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Psychoanalytical horror in Ari Aster

Hereditary, Midsommar and *Beau is Afraid* under Jungian and Freudian views

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Master's thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master in Anglo-American Studies, supervised by Professor Mark Poole.

Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University of Porto

2024

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Declaration of Honour

I hereby declare that this dissertation is of my authorship and has not been used previously in another course, degree, curricular unit or subject, at this or any other institution. References to other authors (statements, ideas, thoughts) scrupulously respect the rules of attribution and are duly indicated in the text and bibliographical references, in accordance with the rules of referencing. I am aware that the practice of plagiarism and self-plagiarism is an academic offence.

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Porto, September 14th 2024

Ana Rita de Almeida Batista

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Resumo

A relevância do escritor e director Ari Aster no género cinematográfico de terror deve-se à sua forma única de contar histórias, que consiste em explorar os limites das capacidades mentais humanas, enquanto utiliza metáforas compostas por situações da vida real. Com filmes como *Hereditary* (2018), *Midsommar* (2019) e *Beau is Afraid* (2023), Aster combina uma mise-en-scène rica com temas intensos, como trauma geracional, relações familiares disfuncionais e problemas de saúde mental, enquanto adiciona os elementos sobrenaturais, frequentemente utilizados no género de terror, com a finalidade de horrorizar o seu público. As longas-metragens de Aster destacam-se no subgénero de terror psicológico, não só pela ausência de cenas com o uso excessivo de sangue e violência, mas também pela preferência no uso de dicas subtis, com a finalidade de criar momentos de tensão e ansiedade. Quando aplicadas, as teorias de Carl Gustav Jung e Sigmund Freud revelaram que o trabalho de Aster é relevante tanto no estudo de filmografia de terror moderno, como no estudo de psicologia e psicoanálise.

Palavras-chave: terror, Freud, Jung, psicoanálise, Aster.

Abstract

Ari Aster has risen to relevance in the horror genre due to his unique way of storytelling, which involves exploring the limits of the human mental capacities, employing metaphors made up of real-life situations. With films such as *Hereditary* (2018), *Midsommar* (2019) and *Beau is Afraid* (2023), Aster uses a rich mise-en-scène combining it with intense themes, such as generational trauma, dysfunctional family relationships and mental health issues, while also adding the supernatural elements, frequently used in the horror genre, in order to further horrify his audience. His feature films stand out in the subgenre of psychological horror, due to the absence of scenes with an excess of gore and violence, and to the preference for subtle clues that provoke tension and anxiety. When applied, the theories of Carl Gustav Jung and Sigmund Freud revealed that Aster's work is relevant not only in the study of modern horror filmography, but also in the study of psychology and psychoanalysis.

Keywords: horror, Freud, Jung, psychoanalysis, Aster.

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Introduction

Horror films aim to shock and horrify the audience, usually with the anxieties of the society that accompanies the release of the films. These anxieties change over time, as does the audience's ability to be shocked by their portrayals. Ari Aster's filmography is extremely relevant to the horror genre, given that the director chooses to adapt real life situations to the format of horror. Aster chooses to horrify his audience by portraying people going through traumatic experiences, while either adding the supernatural element of a demon possession to an already broken and traumatized family, like in *Hereditary* (Aster, 2018), or by adding a murderous cult to the story of an inevitable break up, like in *Midsommar* (Aster, 2019), or by simply letting the worst fears of an anxious person happen, like in *Beau is Afraid* (Aster, 2023). His films play on the psychological issues real people deal with, such as family trauma and abusive interdependent relationships. Aster's feature films became a staple for horror fans, due to his intricate ways of storytelling, and due to how much thought he and his team put into every shot, scene and piece of dialogue.

By using numerous tools available in film making, Aster is able to depict these tragic stories without having to be so frontal with his audience. Furthermore, his stylistic choices instantly became recognizable to horror film audiences, and I believe that his sudden rise to be considered a respectable director has something to do with this. After watching his films, audiences feel the need to rewatch and discuss them, as it is very common for Aster's films to be filled with essential details that add to the plot. For me, Aster has found a refreshing way of exploring the family and mental health issues, using the horror elements associated with the subgenre of psychological horror¹. What drew my attention to his films was Aster's ability to shock and horrify without overusing the gore techniques previously recognizable in this subgenre, as he takes preference in stressing the audience with the lack of bloody corpses and in adding exposition and details that leave the viewers waiting for an ending to the suffering of his characters.

These essential details are what make analyzing and studying the films so relevant and interesting to modern audiences. For me psychoanalysis aids this analysis and study, as it allows for the films to be deconstructed and analyzed, while also exploring the possibility of the films' lessons to be

¹ Some examples of psychological horror films may include *The Babadook* (2014), *Mother!* (2017), *El Hoyo* (2019), and *Smile* (2022).

applied to real life. What brings Aster's films and psychoanalysis together is exactly the simplicity of it being relatable to everyone who either watches the films or studies psychoanalysis. Upon watching and rewatching the films, I was intrigued by the amount of psychoanalytic work Aster has applied to his films, whether it be purposeful or not. With this dissertation, I attempt to identify some of the motifs Aster uses to carry out his message and applied Carl Gustav Jung and Sigmund Freud's work to it, eventually showing the depth of Aster's filmography and how they can be used in metaphorical depictions of mental health issues and the deconstruction of the family element.

The choice to use Freud and Jung came from the knowledge of the mentorship Freud provided Jung with, even recognizing him as a possible successor in the field of psychoanalysis. Jung studied the existence of a universal unconscious, eventually steering away from Freud's insistence on repressed sexuality as a motive for unconscious desires and thoughts. Although Freud believed Jung had taken a different direction in the study of psychoanalysis, both psychoanalysts were focused on investigating and decoding the unconscious, their concepts and ideas on the subject blending with each other. Using Jung's archetypes, more specifically the mother archetype, and Freud's theories regarding religion and the unconscious mind aids in attributing meaning to the techniques and motifs Aster chooses to employ, adding to the meaning that the director already attributed to the films, using *mise-en-scène*.

With this dissertation I will be deconstructing Aster's feature films *Hereditary*, *Midsommar*, and *Beau is Afraid*. In the first chapter I will provide a brief biography about Ari Aster and his inspiration for becoming a writer and director. Then I will move on to the second chapter where I will be analyzing some of the *mise-en-scène* techniques used. In the third chapter, I will use the Jungian archetypes and the concept of universal unconscious to analyze the mother archetype and the figures associated with it in the films. And in the fourth chapter, I will employ Freud's theories on religion and the repressed, or unconscious, mind. Finally, I will lay out my final remarks, hopefully proving that Aster's feature films can and should be studied as a staple for psychoanalytical horror.

1. Ari Aster

Ari Aster was born in the state of New York, on the 15th of July 1986. Being a long-time fan of films and the art of making them, the director has always felt more drawn to horror films. Although the art of writing screenplays appeared more appealing to the director, Aster tells The Verge, “the life of a screenwriter would probably be a painful one for me”. While attending the American Film Institute Conservatory, Aster concluded that he would also have to take up the task of directing, fearing that he would have to “relinquish control, and give the movie to somebody else, who then realizes it to their liking. And so I think it was in undergrad that I realized I definitely needed to be a director as well.” (Bishop, 2018).

After graduating from Santa Fe University of Art and Design, Aster went to the American Film Institute Conservatory where, as he says to Alibi, “I graduated and got my MFA and made a lot of shorts and wrote a lot of feature screenplays, hoping to get one of them off the ground.” (O’Leary, 2018). Whilst studying in the AFI Conservatory, Aster started writing and directing many short films, such as the 2008 short *Herman’s Cure-All Tonic*, “The earliest artifact of Aster’s pet themes and obsessions”, that follows the son of a pharmacist that uses his father’s body to make a product that cures all diseases, cementing from the beginning his love for portraying the taboo and the uncomfortable, (Querol, 2023). Following this debut, the director came out with seven more short films, dabbling in other themes, such as the complexity of romantic relationships, the occult as an opposition to conventional religion, even taking inspiration from some of them to expand his feature screenplays, such as *Beau is Afraid*.

Aster gained attention and recognition after his 2011 short, *The Strange Thing About the Johnsons*, where the director really shows his appreciation for exploring family dynamics and how they affect individuals. This short follows the Johnsons, a seemingly happy family that turns out to have a dark and disturbing secret. It’s Aster’s most known and controversial short, as it explores complex father-son relationships, incest, sexual abuse and how this destroys the family in question. Although it is a very disturbing and uncomfortable watch, this short film was the gateway to success, since it “actually served as Ari Aster’s thesis film while studying at the American film Institute’s graduate school in California.” (Querol, 2023). The short film was also “the project that landed him an agent” (Kohn, 2018), and this allowed him to continue to make more short films and, eventually, his feature films.

The director's take on different family dynamics did not end with his 2011 short film. To this day, Aster still enjoys exploring the psychological and physical toll that a poor, neglected, or abusive relationship takes on an individual. These viewpoints that Ari Aster explores in his movies and short films do not come solely from imagination. In an interview Aster gave to IndieWire, he said that *Hereditary* was is "related to certain things that had happened in my life and things that my family and I went through together (...) But the movie itself is all invention. The feelings behind the film are personal, but none of the characters are surrogates for anybody in my family." (Kohn, 2018). Aster actually attributes his success to his parents, whom he described as "incredibly supportive. They're both artists. My mom is a brilliant poet (...) my dad is a jazz drummer, an R&B drummer". He also notes that he's only "able to work with such dark material" because he was never questioned by his parents (O'Leary, 2018). There is a clear contrast between Aster's supportive family and the broken families he writes about. His debut movie *Hereditary*, from 2018, appears to be a love letter to complicated and shattered families, a therapeutic way for the director to express himself, "Filmmaking is so much about catharsis anyway, (...) It's therapeutic." (Kohn, 2018).²

² For more information about Ari Aster's featured films, see Appendix 1.

2. Mise-en-Scène in Aster

The French term “mise-en-scène”, which literally translates to “to put on stage”, is used when studying and analyzing film “in the discussion of visual style” (Gibbs: 2002, 5). The visual style of a film include “the contents of the frame and the way that they are organized (...) They include lighting, costume, décor, properties, and the actors themselves.” (Gibbs: 2002, 5). Furthermore the mise-en-scène is the relationship between all of these contents of frame and the way they are laid out for the viewer to see and understand. In talking about “visual style”, it is also taken into account the “framing, camera movement, the particular lens employed and other photographic decisions.” (Gibbs: 2002, 5).

Much like every other director, Ari Aster uses these tools to further the plot and develop characters, while drawing attention to elements in the film he feels are important. What is unique about Aster’s filmography is that his use of these elements varies drastically from film to film. The director’s use of lighting, color, props, décor, action, space and camera work vary according to the themes he wants to explore.

2.1. *Hereditary*

Lighting is an extremely important tool in filmmaking, considering “Lighter and darker areas within the frame help create the overall composition of each shot and thus guide our attention to certain objects and actions.” (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008: 124). For example, the final scenes in *Hereditary*, with Peter (Alex Wolff) and Annie (Toni Collette) are extremely dark, and Aster uses a technique that involves hiding something or someone in the dark area of a shot, bringing it to the lighter area of the shot to make a horrific reveal.

One example of this technique is demonstrated in the scene where Peter wakes up after having broken his nose, the area of the shot around him is extremely dark, while outside lightning falls on him from a window. Annie, who is now possessed, is hidden in the upper corner of a wall behind her son, and her silhouette is almost invisible to the viewer, as she blends with the dark background. It is only when she crawls through the air across the room that the audience knows she is there. This technique is used to once again employ the element of horror and unease, as the viewer now knows that Annie is different and a possible threat. Aster uses a combination of side lighting and

low-key illumination³ in this scene, which “creates stronger contrasts and sharper, darker shadows.” (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008: 130), bringing focus to Peter’s character, making him appear disoriented as his facial expressions are not visible enough, which makes the reveal of Annie’s presence much more dramatic and scary. This lighting technique creates what it is called “chiaroscuro”, corresponding to “extremely dark and light regions within the image” (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008: 130), mostly used in mysterious and tense scenes, often featured in the horror genre.



