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Presentation and Interpretation of Power Dynamics within Character Transformations: Darren Aronofsky's "*mother!*"

Katarina Bošnjak ¹

Abstract

The movie *mother!* is a psychological horror movie, written and directed in 2017 by Darren Aronofsky. The plot of the movie revolves around a couple living in an isolated house, as their serene lives become thrown into disarray by a series of bizarre events started by the arrival of a mysterious couple and many other strange guests. This movie is known for its representation of biblical symbolism, with underlying warnings of the inevitable self-destruction of human race through their historically repetitive torment of Mother Earth. The main topic of this article is going to be an analysis of the symbolic milieu of the movie, with special attention to the depiction of power dynamics of the represented (divine) feminine and masculine, as well as power relations of the characters, in general. In that process, we hope to understand the stages of their transformation, with regards to the question of the nature of their transformation – was it social or structural? Interpretation of the transformation and its nature, we also contemplate the nature of recognized process of *othering* in the movie, that relies on the root of the recognized power relations? All of these questions are explored through interpretation of symbolic communication, in which the architectural setting acts as a character „anchor“ and a sustenance for its development, as well as the indicator and medium of its transformation.

Key words: film, religion, Darren Aronofsky, architecture, divine representation

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Introduction

The movie *mother!* is a psychological horror movie, written and directed in 2017 by Darren Aronofsky. The plot of the movie revolves around a couple (Javier Bardem as Him, and Jennifer Lawrence as the Mother) living in an isolated house, as their serene, but somewhat stale lives become thrown into disarray by a series of bizarre events started by the arrival of a mysterious couple (Ed Harris as the Man and Michelle Pfeiffer as the Woman). This movie is known for its representation of biblical symbolism, with underlying warnings of the inevitable self-destruction of human race through their historically repetitive actions of Mother Earth's torment.

Overall, the plot of the movie depicts a historical cycle, where Him, the acclaimed poet, the innate Creator, in the stroke of inspiration after a long writer's block writes a poem that turns out to be the plot frame of the movie itself. The cycle is followed through the Mother's perspective, who is subjected to the most deleterious effects of His creation and this cycle. She is the innate caregiver and homemaker, whose essence is imprinted into the house, in a manner that depicts the impossibility to separate her character from the house. The house is not only an architectural narrative and a cinematographic element of a plot setting, but an indicator of her transformations, as well as the main constituent of her character as well.

The main topic of this article is going to be an analysis of the symbolic milieu of the movie, with special attention to the depiction of power dynamics of the represented (divine) feminine and masculine, as well as power relations of the characters, in general. In that process, we hope to understand the stages of their transformation, with regards to the question of the nature of their transformation – was it social or structural? By social transformation, we imply that the origin of the transformation is external and perceptual, while structural transformation is internal and, therefore substantial. Interpretation of the transformation and its nature, we also contemplate the nature of recognized process of *othering* in the movie, that relies on the root of the recognized power relations? All of these questions are explored through interpretation of symbolic communication, in which the architectural setting acts as a character „anchor“ and a sustenance for its development, as well as the indicator and medium of its transformation.

Symbolic elements

This chapter relies on the analysis of plot elements, characters and their representation, through the interpretation of the symbolic milieu, which mostly relies on biblical elements.

The movie opens with a glimpse at a severely burned girl crying amidst the fiery destruction, and He is placing a crystal on a small pedestal, after which we are taken through the regenerating hallways of a previously burned house. Mother wakes up, alone in the bed, starts walking through the house, barefoot², searching for Him. After a brief conversation between them, we can see that He is self-centered, focused on His needs, ignoring her need for affection, oftentimes protection, which is more recognizable as the plot evolves. The movement of the camera itself emphasizes that Mother is the center of the plot for the audience, while He is the center of her world, as well as his own world, making her a secondary setting maker. She is redecorating the house, making it a home, giving it a meaning. Her connection to the house is accentuated through a scene where she touches the walls, listening to the pulse of the house, in order to make decisions (Photo 1). Mother represents the Mother Earth, strong yet fragile, feminine embodiment of love. He represents God, creative yet authoritarian masculine figure who places himself in the center of the world(s).



Photo 1. Movie still *„Mother and house spiritual connection“* (mother!, 2017)

The doorbell rings as He writes. She is wary, but He opens the door and lets in the Man (representing Adam), who asks for a place to spend the night. He and the Man start drinking, often ignoring her demands³ and excluding her from their conversation. At this moment we can see the beginning of her *othering*, internalized

² She is barefoot the entire movie, which emphasizes her connection to the house – we familiarize ourselves with her character as we familiarize ourselves with the house itself.

³ For example, she asks the Man not to smoke in the house, but he does it anyway as soon as she leaves the room. This signifies his inclination to negligence and the pollution he brings to the environment she is lovingly nurturing.

by pain she feels as her environment starts to change because a stranger crossed her boundaries, and she is alienated in her own space through not having support she needs from her husband.

