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Harvey-Kattou, L. 2025. Creating A Feminist Gaze?: Motherhood and Identity in Recent Costa Rican Cinema in: Vania Barraza and María Helena Rueda (eds.) Female Agency in Films Made by Latin American Women, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 169-189, reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan.

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https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-72600-2_8

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Creating A Feminist Gaze?: Motherhood and Identity in Recent Costa Rican Cinema

Liz Harvey-Kattou

The idea of motherhood has long been presented as an identity in and of itself by popular media, with mother characters in fiction films embodying various guises, yet always in their role as a mother. In this chapter, I use the framework of the feminist gaze to argue that this conflation of motherhood with a person's identity is completely undone in two recent Costa Rican films: *Apego* (*Attachment*, 2019), directed by Patricia Velásquez and *El despertar de las hormigas* (*The Awakening of the Ants*, 2019) directed by Antonella Sudasassi. While motherhood studies and the exploration of motherhood in film are much-researched areas, I contend in this chapter that the common categorization of mothers-on-film into "good" and "bad" is subverted in these movies. Instead, the directors disentangle the protagonists' identities from this role, presenting multiple possibilities for the mother figure when she takes herself off the pedestal of "motherhood," and uses her own agency and voice for her empowerment. I term this subversion and undermining of a heteropatriarchal stance in cinema a feminist gaze; this gaze is one that stands in opposition to both Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze as well as later interpretations of the female gaze.¹ I suggest a feminist gaze is employed by a director of any gender who creates complex, nuanced, and multidimensional characters who either subvert or, in most cases, overcome the confines of heteropatriarchy in some way, inviting the spectator to reflect on the feminist possibilities of this. The feminist gaze takes the principles of gender equality, fluidity, and freedom and situates them at the heart of film through narrative and visual choices. It is these choices that will be explored in this chapter, to show how a feminist gaze is constructed in *Apego* and *El despertar*, in light of the concept of motherhood. Beginning by mapping out how motherhood has been conceptualized on screen, it analyzes the use of the feminist gaze in the two films demonstrating how they undermine the trope of the self-sacrificing mother and how narratives of "good" and "bad" mothering are passed on intergenerationally. It goes on to show that it is the loaded concept of motherhood itself that the characters in both films need to overcome through the reclaiming of their voices which in turn undoes Ann E. Kaplan's "impossible triangle"² of sex, work, and motherhood.

Tropes of motherhood on screen

Many studies have been conducted on the mother figure in society as well as the representation of motherhood on film, concentrating on the dual "demonization" and "deification" of the role of the mother in popular culture.³ Of motherhood in general, Addison

¹ While Laura Mulvey's male gaze consists of an imagined heterosexual male creator and spectator who dictates both how women are styled and how they fit into the narrative ("Visual"), the idea of a female gaze has been developed as a way to inscribe a feminist ideology onto a film by academics such as Michelle Citron et al ("Women") and Zoe Dirse ("Gender") who argue that women's films are distinct to those made by men.

² Kaplan, "Impossible Triangle."

³ Addison et al, *Motherhood Misconceived*, 4.

et al state that it has had "extraordinary cultural visibility"⁴ in the twenty-first century, and Buchanan asserts that "motherhood is part of the larger discursive formation of gender."⁵ Underlining the linkages between gender binaries and the idea of motherhood in society, Buchanan goes on to note that the mother figure fits into its own gendered binary of "good" and "bad," or "god woman" and "devil woman."⁶ This is of course an extrapolation of Freud's Madonna/whore complex, which divides women (not just mothers) into the categories of "good" and pure like the Virgin Mary, or "bad" and promiscuous like Mary Magdalen.⁷ The longevity of these images is clear as feminist film theorists in the 1970s noted a continuing trend of women being presented in these terms in movies, with Laura Mulvey stating that women-as-mothers are always associated with either maternal plenitude or maternal lack.⁸ Kaplan's extensive work on motherhood on film from the 1990s⁹ presents a similar picture as she notes that motherhood is binarized in terms of evil witches (the "bad" mother) or angels (the "good" mother), while more recent studies by Addison et al explore the warring depictions of the working vs the stay-at-home mother who also act as bad/good representative parallels.¹⁰ Sayed also introduces her volume *Screening Motherhood in Contemporary World Cinema* by noting that there is a "limited range of representations of the maternal"¹¹ on film, and this collection demonstrates that mother characters are indeed wholly and totally defined by their role as mother.¹²

