

Monstrous Motherhood

From 'Rosemary's Baby' to 'Nightbitch'

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An extract pp 87-96

Original title Monsterlijk moederschap
Publisher Flaneur Uitgevers, 2025

Translation Dutch into English
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5. Monstrous Motherhood

The first time I watched Jason Reitman's film *Tully* (2018), in which Charlize Theron plays an exhausted mother, what I primarily saw was a woman struggling with growing up, a person finding it hard to let go of the younger version of herself and accept her current, adult self. It was a theme Reitman had previously explored in *Young Adult* (2011), also starring Charlize Theron and based on a screenplay by Diablo Cody.

In *Tully*, Theron slips into the stretch-marked skin of Marlo, a mother on the verge of a breakdown following the birth of her unplanned third child. On her brother's advice, she hires a night nanny, whom, in the nighttime, puts the crying baby on its mother's breast, changes its nappy and rocks it back to sleep so that the mother can get some more rest. Enter Tully (Mackenzie Davis), an extremely attractive, precocious twenty-something who lovingly lightens Marlo's load.

In a key scene, Marlo and Tully go to a pub in Bushwick (the neighbourhood in Brooklyn where Marlo lived in her twenties). Tully has been with the family for a while now, things seem to be improving, so she says she's quitting as a night nanny, it's time to leave. Symbolically, this means it's time for Marlo to let go of her younger self. I bet you have big plans, says Marlo, "*Your twenties are great, they are. But then your thirties come around the corner like a garbage truck at five a.m..*" I'm not afraid of the future, Tully tells her. You should be, Marlo replies.

The second time I saw *Tully*, the memory of my own endless days and sleepless nights with a tiny baby was still so fresh that I cried at the sequence in which the baby screams, the mother mechanically gets up, feeds, changes, comforts, rocks and goes back to sleep. Until the baby screams again and it all starts over. Pumping milk. Rocking. Bouncing on the exercise ball, up and down, comforting the baby until it sleeps. Over and over. The relentless repetition of the same actions again and again, the soul-destroying nature of it all, the crushing fatigue. And then that bag of freshly expressed milk that Marlo, half asleep, forgets to seal and which tips over. You have to have been a sleep-deprived mother to fully appreciate the tragedy of that moment. I'd never seen motherhood so accurately portrayed in a film before.

Yet it is no secret how hard life with a small baby can sometimes be, and how intense and invasive breastfeeding can be. At Tate Britain, I saw a small bronze sculpture by Henry Moore from 1953, a work that hadn't struck me on a previous visit, before I became a mother myself. The British artist often depicted mothers with children, but this *Mother and Child* is remarkably dark and menacing: the child reaches from the mother's lap, mouth wide open, towards her breast (the baby

even bears a slight resemblance to the monstrous creature from Ridley Scott's sci-fi classic *Alien*), whilst the mother grips her child's neck to prevent it from getting any closer. Moore wanted to show the complexity of raising a child. Sometimes, he said, "it's as though they want to devour their parent... as though the parent, the mother, had to hold the child at arm's length".

In 1975, the Czech painter Jan Kristofori produced a drawing of a mother holding a crying baby in one arm, whilst – clearly irritated – she squeezes her breast over a citrus juicer with her other hand. Louise Bourgeois produced numerous gouaches in the last five years of her life, executed in an unpredictable wet-on-wet technique, which explore the cycles of life. She focused, among other things, on themes like birth, motherhood, nutrition and dependence in a blood-red series called *The Feeding*, in which breastfeeding doesn't appear to be a pleasant activity for either mother or child. In *Tully*, Marlo goes jogging in an attempt to gain more control over her body and her life. (Her older daughter had asked at the dinner table: "Mom, what's wrong with your body?") When Marlo sees a young, slim, fast jogger, she shifts up a gear to catch up with her, running until she collapses. The young woman is concerned: are you okay? Until she sees Marlo's breast, which is leaking milk. Horrified, the young woman runs off. A mother's body is considered abject.

