

Maternal trauma through Cinema Screen, Performance Stage, and Society

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at how toxic relationships within families particularly those shaped by toxic motherhood are portrayed in contemporary cinema and art. Focusing on four films: *Hedi* (2016) by Mohamed Ben Attia, *Ma mère* (2004) by Christophe Honoré, *White Oleander* (2002) by Peter Kosminsky, and *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011) by Lynne Ramsay, alongside three performance works: *Me and My Mother* (2014) by Ragnar Kjartansson, *Yerma* (2016) by Simon Stone, and selected pieces by Marina Abramović. It explores how maternal overprotection and emotional control, often rooted in fear, societal pressure, and gendered expectations, can cause lasting psychological harm. These stories show how love, when distorted by dominance or insecurity, becomes a source of trauma rather than comfort. By examining how parents relate differently to sons and daughters, the article highlights how film and visual art reflect and sometimes challenge the deeper cultural narratives around family, power, and care. In doing so, it offers insight into the subtle but enduring violence that can exist beneath the surface of parental love. By highlighting the intersection of individual trauma and societal violence, the article offers a critical lens on the hidden impacts of overbearing motherhood and the enduring scars it can leave on children. By attending to the differing dynamics between mothers and their sons or daughters, the article interrogates how familial intimacy reflects and perpetuates broader structures of power, revealing the enduring effects of coercive care on the individual psyche.

KEYWORDS: Societal violence, Psychological trauma, Gender roles, Family dynamics, Cinema and society, cinema therapy, performance art, art therapy.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly shifting landscape of contemporary society, visual media and image culture have come to play a dominant role in shaping perception, values, and emotional life. Where ethical frameworks once anchored collective behavior, today's cultural currents increasingly emphasize individualism, consumption, and self-interest. What was previously considered psychologically harmful or morally questionable is often rebranded as acceptable if not desirable, under the guise of progress or personal freedom. Within this broader transformation, the institution of the family, once seen as a stable unit grounded in shared norms, has undergone equally profound changes. In many cases, the family has become a more fragmented and self-referential space, at times unaware of the long-term emotional and psychological impact it has on its members.

These shifts raise urgent questions about the nature of care, authority, and emotional bonds within the family, especially regarding the mother-child relationship. While motherhood is traditionally celebrated as a symbol of unconditional love and protection, it can also become a site of psychological control, emotional dependency, and unconscious projection. When maternal care is shaped by anxiety, fear, or social pressure, it can manifest in overprotection, boundary violations, or even emotional manipulation. This dynamic, commonly referred to as toxic motherhood, has the potential to inflict deep psychological harm, particularly during the formative years of childhood, when identity and emotional patterns are most vulnerable to external influence.

Drawing on the foundational insights of psychoanalysis, especially those of Freud and later thinkers like Nancy Chodorow, this article situates the trauma of maternal overprotection within a broader inquiry into early childhood experience and its long-lasting effects. Freud's own recollections of childhood illustrate how even small moments of emotional affirmation or rejection can shape a person's internal world and future aspirations. Chodorow, in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), expands on this by emphasizing how the psychological

structures of mothering are reproduced across generations, especially through the different ways boys and girls internalize their maternal relationships. These gendered dynamics often result in divergent emotional consequences for sons and daughters, shaping their relational styles, autonomy, and even their understanding of love and care.

This article explores how such maternal patterns, specifically the trauma of overprotection, are represented in contemporary cinema and performance art. Through the analysis of key films such as *Hedi* (2016) by Mohamed Ben Attia, *Ma mère* (2004) by Christophe Honoré, *White Oleander* (2002) by Peter Kosminsky, and *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011) by Lynne Ramsay, alongside performance works including *Me and My Mother* (2014) by Ragnar Kjartansson, *Yerma* (2016) by Simon Stone, and selected pieces by Marina Abramović, this study sheds light on how toxic motherhood is rendered visible through narrative and image.

These works serve not only as mirrors of lived psychological realities but also as critiques of the cultural norms that uphold certain ideals of motherhood, often at the expense of the child's emotional autonomy.

Ultimately, this inquiry aims to deepen our understanding of how maternal overprotection can silently shape and, in some cases, destabilize the emotional architecture of children, and how this trauma is both reflected and challenged in contemporary artistic expression. By engaging with these visual narratives, we uncover the intimate intersections between personal trauma, gendered expectations, and the evolving meanings of care in modern society.

In this context, the maternal figure plays a compelling role. Far beyond the biological bond, the emotional environment shaped by a mother can either support a child's growth or become a source of psychological tension. When care becomes possessive, when protection turns into control, or when love is conditional, a toxic pattern emerges, one that may not appear harmful on the surface, yet can distort a child's emotional development in lasting ways. This form of toxic motherhood, often masked by societal ideals of maternal devotion, reveals how complex and ambivalent parental influence can be.

This article explores the psychological weight of such maternal dynamics, examining how they are represented in contemporary cinema and art. By analyzing these depictions, we gain insight into the silent forms of emotional harm that can occur within families and how they reflect broader cultural attitudes toward motherhood, authority, and childhood vulnerability.

