

From Witchcraft to Possession

A Study of 'The Witch' and 'Hereditary' in the Context of Elevated Horror

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Master Thesis

Aalborg University

May 31st, 2023

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Introduction

In the realm of contemporary horror cinema, a new breed of films has emerged, defying traditional genre boundaries and redefining the landscape of fear. Termed 'elevated horror,' this distinct subgenre has garnered significant attention and acclaim in recent years. Among the key players in this cinematic movement are thought-provoking works such as 'The Witch' (2016) and 'Hereditary' (2018). These films have become touchstones of the genre, eliciting passionate reactions from both audiences and critics.

In an article from Vanity Fair titled "This Was the Decade Horror Got 'Elevated'" (2019), the concept of elevated horror is explored within the context of the past decade's horror film landscape. The article acknowledges the use of the term to describe recent horror films that have garnered critical acclaim. However, it suggests that these films are not entirely revolutionary but rather contribute to a broader continuum of horror cinema. Additionally, the article highlights the role of Blumhouse Productions in shaping the evolution of horror movies by providing opportunities for emerging creatives to showcase their work.

Conversely, the legitimacy of elevated horror as a subgenre is called into question in a CBR article titled "Elevated Horror: The Movies of a Subgenre That May Not Exist" (2020). The article presents the argument that elevated horror is a loaded and contentious term lacking unanimous acceptance among horror movie enthusiasts. It describes the subgenre as films that eschew traditional jump-scares and excessive gore, instead focusing on psychological and emotional disturbance to unsettle even the most seasoned horror buffs. Notable examples of movies often associated with elevated horror are provided, such as "Midsommar," "The Lodge," "Us," "It Follows," "The Perfection," "Mother!," and "The Babadook."

Similarly, a thought-provoking article from Slashfilm titled "There's No Such Thing As An 'Elevated Horror Movie' (And Yes, 'Hereditary' Is A Horror Movie)" (2018) challenges the very existence of the term "elevated horror." The author asserts that filmmakers have long sought to distance their works from the horror label, given its historical marginalization within the cinematic landscape. The article further contends that marketing strategies have often mischaracterized movies with unconventional and art-house qualities under the umbrella of elevated horror. Ultimately, the author posits that horror, with its raw and unfiltered expression, remains one of the most profound forms of cinematic artistry.

While the term 'elevated horror' may be met with debate and varying interpretations, it serves as a signifier for a departure from conventional horror tropes, as well as a testament to the artistic and intellectual aspirations of these works. 'The Witch' and 'Hereditary' both exemplify this artistic evolution, presenting narratives that transcend mere scares and delve into the depths of human psyche and societal anxieties.

'The Witch' immerses viewers in the grim and puritanical world of 17th-century New England, where a family's religious devotion unravels amidst suspicions of witchcraft. Director Robert Eggers crafts a meticulously researched period piece that immerses the audience in a haunting atmosphere, combining historical authenticity with psychological terror. By exploring themes of religious hysteria, isolation, and the erosion of familial bonds, 'The Witch' challenges preconceptions of horror, infusing it with intellectual and allegorical depth.

Similarly, 'Hereditary' plumbs the depths of familial trauma and psychological horror. Director Ari Aster constructs a narrative that blends domestic dysfunction, occult rituals, and supernatural elements to create an unsettling and deeply disturbing experience. Anchored by remarkable performances, the film explores themes of grief, inherited madness, and the disintegration of the family unit. With its atmospheric tension, visual symbolism, and

unflinching exploration of human vulnerability, 'Hereditary' exemplifies the transformative power of elevated horror.

The language employed to discuss these films reflects the intricate interplay between aesthetics, subversion of expectations, and the profound impact they have on audiences. By delving into the realms of 'The Witch' and 'Hereditary,' quintessential examples of elevated horror, this paper embarks on an exploration of their narrative complexities, thematic depth, and stylistic choices that have positioned them as seminal works within the genre.

Through a close analysis of these gripping films, this study attempts to uncover the elements that define elevated horror, examining their subversive storytelling techniques, their exploration of psychological terror, and their ability to provoke introspection and unease. By delving into the intricacies of these works, the aim is to shed light on the significance and nature of 'elevated horror'.

Theory

The theoretical chapter of this paper aims to provide a conceptual framework for analyzing the genre of 'elevated horror'. Elevated horror is a term that has been used to describe a recent wave of horror films that are more sophisticated, artistic, and socially relevant than conventional horror fare. The term is controversial and contested, as some critics and filmmakers reject it as elitist, vague, or inaccurate. However, this paper does not intend to endorse or dismiss the term, but rather to explore its implications and potentialities for horror studies. The chapter will begin by reviewing the existing literature on horror film theory, focusing on the main approaches and debates that have shaped the field. Then, it will introduce some key concepts and theories that are relevant for understanding elevated horror, such as the notions of genre hybridity, post-horror, affect, the uncanny and social relevancy.

Finally, it will propose an example of how even classical horror movies have much of the same claim to social relevancy.

Horror Films

Before we approach the category of elevated horror movies, we should look at the broader category and established theory of the 'common' horror film. This is a subject that has a long history and the genre has established storytelling tropes, cinematic techniques, and ways of instilling horror in the audience. Furthermore, it is important to outline the cultural historicity of horror movies, to examine where they are now.

Horror movies have been there since the beginning of cinema, and before then it has their roots in gothic literature. Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein*, was adapted into a short silent horror film in 1910, and even before that *The House of the Devil*, regarded as the first horror movie from 1896. Horror has been a staple genre of movies since the beginning and its roots go even further back to gothic horror literature.

Among the multitude of movie genres, horror is interesting because of its contradictory mission statement, it sets out to intrigue and keeps the audience's attention by instilling an unpleasant feeling in them: "Interestingly, horror is one of the few genres that are defined in terms of its intended affect. While some genres such as the crime film, science fiction, and the western are defined by setting and narrative content, others, such as pornography, comedy, suspense and horror, are defined or conceived around particular emotional responses" (Church 3). Defining horror movies based on affect, is a point of departure from gothic literature, although the term 'horror' is sometimes used interchangeably with 'gothic' regarding literature. Horror seems to transcend the medium, which makes sense since it is defined by affect. This is further exemplified when seen in the

light of other genres; the western is defined by its setting, and crime film is defined by its narrative content.

Horror aims to create a sense of dread, shock, and terror in the audience, often by exploiting their primal fears and vulnerabilities. Horror can use various techniques to achieve this effect, such as suspense, gore, supernatural elements, psychological manipulation, and moral ambiguity. These elements will be discussed further, especially how they are utilized specifically in 'elevated horror'. Horror is a subjective experience that depends on the individual's emotional and cognitive responses to the stimuli. What may horrify one person may not affect another, and vice versa. Therefore, horror is not a fixed category, but a dynamic and evolving one that reflects the cultural and historical contexts of its production and consumption. It is also this dynamic that makes horror well-suited for hybrid genres. For example, if the setting is space, but the emotion the story is trying to instill is horror, we talk about sci-fi horror.

Trends in Horror

To better understand why we are talking about elevated horror as something new, we can demonstrate a general outline of the historicity of horror movies. The genre has evolved throughout the years, reflecting the fears and anxieties of different generations and cultures, but while certain trends were more or less popular at different times, we still see examples of all the trends to this day. Furthermore, these trends were not the only types of horror movies of their time and this list is more for a general overview of what a trend within a genre can look like, but they are still just trends and by no means monolithic.

