



When the Mother Fails: Maternal Ravage and the Psychoanalytic Traces of Femininity in *La Quietude*

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Abstract

This study aims to offer a psychoanalytic analysis of Pablo Trapero's *La Quietude* (2018) by focusing on the mother-daughter relationship. The character dynamics and narrative structure of the film are examined through Freud's theory of castration, Lacan's concept of ravage, and Winnicott's notion of the "good enough mother." The presence of a mother who is physically there but functionally absent is discussed in relation to its effects on the daughter's identity formation and feminine subjectivity. In addition, the film's representations of sibling rivalry, unresolved oedipal attachments, and failures in maternal identification are interpreted within the framework of psychoanalytic theory. The analysis concludes that maternal devastation functions not only as a personal trauma but also as a structural rupture in the intergenerational transmission of feminine knowledge and desire.

Keywords: Maternal ravage, Mother-daughter relationship, Maternal failure, Symbolic transmission, Psychoanalytic film analysis

Anne Başarısız Olduğunda: *La Quietude* Filminde Annesel Yıkım ve Kadınlığın Psikanalitik İzleri

Özet

Bu çalışma, Pablo Trapero'nun *La Quietude* (2018) adlı filmi üzerinden anne-kız ilişkisine odaklanan psikanalitik bir çözümleme sunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Filmdeki karakter dinamikleri ve anlatı yapısı, Freud'un kastrasyon kuramı, Lacan'ın *ravage* (yıkım) kavramı ve Winnicott'un "yeterince iyi anne" anlayışı çerçevesinde incelenmektedir. Fiziksel olarak mevcut ancak işlevsel olarak yok olan bir anne figürünün, kız çocuğunun kimlik oluşumu ve kadınsı özdeşleşmesi üzerindeki etkileri ele alınmaktadır. Ayrıca filmde kardeşler arası rekabet, çözülmemiş Oidipal bağlanmalar ve annesel özdeşimdeki başarısızlıklar gibi temsiller de psikanalitik kuram bağlamında yorumlanmaktadır. Çözümleme, annesel yıkımın yalnızca kişisel bir travma olarak değil, aynı zamanda kadınlık bilgisi ve arzusun kuşaklararası aktarımında yapısal bir yarıma olarak işlev gördüğü sonucuna ulaşmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Annesel yıkım, Anne-kız ilişkisi, Annelik işlevinin yetersizliği, Simgesel aktarım, Psikanalitik film çözümlemesi

1. Introduction

The mother-daughter relationship occupies a central place in psychoanalytic theory, both in the formation of female identity and in the processes of intergenerational transmission. While Freud considered the daughter's bond with her mother as a unique form of the Oedipal complex, Lacan emphasized the destructive potential of this relationship and the mother's central position in the structure of desire. In the formation of feminine subjectivity, the mother's presence, or structural absence, has effects that extend beyond the caregiving function; it also involves the failure or impossibility of transmitting feminine knowledge and desire (Recalcati, 2019). Winnicott, for his part, conceptualized the maternal function as a foundational element in ego development, positioning the mother's emotional attunement and reliability as essential for psychological integration.

This study aims to rethink the concept of maternal devastation through Pablo Trapero's *La Quietude* (2018). The film presents two daughters and a mother entangled in distinct relational configurations. These relationships will be analyzed in light of psychoanalytic concepts, focusing on a mother figure who is "present" yet "non-functional," and how this affects the subject's development, object choice, and structure of desire. In this regard, the study explores how psychoanalytic concepts can be activated through cinema, not just as representations but also as means of transmission.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1.Freud: The Oedipal Conflict and the Mother-Daughter Relationship

In Freudian psychoanalysis, the Oedipal conflict unfolds differently depending on the child's gender. Freud (1931/1997) discussed the daughter's transition from the mother, her first love object, to the father, highlighting the complex affective tensions and internal conflicts this shift entails. While the boy expresses his desire for the mother and rivalry with the father more overtly, the girl's trajectory is more indirect and ambivalent. The mother functions simultaneously as an object of love and a figure of rivalry; when the daughter feels deprived of adequate attention, care, or satisfaction, she may respond with disappointment, resentment, or even hostility.

