

## HOME AS *mother!*-EARTH

“I say Mother. And my thoughts are of you, oh, House.”  
— O. V. de L. Milosz<sup>1</sup>

Darren Aronofsky’s *mother!*<sup>2</sup> is a film consisting of abounding layers, each opening the work to diverse interpretations. Three principal tiers of analysis and interpretation emerge on closer inspection, forming a foundation for the exploration unfolding below. The first layer materializes as the anatomy of an obsessed artist and his wife who are faced with unexpected guests that arrive at their home and destroy its pastoral tranquility. Bridging the present, the second layer installs references to biblical characters from the *Old* and *New Testament*, likewise appearing in the house in orderly fashion. The film’s third base layer zooms out even further, defining “mother” as home and “home” as earth/universe on an anthro-cosmological scale. The following resounds in line with this third layer’s mythological aspect of time and space, crossing and permeating the other two layers as an intricately entangled tripartite tier-system that doesn’t allow any of the layers to be understood in isolation.

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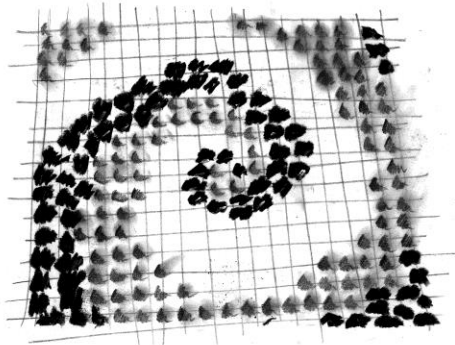
<sup>1</sup> O. V. de L. Milosz, “Melancholy,” in Jacky Bowring, *Melancholy and the Landscape: Locating sadness, memory and reflection* (New York, Routledge, 2017), 46.

<sup>2</sup> *mother!*, 2017, Drama/Mystery, 2h 1m, All the lower and upper-case letters in the name of the film and characters, also spaces are based on Darren Aronofsky’s *mother!* screenplay.

## (Circle)

In Aronofsky's films, the circle, as both a narrative form and a symbolic formal shape, features prominently in the auteur's mise-en-scène. For the director, this symbolism, associated with the golden ratio and rules of proportion, illustrates the form's metaphoric connection with the natural and supernatural. Extrapolated from its geometrical capacities, the circle, thus, stands for notions such as continuity and perfection, its roundness echoing nature, creation, and divinity that find its materialization globally in the spaces created in traditional and modern architecture. This inherent transfer potential is why Aronofsky, apart from spiraling narration, instrumentalizes the shape to control and manipulate atmosphere in his films to become an additional conductor to the content portrayed. For instance, in his first feature-length film *Pi* (1998), the story encircles a mathematician driven (to excess) by his obsession with mathematical regularity as perfection rooted in  $\pi$ , the circumference of a circle. Perfection, as circle, since then assumes its position as signifier and mediator between nature, religion, and the cosmos in Aronofsky's films. In *Fountain* (2006), a film whose synchronous distemporality recalls the birth and rebirth of an immortal love bounded to two souls and cutting across time and space, the circle assumes its non-verbal communication as an archetypal mandala visualizing the mythological fluidity of time and space, and their ultimate manipulation by a force that transcends the limitations of either. Even in *Requiem for a Dream* (2008), a film with no obvious mythological reference, the circle again appears in order to show the imprisonment of characters in their chemically altered states of reality, their home a diabolic circle between consumption and withdrawal, a world of delusion only altered by the seasonal structure of Aronofsky's narration, using intertitles (Summer, Fall, Winter). *mother!* demonstrates the most complex circular structure in

Aronofsky's cinema to date; its tripartite tier-system simultaneously represents the "roundness of being"<sup>3</sup> and "the periodicity of creation."<sup>4</sup>



Pi (1998)



Requiem for a Dream (2000)



The Fountain (2006)



Black Swan (2010)

## Narrative/Atmospheric ○

*mother!* begins in the burnt-out remains of a HOME. HIM, a noted poet suffering from writer's block, places a CRYSTAL FORMATION on a pedestal in his study. The ruined house morphs

<sup>3</sup> Gaston Bachelard. *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How we Experience Intimate Places*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston, Beacon Press Books, 1969), 233.

