

CONTEMPORARY MOTHERHOOD BETWEEN DISASTER AND SACRIFICE: AN ANALYSIS OF *THE IMPOSSIBLE*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Drawing on concepts from cultural studies and film historiography, this article analyses the figure of the mother as a key element in the film *The Impossible* (2012) directed by Juan Antonio Bayona. Its huge box office success (42 million euros in ticket sales in Spain) can be explained by the background of the economic and social crisis afflicting us, which has favoured the production of conservative cultural products.

Part of the appeal of the film lies in the spectacle it offers of the fragility of the well-being of developed societies and its relationship with the figure of sacrificial motherhood, which contributes a highly marked gender reading to a humanitarian crisis situation that we associate with the sense of global economic collapse. The crisis was identified on 23 October 2008 by the head of the US Federal Reserve, Alan Greenspan, in the following terms: "We are in the midst of once-in-a-century credit tsunami" (BOYLE, 2013). In 2012, according to Sheldon Filger (2012), we experien-

ced an "acceleration of the negative economic and fiscal metrics that plagued advanced and major emerging economies in 2011", especially in the Eurozone. In Spain, unemployment rose to 25% (50% among youth), and the situation in Greece, Portugal and Ireland was dramatic, while countries with strong economies were plunged into fear of a "double-dip recession" (ROSENBERG, 2012: 174), an economic recession within another recession. In 2012, the economic language was apocalyptic and cinematic: *Taxmageddon*, referring to a fear of an increase in taxes in the US, in articles like "Coming Soon: 'Taxmageddon'" (LEONHARDT, 2012) and *Eurogeddon* in articles like "Eurogeddon: A Worst-case Scenario Handbook for the European Debt Crisis" (WEISSMANN, 2012) were terms used by the financial press that demonstrate the importance that cinema continues to have in the creation of frameworks of social interpretation.

Our analysis of how cinema contributes to the collective imaginary (RYAN and KELLNER, 1990), and which in this case produces reassuring figures like the "sacrificial" mother, is based on three different

strategies. First of all, we will look at the relationship of *The Impossible* with the “disaster film” genre, examining its mechanisms to create a metaphor for the social anxieties associated with historical events (BOYLE, 2013, JAMESON, 1979). Secondly, we will conduct an analysis of the *Mater dolorosa* stereotype, beginning with its historical evolution, so that we can analyse the visual and structural strategies used in Bayona’s film. Finally, we will consider how the film has been affected by the way in which the general press treated the tsunami.

In tension with the allusion to the *veracity* of the story by the film’s director and protagonists, we have based this analysis on a series of assumptions. First: that *The Impossible* is an artistic recreation of real events. Second: that as such a representation, it forms part of a visual tradition (in this case cinematic and pictorial) against which it can be analysed. Third: that as an artistic recreation, it works with a high visual density that condenses aspects of the narration that can be highlighted and analysed.

Our analysis of the film’s symbolic universe is focused on its treatment of the figure of the mother, because we are concerned here with the silent revolution, as Badinter (2011: 11) describes it, that has reinstated motherhood as the “centre of female destiny” in a debate that is of interest beyond the broad limits of the feminist theoretical universe. On the other hand, we are conscious of

The impossible (Juan Antonio Bayona, 2012)



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the general phenomenon in mainstream cinema which, according to various authors (GALLAGHER, 2009: 210), involves the use of the image of wounded or hospitalised women as a leitmotiv in genres as diverse as comedy, action and science fiction. In other words, this kind of scene can appear in films like *Spiderman* (Sam Raimi, 2002), *Collateral* (Michael Mann, 2004) or *Superman Returns* (Bryan Singer, 2006). The images of hospitalised or suffering women are an “exceptional strategy” that transforms the “most vibrant” narrative development, because “women’s deathbed and hospital-bed scenes in contemporary cinema validate anew the maternal role and the figure of the mother transporting the woman-centered discursive space of melodrama into narrative terrain often hostile to women’s presence”, but may have a negative impact on the representation of femininity, which is depicted as inherently weak. It is obvious that the media visually exploit suffering and violence (BUTLER, 2004) and in this general process, the wounded bodies of women are exhibited without restrictions for the spectators’ gaze.

