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Only Mom Can Save the World: Myths of Salvation and Destruction in Post-Apocalyptic Film

A version of this paper was originally given at the Motherhood to Motherhoods: Ideologies of the 'Feminine' conference at Chapman University in April 2023. It presents a comparative textual analysis of two recent films dealing with mothering in the post-apocalypse—A Quiet Place (2018) and Bird Box (2018)—to examine a new maternal myth taking shape, which I call “only mom can save the world.” This work is broken into four sections. The first section confronts the irrefutability of white, heteronormative family structure in these works. The second section examines maternal subjectivity on screen. The third section deals with maternal regret, and the fourth section questions “mother love” as representative of a ubiquitous and unfailing survival strategy. I argue that although these films ostensibly present very different formulations of motherhood, they both ultimately work to affirm or re-establish white, middle-class heteronormative motherhood as the most vital form of emotional and social connection in the face of a collapsing world. Current myths of motherhood tell us that when deployed correctly, “mother love” has the power to shape the future. Considering contemporary anxieties surrounding ecological and economic disasters in our world, the need to examine these problematic myths takes on new weight and immediacy.

Introduction

What does it mean to mother at the end of the world? In our current moment of economic and ecological disaster, many caregivers are not only contending with the conventional questions of mothering according to stringent heteronormative dictates but also grappling with the perceived responsibility of safeguarding the future of humanity. This paper presents a comparative textual analysis of two films dealing with mothering in the post-apocalypse: *A Quiet Place* (2018) and *Bird Box* (2018). As these recent and decidedly

popular films demonstrate, dominant ideologies of normative motherhood and its perceived importance in our culture have remained ubiquitously dogmatic in popular media, despite the appearance of changing societal values surrounding motherhood. By looking at these films alongside works dealing with various iterations of normative motherhood in North America, as well as maternal subjectivity and regret, I argue that although these films ostensibly present different formulations of motherhood, they both ultimately work to affirm or reestablish white, middle-class heteronormative motherhood as the most vital form of emotional and social connection in the face of a collapsing world.

In her chapter “The Myths of Motherhood,” Shari L. Thurer asserts that current myths of motherhood tell us that “the precise dose of a mother’s love, punctually delivered, is the central factor in the well-being of the next generation, that is, the future” (191). This responsibility takes on new weight and immediacy when considered within the context of contemporary anxieties surrounding ecological and economic disaster. By examining these films in the context of prevalent constructions of normative motherhood in our immediate historical moment, we may see a new myth taking shape: Only mom can save the world.

White, Heteronormative Family Structure as Indestructible and Irrefutable

In *A Quiet Place*, the post-apocalyptic world is plagued by blind, clawed, fast-moving creatures who have incredibly acute hearing and hunt by sound alone. This movie follows one family: a father, a pregnant mother, their oldest daughter, and their younger son. Still reeling from the death of their third child a year earlier, the family readies itself for the imminent birth of the latest child and grapples with feelings of guilt and alienation in an almost idyllic farmhouse setting.

The film opens with the Abbot family scavenging for supplies in a run-down supermarket. Their normative family roles are immediately established. The mother cares for her sick son, while the oldest daughter cares for the youngest son. The father arrives with supplies he has scavenged elsewhere, including a gift of garden shears for the daughter. Soon after, he gently scolds the youngest son for picking up a potentially noisy toy, and the son is then comforted by the mother with a beatific smile and a gentle tousle of his hair. What *A Quiet Place* asserts from the first scene, and continues to reassert throughout, is that in the rubble of the apocalypse, the last vestige of humanity is the normative nuclear family.

This formation of the family—headed by one father to act as protector and provider and one mother to act as a caregiver (O’Reilly, “Normative Mother-

hood” 478)—has become so normalized that it is not only presented as a touchstone of normalcy in the post-apocalyptic setting of the film, but it is also assumed to outlive the rest of human culture and social ordering, without question or need of narrative explanation. In “The New Momism,” Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels assert that “the white, upper-middle-class, married-with-children nuclear family remains as dominant as a Humvee, barreling through the media and forcing images of other, different, and just as legitimate family arrangements off to the side” (Douglas and Michaels 353). Indeed, the familial travails of the Abbots take centre stage and are linked explicitly with their experience of the post-apocalyptic space. The only way for them to survive is to resolve their heteronormative family structure and cohesion, somewhat ruptured after the death of the youngest child. In *A Quiet Place*, the nuclear family is presented as the only visible—and therefore only viable—means of survival in an unfamiliar world.

