



Katerina Kolozova

# On Manchevski's Mothers: An Anatomy of Misogyny

*Mothers is a masterful edifice of a narrative which "speaks to everyone," yet conveys a realization of a highly complex entanglement of metaphysics and bodily experience which virtually always escapes the commonsensical mind.*

## 1. Femininity vs. Motherhood

The figures of femininity appearing in the Milcho Manchevski's film *Mothers* (2010) are presented in the following temporal order: a young girl, a young woman as a sexual (though not maternal) subject, an old woman in her post-reproductive years, and, finally, mothers. The section of the film which deals with figures of motherhood is not only executed in documentary style but literally is a documentary. The first two sections of the film, constituting separate stories, are fictional. The main characters in the first section are two little girls who create a fictional story within a fictional story: based on a rumor of an alleged flasher they create a story of the imagined flasher and give false testimony at a police station in Skopje. They end up knowingly accusing an evidently innocent person. In the final section of the film, the director explores an actual case of three women who were tortured, raped, and murdered in the small Macedonian town of Kichevo between 2005 and 2008. The victims (Mitra Simjanoska, found dead in January, 2005, Ljubica Licoska, murdered in February, 2007 and Zivana Temelkoska, murdered in May, 2008) were all working-class mothers in their late fifties to mid-sixties.

The brutality of the acts of torture, rape and murder culminating with the mutilation of the victims' bodies intimates the inextricability of sexuality and destructive violence in a man with sadistic fixation on the image of the mother. Purportedly, the convicted perpetrator, journalist Vlado Taneski, had traumatic childhood experiences with his allegedly emotionally absent, aggressive and promiscuous mother. The film seems to leave open the question of his guilt, to some extent. Vlado Taneski or, for that matter, the "invisible perpetrator" is portrayed as a heterosexual man motivated by sexualized hate for women who are immediately and most pronouncedly identified as "mothers." The victims are all reduced to and primarily described by their roles as mothers by the witnesses, family members, officials and experts featured in the mini-documentary embedded in the last part of the film.

There seems to be a structural rule behind the narrative that situates pre- and post-reproductive femininity in the realm of fiction, whereas maternal femininity, including its sexualization (together with the violence it invites), is placed within the most brutal form of a representation of reality. And that reality is one of utmost physical brutality: violence, femininity as sexual reproduction, aging of the female body, and murder and fragmentation (mutilation) of the body. Fabulation of femininity is enabled by the erasure or suppression—or, simply, invisibility—of the potentiality of maternity and of a transformation of the female body into a maternal one. The little girls' fables of the "maniac" are silly and innocent, and their cruelty of accusing an innocent man seems to be an almost anecdotal little incident, funny in its folkloric and humoresque depiction, reminiscent of Fellini's *Amarcord*.

In the second part of the film, the young woman's sexual pleasures seem to be coupled with the obscene humor of the old woman, who seems to be modeled after the mythic character of Baubo. In Greek mythology, and most prominently in the myth of Demeter and Persephone, Baubo appears as the goddess of female sexual liberation, manifesting herself as an old woman capable of provoking laughter through her obscene jokes even in those most deeply depressed or those immersed in most intense states of mourning (such as Demeter's, which was provoked by the abduction of her daughter Persephone by the god of death, Hades). The old woman in the film, addressed by all of the characters as "majche" ("grandma"), is near death by the fact of her very age and by the absolute solitude of her existence. She is also in constant proximity to death by witnessing it among her neighbors, her relatives, and all of the past villagers (those who have not emigrated) whom she has buried and mourned. This section of the film finishes with her having to witness the decay of the body of an old man, her only neighbor and brother and only other inhabitant of the abandoned village where she lives. She is also the one who has to bury him, as there is no one else to do it. She is helped in the labor of burying her brother by the young woman, who returns to visit and show her the documentary about village life that she and her partner had made.

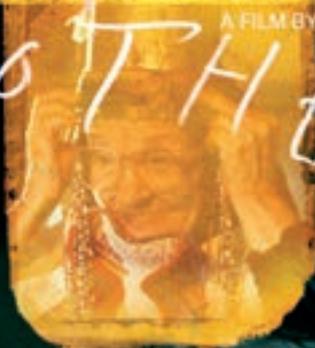
The fabulation of female sexual desire and desirability incarnated by the character of young Ana is inextricable from the fabulation of female sexual liberty expressed as obscene laughter. The joke the old woman makes, "The dick has no end" (*Kuro kraj nema*) provokes liberating yet unsettling laughter from young Ana and her partner as the old woman's obscene, somewhat morbid laughter in abandoned Mariovo seems unstoppable. Her laughter is one of someone looking death in the eye; her eyes no longer contain sexual desire nor do they provoke it. Her eyes tell the story of the death of sex, the death of sexual pleasures that once lived and are now extinguished in her aged body. Her laughter following "The dick has no end" suggests the absence of what once was the experience of those pleasures. Those past pleasures, referenced by the obscene laughter, seem to be obscene themselves. They seem so because they are dead, uttered by someone who is looking death in the eye, voiced by someone waiting for her own death (and for the death of the old man that she knows she will bury with her own hands). The voicing sounds like a distant echo: she is alone in the deserted village, her voice and laughter rough. She seems distant, even alien while she is displaying her pre-modern folkloric garments and adornments associated with marriage and entry into sexuality (which in her youth was always a reproductive sexuality).





