

MAMA: AN EXPLORATION OF GENDER AND MOTHERHOOD IN CONTEMPORARY SPANISH HORROR FILM

MAMA: GÉNERO Y MATERNIDAD EN EL CINE DE TERROR ESPAÑOL CONTEMPORÁNEO

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Abstract

Motherhood can be argued to be a central theme in many recent Spanish horror films. From *El Orfanato/ The Orphanage* or *Los Otros/ The Others* to, more recently, *Las Brujas de Zugarramurdi/ Witching and Bitching* or *Musarañas/ Shrew's Nest*, to mention but a few, their narratives are based on the figure of the (Good/Bad) mother. Their struggles and choices in mothering move the action forward and bring horror to the story, ultimately depicting them as «the problem to be solved» (Davies, 2011, p. 82). Using *Mama* (Muschetti, 2013) as a case study, this article seeks to explore how motherhood is constructed in contemporary Spanish horror film and how this might respond to the specificities of the Spanish social and historical context. For this purpose, the research will particularly focus on the journey that the main female character

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undergoes throughout the narrative, from the reluctant mother and rock star to the «all-nurturing and self-abnegating Angel of the House» (Kaplan, 2000, p. 468).

However, the outcome of the research highlights that this transition is strongly based on patriarchal principles that shape the ideal of good motherhood. The problematic narrative also conceives maternity as a woman's ultimate goal and fulfilment vehicle and assumes maternal instincts exist and are innate to women. Moreover, the study has also uncovered how the confrontation between the good and the bad mother functions as a reinforcement of a very specific maternal style that is highly influenced by Franco's ideology in relation to family, gender roles and female identity. Thus, although the film depicts the struggles of motherhood from a female point of view, it also portrays the horror and terrible consequences of challenging the patriarchal order, therefore promoting an outdated and patriarchal notion of good mothering.

Keywords: gender; motherhood; horror; Spanish horror; film studies.

Resumen

La maternidad como eje argumental central aparece en numerosas producciones cinematográficas de terror español estrenadas en los últimos años. Desde *El Orfanato* o *Los Otros*, a títulos más recientes, como *Las Brujas de Zugarramurdi* o *Musarañas*, entre otras, sus historias se basan en la figura de la (buena/mala) madre. Sus inquietudes y comportamiento en relación a la maternidad mueven la acción y traen el elemento de terror a la historia, lo cual conlleva la problemática construcción de estas mujeres como «El problema a resolver» (Davies, 2011, p. 82). A través del análisis de *Mama* (Muschietti, 2013), este artículo explora la representación de la maternidad en el cine de terror español contemporáneo y cómo ésta puede verse influenciada por el contexto histórico y social. Con este objetivo, la investigación se centrará en la transición de la principal protagonista de roquera reacia a ser madre, a la «abnegada cuidadora y ángel del hogar» (Kaplan, 2000, p. 468).

Sin embargo, la investigación ha demostrado que esta evolución se basa en ideas patriarcales que conforman el ideal tradicional de maternidad. La narrativa también recoge aspectos problemáticos, tales como la construcción de la maternidad como meta y medio de realización de las mujeres, así como reconocer la existencia y biología del instinto maternal.

A su vez, este estudio muestra que el enfrentamiento entre la buena y la mala madre sirve para promover un estilo de maternidad muy específico y fuertemente influenciado por principios franquistas en relación con la familia, los roles de género y la identidad femenina. Así, aunque la película representa las dificultades de la maternidad desde un punto de vista femenino, también refleja el horror y las consecuencias catastróficas que acarrea desafiar el orden patriarcal, promoviendo, por lo tanto, un modelo de maternidad patriarcal y obsoleto.

Palabras clave: género; maternidad; terror; terror español; estudios cinematográficos.

1 .INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the on-screen depiction of motherhood has experienced a significant increase. It is therefore frequent to find approaches from different genres, such as drama (*Tully* [Reitman, 2018], *Room* [Abrahamson, 2015]), super(s)hero (*Jessica Jones* [Netflix, 2015-2019]), musical (*Mamma Mia!* [Lloyd, 2008] and its sequel *Mamma Mia! Here we go Again* [Parker, 2018]), comedy (*Bad Moms* [Lucas and Moore, 2016], *Working Moms* [2017-], *Mamá / Mom* [CBS 2013-2021]), an *auteur* approach (*Mother!* [Aronofsky, 2017], *Mommy* [Dolan, 2014], *Madres Paralelas / Parallel Mothers* [Almodóvar, 2021]) and, of course, horror (*Bird Box* [Bier, 2018], *Hereditary* [Aster, 2018] or *The Curse of La Llorona* [Chaves, 2019]). While different approaches to the topic have been argued to respond to patriarchal constructions (Arnold, 2013) the present study focuses specifically on the horror genre as «horror films about mothers and maternal relationships articulate a great sense of dis-ease about the discursive construction of motherhood» (Harrington, 2018 p. 184), offering a perfect corpus for the specific research of this topic.

