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You Were Home: Women's Work and Creation in Darren Aronofsky's mother!

Sydney Rice

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INTRODUCTION

On September 15, 2017, Darren Aronofsky released his newest movie, *mother!*, after a promotional campaign that left the movie shrouded in mystery, despite being widely released. Expecting a psychological thriller about a home invasion, audiences poured into select movie theaters across the nation and were struck with a movie that is, as described by film critic Michael Sragow, a "repulsive parable," a "fever dream," and "mayhem" incarnate. The movie induces feelings of stress, frustration, and anxiety, and leaves viewers baffled at every moment. People booed. People walked out of the theater midway, demanding refunds, or stuck it out to the end and lamented a lost two hours of their lives. On Rotten Tomatoes, one viewer wrote that after viewing the film, her "brain [was] throbbing from the painful experience of watching quite possibly the worst movie ever made." To top it all off, *mother!* received an F on CinemaScore. Yet despite the negative reviews of others, Jennifer Lawrence, the starring actress, called Aronofsky's work "a masterpiece" in her interview with the Today Show.

Why did this film receive such polarized responses? How can a film that was called anti-Christian, immoral, and misogynistic still earn a 69% from critics on Rotten Tomatoes? Javier Bardem and Jennifer Lawrence, the stars of the movie, are both Oscar winners. Aronofsky, the writer and director, has been nominated for an Oscar for his movie *Black Swan* and has won 39 other awards (IMDb). The film does not have questionable talent, but rather a questionable message. As Brian Tallerico writes in his review of the movie, *mother!* is a film that changes the genre of horror; it is a film that was "purposefully made to be divisive." And given Aronofsky's track record of making disturbing and controversial movies, how could it not be?

*mother!* is dark, twisted, and intentionally ambiguous. It can be as confusing as it is polarizing, but one thing is clear: *mother!* is a surreal film that is focused on the viewer's experience. Aronofsky creates an allegory that is contained within the home, but it is elusive and
strange. Allegories function by having a clear moral or political message, and *mother!* is anything but clear. Aronofsky has overtly stated that there are many ways to view the movie, which he claims he did intentionally; it is an allegory of Christianity, it represents the destruction of a marriage, and it ultimately speaks for the tragedies that humanity has inflicted upon the Earth and our eventual ecological doom. But through a film that expresses concerns for our land, Aronofsky expresses concerns for our women, albeit problematically.

Critics have noted that Aronofsky's film has a strange focus on gender, although it is a difficult focus to dissect. In his review of *mother!*, A.O. Scott expressed feelings of discomfort at the way the titular character, Mother, is treated, and noted that this was not an easy role for anyone to play, remarking that Jennifer Lawrence is "called upon to embody all of womankind." Brian Tallerico commented that it is clear that Aronofsky uses the film to "examine gender roles and differences between artistic and literal creation." Morgan Rojas describes *mother!* as "grossly misunderstood," and notes that the film, while shocking and at times disgusting, serves as "a reflection of the equally shocking times in which we live." Each of these critics noticed the influence of gender, the harsh line between the feminine and the masculine, and then quickly passed this issue by. Why? There are no definite, easy answers to many of the questions the film asks, but the film's importance and its underlying themes are not something that can be ignored. *mother!*, despite its many interpretations, is at its core a story of the female experience and the female struggle to create.

THE "MOTHER EARTH" PROBLEM

Beyond the immediate viewer reactions to the film and the ambivalence critics may feel, there is more to be had in a study of *mother!*. One can begin to decode its strange symbols by seeing *mother!* as part of a larger literary, cinematic, and historical discourse, particularly on the
idea of and the spawn of the metaphor "mother earth." Both female and natural, this metaphor carries a gravity that is often neglected, but that can be viewed properly through the lens of eco-feminism. Eco-feminism allows us to analyze mother! as a work that is inextricable from the female character's experience and perspective. As a basic premise, eco-feminism displays the historical connections between woman and nature. Key to the eco-feminist argument is that throughout human history, the times when we treat women poorly are the times when we treat nature poorly, which has obvious contemporary relevance. Eco-feminism expands on other strands of feminism by specifically arguing that as women, it is our duty to fight for the rights of the environment, as it has also suffered from patriarchal culture and the same oppressive forces that have been exerted on women. As Karen J. Warren and Jim Cheney write in a defining eco-feminist text, "feminist concerns run parallel to, are bound up with, or, perhaps, are one with concern for a natural world which has been subjected to much the same abuse and ambivalent behavior as women" (294). Therefore, this theory stands on the ground that the domination of nature is "morally wrong" and ecological concerns should be adopted into feminist policy (Warren and Cheney 295).