The Reproduction of Mothering and Gendered Psychological Development, Understanding Toxic Motherhood:

Toxic motherhood rarely manifests as overt villainy; rather, it is often a subtle, insidious phenomenon cloaked in congeniality and veiled by self-sacrificial posturing. It materializes through pervasive control, emotional manipulation, neglect, narcissism, or the new common term "emotional incest," a dynamic wherein the child is coerced into serving as a surrogate partner, confidant, or reflective surface for the mother's unresolved needs.

In stark contrast to the idealized nurturing archetype, the toxic mother perceives her offspring not as an autonomous individual but as a mere extension of herself, or, more perniciously, a threat to her identity. Her affection is conditional, her approval functions as a transactional currency, and her expressions of love frequently become guilt-tripping techniques.

Such mothers exert micromanagement over their daughters' lives, dictating vocational choices, sartorial decisions, and interpersonal relationships. In the case of sons, this pathology often transmutes into excessive indulgence that fosters emotional dependency and a problematic dissolution of boundaries. In either instance, the child's capacity for development is systematically undermined.

Psychologist Nancy Chodorow, in *The Reproduction of Mothering*, elucidates how patriarchal structures engender and perpetuate these dynamics by compelling women to parent in ways that reinforce male hegemony, often at the expense of their own needs and well-being. (Chodorow, 1978). Consequently, toxic maternal behaviors can be interpreted not solely as individual pathologies but as symptomatic of broader sociocultural systems.

Contemporary society does not permit women to stay women when they become mothers. It demands an unattainable ideal of perfection. This ideal is an ever-shifting construct, contingent upon intersections of race, class, religion, and most saliently, the media's omnipresent influence. "The Reproduction of Mothering represents the boldest attempt to realign psychoanalysis and feminism in the late 20th century." (Buhle, 1998).

Sociologist Sharon Hays' conceptualization of "intensive mothering" characterizes motherhood as child-centric, expert-driven, emotionally exhaustive, labor-intensive, and financially burdensome. The implicit mandate is that women must perform the totality of maternal roles incessantly and without faltering.

Mass media perpetuates these unrealistic paradigms by promulgating dichotomous representations of mothers as either sanctified paragons or vilified antagonists, effectively erasing the complex realities of maternal experience and castigating those who deviate from these extremes. Especially with the push onto the pervasive myth of the maternal instinct as an innate and universal faculty, it serves to obfuscate the structural and ideological forces at play within capitalist patriarchy. These forces systematically coerce women into motherhood while invalidating their fears, reservations, and expressions of vulnerability.

Art has always been a way of expressing and exposing reality in a creative way to reach audiences and engage them within certain topics, mainly related to humanity's ongoing concerns. Back in history, human beings found the urge to express themselves, or simply archiving their activities, challenges, and their daily routine by drawing on cave walls, later on creating idols or stories present in their mythologies. Those opened up the space to the development of multiple forms of expression, which drive the art to reach a continuous development in form and context. These early visual and symbolic forms laid the groundwork for a diverse and evolving landscape of artistic practices. As societies developed, so did the complexity of their art, expanding in both form and content. What began as acts of survival and spiritual connection gradually transformed into layered cultural expressions, vehicles through which people could explore identity, power, memory, and emotion.

What is noticed is that families in the past were much more coherent with the community direction, the common sense, that's what could maybe explain the fact that they are quite more disciplined than those of nowadays, where the personal statute represents the center of all. The understanding of the social dynamic illustrates the complexities of ethical implementation in community development for a better understanding of the self, the group, and their internal conflicts.

Art continues to evolve as a living archive of human experience, reflecting not only personal and collective realities but also challenging them. In this way, art remains a vital mirror and critique of society, allowing us to process, question, and connect with the world around us. The visual narratives often reflected communal fears, desires, and beliefs, indirectly offering insight into the psychological states of early societies. As civilizations progressed, so too did the understanding of art as more than aesthetic: during the Renaissance, artists like Leonardo da Vinci began to explore the human psyche through anatomical studies and emotionally charged portraiture. By the 20th century, the relationship between art and psychology became more formalized with the emergence of psychoanalytic theory. Sigmund Freud and later Carl Jung both recognized the unconscious mind's role in artistic creation and interpretation. Freud viewed art as a sublimation of repressed desires, while Jung emphasized the symbolic and archetypal nature of artistic expression as a window into the collective unconscious.

These ideas laid the foundation for later developments in art therapy and the use of visual media as a means of accessing and healing psychological trauma. Today, artistic expression continues to offer valuable insights into human behavior, identity, and emotional life. Whether through literature, visual arts, performance, or film, creative work allows both artists and audiences to navigate complex inner experiences and engage with unresolved psychological and societal tensions. In this way, art remains an essential lens through which the human mind and emotional landscape can be explored and better understood. Throughout his career, Freud saw himself as an outsider, a perspective shaped by his position as a Jew in predominantly Catholic 19th-century Austria. This marginality fueled his intellectual boldness and desire for greatness, nurtured during a time of liberal openness that allowed Jewish youth to dream ambitiously. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he recalls an episode from his childhood that symbolized this early thirst for recognition, a moment when he was publicly acknowledged by a street poet, leaving a lasting impression on his self-perception. (Gay, 1995). Freud's recollection of being praised by a street poet as a child, though seemingly minor, illustrates a fundamental idea in psychoanalysis: the lasting psychological imprint of early experiences. This moment, in which he felt seen and valued, fed his desire for recognition and contributed to the development of his ambition and identity.