It is this role and its social importance which has been central to the study of cinematic motherhood. As Addison et al point out, the idea of a "good" mother becomes what every woman is judged on¹³ i.e. the Madonna. Heffernan and Wilgus agree that popular culture is one of the devices used to propagate images of "selfless mothers who sacrifice their time, energy, careers and even their individuality in the name of raising the next generation of 'good citizens',"¹⁴ and their special journal edition of *Women: A Cultural Review* analyzes filmic challenges to the traditional and reified images of the mother figure or, in their words, "other-than-perfect mothers."¹⁵ Within Latin American film studies, it has been noted that, despite the feminist turn in filmmaking in the region, it is rare to see representations that directly undo the binaries of "good" and "bad" mothering. Indeed, Clancy notes of Lucrecia Martel's Salta trilogy that there is an overriding maternal ambivalence – "bad" mothering – running throughout the films,¹⁶ while of Central American film specifically Cortés Pacheco stated in 2014 that all films to date from the isthmus had depicted women as myth and mother¹⁷ or, in other words, the "good" mother. Despite this overwhelming body of scholarship demonstrating the prevalence of this binary representation of motherhood on film, this chapter will show that both *Apego* and *El despertar* actually tear down these portrayals through the creation of feminist characters who break with this existing heteropatriarchal trope.

⁴ Addison et al, *Motherhood Misconceived*, 1.

⁵ Buchanan, *Rhetorics*, 6.

⁶ Buchanan, *Rhetorics*, 9-10.

⁷ Hartman, "Freud".

⁸ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure".

⁹ This includes: Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation* and Kaplan, "Impossible Triangle", 409-25.

¹⁰ Addison et al, *Motherhood Misconceived*, 3.

¹¹ Sayed, *Screening Motherhood*, 1.

¹² Sayed, *Screening Motherhood*, 1-20.

¹³ Addison et al, *Motherhood Misconceived*, 6.

¹⁴ Heffernan and Wilgus "Imagining Motherhood," 2.

¹⁵ Heffernan and Wilgus, "Imagining Motherhood," 14.

¹⁶ Clancy, "Motherhood in crisis", 71.

¹⁷ Cortés Pacheco, "Mujer y madre", np.

The feminist gaze in *Apego* and *El despertar de las hormigas*

Made by Costa Rican director Patricia Velásquez, herself of Chilean descent, *Apego*, her second feature film, was released in 2019. The film has been read by reviewers and critics as being primarily about migration, home, and belonging both to a country and a family unit, especially in terms of the film's title which translates as attachment.¹⁸ However, in this chapter I read the attachments in the film as creating a dialogue on the role of motherhood in a heteropatriarchal society. It is this rigid role that must be undone in order for the female protagonists to find their own voices, and I contend that Velásquez does this through the creation of a feminist gaze which is similar to that employed by Sudasassi in *El despertar*. The film is set in Costa Rica's capital, San José, where recently divorced Ana (Kattia González) is learning to cope with life as a working, single parent. She juggles her job as an architect and her career ambitions to manage a project in Mexico with her busy family life while her ex-husband, Daniel (Daniel González Muniz), constantly lets her down. Her parents, Julia and Andrés (Teresita Reyes and Leonardo Perucci respectively), moved from Chile to Costa Rica to escape Pinochet's dictatorship in the 1970s. Divided into three chapters centering on Julia, Ana, and Andrés, the film's opening chapter shows Julia finding her Chilean ex-boyfriend on Facebook and arranging a trip back to Chile to visit him. Despite Ana's horror at the prospect of her family being broken apart, at the end of the film she too realizes that she needs to use her voice to do what is right for her as an individual, not just as a cog in the machine of motherhood, and she accepts a work project in Mexico.

Antonella Sudasassi's debut feature, *El despertar de las hormigas*, was also released in 2019 to acclaim at international film festivals and in cinemas around the nation. It tells the story of Isa (Daniela Valenciano), a working mother who lives with her husband, Alcides (Leynar Gómez), and their two daughters, Valery and Nicole (Isabella Moscoso and Avril Alpízar respectively), in rural Guanacaste. A seamstress by trade, Isa works from her small at-home studio while simultaneously acting as the primary carer for her two children, her house, and numerous household chores. She forms part of Alcides's wider family whom he frequently tells about their supposedly shared desire for a third child, a boy. What Alcides does not know, however, is that Isa is secretly taking birth control pills and has dreams of opening her own sewing shop rather than having another baby. Just like Ana, Isa also realizes that she needs to use her voice and put herself first, eventually enunciating her desire to move on with her life and career instead of having another child.

Despite their different social classes and geographic settings, there is an interesting symmetry to both films, as both working mother protagonists have two daughters, husbands or ex-husbands who often hinder rather than help, and both protagonists want to concentrate on themselves as individuals rather than as mothers. In terms of motherhood on film, Bassin et al note that it is difficult for both films themselves and those who analyze films to maintain a focus on the subjectivity of the mother character, as the camera and narrative often veer towards the child's gaze and needs instead.¹⁹ Both *Apego* and *El despertar* break with this trope, as they prioritize the mother's gaze as she juggles her role as carer for her children, her work, and herself, and the children are rarely seen on screen without their mother's presence. Indeed, as will be seen in the analysis of the films, the focus here is on the creation of the protagonists' subjectivity and own worlds. As Kratje and Setton point out

¹⁸ Sánchez, "Retrato tico"; Parra, "Patricia Velásquez".