<sup>4</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959), 62.

into a lovely HOME and then MOTHER, the poet's wife and muse materializes in a bed. MOTHER still working on renovating the HOME, starts seeing a beating heart within its walls. One day, MAN turns up at the HOME, asking for a room. HIM agrees, and MOTHER is reluctant. Soon MAN's wife, WOMAN arrives. MOTHER is increasingly frustrated with her guests, but HIM likes them since they are his fans. MAN and WOMAN accidentally shatter the CRYSTAL FORMATION, which HIM had forbidden them to touch. HIM and MOTHER both agree that MAN and WOMAN must leave.

Before they can leave, their two sons arrive and fight over their father's will. The OLDEST SON kills his YOUNGER BROTHER. MOTHER follows a trail of YOUNGER BROTHER's blood to find a tank of oil hidden behind the HOME's basement walls.

At night, dozens of people arrive at the house to honor the dead son. They behave in presumptuous ways that irritate MOTHER. She orders everyone out and argues with HIM over their stay until they begin to have passionate sex. The next morning, MOTHER announces she is pregnant. The news elate HIM and inspire him to finish his work. Upon publication, it immediately sells out every copy.

Sometime later, MOTHER is nearing the end of her pregnancy. A group of fans arrives at the HOME to celebrate HIM's success. MOTHER asks HIM to send them away, but he wants to be admired. Hundreds of people fill the HOME, which falls increasingly into disoriented chaos. Meanwhile, MOTHER gives birth to her baby. HIM tells MOTHER his fans want to see their newborn son; she refuses however, HIM takes their child to the crowd. Devastated, MOTHER wades into the crowd where she sees people eating her son's mutilated corpse. Furious, she

makes her way to the basement oil tank and sets the oil alight; it explodes, destroying the crowd, the HOME.

MOTHER and HIM survive; she is burned while HIM is unscathed. She asks HIM who he is. He says: "I am I and you are HOME." He asks for her love and she agrees. She asks where he is taking her and he says: "to the beginning". When she asks what he wants, he says he wants her love. She tells HIM he can have it. Her love is her heart (CRYSTAL FORMATION). He places it on its pedestal and, once again, the house is transformed and a new MOTHER appears.

“[By doing this], slowly color repairs the shelf, returning it to an un-burnt state.

Now, dawn light reveals glimpses inside a HOME repairing itself from a fire: the front door, a hand rail, a window onto the porch, the plaster work along the ceiling, the ruffled sheets on a comfortable bed in the MASTER BEDROOM

They come back to life. A body emerges before us. A young woman [MOTHER] in that comfortable bed reaching for her man.”<sup>5</sup>

*mother!*'s narrative cycles through space and time one eerie event after the other, only to dispassionately return to its point of origin. While circular narrative is nothing specific to Aronofsky, the way of intentionally confusing time and space through the geometric and architectural structure is.

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<sup>5</sup> Darren Aronofsky. *“mother!”* (Los Angeles, Paramount Pictures Corporation, 2017), 1.

## Meta-○

Mircea Eliade (1907 – 1986), historian of religion, believed in two categories of time: cyclic vision and linear chronological events. In ancient thought, the *eternal return* occurs by re-enacting mythical events that time transforms into a circle through rites, while profane time is suspended by the imitation of archetypes.<sup>6</sup> The cinematic fabric of *mother!* is undergoing a very similar process. After the initial scene—“infinite,” and MOTHER’s awakening—the story transforms its temporal structure into “finite time,”<sup>7</sup> playing out in a contemporary setting. Contained within the opening and closing scenes, this fragment—likewise “round”, or in Bachelardian terms, “round world around the round being”<sup>8</sup>—lodged between these two “atemporal eternities”<sup>9</sup> morphs in duality with the architectural structures that delimit the diegetic space. Step by step, through narration, time, and space, we progress through the cyclical vision Aranofsky’s. This becomes apparent especially after HOME’s rebirth, where we see MOTHER redecorating HOME to fit, again, in the profane time of this cyclical episode. Monadically stretching and collapsing space and time to effectuate the “imitation of an archetypal model” (rebirth of the house), this “reactualization of the mythical moment when the archetype was revealed for the first time,” Bachelard here fittingly argues, is encoded in “[e]very creation [that] repeats the creation of the world and [its] construction [as] cosmogonic gesture.”<sup>10</sup>

For MOTHER, preserving and redecorating is a spiritual experience, she touches, she thinks, she imagines, and she feels through her heart. For her, painting the house is a dialogue with HOUSE rather than an action, it is the cosmogenic “construction from within”. Eliade once stated in a

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<sup>6</sup> Mircea Eliade. *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York, Harper Torchbooks, 1959), 35.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 127.