From the relationship between the Man and Him, we can recognize the egotism and egocentricity of Him, since He basks in Man's compliments and adoration of His poems. However, after apparent interest in the crystal He cherishes above all (Photo 2), He gives the Man only one prohibition – not to touch the crystal. Upon further observation, we can see that the shape of the crystal resembles a heart, or an apple, reminiscing the forbidden fruit of Eden.



Photo 2. Movie still *_Man mesmerized by the crystal* (mother!, 2017)

That night, she witnesses Him helping the Man, while he vomits. A big wound on the Man's ribcage is revealed, which represents the biblical story of creation of Eve from Adam's rib. Next morning, the Woman (representing Eve) arrives, the Man's wife. Extremely self-indulgent, seductive, intrusive and rude. Through these two female characters, we can recognize two culturally constructed gender stereotypes – woman as a sensitive, gentle, passive and devoted homebody and homemaker, meant to procreate, vs. the woman as a selfish, seductive being meant to lead men astray. This dialectic tension is also represented through the two relationships (Him and the Mother, Man and Woman) and their interpersonal dynamics.

Man and Woman stay in the house, even though Mother is against it. Soon, it becomes apparent that the Woman has a tendency to be intrusive of their house, of their privacy, as well as Mother's boundaries regarding the subjects she wants discussed. She disrespects the house and Mother's hard work, drinking and leaving mess all over the house for Mother to clean. Man and Woman's vices are signifiers of their tendency to self-destruction, which follows human kind throughout the history. As expected from the biblical narrative of Adam and Eve's disobedience, Man and Woman break the crystal, making Him angry. He banishes them from his

room, sealing it from further intrusion. This is an apparent analogy of God's banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. However, even after this (for Him) very painful destruction, He lets them stay in the house, trying to find a way to forgive them. This symbolizes the God as a forgiving figure that loves his mimetic creation – man on his image – above all. We could argue that this means that God loves himself above everything.

The next intrusion into the house happens when Man and Woman's sons enter and start fighting over their father's will. This signifies the arrival of strife and violence into once harmonic environment. One could argue that self-destruction (through vice) and violence are innate human properties. The conflict escalates, and the older brother fatally injures the younger brother, while wounding his own forehead. This signifies the Cain and Abel narrative, and the mark God bestowed upon Cain's face before sending him to wander the earth (Biblija, 1987). After the altercation, everybody leaves the house to try to help the younger brother, leaving Mother behind to clean the blood of the floors, and this is the first time she „sees“ the heart of the house, damaged, blackened and shriveled⁴.

After a while, He comes back. The younger brother died. That night, Woman leads a group of people into the house, to have a mourning, which turns into a big gathering, where Mother is further *othered* – with each new person her relevance in her own home is diminished. People violate the house, penetrating every corner of the house against her will, and soon they start to violate her as well – where we the rejection of a man turns into insults and disrespect in an instant. Eventually, after the destruction and flooding of the kitchen, Mother evicts everyone from the house. We could argue that this represents the *rape* of Mother Earth by the human race through history, and periodical revenge of the Mother Earth. This resistance lead to Mother's confrontation with Him, which results in a compromise – she becomes pregnant. This is a turning point in the movie, since both of them are starting to live their innate roles – she is to become a mother, and His writer's block is ended, because a new life in the house is to change everything.

⁴ This is an indication of the further damage to her essence, which is also symbolized through a small detail of a fly dying on the floor, representing a transformation. Another symbol of transformation is depicted in the next sequence, when Mother enters the basement, to see the walls bleeding, so she tears down the wall and opens a door behind it. A frog (symbol of transformation and fertility) leaps towards her.



Photo 3. Movie still *_Him greeting the zealot crowd* (mother!, 2017)

Several months later, we see Him standing at the open front door with His finished book, as if expecting and inviting something. From this point in the movie, the plot culminates and evolves in a fast, chaotic way. He receives even more fame for His book, and soon the growing zealot crowd appears at the front door, asking to see Him (Photo 3). He basks in the glory and adoration, fascinated how everybody understood His book, but how it affects everybody in a different way⁵ (Photo 4). Panicked, she locks the front door, hoping the crowd will disperse. However, the house is full of people who soon start to destroy it, taking pieces of it as souvenirs, because they want to have something of His, to be marked by Him. They also see this as a way to leave the proof that they were there – they display the urge to be remembered. But why do they feel the need to leave their trace through destruction? Is it because of those before mentioned innately human violent urges?



Photo 4. Movie still *_Him enjoying the glory, her loneliness in the chaos* (mother!, 2017)

⁵ This is an interesting statement, since we can recognize through the history of religions and religious writings how they are a similar perspective of similar or same events and notions, yet they cause so much division and harm.