¹⁹ Bassin et al, *Representations*, 8.

regarding the Argentine film *Mi amiga del parque*,²⁰ director Ana Katz's "work leads one to wonder what motherhood is, to shift the borders enclosing motherhood, what it includes and what it excludes, unfurling a series of non-exclusive possibilities,"²¹ and I argue that—especially taken together—this shifting of borders and the multiplicity of possibilities for the lived experience of motherhood is what these two Costa Rican films approximate as well. Indeed, they both disentangle the woman-self from the role of motherhood, presenting these selves as separate but symbiotic facets of the protagonists. The narrative and visuals focus on the protagonists' agency and selfhood, on their experiences within and outside motherhood. What we see in the denouement of both is what happens when mothers put themselves first. Rather than the negative associations with "bad" mothering noted by Kaplan²² or Lucy Fischer,²³ their decisions to use their voices and agency have positive consequences for their families and thus challenge the binarized version of motherhood altogether.

Another serendipitous element of these films is the use of the camera to set up a feminist gaze to break with the binary of "good" and "bad" mothering. The camera firmly lingers on the mother characters – Julia, Ana, and Isa – as they go about their chores: in *Apego* through the medium of framed shots and spying gaze, and in *El despertar* through the use of dream and fantasy sequences. What I contend this does is to create a bond between spectator and protagonist, encouraging empathy for their positions which have been so encumbered by the idealized version of motherhood, and which allow the audience's acceptance of the eventual undoing of heteropatriarchal visions of this at the end of the film. In her 1996 book *Cinematernity*, Fischer contends that in film mothers are automatically spoken for, with little or no agency given to them, and yet both these films show mothers who start the film without agency over their own lives within the narrative, but who completely control the visuals of the film itself.

In *Apego*, the camera is often positioned outside doorways, with shots taken through reflections in mirrors, or from the doors of a wardrobe, which all serve to frame the film as though the audience is an outsider looking in. While the notion of cinematic spying would often be associated with voyeurism or scopophilia, this is turned on its head as, instead of spying on moments of intimacy or sex – which are actually not shown in any detail in the film and are instead glossed over by jump cuts – we spy on mundane, domestic chores such as Ana folding clothes, or Julia reading a magazine. This affective and intimist use of camera work, which places the viewer alongside the protagonists in their private spaces where they would not expect to be watched, serves to further the bond between character and spectator as well as employing the feminist gaze through the creation of the protagonists' own subjective world and time.

This is done in a similar fashion in *El despertar* as, in the first part of the movie, the viewer only has access to Isa's voice through fantasy and dream scenes. This is particularly interesting when considering Fischer's concept of cinematernity as, just as in *Apego*, it is not that the mother has no agency in these films, just that she does not use the agency she has to make a change in her life. For example, while decorating her nephew's christening cake, we see Isa begin to dig her hands into it lifting huge handfuls to her mouth to guzzle it down and yet a moment later, we are flung back into reality, the cake once again intact, only then realizing that the audience has been given an insight into her inner voice, thoughts, and

²⁰ Katz, *Mi amiga del parque*.

²¹ Kratje and Setton, "Deviations," 86.

²² Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation*.

²³ Fischer, *Cinematernity*.

desires. In another scene we see Isa in the shower and as she reaches up to touch her hair great clumps of it fall out in her hand. Panicked, she touches her head again and the same thing happens before she is jolted awake in the sudden realization that this was just a dream, again sharing deeply private moments with the audience. Indeed, even outside these fantasy or dream sequences, the camera follows Isa wherever she goes, including when she is alone in the house performing chores where diegetic sound, silences, and long takes are used to create affect and a sense of suspense that is purposely never realized. Through the use of these types of long takes, a spotlight is placed on Isa's work in the domestic space which forces the audience to reflect on the consequences of the idealization of motherhood.

Internalized roles: the self-sacrificing mother

Motherhood is the defining feature of both *Apego* and *El despertar*; it is how the characters relate to each other and how the narratives move forward. While this analysis will show that Velásquez and Sudasassi construct a feminist gaze which rejects the motherhood dichotomy, instead opting for an ending where the female protagonists use their voices and agency to show a different way forward, the initial depictions of mothers in these films play into the existing binary. Indeed, the first chapter of *Apego* delves into the figure of the traditional mother. Common to many descriptions are the terms selfless or self-sacrificing with Addison et al describing "the ideal of good motherhood" as, amongst other things, "devoted, selfless,"²⁴ while Bassin argues depictions of mothers as "ever-bountiful, ever-giving, self-sacrificing."²⁵ Heffernan and Wilgus further note that "popular culture and the media are instrumental in propagating images of selfless mothers who sacrifice their time, energy, careers and even their individuality in the name of raising the next generation."²⁶ What all these examples show, then, are that there is a cycle of society placing the self-sacrificing mother on a pedestal, while popular culture perpetuates this position, creating one idyllic image of a "good" mother.

