

**ON THE FAILURE OF MATRICIDE:
LA MADRE MUERTA
BY
JUANMA BAJO ULLOA**

María Asunción Gómez
Florida International University

Juanma Bajo Ulloa is one of the most polemical directors of Spanish cinema. Critics have referred to him as “the least cinephile of cineasts,” “a camera virtuoso,” “a cynic,” “a petulant,” “an *enfant terrible*,” “a prodigal son” (Altares 18).¹ He debuted in 1991 with *Alas de mariposa*, a dramatization of a torturous mother-daughter relationship that leads to fratricide. Two years later he produced *La madre muerta*, another film criticized for its excessive cruelty and violence, and which, nevertheless, as the director himself explains, could not be otherwise since “the whole story that is based on the mother-child separation, which is the strongest thing that can happen to a person, which happens when you are born, with the umbilical cord, and when you are older, at 8 or 80 years of age. At any rate, it is always something violent, traumatic” (Altares 22). In this essay I give a psychoanalytical reading to *La madre muerta*, taking as the point of departure the theories of Julia Kristeva (*Soleil Noir* and *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*) and Christina Wieland (*The Undead Mother*) on matricide, a psychic killing which supposedly everyone must commit in order to have access to the symbolic order, to achieve self identity, to acquire language, and to form part of society.

Although it is well known that Kristeva manifests a special interest for the maternal figure in several of her essays, it is not easy to synthesize her theoretical approach as regards this theme. Further, while some consider Kristeva’s view of the maternal as a feminist subversion of Lacanian theories of identity and acquisition of language, others question this interpretation, especially in her recent works.² If in “Stabat Mater”

¹ When in 1991 Bajo Ulloa won the Concha de Oro at the San Sebastian Film Festival with *Alas de mariposa*, he confessed, perhaps naively or attempting to shock, that he hardly reads or goes to the movies, and that he does not recognize any “maestros.”

² Among those critical of Kristeva’s supposed feminism, that of Janice Doane and Devon Hodges

(1977) Kristeva focuses on the creation of a new language of the body, of desire and of maternal subjectivity, and in the dialectic that is established between mother and child, in *The Black Sun* (1986), the main focus is the psychic death (and possible resurrection) of the mother. For Kristeva, matricide is a biological and psychic need: "Matricide is our vital necessity, the sine-qua-non condition of our individuation" (*Black Sun* 27-8). Separation from the mother, in her opinion, cannot be achieved without violence, and it is the only means possible towards the establishing of an autonomous, mentally stable subject. If the break with the maternal object were not produced, the subject would then run the risk of introjecting it and of falling under the black sun of depression and melancholy. Further, Kristeva poses that if the subject resists the violence of the matricidal impulse, that violence will turn on the subject-self: "the maternal object having been introjected, the depressive or melancholic putting to death is what follows, instead of matricide" (*Black Sun* 28).

For Kristeva, then, matricide is inevitable, and one of the ways to achieve it is by creating an abject mother: "In abjection there is one of those violences and dark rebellions of the self against that which threatens it and which seems to come from an exorbitant outside or inside, thrown towards the possible and the tolerable, the thinkable" (*Poderes* 7). The rejection and expulsion of the mother take place during the anal phase. This is the first step towards separation, which is followed by the imposition of the symbolic. The abject mother is the primary object of repression and, thus, the base upon which the symbolic is built (*Poderes* 12-3). However, Kristeva recognizes that this process of separation has its complications, and, even when it is achieved, the individual runs the risk of becoming once again the prisoner of the mother: "The abject confronts us (....) with our oldest attempts to differentiate ourselves from the *maternal* entity, even before existing outside of her thanks to the autonomy of language. A violent and uncomfortable differentiation, it is always threatened by a fall back into

stands out: "Far from offering a feminist subversion of the language of Lacan, Kristeva's most recent discussion of the mother in *Black Sun* emphasizes the pathology of nonphallic maternal desire and the child's fantasized interpretations of it" (54).

the dependence on a power as calming as it is asphyxiating" (21-22). *La madre muerta* presents the complexity of the process of separation from the mother, that constant risk of feeling drawn by her presence, and in conclusion, the failure of matricide. If ambiguity prevails in Bajo Ulloa's film, it is precisely because of the difficulty of establishing the relationship of the protagonist (Ismael) with the figure of "the dead mother".

