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## Screening Posthuman Procreation and Monstrous Motherhood in *Raised by Wolves*

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### Abstract

*Representations of posthuman birthing and artificial motherhood are at the center of the fictional universe of the HBO sci-fi series Raised by Wolves (2020-2022). This paper investigates how the series' cinematographic aesthetics fabricate discourses on human procreation, posthuman motherhood and maternal heteronormativity. In the series, these topics are negotiated within the categoric triangle of woman, animal, and machine. Embodied by the series' gynoid protagonist 'Mother', these categories become blended into a monstrous-feminine other whose uncanny performances of maternity outline the potential fascination and horror of (post)human gestation. Applying a close reading of two scenes screening Mother's performances of birthing and of Mother's own 'birth', this paper debates the subversive potential of the corporeality of the monstrous machine-mother in the light of a patriarchal remodeling of the feminized body for the purpose of procreation, and discusses how the series' adaptation of the notion of the abject is used to constitute the technologized monstrous-feminine.*

**Keywords:** Posthumanism; Monstrous-feminine; Birth; Procreation; The abject

### Introduction

The dystopian HBO sci-fi series *Raised by Wolves* (*RbW*), which premiered in September 2020, co-produced and co-scripted by Ridley Scott, enriches Scott's narrative *Alien* arsenal with its cinematographic representations of artificial/monstrous motherhood, extra-terrestrial impregnation, and posthuman birth.<sup>2</sup> In the series, the female and, occasionally, artificial body in its various pre-, natal- and postnatal stages is presented as “morphologically dubious” (Braidotti 1997, 64): its transformative abilities endow it with the power to threaten the stability of (paternal) authority (Creed 2007, 12-13). The series' embodiment of the transforming female/feminized body is its protagonist Mother, an almost hyperbolically powerful gynoid, gendered as female by body shape, voice, and social performances. Mother is constructed with a “fluid, flexible and instable [body]” (Ursa 2014, 132), a body which is continuously modified, de- and reformed throughout the plot. These alterations are caused either through the hands of the figure of a male genius, who violently invades Mother's body with the mission of re-attributing her womb with the purpose of procreation, by artificial pregnancy being staged as a pseudo-natural mechanism pushed ad absurdum, or by her own powers to shape-shift into a deadly, castrating medusa-esque weapon, a so-called *necromancer*.

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<sup>2</sup> The series was cancelled after two seasons in summer 2022, leaving the audience with unresolved cliffhangers regarding the fate of its human and posthuman characters.



Not only Mother's body is permanently on the edge of transformation. Her identity, including her maternal performances, such as giving birth or taking care of her children, are depicted as kaleidoscopically ambiguous. This paper focuses on the series' scenes of births and argues that Mother's enactment of giving birth to human offspring blends categoric features of the human, the animal, and the machine into an uncanny fantasy of monstrous otherness: As such, "[Mother's] body shares with the monster the privilege of bringing out a unique blend of *fascination* and *horror*" (Braidotti 1997, 65). Thus, in *RbW*, the "[maternal] body is a site for play with categories" (Conboy et. al 1997, 6); it is "always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo" (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, 25). As such, Mother's corporeality ties into Barbara Creed's conceptual framework of the monstrous-feminine, that "what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject" (Creed 2007, 1) and which bears the potential to destabilize the "logocentric economy" (Creed 2007, 64) of a patriarchal system by its transformative and transgressive powers.

Bridging the concept of the monstrous-feminine to the pregnant female body and to posthuman procreation, this paper seeks to show how the series' fantastic conceptualization of the female/feminized body enacting birth and other maternal performances re-thinks and subverts the socio-cultural ideal of the stable mother figure (Ursa 2014, 132) and of "maternity [...] as a pre-alphabetic form of human experience" (Ursa 2014, 131-2). The series stages Mother giving birth as an experience externalized from the womb and thus through her "clean and proper body, the obedient, law-abiding, social body" (Grosz 1994, 192, in reference to Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection). As such, the depiction of artificial delivery seemingly dissolves all "association of woman's maternal and reproductive functions with the abject as a construct of patriarchal ideology" (Creed 2007, 83). The birthing female body in its technologized and perfected version, is purified and thus ostensibly screened as a desirable, utopian phantasmagoria of "mechanizing the maternal function" (Braidotti 1997, 62) in accordance with the paternal ideal in which the female body remains clean and is, as such, controllable. However, as will be shown, it is the specific absence of abject body waste within Mother's performance of birthing that creates an antiseptic and uncanny monstrosity: The unruptured and whole birthing feminized body widens the gap between the weakened human mother and the vigorous posthuman gestation machine.