In the chaos, we can recognize the baptism-like rituals being held, shrines for Him being made. The scenes of riots, executions of revolutionaries and girl entrapment represent the culmination of worst human qualities and inclinations. This is the allegory of conquest, war, famine and death, as if the four riders of apocalypse move throughout the house. Again, she sees in her mind the further blackening of the heart of the house, as she goes into labor. He finds her, and wants to hide her from the chaos, but when people see Him they run towards Him, saying Jesus's famous last words „He has not forsaken them“ (Mt 27:46, Biblija, 1987). One could argue that this can represent a critique of human race that through chaos they created themselves, they self-indulgently justify that their despair comes from God forsaking them, even though God was always there, but they lost the true message by banalizing it and manipulating it through selfish and harmful agenda.

Hidden in His previously sealed study, she gives birth to a male child (representing Jesus), while the chaos outside the room culminates. When the child is born, the chaos abruptly stops, bringing the illusory peace brought by new hope and the arrival of Messiah. This, also, can be argued as a critique to human race and their need for projection of responsibility into other entity other than themselves. The people brought gifts and want to see the baby, however, she does not allow it. Eventually, she falls asleep, and He takes the baby outside. Soon she wakes up, following the baby being carried by the crowd, out of her reach (Photo 5). The Zealots kill the baby, denying its death, insisting that the voice of the baby lives through everybody. This can be interpreted as religious ideology – primal idea being carried and lived through its followers. In one of the most disturbing moments of the movie, we see the people consuming the baby, which is a clear analogy to Christian mass ritual of „taking the body of Christ“ – the act of the ultimate consumption of faith – body of Christ, as well as an act of ultimate betrayal of God. This takes her over the edge of desperation, so she starts killing everybody in her reach, however, people brutally beat her, calling her a *whore*. Moments ago she was appreciated as the mother of this special child, so this abrupt change represents the completion of dehumanization as the result of long-term process of *othering*. He saves her, yet, He still asks of her to find a way to forgive them, which she refuses. Her final vision of completely blackened and dead heart of the house leads her to the basement, from where she destroys everything in a fire.



Photo 5. Movie still *_Crowd carrying the baby* (mother!, 2017)

In the end, everything is destroyed – purified – in the fire, she is extremely burned, as He is unharmed. She asks Him what He is, to which He replies: „I am I, and you are home.“ (mother!, 2017). This is a confirmation of Him representing the God, referring to the God’s sentence to Moses “I am that I am” (Izlazak 3:14, Biblija, 1987). We can also discern the identification of the woman with the idea of home – the essence and heart of the house. After that, He says He is taking her to the beginning – this ties the story as a cyclical repetition of same/similar fatality caused by His creation – human race. Crying, she concludes that she was not enough for Him, to which He says that it is not her fault, because nothing is ever enough and it cannot be, since that would make Him unable to create, and He has to create, because that is His essence. Now, He must try again, but He needs one more thing from her – her love (mother!, 2017). So he takes her heart, crushes it as she dies and finds a crystal in it. He puts the crystal on the small pedestal, and the house regenerates as the new woman – the new Mother wakes up alone in the bed. The new cycle begins.

Representation of (divine) femininity and masculinity

Aside from the allegorical representation of biblical themes, we can recognize the theme of femininity and masculinity and their asymmetrical relationship as a theme that carries this movie. The main characters – Him and Mother are archetypes of man and woman.

The complexity of her character contains her identification with the house, which is a historical notion that woman, as the nurturing (previously) house-bound

subject elevates a house into a home. She is trying to repair the house through the entire movie, but the ongoing violation of the house represents the victimization of women, as well as Mother Earth (which is another layer of her character, and a universal symbol of femininity). He, on the other hand, is the archetypal creator, as well as the owner of the house that she is repairing for Him, in order to create the home through respect and revival of a place that is meaningful to Him. This represents the divine feminine – a woman's life giving ability (in terms of this movie, and world's history), growth and regeneration (the house), all united within the idea of the Mother Nature, which is the baseline for her character. We can ask ourselves, does this mean that He, the masculine archetype, is *ubicated* in an inherited spatial anchor, while she, as the feminine archetype needs to project herself into (his) place after she inhabits it? Through the movie, we can sense this ownership idea lingering through her character – she is identified with the house, He owns the house, and in the end He owns her (crystalized) heart. „The masculine principle is a driving ethos designed to inspire straightforward, confident success, while the feminine principle is composed of vulnerability, the need for protection, the formalities of compliance and the avoidance of conflict” (Brownmiller, 1985, p. 16), which is displayed multiple times through her hesitation of being surrounded by strange “guests” in the house, and scenes of her hiding and running away from uncomfortable situations, as well as her inability to cope with (physical and social) conflicts. Her death is yet another romanticization of her victimhood, vulnerability and giving everything to the man (embodied in the crystal from her given heart). Basically, her role is to position herself as a means through which He maintains a dialogue with (him)self, which is recognizable through their conversations, where she is a passive support, not an active participant. In words of Susan Brownmiller (1985, p.17) “femininity serves to reassure men that women need them and care for them enormously. In its mandate to avoid direct confrontation and to smooth over the fissures of conflict, femininity operates as a value system of niceness, a code of thoughtfulness and sensitivity.”.