<sup>8</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 240.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 112.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

similar line of thought that “[a] new era opens with the building of every house and construction is a new organization of the world and life.”<sup>11</sup> The eternal return, yet morphing in its version as to exhaust the infinite possibilities of space and time, occurs as a fragile genesis that gains its creational potential of construction from the excessive violence of apocalyptic destruction, a circle with no definable beginning and no end.



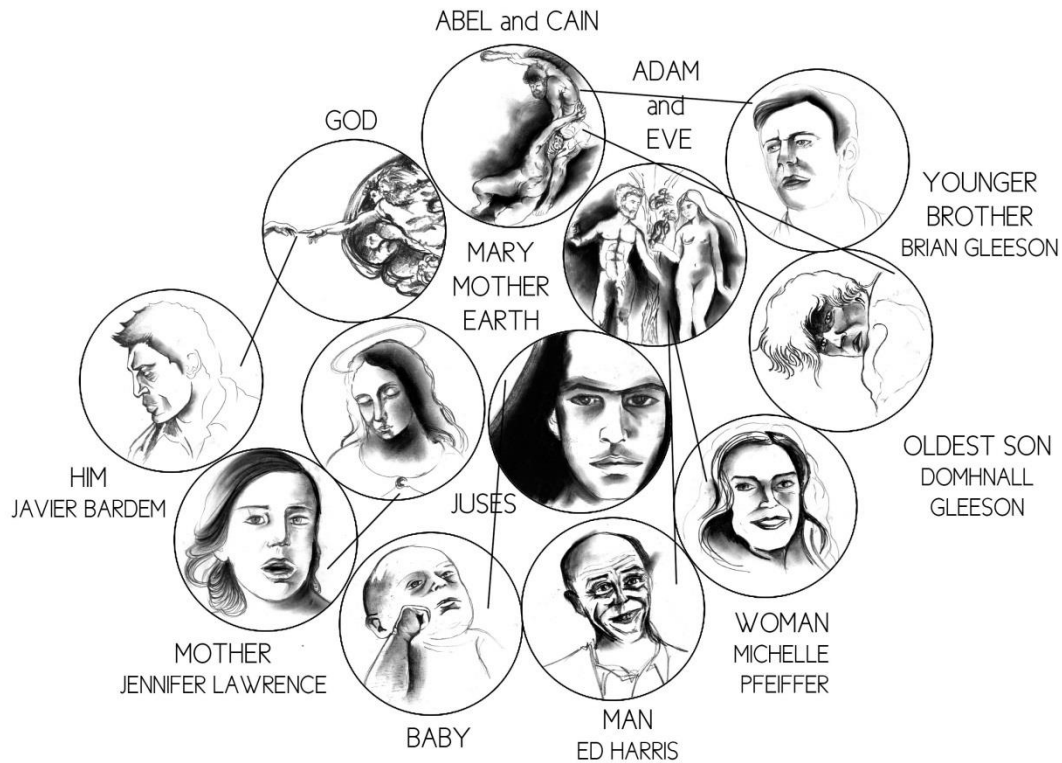
### **Allegorical** ○

The octagonal HOME, with its cosmic roots, is not simply a place for the “new era” as a “materialized time”; it also is the center of the EARTH in mise en scène and narration. As the film progresses, the plot merges into an allegorical phase in which the biblical characters, MAN

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 76.

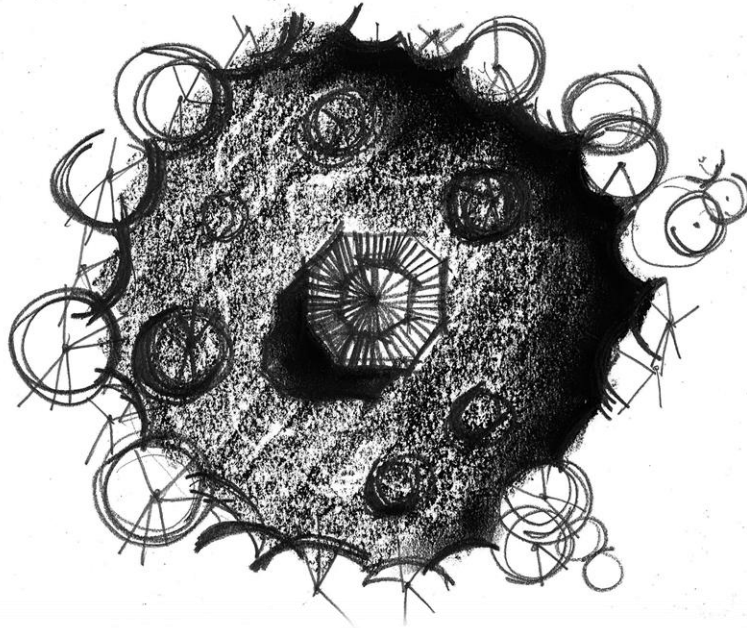
and WOMAN as Adam and Eve, OLDEST SON and YOUNGER BROTHER as Cain and Abel, and BABY as Jesus appear.



