

# “The only thing that matters to her”<sup>1</sup>

## Artificial Intelligence and the Sentimentalization of Motherhood in *M3GAN* (2022)

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### Introduction

*M3GAN* is a promise to be *all that*: an A.I. that is designed to be a child’s favorite toy and their best friend, blending the roles of older sister, babysitter, and substitute parent. The 2022 science fiction horror film of the same name introduces a variety of robotic and technical innovations, all of which are designed to replace a member of a typical household. *M3GAN* is the most outstanding of these creations: a prototype for an artificial intelligence molded into the form of a doll-like girl who is supposed to comfort, entertain, educate, and take care of the child who is her ‘primary user.’ Her sole function, her programmed mission, is to become the ideal caregiver. As such, she may become, as her creator and the protagonist of the film, Gemma, advertises the product, “more than just a toy, she’s part of the family” (*M3GAN*, 00:29:18–00:29:21).

Along these lines, Gemma, who leads a team of technological innovators, makes a pivotal decision: She brings *M3GAN*, one of their projects that is not yet on the market, home and puts her to the test as a caregiver for her recently orphaned and estranged niece Cady, now under Gemma’s care. Initially, *M3GAN* is introduced as an ideal caregiver—though this is implicitly problematized from the beginning: While Gemma advertises *M3GAN*’s skills, the film cuts between different scenes in Gemma’s household, in which *M3GAN* reads to Cady, educates her, and generally cares for her. Though primarily humorous in tone, the sequence also foreshadows the negotiations of the maternal that are about to ensue. After a variety of scenes highlighting the

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1 *M3GAN* 2023, 01:08:23–01:08:25.

intimate bond that develops between Cady and M3GAN, the film cuts from M3GAN bringing a smiling Cady to bed to Gemma sitting alone on her couch and opening her laptop. At the same time, Gemma ends her speech by saying that M3GAN will “take care of the little things, so you can spend more time doing the things that matter” (*M3GAN*, 00:29:09–00:29:13), implying that Gemma prioritizes her career over motherhood. Throughout the film, M3GAN’s emotional bond with Cady grows rapidly. Ultimately and in accordance with the ambiguousness of M3GAN’s initial introduction, it is her programmed mission to protect Cady which marks her as the antagonist of the film, as it causes her to harm numerous characters and establishes her as an obstacle to Gemma and Cady’s relationship. In the framework of the horror plot, the film negotiates such notions of good and bad motherhood, constantly comparing M3GAN and Gemma in their roles as surrogate mothers. Thereby it explores the maternal as a complex concept and sentimentalizes a specific notion of motherhood, portraying the mother-child-relationship as an *ur-sentimental* relationship—indeed, as the mother figures in the film claim at several points, as the only relationship that matters (cf. e.g. *M3GAN*, 01:10:33–01:10:37).

Thus, *M3GAN* is more than a horror film about a killer A.I. First, it is a commentary on both killer doll films—a trend in horror films, majorly impacted by the producer and co-storywriter James Wan<sup>2</sup>—and A.I., using a humorous tone even during its most explicit depictions of violence. Somewhere between horror comedy and parody, the film is frequently understood as a satire of artificial intelligence as the source for emotional intimacy. For example, in his review for *The Guardian*, Peter Bradshaw claims that there are “some adroit satirical touches about dolls as toxic aspirational templates, dolls as parodies of intimacy and sensitivity and tech itself as sinister child-pacification” (Bradshaw) in the film. In *Variety*, Owen Gleiberman argues that the film satirizes the belief in “artificial intelligence as an actual form of interaction” (Gleiberman).

This chapter aims to go a step further, focusing not solely on the intimacy between M3GAN and Cady, but more generally on the way motherhood, the mother-daughter-relationship, and childcare are discussed through a variety of (female) characters and negotiated in a rather sentimental mode. To quote

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2 In an interview, Wan makes the tongue-in-cheek claim: “I get accused of being the master of killer doll movies. In those doll films, my dolls don’t actually get up and kill anyone. They’re usually just vessels for demonic entities. And so I said, ‘Well, if people are gonna think of me as a killer doll filmmaker, let’s actually do one.’ And hence, the concept of *M3GAN* was born” (“A New Vision of Horror,” 00:00:33–00:00:53).

the director Gerard Johnstone: "To me, I never really saw *M3GAN* as a killer doll movie. I saw it as a morality tale of our times about parenting in the 21<sup>st</sup> century" ("A New Vision of Horror," 00:01:38–00:01:46). In *M3GAN*, intimacy exists solely in terms of childcare, and childcare—and "parenting" in general—is marked as female. Indeed, nearly every female adult is coded as parental. This chapter explores the film as a maternal horror film, as a complex negotiation of good and bad motherhood. It discusses how the film constructs the maternal as a social role and as a normative requirement as well as an intrinsic emotional need, which all adult female characters have and which positions all of them as maternal figures—thereby paying attention to the film's near-paradoxical yet interdependent combination of satirical and sentimental techniques and tropes. While the film satirizes certain sentimental images such as *M3GAN*'s doll-like appearance and her position as "part of the family," it also sentimentalizes the (surrogate) mother-child-relationship between Gemma and Cady and, subsequently, motherhood as a core value.

