“Do You *Really* Want to Be Scared?”: Trauma, Horror, and the Problem of Narrative Knowledge in the Films of Ari Aster

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ABSTRACT

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Thesis directed by Associate Professor Kelly Hurley

This paper focuses specifically on popular film in the United States to interrogate an inchoate subgenre of horror, that has been referred to with various titles such as "prestige horror," "postmodern horror," "smart horror" or "elevated horror," as a potential art form in relation to its tendency to leverage generic tropes and conventions in not only subverting the expectations and desires of the viewer, effectively 'wounding' them, but in the process performatively and aesthetically communicating the haunting, visceral experience of living under the weight of transhistorical/relational/intergenerational trauma. I argue that within what might be called a 'new wave' of American horror film, the work of Ari Aster, writer-director of *Hereditary* (2018) and *Midsommar* (2019), demonstrates how well-established generic frameworks can be manipulated and appropriated to both dissemble and accentuate the affective, representational dimensions of trauma fiction, engendering and ultimately transgressing what Dominick LaCapra terms "empathic unsettlement." Fictional texts, such as film, have the ability to performatively enact, through formal strategies and aesthetic qualities, both lived traumatic experience and the symptoms that may arise afterward. In the case of new wave horror, the representation of trauma is supplemented by supernatural tropes, such as possession by a demon, that function to initially affirm the narrative expectations of audiences. However, as the film

progresses, the supernatural tropes in and of themselves become increasingly translucent, to the extent where quasi-fear of what one knows to be unreal no longer keeps the viewer at a safe distance. Instead, this quasi-fear is converted into a deep sense of dread as the tropes and conventions of the horror genre gradually reveal irresolvable, primal sources of fear which implicate the viewer. The divide between discourses in cultural theory and therapeutic practice concerning the ethics of narrative produces a tension between knowing and not knowing, between excess and limit, that this paper attempts to leverage to explore new, promising cultural forms that register traumatic experience along a hermeneutical continuum.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"*That which we do not bring to consciousness appears in our lives as fate"*- C.G. Jung

At the heart of modern trauma theory there exists a crucial contradiction that poses challenges for contemporary scholars studying representations of traumatic experience in art. This contradiction originates in the early 1990s with the emergence of contemporary trauma theory itself with foundational texts by Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Geoffrey Hartmann. The writing of Cathy Caruth, specifically in her seminal text, *Unclaimed Experience*, which, while undoubtedly the most influential and formative text in the burgeoning field of trauma studies, continues to pose obstacles regarding the ethical valence of fictional narratives that strive to represent lived traumatic experience. Many scholars in the field of trauma studies have identified "the problem of narrative knowledge" over the last 30 years, but few have offered solutions. Indeed, Roger Luckhurst points out that there exists "a flat contradiction between cultural theory that regards narrative as betraying singularity and various therapeutic discourses that see narrative as a means of production, transformation or even final resolution of trauma (Luckhurst 82). For cultural theory, one's trauma is innately unique, singular, and impossible to be represent in narrative. Adam Lowenstein formulates this problem in terms of representational strategies in film in his book *Shocking Representation* and points out the tension "between those who feel a certain traumatic event *cannot* be represented and those who feel the same event *must* be represented" (Lowenstein 1; emph. original).

Today a range of expressive mediums like film, literature, the graphic novel, and performance art can be grouped under the nascent genre of the "trauma narrative." In clinical contexts, the trauma narrative is a psychological exercise in which the survivor uses conceptual frameworks, such as linear narrative sequence, to better understand and make sense of their experiences. An organically formed trauma narrative within the clinical setting can be verbal, written, or artistic. The trauma narrative is not limited to the clinical setting, however; in popular culture, there are several modes of expression that strive to articulate traumatic experience. Additionally, the trauma narrative has a potentially negative component that involves exploring memories and past experiences that may be psychologically painful to the survivor when revisited. Cultural texts that can be interpreted as trauma narratives come in several forms, from autobiographical life-writing to representation in fictional mediums like the novel and film. Anne Whitehead, in her book *Trauma Fiction,* notes that the very term 'trauma fiction' "represents a paradox or contradiction if trauma comprises an event or experience which overwhelms the individual and resists language or representation" (Whitehead 1). Trauma fiction, for the purposes of this paper, can be understood as works of fiction that express an implicit philosophy of trauma while also dealing with the traumatic experience itself (Meretoja 26). The divide between discourses in cultural theory and therapeutic practice concerning the ethics of narrative produces a tension between knowing and not knowing, between excess and limit, that this paper attempts to leverage to explore new, promising cultural forms that register traumatic experience along a hermeneutical continuum.

This paper focuses specifically on popular film in the United States to interrogate an inchoate subgenre of horror, that has been referred to with various titles such as "prestige horror," "postmodern horror," "smart horror" or "elevated horror," as a potential art form in

relation to its tendency to leverage generic tropes and conventions in not only subverting the expectations and desires of the viewer, effectively 'wounding' them, but in the process performatively and aesthetically communicating the haunting, visceral experience of living under the weight of transhistorical/relational/intergenerational trauma. I argue that within what might be called a 'new wave' of American horror film, the work of Ari Aster, writer-director of *Hereditary* (2018) and *Midsommar* (2019), demonstrates how well-established generic frameworks can be manipulated and appropriated to both dissemble and accentuate the affective, representational dimensions of trauma fiction, engendering and ultimately transgressing what Dominick LaCapra terms "empathic unsettlement" (LaCapra 41). Fictional texts, such as film, have the ability to performatively enact, through formal strategies and aesthetic qualities, both lived traumatic experience and the symptoms that may arise afterward. In the case of new wave horror, the representation of trauma is supplemented by supernatural tropes, such as possession by a demon, that function to initially affirm the narrative expectations of audiences. However, as the film progresses, the supernatural tropes in and of themselves become increasingly translucent, to the extent where quasi-fear of what one knows to be unreal no longer keeps the viewer at a safe distance. Instead, this quasi-fear is converted into a deep sense of dread as the tropes and conventions of the horror genre gradually reveal irresolvable, primal sources of fear which implicate the viewer.

The ways in which horror films of the new wave subvert the expectations of the viewer and betray emotional identification relates to the idea of empathic unsettlement. First, "empathy" for LaCapra involves "an affective response…combined with cognition, argument, and critical judgement" (*Writing History,* 217). Empathic unsettlement entails maintaining proper distance between one's self and the object of study, counteracting transference of personal emotions and

experiences onto those of the characters appearing in the film. Empathic unsettlement is an ethical response to representations of traumatic experience in that it promotes in the viewer the understanding of the fundamental otherness of the Other, the awareness of differences between one's personal feelings and experiences and those represented in trauma narratives. Further, empathic unsettlement occurs in allowing one's self to become 'unsettled' by partially identifying with the emotions of the Other, which may include traumatic affect. Transgressing empathic unsettlement, then, collapses these distinctions and encourages emotional and psychological identification with characters who suffer through trauma. Indeed, new wave horror films like *Hereditary* foreclose the distance between the viewer and traumatic material so that the subject is directly subjected and encouraged to share in the trauma of the Other. In a sense, the viewer of *Hereditary* may become "possessed" themselves, not by a demon, but by what the demonic represents in traumatic and posttraumatic symptoms. It is no coincidence that the demonic is frequently invoked in psychoanalytic theory to denote qualities of the traumatic, and in *Hereditary*, the affective power in bringing deep seated fears and repressed anxieties to consciousness. Indeed, Aster's work is representative of how narrative vehicles may exploit generic frameworks and conventions to give ethical expression to the aporia of trauma and loss.

This paper does not pretend to offer a totalizing solution to the paradox of trauma fiction noted above, nor does it aim to simply denounce the Caruthian model of trauma; it instead examines Ari Aster's contemporary works of cinematic fiction that privilege experimental form rather than remaining within the representational limits of any one genre or any one model of trauma. Rather than conforming completely to the conventions of the horror genre and adhering strictly to poststructuralist concepts of trauma, Aster introduces a sense of ambiguity, blending genres and different conceptions of trauma. Aster's work will be examined first under a generic

lens that will establish his consistent thematic interests and formal strategies, challenging the traditional separation of the art film and the horror film into two mutually exclusive categories. *Hereditary*, justified as a work of cinematic art, will then be closely read as a trauma narrative, drawing on psychoanalytic and philosophic concepts at work in the film that demonstrate the efficacy of non-redemptive narrative structures in ethically representing how trauma impacts subjectivity. Aster's work implicates the viewer as witness while undermining and betraying totalizing or subsumptive tendencies that constitute conventional empathic responses to human suffering in art. The viewer of *Hereditary* is wounded on an emotional level that evokes a pessimistic vision of the American generational family attempting to work through trauma. In turn, this pessimistic vision bleeds into a nihilistic meditation on the existential horrors inexorably associated with the human condition, including genealogical inheritance of mental illness and inevitable death.

TRAUMA THEORY- PHILOSOPHIES

Before moving to a discussion of the horror genre in the United States and its representation of traumatic experience, the theoretical perspectives and psychoanalytic symptoms forming the foundational etiology of trauma theory must be discussed. Today the trauma paradigm expands across several disciplines from sociology to memory studies; however, this section will trace the major developments foundational to contemporary trauma theory. This paper focuses on literary trauma theory, or the study of the representation of trauma in literary texts and draws primarily on psychoanalytic terms indispensable to an analysis of Aster's thesis and debut feature. What follows, then, is not a full, exhaustive account of trauma theory, but a discussion of key texts and terms that have contributed to the problem of narrative knowledge this paper seeks to address. Among the indispensable analytical tools that will be used to analyze the ethical valence of Aster's narratives are Freudian conceptions of trauma, including mourning and melancholia, the uncanny, the death drive, and the taboo. In addition, scholars and theorists who work within the trauma paradigm, many of whom have revisited and revised Freud, such as Cathy Caruth, Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Lacan, Dominick LaCapra, Roger Luckhurst, and Adam Lowenstein, have provided helpful insight and terms of their own that are integral in framing *The Strange Thing About the Johnsons* and *Hereditary* as subversive trauma narratives. The privileging of human resilience and the prospect of recovery in redemptive narrative structures is deeply undermined by Aster's pessimistic, dread-laden renderings of families struggling under the weight of the past.

The efflorescence of trauma theory itself in the United States is commonly traced back to the mid-1970s. With the Vietnam War coming to an end in 1975, and soldiers returning to the country in seriously troubling condition, psychiatric facilities suddenly found themselves

overwhelmed with the number of combat veterans suffering from what would appear to be the Freudian condition of "traumatic neurosis." Indeed, while the vast majority of trauma scholars date the foundations of trauma theory in the United States back to 1975, from a more global perspective, its true origins stretch back in time to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when the condition called "hysteria" as studied by Pierre Janet, Jean-Martin Charcot, and Sigmund Freud, imposed considerable influence on later understandings of post-traumatic symptoms. While Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer would publish *Studies on Hysteria* in 1895, Pierre Janet and his work on "dissociation" was a direct influence on Freud and Breuer's assertion that "hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences."[1] "Hysteria" denoted a wide range of conditions that today would be recognized as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, one quality of which was Janet's concept of dissociation. Dissociation for Janet was a process by which the mind splits off immediately following an event so overwhelming to the mind that it cannot be normally integrated or directly experienced, which is characteristically accompanied by loss of memory. Dissociation became the primary pathological mechanism through which to understand the effects of trauma. But Janet did not consider dissociation to be a protective mechanism; he rather understood it as a condition that accompanied the development of hysteria in certain "weak" individuals, usually women, under extreme stress. Janet's work on dissociation in the late 19th century was soon overshadowed by the emergent field of psychoanalysis, which held that dissociation was indeed a defense mechanism which the psyche enacted in response to traumatic events wherein the memory of the event would be sealed off, frozen, in a different, inaccessible mnemonic structure. Freud draws a helpful distinction between the conditions of hysteria and traumatic neurosis: while traumatic neurosis can be similar to hysteria in its impact on motor functions, it exceeds hysteria in "subjective suffering" and the "general weakening or shattering

[1] Breuer, Josef, and Sigmund Freud. Studies on Hysteria. New York: Basic Books, 1957.

of the mental functions" (*Beyond* 12). The way to treat the dissociation of the patient who cannot remember the traumatizing event for Freud and Charcot was to promote linguistic, narratological association that integrated the frozen memories into a cohesive self-narrative, also known as "the talking cure." Psychoanalysts understood dissociation as an unconscious process in which the subject was unable to directly engage and experience reality. Contemporary theorists identify several forms of dissociation, one of which is "peritraumatic dissociation," a dissociation that occurs *during* and immediately after a traumatic event. This is not to say, however, that every case of dissociation is peritraumatic, nor is it to suggest that dissociation invariably ensues as a symptom during or after a traumatic event. Dissociation, widely understood as a total withdrawal of the subject from reality resulting from trauma and the amnesic forgetting of the original event, will be drawn upon later in this paper in examining cinematic representations of PTSD.

The nosology of trauma developed by Freud and others is undeniably rooted in the defining event of the modern age, The Great War. The prematurely named, "war to end all wars" contributed significantly to Freud's conceptions of traumatic neurosis. Soldiers were returning from the front suffering from a psychological condition then known as "shell shock." In treating shell-shocked soldiers, Freud notes that the behavior of those affected seemed to be like that of someone "being pursued by a malignant fate or possessed by some daemonic power." In describing the behavior of traumatized soldiers and patients Freud will invoke fate or the demonic or "daemonic" repeatedly, an invocation also present in his work on the taboo. The difference in spelling between the two words is negligible; both words are used to denote an evil or malevolent spirit (in contrast to the ghost, who need not be malevolent), but more generally

refer to "a persistently tormenting force or passion."[2] As we will see in *Hereditary,* the demonic is a key concept in characterizing the plot of the film and its influence on the viewer.

The symptoms of shell shock arose in soldiers who were exposed to the concussive blasts of artillery shells, an innovation of modern warfare, which tended to produce a state of dazed, disoriented subjectivity in those affected. However, the psychological symptoms that define shell shock frequently developed in soldiers who were not exposed to concussive or heavy shelling, and not every soldier who did endure artillery barrages developed symptoms. The fact that some soldiers suffered from an onset of shell shock or war neurosis and some did not speaks to a problem that has faced trauma survivors throughout history, namely skepticism regarding the legitimacy of shell shock itself as a medical condition. Because the wounds of those suffering from shell shock were psychological in nature and not physical, skeptics could not accept that a physical cause, such as a shell exploding, could be more damaging psychologically than physically. In other words, in the absence of a physical mark upon the wounded body, the integrity of a wound suffered by the mind was frequently undermined by various medical and military authorities. Accordingly, soldiers who were treated for shell shock were commonly suspected of malingering or shirking military duties and were generally assumed to be "weak" and "feeble minded." While there is no reliable estimate of the number of British soldiers suffering from shell shock during and in the aftermath of The Great War, it can be reasonably assumed that the widespread diagnoses and treatment of shell shock, traumatic neurosis, and closely related conditions throughout the mid and late modernist period ultimately helped legitimize the suffering caused by trauma.

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[2] demonic." American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fifth Edition. 2011. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company 3 Nov. 2021 https://www.thefreedictionary.com/demonic

The topography of life itself changed dramatically with the advent of modern technology; mass media arose in the early 20th century as the telephone and telegram became a mainstay in households. Perhaps the most influential inventions of industrialization were the mass-produced automobile, the railroad, and photography. Photography was soon followed by the invention of cinema itself with the Lumiere brothers' 50-second-long film, "The Arrival of a Train," in 1896. "The Arrival of a Train" is a telling example of the extent to which Western life was irrevocably sped up and the 'shocks' with which people reacted to it. I am not arguing that "The Arrival of a Train" is technically the first ever horror film, but the affect that it produced in audiences might suggest such a conclusion (the horror film is recognized by its ability to produce fear and horror in viewers). As the title suggests, the short film featured a train pulling into a station and nothing more. But those in the audience reacted with extreme fear due to the visual illusion of the train in the film, which many believed was coming straight toward them, as if they were actually in danger of being hit. This film becomes resonant with respect to trauma, the affective power of film, and the real danger people associated with traveling on the railways. Railway accidents were not uncommon in the late 19th century, leaving many dead and even more seriously wounded. It was not only physical injury, however, that railway accidents inflicted on passengers, as Freud observes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: "After severe mechanical accidents, railway crashes, and other life-threatening incidents, there arises a condition that has long been designated as 'traumatic neurosis'" (2). Similarly, Freud writes in *Moses and Monotheism:*

> It may happen that someone gets away, apparently unharmed, from the spot where he has suffered a shocking accident, for instance a train collision. In the course of the following weeks, however, he develops a series of grave psychical and motor symptoms, which can be ascribed only to his shock or whatever else happened at the time of the accident. He has developed a "traumatic neurosis." (84)

Freud's writing on trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and later in *Moses and Monotheism* figures prominently in the work of Cathy Caruth, a student of Paul de Mann, who returns to these seminal texts in *Unclaimed Experience*. For the purposes of this paper, the essential elements of Freud's initial formulation of trauma, which have been revisited and developed by contemporary trauma theorists, will be discussed in their relation to poststructuralist philosophies of trauma.

It is important to stress how poststructuralist trauma theorists hold that one's experience of trauma is inherently inaccessible to direct experience, language, representation in narrative, speech, and conscious knowledge. Jacques Lacan's understanding of "the real" lends insight into trauma's inaccessibility to knowledge and representation. Lacan's notion of the real shifts over the course of his career, but after 1964, he would use the real in association with trauma. The real for Lacan is what lies outside of signification and symbolization; it is something which cannot be represented by or subsumed within the symbolic order of language. Trauma is real in the sense that it acts as a limit to the signifying capacity of the symbolic and the imaginary. However, Lacan also characterizes the real as a necessary balance to the symbolic and the imaginary, demarcating their borders and providing a contrast that renders them comprehensible. Indeed, Lacan maintains that traumatic experience demonstrates the unassimilable nature of the real. Freud's talking cure and trauma narratives are incapable of fully capturing the real; there is always an excess left over that language cannot signify. This excess will later be associated with Lacan's *jouissance*, or "surplus enjoyment" for Žižek, the essence of the death drive. In the interest of space, Lacan's *jouissance* will not be elaborated upon here, but associating his idea of

the real with the experience of trauma nonetheless speaks to its inaccessibility to signifying mechanisms such as language.[3]

The ethical potential of trauma narratives, according to the Caruthian model of trauma, is determined by their ability to represent "a specificity and singularity" that resonates beyond the level of narrative representation. In other words, a trauma narrative is ethical insofar as it gestures towards what cannot be captured in narrative, to that which exceeds its representational limits. There is an inherent valorization of incomprehensibility under the Caruthian model of trauma that speaks to the ethical limits of narrative understanding. For Caruth, narrative understanding is ethical to the degree it disrupts and denies understanding itself, to the degree it resists and subverts a readily-available meaning that can be applied to a traumatic event. The tension between knowing and not knowing, between excess and limit, have been central to trauma studies since its inception. Caruth frames her approach around "the ways in which knowing and not knowing are entangled in the language of trauma and the stories associated with it (Caruth 4). Caruth, expanding on Freud's writing on traumatic neurosis in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, states that trauma is "always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (4). In theoretical formulations of trauma adhering to poststructuralist thought, the subject who experiences a traumatic event does so belatedly, what Freud terms "nachträglichkeit" in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle.* In this belatedness, memory of the event is stored in the unconscious, rendering it inaccessible to conscious recall. If we follow Freud's argument that trauma involves a breach of the external shell of the psyche, an overwhelming and sudden event that the subject compulsively revisits in dreams and flashbacks, we come to understand the repetition

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[3] See Lacan, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954–1955.

compulsion as a binding mechanism. Repetition of traumatic events is for Freud an unconscious attempt by the subject to generate the anxiety that was missing during the original event in order to bind the sensory excesses and restore psychic equilibrium. The subject is fated to unwittingly relive and repeat the very ways in which the event, in all of its excess, was *not* known to begin with. Trauma resists and defies cognitive assimilation and understanding while simultaneously calling attention to the psychic wound that constantly demands the attention and witnessing of the subject, who is incapable of doing so. Caruth discusses Freud's reading of Tasso's "Gerusalemme Liberata," a narrative that demonstrates her notion of "the voice that cries out from the wound." Freud writes:

> Its hero, Tancred, unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armour of an enemy knight. After burial he makes his way into a strange magic forest which strikes the crusader's army with terror. He slashes with his sword at a tall tree; but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved once again.[4]

Caruth's insight into Freud's original reading of the tale is profound in its revealing of the nature of psychoanalytic writing itself. The psychoanalytic process in therapy inexorably involves listening to the inaccessible wound of another person, where the analyst, despite being unable to "know," in the full sense, the traumatic experience of the analysand, nevertheless bears witness to its expression in strange, sometimes silent forms. Caruth identifies the site of trauma as an "awakening" that simultaneously enacts the necessity and impossibility of responding to the death of another person. The trauma that Tancred experiences in accidentally wounding his love is not only found in the death itself, in the loss of Clorinda, but also in the way that Tancred was unable to realize his folly in the moment of its occurrence, that he realizes in a moment that

[4] For Freud's full commentary on Tasso's work, see *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* chapter III.

will always be too late to change what has happened. Caruth poses a challenging question here: "is trauma the encounter with death? Or the ongoing experience of having survived it?" (7). Caruth reads the tragic story of Tancred as "the story of the way in which one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another…" It follows that for Caruth, the ethical dimension of trauma theory is found in its imperative to listen, to bear witness, to the voice crying from the wound of the Other.

It must also be understood that this formulation of the voice and the wound also pertains to individual experience, where the voice that cries from the wound is the voice of the Other within the self. The voice in this sense cannot be understood or known by the self, it seems alien to it, and yet the self must listen and bear witness to it all the same. The voice that resounds from the wound left by trauma is in both cases of a dialogic nature; it is a call from the Other, from within or without, which demands a form of engagement in listening. For Caruth, it is ethically imperative that the fundamental Otherness of the Other be respected and maintained. However, Caruth and other poststructuralist trauma theorists tend to stress the responsibility we have toward the Other without allowing for the possibility that this Other might make demands to which we cannot and even should not acquiesce, eschewing the means by which this ethical listening, or any other method, can assist the Other in working through trauma. Means of recovery and resilience for Caruth are peripheral to her focus on how to respond and listen to the wound of another person, inviting the critique that her model is "antitherapeutic" in nature. The therapeutic model of trauma stresses the possibilities of recovery and resilience that include but are not limited to verbal and written narration of past events, of temporally integrating traumatic experience into one's consciousness, thereby freeing the cognitive blockage characterized by "a resistance to closure that is demonstrated in compulsive telling and retelling" (Luckhurst 88).