In *Apego*, it is clear that Julia has internalized what it means to be a "good" mother and has lived her life attempting to meet this exacting standard despite the impossibility implied by it. After showing her granddaughter, Claudia, photos from her life in Chile on her computer, she begins to reminisce about what her life could have been. Although critics such as Sánchez²⁷ and Parra²⁸ concentrate on the theme of exile, I argue that it is actually the impossible role of the "good" mother that has led to Julia's malaise. She unequivocally states "I sacrificed everything for you and your father"²⁹ to Ana, noting that "I loved my family, my friends, my job..."³⁰ Although her family, friends, and work were all left behind in Chile, her words demonstrate that she lived up to the expectation that mothers completely sacrifice themselves in order to care for others. Ana mirrors this behavior as she is shown being a "good" mother, creating cozy dens with her daughters at home, reading them stories, cuddling up to them in the morning. These moments of maternal satisfaction are disrupted by what she is sacrificing, however, and she is often late for work, unable to juggle childcare and work duties, and chases her ex-husband to pay the school fees. While she is seen as

²⁴ Addison et al, *Motherhood Misconceived*, 6.

²⁵ Bassin et al, *Representations*, 2.

²⁶ Heffernan and Wilgus, "Imagining Motherhood," 2.

²⁷ Sánchez, "Retrato tico".

²⁸ Parra, "Patricia Velásquez".

²⁹ "yo sacrifiqué todo por usted y papá". From here on, all in-text translations from Spanish are the author's.

³⁰ "quise a mi familia, a mis amigos, a mi trabajo..."

the modern mother who “has it all,” she is seemingly unable to keep up with the competing demands and thus has to sacrifice herself in order to keep her children and her career intact.

Just as Julia and Ana sacrifice themselves to live up to an ideal image of motherhood, Isa in *El despertar* restrains her own voice and agency for fear of being perceived as a “bad” mother. Of dominant models of mothering in the media, Heffernan and Wilgus suggest that “mothers are idealized... these “perfect” mothers inevitably appear blissfully happy, to “have it all together” and to love every moment of their motherhood.”³¹ This pressure has seeped into Isa's psyche as she does not wish to risk falling from the pedestal of “perfect” mothering —that she has been forced into— by speaking her mind. In the opening scene where she decorates the christening cake, other women in Alcides's family swamp her, speaking over her to give their opinions. When she attempts to speak, she is constantly cut off, her voice overpowered and curtailed by others. Here she is framed as visually trapped, unable to escape. Although she is the protagonist and the wandering camera follows her throughout the film often through the use of continuous shots, she has little agency of movement in these opening scenes. Indeed, in this early sequence, Alcides proceeds to dump his baby nephew on her, takes the coffee she is yet to start drinking, and announces they are trying for a third baby. This time Isa is rendered silent due to the secret that the audience later finds out she is keeping – she is taking the pill as she does not want any more children. While the background noise now starts to drown Isa out, the camera also maintains the stifling atmosphere as it moves from a medium shot with Isa framed by a table in a corner of the hallway, to a close-up which portrays the discomfort she feels. Isa stays silent out of fear of her status as the “good” mother, the same role Julia played in her life up to this point in *Apego*, despite the visuals showing us that she feels trapped by this decision.

Intergenerational womanhood

The pressure to be a “good” mother and the fear of being perceived as a “bad” mother has led to the mother protagonists' lack of voice, and in these movies this dichotomy is internalized and passed on from mother to daughter. Both movies portray mothers with school-aged daughters and show that the idealization of the mother figure is perpetuated, with this expectation passed on generationally. Although Julia herself has realized that she no longer wants to sacrifice herself for her children, she still believes that Ana should do so for her daughters. Julia tells her “your daughters need to be with their father more”³² and that they need a father figure. Here, the viewer notes the ironic disparity between these words and the actual narrative of the film, which shows fathers being absent even when present. There are also parallels in Ana's relationship with Claudia which also show the passing down of gendered roles. For example, Ana expects her own mother to continue to sacrifice for her through childcare, cooking, and eschewing the potential journey to Chile to see her ex-boyfriend, blaming Julia for breaking up their family. Similarly, despite Daniel having cheated on Ana and leaving her for his new partner, Claudia blames her mother for her father's absence, stating “it's your fault for annoying him,”³³ a pronouncement reminiscent of Ana telling Julia not to nag Andrés about certain household chores. This learned behavior – or feeling a right to an all-sacrificing mother figure – is seen as destructive to the mother-as-individual. Indeed, as Sánchez has stated of this film, “there are clear elements in the film that refer to psychological attachments. Remaining tied to certain circumstances, habits,

³¹ Heffernan and Wilgus, “Imagining Motherhood,” 4.

