic.

### Misconception: All prolife advocates lack compassion for mothers

The abortion ideology often portrays prolife activists as lacking compassion for mothers in difficult situations and sometimes even vilifies them as hateful. *Unplanned* disrupts this portrayal using multiple perspectives. Shawn and Marilisa, two prolife activists portrayed in the film, and even Abby Johnson herself, once she quits Planned Parenthood and becomes a prolife activist, are shown to be compassionate and understanding of the difficult situations that mothers may be in. These three characters do not condemn or accuse the women entering the clinic but rather attempt to persuade and reason with them. In one scene, Abby Johnson even reveals her own painful history of abortion in order to appeal to a young woman who is seeking an abortion.

### Misconception: All prochoice advocates are compassionate towards mothers

Another common misconception is that all prochoice advocates are compassionate towards women. *Unplanned* once again uses multiple perspectives to disrupt this narrative. According to Abby Johnson's description in the movie, it is all-to-common for boyfriends to drop girlfriends off at a clinic for an abortion and not stay with them to provide comfort and support. She goes on to assert that frequently, these boyfriends simply leave the woman with enough cash to pay for the abortion and cab fare to get back home.

Another perspective is Abby's own perspective after her chemical abortion. In the midst of her agony, she calls the clinic's emergency line and the technician on-duty dismisses her pain with a complete lack of compassion.

## Misconception: Planned Parenthood has no profit motive for abortions

*Unplanned* disrupts the narrative that Planned Parenthood and other abortion providers have no profit motive to perform abortions using the strategy of multiple perspectives. Abby Johnson is initially recruited into volunteering at a Planned Parenthood clinic because the female recruiter told her that Planned Parenthood provided reproductive products, services, and counseling in order to minimize the need for abortions. Later, after having been promoted to pregnancy counsellor, Abby describes the aggressive hard-sales process that she repeatedly used to encourage women who were hesitant to have an abortion. According to Abby, this tactic led to her becoming one of Planned Parenthood's youngest clinic directors.

Another scene in the movie portrays a regional meeting of clinic directors in which Abby was recognized as Employee of the Year. At this regional meeting, her supervisor, Cheryl outlined a new system of abortion quotas which called for each clinic to double the number of abortions performed. When Abby, questioned this new quota system, Cheryl took her aside and severely rebuked her. The scene continues with Cheryl forcefully explaining that Planned Parenthood makes its profits by providing abortion services and that this is how they could afford to build new facilities and provide extravagant benefits packages to its executives. In total, these alternative perspectives disrupt the ideology that abortion providers have no profit-motive to promote abortions.

## Conclusion

Abortion is a highly controversial topic which evokes strong feelings from people on either side of the issue. Going forward, the political divide on this issue is only likely to become more pronounced. Pro-life advocates should examine ways in which their messaging can disrupt the hegemonic ideologies of abortion. Feminist criticism provides a unique way in which these activists can counter the dominant narrative and ideology in order to provide life-affirming support to the oppressed of all varieties.

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