More broadly, it reflects how deeply childhood events, whether positive, like this brief affirmation, or negative, as in the case of trauma, can shape a person's self-image, emotional patterns, and life trajectory. According to Freud and later psychoanalysts, unresolved or impactful experiences in early life often lay the foundation for adult behavior, relationships, and even the unconscious drives that influence one's choices. In this sense,

childhood is not just a phase of growth, but a critical period where the emotional blueprint for adulthood is formed. Childhood is a formative space where emotional experiences silently shape the foundations of a person's psychological life. The impressions left during these early years, whether moments of encouragement or emotional neglect, often become embedded in the subconscious and continue to influence identity, behavior, and relationships into adulthood. Freud's own reflection on a simple childhood interaction that fueled his ambition reveals how even brief encounters can resonate deeply, shaping one's inner narrative and sense of worth. In this context, the maternal figure plays a potent role.

Far beyond the biological bond, the emotional environment shaped by a mother can either support a child's growth or become a source of psychological tension. When care becomes possessive, when protection turns into control, or when love is conditional, a toxic pattern emerges, one that may not appear harmful on the surface, yet can distort a child's emotional development in lasting ways. This form of toxic motherhood, often masked by societal ideals of maternal devotion, reveals how complex and ambivalent parental influence can be.

Moreover, postpartum depression remains a profoundly under-acknowledged affliction, frequently stigmatized and minimized. The societal narrative extols maternal devotion yet remains largely indifferent to the psychological distress and existential ambivalence experienced by many women during this period.

By imposing relentless pressure and silencing maternal agency, society cultivates conditions wherein women may internalize dysfunctionality, transforming into figures unrecognizable even to themselves.

Ultimately, the collateral damage of such systemic failure is borne by the child, an individual who entered the maternal relationship without volition. Offering a critical examination of toxic motherhood and its divergent repercussions on women and men, as explored through the lens of selected films and performance works, is a major step toward a better understanding of the self and the society's traumas and how this could impact the personal and the collective behavioral habits.

Sons vs Daughters: A Gendered Wound

● Maternal Influence on Sons:

Hedi (2016) by Mohamed Ben Attia is a film similar to other fictional films. In general, it seems like an impossible love story. The main character, Hedi, falls in love with a girl he meets by chance a few days before his wedding. As a result of these deep feelings, he breaks his boundaries and taboos. Thus, he slowly begins to discover himself. The fact that the film title is based on the character's name expresses how much everything revolves around him. It explores as well the complex and often suffocating dynamics of overprotective maternal influence within the cultural and societal context of Tunisia. The relationship between Hedi and his controlling mother is central to the film, as it reveals how maternal dominance can lead to emotional repression, stunted individuality, and profound psychological consequences.

The film exposes his life with all its corners, the seen and the unseen. Hedi's entire story takes place during the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia. With this change created by the revolutionary period, people began to recognize and find themselves. It is as if everyone is making their own personal and spiritual revolution, awakening their consciousness.

This question constantly arises in Hedi's mind: "What do I really want to do with my life?"

He begins to plan a path to create a future with the girl he loves and decides to become a new, proper Hedi. However, has he been successful in this decision? Let's explore together to find the answer to this question: Why did Hedi finally make such a decision?

Hedi and his mother have very similar characters, but at the same time, they behave quite differently throughout the film. Hedi's mother is an authoritarian, controlling female character. Since I am Tunisian and have been living in New Tunisia for a few years, I feel that I am well-versed in this subject. Women who have the power to control and govern, like the female character here, are very common in our Berber culture and Tunisian identity. In fact, not only in Tunisia, but also our neighboring countries in the Greater Maghreb region, the status of women is very important. However, the influence of this culture is perhaps most strongly felt in Tunisia. In fact, in Tunisia, from the past to the present, the biggest and most important decisions in our society or family have generally been made by women. (Cherif, 2017). The person who has governed our families has been the "mother" to this day.

In the past, before the Arab invaders came, a woman named "Dihia" ruled over many regions in Tunisia and North Africa. Dihia told the Arab invaders a very powerful proverb. All Tunisians still remember this saying

and say it with pride: “If you have come to share Islam, you can go wherever you want freely. You can talk to people. You can invite them to Islam.

But if you come to take land, no one can take the land of our grandfathers, and we will continue to fight you until we die!" This is just a small example. As can be seen, in Tunisia, women have a much greater value than gender. Everyone knows this and accepts it with pride. The motherhood toxicity is culturally not necessarily seen as an overprotective attitude or as a negative approach in raising children, but mostly as a cultural quality quite appreciated and normalized.

Hedi's mother was also very influenced by Hedi. This influence even continued after Hedi experienced his own revolution. And when Hedi finally chose a path for his own life, he made this choice with his mother's rules. Maybe not completely, but he still would not prefer to take many risks because he is not used to making big or even small decisions on his own.

Hedi's mother is portrayed as a domineering figure who exerts complete control over his life, including his career, his engagement to his fiancée Khadija, and his daily decisions. His protective nature is rooted in a traditional and patriarchal societal framework, where mothers often assume the role of family decision-makers, particularly in the absence of a strong paternal figure.

