

# Darren Aronofsky's *mother!*: Entirely misconceived

By Kevin Martinez  
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American director Darren Aronofsky's *mother!* is the story of a couple, played by Javier Bardem and Jennifer Lawrence. The characters' names are never revealed and the film apparently is meant as an allegory, although precisely what kind is anyone's guess. "Him" (Bardem) is a writer going through a case of writer's block and "mother" (Lawrence) is left by herself renovating their house.

An older man played by Ed Harris shows up. The man says he is a doctor and asks the couple if they are hosting a bed and breakfast. Him implausibly agrees to take him in, much to the anger of mother. The man is joined by his wife (Michelle Pfeiffer), who reveals that her husband is actually dying and wants to see the writer before he passes away.

The wife is rude to mother, but that does stop Him from allowing them both to stay. Eventually, the second couple is joined by their two sons (Domhnall Gleeson and Brian Gleeson, actual brothers), who begin a bitter argument in the house over a will, with one son ultimately killing the other. Mother is left alone to clean up the mess, but notices that the bloodstain on the floor never washes away. (Paradise, God, Mother Earth, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, etc. ...?)

A grieving party arrives at the house and begins taking advantage of mother's hospitality. The guests do as they please in the house and no one seems to care except her. She eventually loses her patience and screams for everyone to leave, blaming Him.

Mother becomes pregnant, and her husband is inspired to write another novel. The book is a success, and soon fans descend on the house, leading to more unwanted company. The newfound guests engage in rituals and worship Him as a God-like figure. The third act of the film descends into an apocalyptic war zone of sorts.

If the plot of *mother!* sounds absurd and self-indulgent, that's because it is. Even the film's title comes in for

misuse, with the lower-case "m" and exclamation point.

Even writing about *mother!* is painful.

One does not precisely know where to begin. Lawrence, Bardem, Harris, and Pfeiffer are all fine actors, but attractive faces and intriguing personalities are certainly not enough by themselves to carry a film. Much has been made of the acting, but here it simply strains. Lawrence seems to be hitting one or two notes the entire time, constantly yelling at people to leave or resenting her husband for allowing strangers to stay.

Nothing adds up. Why does Bardem's character insist on having people stay? Why is Lawrence's character even attracted to him (or Him) as a person (or God)? For all the talk about writing and "inspiration," why does the audience never hear a single line of the author's work? Why, after a brutal fight in which someone is killed, are the authorities not called in to investigate? Why, one wants to know in a practical frame of mind, does no one here own a cell phone?

Aronofsky's film is divorced from real life, the concrete, recognizable life of our time. None of the characters has any compelling motive to do anything except follow the whims of the script, as threadbare as that is. Aronofsky may argue that the actions are not supposed to make sense, that they follow the pattern of a dream, but this is sophistry. Dreams too have a psychological and social logic, and an artist has the responsibility to do more than heap confusion on the screen.

Artists can be as lyrical and surreal as they like, but for their work to have any enduring impact, they have to say something. There has to be *some* connection to the real world as it is actually experienced by the population at large.

This reviewer has only seen three of Aronofsky's films, the overwrought *Black Swan* (2010), *The Wrestler* (2008) and his claim to fame, the vastly overrated *Requiem for a*

*Dream*(2000). For all its faults and limitations, only *Wrestler*, starring Mickey Rourke as a washed-up professional wrestler, had anything going for it. Not surprisingly, a film that shed some light, however dim it was, on social reality had the most depth and emotional connectivity.

Here in *mother!* Aronofsky seems to be deliberately provoking audience members to leave their seats, as yours truly was tempted to do on more than one occasion. There is no musical score in the film, only the sound of creaking floorboards. Almost nothing to relieve the forced tension and pointless sense of unease.

It may well be that Aronofsky has strong feelings and opinions about the world. He told *The Frame* in an interview that *mother!* “came very much from a place of a lot of frustration and I guess a certain amount of impotent rage on what was going on in the world. I just kind of took all that passion that I was thinking of outside of my filmmaking work and tried to turn it into a story.”

However, a convincing drama requires more than rage and frustration. The artist has to know and feel something significant about the world (which involves analysis and criticism, and actual study!) and be able to transform that knowledge and feeling into concrete images that correspond to the “the secret code inherent in things, people and events” (Aleksandr Voronsky). Blind intuition, wild impressionism, subjectivism and irrationalism made into a program, à la Lars von Trier and others, are more useless and counterproductive in our tense, complex and difficult days than ever.

Aronofsky provides some insight into his thought process when he says in lazy, “post-modernist” fashion: “When I was trying to tell the history or the story of people on Mother Earth, I was like, ‘Oh, the Bible could be a really kind of good blueprint to sort of hang all these stories.’ Whatever you believe, it doesn’t matter, but there’s power in those stories because we can relate to them and they have different types of meanings for different types of people.”

Speaking of the recent hurricane disasters, Aronofsky says revealingly, “I mean, it’s depressing as all hell. Outside of this, I’m on the Board of Directors of the Sierra Club so I’m reading everything that’s going on. Two years ago, when I was writing this, it was incredibly heartbreaking. I talk about my grandparents came to this country to give me a better life. And I look at my son and I’m scared.”

The problem here is that Aronofsky has lost his head delving into these problems. He claims to be “basically

~~Flod~~ holding up a mirror to what's going on,” but what he’s “basically” holding a mirror up to is the hysteria of sections of the middle class. He is overwhelmed by events and passes that on to his viewers.

Film critics who should know better have defended Aronofsky. As is often the case in America, first there is the atrocity, as when a certain lowlife becomes president or an appalling film makes waves, and then there is the complacency encouraged by the establishment over said atrocity.

How else can one explain comments like A.O. Scott of the *New York Times* when he claims, “Don’t listen to anyone who natters on about how intense or disturbing this movie is; it’s a hoot!”? Or what about Owen Gleiberman of *Variety*, when he writes, “By all means, go to *mother!* and enjoy its roller-coaster-of-weird exhibitionism. But be afraid, very afraid, only if you’re hoping to see a movie that’s as honestly disquieting as it is showy”?

The public response and poor box office receipts were not what Aronofsky was hoping for, and he lamented in the same interview that the moviegoing public rejected science: “You have other people who basically believe in the power of a iPhone that they can communicate to 35 million people in a blink of an eye, yet they don’t believe in science in other ways.”

He continued, “It has as many people believe in it as believe in gravity. And it scares me and it’s time to start screaming. So I wanted to howl. And this was my howl. And some people are not going to want to listen to it. That’s cool.”

Forgive us, Mr. Aronofsky, if the working and thinking part of the population have better things to do than sit through two hours of this foolishness.

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