“I NEVER WANTED TO BE YOUR MOTHER”: AMBIVALENT MOTHERHOOD IN 21st CENTURY HORROR FILMS

by

ABRA PRESTON-ROBERTS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines depictions of ambivalent motherhood, and societal ambivalences towards mothers in horror films released after *We Need to Talk about Kevin* in 2011. Using 'horror vérité' as a critical framework, this thesis aims to illustrate that recent representations of ambivalent mothers and their bodies either resist, or comply, to postfeminist standards of 'new momism': a term outlined by Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels in their book *The Mommy Myth* (2004). 'Horror vérité' refers to a genre of "truthful horror", that through "artificial means", such as "outrageous, unrealistic plots" reveals societal truths that "might otherwise remain elusive" (Landsberg, 2018, p.632). Through an analysis of films such as *The Babadook*, *Bird Box*, *Hereditary* and *mother!*, this research aims to demonstrate that their use of 'horror vérité' filmic techniques reveal wider social anxieties pertaining to maternal ambivalence and maternal corporeality.

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1. Introduction

This MA thesis aims to address how and why ambivalent motherhood is depicted in 21st century horror films released after Lynne Ramsay's seminal film *We Need to Talk about Kevin* in 2011. Inspired by the book of the same name, written and released by Lionel Shriver in 2003, the film serves as both the inspiration for this thesis, and as the debut for the corpus of films therewithin. The principal justification for choosing Ramsay's film as the debut of the corpus of films is that the film was the first of its kind to pioneer an unflinching depiction of maternal ambivalence onscreen. At the time of the film's release, many film critics puzzled over the "bad seed" aspect of Kevin's character (Travers, 2012), and the reasons for his psychopathic behaviour (Stevens, 2011). However, the theme of maternal ambivalence appeared to elude them, with one critic referring to Ramsey's portrayal of "forbidden fears [and] truths about being a parent", as an "emotionally incorrect theme", and stigmatising what he deemed to be "the worst case of post-natal depression in history" (Bradshaw, 2011). It is only in recent years that publications have unpacked the maternal ambivalence within the film and the extent to which it radicalised a "departure from postfeminism's affective orientation towards maternal happiness" (Smyth, 2020, p.2). Given the film's salience as a pioneer of complex depictions of motherhood, it is significant that after its release, a string of films, both within and without the horror genre, have explored the ambiguities and ambivalences of motherhood. Outside of the horror genre, films such as *August: Osage County* (2013), *Lady Bird* (2017), *I, Tonya*

(2017), *Pieces of a Woman* (2020) and *The Lost Daughter* (2021) depict ambivalent mother/daughter relationships with nuance and complexity. Within the horror genre, films such as *Prometheus* (2012), *The Babadook* (2014), *Goodnight Mommy* (2014), *The Witch* (2015), *Prevenge* (2016), *Raw* (2017), *Alien: Covenant* (2017), *mother!* (2017), *Hereditary* (2018), *Bird Box* (2018), *Suspiria* (2018), *Us* (2019), *I am Mother* (2019), *His House* (2020), *Relic* (2020), *Lamb* (2021), *Men* (2022) and *Umma* (2022), have all dealt with pregnancy, reproduction, birth and motherhood in increasingly innovative and novel ways. As will be explored in the literature review, the release of these films and the increasing awareness of maternal ambivalence as a lived reality for many women (Almond, 2010, p.19), is reflective of the changing "socially and culturally sanctioned models of motherhood" (Harrington, 2017). In the 21st century, women are under increasing pressure to conform to the perfect standards of "new momism" (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, p.4), and "post-feminism" that demand total devotion and sacrifice for your children. Under the strain of these "impossible standards of idealised motherhood" (O'Reilly, 2010, p.17), many women struggle with maternal ambivalence upon realising that the reality of raising a child is "incompatible with their expectation for motherhood" (Darvill, Skirton & Farrand, 2010, p.362). In understanding that the horror film is a "form of popular culture that "explicitly explore social anxieties" (Harrington, 2017), the films in this thesis represent sociocultural and psychoanalytical manifestations of wider tensions and anxieties pertaining to motherhood and maternal ambivalence. It is in the context of these social tensions that this research finds its inspiration. As such, this research aims to answer the following questions: How and why is ambivalent motherhood, and society's ambivalence towards motherhood, presented and explored in the horror genre? How are aesthetic horror strategies used to highlight and represent

ambivalent motherhood, or societal ambivalence towards motherhood? In what ways do contemporary horror films resist or perpetuate misogynistic attitudes towards mothers and their bodies? Finally, are contemporary horror films moving beyond a binary understanding of the mother as either 'Good' or 'Bad'? If so, why and how? In order to explore these questions, one must first define the horror genre and motherhood in the context of this thesis.

1.1 Defining the Horror genre

The horror genre is notoriously difficult to define, precisely because horror itself, "defies definition [...] and our inability to define it exactly is part of what makes something horrific" (Patrick-Weber, 2020, p.1). However, for the purpose of this thesis, it is important to establish a concise definition in order to justify the inclusion of *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011), which unlike the other films in this thesis that are explicitly understood to be horror films, is often defined as a "mystery, thriller and drama" (IMDB, 2011). Brigid Cherry argues that "The whole concept of genre is problematic", and that diminishing horror to a "reductive set of generic conventions" would result in the exclusion of a great number of films "which might in fact be widely considered to belong to the category of 'horror'" (Cherry, 2009, p.2-5). Cherry cites *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) as an example of a film that has provoked "contradictory classifications", with viewers arguing as to whether or not it is a thriller or a horror film (Cherry, 2009, p.14), and thus the film is not dissimilar to *We Need to Talk about Kevin*. It is important to recognise that there are many sub genres of horror, each with their own conventions, but all of which are "unified by "their capacity to horrify"", and subsequently fall under the "umbrella" of the horror genre (Cherry, 2009, p.2-5): monster horror, psychological horror, eco horror, gothic horror, zombie horror, supernatural horror, folk horror, slasher horror, to name a few. As will

be explored in the literature review, horror films “reflect the conditions existing at the time and place in which they were made”, and in doing so, “meaningfully address contemporary issues and reflect cultural, social or political trends” (Cherry, 2009, p.9). Consequently, “the genre ebbs and flows to keep up with cultural conversations and fears” (Patrick-Weber, 2020, p.1), and does so through an “aggressive blurring of boundaries” (Pinedo, 1997, p.10) that assures the genre’s continued success through its unapologetic portrayal of the “taboo” (Cherry, 2009, p.12). Although this thesis will not use a postmodern lens to analyse its case studies, Pinedo’s definition of postmodern horror is very inclusive and thus conducive to a definition of the horror film in this thesis. Using more restrictive scholarly definitions, such as that of Noel Carrol in his book *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990), that suggest that “monsters [are] a criterion of horror” (Carrol, 1990, p.15), would exclude many of the films in this thesis. Therefore, for the purpose of this thesis, the horror film shall be defined using the following criteria:

> 1. Horror constitutes a violent disruption of the everyday world. 2. Horror transgresses and violates boundaries [...] 4. Postmodern horror repudiates narrative closure. 5. Horror produces a bounded experience of fear. (Pinedo, 1997, p.10)

Using Pinedo’s characteristics of a postmodern horror film, the inclusion of *We Need to Talk about Kevin* in this thesis can be justified as follows: the film’s graphic portrayal of maternal ambivalence, which is considered to be an unacceptable societal ‘taboo’ (Almond, 2010, p.11), represents in itself, a “violent disruption of the everyday world” and a “transgress[ion] of [social] boundaries” (Pinedo, 1997, p.10). Furthermore, *We Need to Talk about Kevin* “repudiates narrative closure” through an

ambiguous ending, which will be discussed in the case study, and “produces a bounded experience of fear” (Pinedo, 1997, p.10) as a result of Kevin’s monstrosity. Having proven the film’s validity as a horror film in the context of this thesis, it is now imperative to define motherhood for the purpose of the dissertation.

1.2 Defining Motherhood

For the purpose of this thesis, ‘motherhood’ shall hereby be defined as “the state or time of being a mother [and/or] a female parent” (MOTHERHOOD | meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary, 2021). This includes, but is not limited to, the acts of: gestation, childbirth, pedagogy and caregiving, and is also inclusive of matriarchal societies that function as mother figures. However, the rise in LGBT families and the use of IVF and surrogacy means that the social definition of motherhood is in a constant state of flux and evolution. This thesis will not address these versions of motherhood as there is a lack of such representation in the horror genre, and any analysis of the topic would require a very different and sensitive approach in order to do it justice, and unfortunately this thesis does not have the scope or timeframe to do so. Similarly, it must be acknowledged that all of the mothers in the case studies of this thesis are white, heterosexual and predominantly middle class. Psychotherapist Barbara Almond posits that maternal ambivalence disproportionately affects “middle or upper middle class women” (Almond, 2010, p.10). She attributes this to their wider access to “education about psychotherapy, as well as acceptance of it as a way to treat problems of mind and feeling” (Almond, 2010, p.10). Furthermore, middle class women have the “luxury of choice” and time to worry about their mothering that “comes with a comfortable middle-class existence” (Almond, 2010, p.144), as well as the money to pay for psychotherapy sessions (Almond, 2010, p.10). That is not to say that working class women do not experience maternal ambivalence, but rather

that such feelings may also be bound up with “their economic situation and the social problems they face— employment, housing, health care, and education—” (Almond, 2010, p.144). Given that horror films “tap into the cultural moment by encoding the anxieties of the moment into their depictions of monstrosity” (Cherry, 2009, p.10), it is arguably no coincidence that ambivalent mothers in horror are inordinately white and middle class, as demonstrated by the films in this thesis.

There are, of course, horror films with more diverse representations of mothers: films such as *Us* (2019), *His House* (2020) and *Umma* (2022) tackle notions of classism, marginalisation, xenophobia and immigration in original ways that are reflective of the current socio-political climate. These films are not included in this thesis because they either do not figure maternal ambivalence as a central theme, or they were released too late to be incorporated into the thesis, as is the case of *Umma* (2022). Such films are representative of the mutability of the horror genre that will hopefully continue to depict more heterogeneous versions of motherhood that reflect the multicultural society we live in. Should horror films centred on more diverse representations of Motherhood be released in the future, it would be of great interest to analyse these independently with an intersectional framework that does justice to their themes.

1.4 Rationale of chapters

Having established the influences upon this thesis and the theme of maternal ambivalence as central to an understanding of the corpus of films, a rationale of the chapters will now be provided. Firstly, the literature review will present and engage with critical publications on the Horror genre, the role of the mother in the Horror genre, and maternal ambivalence from both a sociocultural and psychoanalytical

perspective. Furthermore, the critical framework for this thesis will be presented, as well as the importance of this research in the context of a “post-feminist” (Gill, 2017, p.606) society. The thesis is then divided into three chapters which aim to present varied representations of ambivalent motherhood. Chapter 2 focuses on ambivalent motherhood and emotional sacrifice through an analysis of three films: *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011), *The Babadook* (2014) and *Bird Box* (2018). Using *We Need to Talk about Kevin* as the forerunner for the thesis, the chapter analyses the ways in which society interacts with ambivalent mothers who sacrifice their emotional wellbeing for their children. Chapter 3 is devoted to Ambivalent Motherhood and physical sacrifice through an analysis of *Hereditary* (2018) and *mother!* (2017) with a focus on the ambivalent mother’s corporeality and the physical sacrifices she makes for her children. Chapter 4 is dedicated to ambivalent motherhood and matriarchal societies, with an analysis of *The Witch* (2015) and *Suspiria* (2018), in which the ambivalence of matriarchal power, abject forms and castration are explored. Finally, the conclusion debates the future of ambivalent motherhood and representations of maternity in the Horror genre, and the need for further research.

2. Literature Review

This literature review aims to revise the wealth of academic theory published on the themes of motherhood in Horror, sociocultural and psychoanalytical approaches to the horror genre, and maternal ambivalence. This literature review aims to demonstrate the need for research into the sociocultural significance of maternal ambivalence in Horror, within the context of a post-feminist society that privileges 'new momism' (Smyth, 2020, p.9). Given that maternal ambivalence is a psychological reality for many women that is exacerbated or caused by the social phenomenon of 'new momism', both psychoanalytical and sociocultural approaches to motherhood and the horror genre will be examined. This will be achieved through an initial look at historical approaches to motherhood in Horror, and sociocultural and psychoanalytical theory. Secondly, an analysis of contemporary approaches to motherhood in Horror will demonstrate the need for a more nuanced understanding of "Good" and "Bad" mothers. Thirdly, theory pertaining to maternal ambivalence will be examined in order to demonstrate the continued taboo surrounding the subject. Finally, the use of "horror vérité", a critique of "new momism" (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, p.5) and an aesthetic approach will be presented as a critical framework for the analysis of maternal ambivalence in this thesis.

2.1 Historical approaches to Motherhood in Horror

Motherhood is a globally recognised physical and social reality that crosses all cultures and allows the continued existence of the human race. Its "dynamic[ity]" (Greenlee, 2014, p.156) has, and continues to, inspire horror film directors, which in

turn has led to seminal publications on the theme of motherhood in horror. In order to fulfil the research questions of this thesis, historical attitudes towards motherhood in the horror genre must be addressed. Towards the end of the 20th century, the most significant contributors to the study of motherhood, and more widely women, in horror were undoubtedly: Barbara Creed, Carol J. Clover, Lucy Fischer, Joan Hawkins, Linda Williams, Brigid Cherry, Isabel Pinedo, Laura Mulvey and Rhona J. Berenstein. These women, as well as film theorists today, argue that horror is historically misogynistic (Patrick-Weber, 2020, p.4), wherein female characters are "graphically and gratuitously victimised" (Pinedo, 1997, p.71). Laura Mulvey attributes this to the voyeuristic male gaze that either sexualises the female body, or abjectifies it in order to control the threat of castration that the lack of phallus poses (Mulvey, 1975, p.6-10; Williams, 2015, p.24). Creed stipulates that the lack of phallus, accompanied by the simultaneous "fullness [and] emptiness" of the woman's womb, "generates horror" due its capacity to "devour" (Creed, 1993, p.27), and it is for this reason that mother figures have become monsters and figures of terror in Horror. Creed refers to films such as *Psycho* (1960), *Carrie* (1976), *The Brood* (1979) and *Aliens* (1986) (Creed, 1993, p. 1) as key in demonstrating the mother figure as monstrous and her womb as "nightmarish" (Fischer, 1992, p.3) due to the production of both abject substances and "horrific offspring" (Creed, 1993, p.116) that commit murderous, "cannibalistic and incestous" (Clover, 1992, p.28) acts. The 'abject', a term first posited by Kristeva in 1982, refers to "that which 'disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect border, positions, rules", and in the context of Motherhood, refers to "substances that bring the internal to the external; birthing, bleeding and breastfeeding" (Kristeva, 1982; Sharpe and Sexon, 2018, p.2-3). Creed posits that "The horror film attempts to bring about a confrontation with the

abject (the corpse, bodily wastes, the monstrous-feminine) in order finally to eject the abject and redraw the boundaries between the human and non-human." (Creed, 1993, p.14). For psychoanalysts, the horror film therefore remains pertinent as a site of "psychoanalytic concepts and imagery" in which viewers can confront the "uncanny, monsters of the id and the abject" (Carroll, 1990; Arnold, 2013, p.10-11).

Psychoanalytical approaches to the horror genre view horror films as "projections or displacements of fears or as signifiers of a cultural state of mind", in which both "Basic" and "Surplus" repression are explored (Wood, 1986; Prince, 2004, p.118). Robin Wood, a renowned proponent for the psychoanalytical approach argued that "Basic repression is universal" whereas "Surplus repression [...] is specific to a particular culture" (Wood, 1986; Prince, 2004, p.119). For individual viewers of horror films, the confrontation with the abject and uncanny monsters of horror, can allow for a cathartic alleviation of their unconscious "basic repression": "People who experience or witness a great deal of violence in their everyday lives tend to view horror films because the violence in these films is more salient for them" (Oliver and Sanders, 2004, p.249). In terms of "surplus repression", the horror film can mediate a wider, social "coming to consciousness about the material oppressive conditions of society that are shrouded by ideology" (Landsberg, 2018, p.631).

The theory of "surplus repression" is simultaneously psychoanalytical and sociocultural, particularly when applied to an understanding of 1980s horror films. The 1980s was a period that was particularly marked by "dominant ideological assumptions in the culture at large [...] as a response to specific objects and events" (Schneider, 2004, p.135). The success of films with "uncanny child[ren]" such as *The Shining* (1980)*, Poltergeist* (1982), *The Changeling* (1980) and *Pet Sematary* (1989)

were heavily influenced by the “reactionary political agenda on ‘family values’” during this time period in which the role of the child became that of a “primary justification” for family oriented “ideological and sociocultural centrality” (Balanzategui, 2018, p.41). The attacks depicted on the ‘Nuclear Families’ in these films were representative of wider social anxieties surrounding the future of family structures, caused in part by “increasing numbers of LGBT parents” and “rapid increases in women’s economic independence” (Balanzategui, 2018, p.41). Subsequently, as a result of “rising divorce rates” and the breakdown of “heteronormative nuclear family unit[s]” (Balanzategui, 2018, p.41), the ‘monsters’ of horror films became increasingly centred around the family.

The clear influences of wider social anxieties on horror films are key to an understanding of sociocultural theory, that views films as “social manifestations” (Prince, 2004, p.120), in which films reflect both realist and fantastical desires and doings of society (Lovell, 1971, p.15). Critics such as Landsberg define this sociocultural horror as “Horror vérité” in which horror films “reveal the ‘truth’ of a particular situation, a truth that might otherwise remain elusive, masked by ideology, acting or directorial choices” (Landsberg, 2018, p.632). Landsberg defines ‘horror vérité’ as a style of filmmaking that “through artificial means (outrageous, unrealistic plots, heavy-handed visual and aural shocks)” renders “the present and everyday [...] unfamiliar and grotesque in order to bring the real conditions of society into sharp relief.” (Landsberg, 2018, p.632). Using the film *Get Out* (2017), as an example of a “politically inflected horror film”, Landsberg applauds director Jordan Peele’s use of “artificial mechanics of the horror genre” in order to “render newly visible the very real but often masked racial landscape of a professedly liberal post-racial America.” (Landsberg, 2018, p.630-633). Another example of ‘horror vérité’ is the rise in ‘sleep

horror' films, such as *Paranormal Activity* (2009), *Sinister* (2012) and *The Conjuring* (2013), which Keetley attributes to "the exponential growth of both sleep disorders and sleep medicine in the twenty-first century" (Keetley, 2019, p.1020). Consequently, Courtney Patrick-Weber defines the horror film as a "rhetorical genre" as it "takes social issues on a larger scale and humanizes them in a more private realm in order to create a level of social change." (Patrick-Weber, 2020, p.2). Both Landsberg's term 'horror vérité' and Patrick-Weber's definition of the horror film as a 'rhetorical genre', emphasise the political and social capacity of horror films, with Patrick-Weber focusing explicitly on the "rhetorical topoi of pregnancy and childbirth" (Patrick-Weber, 2020, p.2). Patrick-Weber attributes the rise in horror films that focus on a "pregnant person's inability to regulate their 'risky' body", resulting in the "death of an infant or embryo" (Patrick-Weber, 2020, p.1), as seen in *À l'intérieur* (2007) and *The Void* (2016), to the increased medicalisation of pregnancy in wider society, that is in turn depicted in contemporary Horror. However, Patrick-Weber acknowledges the positive potential of the 'rhetorical' horror film, arguing that it may "persuade male viewers" to "identify with a woman character on screen" and "understand how the medicalization of pregnancy and childbirth can make the pregnancy journey more traumatic for pregnant people." (Patrick-Weber, 2020, p.5). With this in mind, contemporary approaches to motherhood continue to analyse its significance as both a psychological and social experience.

2.2 Contemporary approaches to Motherhood in Horror

Since the seminal publications on mothers and women in Horror published in the 1990s, sociologists such as Rosalind Gill have theorised that we are living in a "post-feminist" age, that "renders the intense surveillance of women's bodies normal or even desirable" and enrolls women in "ever more intense regimes of 'the perfect'",

whilst simultaneously exalting female “empowerment and choice” (Gill, 2017, p.606). The extent to which “post-feminist sensibility [...] has made itself virtually hegemonic” (Banet-Weiser, Gill & Rottenberg, 2020, p.16), is evidenced in the rise of “new momism”, a term coined by Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels in their book *The Mommy Myth*: “a highly romanticised and yet demanding view of motherhood in which the standards for success are impossible to meet” (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, p.4). The standards of ‘new momism’ are particularly prevalent in the contemporary rom-com, which has resulted in an “orgy of motherphilia” in Hollywood, according to film theorist Kelly Oliver (Oliver, 2012, p.22). Oliver argues that the shift in social reactions towards pregnancy, which previously evoked “a woman’s sacred and shameful carnality”, now represents an “eroticised norm in American public culture” (Oliver, 2012, p.37). The “baby hunger” (Oliver, 2012, p.25) that grips Hollywood has created a series of romantic comedies centred around the theme of pregnancy, that exalt the perfectionist standards of ‘new momism’: *Juno* (2007), *Knocked Up* (2007), *Baby Mama* (2008), *The Back-Up plan* (2010), *What to expect when you’re expecting* (2012) and *Bridget Jones’s Baby* (2016). Of these films, Oliver notes the consistent theme of “career women wanting babies” (Oliver, 2012, p.25), which she attributes to scientific and medical advancements that have innovated “infertility treatments” (Oliver, 2012, p.31), leading to a rise in single and older women being able to access Motherhood in non traditional ways. This is also reflective of a post-feminist influence on society, which “staunchly celebrates mothering”, promising “happiness, contentment and fulfilment” on the condition that mothers successfully juggle “childcare and waged work properly and display positive affective dimensions of mothering successfully” (Smyth, 2020, p.12). Fertility treatments such as IVF have led to an increase in “multiple offspring”, often

affectionately referred to by their parent/parents as “broods or litters” (Oliver, 2012, p.31). Despite these seemingly positive medical advancements, Oliver postulates that the increase in births of multiple babies, or “litters”, thanks to the innovation of IVF, has led to a surge in “surface anxieties over women’s central role in the continuation of the human species” (Oliver, 2012, p.43), in which the “animal like” forms of unborn babies have become “icon[s] that represent our fears of an abject Other within that threatens our identity as human, while at the same time it has become definitive of human life” (Oliver, 2012, p.32).

The anxieties pertaining to “women’s central role in the continuation of the human species” (Oliver, 2012, p.43), are explicitly explored in horror films centred on the theme of motherhood, which Erin Harrington refers to as “Gynaehorror”:

> “horror that deals with all aspects of female reproductive horror, from the reproductive and sexual organs, to virginity and first sex, through to pregnancy, birth and motherhood, and finally to menopause and post-menopause” (Harrington, 2017).

Sarah Arnold, in her seminal book, *Maternal Horror Film* (2013), argues that there are two types of mothers in Horror: the ‘Good Mother’ and the ‘Bad Mother’. According to Arnold, ‘The Good Mother’ is “all-nurturing and self-abnegating...Totally invested in husband and children, she lives only through them, and is marginal to the narrative” (Arnold, 2013, p.23). Conversely, ‘The Bad Mother’ is “sadistic, hurtful, and jealous, she refuses the self-abnegating role, demanding her own life” and is subsequently “punished for her violation of the desired patriarchal ideal” (Arnold, 2013, p.23). Arnold argues that the role of Motherhood in both wider society and Horror films has become “a site of crisis” that reveal wider tensions surrounding

"patriarchal maternal ideals" (Arnold, 2013, p.18), yet she fails to offer a nuanced reading of mothers outside of a 'Good' and 'Bad' binary. Harrington is very critical of Arnold's binary categorisation of mothers in Horror, stating that such "archetypes" are blunt and reductive in the contemporary horror film, in which "historically specific hopes and anxieties about the nature of motherhood and maternal affect are variously articulated, enforced and challenged" (Harrington, 2017). Although I agree with Harrington, I would argue that there was a significant lack of more nuanced mother figures in Horror in the years before Arnold's book was released, yet some would say that she missed the opportunity to unpack the complexities of motherhood in *We Need to talk about Kevin*, released two years before her book. However, Arnold acknowledges that her binary definition of 'Good' and 'Bad' does not "sufficiently account for...the self sacrificing mother, in horror cinema", and further states that the lack of literature on self sacrificing mothers in horror constitutes a "gap" (Arnold, 2013, p.28). In her chapter "The Good Mother" she discusses the notion of self sacrificing Mothers, who offer their lives for their children (Arnold, 2013, p.38), yet she does not explore the possibility of a self-sacrificing 'Bad Mother', or an ambivalent self-sacrificing mother. The films within this thesis evidence a rise in depictions of ambivalent, self-sacrificing mothers in Horror, which Smyth argues represent an active resistance to "hegemonic postfeminist mothering" (Smyth, 2020, p.5). This is achieved through "mother-centric narratives" that depict mothers as protagonists, thus "emphasis[ing] the mother's subjective experience", and offering "a significantly different insight into the way that dissonant, conflicting cultural expectations work to shape, manage, police and punish the individual" (Harrington, 2017). Subsequently, this thesis shall use Arnold's notion of the 'Good', 'Bad' and sacrificial mother through a critical lens in order to establish that the contemporary

horror mother often blurs the distinction between these categories, thus establishing her as ambivalent.