Within the Spanish context, the new century brought to our screens a series of high quality and profitable stories whose narratives developed around a main female character portrayed as a mother. This is the case of films such as *Los Otros / The Others* (Alejandro Amenabar, 2001), *Trastorno / Demented* (Fernando Cámara, 2006) *El Orfanato / The Orphanage* (Juan Antonio Bayona, 2007), or *No-Do / The Haunting* (Elio Quiroga, 2009). The theme of motherhood continues to be at the centre of more recent titles, such as *Las Brujas de Zugarramurdi / Witching and Bitching* (De la Iglesia, 2013) *Musarañas/ Shrew's Nest* (Andrés & Roel, 2014), *El Pacto* (Victori, 2018), *Malasaña 32* (Pintó, 2020), or *El Páramo / The Wasteland* (Casademunt, 2021), among others. Unlike Hollywood's maternal horror films, focused on childbirth, monstrous progeny or exploring the abjection of the female reproductive system (Creed, Clover, Fisher), these productions seem to be more centred on the behaviours of these women as mothers, and their maternal (in)abilities. Thus, rather than just than following the pro-natalist trend identified in other genres (Zecchi, 2005), the article would argue how these horror narratives promote a very specific and traditional motherhood, highly influenced by Francoist ideal of femininity and maternity. In these

productions, women are constructed as «the problem to be solved» (Davies, 2011 p. 82), portraying «the mother as both the monster and the monster's pursuer» (Davies, 2011, p. 81).

This aspect would be further studied through textual analysis of *Mama*, directed by Andrés Muschietti in 2013. The Spanish-Canadian production was created by the director and her sister Bárbara Muschietti from a homonymous short film. It was produced by Guillermo del Toro and filmed in English with an international cast. The filming locations include Canada and Spain, where the siblings resided for many years, before moving to the United States to continue their work on other successful (Hollywood) horror productions. The film adopts elements from the Gothic to blend maternal melodrama and a ghost story that became «one of the most profitable films of 2013» (Hager & Herzog, 2015 p. 121). It tells the story of two little girls whose mother has been killed by their father, who also tries to hurt them. *Mama*, a ghostly monster, saves them and takes care of the two orphans until they are found by their father's twin brother. Furthermore, the narrative introduces another potential surrogate mother: Annabel, whose process of becoming (good) mother becomes the real protagonist of the film. This article would focus on these two surrogate mothers, their confrontation, and their different maternity styles, arguing that both personas are heavily based on patriarchal ideals of femininity and maternity.

Moreover, I would argue that the explicit and physical construction of *bad* mothers as monsters (supported by make-up and special effects) in the horror genre, could be understood a step forward in the demonisation of women who do not meet the traditional ideal of motherhood and/or who threaten the patriarchal order by offering an alternative to the traditional nuclear family. In other words, these monstrous constructions are based on gendered stereotypes that add negative connotations to the personae, resulting in a problematic representation of women resisting patriarchal constructions onscreen.

2. MAMA

Mama's character was developed from *Mamá* (Muschietti, 2008), the horror short film where two little girls run scared from their monstrous mother.

Accordingly, from the very beginning, this persona was designed to strike terror and created as a monster. In the words of the director, Andrés Muschietti, she is «a decaying Modigliani's portrait» (*Mamá*, n.d.). She is also interpreted by Spanish actor Javier Botet, known for impersonating monsters in recent Spanish horror film and theatre, mostly for his actorial debut playing the Medeiros girl in the *REC* saga (Balagueró, Plaza, 2007-2014), and by playing both male and female monsters in international productions such as *Crimson Peak* (Del Toro, 2015) or *Slender Man* (White, 2018). He gives the character his long bony extremities and her hyper-flexible movements. *Mama* is not a real-life character, but a combination of CGI and digitally treated images of Javier Botet's movements, whereas his antagonist, the father of the girls (and later, his twin brother) is interpreted by the photogenic Danish actor Nikolaj Coster-Waldau, known for his role as Jaime Lannister in the popular television series *Game of Thrones*. The contrast between the attractive actor and the monstrous CGI constructed persona emphasises the problematic gendered construction present in the film as, by extension, the film does not represent equally the traditional patriarchal fatherhood and the alternative motherhood that embodies *Mama*, which is made visibly monstrous, and therefore something to fear, from the beginning.

These two characters are introduced in the opening sequence, before the initial credits, which presents the two sisters as well, and how they became orphans. In this sequence, the aesthetic is marked by its predominant deep blue colour. In her analysis of Kieślowski's film *Three Colours: Blue* (Kieślowski, 1993), Emma Wilson follows Kristeva's notions on colour to explain that «all colours, but blue in particular, as the first colour perceived by the child's retina, take the adult back to the stage before the identification of objects and individuation. Blue is linked by Kristeva to the semiotic and to the space of symbiosis between mother and child» (Wilson, 2003, p. 21). Accordingly, this first part introduces the girls in the family house, a domestic space that symbolises the child-mother bond. As a result, as soon as the father enters that intimate space, Victoria, the elder sister, suspects something is wrong, and she is surprised to see her father there with them. In addition, the artist Wassily Kandinsky states that the colour blue tends to deepness and, more interestingly, he relates it with endless sadness. In this sense, Wilson relates this colour to Julie's mourning for her lost daughter

and trauma «the use of colour forms an integral part of the film's analysis of trauma and mourning for a lost child» (Wilson, 2003, p. 21) in her analysis of *Three Colours: Blue*. However, in the case of *Mama*, the use of this chromatic option seems to increase the feeling of traumatic loss of the mother from the girls' point of view. This feeling is also related to the cold and the loneliness that they are experiencing after becoming orphans, and that can be observed in close shots of the girls.

