

All About My Motherboy

I sometimes thought, I am not my mother; this is *my* story.

Hilton Als

Motherboy is the kind of invented word whose meaning is viscerally obvious the first time you encounter it. Driven apart by a callous world, mother and son are reunited by this term, a compound word that shows why compound words were invented. Devised by writers of the American comedy series *Arrested Development* (2003-2019), Motherboy is a fictional pageant that takes place annually on the real (but surreal) Balboa Island in Orange County, California. Taking the form of a “dinner dance,” Motherboy is a parody of Purity Balls, ceremonies that revolve around a teenage girl’s promise to her date – who is also her father – that she will remain a virgin until marriage. In the highly detailed fictional world of the series, Motherboy’s winning mother-son couple is profiled in the local periodical, *The Balboa Bay Window*, under headlines like “Why I Want to Marry My Mother.”

Arrested Development’s inversion of the daddy’s girl stereotype strikes an appropriately ridiculous note in a show generally invested in turning out the pocket of American culture to reveal its absurdist contents. But while Motherboy the dinner dance might be implausible, the motherboy as a figure is not. All around us, there are motherboys, disproportionately likely to be architects of culture. Yet the power held by these mother-lovers is never straightforward, for their overattachment to their mothers is rendered suspect. At best, the motherboy is abnormally normal – familiar but perverse. At worst, he is a monster.

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Love between mother and son is culturally mandated, but the degree to which this love is permitted is strictly policed. Like many aspects of family normativity, this is a form of racial discipline. The Moynihan Report of 1965 infamously named the prevalence of female-headed black households as the cause of social ills among black Americans, pathologizing black maternity as a kind of social poison. In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Hortense Spillers contextualizes the Moynihan Report within the historical legacy of ungendering and social dispossession that defined chattel slavery. Inheriting the mother’s enslaved status through the principle of *partis sequitur ventrem* – “that which is born follows the womb” – the enslaved child’s fate was determined by a mother who was herself denied the rights and status of maternity. This arrangement, Spillers argues, continues to haunt the present: “The African-American male has been touched, therefore, by the *mother*, handed by her in ways that he cannot escape, and in ways that the white American male is allowed to temporize by a fatherly reprieve.”

Denaturalizing the supposed given of the father’s place within the nuclear family, Spillers suggests that the white father serves to neutralize the intensity – the destabilizing potential – of the mother-son bond, a gesture necessary to ensure the reproduction of a patriarchal social order. Amidst the deep harm that the racial policing of family norms has engendered, Spillers locates a liberatory potential in the supposed “failure” of black families to participate in this project of neutralization: “It is the heritage of the *mother* that the African-American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood – the power of ‘yes’ to the ‘female’ within.” A rigid prohibition against this “yes” is one of the reasons that stigma continues to surround the motherboy. (Indeed, the word motherboy itself participates in this stigmatization by making a joke out of the failure to separate – of the sacrilege of male proximity to the feminine.)

This unsanctioned adjacency to femininity fosters a common conception of the motherboy as homosexual – and indeed, many of the most renowned motherboys, from

Marcel Proust to Lee Alexander McQueen, have been gay. “I went straight from my mother’s womb onto the gay parade,” McQueen exuberantly told *Vogue* in 2002. Eight years later he hanged himself in his apartment, the day before his mother’s funeral.

“I was so lonely knowing her; she was so busy dying,” Hilton Als writes in “Notes on My Mother,” a lament of the gay son identifying with a mother who cannot, or will not, recognize this symmetry. “In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: She is going to die,” Roland Barthes, maestro of yearning and another homosexual motherboy, writes in *Camera Lucida*. “I shudder... over a catastrophe which has already occurred. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe.” With these words, an almost campily melancholic mother-love morphs into an enduringly influential theory of photography. Barthes’ elegy to his mother was published in the same year that his own life unexpectedly ended when he was struck down by a laundry van on a Parisian street. As with McQueen, his mother’s death became his own.

“I have found, in my own case too, falling in love with the mother and jealousy of the father, and I now regard it as a universal event of early childhood,” Sigmund Freud wrote in an 1897 letter to Wilhelm Fliess, his first official mention of the Oedipus complex. Through the “discovery” of this complex, Freud rewrote young boys’ desire for their mother as not only normal, but literally essential to human development. At the same time, for Freud, healthy progression toward the final destination of mature heterosexuality is contingent upon ultimately leaving the Oedipal stage behind. While harboring a possessive passion for one’s mother is an unmissable step in the process of developing sexual subjectivity at all, remaining enthralled to the mother means falling victim to arrested development.

Following Spillers’ lead in resituating psychoanalysis within the context of race, Daniel Boyarin has read the boisterous masculinity of the Oedipal child – who stands ready to fight his father to the death for sole possession of his mother – as a rebuke of the stereotype of the effeminate, passive Jewish man. Against the (tightly conjoined) rising tides of antisemitism and homophobia in the first decades of the twentieth century, Freud felt the need to “escape from Jewish queerdom into gentile, phallic heterosexuality.” To Boyarin, this move was a mistake. “There is something correct – although seriously misvalued – in the persistent European interpretation of the Jewish man as a sort of woman,” he argues. Although utilized as an antisemitic stereotype, this interpretation is rooted in the real division of labor with many Jewish communities, which involved men devoting their lives to the intellectual pursuit of theological study, leaving women to serve as breadwinners. (This alternative arrangement of labor and gender is hardly confined to Jewish communities; in her critique of the false universalism of Western gender discourse, the Nigerian scholar Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí points out that in precolonial Yorùbáland, “motherhood was an *impetus* rather than an *obstacle* to economic activities.”) Boyarin contends that embracing the aggressive, misogynistic virility of white, gentile masculinity is a self-defeating response to the antisemitic weaponization of Jewish male femininity; echoing Spillers, he reads it as a lost opportunity to say “yes” to the “female” within.