2.3 ‘New Momism’ and Maternal Ambivalence

Key to this thesis is an understanding of maternal ambivalence as both a psychological, lived reality for many women, and as social symptom of the rise of perfectionist standards of “new momism” (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, p.4), thus justifying the detailing of both psychoanalytical and sociocultural theory in this literature review. ‘New momism’ is a standard of perfect motherhood that demands that a woman “devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional and intellectual being, 24/7 to her children” (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, p.4). Douglas and Michaels atrribute the beginnings of ‘new momism’ to the rise of “intensive mothering” in the 1980s, that required a mother to possess the “professional level skills [of] a therapist, pediatrician [...] teacher” and encouraged competition between mothers: “The competition isn’t just over who’s a good mother - it’s over who’s the best” (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, p.6). The rise of the conservative Republican party in America in the 1980s, both extolled intensive ‘stay at home’ mothering, and vilified working mothers, even though “work environments [...] emphasised increased productivity”, thus generating a national divide, known as the “mommy wars” (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, p.12), which pitted working mothers and stay-at-home mothers against each other. The media exacerbated the ‘mommy wars’, through a “national fixation” on “childhood danger”, and ‘bad’ working mums, who were disproportionately black and working class, whilst simultaneously lauding the “celebrity mom profile” and white, middle class mothers (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, p.16-85). Douglas and Michaels argue that this conflict and the rise of ‘new

momism' stems from 'post-feminisim', a term coined in 1982 by *The New York Times*. They argue that "postfeminism [...] suggests that women have made plenty of progress because of feminism, but that feminism is now irrelevant and even undesirable because it supposedly made millions of women unhappy" (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, p.24). 'New momism' both insists that "women have choices", and maintains that the only choice that matters is becoming a mother: "it both draws from and repudiates feminism" (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, p.5). For this reason, many critics of 'new momism' argue that motherhood is currently "disempowering if not oppressive" for modern mothers, who are unable to conform to the "impossible standards of idealised motherhood" (O'Reilly, 2010, p.17), thus resulting in many women becoming ambivalent towards both motherhood, their children and society. Barbara Almond, a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, author of the book *The Monster Within: The Hidden Side of Motherhood* (2010), defines maternal ambivalence as, "that mixture of loving and hating feelings that all mothers experience toward their children and the anxiety, shame, and guilt that the negative feelings engender in them" (Almond, 2010, p.19). Almond attributes these feelings to the "fierce and demanding pressures surround[ing] contemporary mothering", as well as the "breakdown of the nuclear family" that "more often than not leaves both mother and child quite on their own to deal with their complicated mutual psychological needs and interactions" (Almond, 2010, p.21). Consequently, maternal ambivalence has become society's "last taboo" (Almond, 2010, p.19; Brenner, 2013, p.90), but it represents both a psychological and social reality that affects many women once realising that their experiences of motherhood are "incompatible with their expectation[s]" (Darvil, Skirton & Farrand, 2010, p.362). In spite of this, maternal ambivalence is stigmatised by society, deemed to be both "unwomanly" and

"unnatural" (Almond, 2010, p.22), sometimes leading people to associate it with child murderers such as Andrea Yates: "child murder is the most extreme and shocking manifestation of maternal ambivalence we can imagine." (Almond, 2010, p.121). For this reason women often repress and "deny" their ambivalence, "thus colluding with the myth and idealization of motherhood" (Chapman and Gubi, 2019, p.2, paraphrasing Brown, 2010). Rozsika Parker, a psychotherapist and author of *Torn in Two: Experience of maternal ambivalence* (1995) and *Mother Love, Mother Hate: The Power of Maternal Ambivalence* (1996), argues that in hiding their maternal ambivalence, women "do not provide each other with comforting reflections and a place of safety in a society even more critical of mothers than they are of themselves" (Parker, 1995, p.3). Given that "patriarchal motherhood", or postfeminist 'new momism' is "oppressive to women because it necessitates the repression or denial of the mother's own selfhood" (O'Reilly, 2010, p.20), Almond posits that the "good enough mother" is the most realistic and reasonable "baseline" for modern motherhood (Almond, 2010, p.26). Coined by psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, the "good enough mother" is an "ordinary devoted mother" who provides a "safe and holding environment for her child", but acknowledges the impossibility of creating a 'perfect' environment. Most importantly, he recognises that "good-enough mothers are ambivalent and that it is perfectly normal" (Winnicott, 1960, p.594; Almond, 2010, p.26-32).

2.4 'New momism', 'Horror vérité' and *Maternal Horror film* as critical framework

Having established that 'new momism' and postfeminism engender feelings of maternal ambivalence amongst mothers, and that this can be attributed to both psychological and social factors, it is only natural that these social tensions should

reveal themselves in the horror genre, principally because it “ebbs and flows to keep up with cultural conversations and fears” (Patrick-Weber, 2020, p.1). As previously mentioned, ‘Horror vérité’, is a genre of “truthful cinema”, that through the “mechanics of horror”, renders “the present and everyday [...] unfamiliar and grotesque” in order to expose wider truths about society (Landsberg, 2018, p.632). Using ‘horror vérité’ as a critical framework through which the films in this thesis shall be analysed, I aim to establish that contemporary horror films present maternal ambivalence, or present a societal ambivalence towards mothers, and in doing so, reflect the tensions surrounding ‘perfect’ motherhood, as perpetuated by ‘new momism’. This will be achieved through a ‘horror vérité’ approach that highlights the social anxieties surrounding motherhood in a postfeminist age, whilst simultaneously recognising the psychological reality of maternal ambivalence. Furthermore, this thesis shall use an aesthetic approach in order to gauge the ways in which aesthetic horror strategies are used to highlight and represent ambivalent motherhood, notably through the use of colour, imagery and camera shots. This is attributed to Schneider’s chapter “Toward an Aesthetics of Cinematic Horror” (2004) in which he argues that “extended investigations into what might be called the “aesthetics of horror cinema”” such as “filmic (including narrative) techniques, principles, devices, conventions, and images” are rarely explored (Schneider, 2004, p.131). Finally, Sarah Arnold’s seminal book *Maternal Horror Film: Melodrama and Motherhood* (2013) shall be used in order to deconstruct the notion of the ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ mother in each film.

2.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, having presented the lack of research into ambivalent mother figures in horror films, and the significance of both a psychological and sociocultural

approach to the subject, this thesis aims to fill this gap. Through an understanding of ambivalent motherhood as both a psychological and social reality, and an aesthetic approach that aims to analyse the ways in which this is represented, this thesis hopes to provide an original contribution to the array of theory already published on motherhood in horror.

3. Ambivalent Motherhood and Emotional Sacrifice

Since the release of *We Need to talk about Kevin* in 2011, there has been a marked increase in portrayals of ambivalent mother figures whose emotional wellbeing is challenged by and sacrificed for their children. This chapter will analyse the following films- *We need to talk about Kevin* (2011), *The Babadook* (2014), and *Bird Box* (2018)- with the goal of establishing these films as a form of resistance to postfeminist 'new momism'. Each of the following films depicts a different form of maternal ambivalence and emotional sacrifice that is triggered by grief. *We Need to talk about Kevin's* Eva both loves and hates her son Kevin, a mass murderer, and chooses to sacrifice her chances of happiness by staying in a town that blames her for his monstrosity. In *The Babadook*, Amelia resents her son Samuel for his survival in the accident that killed her husband, and sacrifices her emotional wellbeing struggling to handle his difficult, and sometimes 'monstrous' behaviour. In *Bird Box,* Malorie's ambivalence regarding motherhood is amplified in a post-apocalyptic world, in which she withholds love from her children, and sacrifices happiness, so as to avoid the heartbreak of their potential deaths. All three mothers grieve their dead partners and/or family, and subsequently epitomise maternal ambivalence, as they are torn between a desire to be rid of their children, whom they associate with grief, and a desire to protect and save them.

Using Landsberg's 'horror vérité' as a critical framework, the following chapter shall demonstrate that *We Need to Talk about Kevin* set a precedent in portraying complex, ambivalent mother figures that figure in later films such as *The Babadook* and *Bird Box*. Using 'horror vérité' directorial styles and tropes, such as distinct colour palettes and exaggerated plotlines, all three films reveal the "terrifying nightmare [of] everyday reality" (Landsberg, 2018, p.632) in a society that villianises

mothers struggling with maternal ambivalence. Through the lens of postfeminist 'new momism', the chapter shall demonstrate the films' active resistance to standards of idealised motherhood through depictions of ambivalent mothers that exemplify both 'Good' and 'Bad' qualites. Arnold's 'Good' and 'Bad' mother chapters shall therefore be critically used as a means of grounding and dissecting each mother figure. Finally, using the concept of the "good enough" mother as stipulated by Donald Winnicott, and explored by Barbara Almond (2010), the possible future of cinematic motherhood shall be presented.

3.1 Alienation, Resentment and guilt: Emotional Sacrifice and Maternal Ambivalence in *We Need to Talk about Kevin*

In *We Need to Talk about Kevin,* Eva epitomises ambivalent motherhood in her relationship with her son Kevin: she does not bond with him, she resents his presence, and she appears to be incapable of motherly love. From the moment of conception to adolescence, Eva abhors the physical and emotional sacrifices that Kevin represents, and upon witnessing his psychopathic tendencies from an early age, she becomes emotionally detached from him. Her strained relationship with Kevin results in the eventual breakdown of her marriage. Kevin commits a mass murder at his highschool, and kills both his father and his sister in an apparent act of revenge upon his mother; he desires her emotional suffering. Years later, Eva is alone, grieving and ostracised by the local community who blames her for her son's violence. She sacrifices her emotional wellbeing and the possibility of moving away from the town in order to stay close to Kevin's prison, even going so far as to prepare his bedroom should he return.

From both a psychoanalytical and sociocultural perspective, the film is groundbreaking in its unflinching portrayal of maternal ambivalence from the moment

of Kevin's conception to adolescence, and the film persistently teeters between blaming Eva for Kevin's monstrosity, and sympathising with her as a victim of Kevin's behaviour. The film hints at the age-old question of whether monsters are born or made, and thus whether or not maternal ambivalence is the cause. This analysis of *We Need to Talk about Kevin* shall therefore establish that whilst Eva embodies Arnold's definition of a 'Bad Mother', due to her emotional neglect of her son Kevin, her feelings can be attributed to both a perceived and real loss of her previous self, liberties and lifestyle. Whilst research into maternal ambivalence was published and discussed in academic circles around the time of Arnold's book, she does not make any reference to it, most likely due to the lack of such themes in the films she chose, and she therefore does not discuss "the last taboo" (Almond, 2010; Brenner, 2013, p.90) surrounding Motherhood in a cinematic context. Research before and after Arnold's publication reveals that many mothers experience intense feelings of alienation, resentment and a loss of identity, that due to cultural expectations pertaining to maternity, they feel compelled to hide (Chapman and Gubi, 2019, p.11).

This analysis of *We Need to Talk about Kevin* shall critically use Arnold's 'Bad Mother' theory to address the initial perception of Eva's character, and then contextualise the depictions of her ambivalence through a more sympathetic lens using more recent publications and the pressures of "new momism" (Douglas and Michaels, 2005; Chapman and Gubi, 2019, p.13). This analysis shall focus on three moments during the timeline of Eva and Kevin's relationship: gestation and birth, infancy, and adolescence. These timelines shall be categorised by the themes of alienation, resentment and guilt in order to reflect upon the evolution of Eva's role as Kevin's mother and the progression of her maternal ambivalence. Similarly, this

analysis shall also place the film's themes of maternal ambivalence within Landsberg's framework of "Horror vérité", a directorial style that uses shocking visuals and sounds to convey an underlying truth of society (Landsberg, 2018); *We Need to Talk about Kevin* reveals the reality of maternal ambivalence and society's discrimination towards suffering mothers.

3.1.1 Alienation and 'Horror vérité'

The particularity of *We Need to Talk about Kevin* lies in its non linear narrative, its use of sound and the motif of reds, yellows and blues that render the film singularly captivating yet unnerving. Eva is perpetually drenched in the colour red, a colour that simultaneously insinuates her blame for Kevin's act of mass murder, and harks back to the gender essentialist association of women with red as a symbol of fertility and the "bodily wastes and secretions" (Arnold, 2013, p.74) of women. From the opening shots of the film, in which Eva is drenched in tomato juice and held above the crowd in a pose reminiscent of Jesus's crucifixion, director Lynne Ramsay uses abject images of blood-like substances to evoke the maternal and foreshadow the tragedy to come. The effect of such shocking visuals on the audience is one of persistent tension as we both witness and experience Eva's life as a mother struggling with feelings of maternal ambivalence and trauma, both of which are very real phenomena in wider society. Alison Landberg defines this particular style of cinematography as "horror vérité", in which the use of "heavy-handed visual and aural shocks [through which] the present and everyday is rendered unfamiliar...bring[s] the real conditions of society into sharp relief" (Landsberg, 2018, p.632). This can be applied to *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, as the film uses surrealist imagery, colour blocking and a fictional plot of a detached mother whose inability to create a loving relationship with her son may have resulted in his murder

of her husband and daughter. The film uses horror tropes and characteristics of 'horror vérité' to reveal, and force the audience to experience the realities of maternal alienation and ambivalence through Eva's character, and subsequently raise awareness of the lived experiences of many women all over the world.

From the moment of Kevin's conception, Eva's lived experience as a pregnant woman is depicted as one of intense alienation. The act of conception between Eva and Franklin, is depicted as a moment of drunken pleasure bathed in yellow light. However, flashes of red light appear to warn of danger as Franklin repeatedly asks Eva, "Are you sure?", "Is it safe?", thus establishing Kevin's conception as an act of uncertainty and potential danger. The screen then cross-cuts between a flashing, red alarm clock with the time 12:01, a close up of mutating cells under the lens of a microscope and flashes of Eva photocopying documents in the present day. The effect of this flash-cutting montage is one of extreme confusion and an overwhelming sense of clinical detachment from the act of fertilisation, particularly when compared to the passion and recklessness of the act that resulted in Eva's pregnancy. The dispassionate and impersonal means in which Eva's gestation is introduced establishes Eva's experience of her maternity as abject, as theorised by Kelly Oliver; "the fetus...has become an icon that represents our fears of an abject Other within that threatens our identity as human" (Oliver, 2012, p.32).

Indeed, Eva evidently experiences feelings of "profound alienation" (Beauvoir, 1949, p.29; Oliver, 2012, p.23) throughout her pregnancy, firstly when she is shown looking resentfully at her heavily pregnant reflection, and secondly when she attends a prenatal class. The prenatal class scene is of notable importance as it uses culturally perpetuated notions of 'Good' mothers to establish Eva as an outsider and a 'Bad'

mother for her refusal to outwardly perform the role of a contented first time mother. The camera slowly zooms in on a medium shot of an uncomfortable Eva as she is surrounded by smiling, chatting pregnant women in a changing room. The women are shown lovingly caressing their exposed pregnant bellies in a sequence of close up shots which then cut to Eva, who is contrastingly fully clothed and staring with resentment at the belly of a pregnant woman next to her (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Eva is framed as the ambivalent mother in a prenatal class. We Need to Talk about Kevin/Artificial Eye

The sequence of close up shots that alternate between contented pregnant women and their bare stomachs, and Eva's evident discomfort is an effective means of establishing Eva as 'other' from the onset of her pregnancy, and is used to further alienate both her and the audience from the stereotypically positive aspects of maternity. The scene's focus on happily pregnant mothers is also reminiscent of the "orgy of motherphilia" (Oliver, 2012, p.22) and "baby hunger" (Oliver, 2012, p.25) that has become increasingly popular in Hollywood, in which films such as *The Backup Plan*, *Knocked Up* and *Baby Mama* heavily romanticise Motherhood and womens' experience of pregnancy. Given that all three of these films were released before *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, one cannot help but compare the protagonists' views of pregnancy. Douglas and Michaels have referred to the resurgence of conventional attitudes towards motherhood, in which women are expected to devote their entire lives and wellbeing to their children, as "new momism" (Douglas and Michaels, 2005; Chapman and Gubi, 2019, p.13); "a highly romanticised view of motherhood in which the standards for success are impossible to meet" (O'Reilly, 2010, p.22). Given the almost propagandistic manner in which women are bombarded with such expectations, both from society, and in films, it is unsurprising that many women struggle with feelings of ambivalence upon realising that motherhood is not as romantic as they had anticipated, as evidenced in many studies on the subject (Darvil, Skirton and Farrand, 2010, p.362). From a 'horror vérité' perspective therefore, Eva's character, although initially viewed as cold and unfeeling, reveals the unspoken and taboo nature of maternal ambivalence when faced with societal expectations of mothers.

Eva's birth scene is also an excellent example of director Lynne Ramsay's re-appropriation of the stereotypically comedic Hollywood childbirth scene, in which

female pain and trauma are often depicted through the male gaze. A perfect example would be Judd Apatow's *Knocked Up*, in which the camera zooms in on a perfectly shaven vagina in which the baby's head is crowning. Such a blatantly sexualised view of childbirth in Hollywood is "indicative of the increasing crossover from pornography to popular culture" (Dines, 2010, p.26; Jolly, 2017, p.412), and is not reflective of the female experience. In order to capture the true trauma of Eva's experience, and that of many women, Ramsay zooms in on Eva's reflection in the hospital lamp which creates a fisheye effect (see figure 2).

Figure 2: Eva's experience of childbirth is distorted and horrific. We Need to Talk about Kevin/Artificial Eye

The image is surreal, Eva's face is contorted and monstrous, and a voice continually repeats "Stop resisting Eva". The moment is evidently frightening for both Eva and the audience, both evoking a more accurate portrayal of the childbirth experience, and establishing the tone of Eva and Kevin's relationship. The immediate aftermath is displayed in a wide shot of Eva sat in a state of numbness and disconnect whilst Franklin rocks newborn Kevin. The filter is a cold, grayish blue and the room appears

bare and clinical: a far cry from the warm toned, rose coloured scenes in Hollywood rom coms (see figure 3).

Figure 3: Eva's postnatal ambivalence and depression is demonstrated by the colours and lighting. We Need to Talk about Kevin/Artificial Eye. This is contrasted with the maternal joy in Baby Mama/Universal Pictures

The scene is jarring as Eva appears totally disinterested in her newborn son, and an immediate reaction is one of judgement that would declare Eva as a 'Bad' mother as she does not embody the "all nurturing and self-abnegating" (Arnold, 2013, p.23) qualities that first time mothers are socially and culturally inculcated to imbibe. Given the "monstrous child" (Arnold, 2013, p.71) aspects of Kevin's character later in the film, one could argue that Eva represents the "woman as monstrous womb" (Creed, 1993, p.1) archetype of horror film mothers, in which the spawn of the 'Bad' mother's children become killers and monsters, as seen in *The Brood*. As such, the film appears to implicate Eva as a clear cause of Kevin's monstrosity, and prompts the audience to wonder upon who, or what, is to blame for the final massacre at the end of the film.

However, it is important to note that Eva raises her daughter Celia with great success, despite her initial ambivalence regarding her second pregnancy. Eva deliberately hides her second pregnancy for as long as possible and only tells Franklin after Kevin points her stomach out. Her concealment of the pregnancy and her unwillingness to disclose it to Franklin both suggests that she harbours feelings of ambivalence towards her pregnancy, notably due to the traumatic experience of her first birth, and also implies that she does not wish to partake in the overtly theatrical displayals of maternity that she abhorred whilst pregnant with Kevin. In spite of her initial doubts, Eva is shown smiling and lovingly cooing Celia after her birth, in a warm yellow room with pink flowers. The contrast between Kevin and Celia's birth is striking, and Kevin remarks upon Eva's displayal of motherly affection towards Celia with resentment. One could infer that due to Eva's low expectations and dread regarding motherhood the second time around, she is pleasantly surprised by her immediate love for her daughter. Whereas, Eva's first pregnancy

was particularly jarring because she was surprised, like many women, that her experience was so “incompatible” with the cultural expectations of motherhood (Darvil, Skirton and Farrand, 2010, p.362), leading to her ambivalence and post-natal depression. A psychoanalytical critique of the film could be used to dissect Eva’s role in Kevin’s monstrosity through the lens of child development, with many studies arguing that “early exposure to a depressed mother is hypothesized to have an enduring, negative effect on infants’ social, cognitive, and emotional development [...] because the impaired quality of the early relationship between mother and infant becomes reciprocated in their communicative gestures” (Murray 1992 and Murray, Sinclair, Cooper, Ducournau & Turner 1999; Homewood, Tweed, Cree and Crossley, 2009, p.1). This can arguably be applied to Eva and Kevin due to the immense difference in her parenting of Kevin and Celia and the subsequent outcome of each child. Given the “horror vérité” aspect of the film, it is possible that Eva’s relationship with Kevin reflects a need for increased support for Mothers suffering with postnatal depression, and the film uses an exaggerated plot to hyperbolise the risks of emotionally underdeveloped children and the effects this has on families and society at large. In doing so however, the film implies that it is indeed Eva’s downfalls as a mother, and her inability to emotionally connect to her child as a result of postnatal depression and maternal ambivalence, that causes Kevin’s monstrousness.

3.1.2 Postpartum resentment

If the tone towards Eva could previously have been interpreted as unsympathetic or accusatory, the depiction of Kevin as ‘monstrous child’ and Eva’s implied postnatal depression establishes a newly empathetic attitude towards her following his birth. Her low mood and her negative reaction to baby Kevin’s behaviours reflect the traits of postnatal depression, “a nonpsychotic, sustained depressive disorder”

(Homewood, Tweed, Cree and Crossley, 2009, p.1). This is demonstrated in the scene shortly after his birth in which Kevin won't stop crying. Rather than react to his cries with love and affection, as society would expect of a 'Good' mother (Arnold, 2013), she takes him in a pram and stands next to a jackhammer in the road to drown out his screams. This behaviour is not only dangerous, but demonstrates the extent of her emotional and physical disconnect from Kevin as his mother. Sociologists have hypothesised that women who struggle most with feelings of maternal ambivalence are those who had successful careers before becoming mothers (Chapman and Gubi, 2019, p.2), and Eva is shown to have had a very fulfilling career as a travel writer. Indeed, Eva expresses her resentment regarding the loss of her independence and career to Kevin as a toddler: "Mummy was happy before widdle Kevin came along. You know that? Now Mummy wakes up every morning and wishes she was in France!". Eva adopts a baby voice that both mocks and belittles Kevin, who glares at her in return. The moment cuts between images of trick-or-treaters harassing Eva in the present day as they shout and bang on the windows, their faces distorted and terrifying, and images of food being thrown at the fridge by a young Kevin. The effect is one of extreme disorientation and stress, which has the intention of replicating Eva's feelings of ambivalence and fear as she is trapped in the confines of unhappy motherhood.

The scene is Eva's first vocalisation of her ambivalence and resentment, not only to the audience, as the camera zooms in on a close up of her face, but also to Kevin himself. Her statement feels taboo and violent, precisely because of the widely inculcated belief that mothers "must be fully satisfied, fulfilled, completed and composed in motherhood", and that "the mother must always put children's needs before her own" (O'Reilly, 2010, p.20). Eva actively states her preference for a

career and personal fulfilment over her own child, a sentiment that is in direct conflict with the standards of “new momism”: “The enlightened mother chooses to stay at home with the kids” (O’Reilly, 2010, p.24). Eva further rejects the enforced stereotypes of motherhood by stating her preference for her life in New York, over the nuclear family setup that Franklin enforces upon her as they move to middle class suburbia under the pretense that it better caters to Kevin’s needs. Franklin is acutely aware of Eva’s emotional distress and dislike of her role as a stay at home Mother, and upon hearing her words to Kevin, glares at her in disgust before turning away. Indeed, director Lynne Ramsay effectively establishes Franklin as a figure of patriarchal incompetence throughout the film through his constant dismissal of Eva’s feelings and doubts: “First he cries too much, then he’s too quiet...and you see it as some kind of personal vendetta?”. Franklin is incapable of reacting with sympathy to the emotional distress of his wife, instead choosing to minimise and invalidate her by constantly insisting, “He’s just a sweet little boy”. From a ‘horror vérité’ perspective, Franklin represents wider societal dismissals of ambivalent motherhood, as he chooses to shame her for her feelings, rather than seek to understand and help alleviate them. Studies have revealed that all women experience complex feelings upon becoming Mothers (Brenner, 2013, p.90), but that maternal ambivalence is only tolerable, and therefore surmountable “when women can accept the feelings without shame and guilt” (Parker, 1997; Chapman and Gubi, 2019, p.13). Franklin frequently shames Eva and disregards her very real concerns regarding Kevin’s behaviour, and thus effectively leaves Eva alone to parent Kevin, who quickly learns that he can manipulate the situation to his advantage by presenting an image of innocence and sweetness to his Father, and only revealing his true colours to Eva. Franklin further personifies patriarchal values through his encouragement of stereotypically

masculine behaviours in Kevin, as demonstrated when he plays violent video games with Kevin as a little boy, and nurturing Kevin's gift for archery from an early age. Once these masculine behaviours translate to acts of violence and defiance towards Eva, Franklin lightheartedly dismisses them, stating, "that's what boys do". In presenting Franklin's character in this way, and by employing such statements that are routinely used to justify bad behaviour in boys, director Lynne Ramsay makes a statement about challenging gender roles in larger society. Through Franklin's incompetence as Eva's partner, and his incapacity to acknowledge Kevin's deviousness, Ramsay places the blame for the film's outcome on Franklin, as equally as she does on Eva. In doing so, she makes a wider statement about the importance of the Father's role in child rearing in a society in which "mothers are still doing the bulk of domestic labour and childcare in homes around the world" (O'Reilly, 2010, p.25).

Having established that Eva vocalises her ambivalence and resentment towards Kevin, it can be of no surprise that Kevin grows to hate his Mother and actively seeks her unhappiness. This is most effectively demonstrated in the nappy changing scene, which demonstrates the dysfunctionality of their relationship and the ways in which they outwardly express their disdain for one another. Kevin appears to be at least 5 years old, yet he is still in nappies. Whilst arguing about maths, Kevin grins at Eva, and intentionally defecates so that Eva is obliged to change him. Whilst she changes him, he is smug, with his hands behind his head, and it is clear that he enjoys his power over Eva as she is submissive to his physical needs. Immediately after changing him, he glances back at Eva, smirks slyly and deliberately defecates again. Eva picks him up and throws him against the wall, breaking his arm. Kevin lies to Franklin and the doctors about the cause of his broken arm, stating that he fell off

the changing table, thus using the incident to manipulate Eva into doing what he wants later on. That same night, he uses the toilet, rather than a nappy, much to the disbelief of Eva and Franklin, thus demonstrating that he had always been capable of doing so, but he chose not to in order to ensure Eva's continued subservience to his physical needs. Whilst Eva's reaction would be considered physical abuse, Kevin later refers to the incident as "the most honest thing you ever did", and thus acknowledges the moment as a momentous physical release of the resentment Eva had harboured towards Kevin from birth.