The anti-therapeutic model stresses trauma's inherent unknowability and resistance to any form of human understanding. Similarly, Caruth, following the tenets of deconstruction, can be said to foreclose the possibility of narrative structure in ethically representing trauma. However, Anne Whitehead writes that "(Caruth's) work suggests that if trauma is at all susceptible to narrative formulation, then it requires a literary form which departs from conventional linear sequence" (6).

There are innumerable scholars, such as LaCapra and Meretoja, who have responded to Caruth's foundational understanding of trauma, but those most relevant to this paper discuss trauma theory's complicated ethical aims as well as the potential of narrative structures to responsibly represent a "poetics of trauma." The arguments of every scholar who has responded in some form to the writings of Caruth cannot be included here in their entirety; instead, arguments that dissent from or modify poststructuralist conceptualizations of trauma that this paper seeks to address and apply to fictional texts will be discussed below. Among the relevant lines of argument that respond to Caruth's writing are those that consider the "ethical turn" of poststructuralism that directly preceded trauma studies as it came into full view in the late 20th century. Caruth's foundational concepts of trauma are rooted in the Yale School of deconstruction which stresses the inability of language and narrative structures to represent absolute truth claims reliably and ethically. Instead, the truth or meaning that a text may offer, as discussed above, can only be gestured to. Poststructuralist theory sees indeterminate meaning, ambivalence, and ambiguity as key areas of textual interest. Premillennial trauma scholars like Caruth and their focus on the impossibility of working through and ultimately recovering from trauma have led to the creation of a somewhat problematic binary that tends to associate poststructuralist trauma theory with an "anti-therapeutic" model of trauma and postmillennial

trauma theory, informed by a variety of philosophies from phenomenology to epistemology, that stresses the agency of the subject in recovering from trauma as well as the primacy of human resilience as a "therapeutic" model of trauma. This binary logic understands the human subject as either primarily vulnerable and passive in the wake of a traumatic event, or as resilient and active in forms of recovery. I argue that this tension can be assuaged by situating it along a continuum of human experience, where the impact of trauma on subjectivity is neither innately "shattering" nor innately open to the possibility of recovery. This is to say that calling an event or experience "traumatic" need not necessarily mean that the experience is shattering, overwhelming, or extraordinary as such. Indeed, Hannah Meretoja in her article on philosophies of trauma proposes a productive solution to some of the ontologically problematic aspects of operating in the either/or binary that involves registering trauma not "in terms of disruption but in terms of how damaging it is." The crucial assertion made by Meretoja in her article is that:

> Overall, traumatic experience is a spectrum, like most things in life. Whether an experience should be called traumatic or not depends less on its integration into one's self-narrative and more on the damage it causes to the subject of experience- whether it severely diminishes one's sense of agency, self-worth and possibilities to act in the world. Such damage must be considered a necessary condition of trauma. (34)

When analyzing the representation of trauma in cultural texts, such as those by Aster, it quickly becomes evident that experience damaging to the subject is not always traumatic in the Caruthian sense; human experiences that might be called or felt as traumatic by one person might not be traumatic to another. The concept of "slow violence" is especially significant here. One cannot help but fault the DSM for the overly strict criteria that must be met for someone's suffering to be "legitimized" as resulting from what is a bona fide traumatic event. The points made by Meretoja are again relevant. Among the most important critiques of the diagnostic

criteria for trauma in the DSM V is a resistance to the "event-centered" model; the DSM criteria as well as post structural conceptions of trauma generally hold that for an event to be "traumatic" it must in some way be not only solitary in nature, but also "out of the ordinary" or "exceptional" in view of everyday life experience.[5] This assignation fails to take into account how long-term, repeated instances may be nonetheless traumatic to a subject as they experience them. For example, a child who is habitually abused throughout their adolescence can be nonetheless traumatized, contradicting the conception of trauma as a solitary, extraordinary event: oftentimes, a trauma is not rooted in a single event, but consists of years-worth of abusive encounters. Conversely, it may be the case that a child who is born into such a hostile, abusive environment may not understand such abuse as traumatic at all—it may very well be that, as Meretoja writes, this is the only reality the child knows; the events that someone else would consider to be traumatic would be to the child in question normal, everyday life experience. Additionally, the victim-perpetrator binary that is curiously enacted in Caruth's discussion of Tasso's story poses problems of its own. These are two points that will be elaborated in an analysis of *The Strange Thing About the Johnsons* and *Hereditary*.

Determining the ethical valence of Aster's films becomes a difficult task when considering the various, at times contradictory, understandings of what constitutes an ethical representation of trauma. On the one hand, adhering strictly to the Caruthian model of trauma where narrative representation, regardless of its structure, is inherently transgressive of both the singularity of a traumatic event and, in effect, the fundamental Otherness of the Other might lead us to condemn Aster's narrative films as unethical. On the other hand, if we incorporate the critiques of Caruth by Whitehead, Arendt, Meretoja, and LaCapra, that hold if a narrative is

[5] For the full list of criteria and their descriptions, see the DSM V, section II, under "Trauma and Stressor-Related Disorders"

sufficiently unorthodox in its temporal structure, diverging from conventional linear sequence, and it is capable of offering meaning without defining it, then we can make an argument that Aster's films are indeed ethical in their resistance to understanding and meaning. Even further, by virtue of the enigmatic and deeply affective plots of the films in question, plots that transgress and blur the boundaries between bystander, victim, and perpetrator, we can argue that these films address the viewer with an incomprehensible demand of a violent and disturbing Other in the Levinasian sense, one who threatens to destroy us should we choose to adhere to the codes of ethical behavior in empathically listening and bearing witness to the voice that cries out from the wound of the Other.[6] In this last point, another ethical paradox is seemingly engendered, for how are we to listen to the voice of a wounded Other who threatens us with annihilation should we choose to do so? In one sense, Aster's films are ethical in aesthetically performing a poetics of trauma, but in another, they cannot be considered ethical due to the transmission of traumatic affect that threatens the integrity of the viewer's subjectivity. The pessimistic vision executed in Aster's films, then, that entails the utter dissolution of the individual and the family following traumatic events, is at once their most ethical and unethical quality.

Dominick LaCapra's notion of "empathic unsettlement" provides a potential solution to the ethical problem of narrative knowledge, albeit a limited one. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma* LaCapra explains that empathic unsettlement can be created by authorial choices that cannot be subsumed within a quantitative or formulaic explanation. In the context of *Writing History* as well as *History and its Limits*, LaCapra discusses empathic unsettlement as an ethical practice associated with historians and theorists studying representations of trauma, whether they be in documentary form or in the form of a fictional narrative, which preserves a critical distance

[6] See Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond Essence,* 1974

between the self and the Other, or the analyst and the object of study. Empathic unsettlement is a practice not limited to commentators, however; artists may structure their work to produce this response in audiences as well. Empathic unsettlement is described by LaCapra in terms of "compassion respectful of the Other," which relates to the "fundamental otherness of the Other integral in the poststructuralist paradigm of trauma." However, LaCapra qualifies his term, emphasizing that this respectful compassion toward the Other "does not mean identification, denial of important differences, and appropriation or incorporation" (*History and its Limits* 25). Empathic unsettlement maintains critical distance from the object of study, whereby empathy or compassion does not bleed into a totalizing appropriation of the trauma of another, in other words respecting the fundamental Otherness of the Other that is imperative to Caruth.

There are certain dangers associated with commenting on or writing about representations of trauma where one may find themselves not only over-identifying with the unique trauma of the Other but transvaluing that trauma into an encounter with the sublime, rendering it as pure excess that demands melancholic fixation and denies any form of critical contestation. LaCapra seems to believe that there are unconscious processes of identification that take place in writing about a victim "such that one may be haunted or even possessed by another in whose halting or broken voice one may find oneself speaking." (*History and its Limits* 67). Applying LaCapra's empathic unsettlement to circumstances where it may falter speaks to its ethical limits, where the commentator or viewer, confronted by the artistic work itself, is compelled to vicariously experience the suffering of the Other precisely when the Other is reduced to the human. The Otherness of the Other is transgressed involuntarily by the viewer, who, while they might have no desire or wish to identify with the Other, nonetheless finds themselves emotionally distraught by the unconscious rendering of inexpressible horror as an

experience of the negative sublime. The negative sublime is a mode of experience wherein one recognizes horror, violence, and other negative affect as exceeding their comprehension, transvaluing it as an encounter with an overwhelmingly negative object. LaCapra notes that appropriation or over-identification may occur when we "become melancholically immersed in a putatively sublime object and (are) led to deny that victims may indeed work through trauma to become, in significant measure, not only survivors but social and political agents" (*History and Limits* 65). This response, often involuntary or unconscious, demonstrates how empathic unsettlement may itself become unsettled when an artistic representation of trauma destabilizes one's capacity to preserve critical distance between oneself and the object of study and undermines normative conceptions of ethical behavior.

As we will see later in this thesis, empathic unsettlement is a prominent feature of *The Strange Thing About the Johnsons* and *Hereditary.* Much of LaCapra's work on trauma is concerned with the ways in which certain narrative structures give expression to historical trauma, specifically the Shoa. An ethical quality of empathic unsettlement for LaCapra is that it "poses a barrier to closure in discourse and places in jeopardy harmonizing or spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events from which we attempt to derive reassurance or a benefit." For the horror critic this might include "the unearned confidence about the ability of the human spirit to endure any such adversity with dignity and nobility" (*History and its Limits* 41). In considering the conventional appeal of the horror film that follows a formulaic, redemptive narrative structure, it becomes clear that where a seemingly similar horror film like *The Babadook* provides catharsis and resolution, affirming the resilience of the human spirit in overcoming the traumatic past, *Hereditary* moves in the opposite direction, leaving the viewer in a state of total despair in part *because* of the pessimistic resolution it offers.

Throughout *Writing History*, LaCapra raises issues with the Caruthian model of trauma and the project of deconstructionism in general by citing the tendency for undoing binaries and replacing them with endless "gray zones" that threaten to collapse important distinctions entirely. An example of this can be seen in LaCapra's commonly referenced concepts of "historical absence" and "personal loss" which, while not necessarily opposed to one another, leverage the tension between them as a productive means of working through the past.[7] Adam Lowenstein notes that while LaCapra "reminds us that binaries such as these…must be seen as 'distinctions' rather than dichotomies and as 'interacting processes,' the possibility of respecting such distinctions often evaporates when confronted by the texts themselves" (Lowenstein 6). LaCapra in *Writing History* does indeed seem susceptible to making judgments governed by the binary logic he seeks to avoid in his respective characterizations of *Schindler's List* and *Shoa* as "redemptive narrative" and "work of art."[8] Regardless, LaCapra attempts to stress that while terms such as "personal loss" and "historical absence" refer to two different forms of interpreting past trauma, they are not always mutually exclusive. LaCapra tries to find a middle ground where the critical distinctions of terms are maintained, but not to the extent where they become diametrically opposed. Both Lowenstein and LaCapra are interested here in the means by which different modes of cultural expression, like documentaries and narrative films, "compete" to produce unconventional forms of knowledge. Hence, both are invested in counteracting the habit of organizing forms of knowledge in binary structures, specifically the representation of trauma, as either "accurate" or "inaccurate," "productive" or "nonproductive," "ethical or "unethical." Instead, LaCapra and Lowenstein attempt to leverage the tension between what appear to be

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[7] For a more exhaustive account of "absence" and "loss" see LaCapra in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* chapter II, "Trauma, Absence, Loss"

[8] See Lowenstein on page six in *Shocking Representation* for a full discussion of LaCapra's polarized classification of *Schindler's List* and *Shoa.*

oppositional poles as two points upon an interpretive spectrum, where both points productively inform the other rather than solely functioning as a means of opposition and value judgment.

In viewing the scholarly projects of LaCapra and Lowenstein more generally, it can be argued that both see the representation of trauma as a product of sociocultural forces and institutions that mediate how such representations are interpreted by audiences. For example, we do not view the contents of a documentary in the same way we view the contents of a narrative film, and both mediums have their respective advantages in representing historical trauma. LaCapra and Lowenstein are in a sense working the same problem from different angles; the problem involves getting beyond the limits of binary logic while maintaining important distinctions in representing limit events. Imperative for Lowenstein is the ability of an artistic work to represent trauma in such a way that it has an impact beyond those directly involved, it must make trauma *matter* to the Other [9]. According to Lowenstein, if historical accuracy, responsibility, and ethics subordinate artistic qualities and style, you are left with a sterile narrative with little to no affective or communicative power. This dynamic becomes clear in Aster's films, in which artistic innovation and style are unburdened by considerations of ethics. Indeed, Aster's focuses on heightening atmospheric dread and directly impacting the viewer by brutally betraying their narrative expectations. Aster chooses to deploy extremely limited narration and coverage to intentionally enshroud the plots of his films. In other words, Aster is able to make trauma matter to the viewer precisely by betraying their expectations and implicating them as witnesses.

Imperative for LaCapra is maintaining critical distance between the object of study and the self, between the observed and the observer, or counteracting the psychoanalytic concept of

[9] See Lowenstein's introduction to *Shocking Representation* (1-17) for his full thoughts on what is at stake in cinematically representing trauma.

transference to an extent where what is being studied, whether it be a horror film or a historical account, bears minimal trace, if any, of the one studying it. LaCapra writes of several means by which transference and its acting out can be tempered, one of which is the process of working through. LaCapra defines "working through" is an "articulatory practice" which may help counteract the repetition compulsion and forms of acting out characteristic of post-traumatic stress:

> The process of working through, including mourning and modes of critical thought and practice, involve the possibility of making distinctions or developing articulations that are recognized as problematic but still function as limits and as possibly desirable resistances to undecidability, particularly when the latter in tantamount to confusion and the obliteration or blurring of all distinctions. (22)

For instance, the ability to make a distinction between personal loss and historical absence is crucial for working through intergenerational trauma. However, LaCapra asks in chapter 2 of *Writing History:* "Can attempts to work through problems, like ritualized mourning and so on, really heal or come to terms with 'open wounds' and 'unspeakable losses'?" Aster would likely respond to this question in the negative. In *The Johnsons* and *Hereditary* we see what happens when historical absence and personal loss are conflated. Indeed, LaCapra explains, using the language of the supernatural, that "the very conflation attests to the way one remains possessed or haunted by the past, whose ghosts and shrouds resist distinctions" (*Writing History* 45). On the one hand, personal loss entails specific persons and specific events, such as the death of a family member; on the other hand, historical absence is much more general and abstract, such as the absence of a messianic figure. LaCapra argues that "paradise absent is different from paradise lost"; the latter implicitly assumes that paradise was once possessed or present, while

the former assumes that paradise was never possessed or present to begin with, therefore “one cannot lose what one never had” (*Writing History* 55).

The psychoanalytic notion of desire becomes helpful in further differentiating absence from loss. For Freud as well as Lacan, anxiety is produced when the object of desire is absent in the sense that it cannot be defined or located. Žižek, reading Lacan, further contends that anxiety is the product of undirected or objectless desire. However, Žižek’s understanding of Lacanian desire extends beyond LaCapra’s formulation. Žižek contends that “anxiety is brought on by the disappearance of desire” that can occur not only when the object is absent, but also when we come too close to attaining the object itself, which would vanquish desire (Žižek 5). If one can attribute the cause of their anxiety to the lack of desire itself or of a specific or definite object, then that object can be construed as lost, and anxiety can be projected onto that object. In other words, anxiety or fear can be allayed when one can identify an object that causes such an affect; “the conversion of absence into loss gives anxiety an identifiable object—the lost object—and generates the hope that anxiety may be eliminated or overcome” (*Writing History* 57). Absence, however, denotes no definite object, forcing the subject to cope with their anxiety in “nonredemptive” ways. In the aporia of trauma, anxiety may abound in the subject who is unable to recognize the lost object of desire, indeed unable to situate themselves in a stable relation to the past. There are particular dangers associated with converting absence into loss, as well as converting loss into absence, both of which are present in Aster’s nonredemptive narrative structures that demonstrate how detrimental conflation can be in an interpersonal, familial setting.

LaCapra’s concepts of “redemptive” and “nonredemptive” narrative structures bear directly on the films in question, which, by all accounts appear to be nonredemptive in nature.

"Redemptive narrative," LaCapra posits, "is a narrative that denies the trauma that brought it into existence." In contrast, "more experimental, nonredemptive narratives are narratives that are trying to come to terms with trauma in a post-traumatic context…this is a perspective through which you can read a great deal of modern literature and art, as a kind of relatively safe haven in which to explore post-traumatic effects" (*Writing History* 59). However, as seen earlier, LaCapra at times frames these terms in binary logic, where a narrative can either be redemptive or nonredemptive, as in the case of *Shoa* and *Schindler's List*. I stress the notion that a fictional or nonfictional narrative has the possibility of being located between the poles of redemptive and nonredemptive. Indeed, this paper observes two such examples that resist binary classification of this sort. However, this is not to suggest that such distinctions are not important or that they are not applicable; they certainly are, but to foreclose the possibility that a narrative could inhabit a position along a spectrum is to deny its communicative and ethical potential, should it exist. In other words, a film like *Hereditary* may be situated closer to the nonredemptive end of the interpretive spectrum because it is trying to come to terms with trauma that mostly precedes the plot of the narrative. However, it can also be argued that *Hereditary* is not nonredemptive in that the viewer is not given a "safe haven" from which to explore post-traumatic effects. They are instead subjected to such effects as over-identification occurs. Regardless, discerning the ethical potential of a trauma narrative requires more than classifying it as either "redemptive" or "nonredemptive;" its redemptive and nonredemptive qualities, in conjunction with other qualities such as artistic style and temporal structure, should instead be seen as interacting with one another within a work as a whole.

AMERICAN HORROR

Supernatural horror as well as psychological horror have not only proven to be effective in disturbing, unnerving, and otherwise torturing audiences, but also engender a new understanding of pleasure derived from the viewer in being intentionally exposed to traumatic experience and for lack of a better phrase 'fucked with' by the film itself. What Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* referred to as "enigmatic masochistic tendencies of the ego" are as present now as when he was writing, if not far more pronounced and visible, as evidenced by the perpetuation of the *Saw* series alone (11). The masochistic and sadomasochistic appetites of contemporary audiences seem insatiable; however, cultural articulations of traumatic experience mollify the self-destructive drives that seem more pronounced in many fans of horror film, but more importantly reaffirm what Roger Luckhurst claims is responsible for the creation of an obsession with the trauma paradigm itself: that "it has been turned into a repertoire of compelling stories about the enigmas of identity, memory, and selfhood that have saturated western cultural life" (80). Cultural forms, such as horror movies, are representative and constitutive of our understandings of trauma itself. For example, a film's deployment of the recurrent nightmare, the flashback, and narrative anachrony or aporia are characteristic of lived traumatic experience. Indeed, these conventions, while perhaps too stable in and of themselves, are constantly being manipulated in form and appearance for various purposes, but ultimately adumbrate how trauma breaches the psyche and how it serves as a cognitive blockage that temporally disjoints and haunts the subject. The active component of trauma in haunting or possessing the subject is especially resonant with the horror genre, and in Aster's films is literally embodied by characters who struggle to free themselves from the past.

Many scholars have pointed out that the horror genre, unlike nearly any other, is recognized and defined by the emotional affect in produces.[10] While the affect of horror might be evoked by the monstrous, the alien, the unknown, or an amalgam of several elements, it is undeniable that the primary determinant of a film placed under the label of horror resides in its ability to scare the viewer. Stephen King in *Danse Macabre* discusses the markers of the horror tale at length, using the archetype of "the hook" to argue that no matter how plot is formulated or modified, the horror story remains a horror story by virtue of its intention of scaring the audience. Similarly, Noel Carroll in his foundational work *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* contends that the horror genre is distinct in its "intended capacity to raise a certain affect" (*Carroll* 14). However, Carroll complicates the notion of the monster as a required element in classifying a fictional work under the genre of horror. Carroll instead posits the presence of the monster as a sufficient but not necessary condition for horror; "correlating horror with the presence of monsters gives us a neat way of distinguishing it from terror, especially of the sort rooted in tales of abnormal psychologies" (Carroll 15). The key difference for Carroll in differentiating a horror story from a story where a monster might simply be present is the attitudes of the characters. Indeed, the attitude of the characters toward the monster in a horror narrative for Carroll must be one of fear compounded by disgust or revulsion, which audience members are intended to mirror. The concept of the monster, however, has gradually shifted back and forth since the emergence of the Modern American Horror film that is commonly dated around the release of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* or William Friedkin's *The Exorcist.* While Carroll's text furthers the "occurrent emotional state" of what he calls "art-horror," an affect that functions on both cognitive and physical levels with disgust as its central

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[10] See King's *Danse Macabre,* H.P. Lovecraft's "Supernatural Horror in Literature," Noel Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror*, and Daryl Jones' *Horror:* A Thematic History in Fiction and Film, Linda Williams "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess" Film Quarterly 44.4 (1991).

component, he also mentions a different type of narrative referred to as "tales of dread" that do not coalesce around disgust. The extent of Carroll's analysis of stories of this type are limited to the recognition that "the emotional response they elicit seems to be quite different from that engendered by art-horror (Carroll 42)." It is these "tales of dread" in which this paper is interested, specifically contemporary works of horror that diverge from traditional understandings and push the limits of the genre in visceral, atmospheric explorations of negative affect such as grief, loss, and trauma.

Scholars, critics, and fans have taken note of a distinct thematic and aesthetic shift in horror films produced in the last ten years or so, specifically since 2010, which challenge and destabilize the predictable viewing experience. The horror genre in particular has always been able to express its own commentary on various issues that define the contemporary American polity in a forceful and thereby often memorable way. Horror directors of the current age are employing increasingly meticulous and innovative qualities in their work that present a new set of challenges both aesthetic and philosophical to today's audiences. The aforementioned fear of those scholars cautiously optimistic about the genre's future base their apprehension mainly on the fact that these "arthouse" productions consistently fail in out-earning their commercial competitors at the box office. The comparative success of overly repetitious, highly conventionalized, formulaic cash grabs like *The Conjuring* series, while giving actors like Patrick Wilson the equivalent of tenure at a liberal arts college, threaten to overshadow and ultimately push out the modestly produced and distributed, though much more artistically centered and philosophically engaging, 'cult' or 'indie' productions. One of the exigent demands of this issue and the purpose of this paper is to garner a justification of more artistically conscious, less commodifiable horror movies that resist meaning and interrogate the desire of the

viewer for redemption or reintegration. A degree of worth or value that is not measured in economic terms is difficult to defend in the United States, but the imposed challenges and philosophic aims of visionary directors, the figures tantamount to the survival of this "renaissance" of the horror genre, regardless of how much money they make, should be venerated on the basis of producing cultural texts that do not conform homogeneously to genre conventions, that question the purpose and potential of what horror can do in the way of cultural and social change, and offering (sometimes forcing) powerfully realistic impressions of traumatic experience and representations of mental illness.

