

Take and eat

Creation and disgust in *mother!* by Darren Aronofsky

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In 2017, at the end of the screening for the 74th Venice International Film Festival, the audience left the cinema reacting to *mother!* by Darren Aronofsky with whistles and expressions of outrage. The film is embedded in the members of the audience through the choice of a semi-subjective protagonist, mother, closing them inside the house from which she herself is unable to leave. Her husband, a poet in creative crisis, regulates the narrative. The house, the world, the womb: a pure environment intimately related to the body of the mother and her maternal function, principle and nature of everything. This symbolic and sacred order will be progressively deconstructed by an escalation of impurities and invasion: the violence induced by the human beings themselves, will cause an ineffable fall into abjection made of disturbing esoteric calls, mixtures of flesh and matter. Ever greater degrees of abomination erupt in what we realize to be an allegory of the biblical creation in its primary concept of origin, genesis of life on Earth. Relying on the analysis that Julia Kristeva makes of the semiotics of biblical abomination, we can see in *mother!* a mixture of blood and promise of fecundation that Aronofsky uses to reveal the evil, the tendency to murder and the death drive of humanity. These are degenerative and devouring elements that will culminate in infanticidal theophagy, unleashing the phantasmatic force of the mother, abused and emptied, until the total decay of a vengeful destruction. Unlike an apocalyptic cinema that hopes for a new beginning after the end of things, we are witnessing monstrous resignation – mixed with attraction and repulsion – for a limit that, once crossed, can no longer be traced. Cinema acts by forcing us to look in a mirror, revealing the disgusting animality inherent in the human.

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Creation and Disgust in *mother!* by Darren Aronofsky

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In 2017, at the end of the screening for the 74th Venice International Film Festival, the audience reacted to *mother!* by Darren Aronofsky with whistles and protests. In the US reception is disastrous both from critics and box office; journalist Anthony Lane said that the movie is insane¹. Aronofsky wrote the script taking inspiration from *El ángel exterminador* (1962) attracted by the ability of Luis Buñuel to confine in a small space a universal metaphor; he chose to do this to produce a reflection on society masked within an apparently private story.

This work is suitable for analysing disgust in reception, which invades the cultural constituted ideal order: it is embedded in the cinematic involvement of viewers, calling them into question to enter the narrative until reaching that crucial point where direct engagement cannot be avoided. An emotional shock that stimulates the development of critical thinking. The audience is exposed to monstrosity and occult, facing a phenomenology of otherness. At the physically experienced disgust is added a psychological discomfort through the impression of reality: the object of the gaze may appear extremely close as if it were in front of the user, establishing a direct contact. Disgust, as an emotion aimed at preventing contamination and reaction that socially we carry out to deviate from something that we believe may not belong to us, is functional to push us to the limit of human nature: there is no way out because *the other is us*. Humanity itself: a picture of the sixth day which, in *Genesis*, corresponds to the creation of man by God.

mother! is a spotlight on the life of a man and a woman whose names we don't know. It's morning, the woman wakes up alone in the bed, looks for her partner by touching the mattress with her hand; he must have gotten up early. She goes down two flights of stairs

¹ A. Lane, *mother!* and Battle of the Sexes, in "The New Yorker", September 15th, 2017.

in a beautiful house full of doors and rooms; wooden supplements creak. The man is not in his study, so the woman goes out on the threshold of the main entrance and there stops, looking for him admiring the surrounding landscape that is like a dreamscape: an endless and bucolic view with green meadow, trees, birdsongs. The man appears behind the woman, making her and spectators jump; after a brief greeting, he vanishes to go for a shower. Something is wrong between the two.

The process of involvement of the viewer revolves around the woman and is implemented through the choice of semi-subjective and over-the-shoulder shots that accompanies the protagonist for most of the time, using the camera by hand. Some subjective shots on Jennifer Lawrence are screen-engulfing close-ups. Using these techniques, the director tries to shorten as much as possible the distance between the screen and spectators, wanting to close them inside the house as to subject them to the same condition experienced by the woman – from now on I will also call her “mother” – of whom they will share both the technical and the narrative point of view. The female protagonist will be the only character to stay inside the house without ever leaving. Indeed, spectators are not aware of what happens outside even when other characters come out; this, inevitably, leads us to empathize with mother, sharing her paranoia. The dimension of time appears undefined, a predetermined reality not particularly recognizable in an historical point of view: an asynchronous fixity.