After their father tries to kill Victoria, pointing a gun at her head in a close-up of the girl's face illuminated by the blue light, the ghost *Mama* is introduced in the film, almost heroically, as she saves the girl's life by killing the father. It is important to note that the narrative constructs maternal instincts so strong that they do not only transcend animal species (Harrington, 2018) but also death, allowing a dead woman, a decaying ghost, to mother. It seems that, even after death, women are expected to fulfil their roles of (good) mothers, to respond to their innate duty to look after the needy.

Nevertheless, through this murder, *Mama* not only embodies the epitome of motherly instinct, but she also embodies transgression in her undead flesh. Accordingly, while the murderous father, whose killing spree is justified by the pressures of a demanding job, is an attractive young man, *Mama*'s horrific monstrous appearance embodies the abjection, establishing a border between the «clean and proper body» and the abject body, or the body which has lost its form and integrity (Creed, 1993, p. 11). Therefore, by depicting *Mama* as a decaying ghost, always surrounded by decomposed nature, mould stains, moths, and brown and green tonalities, she is constructed as the abjection, in opposition to Annabel's or Lucas' «clean and proper body» (Kristeva, 1980 p. 102). Her nature is emphasised by the dialogue: «Daddy, there's a woman outside... She's not touching the floor» tells a worried Victoria to her father, when she first glimpses her. *Mama*'s hands are her first feature shown to the audience, as she grabs the father from the head and drags him away from Victoria, displaying her power, and killing him. In the close-up shot, we can observe that her fingers are too long and bony and her skin looks decomposed. Her hands are the hands of a cadaver. She is meant to cause fear. At the same time, the scene presents *Mama* killing the father, both literally and symbolically, as she puts an end to the patriarchal order, bringing the

girls back to a pre-symbolic stage in the womb-like forest hut. She creates a single-mother family unit in which the father is absent. As a result, her monstrous construction is inextricably linked to her maternal role, which threatens the symbolic order (Creed, 1993). As Barbara Creed points out, this type of monstrous construction of women in relation to maternity «is a construct of patriarchal ideology» (Creed, 1993 p. 83). Accordingly, with the murder, Mama brings abjection to the story and moves it forward, as patriarchal order must be restored. Significantly, it is the father's identical twin brother, also played by Coster-Waldau, who would take the girls back to the symbolic order, within the core of a traditional patriarchal family.

Moreover, the construction of Mama as monster is emphasised by her portrayal as a bad mother, particularly in her inability to self-sacrifice. According to Sarah Arnold, «The Bad Mother of horror does not fulfil her self-sacrificing duties for the child. She is not the quietly suffering and patient mother and, ultimately, she must pay a price for this (where the Good Mother is rewarded for her sacrifice)» (Creed, 1993p.79). In this sense, «by refusing to relinquish her hold on her child, she prevents it from taking up its proper place in relation to the symbolic» (Creed, 1993, p. 12). Consequently, Mama is a bad mother because she has failed in sacrificing her fulfilment as mother for her daughters' sake. Instead, she becomes more and more violent as she sees her position and identity as mother threatened by the traditional nuclear family represented by Lucas and Annabel. She then becomes the fearful character depicted in the original short film, from which the scared girls run and hide.

In an attempt to further develop her monstrous nature, the film offers a backstory disclosed through a flashback dream sequence, since Mama, as a representative of the pre-symbolic, «communicates through dreams, games, snarls, and lullabies» (Clark, 2014 p. 69). The scene reinforces the maternal melodrama aspects in this horror narrative. This blend of generic conventions is not uncommon in horror films dealing with motherhood, where the narrative incorporates «both the visual imagery of the horror genre and the emotional narrative of the melodrama» (Arnold, 2013, p. 78). Moreover, for Kaplan, the maternal melodrama is «centred on the female protagonist and on ostensibly female concerns (love, seduction, motherhood, marriage, children, abandonment, jealousy, role conflicts, etc.)» (Kaplan, 1992, p. 70)

and she points out how this subgenre depicts «the longing of the mother for the (lost) child object.» (Kaplan, 1992, p. 70). Resembling the scene in which *Mama* was first introduced, the flash-back begins with a female hand holding a sharp object that has presumably been used as a weapon. It also frames the action with a general view of an old orphanage, surrounded by children and nuns. The choice of a point of view shot contributes to the identification with the character, which helps to establish an alignment. Additionally, it has a different texture and colour, to mark the different timeline and oneiric nature. It begins with *Mama* panting and showing her hands, now distinctly human, as she grabs a baby held by a nun, and stabs her before running away. *Mama*'s physical appearance is also different, as she is not the decayed monster, but a woman in full corporeal representation. This new, human face of the monster is very significant because it shows how «even female monsters are humanised through their mothering instincts» (Paulson, 2005 p. 137). Moreover, because of the point of view perspective, we only see her through her brief reflection on a mirror, which shows her human face in a medium shot, framed in an old mirror as she holds the baby with one arm and the pointy weapon with the other. This shot reinforces the idea of *Mama* becoming mentally unstable in relation to motherhood. She does not seem to be just defending her baby, but also her right to be a mother. She refuses to be separated from her offspring and, when she feels threatened, she reacts like a wild animal, embodying the archetypal, widespread image of the *mama bear* (Paulson, 2005). Immediately after this, she runs away as a group of angered men, led by a priest, follow her closely. «She is both scared of and angry with religious and scientific institutions, whose respective members have penetrated her both sexually and surgically» (Clark, 2014, p. 69). As she finds herself trapped between the group of men and a cliff, she decides to jump with the baby, failing again to self-sacrifice and allow the child to enter the symbolic.