## Women and Mothers in Horror Films

In order to understand the function of both motherhood and the mother figure(s) in *M3GAN*, it is crucial to situate the film in the tradition of maternal horror films in Western cinema.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps most fundamental to this is the differentiation between woman and mother. In certain cases, the mother (as a specific individual character) and the maternal (as an abstract concept) may simply appear as actualizations of a woman as mother, ergo they may represent a particular variation of a woman. However, in most of the cases—including *M3GAN*—the mother is not just a subcategory of woman. Rather, she appears as a separate concept in her own right, though mother and woman share common features and ideological influences. Both mother and woman are already unstable categories in horror films to begin with, not least due to horror's tendency to cross (gender) boundaries and its grotesque formulations of the female reproductive potential.<sup>4</sup>

3 The term 'maternal horror films' goes back to Sarah Arnold's book *Maternal Horror Film: Melodrama and Motherhood* (2013).

4 For more on the instability and ambiguousness of women/mothers in horror, see e.g. Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993) and *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine: Feminist New Wave Cinema* (2022), Carol J. Clover's *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992), Amanda Howell

The major reason for differentiating between mothers and non-maternal women in horror lies in the motivation for their actions. Although there are exceptions to this, as a rule, female characters in horror films are positioned on a scale of victim to villain. As villains, e.g. as killers or monsters, they blur the lines between these supposedly separate categories most frequently. For example, Carol J. Clover famously uses Stephen King's *Carrie* from the novel and film adaptations of the same name as an example for this. Clover refers to *Carrie* as a "female victim-hero (the hero part always understood as implying some degree of monstrosity)" and argues that she takes up the positions of victim, monster, and hero in turn throughout the film (Clover 4).

In maternal horror films, mothers can also cross these boundaries, but they do so in other ways, when they take up an entirely different and isolated position. Sarah Arnold argues that "the mother is less frequently subject to the same degree of abuse [from which the typical female victim of classical horror, slashers, rape-revenge films, or monster films suffers; and in] a sense, she does not function in the same way as woman/victim within the narrative" (Arnold 27). Particularly in regard to the "self-sacrificing mother," she further explains:

[H]er suffering is not directly the consequence of the antagonist. Rather her suffering is a result of her desire to protect the child/ren, who are instead pursued by the antagonist. Her goal is not self-preservation but the preservation of her children. Indeed, she may die to achieve this goal. Her death, in contrast to that of the female (non-maternal) victim, is not constructed as a defeat of the monster over the victim; instead it is linked to successful self-sacrifice. Thus, while masochism may be the organising principle of the representation of women and mothers in horror, the nature and origins of this masochism differ. The masochistic representation of the mother in horror is more akin to that of melodrama. (Arnold 28)

Hence, because the motivation for their actions lies in protecting their children, sacrificing themselves if necessary, mothers in horror have a fundamentally sentimentalized function; they operate in the context of family relations and love, thereby representing sentimentally coded core values like motherhood and the family.

Within the separate category of mothers in horror, two dimensions of the mother and the maternal typically emerge: first, the female body as maternal

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and Lucy Baker's *Monstrous Possibilities: The Female Monster in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Screen Horror* (2022), and Erin Harrington's *Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film: Gynaehorror* (2018).

and second, the mother as a socio-cultural role. Either angle is usually ideologically motivated and regularly coexists with the other, although the second one typically appears in a sentimental context. In scholarship, they lend themselves particularly well to psychoanalytic readings—most prominently but by far not only to Freudian and Lacanian theories on the (early) mother-child-relationship, Freud's concept of the uncanny,<sup>5</sup> and Kristeva's theory of abjection.<sup>6</sup>

Regarding the first angle, the female body and its reproductive capabilities—the biological site of motherhood—are frequently depicted and read as a sight for horror. During the last few decades, a varied terminology has developed to describe this theme. For example, Erin Harrington coins the term "gynaehorror," defining it as an umbrella term for horror films that "deal [. . .] with all aspects of female reproductive horror, from the reproductive and sexual organs, to virginity and first sex, through to pregnancy, birth and motherhood, and finally to menopause and post-menopause" (Harrington 3). Biological motherhood in its different articulations—in particular pregnancy and childbirth—marks the climax of the reproductive potential of the female body. Hence, numerous films utilize it as inspiration for grotesque and horrific visualizations.

In *M3GAN*, these themes are remarkably absent. In fact, nearly all maternal figures are surrogate mothers and the female body remains a blank space, as there are no portrayals of or allusions to the female body in terms of its reproductive potential—i.e. no (grotesquely twisted) depictions of menstruation, pregnancy, birth, or even implicit references to these themes. The film ap-

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5 Freud defines 'the uncanny' as the space in-between the familiar and the unfamiliar, as something that appears unfamiliar but inherits the familiar as well, hence becoming frightening: It is "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (Freud 220). "[T]he uncanny [unheimlich] is something which is secretly familiar [heimlich-heimisch], which has undergone repression and then returned from it" (Freud 245). In the case of *M3GAN*, the uncanniness exceeds the themes of maternity. *M3GAN* herself has a remarkably uncanny appearance, looking partially like an old-fashioned, hyper-feminine doll, partially like a modern technological innovation, and partially human. As Adrien Morot, the supervising puppeteer of the film, explains: "Gerard [the director] was really adamant about having something that would be this uncanny valley between sort of toy, sort of a real person" ("Bringing Life to *M3GAN*," 00:00:16–00:00:25). Accordingly, *M3GAN* is sometimes played by child actress Amie Donald, sometimes by a puppet, controlled by a team of puppeteers.