Stalled in place within Freud’s teleological account of human sexuality, the motherboy always risks falling into a kind of structural homosexuality even if he is not literally gay. At the same time, the Oedipal dynamic is not based on desire alone, but determined by a nexus of desire and identification. According to Freud’s formula, properly heterosexual little boys should identify with their father and desire their mother; such identification is in fact secondary to, and produced by, romantic rivalry. In Freud’s time, when the homosexuality was linked to gender deviance through the inversion model, it appeared obvious that in desiring their fathers, homosexual boys would identify with their mothers. But the motherboy archive – with its inconsistent connection to homosexuality, transfemininity, misogyny, and philogyny – complicates this story.

Some motherboys desire their mothers, others identify with them; more than anything, the motherboy collapses any meaningful distinction between identification and desire. Nowhere is this collapse more gorgeously displayed than in the films of Pedro Almodóvar. In these films, the “catastrophe” of the dead mother’s photograph becomes an opportunity to cast Penelope Cruz in her image, while the catastrophe of single motherhood – a perennial motif for Almodóvar – becomes the gay son’s chance to become his mother’s husband. “Almodóvar’s dream of ‘women without men’ is fundamentally a dream of women without any man but him,” Anna Shechtman and D.A. Miller observe – perhaps the most succinct possible encapsulation of the motherboy’s *raison d’être*.

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While the picture thus far is of a somewhat idealized motherboy, attuned and unafraid of his inner femininity and lovingly devoted to his mother, selfishness, sadism, and misogynistic violence also form an integral part of the motherboy stereotype. Jimmy Savile, the British presenter who utilized his fame to sexually abuse hundreds (likely thousands) of children over several decades, described the five days he spent alone with his dead mother’s body in an open casket the “best five days” of his life. “Once upon a time I had to share her with other people... when she was dead, she was mine, all mine.” He preserved her bedroom in a pristine state until his own death, dry-cleaning her entire wardrobe on a yearly basis. “My mother taught me the English language,” the American serial killer Ted Bundy recalled from his prison cell on death row. “How many times did she type papers as I dictated them to her? [She] gave me great verbal skills.”

Should we take violent men at their word when they express adoration and indebtedness to their mothers, crediting them in creating the monsters their sons became? To do so risks directing a pathologizing blame toward the mother reminiscent of the Moynihan Report and critiques of *mammismo* that accused an Italian mother-culture for stunting national development. Yet it would equally be naïve to cling to a mirage of maternal blamelessness. Foregrounding her status as a woman, mother, and Christian, Giorgia Meloni enacts a motherboy relation with an idealized national body, the son who she must direct – with the firm touch of fascist love – toward a healthy, disciplined, productive future.

On a more mundane level, too, the motherboy bond manifests as an engineered co-dependency designed to prohibit reciprocal relations with others. The self-styled “boymom” of social media – the symmetrical inversion of the motherboy, whose being similarly revolves around a wilful identity collapse – parades an unashamedly romantic attachment to her son, complete with overt displays of possessive jealousy. TikTok is so awash with videos of boymoms slow dancing with their sons and issuing threatening monologues to their future daughters-in-law that they have formed their own microgenre, which is subjected to frequent parody.

Meanwhile, the pornographic sphere is flooded with MILF content: busty, domineering “stepmoms” deflowering their twinkly sons. A (barely) permissible version of this genre recently surfaced in the form of *MILF Manor*, an American reality TV show in which a group of young men vie for the affection of older women who are – in a scandalous twist of literalism – their actual, biological mothers. “The girls are always poppin’ out,” one contestant complains about his mother’s breasts. “It didn’t bother you when you were a baby sucking on ‘em either,” his mother retorts.

“A son is a poor substitute for a lover,” Norman Bates proclaims in *Psycho*, a hollow plea to the boymoms and MILFs of the world. Motherboys abound in horror, a genre that specializes in exposing the petrifying underside of all that is familiar and beloved. *Psycho*, like *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and *The Silence of the Lambs*, took inspiration from the real murderer Ed Gein, who, following the death of his abusive, fanatical mother, exhumed body parts from a local cemetery to construct a “woman suit” through which he hoped to

symbolically enter her body. Gein's story was exploited to spawn a link in the public imagination between transfemininity and sadistic murder. Yet Gein himself was not trans in any meaningful sense; his wish was not to become a woman, but to achieve an eternal unity with his mother.

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"To write means to find reasons to tell you about my mother," Brian Dillon confesses in the essay collection *Affinities*. If motherboys are disproportionately represented in the cultural domain, it is likely because of this tendency to sublimate maternal obsession into some productive form. "My mother spent many hours alone with me, in the dark, in her bedroom, listening to me lie. Somehow, she knew that most writers became writers after having spent their childhood lying," Als recalls. He then adds: "Or perhaps she didn't know that at all."

As these words indicate, there is something inescapably melancholic about the art produced by the motherboy's sublimation. Perhaps this speaks to the intrinsic tragedy of the relation itself: a love whose death begins at birth, an obsessively longed for union that can only ever approximate its own memory. Yet the problem could equally lie in the unshakeable knowledge that we, the viewer, are never the true intended audience; she is always somewhere else.

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