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## Sublimity of the New Mother in Gothic Film

### *The Babadook* and *Goodnight Mommy*

*The admixture of fear and exaltation that constitutes sublime feeling is insoluble, irreducible to moral feeling*

Jean-François Lyotard

*Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, 1994, p. 127

Societal depictions of women are historically deficient; in all art forms women have been systemically portrayed inadequately as human beings. But, when representations of women breach the boundaries of these portrayals in any given genre, audience members can experience something extraordinary, for they are witnessing the *sublime*. The sublime, according to Edmund Burke's 1757 *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, is an overwhelming, painfully pleasurable experience, that is both astonishing and terrifying. Beyond this – as expounded by Jean-François Lyotard in his 1994 *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* noted at the outset of this chapter – the sublime is an amalgamation of irreducible emotions on opposing sides of our moral spectrum; it is therefore beyond our moral comprehension and ability to resolve the inner tensions evoked by its presence. In the case of Gothic film the sublime is acutely confrontational, especially, this chapter contends, when there are profound renderings of the mother. The representations of women who are also mothers in Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook* (2014), and Veronika Franz' and Severin Fiala's *Goodnight Mommy* or *Ich Seh Ich Seh* (*I See I See*, 2014),<sup>1</sup> are frighteningly electrifying, and dreadfully empowering. They are not good, they are not bad, they are *new*; they are human; they evoke feelings impossible to comprehend, and audiences cannot seem to get enough of them.

### Beyond the Good and the Bad, *New Mothers* in Film

Cultural representations of women have been unfailingly fraught terrain. Second wave feminists in the 1960s and 1970s actively questioned these representations both in the culture and in related academic disciplines. One problem with representations of women has been their consistent marginalization. Women historically were unimportant bystanders: women scientists and mathematicians were

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1 Had I enough time and space, the 2018 film *Hereditary* directed by Ari Aster would also have been a part of this study, as Annie Leigh Graham demonstrates characteristics of the New Mother as well.

supposedly non-existent, women literary authors were inferior to their male counterparts, and representations of women in cultural production – i.e. literature, drama, film, etc. – were generally peripheral characters with little or no breadth of development, crafted as secondary to and/or romantic partners for the prominent male characters.<sup>2</sup>

Since the early years of film criticism the representations of women have become more robust. Women have become the center of numerous films, and these characters have become more vigorous and complex as a result. One kind of woman, however, has struggled to break out of stereotypes: Mothers. Mothers in film are most often seen within one of two extremes: the Good Mother and the Bad Mother. Following E. Ann Kaplan's definitions of Good and Bad Mothers in *Motherhood and Representation: the Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (1992), Sarah Arnold, in *Maternal Horror Film: Melodrama and Motherhood* (2013), defines the first as the descendent of the sacrificial mother "valorised in the maternal melodrama" (p. 47) – to be discussed later – whose motivation rests primarily upon her children's needs; the second as a mother whose motivation does not. As a rule, mothers in contemporary Gothic and Horror films, hold to these categories as well: "Maternal sacrifice" of the Good Mother in Horror, "enables the survival of the child," states Arnold (p. 44), while the Bad Mother is much more complex. According to Kaplan, the Bad Mother is "tyrannical, possessive, controlling and not above deceit" (p. 81), but Arnold broadens her characterization even more. The Bad Mother is:

the source of friction within the horror text. At times she is the monster or the villain [...], where the mother's behavior is malevolent and violent. In other instances her prohibitive and overpowering nature produces violent tendencies in her children [...]. At times she is neglectful or selfish [...] or emotionally abusive. (p. 68)

In other words, although Arnold suggests that mothers continue to be defined in extreme ways, angelic or demonic, the space for those on the negative end of the scale has ballooned exponentially. "Malevolent and violent" mothers are named alongside mothers who may be only "prohibitive," "overpowering," "neglectful," or "selfish," – or in other words: human. Arnold extended this category in order to more carefully parse the debt Horror film owes to Melodrama when it comes to the depiction of mothers. But, the new characteristics on the darker side embrace a number of behaviors inequivalent to each other. For example, *passive* bad mothering does not seem comparable to *active* bad mothering. A merely-existing mother does not correspond to an enthusiastically evil one. However, disentan-

2 With few exceptions, this general trend was particular to men's representation of women in cultural production. Although women's literature may have held similar traits regarding *some* women characters, they did not relegate their women characters to the sidelines. For, as Ellen Moers notes in *Literary Women: The Great Writers*, if we are willing, the "great [women] writers" reveal "deep creative strategies of the literary mind at work upon the fact of female" (1976/1985, p. xi).

gling these types is not the goal of this chapter. Like Arnold, I wish to expand a category, but it is the general category of the cinematic “Mother” I would like to develop. This chapter will broaden the category of the cinematic “Mother” by focusing on filmic mothers who overwhelm these preexisting categories. These New Mothers hopelessly entangle the bad with the good, creating alluring ambiguity in characters who are both fearsome and sympathetic, who exist somewhere in the vibrant in-between. They blur boundaries of safety and threat; they are terrifying, but also invigorating; they overwhelm our senses: they are *sublime*.