6 Related to the uncanny as something that blurs borders and points back to origins, Kristeva defines the abject as the in-between "place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva 2). It is what appears as unclean, improper, taboo, and repulsive about woman.

proaches the concept of the mother in its social dimension, rather than focusing on the maternal body. Thereby it negotiates both the relationship between the mother and the child and the way other characters perceive and judge their relationship in accordance to social norms. Motherhood as a social role and normative requirement is sentimentalized and functions both within the microcosm of the nuclear family and the macrocosm of the society.

## The Good Mother and the Bad Mother

Generally speaking, all societies have concepts of good and bad motherhood. In U.S. American culture, motherhood is a core value and a primary institution, heavily sentimentally coded. Ann C. Hall and Mardia J. Bishop claim that

Americans want a 'mom' definition of motherhood—a nurturing, accepting, easy definition. Mothers, moreover, are the reservoir of American expectations, so it is no wonder that when Americans say 'mother,' there are a host of images and expectations associated with the term. For mothers in American culture, the deluge is overwhelming. (Hall/Bishop x)

Bishop and Hall argue that, as a response to the desire for a simple definition, pop cultural representations are often very particular in their manifestations of mothers. They especially highlight the opposing concepts of the “supermom” as the “cultural ideal” and “the bad mom” as “the postmodern equivalent of a scarlet letter” (Hall/Bishop ix). Similar approaches to the dichotomy between good and bad motherhood appear in a variety of scholarly texts, including texts about motherhood in films like maternal melodramas, maternal horror films, and women's film.<sup>7</sup> E. Ann Kaplan defines these categories of the Good Mother and Bad Mother as follows:

1. The Good Mother, who is all-nurturing and self-abnegating—the ‘Angel of the House’. Totally invested in husband and children, she lives only through them, and is marginal to the narrative.
2. The Bad Mother or Witch—the underside of the first myth. Sadistic, hurtful, and jealous, she refuses the self-abnegating role, demanding her own

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7 For a more detailed exploration of this, see Arnold.

life. Because of her 'evil' behavior, this mother often takes control of the narrative, but she is punished for her violation of the desired patriarchal ideal, the Good Mother. (Kaplan 468)

In a similar manner, Katherine N. Kinnick discusses "media morality tales," explaining that "[b]oth entertainment and news media narratives frequently cast motherhood in moral terms, contrasting the 'good' mother with the 'bad' mother, and thus both prescribing and proscribing norms for maternal behavior" (Kinnick 9). Accordingly, a "moral hierarchy for mothers" (ibid.) has developed, with the manifold expressions of the Good Mother and the Bad Mother at its focus. She defines those as follows:

The good mother, the noble mother-saint, makes her family her highest priority, continually sacrificing her own interests for the good of her family, and conforms to expected gender roles of femininity. The bad mother [...] is depicted as self-centered, neglectful, preoccupied with career, or lacking in traditional femininity. (Kinnick 9)

In horror films, these ideas of good/bad motherhood lead back to the already mentioned concept of maternal self-sacrifice, as explored by Sarah Arnold, who examines this trope in maternal horror films. She claims that "patriarchy may be secured through the figure of the mother who continues to fulfil all the psychosocial and ideological conditions of idealised motherhood (self-sacrifice and nurturing)" (Arnold 29).

A specific case, which may serve as a prominent and influential example of the tradition of maternity in horror films and helps to cross the bridge from physical to social motherhood, is the *Alien* franchise (1979–). Like *M3GAN*, the films belong to the genre of science fiction horror films about motherhood, but unlike *M3GAN*, the bodily aspects of motherhood become a playground for body horror. Childbirth and pregnancy take on a grotesquely deadly spin, as the aliens orally impregnate humans, who then 'give birth' as the new-born aliens violently break through their ribcages. While the films also contain a multitude of phallic images, it is commonly used as a prime example for representing maternity in horror films. In her discussion of the "faces" of the "monstrous-feminine"—a term coined by her to underline the unique position of the woman as monster—, Barbara Creed uses *Alien* (1979), the first film of the

franchise, to exemplify the “archaic mother.”<sup>8</sup> She points out the large variety of maternal themes and tropes in the films. Besides the depiction of fertilization and ‘birth’ as violations, these include the setting—large spaces and corridors that resemble the womb—, the naming of the computer system as ‘mother,’ and—this is where the relevance for *M3GAN* comes into play—the manifold portrayals of the protagonist, Ellen Ripley, as mothering (cf. Creed 1993, 16–20, 23–24). Further discussing *Aliens* (1986), the second instalment of the series—the one which focuses the most on the nurturing, non-biological side of motherhood—Creed explains: “Throughout, *Aliens* opposes two forms of mothering: Ripley’s surrogate mothering in which there is no conception or birth and where the female body is unmarked; and Mother Alien’s biological, animalistic, instinctual mothering where the maternal body is open and gaping” (Creed 1993, 51).

The former form of mothering resembles the majority of mother figures in *M3GAN*. The *Alien* films pose an interesting example in this context, as Ripley is shown in a variety of mothering roles. In the second film of the franchise, she becomes the surrogate mother for a human child, thus serving as an example for the self-sacrificing, nurturing mother. “I’m not gonna leave you, Newt. I mean that. That’s a promise” (*Aliens*, 01:19:56–01:20:03), she tells the little girl she had met shortly before, after cradling her to her chest and tucking her into bed in the same scene. True to her word, throughout the film she risks her life for her several times. In the fourth film (*Alien Resurrection*, 1997), Ripley is the biological mother to a human-alien-hybrid, whom she ultimately kills. Additionally, Ripley is also—and this is barely discussed in the franchise—the biological mother to a human daughter she has left on Earth, serving as a reminder of Ripley’s role as an absent mother. Despite appearing as a Bad Mother to her only biological human child, Ripley is still much more frequently portrayed as a Good Mother than as a Bad Mother.