To regulate the narrative, despite it revolves around the woman, will always be the man. He is a poet in creative crisis of which she is totally subject, without any decision power. The husband tends to remain isolated in his spatial «*inner sanctum*»² (study) trying to find inspiration to overcome the writer’s block. The conversation with his wife is almost absent; she is often avoided by him with the pretext of having to work. The devotion of the female towards the male outlines a fallologocentric arrangement dominating family life: an excellent example of that imbalance at the heart of the feminist philosophy of difference.

How does this structure act on the public? Talking about the identification of the spectator is a good reference *Alice Doesn’t* by Teresa de Lauretis (1984) who reflects on how «the spectator’s movement or passage is subject to an orientation, a direction [...] that is

² *Ibidem*.

the movement of narrative; the text-images distributed across the film (be they images of people, objects, or of movement itself) are finally regrouped in the two zones of sexual difference, from which they take their culturally preconstructed meaning: mythical subject and obstacle, maleness and femaleness»³. Since the gaze system is an essential point of representation, the audience is the main subject to which the narrative is directed; to welcome it, spectators must be willing to come into contact with images identifying themselves with the female protagonist. Negative feelings like disgust should not compromise this; otherwise, they cannot fully grasp the meaning that the film wants to convey. Aronofsky wants to make available the possibility of identification with the feminine, or the object of the combined dominant gaze of the public, the male and also the female characters: there is no difference because they will be all violent invaders. As a result «the look of the camera (at the profilmic), the look of the spectator (at the film projected on the screen), and the intradiegetic look of each character within the film (at other characters, objects, etc.) intersect, join, and relay one another in a complex system which structures vision and meaning»⁴. The public can share mother's point of view to prove what she feels but it can also observe her voyeuristically from the outside⁵.

The audience is the subject to which the narrative is directed, but it's not just this. The first shot of *mother!* is a close-up on face and eyes of the actress preceding the one played by Lawrence⁶; her gaze fixed in the camera immediately calls the audience with what Paul Willemen defines *fourth look*: «when the scopic drive is brought into focus, then the viewer also runs the risk of becoming the object of the look, of being overlooked in the act of looking»⁷. Regarding the female spectators, we must point out that «we cannot assume identification to be single or simple. For one thing, identification is itself a movement, a subject-process, a relation: the identification (of oneself) with something other»⁸. Therefore, «cinematographic identification, in particular, is inscribed in the two registers articulated by the system of look, narration and visual (sound becomes a third register necessary in those films that intentionally use sound as an anti-narrative or denativising

³ T. De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't. Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, Macmillan, London 1984, p. 138.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ Aronofsky had already investigated the feminine identity in *Black Swan* (2010) from a psychoanalytic point of view and also dealing with the problematic relationship of the protagonist (Oscar winner Natalie Portman) with her mother.

⁶ I will explain later why.

⁷ P. Willemen, *Letter to John*, in "Screen", 21/2, 1980, cit. in *ivi*, p. 206, n. 47.

⁸ T. De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*, cit., p. 138.

element)»⁹. Particularly fitting is this last remark of De Lauretis on the anti-narrative role of soundtrack: in *mother!* it is totally absent, increasing the feeling of progressive oppression experienced by the protagonist as well as by the viewers (if they are arranged to be actively involved), compressing the narrative for specific purposes.

The house, the world, the womb. Mother lives in an apparently idyllic place, intimately related to her body and maternal function as a natural principle of life. The house – the only location of the film – is symbolically a living organism connected to the figure of the mother in a total identification: the space of the house is an external organism but at the same time it is an extension of her body. The walls are her skin: inside them she perceives a vital component like an anatomical organ; particularly, it seems, heart. Not by chance, after a fire had previously destroyed the house, the woman occupies her days on domestic care activities and manual renovation of rooms and furnishings compromised or marked by soot, *giving them new life* making the house «a paradise». Recurring scenes portray her in solitude and in silence, veiled with mystery. Something like what Lidia Curti says: «la casa, il chiuso, luogo della domesticità, si pone come il luogo dell'enigma, del mistero, il lato oscuro dietro la facciata: lo *heimlich* è allo stesso tempo *unheimlich*, il luogo del magico, dell'inquietante, fatto di porte chiuse, di muri da scavalcare, finestre da infrangere, per la donna protezione e prigione al tempo stesso»¹⁰. In visionary episodes of special connection – that cancel the material distance between the thing and the body – there is a kind of phantasmal power of mother that she manifests when she is alone, especially during the rearrangement of rooms: there is a strange form of dialogue between the house and the woman. Represented as an archaic goddess of classic beauty and balance, her image will decompose: the events will reduce her body and psyche to victims of the devastation at the hands of humanity. The first part of the film is characterized by naturalistic chromatic choices that match with the realism of the handheld camera and the choice of the cinematographic format Super 16 millimeters. This gives way to the second part, that features visual horror tricks and hallucinated visions in red as well as darker atmospheres and a wider use of CGI. The effect sought by Aronofsky is that of a materiality of the image, a porous texture as a patina. The claustrophobic direction

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ L. Curti, *La voce dell'altra. Scritture ibride tra femminismo e postcoloniale*, Meltemi, Milano 2018, p. 214.

increases the suffocation experienced by mother, up to the emotional shock of the final passages. It allows us to critically recognize how realism of the cinematographic image can promote immersion, offering an experience of proximity.