Since the 1970s, feminist criticism has been engaged in an in-depth review and historical observation of the models of mothers, resulting in an interesting bibliography (THORNTON, 2014; FEASEY, 2012), especially in relation to melodrama (DOANE, 1987; FISHER, 1996; KAPLAN, 1992; ARNOLD, 2013; WHITNEY, 2007) and other film genres (MACCORMICK, 2010; DOUGLAS and MICHAELS, 2004; HORMIGOS,

2010). From a feminist perspective, the history of representations of motherhood can be arranged on a binary scale: self-sacrificing mothers who give up everything to physically or emotionally support their children, or “viperous spiders” (WALTERS and HARRISON, 2014: 39) who weave webs of evil around their children. This dichotomy is highly negative for the social imaginary because it constrains women in claustrophobic models that provoke anxiety and insecurity. Some critics argue that in recent years, especially in television series, a new model has emerged (WALTERS and HARRISON: 2014) of “aberrant mothers” who break with the traditional sacrificial models, but who nevertheless are not narratively punished, as would have happened in the past. This type of model may be less oppressive for women, but at present it is more common on television than in cinema.

2. APPETITE FOR DESTRUCTION: FEMINISM, DISASTER FILMS AND METAPHORS FOR THE FINANCIAL CRISIS

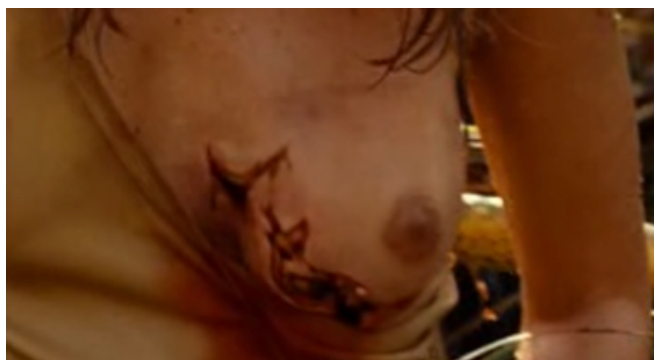
The marketing strategy for *The Impossible* focused on the idea that it was the true story of the Álvarez-Belón family. María Belón played a very active role in the writing of the script, the filming process, and the promotion, for which she granted a multitude of interviews in different media. As Tunzelmann (2012) in *The Guardian* noted: “The real family on whose experiences the film is based is Spanish. Maria Bennett’s real-life counterpart, María Belón, has a story credit on this production.” The combination of the press stories and those provided by María Belón ultimately limited the cultural and cinematic criticism of the film, which barely went further than comparing the family’s actual experiences with what was presented on screen. For example, an important issue was not addressed: this film’s relationship with the disaster film genre, despite the fact that the genre in which a cultural product is inscribed acts as a frame of reference that we should always

take into account when interpreting the text. In the case of *The Impossible*, this frame of reference needs to be explained.

The history of the disaster film began in the 1970s with titles like *Airport* (George Seaton, Henry Hathaway, 1970), *The Poseidon Adventure* (Ronald Neame, Irwin Allen, 1972) and *The Towering Inferno* (John Guillermin, 1974). The action in these films revolved around a large-scale disaster provoked by some form of technology. Helen Hanson (2006: 128-129) highlights the presence of a white male hero who articulates most of the collective responses to the disaster. This opens the genre up to a political reading because it reinforces individualist and traditional family values. Hoberman (2003: 17) also noted that these films had a comforting element because they celebrated “the inherent virtue of decent, everyday Middle Americans, linking their survival skills to traditional gender roles and conventional moral values.”

Cynthia Belmont (2013) adds a gender perspective to the analysis of disaster films of the 1990s with her suggestion that in these films we can see heroines who lose their power as the story progresses (*Armageddon*, 1998), and who are even often given the blame for the disaster. Narratively, this loss of female power balances and connects with the efforts of the male protagonist to dominate a wild natural force that attempts to destroy “the American way of life.”