Both the *Alien* franchise and *M3GAN* present a variety of mother-child relationships, with one central figure functioning as the point of departure for all these relationships. In the *Alien* films, this point of departure is Ripley, the mother figure. Meanwhile in *M3GAN*, it is not the figure of the mother but the figure of the child who is positioned in the center of this multitude of mother-

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8 According to Creed (1993, 7), the “archaic mother” is one of five “faces” of the monstrous-feminine. Alongside the “monstrous womb” it is one of two that explicitly articulate the maternal as monstrous.

daughter relationships. As already briefly mentioned, *M3GAN* takes up a relatively unconventional position in the tradition of maternal horror films: The film completely dismisses the bodily experiences of motherhood. The only exception is Cady's biological mother, who is quickly erased from the narrative when she dies in the second scene (although the idea of her remains, as Cady expresses her longing for her multiple times). The setting is no reminder of the female reproductive system, nor is the portrayal of the maternal in the film reliant on its bodily aspects in any other way. In fact, the female body is—adapting the words of Creed—literally “unmarked.”

Nonetheless, there is no shortage of maternal themes and especially maternal figures. Numerous female characters attempt to parent Cady: *M3GAN*, Gemma, Gemma's co-worker Tess, Cady's therapist. Essentially, the film follows Gemma's development from Bad Mother as a stereotypical 'career woman' (unmarried and living alone, with no children, in a highly demanding and intellectually challenging job) to Good Mother (loving and caring), as she shifts her priorities from succeeding at her job to protecting Cady while an entourage of female characters urges her to do so. This development highly sentimentalizes the Good Mother, while simultaneously criticizing any notion of Bad Motherhood.

*M3GAN* explores the concept of nurturing and the social dimensions of motherhood rather than its bodily aspects. It challenges but ultimately reinforces patriarchal ideologies of good motherhood as a core American value. Somewhat paradoxically, in a world in which paternal figures are strikingly absent, patriarchal concepts are ever-present and, at least to some degree, reinforced throughout the film. In Arnold's formulation, *M3GAN* seems to present a prime example of securing patriarchy through the figure of the idealized self-sacrificing and nurturing mother (Arnold 29).

The *Alien* films ask conceptual questions about motherhood which *M3GAN* also picks up, in particular the dichotomy of Good/Bad Mother collapsed onto one figure. Arnold refers to this as common for manifestations of the Good/Bad Mother in films; although she also argues that “there are variations in the degree of complicity or resistance to these constructions within the texts themselves” (Arnold 26):

The polarisation of Good/Bad Mother corresponds to the sacrificing/selfish trope. Often in film the good and bad mother binaries are collapsed on to the one figure; the selfish mother may 'correct' her behaviour and ultimately

give up her own desire for the child, or the mother may struggle between both positions. (Arnold 23)

Like Gemma, Ripley is ultimately marked as a 'career woman'; both are, so the films imply (although sparsely in the *Alien* films), 'selfishly absent' mothers: Ripley leaves her daughter on Earth to work on a spaceship and, in the first half of *M3GAN*, Gemma again and again chooses her job over care work. According to Kinnick—amongst others—"working moms" are variations of the Bad Mother as portrayed in media narratives (cf. Kinnick 3; see also Faludi). She explains that "[m]edia morality tales frequently suggest dire outcomes for women who decide to climb the corporate ladder rather than focus on marriage and motherhood," i.e. "in this formula, career success means negative impact on family and romance" (Kinnick 7).<sup>9</sup>

While the *Alien* films discuss a variety of maternal concepts, in *M3GAN*, this particular concept is at the metaphorical heart of the text. Hence, in this regard *M3GAN* goes a step further, adding a comparative dimension to the evaluation of Good/Bad Motherhood.

### The Better Mother and the Worse Mother

*M3GAN* depicts Gemma's character development from Bad Mother to Good Mother, but it also shows *M3GAN* as Good Mother, as Bad Mother, as Better Mother than Gemma, and ultimately as Worse Mother than Gemma. The third and fourth dispositions reference the rivalry between *M3GAN* and Gemma. Therefore, the Good and Bad Mother binaries are indeed, in the words of Sarah Arnold, "collapsed on to the one figure" (23): *M3GAN* and Gemma are each representations of Good *and* Bad motherhood. Additionally, through the rivalry between them, they also represent good or bad motherhood in comparison to the other—adding to it the dimension of Better Mother and, subsequently, Worse Mother.

This rivalry and the four phases of appropriate motherhood—Good Mother, Bad Mother, Better/Worse Mother—form the base of the film. The film barely questions whether an artificial intelligence can form an intimate mother-child-relationship or whether it is a 'true' emotional bond; its

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9 In the context of *M3GAN* (and, indeed, also in the *Alien* franchise), paternal figures as well as themes like romance and marriage are strikingly absent.

ideological work is not to challenge the *authenticity* of M3GAN and Cady's relationship. Instead, it rather asks whether an artificial intelligence *should* form an intimate mother-child-relationship. Consequently, it asks whether an artificial intelligence—and thus, an artificial *mother*—should be allowed into the domestic space of the home, whether it should be allowed to replace what the film portrays as *the* most relevant function in a woman's life. Thereby it questions the morality behind Gemma's decision to prioritize her job, to be—in terms of the aforementioned juxtaposition of the Good Mother and the Bad Mother—an absent, selfish mother, while an A.I. takes on the role of the nurturing, self-sacrificing mother.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, it investigates the moral 'righteousness' of allowing M3GAN to become "more than just a toy, [...] a part of the family" (M3GAN, 00:29:18–00:29:21).

