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## A Dollhouse of Grief

Examining similarities and differences in the  
filmography of Ari Aster

Bachelor's thesis in Film Science  
Supervisor: Christer Bakke Andresen  
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## Abstract

This thesis is about Ari Aster, who is relatively new to the film scene, having released three feature length films at the time of this writing: *Hereditary* in 2018 followed by *Midsommar* in 2019 and *Beau is Afraid* in 2023. While there has been countless essays, theses, dissertations, and books written on more established writer/directors (Hitchcock, Tarantino, Scorsese, etc.), there has been minimal academic writing on the works of Aster given how little time since his debut. Thus here I seek to analyze Aster's filmography thus far. The focus will be to see if there are similarities in film style, and if it is fair to say there recurring themes and/or other narrative elements in Asters films.

## Introduction

The works of Ari Aster has often been grouped in a genre dubbed by certain critics and academics as "Elevated Horror" or "Post-Horror." What exactly classifies under this genre is not readily defined, although David Church offers some common unifying traits in *Post-Horror: Art, Genre, and Cultural Elevation* (2021): "minimalism over maximalism, largely eschewing jumpscare, frenetic editing and energetic and/ or handheld cinematography in favor of cold and distanced shot framing, longer-than-average shot durations, slow camera movement, and stately narrative pacing" (11). Indeed both *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* are grouped within what Church considers the "core corpus" of post-horror cinema. Although loose, I concur we can by these metrics group all of Aster's current filmography within this genre. I will expand upon what this means when I talk about how Aster creates apprehension and dread after the short analyses of the films. Church also argues the differences between post-horror and conventional horror films "is primarily one of tone," defining tone as constructed via creation of an overall mood in the film (11) but does not elaborate further on how tone or mood is created in post-horror films such as the works of Ari Aster. I do agree with his assertion but would expand it slightly by involving Greg M. Smith's so-called "mood-cue approach" to film analysis. To summarize simply: "Because it is difficult to generate brief, intense emotions, filmic structures attempt to create a predisposition towards experiencing emotions" (Smith 1999, 115). This is done via what Smith calls mood-cues. In the works of Aster, the mood is one of apprehension and dread, as elaborated on later, and the mood cues used to achieve this is by including elements that are uncanny or subtly wrong in some way, such as Charlie's clicking sound after her death in *Hereditary*, or the gaslighting our protagonist experiences in *Midsommar* and *Beau is Afraid*.

Asters films seems superficially very different in terms of diegesis and genre, with the only connective element being falling under the horror genre: *Hereditary* is a supernatural horror film, *Midsommar* is a folk horror film, and *Beau is Afraid* is a surrealist tragicomedy with horror elements. However, one must not look particularly deep into the narratives to find elements that occur again and again. In terms of themes: Family trauma, dysfunctional relationships, gaslighting, these are just some of the similarities astute viewers will notice when they view Aster's filmography. More subtle similarities can be found in the stylistic presentation: the way the camera moves often presents the sets as something reminiscent of a dollhouse, where the 4<sup>th</sup> wall in a literal sense does not exist, allowing the camera to truck from room to room without

cutting. This is especially interesting in *Hereditary* as Annie, the main character, works with creating miniature dioramas. In this sense the camera moves between rooms like they exist in a dollhouse, mimicking her work.



*Figure 1 and 2: The 4th wall is absent in these sets, allowing the camera to move between rooms without cutting, shown here in *Midsommar* and *Hereditary*. The films world being presented in this dollhouse-esque style is a recurring element in Aster's filmography.*

There is explicit graphic violence in all of Aster's films, though I would not cite it as a distinctive similarity between them due to how ubiquitous of a term it is, especially in the horror genre. I do consider it an interesting similarity, however, that the graphic violence is generally not the source of the audience's apprehension, at least in my experience. I will expand upon this after the individual analyses.

In the individual analyses below, I could refer to certain groups as cults. I recognize this term to be controversial and hard to define. For example, the demonic worshippers of

Paimon could be labeled as a cult, or it could simply be called a religious community. Similarly, the Hårga could be labeled as a cult, with their isolationist nature and strange religious practices, or it could simply be a family community. Aster himself does not call the Hårga community a cult (Wilkinson 2019). To spare myself the trouble of defining or justifying their existence as cults, I will not refer to them as such.