According to Freud (1924), the girl's departure from the mother is rooted in castration anxiety: the mother is perceived as having failed to provide the desired genital organ, emotional fulfillment, or

libidinal gratification. This disappointment leads the girl to redirect her desire toward her father. However, because this redirection is built upon the devaluation of the mother, the daughter maintains a conflicted attitude: both resentment and longing toward the mother coexist. The fact that she has both devalued the mother and still needs her makes the girl child feel trapped in the oedipal stage (McWilliams, 2020: 398-399). In Freud's theory, the mother-daughter bond thus emerges as deeply ambivalent, shaped by unresolvable tensions and unconscious identifications (Freud, 1931/1997).

2.2.Lacan: Maternal Ravage, Demand, and Lack

Jacques Lacan adopted Freud's foundational insights into the mother-daughter relationship but critically revised its castration-centered framework. For Lacan, if the girl were structurally constituted as already castrated, she would not direct a demand toward the mother for what is lacking. Yet the daughter does, in fact, demand not only love but a "substance" from the mother, and the impossibility of satisfying this demand is where ravage takes root (Lacan, 1973).

In his text *L'écroulement*, Lacan (1973) uses the term *ravage*, translated as "devastation," to describe the psychic damage produced in the daughter when confronted with the mother's enigmatic and ultimately unfulfillable desire. The mother is perceived as omnipotent yet withholding, and her inability to respond to the daughter's demand leads to a subjective collapse. Lacan's well-known claim that "The Woman does not exist" (Lacan, 2007, p. 578) is not a negation of women's existence, but rather a theoretical statement about the impossibility of a universal feminine essence. Instead, femininity is constructed in relation to the Other and through the experience of lack.

In this framework, the mother is not only a caregiver but the bearer of feminine knowledge: the one who is supposed to transmit what it means to be a woman. However, Lacan suggests that the mother is herself lacking in this knowledge. The mother's failure to embody and transmit femininity results in a rupture in symbolic transmission, leaving the daughter without a stable point of identification. Thus, the mother-daughter bond is structured through absence, ambiguity, and excess: love and resentment, desire and devastation intertwine.

2.3.Winnicott: The "Good Enough Mother" and Object Relations

Donald Winnicott placed early mother-child interactions at the center of ego development, positing the mother's capacity for emotional attunement as foundational to the formation of the self. The

“good enough mother” is one who responds sensitively to the infant’s developmental needs, offering a reliable and containing environment that allows the child to gradually relate to external reality (Parman, 2007). Beyond her physical presence, the mother’s emotional responsiveness and mirroring function are crucial in facilitating a coherent sense of self.

Winnicott’s (1960) famous claim that “there is no such thing as a baby” emphasizes that the infant cannot be understood apart from the maternal context that sustains it. When the mother fails to provide sufficient emotional holding, the child may experience threats to ego integration and develop defenses that impede healthy separation and individuation. Such failures may stem not only from immediate caregiving lapses but also from the mother’s own unresolved traumas and relational deficiencies.

3. A Psychoanalytic Reading of *La Quietude*

Focusing on the themes of motherhood, sisterhood, and femininity, Pablo Trapero's *La Quietude* (2018) explores one of the many possibilities inherent in the mother-daughter relationship. The film explores the emotional dynamics between Esmeralda, a mother from an affluent Argentine nuclear family, and her two daughters, Eugenia and Mia, who are in their thirties. Although the film initially seems to depict an ordinary family conflict, it gradually reveals the deep psychoanalytic tensions embedded in the structure of their relationship. In particular, the fractured bond and conflict between Mia and her mother, Esmeralda, forms the backdrop of Mia's daily life, her relationships with men and other family members, and provides a striking example of Lacan's concept of *ravage*.