Unlike the aforementioned maternal melodrama that preceded gothic film, in which “dilemmas of the mother are rarely tragic,” (Doane, 1987, p. 71), the New Mother is ensconced in tragedy. But more importantly, it is no coincidence that the New Mother in this study is also the main character. She is a mother, yes, but she is also a protagonist. While melodrama eschews interiority, according to Mary Ann Doane (p. 72), seeking rather to focus the “narrative conflict [...] *between* characters rather than *within* a single mind” (p. 72), the New Mother’s subjectivity is central to the film not only as a mother, but as a person. And, as a person, she exists in abstruse complexity, often beyond, even in spite of, her child and/or family. These representations are much harder to position in distinct classifications, as these protagonists who also happen to be mothers do not allow for easy answers as to why they may be gentle or harsh, kind or cruel, and indeed they may act worryingly. These women are driven by their own motivations, not simply as the protector of or threat to their children, and therefore their mothering can be of secondary concern to other issues in the films. In other words, this mother is human.

### New Mothers as Human

The mothers in these films are in the middle of things: they are not new mothers or old mothers, they are in or around middle age. This middle-aged mother is in the heart of the childrearing years, and has complicated feelings surrounding her child. But, as noted above, the reasons for this are not entirely bound up *in* the child. These more nuanced feelings of mother for child are challenging for audiences, which is more than likely why the Good and the Bad Mothers have flourished for so long. It is easier to adore or despise than to identify with a complex character who displays an uncomfortable array of emotions in close proximity to a child. What is more, negative feelings toward children, from mothers who cannot easily be recognized as Bad, are especially difficult to grasp for audiences in western cultures. Enduring societal taboos are held against recognizing such feelings in the first place.

Perinatal Mood and Anxiety Disorder (PMAD), which includes postpartum psychosis (PPD), for example – that temporary state in which *childbearing* destabilizes the mother’s psyche so much so that it may result in self-injury or harm to

the child – has only been open for public discussion in western societies in the last two decades. With this fairly new openness about mothers and their negative feelings toward children, PPD has been a favorite go-to disorder for mothers in Gothic and Horror films in recent years. The films have represented mothers suffering from this disorder exponentially more than these mothers are found in the general population.<sup>3</sup> This means that film has crafted an excuse to continue delineating between Good and Bad, for the Good Mother has gone Bad for good reason. And it is temporary; therefore, it is only necessary to anchor the mother's psyche again in order for the Good Mother's return. With that said, there is literally no discussion or terminology to describe the everyday emotional states into which mothers are intermittently forced during the long years of childrearing. *Childbearing*, we admit, can ignite temporary trauma, risky for both mother and infant, but *childrearing* is a much more sustained encounter with a child that can intensify and extend suffering.

People generally assume that once in the childrearing stage, mothers settle into the daily life of the family without incident or cause for concern, but these New Mother characters suggest that the daily life of the family can also be dangerous. Childrearing imperils women in ways rarely shown in their terrific mundanity. There may be many cinematic mothers who testify to the imagined joys and terrors of motherhood, but there are few like the New Mother who plausibly depict the grueling trudge of feelings aroused by the plod of common, ordinary family life.

Such rich representations of mothers and their lives are extremely important to the project of cultural production. Although periodically shocking, these representations that are neither Good nor Bad but both, and terribly distressing for that, offer an expansion of the Mother character in film. In a sense these characters make us stew in our own expectations of mothers by foiling our hopes of her self-sacrifice (Good), and thwarting our desire to dismiss her as evil (Bad). These characters demand that we sit in the thrillingly uncanny space of unknowing throughout the majority of the films. In essence, these New Mothers offer a humanity to mothers that extreme labels have foreclosed for so long.