Furthermore, the backstory also presents *Mama* as a mother struggling to meet the ideal of motherhood and a victim of patriarchal authorities. She was a single mother whose baby was taken away from her and she was forced into a mental hospital by these authorities. She is then portrayed as a victim of them and their repression. Accordingly, the scene explores how both *Mama*'s humanity and her construction as a monster and violent behaviour

are deeply related to maternity, reproducing patriarchal concepts of women becoming complete only through motherhood or how women's madness and violence are also inextricably linked to this aspect of their lives.

Although no specific person is held responsible for the actions against her, it can be observed that the Roman Catholic Church, the R.C. from now on, is involved as the orphanage shown is run by nuns and, when she runs away with her baby, she is followed by a group of armed men, led by a priest. This involvement of the R.C. Church as a repressive institution, especially towards women, is reminiscent of Spanish recent past. In this sense, it is also worth mentioning that this story of a single mother whose baby has been taken away presumably by the R.C. Church could be related to the scandal known as the *Stolen Babies* (*Niños robados*). This case is the story of hundreds of children (more than 900) who were taken away from their mothers at birth. It happened under Franco's dictatorship and the R.C. Church seems to be again the regime's tool for women's indoctrination and, ultimately, punishment as the only convicted responsible for these crimes was the R.C. nun Sor María, who took the babies away from single mothers or leftist, working class families by telling the women that their children had died, in order to give them to *good catholic* families, that is, traditional patriarchal family units sympathetic and supportive of Franco's regime. It is worth mentioning that during the dictatorship, families «represented the microcosm of the Francoist regime, with ultimate authority resting in the father» (Morcillo, 2000 p. 75), while women, confined in the domestic realm, «were limited to their duties as mothers and wives» ((Morcillo, 2000 p. 75)). This is significant because it is precisely this type of family organisational mode that is constructed by the patriarchal authorities in the narrative, represented by Scientist Dr. Dreyfuss, to reinsert the girls back to civilisation, and the reason why he will pressure Annabel into the right type or good motherhood.

As the Argentinian lawyer Carlos Slepoy explains, «In Spain, 30,000 children were stolen from the Spanish Civil War to the end of the fifties. Children of up to three years old were taken away from Republican mothers, later, this became a general action against dozens of single and/or poor women» (Slepoy, as cited in Rebossio, 2013). Although the powerless women suspected that the nun's version of the deceased babies was not true, there was

nothing they could do to prove it. «I couldn't accuse them of lying. This was Franco's Spain. A dictatorship» (Adler, 2011) states one of the many women whose baby was stolen. Furthermore, Sarah Wright has identified a trend in Spanish contemporary horror which relates ghost narratives, children, and historical memory. Wright discusses «the common practice under Francoism of separating the children of incarcerated *rojos* and killing them or sending them away either to state run orphanages or for adoption by Francoist families» (Wright, 2013 p. 119) in relation to films like *The Orphanage*, *The Haunting*, *El laberinto del fauno / Pan's Labyrinth* or *El espinazo del diablo / The Devil's Backbone*, although her theories are resonant with *Mama*, as the film follows a similar pattern to those mentioned in her research. It is also significant that this revelation of *Mama's* past coincides with Spain's, and it is disclosed through a flash-back. For Wright, «These revelations mean that the memory that these films evoke is still ever-present for spectators, performing revisionist exercise as the discoveries about Spain's past continue to appear in this overdetermined landscape of Spanish historical memory with enormous rapidity» (Wright, 2013 p. 119). In this sense, *Mama's* timeline brings to the present the recent past, in a ghostly, undead way, showing that is still very present and haunting. Moreover, it does so in relation to the maternal discourses present in the film. Accordingly, the film shows a clash between past and present and between two different types of motherhood. At the same time, it highlights how family and motherhood are still influenced by Francoist principles and identities.

While *Mama* is this scene's subject, telling emotionally her own story, a male character, Dr. Dreyfuss, would make her the object of his male, rational, scientific research. As Zoila Clark explains, «it is no surprise Science typically chooses woman over man as the object of study» (Clark, 2014 p. 71). Dreyfuss is intrigued by her but, as a representative of a patriarchal institution, he is determined to reinsert the girls back into the symbolic order, which is why he will be a key character in Annabel's journey towards (traditional) motherhood. His research allows us to learn more information about *Mama* but, significantly, this information, told from a male point of view, comes with negative connotations. One example of this is her name. When we finally learn her name, Edith Brennan, it comes with a very specific adjective: mad. Accordingly, *Mama* will be known as Mad Edith Brennan from this

point. This establishes a gendered division that responds to Clover's theory of Black Magic versus White Science (Clover, 1992). As Clover explains, «within the Western rational tradition, White Science representatives are nearly always white males, typically doctors, and its tools are surgery, drugs, psychotherapy, and other forms of hegemonic science» (Clover, 1992, p. 66). His discourse contrasts significantly with a public servant who is assisting him in his investigation and who would give him the key to Mad Edith Brennan's story. The wise worker is an older woman with long, white, braided hair. She is knowledgeable, and she finds the remains of Mama's lost baby. She embodies the Black Magic, a world of spiritualism, and seances whose representatives are «children, old people [...] but first and foremost women» (Clover, 1992, p. 66). As a result, she is the one who introduces the word «ghost» to refer to her, as the doctor states that he does not believe in them. Moreover, she tells the doctor that someone did something «wrong» to Mama that needs to be made «right», showing a deeper understanding of the situation but perhaps also alluding to Spain's conflicting recent past and present. As a depiction of the black magic, she adds the emotional element lacking from the doctor's rational investigation.