In the film, the trauma of maternal overprotection is depicted with quiet intensity, revealing the deep psychological toll it takes on the protagonist. Hedi's mother exerts overwhelming control over his life, micromanaging everything from his arranged wedding to his daily behavior, leaving him with little room to express personal desires or pursue his own aspirations. Her affection is conditional, tied closely to his obedience, and her disapproval functions as a powerful emotional lever. Bound by rigid expectations of tradition and filial duty, Hedi is expected to conform to the role of the compliant son and the responsible husband roles he accepts outwardly but inwardly resents. A compelling review I stumbled upon on social media, "Playing Hedi's wonderfully toxic mother, Sabah Bouzouita also merits praise. She dispenses imperious affection to her son and beams a cloying, artificially sweetened smile in public." (Wendy Ide, 2016). This pressure results in a profound lack of autonomy: Hedi moves through life passively, emotionally detached from his environment, including his fiancée. His relationship with Rim, a free-spirited hotel entertainer, becomes a turning point. Through her, he experiences moments of genuine connection and begins to awaken to the possibility of a life beyond his mother's control.

The film carefully illustrates this transformation through restrained visual and narrative choices. A muted color palette echoes Hedi's repressed inner world, while frequent close-ups draw attention to his silent emotional struggle. The stark contrast between the suffocating atmosphere of his home life and the fleeting freedom he experiences with Rim underscores the suffocating effects of toxic motherhood. Hedi's journey captures the quiet yet deeply rooted conflict between duty and selfhood, revealing how maternal overprotection, often cloaked in care, can leave lasting psychological scars and delay the process of self-discovery.

There have been many people like Hedi in Tunisia since the revolution. As a country, there will be change or not, whether there is hope or not, happiness or sadness, we have experienced and still experience many contradictions like this. But one important thing has remained from the revolution to today: freedom and especially freedom of expression. And I think there is no weapon more powerful than freedom. That's why we are all like Hedi, we look to the horizon with more hope and say; Yes, I chose Tunisia! Because there will be no place more beautiful than Tunisia! Yes, we have done very important things, but there is still a long way ahead of us. Things can change here... Because the smell of freedom in Tunisia is an exception, just like Jasemin. This feeling leads to hope, even though actions cannot be totally free, no one has the ability to control thoughts anymore, since the truth is finally revealed.

In summary, *Hedi* portrays the overprotective mother as a symbol of societal and cultural constraints, while Hedi's trauma illustrates the psychological cost of such dominance. The film ultimately questions the balance between tradition and personal freedom, offering a poignant commentary on the universal desire for self-determination.

From his side, Christophe Honoré, with his disturbing themes and provocative staging, pushes the viewers in his movie *Ma mère* (2004) to confront deeply rooted taboos, notably through the representation of an incestuous relationship that disrupts moral and social norms.

By exacerbating the Oedipal dynamic, the director stages characters caught in a fusional attraction and repulsion, where repressed desire emerges in a raw manner, without filter or restraint. Far from being limited to a simple gratuitous transgression, this representation seems to explore the dissolution of moral barriers

embodied by the Freudian superego, giving way to a psychic chaos where primary impulses dominate. The apparent madness of the characters, marked by erratic behavior and an almost unreal incoherence, can be interpreted as a defense mechanism in the face of insurmountable internal conflicts or as a compulsive repetition of buried traumas.

Christophe Honoré directed, with both verve and boldness, a rather faithful adaptation of Georges Bataille's novel *My Mother*, one of his most abrupt and unsettling works, rooted in autobiographical inspiration. On this occasion, he discovered something of an alter ego in Louis Garrel, who played the lead role. The central challenge of the adaptation seemed to lie in embracing the excess at the heart of Bataille's fiction and representing it as such. For indeed, in much of Bataille's narrative writing, the intention is to reach that extreme point where even the very power of language dissolves, where communication shatters like a chrysalis, and the stripped-down quality of the writing comes to express precisely that fragmentation.

Thus, there is little room for stylistic flourishes or metaphor in *My Mother*, to say the least, particularly in moments such as the narrator masturbating in front of his dead mother's body, laid out in a coffin. This taste for the extreme and the horrific, where the film ultimately concludes, underlining the agonizing impossibility of mourning a parent, would resurface in Honoré's next feature, though in a more playful register, something for which he was rightfully appreciated. But is it even necessary to stress the risk involved in any project that dares to end on such a note?

Just as Jean Eustache's work held within it both drama and comedy, Christophe Honoré's film quickly reveals the death of one of the central figures in its emotional triangle, played by Ludivine Sagnier, so that the musical numbers shift from joy toward a state of breathless grief and emotional suffocation. This transition occurs with a certain grace, thanks largely to the subtle use of the song, which is more nuanced than it might seem at first glance.

Honoré rightly pointed out during his appearance in Cannes that the songs in this film serve a particular purpose: they mark the moments when the characters soliloquize, expressing their feelings toward their loved ones, something impossible to do in the presence of others. While the songs may expose a sense of despair that challenges the tyranny of emotional ties, they also carry a moral function, a new element in the filmmaker's work that goes beyond mere cinephilic whim. (Lafleur, 2008). Through these musical interludes and the strange return of lyricism they embody, the impossible and the unspeakable, along with the pain they conceal, find expression in an unexpected exaltation, where intimate language and subjective voice may finally come to rest.