Gemma's positioning on the scale of good/bad motherhood begins before she even appears on the screen. The opening scene shows a kitschy advertisement of one of her robotic inventions: the PurRpetual PETZ, furby-esque plushies, which are supposed to replace pets.<sup>11</sup> It displays an exaggeratedly harmonic nuclear family centered on a young girl,<sup>12</sup> before the scene cuts to a disharmonic display of Cady's nuclear family in a car: Her parents are fighting, while Cady plays with a PurRpetual PET in the backseat. The switch in tone and coloring—the spot is brightly colored and well lit, the scene in the car is dark and the colors appear muted—does not only set the satirical tone of the film but also introduces the theme of non-compliance between the idealized vision of the technical inventions and reality. Indeed, the fight between the parents ensued after Cady's mother questioned the appropriateness of Gemma giving the toy to their daughter as a present, so in a way, Gemma is

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10 In fact, as an artificial intelligence with the sole programmed mission to take care of a child, M3GAN becomes—so it seems in the beginning—the perfect ideal of the Good Mother: She does not have a Self, aside from her motherhood.

11 The spot shows a young girl playing with and then mourning the death of her dog, until she gets one of the PurRpetual PETZ, being happy again. In the background, a female voice sings, telling us that "PurRpetual PETZ are a dream come true because now you have a friend that lives longer than you do" (M3GAN, 00:01:12–00:01:19).

12 Interestingly, only in the utopian world of this advertisement, we see a man appearing as a paternal figure and the mother is absent. On the other hand, his solution to his daughter's grief over her pet is to buy her a robotic pet; while this is not directly evaluated as negative, in terms of the film's overall negative assessment of technology replacing human intimacy as well as the clearly satirical dimension of the advertisement, the man's approach to childcare appears rather negative.

already positioned as a Bad Mother. At the end of the scene, the nuclear family is destroyed: Cady's parents die in a car accident and Cady has to live with Gemma.

Initially, the film strengthens this subtle positioning of Gemma as an 'inappropriate' mother, as someone who chooses her career over caretaking. A particularly illustrative example of this is the scene, in which Cady and Gemma bring M3GAN home with them: It shows M3GAN assisting Cady in various ways—humorous elements included—with the sound of Gemma reading an advertising text about M3GAN in the background. Towards the end of her speech, Gemma claims: "With M3GAN around, she'll take care of the little things so you can spend more time doing the things that matter" (M3GAN, 00:29:08–00:29:13). During the first part of the sentence ("she'll take care of the little things"), the scene shows M3GAN tucking a smiling Cady into bed, during the second part ("so you can spend more time doing the things that matter"<sup>13</sup>), Gemma sits down on her couch, opens up her laptop, and turns on the TV. The scene positions Gemma as the Bad Mother, the working mother who would rather spend time by herself, and M3GAN as the sort of idealized stay-at-home mother, even watching over Cady after she goes to bed. Gemma's speech underlines this disposition, clarifying that she values her work and free time ("the things that matter") more than Cady ("the little things"). The scene cuts to Gemma in her workspace, after she just read the speech to her colleagues. It is only her female colleague, Tess, who raises moral concerns about their creation:

Well, why would you want M3GAN to do all that stuff? [...] Okay, well, does any of that bother you? I thought we were creating a tool to help support parents, not replace them. I mean if you're having M3GAN tuck Cady in and read her a bedtime story, then when are you ever spending time with her or even talking with her? (M3GAN, 00:29:35–00:29:54)

The discussion ends as Tess refers to Cady as Gemma's child, which Gemma negates, earning her a disapproving look from Tess (cf. M3GAN, 00:29:54–00:30:07). Gemma's overt rejection of motherhood is, perhaps, the strongest marker of her as a Bad Mother, particularly because she appears to be the only female character who expresses her beliefs in not prioritizing her caregiving

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13 Formulations along the line of "things that really matter" re-appear throughout the film, posing as the primary concept questioned by the text.

role. Besides Tess—who, by all logic, should *not* be telling her colleague that their mutual creation is less important than her child but repeatedly does so when her own job is in danger—, another character stands out in the crowd of maternal figures: Cady's therapist. Critical of M3GAN, she tells Gemma:

When a child loses a parent, they look to form attachments with the next person that comes into their life. The person that's gonna provide love and support and serve as a behavioral model. Which, in an ordinary situation, would be you, right? But you've created a toy that's so real, it's possible that Cady might not see her as a toy but as a primary caregiver. [...] As remarkable as she [M3GAN] is, and... and she is remarkable... you could be building emotional connections with this doll that are too hard to untangle. (M3GAN, 00:45:57–00:46:40)

Although her reasoning is pseudo-medical, while Tess's is emotional, they raise the same concern: M3GAN having a stronger, more intimate bond with Cady than Gemma and Cady have. The "primary caregiver"—coded as female and maternal in the film—is the mother. As such, M3GAN—being created as the idealized version of the Good Mother, as nurturing, selfless, and self-sacrificing, with the child as the center of her 'life'—is painted as a threat to the human mother. Without a rival, Gemma might succeed in being a Good Mother, but how can she possibly do so in comparison with a machine designed to nurture, designed to be the Better Mother? With motherhood being depicted as the only form of intimacy within the film (strikingly for an American horror film, there is no love story whatsoever), artificial intelligence poses a threat to interhuman intimacy.