The symbolic order will be deconstructed by an escalation of invasion and colonization: so much violence induced by human beings themselves, that will lead to a fall into abjection, esoteric allusions, mixtures of flesh and matter. The intention of Aronofsky is to allegorically isolate the whole world within the house – of which mother is the core – to crystallize humanity in a picture of its values that will collapse by turning them over. To do this, Aronofsky exploits religion as sacred horror. We see increasing degrees of abomination breaking into an allegory of the biblical creation in its primary concept of origin of life on Earth¹¹. The religious theme is chosen again by Aronofsky after *Noah* (2014), not particularly appreciated by audience and critics. It is interesting to note, however, how the character of Ila in *Noah* seems to anticipate the maternal role played by Lawrence in *mother!*. In the adapted Old Testament (*Genesis*) story of Noah's Ark, Ila is a fictional character: she is the wife of Noah's son Sem, that finds herself living motherhood as a kind of curse. Found on the way to Methuselah, Ila was seriously injured in the womb. Naameh, wife of the patriarch, offers to cure her and take her with them, but warns Noah that because of the wound she will not be able to have children. It will be the same Methuselah to bless her and make her fertile. If she gives birth to a girl, Noah is ready to sacrifice the baby; otherwise, the daughter would be able to procreate in turn, contravening the will of the Creator (the name used in the film instead of God) by disobeying him fostering new human progeny. Ila gives birth to female twins. Noah is determined to eliminate them, his whole family is against him; on the point of doing the gesture he is assaulted by remorse and throws the dagger to the ground.

As we can see in the credits at the end of *mother!*, the characters embody biblical types of men and women with their peculiar qualities. Note how the poet is called "Him" and the woman "mother", not "Her", identifying her only as a woman capable of generating (as we will see later). Therefore, we can consider the Bible as an intertext that gives structure to the script. Why Aronofsky chose the Jewish-Christian monotheism? A first reason is the opportunity to place the focus of narrative on a female character totally absent in

¹¹ The director's strong interest in questions about human life had already been revealed in *The Fountain* (2006).

the Bible. A figure that will put in crisis the fallologocentric centrality of the male through a representation that focuses on what is missing in the Bible: the woman with her identity and will. The poet represents God in struggle with creation: at a first reading, we talk about poetic creation; later, we will have to give it a broader connotation¹²; mother, at a first level, is the inspirational Muse. I will present later a second valid reason using the notion of abjection coined by Julia Kristeva: the dark side of religious, moral and ideological codes. The problem is that the recurrent presence of these harmful trends does not allow us, as species, to avoid the dramatic convulsions of religious crises.

The first couple of strangers to enter the scene reproduces the original one formed by Adam and Eve. The man enters the house (the woman will come later) because someone told him he would find a room to rent; he is a surgeon and a big fan of the writer. The poet is clearly attracted by the idea of being flattered; he considers it functional for poetic inspiration. He is too eager to welcome the two in the house, avoiding asking mother whether she agrees or not with this disturbing hospitality; the fact that the man has found the house by chance, as he claims, is not credible. His entry coincides with the first of many ailments accused by mother as the story progresses. They will be increasingly destabilizing because it is from this moment that the uncontaminated nature begins to be ruined: the relation between humanity and nature is linked to the relationship that the first couple of lovers has with the Eden Garden, of which the house and the studio look like surrogates. Eve is ardently tempted by a crystal that the poet keeps in his studio, an object he particularly cares for. Note that this is already a reference to a temptation related to food: the crystal is desired as it was the apple, the forbidden fruit of the tree of Evil in Genesis. The woman who symbolizes Eve is a vamp; she will repeatedly put mother in difficulty by addressing sexual and relational issues that seems to be, for her, a taboo or at least a weak point. After trying several times to reach the room with the stone, the couple breaks the crystal. The insane desire to *touch* and *look* at it starts the inevitable consequences of the original sin. Immediately Adam and Eve mate, purposely leaving the bedroom door open expecting – as it happens – to be seen by mother. Everything, from this moment, will degenerate compromising the apparent initial serenity, *serving* the decline in human baseness. At this point arrive the two sons of the couple, recognizable in

¹² He presents characteristics comparable to God in the Old Testament.

the fraternal couple of Cain and Abel. They will be the cause of a huge narrative breakdown, staging the first murder in human history: the fight ends with the killing of one of the two (Cain) by the other (Abel, resented because of the preference reserved by the father in relation to his brother)¹³. The poet/God observes the scene from the top of the stairwell, a vertical position of legislating superiority; he invites the boys to remain calm but it won't do any good. The events seem to refer to how the idyllic Genesis world disappeared or revealed itself.

