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The Horror Film- ENG 267

### It's Alright, Ma (You're Only Bleeding)

In Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), the murderous and mother-obsessed Norman Bates tells the heroine Marion Crane, "A boy's best friend is his mother." While this line has almost become as iconic as the film itself, the fact that it appeared in what many consider to be one of the first mainstream slasher films makes it seem as prophetic as it is iconic. Many slasher films revolve around the character of an adult, abandoned as a child, whose obsession with his mother causes him to seek out female victims and, in the tradition of the slasher film, stab them to death. Although the origins of the "murderous abandoned child" can be traced back to *Psycho*, the character really came into its own during the early 1980s wave of slashers; films such as William Lustig's *Maniac* (1980) and Robert Hiltzik's *Sleepaway Camp* (1983) presented audiences with slashers who were abandoned by their parents and who serve as the viewer's main point of identification, allowing audiences to explore the slasher's compulsion to penetrate the female form. This is an incredible departure from films like Tobe Hooper's *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) where audiences were meant to identify with groups of teenagers and were never given a glimpse into the mind of the killer. Because the audience is aware of the reverential relationship that the slasher has with his absent mother, the act of slashing suggests an attempt to reestablish a connection with the womb and reenact his birth, perpetuating the abject relation to the maternal as mentioned in Barbara Creed's "Horror and the Monstrous Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection." In her essay, Creed argues that the maternal function has become associated with the abject because of the dominant paternal or symbolic order, a dynamic that suggests the slasher's desire to reborn may, in fact, be symptomatic of a need to move from the maternal order and into the symbolic.

Before delving into the implications of the slasher penetrating feminine bodies, a psychological framework must be established in order to understand the "the abandoned child." In Otto Rank's *The Trauma of Birth*, Rank expands Freud's theory of the repression of birth and what purpose it serves in human development. Rank believes that the "rebirth phantasy," a common occurrence in which the patient fixates upon the psychoanalyst and assigns them a parental role, is evidence of the patient's continued fixation on his or her mother; writing, "It became clear to me that the strongest resistance to the

severance of the libido transference at the end of the analysis is expressed in the form of the earliest infantile fixation on the mother” (Rank 4). From here, Rank theorizes that patients who are affected by the birth trauma are compelled to continually reenact their birth and align themselves with the intrauterine. This, Rank writes, is an attempt by the patient to free himself from the maternal by recreating the act that imparted the anxiety of separation, therefore “[mastering] the birth trauma” (Rank 5). Rank observes, however, an inherent danger in the rebirth phantasy, writing, “Naturally the patient constantly shows the tendency behind all his resistances to prolong indefinitely the analytic situation which yields him such considerable satisfaction” (Rank 9-10). In other words, the act of aligning oneself with the intrauterine is so enjoyable that individuals prolong the rebirth phantasy, indefinitely postponing the stage where they separate from their mother and become autonomous.

This theory complements John Bowlby’s expansion of Anna Freud’s findings on separation anxiety and long-term abandonment. In Bowlby’s *Separation: Anxiety and Anger*, an in-depth examination of separation anxiety and Freud’s theories on the subject, he describes Freud’s concern that finding a surrogate mother for a child that has been abandoned by his parents is a near impossibility. This assertion is based on a study conducted by Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham during World War II in which they observed the behavior of children who were left in a residential nursery. The nurses soon acted as surrogate mothers for the children, and Bowlby describes the relationship, writing, “Each nurse could care for her own little group of children... the children became strongly possessive of their nurse and acutely jealous whenever she gave attention to another child” (Bowlby 3). During Freud’s study, it became clear that children who were abandoned sought out surrogate mothers, often resulting in either a heightened possessiveness or open aggression if the child found his surrogate unsatisfactory: “[The children] were also unusually prone to become hostile towards [their surrogate] or to reject her, or else to retreat into a state of emotional detachment” (Bowlby 4).”

While this is not always the case, Bowlby points out that a significant number of abandoned children exhibit these qualities and often develop into highly neurotic or troubled adults (Bowlby 5-6). Indeed, in one particular study, conducted by Christoph Heinicke and Ilse Westheimer, it was revealed

that separation anxiety is inordinately linked to the mother, causing children to continually call out for her or, in some cases, actively search for her. One child that was particularly shaken is described as refusing to even accept the possibility of separation from her parents, unwilling to take off her coat and after “[nodding] off from sheer fatigue... awoke screaming for Mummy” (Bowlby 8). After a period of time, however, even the most affected child began scouting for a surrogate, eventually connecting with her in ways that he or she would with his or her real mother, apparently seeking “some sort of reassuring or affectionate response from [their surrogate]” (Bowlby 9).