Figure 1 - *Hereditary*: Peter sitting on his bed and Annie leaning against the wall in the background. Peter is the main focus of the shot, with the low-key side lighting (1:48:09) (Treated by the author: +40% brightness)

Here the use of chiaroscuro emulates an unavoidable sense of misery and sadness within the audience. The lighting at the Graham’s house is consistently becoming more and more absent in most scenes, as Peter, Annie and Steve become more estranged from each other, contrasting with the amount of warm lighting existent in the first act of the film, when the family’s relationships were somewhat healthy. The high-key illumination, which “refers to an overall lighting design that uses fill light and backlight to create low contrast between brighter and darker areas” (Bordwell &

³ Sidelight, also known as crosslight, refers to the light cast on an object or a character, in order to create sharper shadows. Similarly, low-key illumination refers to the lighting technique of eliminating light from the majority of the frame, usually “applied to somber or mysterious scenes” (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008: 130).

Thompson, 2008: 129), and the use of warm toned lights invoke the feeling that their house is a place of comfort and safety. When the family is ultimately broken, Charlie (Milly Shapiro) and Steve (Gabriel Byrne) dead, Annie possessed by the demon King Paimon, and Peter alone and mentally and physically worn out, low-key illumination is used. The house looks cold, and there is an impending feeling that something bad is bound to happen.



Figure 2 - *Hereditary*: Peter, Charlie and Annie. The setting is lit up using high-key illumination, with warm lighting. (27:34)



Figure 3 - *Hereditary*: Peter coming down the stairs into the entry way. Low-key illumination is used to create and add mystery and tension to the scene. (1:50:45)

2.2. *Midsommar*

In *Midsommar* (2019), on the other hand, Aster makes use of bright light and colors, since most of the movie takes place during the real celebration of the summer solstice, the midsummer. Aster also makes use of fields and big communal infrastructure to invoke the feeling of freedom and community the main character experiences, and this can be seen as an invitation for the audience to put themselves in her place. Dani (Florence Pugh) is always shown to be indoors before arriving in Hälsingland, she is either in her apartment, Christian's (Jack Reynor) apartment or on the plane, and these scenes feel cold and, at some points, rushed. Aster also chooses to use muted colors in the beginning of the film, perhaps to mirror Dani's state of mind, since she falls into depression after her parents and sister's deaths. The colors become brighter when she arrives in Hälsingland, and by the end of the film she is dressed in a floral dress, the most colorful piece of clothing she wears in the film, signifying she has finally distanced herself from who she was in the beginning of the film.



Figure 4 - *Midsommar*: Dani laying in bed, the colors surrounding her are extremely dull and neutral (13:03)



Figure 5 - *Midsommar*: Dani wearing the floral dress, bright and colorful, contrasting with both the Hårga and the setting (2:20:32)

After arriving in Hälsingland, Dani is rarely shown to be indoors, and even when she is, there is a feeling of community attached to the buildings, for example when she helps the Hårgan women cook, or the communal sleeping building they all share. Within the Hårga community there is no use for individual spaces, because they believe in doing everything together, only using the closed spaces for practical activities, such as sleeping or preparing the food. Their close connection with nature provides a sense of freedom.

Aster's use of different costumes and settings throughout the film is an example of how a director can use these elements, both individually and together, to employ visual clues that aid the audience on where and who to pay attention to, since "setting may provide a more or less neutral background, while costume helps pick out the characters" (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008: 122). At the beginning of the film, the main characters wear clothes with colors that blend very easily with the background and the setting. However, when the group arrives in Hälsingland, the Hårga wear bright white clothes, adorned with symbols varying from the color blue, red, and yellow. These white clothes blend the Hårga together as a group, while making it easy for the audience to pick out the outsiders, who are not given white clothes, except for Dani, who receives a dress by the end of the film. The choice of making the majority of the film's costumes white also plays well with the green setting of the forest surrounding the community, as it makes the actors stand out, even if they are not a main character in the film.



Figure 6 - *Midsommar*: Pelle, Josh, Christian, Dani and Mark dressed in dark clothing, blending with the setting's dark colors (14:48)



Figure 7 - *Midsommar*: The green setting makes the Hårga members, in white, and the outsiders, in dark clothes, stand out (40:13)

2.3. *Beau is Afraid*

For *Beau is Afraid* (2023), Aster uses exaggerated acting from actors and extras in the film to convey the sense of unease and anxiety, as well as a mix of vivid and pastel colors depending on Beau's position in the plot. Framing and camera work is also employed in this film as a way to show the audience Beau's point of view of the world as an extremely anxious man, who tries to please his mother to an unhealthy extent. Aster relies on *Beau is Afraid*'s actors, both the extras and the established characters, to create this hectic world. The extras are used in the first act of the film, when Aster establishes Beau's neighborhood as a place of chaos which is extremely crime driven. The first scene where the audience is shown the conditions of the neighborhood, it all comes together as this nightmarish setting, with a lot of visual and sound clues that appear extreme and not real. However, even though "Acting is often approached as a question of realism." (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008: 133), Aster approaches the unrealistic view that someone with extreme anxiety, such as Beau⁴, has of the world. The extras, portraying roles ranging from prostitutes and murderers to dirty cops and drug addicts, embody the most realistic traits of these individuals. Nevertheless, when it all comes together in the film, it turns into an almost impossible urban scenario. Bright neon lights work well in this film to attribute a sense of cold and unfamiliarity to the streets, and the absence of frontal lighting creates the mysterious and scary ambience that Beau feels. He is alone, scared to walk through the street, making him run for the

⁴ Joaquin Phoenix has been praised for taking on eccentric roles, such as Beau in *Beau is Afraid*, Arthur Fleck in *Joker* (2019) and Theodore in *Her* (2013). His acting style is heavily focused on character development and he notably takes on roles that explore the human mind, especially when its health has declined.

safety of his apartment, running from the individuals that roam through it, like the tattooed man that follows him and tries to enter his apartment complex.



Figure 8 - *Beau is Afraid*: A corner on Beau's neighborhood
(8:00)



Figure 9 - *Beau is Afraid*: The tattooed man that runs after
Beau (8:31) (Treated by the author: +20% brightness)

Of course, the individual study of each of these elements is important. However, their importance and possible meanings can only be understood when they are analyzed regarding their interaction with one another, as they depend “for its effect on a combination of elements (...) [and] it is the interplay of elements that is significant” (Gibbs: 2002, 26). Context is also important as it takes into account “the narrative situation, the ‘world’ of the film, the accumulating strategies that the film-maker adopts.” (Gibbs: 2002, 26).

3. C. G. Jung and the Archetypes

Carl Gustav Jung's beliefs are relevant when analyzing Aster's filmography, as it depends, most of the times, on heavy psychological themes, such as PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), grief, family dynamics, mental health problems, and mental implications regarding religion and beliefs.

C. G. Jung was an important figure in the field of psychology and psychoanalysis. He was in contact with Sigmund Freud in the early years of his career, eventually becoming his trainee and collaborator, as he agreed with his views on human psychology, "His fascinating and quite startling correspondence with the older man began in 1906, when Jung sent Freud a copy of his work on word association." (Rowland, 2002: 7). Jung shared Freud's belief that the unconscious mind was relevant in the personality and behavior of an individual. However, their paths diverged when Jung's personal research led him to discovering the concept of the collective unconscious. The end to this friendship and partnership was, however, fated to happen since "Even early in the collaboration, Jung recorded reservations about Freud's exclusive notions of sexual repression and infantile desires." (Rowland, 2002: 7). Jung recalls that from the very first time he was exposed to Freud's ideas, the notion of everything being related to repressed sexuality did not meet his own theories, "Wherever, in a person or in a work of art, an expression of spirituality (in the intellectual, not the super-natural sense) came to light, he suspected it, and insinuated that it was repressed sexuality." (Jung, 1989: 149) Jung openly rejected Freud's sexual theories and stated that his attitude towards philosophy and religion was "the thing that struck at the heart of our friendship. (...) To me the sexual theory was just as occult, that is to say, just as unproven an hypothesis, as many other speculative views." (Jung, 1989: 150-151).

It is also relevant to mention that Jung was, and still is, considered to be an antisemite, despite being mentored by Freud, who was in fact Jewish. These accusations started when the psychoanalyst was still alive. After Hitler's rise to German chancellor in 1933, Jung "assumed the presidency of the General Medical Society for Psychotherapy (...) In the December 1933 issue of the Society's journal, he made his most controversial remark when he said that it was important to openly discuss the differences that actually existed between Germanic and Jewish psychology" (Roazen et al., 2003: 21). Even Freud wrote, regarding who would continue on with his legacy, that Jung was the best option, since "he seemed ready to enter into a friendly relationship with me and for my sake to give up certain racial prejudices which he had previously permitted himself."

(Freud, 1981b: 43). Jung responded to this statement in a letter to C. E. Benda, “When I wrote my book *Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido* (“Psychology of the Unconscious”) and deviated at one point from orthodox theory, Freud suddenly accused me of anti-Semitism. (...) This prejudice has stuck to me ever since and has been repeated by all Freudians” (Jung, 2015: 167). Jung later contradicts his own defense, writing in “The State of Psychotherapy Today”, in 1934, where he compares Jews to women, “The Jews have this peculiarity in common with women; being physically weaker.” (Jung, 1970: 165); compared German and Jewish unconsciousness, “the average Jew is far too conscious and differentiated to go about pregnant with the tensions of unborn futures. The ‘Aryan’ unconscious has a higher potential than the Jewish” (Jung, 1970: 166).

Despite their religious disagreement, Jung and Freud shared the same theories regarding the division of the human mind. For Jung, the psyche can be broken down into three elements: the ego, which represents the conscious mind, the personal unconscious, that “rests upon a deeper layer”, and the collective unconscious, the “deeper layer”. The archetypes are the contents of the collective unconscious, that Jung describes as “contents and modes of behavior that are more or less the same everywhere and in all individuals.” (Jung, 1980: 3-4). There are several archetypal characters described by Jung throughout his work, such as the Shadow, the Anima and the Animus, the Self, and the Persona. According to Jung, the Shadow represents the “dark aspects of the personality” that challenge the ego personality (Jung, 1979: 8); the Anima and the Animus represent, respectively, the presence of “a feminine element” in a man’s conscious, such as emotion, and the presence of a “masculine imprint”, such as a drive for power or “mind or spirit”, in a woman’s unconscious (Jung, 1979: 14); the Self represents “the integration of the contents of the collective unconscious” and their “influence on the ego-personality”, meaning the totality of the human psyche, both the unconscious and the conscious minds, forming a personality (Jung, 1979: 23); the Persona refers to a “kind of mask” combining the “relations between the individual consciousness and society”, in order to protect the “true nature of the self” (Jung, 1972: 264). Despite being able to stand alone, with different characteristics and functions, there is a certain interconnectedness involving the archetypes. They do not depend on one another, but they complement one another, balancing the complexity of the psyche.