As the narrative progresses, all those who will enter the scene without apparent reason seem already to know the place where they are and the events that will occur, as in a history already lived, sending the woman into crisis. She, although constantly present, is excluded from the conversations that the poet has with people, if not mocked, insulted or mistreated, even as a subject of sexual provocations and allusions; she seems to be the only one unaware of what is happening. The intruders do not seem to have any other place to go, once they arrive it is impossible to drive them away and their actions will be a mirror of the men's oppression over other men and – above all – the woman. The religious code is used to deconstruct from within the allegorical order, presenting a climax of imperfection which begins when the man gets the inspiration for writing, an element empirically connected to the concept of *creation of humanity*: the same term "poet" means "he who creates". It highlights the despotic attitude that man has towards nature, as explained by Northrop Frye¹⁴ who speaks of the existence of a reign of terror over all "lower" creatures, exemplifying Arthur Schopenhauer's observation that animals live in a hell where humans are the demons.

Aronofsky wants to avoid a framing within defined genres, preferring a contamination that proposes tributes or quotations¹⁵. *mother!* is commonly called horror, but this trivializes it: the structure proposes a parody of reality that transgress the sacred combining the carnival with the apocalyptic. However, in line with one of the typical tricks of horror and thriller films, the house undergoes an assault by strangers who came to celebrate the funeral of the murdered boy (Abel), creating a highly tense atmosphere. A critical text useful to deepen this analysis is *De l'hospitalité* by Jacques Derrida (1997). The essay analyses

¹³ As for the poet and the mother, no other character's name is known.

¹⁴ N. Frye, *Il grande codice. Bibbia e letteratura* (1981), trad. it. di G. Rizzoni, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2018, p. 101.

¹⁵ The thematic reference, for example, to *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) by Roman Polanski.

elements such as proximity, intimacy and otherness within the place in which they are, considering the arrival of the foreigner as a surprise that produces a sort of interruption. Being a guest, *hostis* which in Latin means also “enemy”, means to deal with the intrusion of the different an unknown in opposition to familiarity: the human being seeks, by nature, to make *known* the *unknown* to identify it having at least some control over it. Open to the visitor or exile or foreigner puts in a condition of danger that threatens the dynamics of power and duality, the relationship of the *self* with the *other*, of the *private* with the *public* or that between the *subject* and the *object*. Those who arrive always represent a risk that brings back to the frontier. Considering that is the poet who opens the door making the classic “honors”, in *mother!* there is a conjugal, paternal and phallocentric model. Indeed, the poet puts hospitality above all; the first contact with the stranger passes through him and then arrive at the mother, who can only passively welcome. Derrida explains that normally the authority is that of the head, father, lord of the family (*pater familias*) who holds and manages the power of hospitality; in our case, the poet is happy to welcome intruders rather waited for them, thus he does not offer any resistance¹⁶.

In a narrative deviation, the poet and mother (conditioned by conversations with the woman/Eva) seem to reconcile. Here begins a second act. During a sexual intercourse, a conception takes place; mother is mysteriously aware of it immediately after awakening. After a few months, the woman feels the first kick of the foetus just as the poet ends his new story: the point of contact between the creation of life and the fulfillment of the *word of God*. The two things are clearly connected: the gestation goes hand in hand with the writing of the poet’s work, which will be an immediate success. The temporal structure, as already mentioned, does not follow real time but it is managed in function of the events that must take place.

The story jumps forward to the romantic evening organized by mother to celebrate her husband’s success. The dinner is interrupted by journalists and fans gathered outside the door. The situation degenerates quickly: the adoring crowd does not want to just interview or greet the man but, sneaking into the house, begins to steal food, take away things and destroy furniture, taking religious ceremonies. The armed forces’ incursion and the sudden explosions reduce the interior of the house to a pile of rubble; lifeless bodies lie

¹⁶ I find valid also the possibility of imagining the intruders as if they were ghosts, or rather phantasmatic spectral apparitions.