A FILM BY MILCHO MANCHEVSKI

# MOTHERS



A CINEMA FILM PRODUCTION IN COOPERATION WITH THE FILM CENTRE OF THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA AND THE FILM CENTRE OF THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA. THE FILM IS A CO-PRODUCTION OF THE FILM CENTRE OF THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA AND THE FILM CENTRE OF THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA. THE FILM IS A CO-PRODUCTION OF THE FILM CENTRE OF THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA AND THE FILM CENTRE OF THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA.

CASTING AND STYLING: OLIVIERA JUKY. COSTUME DESIGNER: ANITA STANISHEVA. HAIR: ANITA STANISHEVA. MAKEUP: ANITA STANISHEVA. PRODUCTION DESIGNER: ANITA STANISHEVA. EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: ANITA STANISHEVA, ANITA STANISHEVA. PRODUCED BY ANITA STANISHEVA. DIRECTED BY ANITA STANISHEVA. WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY ANITA STANISHEVA.





As in all of Manchevski's films, we once again find a simple myth structure behind a dense narrative and rich dialogue of non-pretentious, everyday language. And once more, sexuality and death are closely linked. In *Mothers*, Manchevski displays the "gorgonic" character of the connection between death and female sexuality. It is displayed not only in the second part of the film, through the encounter between the young woman and the old woman and their "solidarity in obscenity," but also in the third, documentary part of the film where the aging maternal body is grotesquely sexualized. The grotesque is the result of the direct intervention of death upon the sexualized maternal body, bringing its marks of annihilation and dismemberment to it. Death stares at us as the mask of the Medusa.

*"Her feet, head and hands were tied. She was covered with apple leaves and bean pods. And a blanket, tied with white cable. I touched, the leaves parted. I saw a blanket, I thought, either weapons or a corpse. I touched with the shovel, it was soft. A corpse. I called the police. They said, don't go anywhere. They know my tractor, I have a new tractor. I waited, they came. More police came from Bitola and Skopje, 50 of them, the chief of police, 20 cars. She had on a blue vest with buttons, naked from the waist down. Zoran said, This is Mitra..." (A quote from an eye witness appearing in the third part of Mothers)*

The experience of witnessing the sight of the mutilated maternal body is one of horror. The person who discovered the dead body and who first laid eyes on the horrific scene is someone who knew the victim in his early youth. Her maternal role is the first thing the witness references while remembering her. Namely, the witness informs the viewers that the murdered woman (Mitra) was someone who used to invite him to her house for a snack when he was a child. For him, the contrast between the image of Mitra in his memory and the one he had just discovered (that of her naked, mutilated and raped body) causes a traumatic experience of extreme horror:

*"I didn't tell anyone at home when I found her. The next morning my skin was covered with three mm of water. I spent 200 Euros for treatment. My skin fell off, new skin grew later."*

Maternity itself seems to be gorgonic as it hides the truth of the brutality of physicality of life and its creation. Paradoxically, sexuality is at the same time reproductive and destructive. It is also consumption and dispensation, namely orgasm and ejaculation. The complexity of a sexualized perception of the maternal body seems to resist historicity and foregrounds much of any ancient or contemporary mythology. Greek cosmogony, Aristophanes' comedies, Rabelais' imaginaries, and Macedonian and other Balkan folk tales inform us of the primitive nature of the fear caused by the dual nature of maternal sexuality. The inviting pre-reproductive female sexuality deforms into the pregnant body, terrifying in its deformity and in the monstrosity of being two bodies and souls in one. The single and unique self has mutated into a hybrid oneness of two. Subsequent motherhood is an overwhelming totality of, on the one hand, pleasure and protection and, on the other, omnipotence, which thus poses a threat. The uterus of comfort and pure pleasure is also the engulfing blackness of death. *Vagina dentata* is a universal mytheme in infinite variations, and it is formative of the pathology of the everyday life in all epochs, including the globalized and mediatized reality of the 21st century.

