

SOMETHING BETTER

By Dany Lyne

The first frames establish the primary dynamic that will be sustained throughout the narrative: Mother and Child as «natural» residents of the domestic space and Father as a relative outsider, leaving or asked to leave, returning or asking to return. The dynamic of the nuclear family is revealed on its final day, at its breaking point and in the painful process of collapse. Mother, Father, and Child are devastated by betrayal, abandonment, alienation, bitterness, helplessness, and grief. Their silence signals their despair.

In Aleesa Cohene's work, architecture is a character. The idealized architectural manifestation of the nuclear family stands intact in *Something Better*: a temple in a dream of The Dream. The homes are pleasant and welcoming, the kitchens are comforting and promise abundance, and the bedrooms are cozy and safe. Cohene represents the utopian myth by meticulously selecting the textures, colours, patterns, clothing, objects, and architecture of the 1970s—the era of her own childhood. The illusion of togetherness, of *family* is present and seductive. Memory and fantasy mingle to create a psychological mechanism similar to denial as the architecture blithely enforces the nuclear family construct.

Yet Cohene's fractured narratives debunk the myth. The foundation of the home has structurally collapsed. The loss of Father is painfully palpable and plays itself out against the idealized middle-class backdrop. The characters' faces and bodies present the absence of that which is lost: the dream of unconditional love forever and ever. The inhabitants' emotional devastation stands in stark contrast to the nostalgic physical manifestation of the nuclear family home. Their hearts are crushed and disconsolate. The temple of unconditional love is contaminated by isolation, sorrow, and hopelessness. The characters inhabit a traumatic history, experiencing together alone the distressing rupture of the false promise. Nostalgia is turned on its head. No longer dulling the senses, the falseness is exposed: Father, Child, Mother are each trapped in their own frame, perpetually isolated from each other, yet at the same time the trap is their very relationality, their juxtaposition, a paradox that Cohene has beautifully and subtly teased out: Father is father because of Child, Mother is mother because of Child, Child is child because of Father and Mother. Similarly, Father is father because of Mother, Mother is mother because of Father.

Child is the powerless witness of this unhappy containment. Peering from behind windows, listening at doors, peeking through keyholes, roaming aimlessly in the emotionally gutted home, Child has no agency. Estrangement, abandonment, and betrayal

take their toll. Overwhelmed with sorrow, confusion, anxiety, anger, and doubt, Child observes, mostly in silence, as h/er caregivers' integrity weakens, their weariness exposing the gendered artifice they are senselessly re-creating. Mother unconditionally preserves the appearance of family and stability. She is trapped in the endless cycle of producing the family meal: the cardinal rite of togetherness. On the brink of collapse she hoists her will to meet the demands of duty. *«It is my job to do everything I can to make my children part of a normal world, a world of school, and friends, and lovers and families of their own some day.»* Beyond her «maternal instinct» to protect and nurture her Child, she is the custodian of the nuclear family contract. She molds the family home into a recognizable physical form while she is powerless to shape/transform its emotional and spiritual substance. Father is locked outside the home, or returns as mere guest to graze its surfaces, presumably having violated a fundamental rule of engagement. Access to the inner sanctum is irremediably forbidden. He is denied access to the home and emotionally extracted from the familial relationships. He is perennially shattered, guilty, resentful, helpless, and inadequate. Locked out of his role of Husband/Father he wanders aimlessly; disempowered and rudderless he seeks comfort in his previous role of boy-child, playing pinball into the night. Inside and out, the characters are stunned by the abyss before them, their roles disintegrated, hollow, pointless.

Child too, in the privacy of h/er bedroom, is caught in the early trappings of gendered rituals. S/he enacts encoded gender roles: Girl engages in reverie before a ceramic ballerina and draws on floral wallpaper while Boy watches violent televised cartoons and reads Mad magazine. Child's individuation process develops in the midst of this cultural complexity and duplicity. When s/he responds, *«I know,»* to Father's statement: *«What she [Mother] means is that she prefers the senseless pain we inflict on each other to the pain we would otherwise inflict on ourselves... But I am not afraid of that solitary pain. In fact, if I do not strip myself of all that clatter and clutter and ridiculous ritual I shall go out of my fucking mind!,»* Child expresses h/er awareness, doubt, and suspicion of h/er familial environment.