The idea of survival linked to the reinstatement of gender roles leads us to the problematic and ambivalent idea of motherhood: “disaster films often envision nature as female, as a mother—in this case, not a loving one who deserves our love in return, but rather an alienated adversary in a battle of good and evil” (BELMONT, 2013: 358). The equation in a patriarchal society that links the woman with nature and nature with motherhood is complex, because it is related both to the system of care and to random punishments. This restructuring and reinforcement of the nuclear family after the natural disaster has a reading that Bel-



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mont associates with apocalyptic religious literature and the concept of Christian guilt, or “cosmic displeasure with humanity” (BELMONT, 2013: 353).

On the question of the connection between the disaster film and financial crises, especially the crisis that began in 2008, an extremely interesting analysis can be found in an article by Kirk Boyle (2013), “The Imagination of Economic Disaster: Eco-Catastrophe Films of the Great Recession”, where, using the theory of framing (LAKOFF and JOHNSON, 1980), he argues that the natural disaster metaphor was one of the first used by political leaders to talk about the crisis as a “perfect storm, whirlpool, hurricane, earthquake, tornado and wildfire.” He analyses a series of films with reference to the ideas set forth by Fredric Jameson in essays like “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture”, to see how these kinds of works participate in the social and psychological mechanisms of repression/displacement to talk about ecological but also economic issues, based on Jameson’s suggestion that the “drawing power of the works of mass culture has implied that such works can-

not manage anxieties about the social order unless they have first revived them and given them some rudimentary expression” (JAMESON, 1979: 144). In this respect, we need to ask what kinds of effects could the crisis have on Spanish women of child-bearing age. While establishing a direct correlation would be impossible, we can note that the birth rate in Spain fell from 2008 to 2012, when the film was released, by a significant 12.8 % (Huffington Post, 2013).

3. THE ORIGIN OF THE MATER DOLOROSA

One of the theories of our study is that *The Impossible* constructs a conservative image of the mother on both narrative and expository levels. The film’s narration reinforces actions that point to the model of the sacrificial mother, while in the visual construction of Maria there is an exaggeration of the gruesome make-up and the gestures that make her appear as a *Mater dolorosa*: bloodied, wounded, and yet still firm in her motherly values and instincts.

In the Christian tradition, there are two stereotypes of the mother: the Virgin with Child, who conveys a sense of tranquillity and happiness, and the Virgin shattered by the pain of her son’s death, which possesses a redemptive element. Jesus died to redeem the world, and Mary’s pain at the foot of cross has the same meaning: she is pained by her son, but also by humanity. As Badinter (1991: 225) suggests, pain and motherhood are thus associated through the evocation of the mother in mystical terms, as the maternal sacrifice is rooted in female nature. Implicitly, every good mother is a “saint”. One variant of this figure is Our Lady of Sorrows (in Latin: *Beata Maria Virgo Perdolens*), recognized at the synod of Cologne in 1413. From that time, this image formed part of the devotionals (fundamental in the education of young women), highlighting the theme of the seven sorrows suffered by the Virgin (represented by seven swords piercing her heart), evoking

the prophesy of Simeon contained in Luke 2:35: "Indeed, a sword will pierce your own soul, too, so that the inner thoughts of many people might be revealed."

This model of the suffering mother carries a huge symbolic weight, as the Catholic tradition has reinforced the model of motherhood as a painful event, a model itself derived from Biblical tradition; "it will be painful for you to bear children" (Genesis 3:16) is the punishment women receive for having eaten the forbidden fruit. Motherhood condemns women to the physical pain of childbirth, but also to having it as their principal social function. This negativity associated with conception and birth is neutralised in depictions of the Virgin as a mother with child, publicly recognised images of the figure of Jesus, but not of his birth. Susan Sontag (2003: 21) suggests that "[t]he sufferings most often deemed worthy of representation are those understood to be the product of wrath, divine or human. Suffering from natural causes, such as illness or childbirth, is scantily represented in the history of art;" it is for precisely this reason that the representation of dramatic pain shines in the depictions of the Baroque martyrs, because, as Mercedes Alcalá (2012: 2) suggests, showing wounded bodies of women is a display of male power over them.