It is from the intersection of these two theories that the character of the abandoned child, as seen in the slasher film, takes shape. According to N. Blandin, PJ Parquet, and D. Bailly of *The Centre d'Information et de Traitement des Dépendances*, both Sigmund Freud and Bowlby's theories on birth trauma and separation anxiety are rooted in the supposition that the connection to the mother is instinctive (Blandin n. pag). This means that separation anxiety is not a learned behavior where one has to be conditioned to feel connected to the maternal, but “genetically programmed” and can be experienced regardless of how much contact an individual has with one's mother. This is not the only place where the two theories seem to be in conversation with one another; in both Rank and Bowlby the individual who has not properly separated from his or her mother seeks out a surrogate, whether it be an actual maternal figure or a psychoanalyst. In the cases described by Bowlby where the child attempts to reject his surrogate, we see shades of Rank's rebirth phantasy, where the shift from hyper-possessiveness to the almost uncontrollable need to separate mimics the behavior of the patients who actively reenact the birth process, starting in the womb and eventually working towards their rebirth. Because of the various ways that the theories overlap, it would not be so farfetched to suggest a fusion of the two, where an individual seeks out a surrogate maternal figure in order to fulfill both the “rebirth phantasy” as well as the need for maternal authority, as expressed by the abandoned children.

A film that may be helpful in examining how this figure translates into horror cinema is Ridley Scott's sci-fi slasher, *Alien* (1979). Set in the distant future, a space crew, aboard the appropriately named spaceship “Mother,” land on a foreign planet in order to investigate what they believe to be a distress

signal. Upon landing, the crew finds a spaceship that contains a room full of abandoned alien eggs. One of the crewmembers, Kane, examines one of the eggs and is attacked by the “face-hugger,” a crab-like alien that impregnates him with an alien child that later bursts from his chest. Kane’s “child” develops into an adult almost instantaneously and terrorizes the rest of the crew, using its body to penetrate each member until Ripley, the film’s heroine, expels the alien from the ship.

Before venturing into the mechanics of how the alien and its desire to attack the crew operates in terms of rebirth phantasy, it is first necessary to examine the situation of its birth and how it could potentially be related to separation anxiety. Because the “face-hugger” is the impregnator and the human body houses the alien until it is born, it seems that the distinction between human males and females is almost infinitesimally unimportant when discussing the maternal body. To the alien, each body on the ship would be a maternal body because of the way Kane serves as an incubator for the face-hugger’s seed, much like in human pregnancy when the woman acts as the vessel through which the child is carried and eventually expelled. So the fact that Kane is actually a male and not a female does not matter when exploring the relationship between the abandoned child that is the alien and his relationship to what he would consider the maternal body.

From here, we can see that after Kane, who enacts the maternal function, dies, the alien baby is left with no parents, and is, for all intents and purposes, an abandoned child. With this in mind, the alien’s pursuit and subsequent murder of the crewmembers takes on an entirely new dimension. Placing the behavior of the alien within Bowlby’s framework, its desire to hunt the crew seems to parallel the abandoned child’s desire to seek out a surrogate mother to bond with. Indeed, like the children described by Bowlby, the alien seems fixated on the prospect of reuniting with the maternal function and largely ignores the only non-human creatures on the ship, Ash the android and Jonesy the cat. While this may seem insignificant at first glance, Ash and Jonesy are frequently in the same space as the other human characters, yet are never followed or captured by the alien, who instead opts to hunt the human crew. If the alien truly were hunting the creatures aboard the ship solely because of predatory instinct, it would not seem that it would be so discriminate; after all, why only kill the largely harmless Brett when Jonesy

exists in the same space? Similarly, why is Ash the only crewmember, besides the lone survivor Ripley, to not be killed by the alien, but, rather, by his shipmates? It seems as though the alien's blatant disinterest in the non-human bodies on the ship indicates that it is not necessarily an inborn violence or predatory instinct that is driving him to penetrate the crew, but, rather, a desire to rejoin with the maternal body, a feat that is only possible through interacting with the human crew.

But if the alien's goal is to reunite with the maternal body, why kill it instead of merely bonding with it? To answer this, one only needs to examine the alien's method of killing the crewmembers: penetration. Indeed, the alien literally takes its body and attempts to shove it inside of his surrogate mother, allowing him to reenter the maternal body, and, by extension, the womb. The alien's desire to reclaim its position inside of the maternal body is the ultimate form of bonding; like the patients in Rank's studies who fixate upon the psychoanalyst and attempt to mimic the intrauterine stage, the alien's desire to rejoin with the mother is so strong that it physically manifests by forcing itself inside of the maternal body, realigning itself with the intrauterine stage.

Through this realization, it becomes clear how the alien fulfills Rank's rebirth phantasy. The pattern of the alien's murders seems to play out as follows: locate the victim, penetrate the maternal body, and, lastly, sever that connection shortly thereafter. As has been established, the alien's pursuit of the crew seems to align with the search for a surrogate while the penetration manifests the desire to reenter the womb, and the final act, removing itself from the maternal body, mimics the actual birth of the alien. Even if one ignores the implications of the alien physically removing itself from the maternal body, the visual parallels between the post-penetration and post-birth bodies certainly suggests a relationship between the two. Upon removing itself from the maternal body, the alien leaves a large hole in its victim's body, leaving him or her completely bloodied. This becomes particularly apparent during the death of Parker, the first onscreen victim, besides Kane. When the alien kills Parker, the penetration is not only visible, but the cavity that the alien imparts in his chest is also shown as well, though not without the alien inside of it. At this moment the parallels between the post-birth physicality of Kane and that of Parker become indistinguishable. Both bodies are left terribly bloodied and hollow after their encounter

with the alien, creating a parallel between the way the alien is born and the way that it kills the crewmembers. It is also interesting to note that during the murder of Lambert, which is only demonstrated through audio, her screaming and panting is not dissimilar from the behavior of a woman giving birth or even that of Kane, who constantly screams until the alien is born. Indeed, it seems as though by removing itself from the maternal body, the alien is reenacting its own birth, therefore fulfilling the rebirth phantasy.