Popular culture and the normative imagery it creates seek to sanitize the organic residue of an experienced maternal “deformation” of the body. Dieting, gyms, and cosmetic surgery all promise to erase all marks of the maternal transformation of a body in order to sexualize it once again. Any reference to its reproductive role is not sexually desirable; neither is it part of the image of the normality of the world that “automatically” springs to mind. The physical reality of human reproduction or maternity is an aberration from the “normal” course of life, just as death or disease is. The latter are “normalized” by treating them as if they were not even happening, as if they were not really disturbing “normal” life--the morals Hollywood has taught us during the second half of the 20th and at the beginning of the 21st century.

Rendering death and physical decay grotesque and caricaturing the female reproductive role disrupts normality by the virtue of displaying the failure of normality to erase or fully mask primordial fears. The rape and mutilation of mothers conveys the misogynistic horror and disgust of the perpetrator, materialized as passionate hate and destruction of the body of the Mother.

## 2. The Figure of the Maniac: Violence and Sexuality

The two little girls in the first part of the film recycle the story of the “maniac” (the flasher), and maintain it to be true in front of the police. Consequently, a “suspicious character,” someone who stands out from the ordinary image of normality, is arrested. The process of inventing the story (or, rather, the lie) of the “maniac” is, in fact, the subject of the first narrative of Mothers. As we see in the third part of the film, usually in real life, the “maniac” does not stand out from what is imagined to be normal: he is the epitome of the norm and social acceptance. The perpetrator in the third part, Vlado Taneski--that is, the one who is charged and declared to be the perpetrator--is a journalist, a correspondent from a small town, a respected member of the community praised for his “intelligence, his success, his authority and his good neighborliness”

His wife seems to be emphatically--and, hence, symptomatically--normal. She is the only person in the documentary (the third part of the film) who conveys her trauma with grace and elegance, commemorating her late husband as if reading from a prewritten eulogy or reciting it by heart. She maintains his innocence, without demonstrating the slightest dismay at his “unjust conviction,” nor at the nature of the crimes that took place in Kichevo, the small town where her husband, she and their two children spent most of their lives. She seems to mirror the normality that her husband had displayed and in which she still participated--a purely performative normality. I recognize that all social roles are performative. However, the absence of a neurotic tension created between, on the one hand, real, material fears and attempts at adjustments to the norm and, on the other, the dictates





of the norm, suggests a total performativity. The latter consists of mere gestures suggesting emptiness in psychic life, the work of the automaton of fetishization without any sense of a suffering subjectivity behind it.

The subject slides through the automated signification of his initial or primal trauma. However, s/he is not suffering the trauma as real "in itself," as a materiality of injury and destruction. His or her reaction is one of pure economy within the signifying chain which s/he attacks by way of annihilation of the signifiers "mother," "maternal body" and "incest." S/he compensates for the trauma by making the mother/s "pay" for their crimes against him/her personally and against the order of moral decency. The structure of the psychotic justification of the case of Kichevo serial murders and rapes displays such logic as the raped mothers seem to have been perceived as "resembling" "whores," according to one of the witnesses. Through the testimonies of witnesses, and via the proxy of the wife's narrative representing the Taneskis as a model family, an image of an uncannily undisturbed normality of the character of accused journalist Vlado Taneski comes into focus. The same suspect normality resonates in the smooth, almost ceremonial tone of Mrs. Taneski's account.

The "maniac" is usually the nice, helpful neighbor. The suspect freak from the first part of the film would not be able to understand nor operate with the economy of normality whose manipulation "the maniac" has mastered. The freak is "bad with numbers" and does not know how and how much to demand as compensation for the injustices he has suffered. Contrary to this, Taneski was a calculating person. He was able to write a ceremonial letter of expression of regret (for the "pain he had inflicted on his family, albeit being innocent") addressed to his wife. This letter is considered to be his suicide note. It resounds with unusually unharmed normality and model citizenship. He allegedly killed himself by fixing his body in a corner of his cell in such a way as to be able to drown himself in a bucket of water. It seems highly unlikely for one to be able kill oneself by drowning in a bucket of water. Regardless of how convincing the interpretation of his death as a suicide sounds, it is telling that the grotesque way he died resembles the grotesque rendering of the bodies of the victims which he allegedly mutilated after first immobilizing them.

The terrifyingly grotesque, by definition, stares at us from the emptiness of nothingness. The glaring normality of the Taneski couple and that of the small town of Kichevo stand out in the emptiness. Nothingness and the grotesque are also present in the laughter of the old woman in the film's second part. As concluded above, they resound in the emptied space of sexuality following the obscene joke.