This idea of the sacrificed mother passed intact from the medieval Christian imaginary into the modern era and is present in both Rousseau and Freud, who, "with 150 years between them, elaborated an image of the woman that coincides remarkably: notable are her sense of self-denial and sacrifice" (BADINTER, 1991: 225); in other words, they do not become heroines by the use of force, but by their capacity for sacrifice and for stoically enduring suffering. Heroines become heroines by devoting themselves to others and showing their pain in public unhesitatingly and unrestrainedly. In this context, we can read the clear presence of a mother in our film who is wounded and bears her sufferings while protecting her son as they search

for the rest of the family, developing the formula that Molly Haskell (1987) posits in her classic study of the role of the woman in classical melodrama: self-sacrifice, suffering and redemption.

4. NARRATIVE AND VISUAL ANALYSIS OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

The way that the events in the film are narrated is very similar to the style of journalistic chronicles. The main protagonists are white, while the Asian victims, whom Dhiraj Murth (2011: 1-12) refers to as "subaltern victims" of post-colonialism, seem to form part of the backdrop. General explanations are omitted and the tragedy is narrated from the point of view of a single family (GALTUNG and HOLMBOE, 1965: 66-84), suggesting the assumption that audiences prefer stories that are specific and even morbid in their details.

The visual references for the film are the press coverage of the tsunami and previous disaster films. How many of the premises of this genre can we identify in the film? The first narrative coincidence is that the natural disaster occurs in an exotic setting where an international elite spend their holidays, and the luxury acts as a counterpoint to the chaos, where all comforts disappear. The tsunami is a simplifying metaphor for the complex global financial crisis that began in 2008, which is verbalised by the father of the family when he expresses his fear of losing his job.

Another conservative element of the film is that the local victims appear only incidentally, and the stories told are always the stories of Westerners. Local references are erased and replaced with familiar details. The critic for *The Guardian*, Alex von Tunzelmann (2012), remarked: "The Álvarez-Belón family's story is moving, dramatic and true, and there's no reason it shouldn't be told; but it's a shame that that the film excludes any meaningful acknowledgement of the disaster's Asian victims while doing so." It is significant that the social differences reappear at the end of

the film, when the family is rescued and can leave behind the disaster afflicting a developing nation.

The references to social position, to the father's job, to the mother's desire to work, or to their subsequent physical suffering are important, as the film constructs its political position by juxtaposing a large-scale event (the tsunami) against a small-scale event (the challenges faced by the family and their dramatic separation). Of relevance to this point is an essay by Slavoj Žižek (2007) in which the philosopher analyses disaster films as if they were family dramas: "The films which are furthest from family dramas are catastrophe films, which cannot but fascinate the viewer with a spectacular depiction of a terrifying event of immense proportions."

It is significant to note the constant reference made by the characters to returning to their roots, without identifying where those roots are, particularly considering the Spanish family is portrayed in the film by British actors. During the opening scenes, in a conversation before the tsunami, Maria expresses her desire to "go home", relating this to the possibility of going back to work, thereby subverting the meaning that "going home" has traditionally had for women. This suggestion doesn't please Henry, who replies "Well, you should think about it" just before the tsunami strikes. After the devastating wave the theme of returning home reappears almost immediately in the agonising survival scene when, after the obligatory cries for help ("give me your hand" or "hold on"), Lucas repeatedly asks his mother "Can we go home? I'm scared." In other words, in this catastrophic process the tsunami has changed the meaning of "go home", which shifts from being linked to female independence to a metaphor for the traditional concepts of safety and stability for the children.

The tsunami occurs just when Maria mentions the possibility of working to her husband. If we consider that disaster films often underscore the corrective function of the tragedy by having it



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coincide with a morally reprehensible event, we can deduce that the tsunami and the role of the woman are very closely related. It is not so much a criticism of a disaffected mother (when the hotel receptionist finds out that she is a doctor and has left her job to take care of the kids, she remarks: "I see, you got promoted") as a reflection of a gentle mother who has doubts about her destiny, and whose maternal instinct will be triggered by the tragedy. In this sense the tragedy of the tsunami plays the role of what Žižek (2007) describes as a "'vanishing mediator' whose function is to restore her sense of identity and purpose in life, her self-image [...]; once his job is done, he can disappear."