These biblical allegories transport the diegetic space of *mother!* from its circular motion to the center of the circle. Exemplified in the topological framework of biblical Golgotha—the place which “was situated at the center of the world, since it was the summit of the cosmic mountain and at the same time the place where Adam had been created and buried”—the translocation of HOME to the center mirrors the anticipation of point zero, the moment in which the circular progression effectively loops space and time—where (Golgotha) “the blood of the savior [Jesus]



falls upon Adam's skull, buried precisely at the foot of the Cross, and redeems him."<sup>12</sup> HOME is Golgotha, the mythological center, a place for constant creation as imago mundi or imago magi.<sup>13</sup> The symbolism of the center, which relocates any temple, palace, or building into the same central point of mythical space, has abolished profane space.



### ○ in Detail

Gaston Bachelard (1884 – 1962), here, aids in deducing the greater picture (macrocosm) from the smaller picture, as the archetypal aspect of space also exists in each architectural element of a house (microcosm). In the film this manifests as the architectural details which—fragmented and either in states of construction or destruction—help to assemble the big picture (read: circle).

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<sup>12</sup> Eliade. *Cosmos and History*, 14.

<sup>13</sup> Henry Corbin, French theologian, in his article, “Emblematic Cities” used the term “Imago-magi”, magical image, for Islamic architecture considers the mosque a terrestrial temple (microcosm) that is a projection of the celestial temple (macrocosm) in heaven.

For Bachelard, home is not just a home; instead, he reveals that setting is more than a scene. He talks about home as a “self-enclosed whole, a macrocosm” or “our first universe.”<sup>14</sup> For the philosopher, “house” is not simply an objective entity, “house” is a matter of subjectivity. He sees the concept of the home as poetic imagination, as a place for daydreaming. Aronofsky also takes the same subjective cinematic approach in *mother!*, in which HOME is more than a home.

The way we experience HOME is similar to MOTHER’s experience, portrayed in three distinct cinematic camera techniques: close-up (MOTHER’s emotional reactions), over-shoulder (MOTHER’s shoulder), and POV (MOTHER’s point of view). Because of this, we observe HOME as MOTHER’s psychic state.<sup>15</sup> This approach aligns closely with the mythological space and elements of HOME, including FRONT DOOR, WALL, FLOOR, BASEMENT, HIDDEN CELLAR, WINDOW, and so on.

**FRONT DOOR** The first microcosm in the house is the front door, a gate that is as much ritual as it is a fundamental architectural element. The entrance is the symbol of creation and existence for the characters in the film. We see almost all of the film’s principal characters for the first time near the FRONT DOOR, which serves as a dialectic of within and without, as “[o]ne who opens a door and one who closes it is not the same being.”<sup>16</sup> After MOTHER’s (renewed) materialization at the opening scene, she is searching for HIM at HOME. She is the first character who opens the FRONT DOOR of HOME:

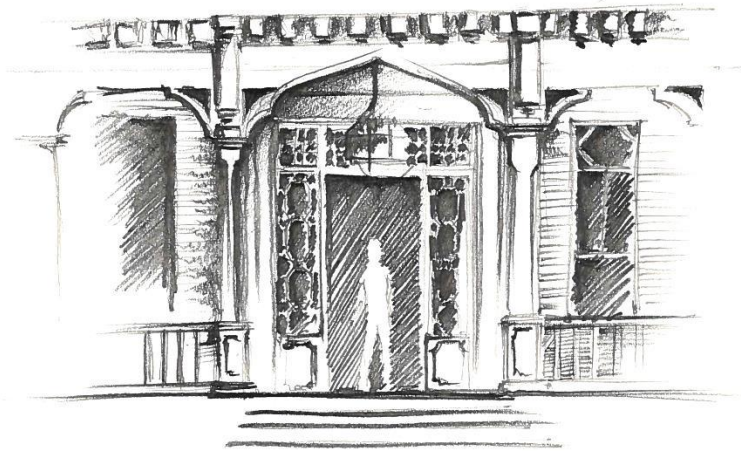
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<sup>14</sup> Gaston Bachelard. *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How we Experience Intimate Places*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston, Beacon Press Books, 1969), xvii.