Whereas Mama's flashback scene was personal and emotional, the sequences derived from Dreyfuss research, inserted in the narrative at different points, the persona does not appear at all. Instead, Dr. Dreyfuss is reinforced as the subject and Mama the object of his impersonal investigation. Therefore, he is displayed visiting local archives and public records, checking number and impersonal, rational data. He is shown in medium shots sitting at a desk, surrounded by files, wearing his glasses while he is looking for the real story behind his object of study. This portrayal emphasises the white science construction and his personal detachment with the woman, which contrast deeply with the high emotional sequence in which Mama tells her own story. Nevertheless, it is important to consider that in both versions and timelines, Mama is portrayed as a bad mother and a monster.

Finally, as an in-text representative of patriarchy, Dr. Dreyfuss promotes the traditional nuclear family, supporting the idea of the girls staying with Lucas and Annabel, instead of favouring the option of the girls living with their maternal aunt, a single woman. He would grant them a house to live in, facilitating their transition into a nuclear family and helping the girls to

get back into the symbolic order, putting and abrupt end to the transgressive pre-symbolic matriarchy in which the ghost and the girls live in the womb-like hut. By restoring the patriarchal order, he would end the abjection. Moreover, he would push Annabel in her transformation from her role of independent, childless woman to the ideal of motherhood.

3. ANNABEL

According to María José Gámez Fuentes, because of the relevant role that motherhood held in Franco's regime, the theme became central to many narratives in democratic Spain, exploring the tensions and (dis)continuity between our national past and present (Gámez Fuentes, 2004). In *Mama*, this tension is embodied by the other motherly figure in the film, Annabel, a modern woman who, after being pushed to adopt a maternal role, would be haunted by the ghosts from the past. She is interpreted by the attractive Hollywood actress Jessica Chastain and her transition from an irresponsible, adolescent character to the patriarchal construction of the good mother is the centre of the storyline. «Annabel is reluctant to look after the children and, soon after that, she is willing to sacrifice her life to prevent any harm on them», explains Chastain in a recent interview (*Mamá*, n.d.). This transition, spread throughout the narrative, could be divided into three different stages: a presentation of the persona constructed as a bad mother, her struggle to adopt the constraining role of motherhood imposed by the patriarchal institution and being always under scrutiny, and her completed successful transformation into the good mother.

3.1. Annabel, the rock star

After the opening credits, the film introduces Lucas and Annabel in their small studio, before the girls are found. In this sequence, the mise-en-scene is key to understand the construction of Lucas and Annabel as a single, childless couple. The walls are covered by posters and drawings, the bed is not made, clothes are spread all over the place and so are books and other objects. Music plays in the background as the camera explores the set, which looks like a teenager's bedroom, untidy and disorganised. Regarding the characters, they are both young and they wear casual clothes. More interestingly, in this

introductory sequence, whereas Lucas is presented working and talking on the phone with the men he has hired to find his brother and nieces, Annabel is presented in the bathroom, taking a home pregnancy test. The camera tilts around her, increasing a feeling of anxiety and concern, as Annabel stares intensely and very seriously, at the pregnancy test. When a close-up of the test shows that the result is negative, her face changes and smiles, thanks God, and even celebrates the result. Furthermore, the next sequence focused on this persona, depicts her playing the electric bass during one of the rehearsals with her punk rock band. By constructing the character as a punk rocker, covered in tattoos, wearing black, heavy eye shadow and Ramones T-shirts, the narrative presents Annabel as a Bad Mother as «Rock represents oppositional culture in the popular imagination, a space of rampant sexuality, noise and unruliness [...] this space is constructed as male and young; it is a place outside of the responsibilities of increased age, responsibilities that include parenting» (Coates, 1998, p. 320). Moreover, she seems clearly upset when Lucas interrupts the rehearsal to tell her that they have found the girls alive. Accordingly, the film presents Annabel not only as a woman who clearly does not seek motherhood, but as a woman with no motherly instincts whatsoever. She is selfish and unsympathetic.

Later on, after the girls are found alive and taken under Dr. Dreyfuss custody, the parenting ability of the couple is questioned in a trial that discusses the girls' custody. Whereas it is pointed out that the couple live in a small apartment and that Lucas' job does not provide with a steady, considerable income, Annabel is pointed out as not a good mother because she is a bass player in a rock band, relating again bad parenthood with rock music. The other option defended in the trial is embodied by the girls' mother's aunt, who is a single middle-aged woman who, significantly, reminds the judge that her niece was murdered by Lucas' brother. Dr. Dreyfuss, a white, middle class, middle-aged, man of science, has the power in this decision and he decides to support the possibility of a traditional nuclear patriarchal family instead of the single motherhood option by letting the couple a house free of rent. At this moment, Annabel's life changes completely and she is forced into the role of mother that she has been rejecting from the very beginning. Her frustration is shown in a short sequence in which she talks to the singer of the band in the rehearsal room. She is visibly upset. When

her friend suggests her to leave Lucas to avoid the imposed maternity, she responds that she cannot do it and it is disclosed that she dutifully accepts this imposed role because of her unconditional love for Lucas. This alludes to another patriarchal myth in relation to femininity: romantic love. Her friend reminds her that she is in a rock band, she sadly states: «I was in a rock band» in an intimate close-up shot, showing that she is expressing her emotions and saying goodbye to Rock as it seems that it is not compatible with (good) motherhood (Coates, 1998). Through this scene, Annabel is shown sacrificing her hopes and dreams in order to commit to motherhood and restore the patriarchal order, «putting herself in service of the needs expressed by male characters» (Lee, 2019, p. 58). This self-sacrifice is the catalyst of her journey to become a good mother, and it is also reminiscent of the abnegation and main principle of the Francoist ideal of motherhood. As Morcillo explains, «Spanish women were expected to render their traditional self-denying service by devoting themselves with love to the family and home [...] They supported their husbands and the national endeavours without asking any questions» (Morcillo, 2000 p. 68), which is exactly what Annabel is doing in this part of the film. She is self-denying and leaving the public sphere to enter the domestic realm and devote herself to the family and home. Significantly, self-denying also marks the beginning of her journey as a good mother.