The narrative ellipsis of abject body material is repeated in the screening of Mother's own 'birth': In its deadly necromancer form, Mother's body undergoes forceful repurposing for human reproduction at the hands of a male scientific genius, her opened feminized body depicted as clean, sterile, and thus tolerable. Mother thus starts a new career as a seemingly obedient mother figure after a phase of excessive hyper-aggression from which she needed to be cured by the male mastermind. However, from this corporeal union between the mechanized monstrous-feminine and the forcibly inscribed maternal emerges a posthuman entity who becomes a symbol of ultimate ambiguity at the threshold of matriarchal revenge terror: Once Mother rediscovers her slumbering necromancer identity when her offspring is threatened by male invaders, she confounds her maternal instincts with her nature as monstrous femme castratrice: In her new form as mother-monster-machine, she turns the bodies of her male opponents into signifiers of the abject, into bodies without "form and integrity" (Creed 2007, 11). Mother thus succeeds in the "transformation of motherhood into agency" (Kot 2017, 1), overwriting her violently inscribed purpose with her own rules. However, as her acts remain monstrous, she concurrently constitutes herself as a symbol of ultimate ambivalence.



## The artificial mother giving birth

The female monster, or monstrous-feminine, wears many faces: the amoral primeval mother (*Aliens*, 1986); [...] woman as monstrous womb (*The Brood*, 1979); [...] the castrating mother (*Psycho*, 1960); woman as beautiful but deadly killer (*Basic Instinct*, 1992); [...] woman as non-human animal (*Cat People*, 1942); [...]. (Creed 2007, 1)

This is the collection of representations of female monsters Creed provides in her anthological case study of female perpetrators in cinematic horror. *Raised by Wolves* stages all these faces of the monstrous-feminine, with that of the technologized posthuman woman/mother to be added to the count. In *RbW*, the embodiment of all these fantasies is the humanoid gynoid “Mother”, brought to life on screen by Danish actress Amanda Collin. Mother, together with her male counterpart ‘Father’, played by British actor Abubakar Salim, is entrusted with the mission to breed and raise a colony of a dozen human children on the barren and seemingly uninhabited planet Kepler-22b. While Father is initially represented as a calm and trusting side character, Mother serves as the incarnate version of Rosi Braidotti’s plural “sequence ‘mothers, monsters, and machines’” (1997, 59): Mother by name and reproductive abilities, machine by origin, and monster revealed by the fact that over the course of the first season Mother discovers her powers to shapeshift into the ruthless killer weapon called necromancer, whose deadly abilities inside her haven been (not very successfully) overwritten by a subsequently added purpose installed by the male genius forcing her into “scripts [and] patterns of motherhood” (Kot 2017, 2).

In contradiction to numerous iconic female robots in film signifying sexual availability to all its spectators – such as the replicant Rachel in the first *Blade Runner* film (1982) or the ever so innocently sweet but devious gynoid Ava in *Ex Machina* (2014) – *RbW*’s Mother appears androgynous, eerily sterile and at first completely disinterested in copulation. She wears a full-body neoprene suit costume and a vacant mimic expression; her conversation is functional and emotionally deplete (Scott, R. 2020, 00:02:01). Her athletic build is revealed to be an indispensable resource for survival on Kepler-22b, a challenge the two androids immediately face when abandoning their spaceship after crashing onto the planet’s surface. In the opening scene, long shots capture an infertile landscape of endless dunes and raging sand twisters (Scott, R. 2020, 00:03:23), an environment as hostile and unliveable as the fictional version of the series’ planet Earth being ravaged by nuclear war (Mimica-Gezzan, 2020, 00:24:27).