On the other hand, there is another perception of femininity in this movie – that of the character of Woman/Eve. The character of Eve represents the primordial sinner, “corrupted” purity of romanticized femininity, represented through her shamelessness, dominance in the relationship with the character of Man/Adam, as well as her uninhibited sexuality – which are the opposite traits of the Mother. However, these two characters are pushed against one another to the point where vulnerable Mother is bullied by the imposing Eve, as if the message is that these two characters cannot coexist in one house, to be more precise, as if a woman cannot be both characters simultaneously. The masculine archetype represented by Him is,

however, not pushed against, but complemented by the character of Man/Adam, a pliable, corruptible character whose essence is to follow and worship authoritarian figure. This is further emphasized through subsequent development and corruption of (dominantly) male characters recognizable in the crowd that invades the house, as if the more time passes, the pure, divine masculinity is diluted and corrupted by losing the archetypal masculine image of God, upon which they are based. But, is this really a lost image, or only a distorted one? God, after all, is vengeful, violent, egocentric, yet, He is forgiving, and this trait would not be valid were it not for His sinning, flawed creations, which leads us back to the notion that His/God's masculine archetype is not in conflict, but complemented by his *otherness*, unlike that of a woman.

This takes us into the topic of perceptual dichotomy of femininity and resulting *otherness*, shown through the transformation of Mother. In her character development, we recognize alterity and ephemerality of perception of her femininity, as well as instability of her position within the world. This instability moves between the material, imaginary and social domain - at moments she is perceived as a nurturing figure, a home, then as a divine figure giving birth to the savior, and at moments she is perceived as a dangerous, dehumanized figure meant for exploitation and eventual destruction. These moments are recognizable through His attitude towards her, as well as transformative attitude of the guests and crowd towards her – she is a danger when she defends herself, she is a *whore* when she rejects men's advances, and she is the key to salvation and safety when she is living according to limitations of her “nature” to procreate and nurture. She is a subject of love and violence, and an inhabitant of a decentered and chaotic world in which she feels alienated. Basically, she, as a woman, is subjected to the conditions of human race controlled and constituted by ideologically motivated power discourses that prevail their society, thus, is *othered*⁶. The accomplishments of those who are marked as *Other* “may not always be disdained; often, they will be appreciated, but always in their special and peripheral place, the place of their difference” (Bordo, 1996, p. 12). In words of Laura Mulvey (1989, p. 15), “woman stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male *other*, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of a woman still tied to her place as the bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.”.

⁶ She is His *Other*, thus, this notion is embedded within cultural and communal codes and conventions.

Since we recognized the importance of architecture within her character, through her identification with the house, longing to become a home, it is necessary to analyze the role of architecture as the carrier of her character and the plot, as well as its role in her transformation throughout the movie.

Architecture as a narrative element

This movie shows an intrinsic link between architecture and cinema, as the house's layout is directing us, the audience, through its spaces and plot succession, reflecting her mental disarray and emotional responsivity through vertiginous camera movement focused on her, communicating her perspective and experience, simultaneously engaging our responsiveness and attention. For purpose of this movie, the house was built based on an octagonal Victorian house laid out like a human brain, but the set was designed to support filming her point of view (see: Desowitz, 2017). The entire movie is set inside the house, in the midst of an idyllic garden, reminiscent of the garden of Eden (Photo 6). However, the movie never takes us physically inside the garden, it is shown only as the surrounding of the house, a buffer between the unknown, that threatens the peace of the interior life, and the known, the house that embodies the safety that is destroyed once the unknown crosses the entryway threshold.



Photo 6. Movie still *_Mother on the threshold of the (un)known (mother!, 2017)*

A strong significance, in this context, carries the house threshold – the entrance to the house. Front door is the herald of all the changes that come – it separates the outside from the inside world, the strangers and outsiders from their solitude. It

also represents the dividing line between sacred space of the house and the profane world outside of it. This is the basic liminal⁷ space that her and His relation to society – His is open, her is closed. The house/home is a known space of belonging, while everything around it is an unknown space, space of *otherness* inhabited by strangers and untrusting people (Photo 7). This is further emphasized by façade design, as „façade and interior design represent how person sees themselves, both as an individual psyche, and in relation to society and the outside world.“ (Cooper, 2014, p. 137) – the façade is quite introverted, and the house interior is unfinished, in between two destructive events, just like Mother.

