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The Battle of Bad Mothers

The Film *Mama* as a Commentary on the Judgment of Solomon and on Contemporary Motherhood

The modern horror film genre has incessantly dealt with questions of parenthood, pregnancy and the status of mothers, particularly with "bad mothers."From the heart of popular culture, horror films engage in these issues unexpectedly, and sometimes even radically. These films enable us to recognize cultural taboos and to expose secrets that are not expressed in other genres. In this article, we examine the successful horror film, Mama *(2013) that centres on two "bad mothers" involved in a fatal conflict over two girls. Through a comparison between* Mama *and the biblical myth of the judgment of Solomon, with which it dialogues and comments upon, we investigate the cultural hierarchy existing between two types of bad mothers, whom we term the "overfeeding mother" and the "starving mother." The film disassembles and deconstructs this cultural hierarchy, while clarifying its social motivations. Proposing a radical alternative to Solomon's judgment, the movie challenges the prevalent conception of bad mothering by exposing both mothers' human faces, hence acquitting them in the eyes of the viewers.*

The horror film *Mama* was one of the most profitable films of 2013. It was produced on a low budget by Hollywood standards (15 million dollars), but earned ten times that much at the box office, and was distributed in more than 45 countries around the world: from Peru to Hong Kong, from Australia to Iceland.[1] Its commercial success was not obvious, as it does not center on a schematic war between forces of good and evil, and has no abundance of spectacular effects. The film focuses on the domestic realm; it places two stepmothers against each other, both wanting to gain possession over two small orphan girls. What did the movie expose that frightened and excited viewers all over the world?

In this paper, we suggest that the movie achieved its success due to its distinctive representations of bad motherhood. As we demonstrate, the modern horror film genre has incessantly dealt with questions of parenthood, pregnancy and particularly with "bad mothers" (Arnold 4). As in other horror films, *Mama* enables us to recognize and challenge cultural taboos concerning motherhood. Yet its subversive representations of the maternal are distinctive in contemporary popular culture.

The paper delves into the alternative visions of bad mothering outlined by the film, depicting it as a modern version of one of the best known biblical stories, the judgment of Solomon (1 Kings 3: 16-28).[2] The biblical story centers on a "custody battle" between two mothers, each claiming that the child is hers. Although in the bible story the distinction between the good mother (who is the biological mother) and the bad mother (pretending to be the biological mother) is unequivocally decided as evidence of King Solomon's wisdom, *Mama* presents a more ambivalent and complex interpretation of the ancient myth. The custody battle in the film takes place between two bad mothers, which makes it difficult for the viewers to fill the role of Solomon, to judge between them and to reorganize the world in schemas of good and evil.

Through the comparison between the film and the biblical myth, the paper investigates the cultural hierarchy existing between two cultural representations of bad mothers, whom we term the "overfeeding mother" and the "starving mother." As we will show, the film disassembles and deconstructs those representations, while clarifying their social motivations in contemporary culture.

Subversion and the Horror Genre

In the past decades, mothers have become central characters in popular horror films (Arnold 4). That is because, perhaps more than any other genre, in the modern era, horror serves to bypass explicit and hidden censorship which dictates what can be told, in whose name, and what the limits of the legitimate story are. In the depth structure of horror stories, there are cultural and psychological secrets which popular culture tends to blur or to place in a legitimate narrative framework, foreknown and often deceptive (Hills 91). The obsessive concern in horror films with questions of parenthood make it possible to expose and report threatening, frightening and violent aspects of modern parenthood. They supply honest and complex answers to questions like: "Do I necessarily love my child? Do I love him/her unconditionally?" "Am I a good parent?" "Am I harming my child?" or "Am I afraid of him/her?" Other popular avenues, such as romantic comedies or family dramas, present an array of fraudulent clichés: "Every parent loves his/her children," "Real love is unconditional," "Children are true bliss," "Being a parent is a magical journey into self fulfillment." These

platitudes restrain or silence the potential complex responses to these questions. At the heart of popular culture, horror plays a subversive role: it presents either implied or obvious anxieties considered taboo in other cultural channels.