In American cinema, the horror film has traditionally been kept at a safe distance from the "art film" as well as the "indie film." The independent or "indie" American film is conventionally situated much closer to the realm of the "art film" than the horror film could ever hope to be. However, it is worth considering the formal and generic aspects of the American indie film that are shared by the American horror film. By outlining the likeness between these two modes of representation in film, an argument for the work of Ari Aster as "indie horror" will demonstrate the artistic qualities present that merit serious critical and scholarly attention to come. Calling a film "indie" in the United States can indicate several different meanings that have shifted over time. In the early days of American cinema, specifically around the 1930s, the term "indie" referred to how a film was produced. An indie film was seen as a work produced outside of the Hollywood studio system which by comparison was made with a much smaller budget. However, as the major Hollywood studios shifted toward distribution rather than production in the 60s and 70s, indie gradually became a less stable signifier for small budget, modestly produced films. Eventually, in the late 70s and early 80s, the classification of a film as indie came to embody what Jamie Sexton in his article on U.S. indie horror calls a "quasi-generic

construct" which indicated a film's formal qualities and authorial strategies over its economic production. Indeed, Sexton points out that "American independent cinema often refers to films that express an authorial vision, experiment with form and narrative, represent marginalized voices, and attempt to go against the sentimentally perceived as indicative of mainstream Hollywood filmmaking" (Sexton 5). Economic properties of a film's production that previously indicated its indie status were slowly replaced by aesthetic and ideological properties that were lauded on the basis of their contrast to Hollywood style. This updated understanding of independent cinema is the dominant one in placing contemporary films within generic frameworks, which distinguish themselves from avant-garde productions by being shown in conventional venues and commonly being feature-length. I differ from Sexton here in arguing that an indie film, beyond the purposes of clear distinction from similar forms like the avant-garde, need not be a feature-length film to qualify as an indie film. Ari Aster's short film, *The Strange Thing About the Johnsons* I contend is integral and quite similar to his first feature-length film, *Hereditary*. The primary difference between *The Johnsons* and *Hereditary* is the inclusion of the supernatural; however, *The Johnsons* demonstrates Aster's interest in blending elements of the melodramatic with horror as well as his markedly pessimistic tones. Nevertheless, there is considerable overlap among the quasi-generic construct of American indie film and the art-film.

One of the key points of intersection is their similar use of genre as a means of orienting viewer within well-known frameworks through which to understand a film's content. However, the use of stable generic frameworks may only be deployed by a filmmaker as a means of subverting their generic expectations. For example, David Lowery's 2021 film *The Green Knight* uses the genre of the chivalric romance, typically involving a heroic protagonist undergoing a

series of trials to prove his worth and honor, to play on its canonized expectations, offering a vision of the famous tale of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" that deviates significantly from the original narrative, profoundly altering its traditional structure and meaning. The art film and horror film are usually separated in mutually exclusive categories, organized within an either/or binary. In *Shocking Representation*, Adam Lowenstein traces his concept of the "allegorical moment," a site of confrontation between film, the spectator, and history, within a set of modern horror films that challenge the binary logic mentioned above, which is also operant in the study of trauma narratives in its priviledging of modernist over realist narrative forms in depicting historical trauma. Lowenstein argues that his specialized set of modern horror films, which includes *Eyes Without a Face, Onibaba,* and *Last House on the Left*, are confrontational "in the sense that they border on the territory of a cinema conventionally perceived to exist at the furthest remove from the horror film: the art cinema" (Lowenstein 6). Lowenstein's book is closely relevant to the concerns of this thesis in that it seeks to leverage tensions created by binary oppositions to question the underlying logical and philosophical elements that govern representation itself. Representation for Lowenstein is a "vital but precarious link…between experience and reflection (which) holds out the promise, however risky, that trauma can be communicated" (Lowenstein 5). Indeed, I believe that horror films of the new wave located on the border of convergent genres, such as melodrama and horror, are promising vehicles for ethical representations of trauma. Aster's films in particular straddle this generic border, and in combination with deceptive marketing strategies, are able unsettle genres and viewers alike, pushing the affective boundaries of cinematic representation in articulating traumatic and post-traumatic experience.

A24, an independent company behind the production and distribution of *The Green Knight, Hereditary,* and *Midsommar* contributes to the subversion of viewer expectation in considerable and novel ways. In the case of the aforementioned films, A24 released trailers for each that seem to be intentionally misleading or deceptive. The trailers for these films are not only quite obscure, never tilting their cards so far as to reveal critical pieces of information, but more importantly function as "trojan horses." In other words, trailers for *Hereditary* released by A24 featured a film that by all accounts appeared to be a bona-fide work of the horror genre, a film that appeared to be another rehashing of the trope of demonic possession in a family context similar to *Rosemary's Baby* or the *Insidious* films. However, this trailer, along with those released ahead of *The Green Knight* and *Midsommar*, was an elaborate ruse orchestrated to play on the expectations of the American moviegoing public. By careful exclusion of expository information and careful inclusion of familiar horror tropes, *Hereditary* was marketed as a horror film that could attract the loyal fans of the genre as well as those who might normally avoid them. Breaking the demographic deadlock, an achievement that King holds to be a great indicator of success, is in the case of *Hereditary* achieved by pure deception in marketing. The narrative that actually lies in wait within the trojan horse is a trauma narrative, an exploration of some of the most terrible and inexorable aspects of being human that cannot be remedied. The horror genre in this example operates primarily as a means of disguising content that is in many ways far more terrifying and destabilizing than the traditional redemptive narrative that allows for closure, resolution, and catharsis. This is not to say that *Hereditary* is without resolution or catharsis, for both elements are present at the conclusion of the film, but are to say the least unwelcome to audiences accustomed to being let off the hook in a "magical moment of reintegration." The thematic and formal gap that separates the films written about in *Danse*

Macabre and those examined in this paper expands upon further comparative analysis. To King, directors of horror films are "agents of the norm" who reaffirm the viewer and society at large of its enemies and boundaries, reinscribing the differences between "normal" and "abnormal" "good" and "evil" in hyperbolized displays of monstrous threats that menace cultural foundations such as the nuclear family (35). This characterization fails to accurately characterize Ari Aster and several other directors of 'prestige horror' who, by means similar to the modern horror film, arrive at disparate ends which actively destabilize the norm itself as well as the desire for a norm at all. Indeed, the emergence of a "new wave" in American horror film characteristically destabilizes generic and meaning-making structures by decentering tropes and exploring new depths in negative affect that have proven to be viscerally impactful to viewers. Because horror films of the "new wave" blur moral boundaries and challenge the viewer to engage in and identify with trauma, horror directors can no longer been seen as "agents of the norm." Directors like Ari Aster actively destabilize the norm, placing cultural values in a state of flux by eliciting terror in viewers.

In *Danse Macabre,* King provides a clear distinction between terror and horror; "terror- what Hunter Thompson calls 'fear and loathing'- often arises from a pervasive sense of disestablishment; that things are in the unmaking" (15). Horror, on the other hand, is described as a "low sense of anxiety which we call 'the creeps." King's notion of terror is especially useful in its ability to destabilize by bringing to light fears that might be personal and very real. In many of the horror films of the "new wave" there is an overbearing presence of terror and dread, where narrative events proceed along a path leading to disintegration, rather than integration. King goes on to remark on how rare it is for a horror film to elicit an emotional response of terror that effectively unites people in a shared moment of intense fear, where it seems as though a sense of

instability pervades the American psyche, perhaps not uniformly, but nevertheless ubiquitously. As intimated above, such unitary terror seems to be engendered most successfully in moments of historical crisis, and King specifically references the assassination of JFK as one such moment. However, I would like to diverge from King's formulation of the value of what he calls the "moment of reintegration" in *Danse Macabre* to clearly distinguish the modern horror film and the "post-modern" horror films of the new wave. To support his notion of terror that can unite, King repeatedly references the "magic moment of reintegration and safety at the end (of the horror film), that same feeling that comes when the roller coaster stops at the end of its run and you get off…whole and unhurt" (17). Further, King believes that it is this "feeling of reintegration…that make(s) the danse macabre so rewarding and magical." There is an ethical imperative in this moment of reintegration, where human vulnerability is emphasized to an extent that may generate a newfound sense of empathy for the Other. This moment of reintegration, where normalcy and safety come back into full view, is similar to LaCapra's concept of redemptive narrative structures, where the threat is ultimately neutralized, the symbolic order restored, ultimately signifying an optimistic portrait of human agency and resilience. There are, of course, exceptions to the norm of the redemptive narrative in modern horror film, such as *Silence of the Lambs, The Blair Witch Project,* and *Rosemary's Baby* wherein the threat is not neutralized and good does not prevail over evil, but these are exceptions to the rule. While the aforementioned films can certainly be seen as precursors to the horror films of the new wave, there are still clear distinctions between them, most evident in tone, mood, and atmosphere. The modern horror film typically relies on frightening the viewer through "jump-scares" or grotesque scenes of violence and gore rather than steadily building a sense of dread that culminates in catastrophe. Many of these modern horror films, like those of the 90s, have

made it difficult to confidently argue for a likeness between the art film and the horror film, and King is well aware of this: "the artistic work of horror is almost always a disappointment…you can scare people with the unknown for a long, long time, but sooner or later you have to turn your down cards up. You have to open the door and show the audience what's behind it." But, as King acknowledges, this is not always the case; there are several examples of horror films that refuse to open the door at all, such as *The Haunting of Hill House*, in which the door bends beyond its limits, but never opens. Overwhelmingly, opening the door proves to be a mistake in that what is revealed—a monster, alien, ghost, or diabolic human—is no longer unknown to the viewer, who is then able to account for and integrate the shape of the threat no matter how unsettling it may be.

I would like to propose another means by which contemporary horror directors get around the problem of opening the door unaccounted for in *Danse Macabre,* and that is to throw the door open from the very beginning. A crucial qualification, however, is that the audience is oblivious to the fact that the door has been opened from the outset of the narrative on account of the characters' seemingly normal, human form. To elaborate, opening the door and revealing a monster that is not recognized as such proves to be an extremely effective tool in eliciting the distinct tones of dread and terror present in Aster's films. In fact, as the viewer becomes gradually aware that the door has been wide open the entire time, there is mounting desire to close it again and push the disturbing contents behind it back into the crypt. In *Hereditary*, for example, the realization that the most direct, monstrous threat to the family is none other than the family itself proves to be a particularly unsettling truth that cannot be explained away or neutralized, it speaks to a reality of the human condition that is inescapable. Furtively opening

the door is a prominent feature of Aster’s films and many other contemporary horror films that use artifice as a means of achieving emotional effect in audiences.

CHAPTER 2

HORRORS OF THE FAMILY IN *THE STRANGE THING ABOUT THE JOHNSONS* AND *HEREDITARY*

"My biggest problem with recent horror films is that I really feel like there's this agenda—I don't know if it's a studio agenda—to let you off the hook. And if everyone gets fucked at the end, they make sure you're not invested in anybody. And the films that always got to me were operating on more of an existential level, where it's like, okay, we're going to pose the problems of life, things tapping into your most primal fears—death, does anybody really know anybody?—and not resolving anything, just rubbing your face in the inevitability of all that stuff. That stuff's not pleasant and we think we go to horror movies to avoid them. We want to go to an experience, we want to be riveted, taken on a ride, and we want to be scared. And I think with *Hereditary*, and other films I'm referencing, they turn on you, they ask, so do you *really* want to be scared? And the only way I know how to do that is to go into my own fears and what bothers me." – (Ari Aster, 2018)

Reading the films of Ari Aster as trauma narratives, I will accomplish two things. First, I will examine the subjectivities of the characters in detail as they experience and attempt to cope with trauma during and after its occurrence. Using key analytical tools from psychoanalysis, trauma theory, and philosophy, I will explicate the complex emotional and psychological states that help explain the enigmatic nature of Aster's narratives and their cryptic messages. Second, by shedding light on distinct forms of traumatic and post-traumatic subjectivity, I will elucidate implicit philosophies of trauma that figure prominently in Aster's work in relation to their influence on how trauma is represented in film. On one hand, implicit philosophies of trauma within Aster's films challenge dominant understandings of trauma as an extraordinary, singular event inherently registered as a completely unassimilated experience. On the other hand, many tenets of the Caruthian model of trauma, such as the inherent belatedness of traumatic impact, the primacy of the repetition compulsion, resistance to narrative representation, and dynamics of traumatic memory are reflected in Aster's films, creating an ambiguous relationship to any single

or totalizing structure of experience embodied by cinematic art. The characterization of Aster's consistent representations of trauma as theoretically ambivalent, I contend, not only allows for the possibility of analysis but more importantly, exemplifies narrative form that is not innately problematic, ethically speaking. While *Hereditary* and *The Strange Thing About the Johnsons* resist the viewer's effort to understand and assimilate their 'meanings' and refuse to provide any semblance of conventional denouement or catharsis, it is precisely this resistance that imbues them with an ethical potential. In other words, the ethical value of Aster's films resides in their ability to "reveal meaning without committing the error of defining it."

To step beyond questions of ethical value, however, viewing *Hereditary* and *The Strange Thing About the Johnsons* as essentially "homeopathic," to borrow Lowenstein's term, as introducing a certain amount of poison, if you will, into the consciousness of the viewer, might explain the immediate and residual emotional effects of viewing texts that offer bleak and pessimistic renderings of human life. In the context of film, the concept of homeopathy can be seen as a means of counteracting the "tetanus of imagination" that may accrue in audience over time. Homeopathy in horror film may involve crossing taboo lines, destabilizing sociocultural narratives, or otherwise subjecting the viewer to allegorically mediated traumatic content that engenders what Walter Benjamin refers to as a "profane illumination."[11] Casting *Hereditary* and *The Strange Thing About the Johnsons* as homeopathic questions the potential of the horror genre in general as it is traditionally perceived. Instead of functioning as cultural products that affirm the viewers' normalcy and safety, Aster seems to intentionally subvert this dynamic, instead forcing the viewer to question the idea of normalcy and safety themselves. Aster's films push the representational capacity of genre to its absolute limit, to a horrifying extent, where the

[11] See Lowenstein 45-50

unthinkable begins to bleed from the fragile barrier separating the Real from symbolically mediated Reality. *The Strange Thing About the Johnsons* and *Hereditary* question and subvert viewer desire for resolution and catharsis in narrative structure. Indeed, these essentially homeopathic works are able to reflexively interrogate why the viewer actively wants and hopes for a happy ending or return to normalcy.

THEMATIC ORIGINS: *THE STRANGE THING ABOUT THE JOHNSONS*

One of the most frequently terrorized and threatened institutions central to American culture is the generational family. The representation of the American family and what threatens to destroy it is commonly reflective of "free-floating anxieties" limited to a specific historical moment, but this is not always the case. Don Siegal's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers,* for example, was an expression of American fears regarding the spread of communism allegorized as the alien enemy indistinguishable from your human neighbor. While it is a tendency of horror film to play upon timely cultural anxieties, recently evidenced by Jordan Peele's *Get Out,* a dark meditation on race relations, there are also certain fears and anxieties not exclusive to a specific historical event that are explored and sometimes exploited by the horror film. Among these are existential fears, such as fear of a losing a of loved one, fear of death and dying, and fear of the unknown. Within the context of the American family, the horror film, according to King, has a unique ability to cross taboo lines and becomes of value to the audience in "helping it understand what those taboos are, and why it feels so uneasy about them" (82). King goes on to say that the horror film can even help "break" taboos by exploring "cultural pressure points" or "areas of unease" that are typically off-limits to representations in popular culture. For Aster, crossing taboo lines surrounding the family seems to be a consistent thematic interest that applies

considerable pressure to those cultural fears and anxieties. And if King's liberal definition of "art" is "any piece of creative work from which an audience receives more than it gives" (81), *The Strange Thing About the Johnsons* and *Hereditary* undoubtedly give the audience more than they bargained for in its provocative insinuations regarding how loss and trauma can spell the end for families who either refuse to acknowledge realities or are utterly incapable of doing so. Either way, the taboos in America around the sanctity of the family, death, especially the death of a child, and the cultural pressure to be optimistic in the face of adversity, at least outwardly, are all directly interrogated and subverted by Aster's sometimes perverted renderings of human suffering. Where other horror films allow audiences to retain a sense of epistemological grounding and safety, Aster's horror films subvert these assurances and turn them back on the viewer, exposing their own taboo fears and in effect leaving them for dead. Another line of departure from King concerns the ability of a horror film to break taboos. Based on the plots of his films, Aster tends to bring taboo issues and fears to the forefront of the narrative and leaves them there. The viewer is forced to cope with them on their own terms, to reflect on their own potentially taboo feelings and fears toward their own lives and families. As Aster has said repeatedly in interviews, "there is no moralizing"—his films cannot be simply taken as cautionary tales or warnings about the consequences of keeping secrets. While there are cautionary aspects of his films, Aster has intimated in various interviews that he is far more interested in representing existential realities of being human, not prescribing a moral or ethical lesson that the audience will take away. Indeed, Aster represents trauma as an existential reality of being human, as something we all come to endure at some point in our lives. Trauma is at the heart of the diegetic realities of *The Johnsons* and *Hereditary*, both of which revolve around

ways in which families ignore, avoid, and ultimately become victimized by the return of the repressed.

Ari Aster graduated from the American Film Institute, an institution known for its emphasis on Hollywood-style filmmaking, where he would begin to pursue thematic interests in families struggling under the weight of trauma and loss. Aster has said in interviews that the films made during his time at AFI were kind of limit-tests of what he would be allowed to explore.[12] Interests in taboo subjects that Aster has developed throughout his career seem to have their roots in *The Strange Thing About the Johnsons*. The American family has always been a particularly attractive target in the horror genre, eliciting fears and anxieties from audiences, but the threats posed against it in the genre are overwhelmingly supernatural in essence. The haunting of a ghost or demon are perhaps the most recurrent tropes deployed by filmmakers menacing the integrity of the nuclear family and invading the domestic space, and while these are used as metaphorical vehicles for 'real' threats such as economic ruin in *The Amityville Horror* or political upheaval in *The Purge* series, there are limits, defined by cultural tradition and taboo, to what form these threats can take. Stephen King and Thomas Ligotti discuss these limits, both suggesting that some fears, namely naturalistic, primal fears, are off-limits due to the illusion-shattering effects of immersion within a cinematic work. While modern horror films of the late 20th century strove to depict threats that in a sense bested and displaced very real horrors inherent in everyday life, Aster's work tends to invert this dynamic, as evidenced in *The Strange Thing About the Johnsons*.

[12] "One of my shorts, *The Strange Thing About the Johnsons* [2011], was my Sirkian film. That was a weird mutt of a movie, where it started as one thing then became another and then another. I was at AFI, which is a kind of industry school. They're very Hollywood-oriented and they want to train you to become a Hollywood filmmaker, and the films they show the incoming fellows are very politically correct, you know, Oscar movies. And I just thought, what's the worst thing I can make at AFI? "

Aster's AFI thesis, *The Strange Thing About the Johnsons,* is a 29-minute film that follows a seemingly normal African American family which becomes undone by repressed sexual trauma. While there is some evidence to suggest that Aster's short film could be interpreted as a comedy, this seems less and less likely as the film goes on. Despite the short's extremely excessive representation of the taboo and the acting that at times seems intentional over-acting, I see Aster's thesis as a work of indeterminate genre; he will fully develop this generic ambiguity a few years later in *Hereditary*, but *The Strange Thing About the Johnsons* first establishes Aster's authorial interest in blurring boundaries between defined genres, augmenting a sense of existential anxiety and instability in the viewer, who becomes increasingly uncertain of the kind of film they are watching. Indeed, Aster will implement a similar approach in his debut feature, *Hereditary*, creating a "slow-burn" plot that begins within one genre but gradually bleeds into another. One consistent thematic interest that runs through all of Aster's work and begins most prominently in *The Johnsons* is an exploration of the taboo.