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3 A recent study in *BMC Psychiatry* suggests that between 0.89 and 5 out of every 1000 women may suffer from post-partum psychosis globally (VanderKruik et al., 2017). A number of Gothic and Horror short and feature films have focused on mother protagonists with post-partum depression or psychosis recently. The following is a handful of examples from the last five years: *Lady Lazarus* (short film, 2020) directed by Jamie Lou, *Tully* (2018) directed by Jason Reitman, *Still/Born* (2017) directed by Brandon Christensen, *Mother!* (2017) directed by Darron Aronofsky, *Dreamlife* (short film, 2017) directed by Anna Mercedes Bergion, *Prevenge* (2016) directed by Alice Lowe.

## New Mothers and Subjectivity

The Good Mother's heroic feats for the sake of her child require only feelings of sacrifice and obligation, which actively diminish a mother's own character development on screen, disallowing her a more full range of human emotion. Inversely, Bad Mothers who embody only antagonism require that cinema restrain a spectrum of character emotions and flatten expansion.<sup>4</sup> Between these poles is the New Mother who lives the everyday monotony of parenthood and the flux of emotions associated with it. Much time is spent constructing this mother cinematically; therefore, she is the dominant figure, and we feel like we understand her in ways that other mothers disallow. The desperate feelings of pain which point hostility toward her child are nearly all understandable, given her depth of character.<sup>5</sup> For the most part, this mother's experience is one that is common and ubiquitous, one that will resonate with mothers from all walks of life. For, mundanity is by definition an earthly slog.

There are various ways the films in this study portray their mothers as persons, with interests and concerns beyond the needs of their children. In *The Babadook*, for example, Amelia Vanek (Essie Davis) is struggling with something beyond her son Samuel (Noah Wiseman). We find this through the film's focal point, which is trained steadfastly on Amelia. "[E]arly on," notes Director Jennifer Kent, "people thought it [the film] should be about the boy, but it really was never about the boy" (qtd in Sélavy, 2014):

it always felt right to see it through her eyes. [...] Even when she goes to some really dark places, I still tried to keep it within her point of view as much as possible, so that people would... actually travel through that experience with her. (qtd in Sélavy, 2014)

And indeed the audience travels with her. Amelia is a person fatigued, exhausted, depleted, and most likely depressed, and these details manifest themselves through cinematic techniques such as color and lighting, which are used to drive the point home. The use of desaturated color throughout the film – a limited spectrum of "grays, blues and mauves" by cinematographer Radoslaw Ladczuk (Rooney, 2014) – is employed even in scenes outside the home. Low-key lighting, as well, seems to overwhelm the entire film, although it is used only within the private spaces of

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- 4 A few examples of Good Mothers in Gothic/Horror films are Chris MacNeil in *The Exorcist* (1973), Wendy Torrance in *The Shining* (1980), and Diane Freeling in *Poltergeist* (1982). A few notorious examples of Bad Mothers are: Norma Bates in *Psycho* (1960), Margaret White in *Carrie* (1976), and Pamela Voorhees in *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (1980).
  - 5 Obviously there is a point late in *The Babadook* in which supernatural forces overpower mundane domestic life, and the audience must distance itself from heinous, even murderous behavior. However, until this point, I suggest, viewers continue to empathize with much of the mother's unpleasant feelings and behavior. Conversely, *Goodnight Mommy* works a bit differently; no supernatural exists, and the viewer is slightly uncomfortable with Marie-Cristine from the start. It is not until we understand the significance of the "accident" that we absolve Marie-Cristine of her earlier sternness, which will be discussed later.

home and car. There are only a handful of moments in which light demarcates difference in location within the film, but even these moments, which are lighter, are deadened by the limited color palette. This controlled use of color and light acts as a dulled rinse that bathes each scene in mundane weariness. It projects to the audience that this is a dulled life, an exhausted life, a life without life.

Other ways in which the film emphasizes Amelia's very human fatigue and thereby her despair are through setting and costume, as well as transitions between scenes. The film subtly underscores Amelia's sleep deficiency by dangling the idea of sleep throughout the film just out of her reach. For example, the majority of film time is spent in a darkened house; roughly sixty-six minutes out of the eighty-six minutes of the film are set in the dim home, signifying night even during daylight hours. Costume, similarly, is suggestive of sleep. Although the film spans only six nights and days, and she wears a reasonable four different outfits at various times throughout those days, all outfits meld into the same mien. Amelia spends nearly seventy percent of her time in a nightgown. But, even when out of her nightgown, her clothing seems remarkably reminiscent of it: loose, dull, and formless, they suggest a desire for a return to home and bed. Likewise, as a care worker, her box-formed work uniform and one of the two of her outfits with peter pan collars suggest a nursery with the associated promise of naptime.