This role stems from the position of horror in the modern world in contrast with the drama of Enlightenment. This drama creates a unified subject who discovers himself under the tutelage of science and reason, far from the transgressive powers of metaphysics. At the center of the modern secular story is the journey by a person who fulfills herself and finds her voice by means of belief in individualism and autonomy, striving towards status and emotional advancement, and accumulating knowledge of herself and her world (Sennet 91). According to the modern initiation story, a person must recognize his abilities and his future prospects and strive to realize them using his reason (Botting 14).

Modern horror is a mishap in this meta-narrative. In the laboratory where the enlightened subject is supposed to be created, the lab instruments are damaged and a disordered monster, a parasitic subject, defective, bent and dark, is created. This monstrous subject is connected to illogical external forces beyond its control or recognition, famished, full of lust, unprecedented, unrestrained, and defying censorship (Gooda 790). Modern horror represents freedom that has been lost in a modern-scientific world: the freedom to be monstrous, mythic, transgressive and hybrid. These are the heroes of horror: ghosts or shadows, who slyly and suddenly appear over the shoulder of the enlightened subject and reveal the illusion of the credibility of his reason (Herzog & Yaron).

For this reason, horror is the genre embodiment of criticism of enlightenment: it fully reveals the secret of the inability to create a subject and his world as stable, hermetic, "natural", obvious and coherent. It undermines knowledge structures, myths and recognized images, related for example to the essence of the individual, the family, childhood, motherhood, the home and the community. It cracks the totality of the seemingly stable surface of cultural structures. Indeed, it is always the happy normal family that has moved into the haunted house; it is always the functioning vibrant community in which the deadly virus breaks out; it is always the independent benevolent subject who unintentionally releases what is buried under the surface. Horror presents popular narrative which intersects with the discourse of post-structuralism, in that it challenges the stability of existing structures, is always located in their margins, closely examines their certainties and undermines their existence.

What is Frightening in Motherhood?

The modern horror texts—from *The Turn of the Screw* to *The Ring*—deal continuously with the experience of pregnancy, birth and raising children. Its

literary and cinema products investigate the cultural myths constituting these experiences, and undercut the rigid cultural interpretation that charges them with emotional meaning. But before we investigate how motherhood is presented in the movie *Mama*, as a popular commentary on modern motherhood, we will try to briefly distinguish between the "good mother" and the "bad mother," a distinction that will be the basis of this discussion.

Aminatta Forna terms the array of norms, and social and psychological demands from mothers in a given time and space as "the myth of motherhood". According to this modern myth, motherhood is a natural instinct and thus the ideal mother is a biological one.[3] However, although biology serves as a necessary condition, it is not sufficient to create the perfect mother (Forna 4). A "good mother" is the principal caregiver to her children, and they must take precedence over her other obligations. She loves them unconditionally, but at the same time, she avoids suffocating them with her love. She must understand the psychological needs of her children (and part of her role is to read literature on the subject or to be assisted by professionals in the field), and to grant them space for independence and autonomy. She will make every sacrifice for them, but will also know not to be too protective. She organizes her work around the needs of her children who are the first of her priorities, but simultaneously, she is faithful to the capitalistic ideology as she must be their role model in aiming for self-fulfillment and professional satisfaction. The children of the good mother are independent, have self-esteem and function as productive citizens, but also feel protected and unconditionally loved (see, for example, Chase and Rogers 30; Douglas and Michaels 6; Forna 3; Rich 13-14).