3.1. The Figure of the Mother

In Jungian analytical psychology, the archetype of the mother represents the concept and image of nurture, love, care and protection for the weak and the undefended that shape the collective unconsciousness and the development of the human psyche. Jung attributes these characteristics to more than the figures of “mother” as a biological caretaker, referring to the “personal mother and grandmother, stepmother and mother-in-law”; the psychologist also refers to the figures of mother in societal aspects, such as “a nurse or governess or perhaps a remote ancestress”, as these positions hold the term of mother in a “figurative sense” (Jung, 1980: 81). The latter representation of the archetype also incorporates mythical and religious related figures, including the Mother of God, and this opens Jung’s list to all the “mother-figures” that affect the development of the collective unconscious. These include, heaven, earth, the sea; leading to figures and places that stand for “fertility and fruitfulness”, like gardens and fields (Jung, 1980: 81). Opposing to these positive characteristics of the mother archetype, there are also shadow elements, as in negative characteristics. The negative side of “the mother archetype may connote anything secret, hidden, dark; the abyss, the world of the dead, anything that devours, seduces, and poisons, that is terrifying and inescapable like fate.” (Jung, 1980: 82).

The mother or mother-like roles are extremely important in Aster’s feature films as well as in his short films. There are several instances in his short films where the figure of the mother becomes central to the plot and development of characters: in *Hereditary*, both Ellen (Kathleen Chalfant) and Annie (Toni Collette) take on different portrayals of the motherly archetype, representing the positive and the negative aspects of it; in *Midsommar*, Dani (Florence Pugh) becomes May Queen, mother of the crops, and the Hårgas believe in connecting with nature; in *Beau is Afraid*, Beau’s mother Mona (Patti LuPone) embodies the shadow mother archetype by intentionally making Beau (Joaquin Phoenix) anxious and fearful of everything, creating an unhealthy attachment between the two.

3.1.1. *Hereditary*

With *Hereditary*, Aster set out to explore the effects trauma and grief have on normal, day-to-day, family relationships, as he says “I wanted to make a drama that curdled into a nightmare, in the same way that life can end up feeling like a nightmare when disaster strikes.” (Bishop, 2018). To this drama, Aster added the supernatural element of the pagan cult to truly turn the project into a horror film. The film heavily relies on its matriarchal figures, Ellen, Annie, and Joan (Ann Dowd) to forward the plot, and attribute the element of horror into the narrative. Ellen is established, from early on, as an important character, even though there are no dialogue scenes, and the audience is

only given information through pictures and other characters. Ellen is Annie's mother, who, as we learn from an expository intertitle, has passed away.

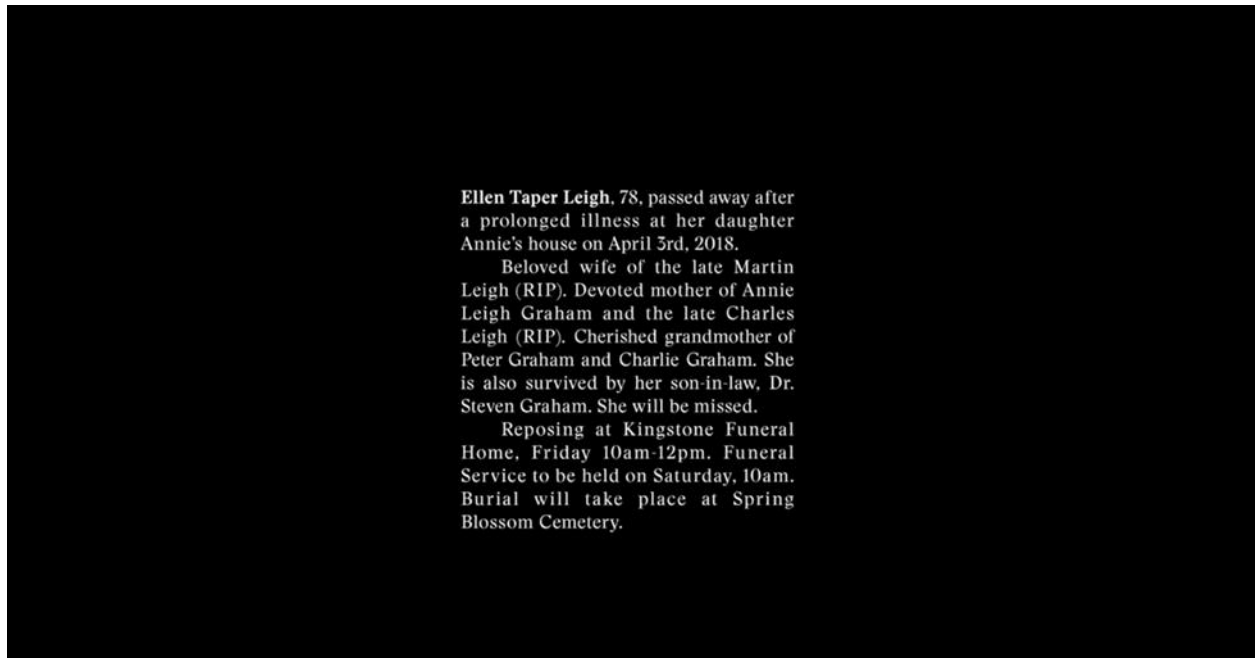


Figure 10 - *Hereditary*: Intertitle (00:29)

From this intertitle, Aster has informed the audience that death and grief will be relevant themes in the movie. Ellen, functions both as the reason for this story to begin, and as the reason for the beginning of the family's downfall. Being the leader of the cult that praises King Paimon, as Annie later finds out (1:34:40), she knowingly subjects her grandchildren to the cult's horrific practices. The film cuts to its first scene with a long shot of Annie's miniature atelier, establishing an important motif throughout the movie, before settling on a model of the Graham house. The shot starts by showing the tree house through a window, and slowly pans around to show other miniature models, before tightening the shot in the house, specifically in Peter's room.



Figure 11 - *Hereditary*: Tree-house shot (00:54)



Figure 12 - *Hereditary*: Graham miniature house (01:55)

When using Jung to analyze *Hereditary*, it can be pointed out that the Graham house being surrounded by an extremely dense forest also foreshadows the importance of mother symbols in the narrative, as he writes “Another (...) mother-symbol is the wood of life, or tree of life. The tree of life may have been (...) a kind of tribal mother.” (Jung, 1967: 321). The choice to use Annie’s career as a miniature artist, could be a way for Aster to subtly express that what the audience is about to watch is purely an expression of Annie’s unconscious and her reaction to the disastrous events that will follow, and may not in fact be a reality within the narrative. It also foreshadows the higher powers that control the Graham family, and how helpless they are, right from the beginning of the movie.

The film’s emphasis on Ellen continues as the family prepares to attend her funeral. While giving the eulogy, Annie describes her mother as a “very secretive and private woman” and talks about her fondness for “private rituals, private friends, private anxieties”. Annie’s tone whilst giving her eulogy sounds monotone and her voice appears to be shaky at some points; her body language hints at the discomfort to talk about her mother in front of other people, and this gives the impression of not being as genuine as it should be. Annie is essentially putting on a mask, or, using Jung’s archetypal term, she is developing a Persona, which he asserts as a “division of consciousness into two figures (...) an incisive psychological operation that is bound to have repercussions on the unconscious.” (Jung, 1972: 265). The miniature model motif is once again brought up, as the audience is set to watch the family entering their home from a lateral point of view, as if watching a miniature playhouse. There is a conveyed feeling of familiarity through lighting in the house, even when the family isn’t home, with some wall fixtures being on. When they do enter the house, the house fills with more light, specifically a warm tone light. At this point of the narrative, the family is still somewhat functional, dependent on each other to a certain extent

and this is enhanced by the shot of the entire family in the foyer: while the rest of visible rooms are dark and have no lights on, the entrance of the house has warm tone lights all around.



Figure 13 - *Hereditary*: Graham family's house (06:17)



Figure 14 - *Hereditary*: Graham family in the house (06:32)

The audience gets some confirmation of Annie's naivety, when she attends a grief counseling group, where she truthfully describes her mother and their relationship. Annie first arrives when there are still people outside the building, but in the next scene, the group is already inside, sharing their experiences. This hints at Annie's reluctance to participate and talk about her mother, which is continuous in the way she is sitting. Opposing to the other people participating in the counseling, who keep their hands on their lap, their posture indicative of the openness to potentially deal with grief in a healthy way, Annie keeps her head down, her arms crossed beneath her chest. She is placed at the center of the shot, her jacket still on, contrary to most of the other people in the room. The people next to Annie are dressed in lighter colors, making her visually stand out.



Figure 15 - *Hereditary*: Annie in the grief counseling group (19:29)

At first, Annie refuses to speak when asked to. Eventually, she agrees and starts talking. As the camera zooms in on her, she starts describing her journey and life through grief. The way she announces to the group why she is there is cold and abrupt, *My mom was old and she wasn't all together at the end – and we were pretty much estranged before that – So it wasn't a huge blow. But I did love her.* This statement is somewhat contradictory: how can Annie state that she loves her mother yet say that her death wasn't a huge blow? She continues, *And she didn't have an easy life*, recounting the death of her father, by starvation, and the death of her brother, by suicide. It is almost as if Annie is trying to find a justification for her mother's actions, and for their relationship, that she describes after taking a break and allowing herself to look around. The scene cuts to Annie's point of view of the room, the group is completely silent, exchanging worried looks; probably because Annie just announced that mental illnesses are common in her family, possibly hereditary: Ellen suffered from DID (Dissociative Identity Disorder) and dementia, Annie's father suffered from psychotic depression, and her brother suffered from schizophrenia. Annie has been grieving all her life, for her father, her brother and now, her mother. With no interruption from the group, Annie continues by claiming *She [Ellen] is completely manipulative*, using the present tense, therefore indicating that she is not over her traumatic childhood and adulthood. Annie blames Ellen for every unresolved trauma that was ever inflicted on her. She withheld the opportunity for Ellen to be close to Peter when he was born, *I didn't let her near me when I had my first – my son*, but did so when Charlie was born, *which is why I gave her my daughter; who she immediately stabbed her hooks into.* This line alone foreshadows the entire plot, from here onwards.

It is known from a previous conversation Annie had with Charlie, that the girl was Ellen's favorite, indicating that the eldest didn't even allow Annie to breastfeed her. At first, it appears as if this doesn't necessarily bother Annie; she is playful with her daughter, attempting to perhaps instill some comfort. However, she clearly resents this and views it as a traumatic event, as can be seen in her workshop in the next scene, where she aggressively turns a miniature scene where a Annie is breastfeeding Charlie, whilst a sick Ellen watches bedside, while offering her breast to feed the baby. The choice to depict such pivotal information regarding Ellen and Annie's life by using the recurrent theme of miniature modeling, only points to how much this situation bothered and annoyed Annie.



Figure 16 - *Hereditary*: Miniature model of Annie, Charlie, and Ellen (13:04)

Annie's resentment toward Ellen can be analyzed under Jung's concept of the mother-complex, "the mother always plays an active part in the origin of the disturbance, especially in infantile neuroses (...) the child's instincts are disturbed, and this constellates archetypes which, in their turn, produce fantasies that come between the child and its mother as an alien and often frightening element." (Jung, 1980: 85). Jung divides the mother-complex based on their influence on either the "son" or the "daughter". For this analysis, it is interesting to use "The Mother-Complex of the Daughter", which Jung elaborates in four different types, most notably, regarding Annie and Ellen, the "Resistance to the Mother", where he writes that this type refers to an "overwhelming resistance to maternal supremacy" (Jung, 1980: 90). This can be observed by the way Annie attempts to deal with her own emotions to protect her loved ones, as opposed to Ellen who traumatized her, manipulated her, "The motto of this type is: Anything, so long as it is not like Mother!" (Jung, 1980: 90). Eventually, Annie does become like her mother. After Charlie dies, decapitated whilst being run to the hospital by a drugged Peter, Annie unintentionally assigns the blame on her son. Her relationship with her son is already marked by an emotional gap that is very clear from the beginning of the movie: Peter and Annie don't share meaningful conversations, like she does with Charlie, and Peter only seems comfortable talking with his father, Steve (Gabriel Byrne).