The film also points toward Amelia's desperation to fulfill her own needs, such as human intimacy and alone time. She has a foiled attempt at masturbation, and is an unwitting voyeur of a couple's intimate kisses in a parking garage. She pretends her son is sick in order to leave work one afternoon to window shop and eat ice cream alone. The extradiegetic music backgrounding the scene mimics the ways in which sleep has evaded Amelia. The soft, tremulous chords beneath a chiming and simple melody has both a surreal and worrisome affect, as if one might relax but for the minor key and fretful, anxiety-inducing tremolo from major to minor thirds.

In *Goodnight Mommy*, although our access to Marie-Cristine Mettler (Susanna Wuest) is more restricted than Amelia, we also have a character who is shown as a person in her own right and whose concerns lie beyond her children. These concerns manifest through various moments of isolated sadness or grief resulting from the plethora of significant life changes witnessed only by the audience. Marie-Cristine is the mother of ten-year-old twins, Elias and Lukas (Elias and Lukas Schwarz). She has been some time absent after having undergone cosmetic surgery, which we find out later in the film. She returns home around the film's seventh minute.

Change seems to be a major theme at this point in Marie-Cristine's life. Although still quite young – perhaps mid-to-late thirties – we glean through the twins' computer sleuthing that she has felt the need to alter her appearance. She is a local television celebrity of some notoriety and relative financial success, according to websites seen by the children thirty minutes into the film, and she

is on the cusp of middle age. Although no reasons are given for her surgery, the media's idolization of youth is perhaps one incentive; the fact that she has also rather recently re-entered the dating scene (as seen on her website dating page), is possibly another motive. Moving into middle age as well as currently attempting to negotiate her way through online dating can be challenging to anyone's self-confidence of mind and body.

Furthermore, the family home is currently on the market to be sold. At the hour-mark in the film after the children have run off,<sup>6</sup> Marie-Cristine offers an explanation to the local minister who returns them: she references an accident and a divorce, suggesting that the not so distant past has been tragic and overwhelming. This is one of the handful of controlled moments in which the audience witnesses a vision of the consequences of these changes on Marie-Cristine's mental state, and reveals her vulnerability. She stands drenched on the porch of her home in a close-up shot, mascara streaming down her wet face, arms hugging herself against the cold. As her face begins to indicate a full sob, the automatic porch light flips off, hiding her face, and the sound of the storm drowns out any sound she might make. It is a confined and brief vision, but a powerful performance by Wuest expresses Marie-Cristine's despondency.

In her dim room after this event, she swallows a painkiller as she quietly cries herself to sleep. At nearly one minute, this is the longest shot of Marie-Cristine's concealed emotions. A similar instance earlier in the film is after she has aggressively – and physically – argued with Elias, forcing him to admit she is his mother. While Elias nurses his wounded ego, she retires to her darkened room and silently weeps alone, unmoving, away from the camera. There are other solitary scenes as well in which she simply examines the work done to her body, all isolated and silent on her part. The viewer can only guess what is going on in her mind. Together these moments work to exhibit Marie-Cristine as a multidimensional human being with many concerns about the changes in her life not solely related to her children.

These major changes as well as her bodily transformation are hints of changes to come for the household, for Marie-Cristine makes clear she will focus foremost on her rehabilitation. She immediately places her recuperation above any other interest. Upon her return, she explains to her sons that her convalescence requires silence and rest; she is not to be disturbed unless it is very important. She wants no visitors. The curtains should be closed to avoid sunlight. And finally, the children should play outside quietly, and not bring anything into the house.<sup>7</sup> Although her sons intimate that an uncharacteristic sternness of demeanor has been intro-

6 A plot point is necessary here: suspicious that Marie-Cristine is an imposter, the twins run away to the nearest village and seek out the minister, whom they implore to take them to the police station.

7 This seems a strange rule at first, but we find soon enough that the children apparently engage in this activity often, evidenced by their sizeable collection of *Gromphadorhina portentosa* or hissing cockroaches, as well as the hidden stray cat (more than likely diseased and sick) under their bed.

duced upon her return, and the audience feels a sense of uneasiness, they generally understand her responses physically and mentally.