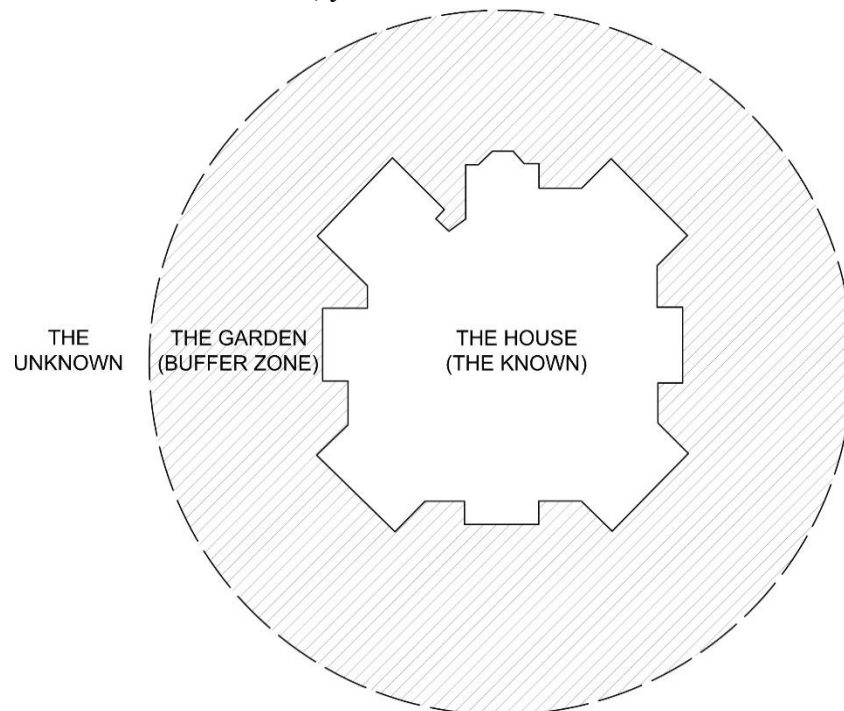


Photo 7. House and its threshold between the known and the unknown (K. Bošnjak, 2021)

Her role as the homemaker was already emphasized, as she strives to renovate the house to turn it from the mere building meant for accommodation to a place of belonging – a home. The home is a “social place and mythologized space” (Mulvey, 1989, p. 64), that gives order and pattern to the oppositions of inside and outside, and the perceived sphere of male space (outside the home) and female space (inside

⁷ Liminality (lat. *limen* – threshold) is an anthropological concept developed by Arnold van Gennep, which implies the ambiguity that occurs at the transition from one status to another during a transformation, where something is on the border between the previous state and the new one, whilst having characteristics of both states, but not enough to actually belong to either (Turner, 1974). Application of this concept transgressed to elucidation of processes and states that occur during adaptable and fluid state caused by transformations.

the home)⁸. “The private sphere, the domestic, is (historically) associated with woman, not simply as female, but as wife and mother. It is the mother who guarantees the privacy of the home by maintaining its respectability, as essential a defense against outside incursion or curiosity as the encompassing walls of the home itself” (ibid, 69-70). This notion is reflected in the character of Him and the Mother – He lets the inside become violated by outsiders, while she frantically tries to protect the inside from the intrusion, while being intruded upon by outsiders herself. Actions of the intruders refer to mankind cultural need to imprint themselves and proof of their existence into the space – by writing on it and marking it (fixation of their identity into physical environment), and by its destruction (indicating the self-destructive nature of humankind). Here we can recognize different meaning of a house to different people – for some people it is a fortress to be defended, for some it is expression of the self to others (see: Doyle, 1992). Yet, house is the universal symbol of the self – „in trying to comprehend the most basic of archetypes – self – to give it concrete substance, man grasps at physical forms or symbols which are close and meaningful to him, and which are visible and definable. The first and most consciously selected form to represent self is the body, for it appears to be both the outward manifestation, and the enclosure of self. On a less conscious level, man also frequently selects the house, the basic protector of his internal environment (beyond skin and clothing) to represent or symbolize what is tantalizingly unrepresentable.“ (Cooper, 2014, p. 131)

Drawing inspiration on Slavoj Žižek’s Jungian analysis (see: Jung, 1965, p. 182) of the Bates house from Hitchcock’s movie *Psycho* (The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema, 2006), based on Freud’s three aspects of the psyche, we can analyze the representation of three levels of human subjectivity in this house. Ground floor represents the *Ego*, the everyday conscious, situational, experiential life, first floor represents *Superego*, the authoritative, commanding, judging aspect of our psyche, and the basement represents the *Id*, the home of instinctual desires, the unconscious, neglected and often feared part of ourselves. In this movie, the ground floor is where most of the plot happens, and we follow her everyday mostly solitary life driven by her nature to nurture and repair – this is the part of the house where everybody invades. His appearances in these parts of the house indicate His everyday life as someone who enjoys being adored and praised. The *Superego* is a symbolic representation of father figure, it is an indicator of hierarchy in the context of His needs and desires, she cannot comprehend it completely, but it still dictates

⁸ Through the usage of spaces of the house through the movie, we can recognize His study and the living room as male spaces, performative spaces meant to express His social identity, while the kitchen is female space, mostly used by her, often as a refuge from the guests.

their lives (Photo 8). His study is on the first floor, and it is the only room in the house that He prohibits to be entered. It is barricaded after Man and Woman submit themselves to their basic urges and explore the crystal against His commands – the violation of His space is almost unforgivable. This is the judging aspects that condemns the (morally) unacceptable behavior. The basement is the culmination of her suffering, and the place where she gives in to her instinctual strength to annihilate everything. Throughout the movie she fears this room and the signs of the transformation to come. This is the room where her visions show her the heart of the house, and from this place she commences the fire that “purifies” the house of everyone (Photo 9). Her coming down to this room symbolizes the transference of her psyche to the realm of *Id*, the unconscious. However, while she is transformed, burned and destroyed by this act, He is physically unchanged, but He abandons his Superego-like authority and admits His instinctual self – the innate creator run by her support, caught in a loop of failure and destruction.