What pertains specifically to mother! in ecofeminist theory is its analysis of the way that women and nature are portrayed through language. Our most familiar metaphors for nature are feminine, and our most familiar metaphors for women are in the realm of the animal. Through the workings of language, man assigns woman to the status of "other," and from there, "Man identifies that which he wants and desires, or has acquired or fears acquiring, as Woman. The earth, the sea, the hurricane, Truth, Freedom, Liberty, Sexuality are all called Woman, as is Death itself" (Kittay). Ships, planes, and cars are female. It is normal for a man to identify a woman, specifically one he is attracted to, as an animal which must be hunted and captured. Phrases such as "the rape of nature" and "virgin forests" are common, as is calling a woman an
"old hen" or a "bitch." The conceptualization of woman as "other," and the use of woman in these metaphors displays a mentality that woman's status is inferior to that of man, and is the complete basis of this language. Woman is objectified, while nature is personified. Woman is portrayed as inhuman, even in elevating her, and nature is portrayed as a being that can fix its own problems whenever it desires. Man dominates both, while taking responsibility for neither.

The concept of Earth as female and more specifically of Earth as mother is not a healthy one. The Mother Earth metaphor encourages patriarchal culture to view both woman and nature as there for the taking. As the "other," woman is aligned with nature, while man is aligned with society or culture, in part because of the differences in the way women have historically taken roles in the world. As Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen argue, through social evolution, woman has been forced to take a role outside of culture because of her role in childbearing. While men were out hunting and competing for resources, a woman's reproductive capabilities prevented her from "full participation in the hunt," and this "relegates her to the realm of non-culture" (Gaard and Gruen 78). The place of woman was then removed from society and culture, where the man ruled, partially because the act of creating life has always contradicted the violence and competition in the male-oriented world. In order for the patriarchy to function, woman needed to be constrained in order to protect a valuable resource: her ability to reproduce (Gaard and Gruen 78). Any work that she could do outside of the home would be pointless in comparison to what she could create with her own body.

Mother Earth is the most popular of the problematic woman-nature metaphors, and the vehicle that moves Aronofsky's allegory. In an allegory that is vague, threatening, and bold, it makes sense that Aronofsky would rely on a trope that comes to us naturally—otherwise, his intended ecological statement might go over viewers' heads. In other words, the connection between Mother, the character, and Earth is more accessible because of Mother Nature's or
Mother Earth's prominent role in pop culture. Mother Earth stars in everything from *The Smurfs* to tampon commercials. The story of the maternal earth goddess has been around since ancient times—there is some version of her in almost every ancient culture—and Gaia from the Greek mythos is the most well-known figure. Gaia represents both the physical earth, the earth that sustains all life, as well as the creator of the earth and the universe. In both Hesiod's tale of creation and Homer's, before Gaia there was only Chaos, until Gaia arose of her own accord. Gaia is depicted as the "broad-bosomed earth," and she "serves as the ever-immovable base" for Gods and mortals alike (Hesiod 30). Gaia created herself, created the earth, and then created Uranus. In partnership with Uranus, Gaia created the giants, the titans, and the rest of the conceivable universe. She served as a center of prophecy, her womb served as a prison to her children, and all new creation is attributed to her.

At this early stage, these metaphors and views of the world as created by woman were not necessarily harmful. They still implied that the Earth takes care of itself, but the destructive capacity of humans on the earth was still relatively muted. Then, as Catherine Roach writes, a new way of viewing the world came as a result of Enlightenment thinking, beginning in the 16th century. The "new ethic" developed as a part of the rise of intellect emphasized the "greater control and domination of both nature and women and their treatment as resources" (Roach 51). Enlightenment thinkers dismissed viewing nature with a sense of wonder and magic. Thinking moved from viewing nature as sacred and organic to viewing nature as mechanistic, something that can be possessed and can then be controlled. Attitudes toward women parallel this shift. Once, the domestic was viewed as an art that took skill to master. The ordering and management of servants, even the space within the home was considered the sacred duty of woman (Abrams). But because of Enlightenment values, the domestic was no longer taken seriously. The domestic was not hard, was not respected, and was something to be mocked. Women went on doing their
household duties, but this was no longer considered to be "work." Work was what men did; work was outside the home.