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In the late 1960s, 'pregnancy horror' emerged in film. There are a few reasons for this. The Motion Picture Production Code (rules to which all American films had to conform) prohibited the depiction of childbirth until 1968. Moreover, ultrasound was developed in the early 1960s. The ability to produce ultrasound images of the foetus in the womb reinforced the idea that the unborn child existed as an independent being from the moment of conception. The focus and empathy shifted from the mother to the foetus. "Without the woman's body, there would be no foetus," writes Joke de Wolf in her book *Het moedermodel* [The Mother Model]. Yet "since the 1970s, court cases have referred to the foetus as an independent 'person' who must be protected against the potential wrongdoings of the woman carrying him or her." Another consequence of the ultrasound was that the foetus could also be seen as foreign to the body, something that does not fully belong to one's own body, but intrudes.

In Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), Rosemary's pregnancy affects her health. She loses a great deal of weight and suffers from extremely painful cramps, but her husband and her doctor (the men she should be able to trust, as Claire Dederer writes in her book *Monsters*) downplay her complaints. And so Rosemary (played by Mia Farrow), without help, "in her chic white dresses and her Vidal Sassoon hairstyle" (Dederer), hurtles towards her downfall. She gives birth to the devil's child.

Because women can give birth, writes Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, they are linked to the animal kingdom, to the cycle of life, decay and death, and this reminds humanity of its mortality and the fragility of the Symbolic Order. That is why mother figures in horror films are often portrayed as abject.

The womb is the epitome of the abject because it contains new life that will pass from within to without, bearing traces of contagion – blood, faeces, placenta. Bregje Hofstede provides an intense, true-to-life illustration of this in her novel *Oersoep* [Primordial Soup]. There is vomit – "there he comes again with that little yellow bucket" – spontaneous defecation, and pain, a great deal of pain. "You can tell there isn't a passageway here; one is being made."

The body of a fertile woman and the fact that she can give birth provide horror films with an inexhaustible arsenal of gruesome images: dark, claustrophobic spaces allude to the birth canal or the womb; births of all kinds are depicted violently; and blood, pus, piss and shit – in short, the abject – also constantly refer to the mother and her body.

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Few films have taken this womb symbolism to such a chilling extreme as *Alien*, arguably the most terrifying film I have ever seen. The claustrophobic menace is palpable almost every minute. Ridley Scott's 1979 sci-fi classic opens with a long tracking shot through one of the narrow corridors of the spaceship Nostromo, that leads to a chamber where seven crew members are awakened from stasis – a prolonged sleep in which they do not age - by the on-board computer. They emerge half-naked from white, womb-like capsules, as if from a sterile, painless birth.

The computer, affectionately called “Mother” by the crew, wakes them because intelligent life has been detected on a moon; the crew members must investigate. Three astronauts set off to explore an unknown spaceship. Kane (John Hurt) descends into a long shaft that leads to a hatchery full of eggs. Although everyone knows you're supposed to leave eggs alone, Kane moves closer to take a look, he even touches one, and watches in fascination as it cracks. But then a monstrous creature suddenly leaps onto his helmet and won't let go.

Against the advice of Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver's breakthrough role), Kane is not placed in quarantine but immediately brought back on board, which proves fatal for everyone except Ripley. In the famous chest-burst scene, the alien bursts straight through Kane's chest in a gruesome, bloody birth scene (a counterpart to the opening scene). In *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Barbara Creed argues that the male body becomes grotesque when it adopts characteristics of the female. Kane is penetrated and impregnated by the alien, and subsequently “gives birth” to a monstrous creature. In the words of David MacIntee, author of *Beautiful Monsters: The Unofficial and Unauthorised Guide to the Alien and Predator Films*: “Alien is a rape movie with male victims. And it also shows the consequences of that rape: the pregnancy and birth. It is a film that plays, very deliberately, with male fears of female reproduction.”