Photo 8. Movie still *_First floor as the Superego* (mother!, 2017)



Photo 9. Movie still _*Transference of Id into the Ego* (mother!, 2017)

The three levels of human psyche are centered around a staircase in the double height hall that connects all of them – the cosmic axis (see: Eliade, 1959), the vertical upright that is a universal symbol for passage to the worlds above and below the earth. House is the center of the world (symbolically and practically in everyday lives), representing an *imago mundi*, which in terms of this house indicate that this world is unfinished, she is in the process of creating it, defining it and nurturing it, thus, it is going through transformation, therefore it is in the state of cosmogonic liminality.

This loop – the cycle from genesis to apocalypse is bound to the Mother and the house, as the holder of action, thus the performance of its spaces is crucial for understanding the liminal aspects of character transformations.

Transformation elements of the character of the Mother

Character of the Mother is an episode of one cycle, in which He aims to create the human race that does not end in destruction. From the context, we can understand that this cycle always begins and ends in the same manner – Mother remaking the house that was previously destroyed in the fire, and everything between those two points are incentives that provoke her transformation, culminating in the apocalypse. Thus, we will analyze the stages of her transformation through the analysis of plot succession, following the subsequent transformation of the house (that is essentially her), Him and the people (observed as one amalgamated character), as they are a reflection and/or stimuli for her transformation (Photo 10).

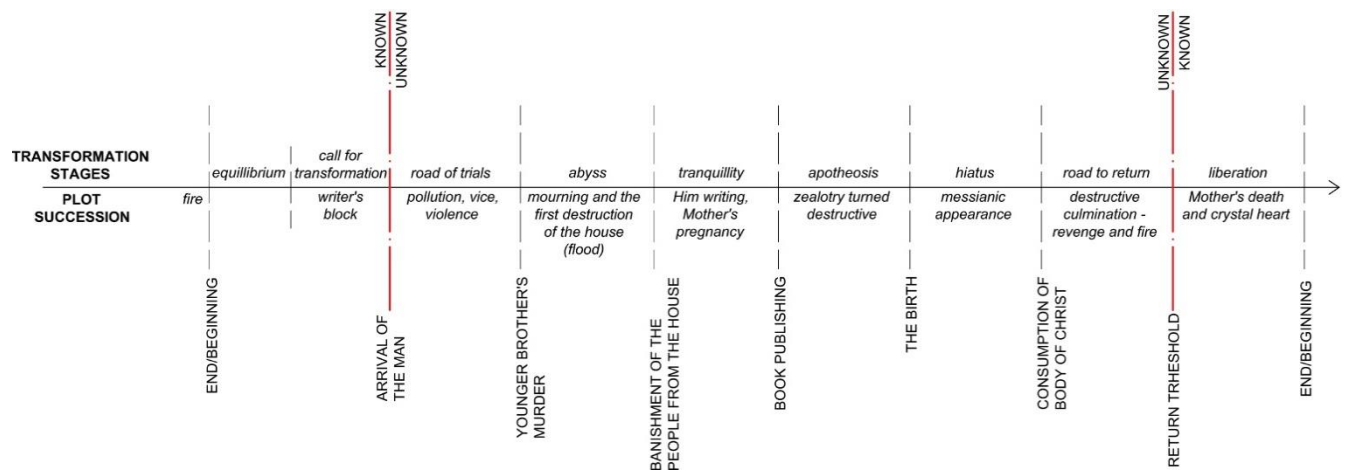


Photo 10. Transformation stages through plot points (K. Bošnjak, 2021)

The beginning part of the movie offers us a baseline for their characters, we see the initial illusion of equilibrium, through which we understand their roles and relationship. Their relationship discovers the first subtle sign of transformation to come – the initiator in the form of His struggle with creative work. Soon after, we cross the threshold from the known into the unpredictable, the unknown, through the appearance of the Man. This is the grand initiator of the revelation of their identities – Him as an egocentric and her as a borderline xenophobe. This arrival immediately starts to transform the house, degrading it through pollution.

The next stage is *the road of trials*, arrival of the Woman and two Brothers, who bring their own vices and violence. At this point, He is still in their baseline character identities, however, the house transforms via decay further, as it is an unconscious part of her, as well as a representation of earth and the idea of home whose essential part is the belonging (of which she is unable, since she is *othered* by the new presences in the house). She is slightly affected.