This is a film that employs the visual strategies typical of disaster films, but that integrates elements from religious cinema. In *The Impossible* we see scenes that recall imagery of the expulsion from Paradise, the Virgin and Child and even the rescue of Moses from the rivers of the Nile (WRIGHT, 2013:

58). In the film the family is expelled from their paradise of comfort and in this disaster the gentle, post-modern mother has a painful and atavistic experience of motherhood. This poses an extremely problematic gender reading. "Mom [...] I can't see you like this" her son tells her when he sees the wounds on her leg and chest and looks away. As Susan Sontag (2003: 21) remarks, "the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked. For many centuries, in Christian art, depictions of hell offered both of these elemental satisfactions."

While in the first minutes of the film we are presented with a female figure that possesses the elements of a lusty Eve, a tempter with sensual beauty, with the effects of the tsunami, the elements belonging to Eve disappear and the figure of the *Mater dolorosa* is adopted to represent Maria's body. This shift means that we now always see Maria covered in contusions, with black eyes and bleeding wounds. Maria's body is dragged, operated on, vomits up blood and mud and is even given up for dead on two occasions. From the moment of the disaster, it is a spectacle of pain and suffering, exposed to the gaze of her son and the spectators through the camera, which pauses briefly but precisely to show us details like her sores or her wedding ring. This kind of transfiguration of the protagonist's body as a spectacle of the pain of another is related, according to Sontag (2002:43), to religious thinking, which "links pain to sacrifice, sacrifice to exaltation", in this case making us stronger in our weaknesses, especially in those related to our gender roles.

This image also fits the way in which the international press depicted the news of the tsunami, where, as described in an article by Marilyn Childs (2006), women were represented in the press as the personification of the universal victim of a disaster: weeping, tormented and overwhelmed by the situation, while the males appeared bereft of emotion but engaged in action, participating in rescue work or helping other victims.

Similarly, the study by Porismita Borah (2009) examining how American newspapers portrayed the tsunami in the Indian Ocean compared with Hurricane Katrina revealed that the image most widely used by newspapers like the *Washington Post* for the tsunami was the picture of a mother crying over the lifeless bodies of her children. And in her study of the impact of the tsunami in the British press, Tracey Skelton (2006) highlights the number of stories she could find in the media of mothers trying to grab hold of their children and losing them in the waves. All these stories and anxieties related to dead or missing children underscore the role of motherhood. These are the same audiovisual strategies we see in the film, such as when Maria and Lucas find a child floating in mud and take him with them in a highly melodramatic scene. Mary Ann Doane (1987: 73) points out that "maternal melodramas are scenarios of separation, of separation and return or of threatened separation dramas which play out all the permutations of the mother/child relation."

As was the case of the women affected by the tsunami portrayed by the press, the figure of Maria in the film is essentialised: she is not a woman, she is only a mother. It is an exclusive vehicle of suffering and sacrifice that is shown to us in the close-ups of the face, the bleeding wounds shown quickly but constantly and that build up a picture of a heroine enduring physical pain. Maria grows agonisingly weaker before our eyes, while at the same time she acquires greater moral strength. She is a character sanctified for her dignity in the face of suffering.

It is our view that the *Mater dolorosa* is something more than a visual reference in *The Impossible* as it articulates and encapsulates all the narrative and visual discourses about the protagonist, which are fused into a character so simple that she borders on stereotype, yet complex enough to be the result of a long cultural tradition. This is due its nature as a quintessentialised representation of the mother and, to use an expression

of Badinter's (1991), a relational figure on which different ideological and cultural focal points are centred, including cinematic ones. This concept of superlative motherhood could be connected to an article by Adrienne McCormick (2010) analysing two extreme forms of motherhood in classical melodrama: "supermothers" and mothers who fail their offspring: "'Supermother' films coming out of Hollywood in the twenty-first century thus far feature mothers having to prove their mettle once again, no longer against insensitive husbands, racism, limited employment opportunities, and the like, but rather against terrorists, the supernatural, and aliens from outer space" (2010: 144-145).

In all these new scenarios, as in the case of the tsunami in *The Impossible*, mothers are punished on screen while ideals of a supermother capable of overcoming all manner of adversities are reinforced.