everywhere, there are camps of survivors between one corner and another. Battlefield conflicts raging, a flock of desperate women has been confined in a cage that mother tries in vain to open. The sequence offers an inexorable glimpse into human history in all its negative declinations. Upset by the pains which have meanwhile begun, repeatedly hit by the screaming mass, mother drags herself in search of the man. During the siege invaders are the representation of humanity at its extreme, hungry and thirsty. In chaotic collective scenes reminiscent of Hieronymus Bosch (among all *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, 1485 ca.) or Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), the *massa damnata* of the poet's fans – including the extreme faithful of God – fascinates thefts and looting, dishonesty, struggle for possession of relics, gender and power disparities, selfishness contrasting social and civil codes, abatement, perversions, madness and addictions. There are a lot of death and atrocities of war, a jumble of violence and degeneration. The ecstasy linked to faith, with its sacredness, becomes carnivalesque and mixes itself by contaminating the abject, decaying in turpitude and leaving abundant way to repellent aesthetics. A nightmare in the form of disturbing vision that documents the horror of our world, in a dizzying and labyrinthine sequence lasting half an hour.

The fundamental point is that the abuse of things turns out to be an abuse of woman and her corporeality that, because linked to fertility, is depredated. To symbolize this violation there is a scene in which – cleaning the parquet from the blood of Abel – mother noticed a bloody fissure that, very similar to a vulva, confirms the symbolically organic quality of the material parts of the dwelling and the anatomical/sexual parallelism between the mother and the house¹⁷. During the occupation, the ailments suffered by mother increase causing a loss of lucidity; before becoming pregnant she took sedatives providing a reference to the question of madness typically linked to the feminine. The malady is now replaced by the uterine contractions: to her cries corresponds a visual distortion of the image that trembles blurred for a few seconds. Meanwhile, the visionary perception that mother has of the internal organism in the walls – to which she tries to “reconnect” by leaning her head against the wall – is increasingly suffering. She will try to get out of the house several times but, of course, this is not possible.

¹⁷ Some intruders, then, will want to take a selfie on the floor, next to the bloody crack.

Kristeva's analysis of the semiotics of biblical abomination in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur. Essai sur l'abjection* (1980) can be a valuable critical tool which exploits the mixture – conceptual and visual – of blood and procreation. According to Kristeva nothing is disgusting in itself, disgusting is what disobeys the rules of the symbolic system; Aronofsky proposes a challenge to this sense of the limit through disturbing excesses. The question is that the boundary between pure and impure (an abstract demonic force) is placed *in* the mother that is the menacing feminine. The potential danger of being a woman is clear without being a mother: the menstrual cycle establishes the “sign” of an intrinsic evil; however, the ultimate damnation of the female is the ability to procreate¹⁸. In addition, Aronofsky emphasizes the wickedness of idolatry sanctifying the Man/God, seen as the last hope for salvation; a wild force that will cause the regression to barbarism with tribal behaviours that will blend into the attraction for «the desirable and terrifying, nourishing and murderous, fascinating and abject inside of the maternal body»¹⁹. The one who gives life, identified with the *other* and therefore *alienated*, can only be the repressed evil in a body that retains a bloodshot threat.

At these elements we can associate the complex concept of *chora*, born from Plato's *Timeo* (48-53), collected by Derrida and taken up by Kristeva. For the purposes of this analysis the synthetic form given by Adriana Cavarero is excellent²⁰: Plato describes the birth of the universe and the father who creates it like the Man/God interpreted by Javier Bardem; there is a “son”, the world, made at the image of the father, that in *mother!* can be the invaded house. The third element is *chora*, in which the father imparts its forms to generate material universe: from the Greek *xώρα* which means “space” or “place” *chora* is formless matter. The crucial point is that it cannot be said by *logos*: Plato declares the *chora* unspeakable as something that transcends speech. Metaphorically, however, he calls it “mother” and “matrix”. Therefore, we can understand it as the feminine that exists but at the same time is irreducible and, above all, not domesticable. For Cavarero *chora* is a vocal power, something bodily, rhythmic, vital, exciting that nourishes, however exceeding the language. I argue that the figure of *mother* may be one of the forms of *chora*,

¹⁸ If a woman gives birth she will be *naturally* “unclean” (Leviticus 12,5); the male newborn will be circumcised to ensure a drastic separation from the filth of the maternal sex: the circumcision is the physical mark of the covenant with God (Leviticus, 12,3).

¹⁹ J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection* (1980), transl. by L. S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, New York 1982, p. 55.

²⁰ I. Margarese, *Adriana Cavarero: raccontare e pensare*, in “Magma. Navigazione”, 3, 2022.

especially if we understand it as a receptacle of the entire becoming: motherhood as a condition made of matter, so that it can be also destroyed.