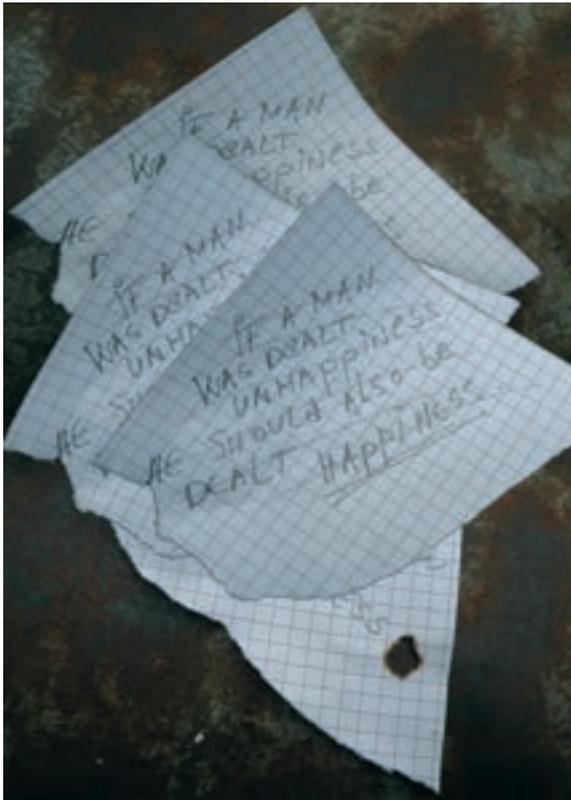
"The dick has no end" is an obscene joke not only because it comes from a place of sexuality that has died long ago, but also because of its reference to endlessness, to atemporality and, through it, to death. It also implies a reference to penetration and through that to bodily invasion, i.e., aggression. Hence, it brings forth the immanent interrelatedness of death and (hetero)sexuality. The laughter of the old woman accompanies the language of an old myth and resonates as immaterial. The mutilated bodies of the mothers are a materialization of something that could be conceived only as a mythical or religious potentiality. Maniacal realization of something that is a signifier of impossibility brings forth the impossibility of meaning, the death of a signifier and the suffocating presence of the real as death. The absurdity of the mutilated bodies is what provokes the sheer horror in two of the witnesses, both of them men. (While the women in the documentary mostly demonstrate mourning, the men demonstrate horror.) In addition to the testimony of the witness who found Mitra and claims to have lost his skin as a result of the trauma he experienced at the sight of her body, we also hear the following testimony by the son-in-law of Zivana, another victim:

*"A terrible picture. I thought I'd never speak about it. The picture I saw . . .  
The massacre . . . Her head didn't look like a head. Her neck smashed as if she were a snake.  
Her right eye was hanging out. Her arms black from the elbows down. It's not that she's gone  
. . . One day we'll all be gone..."*

The horror comes from the absurdity, from the destroyed and dismembered body as meaning, from rendering meaningless death, destruction and sexuality. Such acts would be in fact products of the banalization of death, sexuality and the figure of motherhood. The "maniac" is a banal person, his actions are executed with a banal routine, so banal that they provoke a sense of disgust and pain in the face of the destruction of something "sacred" (a product of sublimation). The son-in-law, describing the horror he experienced while observing the mutilated, disfigured corpse, sits next to Zivana's grave, together with his wife, Zivana's daughter, paying respect to the deceased. The assumed solemnity of the act of visiting the grave of a loved one is disturbed by the stain of obscenity, abnormality and perversion undermining the dignity of death. It is not a dignified death. It is difficult to mourn in the place of experiencing horror, or to mourn without any sense of horror. Death is banalized by banal sexuality and aggression committed by a banal, sickeningly "normal" person, a model citizen.



Rareys — **Believe It or Not!**

A comic book style illustration of a man's face, looking down with a somber expression. He has a glowing yellow and orange halo around his head. The background is dark with a full moon in the upper right corner.

**VLADO TANESKI,**  
A MACEDONIAN CRIME REPORTER, COVERED A SERIES OF MURDERS IN SUCH DETAIL THAT POLICE EVENTUALLY DISCOVERED IN JUNE 2008 THAT HE WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR THEM.  
Submitted By Vladan Chanackevich, Belgrade, Serbia —

Dist. by United Feature Syndicate Inc.  
TIM AND JEN BOUGHT AND I  
Subm

© Rarey Entertainment, Inc./Dist. by UFS, Inc.