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Maria is the mother of three children whom she cares for equally; however, when the disaster strikes, in a highly significant twist, her maternal role is focused on the relationship with her eldest son, Lucas, who, after the first moments of the tragedy, takes on the role of Maria's male-protector in an ambivalent relationship; while he is with his brothers he is just another kid, but when the tragedy unfolds he comes to embody the essential mother-child

relationship, a relationship of care that at a certain point can be inverted so that the child can become a man capable of looking after his mother. On the other hand, in the scenes in the hospital, in spite of her qualifications as a doctor, Maria projects her motherly care running errands, connecting families, doing emotional work through her son Lucas. This introduces an interesting tension between the processes of mother/child identification-separation which, according to Doane (1987), form the basis of the classical maternal melodrama. In this way, we could view *The Impossible* as a story of learning and growth, a *Bildungsroman* in which the child becomes a hero upon passing a series of tests, the most important one being liberating himself from dependence on his mother. Along these lines of argument, it is interesting to note the comparison that Doane (1987: 90) makes between youth literature and melodrama, since "both boys and women are 'presubjects'; they are denied access to the full subjectivity bestowed on the adult male within a patriarchal culture." However, there is one substantial difference: while the hero of youth literature always achieves full subjectivity, the melodramatic heroine is always waiting, because "no *Bildung* takes place."

Maria is the victim who articulates no way out of the crisis situation other than rescuing another child (Daniel), an action that reinforces her condition of mother in relation to the narrative space of Henry, briefer but more active: a world of males who work together resolutely in the search for family members. Maria is the suffering mother and Henry is the wounded rescuer, each one conforming to a gender stereotype that keeps intact the traditional roles of the couple structure, which after a brief hesitation over their arrangement ("I can go back to work") are brutally reinstated by the disaster, which we can read as disapproving. Maria's maternal passivity is a way of returning order to the chaos



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that has been unleashed, and is exemplified in the scenes where Lucas takes the role of dominant male and begins making practical decisions and where, nevertheless, his mother continues to be the moral benchmark for him: when they hear Daniel's voice, Lucas doesn't want to respond, but his mother compels him to rescue the boy. In the hospital, Maria, transformed into the universal mother, asks again about Daniel, and encourages her son to become a useful person for the group.

As noted above, in cinema the models of "good mothers" acquire meaning in counterpoint to the models of "bad mothers". However, none of these models is stable. As Sarah Arnold (2013) argues from a psychoanalytical perspective, the good mother is a cultural construct which, in any case, is generally eclipsed by the father (as occurs in *The Impossible*): "the Good Mother is more often than not over-shadowed by a more powerful agent: the father, who either threatens or secures the family. The Good Mother retains

certain core elements such as selflessness and sacrifice, yet she is always determined in relation to a paternal figure. Her ability to nurture is dependent upon the third term of the father" (2013: 13).

The father is the active element in the plot who conquers an adverse space typical of adventure films, and the mother represents the passive element who waits to be rescued by her husband. Maria is the suffering, confined and powerless figure of melodrama, whose *pathos* is reinforced, according to Mary Ann Doane, "by the disproportion between the weakness of the victim and the seriousness of the danger" (1987: 73).

Maria is the mother who encapsulates the new "female destiny" of women in this period of crisis (BADINTER, 2011: 11) that began in 2008. This is not the first time in the last century that we have seen this kind of reactionary response. Susan Faludi (1991) also studied the backlash that occurred during the 1980s in the United States, and also in the period after 9-11 (FALUDI, 2009), moments when the media promoted the development of conservative ideas about the roles that each gender should fulfil. Finally, the financial crisis of 2008 has once again awakened the ghost of all-powerful motherhood through discourses of "New Domesticity" (MATCHAR, 2013), where the renewed interest in natural childbirth and attachment parenting (GONZÁLEZ, 2003) would be combined with personal solutions of many women who "choose" to remain very attached to domesticity. This renewed interest in more traditional child-rearing in the context of a financial crisis offers a new light under which to examine Maria's wounds. She is a character whose essentialism conceals the frustrating domesticity associated with child-rearing (FRIEDAN, 2010), and whose moral heroism only increases the anxiety provoked in women by these images of total motherhood (WARNER, 2005).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The central character in *The Impossible* is a mother who over the course of the story undergoes a transformation: from an “ordinary” mother she changes before the spectators’ eyes into a *Mater dolorosa*. To make this happen, various representative strategies typical of disaster films are employed, including their moralistic and religious features. The terror of the expulsion from paradise and the fear of nature as an instrument of divine vengeance are explicit in the audiovisual text.