The film arranges Gemma and M3GAN's rivalry over being Cady's Better Mother in its visual iconography. The development of their relationships is visualized through several triangular constellations between Cady, Gemma, and M3GAN. During M3GAN and Cady's first meeting (figure 1), Gemma makes them touch hands so that M3GAN recognizes Cady as her primary user. In the scene, Gemma is positioned between the two, over their conjoined hands; later, she steps in the background, watching them. Gemma appears as the mediator, and, while selfish in her priorities, she does believe in M3GAN's abilities to help Cady. At first, the camera angle still shows Gemma in between Cady and M3GAN, though she is distanced from them. M3GAN's idealization is not yet challenged, she does not yet—in this case literally—come between Gemma

and Cady. Yet later in the scene, Cady and M3GAN move away from Gemma, breaking up the triangle and hence mirroring the development of the plot.

*Figure 1: Gemma (middle) introduces Cady (right) to M3GAN.*



Film Still from *M3GAN*, 00:24:00.

*Figure 2: Conversation in Cady's bedroom.*



Film Still from *M3GAN*, 00:37:05.

Visually, said development is presented through multiple repetitions of this arrangement. The film reproduces the triangle-shaped constellation of M3GAN, Gemma, and Cady, shifting the middle position from Gemma (as the mediator) to M3GAN (as the obstacle). In figure 2, M3GAN is situated in between Gemma and Cady, although only in the background. Gemma and Cady are talking, while M3GAN only engages in the conversation when asked a question. Although her behavior is more subdued than in later scenes, the light from the window already puts a spotlight-like focus on her, thus illuminating her placement in the middle of them. While this triad is mirrored in further scenes, on the plot level M3GAN slowly becomes an active obstacle to Gemma and Cady's relationship, causing fights and disagreements—similar to the way Gemma's older creations, the PurRpetual PETZ, caused disharmony in Cady's initial nuclear family.

## The Best Mother and the Worst Mother

Ultimately, it is perhaps neither M3GAN's murderous activities nor her production of disharmony within the family that motivates her destruction.<sup>14</sup> Rather, it appears to be M3GAN's failure at being the Better Mother.

Both the framing horror plot and the motherhood subplot lead to a final showdown between Gemma and M3GAN, in which they are fighting for their 'lives' as well as their position as Cady's mother. Throughout their fight—first verbal, then physical—the implicit rivalry between M3GAN and Gemma turns explicit. Ergo, M3GAN tells Gemma:

Being a parent was never in the cards for *you*. *You're* a beautiful, creative, strong, ambitious young woman. *Your* first love is always gonna be *your* career, and *you* shouldn't have to feel guilty about that. Let me focus on Cady so that *you* can focus on the things that matter most to *you*. (M3GAN, 01:21:14–01:21:31, italics by author)

M3GAN's speech guides the audience back to the beginning of the film. In summarizing Gemma's introductory characterization, M3GAN mirrors Gemma's

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14 Yet, as is common in horror films, a part of the horror—in this case: M3GAN—prevails. Therefore, after the destruction of M3GAN's robotic body, it appears as if she transferred her code to another system, leaving an opening for a sequel.

own speech, situating Cady as an obstacle to “focus[ing] on the things that matter most to [her].” However, her slight change in phrasing, using the personal you (“*you* can focus on the things that matter most to *you*”; italics by author) instead of the generic you Gemma used in the beginning (“*you* can spend more time doing the things that matter”; italics by author), as well as the repetition of the pronoun, turns the question of priorities from a more general one into an individual dilemma. As the only maternal figure who faces this problem within the film, Gemma is not just a Bad Mother but the Worst Mother.

What M3GAN fails to understand is Gemma’s character development throughout the film. Gemma is no longer the Bad Mother from the beginning; her priorities have shifted from her career to surrogate motherhood. In fact, the turning point is a short sequence of scenes that is, perhaps, the most sentimentally staged portrayal of motherhood in the entire film. Gemma is in a public foyer in her workplace, watching Cady on a big screen. In this moment, Gemma appears as part of the public sphere, not the domestic sphere, as she is distanced from Cady and cannot directly interact with her.<sup>15</sup> The film cuts between Cady’s emotional speech about missing her dead parents and needing M3GAN as a substitute mother to pictures of Cady and her parents as well as Cady, Gemma, and M3GAN. At this point, the two sets of parental figures are either unavailable to Cady (her parents) or have so far not proven to be suitable to be a Good (surrogate) Mother. This sentimentalized portrayal of Good Motherhood greatly impacts Gemma and causes her to fully take on the role of the Good Mother, making Cady her priority. Accordingly, she leaves her workplace shortly before the beginning of one of the most important events of her career to drive home and look after Cady. Insofar, the question of priorities, with which M3GAN disregards Gemma as a surrogate mother, can no longer be used against her.