Aronofsky takes the Mother Earth metaphor and the art of the domestic and uses them to make something—whether it be a masterpiece or an utter waste of time—and that something, which he calls an allegory, is confusing and convoluted. *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* defines allegory as "the concrete presentation of an abstract idea…with at least two levels of meaning. The first level is a surface story line…The second level is typically moral, political, philosophical, or religious" (Murfin and Ray 10). Aronofsky follows some conventions of allegory and abandons others. The characters in his film do not have names but bear the names of their representative social roles, often mimicking those used in scripture, such as "Mother," "Herald," "Adulterer," or "Cupbearer." Like an allegory, many of the images shown are meant to be taken symbolically, such as the beating heart that Mother sees inside the home. The difference in a typical allegory and the way that Aronofsky frames his allegory, is that Aronofsky's allegory is not " thinly veiled" in order to more easily "facilitate recognition of this deeper level of meaning" (Murfin and Ray). Aronofsky's allegory is not easily understood, and part of the problem is that audiences could not differentiate between the first level of meaning and the second. The first level of meaning in *mother!* is religious; Aronofsky uses commonly known biblical stories to move his plot along. Many viewers and critics who caught on to the use of the biblical plot elements crucified the movie then and there. When one looks for the second level of meaning in the allegory, though, one finds the true experience of the film. Whether one believes the film is about the destruction of the Earth or not, what Aronofsky portrays about women, and more specifically about mothers, and the way they are treated is disturbing. The film functions by putting the audience in Mother's perspective and is therefore a powerful statement about women's creation.
PLOT SUMMARY OF MOTHER!

Because mother! can be a difficult movie to dissect, I will summarize the plot as succinctly as possible. The opening image of the film sets the tone for the entire movie: a woman, burning, a look of determination in her eyes that then turns to grief. The screen goes black, and returns with an image of "Him," also known as "The Poet," placing a crystal on a stand. A house then materializes, and with it the image of a woman in bed. "Mother,"—the otherwise nameless character played by Jennifer Lawrence, and from whose limited perspective the movie is filmed—rolls over, and the first line of the movie is her question, "Baby?" Mother searches for Him, only to have Him sneak up behind her. Him is a famous poet suffering from writer's block who has been unable to produce any writing for years. Mother, his wife, has taken on the project of rebuilding his childhood home after it burnt down in a fire.

The couple receives a knock on the front door. "Man," an unexpected visitor, is invited by Him into the home, despite Mother's discomfort. At night, Mother walks in on Him tending to Man. Man is leaning over the toilet. Mother notices a chunk of his skin missing from his ribs, but Him covers Man's side and shooes her away. The next morning, there is another knock on the door. Mother opens the door and finds "Woman," the wife of Man, on her doorstep. Him invites Woman to stay, and Mother becomes suspicious of their guests and their rude behavior. Unseen, Man and Woman enter Him's office to admire the place where he works. While in the office, they accidentally shatter Him's crystal. Him is enraged and squeezes the crystal until blood runs from his hands. Mother orders Man and Woman to leave. As they are preparing to go, their two sons rush in and bicker over their inheritance. The oldest son kills the youngest son with a doorknob and then flees. Him, along with Man and Woman, seek help for the youngest son outside of the home. Mother is forced to clean the blood from the floor, but there is one stain that will not come out. The oldest son returns to get something he left behind, surprising Mother. He
asks her, "They left you all alone?" and then says, "You do understand," and leaves the home without another word.

Him returns home, covered in blood and without Man and Woman. Him and Mother go to sleep, only to be awoken by the sounds of people entering the home. They are mourners that Him invited in, and they are holding a service for the youngest son. Throughout the night, the house gradually fills with people. The people get more and more aggressive toward Mother, even after she insists that this is *her* home. She goes from asking politely for them to leave to screaming at them. They do, shooting Mother dirty looks and thanking Him. She begins to clean up the mess they made. Mother and Him get into a fight, and he grabs her hard and forces her to kiss him. Eventually, she gives in and they proceed up the stairs and into the bedroom. The next morning, Mother declares that she is pregnant. At first Him is hesitant, but then he is joyous. He is inspired. Him begins writing again. Mother cleans the house after the destruction of the night before.

The movie progresses several months. Mother is pregnant and is showing. The baby kicks and Mother rushes to tell Him, but he is clearly occupied. Him is standing in the doorway, and as she approaches he turns to tell her that he has finished his "masterpiece." He allows Mother to read it, and she is moved to tears. The couple is interrupted by a phone call from Him's publisher. Fans begin to show up to the house; hundreds of people crowd around to see Him. The scenes of the movie devolve into chaos as more fans of Him's work arrive. Fighting begins, and violence and death are everywhere. In fast-paced scenes, Mother progresses through labor in the midst of total destruction. There are plague victims, slaves, riots, and grenades going off. It is horrifying and overwhelming. Him rescues her and brings her into his office for protection.