³² “tus hijas necesitan estar más con el papá”.

³³ “es tu culpa por molestarlo”.

traditions,”³⁴ and I argue that these habits and traditions to which all the characters are attached are the specific conception of the “good” mother.

Another clear example of the passing down of this stereotype is the unspoken yet explicit expectation that, once Julia leaves for Chile, Ana will step up and fulfill the role of carer for her father and brothers. When Andrés falls ill, Ana’s brothers state they will share the cost of a carer with her but that Andrés must live with her because she is the “preferred one.”³⁵ This choice of word masks the gendered dynamics at play whereby because she is a mother and a daughter she is automatically also seen as the caregiver for the aging parent. Similarly to *El despertar*, this scene uses a long take with stuttering dialogue in order to force the spectator to participate in Ana’s frustrations firsthand. Moreover, the low-angled shot which is used to frame the conversation below the characters’ eye-level once more creates the feeling of spying, while the audience shares in Ana’s powerlessness in this scene. Despite the nature of the roles thrust upon her, no understanding of the burden placed on her is shown by the father or brothers; Andrés, while recuperating at Ana’s house goes missing from her care without telling her where he is, leaving her to search hospitals and morgues for him, and he returns, throwing a huge party at his house without telling his children that he is back. The framing of these scenes is also telling; when the siblings step into the garden and see Andrés singing and dancing at the party at his house, he is framed by a pergola as if he is on stage. His sons enter this stage to hug him, while the camera and spectator stay alongside Ana in the low angled shot, following her eyeline as she steps down off the decking. The low angle once again visually depicts her helplessness in the face of her male family members.

As with *Apego*, the intergenerational passing down of the “rules” of womanhood within the heteropatriarchy is also apparent in *El despertar*. Here, this is seen through Isa’s relationship with her daughters and how she instructs them in the ways of domestic chores and personal care. In the opening sequence children run through the halls, women cook, clean, and gossip in the kitchen, men sit on the patio watching TV and talking. Immediately, the traditional heteropatriarchal family setup is constructed. The first interaction that we see is when Isa’s daughter runs through the house covered in dust having been playing with her male cousin; Isa cleans her down, chastising her for getting her clothes dirty. This preoccupation with her daughters’ appearance is a theme that runs throughout the film, and from this opening encounter, it is clear that Isa believes that one facet of motherhood is the enforcing of normative gender roles that teach her daughters to be well-turned out at all moments. This narrative continues in their own home. In one scene, she takes the time to teach them how to sweep the floor correctly. Isa sweeps up, then tells her daughters how to hold the broom, how to angle it to sweep correctly, and how to collect the dust, stating “no one likes dirty people.”³⁶ The styling of this shot is deliberate, as Isa forces her daughter up off the couch and then instructs her in a long take of over one minute, all in real-time, which ensures that the audience also participates in this ritual. This overt passing on of a very specific idea of womanhood as keeper of domestic cleanliness is in turn wrapped up in Isa’s notion of motherhood and forms a key convention that she wishes to pass on to her daughters.

Another gendered practice that Isa passes down as a mother is that of haircare. Across cultures, hair has long been a symbol of femininity. Anthony Synnott contends that

³⁴ “hay claros elementos en la película que refieren a ataduras psicológicas. El quedarse pegados a las circunstancias, a los hábitos, a las tradiciones”.

³⁵ “preferida”.

³⁶ “A la gente cochina nadie le quiere”.

“hair is perhaps our most powerful symbol of individual and group identity” because it is a rare mix of both a highly personal choice while also being on public display³⁷ – although I would add that this latter aspect is culture and religion-dependent. Synnott also points out that for women, the idea of long hair is praised in the Bible as a woman’s “glory”³⁸ as well as being seen within a binary system of gender norms as appropriate in relation to men’s short hair.³⁹ These very traditional, Christian-influenced ideologies are clearly at play in this film, with Isa making a point of never have cut her own hair and, despite their pleas to have shorter styles, never having allowed her daughters to have a haircut either. The sense of self placed hair by Isa is palpable. Sudasassi uses long takes to detail the intricacies of Isa’s hair washing routine; her hair is too long to wash comfortably in the shower, so she dresses after showering, sits outside with a tub of water and washes the lengths of it with soap and conditioner, rinsing and combing it out as she goes.