The myth of the good mother, which exists in all popular cultural arenas, is thoroughly imbued with contradictions and is actually impossible; it turns mothers into haunted women. Generations of mothers feel that any wrong movement or incorrect reaction can cause their child irreparable damage, writes Ariella Friedman. There has been no way to fulfill all of the demands required from the ideal mother. Mothers have been accused of not giving enough love or giving too much love; of not providing the child with enough attention, or not being able to let him go. "Guilt feelings have become a dominant component in the experience of motherhood" (Friedman 192). According to Susan J. Chase and Meredith W. Michaels "motherhood has become a psychological police state" (6).

Against the cultural campaign of the good mother, the bad mother lies in wait, as a warning signal. Most feminist research about motherhood relates to this figure by describing specific cases of mothers who abused, abandoned, neglected or even murdered their children (see LaddTaylor and Imansky 1-30; Rich, 256-280; Forna 185-193; Douglas and Michaels 140-172), but they have difficulty in supplying a comprehensive description of a "bad mother".

The common assumption according to which a good mother is the "natural" identity of normal women and "unconditional love" is an instinctive feminine compulsion, leads to the fact that behavior which deviates from this identity requires contextual explanations. When women deviate from those social expectations, they are usually presented as psychological or sociological victims (insane or subjects of social injustices) (Naylor 172; Ward 176).

Although research on bad mothers usually refers to abusive or abandoning mothers, "the bad mother" is a threat hovering over normative mothers. Mothers ask themselves (and social systems incessantly ask them) whether they are patient enough, nourishing enough, loving enough—but not too much. The emotional balancing question of relations between mothers and children is an inexhaustible source of neuroses and misery, especially in a reality where women work but are demanded to be completely devoted to their homes and families (Douglas and Michaels 1-13).

Horror films reveal the deep distress, caused by self or external judgment of maternal practices, primarily by presenting mothers who, for various reasons, do not fulfill their role as they should. In her book on mothers in horror movies, Sarah Arnold describes the bad mother in contrast to the good mother: The good mother is characterized by self-sacrifice, devotion, care and sentimentality, while the bad mother is identified with behaviors like over involvement, selfishness and a stifling presence (Arnold 183). The maternal power in these contexts, maintains Arnold, is destructive, primitive, archaic and boundless (ibid 11). But the portrait of the bad mother is more complex. We argue that the representation of maternal evil in horror films complies with one of two patterns: "the overfeeding mother" or "the starving mother."

The overfeeding mother is similar to Arnold's description. She is a mother who nourishes her children with infinite love and devotion, without seeing their needs or leaving them autonomous space. Out of narcissistic need to safeguard her maternal role over time, she allows them to remain dependent and infantile, lacking the ability to make decisions or to judge for themselves. In one of the extreme embodiments of such a mother, the mother dominates her child entirely, even after her death (as in Alfred Hitchcock's film, "Psycho", in which the main character serves his mother offerings of love and murderous loyalty).

The second type of bad mother is "the starving mother". She is a mother who renounces her emotional maternal roles: cold, utilitarian and impatient, she devotes herself to her other obligations (for example, intimate relationships or profession) and views her children as an annoyance and as an obstacle blocking her way. She ignores them or denies their existence; she starves them psychologically and emotionally. In her extreme embodiment, she kills her children (for example, in *The Ring*, where the mother throws her daughter Samara into a well when the girl does not fit her parental expectations) or

abandons her children (like Natasha's mother in *Dark Water* who deserts her daughter and causes her death).

The two conflicting patterns—which embody the extreme positions of "too much" and "too little", in comparison to the norm of the maternal image—share some common characteristics. They are self-absorbed: attentive to their own needs, tending to neglect the demands of their children (for separation and autonomy, or for attention and love).

The Bad Mother vs. the Bad Mother in *Mama*

The uniqueness of the film *Mama* stems from the fact that it deviates from the conventional confrontation between the good and the bad. It presents a duel between two women, neither of whom is a good mother: The two main characters represent two models of the bad mother: the overfeeding mother and the starving mother.