## Women and The Gothic

In the Introduction to their 2016 collection *Women and the Gothic*, Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik state that “Gothic texts still frequently convey anxiety and anger about the lot of women” (p. 1). Although narratives such as these may “vary in expression and representation across the centuries and across cultures,” they suggest, the volume of these types are “depressingly constant and suggest that women have been and still feel disadvantaged and disempowered” (p. 1). This sentiment seems obvious, for indeed it is sometimes disheartening in 2020 to see yet another woman in another film in dire straits mostly because she is a woman. Still, the Gothic has never been so transparent as to always and only suggest one thing. Although the lot of women can sometimes be discouraging, one can take heart in the Gothic’s inherently unreliable nature. It is true anxiety and anger reside in the image of the terrorizing and terrorized women of the Gothic. But, it is also true that it has always been a genre “preoccupied with women’s experiences,” notes Paula Quigley in “*The Babadook* and Maternal Gothic” (2019, p. 186), a genre in which women have been brought to the forefront. Quigley, Horner, and Zlosnik all agree that the woman-focused Gothic concentrates on what women undergo throughout their navigations and negotiations “within patriarchal power structures” (Quigley, 2019, p. 186). Horner and Zlosnik further propose that although it is demoralizing to witness women’s continuing struggle in the Gothic mode, the “use of Gothic effects to celebrate transgressive female energy and iconoclasm,” is “perhaps greater and more subtle now than it was [...] in the early nineteenth century” (2016, pp. 1–2). In other words, reading women in the Gothic today is a much more nuanced endeavor, that may bring about anxiety and fear, but also an increasing dismantling of the image of “woman,” and resistance to the systems that oppress her.

One oppressive system visited and revisited by the Gothic and resisted again and again by Gothic protagonists, is a system that forces women, especially women who become mothers, into primary relationships with the domestic. According to Norman N. Holland and Leona F. Sherman, “women-plus-habitation,” among other things, has been a standard association typical of the Gothic mode “since the eighteenth century” (1977, p. 279). Therefore, it is no surprise that the action of both films in this study takes place largely in the home. In *The Babadook*, the audience meets Amelia Vanek in her bedroom, witnessing her dream-turned-nightmare of the birth of her son: roughly 82% of the action takes place in the home. Marie-Cristine Mettler is not home at the outset of *Goodnight Mommy*, but upon her return, she stays within the walls of her home for the remainder of the

film: nearly 89% of the film's setting is at or in the home. As noted judiciously by Eugenia Delamotte in her 1990 *Perils of the Night*, women in the Gothic “just can't seem to get out of the house” (p. 10).

Hence, these two films have stayed true to the Gothic setting, the relationship between “mother” and “home.” But they also masterfully hang the audience on that which is most important in Gothic: ambiguity. As noted by Diane Waldman in her article “‘At Last I Can Tell it to Someone!’ Feminine Point of View and Subjectivity in the Gothic Romance Film of the 1940s,” the “central feature of the Gothic is ambiguity” (1984, p. 31). She defines ambiguity as “the hesitation between two possible interpretations of events by the protagonist and often, in these filmic presentations, by the spectator as well” (p. 31). She suggests that although other genres share this feature, in the Gothic, “the hesitation is experienced by a character (and presumably a spectator) who is female” (p. 31). The Gothic tool of ambiguity, as stressed by Waldman, has been so meticulously exercised in crafting hesitation surrounding these New Mothers, that we continue to reel, unable to even in the end find sound footing.

*The Babadook* and *Goodnight Mommy* each revolve around two hesitations, which mirror each other. Both hesitations encompass questions of identity. In *The Babadook*, for example, our first hesitation pertains to the identity of Samuel. We are drawn into a story of the grueling grind of parenthood, even more demanding, single parenthood. But, there is ambiguity surrounding Amelia's young son who has a penchant for making weapons, throwing temper tantrums, acts hyperactively and thinks over-imaginatively. He is sympathetic in many ways too, obviously, but this troubled child is clearly a drag on his mother's health, body and spirit. We are thus, drawn into the mundane, quotidian life of a mother attempting to survive the years after the death of her partner. Although Samuel is a challenging kid, he does not seem to mean harm. But the reality of our assumption becomes ambiguous when it seems perhaps Samuel is more disturbed than we think. His aggression we have brushed off as simply excessive energy. His use of firecrackers and booby traps we have chalked up to weird, but harmless child's play. However, when glass is found in the soup, it seems Samuel may be more dangerous than we had before given him credit. In retrospect, then, the magic, the booby traps, and his obsession with the unseen Babadook seem more nefarious. Add to this the defaced images of Amelia and husband in the photograph, as well as Samuel screaming “Do you wanna die?!” when Amelia attempts to disarm him, and our view of him becomes more alarming. Perhaps it is at this point that the story of the grueling grind of parenthood with a child who may be disturbed, becomes one suggesting that he could also be dangerous.

The second hesitation involves Amelia herself. So sympathetic a figure for nearly an hour, we allow this New Mother a certain latitude in her desperate survival. We empathize with the daily exhausting unhappiness of her life; we even empathize as she begins lashing out at her son because of it.