### 3. Misogyny at the Heart of Heterosexuality Itself ?

In the film, the filmmaker assumes the women's positions: the little girls imagining the "maniac," the exchanges between the young woman and the old "Baubo" concerning sexuality (and also death), the daughters' testimonies about their murdered mothers--they all proffer the women's angles on the matter of femininity and sexuality. However, the view of this subject position seems to stare back at us with the same horror at the absence of meaning as the mutilated maternal body does as it stares back at the observer. They essentially have nothing to say as the narrative of the film is structured in a way that positions the phallic perspective as central and determining of all others. "The dick has no end" ought to be read as "there is no end to sexuality."

Nevertheless, female sexual experience does not have to be structured and subordinated to the pleasures and dictates of phallic desire. Quite to the contrary, sexual heteronormativity conditions the organization of female pleasure. Thus, female pleasure is not organized according to female bodily structure and its organs. The male storyteller (the filmmaker), does not even begin to imagine such a position. Instead, he conveys the glaring nothingness of the female position vis-à-vis the phallically conditioned narrative of sexuality and death. The empty gaze of the female sexual subject when faced with the phallic narrative speaks with an absence, with death, as there is no woman in the narrative of "the dick of no end."

The word "vagina" is mentioned in the film only when the rape and mutilation of the three older women is discussed in the third part. It seems that the "black hole" of the vagina, its darkness, and its otherness invite an equation of female sexual experience with death, annihilation and destruction. It might be that this frightening blackness has been feeding the horror (inflicted horror) of the rapist and the murderer. However, as mentioned above, it cannot be the source of the crimes as such virtually metaphysical realizations and mythic narratives normally remain within the realm of impossibility. Their exclusion from the field of the possible enables what is the norm and engenders aberration from it. The "maniac," banalizes the mythic by bringing it to the level of everyday reality, of socially automated action, of the possible.

Nonetheless, the absence of response, the uncanny female silence as the response to the phallic narrative is deafening. The empty gaze resembles that of the Gorgon. The invading narrative of the hegemonic field of sexuality, that of the heterosexual male, is horrified by the spectrality of the response or, rather, its absence. And how could there be any other sort of response, considering that the invited response is but a mirroring of the phallic penetrative desire? The all-invading narrative, which renders the "speech" of the vagina a mere absence of an adequate female phallic response, belongs to archaic--and also contemporary--male heterosexuality. Frustration is gendered and frustration engenders hate.

Misogyny is a structural necessity of (archaic) male heterosexuality. Women consent to sex and subordination as part of the penetrative male desire. Women are taught to take pleasure in the act of subordination as it is the seal of the desire for them. Without feminist revisions, disruptions and restructurings, heterosexuality will always contain some extent of structurally unavoidable misogyny, and *Mothers* makes this realization painfully clear. Although it is not a position the filmmaker seeks to convey, it becomes clear by the sheer structure of the film's narrative and its accompanying imagery.

As the film shows, the rootedness in phallogentrism of archaic male heterosexuality—which is also contemporary, unless it is subjected to feminist reinvention—lies in the bodily organization of desire. According to its organization, desire is centered around a single organ, and that organ is the male genital. If we suspend the “irrefutability” of this truth about sexuality and admit that it might merely convey the male angle of either hetero- or homosexuality, and that this particular angle invades the entire realm of heterosexuality as its all-encompassing truth, we might unveil an experience of sexuality that is utterly different in its structure. Luce Irigaray wrote of female sexuality as fundamentally uncentered and fluid. Vaginal experience is described as uncentered, but also self-sufficient (“the lips constantly touching each other...”) and the enclosure created by “lips upon lips” is, according to Irigaray, a specifically feminine pleasure of a desiring body, one for which lesbian sexual experiences can vouch.<sup>1</sup> Such language of sexuality collides with the one based on the premise that “the dick has no end.” From the perspective of feminine sexuality Irigaray describes, “dick” is certainly finite. What is infinite and unstoppable is the vaginal, self-feeding desire.

The film displays the dead end of heterosexuality, which merely projects male desire and its bodily organization. The gorgonic empty stare projects back a mirror image, and, hence, death. The frozen return gaze back of imposed desire and the hate that the suspicion of a different pleasure inspires are at the heart of a regular guy's misogynistic (hetero) sexuality. They also inspire the misogyny of the maniac and also of the woman who mirrors instead of actively desiring (as self-hate).

*Mothers* is a masterful edifice of a narrative that “speaks to everyone,” yet conveys a realization of complex entanglements of metaphysics and bodily experience that virtually always escape the commonsensical mind. The film's narrative flows easily, leaving a trace of a deeply unsettling realization about a brutal universal truth that one is compelled to revisit over and over again.

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1 Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*. Cornell University Press, 1985.