Figure 17 - *Hereditary*: Peter talking to Steve (08:10)
(Treated by the author: +20% brightness)



Figure 18 - *Hereditary*: Peter talking to Annie (25:38)
(Treated by the author: +10% brightness)

Just from Peter's reactions to having to talk to both his parents, it is obvious that he is comfortable speaking to Steve: he smiles, doesn't shift his position, and appears relaxed; While talking to Annie, he doesn't go beyond the door at her office, his posture is slouched, his hands are in his pockets, almost as if he is reticent to speak to her. Steve also makes a point to look at Peter when they're speaking, he searches for eye contact, as assurance that he is being listened to and is listening as well. Annie doesn't even look up from the model she is working on, signaling to her disinterest in Peter.



Figure 19 - *Hereditary*: Steve talking to Peter (08:11)
(Treated by the author: +20% brightness)



Figure 20 - *Hereditary*: Annie talking to Peter (25:41)

Instead of seeking comfort from her family after Charlie's death, Annie furthers the gap between them, especially with Peter. This gap that is forming between Peter and her mother is aural and visual in the editing of the film. After Annie finds Charlie's decapitated body, the scene cuts, with Annie screaming and crying in the background sound, to Charlie's decaying head on the side of the road. Without breaking the sound of crying, it cuts once again to Annie on her bedroom floor, kneeling and being comforted by Steve. Peter stands in the hallway alone, expressionless.



Figure 21 - *Hereditary*: Annie being comforted by Steve (37:50) (Treated by the author: +20% brightness)



Figure 22 - *Hereditary*: Peter in the hallway, listening to Annie's cries (38:35) (Treated by the author: +55% brightness)

The scene cuts away immediately, without breaking the sound of Annie's anguished cries, to the Charlie's funeral. With the casket in the middle of the shot, Annie and Steve stand on one side, Peter stands away from them, once again, expressionless. Even after the funeral, Peter doesn't mix with the people in the wake. Annie is alone, apparently sleeping, Steve is walking around, talking to people, Peter stands behind a glass, watching everything from a distance, signifying the alienation and isolation he feels and is about to experience for the rest of the film.



Figure 23 - *Hereditary*: Charlie's funeral (38:38)



Figure 24 - *Hereditary*: Peter at Charlie's wake (39:14)

Annie's disinterest in Peter's well-being is more notable in a scene where Peter comes back from school. Unaware of Annie's presence inside the parked car, Peter is shown to be gathering courage to enter his own home. Annie's disinterest to seeing her son hurt and afraid to go inside his own home is heartbreaking, as she no longer has the need to offer him the comfort and the care that a mother would normally have. Although Annie has been estranged from Peter throughout the whole movie, she admits in a conversation with Joan, that this has been a recurrent theme in their relationship. When Joan asks her about the relationship with her son, Annie shows signs of guilt and regret with its degrading state. She recalls an incident that happened a couple of years back, when, while sleepwalking, she doused herself, Peter and Charlie in paint thinner. When she woke

up, she had a box of matches in her hand, and as she struck one of the matches, Peter woke up and started screaming. Even though the incident took place years ago, Annie is still extremely defensive, as portrayed by Toni Collette's facial expressions, almost as if it was ridiculous the thought or insinuation that she would ever harm her own children.



Figure 25 - *Hereditary*: Annie's face contorted while she talks about her sleepwalking attempt to kill Peter and Charlie (53:46)

This defensive stand completely disregards the thought that Peter is obviously traumatized by waking up to his mother trying to burn them alive. Yet Annie blames him for their continually disappointing relationship, saying that he always held this situation over her.

It appears that for Annie, every negative thing that happens, is someone else's fault, and there is a parallel between her relationship with Peter, and her relationship with Ellen. This projection that Annie makes in familial relationships, originated in her own relationship with her mother. Jung writes "All her [the daughter] instincts are concentrated on the mother in the negative form of resistance and are therefore of no use to her in building her own life" (Jung, 1980: 91).

3.1.2. *Midsommar*

Contrary to *Hereditary*, in *Midsommar*, the mother archetype extends from the conventional figures associated with motherhood. The film focuses on Dani Ardor and how she navigates the Hårga community, transforming from a simple visitor to the May Queen, mother of crops, an important figure in the cult's culture. Dani's role in the pagan cult is foreshadowed from the very

first shot in the film, which is of a painting depicting the most important moments in the film, with special emphasis on Dani, dressed in a pink jacket and a long blue skirt.

This opening mural was painted by Mu Pan, a contemporary artist, described by Aster as “one of my favorite contemporary artists, [Mu Pan,] a modern [Hieronymus] Bosch.” (Beresford, 2019). The influence from Bosch is clear, taking into account paintings like “The Garden of Earthly Delights”, painted between 1490 and 1500. Bosch’s painting’s theme is “the fate of humanity”, organized in three distinct panels: the left panel with “God presenting Eve to Adam” in Paradise, the middle panel, a continuation of Paradise “through the use of a single, continuous landscape with a high horizon line”, depicting the concept of sin in various ways, and the right panel depicts punishment in Hell as the only fate for humanity (Silva Maroto, 2016). Unlike “The Garden of Earthly Delights”, the mural painted by Mu Pan follows the opposite flow of Bosch’s panels, with death being in the first panel, then following, from left to right, the journey of Dani and her friends’ transformation by the hand of the Hårgas.



Figure 26 - *Midsommar*: First shot of the film (00:25)

The second shot of the movie that foreshadows Dani’s role as May Queen is the shot of her parents’ bedroom where her picture is surrounded by flowers, hinting at the crown she wears after being crowned later in the film. There is also a clear contrast in colors from the opening act with the demise of Dani’s parents and sister, that lead to a worsening of her mental health issues and, subsequently, to her willingness to be integrated in the pagan cult. The greyish-blue color is

prominent in the next scenes, as the audience is shown Dani's personality and how she copes with grief, whilst trying to maintain her relationship with Christian (Jack Reynor) on good terms. Eventually the blue and gray tints are replaced by a more vibrant yellow and green, when Dani arrives to Hälsingland, in Sweden.



Figure 27 - *Midsommar*: Dani's picture with flowers (02:26)
(Treated by the author: +45% brightness)



Figure 28 - *Midsommar*: Dani is crowned May Queen
(1:45:36)

Dani's presence within the Hårga community is also foreshadowed by some of the members of the cult. Pelle (Vilhelm Blomgren) shows genuine happiness when talking to Dani about the festival they are going to attend, and appears suspiciously happy, when Dani takes interest in the former May Queen, *That's last year's May Queen*. Taking a brief pause, he looks over at Dani fondly and adds, *You know, I'm very, very glad you're coming*.

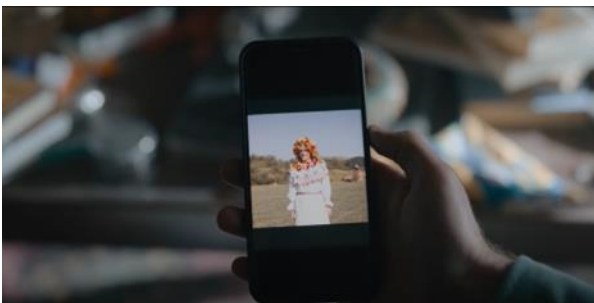


Figure 29 - *Midsommar*: Pelle shows Dani the former May Queen (21:11)



Figure 30 - *Midsommar*: Pelle is happy Dani is going to Hälsingland (21:17)

Furthermore, upon arriving in Hälsingland, every single outsider is greeted by a simple Welcome, except Dani, who is greeted by Father Odd (Mats Blomgren), an elderly of the Hårgas, with a hug and a warm, Welcome home. Looking directly at Dani, Father Odd adds *We are so very happy to have you*, not making visual contact with the rest of the guests. He also hugs Dani the same way he hugs Pelle, so it can be stated that perhaps he considers her to be part of their family already.



Figure 31 - *Midsommar*: Father Odd hugging Dani (35:43)

Dani is included by Hårgas in many of the rituals and day to day chores. One of the rituals is the dance with which the cult chooses their May Queen: several girls, after drinking a drugged tea, dance until they drop to the floor, and the last one standing is crowned the May Queen, given a place of honor at a feast, and then is taken to perform a ritual to bless the harvest and the cattle. Dani's character and her journey throughout the film mirror the transformation associated with the mother archetype, as are "various vessels such as the baptismal font, or to vessel-shaped flowers like the rose or the lotus" (Jung, 1980: 81). Flowers are a very recurrent motif throughout the film, with a special emphasis on flowery themes in clothing and decoration as the story gets closer to an end, symbolizing the culmination of the changes and the rebirth of Dani's spirit.



Figure 32 - *Midsommar*: Dani wins May Queen (1:43:44)



Figure 33 - *Midsommar*: Dani's dress as May Queen (2:05:16)

Her final role of May Queen can be seen as a mythical role of a mother, as she is associated with "fertility and fruitfulness" (Jung, 1980: 81), and Jung finds it possible that "there are what might

be termed mothers in a figurative sense. To this category belongs the goddess (...) Mythology offers many variations of the mother archetype” (Jung, 1980: 81).

However, Dani is not the only figure of the mother archetype present in the film: all of the female Hårgans appear to behave following a cultural code imposed by their religion, which is mainly focused on nurturing and caring for each other. Throughout the film, the audience is continuously being shown how the Hårgans function as a society, what their beliefs are, and who performs in the highest positions within them. Women in the Hårga occupy all sorts of work posts, from simply cooking all the meals seen in the film and doing laundry, with characters such as Maja (Isabelle Grill) and Inga (Julia Ragnarsson), to recognizing the new May Queen and allowing outsiders to mate with their women as well, with the two elder women Siv (Gunnel Fred) and Irma (Anki Larsson), always holding a position of empathy and caring toward every member of their community. Jung explains “The qualities associated with it [the mother archetype] are maternal solicitude and sympathy; the magic authority of the female; the wisdom and spiritual exaltation that transcend reason; any helpful instinct or impulse; all that is benign, all that cherishes and sustains, that fosters growth and fertility.” (Jung, 1980: 82). Female Hårgans as a collective and, eventually, Dani act as the figure of the mother in *Midsommar*, which is in theme for the film since it is said by Pelle that *Everybody sort of does everything together*. This statement is supported by most scenes in the film. However, there are two that directly link to “the qualities of maternal solicitude and sympathy” (Jung, 1980: 82). One of the scenes shows Christian having forced sexual relations, as he is under the influence of various drugs, with Maja, while several of the Hårga women watch and moan along with her. The second scene, shows Dani, crying and throwing up, after finding out that Christian is cheating on her. However, for the first time in the film, she is held and cared for by the Hårgan women, that allow her to scream and cry, even joining in.



Figure 34 - *Midsommar*: Christian in the mating ceremony
(2:00:57)



Figure 35 - *Midsommar*: Dani with the Hårgan women
(2:00:09)

The latter scene is the perfect contrast to how, earlier in the film, both Christian and the editing of the film would not allow Dani to express her emotions in the same way she does with the Hårgans. When Dani finds out about the murder-suicide of her parents and sister, she is in fact held by Christian while she cries, however it looks like it is an obligation for him, as he sits expressionless while hugging her. Later in the film, when Dani finds out that Christian and his friends are taking a trip to Sweden, she attempts to explain to her boyfriend that she is hurt by the fact that he did not tell her about it. Yet Christian treats this argument as if Dani is attacking him, even though she is not. Dani has an emotional dependency on Christian, which she fears may be driving him away, as she explains to a friend, *I lean on him constantly for support (...) What if I need him too often and it becomes a chore?* This can be seen by the way she behaves around and with him, always apologetic, even when she doesn't have to be, as indicated by the position of her hands, always together and fidgeting. In some scenes the audience is also drawn to where and how Christian is shown in the shot, as can be observed when Dani confronts him about the omission of his trip to Sweden. Dani and Christian are both in frame. However, he is in the reflection of the mirror, with a lamp on either side of him, drawing attention to him in this scene, signifying the inevitable rupture that will happen later.