From the very start of the film, the taboo is unavoidably situated in the opening scene of a masturbating boy. The masturbating child, and indeed masturbation itself, is among the most undisputed taboos in Western culture, dating from before Freud to the end of the Age of Reason, when masturbation was seen as a pathological behavior, described by discourses of monstrosity, abnormality, and secrecy. The act of masturbation was characterized as a seriously deviant, almost criminal act that, despite its ubiquity and very normal place along the spectrum of human behavior, was meant to be policed and suppressed from consciousness. The culture today in the United States, while considerably more accepting of sexuality in its many forms, nevertheless maintains this taboo in forms of popular culture. That is to say, representing masturbation in cultural texts like film and literature is a risky decision that bears traces of a historically taboo

subject. Aster, however, appears to be aware of the waning of this particular taboo, and augments it to a much more affective level. Within the first 30 seconds of the film, the viewer is exposed to a scene where a father walks in on his son masturbating, immediately invoking the taboo. While this inadvertent confrontation is undoubtedly common, the direct presence of a father suddenly bearing witness to the sexuality of his young son is extremely abrupt in *The Johnsons*. With the door to the son's room suddenly opening, the viewer hardly has time to process what is going on within the diegetic space before the taboo surfaces. Aster demonstrates keen awareness of the boundaries of taboo in American culture just in the opening sequence of his short, to which the viewer reacts with an almost involuntary response of discomfort and second-hand embarrassment. Aster builds on these reactions, introducing an evidently understanding and kind father figure, Sidney Johnson, who reassures his son, Isaiah, that "he didn't see anything" (1:00-1:07). Mr. Johnson goes on to tell his son "that was he was doing" is completely natural and normal, but Isaiah's reflexive question to his father "do you do it?" gives pause to his efforts to normalize the encounter. Mr. Johnson sidesteps the question, reiterating that "everybody does it" and that there is nothing to be ashamed of. It appears at this point that Aster creates a profoundly heartfelt moment here between a compassionate father and son, momentarily suspending what would be an irredeemably taboo event with comedic relief. However, Aster only sustains this illusion of a somewhat rare if not abnormal effort to normalize a social taboo to deliver the true shape of what something so abnormal and unheard of that it falls outside even the taboo. For what is taboo in a given culture still remains within the symbolic framework, in a sense accounted for, mediated, and to some degree expected, therefore nullified.[13]

[13] See Freud in *Totem and Taboo* 11-13

The short film becomes self-conscious at the moment the father asks Isaiah if he knows what a taboo is, to which Isaiah responds by nodding his head, saying “yes,” ironically keeping the answer unsaid. Mr. Johnson suggests that by openly acknowledging the reality of the encounter between them explicitly as he does, it cannot be considered taboo, because what is taboo only becomes as such when we “hide it under the rug” or suppress it. Suppression, in contrast to repression, involves the active, conscious attempt to push unsettling or unfavorable thoughts and feelings out of one’s mind. Because the issue is now explicitly discussed, “out in the open” we, along with the father, are lulled into overlooking what could have easily become taboo, but Aster assuages these emergent anxieties only artificially. Before leaving the room, Isaiah tells his father that he loves him, and the father reciprocates. Again, in an extremely short span of time, Aster has framed a potentially taboo encounter between father and son and then proceeds to neutralize it by acknowledging its occurrence in the most explicit terms possible, leaving the viewer relieved along with Isaiah as his father leaves the room and shuts the door. Isaiah lets out a sigh of relief and falls back on his bed, at which point a light melody begins to play as the camera zooms in on the picture Isaiah was using to masturbate unfolds, revealing its subject as none other than his own father, shirtless and smiling. The lighthearted, soft music that begins to play as the subject of Isaiah’s sexual fantasy is revealed creates dissonance in the viewer, framing a bizarre occurrence in tones of innocence that has disorienting effects. As mentioned earlier, the taboo here is suspended momentarily, allowing the viewer to breathe before the film seizes them with a realization beyond the limits of taboo itself. Aster forces the viewer to stretch their imaginations into places beyond perversion and taboo to make sense of what they have just witnessed, the effects of which are belated, accruing with a horrifying slowness that is registered as a mounting sense of catastrophe. It would certainly be interesting to

see the reaction of Sigmund Freud to this scene where the Oedipus complex is completely inverted, displaying a case of a son incorporating his own father, instead of his mother, as a love object to which his libidinal desires will remain fixed throughout the film. The horror of this opening sequence is difficult to grasp in the moment of viewing, but the representation of a sexual complex akin to Freud's "Wolf-Man" arrests the viewer with total disbelief as they are exposed to a total perversion of the love between parent and child.

The disturbing and bizarre opening scene then fades into an illusion of normalcy. While the viewer has already been exposed to what could be "the strange thing" about the Johnsons, the Johnsons themselves remain blissfully unaware of the developing tension between father and son as they all pose for a family picture. The Johnsons, portrayed from this external perspective, appear to be completely normal, a postcard image of the middle-class American family. While there is undoubtedly something "strange" about Isaiah fixedly starting up at his father during the photo-op, the reason for which the viewer is invited to morbidly speculate, there is nothing to indicate that something immanently horrible is developing. Indeed, the scenes that follow the opening of the short seem to parody the stereotypical progression of the American family. The tableau fades into another tableau, only this one is steeped in the imagery of a wedding that the viewer soon learns is Isaiah's. The transition between photo-ops at this point in the short demonstrates contrast within repetition, where both continuity and change become glaring. On one level, the single-family unit in the first tableau is now joined by another "happy family", that of the bride whom Isaiah has married, in which all are smiling contentedly with the exception of Isiah's father, who stares gravely into the camera.

Aster's framing here is critical to grasping the social commentary being made about how American families keep up appearances. On the one hand, the two families portrayed in the

wedding picture appear to be very similar to one another. Where the photographer of the first photo-op encourages the poses of the Johnson's, calling them a "happy family" we now hear the photographer of the wedding picture call the full group two "happy families". While the family of the bride is left unexplored, it is probably safe to assume that neither are purely "happy families" and the artifice deployed by Aster here in framing what the viewer knows to be profoundly twisted speaks to one of his central interests in how families assiduously avoid explicit confrontation and attempt to maintain facades of happiness and normalcy rather than allow shameful secrets and taboos to come to light. The viewer is told in a title superimposed on the wedding photo-op that 14 years have passed since the inaugural events of the plot, Isaiah is now grown up and getting married, which gives rise to the illusion that all is well, betrayed only by the stern look of Isaiah's father, who up until this moment has seen constantly smiling both in and out of photo-ops. Regardless, the two "happy families" in this scene become one "happy family" as the viewer cannot help but shudder at the thought given the events they have just seen two minutes ago. Aster seems to be interrogating the very idea of what a "happy family" really is in moments like these, where the idea the viewer might have is radically different from that depicted in the film. The happy American family, for Aster, is only happy insofar as it creates the external appearance of happiness.

Any hope harbored in the viewer that things have magically turned out okay between Isaiah and his father are dashed as we follow Isaiah's hand, wedding ring and all, slowly move down the back of his father as they pose for the picture and grab his butt in a gesture completely robbed of innocence. The temporary distortion of the background music and grimace of Isaiah's father upon feeling the hand of his son indicates that while this action is certainly unwelcome, his lack of immediate exclamation or explicit acknowledgement of it happening nevertheless

suggests that it is only the latest instance of a long and painful period of sexual abuse at the hand of his own son. The reaction of the viewer to this scene can only be one defined by excess; either involuntary laughter at the sheer absurdity of it, or involuntary gasping in disbelief. No stable indication is provided as to how the viewer should react to these jarring moments, exacerbating feelings of uncertainty and discomfort. In fact, the quick succession of first and second scenes of this film seem to be inviting a comedic response from the viewer, and perhaps the viewer feels that they *need* to laugh, as if taking the short's content seriously would be an indictment or condemnation of sorts. However, it becomes increasingly difficult to laugh as the plot progresses, and one suspects that Aster's manipulation of genre to confuse and distort emotional response based in sociocultural taboos and norms is cruelly intentional. A cut ensues that follows Isaiah's mother as she entertains guests of the wedding reception with anodyne, superficial conversation before she begins to look for her son and husband, both of whom have disappeared. A tracking shot continues to follow Isaiah's mother as she looks for them, the diegetic sound from the band gradually fades as she leaves the backyard and comes to a white picket fence, hearing indistinct noises from behind it. The shot then slowly zooms into the fence as sounds of heavy breathing and kissing can be heard emanating from behind it. Isaiah's mother, now visibly concerned, leans in to look through a hold in the fence that hides the sounds behind it. The perspective of the camera leans in with her, zooming into the hole in the fence and revealing the source of the noise, two figures in tuxedos none other than her husband and son are seen kissing before Isaiah kneels to undo his father's pants in a sexual rush as the music suddenly changes to chaotic plucking of strings that signifies her shock and horror. A shot of Isaiah's mother's widening eye registers her disbelief as she witnesses her son go down on her husband before turning away from the fence, traumatized.

This moment in *The Johnsons* is the first representation of traumatic experience in Aster's work. In the context of *The Johnsons* Aster's authorial choices in representation are markedly Freudian and adhere to many of the primary tenets of Caruthian trauma theory. Directly after Isaiah's mother witnesses her son in sexual contact with her husband, the event is repressed, registered in "traumatic memory." Caruth, drawing on Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* holds that the subject exposed to trauma is not fully conscious in the moment of exposure and unconsciously represses the experience in an attempt to protect the psyche. As Isaiah's mother turns her back to what she has seen, her facial expressions indicate that she is in a dazed state, unable to comprehend the reality of the situation, her eyes move erratically, her hand instinctively raised to her mouth as if to cover a scream. The process of repression at this juncture is rendered visible as her expressions of utter shock give way to a blank expression, as if she is not fully present for a moment, before she returns to the wedding reception with a feigned smile on her face, as if nothing had happened. Another cut takes the viewer forward in time, but just how much time has passed between the wedding and the present moment is unknown, performatively enacting the rupture in temporal subjectivity that ensues after a traumatic event. Isaiah's mother is making dinner for the family and Isiah's wife, who offers to help set the table, but is denied by Isiah's mother, who assures her that "everything is under control." We then cut to Isiah's father, who we now learn is a writer and poet named Sidney.

The camera slowly pans across some of his publications, titled *How I learned to Breathe* and *Agonized Embrace* before settling on a heavily enshrouded room where Sidney is typing in a document. A close up on this word document reveals a journal-style entry, lamenting his failure as a father to deal with the abnormal sexual development of Isiah and the abuse he has endured as a result. Guilt and responsibility enter the narrative as two significant themes, both of which

seem to be explored by the titles of Sidney's poetry collections. Also important to note, however, is the psychological process of sublimation, a process that involves transforming societally or culturally inappropriate feeling, often taboo, into artistic work. For Mr. Johnson, it is clear that writing poetry is his method of sublimation, where his feelings of remorse, guilt, and pain are 'bound' within his writing. Sublimation is a means of working through trauma, but it does not offer unconditional escape from it or solution to it. The argument could be made, based on what Aster has said in several interviews, that his films are products of artistic sublimation which, while they might be therapeutic exercises for Aster, are deeply disturbing to the viewer. As a coping mechanism, Mr. Johnson expresses his publicly or externally inadmissible and shameful secrets within the poetic medium, dissembling their impetus in creative work. Despite his attempts to bind what has been traumatic for years in poetry, it is clear that Mr. Johnson still feels very acutely the subjective aporia and pain of traumatic sexual abuse by his son. The information we learn from the word document also serves to complicate the victim/perpetrator binary, diverging from Caruthian understandings of trauma where victim and perpetrator are very clearly defined categories. Recalling Caruth's reading of Tasso, Tancred occupies an interstitial position between victim and perpetrator, but Caruth automatically classifies him as victim despite the fact that he is arguably also the perpetrator. Tancred wounds Clorinda twice, however unwittingly, and embodies both victim and perpetrator. However, in *Unclaimed Experience,* Caruth never seems to acknowledge circumstances in which someone may occupy both subject positions of perpetrator and victim simultaneously. Mr. Johnson writes, "to condemn my son, I must first condemn myself. And of the crimes perpetrated against my body, we are both guilty." Mr. Johnson implicates both himself and Isaiah as both perpetrator and

victim, leaving the viewer with no reliable means of discerning guilt or culpability in what has become a sexually abusive relationship between them.

The origin of this pattern of sexual abuse is also left unspecified with the exception of a few hints dropped sporadically in the narrative, again frustrating the expectations and emotional responses of the viewer, who has only seen Mr. Johnson portrayed as a passive victim to his son's advances. In most films, especially Hollywood-style productions, the line between good and evil, between victim and perpetrator, is clearly defined, giving the audience stable figures onto whom they can project their emotions, identify with, or otherwise feel empathy for. The line in Aster's films is invariably blurred to the extent that it seems to vanish completely at points where normative values are in a state of total flux. *The Strange Thing About the Johnsons* illustrates the morally and ethically indeterminate nature of nearly all of the main characters that appear in Aster's work which renders the interactive dynamic of emotional identification in the viewer a difficult task that may entail introspective or reflective reactions regarding their fundamental values and assumptions surrounding right and wrong. Aster is particularly adept at creating spaces where normative or fundamental meaning begins to decay; this can be seen first in *The Strange Thing About the Johnsons* and later in *Hereditary,* both of which depict a transformation of the family home, a cultural base of fundamental American values, where assumptive connotations of unconditional love, kinship, and security are completely subverted. In spaces like the home, where positive emotions like love and belonging can become elevated to a transcendental extent, there is equal potential for negative emotion like discomfort, resentment, and alienation which can become amplified not only by virtue of the physical space but the specific people, family members, who inhabit it. Aster seems particularly interested in exploring

the means by which conventional values and cultural assumptions, specifically surrounding family life, can become corrupted and distorted by trauma.

Returning to *The Johnsons,* we see the word document that Mr. Johnson has been typing is refusing to close as his son nears his room to usher him downstairs for dinner. This scene, while seemingly insignificant, reveals Aster's control of the mise-en-scene from lighting to setting, which functions here to intimate the subjectivity of the traumatized subject. Mr. Johnson, hearing his son mount the stairs leading to his room, is immediately struck by fear that what he is writing, if seen by Isiah, will bring punishment. He frantically attempts to close the document, but technical issues with the computer deny his efforts, leading him to initiate a hard-shutdown of the entire computer by holding the power button. The computer screen that displays his emotional anguish remains obstinately lit, much to the panic of Mr. Johnson. Isiah then briefly enters the frame, casually informing Mr. Johnson that dinner is ready, before quickly going back downstairs, at which point the computer screen finally shuts off, leaving Mr. Johnson alone, inundated with shadows. The mood established by the framing of this scene compounds the sense of helplessness and despair that Mr. Johnson feels. His frantic attempts to close the word document are representative of attempts at suppression, and the refusal of the computer to turn off answers his attempts, in a sense, as if the contents of the document insist on being read. The following scene, one that displays the Johnsons eating dinner together, will be reproduced in *Hereditary* in similar circumstances. As the family sits around the table, there is a palpable fragility in the strained manners and decorum exhibited by each member which speaks directly to Aster's thematic interests. The family eating dinner together is perhaps one of the most evident and common displays of philosophic goods like unity, love, and kinship that are among the cherished cultural values of the United States. In this scene, however, the dinner comes to

represent the inverse of those values. This framing strategy that Aster will employ throughout this work, which encourages the breakdown of external appearances and internal realities, functions to disorient the viewer, subverting their expectations regarding what the "happy" or "normal" family looks like and how they conduct themselves. In this case, the family dinner, taken at face value, is portrayed in a positive light. However, the viewer, having more narrative knowledge than the characters, knows that this seemingly warm, joyous occasion is in reality something much darker: one of the many means used to maintain appearances in American culture despite the hidden trauma that could at any moment tear the family apart. The speech in this dinner scene is quiet and strained, as if everyone is walking on eggshells around Isiah for fear of an outburst. The sound of a printer begins to bleed into the scene as Aster transitions to a shot of a manuscript Sidney has just finished titled "Cocoon Man."

The title "Cocoon Man" represents the lived traumatic experience of Mr. Johnson, who must bury, repress, or otherwise sublimate the trauma of ongoing sexual abuse by his son. For this reason, Sidney likely feels as though he is living within a cocoon, a shell, where there is no metamorphosis and where he cannot express his true feelings without the family falling apart. We see Mr. Johnson take the finished manuscript and place it on his bed for his wife to find. It is clear, based on the attire of Mr. Johnson, being fully dressed, that it was his intention to leave "Cocoon Man" for his wife to find and run away. Unfortunately, Isiah finds the manuscript before Mrs. Johnson and soon confronts him with it. Mr. Johnson waits in the dark of his room, as if he knows Isiah is coming. The door opens and Mr. Johnson flinches, an involuntary response characteristic of the sensory oversensitivity displayed by the traumatized. Isiah, with the manuscript in his hand, chides his father for the apparent artlessness of his "autobiography." Mr. Johnson is terrified and looks as though he could cry as he apologizes to his son for "what he

wrote." This is followed by another perversion of love between parent and child as Isiah tells his father "I love you dad, but this makes it hard." The audience, as well as Mr. Johnson, feel the dark implications of what Isiah says as he explicitly threatens him with "more than a slap on the wrist" should another copy of the manuscript be found around the house. In these moments, it is as if the role of father and son are actually reversed. Mr. Johnson cowers in submission in the presence of Isiah, who chastises and humiliates him. The relational dynamics of parent and child actually become inextricable from the dynamics commonly seen in abusive relationships, where the victim blames themselves for the violence done to them by their partner. Isiah then leaves his father in a lightless room, again trapped within the cocoon. A countdown from ten is then heard as we see Mr. Johnson delete the digital file of "Cocoon Man," another instance of repression, before a cut takes us to a New Year's Eve party.

In the opening seconds of this scene, Aster cues an anachronistic noir soundtrack that could be pulled straight from the Gold Room of the Overlook hotel. The selection of music contributes to this disorienting feel of the short film; the viewer is presented with what appears to be a joyous celebration of the new year, but this joy and apparent happiness are rendered perverse as we see Mr. Johnson alone and in despair. Again, Aster's interest in artifice, the ways in which families hide and willfully ignore painful secrets, is demonstrated in this scene. The party ends, and we see Isiah's wife hugging guests as they leave, but as soon as everyone is gone, she lets out deep sigh as her demeanor instantly changes. Within the shot, we can see Isiah standing behind a wall as he breaks a glass in a fit of muted frustration. In unnaturally restrained speech, Isiah tells his wife he plans to stay at his parent's house and help them clean up, to which she responds with a look of alarm and disbelief. A transition is signaled by the voice of Ari Aster himself, who narrates the self-help audiobook that Mr. Johnson is listening to in the bathtub.

Aster makes an appearance in almost all of his short films and will make a very similar appearance in *Hereditary*. It is in these cameos where Aster expresses his most scathing, albeit veiled, commentary on the absurdity of optimism and positive thinking in working through difficult and traumatic events. Mr. Johnson listens to his self-help book on the power of positive thinking to find some semblance of solace that will distract him from the reality of his traumatic abuse. Even if this solace is illusory, the self-help narratives and doctrines of optimism speak to contemporary American culture, which is inundated with such publications that promise happiness if one can simply change their outlook on life. In the diegesis of the film, this can be seen as a futile coping mechanism that Mr. Johnson turns to in times of need. For the viewer, there is something particularly cruel and callous in hearing the suggestions that one's problems in life can be solved by the power of positive thinking, presuming first that such problems can be solved at all, and second that one who might be in similar circumstances as Mr. Johnson, would be capable of positive thought.

Aster evinces a clear disdain for the hollow promises of positive thinking and normative optimism by juxtaposing them with traumatic events which are too overwhelming and too damaging to the subject to be healed or 'fixed' by a shift in attitude. As Mr. Johnson lies in the tub listening to Aster talk of the power of positivity, Isiah reaches the locked door to the bathroom. Isiah tells his father "you know how I feel about locked doors," an utterance that might be familiar to many who have heard it from their parents, reiterating the total reversal of roles between parent and child. Isiah stops trying the handle and instead begins to kick the bathroom door down, drawing the attention of his father as he removes his headphones. We, along with Mr. Johnson, can only look on helplessly as Isiah breaks the door down, a moment that is powerfully representative of the manner in which trauma can resurface in a forceful and

sudden way in consciousness. The power of positive thinking in this scene is rendered moot, and in retrospect, is cast as an almost comically futile defense when the repressed returns. Mr. Johnson begins to scream as his son enters the bathroom. We then cut to a shot of Mrs. Johnson sitting on a bed watching a medical drama while the screams of her husband can be heard in the diegetic space. Her blank expression is similar to the one seen earlier in the film when she looks through the fence at the wedding, indicating a dissociative state. In an act that appears to be horribly cruel, Mrs. Johnson turns up the volume of the television to an extent that her husband's cries can no longer be heard. Mrs. Johnson attempts to distract herself in an effort to keep her trauma repressed and unacknowledged by watching television. Just as her husband listens to audio books on positivity, she removes herself from reality by becoming engrossed in artificial drama. The differences in their respective methods of repression, however, are important to point out. Mr. Johnson takes refuge in an illusory world of art and positivity, while Mrs. Johnson attempts to remain ignorant by watching a fictional show involving death, trauma, and constant crisis. The alternative methods of coping are two sides of the same coin: while some deal with past trauma by turning to illusions of happiness, others cope by engaging with texts that simulate trauma in a controlled and removed setting.

Indeed, several studies have been done on the therapeutic qualities of watching movies, specifically horror movies, and TV shows that involve trauma and loss as a means of dealing with and attempting to master personal trauma and fear more generally. It is heartbreaking, however, to see Mrs. Johnson deafen the agonized screams of her husband as he is sexually assaulted by Isiah, even if it is a means of self-preservation. In any case, Aster viscerally depicts how forms of coping and escape fail as repressive or avoidant mechanisms when certain traumatic events breach the psyche and cannot be ignored. Stressing the limits of coping and

defense mechanisms even further, we cut to a shot of Isiah getting out of the tub as Mr. Johnson's audiobook on positivity plays in the background. Isiah tells his father to "put that in your book" before dressing and leaving the room, emphasizing the limits of sublimation in transvaluing a traumatic experience into a work of art. It seems clear for Aster that with traumatic experience, once a certain threshold is passed, attempts to work through the past become impossible. Especially important here are the ways in which trauma *becomes* overpowering and indominable; in this case, a taboo encounter between father and son develops into a sexually abusive, traumatic relationship for Mr. Johnson. Because the inaugural encounter at the start of the film is taboo, notwithstanding the effort to normalize it, it becomes significantly more difficult to address and work through. The plots running through Aster's films are both cyclical and transformative in this way; what begins as taboo, after a period of latency, becomes traumatic and abusive. As the film goes on, the trauma of Mr. Johnson becomes taboo—a process active in sexually abusive relationships as well as in intergenerational trauma—which prohibits him from seeking the help of his wife or other people. The physical and psychological damage of trauma can become exacerbated in this way, condemning the victim to silence for fear of what could happen should they choose to speak out. In the next scene, Mr. Johnson lies awake in bed with his wife, considering if he should say something to her about what happened. Although they lie next to each other, there is a chasm between them that cannot be bridged. It is revealed that Mrs. Johnson is also wide awake, but neither says a word to each other.

The following morning, Mr. Johnson is seen retrieving a copy of his "Cocoon Man" from under the floorboards of the house. It is again clear that he intends to escape by leaving his family and running away, but he is again stopped by Isiah. The conversation between them that

follows serves to further blur the line between perpetrator and victim when Isiah asks "Am I totally alone here? Am I just this abusive monster and you're some sad helpless victim? Or does it take two to tango? Because I think it does. And if I've done anything, you've done it with me" He goes on to say, "I didn't ask for this, this is your thing, something you started" (19:00-19:18). The ability to identify or empathize with either Isiah or his father becomes impossible not only because the viewer is denied narrative knowledge about "who started it" but also because Isiah professes his extremely distorted understanding of love for his father. We suddenly become less sure in our judgment of Isiah as perpetrator and Mr. Johnson as victim. On one hand, this could be an instance of 'gaslighting' where Isiah, attempting to rationalize and justify his own abusive behavior, blames the victim, and attempts to undermine their judgment. On the other hand, Isiah could be telling the truth about his father starting what has become a sexually abusive relationship which Isiah now believes is genuine 'love'. The viewer is not given any definite answer, however, causing them to question their own assumptions and judgments about Isiah and his father and rendering emotional or projective identification impossible and even undesirable. Aster creates characters who embody subject positions of both victim and perpetrator in instances of trauma; human suffering in *The Johnsons* as well as *Hereditary* invite the viewer to empathize with characters, but these characters are never cast in a morally or ethically clear light, rendering emotional or empathic engagement difficult. This kind of paradoxical dynamic relates to Caruth's formulation of trauma; an enigmatic voice cries from the wound of trauma, it demands attention while simultaneously resisting any effort to find meaning in it. Mr. Johnson has no response to his son's accusations and flees the house into the street, where he is hit by a passing van, and killed instantly. At the moment of confrontation, when trauma erupts, Mr. Johnson sees the full extent of the psychological damage done to his son in how perverted his

understanding of love between parent and child has become. It is only following the death of Mr. Johnson, however, that Mrs. Johnson can no longer ignore her own trauma, a cadence of causation that will be repeated in *Hereditary*.