In *Genesis* 9,4 we read that men are not allowed to eat flesh with blood. Despite this, the devouring elements described so far will culminate in infanticidal theophagy²¹, dragging into the abyss the mother – abused and emptied – until the total decay of the world and the vengeful destruction. The regression to socially unacceptable behaviours lead the narrative at the border between civilization and incivility culminating in cannibalism: the fruit of the womb is taken from the father to be sacrificed. The abomination of food which transgresses natural limits is related to childbirth, opposing impurity to sacrifice like a metaphor for purification. Indeed, the three categories of abomination are – as reported by Kristeva – the food taboos; the bodily alteration with its apogee in death; the female body (in addition to incest). These categories regulate the limits of access to a given place, often regulated by laws for purity. This reveals the accusatory connotation of *mother!* towards human beings, culminating in the staging of the devouring of not conforming meat: the unrepresentable to be rejected, product of the inexhaustible death drive that is consubstantial to humanity.

The story has now the form of a feverish dream. The scene of the birth, with messianic traits, portrays humanity gathered in a house, waiting in an absolute silence compared to the noise produced until then. From the moment the child has expressed his tears, everyone prays or sends gifts to mother, who is sheltering in a room and is facing labor on the floor. To give an idea of the emotional tension of this passage, I think at the beautiful expression coined by Luisa Muraro on put the world into the world²²: a metaphorization of the experience of motherhood raised to a miracle. Humanity expects to see and touch the son, with the consent of the God/Father whose role continues to slide from benevolent to evil which objectify the mother. As we read in Leviticus²³, women – to purify themselves from the fact of being a mother – must offer a holocaust like an expiatory sacrifice. Frye, on the other hand, talks about creation as the first phase of a process of revelation (a core theme of biblical content), emphasizing the difference between creation in the Bible – artificial myth in which the world is originally formed from the father – and the

²¹ The sacramental eating of a god typically in the form of an animal, image or other symbol as a part of a religious ritual and commonly for the purpose of communion with or the receiving of power from the god.

²² L. Muraro, *L'ordine simbolico della madre*, Editori Riuniti, Roma 2022, p. 129 (my transl.).

²³ Argued in J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, cit., p. 112.

myths of sexual creation, in which the world is born from Mother Earth²⁴. Reflecting on the placement of *mother!* in one of the two categories, I would opt to support a mixture of the two types adding that the myths of creation tend to be cyclical. Anyway, the figure of God rationalizes the *ethos* of a male-dominated patriarchal society. The father of the child, after having subtly waited for mother to close her eyes exhausted by fatigue, takes the newborn and presents him to the crowd, who will lift him up to praise him, passing it from hand to hand until his neck is broken. Within a few seconds, when mother makes her way into the group to reach him, her son has already been placed on an altar and, dismembered, is now an unrecognizable mass of blood and small bones. People closest to the altar are behind her; first they cry as for repentance but the next moment they eat the pieces with hands, reciting a litany: «this is the sound of life, the sound of humanity, its cry of love, its love for you». This ritualized voracity is caused by the unbridled desire to enter mystical communion with the divinity, identified in the body of the newborn with a clear reference to Jesus Christ²⁵: receiving a part of the blessed body through ingestion allows to elevate one's own corporeality believing to be able to embody the divine. Lane talks about «a noisome parody of the Eucharist»²⁶.

Cannibalism, often linked in contemporary studies to elements such as colonialism, overpopulation, predatory capitalist consumerism regulated by dynamics of power, psychoanalysis and sexuality, is defined in the relationship between *self* and *other*. The cannibal incorporates historical moments or places, changing according to the fears of people. The cannibalistic phenomenon proposed by Aronofsky reaches a higher level of upheaval because it affects the newborn's body in its incorruptibility. A similar choice discusses the real cannibalistic meal, different from representations that go beyond the boundaries of reality as in stories about zombies, vampires and various “living dead bodies”. We must take note that «at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries, our greatest fear, it seems, is ourselves. [...] We are rapacious, cannibalistic

²⁴ N. Frye, *Il grande codice*, cit., p. 132.

²⁵ «Swallowed, eaten, parted and drunk» says N. Frye, *Il grande codice*, cit., p. 128, (my transl.). A prefiguration of the sacrifice of Christ is in the episode of the *Genesis* about Isaac (one of the salient stories of the *Pentateuch*). God, to test his faith, orders Abraham to kill his son Isaac as a burned offering in Moria; as he is about to obey, an angel sent by God comes down to stop him. Isaac was miraculously born by the will of God, despite the venerable age of Abraham and his sterile wife Sarah: therefore, he is often considered the forerunner of the Messiah.