3.2. Annabel, the forced mother

Immediately after she has accepted her new role and put on hold indefinitely her career in rock music, the girls are taken to the new house, where Lucas and her receive them, emulating the traditional nuclear family. The darkness of the previous sequence has disappeared, and the equally dark and dirty rock setting has been changed to a residential location full of trees, light and family houses. As Lucas introduces Annabel to the girls, Lilly, the youngest one who is still learning to speak, whispers the word «mama» and Annabel reacts immediately to stop the girls to call her that, reinforcing her initial rejection of motherhood and lack of maternal instinct. This is the beginning of her journey.

In this part of the film, Annabel is depicted confined in the domestic sphere. She wears casual clothes that contrast with her previous rock clothing style, and she is portrayed engaged in domestic work and caregiving. However, although we can begin to observe a physical change in her, at this stage, she is still struggling to accept her new role and therefore, she openly shows her discontent. This attitude can be clearly observed in a scene that shows her in the kitchen, a traditional female locus, but instead of cooking or feeding the girls, she is playing her bass, still holding on to her previous childless lifestyle. As discussed above, in relation to Coates theories, rock music and style are constructed as unmotherly in the film. Thus, by still depicting her playing rock, the narrative shows that she has not yet reached the ideal of motherhood. Furthermore, she also questions her own ability to mother, expressing to Lucas how she doesn't think she can do it. The pressure she is experiencing increases when Lucas falls into a comatose state after being attacked by Mama, leaving her as a single mother. In the absence of the *father*, Annabel tries to reject once again motherhood, but Dr. Dreyfus forces her to accept her (natural) role of mother in the patriarchal family he has been defending since the beginning of the film. In this scene, the psychiatrist assertively tells her to grow up in a very paternalistic way. He is standing in a medium shot while Annabel is sitting on the hospital bed, by Luke's side, crying, emphasising her suffering and the patriarchal authority exerted over her.

As a result, Annabel is left alone in the house and is the sole responsible for the girls' wellbeing, but she is still a neglectful mother who does not show any maternal instinct or sympathy for them. She is just coldly fulfilling her duty, with no feelings attached. She is shown in the kitchen opening cans of food and spilling its content brusquely in bowls to serve for dinner, showing that she does not know how to cook, and she is not even concerned about that. She does not care. Additionally, she shows detachment to the girls. She is shown in the girls' bedroom at night, helping them to their beds. She fails to be the loving mother as she refuses to kiss her good night and, when Lilly refuses to sleep in her bed, she just walks away and says «whatever» with an attitude. Annabel is a bad mother as she does not care for the girls. Consequently, she is still portrayed as an unlikable character who could be interpreted as a monstrous mother, who reminds of the fairy tale evil stepmother archetype.

She is not only neglecting two little orphans but also because she is failing to fulfil what patriarchal society considers «a natural and essential part of a woman's experience» (Harrington, 2018 p. 180). As Harrington explains, «this marks a very particular type of gynaeohorrific monster» (Harrington, 2018 p. 180.). Thus, it could be argued that at this point of the narrative, both maternal discourses are portrayed as lacking and inappropriate in relation to the ideal of motherhood. While Annabel's mothering lacks «essential motherhood, the innate, instinctual and perhaps animal ability to mother» (Harrington, 2018 p. 193), Mama lacks, in both timelines, «the ideal motherhood, the ability to mother in a socially and culturally appropriate manner» (Harrington, 2018 p. 193). As a result, at this stage, both women are bad, monstrous mothers.

For this reason, Annabel does not pose a threat to Mama and, consequently, she does not attack her, as she did with Lucas. Both women co-exist in the house and Mama is still the motherly, loving figure in the film, who plays and looks after the girls, singing lullabies to the girls, as seen in the film. She displays a raw, visceral animal-like mothering style (Harrington, 2018) that is, however, still nurturing.

In addition, another aspect implicit to motherhood that Annabel is seen struggling to adjust to is the constant monitoring of her mothering skills. As part of her new role as a mother, Annabel is now constantly being policed by patriarchy representatives, such as Dr. Dreyfuss or Lucas, but also by other female characters, such as the girls' great aunt, a middle-aged single woman, whose visit highlights that the house is unkept and Lilly has bruises all over her body, visibly looking neglected. The constant scrutiny proves that becoming mother is not enough and she must become a good mother, that is, a perfect embodiment of the (impossible) ideal of motherhood. Her previous coldness has changed for suffering, an essential pillar of the construction of the good mother. She is seen struggling alone with the girls and constantly suffering, proving that «both motherhood and the pressure to live up to an ideal vision of it become the true horror» (Davies, 2011 p. 92) of these maternal horror narratives.