But with this realization, another question arises: with the resolution of the rebirth phantasy, why does the alien continue to reenter different maternal bodies? While at first this may seem incredibly problematic, the answer is actually embedded in the Rank. When outlining the dangers of rebirth phantasy, Rank discusses how the psychoanalyst must actively facilitate the successful rebirth, for fear that the patient will not come to terms with his separation from the mother and reenter the intrauterine, what he asserts gives the patient the most satisfaction (Rank 9-10). Without a facilitating force or inherent desire to separate from the mother, it seems as though the rebirth is likely to fail. The resolution of *Alien* acknowledges this, establishing Ripley as the agent of the alien's death and expulsion from the womb.

So what exactly does this framework do for the traditional horror slasher? After all, *Alien* is certainly not the traditional slasher film and is missing several elements that seem to define the genre and most of the theory surrounding it: a human murderer who uses sharp objects to penetrate the feminine form. Even if it was to be embraced as a standard slasher, *Alien* is so obsessed with unnatural births that it is set apart merely because of its subject matter, which, as Carol Clover argues in her essay "Her Body, Himself: Gender in Slasher Films," is far more concerned with the hierarchy of sexual power than rebirth. In fact, Clover would likely argue that identifying most females in slasher films as potentially maternal would be a grave mistake. In her essay, Clover asserts that the slasher pursues the "final girl," her term for the inevitably female gendered survivor, not because of the maternal potential that he sees in her body, but, rather, because the abject terror expressed by the survivor is only suitable because of her gender. She goes on to argue that the final girl expresses prototypical male characteristics while the slasher exists in a

kind of genderless flux, resulting in a male identification with the final girl and her phallusization when she “expels the killer from the narrative” (Clover 77-86).

This observation is far from wrong but only takes into account slasher films where a final girl is clearly present and the true motive of the slasher is not fully developed. For slashers such as Michael Myers in *Halloween*, Clover’s theory fits precisely because of the lack of characterization and clear intention on the part of the slasher. The film also goes to great lengths to keep the audience in the same space as the final girl and exhibit shifts in viewer identification, as Clover smartly points out. This is why it would be fair to read *Alien* through Clover’s analysis of the slasher; Ripley clearly embodies the final girl, and the alien, though admittedly phallic, has no human gender, allowing the male viewer to take pleasure in Ripley’s feminine terror and identify with her “masculine resourcefulness.” In films where this is not the case, however, the slasher’s motivation and what “slashing” represents to the killer becomes far more important. Indeed, Clover never even attempts to locate the role of the feminine in films where the slasher is the main character or cases where the final girl never makes her appearance. In addition, she ignores slashers that do not allow identification with anyone other than the killer. What is the viewer to make of the slasher and his relationship to his victim in cases such as these? This is precisely the question that is so central to films where the slasher is characterized as an abandoned child and why Clover’s analysis is inadequate when approaching these films. In order to understand the slasher, one must understand the act of slashing and how it relates to the desire to enter the female body.

This is why the framework of rebirth phantasy established in *Alien* can be translated into other more traditional slasher films. The alien’s desire to enter the maternal body, while never made explicit, seems to mirror the behavior of several slashers and, in some cases, is a narrative facet in the film itself, an example being Hitchcock’s *Psycho*. The film initially positions the viewer with Marion Crane, who has just stolen a large sum of money from her employer and is on the run from the law when she meets Norman, the film’s slasher. Norman runs the Bates Motel and takes care of his extremely controlling mother, quickly earning him the sympathy of both Marion and the audience. Marion is then killed by someone whom the audience believes to be Norman’s mother, and the rest of the film revolves around

various characters trying to unravel the mystery of Marion's death--only to discover that Norman killed her while wearing his mother's clothes. The film ends with Norman being completely suppressed by his mother's psyche, which he developed in order to reject that she ever died, doomed to inhabit his own body without agency within it.

At a narrative level, it seems as though Norman is very much like the child, as described by Bowlby, who refused to accept her parents departure, continuing to wear her coat and shoes as if expecting her parents to return any moment. Unlike the child, though, Norman wears his mother's clothes, which, while suggesting a denial similar to that of the child, externalizes his desire to merge with the maternal form and reenter the womb. On the surface, Norman attempts to coat himself in the maternal body by wearing his mother's dress, wig and speaking in her voice, which feeds his refusal to accept her death and allows him to return to the position of the intrauterine. Judging from Norman's attire during the murder of Marion, it seems as though Norman does not want to separate himself from his mother, but, rather, become far closer, potentially upsetting the framework of rebirth phantasy and indulging in womb phantasy in its stead. Norman, however, vocalizes almost the opposite desire, telling Marion that he feels as though he is caught inside of his own "private trap," demonstrating the desire to escape his oppressive mother and seize his autonomy, and while it is true that he almost immediately retreats from this statement, it would be difficult to completely ignore it or deem it superfluous.