These actions are also filmed in real time using diegetic sound only, inviting the viewer to reflect on the symbolism of the process. The long takes mean we accompany Isa according to her own time, once more demonstrating that the feminist gaze is one where the character’s subjectivity is not only considered but also shared with the viewer. In also teaching her daughters how to care for and plait their hair as she does, it is clear that haircare forms a part of intergenerational womanhood for Isa. Indeed, this is set up visually when Isa, Valery, and Nicole are lined up plaiting each other’s hair in perfect symmetry. In another scene, Isa brings out home remedies to remove chewing gum from Nicole’s hair instead of cutting it out; she also chastises the girls for sitting too close to the fan, worried they will get their hair caught in the blades. Here, Isa demonstrates her concern for her daughters’ appearance and for a convention she wants them to uphold. This transmission of heteropatriarchal womanhood is not restricted to rural Costa Rica, but forms a key part of the idea, or perhaps desired idea, of motherhood in other cultures too. Addison et al note that “mothers reproduce dominant ideology (quite literally), yet also become ready targets if they fail to uphold prevailing notions of “good” motherhood.”⁴⁰ While Isa very overtly reproduces these dominant ideologies through teaching her daughters how to behave and look, it is also clear that she feels she would be punished – perhaps by family members, her children’s school, or wider society – if she did not adhere to this pattern.

Overcoming motherhood through enunciation: breaking the impossible triangle

In 1990, Kaplan called sex, work, and motherhood “the impossible triangle,” both in life and on screen.⁴¹ I contend that in these films sex stands in for everything a woman wants for herself – it may be sex or a meaningful relationship, it could be hobbies, interests, and friendships – anything outside of her duties in the workplace and in the home. Kaplan notes that society has made it almost impossible to combine these three, stating that:

if the patriarchal imaginary has to a degree accommodated women’s newfound sexual freedom in recent years, and has accepted woman’s needs for work, new anxiety arises from the changed reality that childbirth and child care no longer signify

³⁷ Synnott, “Shame and Glory,” 381.

³⁸ Synnott, “Shame and Glory,” 381.

³⁹ Synnott, “Shame and Glory,” 381.

⁴⁰ Addison et al, *Motherhood Misconceived*, 4.

⁴¹ Kaplan, “Impossible Triangle,” 409.

either that woman need stay in the home, or that she be married and sexually monogamous.⁴²

Accordingly, she notes a trend in Hollywood film that sets female sexuality up as a threat to motherhood,⁴³ and yet this is precisely what I argue is undone in *Apego* and *El despertar*. Indeed, Velásquez and Sudasassi do not just highlight the vagaries, contradictions, and power of the “ideal” image of the mother figure, but they use these films to actually navigate a way out of it for their protagonists. Kaplan conceptualizes the binary as the angelic or evil mother, or one who sacrifices and one who is, implicitly, selfish,⁴⁴ and yet the protagonists show that they can be caring and present mothers to their children while also pursuing their own dreams and desires as individuals.

In *Apego*, both Julia and Ana find liberation, and this comes to them through the powerful use of their own voices. Julia’s coming-to-consciousness is seen in two key scenes. The first is after Julia has made the decision to travel to Chile to see her ex-boyfriend, and she takes control symbolically by sitting at the head of the table for Sunday family lunch. The camera is positioned in the characters’ eyelines as they sit at the table, yet Julia or Ana are always in the center of the frame in a medium shot, denoting their agency as protagonists. Julia then states that she will be going to Chile. Immediately, her three children and husband start talking over her, arranging a family trip or dissuading her from going. During this conversation where everyone talks over each other, the camera focuses on Julia, framing her in a medium-close-up to force the audience to gage her reaction to these words. Here the mechanism of the voice is audible as she quietly repeats twice “I am going alone,”⁴⁵ before having to shout this again to actually be heard by those around her; as the camera is focused solely on Julia, however, the audience is made to hear her immediately and recognize that she is being ignored. For Julia to make a decision for herself seems inexplicable for her family, with her eldest son immediately replying “we’re all family, this is a decision we can make together,”⁴⁶ presuming to speak for her instead.

The second key scene is at the local pool where she takes an aqua aerobics class; alone in the water, gazing into the distance, the medium-close-up again allows us a glimpse into her somber thoughts. When in the locker room afterwards, the camera sits at a low angle, highlighting the protagonist’s subjectivity as the audience spies on her in a private space. The scene shows her sitting on a bench in a bathrobe to the left of a row of three lockers. On the other side, unseen by her, are three women talking and laughing in a happy group. Melancholic music plays over this otherwise soundless scene, allowing the audience to participate in Julia’s feelings of loneliness and exile. As the lights go out and the gaggle of women look around in surprise, we see her shadow immovable against the far wall, out of step with the life that surrounds her.