Figure 36 - *Midsommar*: Dani and Christian in the mirror (14:50) (Treated by the author: +40% brightness)

Regarding the editing of the film not allowing Dani to express her emotions, there is a key moment after the Ättestupa, the sacrificial suicide of two elder members, when Dani, obviously upset and disturbed by the violent ritual, and perhaps still attempting to navigate the unresolved grief connected to her family's death, walks away to get a moment alone, not allowing herself to cry until she is alone. When she finally allows herself to cry, the film only allows her one sob and then the scene is cut abruptly. Even though the audience is aware of her feelings, the editing does not allow it to be shown too much before cutting to Hårgans setting up the stage for the next communal reunion, therefore not allowing Dani to express herself, contrary to the way she then expresses her pain with the group of Hårgan women.

3.1.3. *Beau is Afraid*

In *Beau is Afraid*, however, Aster allows its characters to display emotion with an anxiety inducing purpose. Beau is shown throughout the film as someone who is extremely anxious, perhaps depressed, and with an emotional attachment to his mother, Mona. The emotional attachment theme is clear from the very first second of the film, as well as is the feeling of unease that becomes recurrent throughout, both the film and Beau's life. The film begins with Beau's birth, from his point of view, while his mother nervously yells at the doctor. After an appointment with his therapist, Beau is shown to be walking through a world that, as is revealed to the audience later in the film, is constructed by his mother. Beau's first phone call to his mother is to inform her that he

will not be able to meet her for the anniversary of his father's death. This phone call allows the audience to join Beau in his anxious state of mind while talking to Mona. When explaining that his keys were stolen from his door, therefore keeping him from catching his flight, the camera moves closer and closer to Beau, as he attempts to answer Mona's questions. After Beau explains that he is still at his apartment, Mona points out that his flight is in an hour, and her voice tone changes abruptly after a small pause, which alarms Beau and makes him visibly nervous, as he keeps repeating that the keys were stolen. This invokes a sense of doom for Beau, and for the audience, from the beginning of the movie.



Figure 37 - *Beau is Afraid*: Beau nervous after Mona's tone change (19:14)

Beau's apartment mirrors his submissive personality, with neutral colors and no decoration that could provide some information regarding his personality. Mona's house, however, is bigger and has a cleaner aspect to it. It is also very modern, with a lot of natural light and the walls appear to be filled either with art or pictures of Beau and Mona. One of the techniques Aster uses in *Beau is Afraid*, as he does in *Hereditary* and *Midsommar*, is foreshadowing through symbols and moments, some more obvious than other. While talking about Mona to his therapist, played by Stephen McKinley Henderson, he writes the word 'GUILTY' on his notepad, foreshadowing the trial Beau goes through at the end of the film. As the audience finds out, Beau's life is being meticulously supervised by Mona, who infiltrates people in his life, as well as taking control of where he lives and who he is surrounded by. Beau is confronted with this fact when he walks around Mona's

house and discovers a picture of him taken from surveillance footage from when he was held captive at Grace (Amy Ryan) and George's (Nathan Lane) house, displays of the premade food he eats at the beginning of the film, the housing project where he lives, a sign advertising security cameras, which the audience knows to have been used to spy on Beau, and a picture of Mona made up of employees from her company MW (for Mona Wassermann)⁵. This is Aster's most direct visual technique of saying that Beau's life is controlled by Mona in every way, since everyone in his life works for her. This technique is paired with the audio of the film, first when the voiceover at the funeral says *And Mona, who was a devoted mother to her sole surviving son, Beau, whom she loved so deeply, and who has elected not to be present today* (2:04:57); and secondly, where the song "Everything I Own", sung by Bread, can be heard:

You sheltered me from harm	And I would give anything I own	
Kept me warm, kept me warm	I'd give up my life, my heart, my home	
You gave my life to me	I would give everything I own	
Set me free, set me free	Just to have you back again	
The finest years I ever knew		(Gates, 1972)
Were all the years I had with you		

Every audio clue hints at Mona's state of mind regarding her relationship with Beau: she feels as if he "elected not to be present" at her fake funeral, when it was in fact not a choice made by him, simply an unfortunate chain of events that did not allow him to be present; and the song choice hints at what Mona feels like Beau should be feeling, since it is the way she feels as she gave up everything for him.

⁵ Mona's picture in the film, resembles *Myra*, a 1995 painting of Myra Hindley, an English serial killer, that raped and murdered five children (ages ranging from 10 to 17), known as the Moors murders, along with her boyfriend Ian Brady, between the years of 1963 and 1965. The painting, by Marcus Harvey, is made up of an infant's white, grey and black handprints, to reproduce Hindley's mugshot. Much like Beau and Mona's relationship, Hindley was obsessed with Brady, which lead her into a life of brutal crimes, with a legacy as a serial killer for almost 60 years. Mona and Myra also share similarities regarding their name, composed by 4 letters.



Figure 38 - *Beau is Afraid*: Beau looks at the surveillance picture of him (2:06:37)



Figure 39 - *Beau is Afraid*: Advertising sign that reads "Your security has been our business for 40 years" (2:07:06)

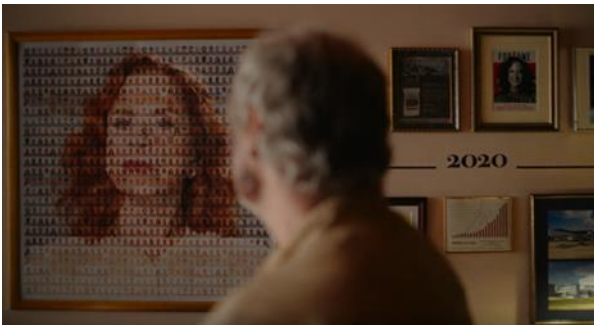


Figure 40 - *Beau is Afraid*: Beau examines Mona's picture made up of the faces of her employees (2:08:35)



Figure 41 - *Beau is Afraid*: Close up on the employees' pictures, where Roger, Elaine and other employees are recognizable (2:09:03)

Aster's preference for foreshadowing symbols and scenes extends to other scenes, such as the one where, on his way home after his therapy session, Beau walks by a small child, playing with a boat in the water. When the child is approached by his own mother, berating him for leaving her side and taking the controls away, the boat tips over, mirroring Beau's boat tipping over when he is considered guilty at his trial. Once Beau arrives at his mother's house after the funeral, there is a statue similar to the small one he got for Mona at the beginning of the film, looking over him as if it is judging him for arriving late to the funeral.



Figure 42 - *Beau is Afraid*: A boy is pulled by his mother (left), his motorized toy boat tips over in the water (07:16)



Figure 43 - *Beau is Afraid*: Statue at Mona's house looking over Beau (2:03:57)

Mona's presence in Beau's life feels suffocating and claustrophobic, and his fate is decided by Mona from the beginning of the film. Mona is a figure of the "Terrible Mother" archetype that Jung describes as the mother "who devours and destroys, and thus symbolizes death itself." (Jung, 1967: 540). He recalls a case where a woman, just like Mona, "kept her children tied to her with unnatural love and devotion." (Jung, 1967: 540). Mona clearly keeps Beau from living his own life, from a very young age. She instigates in Beau a fear of sexual relationships as a whole, telling him that his father died at the exact moment of his conception, evidently causing Beau to be alone and without the presence of another female role in his life, "The mother apparently possesses the libido of the son (the treasure she guards so jealously), and this is in fact true so long as the son remains unconscious of himself." (Jung, 1967: 589). When Beau reconnects with his childhood crush, he becomes conscious of himself, as he, although uncertain, has sexual relations with Elaine (Parker Posey). Elaine can be looked at as a mother herself, since she is the reason behind Beau's sudden aware consciousness. She, along with Mona, belongs to Jung's dual-mother motif and this "suggests the idea of a dual birth. One of the mothers is the real, human mother, the other is the symbolical mother; in other words, she is distinguished as being divine, supernatural, or in some way extraordinary." (Jung, 1967: 532). Mona's presence and control over Beau and Elaine is felt even in this intimate and transformative moment through the background song Elaine chooses, "Always Be My Baby" by Mariah Carey. The lyrics of this song, paired with the visuals of the scene, accentuate the awkwardness of the situation, as the song says:

We were as one, babe
For a moment in time
And it seemed everlasting

No you'll always be a part of me
I'm part of you indefinitely
Boy don't you know you can't escape me

That you would always be mine
Now you want to be free
So I'm lettin' you fly
'Cause I know in my heart babe
Our love will never die

Oh darlin' 'cause you'll always be my baby
And we'll linger on
Time can't erase a feelin' this strong
No way you're never gonna shake me
Oh darlin' cause you'll always be my baby

(Carey et al., 1996)

Both “Everything I Own” and “Always Be My Baby” have a running theme of belonging to someone else, the inability to escape and to be set free. However there are some controlling subtones to it when the songs are applied to *Beau is Afraid*, in lines such as “I would give everything I own / Just to have you back again” (Gates, 1972) and “No you'll always be a part of me / I'm part of you indefinitely / Boy don't you know you can't escape me” (Carey et al., 1996). Both songs are used in a scenario where Beau is the main focus of the shot, when he makes groundbreaking discoveries about himself and his life, as if he is being serenaded by his mother throughout these changing and significant moments.

After climaxing, Beau realizes that his mother had been lying to him his own life, since he did not die. This is a major turning point for Beau, as he is capable of standing up for himself when Mona confronts him about their relationship, by using voice recordings of his therapy sessions. Before Mona is able to finish telling Beau that she hates him, he strangles her enraged. Beau seems genuinely disturbed by his own actions, as this is a clear sign of rupture in their relationship. This rupture carries the weight of their attachment to each other, “the violence of the separation is proportionate to the strength of the bond uniting the son with the mother” (Jung, 1967: 518). However, it also indicates how much control Mona had on Beau’s unconscious and personality, “and the stronger this broken bond was in the first place, the more dangerously does the “mother” approach him in the guise of the unconscious.” (Jung, 1967: 518).

4. Freud and Religion

According to Sigmund Freud, an individual's behavior and personality is influenced by the conscious, preconscious and the unconscious mind. As written in "The Unconscious", the conscious refers to "conscious mental acts, such as ideas, purposes, resolutions and so on" (Freud, 1981c: 168). As per Freud's essay "The Ego and the Id", the state of consciousness is "characteristically very transitory", as something that is "conscious now is no longer so a moment later" (Freud, 1986: 14). Although the conscious mind is important to Freud, the psychoanalyst focuses mainly on the unconscious mind and what techniques to use in order to decode it best. Freud states, in the same essay, that there are "two kinds of unconscious – the one which is (...) unconscious only descriptively, not in the dynamic sense, we call preconscious; we restrict the term unconscious to the dynamically unconscious repressed" (Freud, 1986: 15). Even though the preconscious is considered to be part of the unconscious, it sits closer to the conscious mind than to the unconscious mind, as it applies to every thought, idea and wish that is unconscious but can be moved in to awareness. The unconscious then becomes everything that is purposely, or not, repressed. Freud writes in "The Interpretation of Dreams", "Everything conscious has an unconscious preliminary stage [E.g.: the preconscious]; whereas what is unconscious may remain at that stage (...) The unconscious is the true psychical reality" (Freud, 1981a: 612-613).