Samuel: Mum, I took the pills, but I feel sick again. I need to eat something. I couldn't find any food in the fridge. You said to have them with food. I'm really hungry, Mum.

Amelia: Why do you have to keep talk, talk, talking? Don't you ever stop!

Samuel: I was trying...

Amelia: I need to sleep!

Samuel: I'm sorry, Mummy, I was just really hungry.

Amelia: If you're that hungry, why don't you go and eat shit!

The medium close-up of Amelia's face in this moment is terrifying, and it clearly shocks the viewer, as this is out of character for Amelia up to this point. As we watch her face soften in the recognition of what she has done, and her subsequent remorseful and guilt-ridden apology to Samuel and promise of a special morning at a local restaurant for breakfast ice cream, we forgive her ugly words and expression because every, single, mother watching this film has had at least one similar moment: ugly words said at a breaking point – albeit perhaps not as ugly as Amelia's – followed by florid apologies attempting to overcompensate for the ugly moment. This is just shy of the hour mark in the film, and we continue to feel sympathy for Amelia as she sits at Wally's with Samuel, surrounded by children arguing and yelling, a strained smile on her face as she rubs her jaw because of a chronic toothache.

Although very strange indeed, we even continue to empathize with her as she rams into another car on the road, and once home, sits fully clothed in the bathtub. More than anything, these incidents seem to display her inability to function because of exhaustion. She makes it clear yet again that she needs sleep. And, again, those knowledgeable about the fatigue of childrearing sympathize with this mother whose life has become simply attempting to survive each day.

Even when she picks up the knife out of the drawer, we want to give her the benefit of the doubt. She is a frightening figure, and a threatening one.

Samuel: It's just the Babadook made you crash the car and then...

Amelia: What did you say?

Samuel: I said, the Babadook...

Amelia: The Babadook isn't real, Samuel. It's just something you've made up in your stupid little head.

Samuel: I just didn't want you to let it in!

Amelia: I'll make sure nothing gets in tonight. Alright Samuel? Nothing is coming in here tonight. Nothing!

We are relieved that she uses the knife only to cut the phone cord, and once she has locked all the doors and windows, she seems to return to her recognizable self, confused and frightened by her fluctuating moods and anger. Later, she is fright-

ened by the bloody vision of Samuel on the couch, the imagined newscast about herself as his murderer, and flees the Babadook to her upstairs bedroom as it pursues. It is only after she is gorged in the back and her behavior becomes more bestial and erratic, that our hesitation ends and we lose faith in Amelia.

In exact opposition to *The Babadook*, the first hesitation, not the second, in *Goodnight Mommy* surrounds the identity of the mother. As noted earlier, she returns to her home after cosmetic surgery. Her face is bandaged, and her sons immediately begin questioning whether or not she is truly their mother. Indeed, they listen to voice messages in which she speaks more lovingly to them than does the mother who returns; and upon her return she does not speak to one of the boys at all. Her newly brusque deportment as well as the strict house rules make the brothers skeptical of her identity. In searching for clues to that effect, the children find a photograph of their mother with another woman they do not know. The two look alike and are dressed alike. “Could the woman in the photograph be impersonating their mother?” the camera asks in an over the shoulder shot, as they confiscate the photo for evidence later. Also, “where is the identifying mole on her face, and what color are her eyes really?”

The ambiguity of this hesitation is strong as the viewer follows the boys and their suspicions. They are incredibly sympathetic as they pray for the return of their mother at a wayside shrine. The mother’s bandages bend us toward an imposter, the jump cut of her bruised and bloodshot eye in the makeup mirror suggests the monstresque, as does her mascara-streaked face after standing in the rain explaining herself to the local clergyman. But, during the children’s detective work, the audience is also sympathetic to the mother. The mother vacillates between a disagreeable imposter and a woman, noted earlier, as simply recuperating from some major trauma in both body and spirit. Neither identity prepares us for the next hesitation.

Once the film has passed the hour, the second hesitation occurs. Although we have found many clues about Marie-Cristine, we have allowed our interest in her identity to cloud the clues about the children’s. We are as surprised as Marie-Cristine herself to find her tied to her own bed. The masks both boys don indicate both intimidation and war, and much to her surprise and our horror, within minutes the torture begins. The earlier homemade weapon and booby-trap construction, a hobby much like that engaged by Samuel in *The Babadook*, takes on a sinister turn.<sup>8</sup> Our hesitation regarding the identity of the mother seems to all at

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8 It would be interesting to interrogate more closely gender in the first two films. The fact that the children are boys preoccupied with weapon construction, who in the first case *might* terrorize, and in the second case, *do* terrorize women – their mothers – could be an interesting exploration. Although in the end, Samuel does end up truly attempting to protect his mother with his weapons, the boys in *Goodnight Mommy* use them to intimidate and threaten their mother to a horrifying extent. It should be noted that people like Peter Bradshaw of *The Guardian* (2014), and Lies Lanckman in her 2019 chapter suggest a rich Freudian reading can be done with the film, but perhaps a rich study could also be done beyond psychoanalysis. Full citations of these works can be found in the bibliography.

once fall away. Our dawning realization of the two boys as the brutal antagonists is shocking and terrifying, spurring our final sympathies with Marie-Cristine.