### *Hereditary: A Short Summary*

*Hereditary* was Ari Aster's first feature film, and so far the only one to feature overt supernatural elements. It is, of course, a horror film, centering around a family who inadvertently summons a demon. This debut features many of the stylistic and thematic elements that would become recurring in his following two films, such as the dollhouse approach to set design and themes of guilt, grief, and trauma. What makes *Hereditary* a great horror film is its use of creepy, almost uncanny imagery and graphic violence that still feels restrained and not gratuitous; a balancing line many a filmmaker has fallen off of. It is also highly rewatchable, rewarding the audience with hints and foreshadowing a first-time viewer could easily miss. Take the first shot of the film, for example. Here we see the outside of a tree house seen through the window of the house itself. The significance of the tree house, and why Aster chose to show this as his opening shot, is unclear. A viewer who has seen the film already, however, may notice that this is also where the final scene of the film will take place. It feels to me as if Aster is winking at the audience and saying: "This is where it begins, and where it will end." Subtle nods like these are common in Aster's work.



*Figure 3: The opening shot of Hereditary. This is where it begins.*

The shot then pans to one of Annie's dioramas showing the bedroom of Peter, which as it zooms in transforms into the actual scene taking place next. This also sets the stage for the entire rest of the film, introducing Aster's dollhouse approach to mise-en-scene.

The surface level summary of *Hereditary* is, as mentioned earlier, a supernatural horror film where a family unwittingly summons a demon. However, grief, mourning, trauma, and mental illness are the true themes of the story. The apt title reveals more than one may initially believe, hinting both at how Annie tries to prevent generational trauma and



mental illness that run in her family from being inherited to her children and how occult knowledge is usually transferred via a master/apprentice system as if from parent to (symbolic or actual) child, as observed by David Church in his analysis of the film (2021, 89). Already at the second scene in the film, Annie speaks her eulogy for her deceased mother Ellen, talking about how secretive and private her mother was. She later recounts to Charlie how Ellen would insist on breastfeeding Charlie instead of her. At a grief counseling meeting later on she recounts more of her family traumas; her father starved himself to death due to mental illness and her brother hung himself after accusing Ellen of “putting people inside him.” It’s clear that Annie carries deep-seated traumas from her upbringing and that it’s affecting how she raises her own children. It’s especially horrific for an audience member who has already seen the film, as Annie’s brothers claim of putting people inside him sounds eerily similar to Ellens demonic rituals. The family dynamic obviously deteriorates further when Charlie is accidentally killed by decapitation via telephone pole while being driven home from a party after suffering an Anaphylaxis attack from eating nuts. Annie blames Peter for the accident, while Peter points out that Charlie would never be at the party in the first place if Annie hadn’t insisted she be included against both Peter and Charlie’s wishes. This broken family dynamic takes center stage for the rest of the runtime: it leads to Annie being approached by one of the demon worshippers and convinced to do a séance which unwittingly makes her recite the demonic ritual that opens the door for the demon to enter. It leads to Steve, a psychiatrist and Annies’s husband, to distrust her and believe Annie to suffer from some sort of psychosis. When Ellen’s corpse is discovered in the attic, Steve believes that Annie was the one who exhumed it. Eventually they all die, Steve being incinerated by magic and Annie being possessed by the demon and made to decapitate herself with a piano wire, Peter is then possessed after jumping out of a window and climbs into the tree house, where the worshippers are waiting for him. Then we have the first instance of a recurring element that will also feature in the following two films, which I have dubbed the Aster Reveal. Towards the end of one of Aster’s films, usually one of the last scenes, a character will explain the motives and central plot of why the film happened. In *Hereditary*, the Aster Reveal is presented by Joan, the demon worshipper who tricked Annie into reciting the demon summoning ritual. Joan explains how the demon summoned is named Paimon, that he was initially summoned into the body of Charlie but because Paimon desires a male host they have now corrected it to Peter, which is presumably what the whole ritual was about.