One of the earliest trends in horror movies was the monster movie, which featured creatures such as vampires, werewolves, zombies, and Frankenstein's monster. These films often explored themes of science, religion, and morality, as well as the fear of the unknown

and the other. Some examples of monster movies are *Nosferatu* (1922), *Dracula* (1931), and *The Wolf Man* (1941). In Isabel Pinedo's "Recreational Terror: Postmodern Elements of the Contemporary Horror Film" (1996), she outlines the basis upon which the classical monster movie is built: "The narrative revolves around the monster's rampage and people's ineffectual attempt to resist it. In the end, male military or scientific experts successfully employ violence and/or knowledge to defeat the monster and restore the normative order" (Pinedo 19). In that sense, these movies had a clear dichotomy between the external evil and the innate human good.

Another trend in horror movies was the slasher film, which emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. These films focused on a masked or disfigured killer who stalks and kills a group of teenagers or young adults, usually with a sharp weapon. These films often featured graphic violence, sexual content, and a final girl trope, where the last surviving female character confronts and defeats the killer. These are films like *Halloween* (1978), *Friday the 13th* (1980), and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984).

A more recent trend in horror movies is the found footage film, which originated in the 1990s and became popular in the 2000s. These films use a documentary-style format, where the footage is supposedly recorded by the characters themselves using cameras or phones. These films often create a sense of realism, immersion, and authenticity, as well as a fear of being watched or recorded. *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *Paranormal Activity* (2007), *Cloverfield* (2008), and *REC* (2007) all utilize this creative and cheap way of presenting the content of the movie.

This leads us to the most recent wave of horror movies, which this paper is concerned with. Movies like *The Witch* (2015), *Get Out* (2017), *Hereditary* (2018), and *Midsommar* (2019) which I propose are somehow fundamentally separate in what kind of horror movie they are from the aforementioned subgenres, yet still share their DNA based on how they try

to affect the audience. This type or genre of horror movie has been called ‘elevated-horror’ by some, while others propose the more neutral but more vague term ‘post-horror’.

Elevated Horror? Post-Horror? Art-Horror?

The particular wave of horror movies starting in the 2010s is still ongoing and constantly getting discussed. While I have been using the term ‘elevated-horror’ consistently about these movies, it is imperative that I point out that this term has not solidified itself into discourse. The implication of the term is almost inflammatory because it implies that horror movies were not elevated before the 2010s. The term was coined in 2019 to describe the wave of horror movies that imbued their storytelling with metaphor and strong craftsmanship over jump scares and gore. However, some people argue that the term reduces the rest of horror to “non-elevated” status and devalues the storied history of the genre.

One of the few articles that have attempted to address and describe this problem is “Post-Horror: Art, Genre, and Cultural Elevation” (2021) by David Church. In this article, Church is a proponent of the term ‘post-horror’ although admitting that this moniker is not perfect either: “Coined in July 2017 by *Guardian* columnist Steve Rose, the term ‘post-horror’ is one of many flawed attempts to name a corpus of recent films ... whose generic overlaps with horror cinema also open onto a wider range of precursors and contemporary intertexts.” (Church 3). Church also claims that at least one of the reasons we see multiple names for this genre is the proliferation of ‘post-horror’ in Britain, while the term ‘elevated-horror’ seems to be the Anglo-American name for the same corpus of content.

This does not mean that Church dismisses the term ‘elevated-horror’ in favor of ‘post-horror’, rather each term accentuates different similarities between these movies. But neither of these names are without issues: “‘elevated’ is a more accurate descriptor for the aesthetic strategies used in these films, but ... it comes freighted with elitist biases against the

horror genre itself. Meanwhile, ‘post-horror’ is also problematic, since it could erroneously imply that these are not ‘actual’ horror films – yet its very vagueness as a term also makes it more reclaimable” (3). The aesthetic similarities between these movies are often immediately noticeable when compared to more traditional horror movies. This is also something this paper will explore in the analysis, what makes out the aesthetic of an elevated-horror movie, in terms of cinematography, editing, and mise-en-scène, and perhaps other medium-related technical aspects make up the emergent aesthetic of elevated-horror movies.

The other part of the quote in the last paragraph is related to the connotations of the words used in the terms. ‘Post’ has been used across a variety of modalities and genres over the years. It is for example a popular prefix to describe genres of music that are a reaction to a preceding genre. We should also remember not to confuse post-horror with postmodern-horror, the latter of which is also a trend that has been happening sporadically throughout the history of horror movies. The postmodern horror movie is characterized by its self-referentiality, intertextuality, and subversion of traditional horror tropes. While post-horror shares some similarities with postmodern horror, it is a distinct genre that emphasizes mood, atmosphere, and psychological unease over traditional scares. By understanding the differences between these terms and their associated connotations, we can more accurately analyze and interpret the evolving landscape of horror cinema.

Church says that the term ‘post-horror’ somehow implies that they are not actual horror films, although this seems illogical given the way the prefix is used in for example music: post-metal music is still recognizably heavy metal, just as *Hereditary* is still recognizably a horror film. Now the part about ‘elevated horror’ being elitist against the horror genre itself is interesting because the naming of this style of horror ‘elevated’ implies that horror that does not fit into this corpus of works is decidedly not elevated.

Church's observation that the term 'post-horror' could be interpreted as undermining the legitimacy of the genre is not without merit. The use of the prefix 'post-' to describe a particular subset of horror films could suggest that these works are somehow beyond or above the genre itself. Similarly, the term 'elevated horror' implies that horror films that do not conform to certain aesthetic or thematic standards are somehow inferior or less deserving of critical recognition. This perceived elitism raises important questions about the nature and function of genre and the ways in which critical discourse can impact the reception and interpretation of individual works.

A series that comes to mind of having the complete opposite reception of being seen as elitist, is the Twilight series by Stephanie Meyer. This was a massively popular series of young adult novels, with gothic themes and elements that audiences loved, hated, and loved to hate. Anne Morey's book "Genre, Reception, and Adaptation in the 'Twilight' Series" (2012) places the series within a broad tradition of literary history, reception studies, and cinematic adaptation. Twilight, as a series, was on the opposite end of the spectrum of the connotations surrounding the term 'elevated horror', Morey describes the series as: "working with a combination of low-status genres—the vampire tale, the romance, the female coming-of-age story—the political aspects of the saga's genre are both prominent and inextricable from gender" (Morey 2). Morey identifies that one of the key aspects that made the reception of Twilight so harsh is the audience's expectations of these genres, their conventions, the genre's hybridity as well as, as she describes: "this outcome strikes so many observers as a degeneration from a once-proud (and patriarchal) tradition" (2). While the hybrid of romance and vampire stories arguably tracks back to Bram Stoker (while not per se romantic, definitely has the major themes of gender and sexuality) the subversion of the series' textual history upsets the normative and gendered tradition of the genre. While Morey seems to argue that the series is exceptionally astute and sentient, compared to the audience

and critical reception, it undeniably was notable for its reframing of genres, including those with gothic inspirations. This subversion of genre expectations, and often hybridity of genres, is at the core of the argument as to why we are calling these horror movies for elevated or post, and the framing Morey use about upsetting a normative social order, although this was met with criticism in *Twilight*, could also explain the polarising nature of elevated horror movies.

Art-Horror

For the sake of thoroughness, we should also address the final term, which seems to be less popular in describing these movies. The term ‘Art-Horror’ or sometimes ‘Arthouse horror’ typically refers to horror films that emphasize artistic and aesthetic elements, often incorporating elements of experimental or avant-garde filmmaking. These films tend to focus more on atmosphere, mood, and psychological tension than on traditional horror tropes like jump scares or gore. Art-Horror films may also incorporate themes and motifs from other genres, such as drama, thriller, or surrealism. They often feature strong visual and stylistic elements, with an emphasis on cinematography, sound design, and production design. And if all of that sounds familiar, it is because all of these elements arguably apply to ‘elevated horror’ and ‘post-horror’ too.

