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Film Review: Mother! (Darren Aronofsky, US 2017) 2018

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19475>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Given, Jacob: Film Review: Mother! (Darren Aronofsky, US 2017). In: *Journal for Religion, Film and Media*. Trauma, Memory and Religion, Jg. 4 (2018), Nr. 1, S. 117–120. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19475>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

https://www.jrfm.eu/index.php/ojs_jrfm/article/view/120

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Film Review

MOTHER! (Darren Aronofsky, US 2017)

It is customary to preface a film review with a brief synopsis. However, Darren Aronofsky's *MOTHER!* (US 2017) resists concise summarization, not because it lacks a discernable plot, but because the movie carries meaning on multiple levels.

First, there is the literal meaning of the film. Jennifer Lawrence plays Mother, the wife of Him (Javier Bardem), a poet numbed by writer's block. Lawrence spends her time attending to his needs and remodeling his fire-damaged childhood home as Bardem struggles to find inspiration. One day, a stranger (Ed Harris) arrives on their doorstep, apparently mistaking their house for a bed and breakfast. Bardem generously offers the stranger a place to stay, but we see that Lawrence bears the brunt of the work required to offer such hospitality. The men talk as she works in the kitchen and prepares the stranger's linens. It turns out, though, that the stranger is not the wayward traveler that he had presented himself to be. Rather, he is an admirer of the poet, and he is dying. Lawrence, understandably, meets this revelation with alarm, while Bardem appears flattered and doubles down on his offer of hospitality. Soon the stranger's wife (Michelle Pfeiffer) shows up at the door and Bardem welcomes her in, to Lawrence's dismay. Then the strangers' two sons arrive, quarreling over a detail in their father's will. The quarrel quickly turns violent and results in the death of one of the sons. Bardem accompanies the family to the hospital, leaving his clearly traumatized wife behind to scrub the blood off the floor. Eventually the extended family of the stranger arrive for the funeral of the stranger's son. Lawrence chases a couple from the master bedroom, a man verbally harasses her when she refuses his advances, and a couple sits on the not-yet-braced kitchen sink, which collapses and causes a large pipe to burst, forcing the crowd to leave the house. Then an argument between Lawrence and Bardem leads to sexual intercourse, and the first half of the movie comes to a close.

The next morning, Lawrence reveals that she is pregnant (seemingly intuiting this information), and Bardem, overjoyed, has found the inspiration that he needs to write his masterpiece. Fast forward approximately nine months and the couple are about to celebrate the extraordinary success of Bardem's new book with a dinner. Bardem is flattered when an adoring crowd suddenly ap-

pears on the lawn. The people force themselves into the house, and the movie quickly becomes nightmarish and violent. Fans seem less like admirers and more like cult members, building shrines to the poet inside the home and conducting orgiastic rituals. Inexplicably, the basement turns into a war zone. Bardem's publisher (Kristen Wiig) executes prisoners six at a time and riot police clash with protesters. When Lawrence suddenly goes into labor, Bardem carries her up to his office, where she gives birth to their son. She falls asleep and Bardem hands the child over to the mob. They pass the urinating baby above their heads until its unsupported neck breaks. They then ritually cannibalize the child. Lawrence assaults the priestly figure officiating at the cannibalization with a glass shard and several surrounding people, lacerating the faces of some children. The crowd proceeds to brutalize Lawrence in what is surely the most memorable, if horrific, scene of the movie. Bardem rushes in and cradles his wife, saying that they have to find a way to forgive the mob. She hurries to the basement, breaks a gas line, drops a lighter, and incinerates the house. Bardem then carries her badly burned but somehow still living body, places it on the table and asks her for one last thing: her "love". She consents, and he opens her chest to remove her heart, which takes the form of an ash-covered crystal. Upon placing the crystal on its decorative mount in his office, the house is restored and a new woman awakes in bed. The cycle continues.