This narrative framework, almost comparable to that of a psychiatric hospital, allows the unconscious of the protagonists to express itself freely, escaping the usual frameworks of human rationality. Through this extreme provocation, Honoré forces the viewer to examine his own moral limits, to confront the unspeakable, and to question the construction of cultural prohibitions that structure human relationships. This narrative shock, although disturbing, has a cathartic function by freeing the collective unconscious and questioning the standardized society that often reduces "abnormal" behavior to a pathology, without understanding its symbolic and psychological depth.

Honoré also explores the confrontation of linguistic registers, the inner conflicts within language so central to Bataille's work, by weaving together different voices in the film. Notably, he uses Bataille's original text for the mother's dialogue, while writing the lines of the other characters himself. This tension between written and spoken, literary and colloquial language becomes a formal strategy that mirrors the film's thematic ruptures.

Bataille's influence is undeniably foundational, but Honoré also cites a diverse range of artistic inspirations, including the raw emotional intensity of Sarah Kane's theatre, the transgressive narratives of Bret Easton Ellis, as well as contemporary voices like Teal Mans, Nan Golding, and the visual provocations of Claude Lévêque. These influences converge in a cinematic language that is fragmented, provocative, and often unsettling.

In depicting sex scenes, Honoré deliberately rejects both the close-up, unthinkable with well-known actors, and the long take, which would veer toward an uncomfortable realism better suited to pornography. Instead, he employs editing as a means to introduce aesthetic distance. The film editing becomes a form of discretion, allowing the film to suggest rather than expose, to gesture toward intensity without exploiting it.

One of the key gender shifts in the adaptation is the transformation of the character “Loulou”, originally a masochistic woman in Bataille’s novel, into a boy. For Honoré, this change is not incidental: it allows him to bring homosexual desire onto the same narrative plane as heterosexual desire. Loulou’s terrifying passivity and aura of vulnerability seem to echo a character from a Dennis Cooper novel, enigmatic, fragile, and erotically charged.

Honoré chooses not to anchor the film in the historical context of the original novel, set around 1900. Instead, he relocates the story to contemporary Las Palmas, in the Canary Islands. This displacement is symbolic: just as in Bataille’s work, the protagonist is not in pursuit of pleasure per se. Ecstasy here is not an end, but a means of a desperate pathway toward something beyond, something that escapes the commodified pleasures of tourist destinations like the Canaries.

An island populated by tourists during the summer. A house with a swimming pool and a view of the sea. Pierre, aged seventeen, feels blind love for his mother, who is not ready to take charge of what he has in mind. The father goes to France and dies in an accident. Thus, refusing to be loved for what she is not, Hélène, the mother, chooses to reveal her true identity to her son. That of a woman who has become addicted to immorality. Pierre will seek her help to be initiated into debauchery and venture into increasingly risky games.

Death, in the film, is intertwined with incongruous laughter, a paradox that destabilizes the expected response to loss. The pop song that plays at the end, in stark contrast to Samuel Barber’s solemn *Agnus Dei*, brings a surprising lightness. But this lightness does not negate emotion; rather, it reveals another register of mourning, one that is tender, offbeat, and quietly devastating.

Pierre and his mother ultimately fail to be happy together. Yet the tragedy does not lie in their inability to find happiness, which is presented as secondary, but in their inability to be together. In Honoré’s vision, it is not unhappiness that wounds, but separation.

In the movie *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011), the director Lynne Ramsay offers a harrowing portrait of maternal alienation and its devastating consequences. Eva (Tilda Swinton) is a woman fundamentally estranged from the role of motherhood from the outset.

Pressured by her husband and societal expectations, she consents to a pregnancy that extinguishes the vitality of her career, autonomy, and identity. Postpartum depression descends swiftly, deepening the chasm between mother and child. She cannot bond with Kevin.

Kevin (Ezra Miller), her son, grows into a sociopathic killer or a school shooter whose crimes defy moral logic. Yet the film resists a simplistic nature-versus-nurture binary. Kevin’s masculine identity is not shaped in isolation, but rather forged by maternal detachment. His relationship with Eva is defined not by discipline or intimacy, but by distance and disdain. He adopts silence as a weapon, deceit as defense, and ultimately, violence as a language of reclamation.

Kevin never cries. He never seeks comfort. Instead, he manipulates with chilling precision, enforcing emotional dominance in the void where tenderness should have been. This is not merely the portrait of a violent boy; it is a cautionary tale about masculinity formed in the absence of emotional modeling, specifically that of a mother. Eva does, at times, attempt to perform motherhood. She sings lullabies, initiates family activities, and tries to connect. But the effort is mechanical, haunted by ambivalence. Kevin senses the dissonance. And, in a perverse reversal of maternal accountability, he punishes her for it.

The tragedy is not just the boy Kevin becomes, it is the mother Eva is never allowed to be. Ramsay’s film, therefore, must not be read as an indictment of Eva as an individual, but as a haunting meditation on what happens when society demands maternal perfection while offering no structural support for ambivalence, trauma, or refusal. Eva is coerced into motherhood, deprived of adequate mental health care, isolated in her struggle, and ultimately vilified for failing to love a child she never truly chose. Kevin’s monstrosity, then, is not solely the outcome of maternal coldness but of a society that commodifies reproduction, sanctifies maternal instinct, and pathologizes deviation from its myths.