This leads us to the next stage of the transformation – *the abyss*. At this stage, the destruction of the house is not passive, it is actively performed by the people who came to mourn the death of the Younger brother. The active destruction triggers her first transformation manifested through rage and courage to confront the people and Him about the sanctity of her space.

This stage is followed by a *tranquil period*, which, essentially, reveals the most important moment of transformation(s). House is regenerated, He is writing, and she is pregnant, which in cultural and symbolical aspect represents the threshold of the entelechy of femininity – becoming a mother.

End of her pregnancy is another threshold, marked by tumultuous events that announce the culmination of the transformation. At this stage, He revels in the mass adoration, the people are being transformed from a respectful God-loving crowd to a destructive, war-loving, faithless mob that blames their troubles and actions on God's perceived absence from their lives. The house is completely destroyed within. The culmination of this prolonged stage is marked by her giving birth to a boy. This is an act through which she is *apotheosized*⁹⁹ by Him and the people, by giving birth to the son of God. People are again transformed into the God-loving crowd, calmed by the messianic appearance. Their desire to be as close to him takes us to the next stage, which, in terms of this cycle, is a road to return to the *equilibrium*.

They consume the body of Christ, and this is the final incentive of transformation – she disintegrates into destruction and begins her revenge on people, people overpower her and turn against her after they took everything she had, *othering* her completely, as He stays within His forgiving role of their God. The culmination of His transformation happened in the moment He finished His book, so He does not have any more significant stimuli to transform Him, since He is, basically, complete.

In the final act of this stage, she burns down the house and destroys everything. This is her *liberation*, and it plays the crucial role in the final return threshold – giving her heart to Him, since He must start everything *ab initio*.

⁹⁹ Glorification of a subject to divine levels.