In fact, it is during this conversation that Norman's relationship to the female form is developed and the audience learns of Norman's penchant for stuffing birds. His hobby alone suggests an obsession with shoving himself inside the female form because of the constant comparisons that are drawn between Marion, whose surname is not so coincidentally Crane, and the stuffed birds that surround her. But it is perhaps Norman's language when discussing the "hobby" that is most telling; "It's more than a hobby. A hobby is supposed to pass the time, not fill it." As if the nature of the hobby, which is to replace the insides of birds in order to preserve them, is not suggestive enough, Norman goes a step further and openly associates the hobby with the act of "filling," which certainly relates to the desire of the slasher to reclaim his spot in the now empty womb.

In addition, the audience is exposed to Norman's complicated feelings about his mother, who he fantasizes about leaving but stays with out of loyalty. Norman's resentment of his mother comes to a head when he tells Marion, "I think that we're all in our private traps, clamped in them, and none of us can ever get out. We scratch and we claw, but only at the air, only at each other, and for all of it, we never budge an inch" and then follows it by declaring, "I was born in [my trap]." It is difficult to ignore the parallel between Norman's description of a "private trap" and the vaginal imagery. Norman's admission that he was born in his trap strengthens the association and paints the womb as a kind of prison from which Norman is desperate to escape. Certainly the word "clamped" evokes the image of a child attempting to separate from the maternal body, only to be held in place by the mother's vagina. And what is interesting about the juxtaposing of the vagina and, what seems to be, a bear trap is association of violence and restrictiveness with the maternal body, validating Norman's desire to escape.

So if Norman wants to fulfill the rebirth phantasy and separate from the maternal body, why does he, prior to any of the killings, coat himself in his mother's clothes? In order to explore this, it is necessary to examine Marion's murder and the function that her death serves for Norman. Before Marion's death, Norman spies on her through a peephole, admiring her naked body before returning to the house, most likely, in order to dress himself in his mother's clothes and obtain a suitable weapon. Norman then returns to Marion's room, stabbing her several times while she screams and her blood mixes with the water surrounding her feet.

As in *Alien*, the screaming and flow of blood evokes birth imagery, demonstrating Norman's attempt to undergo a rebirth of his own. Unlike the alien, however, Norman has no way of physically entering the maternal body because, as a human, he lacks the penetrating capability that the alien demonstrates. This is where the slasher's weapon becomes extremely important. In Clover's essay, she rightly establishes the killer's weapon as an extension of himself, asserting that the knife is an extension of the killer's ambiguous masculinity and therefore a kind of surrogate penis, establishing the killer's "phallic purpose" by plunging into "trembling bodies of young women" (Clover 80). While Clover sees "phallic purpose" in the killer's weapon, in situations where the slasher is attempting to rejoin with the

maternal body, it seems far more likely that, like the penetration in *Alien*, the killer is actually using the knife to reconnect with the maternal body, rather than expressing his sexual frustration upon it. In addition, her suggestion that the wound acts as a kind of surrogate vagina that the slasher creates through penetrating “young female bodies” is easily applied to the desire of the abandoned child to enter the female body because, like the alien, by inflicting these seemingly vaginal wounds upon the female form, the slasher mimics his own birth and fulfills the rebirth phantasy once removing his blade by recreating the bleeding vaginal cavity that he initially emerged from, re-experiencing the moment of his own birth.

By establishing the knife as an extension of Norman, it seems as though his actions line up with that of rebirth phantasy. By penetrating Marion’s body, Norman is able to truly reconnect himself to the maternal, taking the knife, an extension of his physicality, and placing it firmly inside of Marion, causing it to become an extension of her as well. It is here that the knife is revealed to be a kind of umbilical cord that allows for the slasher to reestablish his connection to the maternal body. In addition, because Marion is naked throughout the scene, her identity is essentially reduced to that of her feminine form, making Norman’s entrance into her body less about penetrating Marion, as the audience knows her, and more about inhabiting her physicality. With this established, Norman’s attire takes on a new dimension, independent of his desire to reenter the womb. By cloaking himself in his mother’s clothes while he murders Marion, Norman strengthens the connection between the act of removing the knife with the act of evacuating the maternal body. After severing his connection to Marion’s body, he immediately leaves the bathroom and removes his mother’s clothes, no longer inhabiting the maternal form. By doing this, Norman doubly distances himself from the maternal form; mimicking his own birth through the murder of Marion and separation from his mother by casting off her clothes in favor of his own.