It is interesting to note that the film uses abject substances such as defecation to portray conflict between a Mother and her son. Many theorists of Motherhood in Horror, such as Kristeva and Arnold hypothesise that such fluids "connote the maternal" (Arnold, 2013, p.75), as "the maternal female body…transgress[es] the bodily boundaries of the flesh" (Kristeva, 1982; Sharpe and Sexon, 2018, p.2), and is therefore monstrous. The "boundaries between self and other" (Sharpe and Sexon, 2018, p.3) collapse once a woman becomes pregnant, and therefore both Mother and Child become abject figures of monstrosity. Kevin refuses to relinquish the "bodily boundaries" (Kristeva, 1982; Sharpe and Sexon, 2018, p.2) between himself and Eva by maintaining rituals of nappy changing involving his own excrement. Although initially perceived as an act of manipulation to maintain control over Eva, one could argue that he subconsciously desires a return to an earlier state of infancy, in which Eva was obliged to dote upon his every need because he, himself, was incapable of doing so. As such, although the scene is violent, one can argue that at the centre of it, is a young boy using everything in his means to gain attention from a mother who resents his very existence.

3.1.3 Guilt and adolescence

Once Kevin enters adolescence, Eva appears to be more settled in her domestic life. She dotes upon her daughter Celia, and has settled into an understanding of respectful distance with Kevin, who is now cold, calculating and sardonic. Eva's feelings of maternal ambivalence towards Kevin have appeared to lessen with time, supporting the evidence that many women gradually regain their former confidence through a "reemergence of self" after their children begin to express physical and emotional independence (Homewood et al, 2009; Chapman and Gubi, 2019, p.12). Despite Eva's newfound identity as a contented mother to Celia, Lynne Ramsay continues to underpin the uncanny resemblance between Eva and Kevin through their appearance, thus suggesting that they will be forever entwined together as mother and son, in spite of their apathetic indifference towards one another. The striking similarity between the two is frequently referenced throughout the film: images of Kevin washing his face are superimposed upon Eva's as she does the same, Eva removes broken egg from her mouth and omelette and lines them up, and Kevin bites his nails and lines them up on the prison table, Eva watches Kevin on TV and her face appears in the reflection. Reflecting upon the film on its 10 year anniversary, film critic Prahlad Srihari, in referencing an interview with Tilda Swinton, notes that Eva's self hatred stems from her recognition of the striking similarities between herself and Kevin, and therefore Kevin's acts of violence are not totally alien to her: "she recognises it only too well, becomes it comes from her. He is her" (Srihari quoting Swinton, 2021). As such, Eva spends the entirety of the film attempting to pinpoint the exact cause of Kevin's monstrosity, and her guilt is represented through the nonlinear narrative that jumps between the past and present day as she relives Kevin's childhood and her experience as a mother.

Whilst present day Eva is a guilt ridden alcoholic, her flashbacks reveal her attempts at forming a relationship with teenage Kevin; she invites him out mini golfing and to dinner at a restaurant. She tries to engage in conversation with him, asking about life at school, which he quickly rebuffs in a scathing monologue that underpins his disdain for her: “Once you’ve sucked up that entire bottle of wine you can go all gooey eyed and say how nice it is to spend quality time together. You can scooch over and put your arm around my shoulder, give it a little squeeze”. Kevin’s response to Eva’s genuine attempt to salvage their relationship is the final nail in the coffin: it is too late. Kevin quickly displays violent tendencies that are indicative of psychopathy, both killing Celia’s guinea pig and crushing it in the waste disposal system for his mother to discover, and allowing Celia to play with drain cleaner, resulting in the loss of her eye: “Cruelty to animals is a symptom of conduct disorder and associated with psychopathic traits…and predicts interpersonal violence later in life” (De Wied, Meesus, Van Boxtel, 2021, p.869). Not only has Kevin’s behaviour resulted in the disfigurement of his sister, but Eva’s growing fear of him results in the breakdown of her and Franklin’s marriage, which Kevin is all too aware of, stating to the couple: “I am the context”.

After the school massacre and the murder of Celia and Franklin, Eva is ostracised by her community. She is physically assaulted by the mothers of Kevin’s victims, has her home and car vandalised with red paint, and she is left alone, wallowing in her depression and drowning her sorrows in red wine. The entire community blames her for Kevin’s crimes: she is a ‘Bad Mother’ and she produced a monster. In her essay ‘Of women and children. Bad mothers as rough heroes’, Nicoletta Vallorani argues that Western ideals of Motherhood believe that “a child’s misbehaviour is his

mother's fault" (Vallorani, 2017, p.47) and that subsequently, any crimes committed by Kevin are automatically attributed to Eva. According to the community, the standards of 'new momism', and the definition of a 'Good Mother" as stated by Arnold, Eva is a 'Bad Mother', whose selfish desires for independence and her incapacity to conform to romanticised ideals of maternity must be punished: "the Bad Mother must ultimately suffer (she suffers the loss of a child)" (Arnold, 2013, p.78). Vallorani also contends that Eva's name has biblical origins, and that much like Eve in the Garden of Eden, having committed the sin of disobedience - in Eva's case to patriarchal standards of maternity- Eve is punished by becoming mortal and a mother: "Motherhood was therefore intended as a punishment" (Vallorani, 2017, p.45). Indeed, Kevin punishes Eva for her misgivings as a mother to him through the murder of her daughter, husband, and the defamation of her name in her local community. From a 'horror vérité' perspective, Lynne Ramsay appears to contend the villainization of mothers in larger society, who are held responsible for the crimes of their adolescent and adult children.

However, rather than abandon Kevin and seek a fresh start elsewhere, Eva remains in the town and regularly visits Kevin in prison. She even prepares his bedroom in her new home, should he be released. Due to the overwhelming guilt Eva harbours, she sacrifices her chances of happiness elsewhere, believing that her current situation is "the right punishment for her having been a bad mother" (Vallorani, 2017, p.46), even going so far as to declare to religious missionaries who knock on her door, "I'm going straight to hell" with a smile on her face. In these actions, she is "self-sacrificing [and] quietly suffering" (Arnold, 2013, p.79)- qualities deemed to be that of a 'Good Mother'- and in doing so, appears to undergo a maternal redemption. The end of the film is the two year anniversary of Kevin's mass murder, and Eva

asks why he committed his crimes. He responds, “I used to think I knew. Now I’m not so sure”. Whilst one could interpret his answer as a means of deflecting blame, I would argue that his previous reasoning for committing the murders was to cause Eva suffering, as evidenced by his continued antagonisation of her throughout his life. Upon seeing that Eva chooses to remain his mother after the atrocities committed against her, and witnessing the selflessness with which she remains by his side, he has begun to doubt the feelings of resentment that he hitherto harboured. This is demonstrated in the first instance of shared vulnerability in the entire film, in which Eva and Kevin share a tight hug, full of emotion, before Kevin is taken to adult prison.

3.1.4 Conclusion

We Need to Talk about Kevin set a precedent for depictions of ambivalent motherhood in film, and its influence is still felt to this day, as evidenced by the films in this thesis. The aesthetic horror strategies analysed in this case study are used to great effect to highlight Eva’s maternal ambivalence: colour is used to oppress and stifle Eva in order to symbolically represent the solitude that her maternal ambivalence and Kevin’s monstrosity has engendered. Furthermore, director Lynne Ramsay’s criticism of ‘new momism’ and its effects on women and children through a ‘horror vérité’ directorial style ultimately blames the outcome of Eva and Kevin’s relationship on society’s dismissal of postnatal ambivalence, and thus resists misogynistic attitudes towards imperfect and ambivalent mothering. Through an exaggerated plotline, the audience is left to ponder upon the emotional suffering of modern mothers and their children, should their pleas for help and support be ignored, dismissed and shamed by family members and the wider community. The final moments of the film, in which Eva walks through the prison doors to the

sunlight, accompanied by the song “Mother’s Last Word To Her Son” by Washington Phillips, appears to suggest Eva’s rebirth as she finally attains peace with Kevin.

3.2 Single Mothers, Fatigue and Rage: Emotional Sacrifice in *The Babadook*

Kevin represents a realistic ‘monster’ in *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, whose acts of violence, accompanied by Eva’s postnatal depression, engender her feelings of maternal ambivalence long before the deaths of her husband and daughter. Contrastingly, *The Babadook* (2014) uses a surreal monster to represent repressed feelings of grief and maternal ambivalence after a tragic accident kills the protagonist’s husband, leaving the mother alone to care for her son, for whom she harbours intense resentment and ambivalence. The rationale for including *The Babadook* in this thesis is as follows. Firstly, the film uses a supernatural monster to epitomise grief and maternal ambivalence in a unique way previously unseen in the horror genre. Secondly, the mother figure, Amelia, is not only forced to confront this monster, and by extension, her maternal ambivalence and grief, but she overcomes them, thus signifying a positive and hopeful portrayal of maternal ambivalence: the film moves beyond a binary understanding of the mother as ‘Good’ or ‘Bad’, and ends with the “good enough mother” (Almond, 2010, p.26). Thirdly, the film’s presentation of Amelia’s possession as a means of creating a “new alliance with her child” (Briefel, 2017, p.18) is unprecedented in the horror genre, and thus merits analysis.

Jennifer Kent’s *The Babadook*, released in 2014, recounts the fractured relationship between Amelia and her son Samuel, who was born on the night of the fateful car accident that killed Amelia’s husband Oskar. Seven years after her husband’s death, Amelia hasn’t processed her grief, struggles with depression, and can’t control her

son Samuel who is increasingly erratic and terrified of imaginary monsters. His paranoia keeps Amelia awake every night, resulting in her severe fatigue and an increasing resentment towards her son. Upon the arrival of the Babadook book, which depicts a shadowy figure that haunts the pair of them, both Mother and son are torn apart by paranoia and Amelia's eventual possession by the creature. Under the Babadook's influence, she kills the family dog and attempts to murder Samuel, until his love for her expels the Babadook, and allows her to fight the monster, who retreats to the cellar where her husband's belongings reside. Amelia and Samuel's relationship is restored and they both learn how to love and communicate with each other, under the condition that they feed a daily meal to the Babadook in the cellar to keep him at bay.

The Babadook monster is a metaphorical manifestation of grief and maternal ambivalence, and represents the physical and emotional chasm between Amelia and Samuel that refuses to leave unless acknowledged as a presence in their lives: "The more you deny, the stronger I get". Kent's use of a cool, cold filter and the prevalence of grey, dark blue and black throughout Amelia's house establishes Amelia's world as perpetually tainted by grief and depression. The film's tagline, "You can't get rid of the Babadook" evokes the permanence of grief as an unavoidable aspect of our everyday lives. However, should you choose to ignore and repress grief, you risk your health and your relationships with those you love: "You start to change when I get in, the Babadook growing right under your skin". Amelia is incapable of accepting the loss of her husband, and is permanently haunted by visions of his last moments before the car crash. As such, she is ambivalent towards her son, whom she subconsciously resents for surviving the car crash in place of her husband. Her inability to acknowledge the devastating effects of her repressed grief

on her wellbeing and that of her son leads to a brutal confrontation with the Babadook and the misery he represents. Through this confrontation, she eventually learns to live with both her maternal ambivalence and grief.

The following analysis shall establish that director Jennifer Kent uses 'horror vérité' (Landsberg, 2018) techniques, including surrealism and an omnipresent monster, to highlight the social realities of grief and maternal ambivalence, as well as the plights of struggling, single mothers. Amelia's imperfections as a mother, both at the beginning and end of the film fly in the face of the influence of 'new momism' in Hollywood and wider society (Douglas and Michaels, 2004), and therefore underpin the need for more diverse representations of motherhood grounded in reality. Using Briefel's analysis of the film, it shall also be established that Amelia's possession towards the end of the film that results in her increased assertiveness and cruelty ironically allows for a "new alliance with her child" (Briefel, 2017, p.18), as she establishes the correct power dynamic between mother and child. Her possession and the violent acts she commits against her son Samuel, are an exaggerated reminder of the risks of isolating women struggling with maternal ambivalence and grief. In doing so, the film takes after Lynne Ramsay's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* through a supernatural, exaggerated storyline that emphasises the need for a change in societal attitudes towards grief, mothers and maternal ambivalence.

3.2.1 Single Mothers: 'Good' or 'Bad'?

A central theme of the film, and a significant source of tension, is Amelia's capacity, or lack thereof, to care for Samuel as a widowed single mother. The depiction of struggling single mothers in horror films is not a novel idea, and has already been explored in films such as *The Sixth Sense* (1999), *The Others* (2001) and *The Ring*

(2002), as investigated by John Lewis (2005). Lewis posits that contemporary horror films purvey an image of single mothers as "weak, inferior or powerless" (Lewis, 2005, p.6), who are subsequently demonised by "Republican 'family values' [that extoll the] virtues of patriarchal father figures" (Lewis, 2005, p.1). Amelia and Samuel are incredibly isolated, and Amelia herself admits that she struggles as a single mother: "I'm really not coping". Contrary to previous films with single mothers, *The Babadook* offers a more progressive and complex representation of single mothers precisely because she admits to her struggling and maternal ambivalence, and overcomes the 'monster' of the film single handedly, thus undergoing her own metamorphosis without the help of male influence. Indeed, the patriarchal figure of the film, Amelia's dead husband Oskar, is only present in the form of his belongings hidden away in the cellar, yet Amelia is obstinate that Samuel should not see them, instead choosing to lock them away. Her choice to do so is significant as a repression of her own grief, which serves as a catalyst for the emergence of the Babadook. However, in doing so, Amelia subconsciously prevents Samuel from gaining a better understanding of the father he never knew, which he openly criticises upon being reprimanded for playing with his dad's belongings: "He's my Dad too, you don't own him!". Rather than openly celebrating her husband and sharing him with her son, she locks him away, and therefore deprives Samuel of his father, irrespective of whether he is dead or alive. Samuel is astute in observing this, and acknowledges her simultaneous refusal to celebrate his birthday on the correct date as it is the same date as the death of her husband, and her reticence in sharing the memories of the father he never knew: "She won't let me have a birthday party and she won't let me have a dad!". From a social and emotional perspective, Amelia arguably fails to fulfil her role as a loving Mother, choosing instead to prioritise her

own grief over the emotional needs of her son. The depiction of such a mother in film reflects the increasingly “conservative attitudes towards women’s role in reproduction and family” (Oliver, 2012, p.22), that appear to vilify non-traditional family structures through negative portrayals of struggling mother figures. Amelia is trapped in a cycle of grief, and therefore cannot fully provide for the emotional needs of her son. Subconsciously aware of this, she instead emotionally and physically overcompensates in her relationship with Samuel through persistent reassurance, leading to her eventual burnout.

Amelia’s character presents us with an image of motherhood as a constant state of exhaustion and emotional sacrifice. In her critical essay on *The Babadook*, Aviva Briefel underlines the cause of Amelia’s exhaustion as ‘reassurance’; Amelia lives in an endless cycle of comforting Samuel and assuring him that his imaginary monsters do not exist. Briefel argues that such a depiction of motherhood stems from “a culture that has long valued reassurance as a favoured mode of allaying childhood fears” (Briefel, 2017, p.9), rather than harsh dismissal or a stern assertion that monsters do not exist. Amelia herself certainly believes that using reassurance is an attribute of a ‘Good Mother’, who is selfless and nurturing (Arnold, 2013), as symbolically represented through her pastel pink clothing, reminiscent of fragile femininity and a soft character, similarly embodied by characters such as Olympia in *Bird Box*. However, Briefel asserts that Amelia’s constant reassurance serves as a “soporific” (Briefel, 2017, p.9) both intended to get Samuel to sleep, and to numb the repressed grief and pain that Amelia suffers with after her husband’s tragic death. Conversely, this mode of parenting does more harm than good to both Amelia and Samuel, as both are incapable of facing their fears head on, allowing the Babadook to effectively insert itself into their lives without much difficulty. Herein lies the

complexity surrounding the notion of a 'Good Mother', which both Fischer and Arnold refer to as an experience of maternity that is "fraught with hysteria": "the mother is blamed for her transgression which may be 'the maternal sin of absence' or 'overinvolvement'" (Fischer 1968; Arnold, 2013, p.18). Amelia's constant reassurance borders into the territory of 'overinvolvement', to the extent that she neglects her own physical and emotional needs, as is perversely extolled by 'new momism': "to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional and intellectual being, 24/7 to her children" (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, p.4). Not only is this a facet of "intensive mothering" that insists that "the best mothers always smile [...] they are never tired [and] they never lose their temper" (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, p.6), but it also establishes Amelia as the "masochistic mother": "She undertakes the role of sufferer for the sake of her children" (Arnold, 2013, p.42). In doing so, Amelia is associated with "essential motherhood", that "requires women's exclusive and selfless attention to and care of children" (DiQuinzio,1999; Arnold, 2013, p.39). Furthermore, essential motherhood reduces women to their "biological reproductive capacities" (DiQuinzio,1999; Arnold, 2013, p.39), and Amelia's 'reproductive' anatomy is symbolically depicted by the vagina like opening in the kitchen filled with cockroaches (Briefel, 2017, p.15) (see figure 4).

Given that cockroaches are often associated with infestations, dirt and disease, one could argue that the film insinsuates that childbirth, and in turn, children, are abject, and thus perpetuates misogynistic attitudes towards maternal corporeality and reproduction. Furthermore, *The Babadook* arguably uses abject vaginal imagery to infer Amelia's ambivalence towards Samuel's birth, as it coincided with the traumatic

death of her husband. Amelia subconsciously associates childbirth with trauma and the abject, and in turn associates Samuel with such emotions.

Figure 4: The vagina as abject opening. The Babadook/Umbrella Entertainment.

Samuel's character has proven to be polarising, with his erratic behaviour and intense emotional outbursts being the subject of much viewer criticism. A simple google search will reveal multiple articles, reddit threads, memes (see figure 5) and YouTube videos dedicated to bemoaning the character, with one article observing that "On occasion, the Samuel character has even been the noted reason why viewers don't like the film at all." (Burgess, 2021). Such visceral reactions to the character can arguably be attributed to his frequently violent behaviour and turbulent emotions, including screaming at his mother, pushing his cousin out of a tree house, and fabricating weapons to use at home and at school. Many online argue that his treatment at the hands of his possessed mother towards the end of the film is merited. One YouTube video entitled "Why the mom in Babadook wanted to kill her son", is captioned "Because he's an annoying little shit" (2015), and another,

“Screaming kid from the Babadook” is captioned “an ad for using condoms and the practice of safe sex” (2015).

Figure 5: In a now deleted tweet Samuel is figured as monstrous by memes. The Babadook/Umbrella Entertainment.

Given the pervasiveness of such attitudes online, some articles have defended the character, arguing that his mental health throughout the film is largely ignored by Amelia and viewers (Burgess, 2021), whilst others have resonated with the film’s depiction of a son with “an obvious behavioural disorder” (Thompson, 2017). Nevertheless, such vitriol towards the character, and his behaviour in the first half of the film, establishes him as a “monstrous child” (Arnold, 2013, p.71): a horror trope similarly seen in films such as *The Exorcist* (1973), *Orphan* (2009), *Case 39* (2009) and *We Need to talk about Kevin* (2011). Whilst Samuel is not murderous and dangerous like the “monstrous children” in these films, he is viewed as exceptionally

difficult and irritating, thus associating him with monstrosity, because we observe him from the point of view of Amelia, who is exhausted and resentful of his behaviour.

However, it is rather narrow minded to dismiss Samuel's character as "monstrous", particularly given the nuances of his relationship with his mother as it progresses during the film. His evolution from the perceived antagonist during the first half of the film, to the undeniable victim of his mother's abusive behaviour in the second half, confirms the complexity of his character, and the ways in which his behaviour is directly influenced by his mother's treatment of him. Arnold argues that monstrous children are "a product of the Bad Mother" (Arnold, 2013, p.71). Although Amelia is not emotionally or physically abusive towards Samuel until the second half of the film, her ambivalence towards him as a result of her grief is palpable, both to Samuel, to the other characters, and to the audience: "You can't stand being around him" (*The Babadook*, 2014). She both physically and emotionally distances herself from him, as seen when they eat dinner, when they sleep (see figure 6), and when he attempts to hug her: "Don't do that!".

Figure 6: Distance is both figurative and literal between Amelia and Samuel. The Babadook/Umbrella Entertainment.

Amelia does not wish to acknowledge that the reason for her ambivalence is the death of her husband, and her resentment towards Samuel's survival in the same

accident. The Babadook's emergence is attributed to this emotional repression, and once possessed, her true feelings towards Samuel are finally released: "You don't know how many times I wished it was you, not him who died!" (*The Babadook*, 2014). The tirade of insults, abuse and neglect that Amelia inflicts upon Samuel in the second half of the film, are a symbolic emancipation of the hitherto unspoken resentment that Amelia has left to accumulate inside of her, and thus triggers Samuel's confrontation with the monster of the film: 'The Bad Mother'.

3.2.2 Fatigue and 'The Bad Mother'

Amelia comes to represent the 'Bad Mother' and monster that Samuel fears after her debilitating fatigue, maternal ambivalence and grief are expressed through the Babadook's possession of her. The first instance of Amelia's verbal mistreatment of Samuel, in which she snaps at him "if you're that hungry, why don't you go and eat shit!" (*The Babadook*, 2014), occurs after countless nights of insomnia due to Samuel's nightmares and Amelia's fear of the Babadook. Samuel's reminder that the fridge is empty, and that he is hungry, standing slightly out of focus in the background of a medium shot of Amelia in bed, serves as a visual representation of the eternal "burdens of maternal responsibility" (Briefel, 2017, p.3). Consequently, Amelia's increasing irritability towards Samuel is arguably a natural reaction to the expectations of 'new momism' that encourage "intensive mothering" and expending "every single bit of [...] emotional, mental and psychic energy on [...] kids" (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, p.6). Indeed, earlier in the film Amelia is confronted with the image of 'new momism' and social ideals of motherhood at her niece's birthday party. The camera flips between medium shots of Amelia, slightly disheveled, sat alone, opposite her sister Claire with the other mothers, all beautiful and well dressed (see figure 7), establishing Amelia as an outsider. This is further

emphasised when one of the mothers implies she is a “disadvantaged mother” due to the death of her husband, thus solidifying the lack of empathy surrounding social attitudes towards single mothers.

Figure 7: Amelia against perfect ‘new momism’. The Babadook/Umbrella Entertainment.

The irony of Amelia’s ‘Bad Mother’ transformation, in which she embodies Creed’s “woman as possessed body” (Creed, 1993, p.1), is that her “verbal assaults allow for a new alliance with her child” (Briefel, 2017, p.18). Whereas Amelia previously struggled to discipline Samuel and establish her parental dominance, under the spell of the Babadook, she asserts herself and reclaims her role as the matriarch of the house. After Samuel calls their elderly neighbour, Mrs Roach, asking to stay at her

house due to his fear of his possessed mother, Amelia loudly shouts what she was unable to do at the beginning of the film regarding his carrying of homemade weapons: “Get that bloody thing off!”. Similarly, upon his refusal to take a sleeping pill she spits, “I am the parent and you are the child so take the pill!”. Cutting quickly between a medium shot of Amelia as she brandishes a knife, and a close up of Samuel’s terrified face, it is clear that the power balance has shifted in their relationship. This power shift is literally presented as she later hovers over him, the camera titled upwards to demonstrate her strength, before cutting to a medium shot looking down on Samuel, who is now in danger. Shouting “You’re not my mother!”, Samuel runs away, chased by Amelia: “Run, run, run, as fast as you can!”. Samuel’s statement underpins “infantile anxieties of corruption, defilement and possession” (Arnold, 2013, p.69). Having only ever known Amelia as the fragile, cooing mother that endlessly reassured his fears, the version of Amelia that berates, punishes and hurts him is perceived as an imposter: “the infant does not experience the mother as a whole object; rather she is split into part object- good or bad” (Arnold, 2013, p.82). Through Amelia’s possession, the film appears to offer two polarising versions of motherhood, that using Arnold’s ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ mother theory, are typically binary. However, Amelia’s version of mothering is never consistently ‘Good’ or ‘Bad’ throughout the film, even during her possession, and she demonstrates both flaws and strengths. For instance, the Babadook’s possession of Amelia gives her the voice and strength to express her boundaries, tackle her grief and establish herself as Samuel’s parent, even though she is violent and abusive. Similarly, the softer Amelia at the beginning of the film is capable of comforting Samuel and standing up for him when he is criticised by others, even though she is incapable of setting appropriate boundaries and discipline. In doing so, director Jennifer Kent uses the

horror genre, its exaggerated tropes and surrealism as a 'horror vérité' technique in order to convey, much like Lynne Ramsay's *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, an ambivalent, convoluted motherhood. By the end of the film, Amelia is a "good enough mother": she "provid[es] a safe and holding environment for her child", but that environment will not necessarily always be "loving or perfectly gratifying" (Almond, 2010, p.26).

3.2.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, the film is inspired by the 'horror vérité' aspects of *We Need to Talk about Kevin* as it provokes discussion pertaining to the difficulties of motherhood and society's reaction to struggling mothers. Director Jennifer Kent stated in an interview with Beyond Cinema Magazine that "I'm not saying we all want to go and kill our kids, but a lot of women struggle. And it is a very taboo subject, to say that motherhood is anything but a perfect experience for women." Given the prevalence of ambivalent motherhood among mothers, namely due to the rise of 'new momism' and its pressures on modern women (Chapman and Gubi, 2019, p.11), the film's depiction of an imperfect mother who openly admits her ambivalence to her child, much like Eva in *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, represents another groundbreaking portrayal of motherhood in the Horror genre, and moves beyond a binary understanding of mothers as 'Good' or 'Bad', as this thesis aims to prove. Given the sheer volume of articles pertaining to the theme of motherhood in *The Babadook*, one can argue that Kent has fostered a dialogue about maternal ambivalence that has allowed a greater understanding of mother figures in later horror films, such as *Hereditary* and *The Witch*: "their fears are based in something very real: the trials of parenthood, and the fear of failing at it" (Campbell, 2018). Although Amelia arguably ends the film as a 'Good Mother', who loves and dotes upon Samuel, Kent does not

romanticise Amelia's maternity, instead portraying a single mother who is 'good enough' (Almond, 2010, p.26). She is finally capable of celebrating Samuel's birthday on the correct day, and takes pleasure in spending time with her child. Shown in the final scene with her scars and injuries from her confrontation with the Babadook, Amelia represents a work in progress. *The Babadook* is successful in using 'horror vérité' techniques, namely the surrealism of a monster as a manifestation of grief and maternal ambivalence, as it empathetically depicts a strong, complex, single mother. In doing so, it breaks away from one dimensional portrayals of single mothers in horror as incompetent and in need of a patriarchal figure to rescue them, thus paving the way for further depictions of flawed, 'good enough' single mothers, as later seen in *Bird Box*.