In *Bird Box*, the protagonist is immediately presented as an outlaw mother who needs to be corralled into normative motherhood. The film’s narrative oscillates between the unfolding events of the apocalypse and the events of five years in the future. Sandra Bullock plays Malorie, a single, pregnant woman who experiences open regret about her pregnancy. The apocalyptic creatures in this film operate through sight, as anyone who views them finds themselves inexorably compelled towards suicide. Malorie finds herself ostensibly trapped in a house with an unlikely group of people, one of whom gives birth on the same day as she does and dies soon after. The timeline in the future sees Malorie and two five-year-old children, whom she calls “Boy” and “Girl” undertaking a long and treacherous journey down a river towards a supposed sanctuary.

Within the first few minutes of the movie, before the apocalyptic event, we see a pregnant Malorie visited by her sister, Jessica, who acts as a caretaker to her immature artist sister. She looks around the house-turned-studio crowded with paintings and tells Malorie that she should not have any more roommates after the last one, Ryan. When Malorie responds that he is “not a roommate,” implying that he is the biological father of her baby, her sister responds harshly, “Uh, it turns out he kinda was. Anyway, you can’t raise a kid here. Where would you even put her?” Our introduction to Malorie is rooted in her difference from normative constructions of family and motherhood.

Malorie is established as the biting yet still likable rebel, and what immediately establishes her as rebellious—accompanied by the signifiers of the alternative music she has blaring and the paint-splattered overalls—is her reluctance to mother within a heteronormative context, or even at all. “Normative motherhood,” writes O’Reilly, “although representative of very few women’s lived identities and experiences of mothering, is considered the normal and natural maternal experience: to mother otherwise is to be abnormal

or unnatural” (“Normative Motherhood” 478). Malorie’s “abnormality” at the start of the film—shown through her age (Sandra Bullock was 54 at the time this movie was made), her singleness, her living space, and her lack of nurturance of any kind—is established as the starting point of her character arc. It is clear from the beginning that her arc is not leading her towards alternative mothering but rather towards learning and growing as a character in a way that aligns her with normative motherhood ideals. Her consistent resistance to normative motherhood and family formation is coded as immaturity and motherhood as her character’s call to action.

These films present drastically different family formations and mothers at their centres: one squarely in line with normative dictates and one falling outside. However, one is presented as noble and courageous, a shelter from the harsh world outside, while the other is presented as severe, damaged, and needing emotional growth. In “The New Momism,” Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels call attention to “dominant media imagery” that “serves to divide us by age and race and ‘lifestyle choices,’ and seeks to tame us all by reinforcing one narrow, homogenized, upper-middle-class, corporately-defined definition of motherhood” (353). Both these films reinforce these moralizing meditations on motherhood, which are meant to lead viewers to the same conclusion: Normative motherhood is the only way to mother successfully and only the heteronormative nuclear family structure provides safety and stability in times of crisis.

Mother Is Mother, and That Is All

These films present a familiar lack of maternal subjectivity, albeit from different angles. Again, *A Quiet Place* provides the most straightforward example of the monolithic mother; her identity is negotiated only through her role within normative motherhood. The mother, who is given the name “Evelyn” only as the credits roll, is the barefoot angel of the film, showing nothing but love, gratitude, and strength as she cradles her pregnant belly and moves through her bucolic life in flowing dresses. More importantly, there is not a single scene featuring the mother in *A Quiet Place* in which she is not providing acts of service for her family. *Every single action* we see her take throughout the film is done for the benefit of others. She is shown doing laundry, hanging it out to dry, cooking, serving dinner, cleaning, arranging the baby’s room, teaching a math lesson to her son, comforting her children and her husband, and protecting her kids. Even in her one moment of peace, she listens to her baby’s heartbeat through a stethoscope to find tranquillity.

Thurer’s description of the experience of normative motherhood sheds light on Evelyn’s lack of subjectivity:

Even as mother is all-powerful, she ceases to exist. She exists bodily, of course, but her needs as a person become null and void. On delivering a child, a woman becomes a factotum, a life-support system. Her personal desires either evaporate or metamorphose so that they are identical with those of her infant. Once she attains motherhood, a woman must hand in her point of view. (191)

While Evelyn has control over the minute workings of the lives of her family, she is rendered almost invisible as a character outside of her inseparable roles as mother and wife. She has no desires, fears, or joys outside of her family. Even as the film defines her as a wife and mother alone, Evelyn herself espouses these definitions. Just after giving birth, she asks her husband tearfully, “Who are we if we can’t protect them?”