The world seems to quiet for a while as she gives birth to a baby boy. Him watches over her, but Mother refuses to let Him hold the baby. Mother begs Him to make the fans leave, but
when she nods off, Him takes the baby from her and delivers it to the fans. Awake now, Mother screams, desperate, and tries to run after the baby through the crowd. The fans lift the baby above them, breaking its neck, and in mourning, a zealot leads the fans in a ceremony in which they eat the baby's body. Mother finally reaches the front of the crowd, and enraged, begins lashing out at the people. They beat her down until Him comes and saves her from them. Mother runs from Him into the basement, coming upon the oil tank stored there, and opens it up, taking out Man's lighter. Him follows her and begs her to stop. She drops the lighter, setting the whole house aflame. He walks through the flames to Mother, who is burning, and Him carries her out of the basement and into the ruined office. When Mother asks who Him is, he replies, "I am I. You were home." With her permission, Him reaches into her chest and pulls out Mother's heart. She crumbles into ash. Him crushes the heart until it forms the same crystal that he had before, and he places it in the same spot it once was. The house materializes again, unburnt, and shows a woman in bed. She turns to the camera, a new Mother played by a different actress, and asks the question, "Baby?"

THE HOUSE

The house is an integral part of the film, as it is Mother's creation, and the way that it is designed layers meaning in the film. Multiple versions of the home were created for filming: one on location in Bizard Island for the daylight scenes and the first half of the film, and one in the studio in Montreal, Canada, for the nighttime scenes and the destructive latter half of the film ("mother!: The Downward Spiral"). The home reinforces the themes of entrapment and the cyclical nature of life and of creation through its architecture. Phil Messina, the production designer for mother!, designed the house with phrenology in mind; he claims that he created the octagonal-shaped home because this shape is believed to be the most "harmonious shape for a
house" based on the design and functionality of the human brain (see fig. 1). In the home, there are no dead ends; each room leads into another room and all parts of the house can be seen through the atrium.

![Fig. 1. Mother's Octagonal Home (from Aronofsky's mother!, 2017)](image1)

It is designed so that the audience and the characters are "always moving forward" ("mother!: The Downward Spiral"), but in doing so they may circle back to where they came from. The home itself is situated within a circle of trees (see fig. 2). This is important because mother! is
filmed from Mother's limited perspective, and because of the life cycle of Mothers that is shown in the beginning and the end of the film.

Fig. 3. Him pulls Mother back into the home.

Mother's movements are contained within the home, but they do not begin to feel claustrophobic until the end, once she notices her own entrapment. Just before Mother's intended celebration of Him's work, she is seen bathing. The scene shows her reaching into a packed bag, which indicates that Mother is fully prepared to leave the home to deliver her baby, so she does not yet fully understand her fate. Once she goes into labor, there are multiple moments when Mother sees an escape—be it a door, a window, or a gaping hole in the wall—and attempts to leave the home, even if she must crawl over the rubble and dead bodies of the invaders to do so. Each time, though, she is pulled back inside, back into the interior of the home, even as more people become antagonistic toward her (see fig. 3). The audience realizes then that while Mother may have initially been in the home of her own free will, she did not have much of a choice anyway. She is designated to the realm of the domestic, and the house is the physical embodiment of that. The house and the people that invade it all ensure one thing: that Mother stays in her place.
mother! is shot entirely through Mother's limited perspective. She is, after all, the titular character. There are three primary perspectives in the movie, and it rarely departs from this: those that are shot looking over Mother's shoulder, those that are close ups of her face, and those that are shot from her point of view. At times, this limited perspective makes the film confusing, such as when the two brothers are fighting. The camera follows Mother through the rooms as the fight progresses, so that the audience only sees flashes of the action. This technique is used again in the final scenes of the film, and it reinforces the downward spiral of action, and the circular turning of the home, of time, and of Mother. As Mother crawls over the bodies of war victims, escapes riots, and attempts to free enslaved women, the camera is rotating around her, as she is moving in a circle through the exterior rooms of the home (see fig. 4). Mother is the constant focus, the constant specimen under the microscope, and in order for the film to work Jennifer Lawrence had to be, as Aronofsky puts it, "endlessly specific and endlessly good" (mother!: The Downward Spiral”). Each movement, emotion, and thought of Mother's is captured, and these filter the world around her for the audience. The audience has no choice but to put themselves in the place of Mother, and she is the only sympathetic character. To shoot the film from the perspective of Him would be impossible. The movie would become pretentious, and it would
reinforce patriarchal views instead of subverting them. Mother’s distance and alienation is felt powerfully only because we never leave her perspective.

The close camera angles reinforce that Mother is the protagonist of the story, but in doing so they reveal the extent to which Mother loses the little control she was able to maintain in her world. As Mother approaches Man and Woman in one scene, she glimpses them having sex through a cracked doorway (see fig. 5). This kind of voyeurism exists throughout the film at an alarming rate, in the sense that someone is feeling pleasure at seeing the pain or distress of others. Mother becomes a witness to the complete human history of violence, including war, riots, plagues, and slavery. The audience, then, sees all of this, in addition to the violence that is inflicted upon Mother, for the purpose of entertainment.