3.3 Redefining Motherhood: Maternal ambivalence and emotional sacrifice in *Bird Box*

Whilst Amelia suffers from maternal ambivalence as a result of the death of her husband and Samuel's 'monstrous' behaviour, and this is then symbolically personified in the form of the Babadook monster, *Bird Box*'s (2018) Malorie is ambivalent about motherhood from the moment of conception, but is soon tasked with caring for two children in a post-apocalyptic world. The rationale for choosing *Bird Box* as a case study can be attributed to the following: the film depicts maternal ambivalence as both a literal and figurative journey that leads to acceptance of the maternal role and the embodiment of a 'good enough' mother, and subsequently moves beyond an understanding of horror mothers as either 'Good' or 'Bad'. Furthermore, the film uses aesthetic horror strategies such as colour and framing in order to establish the differences between a traditional 'Good', pregnant mother, and an ambivalent pregnant mother. Through these two distinct versions of motherhood

that are embodied by two different women, the film explores misogynistic attitudes towards pregnant women and their bodies, thus offering an original contribution to this thesis.

In *Bird Box*, Malorie is pregnant and totally ambivalent towards motherhood at the beginning of the film. She does not express maternal desires, and considers putting her unborn child up for adoption. After the outbreak of an unknown entity that, once seen, causes people to commit suicide, Malorie witnesses the suicide of her sister Jessica, and takes refuge in a house with a group of strangers. Shortly after the arrival of Olympia, also heavily pregnant, both women go into labour. After Olympia commits suicide, as a result of seeing the entity, Malorie becomes a mother to both her son and Olympia's daughter. Malorie names the children 'Boy' and 'Girl', and in doing so, she ensures a level of emotional detachment that does not implicate her as their mother, even though she undertakes the physical acts of care needed to keep them alive. Malorie forms a relationship with fellow survivor Tom, who acts as a paternal figure to both children and indulges them with love and fairytales, much to Malorie's disapproval, who believes this gives them false hope. After he dies whilst saving them from attackers, Malorie embarks on a perilous journey down a river to find a safe haven with the two children, all blindfolded to protect them from the entity. Throughout their trip, both Malorie and the children are forced to face the true nature of their relationship and finally vocalise the love they have for each other. The film finishes with Malorie finally declaring that she is their mother, that she loves them, and naming them both Olympia and Tom.

The following analysis will establish that through 'horror vérité' techniques, including the exaggerated plotline of an apocalypse, and Malorie's character development as

a ‘good enough’ mother, the film redefines social definitions of motherhood and family structures. Acts of parenting socially and historically perceived as paternal, such as rule making and discipline (Hagenrater-Gooding, 2021, p.89) are embodied in Malorie’s character, and are essential in ensuring the survival of her children. Although Malorie is criticised by Tom for her perceived lack of traditional motherly qualities, such as sentimentality and nurturance, her success in raising her children in a world where they are constantly vulnerable to death confirms her parental capability. Director Susanne Bier uses the character of Olympia, an embodiment of Sarah Arnold’s ‘Good Mother’, who is soft, vulnerable and sentimental as a foil for Malorie’s stoic, strong and commanding demeanour. Whilst Olympia’s ‘Good Mother’ qualities are desirable in our current society, her incapacity to adapt to the dangers of a post-apocalyptic world make her an inept mother, and she is therefore punished with her death. This analysis shall critically use Arnold’s definitions of ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ mothers to work through Malorie’s character development, as she progresses from maternal ambivalence to acceptance, and posit that her final role as a ‘good enough’ mother redefines what constitutes modern maternity in an ever-changing society. This analysis shall also critically use Anaz and Ceretta’s (2019) interpretation of the inversion of light and dark symbolism in the film to demonstrate the film’s redefinition of horror tropes and motherhood.

3.3.1 Maternal ambivalence and the ‘Bad Mother’

The beginning of the film establishes Malorie as a ‘Bad Mother’, struggling with maternal ambivalence, and seemingly unprepared for the birth of her child. Living in a chaotic, cluttered art studio, without food or drink in the fridge, her sister Jessica goes so far as to state, “You can’t raise a kid here!” (*Bird Box*, 2018). Malorie paints a large mural depicting people sitting at a table, herself included, surrounded by

thick, black paint. She describes the painting to Jessica as reflecting “people’s inability to connect” (*Bird Box*, 2018), inferring that she is unable to emotionally connect with her child. Jessica denies this, stating that “it’s an immediate love affair” once a baby is born, and then saying “You should be afraid of being alone. Not of this” (*Bird Box*, 2018), at which point the camera cuts to a close up of Malorie’s face as she attempts to hide her disappointment. Jessica reminds the audience that expectant single mothers are socially obligated to fear being alone, with her use of the modal verb “should” underpinning the urgency of Malorie’s single status, which we understand is the result of a breakup with her ex “roommate” Ryan. From the point of view of a society that has traditionally revered the nuclear family, Malorie represents a “violation of preordained family structures” (Valdivia, 1998, p.275), and is thus a ‘Bad Mother’, whose depiction in a 21st century film can be seen to underpin the “dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the psychosocial structures of the family” (Arnold, 2013, p.69). Although Jessica is lighthearted in her teasing and scolding of Malorie, her dismissal of Malorie’s feelings of maternal ambivalence, and her clear disapproval of Malorie’s single mother status, is once again reflective of wider social anxieties pertaining to single mothers and ambivalent mothers, thus further stigmatising women in these categories.

A key scene in establishing Malorie’s ambivalence towards her pregnancy takes place in hospital, where Dr Lapham performs an ultrasound, which Malorie categorically refuses to look at (see figure 8). A wide bird’s eye shot looks down on Malorie, lying on a reclined chair as Dr Lapham performs the ultrasound, and Jessica stands by her side. The camera cuts between close up shots of each face, and a close up of the ultrasound, whilst the three women banter back and forth about Malorie’s attitude towards her pregnancy, which she refers to as a “condition”.

Figure 8: Malorie refuses to look at her ultrasound. Bird Box/Netflix.

The scene is lighthearted, but Malorie's statements including "a tiny glass of rose is not gonna hurt the little bean" (*Bird Box*, 2018), demonstrate the extent to which she is apathetic towards the life inside her, both failing to recognise that at almost nine months pregnant, her baby is no longer "a little bean", and that drinking alcohol whilst pregnant is strictly taboo and strongly advised against should you worry about the health of your child. Her use of the improper noun "bean", although initially perceived as playful, serves to detach herself from the child, imagining it as an object, rather than a living being. In applying Arnold's definition of a 'Bad Mother' in Horror, Malorie is "neglectful [and] selfish" (Arnold, 2013, p.68) in her attitude towards her baby, even more so once she considers the possibility of giving the baby away through adoption. In her essay on language in the adoption community, Weller states that social attitudes maintain that "To even consider adoption makes her, a 'birthmother', a lesser person. She's all at once a whore and a saint, no matter her final decision, if it even is her decision" (Weller, 2019, p.275). The film acknowledges such attitudes when Dr Lapham states "There's no judgement here", thus destigmatising the adoption process in the face of a society that still considers the

decision of birthmothers as immoral. In presenting Malorie's emotional conflict regarding her baby and her ambivalence in a way that both acknowledges her character flaws, but also sympathises with her plight, the film takes inspiration from earlier films such as *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, in which the nuances of maternal ambivalence encourage debate regarding society's failure to recognise maternal suffering without stigmatisation.

Clothed in a blue satin shirt worn underneath a baby blue coat, Malorie appears serene and relaxed in the scene, although the pastel hue of her coat, lined with blue fur, is striking as it feels at odds with the hard exterior she presents to the audience. Throughout the film Malorie is clothed in shades of blue, most notably in her pale blue coat, and in her blue blindfold. Director Susanne Bier's choice of the colour blue for Malorie is complex, as it has multiple connotations: it is at once soothing, cold, bold and reminiscent of the sky and water. Given that Malorie's name derives from the French word "malheureux" meaning unfortunate, ill fated and unlucky, one could contest that the colour blue connotes the deep sadness and turmoil within the character, who we come to understand had a difficult upbringing: "we would have a mother who would have actually raised us", "[my father] was fluent in asshole as well" (*Bird Box*, 2018). Anaz and Ceretta take a different view, anchored in their interpretation of the film as a paradoxical inversion of social understandings of light and dark: "the celestial light, the sky-blue [...] are symbols of the idea of clarity of luminosity [...] or in the negative sense, when there is excessive light, to meanings of blindness and glare" (Anaz and Ceretta, 2019, p.562). The inversion of cultural meanings of colour and light underpins the theme of ambivalence within the film. Natural light threatens the lives of the characters in the film, as it is the act of opening one's eyes that allows the creatures to inhabit the body and causes one to

commit suicide. As such, shutting oneself away in the dark is paradoxically safer than the light, and the characters take refuge within the blackness of their blindfolds:

> "The shadows, the dark, the night and blindness are negatively valued when they refer to the unknown, the chaos and the obscure, or positively when it has its meanings inverted or transmuted [...] the night is euphemized and becomes divine, time of the big rest" (Anaz and Ceretta, 2019, p.562).

As such, Malorie is figuratively blinded by her fears of motherhood in the light of day, yet it is physical blindness that provides her with the clarity to accept her love for her children and declare her role as their mother at the end of the film. This paradox is reflected in the evolution from her pale blue coat at the beginning of the film, to her dark blue blindfold and muddy clothes at the end.

The association of certain colours with motherhood in horror films is convoluted and reflective of the mother's role. As will be explored in the next chapter, the mothers in *Hereditary* and *mother!* are associated with earth tones, and the sacrifice of their bodies is key to the plot, therefore they are associated with nature and biological essentialism. In *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, Eva is drenched in red and surrounded by blue as a symbol of the blood that is figuratively on her hands, and serves as a constant reminder of the police lights at Kevin's crime scene. *The Babadook*'s Amelia is clouded in grief, and is therefore smothered by blacks, greys and dark blues that are claustrophobic and heavy. Amelia's fragility and outward presentations of 'Good Mother' qualities and femininity are further represented in her pastel pink dress. *Bird Box,* however, is less explicit in its symbolism, as reasoned by Anaz and Ceretta, precisely because it inverts interpretations of dark and light. Although the beginning of the film is bright and airy, it perversely signifies death and

trauma, and the muted tones of blue, pink and green later in the film might represent a blurred vision of the outside world beneath the safety of a blindfold. Given that the film plays on the inversion of social understandings of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ through such techniques, it is of no surprise that the theme of motherhood, and what constitutes a ‘good’ and ‘bad’ mother is challenged, notably through the arrival of Olympia.

3.3.2 The inversion of the ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ mother

Olympia’s arrival signifies the difference between social definitions of ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ mothers, and she serves as the foil for Malorie’s character. Knocking on the door, Olympia begs to enter the refuge of Greg’s house with the rest of the characters, as she has left her house after running out of food, claiming “I was afraid I’d starve my baby” (*Bird Box*, 2018). Malorie grabs a gun, pointing it at the door as Olympia enters, tearful and vulnerable in a satin pink blindfold, a symbol of her feminine vulnerability. The camera cuts from a close up of Malorie’s face as she tightly holds the gun, to a close up of a crying Olympia, before cutting to an over the shoulder wide shot (see figure 9) that centres Olympia in the frame, with Malorie’s gun pointed directly at her. It is the first shot that figures Olympia’s pregnant belly, and thus directly encourages a comparison between the two pregnant women. The shot concurrently juxtaposes Malorie’s ‘masculine’ solidity, holding the gun as a phallic symbol, with Olympia’s ‘feminine’ weakness as she trembles in the door. Their stark physical differences are also effective in establishing ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ motherhood: Olympia’s round, larger form and her blonde ringlets indicate a softness of character and maternal warmth, whereas Malorie’s sharp black bob and angular features indicate an inherent hardness that is less commonly associated with traditional images of maternity.

Figure 9: Malorie points a gun at Olympia. Bird Box/Netflix.

In spite of the transparent character differences between the two women, both are defined and allied by their pregnancy, much to Malorie's dismay. Olympia's first question to Malorie pertains to her due date, with Olympia proudly declaring "October 1st" as she caresses her belly, to which Malorie hesitantly replies "Uh, end of, uh, September" (*Bird Box*, 2018); her vagueness further demonstrating her lack of interest in her own pregnancy. Olympia later insists upon sleeping next to Malorie, reasoning that "it might be good for us to be close, considering.." (*Bird Box*, 2018), as she gestures towards her belly, and in doing so deduces that in sharing the experience of pregnancy, they should stick together in solidarity, not realising that Malorie does not share her enthusiasm. This scene further demonstrates the striking differences between the two women, with Malorie turning her back to Olympia and the maternal world she represents, the line of the bed creating a symbolic and literal divide between them (see figure 10). Rather than taking the hint, Olympia proceeds to badger Malorie with questions pertaining to her marital status and baby names, which we view from a tilt-shift shot that sharpens Malorie's image, whilst blurring Olympia behind her shoulder (see figure 10).

Figure 10: Malorie turns away from Olympia and her 'Good Mothering' Bird Box/Netflix.

The shot connotes the power dynamic between the two women, clearly demonstrating Malorie's dominance in front of the camera, and foreshadowing Olympia's absence as a mother to her daughter later on, as she fades into the background. The quick succession of these shots that each depict a physical, emotional and maternal divide between the two women is explicit in its intention of establishing two opposing notions of motherhood, with Malorie viewed as 'Bad' in the traditional sense due to her disinterest in her pregnancy. However, Olympia embodies Arnold's definition of a 'Good Mother', both adoring of her husband

deployed in the army, and heavily concerned with the wellbeing of her unborn child. We are additionally encouraged to compare the two women through shots depicting Olympia taking prenatal vitamins, and Malorie drinking whisky with Douglas: two instances that considerably demonstrate the extent to which both mothers care for the wellbeing of their children.

Olympia's 'Good Mother' qualities are her downfall in this post-apocalyptic world, and her inability to protect herself, particularly when pregnant, ironically makes her a 'Bad Mother'. Such a paradoxical inversion of our social understanding of motherhood is key in demonstrating the nuances of Malorie's mothering that, although lacking in sentimentality, are key to ensuring the survival of her children. Arnold righly states that although the 'Good Mother' "valorises self-sacrifice, selflessness and nurturance" (Arnold, 2013, p.37), she is "aligned with utter passivity" and she is "incompatible with the assertiveness necessary for survival" (Arnold, 2013, p.46) in the context of a horror film. Her arrival in the household signifies a weakening of the pre-established refuge, both as another drain on the already diminished supplies, and as a character in need of constant protection. Douglas, the self-proclaimed "asshole" of the film, bemoans, "Great. Now we can all starve here in the maternity ward" (*Bird Box*, 2018), vocalising the fragility that pregnant women represent, burdening the household with their physical vulnerability (Grafius and Stevenson, 2021, p.4). Indeed, Olympia's lapse in judgement in allowing Gary, a criminally insane murderer, to enter the house, leads to the deaths of most of the other characters, resulting in many memes online pertaining to the general hatred of the character: "I don't often wish a movie character dead within the first five minutes of meeting them, but that sure was the case with Olympia" (Garrett, 2018). Olympia is sweet, but viewed as a "simpleton" by the other characters, and her death straight

after giving birth to her daughter is tragic, but unsurprising given her naivety and inability to detect danger. Her death, ironically, ensures the survival of her daughter, as she is entrusted into Malorie's care, whose stoic and hardy nature are more compatible with endurance in this world. Arnold refers to the 'Good Mother' being "overshadowed by a more powerful agent: the father, who either threatens or secures the family" (Arnold, 2013, p.37), a role performed by Malorie, who both figuratively dominates Olympia in the camera shots, and literally secures the family unit.

Olympia's character is arguably one dimensional and shallow in the context of the film, as she primarily serves as a foil in order to establish Malorie as the rightful maternal protagonist. Given that her femininity and softer personality are viewed as weaknesses by the other characters, and lead to her death, one could argue that the film perpetuates the misogynistic attitudes that Arnold references with regards to 'Good Mother' tropes in earlier horror films: "the film text reduces the female to object" (Arnold, 2013, p.19). In presenting Olympia as a one dimensional character that audiences are encouraged to dislike due to her lack of survival instinct, the film further entrenches misogynistic attitudes pertaining to mothers in horror. Arnold refers to the "concept of the good mother [being] attacked" (Arnold, 2013, p.38), meaning the 'Good Mother' is killed to advance the plot. Olympia is a 'Good Mother' in our society, yet in an apocalyptic world she becomes the 'Bad Mother' as she is incapable of protecting herself and her child. Consequently, Anaz and Ceretta's theory of inversion pertaining to the social understandings of light and dark can also be applied to the notion of the 'Good' and 'Bad' mothers in *Bird Box*, thus paradoxically making Olympia 'Bad' and Malorie 'Good' in the apocalyptic world of the film. However, given the nuances of complex motherhood found in the films in

this thesis, it feels perfunctory on director Susanne Bier's part to not have offered a more nuanced presentation of motherhood outside of Malorie's character, and the film thus fails to progress beyond a binary understanding of the 'Good Mother'.

3.3.3 Redefining the 'Good Mother'

Director Susanne Bier uses 'horror vérité' techniques including an exaggerated plotline and the threat of a surreal monster in order to place duress on the protagonist, Malorie, and subsequently redefine what constitutes a 'Good Mother' through Malorie's reactions to these outside influences. Bier also uses the deaths of Olympia and Tom as a means of establishing a non traditional family unit, wherein Malorie is both mother and father to her two children, one of whom is not biologically hers. In doing so, Bier prompts discussion pertaining to adoption and family structures outside of the norm of the 'nuclear family'. Malorie embodies traditionally masculine qualities such as assertiveness and independence, whilst largely neglecting the nurturing and sentimental aspects of the 'Good Mother', and she therefore represents the "law of the father" (Williams, 2014, p.14) in the family structure. Given the constant threat of death in the apocalyptic world of the fim, Malorie does not have the luxury of coaxing her children, Boy and Girl, into submission. Our introduction to the characters establish this at the beginning of the film, through an extreme close up shot of her eyes and face, slowly zooming out as she firmly establishes the ground rules for their trip along the river. Her words are violent: "Under no circumstance are you allowed to take off your blindfold. If I find that you have, I will hurt you [...] If you look you will die". The camera cuts to a close up of two baby-faced children, and we realise the gravity and shocking nature of Malorie's words. We are also struck by the manner with which she addresses them as "Boy" and "Girl", as we later learn that she has not given them names. In naming

them as common nouns, she does not accord them the identity that a first name signifies, and therefore establishes a level of emotional detachment that arguably stems from her maternal ambivalence and her reticence to have children in the first place. Furthermore, in establishing an emotional detachment from the children, their deaths may be less traumatic for Malorie, unlike the deaths of everyone important to her throughout the film: her sister Jessica, Olympia, her friends and family, and later, Tom. Grief is a key theme in the film: should you look at the entity you are so overcome with grief and emotion that you commit suicide; Malorie is in a constant state of grief regarding the loss of her friends and family, she grieves the loss of her life pre motherhood, and the loss of normality in a post-apocalyptic world. Consequently, the choice not to name the children represents Malorie's attempts to control and contain one aspect of her grief, believing that in doing so, she may suffer less should she lose them.

The theme of grief is further explored through the presentation of Malorie and Olympia's traumatic childbirths, as is also explored in *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and *The Babadook*: Eva gives birth to Kevin contorted and in pain, Amelia gives birth to Samuel as her husband dies, and Malorie gives birth to Boy during the mass murder that results in Olympia killing herself after looking at the entity. One could argue that in doing so, all three films use the exaggerated aspects of 'horror vérité' to raise awareness of traumatic birth and post-natal depression, which continues to be misunderstood in wider society (Homewood, Tweed, Cree, Crossley, 2009, p.313). Similarly, the presence of these scenes and their themes of trauma fly in the face of the highly sexualised and romanticised scenes of childbirth in Hollywood, notably in romantic comedies, as previously stated. Other films outside of the horror genre have since realistically depicted traumatic birth and postnatal depression such as

Pieces of a Woman (2020), that depicts the death of a newborn baby after complications in labour, and documents the subsequent grief and fallout. The 24 minute one take birth scene represents a groundbreaking, unflinching portrayal of childbirth hitherto unseen in cinema, and responds to the demand for more realistic depictions of childbirth. The 'horror vérité' qualities of the birth scenes in *Pieces of a Woman*, and the films in this thesis signify a step in the right direction for social recognition of postnatal depression and traumatic birth, and merit continued research and analysis in the years to come.

Despite her success in keeping Boy and Girl alive, Malorie's mothering is criticised and maligned. After cutting short Tom's fairytale story that he recounts to Boy and Girl, Malorie and Tom, who have been in a relationship since the childrens' birth, argue about Malorie's parenting. Malorie reproaches his fairytale story about playing in trees with other children, as she believes it gives the children false hope, and in doing so, detracts from the goal of survival: "They'll never climb trees, they are never gonna make new friends!" (*Bird Box*, 2018). The camera cuts quickly between close ups of Malorie and Tom's faces, both on opposite sides of the room, creating an atmosphere of division. Malorie is heavily accusatory, stating "They're gonna die if they listen to you!", to which Tom replies ,"You need to love them knowing that you may lose them at any second. They deserve dreams. They deserve love. They deserve hope. They deserve a mother. They deserve a mother. You haven't given them names Mal! Their names are Boy and Girl!". His repetition and insistence that "they deserve a mother" effaces Malorie's role, and demonstrates the extent to which he believes that she does not embody social expectations of maternity, thus rendering her acts of mothering obsolete. Hagrenrater-Gooding states that "Malorie is haunted by the (societal) mirror by which she feels she must measure up (the one

of an idealised mother)" in which she self-decrepitates her success in raising her children through the constant comparison to a "model of mother that focuses on affect and feeling and obscures the *work* of mothering" (Hagenrater-Gooding, 2021, p.89). In doing so, the film acknowledges the influence of 'new momism' on social expectations of mothering, but uses Malorie's imperfect mothering as a form of resistance to the "unrealistic pressures [women] plac[e] on themselves because of cultural ideals" (Chapman and Gubi, 2019, p.10). Subsequently, Malorie continues to embody both the 'maternal' and 'paternal' role and thus resists hegemonic, traditionalist perceptions of 'good' mothering.

The film's emotional climax occurs in the forest wherein Malorie loses both Boy and Girl, and must convince them of her love in order to get them back. Throughout the film, Malorie's relationship with Girl is full of tension, with Malorie scolding Girl's inability to detect danger, much like her birth mother Olympia: "I can't trust you!" (*Bird Box,* 2018). Malorie even considers sacrificing Girl by insinuating that she should remove her blindfold to guide the boat through the rapids, and her treatment of Girl raises questions regarding the relationship between non-biological children and adoptive mothers in a society that continues to view adoptive families as "second best" to biological ones (Baxter et al.,2014; Weller, 2019, p.270). Indeed, despite her ambivalence towards her pregnancy, Malorie outwardly demonstrates a preference for her son, Boy, to her adopted daughter. This is likely due to the obedience he demonstrates, his embodiment of Malorie's strength and being her biological son. Girl represents a burden that Malorie had never intended to undertake. However, one could argue that her act of saving Girl from Olympia before her suicide constituted a conscious choice to become her mother. Nevertheless, Girl's awareness of Malorie's unspoken feelings result in her reticence to return to Malorie

once the three are separated in the forest at the end of the film. The scene depicts Malorie and her children facing the wrath of the creature who chases them through the forest, using the voices of loved ones to convince them to take their masks off. After they are separated, Malorie calls to them, finding Boy who reveals Girl's true feelings towards Malorie: "She's scared of you!" (*Bird Box*, 2018). The handheld camera evokes the chaos and panic that Malorie is experiencing as she frantically searches for her children. Cutting back and forth between close ups of Malorie and Girl's face, Malorie finally vocalises her true love for Girl and apologises for her mistakes: "I'm so sorry sweet girl, I'm so sorry. I was wrong. I shouldn't have been so harsh [...] I need you to come to me, baby come to me…..I love you so much, I love you so much" (*Bird Box*, 2018).

Much like Amelia's battle with the Babadook as a metaphor for her grief, Malorie's final battle with the monster allows her to come to terms with her love for her children and her declaration that she is their mother, in spite of her initial struggles with maternal ambivalence. As such, she finally releases the repressed love for her children that her fear of losing them to tragedy previously prevented her from expressing. One could argue that in doing so, she finally embodies the nurturing 'Good Mother' qualities that Olympia represented, implying that Malorie's previous version of mothering that ensured the childrens' survival was not sufficient when faced with the task of bringing the children back to her. Anaz and Ceretta argue that in doing so, "The hero's relationship with motherhood- from reluctance/rejection to acceptance- establishes the premise of the movie that the maternal instinct defeats all evil" (Anaz and Ceretta, 2019, p.561). As such, one could argue that the film's ending returns to an idealisation of the 'Good Mother' archetype in which the child's survival necessitates maternal sacrifice (Arnold, 2013, p.45). Malorie's pleas to the

sanctuary “Please just take my children!” as the monster risks engulfing them all demonstrates her embodiment of the ‘Good Mother’s’ selflessness: a stark contrast to her maternal ambivalence at the beginning of the film. However, it can be contended that Malorie’s final acceptance of her mother role, as evidenced when she states “I am their mother”, constructs her as a “good enough mother”. Although she may not always outwardly demonstrate affection and maternal love, she “provid[es] a safe and holding environment” for her children (Winnicott, 1960, p.594; Almond, 2010, p.26-32), and that is not only enough, but “perfectly normal” (Winnicott, 1960; Almond, 2010, p.32). In doing so, the film not only resists hegemonic standards of postfeminist ‘new momism’, but also normalises imperfect mothering, and is therefore a testament to the shifting social attitudes towards motherhood.