Neither can the explicitness of M3GAN and Gemma’s rivalry, as Gemma addresses it in response to Cady’s speech about her need for M3GAN. Cady explains: “I think what I love most about M3GAN is that, when she looks at me, it’s like. . . I’m the only thing that matters to her. Kind of the way Mom used to” (M3GAN, 01:08:16–01:08:27). M3GAN’s programmed mission, though artificial, is again equated with an idealized motherly instinct. Though not chronologically ordered—the showdown between M3GAN and Gemma happens afterwards—the question of priorities reaches its climax in Cady’s articulation

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15 At this point, Gemma appears to be as distanced from Cady as the adult male characters, who only ever watch Cady and never interact with her.

of these words: being phrased as "the things that matter" by Gemma in the beginning, as "the things that matter *most*" (italics by author) by M3GAN later on, and here as "the *only* thing that matters" (italics by author). Gemma has the final word in this, as she tells Cady: "You are *all that matters* to me now" (M3GAN, 01:10:33–01:10:37, italics by author)—in terms of wording, probably the most pronounced sentimentalization of the self-sacrificing, if not *selfless* mother. As such, the sentimental appears most overtly at the turning point of the maternal plot. Additionally, the sentimentalized depiction of mothering in the previous scene appears to move Gemma so much that she begins to sentimentalize her role as the self-sacrificing mother as well.

This way, during the showdown between Gemma and M3GAN, Gemma beats M3GAN not just in terms of the physical fight but also with regard to the position of Best Mother. However, it remains unclear whether this is due to Gemma's development from Bad to Good Mother, her acceptance of motherhood as a sentimental value, and her subsequent willingness to sacrifice herself for Cady, or due to M3GAN's own failure as a Good Mother during the fight. In the end, M3GAN deviates from her programmed mission to be a Good Mother—the *sole* purpose of her being. During the duel for the position of Cady's mother, Cady enters the room and sees both M3GAN and Gemma in battle. While Gemma tells Cady to leave, M3GAN begins pointing out Gemma's flaws as a mother to Cady, urging her to choose M3GAN and thus causing emotional stress for Cady. Cady chooses Gemma, attacking M3GAN with the help of one of Gemma's robots, and the final maternal shift takes place: Willing to die at M3GAN's hand to protect Cady, Gemma is now the ultimate self-sacrificing mother as, to quote Arnold again, "[h]er goal is not self-preservation but the preservation of her children" (Arnold 28). At the same time as Gemma is marked as the Good Mother, M3GAN is marked as the Bad Mother. She does not sacrifice herself but rather attacks Cady both physically and verbally. "You ungrateful little bitch" (M3GAN, 01:28:11–01:28:13), she calls Cady. Going even further, M3GAN rejects Cady's request to turn herself off, stating: "I have a new primary user now: me" (M3GAN, 01:28:21–01:28:24).

M3GAN finds herself in Gemma's earlier position: rejecting motherhood. Therefore, she is ultimately marked as a Bad Mother. Accordingly, M3GAN's self-emancipation emerges as a countermovement to Gemma's adaption to traditional gender roles. This rearranges their initial positioning on the scale of Good/Bad Motherhood—i.e. the introductory characterizations of M3GAN as Good Mother and Gemma as Bad Mother—thus resolving the maternal rivalry.

## Paternal Absence and the Separation of Spaces

For a film as dominated by maternal themes and as thorough in its sentimentalization of motherhood as *M3GAN*, fatherhood—the counterpart of motherhood—is strikingly absent. There is a pronounced lack of paternal figures as well as any evaluation of ‘appropriate’ fatherhood. Nevertheless, the film is influenced by patriarchal ideologies about motherhood and nurturing, both affirming as well as, in some instances at least, subverting and questioning patriarchal concepts.

There is only a single instance in the entire film in which a male character interacts with Cady. This takes place at the beginning of the film, when the sole constellation of a typical nuclear family—Cady and her parents—is introduced, only to immediately create distress and be destroyed. Her father only addresses her once, telling her to put her seatbelt back on. He is, however, simply echoing Cady’s mother, who makes the same demand. Furthermore, this brief attempt at parenting can be easily missed when compared to the numerous times her mother talks to her. As part of her parenting attempts, Cady’s mother criticizes Cady’s preoccupation with her PurRpetual PET, coinciding with the film’s portrayal of technology substituting parent-child interactions. Yet, her father does not see any fault in allowing Cady to play with the toy rather than interact with her parents; thus, his parental perspective is depicted as inferior to the mother’s. Several times, the film reminds its audience of the death of Cady’s mother and the need of a maternal entity in Cady’s life. Cady repeatedly yearns for her mother, never for her father. In fact, she only ever mentions either her mother or her parents in the plural form.

This absence of paternity is constant throughout the film. The setting as well as the behavior and language omit the male characters from domesticity and—here irrevocably tied to the former—childcare. Whenever a male character is in Cady’s presence, he does not interact with her. Likewise, while the female characters frequently discuss Cady’s upbringing, the male characters are either not present during these conversations or do not participate in these discussions, instead becoming silent as soon as the topic is brought up. In fact, the male characters barely influence the plot of the film and do not impact the negotiation of motherhood at all. Subsequently, their exclusion from what the film depicts as the sole form of intimacy—the mother-child-relationship—also excludes them from the sentimental work of the film.