Is art-horror then just another name for the same thing? It might appear that way because we have these new terms floating about, but art-horror seemingly precedes both ‘elevated horror’ and ‘post horror’. Arguably, this is because of the provenance of art-horror, which seems to stem not from horror movies, but from arthouse movies which then got infused with horror.

Arthouse cinema is, among other things, described by its mode of production and consumption. Unlike a lot of Hollywood films, these movies do not set out to make money

and gather mass market appeal but rather to be made from the director's artistic expression. This type of movie first appeared after World War II, although according to David Bordwell in "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice" it has roots in earlier silent films from German Expressionism and French Impressionism: "the art cinema as a distinct mode appears after World War II when the dominance of the Hollywood cinema was beginning to wane" (Bordwell 2). Bordwell emphasizes that the way in which these movies are produced and consumed are not the end all of categorization: "whereas stylistic devices and thematic motifs may differ from director to director, the overall functions of style and theme remain remarkably constant in the art cinema as a whole" (3). Following Bordwell's argument, 'elevated horror' and 'arthouse horror' are very similar, and perhaps even interchangeable near the fuzzy borders of the horror-art-movie spectrum, but many of the movies in this recent wave are not arthouse movies based solely on their mass popularity and famous production studio, even if the style and theme between these movies, and arthouse movies, are fairly consistent.

Secret(?) Ingredients

This section will focus more on an exploration of concepts that have been suggested as part of the ingredients that make up an 'elevated horror' movie. These elements are part of the hypothesis of this paper, that there are certain classical traits of horror movies utilized in new ways, that separate these movies from 'regular' horror movies, and also emphasize how these are still horror movies rather than arthouse movies.

The Uncanny

Since its publication in 1919, Sigmund Freud's seminal essay 'The Uncanny' has occupied a prominent position within the realm of psychoanalytic theory and its application

to cultural studies. Drawing upon his psychoanalytic framework, Freud explores the concept of the uncanny as an eerie and unsettling experience that arises from the familiarity intertwined with strangeness. As Freud delves into the depths of the human psyche, he unearths the uncanny as a complex psychological phenomenon, encompassing notions of the repressed, the return of the repressed, and the blurred boundaries between the familiar and the unfamiliar.

Gothic horror literature has been utilizing the uncanny to affect readers into unease for a long time, even paintings and statues can instill this unnatural feeling in the observer. And while it has also been utilized in horror movies before this recent trend, the mode of utilization, I theorize, has changed. Arguably, the most important aspect of defining the uncanny is something that is both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time.

Freud's conception of the uncanny entails a profound psychological experience characterized by a disquieting sense of unease and eeriness, evoked by phenomena that are simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar: "the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar." (Freud 220). Freud postulates that the uncanny arises from the resurgence of repressed or primordial aspects of the human psyche, which unexpectedly resurface and disrupt established notions of reality: "It is true that the writer creates a kind of uncertainty in us in the beginning by not letting us know, no doubt purposely, whether he is taking us into the real world or into a purely fantastic one of his own creation" (230). Within this framework, the uncanny emerges as the manifestation of hidden or suppressed elements that defy rational expectations, unsettling the individual's psychological equilibrium. Freud identifies recurring motifs associated with the uncanny, including the duality of doubles, spectral apparitions, animate yet lifelike figures such as dolls and automata, and uncanny coincidences. These manifestations blur the boundaries between the conscious and unconscious realms, reality and illusion, and life and death.

Some scholars have critiqued Freud's emphasis on the individual psyche and the universal aspects of the uncanny, arguing that cultural and historical contexts play a crucial role in shaping what is perceived as uncanny in different societies and periods.

One influential work in this regard is "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" (1991) by Fredric Jameson. Although not solely focused on the uncanny, Jameson explores how cultural production and consumption are influenced by the social and economic structures of late capitalism. He briefly mentions Freud and argues that the uncanny can be understood as a manifestation of the contradictions and anxieties arising from these structures, highlighting the importance of analyzing the uncanny within specific cultural and historical contexts (Jameson 24).

Other scholars, such as Nicholas Royle in his book "The Uncanny," have examined the relationship between the uncanny and cultural narratives, suggesting that cultural and historical forces shape what is deemed uncanny and contribute to its diverse manifestations. I'd further argue that Royle's opening definition of the uncanny as a concept resonated with my understanding of the uncanny better than Freud's long-winded dictionary reading: "the beginning is already haunted. The uncanny is ghostly. It is concerned with the strange, weird and mysterious, with a flickering sense (but not conviction) of something supernatural. The uncanny involves feelings of uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of who one is and what is being experienced" (Royle 1). Royle does not apply this definition to contradict the 'familiar being unfamiliar' definition which is more classical but to add complexity to a term that is deserving of it.

Royle also reads Freud within the Bloomian framework of canonicity, and in so doing argues that canonicity and uncanniness are linked: "When you read a canonical work for the first time you encounter a stranger, an uncanny startlement rather than a fulfillment of expectations. Great works come to us as if composed in a foreign yet strangely recognizable

language” (15). It is outside the scope of this paper to delve into Harold Bloom and canonicity in regards to elevated horror, but the ‘uncanny startlement rather than fulfillment of expectations’ might be a feature or element of why we are suddenly talking about horror as elevated, and receiving such critical and audience acclaim. While ‘good’ and ‘bad’ movies will always remain individually subjective, perhaps this quality of the uncanny is also a sign of the perceived quality of the movies within the genre and makes for one of the secret ingredients.

Social Commentary

The word ‘social’ has appeared a few times throughout this paper but at the beginning of the theory chapter, I postulated that ‘elevated horror’ share their social relevance as a common bond. This is something that intuitively feels true when looking through popular discourse as discussed in the introduction, but there are some trappings with this logic.

The primary problem with this outlook is that it dismisses ‘non-elevated’ horror movies as being socially irrelevant, or as having no deeper meaning or messaging. We earlier discussed how the Twilight movies disrupted the normative social order, and we discussed how horror movies, in general, were defined by their affect rather than their narrative content. While disrupting a normative social order would certainly require a social order of its own, the affect-content paradigm is often used in popular discourse to dismiss any and all messaging a piece of artistic content has. Especially in horror, this seems to split audiences, where some will rate a horror movie's quality based solely on how much it scared them (affect) while others see the affect as secondary to the narrative content. Some suggest that the affect of ‘elevated’ horror movies has simply moved from ‘shock and gore’ to a more vague psychological dread. But even then, we have psychological horror movies that precede

this new term, and we have both shock and gore in these new 'elevated' horror movies, leaving us at an impasse for now.

Furthermore, this discourse can often lead to problematic places, because social relevancy, much like uncanniness, is not a fit-all term, but rather dependent on cultural and historical context. Anything and nothing can be seen as social messaging, no matter how much we see especially American conservative commentators decry every new movie as being 'woke' and filled with political messaging. In order to sidestep this culture war, these commentators are of course correct, in the sense that every piece of narrative content inevitably has a narrative, and that you can derive meaning from narratives. This is nothing new in the step from horror movies to 'elevated' horror movies.

It Was Always There

Carol J. Clover's book "Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film" (2015) is a seminal work in the field of film studies that examines the representation of gender in horror films. Clover introduces the notion of the Final Girl, referring to the surviving female character who emerges as the last contender against the film's antagonist in many slasher films (Clover 35-36). This figure assumes significant importance in the genre as she embodies qualities that challenge conventional gender norms. Notably, the Final Girl is portrayed as intelligent, resourceful, and resilient, engaging in a final confrontation that subverts traditional expectations.