Figure 4. The last shot of *Hereditary*. And here it ends.

We may here note a narrative element that will be recurring in the coming two films: There are no happy endings in Aster's films.

#### *Midsommar*, A Short Summary

Like *Hereditary*, *Midsommar* is about dysfunctional relationships just as much as it is folk horror set against a Swedish backdrop. The demon worshipping community has been swapped for a more realistic, isolationist commune in Sweden. *Midsommar's* most obvious divergence from the storytelling of *Hereditary* is the absence of any supernatural elements. In terms of style what sets the two apart is principally the mise-en-scène; *Hereditary's* dark, muted color palette with candle-lit interiors stand in stark contrast to the bright Swedish (although filming actually took place in Budapest) outdoors and brilliant white garments of the Hårga members. This approach means Aster must cede one of the horror genre's favorite elements; darkness. Fear of the dark, and more importantly fear of that which lurks in the dark is a staple of horror iconography. This tendency to derive horror from preying on humans innate evolutionary fear of darkness is something most horror films do to some extent. In the absence of imagery, the brain conjures its own imagery that might be just as, if not more, terrifying than if the imagery was shown. We perceive these events without seeing them, as Julian Hanich put it: "...the embodied subject may be invisible *in* vision, or, as well, *to* vision but is still available to perception—of which vision is only a single modality... (Hanich 2010, 119). Directing a horror film without using darkness is a challenge, which Aster rises to with flying colors. In narrative, similarities to *Hereditary* are more obvious. While *Hereditary* was about trauma suffered by a family, *Midsommar* is principally about a deteriorating relationship between two people on the verge of a breakup.

We are introduced to our main character Dani through a phone call with her boyfriend Christian. Dani's sister suffers from a mental illness and often send frightening messages or voicemails to Dani, and this time she has once again made Dani worry. As Christian tells her that her sister is just doing this for attention and that Dani can't let her sister control her life in this way, the camera shows us what has happened; Dani's sister has killed both her parents and herself via carbon monoxide poisoning. Christian

intended to break up with Dani, discussing this with his friends earlier, although he ultimately does not when he learns what happened to Dani's family. The conflict between the two remains prominent throughout the rest of the film. The film cuts to presumably a few months later, as it is no longer winter. Dani is seen in bed below a large painting by John Bauer depicting a bear and a princess. An audience member familiar with the film should see the undeniable fairy tale parallels of *Midsommar*, and this painting can be seen as functioning essentially the same as the tree house in *Hereditary*, a subtle nod to the audience about what will happen later in the film. Christian has been invited by Pelle, along with friends Mark and Josh, to visit Pelles ancestral home in Hälsingland. Dani is initially upset with Christian for not disclosing this to her, although when he passive-aggressively threatens to go home Christian manages to make Dani apologize to *him* for "attacking him".

CHRISTIAN: I really think I should just leave.

DANI: I'm not trying to attack you.

CHRISTIAN: It really feels like you are.

DANI: Well, then, *I'm* sorry. I just got confused.

Gaslighting seems to be a recurring theme in Aster's works. Gaslighting is defined by David Church as "a destructive pattern of emotional manipulation achieved by consistently undercutting a person's psychological selfhood to the point of affecting their sense of reality, especially through accusations of being mistaken, paranoid, or crazy." (Church 2021, 102). Evidently I am not the first to point out gaslighting in Aster's films. Church dedicates a sizeable chunk of his book to discuss the themes of gaslighting in *Midsommar*. He raises some good points, but also gets important parts wrong. Church remarks "...the gaslighting continues – whether in minor forms (such as Christian lying about having forgotten Dani's birthday) or the major betrayal that occurs when Christian deflowers Maja..." Framing the latter as a betrayal is not fair in how I interpret the narrative. Christian was invited in an earlier scene to "mate" with Maja, but he declined, saying he was already with someone. It is only when Christian is drugged with hallucinogenic flowers to the point of being delirious that he is guided into the chamber to inseminate Maja, and when he realizes what he has done, he flees in horror. This should be seen essentially as sexual assault: everyone should agree that a person who did not consent to "mate" with someone in a sober state yet does so when drugged has been sexually assaulted and framing this as a "betrayal" as if Christian was fully aware of what he had done downplays the seriousness of that word. Additionally, Church seems to be most focused on Christian's instances of gaslighting while downplaying the Hårga community's gaslighting, which I found exceptionally more pervasive within the film. Take for instance a later scene, where Connie and Simon wish to leave after witnessing the ättestupa ceremony, where two elderly Hårga members jump to their death from a cliff. One of the Hårga elders tries to convince Connie that Simon left for the station without her, which she doesn't believe. The elder is essentially trying to gaslight Connie into believing that Simon would leave without her.