Hope for *Something Better* cuts in when Child expresses h/er anger and protest from under a rainbow coloured cloth—traditionally a symbol of inclusiveness, hope, yearning, and more recently a symbol of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender pride. S/he mouths the words of a television super hero: *«Watching mankind with hatred that is as boundless as the stars with plans for the destruction of man that is beyond imagining... [wicked laugh] ...»* Just wait and see: the holy trinity Male/Female/Child, the unchallenged gendered role matrix will be tackled by a super hero: the empowered Youth who will vehemently dismantle gender, and thereby the nuclear family as we know it and all sexist prejudice.

Hope crashes in again at a critical juncture in the narrative. Marked by shattered glass, the only literal destruction Cohene shows, the frame narrows to a single keyhole in a sea of blackness to reveal a piano in the distance. Father, Mother, and Child retreat in

sequence to this island of hope, stillness, and soulful release. Loneliness and fear yield to solitary and introspective engagement. Their safety and peace transcends the family home allowing them to embrace individualization, wisdom, and creation. The composer's conception echoes their narrative of desolation and despair as well as that of hope and redemption, and transforms it into a poetic, stylized form that Father, Mother, and Child encounter like a mirror. The score exposes, proposes, engages, uplifts, and challenges them to confront themselves. The characters tap into their agency and the magnitude of their potential to co-create their reality. They confront their own humanity and inhumanity, thereby supporting an attempt to reach for a peaceful, spiritually vibrant future.

«Music reveals all the thousand-fold transitional motions of our soul.» (Wackenroder)
Cohene's score is her preeminent story-telling tool. Paired with her incisive editing/image placement she pulls the unfolding narrative forward with hypnotic, melancholy, and driving musical intentionality. Like a conductor calling forth the instruments and drawing out the tone, colour, and tempo, Cohene unveils the tragedy with fastidious and meticulous vigilance. Her rhythms are firm and well marked. The pulse of the content pierces and penetrates consciousness. The images collide, meet, and cross-pollinate with energy and confidence within this disciplined auditory framing. The quiet loud horror of the collapse of unconditional love haunts and terrifies. The characters' sorrow permeates every frame, smearing the walls, windows, and doors: the architecture is marked with the traumatic history.

Hollywood actors and cinematic convention submit to Cohene's discrimination and intention. While Father, Child, Mother are played by a series of different actors they represent the archetype «Father, Child, Mother,» iconic gendered signifiers. Yet, the fact that Father, Child, Mother have many different faces deconstructs this «universality» and particularizes the experience for us: there will be one face in there that reminds us of our own singular mother and father, and also of our singular selves as children. Cohene's collage presents archetypal/intimate images that agitate our awareness, awakening the coiled serpent in our heart and soul that bypasses our modes of denial, defense systems, and coping mechanisms. We find ourselves exposed and self-aware. Our personal histories resonate with that of the characters' histories. Like Child in the last frames, we walk cautiously, almost fearfully, in the hallway of our dark childhood home. The Child's wrapped present may end up in the trash in this powerless chapter of h/her life, but like the film clips, this powerlessness can be retrieved, reclaimed, reinterpreted, reshaped, and compassionately transformed for the future.

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ALEESA COHENE has been producing videos and video installations that seek to occupy the oppositional zone between ideas and emotion, cultural belief and personal integrity since 2001. Her work has shown in festivals and galleries across Canada as well as in Brazil, Germany, Holland, Russia, Scandinavia, Turkey, and the United States, and has won prizes at Utrecht's Impakt Festival and Toronto's Images Festival. Cohene has participated in artist residencies in Canada, the Netherlands and Denmark and is currently pursuing a fellowship at the Kunsthochschule für Medien (KHM) in Cologne, Germany. Her work is distributed by Vtape in Toronto.