The two sisters have strikingly different relationships with their mother: Eugenia receives attention and affection from her mother, is verbally affirmed, and enjoys physical affection such as hugs, embraces, and touching, while Mia, in contrast, is continually excluded, neglected, criticized, and rejected. This asymmetry evokes Freud's Oedipal complex theory and Lacan's ideas on desire and lack, suggesting that the mother figure is split. The mother is both nurturing and destructive at the same time, both present and absent.

La Quietude presents the mother not only as a failed caregiver but also as a figure unable to convey femininity, a broken link in the symbolic chain of maternal inheritance. Mia's struggle is not just for acceptance and love, but also for the stable establishment of a feminine identity passed down

from her mother. Mia's emotional dependence on her father and the confusion in her romantic relationships reflect the psychological impact of growing up in the shadow of a disrupted maternal function.

3.1.The Present but Absent Mother: Esmeralda and Winnicott

In *La Quietude*, the character of Esmeralda exemplifies the antithesis of Winnicott's "good enough mother." Although physically present, she is emotionally inaccessible: unable to attune to her daughter's needs, to reflect her emotions, or to offer any sense of psychological containment. Her relationship with Mia, in particular, illustrates what Winnicott described as the failure of maternal responsiveness (Parman, 2007), which disrupts the development of the self.

Esmeralda displays warmth and affection toward Eugenia: she embraces her, speaks to her with tenderness, and maintains a visible emotional bond. Mia, however, is treated with coldness and irritation. Her feelings are dismissed, her voice is interrupted, and her emotional needs are persistently overlooked. From Winnicott's perspective, such a mother cannot facilitate the emergence of a "true self"; instead, the child develops in a context of chronic misattunement, which compromises the ability to form a cohesive identity and engage with external reality in a secure manner.

In Esmeralda's relationship with Mia, 'absence' represents not only a lack of affection but also stems from a traumatic birth story and involuntary motherhood. As we learn through Esmeralda's confession at the end of the film, Mia was born as a result of a rape. The mother character's inability to bear this burden aligns with Winnicott's idea that a mother's own object relations ruptures contribute to her being not a "good enough mother". Esmeralda's failure to breastfeed Mia, to touch her, and her confession that she "never loved her" is not solely an individual failure; it highlights the fractured structure of the mother-child bond from the outset and the traumatic gap in intergenerational transmission.

Mia's response to this absence manifests as consequences in every aspect of her life. As a child who is constantly criticized by her mother, Mia is fragile, hungry for love, and in search of approval. This situation appears as a recurring pattern in both her intense emotional bond with her father and her romantic relationships.

3.2.A Ruptured Maternal Legacy: Lacan and the Failure to Transmit Femininity

Lacan's proposition that "The Woman does not exist" (Lacan, 2007, p. 578) suggests that there is no universal and holistic essence of femininity and that femininity is defined in the context of the desire of the Other. In line with this idea, the mother figure does not have a fixed identity tied to the knowledge of being a 'woman' but is a structure defined by lack and emptiness. The mother remains one of the most powerful, anarchic, disordered, and formless incarnations of the Other, something that is impossible to regulate or measure (Recalcati, 2019, p. 319).

In *La Quietude*, Esmeralda's relationships with her daughters dramatically represent this structural failure. Mia not only longs for her mother's love but also seeks a symbolic model of how to be a woman. Esmeralda, however, cannot provide this; her own femininity is marred by trauma, resentment, and silence. The maternal legacy, what Lacan might describe as 'the knowledge of being a woman' remains inaccessible, generating a breakdown in symbolic continuity. Lacan's assertion that "There is no such thing as Woman, only women" confirms the absence of any universal feminine essence: This symbolic absence binds the daughter to the mother as the only available reference from which she can seek the forms necessary to become a woman (Recalcati, 2019, p. 319).