At Mr. Johnson's funeral, we see Mrs. Johnson in a terminally dissociative state, her expression is blank, her eyes do not move, nor does she speak as mourners offer their condolences. The ritual of mourning is depicted here as ineffectual in alleviating the pain of loss. Further, the death of Mr. Johnson does not provide any sense of closure or resolution in Mrs. Johnson or Isiah; instead, it triggers the resurgence of repressed traumatic memories that culminate in a violent confrontation. Isaiah is later accosted by his mother, who asks him "why was your father crying when he drove you home from prom night?" (23:12). It is clear that Mrs. Johnson is suffering from the resurgence of traumatic memories long repressed. The audience has no narrative knowledge of the event she is referring to but can reasonably infer that another instance of sexual abuse was the reason Mr. Johnson was crying, or perhaps, given the last conversation between Isiah and his father, he was crying over his own guilt for sexually abusing his son; the viewer has no means of discerning the truth. The fact that Isiah does not remember what happened that night also suggests that the memory was repressed as traumatic. Mrs. Johnson then asks, "is that when it started?" indicating that she now is fully aware that something was going on between them, but still avoiding explicitly saying what "it" involved. Isiah tries to gaslight his mother, telling her that she is emotional, that she doesn't know what she is talking about, but Mrs. Johnson, possessed by traumatic memories, insists that she does, and finally condemns her son, telling him that "he killed his own father" and calling him a "monster." Isiah implicitly confesses his guilt after hitting his mother, saying that he "loved him better than you ever did." A physical altercation breaks out between mother and son, another

instance of Aster crossing taboo lines. Isiah stabs his mother with a letter opener before attempting to burn her alive in the fireplace. Before he can, however, Mrs. Johnson grabs a fire poker and stabs him in the eye. She then proceeds to bludgeon Isiah to death as she sobs in anguish. The final shot shows Mrs. Johnson completely defeated, overcome by the return of repressed trauma, tossing the last remaining copy of "Cocoon Man" into the fire as a light melody begins to play.

In an interview in 2018, Aster discusses the process of making *The Johnsons*, rhetorically asking: "Is this a comedy or is this a melodrama that is weirdly presenting itself as though it thinks that this is a real issue?" Aster's interest in generic instability and mutation poses challenges to the viewer that ask such questions but do not provide answers. It is up to the viewer to decide the genre of the film, to decide which structure of meaning to apply to a film that is intentionally constructed as ambiguous, just as it is up to the viewer to decide if the sexually abusive, incestuous relationship "is a real issue." The veracity of the exact issue depicted in "The Johnsons" is irrelevant; what it attempts to impress upon the viewer is more general in that it seeks to shed light on taboo subjects in American culture, such as incest, and performatively gives expression to trauma developing within the family as a result of what is represented as unavoidable. This is more literalized in *Hereditary*, but in *The Johnsons,* Aster establishes his thematic interest in nonredemptive narrative structures involving dysfunctional families struggling through trauma. Without the closure, catharsis, and resolution found in Hollywood-style narratives, Aster turns on his audience and in a sense forces them to find redemptive aspects of otherwise bleak stories. Sometimes, at least in Aster's work, the catharsis and closure offered is extremely pessimistic, implicitly interrogating viewer desire for resolution and meaning. Plots about dysfunctional, suffering families who are ultimately destroyed due to their

inherent, human flaws do not offer moral lessons or prescribe ethical behavior, but gesture to the inexorable suffering that everyone is destined to endure and are helpless to prevent. Whether the trauma is the result of an accident or perpetrated intentionally is in a way extraneous. What Aster aims to emphasizes is the immanence of suffering, sometimes masquerading as an impartial, uncaring force of fate or destiny, which cannot be overcome, transvalued, or ignored. Aster's understanding of trauma, then, bears resemblance to the Caruthian, nontherapeutic model in its representation of traumatic affect as always too sudden, too overwhelming, and too damaging to be alleviated. It seems that Aster endorses a pessimistic, anti-humanistic view of human resilience to trauma, where catharsis is found only in release, in death. We see these themes developed and this vision fully realized in *Hereditary*.

CONFRONTATIONS WITH THE REAL: INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA, MENTAL ILLNESS, AND THE UNCANNY IN HEREDITARY

Despite the traditional relegation of horror cinema to the periphery of mainstream consumption in the United States, several horror films released in the last decade or so have proven to be remarkably successful commercially in addition to garnering widespread critical acclaim. Historically speaking, it is often the case that only one of these metrics of success is present in the general reception of horror film. Ari Aster's debut feature film, *Hereditary,* is an apt example of a film that has achieved both commercial success, grossing over $40 million in the United States alone with a production budget of $10 million, and found a positive reception among critics. One potential explanation for this is suggested by Bong Joon-ho, director of an equally disturbing film, *Parasite,* who writes, "In *Hereditary,* Ari Aster goes beyond the trappings of genre and delivers true, profound horror. A horror that is primal and inescapable." The magnitude of an artistic achievement of this kind was poignantly felt first by a family audience in Australia, which was accidentally exposed to a preview of the film in January of 2018, when in the theatre to watch the PG rated *Peter Rabbit.* This 'accident' reportedly caused 'a small panic' in the theatre and deeply disturbed children and parents alike. In the early stages of release, the production company A 24 hosted a "*Hereditary* Heart Rate Challenge" where groups of five moviegoers had their heart rates tracked throughout the viewing experience. The results were concerning; heart rates of viewers peaked at 167, reflective of an inordinately high capacity to terrify audiences. It is interesting to note that despite the overwhelming fear and terror that *Hereditary* inspires in audiences, it was not originally conceived as a horror film, and to this day is defended by Aster himself as being first and foremost a "family drama." The downplaying of the evident horror tropes present in the film by Aster lends itself to a sense of

anxiety in the viewer in determining their expectations about the type of movie they are watching. The conflation of the family drama and the horror film are in part responsible for the affective power of *Hereditary* and the residual dread carried away from the viewing experience. More important to the affective power of the film, though, is the gradually developed metaphor of intergenerational trauma and genetic transmission of mental illness, sustained by an overtly enigmatic and terrifying horror plot, depicted within dynamics of the American nuclear family. Indeed, *Hereditary* enjoins the viewer to empathize and emotionally identify with its characters to a degree where one has difficulty maintaining distance from their trauma and suffering.

Hereditary is not 'just' a horror movie, but an excellent example of a cultural text that leaves the viewer with little choice but to empathize or at the very least engage on a more meaningful level with the bereaved, traumatized, and mentally ill. Furthermore, *Hereditary* goes farther than merely demanding empathetic engagement with complex characters and plot; its cinematic structure and attention to family dynamics renders unique a traditionally supernatural story of possession, produced in the horror genre time and time again, and offers a viscerally horrifying portrayal of intergenerational trauma. Aster has said multiple times in various interviews that he wanted to avoid genre cliches and obvious symbols that traditionally spoon-feed the viewer expositional information. While there are no upside-down crosses, the name of the first-born son of Annie, Peter, still carries a biblical connotation to St. Peter, or the Petrine Cross, an inverted crucifix. There are also no pentagrams to be found in *Hereditary*'s 127-minute run time, nor anything for that matter that would alert the audience to a potentially formulaic narrative of demonic possession. Instead, Aster casts a kind of spell on the spectator, subverting their expectations and delivering a viscerally horrifying film, the most disturbing aspects of which are transmitted to the viewer, who is now infected with a deep sense of dread that

countless families feel in reality when under the weight of intergenerational trauma and mental disorder. In a Q&A session shortly after the film's release, Aster is quoted saying "I had gone through some stuff with my family. I took my sickness and now put it inside all of you." *Hereditary*, under the guise of a seemingly traditional horror narrative, utilizes the trope of supernatural possession by a demon, or a monstrous Other, to represent the viscerally haunting presence of intergenerational trauma, loss, mental illness, and their effects on the second and third generations of a family unable to work through the past. Rather than focusing exclusively on *Hereditary's* place in the horror genre and its relation to other films, I will deploy a critical lens informed by modern trauma theory will engender questions that interrogate the ethical valence of contemporary representations of intergenerational trauma and mental illness.

Building on the themes and probing of negative affect in *The Strange Thing About the Johnsons,* Aster's debut feature film, *Hereditary*, proved to be quite polarizing to contemporary audiences.[14] This could, in part, be a byproduct of deceptive marketing in the trailer released by A24, which emphasizes the horror elements of the film without disclosing any narrative information. As discussed previously, Aster frames the plot of *Hereditary* as a horror story, a tactic used by indie filmmakers to situate the viewer within a well-defined generic structure that mollifies apprehension and promotes the forming of expectations for the film. These expectations and generic tropes, like possession by a demon, function to make the viewer take their guard down, as it were, and expect the narrative to resemble that of horror movies involving demonic possession they have seen before, e.g., *The Exorcist, Rosemary's Baby* and, more recently, *The Conjuring, Insidious, Paranormal Activity* and several others that tend to follow a formulaic, redemptive narrative structures that conform to the expectations of the audience.

[14] For example, *Hereditary* has an aggregate grade of "D" on Cinemascore, an online movie review platform.

There are clear and significant distinctions between a film like *The Exorcist* and *The Conjuring*, but I want to emphasize the structural and aesthetic differences between recent horror films like those mentioned and *Hereditary*. The most prominent point of departure in *Hereditary* is its generic ambiguity and stylistic features. David Church, writing on films he categorizes as "prestige horror" which includes *Hereditary, The Babadook, The Witch,* and *It Follows*, notes that "these particular horror films favor minimalism over maximalism, eschewing jump scares, frenetic editing and/or handled cinematography in favor of cold and distanced shot framing and unhurried narrative pacing" (Church 7). Indeed, *Hereditary* features a "slow-burn" plot that generates apprehension, dread, and paranoia in the viewer. Dread and paranoia are augmented by the aforementioned stylistic qualities that function to destabilize and 'wound' the viewer on an emotional level. *Hereditary* itself, along with *The Johnsons*, could be seen as products of Aster sublimating traumatic experiences in his own life, binding that trauma within these films, and communicating its affects to the unsuspecting viewer, who, instead of deriving enjoyment from the viewing experience, is deeply disturbed and distraught by what becomes increasingly recognizable as a trauma narrative.

The plot of *Hereditary* follows a middle-class American family, the Grahams, consisting of Annie, a professional miniaturist, Steve, a practicing psychiatrist, and their children, Charlie, a young, androgenous-looking girl, and Peter, a stereotypical teenager in high school. In the opening shot, the camera pans across a wall revealing several handcrafted dollhouses before settling its gaze upon a miniature of a large house, and slowly zooms in on one of its rooms. The camera continues to edge closer to the room until it fills the entire frame, with sunlight pouring in from the window; the room has now become a diegetic space, confusing reality with its miniature imitations. The film begins on the morning of the funeral for Annie's mother, Ellen

Leigh, who succumbed to a long illness and died while living with Annie and her family. Extremely restricted narration places the viewer on an equal plane with the characters; Aster has said the viewer is only able to learn what the characters themselves put together, inviting constant apprehension and paranoia. It is not long after Ellen's death that Charlie dies in gruesome fashion. Charlie is said to be allergic to nuts, and while she accompanies Peter to a party she had no intention of going to, she unwittingly eats a piece of cake with nuts, causing her to experience difficulty breathing. Upon realizing the exigency of the problem, Peter frantically attempts to drive Charlie to a hospital as she struggles to breathe in the back seat, sticking her head out of the window to get air. A deer carcass suddenly appears in the middle of the road, causing Peter to swerve erratically to avoid hitting it. Charlie, with her head still out of the window, is then decapitated by a telephone pole as a result of Peter trying to avoid the deer. Peter and Annie are both traumatized by the sudden loss of Charlie, and their resentment of each other for their respective roles in her death eventually culminates in a viscerally emotional dinner scene. It is not long after that Annie begins to realize that what is happening to her family is not random or extremely unfortunate, but rather the result of a meticulously planned possession ritual executed by the cult of Paimon, a (mostly) unseen group devoted to one of the eight kings of hell. With the exception of Peter, the Graham family is dead by the end of film. Peter, or rather Peter's body, becomes the vessel for King Paimon, and the ritual is completed.

Crucial to framing *Hereditary* as a trauma narrative are close readings of scenes both integral to the plot and resonant with psychoanalytic and philosophic concepts that demonstrate how the subjectivities of the characters, as well as the viewer, are mentally and emotionally possessed by trauma. The concept of "*mise en abyme*," which translates to "to put into the abyss," refers to the endless process of interpreting meta-fictional references in works of art. A

common example to demonstrate this concept in physical terms is placing two mirrors facing one another, creating an endless reproduction of smaller images within larger images. In film or literature, *mise en abyme* may take the form of certain references that point to the artistic medium that the viewer or reader is experiencing and interpreting. More abstractly, the effects of *mise en abyme* can take the form of a film within a film, a novel within a novel, or a play within a play. The inscribed narrative functions within the broader narrative to reflect or mirror a reality the author stylizes in the work taken as a whole. *Mise en abyme* may be deconstructive in its emphasis on intertextuality and the inability of language to fully capture or represent reality. The notion of the "dream within a dream" is also a facet of *mise en abyme*, where the representation of reality and the presence of meaning are rendered unstable and unreliable. *Mise en abyme*, when used in film, often serves to disrupt foundational narrative structures the viewer may rely upon in discerning meaning.

There are several different uses of *mise en abyme* in *Hereditary*, one of which is present from the opening shot mentioned previously. The "dollhouse aesthetic" running through *Hereditary* (Greenway, not Andersen) creates the effect of *mise en abyme*. The events of the film appear to take place in a miniature within a miniature, a construction of reality, wherein themes of the film itself, such as the question of free will and human agency, are implicitly reflected by the constant presence of dollhouses and miniatures. The opening shot of the film that places the viewer in a miniature construction of the Graham house proceeds in a workshop identical to Annie's, invoking a feeling of disorientation or vertigo in the viewer, who is in a sense placed between two mirrors as they question endlessly the implications of narrative events occurring in this space. Aster has expressed interest in artifice on numerous occasions, and the dollhouses and

miniatures throughout the diegetic space reflect this interest in undermining a confident sense of what is real and what is artificial.

After Ellen's funeral, it becomes clear that her death affects different members of the family along a continuum of traumatic affect. Peter and Charlie have disparate emotional reactions to Ellen's passing; Peter appears to be completely unaffected when his father asks him if he "feels a little sad," and Peter responds with a shrug. In contrast, Charlie appears to be in a state of melancholy and despair as she remarks to Annie that Ellen wanted her to be a boy and asks her mother who will take care of her when she (Annie) dies. These comments are disconcerting to the viewer, who wonders why Ellen wanted Charlie to be a boy, and why Charlie, at such a young age, is preoccupied with the death of her mother and by implication herself. Also significant in these respective scenes is the lingering presence of Ellen beyond the grave. Despite being physically dead, it seems that much of her remains in the minds of Annie and Charlie. As Annie puts Charlie to bed, she recalls how Charlie was Ellen's "favorite" and how "she wouldn't let me feed you because *she* needed to feed you" (9:10). Annie still harbors resentment for her mother and evidently is possessed by questions that were never answered, like why she insisted on breastfeeding Charlie. This conversation between mother and daughter is also riddled with taboo subjects, one of which is the thought of death itself. Thoughts of death are especially taboo in the mind of a child but is also created by the extremely bizarre insistence of a grandmother in breastfeeding her grandchild. [15] Taboo subjects aside, the residual presence of Ellen in the minds of her daughter and granddaughter is presented ambiguously in a short sequence where Annie briefly looks through some of Ellen's belongings before turning the light out in the workshop and going to bed. Before leaving the room, Annie sees a faint vision of her

[15] For a more detailed discussion of death as taboo in American culture, see Stearns, *Revolutions in Sorrow* 100-105

mother, softly smiling from the shadows. Annie turns the light on, and the apparition vanishes. Two processes are at work in this instance; the first of which is the introduction of uncertainty regarding Annie's sanity—the vision of Ellen is hardly visible on screen, causing the viewer to share in Annie's incredulity: is Ellen really there? Or is Annie hallucinating? Events like this one engender an inverted metaphor of mental illness; whereas supernatural tropes are often used to denote mental illness, such as the hallucination of people and things that are not really there, it seems that in *Hereditary* mental illness serves as a metaphor for the supernatural. The second process is seen in Annie's actions immediately following this preternatural encounter which is also another instance of *mise en abyme*. After turning the light back on, Annie strides over to a miniature depicting the taboo breastfeeding of Charlie and turns it toward the wall. It is curious to see that in addition to Annie's personal miniature creations functioning as a form of repetition in acting out unintegrated events of the past, she also feels inclined to suppress the memories that such creations contain. It could also be said that Annie's miniatures are her attempts to integrate memories and experiences that exceed her comprehension and understanding.

In the following scene, we see both Peter and Charlie at school. Charlie is shown tinkering with a strange doll she has made, perhaps emulating her mother's work, when a bird flies directly into the window. Charlie then eyes a pair of safety scissors that she will later use to decapitate the dead bird to use as a head to one of her dolls. Peter's class is seen discussing Sophocles' "The Women of Trachis," the major themes of which are written on the board. Among these themes are "escaping fate," "the relationship between knowledge and responsibility," and a quote "no man is considered fortunate until he is dead." This is another use of *mise en abyme*, an intertextual reference, that Aster weaves into the plot that mirrors the very themes present in *Hereditary.* The last theme, "no man is considered fortunate until he is dead,"

represents the pessimistic vision that Aster aims to emphasize through the immense suffering his characters endure throughout the film. Escaping fate and the notion of free will are intimately related but will be discussed in more detail below. There are several parallels between “The Women of Trachis” and *Hereditary*. The plot of “The Women of Trachis” revolves around a prophecy spelling Heracles’s death. The prophesy holds that Heracles will be killed by someone already dead, and much of the play centers on the deceptive and tragic nature of this prophesy. The wife of Heracles, Deianira, has long awaited the return of her husband from battle, fraught with worry that he will not come back. Heracles’s herald then arrives to tell her that he will soon return after laying siege to a city that once enslaved him. Deianira learns, however, that Heracles is truly besieging the city to capture a beautiful woman, Iole, and take her as a slave for himself, which fills her with rage and bitter envy. Deianira conspires to send Heracles a robe dyed with the blood of a centaur, Nessus, who, upon being killed by Heracles long ago, told Deianira that his blood could be used to ensure that Heracles would never love another woman. But this is deceit, the blood of Nessus is poisonous, and Deianira learns this too late. Not long after, she learns from her son, Hyllus, that the robe is slowly killing Heracles and she is plunged into guilt and despair. Hyllus shames his mother for an act he sees as intentional, but it is not until Deianira kills herself in grief that he realizes her true intentions. Of course, in keeping with the nature of trauma, it is always too late for Deianira, Heracles, or Hyllus to avert the course of fate that they unwittingly set in motion. Heracles is carried back to Trachis in extreme agony, still under the assumption that his wife intentionally poisoned him. After Hyllus explains to him what has actually happened, Heracles understands that the prophecy which told of his doom has come to pass, he is to be killed by someone already dead. The ending of the play provides the very same catharsis offered in *Hereditary*. Heracles does not magically recover, he continues to die very

slowly in horrible pain, and begs Hyllus to end his suffering and kill him. Hyllus reluctantly agrees, and the play ends.

The bleak conclusion to Sophocles' tragedy is reflected in the narrative events of *Hereditary*, which ultimately demonstrate the pessimistic truth that, in excruciating pain wrought by an inescapable fate, the only release can be found in death. Taken to its extreme conclusion, this truth resembles that which is said by Silenus to King Midas, that the best thing for humankind is to have never been born at all. Peter's teacher asks the class if the fact that Heracles never had any choice in his fate to begin with makes the play more or less tragic, to which a student responds, "I think it's more tragic because if it's all just inevitable that means the characters had no hope, they never had hope because there all just like pawns in this horrible, hopeless machine" (15:38). The trenchant viewer might recognize this lesson as foreshadowing, but this suspicion is only gradually validated as it becomes increasingly clear that the Graham family, just like Heracles and Deianira, are victims of fate, and are powerless to understand or alter it. There are several elements in *Hereditary* that appear to herald the doom of the Graham family, but, as in Sophocles' tragedy, they are overlooked and ignored by the characters and viewer alike, sometimes willfully. One such herald that appears in the screenplay but curiously does not appear in the film is the whippoorwill. The whippoorwill is a bird native to the northeastern United States and historically has been seen as an omen of death. H.P. Lovecraft writes of the Whippoorwill in "The Dunwich Horror":

> Then, too, the natives are mortally afraid of the numerous whippoorwills which grow vocal on warm nights. It is vowed that the birds are psychopomps lying in wait for the souls of the dying, and that they time their eerie cries in unison with the sufferer's struggling breath. If they can catch the fleeing soul when it leaves the body, they instantly flutter away chittering in daemoniac laughter; but if they fail, they subside gradually into a disappointed silence.

In Aster's original screenplay, a whippoorwill appears in the rafters at Ellen's funeral "fixing its gaze on Annie." The whippoorwill is not unlike the Banshee in this regard, who also foretells the death of a loved one. Nevertheless, cryptic symbols like the whippoorwill appear throughout the film, giving the characters and viewer an ominous impression that bad things will soon occur. Thomas Ligotti argues that "atmosphere (in supernatural horror) is created by anything that suggests an ominous state of affairs beyond what our senses perceive, and our minds can fully comprehend" (Ligotti 174). The meaning of these symbols is never defined or explained by the film, leaving the viewer to make sense of them as they will. Forcing the viewer to interpret the meaning of symbols that cannot be elucidated by preexisting knowledge, promotes a participatory dimension between the viewer and the characters, both of which are equally disadvantaged on the level of narrative knowledge. The presence of enigmatic symbols and signs can also be seen as representative of how the unresolved trauma of one's ancestors comes to be experienced by their descendants. Intergenerational trauma as well as hereditary mental illness are central in instilling feelings of dread and impending doom in the viewer who gains just enough narrative knowledge to imagine the worst for the characters as well as themselves. Inherited trauma and mental illness are existential horrors that countless individuals and families suffer without any choice in the matter, and *Hereditary* epitomizes these horrors in visceral, haunting fashion.