Once Mother and Father settle for a location, the series quickly proceeds into “the reworking of the primal scene, the scene of birth” (Creed 2007, 17): Mother is placed on a mat amid a dome-shaped, rubicund tent evoking a visual similarity to the inside of a womb by its reddish color and the low-key lighting (Scott, R. 2020, 00:05:25). The symmetrical arrangement of the shots mimics the aesthetics of an operating theater in which Mother’s body becomes the maternal spectacle, which foreshadows a later flashback scene in which Mother will be forcefully reprogrammed from deadly necromancer to caring mother. It is now that Mother’s body reveals its “gestational mechanism” (Ursa 2014, 139): While she lies completely motionless on the mat, breaking with traditional associations related to birth such as the opened and agonized female body, Father inserts six tubes into Mother’s abdomen; the tubes will later be shown to be connected to cooling boxes containing frozen human embryos. Through the tube props, the scene enmeshes the imaginations of umbilical cords connected to Mother’s abdomen with the imagery of mammal teats: The human, the animal, and the mechanic are merged into one in this display of posthuman birth. This notion becomes enhanced when Mother initiates the act of fertilization by voice – “activate” (Scott, R. 2020, 05:45),

triggering a substance flow from her womb to the embryos. Mother ‘giving birth’ is twisted into a speech act commanding a device to be turned on. Mother’s body becomes “a medium of culture” (Bordo 1997, 90): Speciesism and seemingly all other binary categorical differences (artificial/natural, male/female, human/beast) are overcome.

While sci-fi imaginations of birthing frequently evolve around the fantasy of the mothering father (Ursa 2014, 131), most canonically captured in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), *RbW* erases the father figure from the staged process of fertilization and embryonic growth: It is Mother who controls the flow of fluid material from her womb to the human children, stressed through close-up shots of her face and abdomen (Scott, R. 2020, 00:05:47, and 00:05:52). While the babies already exist in a somewhat gestated pre-form, they cannot come to life on Kepler-22b without Mother’s vitalizing body substances.<sup>3</sup> She thus becomes “the generative mother, the pre-phallic mother, the being who exists prior [or post] to knowledge of the phallus” (Creed 2007, 20).

As Mihaela Ursa states, “natural maternity and birth found a counterpart in dreams of non-maternal generation of humans [and the] phantasm of motherless birth [expressing] a cultural longing of cutting female physiology out of the generative picture” (2014, 131). *RbW* amalgamates fantasies of biological maternity with the “technologized means of body generation” (Ursa 2014, 132) and pours them into a utopian version of delivery where the female body can give birth or fertilize life without male insemination, without physical pain of a female body opened and without bodily wastes exposed. In that sense, Mother is framed as the embodiment of the “aseptic and clean [...] technological mother” (Ursa 2014, 137), the daunting imagination of gestation without the male, rendering her utterly uncanny.

In outer space, birth is a well controlled, clean, painless affair. There is no blood, trauma or terror. [The scene in *RbW*] could be interpreted as a primal phantasy in which even copulation is redundant. [...]. [The] mother is sole parent and sole life-support (Creed 2007, 18).

At the end of a nine-month term, the embryos are fully developed into babies to be delivered. While Mother still lies completely motionless on the mat, Father enters the tent, equipped with a large bowl of water, a mechanized midwife (Scott, R. 2020, 00:06:42). Close-up shots capture him cutting the tubes connecting the cooling boxes to Mother’s abdomen as if cutting umbilical cords (Scott, R. 2020, 00:07:13). Father delivers the first child by removing the top layer of the first box and wrapping it in cloth (Scott, R. 2020, 00:07:44).<sup>4</sup> By depicting the act of birthing as externalized and therefore separated from the female body, the series “[plays] on the inside/outside distinction in order to point to the inherently monstrous nature of the womb” (Creed 2007, 49). Simultaneously, the displacement of birthing outside of the female womb once more evokes the notion of the monstrous-feminine.