Similarly, in *Bird Box*, Malorie responds to criticism of her lack of maternal affection with the aggressive assertion: “Every single decision I have made has been for them. Every. Single. One.” The film’s plot is centred on her pregnancy and her performance of motherhood, as she struggles to overcome experiences that are constructed by the narrative as poor parenting and fear of connection rather than as a battle to survive an untenable situation with two small children in her care. In “Faking Motherhood: The Mask Revealed,” Susan Maushart writes the following about motherhood: “Instead of being seen as something we do, the work of mothering is something we are: the dancer becomes the dance” (280). In *Bird Box*, Malorie is consistently defined by her opposition or resistance to motherhood, specifically. As the film defines her as a mother, it also paradoxically defines her as a not-mother, the very antithesis of constructions of normative motherhood.

Responding to her harsh attitude towards the children, Malorie’s partner Tom says, “You need to love them, knowing that you could lose them at any second. Okay? They deserve dreams, they deserve love, they deserve hope, they deserve a mother. They deserve a mother.” Not only are the words “dreams,” “love,” and “hope” presented with the same lexical weight within the sentence as the word “mother,” but they are also conditional upon the latter. The repetition of the last line signals to the audience that Malorie—despite giving birth to one child, informally adopting the other, and feeding, clothing, and keeping them safe—is not allowed the title of mother because she has not been mothering according to normative standards, and has also therefore been denying her children “dreams,” “hope,” and “love.”

There is a cognitive dissonance present in the film: Malorie is simultaneously defined by her relationship to motherhood while also being denied the mother identity. She exists in a no woman’s land, where she is a “dancer” denied the “dance,” unable to construct an individual subjectivity outside of motherhood, nor gain access to even this identity. In “Maternal Regret,” O’Reilly writes, “As the normative script positions motherhood as a woman’s purpose and

fulfillment, it simultaneously and unsurprisingly delineates non-motherhood as absence and meaninglessness” (568). In essence, Malorie is either a mother—not just by caregiving but within the bounds of normative motherhood—or she is nothing.

Her entire trajectory leads to the moment of resolution—the last line of the film. After finally naming the children, she says “And I am their mother.” In this moment, she can be seen as finally relinquishing her sense of self—her name—to provide selfhood to the children. This loss of identity is framed as a happy ending in *Bird Box*. Malorie has finally become “mother,” as she has been called to be to safeguard the next generation. If “mother love” is all that can save the world, the mother must be mother alone and no one else. Saving the world, like raising the children, is her full-time job and requires the sacrifice of her identity and her sense of self.

Erasure and Eradication of Maternal Regret

Malorie is not allowed the title of “mother” until the film’s end partially because of her experience with maternal regret. It is clear from the start that Malorie does not want to be a mother. Early on in the film, before the apocalyptic event, her sister and OBGYN tease her jointly when she calls her pregnancy a “condition.” “Oh, don’t you know,” says the sister jokingly to the doctor, “if you don’t acknowledge a thing, it just goes away.” The doctor smiles and jokes back: “Oh really? All this time I had no idea.” In the first scholarly study of maternal regret, Orna Donath describes a phenomenon she calls “passive decision making,” signalled in part by the way many women described motherhood as simply happening to them rather than being something in which they were participants (O’Reilly, “Maternal Regret” 569). Malorie seems to fall neatly into this category. Both her doctor and sister tease her reaction to pregnancy as something that just happened to her and as something about which she has not yet made a concrete choice. We are introduced to Malorie after abortion is no longer an option (and is not mentioned at all); in a sense, the choice presented to her is either to embrace normative motherhood fully or to relinquish her child. The doctor, after telling her she cannot simply “ignore it and hope it goes away,” hands Malorie a pamphlet on adoption.

She is told in so many ways by the women around her that motherhood is natural and instinctual. This is a narrative of biological destiny that is all too familiar to folks with uteruses, one that is essential to patriarchal control and asserts that birth and mothering are not only the only road to true fulfillment, but that we will naturally and instinctively know exactly what we are doing when we get there. Because Malorie does not expect the “immediate love affair” with her baby that her (apparently childless) sister predicts, she is already deemed unnatural and unfit. “When a horse gets pregnant it knows

right away,” says her sister. “It changes the way it eats. It changes its gait. It bites all the other horses who come too close.” Here, her sister calls upon that narrative of biological destiny, implying that because it is the “natural” order of things, her sister will of course love her baby and know how to care for it. O’Reilly writes the following on maternal regret:

To be a non-mother is ... to go off script with no story to be told. Simultaneously, normative motherhood renders maternal regret inconceivable and unimaginable: how can you regret something that is naturally ordained, freely chosen, and simply meant to be? Maternal regret subverts and disrupts normative motherhood and in particular, its mandate of essentialization; for if motherhood was truly natural, chosen, and supposed to happen, there could not be regret. (“Maternal Regret” 569)

Malorie’s maternal regret is effectively erased by those around her and is sterilized by the film as a general fear of love and connection to other people. As soon as she reconciles these feelings at the film’s turning point, she can love the children and show them nurturance and affection without hesitation. This aligns with the commonly-held notion that maternal regret is a phase to be moved through, a test to be passed. Once Malorie has passed this test, she can become a normative mother and save her children’s lives.