Additionally, the camera angles suggest a kind of missing knowledge both on the part of the audience and on the part of Mother. When Oldest Brother re-enters the home, he is seen only as Mother bends down to pick up the picture of Him. A classic jump scare, she is unaware of his presence until he startles her, and she turns around. Jump scares work by luring the character into a false sense of security, while filling the audience with suspense using music that's pushing toward a climax, or typical cues such as opening a door or looking in the mirror. While Mother
may feel safe in her home, she isn't truly. Earlier in the film, Mother is preparing breakfast, and shuts the refrigerator door to reveal Man standing behind it. These scenes are a physical representation of dominance over Mother that is exhibited in all of her interactions with men, especially with Him, and even in her interactions with Woman. Him is frequently seen towering over Mother, or in scenes where she is approaching Him from beneath, coming up the stairs. In Figure 6, one can see from Mother's perspective as she looks up at Him. In Figure 7, we see Mother in one of the scenes shot over her shoulder, sitting at the bottom of the stairs.

Fig. 6. Him gazes down at Mother from above.

Fig. 7. Mother is shown at the bottom of the stairs.
One of the most haunting images of this is when Mother is on the floor, holding her newborn child, and Him is sitting in the armchair, staring down at her for what appears to be hours (see Fig. 8). Even the simplest movements were staged with care—everything about *mother!* is intentional and loaded with meaning—and all of these cinematic elements support Mother's oppression.

![Fig. 8. Him stares at Mother as she guards her baby.](image)

**THE FEMALE CREATION**

Throughout *mother!*, Mother's creations are devalued by those who enter her home. Mother takes pride in her work, but the sanctity of her space and her creation is repeatedly violated. In the beginning of the film, Mother is shown as the ideal woman and wife. Mother is beautiful, airy, and light. She is the fair and glowing Madonna of a renaissance painting, as is emphasized in one of the promotional posters used for the film (see Fig. 9), which is comparable to Hans Holbein's "A Lady with a Squirrel and a Starling" (see Fig. 10). Everything about her is natural, pleasing, and demure.
She is the passive figure. Things happen to her, they are not caused by her. Mother is frequently seen in the kitchen cooking, washing dishes, and cleaning up after her unwelcome guests. Each time they leave a mess, as Woman does after making her "secret-recipe" lemonade, Mother is there to clean up after them. Mother is seen in the kitchen, baking meals to perfection. She sets
the table; she serves tea to guests. She is the domestic figure, but she is also an architect and interior designer. Mother has rebuilt Him's childhood home from the ground up and continues to perfect the home. She meticulously mixes the paints to the right shades for the walls (see fig. 11). She speaks to Woman of braces, treads, railing, and skylights. Mother makes intentional decisions about her art, the literal art of home-making, and she has an intimate connection with her creation. When painting, she touches the wall and sees a vision of a heart. The heart is then pumping, full and healthy. As the film progresses, it hardens, becomes more frantic, and then becomes still. The heart is representative of the heart of her home, her heart, and even the pulse of life itself. Mother and her work, her art, her home, cannot be separated, and as the heart dies, she dies, and her work dies as well, likely to be forgotten and replaced.

Mother's homemaking is set in stark contrast to the work of Him. Him, also known as The Poet, is characterized as a man's man. He is gruff, at times sportive, and often takes charge. He has an eloquent use of words, which is accented by Bardem's deep and commanding voice, and his lines often mimic scripture. At times, he dotes on mother, especially after she announces her pregnancy. Often, however, he is patronizing. When he states, of Man, "it's so inspiring speaking with someone who really appreciates the work," Mother replies, "I love your work."
Him responds with a condescending, "Of course you do." Him only offers to help Mother with the home once, and he does not even fulfill his offer; he turns around and walks back out the door, to the waiting masses of fans. Even in the end, after everything is burned, he carries her as one would carry a child (see fig. 12). Mother apologizes to Him, but Him deflects the apology; "It's not your fault," he says, "Nothing is ever enough." No matter what she did, no matter what she created, it would not be enough to satisfy his desire. Even though she stays in her place and does exactly what he wants, Him will always require more of her. Mother may be a creator, but he is an endless consumer.

Fig. 12. Him cradles Mother in his arms.

Him, The Poet, is above all a creator, or even the creator. He considers his work to be a high art, as do all other characters in the film, in contrast with Mother's low art. When Mother confronts Him on his abandonment of her, after leaving her to clean up the younger brother's blood, she screams at Him, "No, it's not about them, it's about you. It's always about you and your work…I rebuilt this entire house, wall to wall, you haven't written a word." Him replies, "All I'm trying to do is bring life into this house…You think you can't breathe? I'm the one who's suffocating here." The irony is that Mother is the one who is never allowed to step out of the house. The furthest from the house that Mother can get is in the doorway, except in her
imagination (see fig. 13). After reading Him's new piece she sees the two of them holding hands inside the meadow surrounding the house, and watching the house recreate itself from afar (see fig. 14). While she is outside then, she is thinking about her relationship with Him and her relationship with the house.