3.3. Annabel, the good mother

The real turning point in Annabel's attitude towards the girl comes when Lilly goes missing and she realises she has failed in her maternal responsibilities. After Annabel sees her outside, under a tree, she runs to check if the girl is ok, but she is shaking, close to hypothermia. Then, she takes her back inside the house and tries to warm the little girl. Although the girl fights when Annabel wraps her with her body in a warm, motherly hug, after a few seconds of fight, Annabel wraps her closer, in a tender hug that both she and Lilly start enjoying, unexpectedly bonding with each other. In a close-up we see Annabel warming the girl's hands. Then, the girl dedicates a meaningful look at Annabel, who realises that she likes to feel her warm love. The background is blurred, which focuses the attention on the two characters connection, and a melodramatic music starts to sound, increasing the emotional content of the moving scene. After the camera focuses on the two gazes, Lilly, looking up at Annabel and Annabel, tenderly looking back at her, it comes back to the long shot from the beginning but now showing a very different sight. Whereas in the first shot the two were fighting, in this last one they are calm, smiling, they have bonded. This scene marks the anticipated awakening of Annabel's mother instincts, reinforcing the patriarchal construction of the biological nature and innate aspect of motherly feelings, linking them to female nature.

Annabel has now successfully transitioned from the monstrous bad mother to the good mother, the «all-nurturing and self-abnegating - the Angel of the House» (Kaplan, 2000, p. 468). Consequently, she is finally seen smiling and enjoying the company of the girls. She is portrayed engaging happily in housework and children care. This new Annabel has embraced the patriarchal ideal of motherhood and has somehow defeated the previous Annabel, the rock star, the deviant bad mother, putting an end to the horror she brought.

In contrast, this milestone threatens Mama's motherhood and, as a result, she becomes aggressive. «Mama tries to kill Annabel because the girls start to love her and she becomes her rival» states Chastain, in an interview (*Mamá*, n.d.). According to Kaplan, «Female jealousy possessiveness and competition are the product of woman's 'incompleteness', her positioning

in patriarchy as objects, not subject» (Kaplan, 2000, p. 81). As mentioned above, the narrative has constructed Mama's humanity and worth in relation to motherhood and, as a result, she «fulfils herself only through her children, and thus, lives through them» (Hager and Herzog, 2015 p. 128), which might explain why she reacts with violence.

Mama's advances towards the girls triggers the final fight. This last scene takes place at the cliff where Mama jumped to her death with her baby, anticipating her plan and adding tension to the story. The cliff is depicted as a long, rocky platform where each woman stands facing each other from opposite ends. This symbolises not only the clash between good versus evil, but also between the world of the living and the world of the dead, and between present and (haunting) past.

Thus, whereas Lucas and Annabel stand at the beginning of the platform, representing the traditional patriarchal family, Mama floats at the end of it, as a threatening monster. The girls are depicted sitting, halfway from each end. The sequence brings back the deep blue light tonality from the beginning of the film, alluding to the deep sadness, the mourning for a lost child and the mother-child bond. Suddenly, Mama opens her arms, welcoming her children with the purpose of taking them to the world of the dead, where she belongs. Lilly stands up immediately and walks towards her but just before Lilly falls from the cliff, Lucas stops her. While Mama is now attacking Lucas, Annabel tries to trade Lilly for the remains of Mama's long-lost biological baby. Then, Mama walks the platform back to the *living* side, as the baby reminds her of her mortal existence and her unsolved matters.

When mother and child are finally reunited, Mama walks away, holding the remains of her biological baby, whereas Lucas, Annabel and the girls are again together, as a family. Justice has been done and as Mama unfolds the remains in a close-up, she falls to her knees, crying for her baby in a long descriptive shot, as melodramatic music starts to play, increasing the dramatic feeling of this emotive scene. Moreover, the camera moves around her showing how the evil, decayed ghost recovers her human form again, turning her dark decomposed skin to pale, making her look like an old black and white Modigliani portrait. This scene emphasises Mama's human side, which brings sympathy towards the monster in what looks like a happy ending, where both mothers leave with their children.

Nevertheless, as the restored nuclear family attempts to leave, in what seems like the perfect happy ending, Lilly calls for Mama, who then looks back at the other side of the cliff and turns again into the evil, decomposed monster. This shows that what really threatens Mama is the patriarchal nuclear family that has been encouraged by the narrative since the girls were found alive. Thus, Mama attacks Lucas, the paterfamilias, and Annabel and she starts walking back to the other side of the platform with the girls. However, Annabel is determined to get the children back and she fights her injuries and crawls after them, despite the pain. This reinforces her construction as a good mother who self-sacrifices and is also subject to attacks in the narrative (Arnold, 2013).

In the final, climatic scene, Mama jumps off the cliff with Lilly, as she did with her baby when she was alive, and Victoria stays with Annabel, who is still wrapped around her legs. The camera shows now how Mama surrounds Lilly with her dark dress and the two of them are depicted in a close-up in a shared, dark, small, intimate space which reminds of an intra-uterine cavity, until the shot fades to white, presumably when they reach the world of the dead. Allowing Mama to *mother* Lilly could be interpreted the *wrong* made *right*, that the public servant explained. By extension, it allows the present to repair the wrongs of the past.