The tragedy of the tsunami in 2004 is transformed in the film into an atemporal event, and the general human drama is essentialised in a single white, Western, bourgeois family. The financial (and social and family) crisis underpins the tragedy. The narrative solution posited in response to this widespread crisis situation is a return to traditional family values, in which the figure of the mother is expressed in a behaviour of unlimited sacrifice. This expression is realised on two levels: in the narrative development of the actions that unfold, but also inscribed on the body of the woman-mother, which is transformed before our eyes into a wounded, beaten and torn body... a body constantly bleeding and on the brink of death. This way of depicting motherhood recalls the artistic tradition of the Catholic world in its representation of the Virgin as tragic mother at the foot of her son’s cross on Calvary. By extension, all mothers are faced with an implicit association between motherhood and female saintliness.

The hyperbolic mother, whose main function is to endure pain, is the most spectacular element of the film. It is a traditional and post-modern visual spectacle that plays with cultural references, and that is instructive as it is linked to a crisis situation. It is a mechanism which, further supported by the representations of real victims from the press and television news, turns all wo-

men into mothers and all mothers into suffering victims, and that is extraordinary for its repetition in so many different media. The coincidence in the use of the *Mater dolorosa* in two visual and narrative systems as different as disaster films and general press images alerts us to the possible repercussions of this centrality of the mother and how they can act on stories of crisis.

The film focuses its narrative attention on the relationship between mother and child, the real protagonists of the film, revitalising the formulas of classical melodrama, which are mixed with the shocking realism of disaster films and confirmed in the complete submission of the woman to the family and in the fact that she is given no more evolution than her painful acceptance of motherhood as a revocation of action. The vision that the film presents of femininity is based on a motherhood so exclusive, passionate and demanding that it can only be sacrificial. These kinds of discourses disseminated by the general press but underscored in fiction return us to the idea that the personal development and life path of women is based on their role as mothers, as a consolation for them in a world in crisis that does not favour access to equality or social and representative justice.

In any case, we might well question the meaning of this film in a social context that is extremely complicated for women who want to be mothers. The reality is that we have a birth rate in Spain that is among the lowest in the world (1.33 children per woman), and the average age at which women have their first child is over 31. It is clear that the crisis has had a negative impact on these rates. What we are told in this film clashes paradoxically with the reality of many women who cannot become mothers because they have no work, economic resources or in any case lack the support they would need to be able to reconcile their public and private lives. ■

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CONTEMPORARY MOTHERHOOD BETWEEN DISASTER AND SACRIFICE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

Abstract

This text analyses the image of motherhood presented in the Spanish film *The Impossible* (2012) based on two different contextual elements: the disaster film and the stereotype of the *Mater dolorosa* (*Mother of Sorrows*). The argument put forward is that the figure of the sacrificial mother that appears in the film responds to a specific moment of financial and social crisis in which traditional figures of the sacrificing and care-giving mother provide assurance in a world of widespread uncertainty.

Key words

Cinema; *The Impossible*; feminism; disaster; sacrifice.

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LA MATERNIDAD CONTEMPORÁNEA ENTRE LA CATÁSTROFE Y EL SACRIFICIO. UN ANÁLISIS DE LO IMPOSIBLE

Resumen

Este texto analiza la imagen de la maternidad que se proyecta en la película española *Lo imposible* (The impossible, Juan Antonio Bayona, 2012) desde dos elementos contextuales diferentes: el cine de catástrofes y el estereotipo de la *Mater dolorosa*. En él se argumenta que la figura de la madre sacrificial responde a un momento específico de crisis económica y social donde las figuras tradicionales de la madre sacrificada y cuidadora aportan seguridad en un universo de incertidumbre generalizada.

Palabras clave

Cinema; *The Impossible*; feminism; disaster; sacrifice.

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