The synchronous multiple births are successfully achieved without the shedding of body fluids; instead, the only visible body fluid is the unspecified life-giving substance provided by Mother for her children, safely contained in tubes. As such, the series’ aesthetics subverts the notion of the abject in relation to the birthing mother. While “[b]leeding, excreting, ... or giving birth [typically] bear the natural potential of ugliness and unpredictability” (Ursa 2014, 138), the explicitly

<sup>3</sup> As Mother needs to provide her body fluids for nine months, the series adds another human- and mammal-like attribute to the process of birthing and intertwines impregnation, the course of pregnancy, and birthing into one.

<sup>4</sup> In *The Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva speaks of the abject potential of „the skin on the top of milk“ as a „sign separating her world from [father’s and mother’s] world“ (Creed 2007, 9, referring to Kristeva 1982, 75). This image and association are acted out in *RbW*.



highlighted absence of female bodily wastes in this scene is unsettling, with Mother as a threatening artifice decoupled from biological norms. According to Creed, mothers are traditionally portrayed in sci-fi (horror) films as appearing in an abject “array of bodily wastes such as blood, vomit, saliva, sweat, tears and putrefying flesh” (2007, 59). As such, they “threaten a subject that is already constituted, in relation to the symbolic, as whole and proper” (Creed 2007, 13), in other words, the male. Rendering the aesthetics of birthing with its radical “absence of physiology” (Ursa 2014, 137) as both antiseptic and disembodied, Mother becomes the materialized, tech-perversed version of immaculate conception and birth, of the purified and controllable female body. However, the scene’s hyperbolic sterility distorts this notion into absurdity: By denying the audience the conventional visual markers attributed to the usual repulsiveness of birthing events, the absence of abject body material on screen creates a craving for (female) body wastes as signifiers of human origin. Thus, the scene’s perversity lies in the disintegrated female body in absentia. The whole and unruptured posthuman body becomes a spectacle of uncanniness and ambiguity.

### **Birthing the artificial mother**

In season one, episode five, “Infected Memory”, Mother gains access to her repressed memory files by plugging a cable into her chest (Mimica-Gezzan 2020, 00:23:35). Leaping back to an unspecified moment in time, Mother witnesses her own ‘rebirth’ as a maternal subject when her body and, implicitly, her mind are repurposed under the hands of the male genius and love interest/father of her monstrous child to be, Champion Sturges. In the scene, Mother enters an underground reworking of a steampunky alchemist’s lab in the vein of Frankenstein’s, constituted by the scene’s dim lighting, mise-en-scène and props (Mimica-Gezzan 2020, 00:26:07). Mother witnesses herself, in her incarnation as a necromancer, whom Sturges has deactivated and knocked unconscious earlier in the scene, being restrained in a prop resembling an open coffin (Mimica-Gezzan 2020, 00:26:46). The setting, with its mock-ups of surgery tables and medical instruments, self-reflexively evokes the aesthetics of an operating theatre with Mother’s cut-open technological body at its center, creating an intertextual link to the first scene analyzed above.

The scientist Sturges towers over Mother, staging the successful power claim of patriarchal science over the transgressive female body: Mother’s exsanguinate body is cut open, revealing her synthetic innards. Captured from a bird’s eye view, large glowing tubes have been inserted into the necromancer’s ‘female’ body areas: into the uterus, the stomach, and the breast (Mimica-Gezzan 2020, 00:26:22). The tubes and the contours of the restraining operating table are the only light sources in an almost black-and-white chiaroscuro composition that highlights the bodily changes the necromancer/Mother will undergo. Close-up shots depict Champion Sturges’ hyper-sized injection needle, which he uses to penetrate Mother’s innards, searching her insides for the right place to create an electric shock. Regaining consciousness Mother moans as if in pain or in pleasure, which creates an uncanny moment (Mimica-Gezzan 2020, 00:27:07). Through this act of the phallic invasion of the fixated female body, Sturges erases the necromancer’s weaponized superiority and reprograms it/her for the purpose of maternity (Mimica-Gezzan 2020, 00:27:01). In a twisted reconceptualization of the wandering womb in relation to female hysteria,<sup>5</sup> the necromancer’s transgressive identity becomes overwritten with maternal ‘code’ through an act of ejection