![Fig. 13. Mother stands in the doorway.](image)

![Fig. 14. In Mother's imagination, the couple holds hands outside of the charred house.](image)

Mother is the one who is literally trapped, while Him is constantly searching for a higher art and meaning, contrasted against Mother's low art, a higher meaning that he is unable to find until Mother is pregnant. His office or writing room is on the highest floor of the home, where Mother is most frequently seen working on the ground floor or in the basement. His work is supreme—millions of people flock to see Him and to worship Him. All copies of his work are sold out in
one day. While Mother works tirelessly to mix the perfect yellow shade for the walls of the home, Mother's work is never recognized, except fleetingly, when Man and Woman first arrive. Man reacts in surprise that she was capable of such work; "So she's not just a pretty face!" he exclaims, and Woman later remarks that she is working too hard.

Mother's work, the house, is devalued in many more ways. Not only is it set up in stark contrast to the work of Him, but there are several physical acts and implied acts of disrespect to her and her home. It begins when Man enters and begins smoking a cigarette. Mother asks him politely to stop, insisting that they do not smoke in the home. At this time, he acquiesces. At night, though, when Mother checks on Him and Man, there are cigarette butts and Man's lighter in the guest room. It is unclear whether Him is complicit in this act of disrespect, but surely the smoking did not escape his notice.

The home is disrespected again when Woman enters. Again, Mother is uncomfortable with her presence, but when left alone together Woman becomes unbearable. On the tour of the home, Woman continues to disregard Mother's wishes, attempting to enter Him's office. Woman has Mother carry her laundry bag to the washer, and then mocks Mother's clean clothes that fall out. Woman holds up her own lime green lingerie, advising Mother to "keep things interesting." She asks questions about Mother's sex life and her marriage and implies that Him is either no longer sexually attracted to Mother or no longer in love with her.

Mother and her work are continuously disrespected by the people who enter her home, Man and Woman being only the beginning. After Man and Woman break the crystal, it is actual Him who disrespects the domestic sphere by knocking off the doorknob to the office, and then boarding it over. The doorknob makes a dent in the floor, but Mother hides her distaste with Him and takes out her frustration on Man and Woman. After the sons enter, it is the doorknob to the office that the oldest son uses to kill the youngest son. After the death, she is left alone to clean
up the sons' blood. The blood is corrosive, seeping through the floorboards and creating a stain that cannot be erased (see fig. 15). This stain then seeps into the basement, where it corrodes the wall and reveals a section of the basement that Mother did not seem to know about, despite her connection with the home (see fig. 16). This is a continuation of that jump-scare-unknown, and like the house, the death of another woman's child awakens a part of Mother that she did not know existed. It is this revelation that allows Mother to become less and less passive.

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*Fig. 15. Mother touches the stain created by the spilled blood.*

*Fig. 16. Mother explores an unknown part of the home.*

If the first unwanted guests were not rude enough, more and more invaders enter the home, apparent friends of Man and Woman. While their presence in the home is disrespectful,
their actions are even worse. The unwanted guests make a mess of the place, claiming it as their own. They paint over the walls that Mother worked so hard to perfect, telling her it's not a "big deal." A man, named only "Adulterer" comes up to Mother and starts to hit on her, asking her to go on a walk with him, or to let him show her a good time. When she rejects him, he is enraged, says he was never interested in the first place, curses at her, and leaves. All the while, the invaders repeatedly lean on or even sit on the sink, and Mother tells them again and again to stop because the sink is not braced yet. They tell her that she's wrong, "it's fine," and begin to bounce on the sink to prove that they know best. The uninvited guests refuse to acknowledge Mother's perspective, even though she is the expert on the home. They refuse to see her space as having any sanctity. Then, as expected, the sink falls from the wall and causes the pipes in the home to burst. Mother is left screaming at them to get out, turning to Him and screaming "They won't listen!" Her frustrations are valid, but the invaders refuse to see it that way.

In the final, destructive scenes, Him's fans and followers steal the furniture from the house, tear away pieces of the home, and start literal wars inside the house. The home that she worked so hard to build is completely destroyed before her eyes, and she is powerless to stop it, because the fans never viewed it as hers. Everything that she created was just Him's by proxy, and they needed to have something of his to prove their devotion. There is only one way that Mother is considered valuable, and that is as an inspiration to Him. If the home is Mother's work, Mother's creation is her child. But unfortunately, like the home, her child is taken from her.