²⁶ A. Lane, *mother! and Battle of the Sexes*, cit.

aggressors»²⁷. Kristeva writes²⁸ that purity and impurity are situated in worship because it represents or serves a logic on which the symbolic community is founded. In this perspective, the *meatification* of the baby is dangerously close to the use of the scapegoat as a vehicle for the elimination of evils that plague the world, whether invisible or incarnate. The meal is a moment of *catharsis* that exposes the equation between human and bestial, in the staging of a sacred cannibalism that refers to the archaic assumption of flesh for the expulsion of demons and absolution from sins. Moreover Jennifer Brown – quoting Peggy Sanday²⁹ – alludes to the hypotheses that cannibalism could be linked to fantasies of *return to the womb*.

It is important to keep high attention on the *use* made of the mother: the murdered newborn is the element that triggers her loss of control. We have to reiterate the identification between the fertile body of the mother, the eaten body of the child and the environment in which they are located: the consumption of the child's flesh aligns with that of the mother's mind and body. This is something that gives us the opportunity to recall the fascinating etymology of the word "hysteria" derived from the Greek ὑστέρα, "uterus". Coined by Hippocrates, the term refers to the model of the part for the whole: the woman's uterus is identified as the entire female organism. Curti, in fact, reiterating the connection between the impure maternal body and the leper dying body – hence the substantial impurity that the Bible refers to the woman – recalls the archaic icon of the uterus with the horns to remind us how often the hell is represented as a womb, developing the monster/motherhood binomial in the literary and filmic imaginary³⁰.

The answer to this abomination will not be the classical divine curse but the apocalyptic annihilation. This time not the flood but flames invade the Earth:

Mother and death, both abominated, abjected, slyly build a victimizing and persecuting machine at the cost of which I become subject of the Symbolic as well as Other of the Abject. [...] What you sacrifice by swallowing, like what you suppress by rejecting, nourishing mother or corpse, are merely pre-texts of the symbolic relation that links you to Meaning.

²⁷ J. Brown, *Cannibalism in Literature and Film. Introduction*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2013, p. 13. Can be interesting to tackle this theme by comparing *mother!* and *The Baby of Mâcon* (1993) by Peter Greenaway: some points of contact are significant to deepen cannibalism, theophagy and gender roles.

²⁸ J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, cit., p. 104.

²⁹ P. R. Sanday, *Divine Hunger. Cannibalism as a Cultural System*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1986, cit. in J. Brown, *Cannibalism in Literature and Film*, cit., p. 5.

³⁰ L. Curti, *La voce dell'altra*, cit., p. 77.

[...] Nothing is sacred outside of the One. At the limit, everything that remains, all remainders, are abominable³¹.

Aronofsky puts into scene what Kristeva calls the sacred horror of the feminine, the diabolical, the sexual³²: at first mother will react violently, screaming in despair embodying the anger of a betrayed *nature*. The first thing she does is to try to collect from the hands of worshipers the waste of the child, bringing them back to her belly; she will succeed in striking and injuring with a glass splinter some of the fanatics, but she will soon be thrown to the ground overwhelmed by kicks, blows and sexualized insults. It will be the Man/God to stop the aggression: with a logocentric intent he asks her to forgive the crowd. He expresses his desire not to let the son be sacrificed in vain, as the absurd last chance for salvation: «change everything, change everyone». This is the extreme attempt to dictate conditions as *pater familias* and *creator* of the entire progeny in the house. The omnipotence of the poet is lost during the narrative arc, because – even if he wants to – he can't change the course of history: male impotence is another important moral aspect of *mother!* The hospitality granted by man – blinded by his attempt at redemption – makes humans intruders in their own house, lost in an instinctive precultural bestiality. Mother, unable to grant what is asked, puts into sharp question the man's *word*, depriving it of his strength by collapsing the “house of cards” he raised, realizing the fear of the maternal figure: the woman as a *creature* with abilities that men are not able to control. The almighty agency of the God/Creator, therefore, is completely reset due to the derridean paradox of xenotransplantation: hospitality threatened by the *other* which becomes so hostile to subjugate the authority of man and the passivity of mother, making them hostages. The creator loses control of his own product and becomes the host of the host: as the life of the mother is determined by motherhood, so the existence of the father does not exist without his adulators. The difference is that the poet has not been subdued by others and reduced to passivity in order to complete his work; his existence is legitimized by the duty to continue writing.

Mother unleashes an apocalypse – the unveiling of revealed truth (ἀποκάλυψις, *aletheia*) – implementing the final annihilation of the house and then of the world that personifies. As a cry to the Earth in reaction to the evil inflicted by humanity, chaos and

³¹ J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, cit., pp. 114-113.