While *We Need to Talk About Kevin* presents maternal detachment through narrative cinema, Artist Ragnar Kjartansson’s performance piece *Me and My Mother* renders it in distilled, cyclical violence, both visceral and absurd. For some years, Kjartansson has recorded a single take of his mother, the Icelandic actress Guðrún

Ásmundsdóttir, spitting in his face. The action is simple. The implications are labyrinthine.

At first glance, the work invites laughter. Its minimalism and repetition evoke the absurdist logic of a Beckett play. Yet beneath its humor lies a confrontation with something far more harrowing: the performance of maternal cruelty as a symbolic language of inheritance. Spit, here, is not merely a bodily rejection—it is a projection. A discharge of disappointment. A ritualistic purge. Each successive iteration sees the mother spit with greater force, as if exorcising decades of buried resentment.

But whom does she reject? Her son, or herself, through him? This is the disorienting genius of the work: the son becomes a proxy not only for maternal disdain but for maternal self-loathing. When she spits, she may well be targeting the boy she raised, but also the choices she made, the life she compromised, the identity she forfeited in becoming a mother. Trauma, after all, is generational. Inherited not just through DNA or behavior, but through unspoken projections and unmetabolized grief.

Kjartansson remains entirely passive throughout. He does not flinch. He does not wipe his face. He simply absorbs. His silence is not weakness, but endurance. An emotional stoicism that echoes the coping mechanisms developed by children of emotionally volatile parents.

Unlike Kevin, who externalizes his suffering through violence, this son turns inward. He becomes a vessel. A mirror. A sponge. His stillness testifies to the psychic labor of surviving a love that wounds rather than soothes.

What we witness is the effect of an emotionally immature mother—one whose own trauma, fragility, and thwarted agency are transmitted rather than resolved. Emotional immaturity, unlike emotional detachment, does not manifest through absence but through intensity. The mother's aggression in *Me and My Mother* may be theatrical, but it is not artificial. It comes from somewhere real. Somewhere buried. And its repetition ritualizes the inescapability of unresolved maternal rage.

This is not the portrait of a monster, but of a mother who cannot reconcile who she is with who she was told to be. Her spitting is a tragic performance of her fracture, one directed at her son only because she has no space to direct it at the world that deformed her.

Together, Ramsay's film and Kjartansson's performance offer a dialectic on the main subject; one example is forged through emotional absence, the other through emotional volatility. One mother detaches to survive. The other lashes out. In both, the child pays the cost. Yet where Kevin becomes monstrous, Kjartansson's son-figure becomes inert. Violence and endurance. Two masculine responses to maternal trauma are revealed as catastrophic in their own way.

● **Maternal Influence on Daughters:**

White Oleander, directed by Peter Kosminsky and based on Janet Fitch's novel, unfolds elegantly and devastatingly. At its center is the relationship between Ingrid (Michelle Pfeiffer), a passive-aggressive mother, and her daughter Astrid (Alison Lohman), an innocently naive girl. Ingrid is not the archetypal abuser. She's articulate, composed, and cultured. Everything you would expect a perfect mother to be. But Ingrid is the embodiment of toxic femininity masked as ideal motherhood. Instead of being loud or chaotic, she is rather refined and surgical in her cruelty. Her manipulation operates like perfume that's suffocating beneath its sweetness.

She views Astrid not as a child but as an artistic accessory, a living artifact that must reflect her intellect, her beauty, her control. Astrid is never allowed autonomy, only adaptation. And when she begins to stray from the script, Ingrid punishes her with cold precision. From prison, she exerts godlike influence, sabotaging Astrid's foster homes with a single line in a letter, a strategically planted doubt, a silence at just the wrong time.

Astrid's adolescence becomes a warzone of identity. Every foster mother becomes a failed attempt at sanctuary, but also a cracked mirror, reflecting Ingrid's damage. Through these iterations, Astrid learns the survival tactics common to daughters of toxic mothers: dissociation, shape-shifting, self-erasure.

She changes names. Hair color. Religion. Tone. She becomes whatever a room needs her to be, until she no longer knows who she is.

The scene where Astrid constructs a suitcase of symbolic objects, each one tied to a different version of herself, is haunting in its honesty. It captures the disorientation many daughters of emotionally manipulative mothers face: the inability to separate oneself from the legacy of maternal expectation. When the mother is a narcissistic perfectionist, the daughter is often forced to perform a version of herself that exists only to appease or impress. What society rarely admits is that it participates in this choreography. The "perfect mother" and the "perfect daughter" are twin illusions enforced by media, tradition, and culture.

Mothers are told they must be selfless, composed, effortlessly beautiful. Daughters are raised under that same gaze; to be obedient, polished, competitive, and pleasing. The toxicity arises when these standards collapse inward, devouring both mother and child in their unattainability.