Unfortunately, Norman’s rebirth is unsuccessful, and, at the end of the film, he is completely subservient to his mother, whose psyche has trampled his own, permanently relegating him to the intrauterine. It is here that the viewer gains an insight into the potential consequences of not being able to “master the birth trauma.” Norman’s fate ultimately communicates the danger of the rebirth phantasy that Rank describes, which leads to individuals never truly separating from their mother and, instead, staying

in the intrauterine phase. By allowing his mother to take control of his body, Norman gives up all hope of escaping his “private trap” and is forever trapped in the womb.

So while the rebirth phantasy is clearly present in both *Alien* and *Psycho*, its implications are still relatively unexplored. Both films portray the relationship between mother and child as highly unnatural and go as far to suggest that an overbearing mother is nearly as monstrous as her murderous offspring. Even the child’s desire to separate from the mother marks the maternal as something to be avoided, an idea that is clearly expressed in film theorist Barbara Creed’s “Horror and the Monstrous Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection.” In her essay, Creed argues that the role of the mother in both society and media is abject and the relationship between the mother and child becomes complicated when the child attempts to break away from the mother. “The position of the child is rendered even more unstable because, while the mother retains a close hold over the child, it can serve to authenticate her existence – an existence which needs validation because of her problematic relation to the symbolic” (Creed 72). In other words, the mother’s association with blood, an association drawn from the scene of birth, and other abjections such as feces, which is because of the mother’s part in “potty training,” causes her to exist in a powerless state that motivates her to find meaning through her child. Therefore, when the child attempts to separate from the mother and enter, what Creed calls, the “symbolic” or “paternal” order, the mother’s existence is threatened and she exerts even more control, attempting to stop this transition and keep the child dependent upon her.

It is not too difficult to see how Creed’s theory and rebirth phantasy could work hand in hand. In the slasher film, the child’s attempt to escape the mother is embodied by his reenactment of his own birth, and even the failure of the rebirth seems to coincide with Creed who states, “The child finds it easy to succumb to the comforting pleasure of the [mother-child] relationship” (Creed 72). Through Creed, it becomes clear that the maternal presence that haunts these slasher films is what is preventing the slashers from entering the symbolic order, resulting in damaging psychological consequences and violence once separated from the maternal. This is certainly present in *Psycho*, where Norman seems desperate to separate from his mother, yet cannot grasp his autonomy because of his dependence on her. Because of

the overbearing maternal presence that shaped his adult life, once abandoned, Norman cannot reconcile how to enter the symbolic order because he never left the womb in the first place, causing him to, unsuccessfully, reenact his own birth in an attempt to seize his individuality and enter the symbolic order.

This raises the question of whether abandoned children can ever truly escape the womb and enter the symbolic order. In both *Alien* and *Psycho*, neither slasher exhibits a strong enough desire to overcome the need for maternal authority and either had to be forcibly ejected from the womb, dying in the process, or remain contented to inhabit it, essentially being erased by the maternal presence. In the case of Hiltzik's *Sleepaway Camp*, however, the viewer is given a slasher that initially submits to the maternal order, but, over the course of the film, develops an urge to escape it, resulting in a successful rebirth. The film follows Angela Baker and her cousin Ricky who leave Ricky's mother, Aunt Martha, to go to summer camp. Soon after they arrive, an unknown individual begins to systematically murder campers and staff, but the deaths are written off as accidents. Meanwhile, Angela struggles with her inability to interact with the other campers and to become intimate with Paul, Ricky's best friend, who is romantically interested in Angela. This anxiety stems from Angela witnessing her father and brother being run over by a speedboat as a young child as well as the trauma of seeing her father have intercourse with another man. The film concludes with the remaining campers and staff discovering a naked Angela, who is actually a boy that has been forced to assume the identity of a girl by Aunt Martha, holding Paul's severed head, revealing Angela to be the killer.

Indeed, the gender roles in Hiltzik's *Sleepaway Camp* are somewhat of a puzzle. Upon a first viewing, Angela's reluctance to sexually engage with Paul seems to align with Clover's assertion that the final girl cannot have intercourse because she is a point of identification for a predominantly male audience. But when the viewer watches the film a second time, aware that Angela is actually a male forced to assume the role of a female, her avoidance of sexual contact seems driven by an anxiety over the gender assigned to her by Aunt Martha, her surrogate mother, as well as a kind of homophobia surrounding her departed father. With this in mind, the resolution of the film, where a naked, blood-soaked Angela wordlessly gawks at the camera, suggests a literal rebirth and escape from the influence of

Aunt Martha, meaning that Angela successfully escaped the womb of her own accord, unlike the alien and Norman.

But Angela's desire to shed her feminine identity and rebel against the maternal is not immediately present, which is made clear in both the opening and the conclusion where a flashback reveals Martha telling Peter, a young Angela, that he would assume the role of a girl. When the viewer is introduced to Angela and Aunt Martha, the latter is incredibly overbearing and supportive, frequently touching Angela and calling her an "angel." Even upon saying goodbye to her own son, she shows far less passion than she does towards Angela, merely kissing Ricky on the cheek while she embraces Angela for an uncomfortable amount of time. Angela wordlessly accepts this praise, and remains expressionless throughout the scene, underscoring her complete passivity when faced with the maternal order. This, of course, is explained later in the film when it is revealed that after the death of her father, Angela is sent to live with Aunt Martha who exchanges her affection for Angela's swapping of genders.