As can be deduced from interviews published on *La madre muerta*, Bajo Ulloa is not deeply familiar with the psychoanalytic theories of object relations, which with such intuition he has dramatized in this film.³ However, it is certain that, from the beginning, his purpose was to create a film rooted not in realism, but rather in the mythic, the symbolic. Bajo Ulloa explains that before he even had a clear idea of the storyline, his intention was to present "a violent story, a kind of tale in which ceasing to love would be defined, and why love and hate are so close" (Altares 22). If *La madre muerta* also lends itself to other kinds of sociological and historical readings, the analysis which I propose illustrates, and, at times, questions a series of psychoanalytical theories and supposedly universal myths.

La madre muerta revolves around the ambiguous relationship of Ismael with Leire, the daughter of a restorer of religious images whom Ismael has killed (the dead mother) as he is caught in the act of robbing her house-workshop. In fact, Ismael had also shot Leire, but the child survives. This orphan of the vacant stare and incapable of showing affection becomes the ghost of the murdered mother. Ismael tries to rid himself of her, without success, and he always shows an ambivalence of behavior. First he takes her captive, but he doesn't want to ask for a ransom; he tries to kill her by pushing her onto the train tracks, but he cannot do it; he spends nights watching over her, and he uses her to satisfy his sexual perversions; while on other occasions, the only thing that worries him is that Leire doesn't laugh. Ismael's girlfriend, Maite,

³ According to these theories, the mother is an object for the child. Melanie Klein goes further to explain the nursing child fragments the mother into objects (milk, faeces, breasts, penis, children), and later separates "good objects" from the "bad objects," and introjects the good ones. Nevertheless, the introjection does not eliminate bad objects, since, because of his paranoia, he feels persecuted by them.

begins to be jealous of Leire as she realizes he cannot, or doesn't want to, kill her. It is also Maite who warns of the danger Leire represents. She ought to be considered a victim, but for this strange pair of psychopaths she embodies a mysterious and dark being who threatens them in an impalpable way. Though Maite begins by showing tenderness and compassion for Leire, shortly thereafter jealousy is too strong, and she does everything possible to get rid of her. Ismael ends up saving her life and provoking Maite's suicide. Ismael's violent behavior and obsession with Leire continue, and they lead him to his own self-destruction.

The image Bajo Ulloa chooses to publicize his film (first in the poster, and later on the cover of the DVD) is a picture of the Virgin with the baby Jesus in her arms, but he adds an element which will take on meaning as the film progresses. It is a thick chain around the neck of the baby Jesus, which can symbolize, as we will see later on, the link between the subject (Ismael) and the "maternal object" (Leire).

In fact, in *La madre muerta*, Bajo Ulloa dramatizes the paradoxical attempt to destroy and possess the mother. Ismael experiences a series of aggressive impulses along with intense libidinal pulsions towards the adolescent girl who represents "the dead mother." The excision in the psyche of the protagonist and the impossibility of a metaphorical matricide explain his failure and his psychotic state. Psychological matricide is postulated in Western societies as a necessity, but the negation of the mother's power and the imposition of the father's law have brought as a consequence a chaotic society of traumatized individuals, who, instead of lamenting the separation from the mother, feel persecuted by the guilt of murder and the fear of the return of the "the undead mother" (Wieland 9-14).⁴ Further, the title of Wieland's essay, *The Undead Mother*, as well as its very thesis could be the title and the thesis of Bajo Ulloa's film: "This book argues that matricide has been the Western, culturally sanctioned means by which separation from mother has been achieved. However -I shall argue- this does not lead to a genuine separation from the mother or to the establishment of a parental couple within the psyche, but to a rigidly divided psyche where