The fact that Christian does not treat his girlfriend well, like forgetting her birthday before pretending he didn't and dismissing her when she expresses her desire to leave Hårga as well as Dani's dependence on Christian to function is ultimately exploited by

the Hårga to drive the two apart, and separate and ultimately dispose of the rest of the group. Mark is lured away and killed in the woods, and Josh is bludgeoned to death when he is caught photographing the sacred Hårga texts. In the final act of the film, the above-discussed sexual assault of Christian happens, and Dani is crowned may queen, choosing to sacrifice Christian when given the option to save her. The Aster Reveal here is presented by one of the Hårga elders, explaining why Pelle and his brothers had invited outsiders in the first place: for the ritual breeding, or “bringing in new blood” as they call it. As Christian is burned alive in the temple, Dani wails but ultimately smiles when the temple collapses, concluding her indoctrination into the group and replacing her lost family with a new one in the Hårga. Aster himself comments on the most obvious fairy tale parallel in the film: “We begin as Dani loses a family, and we end as Dani gains one. And so, for better or worse, they are there to provide exactly what she is lacking, and exactly what she needs, in true fairy tale fashion” (Wilkinson 2019).

### *Beau Is Afraid, A Short Summary*

We are again presented with a film that seems on a surface glance to be entirely different from the previous two entries apart from containing horror elements. The film is hard to even categorize in a specific genre, blending horror, dark comedy, and surrealism to the point it is difficult to point out where one genre begins and another ends. Trying to find the elusive definition of what this film is, I settled on the following: *Beau Is Afraid* is a film about a man with anxiety living in a world where everything his anxiety makes him worried about is real. Our protagonist Beau is kind and mild-mannered but suffers from paranoia and anxiety, and his mental health is not helped by living in a run-down apartment in a crime-ridden neighborhood. The short plot summary would be that Beau must go on a journey to his mother’s estate to attend her funeral. However, to illustrate what I mean by a world where every intrusive thought a person with anxiety experiences is correct, let us look at one of the scenes early on in the film. In the opening scene Beau is prescribed an anxiety medication and instructed to always take it with water. A couple of scenes later, a series of worst-case scenarios unfolds: Beau takes the pills, but his water bottle is empty. As he goes to drink from the tap he realizes that the water has been shut off for maintenance throughout the entire building. He googles the effects of taking this particular brand of medication without water and is told that taking that specific anxiety medication without water will lead to hospitalization or death in most cases. He rushes to the store across the street to buy a bottle of water, propping the door open with a phone catalogue as he lost his keys in an earlier scene. His card naturally declines, and as the cashier demands Beau pay the full price down to the cent, homeless people start swarming inside Beau’s apartment building. Beau is ultimately 5 cents too short, and the cashier calls the police. Beau rushes over to try and get back inside his building only to be locked out when one of the homeless people removes the phone catalogue propping the door open.

This series of events is absurd and would never happen in the real world. However, this surrealistic turn of events is just likely enough that we could believe them if they were to happen to us. As humans, we will naturally have thoughts and anxieties that are not fully rational. Thoughts such as “What *if* the pills I just took will kill me if I don’t drink a glass of water” or “What *if* my card declines and the cashier calls the police when I’m five cents too short of the price” are irrational thoughts that we all experience sometimes, and those with anxiety disorders like our protagonist are especially prone to

this. *Beau Is Afraid* is a film where all those irrational fears an anxious and paranoid person experience are real. The horror is derived from our sympathy with Beau and the horrors he experiences, as well as the discomfort we experience by seeing him gaslit by the world around him. The surrealism of the film stems less from the impossible happening to the highly improbable continuously happening at all times. Most of the scenes in the film *could* hypothetically happen, if the entire universe was intent on making Beau's life as miserable as possible. This assertion will prove to be not too far from the truth.