Ingrid doesn't just hurt Astrid; she represents a lineage of women mutilated by perfectionism. She is the "almond mom" before the meme: monitoring food, beauty, composure, and ambition. She belittles Astrid for crying, for needing love, for being too soft. This mirrors a broader social pathology where mothers, trapped in cycles of performance and deprivation, unconsciously reproduce the same metrics of failure in their daughters. They compare, judge, and control. Not always out of cruelty, but out of fear. Fear of irrelevance. Of imperfection or not being enough.

Astrid's deepest wound is not Ingrid's distance, but her proximity. Her voice echoes in Astrid's mind long after her physical presence fades. This is the legacy of the emotionally immature mother: not physical scars, but internalized standards. A daughter who feels perpetually unworthy, too much, never enough. A girl who grows into a woman, unsure whether her desires are her own or inherited expectations in disguise.

White Oleander doesn't offer a neat redemption arc. It doesn't glorify suffering or pathologize Ingrid into a caricature. Instead, it shows how love can be manipulative. How mothers, wounded by the world, can inflict that wound again under the guise of protection. And how daughters, in their longing to be loved, will bend until they nearly disappear.

While *White Oleander* exposes the damage wrought by a mother too controlling, Simon Stone's adaptation of *Yerma* shows the implosion of a woman destroyed by the absence of motherhood.

This performance starring Billie Piper is a contemporary, ferocious reimagining of Federico García Lorca's 1934 tragedy. The play, staged at the Young Vic in London, strips away the original's rural Spanish setting and places us instead in the heart of urban middle-class life. Piper plays a nameless character, a witty cosmopolitan journalist who appears to have it all: a sleek home, a handsome partner, and professional success. But beneath the curated life lies a hollow obsession with becoming a mother. And that desire metastasizes into something feral.

At first, her pursuit of pregnancy feels hopeful, even charming. She blogs it, jokes about it, and makes it palatable for her online readers. But over time, her sense of self narrows until motherhood is no longer a wish. It's the only thing between her and meaninglessness. Each failed IVF round, each negative test, strips away her humanity.

The entire play is staged inside a transparent glass box. At first, the box is expansive, filled with modern furnishings and light. But with each scene, it subtly contracts. The walls close in visibly, literally. The audience surrounds her, watching her as if she were an exhibit. There is no privacy. She is both subject and spectacle: a woman whose private grief has become a public performance, a curated breakdown consumed in real-time.

One of the most famous scenes in the play, widely circulated online for its rawness, occurs when she turns to her mother for comfort. She bitterly jokes, "Will you hold me?" Her mother hesitates. There's a long pause, and only after so much reluctance does she offer an awkward embrace. That's not love, that's compliance. This moment reveals everything. Her mother criticizes her for "oversharing," for writing publicly about her fertility, for "making a show" of herself. But what she's criticizing in reality is vulnerability itself, something she never allowed herself to express or model.

This maternal coldness is quietly foundational. In that scene, the main character is not just grieving the absence of a baby; she is also grieving the lack of affection she has withstood her whole life and might have to go through for the rest of it. Her emotional language was never learned because it was never spoken. Her mother's coldness has become an unanticipated future. Consequently, the void she tries to fill with a child is actually the wound left by a childhood starved of warmth.

The toxicity here is generational and understated. Her mother doesn't resemble Ingrid; she isn't flamboyantly cruel or grandiose. She is emotionally inarticulate. Guarded. Dismissive. This is the mother who raises daughters in stoicism and silence, who teaches that feelings are inane and intimacy is worthless. A mother molded by a world that demanded composure and bred repression.

Her desperation, then, is not just hormonal; it's ancestral. She is trying to mother a child in a world that never fully mothered her.

Billie Piper's performance is volcanic. She begins with self-deprecating jokes and sharp monologues, which are very relatable to everyone of this generation who withstands trauma by indulging in comedy. But by the end, language fails her. She screams. She claws. She disintegrates. Her emotional collapse is so total that it feels almost unwatchable, and yet the play forces us to look. The glass never cracks.

When she strangles an imaginary child in the final scene, it is not an act of violence; it's an act of exorcism. She's killing the myth that having one would save her. She is killing the version of herself that believed motherhood would make her whole.

Yerma reframes the maternal narrative. Unlike the previous works, it doesn't show toxic motherhood; it shows how the *idealization* of motherhood becomes toxic. It shows how society promises women that motherhood is their destiny, their reward, their redemption. And then offers no roadmap when biology or circumstance betrays them.

Together, the two works illustrate two ends of the same continuum. One daughter tries not to become her mother; the other is destroyed by the version of womanhood her mother could never embody. Both are trapped in mirrors they did not ask to hold.

Just as *White Oleander* and *Yerma* showcase the psychic fracturing of daughters within cinematic and theatrical paradigms, Marina Abramović, the world-renowned performance artist, enacts that trauma corporeally again and again in visceral real-time moments. Her artistic corpus constitutes a sustained, lifelong negotiation with an absence of maternal affection, authoritarian upbringing, and how this paradoxical condition of survival in such an environment inspires an artist's journey.