Her empowering decision to go back to Chile chimes with Tally’s assertion that twenty-first century films from Hollywood show a “liberatory vision of older women... as exploring and enjoying their sexuality while maintaining the subtext of this as disturbing the stability of the nuclear family.”⁴⁷ Here, the roles are reversed as exploring her sexuality and new opportunities is implicit for Julia, while the disturbance of the family unit is made clear.

⁴² Kaplan, “Impossible Triangle,” 413.

⁴³ Kaplan, “Impossible Triangle,” 413.

⁴⁴ Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation*.

⁴⁵ “Voy sola”.

⁴⁶ “Estamos en familia, es una decisión que podemos tomar juntos”.

⁴⁷ Tally, “Sexuality and motherhood,” 33.

Here, Julia does not give way to the self-sacrificing mother ideal she has attempted to live up to until now. Instead, she feels empowered and makes a conscious choice to ignore her guilt; when Ana suggests she should postpone her trip in order to look after Andrés who has a urine infection, she retorts “if you’re so worried about him look after him yourself,”⁴⁸ an affirmation of her newfound power to choose her own path. Velásquez is careful not to merely reverse the roles of caring, selfless mother and absent, selfish father, however, and despite using her voice to make positive decisions for herself, Julia maintains her role as a loving and caring mother. Upon saying goodbye at the airport, her last words to Ana are “I love you very much, I love you,”⁴⁹ a reconciliatory parting note.

Although *Apego* shows the learning of idealized motherhood, Ana also begins a gradual unlearning process based on Julia’s actions. Unlearning societal roles is key to Gayatri Spivak’s work, and she advocates for a constant questioning of these in order to undo those that are harmful, both to one’s own psyche and to that of others.⁵⁰ Ana and Julia are not part of a marginalized social class, but at the start of the narrative they appear in a position of subalternity as they do not use their voices to take charge of their own lives. Ana’s arc of empowerment begins when she asks her brother to babysit for her and goes to a party; there she gets drunk, meets an acquaintance, and has sex with him in the garden. Kaplan discusses the working mother as presented on film as beautiful but not sexy, as mothers on film must either work or be sexually active, but not both, while the executive father is represented as both powerful and sexy.⁵¹ Whereas this chimes with the portrayal of Ana and Daniel up until this point in the film, we are now offered a glimpse at a woman who manages work, motherhood, and sex without being punished for it in the narrative. In fact, after her one-night stand, Ana is transformed, having had an unspoken revelation that acting on her own desires is sometimes what she needs. The audience is allowed into this coming-to-consciousness through an email she writes to her mother. She begins by writing “since you left Dad hasn’t been well and everything is in chaos.”⁵² After reconsidering this guilt-inducing formula, perhaps realizing that her mother is also a person in her own right, she then deletes these words and writes a more palatable email instead, showing that she has begun to understand and accept her mother’s decision to act for herself.

Despite this, in the short-term, Ana continues to play the role of carer for her father and when she eventually finds out that he has been keeping his cancer diagnosis a secret and has not been seen for a week, she takes the lead trying to find him with the help of her brothers. However, some days later as she passes her parents’ house, she finds Andrés throwing a raucous party, the house bouncing with music and full of people. This is her pivotal moment, and she finally understands that she does not have to take over her mother’s role as caregiver. At this point, she chooses to regain and use her voice, once more following her mother’s example in an unlearning project of her own. She does to her ex-husband what he has done to her countless times: she packs up her children’s things and drops them off for the weekend with no warning, allowing her to go to Mexico for work.

Although Sánchez states that “Ana, in some ways, realizes that she has spent years living a life she did not like to please her family,”⁵³ this is not entirely the case; it is not her

⁴⁸ “Si te preocupa tanto cuídalo tú”.

⁴⁹ “Te amo mucho, te amo”.

⁵⁰ Danus et al, “Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.”

⁵¹ Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation*, 180-8.

⁵² “Desde que te fuiste papi está muy mal y todo está en caos”.

⁵³ “Ana, de alguna forma, cae en cuenta que lleva años viviendo una vida que no quiere por complacer a su familia”. Sánchez, “Retrato tico”.

family that she is necessarily trying to please, but the role that society has assigned to motherhood from which she now knows she must escape. This is how Velásquez does away with the good/bad mother binary and instead shows the spectator what happens when motherhood does not only involve sacrifice. She has not left her daughters or her caregiving role, but she has chosen to do it in a place that allows her to be self-fulfilled too. Of her film, Velásquez states that “at the end, the film is to do with this, with the attachments we have, which can sometimes be heavy to carry. It is about how we get rid of these things,”⁵⁴ and I argue that the attachment she mentions here is the very notion of motherhood and the selflessness implied in it that society requires.