⁴ In "The Bodily Encounter with the Mother", Luce Irigaray also denounces current society, our culture and even the smallest details of daily life revolve around matricide (36).

persecution reigns" (Wieland 2-3). It is precisely Ismael's divided psyche what explains his ambivalent relationship to Leire and what gives meaning to that which, at first sight, could seem like incongruous actions: he captures her to kill her, but each time he tries, a force stronger than he impedes it. When finally Maite shoots Leire, Ismael saves her life by taking her to a hospital. Why can Ismael not kill Leire? What is the relationship established between them? What does this young, emotionally vacant mute represent for a psychopath who can kill several people in cold blood and without remorse, and yet cannot separate himself from her?

To answer these questions it is necessary to pay particular attention to the initial segment which serves as a kind of prologue and which contains the key elements that will be reappearing throughout the film. Ismael shines light on different objects in the restorer's home. This repertory of images –religious iconography and different pictorial and sculptural versions of the Virgin Mary with Child- begins with a photograph of a young mother with a baby in her arms and ends with the picture of the Virgin with Child mentioned above. The parallels between the photograph and the picture are notable in terms of what they represent and also for the way in which the camera muses over these images of maternity through a two-shot sequence that begins with a close-up of the face of the Virgin mother and ends, thanks to a sustained *zoom out*, with the frame of the baby in arms.

The killing which is going to be committed is foreshadowed by a detail which at first glance may go unnoticed. The killer takes the framed photo, he looks at it, and, instead of putting back upright, he drops it. Later he stops in front of the picture, and he stares at it for a few seconds. Viewers are forced to focus their attention on the tear which transversely splits the canvass and, also, on the image of the Virgin and the Child, another foreshadowing of the violent separation which is going to take place between the mother and daughter of the photo as well as being a symbolic image of the traumatic mother-child separation which occurs at a psychological level with the entrance to the symbolic order. The shot of the wrenching excision between mother and child is followed by a close-up of the protagonist's eyes. In his gaze are mixed astonishment, fear and devotion. At that moment, a female voice returns

him to reality: "No hay dinero". The eyes that once were fixed on the Virgin of the picture turn towards the young restorer, and with an almost instantaneous automatism, he shoots her twice, thus eliminating the intrusion of a maternal figure which is not the Virgin Mother. With the first shot we see the body of the restorer fall; with the second there appears the image of the illuminated Virgin. The dead mother is seen from the perspective of a new character, a six- or seven-year old child, who witnesses the death of her mother. An enigmatic smile is traced on her face, and, using a creative subjective shot, the director offers the blurred image of the girl's feet tinged by the blood that darkens the view of the mother; then, the image fades out to red.

In this initial segment the religious icon of the Virgin Mother foregrounds how the discourse of the maternal in Spain has been controlled for centuries by the morals and the icons of the Catholic Church. The Virgin Mary is a construct created to serve the psychic and social needs of individuals in their relationship with an ideal mother. Ismael's gaze before the picture of the Virgin with the Child explains his identification with this icon and the power of its attraction on him. Ismael longs for the innocence and feeling of wholeness of the pre-oedipal state, in which the symbiotic union with the mother prevails, but the tear in the picture reminds him of the inevitable separation.

In this segment we also see how Bajo Ulloa ties the two protagonist characters, Ismael and Leire, in their traumatic separation from the mother. Throughout the film this connection is accentuated by psychological traits both share. Both Ismael and Leire appear to be caught in a kind of regressive infantilism, whose most noticeable manifestation is an obsession with chocolate. On the other hand, from this first scene of the matricide on, their incapability of expressing affection, suffering and feelings of guilt is apparent. But, the relationship between the two characters goes beyond this kind of mirroring metaphor, in which Ismael is reflected in Leire.⁵