In *A Quiet Place*, there is no maternal regret and not a shred of maternal ambivalence, even at the prospect of giving birth in a basement as silently as possible and then raising that child amid an apocalypse in which the slightest sound may end in grisly death. The mother adheres entirely to the dictates of normative motherhood and to the signifiers of “natural living.” Such adherence anchors her to what O’Reilly calls “naturalization,” which assumes that “maternity is natural to women—that is, all women naturally know how to mother—and that the work of mothering is driven by instinct rather than intelligence and developed by habit rather than skill” (478). Evelyn embodies the normalized version of motherhood to which the sister in *Bird Box* alludes. Motherhood is natural. It is biological destiny. Horses do not regret motherhood. They simply know now what their life’s purpose is and adjust according to what “nature” dictates, as Evelyn does. In a discursive loop of creation and confirmation, this ideology of motherhood confirms our notions that maternal regret is an aberration, and that if we are confronted with maternal regret, as we are at the start of *Bird Box*, it is merely a phase of “growing pains” before the ultimate form of motherhood—as represented in *A Quiet Place*—is reached.

Evelyn’s passive acceptance of her role without qualm or question and Malorie’s ultimate and complete overcoming of her negative feelings towards pregnancy and motherhood both erase maternal regret and confirm normative

motherhood as the only available way to mother. These versions of mothers in popular media—both of which were written by men, not incidentally—are a form of control over women, which forces them to ignore or resent their feelings. O'Reilly asserts that the controlling and coercive pressure we put on mothers and people who mother forces them to hide feelings of maternal regret, which have become undoubtedly “tabooed” (570). In other words, as Maushart puts it, “Quite simply, what we see of motherhood is not what we get. As a result, the conviction that we are not measuring up becomes almost inevitable” (277). The media we consume plays a huge role in the creation and propagation of our social discourse, and what stories like this tell us is that maternal regret is not only impossible but also irreconcilable to a world teetering on the brink.

Mother Love Must Save the Family; Mother Love Must Save Us All

Social, cultural, and historical tensions shape the stories we tell, and those we choose not to. As Thurer explains, “The good mother is reinvented as each age or society defines her anew, in its own terms, according to its own mythology” (190). In a world on the edge of economic and ecological collapse, where stories of disaster and survival proliferate, what stories are we telling about mothers? I argue that the perceived biological destiny of motherhood now includes the mandate that mothers are responsible for the future of the human race.

In *A Quiet Place*, both the eldest daughter and Evelyn feel responsible for the death of the youngest son. Much of the tension in the film comes from their insecurities about this guilt around the father, specifically. Immediately after telling her husband that their new baby is a boy, Evelyn says of their deceased son: “I could have carried him. He was so heavy. I can still feel the weight in my arms, small but so heavy. And my hands were free. I was carrying the pack but my hands were free. I could have carried him. I should have carried him.” The husband says nothing to assuage his wife’s guilt, only “you have to stop.” As Thurer asserts, “Today, mother love has achieved the status of a moral imperative. Our current myth holds that the wellbeing of our children depends almost entirely on the quality of their upbringing (read mother, since it is she who usually has primary responsibility for raising children)” (190). The film’s logic suggests not that the mother is unjustly blaming herself, but in fact that it was her failure to carry her son that led to his death, and the lesson she has learned is that she must devote every moment of her life to caring for their children if she wants them to survive. This lesson, articulated by the mother before the father’s ultimate sacrifice, takes on new meaning in her subsequent single motherhood. It is she who must focus exclusively on the wellbeing of the children now. Even the minor comfort and companionship offered by the

husband is materially absent now, and the illusion that it was not a lesson for her alone is dissolved.