There are, however, several instances of the actually impossible occurring within the film. In the second act, when Beau is recovering from his injuries at Grace and Roger's house, he discovers a hidden camera filming him. He rewinds before fast-forwarding the footage, which rapidly moves past the present and into the future, showing scenes that will happen later, even a shot from the final scene of the film. This is the first time the film moves out of the improbable and into the actively impossible, making the audience question the validity of the narrative presentation itself. One of the defining differences that sets *Beau is Afraid* apart from *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* is the reliability of the narrator, or lack thereof. In the former films we may question the characters' motives or intentions, yet we were never led to question the narrative itself as we are in this film. The reliability of the narrator becomes even more obfuscated when we learn about Beau's relationship with his mother Mona.

Mona is absent from most of the film, with her only appearance before the last act being on the phone and in flashbacks. When we eventually meet her in the last act of the film the plot twist is revealed; Mona faked her death and orchestrated the events of the film. It seems prudent to examine Mona's relationship with her son. Mona is a presumed billionaire, the CEO of a conglomerate spanning multiple industries such as real estate, pharmaceuticals, and most importantly, surveillance. Her son, however, lives a life of squalor, eating microwave meals for dinner every day in a street where corpses are left to decompose with no one to clean it up. This begs the question of why. Although never fully explained, it seems to be implied that Mona owns the building and surrounding area as well as various brands seen throughout the film. It could be implied that it is because of Mona that Beau's living conditions are so terrible. Mona is at the end of the day, abusive towards Beau. In the first real dialogue between them in the film she immediately tries to make Beau question his sense of reality, one of the most common forms of gaslighting tactics.

BEAU: For how long? How many years from... from the beginning?

MONA: How is your head feeling? It looks like you really banged up your face. You could have a concussion. You don't feel disoriented? You know where you are?

BEAU: I'm in my house.

MONA: Actually, you're in my house, sweetheart. And my house *is* your house, which it always will be.

Throughout the film, Beau has experienced flashbacks to a vacation he had with his mother on a cruise ship in which he fell in love with a girl his age named Elaine. Elaine made Beau promise to wait for her and thus remain a virgin. Mona has told Beau that his

father, grandfather, and great-grandfather all died from a heart murmur when they had their first orgasm, an obvious lie meant to dissuade Beau from having sex. When Beau and Elaine meet again at Mona's house after the funeral, they have sex although Beau is terrified he will die from a heart murmur. He survives, but Elaine dies instead. In the dialogue above Beau is questioning whether Elaine was one of Mona's employees who worked for her from the start. This is a good question as several other characters from earlier in the film, such as Instead of answering his question, Mona pivots to questioning Beau's mental faculties in a textbook gaslighting manner. The final sentence is interesting as well, if Mona truly agreed that her house was Beau's house, she would not feel the need to correct him and say that it is indeed her house. The implication seems clear: what Mona is really saying is "This is my house, and it can be your house too, as long as you remain in my favor." In the span of this conversation alone, she switches between showing love for Beau by calling him affectionate nicknames or seemingly caring about his wellbeing, and ruthlessly berating him by telling him that he faked his love for her his entire life.

It's clear that living with a controlling and manipulative single parent his entire life has deeply affected the kind of person Beau eventually came to be. The final scene of the film is presented as a large courtroom, with Beau being put on trial for perceived slights against his mother. This serves as the Aster reveal of the film, and is another example of the actively impossible happening, as we transition from Beau steering a boat through the inside of a cave into a large stadium much bigger than what could fit inside the cave. Although this couldn't literally happen, it could be interpreted that this scene is a metaphor for Beau's true feelings about his mother; a never-ending interrogation to prove him guilty of some crime. He eventually gives up appealing to his mother and drowns when the boat he's in capsizes. As the credits roll, the people in the stadium exit while Mona wails abjectly. One could note similarities to *The Truman Show* (Weir 1998). *Beau is Afraid* feature a constructed world much the same as *The Truman Show*, albeit if it was designed to make the main character of the show as scared and paranoid as possible, and both films end with the protagonist on a boat trying to escape it. Unlike *The Truman Show*, however, we do not end with Beau escaping into the real world. Beau instead drowns when the boat capsizes, and we are instead once again treated to an ending that feels rather bitter. We can thus say that a bitter ending is a common thread throughout all of Aster's films.