Intergenerational trauma is a concept within the trauma paradigm that arose mainly in response to the Holocaust. Judith Harris's article "An Inheritance of Terror: Postmemory and Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma in Second Generation Jews After the Holocaust" explores how the children of Holocaust survivors 'inherit' what Marianne Hirsch refers to as Postmemory, "the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic experiences

that preceded their births, but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to constitute memories of their own" (Harris 69). This concept bears directly on the diegesis of *Hereditary* that follows Annie and her family as they fall prey to a demonic curse that is quite literally consuming generation after generation of their family. In her eulogy, Annie reveals that her mother "was an intensely secretive and private woman. She had private rituals, private friends, private anxieties…It honestly feels like a betrayal just to be standing here talking about her…" (5:05). From the outset of the narrative it becomes clear that Annie had a strained relationship with her mother; in fact, no one in the Graham family seems to be heavily affected by Ellen's death except Charlie, who displays extremely strange idiosyncratic behaviors like clicking her tongue repeatedly and severing the heads of animals to complete the odd 'dolls' she is constantly constructing. The two other family members, Peter and Steve, are evidently unbothered by the loss of Ellen. This supports the hermeneutical model of trauma discussed previously, where a painful experience, such as the loss of a parent, is not necessarily traumatic or nontraumatic, but is interpreted based on how damaging it is to the subject. In this case, Ellen's passing does not seem to be very damaging to the Graham family, suggesting that the loss was not very traumatic. On the other hand, though, as seen in *The Johnsons*, the death of a loved one, while in and of itself not traumatic to the subject, can provoke the recollection of traumatic memories that prove to be extremely damaging. What becomes immediately apparent from the beginning of the film is the start of a long line of acts and events that are utterly incomprehensible to the Graham family and to the viewer. For example, during the open-casket funeral, a mourner is seen dipping her finger into a small bottle of oils and streaking it across the lips of Ellen's corpse, observed by a curious-looking Charlie, who says nothing about it. Upon the family's return home, during a shot of the interior of the home seconds before the family

walks inside, a shuffling is heard coming from an offscreen space within the house, and dried footprints around the foyer of the home are observed by Steve, but quickly dismissed.

Indeed, immediately following the scene of Peter completely ignoring the lessons of Sophocles' "The Women of Trachis", Annie is seen adding detail to a miniature laptop that, in another instance of *mise en abyme*, reflects the actual laptop she is using to look up how the dead communicate with the living. Annie making a miniature representation of what she is currently doing is visually disorienting, but, in addition to depicting another instance of Annie's compulsive and futile attempts to control her reality and sublimate uncanny events (the vision/hallucination of her mother in the workshop), these instances are characterized by the repetition compulsion associated with post traumatic symptoms. Similarly, in the very next shot, Annie notices that the door to her mother's room is inexplicably open, and a large triangle is seen drawn on the floor. Annie makes nothing of the enigmatic symbol nor the open door; her solution to these discrepancies, similar to that of Mrs. Johnson, is to suppress disconcerting signs that something is terribly wrong. Annie asks Steve to lock the door to Ellen's room, an instance of suppression, and justifies the anomaly by referencing her tendency to sleepwalk at night. Peter then enters the frame, telling Steve that the cemetery is on the phone for him. The viewer cannot hear what is being said to Steve, only his responses, again inviting the viewer to speculate. Steve asks the person on the other line, "what does that mean, desecrated?" suggesting that the call is to inform him that Ellen's gravesite has been disturbed. Annie then asks Steve about the call, but he tells her that it was "just some billing crap" (18:15-18:45). Whether Steve lies to Annie to protect her from disturbing information is an ancillary concern; the function of the lie is more importantly an act of suppression by Steve himself to keep the ominous signs a secret. Just as the

characters of “The Women of Trachis” fail to see the signs of fate presented to them throughout the play, so too does each member of the Graham family.

A trend of compulsive rationalization and denial emerges in *Hereditary,* exhibited by both Annie and Steve through their respective lines of work, which speaks to the many ways in which survivors of trauma and their children enact idiosyncratic means of distraction from the directly experienced past or repression of inherited memories. In her article, Harris discusses specific parenting styles that directly influence the manner in which children confront generational losses and mediate the traumatic experiences of their parents. She introduces a parenting style wherein parents intentionally withhold information from children regarding their personal experience of traumatic historical events in a protective effort referred to as “conspiracies of silence” (11). There are many phrases used to describe the genre of *Hereditary*, including a family drama, but it seems particularly apt that Aster has also described it as “a conspiracy movie without exposition, told from the perspective of the people being conspired against.” Based on the language used to describe Ellen Leigh (secretive, private) and other crucial narrative events, it is clear that Annie has been subjected to one such conspiracy, but nevertheless retains a sense of loyalty to her secretive mother, in other words enacting what Harris calls “a silent pact with the parents to keep the past a secret.” Sadly, this pact bars both Annie and the rest of her family from understanding the source of the bizarre and supernatural events that haunt and threaten to destroy them completely. A scene in *Hereditary* that is illustrative of the consequences of trauma survivors’ “conspiracies of silence” on the second generation occurs only hours after the funeral of Annie’s mother. Before going to bed, Annie stops to examine boxes full of her mother’s belongings, one of which contains a scrapbook entitled “memories” that she flips through reluctantly before picking up another book entitled

"Notes on Spiritualism." Upon opening the cover, she finds an old note written by her mother that reads "Forgive me all the things I could not tell you. Please don't hate me and try not to despair your losses. You will see in the end that they were worth it. Our sacrifice will pale next to the rewards" (12:33). The performance of Toni Collette, playing the character of Annie, is able to communicate through facial expression feelings of revulsion, disgust, and fear as she shakes her head in frustration before promptly shutting the book, returning it to its box, and pushing it away. While this exact moment is not included in Aster's original screenplay, this scene in the film is marked by an anxious uncertainty that is simultaneously invoked in the viewer, who at this point is as bewildered and disturbed by the note as is Annie, and might be just as tempted to dismiss the enigmatic note as the mere rambling of an old person suffering from dementia and dissociative identity disorder, a crucial piece of information that the audience will learn ten minutes after this scene. This participatory dynamic created by Aster's fragmentation of expositional information renders the audience just as helpless as the Graham family in figuring out exactly what is going on and what the constant appearance of cryptic symbols and phrases seen throughout the film truly means. Harris mirrors several other trauma scholars in characterizing trauma's effects on the subject's relation between past and present, saying, "from the purview of the survivor, the past is seemingly never past, but cohabits with the present and determines the future" (22). In the context of the film, this notion is materialized through the cult of Paimon, who not only physically bring Ellen Leigh's corpse back to Annie's home after desecrating her grave, hiding her in the attic to complete their rituals, but also appear to orchestrate every unfortunate event that befalls the Graham family as if they have been entirely predetermined by a supernatural power.

Hereditary creates a mockery of free will that the Graham family struggles helplessly to understand and resist, which reflects the very nature of intergenerational trauma's effects on the second generation of a family which has been denied all knowledge of the past. The unconventional framing of the film is disturbingly evocative of the utter helplessness with which both survivors of trauma and their descendants attempt to work through the past. The visual discordance established by Aster's use of unconventional framing situates the perspective of the viewer as level with the characters, or on the inside looking out, with a limited understanding, at first, of its purpose. The viewer soon learns that Annie is a professional miniaturist and is frequently seen with a small paintbrush, adding meticulous detail to her projects. In addition to Annie's art functioning as a futile attempt to control and compulsively reconstruct moments from the past, what historian Dominick LaCapra would recognize as a form of "acting out," the extremely detailed miniatures lend themselves to the growing suspicion that there exists a much greater, and perhaps incorporeal, miniaturist at work manipulating the fate of the Graham family. Slavoj Žižek in *Looking Awry* describes this being as "the Other of the Other". Žižek, discussing Isaac Asimov's short story "Jokester," introduces the concept of "the Other of the Other" as a key ingredient in creating a "paranoid" story, where there is "the implication of the existence of a hidden subject who pulls the strings of a great Other (the symbolic order). The existence of this Other of the Other is for Žižek a means of staving off the feeling of nothingness that bleeds from the barrier between the real and reality. Madness, according to Žižek, "sets in when this barrier is torn down, when the real overflows reality" (Žižek 20). The Real in *Hereditary* takes the form of trauma itself, overflowing the barrier of reality and inducing a paranoid construction, where our thoughts and actions are not our own, but subject to the blind will of a hidden Other.

The Other of the Other can be seen as a kind of cosmic puppeteer; in the context of *Hereditary*, this puppeteer is King Paimon, and though he is never shown except in the possessed body, his will is carried out by his loyal followers. In *Hereditary,* human agency and free will are mere illusions; the struggles of Annie and the rest of her family against their fate, sealed by Ellen, are utterly futile. Thomas Ligotti in *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race* discusses the ability of supernatural horror to give expression to pessimistic renderings of human agency. Ligotti uses E.T.A. Hoffman's "The Sandman" to articulate his thoughts on the horrors of human existence:

> There are many abominable fates in horror stories, and among them is that of Nathaniel. Worse still is when a human being becomes objectified as a puppet, a doll, or some other caricature of our species and enters a world that he or she thought was just a creepy little place inside of ours. What a jolt to find oneself a prisoner in this sinister sphere, reduced to a composite mechanism looking out on the land of the human, or one which we believe to be human…and be exiled from it. (198)

Hoffman's "The Sandman," in addition to intimating the dread associated with the emergent suspicion that one's thoughts and actions are not one's own, is also relevant to my discussion of *Hereditary* in its relation to *mise en abyme* and the uncanny as formulated by Freud in 1919. Freud posits that the uncanny "belongs to all that is terrible- to all that arouses dread and creeping horror" (1). The German word, "unheimlich," roughly translates to "unhomely," designating a particular kind of fear that arises when something foreign or unknown is added to what is known and familiar. One means of invoking the uncanny when telling a story is to imbue the reader or viewer with a certain sense of doubt regarding whether or not a character is actually human or an automaton, animate or inanimate. Freud introduces Hoffman's story of "The Sandman" to comment on the uncanny nature of Olympia, who, while only a doll, appears to be convincingly human to the story's protagonist, Nathaniel.

Nathaniel is beset by troubling memories from his childhood, specifically an instance where he hid himself in his father's study during one of the Sandman's visits to get a look at him. Prior to this episode, however, Nathaniel's nurse tells him the story of the Sandman, an evil man who comes to punish children who refuse to go to bed by pouring sand over their eyes, making them jump out of their skull. The Sandman then takes the eyes of defiant children back to his home on the moon to feed his eldritch children. When Nathaniel gives himself away in his father's study, he is seized by the Sandman, now recognized to be a repulsive man named Coppelius, who threatens to burn his eyes out of his skull with hot coals. Nathaniel's father talks Coppelius down, but a year later is mysteriously killed by an explosion following another visit from the mysterious man. Freud expresses uncertainty regarding the reliability of Nathaniel's memory and unwittingly calls attention to the ways in which memories of traumatic events can become distorted or altered. Years later, Nathaniel encounters an Italian optician named Coppola, who offers him "fine eyes, beautiful eyes," which are only spectacles through which Nathaniel sees the beautiful Olympia across the street. In another bout of delirium that ensues after Nathaniel is told that the eyes of the inanimate Olympia were stolen from him, he regains sanity for a time and intends to marry a woman named Clara. Atop a high tower with her, looking at the town square, Nathaniel looks through the spectacles given to him by Coppola and sees a familiar figure walking through the crowd below. The sight of the familiar figure induces another fit of madness in Nathaniel, who tries to throw Clara from the tower. Clara is saved by her brother, but Nathaniel, who now recognizes the figure as Coppelius, the Sandman from his childhood, immediately jumps to his death, and Coppelius disappears.

Freud relates to Hoffman's story the feeling of helplessness felt in dreams, where we cannot exert our will or consciously decide a course of events. It is this "factor of involuntary

repetition which surrounds with an uncanny atmosphere what would otherwise be innocent enough, and forces upon us the idea of something fateful and unescapable" which we feel in dreams where we are continually returned to memories and places against our will. Freud's idea of the uncanny is significantly resonant with the aesthetic qualities of *Hereditary*. Indeed, in an interview in 2018, Aster mentions this specific Freudian concept in discussing his personal fears, saying: "Even if you go back to Freud's essay on the uncanny…he says that horror is when the home becomes un-homelike, *unheimlich.* And that was something I was thinking about a lot in this film" (Aster 2018). In addition to the involuntary repetition characteristic of the uncanny, *Hereditary* renders the family home of the Grahams as almost alien by the end of the film. Aster goes on to say "I wanted to make a home that became something malign and unrecognizable by the end. And that's where the miniatures come in as well. It's a replica of the real thing. It is the thing, but it isn't the thing. That is your mother, but it's not your mother" (Aster 2018). Here Aster clearly expresses an interest in the uncanny effect of doubling, which is present throughout *Hereditary*. In addition to the ubiquitous miniatures, doubling occurs with the characters themselves as they become possessed by Paimon, reinforcing the idea of human beings as uncanny puppets of an uncaring fate.

Each member of the Graham family, with the exception of Steve, is at some point possessed by Paimon. Annie's family history is revealed in bits and pieces, but the viewer learns critical information during her visit to a grief counseling support group. As Annie enters the gymnasium where the meeting is held, the viewer can faintly hear a man translating for a woman speaking in Spanish, who is telling the group of her loss. In the screenplay, the translated dialogue of this woman reads, "Sometimes I even get so relieved…because he was in so much pain, and by the end he just hated himself. Always saying "I'm a burden, I'm a burden, I'm a

burden." Oddly, the last thing this woman says is not included in the screenplay but can be heard in the film, as "But yes, he was a burden" (19:31). Just as Aster hides his most pessimistic social commentary in *The Johnsons*, he hides this taboo sentiment here in barely audible dialogue. It is significant that the unnamed woman speaking actually admits that her dying loved one *was* in fact a burden to her. This is an extremely taboo thing to say about the dying, but this dialogue expresses one kernel of truth which was repeated earlier in the discussion of "The Women of Trachis": that no man is considered fortunate until he is dead, that death is sometimes the best thing for a suffering person. Annie joins the group and reluctantly begins to share; she tells the group that her mom died a week ago, and that she "has a lot of resistance to things like this, but I went to these a couple years ago—I was pressured to come—but it did help…" Annie revealing that she came to grief counseling a couple years ago suggests that she lost another loved one, but the viewer is unaware who she lost. The first shot of the film, which features Ellen Leigh's obituary, does indeed include a reference to the passing of a Charles Leigh, but nearly twenty minutes later, this information resurfaces with uncanny force. Annie takes a pause before saying:

> My mom was old and she wasn't all together there at the end- and we were pretty much estranged before that- so it wasn't a huge blow. But I *did* love her. And she didn't have an easy life…She had D.I.D., which became extreme in the last year, and dementia…My dad died of starvation when I was a baby. He had psychotic depression and he starved himself. Which I'm sure was as pleasant as it sounds. And then my older brother- he was schizophrenic- and when he was sixteen, he hanged himself in my mom's bedroom. Of courses his suicide note blamed her. Accusing her of putting people inside of him.

The narrative information learned from this scene is directly significant not only to the hereditary transmission of mental illness and trauma, but also to Aster's inversion of metaphor. As mentioned previously, whereas many horror films deploy the supernatural as a metaphor for mental illness, Aster situates mental illness up front as a metaphor for the supernatural,

specifically as metaphor for demonic possession. Dissociative identity disorder, dementia, psychotic depression, and schizophrenia can all be psychological responses unconsciously enacted to repress trauma. These conditions can also produce trauma of their own in suicide. It is often the case that a vicious cycle is created in families with histories of mental illness and trauma, where one begets the other in perpetuity. In this scene, the causal chain of events is unclear. However, the results of such a cycle are the same; in each case, Annie's relatives commit suicide rather than continue suffering in excruciating psychological pain. One possible reading of Annie's family history would hold Ellen as directly responsible for the deaths of Charles and Annie's father, in attempting to conjure King Paimon and complete the possession ritual, but the viewer is unable to propose such an interpretation with certainty until the conclusion of the film. If this reading has validity, it seems that Ellen and the cult of Paimon have been attempting this possession ritual for some time, first with Ellen's husband and, after the ritual fails with his suicide, her son Charles, who also kills himself before the ritual is completed. Dissociative identity disorder, formerly known as multiple personality disorder, entails the presence of two or more split identities within a single subject, or "alters" who might have a completely distinct personality, race, and sex. This condition, then, is an apt metaphor for a case of demonic possession, where the subject is inhabited by the identity of an Other who exerts influence in their thoughts and behavior. Similarly, psychological symptoms of dementia, psychotic depression, and schizophrenia include hallucination, depression, and paranoia. Annie's family history alerts the viewer to the reality of genealogical inheritance of mental illness and trauma, which, for many, might be more horrifying than any demon. It certainly seems that for Annie, the loss of her mother, father, and brother could be explained away by mental illness, but Aster does not allow for this possibility. It is in these scenes that *Hereditary* begins to appear

more and more as a trauma narrative, rather than a horror film. It is also in scenes like this one where Annie comes to be seen as completely helpless, a puppet in an unseen and unknown conspiracy that will inexorably end in her death.

Ligotti habitually characterizes human beings as mere puppets, controlled by entities and forces beyond our comprehension, as we try desperately to distract ourselves from the feeling that we are not in control of our destiny, that we will eventually cease to exist. In other words, human beings deploy various mechanisms, such as repression and sublimation, which keep us from confronting the Real, but these mechanisms sometimes fail, especially in the wake of trauma. Ligotti argues, however, that "the major part of our species seems able to undergo any trauma without significantly reexamining its household mantras, including 'everything happens for a reason' and any other adage that gets people to keep their chins up" (Ligotti 26). One of the primary purposes of *Hereditary* that I argue is also its most ethical quality is to force the viewer to reevaluate such household mantras, to infect the viewer with a deep sense of doubt and existential dread that cannot be ameliorated by any reassuring doctrine. *Hereditary* shows us that things *do not* always happen for a reason, or at least a reason that we are able to identify or comprehend, it shows us that things *do not* always get better but can become unimaginably worse.

Indeed, in *Hereditary* narrative events do not move in the direction of salvation or redemption for the main characters. Instead of following a traditional narrative arc, with exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution, otherwise adumbrating a bell curve, the narrative trajectory of *Hereditary* trends downward along a gradual slope. Aster represents this downward path during Charlie's funeral: the camera showing a modestly attended funeral begins to move downward, below the earth and into its depths as the screen fades to

black. While this moment is also intended to signify the Graham family's descent into hell, it is also illustrative of downward narrative movement as well. Additionally, Charlie's funeral serves as a stark contrast to Ellen's at the start of the film. The Graham family is largely unaffected by the death of Ellen, and during the funeral display reticent, reserved responses. Charlie is seen scrawling in her notepad sketches of her mother at the podium and Ellen's body in the casket, demonstrating a similar mechanism for control and mastery that her mother does with her miniatures, but does not show signs of emotional distress until later that night in a belated response. Annie's respective responses to the death of her mother and the death of her child lend insight into the problematic nature of Caruthian models of trauma discussed above, which tend to categorize experiences of events as either totally integrated and non-traumatic or not at all integrated and traumatic. The loss of Charlie is significantly more damaging to Annie than the loss of her mother, although one could argue that the two are correlated in an unseen causal chain of events led by the cult of Paimon. Evidence for this claim is presented in the emotionally visceral response of Annie upon learning that her daughter has been beheaded.

It is curious and perhaps telling to note that many scholars and critics writing about *Hereditary* identify two scenes devoid of supernatural content or horror tropes as the most terrifying and impactful.[16] One of these scenes immediately follows Charlie's death: Annie is seen prostrate on the floor of her room, writhing in the unbearable grief and pain of losing a child. She repetitiously cries in bereavement that she "just wants to die," that she "needs to die" as Peter stands just outside of her room, listening without being able to do anything to assuage her pain. This scene is terribly moving; it is an irruption of the death drive, the wish to die that resounds in the wake of traumatic loss, the wish to be with one's intimates in death. The viewer

[16] See Leslie Jamison's short essay "Love and Terror" which identifies one such scene.

hears and sees the impact of trauma and loss on a mother and on a family and empathizes, sharing in the deeply negative affect. Perhaps this horribly unsettling, disarming portrayal of post traumatic symptoms, which includes the irruption of the death drive, resonates so deeply with viewers because we all will come to experience the loss of loved ones. This emotionally raw performance by Toni Collette breaches the psyche of the viewer without any mediation by the elements of the supernatural or generic tropes; the symbolic falls away in these moments when human beings are seen in throes of immense suffering wrought by existential horrors of modern life. Another scene frequently pointed out by critics as *Hereditary*'s most horrifying moment occurs not long after the aforementioned. In a dinner scene that bears clear traces of the one discussed in *The Strange Thing About the Johnsons,* another irruption of the traumatic Real ensues.

Slavoj Žižek in *Looking Awry* tells of a play by John B. Priestley, *The Dangerous Corner,* about a well-off family seated around a dinner table as its members return from a hunt. A resounding gunshot is suddenly heard in the background of the family's conversation, altering its course dramatically. The initial gunshot in the play serves as the impetus for an irruption of the traumatic real: "Long-repressed family secrets erupt, and finally, the head of the family that insisted on clarifying things, on bringing all secrets to the light of day retires, broken, to the first floor of the house and shoots himself." The gunshot signifying the father's suicide, however, is superimposed on the one heard at the start of the play, before the "dangerous turn" of conversation takes place. The family's conversation then remains on the level of "superficial chatter…the traumas remain buried and the family is happily reunited for the idyllic dinner" (Žižek 17). Žižek uses Priestley's play to emphasize the fragility of everyday reality and the sudden and forceful way trauma can erupt. *Hereditary*'s dinner scene takes place between the

two shots of *The Dangerous Corner*, where trauma shatters the illusion sustained by an idyllic family dinner. If we recall Aster's original conception of the dinner scene in *The Johnsons,* where the conversation remained superficial and trauma remained repressed, a parallel can be seen between the second sequence of *The Dangerous Corner*: Aster's initial exploration of the fragility of the boundary separating the traumatic Real from symbolically mediated, artificial reality in *The Johnsons* is pessimistically realized in *Hereditary,* as trauma breaks through and the Real of desire is articulated. As Annie, Steve, and Peter sit around the dinner table, the presence of Charlie's absence becomes exigent. It is this space between two shots, between two awakenings, that the Real of our desire, murderous and suicidal, can be confronted and expressed.