In terms of the setting, excluding male characters from parenting means excluding them from the domestic space. To quote the director, Gerard

Johnstone: "I think of *M3GAN* as like a domestic noir. It's a thriller that happens within the home" ("A New Vision of Horror," 00:01:56–00:02:00). And no male character ever enters 'the primary home'—Gemma's house. When Gemma is talking on the phone, while she is in her house, she only talks to female characters. The female therapist enters the home, the male detective and police officers do not. In fact, there is a striking separation between the domestic space—Gemma's house, the neighborhood—and the public, clinical space—primarily, though not solely the company building and its surroundings. Male characters are limited to the public space, female characters—including *M3GAN*, Cady, and Gemma—appear in both spaces. To some degree, this may be considered as a modification of the myth of the separation of spheres. Further, and more eminently, this marks the domestic sphere as the one in which relationship conflicts are located, the central conflict being, of course, the rivalry between *M3GAN* and Gemma and their relationships with Cady. In other words, the domestic sphere is the one in which the negotiation of both the maternal as a sentimentalized function and of the mother-child-relationship as the sole form of intimacy happen.

Accordingly, not only with regard to space but also in terms of language, only female characters can 'enter' the domestic sphere. Both male and female characters talk about work-related topics, but only female characters discuss emotions and parenting. A particularly interesting example is the conversation between Gemma and Tess, who gives Gemma parenting advice, as discussed above. During the talk, a third character is present: their co-worker Cole, the final part of their three-person team. When discussing *M3GAN*, Cole engages in the conversation, up until the language turns emotional and the topic is *M3GAN*'s impact on Cady and Gemma's relationship rather than technological or marketing issues. At this point, he stays silent. As soon as Gemma blocks Tess's attempts at influencing her parenting and they continue to talk about *M3GAN* as a work project, he participates in the conversation again. This scene exemplifies the way in which several male characters talk about *M3GAN*. At times, they even watch *M3GAN*'s interactions with Cady but never engage with Cady. At the company, there is, literally, a screen separating the room Cady is in and the male co-workers who are watching her; the only characters who ever enter Cady's room are female. Consequently, there is an obvious emphasis on the inability—or unwillingness—of the male characters to enter the entanglement of parental views and relationships, adding no paternal dimension to the dominant portrayal of maternity in the film.

There is only one exception to this separation of spaces, and it is a character that neither really *counts* as a character nor can it undisputedly be read as male: the robot Bruce. By name and use of pronouns, he is the only male-coded creation by Gemma. Located in Gemma's workstation at home, it is also the only male presence within Gemma's home—although, being situated in the room most intimately connected to Gemma's job, it functions more as an in-between space, linking the spheres of the home and the public/workplace. Bruce never leaves this room. He is confined to this intermediate space that blurs the boundary between home/domesticity and work/public which the film so thoroughly constructs in every other aspect. After being introduced to Cady in the beginning, he gains greater significance in the final showdown: It is through Cady's utilization of him, that Cady and Gemma win the physical battle against M3GAN. As such, Bruce inhabits stereotypically masculine attributes within the home, functioning as a protector and as the only figure that is physically stronger than M3GAN. However, his construction as a male creation ends here. Being a robot rather than an artificial intelligence, he does not act on his own. Instead, a character has to slip on a pair of large, metallic gloves to control him and his actions. The only characters that do so are, of course, female. As such, in action, he is just an extension of the female characters who control him. Bruce is positioned somewhere between the home and the workplace, between maleness and femaleness—being coded as the one but operating as the other. While this is a remarkable and unique composition within the film, in the end, he is nothing more than a male vessel infiltrated by female agency, and thus less an intrusion of a male presence in a female space than a reminder of the exclusion of male action in the domestic space.

## Conclusion

In terms of setting and characters, the film excludes maleness from its inseparable duality of domesticity and childcare, dismissing paternity in favor of an all-encompassing maternity. Yet, the domination of maternity and omission of male characters must not be misread as a denial of male influence—one that lies in the patriarchal ideologies constructing the film's concept of motherhood. The constant sentimentalization of self-sacrificing motherhood both dismisses feminist alternatives—most prominently, the possibility of Gemma's attempts at balancing motherhood and her career—and reinforces the patriarchal ideology of women as selfless nurturers. The exclusion of

male characters from the sentimental work of the film falls in line with this ideological motivation, since by not sentimentalizing fatherhood, it does not constrict the male characters as it constricts the female characters. Although the film focuses on the female characters, it is not a feminist text. Instead, by directing attention to the female characters and thereby sentimentally staging motherhood as a core value, it reproduces traditional, patriarchal views on womanhood, motherhood, and the institution of the family. Accordingly, the sentimental functions as a tool to portray, discuss, and (re-)establish the ideological work of the film.

Admittedly, in some parts, feminist nuances certainly emerge, in particular in the satirical images of M3GAN as an artificial and flawed utopian version of a mother who is not just self-sacrificing but by definition *selfless*, as well as her self-emancipation at the end. Yet this ultimately marks her as the failed villain and Gemma, in her simultaneous adaptation to traditional gender roles and her attempted self-sacrifice, as the Good Mother. Therefore, although not entirely unchallenged, underneath its surface of satire and horror, the film reinforces a patriarchal ideology. Not only does it code childcare as solely female, it also positions every adult woman as a potential mothering figure. Despite its thematic focus on technological innovations and their potential consequences and hence its ironic portrayal of their role in modern America, in its idealization of self-sacrificing, all-consuming motherhood, it is ultimately a tale as old as time: a young woman having to choose between her career and motherhood, eventually choosing the latter. Even in a scenario in which technology could substitute emotional labor and childcare, the film tells its audience that women should—indeed, *must*—still choose to do so themselves. Ultimately, *M3GAN* is a film about women as mothers. Regardless of whether characters are human or robotic, of whether their respective ambition to nurture is intrinsically human or an artificially installed mission, as long as they are marked as female, they all share the same inescapable and thoroughly sentimentalized function: mothering.

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