### Sublimity of the New Mother

The sublime is a term that has been theorized for centuries, and has become an integral part of the Gothic mode. It is an intermingling of *affects* upon witnessing something one cannot grasp, observing a (super)natural phenomenon that one cannot entirely understand or explain. The sublime evokes complex emotional responses in the viewer. Edmund Burke's treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry*, suggests that the extreme feeling of the sublime is an amalgam of a number of emotions: pleasure, terror, and astonishment. Pleasure is its generic terror being that which is evoked by fear of pain. According to Burke, pleasure and terror are balanced precariously against each other in the sublime, producing the "strongest emotion the mind is capable of feeling" (1823, p. 45). He further suggests that the stability of the sublime depends on proximity, for one's propinquity to that which is being witnessed can either extract one from the experience or put one too near. If too distant from the terror of the experience, the sublimity of the experience is lost, since terror is an absolutely crucial element of the sublime (1823, p. 57). If too near, terror overwhelms and only causes pain.

Another essential emotion imbedded in the sublime is that of astonishment. When "the great and sublime in *nature* [...] operate most powerfully," they produce the "passion" of "astonishment" (p. 73), which, he argues further,

is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. (p. 73)

Burke ends with the statement that "astonishment [...] is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree" (p. 74). Indeed, Lyotard's book *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, as noted in the introduction, expresses Burke's idea of astonishment as "insoluble" and "irreducible" (1994, p. 127); in other words, in the presence of the sublime, our minds have a clear inability to hold fully or comprehend its magnitude.

The reason why these three concepts – pleasure, terror, and astonishment – and indeed the sublime itself, are introduced here is because the New Mother generates the sublime on screen, and witnessing her arouses the various emotions delineated above. This carefully amalgamated character is a pleasure to watch, a terror to behold, and leaves us in a state of energized and prolonged astonishment. In an interview, Essie Davis, who plays Amelia in *The Babadook* attempts to explain what I would say is a confrontation with the sublime in the script. She

notes that Amelia's actions and reactions are "horrifying and terrifying, and as a mother myself, very recognizable, which, um, which I found... awful" (Davis & Kent, 2014). She expounds further in another interview:

I recognize Amelia. And, I definitely know the parts of myself that are her. And, I know lots of people who have parts of her. Um, I can completely relate. [...] Lots of mothers, I think, recognize themselves, and, obviously not all the way, but, um, Amelia's a beautiful person, and she really does want to love her son, who's also a beautiful person, who's only trying to protect his mother. (Davis, 2015)

Within these interviews Davis unknowingly alludes to the sublime; her understanding of the powerful contradiction in Amelia attests to this fact. Amelia evokes both terror and beauty, and these two opposing forces that wrestle without besting each other makes for our sense of pleasure. The final twenty minutes are shocking. We are horrified by the way she looks and speaks to Samuel, but we are thrilled at seeing an angered middle-aged woman take stairs two-by-two, hang herself on a doorframe attempting to kick in the door, and when she finally claims her territory against the Babadook, emit perhaps one of the most resonant screams in film history.

The depth of narrative and character in Jennifer Kent's gothic New Mother expands and overwhelms us in ways one can only describe as sublime. Kent herself describes Amelia along these same lines: "Once I kind of finished the role, I was like, wow, this is like as wide as it gets" (2014).