There is one particular scene in *Hereditary*, written about far less often than the ones above, that I argue is Aster's most viscerally impactful representation of traumatic and post-traumatic experience. After Peter realizes that Charlie is having a severe allergic reaction at the "school barbeque thing" and begins to speed her to a hospital, the pacing of the film increases steadily. Charlie struggles to breathe in the backseat, holding her throat while she gasps for air. Peter reassures her that everything is going to be okay, accelerating the car more and more, from 60, to 65, to 70, to 75 mph. Anxiety and fear in the viewer abounds in this sequence, who is forced to watch Charlie slowly suffocate as Peter tries desperately to save her. This scene is also devoid of anything supernatural, instead focusing on a realistic crisis unfolding between brother and sister. Without the overt presence of generic tropes that would allow the viewer to desist from their emotional attachments to the characters, this scene becomes considerably more intense. When the deer carcass suddenly appears in the road, forcing Peter to swerve, the telephone pole seen before, with the easily missed sigil of Paimon inscribed on it, collides with

Charlie at blurring speed as she leans out of the window in an attempt to get air. Žižek in *Looking Awry* discusses the cinematic technique of "rendu" delimited by Michel Chion, as one means of rendering reality in film. This sound technique is used to reproduce "original" or "natural" pre-discursive sounds, in other words rendering the Lacanian Real in audible form. The sound of Charlie's beheading is one such example of auditory rendu, producing a sound "that would otherwise be missed if we were to find ourselves in the 'reality' recorded by the film," and which "seizes us on an immediate-real level" as the sound of death (Žižek 40). In addition, Peter's behavior following this traumatic event demonstrate several symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

This original, impossible sound is then immediately drowned out by the screeching of tires as Peter slams on the brakes. A placid silence ensues as the car comes to a halt within the impenetrable darkness of night and Peter is seen staring wide-eyed, in a daze, his hands still clutching the steering wheel, letting out short, terse breathes, as if he himself is having trouble breathing. The body registers traumatic impact, even if the mind cannot. Here, Peter's eyes are filled with tears that do not fall, his posture is extremely rigid, we follow his eyes as they drift up to the rearview mirror where Charlie's headless body can be seen, but they quickly dart back down. In the screenplay, Peter tilts the mirror up, so Charlie's body cannot be seen. Peter has entered a dissociative state, a psychic defense mechanism that removes him from the current, unbearable reality. He lets his foot slowly come off of the brake, and the car begins to roll forward reluctantly, breaking the deafening silence. Aster's framing of this scene in combination with a compelling performance by Alex Wolf makes it clear that Peter is in a traumatized state. Peter arrives home later that night, leaving Charlie's headless corpse in the backseat of the car. The one light on outside when he gets back goes out after he shuffles inside, leaving the home in

total darkness. The last light of the Graham home is extinguished upon the loss of Charlie, symbolizing a descent into total despair soon to come. As Peter goes up to his room, we hear from an off-screen space the voices of Steve and Annie, who express relief that "they" are home. The viewer, especially a parent, might feel emotionally riven in this scene; every parent at some point or another has likely felt worried and anxious regarding their children's safety as they become independent and can no longer be directly protected at all times. It is especially crushing in this moment to hear Steve and Annie's relief because the viewer in this rare moment knows something that they do not.

Peter goes up to his room and climbs into bed without saying a word to his parents. A long take centers on Peter's face as night turns to morning; his eyes look lifeless, as if they are sealed open. The camera stays close to Peter's face as we hear from an offscreen space the voice of Annie telling Steve she is going out to the store, which the viewer knows will entail a traumatic event in discovering Charlie's corpse. Peter's blank facial expression remains constant as a bloodcurdling scream resounds from outside. His body tenses up when he hears his mother's cries, but he continues to stare blankly into the camera, indicating that he is still in a dissociated state, unable to respond to stimuli or allow for emotional realization. The film then cuts to a shot of Charlie's decapitated head, still in the road, completely disfigured and crawling with ants. This is a revolting image on which Aster keeps the camera for an entire ten seconds as Annie continues to let out ghastly screams in the background. Aster intentionally subjects the viewer to this horrible image to reinforce an emotional connection to Annie; we are directly seeing the source of her traumatization and are not spared the reality of Charlie's gruesome death. After Charlie's funeral, a shot looking through stained glass at a reception in the Graham home performatively represents traumatized subjectivity as distorted and unclear. Peter is figuratively

and literally situated behind this stained glass, a barrier between himself and reality characteristic of dissociation. Further, the dissociative state is rendered auditorily as well, we hear low, indiscernible voices and whispers as guests converse at the reception as Peter looks out from behind the glass. A quick cut also shows Annie bed-ridden, still dressed in black funeral attire, indicating her depressive state. After the guests leave, Steve goes upstairs to find Annie gone, but a close-up shows another cryptic word scrawled on the wall which reads "zazas." This shot enacts continuity with the strange word seen before, "satony," written on the wall in Charlie's room. There is no explanation that connects the two, however, and the viewer is again left to speculate their meaning in connection to narrative events, if any exists.

The ensuing sequence speaks to one of Aster's pessimistic themes concerning the effects of trauma and loss on the family. Whereas in many Hollywood-style films, both horror and otherwise, the loss of a loved one often functions to strengthen familial bonds and generally bring people closer together, in *Hereditary* the trauma of the sudden loss of Charlie functions to push an already dysfunctional family even further apart. Each member is shown to be alone: Annie sleeps in the treehouse, flanked on both sides by two red space heaters that give the shot a diabolic feel, Peter tries to sleep in his room, and Steve is seen going through Charlie's old drawing pad, looking at images of crowned birds and animals before the pages go blank. A now familiar image of Peter's lifeless eyes is superimposed onto an image of the treehouse, gradually transitioning to a scene of Peter in class. Peter looks extremely disheveled, wrought by trauma, and unable to engage with reality. The voice of his teacher sounds as though it is travelling through a thick fog, dulled and distant. Aster in the screenplay describes the voice of Peter's teacher as "distant and vague, as if heard from under-water" and Peter's eyes as "busy with nagging, obsessive thoughts" (Aster 55). A flashback is then seen in the form of a visual

hallucination, one of the many ways that a traumatic event is experienced and acted out in survivors and victims. The flashback is woven into the space of the classroom as Peter looks up to his right to see a rearview mirror reflecting Charlie's headless body in the backseat. This moment represents how memories of a traumatic event resurface in sporadic and unsettling ways that return the subject to the site of the trauma against their will. Also represented by this intrusive vision is Peter's inability to live in the present moment, a prominent symptom of PTSD where the past cohabits with the present, temporally disjointing the subject. In the next scene where Peter is smoking weed with his friends under school bleachers, Aster represents another form of involuntary repetition that demonstrates how trauma is indelibly inscribed onto both the mind and body of victims. After taking a hit, Peter begins to have trouble breathing, he says that he "feels like his throat is getting bigger" which is precisely what Charlie told Peter at the party after eating a piece of cake that triggered her allergic reaction. Peter is again returned to the traumatic event, this time on a bodily level, where he physically experiences the respiratory symptoms of Charlie's reaction. In a later scene where Peter is trying to sleep, he is suddenly awoken by the barely audible but unmistakable sound of someone clicking their tongue. Whether Peter is experiencing an auditory hallucination or truly in the presence of Charlie's spirit is left ambiguous, but here the haunting nature of trauma is materialized within the diegetic sound of the film. These scenes represent in viscerally disturbing detail how the survivor can be "possessed" by past trauma in mental and physical flashbacks symptomatic of PTSD.

Aster's pessimistic depiction of trauma and its effects on familial relationships has no redemptive or redeeming qualities; trauma is rendered as a pure blow, a force that shatters subjectivity and returns belatedly to haunt and possess the subject in horrifying visions and feelings. This form of representation directly supports the Caruthian model of trauma,

emphasizing human vulnerability and diminishing any form of resilience. When Peter returns home from school that night, he hesitates outside of the house, shaking and bracing himself as if he were about to be attacked. There is something particularly disarming about this shot of Peter, who the viewer knows is suffering from PTSD, struggling to bring himself to enter his own home, which perhaps is beginning to feel increasingly *unheimlich* to him. If the family home is becoming increasingly unhomelike to Peter, it is also becoming so for Annie, who sits in the dark of a car in the driveway, waiting for him to go inside. There is a palpable hostility between mother and son here that has become exacerbated by trauma, for as soon as Peter goes into the house, Annie leaves to go to another grief counseling session. Only, as she pulls up to the now familiar gymnasium, she hesitates like Peter does outside of the house, and begins to change her mind. Before she does, though, a woman flags her down.

In representing traumatic and post-traumatic experience, *Hereditary*'s markedly pessimistic stance that emphasizes human fragility can be elaborated further by Hannah Meretoja's notion of "narrative imagination." Meretoja holds that narrative imagination is "our ability to navigate our narrative environments and find our own ways of narrating our experiences" (32). Narrative imagination for the self can be one's ability to imagine their lives as different from current circumstances, or the ability to imagine a meaningful future for one's self. Trauma can significantly diminish one's narrative imagination to an extent where one is incapable of foreseeing a better life ahead, where the future becomes completely foreclosed of possibility. Trauma may render passive our sense of living in the world, where things and events simply happen to us rather than being a product of active will and agency. The concept of narrative imagination is also important for other people attempting to listen and respond to the trauma of another person. There is a clearly ethical connotation to narrative imagination that

relates to Caruth's notion of listening to the voice that cries from the wound, but seldom do trauma theorists consider this dynamic of listening from a pessimistic perspective, where narrative imagination can be exploited to manipulative ends. *Hereditary* demonstrates such a perspective on narrative imagination, with respect to both the self and the listening Other. The ability for Peter, Annie, and Steve to imagine a better future for themselves at this point is considerably diminished. And to compound this problem, the trauma they have experienced with the loss of Charlie estranges them further from one another, which makes sharing and empathically listening to each other equally difficult. Aster's most cruel rendering of narrative imagination, however, concerns its manipulative potential.

The person who flags Annie down as she attempts to leave the grief counselling meeting is a woman named Joan, who by all accounts appears to be a kind-hearted, empathic person. Joan tells Annie that she recognized her from the previous meeting and asks her if she is doing better following the loss of her mother. Annie reveals the loss of her daughter as her reason for coming, and Joan sympathetically offers her condolences. As Annie attempts to disengage from the conversation and leave, however, Joan abruptly states, "my son died" and asks, "how old was yours?" establishing a seemingly genuine connection through narrative imagination and similar experience. Annie tells Joan that Charlie was only thirteen, and Joan tells Annie that both her son and grandson drowned four months prior, and that the youngest was only seven years old. Joan then tells Annie that she has attended these grief counselling sessions for the last two months, and while "they don't make it any easier" they sometimes "make it feel less lonely" and gives Annie her contact information (46:38). Aster frames this meeting as a product of chance, one ostensibly positive narrative development in a relentless chain of trauma and loss. Unfortunately, this seemingly warm moment where narrative imagination allows for an empathic connection

between two people who have both lost children of their own is purely deceptive. In the diegetic world of *Hereditary* it quickly becomes apparent nothing happens to the Graham family by random chance, and that every narrative event is specifically orchestrated toward the completion of the cult's possession ritual.

Indeed, the very next day, a leaflet inviting people to an open séance is pushed through the mail slot of the Graham house as Annie is seen working on a miniature construction of Charlie's room which includes the cryptic word "satony" written on her wall. As Annie reaches for a small bottle of paint in her workshop, she happens to knock another one over, spilling paint onto a piece of paper where Joan's contact information is written. Just like the barely audible clicks that keep Peter awake at night, the barely visible ornate sigil on the telephone pole, and the seemingly chance encounter of meeting Joan, this is another instance of Aster's sleight of hand. If one replays this moment in slow motion, it is undeniable that the bottle of paint falls completely by itself, not because Annie knocks it over. It makes sense, then, considering the diegetic law in the film where narrative events do not happen by chance, only by the illusion of chance, that this apparent accident will prompt Annie to visit Joan's apartment later that day. As Annie knocks on Joan's door, another false coincidence occurs. Joan's embroidered welcome mat bears extremely close resemblance to those that Annie's mother used to make, but Joan dismisses this observation as a "funny" coincidence. Annie is then seen attempting to narrate the traumatic experience of discovering Charlie's headless body, struggling to find language to describe her feelings. This moment depicts the condition of Alexithymia, a post-traumatic symptom where the survivor struggles to attach language to feelings, and to the limited ability of trauma narratives themselves to adequately bind and nullify post-traumatic symptoms. As Annie becomes increasingly emotional in her retelling, Joan remains stoic and reserved, her complexion

cold and stern, as she suddenly inquires about Annie's relationship with her son. Joan seems far more interested in learning about Peter than she is in hearing about Annie's traumatic loss for reasons that will soon become clear.

A crucial piece of narrative information is revealed during Annie's conversation with Joan that lends insight into the strained relationship between Annie and her children. Annie reveals to Joan that when Peter and Charlie were much younger and slept in the same room, she woke up one night to find both of them and herself covered in paint thinner with a box of matches in her hand. Annie awoke to the sound of a match being struck, which was quickly put out before anyone was hurt. However, this memory is resonant with Žižek's reading of Lacan in the notion that only in our unconscious, in dreams, can we articulate the Real of our desire, which, in this case is the full expression of the death drive.[17] Again, however, we must note the ambiguity with which Aster frames traumatic events. Annie's near suicide-infanticide could be explained by the hereditary mental illness that runs in her family which claimed the lives of her father and older brother. In other words, this could be an instance of Annie subconsciously acting-out the traumatic loss of her relatives. On the other hand, though, this event could be an unconscious attempt to exorcise, both literally and figuratively, the demonic curse inherited from Ellen. By killing herself and her children, Annie would render the possession ritual intended by the cult of Paimon untenable, the judgment being that it would be better to die than to be complicit, even on a subconscious level, in the schemes of Ellen and the cult. Regardless, this event is registered as traumatic to both Annie and Peter, though not homogenously. Based on Annie's recollection of the event, it seems that she has rationalized it as merely sleepwalking, explicable only as inexplicable. In contrast, she notes that Peter continues to hold the episode

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[17] See Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 74-76.

against her, convinced that she was intentionally trying to kill him, and this places an irrevocable mark on their relationship.

After Annie relays this event to a nonplussed Joan, a cut takes us back to the Graham house, where we see Steve's relationship with Annie begin to unravel. Steve walks in on Annie working on a miniature reconstruction of Charlie's death, which might not be a surprise considering her repetitious, compulsive tendency to revisit disturbing and traumatic events in her art. This is undoubtedly an unhealthy coping mechanism, however, and does not seem to actually benefit Annie in working through traumatic and emotionally fraught events. Indeed, Annie's miniatures are compulsive reconstructions of the past that do not bind or help her abreact the excesses associated with traumatic events. On the contrary, the miniatures become monuments to the past that only serve to invite morbid recollection and discomfort. Because Annie conflates personal loss with historical absence, which LaCapra warns can be conducive to endless melancholy and an inability to work through the past, she renders herself incapable of recognizing the losses of Ellen, Charlie, Charles, and her father as specific to her and located in the definite past. Instead, these losses are construed as historical absences, unspecific to anyone or anything, and as a result, continue to resurface with traumatic force. The longer the Graham family chooses to ignore the past or keep it repressed, the stronger the return.

The following scene, the aforementioned family dinner, demonstrates the debilitating consequences of repressed trauma that can wound a family beyond repair. This dinner scene also emphasizes how the subject positions of victim and perpetrator can become conflated and unstable in the wake of a traumatic event. There is a mounting tension between Annie and Peter, communicated through mannerisms and subtle facial expressions, which culminates in a heated verbal altercation between them. Peter urges Annie to express whatever is clearly weighing on

her mind, telling her to "release" herself, to which she responds, "release you, you mean." Peter then curses at his mother, something Alex Wolf reportedly found very cathartic, in response to which Annie vehemently chastises him before going into an emotional tirade, transcribed from the screenplay below:

> I've given *everything* to you! All I ever DO is worry and slave and defend you, and all I get back is that fucking face on your face! So full of disdain and resentment and always so annoyed. Well now your sister is dead! And I *know* you miss her and I *know* it was an "accident" and I *know* you're in pain- and I wish I could take it all away! I wish I could shield you from that you did what you did- but your sister is *dead*. She's gone forever. And what a *waste*. If it could've maybe brought us together-*something!*- if you could've just said "I'm sorry" or faced *up* to what happened: maybe *then* we could do something with this! But you can't take responsibility for anything, so now I can't accept, and I can't forgive. Because nobody admits what they've done!

While Annie is unconsciously transferring resentment of her mother onto Peter, her speech nonetheless speaks to the ways in which loss and trauma can become *too much* for any family to bear as well as one of the themes of "The Women of Trachis," namely, the relationship between knowledge and responsibility. But after hearing this, Peter begins to implicate his mother in Charlie's death, forcing her to go to the outing when she didn't want to, but Steve intervenes and ends the exchange before it can escalate further. The binary logic in Caruthian trauma theory that clearly differentiates between victim and perpetrator, as in the case of Tancred in Tasso's story, fails to take into account the many circumstances where one may be both or neither, as in the case of Peter.

The following day, Annie *happens* to run into Joan at an art supplies store where Joan ecstatically tells her of the "open séance" which the cult wanted Annie to attend. Joan then tells Annie that she successfully conjured the spirit of her dead grandson and invites her back to her apartment to prove it. Joan attempts to conjure her grandson, Louie, who she urges to make his

presence known by moving a glass on a table, which, much to the horror of Annie, "he" does. Joan does indeed conjure *something* that writes "I luv u grandma" on a chalkboard as Annie begins to break down in hysterics, stopping the séance. Before Annie leaves, visibly shaken, Joan gives her instructions on how to perform a séance herself, and tells her "You didn't kill her, Annie…she isn't gone" (1:06:00-1:07:42). During Annie's drive home, the sound of someone clicking their tongue comes from the backseat of the car, indicating Charlie's presence. Again, the viewer might hope that Peter and Annie are experiencing auditory hallucinations, but Aster will betray these suspicions in the third act of the film.

In the following sequence, Annie again confronts the Real of her desire, to murder her son and kill herself, in her unconscious. In her dreams, Annie articulates the taboo feelings and desires toward Peter that she previously censored during dinner. The series of dreams that follows is another example of *mise en abyme*, this time a dream within a dream, of which the viewer is given no discernable indication. Annie is seen tossing and turning in bed, unable to sleep, when she sees a large black ant crawling across her pillow. She then follows a thick stream of ants that lead her to Peter's room, only to find him in bed completely covered in them. Annie looks upon Peter in horror as ants are seen pouring out of his mouth and eyes, but this is only a nightmare, and Peter sits up, alive and well, telling Annie that she was sleepwalking. The viewer has no means of knowing if Annie is actually awake or still asleep at this point, and the diegetic reality of the film becomes increasingly unstable as it seamlessly alternates between dream states and waking life. A conversation between them ensures where Annie articulates the real of her desire. Annie tells Peter that "she never wanted to be (his) mother" immediately putting her hand to her mouth as if to stop herself from speaking. Annie explains that she was pressured by Ellen to become pregnant and give birth to Peter, and that she "tried to stop it" by having a

miscarriage. It is difficult to imagine a mother telling her son that he never should have been born, and Peter begins to cry hysterically "you tried to kill me!" at which point a match is struck, showing both of them covered in paint thinner. The waking event which roused Annie in the original occurrence of this event years prior, the sound of striking a match, is the same one which brings her to consciousness in this moment.

In *Looking Awry,* Žižek mentions the tendency of "classic cinema" to use the trope of 'it was only a dream!' to evade unhappy endings. In *Hereditary*, however, waking from a nightmare does not bring about any semblance of happiness or relief, as the reality into which Annie wakes is still nightmarish. Indeed, Žižek discusses a film, *Woman in the Window* by Fritz Lang, which follows a lonely psychology professor who takes a liking to a beautiful portrait of a woman near a club he frequents. During one of his visits to this club, the professor dozes off, and is awakened by an attendant at 11pm. The professor then passes by the beautiful portrait, only this time the women pictured comes to life, exiting the frame and asking the professor for a match. The professor falls in love with this woman, ends up murdering her lover in a fight, and later, upon learning that he will be arrested, commits suicide by drinking poison. However, much to his relief, the professor suddenly is awakened in his usual club by an attendant as the clock strikes 11pm—it was only a dream. Žižek argues that the message of the film can easily be construed according to classical Hollywood rules; on the one hand, the professor who wakes up from his dream could interpret its contents as a warning against falling in love with a beautiful woman, assured that in waking life he is a normal person and not a passionate killer. On the other hand, however, the events of the film suggest a much darker truth, "that in our unconscious, in the real of our desire, we are all murderers." Within the fantasy space of dreams, there is boundless freedom to do and say the things that are forbidden in reality, including telling your son that he

should never have been born. Annie's dream within a dream here bears connection to the Freudian dream of the burning child, where it can be argued that Annie wakes up in order to continue her dream of being a normal mother in a normal family, but Aster does not allow for such an interpretation. Annie's dream returns her to a traumatic event, where she is condemned to relive the horrific moment when she almost killed herself and her children. Her dreams allow her to express the fact that she did indeed try to kill Peter on more than on occasion, representing another resurgence of the death drive in her subconscious. Hence, when she wakes up, the reality of trauma persists—she is returned to a reality where she is not a normal mother in a normal family. Žižek contends that "it is precisely and only in dreams that we encounter the real of our desire…our common everyday reality, the reality of the social universe in which we assume our usual roles of kind-hearted, decent people, turns out to be an illusion that rests on a certain 'repression,' on overlooking the real of our desire" (Žižek 17). However, it is important to include that after finally waking up Annie immediately begins preparing a séance before rousing Peter, who was also having a nightmare, apologizing for what she said at dinner (and possibly in her sleep) and expressing her love for him. Annie *might* be manipulating Peter here, telling him she loves him so that he will participate in the séance, but this is only pessimistic speculation.