3.4 Chapter Conclusion

Having analysed all three films, it is clear that since Lynne Ramsay’s seminal film *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, there has been a distinct increase in films depicting complex mother figures struggling with feelings of ambivalence. Such an increase reflects the rise in a social acknowledgement of maternal ambivalence as a reaction to the pressures of ‘new momism’ that dictates a return to conservative family values and a nuclear family discourse (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, p.4). All three mothers undergo an emotional transformation, notably from being overwhelmingly ambivalent towards their child(ren), to accepting of their role as a mother. Interestingly, all three mothers declare their ambivalence to their child in one way or another: Eva declares “Mummy was happy before widdle Kevin came along. You know that?”, Amelia states “You don’t know how many times I wished it was you, not him who died!”, and Malorie heavily implies that she wants Girl to sacrifice her life on the rapids. Although

controversial and generally viewed as the actions of a ‘Bad Mother’ who is “emotionally abusive” (Arnold, 2013, p.68), these moments represent a release of the repressed emotions of women who continue to be stigmatised for expressing dissatisfaction with motherhood. In the face of ‘new momism’ and a romanticisation of maternity, as demonstrated in Hollywood rom-coms, these films use ‘horror vérité’ to reflect the lesser known realities of motherhood, and subsequently offer the opportunity for wider discussions and less binary visions of mothers in Horror.

4. Ambivalent Motherhood and Physical Sacrifice

The previous chapter established that ambivalent, emotionally sacrificial mother figures resist the idealised perfection of 'new momism' through nuanced 'horror vérité' directorial choices. The following chapter shall analyse *Hereditary* (2018) and *mother!* (2017) through a 'horror vérité' lens that both analyses the maternal ambivalence, or lack thereof, in the two films, as well as the presentation of wider social ambivalence towards motherhood. Social ambivalence towards motherhood is demonstrated in the films through the physical deaths of the mothers, as well as the abjectification, or objectification of the maternal body.

The rationale for choosing these two films can be accredited to their contrasting depictions of motherhood as a lived experience: *Hereditary*'s Annie is the 'imperfect' mother, who expresses maternal ambivalence towards her son, thus aligning her with the mothers in the first chapter of this thesis. Contrastingly, maternity in *mother!* is constructed through a 'new momism' lens of 'perfect' motherhood, and 'mother' exemplifies the qualities of a 'Good Mother'. However, both mothers are physically sacrificed in order to allow for the physical or spiritual rebirth of either themselves or their child(ren), thus embodying Kristeva's view that "matricide is our vital necessity, the sine-qua-non condition of our individuation" (Kristeva, 1989, p.27-28). The extent to which this is misogynistic shall be briefly explored using Alison Stone's critique of Kristeva's theory, in which she argues that it is deeply "problematic" due to the "sexed hierarchy that it enshrines" that privileges the "third term of the father" and deems it necessary to "break up the mother/child dyad" (Stone, 2012, p.118-119).

As in the previous chapter, Landsberg's 'horror vérité' shall be used as a critical framework in order to deconstruct the ways in which these films oppose and/or conform to ideals of postfeminist 'new momism'. Similarly, Arnold's 'Good' and 'Bad' mother chapters shall be used to ground the mother figures in order to establish the wider social tensions and ambiguities that surround maternal bodies and development within the films. Erin Harrington's book, *Women, Monstrosity and Horror film* (2017) will also be used as a framework for unpacking the 'gynaehorror' tropes, such as the 'woman as house' motif that is used in *mother!,* and the "hagsploitation" (Harrington, 2017) elements of *Hereditary*. Similarly, Kristeva's theory of abjection, the works of Sharpe and Sexon, Rebecca Tuvel, Creed and Alison Stone shall be used to examine the implications of abject corporeality and matricide within the context of postfeminism.

4.1 Resentment, Matricide and Abjection: Maternal Ambivalence in *Hereditary*

Ari Asters 2018 film *Hereditary* depicts the unravelling and demise of the Graham family, centred on the protagonist Annie, portrayed by Toni Collette. The film opens with the funeral of Annie's dead mother, Ellen Leigh, a mysterious figure for whom Annie harbours ambivalent feelings of both love, hatred and resentment. Working as a miniature artist, and living with her psychiatrist husband Steve, Annie is distrustful of her teenage son Peter, yet she is highly protective of her 13 year old daughter, Charlie. Charlie is noticeably different from her family: she cuts up dead animals, fabricates figurines out of trash, draws macabre portraits, and prefers to sleep outdoors in the treehouse. After Annie forces Charlie to accompany Peter to a party, Charlie consumes nuts, resulting in a severe anaphylactic shock. As Peter drives hastily back home, Charlie leans her head out of the rear window, and is

‘accidentally’ decapitated after hitting a telephone pole. Believing Peter to be responsible for her death, Annie's resentment towards Peter culminates in two damning monologues in which she reveals she never wanted him and she can’t forgive him: her maternal ambivalence is exposed. Throughout the film it is revealed that Annie’s mother was the leader of a satanic cult that invoked the demon king Paimon, whose spirit resided in Charlie, but being covetous of a male form, desires to inhabit Peter’s body. Thus it is revealed that Charlie’s death was orchestrated by the cult. As Annie discovers that Peter is to be sacrificed, she attempts to sacrifice herself in order to spare his life. Whilst trying to do so, Steve is killed, and Annie is possessed by Paimon. The final sequence of the film sees Annie/Paimon chase Peter, before cutting her own head off. Peter jumps from a window, his soul is killed, and his body is inhabited by Charlie/Paimon. As he climbs into the treehouse, the headless bodies of Annie and Ellen Leigh bow before him, and the cult declares to serve him, chanting in unison, “Hail Paimon!”.

The following analysis aims to establish that the film builds on the foundation of maternal ambivalence first depicted in *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, and extends upon this through a protagonist that is ambivalent towards both her mother and her son. In doing so the film actively rejects “postfeminism’s affective orientation towards maternal happiness” (Smyth, 2020, p.2). Through an analysis of the maternal ambivalence and ‘Bad Mother’ actions that Annie perpetrates towards Peter, as well as her imperfect attempts to save him, I aim to demonstrate that the film possesses elements of a ‘horror vérité’ critique of ‘new momism’ and the perfect standards of contemporary motherhood, as posited by Douglas and Michaels (2004). This will be achieved through a critical lens of Arnold’s ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ mother chapters in order to establish Annie as nuanced, ambivalent, and more reflective of the ‘imperfect’

mother hypothesised by Donald Winnicott (1960), and expanded upon by Barbara Almond (2010). However, I also aim to establish that the depiction of the maternal body as abject, and the presence of matricide as a means of allowing Charlie's rebirth, renders the feminism of the film ambiguous and is representative of continued ambivalent attitudes towards maternal corporeality. Sharpe and Sexon's essay *Mother's Milk and Menstrual Blood* (2018), Tuvel's chapter *Exposing the breast* (2012), Harrington's book *Women, Monstrosity and Horror film* (2017) and Alison Stone's critique of Kristeva's theory of matricide shall be used in order to examine the abject implications of maternal corporeality within the film, and the ways in which these render both Annie and her mother as 'monstrous'.

4.1.1 The ambivalent 'Bad Mother'

Annie's relationship with Peter is a central source of tension within the film: she is at once 'Bad Mother' and 'Sacrificial Mother', thus making her ambivalent. After Charlie's death, Annie becomes a 'Bad Mother' through her emotional abuse of Peter. In a pivotal scene during which the family have dinner, Annie declares that she "can't forgive" Peter for his unwitting role in the tragedy, spitting furiously at him, hurling insults as she calls him "a little shit", and yelling "I am your mother!". Leering menacingly over the table in a wide shot, Annie is established by Aster as a 'Bad Mother': she is "neglectful", "selfish" and "emotionally abusive", and most importantly, she transgresses the patriarchal structures of the nuclear family (Arnold, 2013, p.68-69), as demonstrated by her physical and emotional dominance over the men in this scene. In her analysis of *The Babadook*, Briefel notes that Amelia's "verbal assaults" aimed at Samuel, in which she tells him to "eat shit", "allow for a new alliance with her child" (Briefel, 2017, p.18), as both mother and son are able to recognise and process their own grief and ambivalences. However, in *Hereditary*, Annie's release

of her resentment towards Peter serves only to widen the emotional chasm between them, as she is incapable of acknowledging her own role in Charlie's death, which Peter reminds her of: "What about you mum? She didn't want to go to the party. So why was she there?".

The scene is drenched in an orange/yellow hue that permeates the film, and is also omnipresent in the other two films in this chapter: *mother!* and *Goodnight Mommy*. The significance of colours being associated with mother figures has already been discussed in chapter one, in which Eva, Amelia and Malorie are all associated with shades of reds, blues or pinks which are symbolically representative of death, guilt, grief and gender stereotypes within the realm of postfeminism and 'new momism'. However, it is significant that in this chapter, all three films use earth tones, notably yellow as a motif. Yellow has a significant history in Horror, both in literature and in film. It is most famously used in *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, in which a woman suffering with postnatal depression is confined by her husband, a doctor, to a room covered in yellow wallpaper. Losing all sense of reality in the captivity of her room, she is convinced that a woman is trapped in the pattern of the yellow wallpaper, and attempts to free her. We can see similarities between the book and *Hereditary* throughout the film: Annie's husband Steve is a psychiatrist, Annie is frequently associated with the colour yellow, and she has a family history of mental illness ("My father died [...] from starvation because he had psychotic depression [and] my older brother who had schizophrenia [...] hanged himself in my mother's bedroom"). Furthermore, the voyeuristic trick shots that Aster uses to blur the distinction between reality and Annie's miniatures, as demonstrated in the opening scene demonstrate the extent to which Annie's life is governed by outside forces, and that she is confined within a domestic realm.

Throughout the film, yellow is used in scenes characterised by grief and suffering: our first glimpse of Charlie's wake is a surreal close up through yellow stained glass, the dinner scene is uplit in yellow, Steve's death by fire lights the room in a yellow glow, and Charlie/Paimon's coronation is imbued by yellow light. Interestingly, when Annie reveals to Steve that her mother's cult plans to sacrifice Peter, the camera steadies on a close up of Steve in front of a wall covered in a yellow motif that recalls the motif described in *The Yellow Wallpaper* (figure 11).

Figure 11: Annie, Steve and the Yellow Wallpaper. Hereditary/A24.

In this scene, Annie is the 'Bad Mother' characterised by her "emotional and sensational outpourings" (Arnold, 2013, p.78), whose "hysterical body is inaccessible to the male protagonists" (Arnold, 2013, p.128). Steve's insistence that Annie is delusional ("You are sick Annie!") is further significative of patriarchal "suspicion of the female world" that is characterised by the "supernatural" (Arnold, 2013, p.105), and he is punished for his refusal to believe her by his death: a feminist renunciation of the male, medical universe that is also echoed in *Suspiria* (2018) in which the psychotherapist Dr Klemperer is tortured by the witches for his dismissal of his female patients' concerns. Carol Clover remarks that the "split" between "White Science and Black Magic" is often featured in the horror genre:

> White Science refers to Western rational tradition. Its representatives are nearly always white males, typically doctors, and its tools are surgery, drugs, psychotherapy, and other forms of hegemonic science. Black Magic, on the other hand, refers to satanism, voodoo, spiritualism, and folk variants of Roman Catholicism. (Clover, 1992, p.66)

Although this 'split' in both *Hereditary* and *Suspiria*, depicts male doctors 'othering' women and accusing them of insanity, the torture and deaths of these men is arguably representative of a resistance to the patriarchal hierarchy historically enshrined in the horror genre. Furthermore, from a 'horror vérité' perspective, both Patrick-Weber and Chambers argue that contemporary films both within and without the horror genre reflect the "increasing clinicization and medicalization" of motherhood (Chambers, 2020, p.216-219). Consequently, both *Hereditary* and *Suspiria*'s violence towards patriarchal, medical figures potentially signifies a cathartic form of revenge on a system that inordinately marginalises mothers (Patrick-Weber, 2020, p.13).

Annie's inability to process her own guilt, and subsequent ambivalence towards Peter reflects the reality of maternal ambivalence as a lived experience: she "externalises" her feelings, rather than processing them. This results in her seeing Peter "as an embodiment of hated or problematic parts of herself`", making her "angrier". Almond posits that women who "externalise" their maternal ambivalence in this way are more likely to have a "disturbed" relationship relationship with their own mother (Almond, 2010, p.28). This is indeed the case for Annie, as will be explored later on. As such, the film uses the 'horror vérité' trope of an "exaggerated" plot (Landsberg, 2018, p.632) - the horrific death of a child in a satanic sacrifice - in order to illustrate the realism of resentment, grief and maternal ambivalence, thus increasing awareness of the 'taboo' reality of millions of women. Patrick-Weber theorises that the "rhetorical genre [...] of the horror film as a persuasive tool" can encourage horror film audiences, which she stipulates are "mainly male" - a view also supported by Oliver and Sanders (2004, p.242) - to "identify with" the plight of the female protagonist, and subsequently empathise with maternal suffering (Patrick-Weber, 2020, p.2-5). Through the realism of Annie's maternal ambivalence, and through understanding that she is capable of 'Badness', the film follows in the footsteps of *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and *The Babadook* in generating discussion concerning imperfect, ambivalent motherhood, and is consequently significant of a continued opposition to hegemonic standards dictated by postfeminist 'new momism' (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, p.4).

In order to process her resentment and regain figurative control of her life, Annie creates a miniature of Charlie's death, much to the disbelief and anger of her husband Steve: "How do you think *Peter's* gonna feel about that?". Whilst Annie

professes the miniature to be harmless (“It’s a neutral view of the accident”), she later trashes her studio in a fit of rage and decapitates a miniature of Peter: a symbolic reenactment of the fate she subconsciously would have preferred him to suffer instead of Charlie. Earlier on in the film, she dreams of Peter’s dead body, in which the orifices of his eyes, nose and mouth pulsate with ants: an almost exact replica of Charlie’s rotting, decapitated head (see figure 12).

Figure 12: Charlie and Peter’s heads mirror each other. Hereditary/A24.

Peter is symbolically dismembered and ‘castrated’ by the doubled motif of the rotting head that recalls Charlie’s death, which like most female deaths in horror is “extended, occur[ing] in close range and in graphic detail”, making it “erotically charged” (Clover, 1992, p.35; Pinedo, 1997, p.75) through the abject penetration of bodily orifices. Peter’s association with his sister’s death both emasculates him, and foreshadows the ‘penetration’ of his body by Paimon/Charlie once they use him as a host. The significance of Peter’s decapitation in both the miniature and Annie’s dream is "the capital symbolic act of violence" (Palmer, 2009, p.137 quoting Janes, 2005, p.255), that Annie subconsciously desires as a corporal punishment for his role in Charlie’s death. Given that dreams are “the embodiment of repressed desires, tensions, fears that our conscious mind rejects” (Wood, 2020, p.115), and that Freud first theorised the “metaphor of a house to clarify [...] the concepts of repression” (Roediger, 1980, p.234), Annie’s miniature houses and recreations of traumatic moments in her life are symbolic of her attempts to process and ‘other’ her repressed fears into inanimate objects, so that they no longer pose her any danger in the real world, including the threat that she believes Peter poses to her family. Annie subconsciously fears Peter, which Peter acknowledges during the dream sequence: “Why are you scared of me?”. He is a ‘monstrous child’ that she must incapacitate, and the miniature foreshadows the film’s climax, in which she chases and attempts to murder him whilst possessed by Paimon. Although Annie is not in control of her body or actions, Peter is unaware of her possession, thus believing that Annie has finally decided to kill him and avenge Charlie’s death: he pleads with her “Mum I’m sorry [...] Mummy, Mummy, please, I’m begging you to stop!”. Unlike Amelia’s possession in *The Babadook*, which is “perversely” beneficial to both mother and son, Annie’s possession appears to “legitimiz[e] a display of aberrant feminine

behaviour" that has hitherto characterised her relationship with Peter, thus making her "depraved, monstrous [and] abject" (Creed, 1993, p.127), and cementing her as a 'Bad Mother' figure.

Although Annie presents 'Bad Mother' behaviours, she exemplifies an imperfect mother through her simultaneous maternal ambivalence, her desire to save her children and her willingness to sacrifice herself for Peter. During the same nightmare in which Peter's head crawls with ants, Annie confesses to Peter, "I never wanted to be your mother". As the camera cuts between the shot-reverse-shots of Annie and Peter, she proclaims that she "tried to have a miscarriage", but that "it didn't work" and her mother "pressured" her into giving birth. Peter sobs, crying "You tried to kill me, why did you try to kill me?", dripping wet, and the camera cuts back to Annie, also wet, sobbing "I didn't I was trying to save you!". Lighting a match, her face is illuminated by fire as Peter's bed is set ablaze. The scene is a direct reference to a real event that Annie describes earlier in the film in which she poured paint thinner over herself, Peter and Charlie during a sleepwalking episode and woke herself up lighting the match. The scene is also central to an understanding of Annie as both a 'horror vérité' figure who expresses the 'taboo' of maternal ambivalence, and as a 'perversely' sacrificial mother. Subconsciously aware of the grisly fate that awaits them all at the hands of her mother's cult, Annie attempts to "save" them by killing them. In using infanticide as a perverse form of mercy, Annie blurs the distinction between 'Good' and 'Bad', making her an "imperfect mother": a figure of motherhood that is "socially and culturally condemn[ed]" (Almond, 2010, p.26) in a society that demands maternal perfection. Annie's admission that she "didn't feel like a mother" is reflective of the realities of millions of pregnant women, some of whom fear that they may produce a "monster child" resembling their own mothers, with whom they

have ambivalent relationships (Almond, 2010, p.50). Therefore, much like *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and *The Babadook*, the film depicts a mother actively expressing her ambivalence towards her own child, and in doing so increases awareness of maternal ambivalence in a society that has historically dismissed it (Chapman and Gubi, 2019, p.2). Annie is an imperfect mother, and does commit 'Bad Mother' acts throughout the film, yet after declaring her ambivalence in her dream, she attempts to reconcile with Peter: "I'm so, so sorry for everything, please, please forgive me! I can't stand the things I said". In confessing the 'taboo' of her maternal ambivalence to Peter, albeit in her dreams, Annie is able to confront the feelings she has hitherto repressed, and subsequently move forward in repairing their relationship: her redemption arc begins.

4.1.2 The sacrificial ambivalent mother

Upon realising that Peter is the cult's intended sacrifice, Annie becomes the 'Self-Sacrificial Mother' as she attempts to kill herself in exchange for Peter's life. Arnold defines the 'Self-Sacrificial Mother' through the lens of the 'Good Mother': the 'Good Mother' is selfless, sacrificial, yet ultimately powerless and "aligned with utter passivity". She is a symbol of "essential motherhood": her "biological [and] emotional capacities" make motherhood "natural and inevitable" (Arnold, 2013, p.39-46). Arnold acknowledges that there is a gap in literature on the sacrificial mother and solely concentrates on the concept of the 'Good Mother' as sacrificial, and there is a subsequent lack of literature on the 'Bad' or imperfect sacrificial mother. As posited by Harrington, the binary notions of 'Good' and 'Bad' motherhood in Horror do not account for the "shifts and swings" of popular culture and social anxieties that are "articulated, enforced and challenged" in horror films (Harrington, 2017). Consequently, Annie's role as an imperfect mother, that commits 'Bad Mother' acts,

recognises her maternal ambivalence *and* simultaneously tries to sacrifice herself like a 'Good Mother' represents a groundbreaking resistance to binary motherhood and the horror tropes that permeated the genre in the years before Arnold's publication. In doing so, the film combats archetypes of motherhood that are rooted in 'new momism' and postfeminism standards of maternal perfection, and signals a shift in depictions of motherhood in horror that is reflected in the films in this thesis.

After seeing drawings of Peter screaming manifest in Charlie's notebook, Annie attempts to burn it in order to rid the house of the curse she fears hangs over them, and prevent Peter's death. In burning the notebook she believes that she will catch fire and die, and she says her last goodbyes to Steve: "You are the love of my life". Unfortunately, upon throwing the book into the fire, Steve bursts into flames and Annie is possessed by Paimon. She later saws her own head off with a piano string, suspended in the air as Peter watches in disbelief. Like most male deaths in horror, Steve's death is relatively swift: "even if the victim grasps what is happening to him, he has no time to react or register terror" (Clover, 1992, p.35). However, his death is not "viewed from a distance [or] offscreen" (Clover, 1992, p.35) as would dictate the traditional male death. Indeed, he is associated with the feminine through his death by fire, a fate also suffered by the two other mothers in this chapter. Through his feminine death, he is punished for his inability to separate Peter from the "all encompassing, engulfing, and potentially lethal relation with the mother" (Arnold, 2013, p.10), and he therefore ceases to be paternal in the structure of the nuclear family. On the contrary, Annie's death is typical of a female death in horror: "The murders of women [...] are filmed at closer range, in more graphic detail, and at greater length." (Clover, 1992, p.35). Wide, close up and extreme close up shots show Annie staring emptily at Peter, slicing her neck with increasing speed as blood

flies through the air. Accompanied by the wet sounds of flesh opening, she is abjectified as “woman as bleeding wound”, who is “literally and symbolically castrated” (Creed, 1993, p.444) and associated with the maternal substances of blood and milk, as demonstrated by the juxtaposition between the red blood and her white coat. It is here that the feminism of the film becomes ambiguous. The abject nature of her death and castration reduces Annie to a misogynistic horror trope whose death appears to punish her for her ‘transgressions’ as an imperfect and ambivalent mother. Furthermore, the necessity of matricide in the film in order to allow for Charlie/Paimon’s rebirth into a male body perpetuates the “eliminat[ion] of the maternal in favour of [...] the masculine symbolic world”, and insists that matricide is “the only means towards individuation” (Arnold, 2013, p.73-91). In doing so, the film fails to progress beyond the abjection and demonisation of maternal corporeality, as further demonstrated by the relationship between Annie and her mother.

4.1.3 ‘Hagsploitation’ and the abject maternal

Hereditary’s abjectification of the maternal body is significant of wider social anxieties and ambivalence towards maternal corporeality. This is primarily evidenced in the abject portayal of Annie’s mother, Ellen Leigh, her death and her relationship with Annie. Their relationship transgresses the “bodily boundaries of the flesh” (Sharpe and Sexon, 2018, p.2) through a blurring of the maternal role that sees Ellen attempt to breastfeed Charlie. Through their relationship and their abject bodies in the film’s final scene, both Annie and Ellen are figured as ‘monstrous’, thus arguably rendering the feminism of the film that resists ‘new momism’ through maternal ambivalence perfunctory.

From the outset of the film, Annie's relationship with her mother Ellen Leigh is established as both ambivalent and dangerous: Ellen is a 'Bad Mother'. During Ellen's funeral, Annie uncomfortably remembers her Mother as "very secretive and private" and "a very difficult woman to read". A medium shot lingers on a large portrait of Ellen before cutting to an over the shoulder shot of Annie at the podium, insinuating her continued dominance over Annie: "the dead mother silently presid[es] over [...] her adult children" (Clover, 1992, p.28), and "the Bad Mother continues to haunt from afar" (Arnold, 2013, p. 93). After seeing Ellen's ghost in her workshop, Annie turns a miniature towards the camera, revealing Annie breastfeeding Charlie whilst Ellen leers over them holding her naked, swollen breast (see figure 13).

Figure 13: Ellen attempts to breastfeed Charlie. Hereditary/A24.

The camera lingers on a close up shot of the miniature, establishing its importance in understanding the power dynamics of Annie's relationship with her mother, here characterised by "merging" and "competition" (Fisher and Jacobs, 2011, p.59). Ellen is presented as abject, blurring the "regulations that [govern] the body" because she

defiles the binaries that separate old from young and “clean from unclean” (Arnold, 2013, p.74). Tuvel posits that breastfeeding is often perceived as “gross or obscene” as it “threatens our autonomous and fixed identities” (Tuvel, 2012, p.263-273). In the context of this scene, Ellen’s breastfeeding is ‘obscene’ because her body “transgress[es] the bodily boundaries of the flesh” (Sharpe and Sexon, 2018, p.2), and defies the laws of nature that define post-menopausal women as “barren” and representative of “a non-normative mode of unfecund femininity that is unable to be fully expelled” (Harrington, 2017). Harrington refers to the genre of horror that abjectifies the post-menopausal body as “hagsploitation”: “ films that leverage the grotesque monstrosity of the older woman, and the horror of disease-as-possession” (Harrington, 2017). Given that Ellen is the antagonist of the film, and her dead body is frequently on display in various stages of decay, she is constructed as a literal and figurative “source of pollution”. She is the “hard bodied witch” and the “antithesis of the desired maternal body” (Purkiss, 1996, p.99-127) whose satanism and desire for power engenders the demise of her family. If Ellen is ‘hard’ and ‘dry’, Annie is ‘wet’ as a result of her “emotional and sensational outpourings" and she is “defined by an excess of emotion” (Arnold, 2013, p.78). Consequently, her death is similarly defined by “fluid outpourings” that figure her as abject and monstrous (Sharpe and Sexon, 2018, p.2). The final scene in which their two headless bodies bow before Charlie/Paimon in Peter’s body symbolises the importance of matricide as the “only means towards individuation” (Arnold, 2013, p.91), and spiritual/physical rebirth. Alison Stone posits that symbolic matricide, as hypothesised by Kristeva, is misogynistic due to the “sexed hierarchy that it enshrines” that privileges patriarchal authority and order by splitting the “mother-child dyad” in order to allow the child to “assume a level of unity, autonomy, mastery” (Stone, 2012, p.119-120). In

Hereditary, it is Annie's *literal* matricide that allows Charlie/Paimon's rebirth into Peter's body, thus restoring male power, and establishing the cult as a patriarchy. In doing so, the film 'others' the maternal body as an evocation of both life and death, rendering it uncanny, and deems it as secondary to the male form: it is "a spectral being, not a fully tangible, autonomous being" (Arnold, 2013, p.92-103). Furthermore, the lack of autonomy afforded to Annie throughout the film, as well as her brutal death instigated by the cult so that Charlie/Paimon can be reborn, marginalises her and figures her life as secondary to that of her children. This is symbolically demonstrated by her physical subordination as she bows in front of Charlie/Paimon in the final scene: an image that enshrines the child whilst denigrating the mother. The idolisation of the child at the expense of the mother's wellbeing is an essential component of 'new momism' that demands total "physical, psychological, emotional and intellectual" devotion to her children (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, p.4): her body and mind are vessels to be symbolically or literally cast aside for her children. In depicting images of abject matricide in horror, the film perpetuates a misogynistic and reductive view of the maternal body that is at odds with the nuanced portrayal of maternal ambivalence at the beginning of the film.