Lacan (1973), in his text *L'étourdit*, uses the term *ravage* to describe the psychic devastation that may arise from the mother-daughter bond, suggesting that the mother can become a source of destruction for the daughter (Souza, 2014, p. 2043). Mia's experience of femininity is influenced by an unreachable maternal figure and an excess of affect that cannot be symbolically resolved. Ravage, rather than destroying the bond, paradoxically sustains it precisely because it is destructive. As Lacan notes, "hatred is a boundless career," highlighting the point where the maternal legacy fails (Recalcati, 2019, p. 313).

For Mia, the absence of maternal affirmation is not simply emotional neglect, but an ontological deficit. She is forced to confront womanhood without the guidance of a maternal figure who can model desire, embodiment, or subjectivity. Lacan suggests that femininity can only be taken up through a relation to lack, and in *La Quietude*, Mia experiences this lack not symbolically but as an intimate, traumatic void. The daughter demands from the mother the symbolic key to access femininity, yet the tragedy lies in the fact that even the mother does not know what it means to be a woman. Ravage, in this sense, represents the failure of maternal transmission: the mother cannot

pass down what she herself does not possess (Recalcati, 2019, p. 321). The fantasy of the phallic mother endures by maintaining the illusion that the mother truly has the answer. Even if “there is no Woman,” the daughter believes the mother possesses the key—and this illusion deepens the ravage when the key is nowhere to be found (Recalcati, 2019, p. 321).

As Souza (2014, p. 2044) notes, this devastation leaves lasting traces in a woman’s relationship to her body, romantic attachments, and experiences of loss. Mia’s struggle, then, is not only situated in her present but also sedimented in the psychological echoes of a failed maternal transmission.

The confrontation between mother and daughter, in which Esmeralda reveals her inability to love Mia, marks a moment of painful recognition. Yet it is also the moment when maternal absence becomes speakable. In Lacanian terms, this acknowledgment allows the daughter to situate the Other’s lack, and by doing so, begin the process of symbolic separation. Femininity, while still fragmented, can now be constructed through an articulation of absence rather than a denial of it.

3.3.Oedipal Fixation and the Paternal Figure: Mia’s Attachment Route

In Freudian theory, the girl’s entry into the Oedipal phase involves a shift in libidinal focus from the mother to the father, typically driven by disappointment or frustration with the mother. This redirection is not merely a movement of desire but a defense against the maternal figure’s perceived lack. In *La Quietude*, Mia’s intense emotional bond with her father illustrates a form of unresolved or regressive Oedipal attachment, shaped by maternal absence and psychic deprivation.

Throughout the film, the father is portrayed as an idealized and emotionally safe figure. Even though he remains in a comatose state for most of the narrative, his symbolic function remains intact. Within the Oedipal structure, the child engages in a passionate competition with a rival who is viewed ambivalently, vying for the exclusive love of another, along with the fantasy of replacing this rival (Sharpe & Rosenblatt, 1994). For Mia, the father becomes the primary object of love, affirmation, and identification. Her frequent declarations of affection, such as referring to him as “the man of my life”, suggest a fixation that exceeds normative familial attachment. Freud (1931/1997) noted that in certain cases, women may unconsciously repeat their ambivalence toward their mothers within romantic relationships with men. In Mia’s case, this repetition is literalized in her relationship with her sister’s husband, Vincent.

The father's physical absence, due to his medical condition, further amplifies his symbolic idealization. Unavailable yet ever-present, he functions as a fantasy structure that anchors Mia's desire and compensates for maternal deficiency. However, this compensation is unstable. Mia's ongoing romantic relationship with her brother-in-law Vincent, reveals a collapsed psychic boundary between familial and erotic roles.

This entanglement indicates not only the persistence of Oedipal dynamics but also a failure of symbolic resolution. The object of desire is never clearly delineated; instead, it is split, shared, and contested. The father's unavailability, the mother's rejection, and the sister's position as rival all contribute to a confused and fractured structure of attachment. Mia's Oedipal fixation becomes both a symptom and a strategy: a way of filling the void left by her mother and sustaining a sense of self through impossible objects of love.