Clover delves into the intricate interplay of sexuality and violence within the horror genre. She scrutinizes the male gaze and the voyeuristic elements that pervade horror cinema, as well as the sexualization and victimization of female characters: "this identification along gender lines authorizes impulses toward violence in males and encourages impulses toward victimization in females [...] within the film text itself, men gaze at women, who become

objects of the gaze; the spectator, in turn, is made to identify with this male gaze, and to objectify the woman on the screen” (43). While recognizing the genre's tendency to exploit female vulnerability and suffering, Clover posits that horror films simultaneously provide avenues for female characters to reclaim agency and challenge patriarchal structures.

Clover uses movies such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and *Halloween* (1978) as vehicles for analyses, the latter of which is often considered as setting the standard for modern horror movies. All of this is to say that these movies are not considered ‘elevated’ in any shape of the word, some would probably even call them cheap thrills despite their critical acclaim, but they decidedly have messaging and social commentary. Even if it is lost on a larger part of the audience, it was always there.

So where does this leave us in terms of ‘elevated horror’? The statement “elevated horror films are socially relevant” seems redundant, since every piece of media can be socially relevant in the right context. In the analysis, I will attempt to unravel exactly how these films are socially relevant, what kind of messaging can be untangled from the meanings derived from them, and whether this warrants their unique moniker as ‘elevated’.

Analysis

For the analysis and discussion part of this paper, I will be scrutinizing two so-called ‘elevated horror’ movies within the framework outlined in the theory section.

The Witch (2015) presents itself as a suitable candidate for analysis within the realm of ‘elevated’ horror due to its distinctive approach to the genre. Directed by Robert Eggers, the film challenges and expands upon traditional horror conventions, offering a potentially nuanced and multifaceted work that may resonate with contemporary audiences. Through its complex themes, meticulous cinematography, and immersive sound design, *The Witch* offers

an opportunity for a deeper exploration of the genre's capacity to address social issues and cultural anxieties.

At its core, *The Witch* can be seen as a contemplation of the potential consequences of religious zealotry and patriarchal oppression. Set in 17th-century New England, the film provides a rich backdrop for the exploration of themes such as isolation, paranoia, and female agency. As the family depicted in the film encounters supernatural phenomena, the boundary between reality and delusion becomes increasingly blurred, potentially leading to a profound examination of the ramifications of unchecked religious fervor.

Moreover, *The Witch* exhibits a certain aesthetic quality that aligns with the concept of 'elevated' horror. Rather than relying on cheap jump scares and excessive gore, the film employs subtle, psychological scares. It utilizes natural lighting, stark landscapes, and period-accurate dialogue to create an immersive and authentic atmosphere. The haunting score and sound design further contribute to the film's ability to evoke discomfort in viewers, leaving a lasting impression.

The inclusion of *The Witch* (2015) in the discourse surrounding 'elevated' horror could offer valuable insights into its potential for nuanced exploration of social issues, sophisticated horror aesthetics, and cultural impact. By critically analyzing the film, it may contribute to a deeper understanding of the genre's evolving role in contemporary cinema.

Similarly, *Hereditary* (2018) merits consideration as a compelling subject for analysis within the realm of 'elevated' horror. Directed by Ari Aster, the film delves into themes of grief, trauma, and inherited darkness, presenting a haunting and psychologically rich narrative. Through its meticulous storytelling, strong performances, and striking visual imagery, *Hereditary* showcases the potential of 'elevated' horror to explore deeply unsettling aspects of the human experience.

One notable aspect that sets *Hereditary* apart as 'elevated' horror is its exploration of family dynamics and the intergenerational transmission of trauma. The film delves into the psychological deterioration of the Graham family, portraying the destructive consequences of unresolved grief and the inherited legacies of mental illness. By interweaving supernatural elements with profound emotional depth, *Hereditary* invites a nuanced examination of the complexities inherent in family relationships and the weight of inherited burdens.

From a technical standpoint, *Hereditary* demonstrates meticulous attention to detail and employs visual and auditory techniques to unsettle and disturb its audience. Through atmospheric cinematography, eerie sound design, and well-crafted set pieces, the film builds tension in a slow-burning manner. Ari Aster's precise direction and the compelling performances, particularly Toni Collette's portrayal of the grieving mother, further contribute to the film's immersive and unsettling experience.

When contrasting the choice of *Hereditary* with *The Witch* (2015), both films showcase their ability to elevate the horror genre through innovative storytelling and thematic depth. While *The Witch* delves into themes of religious fanaticism and female agency within a historical context, *Hereditary* explores the psychological landscape of family trauma and inherited darkness. *The Witch* adopts a restrained and atmospheric approach, whereas *Hereditary* embraces a more visceral and emotionally intense style. These films highlight the diverse possibilities within the realm of 'elevated' horror, catering to different thematic concerns and creative choices that resonate with varied audiences.

The Witch (2015) and *Hereditary* (2018) present themselves as intriguing choices for analysis within the realm of 'elevated' horror. Through their distinct approaches, these films offer avenues for examining the genre's potential to address social issues, employ sophisticated aesthetics, and make a cultural impact. By subjecting these films to critical

analysis, a deeper understanding of the evolving role of 'elevated' horror in contemporary cinema can be attained.

The VVITCH - Analysis and Discussion

The Witch has garnered significant attention from scholars and critics, who have extensively analyzed various aspects of the film. While this analysis will acknowledge and draw upon some of those existing points, the primary focus will be on concepts previously discussed in earlier chapters, including social relevance, the uncanny, and genre conventions. Existing articles exploring the folk elements and feminist interpretations of the movie offer valuable insights into its meaning. However, it is crucial to remain critical and not allow these perspectives to overshadow the examination of what constitutes 'elevated' horror.

Specifically, the inquiry will explore the interplay between the uncanny elements, social relevancy, cinematic aesthetics, and the conventions of the horror genre in shaping this emergent genre.

The analysis commences with a fitting starting point, namely the opening sequence of the film. Although the haunting musical score and the subsequent appearance of the title card reading "THE VVITCH - A New-England Folktale" (Eggers 1:11) may initially appear to offer limited insights into the intricacies of 'elevated' horror, several noteworthy elements are effectively conveyed through the utilization of sound and mise-en-scène. The soundtrack, composed by Mark Korven, distinguishes itself by employing unconventional instrumentation. However, in this particular scene and during the display of the title card, the sound design remains relatively minimal in comparison to subsequent segments of the film. The composition of strings in this instance serves not to instill fear in the audience, but rather to immerse them in an authentic auditory experience. Concurrently, the seemingly peculiar choice of spelling, with the movie title written as The VVitch instead of The Witch, deserves

scrutiny. This deliberate alteration aligns with an aesthetic decision informed by a historical pamphlet from the film's setting. During the period depicted in the movie, printing houses often resorted to the use of cost-effective typefaces, resulting in the letter "W" being represented as "VV."¹ Director Robert Eggers deliberately incorporates this historical nuance as an immersive element that transports viewers back to the year 1630.

Similar to the title card, the initial scene of the film functions as a narrative and thematic setup, encompassing elements of setting, plot, and character development. It is noteworthy that horror movies, as a genre, exhibit considerable diversity in their approaches to opening sequences, lacking a distinct narrative trope akin to the "once upon a time" convention found in fairy tales. While certain conventions prevail in slasher films, such as the introduction of a group of young individuals who are destined to undergo torment, *The Witch* deviates from this norm by primarily establishing the setting and the character of the father.