Although the crafting of Marie-Cristine in *Goodnight Mommy* is more controlled and restrained than Amelia, she also presents us with both terror and pleasure. The bandaged face – a thrilling throwback to such characters as Anna Holm in *En Kvinns Ansikte* (*A Woman's Face*, 1938), and Christiane Génessier in *Les Yeux Sans Visage* (*Eyes Without a Face*, 1960) – with the uncanny effect of a smile, is immediately startling and intriguing for the audience. Her appearance after the film opens with footage from the 1959 *Die Trapp-Familie* is especially jarring, as the Good Mother embodied by Maria von Trapp singing Brahms' Lullaby is replaced presently by the monstrosity bandaged Marie-Cristine. Lies Lanckman's 2019 article "I See, I See" reinforces this idea by stating that the clip "establishes motherhood as the central theme" of the film, but also readies us for "a contrast between 'good' and 'bad' motherhood" (p. 172).<sup>9</sup> Further, Olivia Landry's article "Pre-Face, Sur-Face, Inter-Face, Post-Face" (2019) notes that "the image present[s] a historically loaded trace of the cinema past" and "remind[s] the viewer of (Austrian) cinema's inescapable heritages [...] in the figure in of the maternal face" (pp. 95–96).

9 Lanckman suggests that the Austrian film and its variation *The Sound of Music* (1965) are "essentially" stories "about [...] good and bad motherhood," pitting Maria against Princess Yvonne/Baroness Schraeder (2019, p. 172).

At twenty-two minutes the doorbell rings, and Elias knocks on his mother's bedroom door. As one recalls, her new rules state that she is not to be disturbed; which is why the viewer is shocked, but also secretly delighted by Marie-Cristine feigning sleep in order to be left alone. Societally, mothers are pressured to respond to all of their children's queries – the term “helicopter parenting” did not come from nowhere after all<sup>10</sup> – but every mother more than likely wishes she could sometimes ignore them. What makes this scene even more delightful is that once Elias leaves the room, Marie-Cristine's eyes fly open and she crunches down on a biscuit already in her mouth. She had stopped mid-chew to ensure herself unbothered. Her matter-of-factness in resuming this activity is both humorous and horrifying; sublime.

Finally, the strongest incident of the sublime in this film is the transformative scene in which the camera trails Marie-Cristine as she walks into the woods, methodically shedding clothing and finally bandages with each step. It is a beautifully choreographed scene, with the persistent undercurrent of Olga Neuwirth's unnerving film score adding mood to the andante cinematography: a fluidly long take with low-key lighting that does not so much cut-away from the protagonist as it meanders along behind her in hide and seek fashion, sometimes finding her, sometimes losing her, but always in motion. When she finally stops, her back to us, the camera does not. In an arc it moves around her and toward what everyone wishes to see: her face. But as the camera moves, so does Marie-Cristine. She turns away, nodding her head in quick acceleration that ends in ten seconds of jarring, jolting body horror as the camera continues into a full-frontal close-up. The juxtaposition between transformation and despair is beautiful and terrifying – or sublime – in this scene: In vigorous liberation, a lone woman bearing hidden despair, metaphorically peels away the trappings of the world to get to the self, but this liberation ends with a horrific insinuation of who that self might actually be. Still, in terms of motherhood, the body horror, as frightening as it is, can be seen as empowering to an audience; it is not often one is offered such a deep, raw, *human* representation of a mother's pain. *Her* pain, and hers alone.

## Conclusion

In the Gothic, Ellen Moers states in *Literary Women* (1976/1985), “fantasy predominates over reality, the strange over the commonplace, and the supernatural over the natural” (p. 90). As seen in this chapter, the New Mother complicates these binaries by reversal: throughout most of the film the audience is focused on

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10 “Over-parenting” or “hyper-parenting” are known colloquially as “helicopter parenting,” a type of parenting, according to Steven Horowitz in *Hayek's Modern Family* (2016), in which “parents are deeply involved in every aspect of their children's lives even through their college years and beyond, often as a way of protecting them from any perceived danger or possible failure” (p. 184).

the common, the real, the natural of the mother's complicated life. The humanness of the protagonist outweighs the fantastic or the strange. What is more, although Moers (1976/1985) suggests the Gothic is meant to "get to the body itself, its glands, epidermis, muscles and circulatory system, quickly arousing and quickly allaying the physical reactions to fear," not to "reach down into the depths of the soul and purge it with pity and terror" as tragedy attempts to do (p. 90), it is clear that *The Babadook* and *Goodnight Mommy* do not quickly dispel our fears nor do they quickly allay our physical reactions to what we see on the screen. No, these films do not go away. They overwhelm and empower us; their humanity wounds us; their sublimity bolsters us, and hangs like a residue upon us.

This chapter cannot stress enough how enormously satisfying it is to witness these Gothic protagonists, these mothers who have such depth of character. To see remarkable and stimulating women characters shown in exhilarating complexities, even now, is delightfully astonishing. That audiences can also be repelled and disturbed by these "mothers" who step so clearly out of cinematic stereotypes, but simultaneously electrified, is a sublimely discomfiting experience, and one, in all fairness, this author hopes will be repeated in new films for years to come.

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