At the beginning of the film, the viewers discover that the biological mother of two little girls, Victoria and Lilly, has been killed by her husband Jeffrey. The murdering father takes his two daughters to an isolated cabin, and there tries to kill them and himself, but a mysterious figure called *Mama* saves the girls, while he vanishes without a trace.

Five years later, his brother Lucas, who has tirelessly searched for the missing girls, finds them in the same cabin with the help of detectives. Lucas tries to take them under his wing, and his life partner, Annabel, unwillingly agrees. A psychologist, who wants to study the girls, offers a house to Lucas and Annabel. But Mama too has arrived at the house, having followed Victoria and Lilly, and her shadow threatens what seems to be the formation of a normative family. The two male heroes are quickly eliminated from the scene (the psychologist has been murdered and Lucas is in a coma). The struggle for possession of the girls takes place between two maternal figures: Mama, the ghost who saved the children from death and has, in effect, adopted them as her daughters while they were living in the cabin, and Annabel—whose motherhood has been forced on her against her will. The struggle is between two stepmothers, and in a society that extols biological motherhood, they are suspect as bad mothers (Forna 4).

This suspicion is justified, at least at first glance. The biography of Mama is outlined roughly: Mama is Edith Brennan, a young woman who was committed to a psychiatric asylum in 1878, under unclear circumstances, and her baby was taken from her. She grabbed him back, and after a short chase, while religious and medical personnel surrounded her, she jumped with her child from a cliff into a deep lake. The baby did not fall into the water and did not die with her: the blanket in which the baby was wrapped snagged on a

branch protruding from the side of the cliff. Mama, now a ghost, is searching for her child, and finds the two girls in the cabin. She adopts them as her daughters, and thus realizes the motherhood which was robbed from her in the past. She saves the girls from their murderous father, nourishes them, plays with them, sings lullabies to them, and assumes complete custody over them, wandering undisturbed through their consciousness. Even when they are taken from the cabin, Mama fights for them; she will harm every patriarchal institution—their biological father, their adoptive uncle, the psychologist or an aunt who represents the social service authorities—which threatens to take them away. They are hers, and hers alone, and their deaths are preferable to handing them over to another mother. *Mama* is the embodiment of the overfeeding mother, whose unconditional love and devotion even extends to the condition of life.

The threat to Mama is another woman, Annabel, a young unkempt rocker who smokes and drinks. In her first scene, she is sitting on the toilet and thanking god that her pregnancy test came out negative. Annabel again and again repeats that she has no interest in motherhood and that she has no maternal feelings. She copes with the children and with her unexpected maternal status only because she wants to maintain her relationship with Lucas and to accede to his emotional needs and his family obligations. She does not play with the children and does not see to their nourishment. When she puts them to sleep, she pats the older girl on her forehead instead of giving her a goodnight kiss and covering her with a blanket. When they refuse to go to sleep, she responds with "whatever" and leaves, and when she understands that there is something mysterious and threatening in the closet, she doesn't even bother to check. She closes the closet door and goes out of the room.

The viewers feel a clear preference for Annabel, the starving mother; Mama, the ghostly over-feeding mother, arouses a recoiling and threatening reaction. This can be explained on two levels: first, Mama signals the deviation and disruption of everything which is human—she was diagnosed as insane even when she was alive and was admitted to an institution; she killed a baby and now she is a threatening ghost; her body and face are distorted and strange. In contrast, Annabel (portrayed by the actress Jessica Chastain) is young, pretty and human; her devotion to her relationship with Lucas, even at the price of unwanted motherhood, arouses empathy.

However, the immediate identification with the "starving" character over the "over-feeder" carries an even deeper meaning. Contemporary capitalist culture poses women's option of abandonment as a maternal practice, as being legitimate. Mothers abandon their children—to a caregiver, in front of a screen, in the educational system—already at an early age. They pay the price of guilt, but this price is low in contrast to the guilt they will feel if they relinquish their

self-fulfillment. The children's self-confidence depends on the satisfaction of their mothers, or so say the popular books on psychology, and if mothers do not realize their potential, their long-term harm to their children will be more significant (Douglas and Michaels, 6). The over-devoted over-feeding mother perceived as a woman who "has no life," that is, in the cultural discourse, she appears from the beginning as a parasitic ghost: she fulfills herself only through her children, and thus lives through them, and forces them to pay the price of her compulsive gifting. In choosing the lesser of the evils, the cultural knowledge structures prefer the mother who starves her children rather than the mother who overfeeds them.