The character of William, portrayed by Ralph Ineson, assumes a symbolic role within the narrative, and the repercussions of his actions serve as catalysts for numerous ensuing conflicts. In this initial scene, William's religious zealotry becomes evident through his questioning of the faith and purpose of his community, as expressed in his disembodied voice proclaiming, "was it not for the pure and faithful dispensation of the gospels and the kingdom of god?" (Eggers 1:48). The camera intercuts between shots of William's children, ultimately revealing him with his back turned to his family as they are being exiled from the community. Intriguingly, the camera employs a reverse point-of-view as it captures the family wagon departing from the town, symbolically signifying the family's abandonment of the community, while simultaneously emphasizing how the community, quite literally, shuts its gates behind them.

¹ According to Brad Miske from *Bloody-Disgusting*, although the provided link to Eggers' explanation seems to have expired: <https://bloody-disgusting.com/movie/3592874/robert-eggers-sets-record-straight-witch-vs-vvitch/>

This opening scene serves as an evocative portrayal of the character dynamics and thematic underpinnings of the narrative, effectively establishing the ideological conflict that drives the subsequent events. Through visual and auditory cues, the film establishes a sense of isolation, foreshadows the tensions between the protagonist's religious fervor and the surrounding community, and lays the foundation for the family's journey into the depths of psychological and supernatural turmoil.

Furthermore, the notion of male-dominated power structures is introduced in this scene, as the patriarchal leader of the family makes a decision that ultimately leads to their exile. This theme permeates the entirety of the film and is echoed in Laurel Zwissler's article, "I Am That Very Witch" (2018), where she observes that it is the very patriarchal structures that condemn witchcraft. Zwissler asserts that the male headship, to which the parents tenaciously cling, and the insistence on the viability of the isolated nuclear family unit, are the very structures that restrict the options available to the lead character (Zwissler 3). In this feminist interpretation, *The Witch's* historical setting contributes to its social relevance by exploring themes of women's empowerment.

However, an alternative, more sinister reading of the narrative can be gleaned from Zwissler's analysis. She argues that the film can be seen as a story about a young woman and her stalker, where the male antagonist kills her family, coerces her into a sexual relationship, and abducts her. From this perspective, *The Witch* can be viewed as an exposé of devouring male power rather than a fantasy of women's empowerment (Zwissler 7). Nevertheless, I contend that both interpretations—the exposé of male power and the fantasy of women's empowerment—constitute feminist readings that critically examine patriarchal structures.

Delving into the complexities of gender dynamics, *The Witch* prompts discussions on the exertion of male authority and the potential for women to challenge and navigate oppressive systems. These thematic considerations further contribute to the film's claim to

'elevated' horror by engendering social relevancy and engrossing feminist perspectives within its historical framework.

The subsequent scene I wish to explore ventures into the realm of aesthetics, while also displaying a unique self-referentiality to the horror genre. In this regard, it almost appears as if the scene belongs more to a postmodern horror film like *Scream*, rather than the naturalistic, slow-burning style typically associated with elevated horror. Spanning from 6:30 to 6:43, the audience is deliberately held in suspense for a prolonged 13 seconds, with no camera cuts, character presence, or dialogue. This sequence presents a continuous shot of the forest enveloping the family's newfound homestead, while the camera gradually zooms in on the darkness amidst the trees. Prolonged shots are frequently employed in horror films, boasting the lengthiest average shot duration across film genres², effectively cultivating tension within viewers. From this perspective, a novice viewer unacquainted with the film's details would begin to discern the true nature of its genre. However, this shot is unexpectedly interrupted by a voice uttering "boo" to a baby, reminiscent of the childhood game of peek-a-boo, which disrupts audience expectations in an almost comedic fashion. Seasoned horror enthusiasts would likely anticipate a sudden movement between the trees, confirming the presence of something unnatural, and the film capitalizes on this anticipation, resulting in a jolting effect when the audience remains unstartled, and tension is instead defused by a playful utterance of "boo," thereby subverting the horror genre's conventional norms.

Notably, the sound design in this scene, as previously hinted, possesses a distinct quality. In fact, the sound design throughout the entire film is remarkable. The composer of the film commissioned a unique instrument colloquially referred to as "The Apprehension Engine," which he employed to create various drones, screeches, and clanks utilized in the film's sound design. As Church elucidates, the ominous ambiance engendered by this

² According to data on feature films released between 1997 and 2016:
<https://stephenfollows.com/many-shots-average-movie/>

apparatus instills a profound sense of anxiety and dread in the listener, even as these otherworldly sounds elude easy association with conventional musical instruments or arrangements. The machine's tones unsettle the audience all the more due to their elusive origins, defying ready identification with common auditory references in the listener's mind (Church 1). The sound design featured in this particular shot, in conjunction with minimal camera movement and *mise-en-scène*, veers into the territory of the uncanny. In and of itself, an image of trees would not typically evoke unease, but the transformation of this familiar scenery into an eerie tableau by incorporating elements of tension and unfamiliar sounds imbues it with an affect of uncanniness.

The progression from uncanniness to the macabre in "The Witch" engenders doubts within the audience regarding their fear of the forest. The sudden and mysterious disappearance of the baby during a game of peek-a-boo raises questions about the authenticity of what is presented on screen. Suppose the preceding parts of the movie are deemed genuine. In that case, one might conclude that the baby's disappearance is also a natural event, leading to suspicion toward the character of Thomasin, through whose eyes we perceive the story. However, arriving at this conclusion is not straightforward. Between the 7:48 and 9:43 timestamps, the audience witnesses the presence of the baby and a naked elderly woman, likely the titular witch, engaging in what appears to be a ritual sacrifice. The witch smears herself with the baby's blood and moves toward the moon. This scene draws upon legends of witches in New England who were accused of murdering children, such as the case of Mary Johnson, a house servant executed as a witch in 1648 after confessing to killing a child and committing adultery when accused of theft in Connecticut. While witch trials fall slightly beyond the scope of this paper, it is noteworthy how the imagination of people in Puritan New England believed that misfortunes were the result of the devil's work

and his coven of witches, which in turn leads to further authenticity and immersion in the time and place of the movie.

This particular scene in "The Witch" evokes parallels to Stanley Kubrick's "The Shining," particularly the moment when Danny encounters a peculiar pair of twins while driving through the Overlook Hotel. It marks the first instance in that film where something unexplainable occurs within an otherwise natural and immersive environment. Similarly, in "The Witch," the walls of naturalism begin to unravel. However, the exact nature of this unraveling remains ambiguous. Are these supernatural events transpiring within an otherwise natural and immersive constructed world, or is the characters' reality undergoing a psychological breakdown? This introspective questioning is precisely what the film intends for its audience to contemplate, echoing the effect achieved in "The Shining."

The blurring of reality, a common feature in psychological horror and thriller movies, makes it challenging to discern what is real within the plot. In "The Witch," this blurring engenders suspicion among the characters themselves and fosters skepticism within the audience toward the characters and their perceived reality. This hallmark characteristic of psychological horror begs whether it can be extrapolated as a defining trait of "elevated" horror.

The characteristic of blurring the lines between reality, the psychological, and the supernatural in "The Witch" invites further exploration of its significance within the broader context of horror films. By critically examining the film's use of reality blurring, we can analyze its impact on the genre and its potential to engage with deeper thematic elements.

In "The Witch," the deliberate blurring of reality serves as a narrative tool to unsettle and disorient the audience, creating an atmosphere of ambiguity and unease. The abrupt disappearance of the baby and the subsequent revelation of the witch involved in a ritual sacrifice challenges our perceptions of reality and familiarity, evoking an uncanny sensation.