3.4.Sisterly Rivalry and the Shared Object of Love

According to Chodorow, a woman's identification with her mother continues beyond the pre-Oedipal phase; thus, the mother remains not only a figure of early care and mirroring but also a central influence on her daughter's later individuation and relationships (Lomash & Srishti, 2020). When this identification is disrupted or denied—particularly in the absence of a symbolic maternal model—sisters may become entangled in relational patterns shaped by rivalry and substitution.

In psychoanalytic theory, sibling relationships often operate on a dual axis of identification and rivalry. As Bank and Kahn noted, "if siblings are of the same sex, they are rivals for parent love" (1982, p. 162). Therefore, in the situation depicted in the film, the Oedipal triangle expands beyond the parent-child relationship, encompassing siblings as competitors for affection, acknowledgment, and symbolic position. In *La Quietude*, the relationship between Eugenia and Mia is marked by both intimacy and tension, shaped by their shared history, overlapping desires, and conflicting claims over the same love object.

The sisterly bond between Eugenia and Mia encompasses shared desires for Vincent, shared fantasies, and erotic experiences since childhood. While these commonalities suggest identification and a dual bond, the rivalry that emerges over the same object of affection in later years complicates this relationship. Vincent's marriage to Eugenia, despite being Mia's first lover, symbolizes both the loss of the desired object and a betrayal by a sibling.

Mia's ongoing relationship with Vincent after his marriage to Eugenia can be interpreted not only as a 'love affair' but also as an attempt to compensate for the need for love, approval, and feeling valued, which she could not receive from her mother, through competition with her sister. Mia strives to get what she missed in her childhood by regaining what she lost. Simultaneously, in line with Lacan's principle of the orientation of desire towards the desire of the Other, Mia's focus on Vincent is not just an individual desire, but also an attempt to follow and identify with Eugenia's desire.

Consequently, this competition between the siblings for the object of affection functions as an indirect repetition of the failed bond with their mother, revealing another area of rupture in the construction of female identity. This sibling conflict suggests that maternal ravage creates a relational dynamic of repetition, jealousy, rivalry, and anger.

4. Conclusion

La Quietude offers powerful content that exhibits the psychoanalytic depth of the mother-daughter relationship through cinematic narrative possibilities. In this study, the relationships between the main characters in the film are analyzed within the framework of Lacan's analysis of femininity, based on maternal ravage and deficiency, as well as Freud's theory of Oedipal conflict and Winnicott's concept of "good enough mother".

Esmeralda's distant and rejecting relationship with Mia serves as the opposite of Winnicott's definition of a "good enough mother", which in this context explains the deficiencies in Mia's emotional development. Freud's Oedipal fixation dynamics were considered alongside Mia's intense love and idealization of her father, while her competition for the object of love with her sister was assessed as a conflictual extension of this process. The maternal ravage conceptualized by Lacan indicates a rupture in Mia's experience of womanhood, making visible the central yet unreciprocated role of the mother in desire.

Mia largely aligns with the hysterical subject structure as defined by Lacan: The hysterical subject, rather than achieving a fixed identification, discovers her identity in the realm of the Other's desire. Mia's demand for the transmission of feminine knowledge and desire, along with love from her mother, paired with her mother's incapacity to fulfill these needs, compels Mia to confront the absence of the Other's desire. Her attachment to her father, as well as her rivalry with her sister,

reflect the strategies employed by the hysterical subject to assert control over the object of desire. Although the hysterical subject aspires to be the object of the Other's desire, she does not entirely respond to this desire, thereby eluding complete symbolic integration. According to Lacan, "the hysteric's question is not 'What am I?' but rather 'What am I for the Other?'" (Lacan, 1958/1998, p. 194). From this perspective, ravage signifies not merely a maternal failure but also the hysterical subject's refusal to identify entirely with femininity.

These analyses demonstrate that the presence of the mother exerts a series of structural and desirous effects, as well as biological and social ones. The maternal ravage signifies not only an individual rupture but also a structural gap in the transmission of the knowledge of femininity, identity, and the position of desire. In this context, the film *La Quietude* enables us to reconsider the fundamental concepts of psychoanalytic theory.

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