Bajo Ulloa takes care in maintaining ambiguity at every turn so

⁵ The mirroring of the characters is apparent on a linguistic level in the alliteration of their names: Ismael-Leire.

that the roots of the sick relationship Ismael has with Leire are never clear. This ambiguity is especially evident in the first segment we are analyzing. After killing the young mother, Ismael rushes to leave the house, jumping through a window, but before he can do so, an object on the table stops him. It is a piece of chocolate, which he takes and is about to eat when the accusing stare of the child catches him.⁶ Ismael shoots her in the head, and from the blast there is a fade out to the ironic title of the film: *La madre muerta*. The irony is that the child survives, and her role throughout the film is to remind Ismael of the crime he committed, the (real and psychological) killing of a mother who is not completely dead, since she lives on in the lost gaze of Leire, in her young, adolescent body which Ismael desires and fears. Matricide, as Wieland explains, has not offered a definitive separation because the killer, by virtue of his killing, has remained irrevocably chained to his victim (11-12).

Successful separation between the subject and the object of primary identification (the mother) will be achieved through mourning: "Mourning for the lost object establishes both separateness and reality, and ensures the introjection of the object into the self so that the object becomes assimilated into and enriches the self. In contrast, an unmourned object remains unassimilated and is experienced as a persecutor. I would add that an unmourned object is experienced not only as a dead object, but as a *murdered* object" (18-9). Wieland's assertions oppose those of Kristeva, although both are based on the well-known studies by Freud "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917) and Klein "On Identification" (1955), as well as their own clinical experience with adult patients whose disorders have their roots in problematical relationships with their mothers during childhood. While Kristeva sees no other solution than the violence of matricide, Wieland argues for a healing mourning after the necessary separation from the mother. Both agree, however, that when the separation from the mother is not produced in the appropriate way, pathologies like depression, borderline personality,

⁶ Chocolate becomes a type of *leit motif* that appears in the most dramatic moments of the film: the first attempt to kill Leire; sexual abuse; final scene.

or paranoia, among others, can arise.⁷

In the case of *La madre muerta*, Ismael is characterized as a psychopath with traces of borderline personality. His brusque changes in mood are obvious; in a matter of seconds he can go from calm to irrationality and to anger. His irascibility is always inappropriate, and it reappears again and again when he feels threatened or criticized, incapable of managing his emotions and violent impulses.⁸ His relations with Maite are equally tormented, and we observe how he tries to avoid intimacy with her. Ismael attempts, instead, to fill the affective void with Leire, for whom he feels a strong sexual attraction, at same time as he approaches her in search of maternal warmth.

Leire is a kind of ghost, a persecutory image of the murdered mother, and it is Maite who first verbalizes the dark side of the young girl, after having failed in her own attempt to kill her: "Hay algo malo en ella; algo oscuro. Tenías que haber visto su mirada en el desván". Leire's vacant stare becomes an accusing look as Maite aims the gun, and, at that same instant, doves that were around her take off as if they were fleeing from some evil spirit. Maite feels attacked by the enigmatic stare which seems not to belong to this world, and she withdraws the gun. Leire is a virginal and innocent figure, but at the same time she is mysterious and strange. Wieland refers us to Freud--"The Uncanny"--and to Klein in order to expound a new way of understanding "the uncanny": "something we once treasured, and then attacked and destroyed, and from which we are now in terror of retaliation, despite its

⁷ The disorder known as "the dead mother syndrome" has attracted the attention of many psychoanalysts, especially in Argentina. They use the theories which André Green puts forth in his essay "La madre muerta". This syndrome describe a clinical phenomenon en which the subject transforms the image of a live mother into a distant and almost inanimate figure. The child behaves as if the mother had died and were physically absent, and he suffers depressions, which normal last on into adulthood. The feeling of loss of the mother and the affective lack it brings with it translates into a lack of interest in life. See Green's essay, included in *On Private Madness* (1986) and his studies on the same topic in the anthology edited by Gregorio Kohon, *The Dead Mother: The Works of André Green*.(1999).