In conclusion, the film's portrayal of Annie's maternal ambivalence towards both her mother and her son, is significative of a 'resistance' to hegemonic expectations of 'perfect' mothering, and does move beyond horror's binary understandings of mothers as 'Good' or 'Bad'. However, the use of abject matricide that privileges patriarchal authority, perpetuates misogynistic attitudes towards mothering and the maternal body and fails to progress beyond "regimented esssentialist biological focus" (Sharpe and Sexon, 2018, p.4) that reduces women to their corporeality.

4.2 'The Perfect Mother', domesticity and vengeance: 'new momism' and maternal ambivalence in *mother!*

Whilst *Hereditary* presents Annie as an ambivalent, imperfect mother whose maternal corporeality is abjectified and sacrificed for the rebirth of her child, *mother!*, propagates an image of the 'perfect' mother, whose standards of mothering and womanhood embody those upheld by proponents of 'new momism'. The stark contrast between the two films, released within a year of each other, and their opposing versions of motherhood is demonstrative of wider ambivalences surrounding mothering and maternal corporeality.

Darren Aronofsky's film *mother!* (2017) centres on the protagonist 'mother' (Jennifer Lawrence) and her husband 'Him' (Javier Bardem), a famous poet who struggles with writer's block, and who is fiercely protective of a mysterious crystal. Secluded in an idyllic haven of tranquillity, mother is the 'perfect' wife: she is beautiful, she cooks, cleans and spends her days repainting and repairing His home, which we learn previously burnt down in a fire. Within the walls, mother sees a beating heart that blackens as the film progresses. 'Man' and 'woman' arrive, proclaiming to be fans of His poetry, and despite mother's protests, He allows them to stay in the house. Man and woman's two sons arrive, fighting over man's will, who we learn is dying. In the ensuing fight, the eldest son kills his brother, and Him, man and woman take the youngest son to the hospital, leaving mother alone to clean the blood and carnage. Him invites the family to hold the son's funeral at the house, and groups of mourners arrive. Upon their arrival, they disrespect mother, painting the walls and breaking her furniture. After they leave, mother berates Him for dismissing her wants and needs, and they end up having passionate sex. The next morning, mother realises she is pregnant, which inspires Him to write a poem. Nine months later, the poem is

published and mother prepares a feast to celebrate. Suddenly, hordes of His fans break into the house: they rip the house to shreds, start a cult, commit mass executions, traffic women for sex and start wars. After mother gives birth, He takes the baby and gives it to His fans, who kill and eat the newborn child. In retaliation, mother descends into the basement where she pierces an oil tank and sets it on fire, thus killing herself and everyone in the house. Him is unharmed, and He takes mother's heart out of her burnt body which then transforms into a crystal. As He places the crystal on a pedestal, the house is restored as before, and a new Mother appears.

The rationale for choosing *mother!* as a case study can be attributed to the following: it is the only film in the thesis that revolves around a pregnant protagonist who does not experience maternal ambivalence, it is the only film to actively sexualise the maternal body, and it is the only film to depict the figurative rape of a maternal body through the 'woman as house' motif. Moreover, it is the sole film to depict a perfect 'Good Mother' who transforms into a "vengeful mother" (King, 2015, p.8). Consequently, through the lens of 'new momism', and 'horror vérité' the following analysis aims to establish that the film is an allegory for society's ambivalence towards mothers: irrespective of the sacrifices that 'perfect' mothers perform, "it is never enough" (*mother!*, 2017), the "standards for success are impossible to meet" (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, p.4), and mothers are eternally victimised.

Arnold's 'Good Mother' chapter and Douglas and Michael's book *The Mommy Myth* (2004) will be used to demonstrate that mother is the 'perfect' mother and contextualise the aspects of postfeminist 'new momism' within the film. Using Erin Harrington's chapter 'The lady vanishes' in her book *Women, Monstrosity and Horror*

Film (2017), the film's tropes of home invasion, symbolic rape and "the association of female bodies with houses" (Harrington, 2017), will be analysed in order to present the ways in which the film depicts an ambivalence towards maternal bodies through objectification and domestication.

4.2.1 The Perfect 'Good Mother': a postfeminist ideal

Through the idealisation of the perfect 'Good Mother', the film propagates 'new momism' standards of impossible mothering. Arnold defines the 'Good Mother' as "all-nurturing and self-abnegating": she is a woman who is "totally invested in husband and children", living "only through them" (Arnold, 2013, p.23). Mother's "total invest[ment]" (Arnold, 2013, p.23) in her husband is demonstrated by her renovation of his house, as well as her cooking and cleaning. Tisha Dejmanee posits that contemporary postfeminism is "characterised by a concern with interior spaces – reviving domesticity and the importance of finding and securing a home" (Dejmanee, 2016, p.120): women should return to the domestic. This sentiment is also echoed by Douglas and Michaels, who state that "through the new momism women acquiesce to *and* resist good, old fashioned sexist notions of how the world should work" (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, p.13). Mother exemplifies a postfeminist return to the domestic: she is confined to the house, she is subordinate to her husband as the breadwinner, and she openly takes pride in the upkeep of the home, which she views as her "work" (*mother!*, 2017). Douglas and Michaels subsequently refer to 'new momism' as a postfeminist, conscious return to the traditional nuclear family structures exalted in the 1950s and 1960s (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, p.25). The film romanticises female domesticity: mother is played by a beautiful actress (Jennifer Lawrence), and she is pictured in a warm, earth toned domestic space that associates her with the fecundity of nature and emphasises her own fertility and

maternity. Furthermore, Aronofsky's use of natural woods and textures in mother's house recalls the pressure on modern mothers to live "natural[ly]" and "organical]ly]" instead of surrounding themselves with chemicals and plastic toys which are increasingly villianised (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, p.303). Consequently the film curates an image of 'perfect' motherhood and domesticity long before mother is even pregnant, and therefore constructs mother as the 'perfect' wife.

The arrival of 'woman' and 'man' reinforces the 'new momism' intimations within the film. Whilst Him and man go on a hike, woman and mother are left at home doing the laundry and performing household tasks, further cementing the propagation of "old fashioned, sexist" (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, p.13) gender roles: "We are domestic slaves. It's a fate that awaits us when we are born female" (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, p.39). During this time, woman demands to know why mother and Him don't have children, and states "you're not going to be so young forever. Have kids. Then you'll be creating something together. That's what keeps a marriage going" (*mother!*, 2017). In insinuating that motherhood is requisite for a happy marriage and life, the film solidifies the essential argument of postfeminist 'new momism': even though postfeminism insists that "women have choices [...] The only truly enlightened choice to make as a woman, the one that proves [...] that you are a "real" woman [...] is to become a mom" (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, p.5). Indeed, mother's fate is preordained, as literally demonstrated by her name, 'mother', further underpinning the theme of biological essentialism throughout the film: "motherhood is natural and inevitable" (Arnold, 2013, p.39). Although woman extolls the virtues of motherhood, she also acknowledges its all consuming force: "You give and you give and you give and it's just never enough" (*mother!*, 2017). The quote is not only referenced by mother later on in the film - "I'm about to have our baby. Why isn't that

enough for you?" - but also comments on the current social state of motherhood, where women are subjected to extreme public pressures by society and other mothers: "With intensive mothering, everyone watches us [...] Motherhood has become a psychological police state" (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, p.6). The extreme surveillance of women's mothering is literally demonstrated by Aronofsky's use of tight framed close ups on mother: "in the two hour film [Jennifer Lawrence] is in close up for 66 minutes" (Ryzik, 2017). Through these close ups, Aronofsky encourages us to participate in the surveillance of both her 'perfect' mothering, and her maternal corporeality, which is both sexualised and disavowed of its sexuality (Williams, 2014, p.14), and is thus significative of a continued ambivalence towards the maternal body.

4.2.2 The 'Perfect' Mother objectified: ambivalence towards the maternal body.

Aronofsky objectifies, sexualises and domesticates mother through a "voyeuristic [...] male gaze" (Mulvey, 1975; Maguire, 2018, p.90-96) that fetishises a patriarchal image of the 'perfect' 'Good Mother'. We are introduced to mother through a series of tight framed tracking shots that follow her as she wanders throughout the house: she is immediately aligned with the domestic space. As she finally turns towards the camera in a medium shot, her nipples are visible under a sheer, white nightgown that is simultaneously suggestive of her sexual appeal and purity (see figure 14), as evidenced by her white clothes throughout the film. Her silhouette in the doorway to a verdant pasture behind her is symbolic of her fertility: the liminality of the doorway being at once evocative of the opening of a vagina and "pregnancy['s] "marginal" state" (Fischer, 2015, p.445, quoting Kitzinger, 1978, p.71), thus further foreshadowing mother's fate. As previously stated, many theorists posit that horror films are primarily enjoyed by men (Oliver and Sanders, 2004, p.242; Patrick-Weber,

2020, p.2-5) suggesting Aronofsky panders to the “male viewer’s pleasure [that] is governed by voyeuristic control” (Mulvey, 1975; Maguire, 2018, p.90) through a sexualisation of mother’s body.

Figure 14: Mother’s sexuality is objectified. mother!/Paramount Pictures.

Juxtaposingly, she is affiliated with virginity, as inferred when she shouts at Him: “You talk about wanting kids but you can’t even fuck me!”. Interestingly, it is only after one sexual act in the film that mother falls pregnant, thus indicative of a preservation of her purity, as demonstrated by the continuity of her white clothing, even when heavily pregnant. As such, mother represents “the simultaneous fascination with, and disavowal of female sexuality” (Williams, 2014, p.14) that is indicative of the increasing ambivalence towards the pregnant body: “the pictorial display of pregnancy is now an eroticized norm in American public culture” where it was once “a transgressive revelation of a woman’s sacred and shameful carnality” (Oliver, 2012,p.37 quoting Berlant, 1994, p.146). Mother is eroticised by the tight framing shots that focus on her corporeality, yet she must remain objectively pure (demonstrated by her white clothing), thus serving as an antithesis to ‘woman’ (Michelle Pfeiffer). Adorned in black, lace lingerie, woman is a symbol of carnality

and sin: she openly has sex with her husband in front of mother, criticises mother's naivety and pollutes the peace of mother's house. Due to woman's misdeeds and cruelty, she is presented as a "postmenopausal machiavellian manipulator" (King, 2015, p.170), whose sole purpose is to convince the audience that her sexuality and morals are heinous, whereas mother is the "maternal ideal" (Arnold, 2013, p.45). From a sociocultural perspective, Schneider states that "at the heart of cinematic horror lies a patriarchal fear of female sexuality" (Schneider, 2004, p.3), that demonises female desire, and rewards chastity and obedience to male authority. As such, the film offers two feminine archetypes that are pitted against one another: "the virgin [and] whore" (Creed, 1993, p.3), whilst concurrently sexualising both female bodies, and thus constructing the ambivalence towards maternal corporeality that permeates the film.

4.2.3 Figurative rape and vengeance

Ambivalence towards the maternal body is further demonstrated by the figurative rape of mother and her house. It is established early on in the film that mother and her house share a soul: the "sounds of the ravaged house [such as] floorboards" are actress Jennifer Lawrence's "voice, digitally manipulated" (Ryzik, 2017). When mother touches the walls of the house she sees a beating heart (see figure 15) that blackens when she is distressed, and most importantly, when her boundaries are breached. Harrington argues that the 'woman as house' analogy both aligns "feminine corporeality [with the] interior, domestic and familiar", and serves as a means of "constrain[ing] women in space" where "boundaries are permeable and erasable" (Harrington, 2017). Throughout the film her husband invites strangers into her house, and by extension, into her body without her consent: he allows man, woman and their family to enter the house after the death of their eldest son, and he

allows thousands of fans to enter, defile and terrorise both her home and her body in the final act of the film. The “forceful penetrations [of] home invasions” therefore become metaphors for rape, and it is the “women’s bodies, more than the physical houses, which are invaded” (Harrington, 2017).

Figure 15: The house’s heart. mother!/Paramount Pictures.

In fact, the only sex scene in the film between mother and Him begins as a non-consensual rape, with mother pushing Him away and repeatedly saying “no”: the boundaries of mother’s body are physically transgressed. Mother’s figurative rape is alluded to throughout the film by the appearance of a bleeding hole in the floor, resembling a vagina (see figure 16) that widens and bleeds as her house suffers the repeated penetration of hordes of people. Through its rape and “obliteration of boundaries”, the symbolic vagina “speaks to the dehumanisation and objectification of women” (Harrington, 2017), and signals the undercurrent of misogyny throughout the film that subjects maternal bodies to violence. These undertones of misogyny are literally and allegorically presented in the final scene where mother’s body is defiled by His fans, who represent society. Punching her, pulling at her top to reveal her

breasts, she is degraded and insulted for her sexuality: “Die cunt”, “dirty whore”, “slut”, “kill the pig” (*mother!*, 2017).

Figure 16: The figurative vagina is repeatedly raped. mother!/Paramount Pictures.

Given the verbal and physical misogyny that is further aggravated by Aronofsky’s gratuitous close ups on her breasts, it is unsurprising that some feminist theorists have likened the horror genre to pornography: “no part of women’s bodies is safe from being inspected, evaluated, used or abused (Whisnant, 2010, p.160; Harrington, 2017). Elizabeth Grosz argues that this literal violence is inevitable in the ‘woman as house’ horror film, as “the historical conception of space has always functioned to either contain or obliterate women” (Grosz, 1995, p. 55; Harrington, 2017). However, it is interesting to note that both mother and the house then enact their own revenge on society and Him by murdering them: the ‘perfect’ mother becomes “vengeful mother” (King, 2014, p.8).

Robert King notes that the “most psychotic characters” are “vengeful mothers”, who often have “archetypal designations such as “Mother”, “The Woman” or “She”” (King, 2014, p.8), suggesting that mother was always destined to inflict violence on those

who wronged her. Having been abused and having witnessed the cannibalisation of her baby, mother enacts her revenge: she stabs people, scratches His face, and the house splits open as she screams. Descending into the basement, she pierces the oil tank and sets it ablaze, killing herself and everyone in the house, except for Him. Whilst one could argue that through her violent actions she "cease[s] to be maternal" (Arnold, 2013, p.95), she remains "self-sacrificial" (Arnold, 2013, p.37) as she gives her heart to Him so that a new house and mother can be reborn. The events of the film are to be eternally repeated, and mother and her house are doomed to be perpetually abused, as demonstrated by the mirroring of the three mothers at the beginning, middle and end of the film (see figure 17). Speaking to this cycle of events, Him states "Nothing is ever enough. I couldn't create if it was" (*mother!*, 2017), yet it is mother's heart and love that ensures the sempiternal reproduction and 'creation' of new houses and mothers. Him only creates surface level poetry that fuels his narcissism and he uses his wife as a vessel for new life: she is the true creator. For this reason, some critics have referred to the film as a metaphor for the male "co-opt[ion]" of "women's art, humanity and ability to create" in order to "make themselves feel like God" (Joho, 2017). In doing so, the film demonstrates an ambivalence towards maternal corporeality through the simultaneous commodification of its reproductive capacities, and a portrayal of mothers as victims of patriarchal power.

Figure 17: Mother's eternal rebirth is represented by three different actresses. mother!/Paramount Pictures.

4.2.4 Conclusion

Aronofsky's film both resists and perpetuates misogynistic and ambivalent attitudes towards mothers, thus affirming the ambivalence that this research aims to prove exists in contemporary horror films about motherhood. Through the 'horror vérité' tropes of an "outrageous plot" and "heavy-handed visual and aural shocks" (Landsberg, 2018, p.632), the film presents mother's torture and rape as an allegory for society's ambivalence and misogyny towards mothers, yet the film is ambiguous as to whether or not it condemns or condones this violence. Furthermore, through the objectification of mother's corporeality, and the eternal propagation of her torture and symbolic rape, the film promulgates a fetishisation of the maternal body and demonstrates a pervading misogyny in the horror genre.

4.3 Chapter conclusion

Several conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of *Hereditary* and *mother!*. Firstly, both films explore ambivalent motherhood and/or a social ambivalence towards mothers through the presentation of their antithetical mothering. On the one hand, *Hereditary* depicts Annie's nuanced experience of maternal ambivalence towards both her mother and her son, and in doing so, signifies a positive advancement in the portrayal of Horror mothers. On the other hand, *mother!* uses postfeminist and new momism tropes to curate the 'perfect' mother, whose "impossible standards of idealised motherhood" (O'Reilly, 2010, p.17) contribute to the pressures placed on mothers: the film propagates maternal ambivalence on a social scale (Almond, 2010, p.24). Moreover, social ambivalence towards the maternal body prevails in both films: Annie's body is abjectified through her matricide, and mother's body is both objectified by the male gaze, and defiled by

society. The deaths of both mothers in order to allow for the rebirth of their progeny is further significant of the themes of biological essentialism that prevail in both films, and underlines the misogyny that continues to prevail in the horror genre.

5. Ambivalent mothers and witchcraft in matriarchal societies

The following chapter shall analyse *The Witch* (2015) and *Suspiria* (2018) in order to establish the witch figure as the ultimate ambivalent mother in Horror. The witch is both a feminist symbol of emancipation, and a source of social anxiety that 'others' and abjectifies her: "the witch was a woman's fantasy and not simply a male nightmare." (Purkiss, 1996, p.1). The rationale for analysing *The Witch* and *Suspiria* can be attributed to the following: both films offer ambivalent mother figures who simultaneously represent maternal love and danger for the female protagonists, both films offer matricide as the only means of achieving independence and selfhood, both films abjectify the maternal body, and both films are ambiguous as to whether or not witches are truly monstrous, or whether they are powerful opponents to an oppressive patriarchy. Where the films differ is their interpretation of the witch's freedom and power: *The Witch* offers witchcraft to Thomasin as a means of escaping the stifling Puritan community, yet she is ultimately enslaved to the Devil. Contrastingly, *Suspiria* presents witchcraft as a feminist cult that worships three ancient mothers and rejects the patriarchy. However, both films abjectify matriarchs through excessive ruminations on the monstrosity of their bodily fluids, and propagate matricide as a horror trope, thus demonstrating a persistent ambivalence towards maternal corporeality and matriarchal power.

As in the previous chapters, the following analysis shall use Arnold's 'Good' and 'Bad' mother chapters to initially define the mother figures in both films, before analysing their ambivalences. Diane Purkiss's book *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations* (1996) will be used to clarify historical attitudes to witchcraft, and Creed's book *The Monstrous Feminine* (1993) is

key to foregrounding the trope of “woman as bleeding wound” (Creed, 1993, p.444) that is prevalent in both films. Furthermore, Sharpe and Sexon’s essay *Mother’s Milk and Menstrual Blood* (2018) will be critical in understanding the abjectification of the maternal body and its fluids.

5.1 Suspicion, Witchcraft and Emancipation: maternal ambivalence in *The Witch*

Set in New England in the 1630s, Robert Eggers’s *The Witch* (2015), also written as *The VVitch*, centres on the character of Thomasin, a young woman, and her family, after they are banished from their Puritan colony. Father figure William, his wife Katherine, their eldest daughter Thomasin, son Caleb, the twins Jonas and Mercy, and baby Samuel are confined to each other’s company as they attempt to forge a new life elsewhere. Arriving in a wilderness overshadowed by a foreboding forest, the family struggles to tame the land: they are unable to grow enough corn, and unable to hunt for their food. Shortly after their arrival in the wilderness, baby Samuel is kidnapped by a witch as Thomasin plays with him. Blaming Thomasin for his death, Katherine demonstrates a growing resentment towards her, and Thomasin subsequently becomes the scapegoat of the household (Olivetti, 2020, p.250).The twins Jonas and Mercy, often seen conversing with the black goat, Black Phillip, accuse Thomasin of being a witch, which both Katherine and William come to believe after Caleb dies under similarly suspicious circumstances. As the characters are killed, one by one, by the real witch living in the forest, Thomasin is left alone to face the wrath of her mother, who accuses her of ‘witching’ the family. Katherine strangles Thomasin, who kills her mother in self defence. Finding herself alone, Thomasin speaks to Black Phillip, who reveals himself to be the Devil, and she enters into a covenant with him. Walking naked into the forest towards a sabbat of

fellow witches, she levitates into the sky, laughing maniacally, before the screen cuts to black.

The following analysis shall critically use Arnold's 'Bad Mother' chapter to establish both Katherine and the witches' coven as figures of maternal ambivalence as they both offer conditional acceptance to Thomasin, whilst simultaneously posing a lethal threat to her. Sharpe and Sexon's essay on "Mother's Milk and Menstrual Blood" (2018) and Rebecca Tuvel's "Exposing the breast: The Animal and the Abject in American Attitudes towards Breastfeeding" (2018) are critical in demonstrating the significance of abject motherhood throughout the film, notably through images of breastfeeding, milk and blood. In doing so, this analysis shall debate whether or not the film reinforces ambivalent and misogynistic attitudes towards maternal corporeality, and whether or not the film progresses beyond a binary understanding of the mother as 'Good' or 'Bad'.

5.1.1 Motherhood as abject

Throughout the film, the motif of maternal fluids from female bodies is used to establish both motherhood and the maternal body as abject and ambivalent. Eggers repeatedly focuses on the abject qualities of milk and blood, often simultaneously, through the bodies of Katherine and the witch, further blurring the distinction between the two, and continuing to establish Katherine as the 'Bad Mother'. Early in the film, we see Katherine breastfeeding Samuel, a natural act that has always been politicised, both by the Catholic Church in Puritan New England, and by modern society. Puritan attitudes to breastmilk in the time period in which the film is set were particularly ambivalent given the dichotomy between its nutritious qualities and its demonisation by the Catholic church (Maude, 2019, p.3). Given breastmilk's

“inseparability from female sexual anatomy” due to the transformation of menstrual blood into milk, and with menstrual blood being “implicitly tied to original sin”, breastfeeding became increasingly associated with monstrosity, female sin and witchcraft (Maude, 2019, p.4): “breastfeeding type imagery occurred disproportionately frequently in published records of English witch-trials” (Maude, 2019, p.13). Furthermore, given the nutritious importance and power of breastmilk, that was “impossible [for men] to truly regulate” (Maude, 2019, p.12), the maternal body “threaten[ed] social order [because] it produces fluids which transgress the bodily boundaries of the flesh” (Kristeva, 1982; paraphrased by Sharpe and Sexon, 2018, p.2). Eggers was aware of the historical associations between monstrosity, witchcraft and breastfeeding when researching the film, noting that a common, historical belief was that “The black cat was a demon witch's familiar that would be sucking on extra teats on the witch's labia” (Hillis, Vice Magazine, 2016, directly quoting Eggers), and describes the witch as an “anti-mother [who] would feed these animals with her blood that came out of her nipples” (Wickman, 2016, directly quoting Eggers). Given Eggers’s awareness of the historical associations between breastfeeding, lactation and the abject, and his subsequent use of such motifs in the film, one has to wonder whether or not Eggers is explicitly, or implicitly making a social commentary on breastfeeding, outside of the realm of witchcraft.

Rebecca Tuvel’s chapter, “Exposing the Breast: The Animal and the Abject in American Attitudes toward Breastfeeding”, explores the modern demonisation and sexualisation of the breastfeeding mother in 21st century America. She notes that womens’ breasts are increasingly eroticised, both in and out of the cinematic world, and when this is done, “are shot from a heterosexual male point of view” (Tuvel, 2012, p.265). A few twenty first century examples include *The Hangover* (2009),

Grown Ups (2010), *The Backup Plan* (2010), and *Meet the Fockers* (2004), in which the sight of Isabel's large bosoms excites baby Jack, who licks his lips and mimes milking her (Tuvel, 2012, p.267). Although such scenes are intended to be comedic, one can imagine some female viewers being uncomfortable with them, particularly by being associated with animals such as cows. Tuvel argues that this has led many women to feel "cowlike and dehumanised by breastfeeding" (Tuvel, 2012, p.270). The associations between breastfeeding mothers and animals, namely cows and, others and, bestialises women, thus establishing their bodies and fluids as abject and monstrous: "disgust arises from anxiety over relationality to animals" (Tuvel, 2012, p.270). Although not sexualised by Eggers, the act of breastfeeding, and milk itself, are associated with bestial monstrosity and the abject throughout the film: whilst milking Flora, the family goat, Thomasin recoils in disgust as blood spurts out in the place of milk, the old witch of the forest is later seen suckling from Flora's teat before attacking Jonas and Mercy, and most importantly, upon hallucinating that baby Samuel and Caleb are alive, Katherine breastfeeds baby Samuel, only for it to be revealed that she is 'breastfeeding' a raven, who pecks and eats her bleeding nipple (see figure 18). The latter scene, arguably one of the most haunting scenes in the film, associates Katherine and her body with witchcraft and the abject through an emphasis on her bodily fluids, and her relationship with the bestial. Her "hard body", that now produces only blood instead of milk, is the antithesis of the "desired maternal body, flowing with clean nourishment" (Purkiss, 1996, p.127), thus depicting her as both the 'Bad Mother', and as the witch whose familiar sucks upon her blood. Indeed, witchcraft and evil is further linked with Katherine as the witch's maniacal laugh before killing Jonas and Mercy is quickly followed by Katherine's maniacal laugh as the raven pecks and eats her bleeding nipple. Given that the

deaths of Jonas and Mercy occur after the witch suckles milk from the goat, and whilst Katherine 'breastfeeds' a raven, both maternity, milk and breastfeeding are associated with death, suffering, and the occult, symbolically represented by the raven: "the bird of death" (Clifford, 2021).