This intentional ambiguity encourages viewers to question the nature of reality and confront their fears and beliefs, potentially elevating the film's impact beyond traditional horror conventions.

However, it is crucial to approach the notion of blurring reality and its relation to the uncanny with a critical mindset. While these elements contribute to the unsettling nature of the film, they are not exclusive to a specific subgenre or category. The concept of the uncanny has been explored in various works of literature and art, and its presence in horror films does not inherently indicate a distinct genre or an elevated form of horror.

Moreover, the effectiveness of blurring reality and invoking the uncanny in "The Witch" can be influenced by individual interpretation and cultural contexts. What may provoke unease and thoughtfulness in some viewers might elicit different responses from others. The impact of these elements relies on subjective experiences and personal engagement with the film.

The manner in which reality is blurred in "The Witch" and its connection to the uncanny pose intriguing questions about the film's artistic merits and its contribution to the horror genre. While these elements can enhance the viewing experience and stimulate profound reflections, it is essential to approach their significance with critical discernment and consider the broader array of factors that shape our understanding and evaluation of horror films.

Shifting our focus to the more tangible aspects of the film, we observe the family's profound emotional turmoil following the disappearance of their child. The visual composition reflects this anguish, with predominant shades of gray and blue permeating the frame. This somber atmosphere is reinforced by William's remark, "it is no ease to rise on a gray day, the devil holds fast your eyelids" (12:20), emphasizing the bleakness of their predicament. The narrative now firmly grounds us in the natural world, where we witness the

family's further misfortunes manifested through a significant portion of their harvest turning rotten, symbolized by the discarded, decaying corncob (12:58). William, as the father figure, faces a growing sense of inadequacy in fulfilling his role as the leader who ensures the family's survival. His masculinity is underscored by his determination to "conquer this wilderness, it will not consume us" (13:25), reflecting the patriarchal inclination towards conquest that has persisted throughout human history.

This portrayal serves as a discernible social commentary, highlighting the consequences of William's inability to cultivate the land, which necessitates resorting to hunting. Even Caleb, Thomasin's younger brother, appears to question the ethical implications of this perceived transgression. Moreover, this sequence marks the inception of William's paranoia. While acknowledging the formidable power of nature, it is important to recognize that nature is not inherently hostile or intent on consuming William and his family. Nature, in its inherent inertness, remains indifferent to human presence, yet William perceives it as an adversary responsible for the loss of his child and the impending starvation of his family. This imagined animosity towards nature prompts a masculine response rooted in the ethos of conquest.

During a stroll through the forest, William and Caleb embark on a venture to inspect their traps and hunt for game. Unfortunately, their expedition proves to be fraught with a series of misfortunes. William, in a moment of disclosure, confesses to Caleb that he has bartered the mother's silver cup in exchange for the traps, emphasizing the significance of secrecy within the male members of the family and their tendency to withhold information from the women. Furthermore, it becomes apparent that the men rely on the mother's resources while confiding in each other. William justifies his actions by claiming that he is sparing her from the burden of grief and intends to inform her at a later time. However, this seemingly compassionate act unveils an underlying structural issue within the family

dynamic. Instead of fulfilling his role as a provider of leadership and guidance to the entire family, William selectively offers such support solely to Caleb, thereby sowing seeds of distrust among the other family members.

These themes are further accentuated in a pivotal scene following William and Caleb's return from their hunt. The younger twin siblings are observed engaging in a chaotic pursuit of the family goat, aptly named "Black Phillip." This sequence serves as a crucial juncture where the audience gains a comprehensive understanding of the family dynamic. The twins, being small children, exhibit a consistent disregard for parental authority and the admonitions of their older siblings, often inciting disorder within the household. While their disruptive behavior initially appears to be mere mischief, their later association with Black Phillip foreshadows their significant role in the narrative. As they gleefully chase the goat, they chant in unison, "Black Phillip, Black Phillip, King of Sea and Land. We are your servants, we are your man" (19:30). The significance of this chant remains elusive until later in the film, where it becomes evident that Black Phillip represents the embodiment of the devil, and the twins seemingly communicate with him. The twins embody a recognizable trope found in horror narratives—the depiction of young children who exhibit callous laughter at the misfortunes of others, display an absence of grief for their deceased sibling and engage in literal conversations with supernatural entities. Their perception of the world is marked by an inherent innocence and naivety, juxtaposing the prevailing notion that something within the realm of the natural is amiss, thereby underscoring the film's supernatural or psychological undertones.

The mother, Katherine, enters the scene consumed by distress. She directs her attention to Thomasin, questioning why she was not keeping a watchful eye on the twins—a poignant inquiry considering the recent loss of another child. However, before Thomasin can provide an explanation, Katherine abruptly interjects, exclaiming, "What is wrong with you,

Thomasin" (20:54). Subsequently, Katherine orders Thomasin to perform a series of tasks for William. The stark contrast between this interaction and the earlier exchanges involving Caleb and William underscores several thematic elements previously discussed. It illuminates the emergence of hostility, animosity, and suspicion that the family is beginning to direct toward Thomasin, despite her likely innocence, whereas Caleb was met with understanding and guidance during his moment of crisis. Katherine essentially perpetuates the patriarchal structure by silencing Thomasin and compelling her immediate submission to her father's authority. While expressing concern over Caleb's absence upon waking up, a concern likely driven by the recent trauma of losing a child, Katherine's attempts to confront William about their whereabouts are met with a dismissive response. William abruptly terminates the conversation, instructing everyone to cease discussion, thereby exerting his power not as a means to foster reconciliation and understanding, but rather to deflect criticism.

Finally, as the family is on the verge of dispersing, Caleb interjects in defense of William against the criticism leveled at him. He asserts that they "went to find apples" (21:48), although it is evident to both William, Caleb and the viewer that he is fabricating the story. Surprisingly, Katherine responds with understanding and appears to believe or, at the very least, is willing to entertain Caleb's explanation—a marked departure from her reaction when Thomasin attempted to justify her actions. Caleb's willingness to deceive his mother, aligning himself with his father, reinforces the hierarchical structure within the family and contributes to his character's complexity. It illustrates his readiness to engage in wrongful behavior (lying to his mother) in order to safeguard his father—an act driven by a desire to achieve something beneficial. However, this mutual protection between Caleb and William perpetuates an imbalanced power dynamic within the family, particularly in light of William's numerous failures. The resentment directed at Thomasin by other family members, which should rightfully be directed at William in a fair world, further underscores this disparity.

Even in the latter part of the scene, Katherine instructs Caleb not to wander off—a directive that he initially questioned and raised with William. Yet, he complies with his father's authority. Not to be undermined, after Katherine's instruction, William has the final say by issuing his own set of commands. All decisions ultimately rest with William, even as Katherine attempts to assert some control over her children—a behavior stemming from her justified paranoia.

Subsequently, the film effectively reintroduces its horror elements, further exemplifying the trope discussed earlier regarding the younger siblings' interaction with the devil. This is particularly evident when Mercy startles Thomasin and Caleb, proclaiming, "I be the witch of the woods and I have come to steal ye" (24:40). The presence of this trope, wherein children possess an innate ability to perceive the true nature of things and express it honestly, is a prominent feature within the horror genre as a whole, serving as a compelling device for generating fear. In *The Witch*, this theme takes center stage. Frightening events unfold within the natural world, and the truth often proves more terrifying than any supernatural entity one might imagine. What sets *The Witch* apart from many other horror films is its deliberate decision to leave the nature of the supernatural ambiguous. Is Mercy simply an imaginative child, or does an evil witch truly lurk in the forest? The film underscores the significance of a natural and authentic world as the backdrop for probing our own uncertainties regarding the truth.