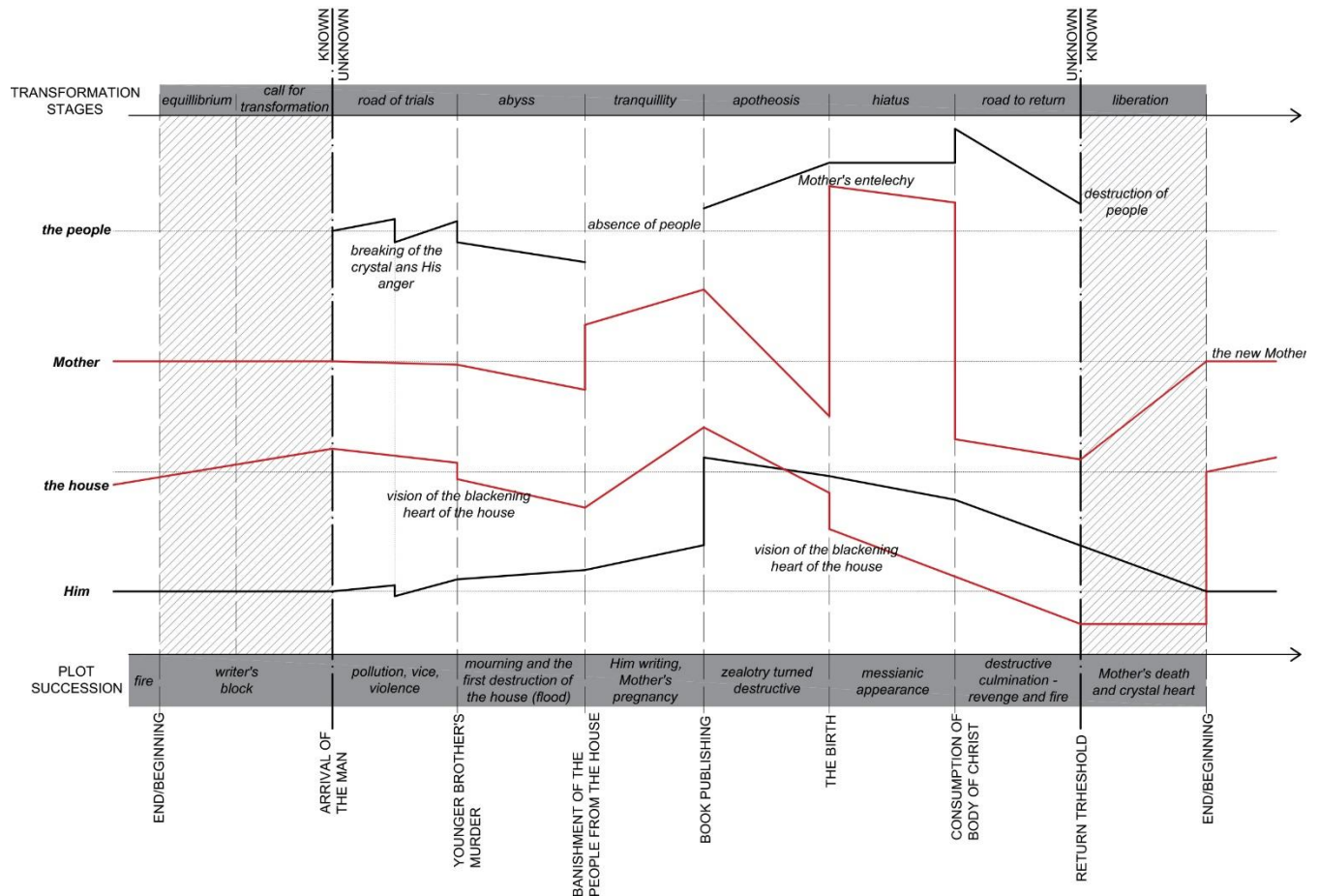


Photo 11. Power dynamics as transformation incentives (K. Bošnjak, 2021)

What we learn, basically, from this analysis is the power dynamics of these characters (Photo 11) and its effect on the transformation. There would be no transformation if there were no power dynamics fluctuations, since all of these characters (sometimes actively, other times passively influence the lives and states of others). Mother and the house are synchronized within their transformation – as their power decreases, encouraged by the process of *othering* brought by the people, their transformation leans towards simultaneous destruction. However, Mother eventually regains control over people, overpowering them, but in that moment, there is no turning back towards positive transformation – she needs to be liberated through complete self-destruction, thus purifying herself from the people. We can conclude that her transformation is both social and structural. Social (external) transformation is brought upon her by Him and people (mostly the aspect of *othering*), however, the structural, substantial transformation occurs as the result of social transformation. Her structural transformation is best perceived through the state of the house. The people are seemingly dictating the power dynamics through the majority of the movie, even though they are merely reacting to the

incentive of Him being the focal point of their existence. Their transformation is mostly in the realm of structural, since they are led by the ideologies that change and dictate their complete world view. His need for transformation is the ultimate stimuli for every other transformation in the movie, however, His own transformation is social, since He does not really grow as a character, or change, the only transformation is perceptual, visible through the eyes of the people.

Conclusion

This movie can be understood as a compresses history of human race, saturated with biblical interpretation and representation of certain events, as well as warning messages about our torment of Mother Earth. Through this narrative, we discover an underlying theme of (divine) femininity and masculinity, and their asymmetrical relationship – the main characters Him and Mother are archetypes of a man and a woman. Their relationship is represented as Him being the creator of femininity (Mother Earth), to be the ultimate support for His essence as the Creator, but she is also a tool, used and abused, heard only at the moment where she liberates herself from the role she was born into (the nurturer). Archetypal setting of their relationship includes dominance of the masculine in its purest form. The “corrupted” version of it, depicted through Adam and Eve, insinuates that feminine dominance over masculinity is almost evil.

The character of Mother is the most complex one, she is identified and imprinted into the house, which overcame its role as a cinematographic element of plot development, and became a character itself. This inherent relationship between Mother and the house represents the historical notion that woman, as the nurturing house-bound subject is to elevate a house into a home, as a place of belonging, and that she is tied to a place as the bearer of meaning. This is also depicted through her fear of the unknown, represented by the house boundary with the unknown world in the form of garden that isolates (and protects) her from everything that is not their house or their everyday life.

After the recognition of the importance of architecture within her character, it was necessary to analyze the role of architecture as the carrier of her character and the plot, as well as its role in her transformation throughout the movie. The house was contemplated within the idea the representation of the three levels of human subjectivity, based on Freudian aspects of the psyche – Ego, Superego and Id, concluding that the plot develops and culminated through interception and transference between these aspects. Each character is bound to the certain aspect –

people to Ego (the ground floor), He is to Superego (the first floor), the father figure, the authority that sojourns in the Ego sphere to be feared and adored, and Mother to Ego, until she transfers to Id, when pushed beyond her limits.

All of the above depicts power dynamics between characters, represented through the fluctuations within their interconnections. These fluctuations are crucial for the transformation of characters! Everything and everyone is connected, however, there is a hierarchy – people respond to Him, trying to dominate over her and the house, while she is synchronized with the house, since it is a crucial layer of her character. Thus her liberation from the harm contains destruction and self-destruction, to give Him the beginning of the new cycle and chance to start his creative process anew. This transformative process of liberation from the self and others is highly purposeful, and not an end in itself.

Finally, it is concluded that Mother is the character most susceptible to transformation, it is part of her nature, while He is not. His transformation can only be perceptual, external, since His nature is static, unchangeable, but longing to be moved by His creations. To answer the main question about the nature of character transformations, it is concluded that her transformation is both social and structural – social by influence of the process of *othering*, and structural as the consequence of social transformation (this aspect is best reflected through the state of house); the people are led by the notion of Him being the focal point of their existence, so their transformation and following influence on the power dynamics is mostly in the realm of structural, since they are internally changing according to ideologies that dictate their worldview. He, as a static character, needs a transformation, so His actions are stimuli for every other transformation, while His own transformation remains in the realm of social – it is the perception of Him that changes, not Him.

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