In the final scene, we see Ripley undressing down to her underwear, a voyeuristic scene that seems to suddenly objectify the heroine's body, even though throughout the rest of the film she defied the stereotypical image of women. Ripley is not just any Final Girl; she is not merely the sole survivor, but the action heroine of the film. Creed analyses the scene as follows: Ripley's body is beautiful, a pleasure to look at, but above all, says Creed, it is reassuring. She represents the ‘acceptable’ form of womanhood, in contrast to the abject, monstrous mother, the alien. When Ripley goes to sleep in her white capsule in the final scene, we are not only relieved because the alien has been catapulted into space, but also because the nightmarish image of the mother (which has kept us on the edge of our seats for the duration of the film) has been suppressed, replaced by a reassuring image.

Long tunnels that lead to womb-like chambers, multiple birth scenes and an alien like a chameleon, constantly adapting and changing shape – references to the changing body of a pregnant woman? Pregnancy, childbirth, the female reproductive organs: in *Alien*, these are all extraordinarily gruesome.

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“Do you just love getting to be home with him all the time? It must be so wonderful.” A woman with a child bumps into a younger woman in the supermarket. “Oh yeah, I mean, that's a good question. But it's complicated though, because I would love to feel content, but instead I feel like I'm stuck inside of a prison of my own creation, where I torment myself until I'm binge-eating at midnight to keep myself from crying. And I'm just angry all the time, like all the time.”

But of course she doesn't actually say that. She replies: “Yes, I do, I do love it. I love being a mom.”

It's a scene from *Nightbitch*, Marielle Heller's 2024 film adaptation of Rachel Yoder's uncomfortable yet hilarious novel of the same name. In a montage, we see the repetition, the tedium of life as a stay-at-home mum with a toddler, a bit like in *Tully*, but with an older child. (The child had cried all day at a nursery which broke the mother's heart, and since the father works away all week, she'd given up her job to look after the child.) Mother and son eat, play, go to the park, watch the refuse lorry go past from the pavement, eat again... ad infinitum.

In the bathroom, the mother (played by Amy Adams) discovers a patch of fur just above her tailbone. Could it be a tail? And aren't her canines just a little sharper than usual? In *Nightbitch*, the total transformation that motherhood inevitably entails is symbolised by a different metamorphosis: at night, the mother – fuelled by her anger, a formless rage – becomes a dog. She becomes Nightbitch.

In the film, that metamorphosis remains fairly tame – yes, the mother suddenly eats raw meat, goes out onto the street at night with a pack of dogs and puts her little son to sleep in a dog basket – whilst the book is uncompromising, as inescapable as motherhood itself. In a gruesome scene, the mother kills the cat in the kitchen while her son plays in the living room. She rips open the animal's belly with a knife, clamps it between her jaws and swings it back and forth until its entrails spill out, the bloodied intestines splattering her face. (In the film, the cat also dies, but it remains unclear exactly how.)

Nightbitch struggles with motherhood and receives little to no help from her husband, who is usually away on business. He says things like: "happiness is a choice". (It just makes you want to slap him in the face with a dirty nappy.)

During a domestic row, he throws the situation back in her face: "Do you think that I want it like this? Do you think that I want to be married to my mother? I don't want to feel your resentment the moment I walk into my house. (...) You're not the person that I married either. (...) She was weird and excited about things, like reading books. (...) What happened to the girl that inspired me? (...) What happened to my wife?"

To which the woman replies: "She died in childbirth."

The penultimate scene of *Nightbitch* is a monologue by the mother, in which she says she had always thought that mothers were weak. But to her surprise, motherhood is the most violent experience a human being can undergo, leaving death aside. "A child's first act is violence against the woman who created it. Yet still, the mother loves the child with the most powerful love known in the universe. This thing rips its way out of us, literally tears us in two in a wash of blood and shit and piss. Or it is cut from us with a knife, our organs taken out then to be put back in and sewn up. So no, motherhood is not sunshine and baby powder. (...) motherhood is fucking brutal."

"She died in childbirth," says the mother about the woman she used to be.

"I'm suffocating," says the mother in *The Lost Daughter*.

"I can't go on," I said myself.

Could it be that it is not the mother who is monstrous, but motherhood itself?