<sup>15</sup> Mekado Murphy. “Anatomy of a Scene, *mother!*”, nytimes.com. <https://www.nytimes.com/video/films/100000005430355/anatomy-of-a-scene-mother.html> (accessed April 9, 2018).

<sup>16</sup> Bachelard. *The Poetics of Space*, 224.

“She opens the door, steps out onto the porch, and stares into the blinding morning sun. She doesn’t see anyone. It is chilly, so she quickly turns to head inside and bumps into HIM.”<sup>17</sup>

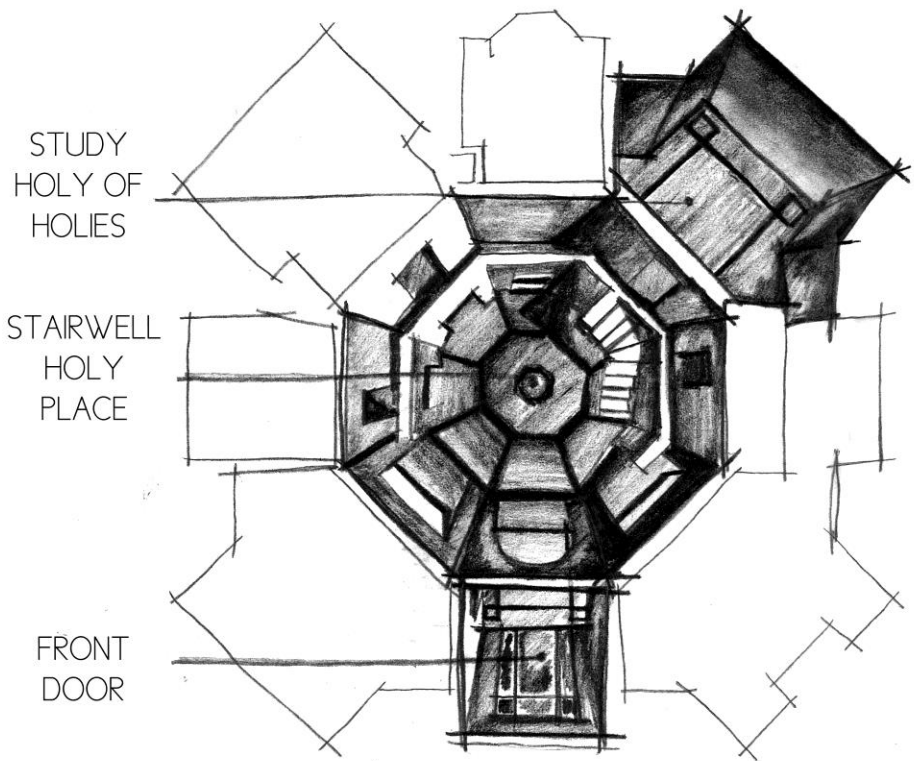


The gate is a threshold from the profane (linear) to the sacred (circular), from non-house to house, from non-being to being. HOME’s diagram is similar to Solomon’s temple, in which the holiness increases as one goes deeper into the sanctuary.<sup>18</sup> In the house, holiness increases from FRONT DOOR to HIM’s STUDY. STUDY in the film is a metaphor for the Garden of Eden where the tree of the knowledge of good and evil or forbidden fruit (MOTHER’s heart) is planted.

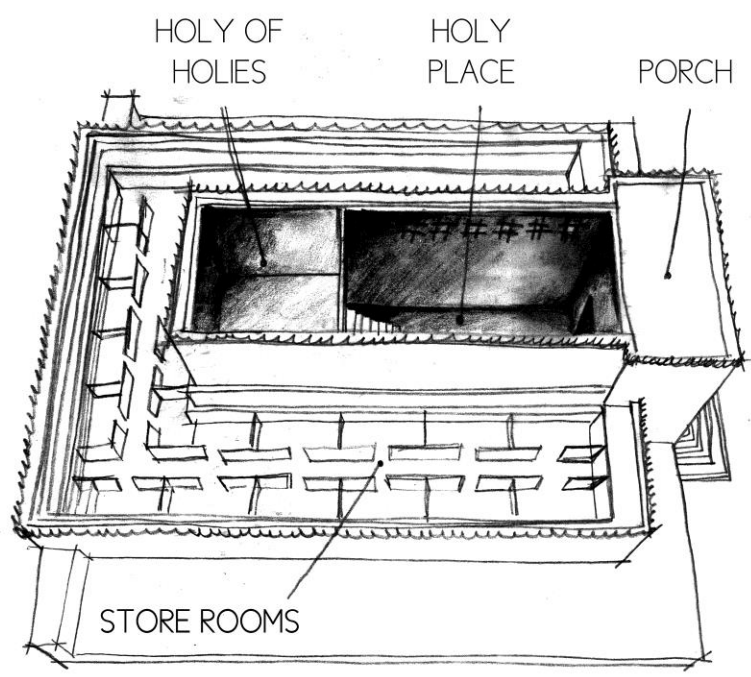
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<sup>17</sup> Aronofsky. “*mother!*,” 2.