Because of this, it is not difficult to draw a connection to Bowlby, who describes similar behavior in abandoned children, who latch on to surrogate mothers, becoming extremely possessive and needy. Angela's behavior also seems to mimic that of Rank's patients who have entered the intrauterine stage, relinquishing all control to their surrogate. This, of course, is nothing new; both Norman and the alien attain this state rather easily, but what is different in the case of Angela, however, is that as the film progresses, the womb becomes a space devoid of pleasure. Like Norman, Angela externalizes her place in the womb by assuming the feminine body as her own, containing her identity as a man within her constructed female visage. At the beginning of the film, Angela's adoption of the female form has few adverse effects and only gains her the affection of her surrogate; once at camp and surrounded by sexually active teenagers, however, Angela quickly comes face to face with the consequences of her assumed gender role, which culminates in her relationship with Paul, who frequently insists on having sex.

In fact, it is the scene where Angela and Paul nearly have sex that she realizes that her heterosexual, masculine identity will not allow her to adopt the role that her surrogate has laid out for her, sparking her desire to escape from the womb and be reborn as a man. The beginning of the scene is rather

benign, featuring flirtatious behavior between Paul and Angela who then lie on the beach and passionately kiss. This moment is interrupted, however, by Paul's desire to touch Angela's body, which prompts a flashback of Angela and her sibling seeing her father and another man have sex. This upsets Angela who forces Paul off her and runs away. It is at this moment that Angela understands her inability to fulfill the role that Aunt Martha has impressed upon her because of her homophobia. Upon a first viewing, this is not as apparent because the audience still believes Angela to be a girl, suggesting that this memory has merely made her uncomfortable with men, which is why she depends so heavily on her aunt. Once it is revealed that Angela is a man attempting to fulfill the feminine role, however, it is possible that she is associating her behavior with that of her father's, which disturbs her and, therefore, causes her to reject Paul. It might be possible that Angela rejects Paul because she is actually a heterosexual male, but because Hiltzik included this flashback during this prelude to homosexual activity between Angela and Paul, it is far more likely that Angela's discomfort in engaging with Paul stems from, what appears to be, a traumatizing memory regarding her father's homosexuality.

Understanding that she can no longer suppress her masculine identity and that her homophobia as well as her heterosexuality prevent her from fulfilling the role of a female, Angela begins to employ the rebirth phantasy, killing two female victims via penetration. It should be noted that both the gender of the victims as well as the method of murder is completely different from the ways in which Angela has killed the campers in the past; every victim up to this point had been male as well as killed in a way that could be construed as an accident. Angela's two female victims, both of whom are in their sexual prime, are killed in the traditional slasher style, by forcing herself into the feminine body. The first murder is rather prototypical where Angela stabs a camper with a knife while she is in the shower; the profusely bleeding wound and screaming camper clearly suggesting the process of birth. The second murder, on the other hand, is far different; Angela electrocutes the camper by shoving a hair curler into the camper's vagina, seemingly ignoring the normal pattern of slasher murders due to the lack of blood.

The two murders, however, are not meant to be viewed separately, but as one action in which the birth process is perfectly mimicked by imagery within the scenes. The first murder, as previously

mentioned, contains a bleeding wound that evokes birth imagery, specifically the crowning of the child, which leads to the emergence from the womb. The murder that follows prominently features the cord that is connected to the hair curler, eliciting imagery of an umbilical cord, which is essentially a literalization of the role of the penetrating object in the slasher film. So when viewed side by side, the murders form a complete portrait of birth, where the slasher fully emerges from the female body and cuts the umbilical cord herself when she removes the curler and dumps the lifeless camper's underneath a bunk bed. This suggests that Angela has finally rid herself of her dependence upon Aunt Martha, a theory that comes to fruition during the final scene, in which Angela literally sheds her female form in favor of a male body.

The film concludes with Angela having completely transformed into a fully developed man with a prominent penis, holding the severed head of Paul. Angela is covered in blood and appears to have lost the ability to talk, merely grunting at the onlookers and smiling wildly. Angela's physical transformation is largely a mystery, having grown significantly in size and developing muscles, she looks like a completely new person, which suggests the fulfillment of the rebirth phantasy. By reenacting her birth through the murder of the two female campers, Angela, quite literally, escapes the womb by shedding her feminine body, and, by extension, frees herself from Aunt Martha's influence. Even visually, Angela's naked blood soaked body aligns her with a newborn child, and because of her fully-grown adult body, it is possible that Angela has been reborn into the symbolic order, allowing her to finally act upon her masculine instincts and attain autonomy.

As is argued by Creed, Martha becomes a monster through her efforts to suppress the child's autonomy and progression into the symbolic order, but what is the viewer to make of Angela's dubious transition into the symbolic? The audience is not given much time to react to Angela's transformation, and her fate after her rebirth is left completely ambiguous. Though the film succeeds in fulfilling Creed's assertion that the maternal order is oppressive and has the potential to shatter a child's psyche, Angela's escape into the symbolic order gives the viewer little reason to celebrate outside of the escape itself. So while the perceived importance of transitioning into the symbolic order can be extrapolated from the

supposed negative effects of remaining in the maternal order, the positive effects of this transition are largely unexplored.