The only thing that matters to Him is Mother's ability to procreate. The only time that Mother is given his full and loving attention is when she announces her pregnancy. Him calls it "the most beautiful gift," implying that this something she has intentionally done specifically for him, and therefore, that it is something she has intentionally denied Him in the past. This "gift" provides Him the inspiration to write, which he did not have previously. But even this beauty,
the literal creation of life, is only valid and respected so far as it is useful to Him. Mother is Him's muse, initially referred to by Him's publisher as "the inspiration." The muse is in no way celebrated for its creative capabilities; the muse is a passive figure that is used in the production of another's work. Mark Fisher and Amber Jacobs write that as the muse, woman is the "passive sexualized object," who is "lacking a subject position or desire" (59). Where Him identifies himself as being "I," a subject, Mother is only "Home," an object. Once a woman begins to fight against the status of muse or the status of object, the invariable result is "madness, breakdown, self-destructivity, and premature death" (Fisher and Jacobs 59). Once Mother begins to resist the invasion of Him's fanatics, Mother is deemed useless. She is "tainted," and is more concerned with the safety of her baby than with her previous and others' current devotion to Him, and therefore she has no further use. The publisher orders Mother's execution, commanding the soldiers to "finish her," along with the other tainted women that are kept in cages.

Finally, in the ultimate act of violence, Mother's greatest creation, and the creation with which she has the most intimate connection, her newborn son, is consumed by Him's waiting fans. She has lost everything. Both of her creations are gone, and with it all of her passivity. Mother is no longer the calm and passive wife. Mother is the depiction of woman enraged, a modern Medea or Lamia. In a heart-wrenching scene, she shrieks at the people, moved beyond words, and destroys anyone within her reach (see fig. 17). At the death of her child, she becomes what some would call a "nasty woman" and the crowd repays her for it. To them, her anger is not justified; Mother does not have the right to be angry, because they never saw anything as belonging to her in the first place. The crowd brutally beats her for her lashing out at the murder of her baby, and in her final decisive act, she attempts to destroy all that she or Him ever created. It does not work though, and in final submission Mother gives Him her love, her literal heart, and everything he needs to start his creation over again.
Fig. 17. Mother wails at the death of her son.

MOTHER!'S IMPLICATIONS AND CRITICISM

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg wrote that in times when great social change occurs, those who may feel powerless will "respond by attempting to capture and encapsulate such change within a new and ordered symbolic universe. They seek with imagery and myth to mitigate their feelings of helplessness" (90). The greater the social change, the more people will rely on "bodily and familial imagery," relying on the "most primitive experience of human interaction and social ordering" (Smith-Rosenberg 90). But if this is Aronofsky's reaction to social change, what social change is he reacting to? mother! was released in September 2017, just as Hurricane Irma was hitting the coast. Now, as I write this in 2018, California is experiencing the worst wildfires on record. Our world is rapidly deteriorating, with more bleak statistics about climate change emerging each day. Aronofsky has stated that he "wanted to make a film about Mother Nature…from her perspective," yet in that same interview he stated that "these issues are not connected to male or female. It's all of us" ("Jennifer Lawrence Tore"). Aronofsky has suggested that while he may have written the film with one clear intent, theories have come out that he did not anticipate viewers to see, such as the film being a representation of fame.
These are valid statements, but Aronofsky, while the director and writer, is not in complete control of the way his work is received. With the publicity that came out prior to and at the release of \textit{mother!}, the film quickly grew to something of a tall tale, a scandal that any mother would gossip about and warn her children not to go see. Aronofsky tried to steer the ways that fans viewed his work, and initially this was done with misdirection. He tried to keep the film mysterious, marketing it as a horror film, and using his own fame and the fame of his actors to boost intrigue. Then, at the Toronto International Film Festival, fans waiting to see the premiere received small, white cards with copies of "Mother's Prayer," on them, which reads as follows, captured in film critic David Ehrlich's tweet:

\begin{verbatim}
mother's prayer

our mother who art underfoot,
hallowed by thy names,
thy seasons come, thy will be done,
within us and around us,
thank you for our daily bread, our water, our air,
and our lives and so much beauty;
lead us not into selfish craving and the destructions that are the hungers of the glutted,
but deliver us from wanton consumption of thy vast but finite bounty,
for thine is the only sphere of life we know,
and the power and the glory, forever and ever,
amen. (Ehrlich)
\end{verbatim}
This "prayer" further plays with the concept of using a biblical medium to tell Aronofsky's story, and immediately draws attention to both the female and the natural. The prayer emphasizes "seasons," our mother's "finite bounty," and the viewing of her as a "sphere of life." The prayer, while pushing a specific and pretentious agenda, is interesting because it turns the film into a multimedia experience and engages the audience with Aronofsky's surreal world. It makes the audience think about the connections between women, Earth, and Christianity before they set foot in the theater. Following this premier and the release date, Aronofsky began to specifically market his film to be viewed as an allegory about the earth, and multiple interviews were published, titled "mother!'s Ending Explained!" and the like, all with quotes from him about the planet's doom if humans do not change their ways.