### Structure of Sympathy

Now that I have discussed the films individually, it seems prudent to expand upon certain similarities I noticed in the individual analyses. To start, let us examine the relationship between the characters and the narrative, and how they ultimately share many commonalities between them. This can be demonstrated using Murray Smith's structure of sympathy: Recognition, Alignment, and Allegiance. In all films, strong characters are among the most important parts of what makes the spectator engage with the narrative and keep their attention to the screen, or in layman's terms, what makes a movie "good." Characters must be given the appearance of being real persons rather than a collection of attributes, because as Smith puts it: "we would not find ourself attracted to (and so could not become allied with) an inert bundle of traits" (Smith 2022, 82). To simplify: we need to understand (recognition) why a character acts in a certain way, even if we don't necessarily agree (allegiance) with them. Alignment in

this model means the relationship between the characters and the audience, such as what perspective or point of view the story is told from, and the information the characters have contra the information the audience has. In *Hereditary* the focal point is Annie, with the rest of the Graham family secondarily. In *Midsommar* the focal point is Dani, with Christian and his friends secondarily. In *Beau is Afraid* our focal point is Beau, and we never see anything from a perspective other than his. Who Aster chooses the audience to align and ally with becomes important when we look at the next point and furthermore, how he uses it to create horror.

### Trauma and dysfunctional relationships

It is clear by now that the archetypal Aster protagonist's actions are shaped by trauma experienced as a result of a relationship with another character, and Aster fosters the audience to have their allegiance to that character. In *Hereditary*, the trauma is something that happens on-screen in the middle of the film, this would be Charlie's death that Annie feels guilty over and drives her family apart. In *Midsommar*, Dani is easily exploited by the Hårga community and to a lesser degree her boyfriend because of her trauma instilled by her sister's murder-suicide. Finally, in *Beau is Afraid*, it becomes clear towards the end of the film that Beau's anxiety and paranoia stems from living with an abusive mother. I would argue that our allegiance is fostered by Aster to principally be with the characters who experiences trauma: Annie and Peter in *Hereditary*, Dani in *Midsommar*, and Beau in *Beau is Afraid*. It's important to distinguish between alignment and allegiance here, although they often overlap. Smith points out that other academics have argued that alignment with a character necessarily creates sympathy for that character (Smith 2022, 186). Although we understand Christian as a character in *Midsommar* our allegiance is ultimately with Dani, even though the film is presented from both of their perspectives. I bring this up to stress the important commonality between the characters we ally with: the way Aster uses them to create apprehension and dread is the same in all three films.

### Apprehension and Dread Vs. Shock and Awe

In the intro I mentioned Aster's films being grouped together in a genre called post-horror, and how in style these films are similar in how they emphasize minimalism and subtlety over the shock and awe the wider horror genre is stereotyped to be. This brings to mind Julian Hanich's distinction between Direct Horror and Suggested Horror (Hanich 2010, 83-126). I would argue that the typical horror film and especially those of lower quality that border on exploitation films has a greater focus on direct horror. We are meant to be afraid of the monster, the killer, the threat to the character lives. Direct horror is shown to the audience. It is visceral, blood and gore. Suggested horror is about concealing from the viewer. When screams are emanating from the darkness, when police discuss a mutilated victim of the killer without showing the audience, or when the camera cuts away from the action right as the killer is about to stab our heroine, that would be suggested horror. Although these tricks still work, the spectator has seen it before, and they demand something new. Ari Aster's filmography and by extension post-horror as a genre takes a new approach to horror. The goal now is to create a more subtle feeling of discomfort in the audience. Graphic violence such as depictions of decapitated heads and bodies in *Hereditary* or the broken bodies after the *ättestupa* ceremony is certainly there to cause shock and disgust in the audience, but I would argue that it is only able to affect the audience due to being used so sparingly. The main