A film that could perhaps shed some light on the role of the paternal authority in the “abandoned child as slasher film” is William Lustig’s *Maniac*, which allows the viewer to witness the resolution of the rebirth phantasy and its slasher’s transition into the symbolic order. The film follows Frank Zito a serial killer who scalps and steals the clothes of women so that he can turn his mannequins into replacements for his dead mother. It is slowly revealed that Frank’s mother was a prostitute who, after dying in a car crash, orphaned Frank as a young child. After murdering several women, Frank pursues another woman, Anna, but instead of killing her, he decides to date her, showing particular interest in her work as a photographer. Soon after, however, Frank once again begins to murder women, and tries to kill Anna when he brings her to see his mother’s grave. Anna escapes, wounding Frank, and the film ends with Frank returning to his apartment, only to find that his mannequins have transformed into reanimated versions of his victims, who tear him limb from limb and feast upon his body.

Before examining Frank’s behavior as a member of the symbolic order, it is first necessary to explore his obsession with the maternal function and feminine form, which largely defines him throughout the film. *Maniac* opens with Frank murdering a young couple, strangling the man while penetrating the woman with a straight razor, and then cuts to a screaming and sweaty Frank waking up next to one of his mannequins. Then, as the credits play across the screen and Frank moves about his apartment, the viewer is shown various aspects of Frank’s apartment, which features a prominently displayed shrine dedicated to Frank’s mother and posters of both the Virgin Mary as well as pinups with the nipples and genitals scratched off.

The rebirth phantasy is present immediately with Frank reconnecting with the feminine form, severing the connection, then waking up screaming like newborn child, his sweaty form mirroring that of a child covered in placenta. Even Frank’s physicality seems infantile, his bloated belly and short limbs, compounded with his near inability to speak to other humans, aligns him with a child, characterizing the stage of arrested development that Frank exists in because of his obsession with his dead mother. This

obsession, however, is not so much with his mother specifically, as it is with the maternal potential of the female form. This, of course, is embedded in the way that he chooses to decorate his room: with pictures of the Virgin Mary, pinup posters stripped of their genitals, and, most notably, mannequins. Of course, the Virgin Mary perfectly embodies Frank's obsession because she is an inherently non-sexual female figure whose maternal energy pervades any piece of media she inhabits. The pinup posters, on the other hand, are objects that were originally intended to be highly provocative and sexual, and by removing the sexual components of the picture, Frank demonstrates his active disinterest in the women as sexual objects and changes them into fetishized versions of the maternal form, beautiful and inviting without any corruptive sexual agency.

But the most telling component of this obsession is Frank's treatment of his mannequins, who he uses as a surrogate for his deceased mother. Throughout the film, Frank talks to the mannequins as though they are his mother, chastising her for going out the night she died, and acting as though they are "still" a happy family. Frank even justifies killing women by saying that he does it so that his mother can look pretty, suggesting a direct link between his obsession with not only his mother and the mannequins, but the murders as well. It is not too difficult to see why Frank would be so obsessed with the idea of a mannequin, an idealized representation of the human form that is completely devoid of any genitalia and cannot, therefore, be thought of as a sexual object. And by dressing the mannequins in the clothes and hair of real women, Frank makes the mannequins appear human, suggesting an attempt to bring his mother back from the dead as a sexless object that's only faculty is the maternal function.

This interpretation, however, is complicated when one considers why Frank needs multiple mannequins. After all, why would someone who is so fixated on non-sexual representations of women become tired of something that so clearly embodies his obsession? The answer lies in the murders of the women, who he frequently confuses for his own mother. One such instance is when Frank pays a prostitute to dance for him with her clothes on, hugs her extremely tightly to his own body and kisses her, then strangles her while he occasionally hallucinates that she is his mother. Though every murder in the

film is rife with birth imagery, this scene is particularly telling because the viewer is given a glimpse into Frank's mind during the killing.

By revealing that Frank is actually fantasizing about, in the case of the prostitute, first fusing with his mother, which is clear through the extreme lack of physical space during their hugging, and then killing his mother, not just a representation of the maternal body, Frank's killings no longer stem from a desire to be closer to his mother but to separate from her. While this specific murder has a curious lack of blood, what is interesting about this scene is that even though Frank is strangling the prostitute, she continues to loudly scream and as she transforms into Frank's mother, the audience's gaze moves from Frank and the victim's face to a shot of her legs and the black crotch of her outfit. Even without the blood in this particular instance, the screaming and shot of the infinite black of the prostitute's crotch still suggests a kind of birth that results from her death, keeping in line with the rebirth phantasy. Indeed, Frank's rejection of the mannequins seems to mimic this desire to separate from his mother; after rejecting the mannequin, he immediately attempts to reenact his birth and separate himself from her, and, when unsuccessful, he returns to the intrauterine state when he depends on his mannequins who are substitutes for his own mother until the urge to separate grips him once again.