Finally, the last shot is a long shot of Lucas, Annabel and Victoria who melt in a hug as the camera moves away from them. This ending reminds of the biblical judgement of Solomon (Hager and Herzog), where two mothers fight custody of a baby. Nevertheless, although scholars like Hager and Herzog have read this fight between two bad mothers, in relation to the biblical story, this research has shown that the character of Annabel has undergone a transformation to become a good mother that is central to the film's narrative. Accordingly, I would argue that the fight takes place between a good mother (product of patriarchal institutions and highly influenced by our recent past) and a bad mother (who poses a threat to the patriarchal order and is therefore depicted as a monster).

Thus, open ending is ambiguous, as the Solomon's *baby*, the two sisters, has been cut in half. It could then be argued that the perfect happy ending would have involved defeating the ghost and her abjection to restore the patriarchal order, as seen in some other films within the Spanish corpus

in which the traditional, nuclear family lives *happily ever after*. Instead, the ending offers different interpretations, but it is important to consider that *Mama* has disappeared and with her, the terror, while Lucas, Annabel and Victoria have finally become the traditional, nuclear family that can live (almost) happily ever after. It is also worth mentioning that both maternal discourses respond to patriarchal principles. While *Mama* was constructed as a monster because of her transgressive maternal role that threatened the patriarchal order, Annabel had to undergo a transition into an imposed role and self-denial in order to become the ideal mother needed for the traditional, nuclear family.

Additionally, the maternal fight also highlights the struggle to meet the patriarchal construct of ideal motherhood, as well as the weight that Francoist identities and gender roles still hold today in relation to motherhood and family.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Within the patriarchal order, motherhood is conceived as the only vehicle for women to reach fulfilment and happiness. In other words, to be complete in society, women have to become mothers. Nevertheless, becoming mother is not enough per se and there is a very specific (impossible) ideal of motherhood that women must meet. Within the Spanish context, this ideal still involves some of Franco's ideals related to the family, gender roles and a gendered division of labour. The female-led film *Mama* focuses on various styles of motherhood, offering a significantly different treatment of the two main female characters in relation to this aspect and showing, at the same time, the past haunting the present in connection to this theme.

On one hand, the monster *Mama* embodies what Harrington calls «essential motherhood» (Harrington, 2018 p. 193), a raw and animal type of maternity. Despite saving the girls from their murderous father and nurturing them for five years, she is depicted as a decayed monster. The research has shown that her monstrous appearance is not connected to the established parallelism with a wild animal but to her transgression of the patriarchal order and her consequent construction as a bad mother. The narrative deepens on her deviant single motherhood and shows how she has repeatedly

failed to let her children enter the symbolic order, challenging the patriarchal authorities policing her maternity. Furthermore, when these authorities try to take her children away from her, she reacts with violence, like a wild animal, as her status as a mother is threatened. Female violence and madness are therefore linked to maternity and her own victimhood. Her failed motherhood is reinforced by her failure to self-sacrifice, which ultimately results in her own death, the death of her biological child and, later, of Lilly, reinforcing the idea of her inability to (good) mother.

Thus, *Mama* and her matriarchal family model are constructed as monstrous and must, therefore, be eliminated in order to restore the peace (and the patriarchal order). It could be said that single women and women organised in alternative family units (with absent men) to the traditional nuclear family are a threat that needs to be eliminated in this type of narratives. Accordingly, the present study has argued that the monstrous and therefore negative depiction of these alternative family units and mothers could be understood as a step forward in the vilification and criticism of women who do not conform to the traditional (Francoist) ideal of motherhood, contributing to the narrative reactionary gender politics.

On the other hand, the other motherly figure, Annabel, embodies both the bad and the good mother, as the narrative focuses on her becoming good mother. This transition, forced, shaped, and policed by patriarchal institutions, shows the struggles, repression and suffering that entail the ideal motherhood. Annabel is firstly introduced rejecting motherhood and is pushed to take on this role, resulting in her embodiment of a bad mother. Unlike *Mama*, Annabel's bad motherhood does not translate in a monstrous/decayed appearance as she is a product of patriarchal institutions and has therefore been placed within the core of a traditional nuclear family. She does not transgress her traditional role neither does she pose a threat to the patriarchal order. Moreover, the fact that the film constructs her journey and resulting role as positive can be read as problematic again, from a gender perspective, since her self-denying has been rewarded by the narrative.

Finally, *Mama*'s cinematic construction of motherhood is based on the patriarchal myth of innate maternal instincts. Whereas *Mama*'s maternal instinct is so strong that even after death, she responds to it, adopting and nurturing two orphan girls in need, Annabel's journey from reluctant mother

to the good mother is based on her acceptance of her maternal instinct. Although innate and intrinsic to female nature, motherly instinct does not guarantee becoming a good mother, as the research has shown.

Thus, the outcome of the analysis shows that whilst Hollywood generally explores the body politics in maternal narratives, focusing on women's bodies through pregnancy, childbirth and depicting as monstrous her reproductive capacity and organs, the Spanish genre seems to approach maternal horror through women's deviant behaviour in relation to motherhood and the abjection of transgressive matriarchies. Accordingly, while Barbara Zecchi points out a pro-natalist tendency in Spanish contemporary cinema, the Spanish horror does not seem to promote natality per se but a very specific type of traditional mothering, highly influenced by Francoist principles, always within a nuclear, patriarchal family. This transgression is reflected in the monstrous construction of mothers and motherhoods outside this order, which has been argued to function as a step forward in the demonisation of these women. In this sense, contemporary Spanish horror creates narratives that explore not only the struggles of motherhood but more specifically, the horror that challenging the patriarchal order bring to these narratives.

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