Figure 18: Katherine breastfeeds a raven. The Witch/A24.

Interestingly, Katherine and the female goat, Flora, mirror one another throughout the film, with both seeing their milk turned to blood, both being sucked/pecked upon by witches/familiars, and both reduced to "bleeding wound" (Creed, 1993, p.444) at the end of the film. Indeed, the goat's dead body, its white fur splashed with blood, can be seen behind Katherine as she delivers her final monologue to Thomasin, thus foreshadowing her own death moments later. Clad in her white shift, faceless, and covered in blood, she soon resembles Flora, and thus their fates are intertwined. In killing the two breastfeeding mothers of the film, and depicting their dead bodies in white and red, symbolic of milk and blood (see figure 19), the film affirms the need to

kill the ‘abject’ mother, whose fluids “threaten social and bodily order” (Sharpe and Sexon, 2018, p.3).

Figure 19. Katherine is aligned with Flora through her abject death. The Witch/A24.

The interchangeable motif of milk and blood throughout the film “induce[s] a reaction of horror” in the viewer “who associates these fluids with a monstrous form of maternity” (Sharpe and Sexon, 2018, p.2). As such, one can argue that the film perpetuates harmful imagery pertaining to mothers and their corporeality by constructing them as “dangerous”, and as a “body that threatens the ostensible divide between nature and culture, animality and humanity” (Tuvel, 2012, p.263). Furthermore, given the associations between Katherine and the bestial, both through the goat and raven figures, one could argue that Eggers perpetuates societal views of breastfeeding as animalistic and disgusting (Tuvel, 2012, p.270).

5.1.2 Katherine and witches as figures of maternal ambivalence

Thomasin’s mother Katherine represents a figure of maternal ambivalence in the film, as demonstrated by her physical appearance, her ‘Bad Mother’ qualities, and eventual attempted murder of Thomasin. Throughout this thesis, it has been established that films use physical appearances to perpetuate, or challenge, stereotypes pertaining to traditionalist, patriarchal perceptions of motherhood: Jennifer Lawrence’s beauty and voluptuous figure in *mother!* are used to emphasise her ‘Good mother’ qualities and fertility, whereas both mother figures in *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and *Bird Box* have short black hair and angular features that are used to imply a lack of maternal instinct and maternal ambivalence. Kate Dickie, who plays Katherine, described as having a “distinctive face with sharp features and penetrating eyes” (Clarke, 2016), is herself reminiscent of cultural depictions of witches with pale gaunt faces, thus aligning her with preconceived notions of sorcery before we meet the film’s real witch. Yet, In spite of her witch-like appearance, she is a ‘Good Mother’ to her Samuel and Caleb, and exhibits motherly affection towards baby Samuel as she breastfeeds him. However, the image is jarring as the actress

herself notes that Katherine has “probably had her last baby” (Clarke quoting Kate Dickie, 2016) due to her age and increasingly unfecund corporeality.

Purkiss reflects upon the corporeality and age associated with women and witches, stating that the “hard bodied witch recalls the bad mother [...] She is beyond maternity, partly because her hardness and dryness are the results of age, and partly because they are the antithesis of the desired maternal body, flowing with clean nourishment” (Purkiss, 1996, p.127). Consequently, given the context in 1630s Puritan New England, in which both the maternal body and the witch’s body were seen as a “problematic source of pollution” (Purkiss, 1996, p.99) due to their production of ‘abject’ substances such as breast milk and menstrual blood, Katherine’s corporeality as a mother is associated with the abject and sorcery before witchcraft is mentioned in the film.

As such, one can draw similarities between the ambivalent appearances of Katherine, as the matriarch of the household, and the matriarchal figure of the witch in the forest. The witch is predominantly shown as a haggard, naked old woman with sagging skin, a crooked nose, and a toothless mouth, her ugliness being “apotropaic, turning away the would be phallic gaze” (Purkiss, 1996, p.127). She is also frequently insinuated to be the hare and raven that observe the family: she is the traditional witch of nightmares. However, once alone with Caleb in the forest, she is transformed into a sensual, beautiful young woman in a red cloak: a symbol of fertility and temptation. As a horror figure, she is simultaneously the “deadly femme castratrice” and “witch” (Creed, 1993, p.1), whose beauty lures a pubescent and lustful Caleb to his eventual death; writhing naked in orgasmic pleasure, reciting prayers. He is punished for his sexual transgressions, for his lusting after Thomasin,

and longing gazes at her breasts, subsequently coughing up a red apple as he dies: a symbol of original sin (McGill, 2018, p.410).

Similar to the castrating witch, Katherine arguably castrates William, her husband, through her constant berating and control, which Thomasin hurls as an insult to her father: “You let mother be as thy master!”. As such, Katherine does not conform to the expectations of a ‘Good Mother’ and wife in puritan society, as she refuses the “self-abnegating role” (Arnold, 2013, p.23) by criticising William’s inability to provide for the family, and is therefore depicted as the ‘Bad Mother’ that “point[s] to dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the psychosocial structures of the family” (Arnold, 2013, p.69). In doing so, Katherine is once again aligned with historical definitions of witchcraft, that stated that “the witch is a kind of antihousewife because she usurps [...] authority over the household in order to misuse it, to invert it” (Purkiss, 1996, p.97). Subsequently, as an “antihousewife” (Purkiss, 1996, p.97) and a ‘Bad Mother’ villainized for her transgressions as a matriarch by Thomasin, she is punished by the “loss of a child”, through the death of baby Samuel, and it is at this point that the “text constructs her as sympathetic” (Arnold, 2013, p.78). She is thereafter seen sobbing and praying by Thomasin, demonstrating her vulnerability, yet also foreshadowing the “emotional and sensational outpourings” (Arnold, 2013, p.78) of a ‘Bad Mother’ that she later embodies when attacking Thomasin at the end of the film. Similarly to the other ‘Bad Mother’ characters in this thesis, who are punished for their transgressions through the loss of a child, such as Annie in *Hereditary*, and Eva in *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, Katherine’s character vocalises her pain by expressing resentment towards her children, notably Thomasin.

After baby Samuel is taken and killed by the witch, whilst under Thomasin's care, Katherine becomes increasingly ambivalent towards Thomasin, believing her to be the cause of Samuel's death: the family openly expresses their dislike for her, and blames her for the misfortunes that befall them. Katherine repeatedly scolds Thomasin for not disciplining the twins, then scolding her when she does. She accuses Thomasin of losing the silver cup, of losing Caleb in the forest and finally, of 'witching' the entire family. As the matriarch, "Katherine's position within the household" (Olivetti, 2020, p.251) is threatened by Thomasin's youth, beauty and fertility. Thomasin's body becomes symbolic of a "matrophobic battlefield" that she could use as "an instrument of protest or resistance" and is therefore "a site of struggle against the mother over the issue of feminine identity" (Martinez Reventos, 1996, p.287). Given Caleb's lusting for Thomasin, and Thomasin's beauty, Katherine perversely fears Thomasin's power to seduce the male members of the family in order to obtain the role of the matriarch (Chusna and Mahmudah, 2018, p.15), which she later confirms in her final monologue: "You bewitched thy brother, proud slut! [...] And thy father next!". Katherine therefore implores William to marry Thomasin to a local family so that they may gain money from her sale, and alleviate the stress on a farm with dwindling resources. Her resentment towards Thomasin being so apparent, the youngest daughter Mercy taunts "Mother hates you", and Thomasin pleads "Let me find favour in your eyes!": "This child is desperate for her mother's affection, yet has been made to feel as though there is nothing she can do to earn that love" (Olivetti, 2020, p.246).

Katherine's maternal ambivalence and resentment is ultimately released at the end of the film, upon finding her family dead. The camera cuts between medium shots of the two women and music crescendoes as Katherine delivers a fatal monologue: "It

is you! It is you! The Devil is in thee and hath had thee [...] You bewitched thy brother, proud slut! Did you not think I saw thy sluttish looks to him, bewitching his eye as any whore? And thy father next! You took them from me [...] You witch!". The damning dialogue is a release of pent up resentment and maternal ambivalence, of which similar examples can also be found in *Hereditary*, *We Need to Talk about Kevin* and *The Babadook.* There is an evident recurrence of 'Bad Mother' figures vocally unloading their frustrations regarding their children, that is demonstrated by the films in this thesis, potentially signalling a wider need to openly discuss feelings of maternal ambivalence in society in order to destigmatise such emotions. The nuanced aspect of the mother figures in this thesis, who in spite of their 'Bad Mother' qualities, as defined by Arnold, is that they are victims to their own suffering and grief, having lost their children or families. However, Arnold associates such "emotional and sensational outpourings" (Arnold, 2013, p.78) uniquely with the 'Bad Mother', and proposes "symbolic matricide as the only means towards individuation" (Arnold, 2013, p.91). An over the shoulder close up shot pictures Katherine, who now epitomises a homicidal 'Bad Mother', hitting and strangling Thomasin, who repeatedly pleads "I love you, I love you, I love you", as the camera cuts between their two faces, further emphasising their divide. In self defense, Thomasin grabs the nearest object to her, a cleaver, and repeatedly hits Katherine, quickly killing her. The rapidity of the scene here comes to a stop, and a wide shot shows a bloodied Katherine lying on top of Thomasin as she sobs. Katherine now represents "woman as bleeding wound", whose "literal castration is [...] where her body is repeatedly knifed until it resembles a bleeding wound" (Creed, 1993, p.444). Whereas Katherine once symbolically castrated William, and therefore presided over the household as matriarch, it is Thomasin who physically castrates Katherine, therefore embodying

Katherine's anxieties. The juxtaposition between Katherine's white shift covered in blood- a nod to the motif of mother's milk and blood throughout the film- and the earth tones of their home and Thomasin's dress, establishes her maternal blood, milk (as represented by her white shift) and body as abject and other. Consequently, given the motifs of white milk and blood throughout the film, which are associated with maternity, Katherine and the Witch, the final shot represents a sacrifice and rejection of abject motherhood: "The maternal horror is [...] about abjection (sacrificing the mother, signifying her as abject)" (Arnold, 2013, p.103). It is interesting to note the similarities between this shot and the shot of Annie's decapitated body at the end of *Hereditary,* another A24 film, whose bloodied cream coat is splattered with blood, and whose character is similarly reduced to "woman as bleeding wound" (Creed, 1993, p.444). Given the infanticidal desires of Katherine in *The Witch* and Annie in *Hereditary* at the end of both films, and their subsequent gory deaths that allow for the 'rebirth' of their children - Peter/Charlie is reborn as Paimon, and Thomasin is reborn as a witch - it is implied that "Matricide is [a] vital necessity" (Oliver, 2012, p.20 quoting Kristeva, 1989, p.27-28) in order to ensure the survival of a child. Indeed, the majority of the mother figures in this thesis are either literally or symbolically killed by their children, suggesting that mother figures continue to inspire feelings of violence in modern society. However, it should be noted that both Thomasin and Peter/Charlie's fates after their mothers' deaths is uncertain, as they are now at the mercy of equally ambivalent 'mother' figures: satanists and witches.

Although she is the film's "Final Girl" (Zwissler, 2018, p.4), Thomasin's future is dubious in the hands of her new family: the witches coven and the Devil. Opinions are divided as to whether or not the film's ending, which sees Thomasin levitating

naked into the sky with the witches of the forest, represents a feminist liberation from the confines of her abusive family, or a return to an oppressive, patriarchal structure. The figure of the witch is often heralded as a feminist symbol, both as a "predator of the patriarchy" and as a "rejection of womens' reduction to motherhood" (Zwissler, 2018, p.21). Robert Eggers refers to the witch figure as an embodiment of "men's fears, ambivalences, and fantasies", as well as "women's own fears and ambivalences about female power and motherhood" (Hillis, Vice Magasine, 2016, directly quoting Eggers). After the "'symbolic order of the father' is dismantled" (Olivetti, 2020, p.252), as well as the overbearing rule of the castrating 'Bad Mother', through the deaths of both William and Katherine, Thomasin is arguably "liberated from the constraints that controlled her" (Olivetti, 2020, p.253). However, the witch's feminist power, and subsequently Thomasin's potential power, is ambivalent as she remains a slave to the Devil, both spiritually and sexually (Zwisller, 2018, p.10). Indeed, the 'deliciousness' of the life that Lucifer offers Thomasin is particularly dubious given the glimpses into the lives of the witches already in the forest, who can only fly through the act of infanticide, and live barefoot in woodland hovels. As such, Thomasin's future and relationship with her new 'family' is equally as ambivalent as that with her now dead one.

5.2 Maternal sin, Matricide and Abjection: Maternal Ambivalence in *Suspiria*

Whilst *The Witch* offers an ambiguous freedom to Thomasin on the condition that she enslaves herself to the Devil, *Suspiria* rejects all masculine power and revels in female brutality and the abject female form. This abjection of matriarchal power renders the feminism of the film ambiguous, and appears to promulgate anxieties surrounding female power and maternal corporeality.

Guadagnino's 2018 adaptation of *Suspiria,* inspired by the 1977 version directed by Dario Argento, follows dancer Susie Bannion as she leaves her Mennonite home in Ohio to join the Markos Dance Company in 1977 Berlin. A series of dream sequences reveal that she was abused by her mother, resulting in her desire for maternal love. She finds this in Madame Blanc, the company's artistic director, who is bedazzled by Susie's talent, and with whom she shares a palpable erotic, yet ambivalent relationship. Unbeknownst to Susie and the other dancers, the dance company and its matrons are members of a witches coven that worship three ancient mothers known as Mater Tenebraum (Mother of Darkness), Mater Suspiriorum (Mother of Sighs) and Mater Lachrymarum (Mother of Tears). Their leader, Helena Markos, who is hidden from the dancers due to her abject form, claims to be Mother Suspiriorum. As a result of her declining health and decaying body, Markos wishes to use a Susie as a host body. The film's climax, in which Susie arrives to the satanic ritual wherein she is the intended sacrifice, only to reveal that she, is in fact Mater Suspiriorum, is a realisation of female power, and a rejection of the maternal ambivalence and abuse that she had hitherto suffered.

Described by Guadagnino as an exploration of the "uncompromising force of motherhood" (Jones quoting Guadagnino, 2018) and a "great feminist film" (Douglas quoting Guadagnino, 2018), he uses Susie's relationships with the mother figures in her life in order to establish motherhood as ambivalent, and potentially lethal, whilst simultaneously exploring the complexities of female power. The following analysis shall explore the implications of maternal sin, abject motherhood and maternal ambivalence in matriarchal societies. This case study differs significantly from the other case studies in this thesis as the film depicts both the internal and external conflict for a desired matriarchal role in an exclusively female world. The film is

comparable to *The Witch* due to its depiction of witchcraft as abject, and the presence of a biological 'Bad Mother' figure, however, *Suspiria* is unique in its portrayal of a matriarchal society that is not subservient to a patriarchal authority, such as the Devil, as seen in *The Witch*. The film's complex presentation of a matriarchal society, that both venerates female power, whilst also depicting it as abject, establishes motherhood as ambivalent, making it a perfect case study for this thesis. This chapter shall continue to critically use Arnold's 'Good' and 'Bad' mother analyses, but shall aim to extend her findings in the context of a matriarchal dynamic that has hitherto not been explored in this thesis. The concepts of abject corporeality, maternal ambivalence and matricide shall be explored in order to debate whether or not the film succeeds in its feminist intentions, and what this suggests about motherhood in twenty first century horror films.

It is of note to mention that although Argento's 1977 *Suspiria* remains a cult classic, and heavily influenced the 2018 version, it will not be analysed in this case study. Given its release in the twentieth century, it is not relevant to this thesis which focuses on films released after 2010. It is significant that the very existence of a *Suspiria* remake elaborates on the theme of motherhood in a way that is consistent with the other films in this thesis, and thus demonstrates a change in social depictions of motherhood. However, I shall not be doing a comparative study of the two films as it merits in depth research that is outside the scope of this thesis. Similarly, the importance of the Berlin setting in the 2018 version cannot be analysed within the scope of this thesis as it warrants extended historical research, which publications such as that of Howard and Murphet (2022) have already done with great success.

5.2.1 The Abject Bad Mother and Maternal Sin

Guadagnino uses abject imagery in order to establish the ‘Bad Mother’ characters in the film as ‘monstrous’. This is particularly prevalent in the character of Helena Markos, whose sins as a ‘Bad Mother’ have physically defiled and corrupted her. As the matriarch of the dance company and witches coven, Markos ensures the regular torture, death and sacrifice of young women in her care in order to remain alive, by ‘expelling’ their souls and draining them of their mortality. Purporting to be Mother Suspiriorum, she is “sadistic, hurtful and jealous” (Arnold, 2013, p.23), of the youth and health of the young dancers. Before we see Markos’s full form, as revealed in the ritual at the end of the film, we see glimpses of her on two occasions surrounded by thick ‘cobwebs’ made of human hair: firstly when her hand longingly caresses the ceiling over which Susie dances, and secondly when Sara, Susie’s best friend, discovers the witches lair, and sees Markos in bed, surrounded by ‘cobwebs’, wherein the defiled bodies of Patricia and Olga are ensnared. Guadagnino’s repeated use of the motif of cobwebs and other arachnid imagery in relation to Markos aligns her with the abject and establishes her as an arachnid matriarch. This symbolism is particularly interesting given the predatory and abject nature of spiders, in which the female of the species is considerably larger and more dangerous, and prone to commiting sexual cannibalism (Tamisiea, 2022). Much like a spider, she is predatory, seeking out girls to nourish herself with, and, along with the other matrons, is seemingly omniscient and omnipresent within the academy. As spiders reign omnipresently over their webs, pouncing on, enveloping and engulfing their prey should one fatally step onto their domain, both Markos and the matrons can telepathically detect and torture their dancers from a distance. This is evidenced when they telepathically open holes in the ground to break Sara’s leg as she

discovers their lair, and when they torture Olga after she accuses them of witchcraft, stabbing their sickles (resembling fangs) into her flesh and carrying her to their lair for later use.

The association between women, witches, mothers, and spiders is not a novel one. Much like the female form, whose bodily fluids "transgress the bodily boundaries of the flesh" (Sharpe and Sexon, 2018, p.2), the spider "invade[s] human domains, crossing boundaries established between nature and culture" (Creed and Hoorn, 2016, p.104), and also secretes 'abject' substances in order to make webs. The various legs that spiders possess is also cause for horror and abjection, although in relation to motherhood, Coats argues that the association between mothers and spiders can be attributed to the multitasking capacities that women possess, and thus they may be represented as "having more than the requisite number of arms and fingers" (Coats, 2009, p.89). Upon finally seeing Markos's full, naked form, we observe the growth of childrens' arms and hands out of her body, both cementing her likeness to an arachnid, and demonstrating the extent of her sadism, in which she sacrifices children to retain mortality. She is at once 'Bad Mother', 'Witch' and "mother-as-monster", whose total rejection of the maternal ideal, "self-sacrifice [and] love" (Arnold, 2013, p.46) has physically polluted her, and she is thus an "incarnation" (Arnold, 2013, p.26) of abjection and maternal horror. Covered in pus-filled boils, infant hands, and dripping with unknown substances, she is "the antithesis of the desired, maternal body, flowing with clean nourishment" (Purkiss, 1996, p.127), and thus generates horror in the viewer (see figure 20).

Figure 20: Markos's abject form. Suspiria/Amazon Studios.

One can compare Markos to the witch in the forest in Eggers's *The Witch*, in that both are abject and ugly; "turning away the would-be phallic gaze" (Purkiss, 1996, p.127). However, I would argue that Markos is significantly more abject than the witch in Eggers's film, as she is not "hard-bodied", or "dry" (Purkiss, 1996, p.127), rather she is gooey, corpulent and ridden with disease. Another key difference between the two witch figures pertains to their service to a higher power: Eggers's witch is subservient to the patriarchal authority of the Devil, yet Markos recognises no such authority, only the power of the three ancient mothers (Mater Suspiriorum, Mater Tenebraum and Mater Lachrymarum), one of which she purports herself to be. Given both her extreme abject form and death - a fate which Eggers's witch does not suffer - one could argue that the film is ambivalent regarding female power and matriarchs. Consequently, the absence of a patriarchal authority in the film celebrates the self-sufficience of a maternal society, which Guadagnino himself describes as "a movie about the world of females" (Juzwiak quoting Guadagnino, 2018). Indeed, Guadagnino ensured that the cast was "entirely made up of women",

with the exception of the two male detectives, in order to “give audiences the unconscious feeling that everything in the movie is indeed female” (Jonas quoting Guadagnino, 2018). In doing so, the film appears to inverse the patriarchy historically depicted in horror films, wherein “the oscillation between the normal male universe and the supernatural female universe maintains the hierarchy which validates the masculine world and is suspicious of the female world” (Arnold, 2013, p.105). In Guadagnino’s film, patriarchal authority is undermined at every turn, and it is the “supernatural female universe” (Arnold, 2013, p.105) of witchcraft that holds the power. As previously discussed in the analysis of *Hereditary*, Clover’s definition of “White Science and Black Bagic” (Clover, 1992, p.66) is reappropriated in order to undermine the monitoring and medicalisation of maternal and female bodies by male authorities (Patrick-Weber, 2020, p.13). Indeed, the two male detectives who come to the academy looking for Patricia Hingle, are hypnotised, stripped naked, and mocked by the witches who laugh and poke their genitals with metal sickles: the men are emasculated and debased in an extreme rejection of both the patriarchal world and the phallus. The only paternal figure in the film, Dr Klemperer, is played by actress Tilda Swinton, further undermining male authority, and whose character is arguably more representative of the ‘Good Mother’ trope, rather than the authority of the father figure. Dr Klemperer is kind and concerned with the wellbeing of Patricia, as a ‘Good Mother’ should be, yet he dismisses her claims of sorcery. The witches are highly critical of what they deem to be his sexist downplaying of Patricia’s fears: “When women tell you the truth, you don’t pity them, you tell them they have delusions!”, for which they punish him by forcing him to witness Markos’s satanic ritual wherein Patricia is murdered. The film is therefore ambiguous in its feminism as it both exhalts female power, yet simultaneously depicts women as abject and

cruel towards both men and each other. Guadagnino argues that such depictions are not reflective of sexist attitudes towards female power, but are rather indicative of the human capacity for evil: “like any community you have displays of power [...] and can bring with it cruelty” (Bloom quoting Guadagnino, 2018). However, one could argue that the emphasis on the abject “fluids” and corporeality of matriarchal figures with the goal of inducing fear in the viewer perpetuates an abject view of female corporeality in the horror genre. In doing so, the film arguably fails to progress beyond discriminatory tropes pertaining to mothers and their bodies; tropes which Creed first categorised in her 1993 book *The Monstrous Feminine*, and therefore demonstrates an underlying ambivalence and misogyny towards maternal bodies.

Susie’s birth mother, Mrs Bannion, is depicted as a ‘Bad Mother’ figure through her mistreatment of Susie in the film’s dream sequences and flashbacks, is subsequently associated with the abject, and punished with her sickness and eventual death. Although we never witness any conversation between Susie and her mother, and her mother speaks very little on screen, we understand that she is a force to be reckoned with, and a source of anxiety for Susie. The opening credits pause on an embroidered poster in Susie’s maternal home reading, “A mother is a woman who can take the place of all others, but whose place no one else can take” (see figure 21). The lingering, medium shot feels threatening, both exemplifying the complex dynamics relating to motherhood in the film, as will be analysed later on, but also establishes Susie’s mother as an all consuming and enveloping matriarch. Interestingly, the shot is not dissimilar to the framing of Ellen Leigh’s photo at her funeral in *Hereditary*, that also constructs her as a menacing matriarch, and thus engenders fear in the viewer. A slow zoom shot into a close up of Mrs Bannion’s

gaunt face, breathing haggardly, is then superimposed onto Susie as she descends into the U-bahn in Berlin.

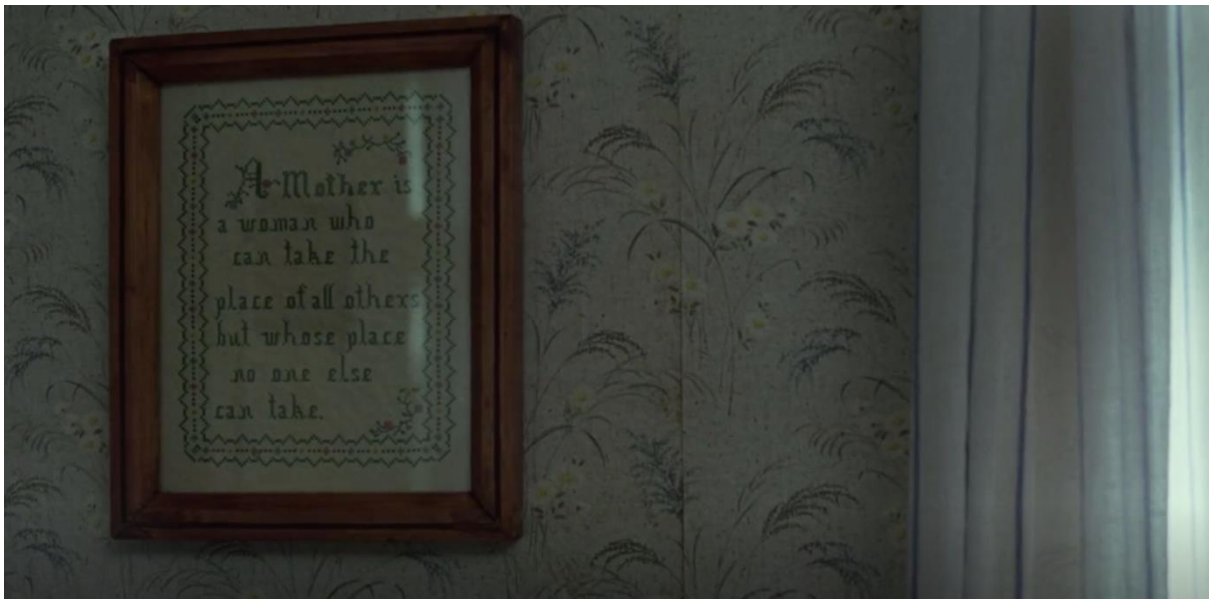

Figure 21: Mrs Bannion's embroidered poster foreshadows the matriarchal theme. Suspiria/Amazon Studios.