According to the essay "The Ego and the Id", Freud believed the human psyche, both the conscious and the unconscious mind, to be divided into three hypothetical parts: the ego (reality), the superego (morality) and the id (instincts). The ego is "that part of the id which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world (...) The ego represents what may be called reason and common sense" (Freud, 1986: 25), as it derives from the id and acts on it, while balancing these unconscious needs with the pressures of the outside world; the superego "is less firmly connected with consciousness" (Freud, 1986: 28) and it represents "the outcome of two highly important factors, one of a biological and the other of a historical nature" (Freud, 1986: 35), meaning it holds the ability to distinguish the wrong and right based on the moral ideals and standards acquired by parents and society; the id "which contains the passions" (Freud, 1986: 25), harbors "residues of the existences of countless egos" (Freud, 1986: 38), thus containing all of the unconscious needs, desires and emotions.

Given that Freud's theories and beliefs are related to the human mind, they become relevant when analyzing Aster's films, especially when it comes to religion and the way it affects and is affected by believers. Freud did not consider himself to be affiliated with religious beliefs. He writes about himself in "Totem and Taboo", identifying himself as "an author who is ignorant of the language of holy writ, who is completely estranged from the religion of his fathers – as well as from every other religion" (Freud, 1981b: xv). Although Freud is nothing but familiar with religions and their language, this gap between the psychoanalytic and religion is explored throughout his work, such as the essay "The Future of an Illusion", where he maintains the same perspective: "religion is comparable to a childhood neurosis" (Freud, 1981e: 53).

Aster uses Freud's beliefs regarding religion and the structure of the mind in his feature films as a way to explore the human mind. The most obvious representations of religion and mental health issues being seen in *Hereditary*, with the cult that worships Paimon and the family's collective declining mental health, and *Midsommar*, with the Hårgan community and Dani dealing with grief and acceptance. In *Beau is Afraid*, albeit subtler than in *Hereditary* and *Midsommar*, there are also themes regarding family pressure relating to religion and the toll this takes on Beau, as well as his symbiotic relationship with his mother.

4.1. *Hereditary*

Freud's theories about the human mind are relevant when analyzing Aster's films, as they have the evolution of the mind as a focal point. Despite being heavily focused on family relationships and the evolution of a family affected by grief, Aster's *Hereditary* maintains its connection with the horror genre by using the element of a cult and their practices. Although the Graham family has no knowledge of the cult of Paimon until the third act of the film, their lives are shown to be moderately controlled by the cult, once led by Ellen, Annie's mother. From the beginning of the movie, it is clear that Annie has trauma, mainly related to her own mother, who she describes as manipulative. After going through Ellen's boxes, Annie makes the shocking discovery that her mother was part of the group that worships the demon King Paimon, and Aster hints at a more important role within the group, showing pictures of Ellen in a white dress, being covered in gold coins by the other members. The fact that Ellen is in all-white clothing also suggests Leigh's high role, as the color white is associated with the promise of peace and beginnings.



Figure 44 - *Hereditary*: Ellen (in white) being covered in gold coins by other members of the cult (1:34:40)

Aster chose one of the demon kings, Paimon, using for his research the book “The Lesser Key of Solomon”, an anonymously published collection of magic spells, sorcery and mysticism. Paimon is “The Ninth Spirit (...) a Great King, and very obedient unto Lucifer” (de Laurence, 1916: 24). Aster decided to add more information about King Paimon, which he wrote himself, which appears briefly in the film when Annie is going through Ellen's belongings. It reads “When successfully

invoked, King Paimon will possess the most vulnerable host.” (1:33:39) and “King Paimon is a male, thus covetous of a male human body.” (1:33:44). This explains the chain of possessions seen throughout the movie, beginning with Charlie, the most vulnerable member of the Graham family, and eventually ending with Peter in the final scenes of the film, when he has already lost his sister, his father and his mother, who attacked him and then died by suicide in front of him. Paimon is also described as being the God of Mischief, and because of its connection to Charlie from the beginning of the film it is also associated with birds: she is seen beheading a pigeon; in the final scenes a mannequin representing Paimon, dressed with Charlie’s head, is accompanied by a caged bird. According to Freud’s essay “Repression”, it is normal for a God to be associated with an animal, either for sacrificial purposes or as a totem, “there are a multiplicity of relations between the god and the sacred animal (the totem or the sacrificial victim)” (Freud, 1981b: 147).

Paimon’s cult is not fully explored throughout the film. However, Aster makes use of the different techniques to show how present they are in the Graham family’s life and how they inevitably affect their lives. From the funeral onward, there are quick shots of members of the cult, either just looking at the main characters, like the blonde man at Ellen’s funeral that stares and smiles at Charlie, or directly interacting with them in order to steer them into the place the family needs to be for the cult to take possession of a male body, or like Joan, who befriends Annie and teaches her the incantations to allow Charlie’s spirit to possess Peter. Charlie is closely followed by the group since she is shown to be the one whose spirit can hold Paimon. However, since she was born a girl, Paimon cannot take full control of Charlie’s body. Charlie shows from the beginning of the movie the knowledge that something is different about her, when describing the relationship she had with Ellen, claiming that *She* [Ellen] *wanted me to be a boy*. Even though she does not speak of her concerns directly with Annie, Charlie is portrayed as a child that feels as if they don’t belong anywhere, due to not knowing their identity. Ellen’s insistence on using Charlie as a provisional vessel for Paimon’s spirit, makes her unable to create an identity and makes her feel alone, even within her own family. Ellen’s spirit reveals itself to Charlie further into the film, therefore assuring the girl that she is meaningful in some way. Freud writes in “Moses and Monotheism”: “it is clearly not enough to assure them that they have been chosen by the deity. The fact must also be proved to them in some way if they are to believe it and to draw consequences from the belief.” (Freud, 1981g: 111). By revealing herself to Charlie, Ellen keeps her granddaughter’s spirit believing in Paimon, making her more susceptible to the spiritualism that keeps Paimon present.

This incessant need to approach the Graham family hints at Ellen's higher position in the cult, either because she founded the cult or because she offered her entire bloodline to be exploited by King Paimon, starting with Annie's father and brother⁶. However, after knowing that King Paimon needs a male able body to possess, it is also hinted at the possibility that Annie's father starved himself so that Ellen couldn't use his body for the ritual. While talking about his brother, Annie refers that *He accused her [Ellen] of trying to put people inside of him*, which may be true. Perhaps Annie's brother wasn't schizophrenic, but was in a way sensing the evil presence of Paimon, the same way Peter does. The cult's devotion to their cause, following Ellen's orders even after she has passed away, may be explained through "what it [religion] undertakes to do for human beings." (Freud, 1981f: 161), as per Freud's lecture "The Question of a Weltanschauung". The members of the cult are promised a comfortable life, "protection and of ultimate happiness in the ups and downs of life" (Freud, 1981f: 161), mentioned from the same lecture. Therefore they are acting with an end goal that ignores the brutality of the way they behave in order to reach it.

Annie's behavior throughout the movie also hints at the possibility that, deep down in her repressed unconscious, she also knows that something has always been wrong. To explore this angle, Aster employs a scene that follows Annie's dream. In this dream, Annie watches as Peter is covered in ants, apparently dead. Suddenly, he awakens and asks Annie why is she scared of him. Annie responds *I never wanted to be your mother*. Even though Annie is shocked that she said that, she continues *I didn't feel like a mother. But she pressured me*. Annie is clearly talking about Ellen, who as it is known after watching the film wanted a male body for Paimon to take over. She goes on to admitting that she attempted to have a miscarriage but nothing worked, and that she is happy it didn't work. When Peter questions her *Why did you try to kill me?*, Annie answers *I didn't! I was trying to save you!* The scene moves at a quick pace, with shots of Peter in his bed and Annie standing in front of him, the camera always cutting back and forth between both of them. In one of the cuts, Peter and Annie are abruptly covered in what can be assumed to be paint thinner, recalling the sleepwalking episode she described Joan earlier in the film. This abrupt change in their appearance, coupled with both of them screaming and the cuts between both of them, is designed to truly assert that this is a dream and to make the audience feel uneasy, since Annie is saying hurtful things to and about her son. Annie's dream could be viewed as "a psychological structure

⁶ (Cf. page 27)

which has a meaning and which can be inserted at an assignable point in the mental activities of waking life.” (Freud, 1971: 1), meaning this dream can and will influence the way she behaves towards her emotions in life, because her unconscious fears and anxieties have now become conscious.

As mentioned before, Aster uses Annie’s job as a miniature artist as a starting point for the film to portray the idea that the Graham family is being controlled by higher powers. This turns out to be true, more obviously by the end of the film, as the cult is present in quick shots and sometimes not even fully in frame. One example of this technique is the shot where Peter is shown to be smoking at his bedroom window, unknowingly being watched by what can be assumed to be a member of the cult. The shot is focused on Peter. However, there is another presence to the left side of the shot, but only the breath condensation can be seen. Although, by the end of the movie, the cult can be seen surrounding the Graham family house, scattered across the grounds of the house in the night. It is an unsettling shot, only noticeable when rewatching the film, as the naked cult members blend with the forest around the house.



Figure 45 - *Hereditary*: Peter being watched, most likely by a member of the cult of Paimon, while smoking at his window. (22:31) (Treated by the author: +40% brightness)



Figure 46 - *Hereditary*: The cult of Paimon surrounding the Graham family house (1:46:52) (Treated by the author: +40% brightness)

4.2. *Midsommar*

All through *Midsommar*, Dani is driven away from Christian by the Hårga, both physically and emotionally, and by the end of the film, she is portrayed as one of the members, smiling as if she has finally found bliss with her new family. When exploring the group mentality with the essay “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego”, Freud analysis the genesis behind “highly organized, lasting and artificial groups.” (Freud, 1981d: 93), such as “Churches – communities of believers” (Freud, 1981d: 93). Freud believes these artificial groups are controlled by an external

force. Even though the Hårga is portrayed as a communal society, which is not the case, as there are members of the group that have control over the cult and manipulate the outsiders, such as Grandmother Siv and Father Odd, since they “prevent them [artificial groups] from disintegrating and (...) check alterations in their structure.” (Freud, 1981d: 93).

Furthermore, both Grandmother Siv and Father Odd take direct control over the decisions that eventually lead to Christian’s demise and Dani’s integration into the group. Grandmother Siv manipulates Christian into taking part of the mating ritual with Maja⁷, promising him an inside look into the ceremony, as he is writing his thesis about the Hårga. This leads to Dani finding out about the betrayal of their relationship and choosing Christian for the sacrifice at the end of the film. On the other hand, Father Odd immediately welcomes Dani to the group, embracing her as if he was welcoming her into her new home⁸. It could be possible that Pelle, whose sole job is to bring in outsiders for the sacrifices along with his brother Ingemar, has talked about Dani in great detail, to the point that Dani’s experience in the midsummer festival is controlled, in order for her to be part of the Hårga by the time the festival ends. Dani is in a severe depression and her declining mental health throughout the film mirrors the amount of attention the Hårgans provide her with, making her the perfect addition to their commune. Freud writes in “The Future of an Illusion” that “devout believers are safeguarded in a high degree against the risk of a certain neurotic illnesses; their acceptance of the universal neurosis spares them the task of constructing a personal one.” (Freud, 1981e: 44); meaning that religion acts as an escape from personal problems , and as a projection of these onto a universal unconscious shared with others going through similar personal issues. In *Midsommar*, it is possible that Dani also uses the Hårga to create a different reality for herself. Rather than being alone and dealing with the death of her family, she has found a group, or a family, that not only listens to her but also make an effort to suffer with her. With the cult she finds a replacement for all the missing elements in her harsh reality.