Many maternal theorists indicate a relationship between the directives of normative motherhood, the functioning of the state, and the maintenance of socioeconomic divisions. In their chapter, “It’s Only Natural,” Walkerdine and Lucey write that “Current ideas about children as having needs to be met by a mother are not universal, timeless laws, but were developed in specific historical and political conditions, which make mothering a function that is central to the way our modern state educational and social welfare practices operate” (123). Furthermore, it is mothers, specifically, who are seen as responsible for whether or not their children succeed under neoliberalism (O’Reilly, “Normative Motherhood” 488). In our current cultural climate, we might push this even further and say that rising anxieties about the precarity of global capitalism and the rapid deterioration of our livable ecological environments have meant that it is not only the “success” of children for which mothers are deemed responsible but also their very survival in an untenable situation. When taken to its most extreme, which these films among countless others do, we are presented with the argument that normative motherhood and its particular brand of attendant “mother love” is what will save the human race.

At the start of *Bird Box*, Malorie gives a stern speech to the children: “You have to do every single thing I say, or we will not make it. Understand? Under no circumstance are you allowed to take off your blindfold. If you find that you have, I will hurt you. Do you understand? ... If you look, you will die.” This immediate introduction to Malorie’s parenting is no doubt meant to shock audiences, both in terms of content and delivery, which is harsh, clipped, and without comfort. It is in direct opposition to the “sensitive mother” Walkerdine and Lucey outline:

The sensitive mother ... hides the fear, the spectre of authoritarianism, or rebellion which ensue if the child realizes herself to be powerless. This powerlessness must be hidden from her at all costs. At risk is not only what is counted in terms of the development of the child, but also the smooth-running society peopled by those who do not believe they are powerless, who believe they have some control. (126)

In this case, it is not a fear of authoritarianism or rebellion that the children should be shielded from, according to normative definitions of motherhood, but the fear of the creatures. Instead, Malorie judges that the best way to keep the children safe is to ensure they are afraid—both of her and the creatures.

This instance is ultimately rectified in a moment of redemption at the film’s climax after Malorie rouses from a hard fall in the woods near the sanctuary and realizes that the creatures are ordering the children to remove their

blindfolds in her severe voice. She calls out to them, trying to order them not to take off their blindfolds. She finds Boy, who is ringing a bell, and when she calls out to Girl, he says, “She’s scared of you.” This is the second major turning point for Malorie, and in this moment, she calls out, “I’m so sorry, sweet Girl. I’m so sorry. I was wrong; I shouldn’t have been so harsh. I shouldn’t have stopped you from playing. I shouldn’t have ended Tom’s story, because it wasn’t finished!” At this moment, desperate to keep Girl safe, she sobs out an ending to the story her partner had tried to tell the children several scenes earlier, in which they are all together and happy. When Girl finally comes to her, she hugs them both close and whispers, “I love you so much” over and over.

Thurer asserts the following: “The current ideology of good mothering is not only spurious, it is oblivious of a mother’s desires, limitations, and context, and when things go wrong, she tends to get blamed. This has resulted in a level of confusion and self-consciousness among mothers that their predecessors never knew” (188). What the ending of this film tells us in Malorie only being able to save both of the children and get them to the sanctuary through an expression of her “mother love,” is that there is no context in which a mother might act outside of the bounds of normative motherhood and still ensure her children’s survival. Malorie’s severity, employed to keep the children safe, is shown to be the wrong way, and in fact damaging, as it was almost weaponized by the creatures to kill the children.

What is at stake is not simply Malorie’s ability to mother within acceptable parameters, but the end of the world. These conflicts become inexorably entwined. As Thurer points out, “How our children turn out has become the final judgment of our lives” (188). The pull between safety and utter destruction is boiled down to the question of whether or not Malorie will overcome her fear and learn to become a normative mother—to love her children “properly.” For the bulk of the film, Malorie seems to be operating under the idea that motherhood and “motherly love,” as we know them under normative standards, are incommensurate with the world in which she is trying to navigate with two small children in tow. What the film ultimately argues in disproving her is that “mother love” is in fact what we need to survive.

O’Reilly asserts that “The demands made on mothers today are unparalleled in history” (“Normative Motherhood” 485). Indeed, in North America, mothers are often seen as solely responsible for the wellbeing of their children, with less support and higher demands. As Abigail L. Palko argues in “Monstrous Mothers,” “Positioning mothers [as individually responsible] allows us to ignore any obligations we ourselves bear with respect to the horrors of the modern world” (583). In our current historical moment, in which our economic and ecological future is uncertain, when we say that our hopes lie in future generations, what ghosts are we creating of the mothers who raise them? And to that end, how many parents are being effectively

removed from conversations about human futurity when we insist on a white, heteronormative framework of caregiving? Are we building another myth with mother at the centre in which she is invisible yet wholly responsible? And what terrible and consuming blame rests on the other side of that massive responsibility? In other words, when we say that children are our future, what we are really saying is that only mom can save the world.

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