The true mystery of *Maniac* arises when Frank begins to pursue Anna, a woman who he originally intended to kill but instead becomes involved with. Following the murder of a young nurse, whom he penetrates with a sword, Frank goes to Anna's apartment completely transformed. He no longer exudes the air of a large, sweaty man-child and instead wears a freshly pressed suit, speaks eloquently, and even combs his hair. Because the scene prior to this depicted Frank successfully penetrating the female form, it is not so farfetched to suggest that he was able to master the rebirth phantasy, although, the film does little to support this claim outside of the juxtaposition of these two scenes. Regardless, it is clear that by dating Anna, Frank enters the symbolic order, which allows the viewer some insight into Frank's potential should he escape the womb. Present for only a few brief scenes, "new" Frank is a complete departure from his past self. When out to dinner with Anna, he vocalizes romantic interest in her, saying he wants to see her before her art show because, "five million other guys [will be there]."

Hearing Frank acknowledge his interest in Anna and romantic jealousy is shocking when one considers Frank's fixation on the female body as a non-sexual object. In fact, while Frank is in the symbolic order, his obsession with his mother disappears; during this scene, Frank talks about his mother's death in a coherent and unemotional way, clearly establishing the origins of Frank's separation anxiety and indicating that by entering the symbolic order, Frank has rid himself of the emotional scars that his mother's death imparted. So by joining the symbolic order, Frank is momentarily able to rid himself of his psychotic impulses and become a normal and relatively charming human being, asserting that it was, in fact, his maternal obsession that drove him to be both murderous and repulsive.

Though, as previously mentioned, this change is not permanent. After joining Anna in her apartment and meeting her friend Rita, Frank's fixation on the maternal body once again seizes him, and he murders and scalps Rita that same night. Unlike the previous shift, Frank's return to the maternal order is largely explained during Rita's murder, where, addressing her as his mother, he apologizes for hurting her and tells her that he only did so because she paid attention to so many other men. Frank then stabs Rita in the abdomen, collapses on top of her calling for his "mommy," then, with the knife still in her, removes a separate knife from his pocket and scalps her. While Frank never specifically says what he did to "hurt" his mother, it can be inferred that it was in fact his relationship with Anna, where he abandoned his mother in favor of the love of a woman, leaving the maternal order for the symbolic. By not removing the knife from "his mother's" body, Frank solidifies his place in the maternal order by refusing to sever the connection to the feminine body and obstructing the rebirth phantasy's completion.

But Frank's guilt over his relationship with Anna does not stop here; on their next date, Frank, once again dressed in shabby unwashed clothing, takes Anna to his mother's grave and attempts to sacrifice her to his dead mother, but, instead, is wounded by Anna while she escapes and calls the police. Frank, gravely wounded, hallucinates that his dead mother rises from her grave and attempts to bring him into her coffin. Scared, Frank runs out of the cemetery, and returns to his apartment where his mannequins have become reanimated versions of his victims. The mannequins penetrate Frank with a sword and then tear him limb from limb, potentially consuming him as well. The film ends with Frank

being discovered by police officers who find that Frank has indeed been impaled by a sword, but not torn to pieces.

While the film's final minutes are far more surreal than anything the viewer has encountered prior, Frank's brutalization by the maternal figures he worships shows the destructive potential of the maternal order. By having a frightened Frank almost dragged underneath the earth by his mother's zombified body, Frank's trajectory within the maternal order is literalized at the visual level; by choosing to serve his dead mother instead of the symbolic order, Frank will permanently revert to the intrauterine, being sucked inside his mother's grave, which acts as a grim visual stand-in for the vagina. But perhaps the most interesting facet of this sequence is Frank's demise at the hands of his mannequins who have also become zombies that rip him limb from limb. It certainly could be said that this scene grants his victims a degree of revenge, but because the end of the scene suggests that the mannequins actually consume Frank, it is far more likely that it demonstrates Frank's assimilation into the maternal order. Indeed, the maternal order is not satisfied with solely Frank's reverence, it must consume him so that Frank and the feminine body are truly fused once more, restoring the pre-birth power dynamics of the mother-child relationship and solidifying Frank's complete dependence upon the maternal order.

So through *Maniac* the viewer is given both the resolution and undoing of the rebirth phantasy, making it clear that slashers, like Norman and Angela, belong in the symbolic order but because of the monstrous maternal presence cannot fully realize their potential as individuals, therefore fulfilling Creed's concept of the monstrous feminine by way of Rank and Bowlby's assertions about abandoned children. Though, it should be noted that this is not an exhaustive study. Films where the slasher penetrates male victims or instances when the slasher is female have been largely unexplored and require further analysis. Despite this, however, it is clear that in films where the slasher's relationship with his mother is overly reverential, his penetration of the female form is rooted in his desire to separate from the maternal order, characterizing the relationship between mother and child as monstrous and highlighting the positive nature of the symbolic order. In other words, slashing is not murder; it is just waiting to be reborn.

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