In *El despertar*, Isa comes to a similar realization: she needs to harness her agency in order to put herself first as an individual. Kaplan has noted that it is hard for women to separate out whether their desire for children is really theirs or just the desire of patriarchy,⁵⁵ and yet what we are presented with in this film is a female protagonist making it clear that she wanted her two daughters, but that she does not want another child. This rejection of the possibility of a third child is not a rejection of motherhood, then, but shows that a mother on film can claim back her own subjective status rather than being spoken for. This happens in *El despertar* slowly, as Isa builds her capacity to have agency over her own life in the narrative of the second half of the film. First, she experiments by taking money from the household’s money tin, buying material for a dress she would like to make for herself instead of for others, and she tells Alcides to get them a babysitter for a night. She takes him to a bar with friends, they drink, dance, and later have sex as directed by Isa. This is a far cry from the mothers on film who can either work or be sexually active⁵⁶ thus firmly challenging Kaplan’s impossible triangle.⁵⁷ After Isa’s first tentative step towards using her voice and gaining agency, she then knows she must tell Alcides that she does not want another child. Too timid to do just that, she goes out to a bar and gets drunk with her friend, staying out all night on the beach. It is here that the spectator is once again asked to identify with Isa as the camera follows her, lingering as she sits on the sand in the darkness, looking out to sea with tears in her eyes; the close-up inviting us into her reality.

It is the film’s denouement that, just like *Apego*, demonstrates how the boundaries and stereotypes of motherhood can be broken on film which is, in itself, a radical proposition. Isa returns the next morning, collecting her daughters from school and then taking them home to wait for Alcides. As they wait for him, she tells Valery and Nicole that she will cut their hair for them just as they wanted. While only a brief scene, I argue that this is actually the pivotal encounter for Isa. Although not cutting her own hair, she is now choosing to use her voice to also give a voice to her daughters, to teach them that their wishes matter and will be listened to. In cutting their hair, Isa hands them the agency they have been missing as they have been taught by her to be subservient – subservient to their families and to the social roles prescribed to them. This scene is poignant and mirrors the image of Isa teaching her children to brush and plait their long hair; only this time she cuts their hair at their direction, among excited giggles from all three. When Alcides returns from work, it is not the battle that Isa had been expecting or dreading. She sits him down, tells him she does not

⁵⁴ “Al final, la película tiene que ver con eso, con los apegos que tenemos, que a veces pueden ser pesados de llevar. El cómo hacemos para soltar esas cosas”. Velásquez in Sánchez, “Retrato tico”.

⁵⁵ Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation*, 4.

⁵⁶ Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation*, 180-8.

⁵⁷ Kaplan, “Impossible Triangle,” 490.

want any other children, and when he asks “now or never?”⁵⁸ she replies “never,”⁵⁹ and the matter is finished. He looks downcast, but then immediately looks at his daughters and states “that haircut suits you. You both look beautiful.”⁶⁰ While Isa has spent the narrative of the film anxious about using her voice to enunciate what she really wants; the melodramatic ending never appears.

Kaplan notes that maternal melodrama is complicit in perpetuating the stereotypes and myths around the “good” and “bad” mother characters⁶¹ which is why it is important that both films present a different ending for the mother protagonists. Although, of *El despertar*, Costa has noted that Isa is “a woman fed up of feeling like a prisoner in the center of a culture rooted in the unspoken conviction that she is responsible for domestic labor,”⁶² it is clear from this ending that she has previously been complicit in keeping herself prisoner in her role as mother and wife.

What both these films demonstrate, then, is the realization that it was not a specific patriarchal figure or mandate forcing either motherhood or a specific type of maternal role on Julia, Ana, or Isa, but it was these mother characters themselves who had internalized heteropatriarchy’s rules and functions and performed them accordingly. In breaking free from the binary of “good” and “bad” mothers, Julia, Ana, and Isa become individuals with voices, agency, and the freedom to be caring mothers for their children and fulfilled women in their own right. Unlike the films written about in Heffernan and Wilgus’s work which show “imperfect” mothers – still implying the binary exists⁶³ –these films actually show these protagonists not as mothers, but as individuals. The recapturing of the voice for these characters reframes the typical maternal narrative, using a feminist gaze to show a multiplicity of possibilities. If Fischer’s cinematernity shows mothers on screen being spoken for, about, and over, these films re-position the mother character both visually and within the narrative; they gain a voice, agency, and personhood away from their roles as mothers.

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⁵⁸ “Ahora o nunca?”

⁵⁹ “Nunca”.

⁶⁰ “Les queda bien este corto. Se ven muy bonitas las dos”.

⁶¹ Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation*.

⁶² “Una mujer harta de sentirse prisionera en el seno de una cultura... asentada en la convicción de dar por hecho que ella... es la única responsable de los cuidados en la esfera íntima”. Costa, “Revolución”.

⁶³ Heffernan and Wilgus, “Imagining Motherhood,” 14.

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