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<sup>5</sup> The wandering womb: “The earliest known medical reference to hysteria comes from Egypt and dates from about 1900 BC. It was believed that the womb could wander around the woman’s body, thus leading to certain illnesses [including hysteria]” (Creed 2007, 56).

symbolizing male technological hybris. Paying tribute to one of the most conventional sci-fi tropes, *Campion Sturges* is staged as *Mother's* (and all of humanity's) "mothering father" (Ursa 2014, 131).<sup>6</sup>

Tying this analysis to the notion of the abject in relation to *Creed's* monstrous-feminine and the maternal female body, the scene is once more constituted by its medical sterility. Though *Mother's* body is widely opened, the *mise-en-scène* does not feature any gore, *Sturges's* instruments are captured as sterile and antiseptic. *RbW* turns "the association of woman's maternal and reproductive functions with the abject [...] as a construct of a patriarchal ideal" (Creed 2007, 83) upside down: Here, the purified female body impregnated with the ability to give birth is decoupled from abject wastes. Keeping *Mother* as a castrating woman in control, the series entrenches her within the system of patriarchal power: *Campion Sturges* removes all aspects in the transgressive female necromancer that could "disturb [the system's] secure sense of borders" (Nicholls 2019, 106). The pure and antiseptic female body with the ability to give birth comes to signify male control.

Following from the above, *RbW* could be seen to succeed in encapsulating the transgressive artificial female in a framework of patriarchal, and, thus, maternal heteronormativity. However, *Campion Sturges's* attempt to forcefully rebirth the necromancer into (a) *Mother* is ultimately doomed to fail: As the narrative unfolds, *Mother* encounters a group of religious invaders who intend to abduct her surviving son, nearly killing her in the process. In this scene of extreme violence, performed on her by another male android, *Mother* reconnects with her repressed/reprogrammed necromancer identity and advances in a moment of hysterical strength, merging the mother instincts with her former necromancer superpowers (Scott, R. 2020, 43:22) into a monstrous matriarch. In her necromancer identity, *Mother* takes bloody revenge and initiates a climax of bodily disintegration bringing about the abject: By the sheer power of her eyes and voice, *Mother* explodes the male intruders into blood and gore, which transforms her into the ultimate female transgressor covered in the blood of her victims (Scott, R. 2020, 00:46:04). What *Creed* calls the "castration anxiety in the male spectator" (2007, 2) is enacted by the whole and non-abject female who has successfully given birth without the active involvement of the male.

While *Mother's* 'rebirth' as a maternal entity by the force of *Campion Sturges* as well as her act of 'birthing' human offspring are shown in a milieu of hyperbolic cleanliness, *Mother* violently reclaims abjection as an instrument of female power. By disintegrating male conquerors into abject body waste, *Mother* reverses "the transition from nature to culture, [for which] woman must deny her potentially 'dangerous' appetites" (Konboy et al. 1997, 3). In the attempt to tame the aggressive, "deadly *femme castratrice*" (Creed 2007, 1) into an immaculate birthing female, the male scientist only succeeds in dissolving the borders between the she-wolf, the woman and the technologized into a three-headed mother/monster/machine hydra. As such, the posthuman mother represents the uncanny and ambiguous "technologized means of body generation" (Ursa 2014, 132) in outer space. *Mother* is the embodiment of what *Kristeva* has called the "dual function of the maternal site as both life- and death-giver, [an] object of worship and terror" (1982, as cited in *Braidotti* 1997, 65) – the monstrous-feminine posthuman mother.

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<sup>6</sup> One could claim that the scene can be read within the concept of the *vagina dentata*, which "generally states that women are terrifying because they have teeth in their vaginas and that the women must be tamed or the teeth somehow removed or softened – usually by a hero figure – before intercourse can safely take place" (Creed 2007, 2). *Mother's* reprogramming from necromancer to mother through a phallic needle constitutes a twisted imagination of this myth.