⁸ We encounter the most shocking example of this type of pathological behavior when he kills his boss. cuando mata a su jefe por blasfemar.

familiarity to us" (18).⁹ Leire is the personification of the uncanny represents for Ismael the reincarnation of the dead mother in search of vengeance, and Maite reminds him of it: "¿No ves lo que está haciendo contigo? (...) Se está vengando de tí, estúpido".

In a later scene that takes place in the same abandoned cathedral, and which significantly is presided over by a statue of the Virgin and Child, Maite suffers another defeat before Leire. This time it is a failure sexual in nature. Ismael is lying between Leire and Maite, and with each of his hands he caresses the genitals of both women, who represent the virgin and the whore. The excision in his personality is reflected in an act which is disturbing as much for its sexual perversion as for its incestuous connotations. Faced with the impossibility of denying the evidence, Ismael promises to kill Leire. As she is about to leave, Maite shouts in French, her native language: "Tu ne peux pas la tuer. Elle est déjà morte". Though Maite sees the morbid attraction to the child as a pedophile perversion, Ismael's relationship with Leire is tinged with oedipal resonance.¹⁰

It is well known that Freud popularizes the Oedipus complex, and that he is the first to define the role of the mother in the resolution of this complex. Freud eroticizes the mother, and he presents her as a threatening being from whom the subject must separate.¹¹ The Oedipal complex is characterized by the child's desire to eliminate the father in order to be able to possess the mother. In "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex" (1924) Freud mentions several possible ways to overcome the oedipal complex, showing an inclination towards one of them: it is the fear of castration which ends up in the attachment to the mother, since it makes desire satisfaction impossible and facilitates its

⁹ Freud uses the word "*unheimlich*" to describe that which is profoundly familiar, but from which we are separated, perhaps for having repressed it. Among the *unheimlich* phenomena, Freud mentions death and the fear of death and ghosts.

¹⁰ Julio Medem, another of the Basque directors, like Bajo Ulloa, with his own personal film style, also presents in his recent film *Caótica Ana* (2007) a very complicated version of the Oedipal myth, in this case using reincarnation.

¹¹ Freud studies the Oedipus complex and develops his theory throughout his life, beginning with "A Special Type of Object Choice" (1910) and formalizing it later in *The Ego and the Id* (1923)

dissolution. In this phase, the child consolidates the functions of his *ego* and his *super-ego*, he knows and accepts the father's rule, which allows for the choice of an erotic object outside of the incestuous relationship with the mother. The renunciation of incestuous desire and the identification with the father are outlets accepted by Western societies when it comes to defining normal psychological development. Attachment, fixation or desire of the mother will lead to different kinds of psychosis. According to Freud, the mother-son dyad has to be undone so that the individual can acquire language and become part of society.

In *La madre muerta* we see that, as Ismael's obsession for the virginal-maternal Leire grows, so, too, his isolation and marginality to society become more marked. The *super-ego*, which normally acts as the psyche's protector by avoiding the taboo of incest, is absent in Ismael. Unable to separate from the mother and accept the rule of the father, Ismael must live on the margins of society.

One of the most forceful scenes of Ismael's erotic attraction to Leire and of the possible oedipal connotations takes place in the bedroom in which they hide after the abduction. It is significant that the wall that serves as a backdrop to these scenes is painted a strong red (a reminder of the dead mother) and that it is divided transversely by the same type of tear that we had previously seen in the picture of the Virgin with Child. Ismael tries to make Leire laugh, so he puts on a clown face, sings, and, at one point, he playfully touches her breast. However, the contact with the breast immediately produces a change in Ismael's attitude. Leire ceases to be for him a child whom he tries to make laugh, in order to become the object of his erotic desire. Ismael's feeling of guilt is obvious. He watches his back to be sure that he is not being watched by Maite, and he next places his hand on Leire's belly. This gesture is full of tenderness, and, at the same time, with frustration, nostalgia and sorrow. It is significant that Ismael focuses on the two parts of the body which serves as index to the lost maternal body: the breast and the belly (womb).