Much like Charlie in *Hereditary* being chosen since birth as a vessel for Paimon, Dani is also portrayed as being the chosen one to take over as May Queen for the Hårga, what the essay “Moses and Monotheism” explains: “If a people or a tribe sets out upon a great undertaking, it is only expected that one of its members (...) will be chosen for that post.” (Freud, 1981g: 18). From the

⁷ (Cf. page 35)

⁸ (Cf. page 33-34)

moment Dani is welcomed into the commune, and subsequently into the Hårgan community, she is considered and treated as the May Queen would. When first talking about the festival, Pelle openly announces that he is most excited for Dani to attend it⁹, and immediately attempts to bond with her by telling the story of how his parents died, leaving him an orphan, just like Dani, and how the Hårga took him in and took care of him as a community. Pelle only mentions this because he knows how much Dani procures security and a sense of family, that she is clearly not getting from Christian. Dani's acceptance in the Hårga allows her to push the grief and pain she still experiences from the death of her family, therefore introducing her, without her control, into the Hårga cult. Freud writes in the essay "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego": "As a rule a person is not consulted, or is given no choice, as to whether he wants to enter such a group" (Freud, 1981d: 93), much like Dani, who, given everything that happens in her life in the beginning of the film, accepts this found family that provides her with every wish and desire she unconsciously has, as the lecture "A Weltanschauung?" explains, "Religion is an attempt to master the sensory world (...) by means of the wishful world which we have developed within us as a result of biological and psychological necessities." (Freud, 1981f: 168).

Throughout the film, the Hårga community slowly integrates the outsiders, providing them and the audience with information regarding their rituals and their way of thinking. When the outsiders and the Hårga witness the Ättestupa ceremony, where two elders of the community volunteer to die by suicide after reaching the age of 72, Simon and Connie, brought to Hälsingland by Ingemar, react with shock and anger at the situation. Grandma Siv explains that it is a custom within their community, when a person reaches 72 years of age, they reach the end of their life cycle, *We view life as a circle, as a recycle. (...) Instead of getting old and dying in pain and fear and shame, we give our life. As a gesture.* Grandmother Siv mentions the name of one of the elders that sacrificed and clarifies that one of the babies that has not been born yet will carry their name. This ties in with what Pelle explains the group in a scene earlier in the film, *We think of life like the seasons*, making each season the equivalent to 18 years. So the Hårga believe in a continuity in life within their community, or as Freud writes in "Totem and Taboo", "a sensation of 'eternity', a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded" (Freud, 1981b: 64). By providing this belief of a limitless and eternal life, the Hårga find comfort in knowing that their spiritual life does not finish with the end

⁹ (Cf. figure 30, page 33)

of their physical life, as “The Future of an Illusion” states: “religious ideas have arisen from (...) the necessity of defending oneself against the crushingly superior force of nature” (Freud, 1981c: 21).

The Ättestupa ceremony is the first instance in the film where it is clear that the Hårga doesn't know that these practices are not conventional and accepted in society. When faced with the horror and shock Connie and Simon demonstrate, Grandma Siv asks Ingemar if he did not warn them about the ceremony. This first poses the question of why it was necessary to warn the outsiders about the rituals and ceremonies performed by them. However, all of the Hårga appear confused by these horrified reactions, given that amidst their community it is a rule, a custom, and everyone's destiny. Essentially, this pagan religion could be recognized as being part of “The religions of mankind must be classed among the mass-delusions (...) No one, needless to say, who shares a delusion ever recognizes it as such.” (Freud, 1981b: 82), as described in “Totem and Taboo”. The Hårga does not recognize any differences from their way of thinking and that of the outsiders, or even identify as a cult, since their way of life is all they have ever known and identified as psychological fulfilling.

The cult is also shown in the film to use a variety of natural hallucinogenic drugs to connect with one another and with the nature around them, such as magic mushrooms, which can cause a distorted sense of place and time, and in Dani's case, provoke panic and paranoia. While the rest of the Dani's group function well under the influence of this drug, Dani's unconscious anxieties are triggered by the mention of the word ‘family’, clearly reminding her of the recent tragedy. When Dani runs into a dark bathroom, she looks in the mirror, watches as her face becomes distorted, and for a second she sees the reflection of her dead sister. She then runs into the forest alone, where she falls asleep. When she wakes up, she is unclear of what day it is and for how much time she has been asleep. Throughout the film, there are several moments where it is clear to see depictions of these hallucinations from Dani's point of view: when she becomes May Queen, she sees her dead parents in the crowd that is congratulating her; in the feast to celebrate her new position she is able to feel the chair adorned with leaves and flowers breathing with her; when she is taken to perform the blessing ritual, her sister's figure with the mask over her mouth can be seen outlined in the trees behind her. The choice to subtly insert Dani's family in the vegetation and

even in the crowds at Hälsingland, act as a way of implying that they are present in her unconscious mind at all times.



Figure 47 – *Midsommar*: Dani looking in the mirror, her face distorted, and her sister's reflection in the mirror (32:14)



Figure 48 - *Midsommar*: Dani's sister's silhouette on the trees, in the left upper corner (1:49:32)

The use of drugs by the Hårga can also be seen as a method to disorient the outsiders, as they plan to use them as sacrifices in the festivities. This fabricated state of drugged confusion and ignorant bliss is similar to the state of “hallucinatory confusion” Freud writes about when talking about religion in “The Future of an Illusion”: “it [religion] comprises a system of wishful illusions together with a disavowal of reality, such as we find (...) in a state of blissful hallucinatory confusion” (Freud, 1981e: 43). Of the group of outsiders, only Simon and Connie appear to be disturbed by the Ättestupa, causing them to try and leave Hälsingland. While Dani is initially disturbed, Pelle is able to convince her to stay and to get to know his family, the Hårga. Josh, who already knew what the ritual was about, is completely unfazed and eager to take notes on everything he just saw, for his thesis. Christian is suddenly interested in writing his thesis about the midsummer traditions the Hårga celebrate, and Mark, who was not present at the ritual, is just in a state of unawareness throughout the whole film. Josh, Christian and Mark do not know they are in danger until they are either killed or trapped by the Hårga. Meanwhile, when Dani first discovers about the final tradition, the burning of the temple with every – sacrificial – gift inside of it, she is in a state of different bliss. She is no longer ignorant regarding the violence that was inflicted on her friends, yet she chooses to ignore that due to how psychologically free and how at peace she feels, now that she gets to choose to kill Christian in the fire. The final scene of the movie shows the Hårga screaming, mimicking the pain of those inside the temple, as Dani smiles – the only scene in the film where she is smiling of happiness – finally accepting to be integrated into the Hårga.

4.3. *Beau is Afraid*

In *Beau is Afraid*, Aster steers away from the violence of cults and their mentality and instead chooses to explore symbiotic relationships, like that of Beau and Mona. This film is particularly interesting to delve into when Freud's theories are taken into consideration. As was explored before, Mona holds control over Beau's life to an extent that even himself is not capable of grasping until the end of the film. She takes advantage of the anxious personality she created and knowingly forces him to be dependent on her. Guilt is also a major theme throughout the film, which Freud writes extensively about in "Civilization and Its Discontents", recognizing it as a tactic for religions to control their believers, "Religions, at any rate, have never overlooked the part played in civilization by a sense of guilt." (Freud, 1981e: 136). As mentioned before, Beau is portrayed as being this individual dealing with great anxiety, stemming from his relationship with his mother. For example when he is not able to leave his apartment and misses his flight to go meet her, Mona behaves in a way that makes Beau feel uneasy¹⁰, implying that it is his choice and decision to not meet her. This state of uneasiness experienced by Beau is explained by the same essay, where it reads "there are types of patients who are not aware of their sense of guilt, or who only feel it as a tormenting uneasiness, a kind of anxiety, if they are prevented from carrying out certain actions." (Freud, 1981e: 135).

Furthermore, Aster's storytelling is often reliant on foreshadowing moments and elements, such as the one in the first scene with Dr. Friel¹¹. The therapist's action in this scene comes regarding Beau's answer to his question of how he is feeling about going home. When Beau reluctantly tells him that it has been several months since he has been home, Dr. Friel asks him if he feels guilty about that, to which Beau has no answer, making it obvious that he feels guilty about not visiting his mother for several months. Beau's sense of guilt only heightens as the film moves forward. After discovering that his mother supposedly died in a freakish accident, Beau receives a call from his mother's attorney, Dr. Cohen (Richard Kind), who tells him that despite the fact that they are bound to carry out the Jewish tradition of burying the body as soon as possible, he is postponing the burial, in order to fulfill Mona's wishes of having Beau present at her funeral. When Beau is unable to attend the funeral due to circumstances that prevent him, this absence is taken by Dr. Cohen and Mona as a choice, therefore guilt tripping Beau and making him feel as though he has

¹⁰ (Cf. example in pages 37-38)

¹¹ (Cf. page 38)

failed as a son. As previously mentioned, Mona holds control over Beau's life, influencing his thoughts and actions. Freud answers the question of why Beau allows Mona to control him (even if he doesn't fully recognize it), in the essay "Civilization and Its Discontents", when he writes "there is an extraneous influence at work, and it is this that decides what is to be called good or bad. (...) he must have had a motive for submitting to this extraneous influence. Such a motive is easily discovered in his helplessness and his dependence on other people, and it can best be designated as a fear of loss of love." (Freud, 1981e: 124). Mona is this "extraneous influence" and Beau only behaves the way he does around Mona and in his life because he is afraid of losing her, as she has been his only constant in life.

Mona also takes over Beau's sexual instincts, suppressing them by telling him that his father died at the moment of his conception. The first time Beau acts on these instincts with Elena, his fears become real, since even though he didn't die, Elena does, taking on this stone-like appearance¹². However, his sense of guilt overcomes him before he climaxes, as he shouts *Stop!* several times, begging Elena to cease her actions. Even though he thinks Mona is dead, he still feels guilty about doing something that she has warned him not to do, as explained in the same essay "a person feels guilty (devout people would say 'sinful') when he has done something which he knows to be 'bad'. (...) even when a person has not actually *done* the bad thing but has only recognized in himself an *intention* to do it, he may regard himself as guilty" (Freud, 1981e: 124). It could be argued that Beau is simply afraid, hence the film's title, of dying the same way his father died too, but with the location being Mona's bedroom, and the song playing in the background invoking this sense of breaking free from someone's love, it could be that Beau is being reminded of his mother and her warnings as well¹³.

Eventually when Mona confronts Beau about his sessions with Dr. Friel, his worst fear becomes a reality. His words during the sessions are twisted by Mona, who accuses Beau of not being grateful for the love she has forced herself to give him, and she breaks down and tells him that she hates him. As has been established, Mona is the motive for Beau's sense of guilt, and this is why he depends so much on her. So this confession of hate is, for Beau, a punishment for his misunderstood words. Although they have a dependence on each other, Beau acknowledges that

¹² (Cf. pages 41)

¹³ (Cf. page 41-42)

he needs Mona far more than Mona need Beau. Freud writes in “Civilization and Its Discontents”, “If he loses the love of another person upon whom he is dependent, he also ceases to be protected from a variety of dangers. Above all, he is exposed to the danger that this stronger person will show his superiority in the form of punishment.” (Freud, 1981e: 124).

Mona’s punishment for Beau also extends into his view of himself. Throughout the whole film, Beau acts as if Mona is the only one that behaves according to her dependency on him, acting as if he is above her, not answering the phone when she calls, and according to her, complaining about the way Mona loves him. When he is considered guilty in the final scenes of the film, Beau is shown to have this resolved look in his eyes, his face relaxes and he stares into the water, as if he is disappointed in himself for confirming Mona’s view of him.

Conclusion

Throughout this dissertation I have attempted to explore the psychoanalytical elements that Aster employs in his feature films. Ultimately, Aster conveys horror by exploring the human mind and by using anxiety inducing scenarios, while also adding supernatural elements and extreme plots to the film's stories.