The Overfeeding Mother versus the Starving Mother: The Final Battle

The audience's sympathy for Annabel does not decide the struggle in her favor. The movie makes sophisticated use of the biblical myth of Solomon's judgment, which presents a similar dilemma. The story presents two unmarried women[4] who have given birth three days apart from each other: one has given birth to a dead child, the second to a living baby. However, one of them suspects that the woman who gave birth to the dead child has switched the babies in the middle of the night, and the dead child she is cradling is not really hers. The two mothers stand facing each other before the kingly judge, and each claims that the living infant is hers, word against word. How did the wise king know who the real mother of the living child was?

> And the king said, Bring me a sword. And they brought a sword before the king. And the king said, Divide the living child in two, and give half to the one, and half to the other. Then spake the woman whose the living child *was* unto the king, for her bowels yearned upon her son, and she said, O my lord, give her the living child, and in no wise slay it. But the other said, Let it be neither mine nor thine, *but* divide *it*. Then the king answered and said, Give her the living child, and in no wise slay it: she *is* the mother thereof. And all Israel heard of the judgment which the king had judged; and they feared the king: for they saw that the wisdom of God *was* in him, to do judgment. (1 Kings 3: 24-28)

In the traditional reading of the scene, the wisdom of Solomon was expressed in identifying the good mother, who was, in his determination, the biological mother who cared about the welfare of the child, and thus, was willing to abandon it. The bad mother, the impersonator, was indifferent to the fate of the child and was willing to cut it in half.

An alternative reading of the bible story, suggests viewing it as a child custody struggle between two "bad mothers." The woman who was ready to cut the infant into two is the overfeeding mother, whose love is so lacking in measure, exaggerated and greedy that she prefers the baby's death rather than to give him up to another. The second woman, the starving mother, agrees to give the baby up: she is ready to abandon the child and never to see her/him again.

King Solomon chooses the starving mother rather than the overfeeding mother. This choice is also common in contemporary capitalistic culture, and in the recreational and educational systems that mediate it: it is better to relinquish and to abandon (at least to a certain extent) than give too much love.

But the film *Mama* creates a turning point in this hierarchical plot. Two mothers struggle for the young girls and there is no male to determine who is more deserving: the men in this plot either disappear or are weak. In the absence of patriarchal mediation the women must find their own solution. The final struggle for custody takes place on the cliff overlooking the lake into which Edith jumped many years before. The two women demand the two children for themselves, but they gradually give up. Each of them holds on to one child and the sisters are divided—each belongs to a different mother.

The act of dividing the two girls hints that the decision of the wise king is not the only possible just verdict. The struggle for the two girls ends in the symbolic division of the baby in two. Lilly, the younger sister, is handed over to Mama, who envelops her as they both dive into the lake. Their death is described with romantic nuances of a return to semiotic order (Kristeva 101), of primal love, without limits, language or law: Lilly smiles with happiness at Mama, and Mama looks at her with a human face, no longer monstrous, with motherly satisfaction as they unite in the lake-womb. The older girl Victoria remains with Annabel, who hugs her tightly with warmth; she will function as part of a normative nuclear family unit, under the protection of a mother who was not interested in her from the beginning, but has learned to accept her. In the isolated cabin in the forest, an uncultured space, the two sisters, who were symbolically one childlike body, have been divided into two. The mothers who were responsible for this violent deed have now been judged innocent in the consciousness of the viewers, while the evil that has clung to their characters diminishes. Consequently this scene is accepted as a happy and just end to the film.