In the final scene, when Ismael returns to the sanatorium where Leire is interned, the power relationships between the two are inverted, at the same as Leire's character is reinforced as a maternal figure. She now appears dressed in less childlike clothing, and her hair is pulled up in

a bun. When Ismael approaches her, he kneels and presses his head to Leire's belly, as she seems to momentarily come out of her abyss to give him unmistakable signs of tenderness as she caresses his head. Ismael cries sorrowfully, as if he were a repentant child showing a profound helplessness. Although it is difficult to interpret what happens in this last encounter between Ismael and Leire, there seems to be a fleeting connection between these two beings that, throughout the entire film, have seemed incapable of expressing affection (Ismael because of his psychotic state, Leire because of brain damage from the gun shot). But, the end of this brief closeness is forceful. The wound on Ismael's hand has not healed, and the blood stain it leaves on the Leire's white dress marks the impossibility of their union, the need for separation between the mother figure and the child. The separation, once more, takes place in a violent way. The sanatorium's security guards try to take Leire from Ismael, but stubbornly he defends himself butting his attackers. Ismael finally falls to the floor, and the sanatorium director takes Leire by the hand to lead her away. After they have taken a few steps, Leire turns towards Ismael, and, fighting to get free, she goes back to where he is. The twist that Bajo Ulloa gives is that she doesn't go back for Ismael, but rather to pick up a piece of chocolate that had fallen on the floor. Is this an act of vengeance? Does it signify definitive separation? *La madre muerta's* ending could not be more sorrowful, nor could it be different.

With this film Bajo Ulloa has opened the doors to a world that exists beyond the limits of human experience and that could be described, in the words of Kristeva, as a "universe of boundaries, of oscillations, of fragile and confused identities, ramblings of the subject and his objects, fears, fights, abjection, and lyricism. At the crossroads of the social and asocial, of the familial and the delinquent, of feminine and masculine, of tenderness and killing" (*Poderes* 180).¹² *La madre muerta* can be interpreted as an allegory for the psychic matricide which individuals of Western societies are destined to perpetrate and the grave consequences which this matricide brings with it. As Wieland warns us, the attempts to kill the maternal monster and substitute it with an innocuous and defenseless virgin create a gender split and a psychic

¹² Thus is how Kristeva describes the Cellinian universe in *Powers of Perversion*.

organization based on that excision: "What is conscious and rational has to be constantly protected from what is unconscious, murderous, and irrational. What is masculine has to be protected from devouring feminine forces, and what is 'acceptably' feminine has to be protected from the devouring maternal monster" (224). Ismael, thus, becomes the epitome of the subject in Western societies, fatally divided and in perpetual fear of the murdered maternal object which leads him unfailingly to self-destruction.

Translation: Richard K. Curry

Works consulted

- Altares, Julia. "Entrevista. Juanma Bajo Ulloa". *Plano corto* 2 (1993): 18-23.
- Doane, Janice y Devon Hodges. *From Klein to Kristeva. Psychoanalytic Feminism and the Search for the "Good Enough" Mother*. Ann Arbor. The University of Michigan Press, 1992.
- Kristeva, Julia. "Stabat Mater". En *Kristeva Reader*. Ed. Toril Moi. Nueva York: Columbia University Press, 1986. 160-85.
- . *Poderes de la perversión. Ensayo sobre Louis-Ferdinand Céline*. Trad. Nicolás Rosa y Viviana Ackerman. Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 1988.
- . *Black Sun. Depression and Melancholia*. Trad. Leon Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.
- Kohon, Gregorio. *The Dead Mother. The Work of André Green*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- La madre muerta*. Dir. Juanma Bajo Ulloa, 1993.
- Wieland, Christina. *The Undead Mother. Psychoanalytic Explorations of Masculinity, Femininity and Matricide*. London: Rebus Press, 2000.