³² *Ivi*, p. 210.

darkness end up being «dialectically incorporated into creation» because they too are «creatures of God»³³. Mother sets fire to the petrol cans hidden in the basement which is like the *womb* of the house. In the end, she will forgive God (the only survivor) allowing him to bring things back «to the beginning», starting again with the hope that this time things are going differently. Finally, the creator reveals to mother the truth by telling her: «you were the house». She allows him to rip her still beating heart from her charred chest; he crushes it with his hands revealing that the original crystal that gives life – while being, at the same time, the root of sin – is physically contained in mother. God, laughing, places it among the ashes: it restores the house from devastation ending the circle of a story that we discover to be utopian cyclical, giving life each time to a different mother who will end up the same way: the close-up on her exhausted face surrounded by the flames, the same scene of the incipit of the film; the figure of the mother continues to reborn but as a dead body that eternally *returns*. At the same time the last action always comes back to the man who articulates the trajectories of the gaze: the dismantling of the patriarchal system in the fallogocentric microcosm fails to succeed. De Lauretis explains it bringing us back to the female spectators: it is necessary to consider the presence of «the masculine position as that of mythical subject, and the feminine position as mythical obstacle or, simply, the space in which that movement occurs»³⁴. Mother does not play a more important role than humanity: the creator expressly declares to the men and women around him: «you are the only purpose».

The film does not leave us with the hope of a positive change in the fate of humanity, even centralizing the ancestral procreative capacity of mother. The director's intention is the denunciation of an impossible tomorrow: the reiteration of humanity that arises, grows and develops degenerating in a never-ending process. Humans cannot avoid coming to terms with their end: this is almost a negation of creation itself. Taking all this into account, we recall in the mother the image of archaic Mother Earth from which everything was born and to which everything returns. A *continuum* that Frye called *natura naturans*: here is the association between the mother's body *adamah* – the dust of the soil – and the imagery of the garden, both subject to cyclicity.

³³ N. Frye, *Il grande codice*, cit., p. 137, (my transl.).

³⁴ T. De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*, cit., p. 143.

Re-discussing biblical topics today can be significant if we approach them objectively outside of the cultic dimension. In *mother!* the utopian idea of creation comes into conflict with the alienation (from nature) and the fall (placed in nature itself). The idea of a cyclic movement is declined not as a resource for a new world but as evidence of the failure that continues to lead humanity to extinction. The God/Father is responsible and victim at the same time; the mother embodies, instead, the single experience of motherhood extended to a universal idea. This representation proposes a symbolic/philosophical analysis of existence but wants to warn viewers about the scientifically recognized risks of climate change; and, in a general perspective, on the dark paths that contemporary history is taking. What would our world be like if we had the chance to start all over again?

It would be wrong to reduce *mother!* to its allegorical meaning, as much as to focus only on the biblical intertext. Aronofsky's aesthetic is intense: an immersive cinema with the aim of increasing the spectator experience by creating a world-opera that seeks a synthesis between narrative needs, allegorical content and maximalist staging. He talks about creation not to exalt its sacredness but in function of the meaning of the apocalypse that follows, embracing a dystopian cut that denies the re-creation of human beings. In the abstract code of *mother!* the innocent purity of Eden has become a blazing fire, the first human and the others who came after him have chosen violence and the symbolic order embodied by mother has collapsed on itself surrounded by abjection. I think we can find here the reason why, in the title, "mother" begins with a minuscule and ends with an exclamation point: a strong statement to draw the public's attention to the inferiority of the mother, representing the womb – incorporated in the house – as invaded and disfigured. In the end, the subject of the film is the unconditional love given by Mother Earth to man and humanity: a love that does not come back but opens the way for exploitation. The paradox is the fact that the invasion occurs because of love for something or someone, in this case God.

The circular arrangement given to the story may appear as a message of hope because life tries to resist to go on. But, unlike a certain apocalyptic cinema that hopes for redemption and a new beginning, we are witnessing a revelation to which we sadly resign ourselves. Mixing attraction and repulsion, *mother!* traces the sign of a limit that, once crossed, can no longer be erased. Manifesting a generative power that becomes monstrous, it acts forcing us to look into the revealing mirror of the animality inherent in the

human. Aronofsky's account shows what happens «turning the uterus into a completely disclosed space, a commonplace»; because the spread of violence is from the maternal that «borrows its madness»³⁵.

³⁵ J. Derrida, A. Dufourmantelle, *Sull'ospitalità. Le riflessioni di uno dei massimi filosofi contemporanei sulle società multietniche* (1997), trad. it. di I. Landolfi, Baldini&Castoldi, Milano 2000, pp. 29-26 (my transl.).