The ending of the scene serves to plant yet another seed of doubt in the viewer, and perhaps in Caleb and Mercy. Thomasin tells Mercy that 'I am that very witch' (25:36) and in horrific detail explains how she stole Sam for the devil. Thomasin has been a sympathetic character so far, but the conviction with which she speaks of her pact with the devil, and the ominous sound design also emphasizes the horror of the scene.

This scene effectively instills a sense of the uncanny, further contributing to the film's unsettling atmosphere. The revelation of Thomasin's confession and her claim to be the witch responsible for the disappearance of Sam introduces an element of the supernatural and the inexplicable into the narrative. The uncanny arises from the familiar becoming unfamiliar, as Thomasin, a character previously viewed as relatable and sympathetic, suddenly takes on a sinister and otherworldly quality. The uncanny is intensified through various cinematic techniques employed in this scene. The juxtaposition of Thomasin's calm demeanor and her disturbing revelations creates a jarring contrast that generates a feeling of unease. The meticulous sound design, characterized by eerie tones and dissonant sounds, further contributes to the uncanny atmosphere. Moreover, the audience's inability to definitively determine the authenticity of Thomasin's claims adds to the uncanny nature of the scene. The blurring of reality and the psychological realm makes it difficult to discern whether Thomasin's confession is genuine or if it stems from a disturbed state of mind. This ambiguity creates a sense of unease and reinforces the uncanny elements present throughout the film.

By infusing the scene with elements of the uncanny, 'The Witch' challenges conventional notions of reality and familiarity. It invites the audience to question their own perceptions and beliefs, further immersing them in the unsettling world of the film.

Continuing to build Thomasin's character relations, we see the family gathered for a paltry dinner, further highlighting their misfortune. Katherine confronts Thomasin about the missing silver cup, blaming her for losing it. William, unwilling to confess that he was the one to sell it, at least tries to keep the order by assuring Katherine that Thomasin is telling the truth. Katherine then comes to the same conclusion that the audience has been contemplating, that something unnatural is happening.

The missing silver cup in the movie serves as a potent symbol, representing more than

just a material possession. It embodies the deteriorating state of the family and the underlying tensions threatening their unity. Once a cherished item, the cup becomes a metaphor for the family's diminishing prosperity and the erosion of their bond.

Beyond the surface level, the cup's disappearance ignites accusations and blame within the family. Katherine confronts Thomasin, assigning her the responsibility for its loss. However, the cup holds a deeper symbolic significance, representing the fragile facade of order and stability that the family desperately clings to in their isolated existence. It also serves as a relic of their former life, symbolizing their connection to the outside world and their previous social status and wealth. Its absence signifies their descent into hardship and isolation, trapped in a harsh and unforgiving wilderness, and marks the loss of their identity and social standing.

Furthermore, the silver cup symbolizes the erosion of trust and unity within the family. As accusations fly, the once-solid familial bonds begin to fracture. William, burdened by his own guilt, attempts to maintain a semblance of order by vouching for Thomasin's innocence. However, his deception only intensifies the growing tensions and distrust among family members.

Thus, the silver cup becomes a powerful narrative representation of the family's disintegration, serving as a constant reminder of their misfortune, shattered identity, and the looming presence of the uncanny. Through this symbol, the movie explores themes of loss, isolation, and the fragility of human connections when faced with external and internal forces. It invites viewers to reflect on the transformative power of loss and the crumbling of familial bonds, adding complexity to the narrative and contributing to the unsettling and uncanny atmosphere that permeates the story.

As the movie's narrative unfolds, the family's situation in "The Witch" deteriorates further, and a pivotal moment occurs when Caleb disappears into the woods. While analyzing

Caleb's character, an aspect that warrants attention is his internal struggle between his desires and his devoutness. Although subtle, the film employs specific camerawork to provide glimpses from Caleb's perspective, highlighting his difficulty in averting his gaze from Thomasin's chest. This internal conflict symbolizes Caleb's embodiment of original sin, reflecting his spiritual struggle with sinful desires. Significantly, it is this vulnerability that becomes the focal point for the witch in the woods to ensnare him.

Initially depicted in the form of the traditional "old hag" archetype, the witch takes on a different appearance when she confronts Caleb. Instead of an aged figure, she manifests as a younger and more attractive woman. This transformation aligns with the thematic exploration of Caleb's desires and spiritual vulnerability. Furthermore, the costuming and cinematography employed in this scene accentuate the parallel between the witch's appearance and the object of Caleb's desire - her chest. The deliberate framing draws attention to this aspect, emphasizing the allure and temptation that Caleb experiences.

By highlighting Caleb's struggle with his repressed desires, the movie delves into themes of sexual repression, temptation, and the surface on the surface level there is also the more religious reading of the consequences of succumbing to sinful impulses. Caleb's fascination with Thomasin's chest becomes a manifestation of his internal conflict, serving as a thematic device to explore the theme of original sin and its potential spiritual consequences. The introduction of the seductive witch represents the external force that preys upon Caleb's vulnerability, further deepening the psychological and supernatural elements of the narrative. The more salient reading requires the context of the ending, or specifically, it requires us to understand Thomasin's character. Caleb is punished with illness for his transgression against his faith, and his repressed natural desires.

"The Witch" has often been characterized as a slow-burn horror film, but this is true primarily in terms of its cinematography and editing choices. The deliberate use of extended

scenes and unhurried dialogue delivery creates a naturalistic atmosphere. However, upon closer analysis, it becomes evident that the narrative itself is far from slow-paced. Each scene is intricately crafted, and densely packed with details that serve to deepen our understanding of the characters and the setting. Despite the apparent unhurried approach, the movie effectively maintains a sense of suspense that is intrinsic to the horror genre.

From a cinematographic perspective, the film's prolonged scenes and deliberate pacing contribute to the building of tension and the creation of an unsettling atmosphere. The longer shots and slower editing choices allow the audience to immerse themselves in the world of the movie, capturing the subtleties of the characters' emotions and interactions. This stylistic approach, combined with the meticulous attention to detail in each scene, heightens the psychological impact and adds to the sense of unease and anticipation.

However, it is important to note that the perception of the movie as a slow burn should not overshadow the fact that the narrative itself is tightly woven and filled with significant developments. Each scene serves a purpose in advancing the plot, revealing crucial information about the characters, their motivations, and the escalating conflicts they face. The attention to detail in the storytelling ensures that the audience remains engaged and invested in the unfolding events.

In the context of the horror genre, the balance between a deliberate pace and narrative momentum is crucial. The movie effectively utilizes its slow-burn approach to build tension and suspense, immersing viewers in the characters' experiences and gradually escalating the sense of dread. By skillfully blending a methodical storytelling style with carefully constructed scenes, the movie crafts an atmosphere of uncertainty and unease.

The perception of the movie as a slow-burn horror film stems from its cinematographic choices and deliberate pacing. However, upon closer examination, the narrative reveals itself to be intricately plotted and filled with significant details. This

combination of visual style and storytelling technique allows the movie to strike a balance between building suspense and maintaining a sense of narrative progression, resulting in a compelling and effective horror experience.