<sup>18</sup> Christine Hayes. “Lecture 8. Exodus: From Egypt to Sinai (Exodus 5-24, 32; Numbers).” YouTube video, posted by “YaleCourses” Dec 6, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kS17dLuTPd0&list=PLh9mgdi4rNeyuvTEbD-Ei0JdMUujXfyWi&index=8>



*mother/* FLOOR PLAN



SOLOMON'S TEMPLE

**WALL** The haptic connections of MOTHER and HOME link the “immediate past” of HOME (opening Scene) to the “immediate future” of HOME (closing scene). She hears a breathing between the house’s walls, the deep rhythmic beat of its mechanical systems, the fluids flowing through its pipes. Similar scenes repeat in the film until we grasp at the end that MOTHER’s heart is the HOME’s heart. The house has been engraved in MOTHER or, to stay with the Bachelardian undertone, “has engraved within us the hierarchy of the various functions of inhabiting.”<sup>19</sup>

**BASEMENT** In one scene, MOTHER and WOMAN have an intimate conversation about sex and happiness in their respective marriages, climaxing when WOMAN wants to know why MOTHER is not pregnant yet. Most of this exchange takes place in the BASEMENT, within a dark atmosphere, evoking eerie feelings. We never observe any male character there and only see HIM transgress only once at the end. In *mother!*, the underground space becomes the archetype of desire<sup>20</sup> and femininity (fertility), it is the unconscious void that contains all elements of construction and destruction, as becomes apparent when MOTHER finds a HIDDEN CELLAR in which she uses the oil tank located therein to burn down the house and terminate the crowd of fans.

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<sup>19</sup> Bachelard. *The Poetics of Space*, 15.

<sup>20</sup> Based on Sigmund Freud’s theories, this could be regarded as Id. Moreover, in *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema* in the film *Psycho* (1960), Slavoj Žižek talks about the house there as the representation of three levels of human subjectivity: ground as ego, upper floor as superego, and cellar as Id.



**STAIRS/WINDOW** The scene of HIM and MOTHER's argument about the catastrophic events at HOME—after the funeral—ends in passionate lovemaking on the STAIRS that dissolves into whiteness, after which MOTHER awakes in the morning, the renewed cyclicity of days.<sup>21</sup> Once again, “finite time” merges into “infinite,” the mythical event, the sacred marriage of earth and heaven. Center is a place for the meeting point of earth (mother) and sky (father). While watching the WHITE light from the bedroom WINDOW, MOTHER has an epiphany and knows that she is pregnant. WINDOW here plays the role of the angel Gabriel in the annunciation; WINDOW is a messenger, a divine element. WINDOW here is not just a dialectic of outside and inside; it also is a dialectic for macrocosm and microcosm.

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<sup>21</sup> In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud talks about stairs as a representation of erotica in dreams.



**FLOOR** Blood covers the floor in the scene in which OLDEST SON kills YOUNGER BROTHER. MOTHER cleans it later, but the blood appears repeatedly and assumes its symbolic form as a scar on skin rather than blood on a floor. HOME leads MOTHER to the hidden oil tank that allows her to initiate the apocalyptic fire that cleanses the hands that shed innocent blood on earth, even if it means a self-sacrifice for HOME.



Eliade believed that humans bore the pressure of history (linear time) by rituals as “the periodicity of creation,” while for Bachelard, one feels at home only when the home is a “self-enclosed whole, a macrocosm.” For Aronofsky, this manifests not simply as a nostalgia for a lost paradise, despite its absurd comical moments, but it mirrors the (literally) heart-breaking quest that moves WO/MAN to make MOTHER EARTH HOME.