The absurdity of the film's literal sense is amplified by its allegorical dimension. The events that unfold in the house mimic stories of the Bible. Ed Harris and Michelle Pfeiffer play the first humans, Adam and Eve. Their son commits the first murder, explaining the odd bloody orifice that forms in the floorboard ("And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand" [Gen. 4,11 ESV]). The increasingly chaotic funerary gathering represents the "increasing corruption on the earth" (Gen. 6,1–8 ESV), culminating in the burst water pipe, the Flood (Gen. 6–8). Jennifer Lawrence's pregnancy represents the incarnation of God's Son, Jesus, which provides the inspiration for God (Bardem) to compose his masterpiece, the New Testament. The subsequent pandemonium parodies the history of the Christian West. The publisher's role as executioner, for example, seems to stand in for fanatical violence committed in the name of religion: the Inquisition, the Crusades, or some similar example. The birth of the child is the Nativity, the child's cannibalization is the Eucharist, and Lawrence's brutalization is the disdain with which the Christian West has treated the earth/women. Finally, Mother (Nature, or perhaps Woman) has had enough and destroys the house with fire, echoing the biblical eschatological motif of the "day of the Lord" in which "the heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare" (2 Pet. 3,10 NIV). Of course, the film does not stop there. God asks one last thing of Nature,

namely, for its love. The whole process begins again as God smiles with joy. The film's departures from the biblical narrative are important. It depicts God neither as the loving and omnipotent creator God of the Hebrew Bible, nor as the New Testament "Abba" of Christ. Rather, *MOTHER!* allegorically portrays God as a megalomaniacal creator who does not truly love his creation, but simply loves that his creation loves him (see Lawrence literally giving him her heart). God's creative endeavors come at a cost: nature/the planet/Mother Earth must bear the burden of God's narcissistic thirst for worship.

So what are these deviations from the biblical narrative? Criticisms, perhaps? If so, what is being criticized? Abrahamic religion? Or is it, more broadly, a commentary on humanity's disdain for the planet/women? At this point the film's ambiguities become more apparent. Aronofsky has referred to the film as a "cautionary tale" that uses biblical narrative to illustrate the history of humanity's mistreatment of the earth.¹ But if the biblical narrative is supposed to be the pretext for illustrating human history as a whole, Aronofsky's portrayal of the God–Nature relationship and his shocking parody of the Eucharist distract from his purpose. Rather than making a broad statement about humanity's destruction of the environment, Aronofsky's critical attention seems to home in on something sinister and inherently ecocidal implicit in the logic of Judeo-Christian religion. Perhaps it is anthropocentrism. Or, perhaps it is an ethic of forgiveness that effectively functions as a blank check for environmental exploitation. In any case, Aronofsky asks us to sympathize with Lawrence/Mother Earth who just wants to be alone with her husband, and, thanks to her stunning performance, I did. But allegorically, Aronofsky asks us to see the God of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures as an impotent narcissist who values praise more than the well-being of creation, who instrumentalizes nature and history for his own creative compulsions. Finally, Aronofsky asks us to see humanity as a tragic aberration that destroys the pristine relationship between God and Nature.

Aside from the narrative confusions inherent in the jumbled blend of surreal domestic drama and deranged biblical recital, the film's greatest flaw is its haphazard aesthetic. Take, for example, the opening sequence. The film begins with a close-up shot of a woman wearing a defiant expression, engulfed in flames. As her hair and skin burn away, she closes her eyes. A tear falls. The sound of flames grows increasingly intense. There is a sudden cut to a silent, black screen. The title appears in white cursive font with Ralph Steadmanesque ink splattering. The exclamation point is then scrawled out and remains visible as the rest of the title fades. The title sequence prefigures a recurring problem in the film: there is a juxtaposition of disparate elements that aims to manifest the surreal perplexity of a dream but ends up coming across as confused and out of place. The film

1 Aronofsky 2017a.

is a gothic and psychedelic experience, to be sure, but it is not composed of the hallucinogenic fear and loathing that the Steadmanesque font might suggest. And why the extra emphasis on the exclamation point, hanging on after the title fades? Why the exclamation point at all? Aronofsky has referred to the film as a “fever dream” following “nightmare logic”, like a “funhouse built on a rollercoaster smashing into a wall”.² Perhaps he emphasizes the arbitrary and randomness for the sake of this “nightmare logic”, but the result is a fragmented and confusing aesthetic that, at times, distracts the viewer rather than immersing her in the fever dream. This seemingly random aggregation of allegory, horror, gratuitous blasphemy, and ecological commentary does not achieve the sublime disorientation of, say, a David Lynch script. Rather, it comes across more as a surrealist Tarantino film with a very, very loud environmentalist message.

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² Aronofsky 2017b.