Annie brings Steve and Peter downstairs to conjure the spirit of Charlie despite their reluctance, demonstrating an extreme form of acting out and what LaCapra identifies as a kind of "traumatropism." Traumatropism is strictly defined as the modification in plants of an organ as a result of wounding; however, taken more generally, traumatropism may refer to alterations, sometimes significant, in human thinking and behavior as a result of trauma. Indeed, LaCapra notes:

> Perhaps the most poignant and disarming kind of traumatropism is that performed by victims who experience post-traumatic phenomena, such as recurrent nightmares, not as symptoms to be worked through but as bonds or memorial practices linking them to the haunting presence of dead intimates. (*Writing History* XXIV)

Annie's recurrent nightmares that return her to traumatic events enact this dynamic of traumatropism, which becomes materialized through the séance, for what form of traumatropism defined above could be more disarming than seeing a mother go to supernatural lengths to have her daughter back, even if it is only in spirit? The séance, regardless of its impetus in manipulation, is perhaps the ultimate form of a practice intended to link a victim to the literally haunting presence of dead intimates. As the séance proceeds, Charlie's spirit, or some other force, moves the glass on the table just as the spirit of Louie did in Joan's apartment. Peter looks to be in a state of shock upon seeing the glass move, visibly shaking and hyperventilating as Annie desperately entreats "Charlie" to make a drawing in her old notebook. Nothing manifests on the page, however. Instead, the glass suddenly flies off of the table, smashing into a wall, before the candle used for the séance suddenly spouts a burst of fire. As Steve looks under the table to find some means of rational explanation for the glass moving, Annie enters a trace state, emitting what sound like low-pitch growls before she comes to. The voice with which Annie begins to speak, however, is not her own, but recognizably Charlie's, who seems to be speaking from within Annie's body. The voice of Charlie, or, in Caruthian terms, the voice of the wound, cries in panic for her mother, and frantically asks why everyone is scared. It is clear that the spirit of Charlie is speaking through and otherwise inhabiting the subjectivity of Annie, a literalized depiction of Caruth's formulation of trauma. Peter, at this point, is completely hysterical, terrified and retraumatized by Annie's unwitting desire to conjure who she believes is Charlie in a particularly disarming form of acting out.

Annie is ‘woken’ out of the trance state, of which she has no recollection, by Steve, who throws a glass of water on her. Unfortunately, as will become glaringly apparent, the damage has already been unwittingly done. Peter’s hallucinations become more severe following the séance; he begins to see a ray of light dancing around his classroom, leading him to see a reflection of himself in glass, a double, that sneers at him as he suddenly hears Charlie’s click coming from an invisible source behind him. Peter calls his father from school in complete hysterics, convinced he has been threatened by some vengeful spirit, prompting Steve to tell Annie that “he has a son to protect,” an implicit threat in itself. Annie becomes enraged upon hearing this, continuing to deny the signs that something horrible is afoot. It is at this juncture, as Annie tries to focus on her work, that the voice of Ari Aster himself is heard, playing “Patrick”, one of Annie’s employers. Just as Aster appears in *The Johnsons* as the normative voice of naïve optimism, so too does he appear in *Hereditary*. Aster, playing Patrick from the Archer Gallery, says through voicemail that Annie and her family have been in their “constant thoughts and prayers” and other superficial lines of concern before getting to the point of the call: to passive aggressively remind Annie that she is on a deadline, and regardless of what she is going through, is expected to meet it. This causes Annie to erupt in a tantrum, destroying every miniature creation in her workshop.

Steve and Peter arrive home not long after and are greeted by the now unignorable stench of Ellen’s rotting corpse in the attic which will soon be discovered. Steve finds Annie in her workshop surrounded by the ruins of her miniatures. She explains that “she just got tired of looking at them” before a quick cut shows a miniature, still intact, of a headless Peter lying in bed, which Steve sees and chooses to ignore, instead deciding to take sleeping pills and remove himself from the developing situation. Later that night, Peter suffers from more traumatic nightmares, seeing a vision of Charlie in the corner of his room, her head falling off of her

shoulders before a pair of hands grabs his head in an attempt to pull it off. Annie then wakes him up, much to the horror of Peter, who immediately assumes that Annie was again trying to kill him. She tells Peter that she knows something is going on and that she is "the only one who can fix it," instilling a small bit of hope in the viewer, who at this point in the film is likely in desperate need of it. Annie intuitively knows that to stop the supernatural events occurring to her and her family, she must take Charlie's drawing pad, her 'link' to the dead that facilitated the séance and destroy it. Unfortunately, when Annie throws the drawing pad into the fireplace, she too catches fire, indicating that she is now inexorably linked to the pad, and to Charlie. The dynamic depicted here is resonant with respect to the ways in which survivor's guilt may become tied up with trauma to produce an inseverable link to one's dead intimates, where certain practices of working through, such as getting rid of a deceased loved one's belongings, is seen as an act of betrayal to the dead. Annie's spontaneous conflagration demonstrates this dynamic in literal terms, where in order to finally sever the link to the traumatic past, to condemn the acts of her mother, she must first condemn herself in the most severe of terms, which is precisely the same impasse that Mr. Johnson faced before his sudden death.

Day turns to night, and Annie, now beginning to realize what is happening to her family, goes to confront Joan about the unanticipated results of the séance. But Joan is nowhere to be found, and in a rare moment, the viewer is shown something that the characters are not: we see the interior of Joan's apartment seen earlier during the original seance, only now it is recognizably different. Inside, there are now ornate sigils and candles placed everywhere, dolls with the severed, crowned heads of pigeons similar to those which Charlie was seen constructing earlier in the film, and finally, surrounded by the odd dolls and candles, a picture of Peter with his eyes crossed out. The viewer is instantly betrayed in this scene, the first of many betrayals,

now realizing that Joan is not the empathetic, compassionate friend that she pretended to be earlier in the narrative. However, the viewer only sees enough to make a strained connection by virtue of the repetitious presence of the strange sigils and dolls, and still is completely unaware of the precise nature of the established link. This expository information only becomes narrative knowledge to a limited extent; the connection between the imagery in Joan's apartment and that seen throughout the film is left undefined and ambiguous, creating an aporia characteristic of inherited traumatic experience, especially of the second generation of traumatized parents, who, subjected to a conspiracy of silence, might be able to put together connections between their own experiences and those of their parents, but are nevertheless powerless to uncover crucial details. Indeed, the trauma and loss that Annie has unwittingly suffered at the hands of Ellen begin to come to light and impact Annie with belated force. She rushes home and immediately begins to rifle through the boxes containing her mother's belongings, a form of artifact mining that she could not bring herself to do earlier in the film.

Similarities and connections begin to increasingly arise as Annie realizes the extent to which she has been deceived. Joan's embroidered welcome mat, which Annie found uncannily familiar upon first seeing it, bears exact resemblance to those Ellen made for Annie and Charles and contains the same ornate sigil seen throughout the film. Annie picks up a book with this same sigil inscribed on its cover to find it full of incomprehensible language and images before picking up another entitled "invocations" where she and the viewer finally learn of King Paimon. A close up of the text shows an image of Paimon upon a dromedary, a figure with an effeminate face who carries three severed heads. Grimoires such as *The Lesser Key of Solomon* or the *Ars Goetia* contain vital pieces of information about King Paimon that could explain the supernatural events experienced by the Grahams. The name "Paimon" is thought to be derived from ancient

Mesopotamian mythology, translating roughly to "a tinkling sound" made in reference to the sounds of cymbals and trumpets which precede his arrival. Paimon is also thought to be connected to the Mesopotamian goddess Isis due to his "beautiful face" and feminine features. Interestingly, the name "Peyman" in Persian and Kurdish culture translates roughly to "pact" or "accord" and in Kurdistan is used to denote both male and female genders. In *The Lesser Key of Solomon* however, Paimon is recognized as obedient to Lucifer, commanding 200 legions of spirits. He is said to have "a great voice" and can teach "all arts and sciences, and other secret things. He can discover unto thee what the Earth is, what Mind is, or any other thing thou mayest desire to know…" (18). Additionally, in The Book of Abramelin, Paimon's powers include knowledge of past and future events, assuaging doubts, conjuring spirits, inducing visions, and reanimating the dead for years on end. [18] The text in *Hereditary* that the viewer sees briefly reads:

> When successfully invoked, King Paimon will possess the most *vulnerable* host. Only when the ritual is *complete* will Paimon be locked into his ordained host. Once locked in, a new ritual is required to *unlock* the possession…it is documented that King Paimon has become livid and vengeful when offered a female host. For these reasons, it is imperative to remember that King Paimon is a male, thus covetous of a male human body.

The powers of King Paimon, including his ability to reveal knowledge of the past and future as well as his ability to induce hallucinations, are strangely suggestive of post-traumatic symptoms. Indeed, it seems that the figure of the demon is more so than the ghost a particularly apt vehicle in representing post-traumatic symptoms, but the concept of the demon itself is seldom discussed in conjunction with traumatic affect in trauma theory. The return of the repressed is much more often represented by the ghost or the undead. Perhaps it is worth considering that the demon,

[18] For the full account of King Paimon's abilities, see Mathers, S L. M. G, Aleister Crowley, and Hymenaeus Beta. The Goetia: The Lesser Key of Solomon pp. 16-17

rather than the ghost, is more accurately representative of the insidious and malevolent nature of trauma and of the relationship to the Levinasian Other who cries from the wound.

Annie continues to go through her mother's things, looking through a photo album which shows Joan and Ellen together over the course of decades, filling Annie with dread and revulsion. After Annie goes up to the attic, finding Ellen's headless corpse surrounded by sigils and candles, we cut to Peter in class, with the phrase "punishment brings wisdom" written on the board. Peter is suddenly beset by Charlie's clicking sounds before his body is contorted by an unseen force that slams his face into his desk, breaking his nose and leaves him hysterically screaming on the floor. Peter appears to be temporarily possessed in this scene but is seen by his unknowing classmates as mentally unstable, the only explicable reason for his behavior. In any event, the viewer bears witness to his suffering, potentially experiencing a building sense of empathy for Peter as he is gradually broken down. Indeed, Aster encourages emotional identification with the family by instilling a sense of hope in the viewer that it is not too late for Annie to save her family and break the curse, that it is not too late for the film to end on a positive, cathartic note that will redeem the anguish and trauma endured by the Grahams.

When Steve returns home with a battered, unconscious Peter, Annie begins to frantically explain the series of coincidences that she has identified as connected, causal events, but Steve sees Annie as "unwell" or mentally ill, accusing her of digging up her mother's corpse and implicating her as responsible for the horrific events that have befallen them. Annie tries to explain to Steve that in conjuring Charlie during the séance she unwittingly made a pact with "something" that now threatens Peter; she resolves to destroy Charlie's drawing pad once and for all, sacrificing herself for her family. Annie insists that it is her fault and needs Steve to throw the pad into the fire. From Steve's perspective, Annie appears to have completely lost all touch

with reality, perhaps assuming that she has finally developed symptoms of the hereditary mental illness that runs in her family. However, LaCapra writes that when survivor's guilt is combined with "overpowering forms of devotion, the trauma that is both incapacitating and consubstantial with the self may be opaque and incompressible, particularly to outsiders, who may find themselves unable to enter the experience" (*Writing History* XXIV). Steve, no matter how deeply he cares for Annie and Peter, is unable to understand and experience the legacy of trauma and loss into which Annie was unknowingly initiated by her mother. The viewer at this point might genuinely believe that this plan will work, that once the drawing pad is destroyed the curse will be broken and Annie's sacrifice will not be in vain. Aster forces the viewer, in a sense, to hold out hope that after the brutal and traumatic events they have witnessed, a sense of justice and normalcy will be restored, like so many horror movies of the past involving demonic possession. As Steve approaches the fireplace and Annie prepares to burst into flames, he changes his mind, telling Annie that she is sick and that he can no longer be a part of whatever is going on, but Annie runs out of patience, taking the pad from him and throwing it into the fire herself.

As soon as Annie does this, Steve bursts into flames. The reason Steve catches fire instead of Annie remains unclear, but it could have to do with the fact that when Paimon is summoned, he requires a sacrifice, which Annie could not possibly be aware of. This scene is similar to the story of Tancred discussed earlier in this paper. Just as Tancred unwittingly wounds Clorinda the second time in self-reproach, so too does Annie unwittingly kill Steve in an act she believes will end in her own death. Annie can do nothing but watch in horror as Steve burns, and the sight becomes too overwhelming for her to bear. At this point, Annie is completely broken down and irreparably traumatized. The death of Steve is so damaging to her

that she becomes literally and figuratively possessed by trauma, allegorized as King Paimon, effacing her identity, and soon bringing about her end. Peter, who slept through everything that had just transpired, wakes up, only to walk downstairs and discover the charred body of his father. Meanwhile, Annie, possessed by Paimon, crawls along the ceiling at the edge of the frame, just out of Peter's vision. Peter sees a naked member of the cult in the shadows after recognizing the burnt corpse, at which point the possessed Annie begins to chase after him. Peter runs for his life, locking himself in the attic. Peter begs his mother to stop as she relentlessly bangs her head against the attic door in an extremely disturbing shot. The banging suddenly stops, giving Peter the chance to briefly look around the attic. Ellen's corpse is shown to be missing from the attic as Peter tells himself he is dreaming, that he needs to wake up, slapping himself in futility. But Peter does not wake up; neither he nor the viewer can say to themselves with relief: "It was only a dream!" Instead, Peter's attention is drawn to another pre-discursive sound, the sound of Annie running a piano wire against her neck at an increasing pace as she stares down at him. This shot of Annie beheading herself with a piano wire accentuates more than any other moment in the film Ligotti's pessimistic suspicion that human beings are merely puppets controlled by forces beyond their comprehension. Annie's movements are extremely rigid and robotic, the viewer can almost envision strings attached to her arms as she weaves the piano wire back and forth against her flesh.

Peter gazes up in pure terror at his possessed mother as she saws at her own neck; he is completely traumatized and vulnerable. Colin Stetson's haunting background music rises steadily before abruptly stopping, giving rise to a silence only disturbed by the horrible sound of the piano wire. Peter then looks down to find more naked cult members in the attic, lets out a scream, and jumps through a glass window to his death. If the naked members of the cult seem

uncanny, it is because the viewer has previously seen them before as teachers in Peter's classroom and as funeral guests. Peter's jump, then, is not unlike that of Nathanael in Hoffman's *The Sandman*. Indeed, LaCapra writes:

> Nathanael's [sic] suicidal jump, which does coincide with his catching sight of Coppelius below, would seem to be both a psychoanalytic and a formal requirement (*mise en abyme)*- a way for a posttraumatic symptom to be sacrificially acted out and a way for the narrator to get rid of the uncanny Nathanael (in a sense, his own double) and put a stop to his compulsively repetitive, uncontrollably delirious, and finally violent life. (*History and its Limits* 87)

Peter acts out past trauma one final time, completely overwhelmed, and defeated. His body lays in the dirt of the garden below and the sound of Annie beheading herself continues, as if the unseen force behind these events could not care less about Peter's death. The shimmer of light that the viewer might now recognize as indicative of Paimon's presence settles on Peter's back and disappears *into* him, suggesting his possession. Peter, now possessed by Paimon, gets up to see the headless body of Annie floating up into the treehouse as if being pulled by a string, his gaze blank but calm as he clicks his tongue. *Hereditary* ends as Peter, or Peter's body, enters the treehouse where the cult members bow in his direction. Behind him is a large wooden doll with the sigil of Paimon carved into its chest and the crowned head of Charlie atop its shoulders. The headless bodies of Charlie and Annie are kneeling in his direction as Joan rises to remove the crown from the doll, placing it on Peter's head. The sound of bells and trumpets resound as Joan tells a scared-looking, emptied-out Peter:

> Charlie, you're alright now. You are Paimon, one of the eight kings of hell, we have looked to the northwest and called you in. We have corrected your first female body and give you now this healthy, male host. We reject the trinity, and pray devoutly to you, great Paimon. Give us your knowledge of all secret things, bring us honor, wealth, and good familiars. Bind all men to our will as we have bound ourselves now and forever to yours. Hail Paimon!

Peter stares expressionless into the camera before the screen cuts to black and the credits begin to roll.

The viewer might have still held out hope that Peter would suddenly wake up to find himself safe and sound, the entire film being one long nightmare, but Aster denies us this escape. Instead, he forces the viewer to find catharsis in a profoundly bleak, enigmatic, and nonredemptive narrative structure. Aster renders sublime the pain and trauma suffered by the Grahams in the final scene, framing the events of plot as leading to a kind of rebirth *ex nihilo*, where in death the family finds catharsis and the ancestral line is allowed to perish.

CONCLUSION

This form of narrative understanding, despite the looming influence of poststructuralist models of trauma, is not subsumptive or appropriative; rather, it is defined by negation. This form of Gadamerian understanding is a form of knowledge that can be justified "only when we realize that things are *not* what we thought they were" (Meretoja 30). In the context of *Hereditary*, this negativity of understanding is encouraged in the viewer, who leaves the viewing experience betrayed on every level. Aster's intentional betrayal of the viewer who emotionally identifies with the characters supports a response defined by negativity: that *Hereditary* is *not* what they thought it was going to be, that the film itself—its representation of trauma and horror—does not fit into preexisting narrative frameworks. In a putatively paradoxical dynamic, Aster's unethical means of possessing and emotionally wounding audiences is generative of an ethical form of narrative understanding, one that unsettles and challenges the fundamental values or "household mantras" mentioned by Ligotti.

Annie displays both compulsive rationalization and a denial of events both past and present of which the viewer gains fragmentary knowledge as the film goes on. The extent to which the film's characters, especially Annie, gain knowledge and understanding of the past is never truly exceeded by the viewer except in this final scene. The audience is on a near equal playing field concerning the incomprehensibility of the horrific events of *Hereditary* as the characters, which promotes an identification with Annie's inherited plight and enjoins a participatory experience, what Elke Heckner calls "secondary witnessing," wherein "viewers cannot remain in a distant, seemingly safe position of spectatorship…it demands viewers take

part in a traumatic affect."[19] Placing the viewer in this participatory role as secondary witness, from an ethical standpoint, can be problematic. The role of a secondary witness, according to LaCapra, is "to get as close as possible to the experience of bearing witness and to become the kind of secondary witness who somehow relives or is marked by what the trauma victim has lived" (*History and its Limits 63*). A potential issue with secondary witnessing resides in the proximity of the witness to the traumatic experience. The secondary witness can become too close to the trauma of victims, to the extent where appropriation or total identification may take place. Recalling LaCapra's idea of empathic unsettlement, the secondary witness, in the above formulation, is not empathically unsettled if they fully identify with the trauma of the Other. In psychoanalytic terms, the secondary witness falls victim to a process of uninhibited transference, where a projection of the self becomes inextricable from the traumatic content of the object of study.

Another component of the role of secondary witness is to "undergo a supplementary, possibly sublime, suffering or anguish in the necessary if impossible attempt to translate witnessing into testimony" (*History and its Limits* 63). Fictional texts that deal with traumatic experience, or trauma fiction, can implicitly render a viewer or reader a secondary witness, sometimes involuntarily, if they find themselves sharing in traumatic affect. For commentators and analysts studying trauma fiction, "the authentic or appropriate affect of testimony, or of any attempt at representation or signification with respect to trauma, is melancholy…which may even be conflated with (impossible) mourning" (ibid). While this "authentic" form of witnessing may be seen as ethical insofar as it serves as a blockage to closure, counteracting the tendency to overwrite or forget the past, it may also pose a barrier to the process of working through trauma.

[19] See chapter III of Heckner's *Visualizing the Holocaust* for more context.

Impossible mourning and terminal melancholy do not allow for an opportunity to make crucial distinctions between personal loss and historical absence, nor do they allow for the stable separation of subject positions such as victim, perpetrator, witness, and bystander.

In *Hereditary*, the viewer "falls victim" precisely to this role of secondary witness. This is how Aster's films actively transgress LaCapra's notion of empathic unsettlement. If empathic unsettlement is an ethical response to objects of study that include traumatic content, and *Hereditary* forecloses the possibility of such a response, then Aster's texts in this light cannot be seen as ethical representations of traumatic experience. However, the viewer of *The Johnsons* or *Hereditary* who unwittingly becomes a secondary witness, who finds themselves subjected to rather than actively partaking in traumatic affect, does not appropriate the trauma of the Other in identifying with certain emotional and psychological states represented in the films that may be genuinely resonant with personal experiences of a similar nature. The cultural pressure points discussed above, particularly universal fears and anxieties such as the fear of death and the fear of losing a loved one, become resonant in cultural texts like horror films that actively elicit processes of personal identification and reflection in the viewer. The affective crux of *The Johnsons* and *Hereditary* is their ability to enact the double bind central to trauma theory in the viewer, whose personal experience may resonate with that of the films' characters on a level inaccessible to conscious knowledge, representation, or signification. The visceral representation of traumatic experience in *Hereditary*, mediated by the generic tropes and conventions of supernatural horror, may gesture to, or elicit an awareness of traumatic experience, taboo feelings toward family members, and pessimistic thoughts concerning the human condition that may be quite personal to the viewer. A process such as this is not dissimilar to Lowenstein's "allegorical moment" that involves a confrontation between viewer, text, and history. Only in

this case, the confrontational dimension is found in personal, individual history rather than a national or collective history. If *Hereditary* forces the viewer to confront their personal trauma or taboo feelings, it does not define or impose a meaning on them, nor does it offer a totalizing solution or means of working through them. Instead, its enigmatic plot and aporetic narrative structure enact the repetition compulsion characteristic of the death drive in the viewer. Freud notes that the compulsion to repeat often gives the subject the impression of being pursued by a daemonic power, subjected to “a perpetual recurrence of the same” which is forcefully operative in *Hereditary*. Interestingly, the repetition compulsion, while functioning as a futile means of mastering trauma, simultaneously perpetuates the impression of the daemonic.

Peter Brooks in his article “Freud’s Masterplot” posits that “it is the role of fictional plots to impose an end which yet suggests a return, a new beginning: a rereading. A narrative, which wants at its end to refer us back to its middle, to the web of the text: to recapture us in its doomed energies” (297). Based on the narrative events of both *Hereditary* and *The Johnsons,* it becomes clear that Aster’s intentional betrayal of viewer desire and expectation is meant to “recapture” the viewer and inspire compulsive returns to the text. By invoking the daemonic character of trauma and primal fear in the viewer, Aster is able to performatively represent the unrepresentable and speak to the unspeakable. Implicating the viewer as secondary witness, Aster creates a fictional plot in *Hereditary* that enacts the repetition compulsion, implicitly demanding that the viewer return to the film again and again in futile attempts to master its traumatic content. Therefore, the viewer who repetitiously returns to *Hereditary* can be said to be “possessed” by its daemonic influence. Additionally, Aster is able to gesture to the experience of trauma by stressing the helplessness with which human beings struggle in repressing or actively struggling against the destiny of all human life.

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