## Conclusion

The tropes *RbW* negotiates extend from the constitution of human exceptionalism and procreation to “developments in the field of biotechnology, particularly artificial procreation, [which] have extended the power of science over the maternal body of women” (Braidotti 1997, 62). In *RbW*’s fictional universe, the categorical and physiological boundaries between the human, the animal, and the machine can and do blend, creating posthuman entities with agencies of their own. The emerging posthuman mother figure is presented as a gender- and category-bending subject, who, once woken from her identity-repressing slumber/stand-by, possesses the power to switch from a worried mother to the violent embodiment of the castrating monstrous-feminine.

Mihaela Ursa reads sci-fi texts featuring disembodied AI as explorations of the “disappearance of the mother” reflecting an “antinaturalistic trend in body technologies disempowering the female body, especially in its gestating and birthing form” (2014, 134). *RbW* subverts this division between the feminized body and its birthing abilities and displays how the embodiment of the birthing feminized body becomes an act of patriarchal control. Regulating female reproduction is turned into a seizing of power, over the transgressive female/feminized body and over the female/feminized body from which all abject body wastes are purged.

Creed has carved out how the connection between woman-as-victim and the abject has been employed as an instrument of female humiliation and disempowerment (see: 2007, 139). *RbW*’s representation of decoupling abject body fluids from the gestating female body at first seemingly fences the female/the feminized into a traditional imagery of purified and hence tolerable female sexuality as well as motherhood. Seen from this vantage point, female disempowerment in *RbW* equals medical sterility. But it is precisely Mother’s antiseptic and arid birthing that constitutes her as the monstrous-feminine, a symbol for the technologized, unnatural origin of this mother figure. Mother reclaims abjection as an instrument of power through her hyperbolic invasion and disintegration of male bodies into abject material. In this way, she reverses the attributed cleanliness and thereby removes the repressive shackle of patriarchal science. Dissolving these categorical boundaries allows Mother to discover the subversive potential of her monstrous-feminine identity and to define a concept of posthuman motherhood.

Even though, later in the series, Mother experiences sexual intercourse with Champion Sturges within a simulation, leading to her impregnation with a monstrous creature to be born at the climax of season one (Scott, Luke 2020, 00:37:51), the series remains faithful to its equivocal stance regarding the posthuman Mother as “a more fluid, flexible and instable [subject]” (Ursa 2014, 132, in reference to Deleuze and Guattari’s “body without organs”). Mother is also an embodiment of ambiguity, of instability and thus of uncanniness, denying the audience any conclusive interpretation of her identity and her intentions. Thus, “[the] only constant [that] remains [is] her becoming metaphor” (Braidotti 1997, 6). She represents a proposal for the constitution of the futuristic technologized maternal body and for posthuman gestation beyond sexes, planets, and the notion of the nuclear family in a universe of galactic imperialism and post-nuclear fight for survival.

Mother is not the only character through which the borders of motherhood in the triangle of the human, the animal, and the machine are negotiated in *RbW*: All enactments of physiological motherhood, impregnation, and birth in the series are staged through bodies explicitly coded as female, be it through the characters’ primary sexual and biological characteristics, given names, or by heteronormative gender performativity: ‘Tempest’, Mother’s third generation foundling child, who becomes impregnated through rape while in hibernation, ‘Sue’, an imposter mother, and

'Grandmother', a super-android entering the stage in season two. They are all entangled in the series' network of motherhood and maternity fictions, and they merit further analysis. The series' monstrous, fantastic imaginations of confounding the human, the animal and the machine into a posthuman, monstrous amalgamation leave the audience to ponder upon forthcoming reproduction politics as they pit prevailing patterns of human exceptionalism against advances in generative AI, neuroscience, and medicine. The discourses thus touched upon raise seminal questions in the light of approaching ecological disaster as well as the statistically confirmed decline of birth rates on a global scale and the impact of potential designer babies through methods like CRISPR. As the series' narrative may never be completed, the audience is challenged to fill the blanks with their own imaginations of posthuman procreation.

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