The same image of her face, and the sound of her laboured breathing are superimposed throughout the film, suggesting that she constantly observes Susie: "the Bad Mother continues to 'haunt' from afar. She refuses to let go even in death or insists on holding the child back through her overwhelming dominance of the child" (Arnold, 2013, p.93). As a dying woman, her presence hangs heavily over Susie and the viewer, and it is notable that she appears almost exclusively when Susie is in distress. A pivotal scene in understanding the relationship between mother and daughter comes in the form of a dream sequence, soon after Susie's arrival at the company. The dream sequence consists of fast cutting a succession of surrealist shots with an array of striking and abject imagery; the overall effect being one of chaos and confusion. Given that dreams represent the "embodiment of repressed, desires, tensions, fears that our conscious mind rejects" (Wood, 2020, p.115), one can interpret the following images as having a symbolic importance with regards to

Susie's relationship with her mother, and maternity as a whole. Several short shots show Susie as a child, hiding in a cupboard, her mother pulling her out, and then burning her hand with an iron as punishment. The recurring image of the cupboard can be interpreted in various ways, either as a lieu of fear, or as one of safety. Given that the home is traditionally the domestic sphere of the mother, one could argue that it represents a "suffocating return to the womb" (Briefel, 2017, p.15), in which Susie's mother's desire to to envelop and engulf her is realised. Susie's willingness to hide in it can suggest an incapacity to "distinguish the boundaries between [her] own flesh and the womb" as is typical of the "pre-infantile self" (Sharpe and Sexon, 2018, p.7), and her subsequent ambivalence towards her mother, in which she both desires and fears her: The 'Bad Mother' is "both yearned for and repelled" (Arnold, 2013, p.99). Given that the womb signifies both "fullness and emptiness" (Creed, 1993, p.27), it is an ambivalent space for Susie, that is both familiar, suggesting safety and comfort, as well as a reminder of the threat of the mother, who poses menacingly in the doorway, threatening to pull her out, and thus forcefully evacuating her from the liminality of the womb. Mrs Bannion is therefore depicted as a 'Bad Mother', capable of inflicting pain on her child, and invoking dread, indicative of the fear of "identifying too closely with the maternal, of never achieving selfhood independent from the mother" (Arnold, 2013, p.93).

The next medium close up shots depict Mrs Bannion, emaciated, mouth wide open in a silent scream, hair pulled like a blindfold over her eyes, with white bandages on her chest, as the words "mother, mother" are repeatedly whispered. The next shot is almost identical, with the addition of a white, gossamer shroud draped over her (see figure 22). The hair imagery is significant here as it is a motif throughout the film: associated with the abject, power and witchcraft, it is an allegory for the ambivalence

that permeates the film, and its association with Mrs Bannion aligns her with its symbolism.

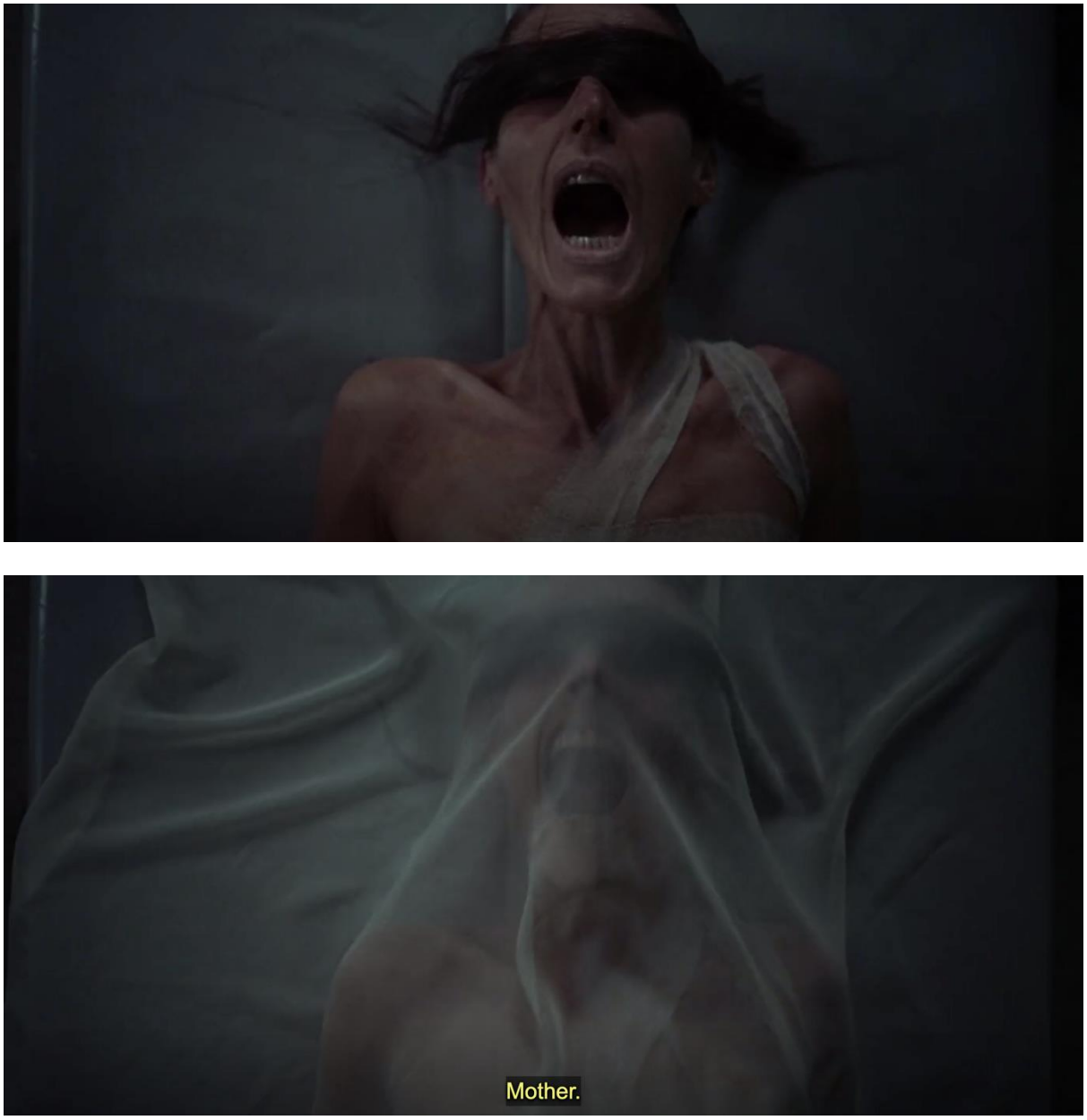

Figure 22: Mrs Bannion is abjectified by her hair. Suspiria/Amazon Studios.

As an abject substance, hair represents “death on the body” (Tondeur, 2012, p.264), as hair is formed from “dead, keratin-rich cells” (Rusting, 2001, p.74), and is subsequently “treated as other” (Tondeur, 2012, p.264): it is representative of the skin’s “defecation” (Tondeur, 2012, p.270). Using Kristeva’s theory of abjection, hair “threatens social order and semantic cleanliness” (Kristeva, 1982; Sharpe and Sexon, 2018, p.2) as it literally “crosses the borders of the skin” (Tondeur, 2012, p.271). Mrs Bannion’s eyes are covered with hair, both blinding her and binding her to an abject substance as punishment for her maternal sin: she is subdued and rendered powerless in this part of Susie’s dream. The dead qualities of the hair and her skeletal body suggest that she is beyond death in these shots: symbolically represented by the hair as “death on the body” (Tondeur, 2012, p.264), and the white gossamer sheet that is reminiscent of coroner’s post-mortem cloths. Given her association with death, it is important to note that actress Malgosia Bela who plays Mrs Bannion, later plays the figure of Death, who is subservient to Susie once she becomes Mother Suspiriorum: the power roles are reversed.

Whilst the abject qualities of hair render Mrs Bannion powerless, hair is a symbol of feminine power for the witches in the coven: bags and dresses are made of hair, hair is weaved into cobwebs in their lair, a picture of Blanc and Markos is framed in hair, Blanc and Susie have very long hair, and hair features regularly in Susie’s dreams sent to her by Blanc. The other students have nightmares about hair, as Sara tells Susie: “I dreamt of hairballs in toilets for three weeks before I got a decent night’s sleep here”. For Susie, hair is contestably associated with the Mennonite community she grew up in, wherein womens’ hair is considered to be a sacred symbol of femininity and piety, never to be cut, but to be hidden under a hair “covering” that signals submissiveness to men and God (Weaver, 2014). Such patriarchal views are

at odds with the matriarchal world of the company, and the significance of the hair over Mrs Bannion's eyes in Susie's dream could signify the witches re-appropriation of the abject qualities of hair as a form of power in order to express their "dissatisfaction" with the patriarchal society outside of the coven, thus "distanc[ing] themselves from the system that would subordinate them" (Weitz, 2001, p.670). Mrs Bannion is therefore punished for both her transgressions as a 'Bad Mother', and as a woman who failed to protest against a system of authority that undermined her female and maternal power.

A central tension within the film therefore pertains to mothers and their abject fluids or forms, and whether or not their abject bodies are a source of power. The mothers with the most power in the film are depicted as abject: Markos, Mrs Bannion and Susie/Mother Suspiriorum. The symbiotic relationship between abject motherhood and power culminates in the film's climax, wherein Markos attempts to use Susie as a host body, only for Susie to realise that she is that which Markos purports herself to be: Mother Suspiriorum. Invoking Death, who proceeds to kill Markos and her supporters as punishment for following a "false mother", Susie's transformation is marked by the colour red which permeates the camera and the scene, further recalling the abject fluids of the female body. Descending in a sheer shift gown with her breasts exposed, she gazes euphorically into the camera, before opening a vagina shaped hole in her chest. Dripping with blood, and with a tongue that screams from within, the vagina in her chest throbs as Susie whispers "I am the mother". Interpretations of the vagina imagery are multitudinous: on the one hand, the vagina, accompanied by Susie's statement, "I am the mother" insinuates that motherhood is essentialist, that maternity is a woman's biological destiny, and that Susie's assumption of the mother role was preordained. Even though Susie, as

Mother Suspiriorum, does not become a biological mother, she assumes the symbolic role of a mother in the context of a matriarchal society, and thus remains a figure of maternity, albeit a powerful one. On the other hand, the “vagina dentata” (Creed, 1993, p.27), which poses the threat of castration, establishes Susie as both a source of abject anxiety due to her production of bodily fluids, and as a figure of power that castrates her foes, as evidenced when she kills Markos and her followers. Here, one can draw similarities between Susie as castrator, and Thomasin in *The Witch*, whose fertility and beauty threaten to usurp and figuratively castrate her mother Katherine, the matriarch of the family. Given that both Markos in *Suspiria* and Katherine in *The Witch* are associated with the abject, as already established, and that both matriarchs are usurped/castrated by young, beautiful women, accusations that the film is misogynistic (Bloom, 2018) have merit. However, Susie herself, becomes a figure of abjection once she reveals her “vagina dentata” (Creed, 1993, p.27), establishing her as as the “archaic mother”: “a force that threatens to reincorporate what it once gave birth to [...] all pervasive, all encompassing- because of the constant presence of death” (Creed, 1993, p.28).

5.2.2 Maternal Ambivalence and Matricide

Madame Blanc is a figure of maternal ambivalence for Susie due to the simultaenous erotic and maternal undertones of their relationship: Blanc loves Susie but prepares her to be sacrificed for Markos. Arguably ‘love at first sight’, Susie’s audition for the dance company enthrals Blanc, Susie quickly lands the lead role in Blanc’s show, “Volk”, and later professes to harbouring an admiration and a yearning for Blanc since childhood, stating “I felt I had to see you”. Given Susie’s own ambivalence regarding her ‘Bad Mother’ figure, Mrs Bannion, she begins to view Blanc as a maternal substitute, and Blanc certainly reciprocates maternal feeling, both tutoring

her, and spending quality time together: qualities of a ‘Good Mother’. However, Blanc is ordered by Markos and the coven to prepare Susie to be sacrificed so that Markos may live in a new host body. Whilst she initially protests to Susie being chosen - “Are we going to waste another girl so quickly?” - she prepares Susie for the ritual, knowing that it will kill her. Their relationship is thus fraught with ambiguity and ambivalence; simultaneously maternal, lethal and sexual.

The scene in which Blanc invites Susie to her room for dinner demonstrates the ambiguities of their relationship: the camera cuts quickly between low angle, medium close up shots of their faces as they discuss Susie’s upbringing, licking their fingers as they eat chicken, generating sexual tension. After Susie reveals she travelled on three separate occasions to see Blanc in New York, Blanc asks provocatively “Were you punished?”, to which Susie replies “Yeah”, before the camera cuts back to Blanc as her face twitches in a sly smile. The scene is key in demonstrating the power dynamic and sexual tension between the two women, wherein Blanc is dominant over Susie, as literally and symbolically demonstrated in the split diopter shot (see figure 23), which sees Blanc looming behind Susie in the doorway, as Susie inhales sharply, staring wide eyed past the camera. The scene also establishes Blanc as an ambivalent matriarchal figure for Susie, whom she both desires as a maternal and authority figure, but who also awakens repressed sexual desires that she could not explore in the Mennonite community, referring to dancing Blanc’s choreography as feeling “what I think it must feel like to fuck”. In meeting Blanc, Susie awakens “repressed or bodily memories of her own intimate relationship with her mother’s body”, which are unconsciously “erotic, or at least sensuous” (Oliver, 2012, p.52), thus establishing Blanc and her maternal body as a “site of conflicting desires” (Creed, 1993, p.11). Consequently, the significance of the doorway in which Blanc

looms in this scene is representative of a rebirth into awakened desires and female power.

Figure 23: Sexual tension between Susie and Blanc. Suspiria/Amazon Studios.

In order for Susie to realise her power as Mother Suspiriorum, she must commit literal matricide, thus propagating the horror trope of matricide as the only means of achieving individuation (Arnold, 2013, p.91). Susie's individuation as Mother Suspiriorum is achieved through the swift deaths of the 'Bad Mothers': Mrs Bannion and Markos are killed by Susie's evocation of death. However, it is Blanc's literal castration as the ambivalent mother, that is abjectified, eroticised and prolonged: she is punished for her ambiguous mothering.

In the film's climax, Blanc finally realises the extent of her maternal love for Susie, and she attempts to stop the ritual in order to save Susie's life. In retaliation, Markos partially decapitates her, and Blanc becomes "woman as bleeding wound" (Creed, 1993, p.1), much like Annie in *Hereditary* and Katherine in *The Witch*. There are

several important analogies between the three mothers: all three mothers are ambivalent towards their children to the extent that they consider, or actually attempt to kill them, all three mothers are figuratively and literally castrated by, or for their children, and all three mothers are abjectified by their monstrous fluids. The red of Blanc's dress, and her white, pale skin (also inferred by her name 'Blanc', meaning 'white'), covered in blood recalls similar imagery in *Hereditary* and *The Witch*, where the red and white colours of their clothing and skin symbolically align the mothers with their monstrous fluids, and thus abjectify them as monstrous: "The symbolic associations of mother's milk and menstrual blood induce a reaction of horror from the observing subject, who associates these fluids with a monstrous form of maternity." (Sharpe and Sexon, 2018, p.2). Although we later learn that Blanc survives her decapitation, the slow motion shots from various angles that follow Blanc's decapitated body, falling to the ground (see figure 24), eroticise her "wet death" and emphasise her abject opening (Pinedo, 1997, p.61): "horror is [...] concerned with the creation of openings where there were none before (Pinedo, 1997, p.62). In doing so, the film promulgates erotic, abject maternal suffering that is subsequently significant of an ongoing ambivalence towards mothers and their corporeality.

Alison Stone posits that matricide is "problematic" because it "enshrines" patriarchal power by breaking up the "mother-child dyad" (Stone, 2012, p.118-119). In Suspiria, patriarchal power is marginalised and emasculated, as demonstrated by the witches' treatment of Dr Klemperer and the detectives. Matricide is therefore reappropriated in order to allow the daughter to claim the matriarchal role without the "third term" of the father (Stone, 2012, p.118): the film rejects the patriarchy. Consequently, the role of the matriarch is fiercely contested throughout the film, which Dr Klemperer refers

to as a “crisis of leadership” (*Suspiria*, 2018): Markos falsely claims to be Mother Suspiriorum in order to retain power within the coven, Blanc disputes her claim but isn’t powerful enough to overrule her, and Mrs Bannion retains matriarchal influence over Susie from afar, as demonstrated by her haunting presence in Susie’s dreams.

Figure 24: Blanc’s erotic death. Suspiria/Amazon Studios.

The conflict surrounding the matriarchal position is foreshadowed by Mrs Bannion’s embroidered poster, seen at the beginning of the film: “A mother is a woman who can take the place of all others, but whose place no one else can take”. Through Susie’s assumption of the matriarchal role as Mother Suspiriorum, the film actively disproves this statement. Having demonstrated that both Mrs Bannion and Markos are ‘Bad Mothers’, and that Susie kills both of them, one could argue that the film implies the following: the ‘Bad Mother’ can, and should be replaced and usurped by her daughter, and this can only be achieved through literal matricide. Arnold argues that this is a horror trope, stating, “the Bad Mother must ultimately suffer”, either through “the loss of a child”, or by “be[ing] killed” (Arnold, 2013, p.78), and this trope perseveres in *Suspiria*. It is interesting to note that upon becoming Mother

Suspiriorum, Susie does not kill Blanc, who represents the ambivalent mother, as previously demonstrated, but she does not save her either. In leaving Blanc to an ambiguous fate, and having realised her individuation as Mother Suspiriorum, Susie commits symbolic matricide of the ambivalent mother, and the rightful matriarch begins her reign.

In conclusion, the film perpetuates misogynistic portrayals of maternal bodies through abjection and erotic 'wet deaths' (Pinedo, 1997, p.61) that punishes both 'Bad' and ambivalent mothers, thus signifying a continued ambivalence towards maternal corporeality. However, the film both extolls matriarchal power and debases patriarchal authority, leading to a revolutionary reappropriation of matricide that excludes the "third term" of the father (Stone, 2012, p.118), and signifies a feminist reappraisal of matricide as a horror trope. On the contrary, the insinuation that literal and symbolic matricide are fundamental in order to achieve individuality debases motherhood and is representative of a continued ambivalence towards mothers and their relationships with their children.

5.4 Chapter conclusion

Having analysed *The Witch* and *Suspiria*, several conclusions can be drawn. Both films depict witches as ambivalent mother figures: they offer young women the opportunity to escape patriarchal authority, and thus represent feminist emancipation, yet they demonstrate extreme cruelty and sadism towards children, whom they sacrifice in their rituals, and offer literal matricide as the only means of obtaining individual freedom. Both Thomasin and Susie escape from stifling, traditionalist communities (The Puritans and the Mennonites), and are sexually liberated by witchcraft, as evidenced by their nudity and gaiety upon realising their

female power: Thomasin floats naked, laughing into the sky, and Susie dances half naked in the Mutterhaus after becoming Mother Suspiriorum. In doing so, both films appear to celebrate female sexuality in a genre which has historically “disavow[ed]” female desire (Williams, 2014, p.14) and castrated it through “a sexualised objectification of that form, whether fetishistic-scopophilic [...] or sadistic-voyeuristic” (Schneider, 2004, p.5). However, there are aspects of socophilia that are evidenced by close ups on Thomasin’s breasts and Susie’s orgasmic writhing on the dance floor, that imply the persistence of the voyeuristic male gaze (Mulvey, 1975, p.6) in Horror. Finally, the dissemination of figurative and literal, abject matricide perpetuates misogynistic attitudes towards maternal bodies, and offers no other means of individuation to its protagonists, thus further marginalising the mother figure in the canon of maternal horror films.

6. Conclusion

In order to evaluate what has been achieved by this research and its corpus of films, it is necessary to restate the definition of horror first stipulated by this thesis in the Introduction. Cherry posits that horror films "reflect the conditions existing at the time and place in which they were made", and in doing so, "meaningfully address contemporary issues and reflect cultural, social or political trends" (Cherry, 2009, p.9). It has been demonstrated throughout this thesis that contemporary horror films centred on maternal protagonists, reflect and resist the current socio-political state of motherhood in the 21st century, that is defined by postfeminist 'new momism'. It has been illustrated in the Literature Review that 'new momism' engenders maternal ambivalence on both a social and individual scale (Almond, 2010, p.21), yet it has become a 'taboo' subject in modern society (Almond, 2010, p.19; Brenner, 2013, p.90). Given its taboo status, the subject of maternal ambivalence perfectly aligns with the horror genre's "violent disruption of the everyday world" (Pinedo, 1997, p.10), thus accounting for the depictions of ambivalent motherhood presented in *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, *The Babadook*, *Bird Box* and *Hereditary*.

Furthermore, this thesis has demonstrated that the films herein "emphasise the mother's subjective experience" in ways that "dissonant, conflicting cultural expectations work to shape, manage, police and punish the individual" (Harrington, 2017). This has been achieved through a contrasting analysis of films that either centre maternal ambivalence as a theme, as demonstrated by the films in Chapter 3, or focus on social ambivalence and violence towards the maternal body and/or protagonist in Chapters 4 and 5. This research has determined that *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, *The Babadook* and *Bird Box* not only use 'horror vérité' aesthetic strategies such as colour and framing to highlight and exaggerate maternal

ambivalence as both an individual and social 'subjective' experience, but they also move beyond a binary understanding of mothers as 'Good' or 'Bad': terms outlined by Arnold in her book *Maternal Horror Film: Motherhood and Melodrama* (2013). Through their 'good enough' mothering (Winnicott, 1960, p.594; Almond, 2010, p.26-32), these maternal protagonists represent a resistance to 'new momism', and hopefully continue to inspire more nuanced, complex representations of ambivalent mothers in horror.

However, this research has also argued that misogynistic attitudes towards mothers and their corporeality continue to prevail in the horror genre. For example, whilst *Hereditary* offers a nuanced portrayal of ambivalent motherhood, and therefore is used as a segue between Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, the film continues to revel in abject representations of maternal corporeality as the principal means of generating horror in the viewer. In doing so, the film perpetuates misogynistic attitudes towards maternal bodies that inordinately abjectify maternal 'monstrous fluids' and reduce the mother to "woman as bleeding wound" (Creed, 1993, p.1). The misogyny, social ambivalence and violence towards mothers has been further explored in *mother!*, *The Witch* and *Suspiria*, through their framing of maternal corporeality and fluids, suggesting that the horror genre continues to "us[e] [maternal] bodies as sites of horror" (Chambers, 2020, p.213), and therefore perpetuates the misogyny that the horror genre has historically been accused of (Peirse, 2020, p.6).

Furthermore, this research has illustrated that the trope of matricide continues to permeate the horror genre, and in doing so not only enshrines the 'third term' of the father (Stone, 2012, p.118), but also perpetuates a social ambivalence towards motherhood and mothers' roles in their childrens' lives. Whilst *Hereditary* depicts an

ambivalent mother who attempts to sacrifice herself for her child - a quality usually attributed to the 'Good Mother' (Arnold, 2013, p.79) - and thus represents an attempt to move beyond binary presentations of mothers in horror, the films in Chapters 4 and 5 continue to present matricide as the only means towards the child's individuation (Arnold, 2013, p.91). Even *Suspiria*, a film that debases patriarchal authority in favour of matriarchal power, and a self confessed "feminist film" (Douglas, 2018), offers abject matricide as the only means of realising catharsis and selfhood.

As such, it is of interest to note that all three films in Chapter 3 are directed by women, whereas all four films in Chapters 4 and 5 are directed by men. In her book *Women Make Horror* (2020), Alison Peirse argues that "a woman director [will not] necessarily [...] make a woman centred film", and indeed "women are not necessarily more progressive or forward-looking than are biological men" (Peirse, 2020, p.9-10). Whilst this is undoubtedly true, the stark contrast between the female and male directed films in this thesis suggests that presentations of maternal protagonists are significantly more nuanced in horror films directed by women. Arguably, this is not only because they do not abjectify or objectify maternal corporeality, as proven in Chapter 3, but also because they "provide a way for women to enjoy genre films as metaphors for everyday female experience." (Lupher, 2020, p.225), and this is achieved through aesthetic 'horror vérité' strategies.

There are several ways that further research can develop and complete the findings demonstrated in this thesis. Firstly, a thorough exploration of the differences between female and male directed horror films centred on a maternal protagonist, would be of great significance in establishing whether or not the gender of the

director positively or negatively influences representations of motherhood. Examples of case studies could include *Us* (2019), directed by Jordan Peele, in which two maternal protagonists blur the boundaries of 'Good' and 'Bad', making them both ambivalent villains/heroes. Similarly, research into more diverse representations of motherhood, as seen in *His House* (2020) and *Umma* (2022) could continue to analyse the ways in which 'new momism', maternal ambivalence and social ambivalence towards mothers are presented, with a parallel focus on the films' themes of racism, marginalisation and classism, as stated in the Introduction. Finally, renewed research into maternal ambivalence as both an individual and social experience that, through 'horror vérité' techniques is presented in horror films, merits continued attention, particularly given the gap in this field of research, as this thesis has demonstrated.

Erin Harrington posits that "Horror films are a space in which historically specific hopes and anxieties about the nature of motherhood and maternal affect are variously articulated, enforced and challenged" (Harrington, 2017). Through the continued release of horror films that challenge and articulate maternal ambivalence, there is hope that one day, maternal ambivalence will no longer be society's last taboo.

7. Reference List

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