Conclusion: The Human Face of the Bad Mother

The film *Mama* undermines the patriarchal cultural conventions that create a rigid hierarchy between two types of bad mothers, "the overfeeding mother" and "the starving mother." It seemingly obeys the accepted perception in that

it signifies the most dangerous mother of all—the overfeeding mother—as a threatening archaic ghost. But despite the horror she arouses, the film does not negate the legitimacy of her existence. The audience gradually befriends Mama, understanding her motivations, seeing her human face and identifying with her maternal attachment to Lilly.

In contrast to most horror movies that deal with motherhood, the scene of the determination of the struggle deviates from the rules of the genre and is shaped into a touching family melodrama. The viewers adapt to the radical solution of dividing the symbolic child, as they discover that the two mothers have learned from one another; they have become more pragmatic. Annabel has become a mother who worries about the young girls after experiencing the threatening presence of Mama. On the other hand, Mama has learned the attributes of renunciation and adaptation: She understands that the desire of Victoria, the older sister, to stay with Annabel is legitimate and that she must accept it. Has the "starver" learned to nourish; has the "over-feeder" learned to desist? This ending—the concealed dialogue between the two mothers and their ultimate agreement—grants a melodramatic tone to the plot and to its radical verdict. It also enables the audience to experience the cruel separation of the two sisters as a "happy end."

Thus, what is frightening in the film and what explains its phenomenal success, is the fact that it deviates from familiar patterns: It does not judge the two bad mothers or punish them, but rather refers sympathetically to their motivations, and even undercuts the cultural hierarchy between the overfeeding mother and the starving mother. Confronting the rigid structure of the limits of the impossible "good mother" and presenting the mother who deviates from these limits as fundamentally monstrous, it presents non-normative patterns of representation of bad mothers and grants them the chance to change, which stems from the dialogue between them. This undermines the horror that they arouse by exposing their human sides and the lack of constancy in their positions. It hints that the ghostly traces of the bad mother are not necessarily horrifying after all; and exactly because of that—in Western culture that so strictly maintains the myth of the good mother and the enormous fear of the bad mother—the film is so frightening.

In this sense, the movie functions as a popular text that undermines the common representations of bad mothers, which appears—explicitly or implicitly—in various arenas of popular culture. These representations map the bad mother as either overfeeding or starving, and grant the latter with cultural priority as the "the least of all evils." *Mama*'s commercial success testifies to a cultural thirst to violate those binary representations or to rephrase them. Contrary to King Solomon's resultant verdict, the film describes the battle between those patterns of bad mothers in a more complex and indecisive

manner. Thus, it offers an option for essential dialogue between contrasting day-to-day motherly experiences, haunted by guilt and fear, which is only rarely presented in contemporary culture.

[1]*Mama*, IMBd <http://www.imd b.com/title/tt2023587/?ref =nv_sr_1>, accessed Sept., 2014.
[2]See *Kings* 3:24-28, *King James Bible*.
[3]As is well known, the cultural image of instinctual mother love has existed in Western culture only since the eighteenth century (Stone 55-65; Gillis 152-166; Hufton 173-217; Silva 10-15; Forna 30-31; Hager 38-39). Until the eighteenth century, women did not necessarily raise their children and were not even demanded to love them (Forna 25-34; Badinter 63). Following social and economic processes, most importantly the acceleration of the industrial revolution, conditions created the need to find a cultural agent to care for the children, leading to the creation of the role of the mother, as it is known to us (Forna 36; Rich 7-52). In the present, women are still obliged to raise their children and to be responsible for their education and their happiness, as women's sense of social, ethical and psychological welfare depends on fulfilling this mission.
[4]The biblical term in Hebrew that describes the women's status, is "Zonot," which refers to women who have engaged in sexual conduct out of wedlock; The common Jewish interpretation (the Halacha) asserts that they were not prostitutes.

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