With this dissertation, I was able to demonstrate how Aster places the family component in the center of each of his feature films. However, instead of portraying the family as a safe and reliable haven for the characters in the films, he decides to blame the family structure for the downfall of his characters. In *Hereditary*, the presence of Ellen and Annie as maternal figures only causes the ruin of the Graham family, as they are exposed to the Paimon cult. In *Midsommar*, Dani is seduced by the idea of a new family in the Hårga, after losing her own, which eventually leads her to lose the ability to recognize the difference between right and wrong. In *Beau is Afraid*, Beau and Mona demand so much of each other, they mainly live a life of heartbreak and anxiety, and by the end of the film, both of them lose what matters most to them, each other.

Applying Jungian and Freudian theories to *Hereditary*, I was able to determine that Aster explores the results of unresolved and generational trauma and grief. He uses the matriarchal characters, Ellen and Annie, to attribute different metaphorical meanings to the plot. Ellen overlooks the Grahams, both when she is alive and after she has passed away, and it is her death that initiates the family's brutal and horrific tear from one another. Her estranged relationship with her daughter is mirrored by Annie and Peter's alienated relationship, highlighting the way unresolved feelings can create a cycle of abuse and pain when they are not dealt with, portraying the traits of the Jungian archetype, the evil mother. The cult eventually takes complete control over the Graham family, overlooking their horrific acts to finally obtain a male body, Peter, and a suitable soul, Charlie, for Paimon. It is the tear in the family's relationships that allows the cult to take control of them, underlining the Freudian belief of how unconscious desires and fears can be used by religious external forces to exploit them for their own gain.

Similarly, in *Midsommar*, the Hårga take advantage of Dani's unresolved grief and unconscious fears to integrate her into the cult and their communal way of living. Although there is a clear transformation in her character, it can be argued that it is not a gratifying transformation for the

viewer, since Dani does not come to terms with her feelings, she simply chooses to escape them and accept the cult as her new family, symbolized by her choosing Christian to be sacrificed in the final ritual of the festival. The Hårga employ many aspects of the mother archetype, taking care of each other, and even though it is recognized as a technique by cults to attract the outsiders, they are extremely empathetic. Dani herself becomes attached to the mother archetype by winning the role of May Queen, which symbolizes fertility and renewal. Ultimately, her downfall is caused by the cult, even though the ending might appear ambiguous to some viewers.

In *Beau is Afraid*, Aster also approaches the family as the center for destruction. However, this destruction affects both main characters, Beau and Mona. Mona, who embodies the Jungian archetype of the terrible mother, fabricating an anxious life for her son, manipulating every aspect of his life, including his relationship with sexual affairs. The only time Beau engages in any sexual activity becomes a turning point for his character development near the end of the film, with the introduction of Elena, another example of the mother archetype. Beau is constantly overwhelmed by a sense of guilt, caused mainly by his mother, which is extensively highlighted by the mise-en-scène. Aster includes several moments that foreshadow the trial at the end of the film, where Beau finally comes to terms with his future, finally free from Mona and from their symbiotic relationship, illustrating just how powerful some psychological attachments are.

Overall, Aster's films are relevant to the study of modern horror films due to his unique and intricate use and manipulation of the mise-en-scène which, when combined with disturbing and devastating plots, force the audience to confront society's worse fears and to identify themselves as the ultimate monsters in horror. Moving forward, I believe Aster will continue to explore relevant themes regarding the human psyche, whether it be with the horror genre or any other genre¹⁴. His view of the human mind, both as an individual and a collective, is unique but accessible to anyone, providing some sort of catharsis to anyone that can relate to it. The writer and director especially focuses on the fact that not all endings are going to be happy or fulfilling. This focus only brings Aster's films closer to reality and, therefore, can be used as a mirror for humankind to identify what is wrong or neglected in its own unconscious mind, acting as

¹⁴ As of 2024, Aster is known to be involved with Joaquin Phoenix in a new film, this time in a western genre film, with the name of the picture still to be announced.

cautionary tales. Eventually this will force us to deal with our feelings and wishes to avoid the fate of a character from an Ari Aster horror film.

An interesting pathway to follow up on this work would be to analyze other Jungian archetype figures present in the films and explore how they relate to the known tropes in the genre, such as the Jester archetype. Another path of study would also involve a more in-depth analysis of the films using Freud's theories, for example the theories regarding anxiety and the defense mechanisms that an individual develops. I believe that this further analysis would cast more importance and draw more attention to the horror genre, as it demystifies the idea that horror is solely based on gore and jump scares. I hope this dissertation not only sheds a light on why psychoanalysis provides a better understanding of the horror genre, but also creates a bridge between the two fields of study.

Appendix

Appendix 1 - Ari Aster's feature films

Hereditary (2018)

Hereditary started off as a difficult project for Ari Aster and his team. Being a debut project, the screenplay was very difficult to sell, and “required years of development”. Aster thought “a horror film would be easier to get financed”, heavily depending on the audience and their knowledge and enjoyment of the horror tropes. However, it took years for the screenplay to sell. When Aster finally found “the ideal producing partner in Knudsen” and this company was able to sell the distribution rights to A24 (Kohn, 2018). A24 is a New York-based independent entertainment company, specializing in television and film production and film distribution. Its success can be attributed to the company's decision not to interfere with the artistic process of their directors, screenwriters, and producers, and to the style of movie and television content they distribute and collaborate in. A24 was, as Business Insider puts it, “a haven for storytellers who want little to no interference”. It is a company made up of film enthusiasts that know how to market their movies and television shows (Guerrasio, 2023). It was evident that Aster was comfortable and confident that using A24's distribution services was going to be the smartest option for his debut featured screenplay.

Aster has made it clear that horror is the genre that suits his creative needs the best. Dark and twisted themes are what keep the genre and its subsequent sub-genres alive, and the young filmmaker is interested in exploring and portraying these dark themes by creating what he calls “more existential in nature” movies. With his debut film, Aster attempts to do exactly that: “I wanted to make a serious films about grief and trauma that worked as a vivid family drama” and the nightmare that life can become if these feelings are not dealt with properly (Bishop, 2018).

Regarding his debut film, Aster recognizes that “there is a pretty explicit nod to *Rosemary's Baby*” by Roman Polanski. Both movies deal with the themes of paranoia and satanic and supernatural cults (Wloszczyna, 2018). *Hereditary* would become A24's highest grossing movie, with \$80 million at the box office, until it was surpassed by the 2022 movie *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (D'Alessandro, 2022).

***Midsommar* (2019)**

Following the success of *Hereditary*, A24 teamed up with Aster and “Knudsen and B Reel will also produce [the film]”. B-Reel is a Swedish company. (Fleming Jr, 2018). *Midsommar*’s plot was proposed by B-Reel to Aster, as he says “They pitched me an ‘Americans going to Sweden and then getting killed off’ concept” However, he did take upon some aspects of his personal life, much like with *Hereditary*. Aster confessed “At the time, I was going through a breakup that was fresh”, and he thought of a way to connect his personal life to the premise of American tourists being killed in a Swedish community (Donnelly, 2019). When confronted with questions regarding his inspiration behind the film, Aster attempts to distance himself from Robin Hardy’s folk horror movie *The Wicker Man*, from 1973. *The Wicker Man*, starring Christopher Lee, Diane Cilento and Edward Woodward, among others, follows a missing person’s investigation that leads to a Scottish isolated island, where its habitants have replaced their Christian beliefs with Celtic pagan inspired rituals. Although both movies deal with community and pagan rituals and beliefs, Aster recognizes the brilliance of the 1973 movie, “It’s a fantastic film with fantastic performances”, while attempting to take his own movie in a more surprising and different direction, and still using the exploration of Paganism as a base for avid folk horror fans, “I tried to avoid it as much as I could. I think what the movie tries to do is point to *The Wicker Man* and set up expectations native to that film, then take a left-turn from there and go somewhere surprising.” (Travis, 2019).

Regarding the name of the film, Aster says it can be pronounced “Either way”: ‘mid-so-mar’ or ‘mid-summer’(Olsen, 2019), the folk horror film had a smaller budget than *Hereditary*, but was much easier to produce than *Hereditary*, despite the warm weather days that took place during filming. Even though the film takes place in Sweden, “it was filmed on the outskirts of Budapest, the capital of Hungary”, due to it being less expensive and having fewer restrictions concerning shooting hours. Despite being shot in Budapest, Aster tried to transform the field where the filming took place, taking inspiration from “farms of the area (...) of Hälsingland” in Sweden. Even though it worked perfectly for the film’s ambiance and design, the weather in Budapest made it extremely difficult for both the actors and the filming crew to work, due to long and repeating takes (Beebe, 2020). To prepare for the film, Aster joined Swedish producer and the creator of the fictional Hårga community Patrik Andersson, and a friend of his and co-creator of the Hårga concept, Martin Karlqvist. Together, they researched Swedish folk stories and traditions, incorporating some of its

real aspects in the fictional script Aster was writing, such as the mallet used in one of the most gruesome scenes in the movie, “The mallet, we did a replica of the mallet from a museum we saw in Stockholm” (Olsen, 2019).

After some earlier screenings of the movie, the MPAA issued that the movie was to receive a NC-17 rating. Aster and his editors had to make some drastic changes to the final cut, to bring the film to an R rating. The NC-17 rating would drastically hurt the release of the film, as it would have limited the number of theatres that could take the movie upon its theatrical release and restricts people under 17 years-old to watch the movie, even if accompanied by an adult. Aster has spoken about the film’s cut that would have released under the MPAA NC-17 rating, explaining that the rating was only considered due to the exposure of graphic nudity and sexuality depicted in the movie’s final scenes. The R rating allows “adult themes, adult activity, hard language, intense or persistent violence, sexually oriented nudity, drug abuse or other elements” (*CLASSIFICATION AND RATING RULES*, 2020). Aster has also admitted that he was able to project the shock that he envisioned with the final cut of the R rated movie, however “Aster has since released a director's cut of the movie that adds almost 30 minutes, turning the 147-minute theatrical version into a 171-minute experience.” (Wilheimi, 2020).

Beau is Afraid (2023)

Two years after the success of *Midsommar*, A24 announced that they were, once again, teaming up with Aster to release a movie, titled *Disappointment Blvd.*, then changed to *Beau is Afraid*. The first release of the title was deemed to disperse attention from a script that was circulating online at the time, “To speculate, it’s likely that *Disappointment Blvd.* was always just a working title meant to obscure any guesses as to what the movie is going to be about.” (Catt, 2023). The film’s new script was inspired by one of Aster’s own short films – *Beau*, released in 2011. The director admits that the rewrite of the 2011 script left the movie sadder and, in a way, funnier. As Aster describes, “I guess it's a world in which all of your worst fears do manifest. A lot of them are things that I hope are universal, and not just specific to me.” To prepare for the filming process, Aster and his assistant directors watched Jacques Tati’s 1967 comedy, *Playtime*, “just for inspiration”. The comedic tone in *Beau is Afraid* attempts to mimic some elements of the 1967 comedy, such as the big sets, with intricate and strong background noises as opposed to scenes with a lot of dialogue. This “anxiety comedy”, as described by the writer and director, ties in with themes that

Aster has explored in other movies from his career, much like in the short-film *Munchausen*, from 2014, and *Hereditary*, from 2019. In these movies, Aster portrays intricate family relationships, especially relationships with mothers. These relationships portrayed in his films, however, do not mirror his relationship with his own mother, whom he says “is nothing like [Beau’s mother] Mona” (A.frame, 2023). The unconventional direction that *Beau is Afraid* takes left audiences and critics divided when it came to ratings. Despite that, Aster accepts that the movie benefits from rewatches to essentially cement the emotional roller-coaster it is (Travis, 2023).

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