But this agenda, no matter how heavily pontificated, does not erase the experience of viewing the film through a strictly female perspective. One cannot separate mother! from the female experience, no matter how much the director may try to ignore the connections that he has created. Jennifer Lawrence, in the same Variety interview, remarked that she viewed the film as "incredibly feminist," and this is part of the reason she chose to take on the role of Mother, despite its intense demands. At the time, Lawrence states, she had just finished reading Jane Eyre and The Wide Sargasso Sea, and could not help but make connections between "these Victorian patriarchal novels [that] show these loving, amazing husbands, that are very slowly and delicately taking away their wives' dignity… these novels showing women's strength being drained away from them" ("Jennifer Lawrence Tore"). Lawrence has been active in praising the film and the things that it has tried to represent.

Aronofsky has clearly framed himself as doing something important and valuable, and the film makes even the most apathetic viewer feel the emotions of Mother: all of the frustration, the panic, and even the intense desire to please. But though Aronofsky makes viewers feel for
Mother and feel through Mother, it doesn't mean that the ways in which he has done so are not problematic. In this film, Aronofsky is continuing to use the same problematic tropes such as the Mother Earth metaphor and woman enraged. He is not intending to perpetuate these stereotypes, but by muddling the allegory to the point of confusion, his intent is ambiguous at times when it needs to be direct. Mother's abuse and brutal beating are not meant to be voyeuristic, but through the medium of film, audiences are invited to view Mother, and thereby Lawrence, in vulnerable position of complete subjection. This voyeuristic nature of the film is expounded when one considers that Lawrence and Aronofsky were dating at the time of production, meaning that a role that Aronofsky wrote for Lawrence, or at least with Lawrence in mind, places her in a compromising position in order to enact his own philosophical vision.

If this film had been released one year later, or even three months later, it would have been viewed entirely differently. Critics would have picked up on the ways in which female creation was diminished, because in October 2017, the entertainment world experienced a major shift. The phrase "Me Too" was coined in 2006, and yet one month after mother!'s release, "Me Too" exploded when the accusations against Harvey Weinstein were covered in a breaking story featured in The New York Times (Hawbaker). Women all over the world broke their silence; celebrities, authors, song-writers, and working-class women alike decided to take a stand against not only sexual assault, but the abuse and discrimination they experience in the work force. Jennifer Lawrence was one of these women, along with numerous others. The "Me Too" movement has made great strides, but when it comes to the recognition women's participation in the creation of arts and sciences, we are still lagging behind. Since the Oscars have been awarded beginning in 1929, only four women have ever been nominated for best director. Of these women, only one female director, Kathryn Bigelow, has ever won (Dockterman). Vida, a New York based organization promoting women in the literary arts, has reported that the publication
industry is no better: of authors represented in literary journals and periodicals in 2016, only one third were female. The *New York Times Book Review* is getting closer to parity, with the percentage of female authors being reviewed at around 44% (Guest). Disrespect of female creation is not something that lies only in the past, and *mother!* illustrates hauntingly and violently the struggle to create.

*mother!* is a film that is swept under the rug, but it will come back to haunt us later. It has messy, dark images that are not the kinds of things we want to experience when viewing a movie. *mother!* is a movie that is uncomfortable to watch; it makes viewers frustrated, anxious, and disgusted. But in doing so, *mother!* makes us feel as women do each time their efforts to create and advance are thwarted. It is a violation, or as Jennifer Lawrence said in her interview with Today, "an assault" against women, and this is why it is uncomfortable. When women are trapped in cages and being executed, it is not only Mother who tries to save them, it is all women. When Mother does not allow Him to take her child, it is all women who shout, "I am his mother!" When Mother is on the floor, being beaten and called a "dirty whore" and a "fat pig," it is all women who are insulted. It is all women, too, who seek to light the spark—or the bonfire—of change in order to create. So, while Aronofsky may have set out to create a film that is about the decaying Earth, in doing so he has created something that is intimately connected with the female experience—so much so, that the two cannot be separated. Over time, the Earth has been degraded almost beyond repair, but this is not so for women. Aronofsky captures this struggle in his movie *mother!*, illuminating what has passed, and inspiring what must be done in the future. For society to progress, we must not ignore the ideas generated by half of its people, or else we too will go up in flames.
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