Born in Belgrade in 1946 to a decorated war hero father and a rigorously militant mother, whom we are going to focus on. Abramović has socialized within a world suffused with discipline, nationalism, and emotional austerity. Her mother, Danica Rosić, a former Partisan major and director of the Museum of the Revolution, exerted a militaristic control over Marina's body and life, enforcing strict curfews well into late adulthood. In addition to constant physical abuse and even harsh routines that extend to dictate her sleeping position. Moreover, expressive motherly intimacy, like kisses, embraces, and consolation, was absent. When, at the age of thirty-five, Marina confronted her mother with the question of why she had never been kissed by her, Danica responded matter-of-factly: "Of course, not to spoil you!" This declaration captures not only an ideological posture of maternal control but a monk-like philosophy that emphasizes self-denial, detachment, and intentional living.

This dour upbringing, marked with repression and consummate surveillance, worsened when the parental attention focused singularly on her younger brother. Growing her loneliness, the result was a childhood steeped in spiritual starvation, a deficiency that, ultimately, became the raw material for one of the most daring and boundary-pushing artistic trajectories of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Abramović's performances are well known for their meticulous calibration of endurance and ritualized sacrifice. She has lashed herself, etched star-shaped wounds into her flesh, masturbated for hours nonstop, lain immobile atop blocks of ice, undergone prolonged fasts, and offered her body to a public set free to engage with it all without a tremor of retreat.

These actions are neither mere provocations nor nihilistic spectacles; they are precise modalities of transformation, inscrutable lexicons of trauma transmuted into articulate, visual language. Performance art is a serious business, as she herself stated in previous interviews. It is perhaps the rawest form we currently have of genuine expression. And although the inspiration from her works of course extends farther than just her relationship with her mother, the ghost of her childhood would always hunt her performances, or at least the psychoanalytical explanations of her art pieces' process.

It is essential to underscore that Abramović does not occupy the identity of a victim. She positions herself rather as a vessel of historical and intergenerational trauma that made her who she is today. Her heritage transgressed, her silence made public. Her body, once surveilled and policed, becomes a stage upon which the formerly invisible daughter reclaims agency and presence.

But while Marina Abramović's early performances read as a punk rebellion against the authoritarian structure that defined her upbringing, in a curious reversal, Abramović's more recent works at the "Marina Abramović Institute" reflect a shift in posture. The latest piece, *Cleaning the House*, with its strict silence, ritualized fasting, and choreographed stillness, seems to echo the same contours of discipline once imposed on her. But this time, the

structure is hers. What was once external control becoming internal architecture. If chaos once served as her medium of emancipation, with age, order now offers a quieter, perhaps more radical, kind of agency. These durational, meditative performances are not an abandonment of her past but a continuation of it. Perhaps proof that inspiration, especially the kind seeded in childhood, never leaves us. It loops, it mutates, it surfaces in places we least expect. The wound becomes the method. Abramović has not softened; she has simply found a new language through which to create. A full circle moment to highlight that a mother's education never leaves.

CONCLUSION

In light of these reflections, it becomes clear that motherhood, while often idealized as a source of unconditional love, is a space of emotional complexity, shaped by fear, control, and unresolved psychological needs. When maternal care becomes possessive, when protection masks manipulation, or when affection is granted on the

condition of obedience, the emotional cost for the child can be both profound and enduring.

Through the lens of modern cinema and visual art, these hidden wounds are not only represented but critically exposed. These narratives invite us to question dominant cultural ideals of motherhood and confront the often-invisible emotional burdens carried within the family. They challenge us to move beyond the myth of the self-sacrificing mother and to recognize the psychological ambivalences that can lie beneath even the most tender gestures.

When art is the common ground for all to meditate on our feelings and express our discomfort, certainly violence can be eliminated and replaced by empathy and understanding. Importantly, this restorative potential of art extends beyond representation. Visual expression has shown particular promise as a therapeutic medium, especially for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), who often exhibit strengths in visual processing. (Malchiodi, 2006). Research suggests that visual art therapy can support emotional identification, flexibility, self-esteem, and social communication.

Humans are not always at ease with verbal communication, especially those with heightened emotional sensitivity, like many children. Speech can sometimes feel limiting or intimidating, making it difficult for them to articulate complex inner experiences. This is why exploring alternative, non-verbal forms of expression becomes essential in creating meaningful dialogue and emotional connection. Children often gravitate naturally toward movement, sound, and image; they dance, sing, and draw not just for play, but as instinctive ways of making sense of their world. Among these, painting has shown a remarkable capacity to help children express thoughts and emotions that might otherwise remain unspoken. “I recall a deeply moving painting session in 2016 with two children, aged 7 and 12, where we communicated for over two hours without saying a single word. Through shapes, colors, and silent gestures, we built a shared conversation on canvas, a reflective, emotionally charged artwork we later titled *Dis moi - Tell Me*. It was not about aesthetic perfection, but about translating inner voices into visual language, a vivid reminder that some of the most meaningful conversations happen beyond words”. (Cherif, 2020).

In this sense, art is not only a mirror but also a remedy, a tool for emotional integration, self-exploration, and reconnection. Acknowledging these tensions does not diminish the value of maternal care; it enriches our understanding of it. And yet, as we uncover these emotional dynamics, a broader question emerges: in a time when traditional structures of support are collapsing and emotional labor remains unevenly distributed, how can we reimagine parental, relational, and societal in ways that truly foster autonomy, empathy, and emotional well-being?

In asking this, we are called not only to rethink motherhood, but to confront the emotional foundations of our contemporary world with wiser thoughts and more expressive artistic creations that address the souls.

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