type of horror Aster induces in the spectator is apprehension and dread. Dread, as in the audience's uncanny feeling that something terrible is going to happen, plays a larger role. Apprehension, where the audience is uncertain about what is real and what might be fake, also plays into this. One of the ways Aster does this in his films is through how he depicts malicious people or groups preying on vulnerable people via, among other things, gaslighting. A surprising similarity in narrative between all three films can thus be formulated like this: All of them feature a vulnerable person, who, after having experienced some form of trauma, is taken advantage of by a person or group to advance their own agenda. Annie by the demon worshipers, Dani by her boyfriend and the Hårga, and Beau by his abusive mother.

### Gaslighting

Gaslighting as a narrative device lends itself well to creating feelings of apprehension, and as such only becomes more and more prominent in each successive film. In *Hereditary*, gaslighting is not so much a theme as it is a subtle allusion to one. Ellen arguably gaslit her family, trying to summon Paimon into her husband and then her son, both of whom died. Then she gaslit Annie, always claiming that it was simply the mental illnesses that run in the family. *Midsommar*, as discussed, is more blatant. Both Christian and the Hårga community engage in gaslighting, and unlike the previous film, we already know Christian is lying from the start. This also sets it apart from the original *Gaslight* (Cukor 1944), where the discomfort experienced by the spectator stems from being unsure of the gaslighter's motives. While we are initially unaware of the Hårga's motives, the spectator also experiences discomfort in *Midsommar* from aware of the gaslighter's motive and thus having more information than Dani does (in the case of Christian). We are not informed of the gaslighter's motive in *Beau is Afraid* until the final act of the film, although the audience should be able to tell something is wrong right from the start. The spectator experiences discomfort due to being able to tell something is wrong with the world Beau inhabits. All of Aster's films share this element to some degree.

### Conclusion

When starting to research this thesis I was only vaguely aware of common themes and recurring elements within Ari Aster's works. After completing my research and analyzing the films in more detail I would argue it is safe to make the claim that the similarities between Aster's three films so far go beyond subtle recurring stylistic or narrative elements and instead shows a deep correlation in themes and presentation at the most fundamental level. The films arguably form a core corpus of what is being defined as post-horror or elevated horror with their focus on being unsettling and uncomfortable over the traditional shocking or scaring the audience of earlier horror films. Grief and trauma always play a large part of the narrative, as well as always featuring those who take advantage of vulnerable people who are dealing with those kinds of emotions, who ultimately reveal their motives to the audience at the end in the form of the Aster Reveal. This exploitation tends to be done to some extent by making the protagonist doubt their sense of reality via gaslighting and derives its horror from either sharing the characters epistemic hesitation over what is real and not or from the audience being aware of the manipulation and thus feeling apprehension from knowing more than the characters does. The question, then, of whether Aster will continue to adhere to this



formula in his upcoming films or break away and try something completely different remains to be seen.

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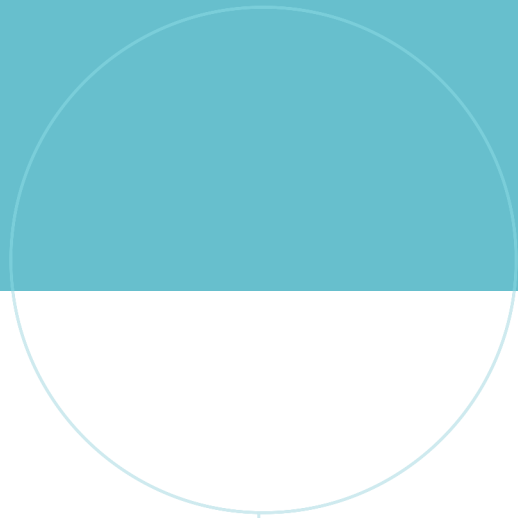
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