As supernatural occurrences intensify within the family, tensions and suspicions escalate in tandem. One pivotal moment arises when Caleb awakens in a feverish daze, a hypnotic state induced by an apple lodged in his mouth. Symbolically, this image alludes to his consumption of the forbidden fruit in the biblical tale of Eden. However, the apple carries additional significance within the movie, which aligns it with the realm of folkloric elements. Katherine interprets the apple as a symbol of witchcraft, a notion readily embraced by the twins who also accuse Thomasin of transforming goat milk into blood. In an effort to maintain control and unity, William assumes a leadership role, as demonstrated by his previous confession regarding the silver cup, and once again takes charge of the conversation, defending Thomasin—though the ensuing discourse takes the form of a witch trial.

This entire sequence of events evokes a profound sense of horror due to its resemblance to the historical circumstances in which countless individuals were accused and subsequently executed for witchcraft. The movie taps into the chilling realism of such accusations, reminding viewers of the widespread paranoia and mass hysteria that plagued societies during the early modern period. The accusations and trials were often fueled by superstition, fear, and societal tensions, leading to the persecution and wrongful punishment of innocent people. By invoking this historical backdrop, "The Witch" imbues its narrative with a chilling authenticity, amplifying the horror by evoking a collective memory of humanity's dark past.

In the present day, the resonance of these historical events in the context of the movie serves as a reminder of the potential for irrationality, scapegoating, and the persecution of the "other" within society. It forces audiences to confront the disturbing reality that baseless

accusations and fervent beliefs can lead to devastating consequences for individuals and communities alike. By aligning itself with the historical framework of witch trials, "The Witch" taps into our shared cultural consciousness and forces us to confront the harrowing nature of unfounded accusations, the erosion of rationality, and the terrifying power of collective hysteria. It is especially frustrating for the audience, because we feel like we know Thomasin, and we know that these events are happening to her, not because of her. We also see the twins being literally unable to pray, and writhing in pain as the others say prayer.

In a climactic turn of events, Caleb's death seems to be because of the prayer administered by his devout parents and Thomasin, although the natural answer would be that he was sick after getting lost in the woods. This further solidifies William and Katherine's conviction that Thomasin is a witch. Desperation for a satisfying explanation seemingly drives them to scapegoat Thomasin, deflecting blame from themselves and their perceived failures. William's religious fervor and pride demand that neither he nor God can be held accountable for the family's misfortunes, positioning Thomasin as the culprit in league with the devil. Thomasin, however, musters the courage to challenge William, exposing his silence about the silver cup and his inability to provide for and protect the family, thus revealing his hypocrisy (1:03:32). William responds with a fervent outburst of swears and violence, intensifying the familial discord.

Interestingly, Thomasin attributes the strange occurrences to the twins and the goat, a perspective seemingly shared by the director, given their peculiar behavior throughout the film and the subsequent overt strangeness. The narrative progresses toward a crescendo of unsettling events, reminiscent of the pattern observed in "The Shining." Katherine glimpses the children she had buried, the twins encounter the aged crone in the stable, and in the only jumpscare of the film, William meets his demise at the hooves of Black Phillip. With the family either deceased or absent, Katherine succumbs to the belief that Thomasin is the witch

responsible for their suffering. This outcome, though anticipated given the family's mounting suspicion, serves as a breaking point for both Katherine and Thomasin. As Thomasin is forced to defend herself, she is compelled to inflict harm upon her own kin, thus embodying the very thing they accused her of being.

The film concludes with Thomasin willingly signing the devil's book and joining the witch coven in the forest. This overtly supernatural and occult ending allows for multiple interpretations. It may signify complete immersion in delusion, blurring the boundaries between reality and illusion, or it could suggest a transformation where the unnatural becomes normalized within the context of the narrative. Regardless, this denouement underscores the film's exploration of the blurred line between the natural and the supernatural, leaving the audience to grapple with the ambiguous nature of the conclusion.

Hereditary - Analysis and Discussion

When analyzing and discussing "Hereditary" in contrast to "The Witch," it is essential to focus on the distinct thematic and stylistic elements that shape the narrative and cinematic experience. While both films fall under the horror genre, "Hereditary" diverges in its exploration of the psychological and emotional horrors lurking within a family unit. Rather than relying on a historical or folkloric setting like "The Witch," "Hereditary" grounds its terror in the familiar and domestic realm, emphasizing the hidden traumas, familial dynamics, and the fragility of the human psyche. The film delves into themes of inherited mental illness, the destructive power of secrets, and the breakdown of communication and trust within the family structure. Additionally, "Hereditary" employs intricate symbolism, visual motifs, and complex character dynamics to create an atmosphere of creeping dread and psychological unease. Through its use of supernatural elements and subtle yet chilling visuals, the film

probes the depths of human vulnerability, the complexities of grief, and the terrifying consequences of unresolved emotional turmoil. Therefore, a comprehensive analysis of "Hereditary" should examine these distinctive thematic and stylistic aspects, highlighting how they contribute to the film's unsettling and deeply psychological narrative.

"Hereditary" and "The Witch" share certain similarities, yet these commonalities serve to accentuate their differences. In many ways, "Hereditary" can be likened to a Russian nesting doll, as it unveils layers of secrets and revelations progressively throughout the film. Symbolism plays a significant role in the movie's visual storytelling, evident from its opening moments. The camera initiates within a house, peering out of a window at another structure, a treehouse. Slowly panning away from the window, it reveals multiple smaller model houses within the room, eventually zooming in on a specific room within one of the model houses, which seamlessly transitions back to the real house (Aster 0:51-2:31). This visual technique, akin to the cyclic nature of an ouroboros consuming its own tail, encapsulates the film's overarching theme of hidden depths and interconnectedness. Collaborating on various A24 productions, director Ari Aster and cinematographer Pawel Pogorzelski have consistently demonstrated their ability to craft striking imagery and employ deliberate movements to foreshadow the presence of both internal and external forces that shape the film's narrative.

Moreover, "Hereditary" aligns with "The Witch" in its deliberate and measured cinematography and editing choices. The extended camera pan observed in the aforementioned scene spans nearly two minutes, weaving a narrative purely through visuals, without the need for characters or dialogue. This deliberate lack of action contributes to an eerie ambiance, intensified by the absence of sound save for the low droning strings in the accompanying music. The crescendo of the musical score into unnerving tones further amplifies the disquietude permeating the scene. Through this deliberate pacing and meticulous attention to cinematography and sound design, "Hereditary" cultivates a sense of

suspense and unease, mirroring the atmospheric qualities present in "The Witch" while forging its own distinct identity.

A significant portion of critical attention surrounding Ari Aster's works has been directed toward his film "Midsommar." However, Aviva Briefel's insightful analysis titled "The Terror of Very Small Worlds: Hereditary and the Miniature Scales of Horror" sheds light on the cinematography of "Hereditary" and its potential for social commentary, as previously discussed in the analysis of "The Witch." Briefel's article explores the horror genre's relationship with "small things," encompassing various elements that contribute to the genre's effectiveness. In the case of "Hereditary," the film proves especially suitable for such examination due to the prominent role played by miniatures, both as a narrative device and as thematic focal points. Briefel astutely observes that these miniatures within "Hereditary" expose the processes and implications of miniaturizing "new" horror. Crafted meticulously by a female artist, these miniatures embody Susan Stewart's concept of the dollhouse as a "materialized secret," granting access to the depths of domestic and feminized privacy (Briefel 316).

In Briefel's analysis, the framing of characters as unnaturally small within the scene featuring the miniatures assumes significant importance within the context of the horror genre's association with "small things." This visual technique aligns with the notion that horror derives its potency from exploring the unseen and overlooked aspects of existence. By diminishing the characters in scale, the film accentuates their vulnerability, fragility, and insignificance in the face of supernatural forces at play. The act of miniaturization metaphorically positions the characters as pawns in a larger, malevolent design, heightening their sense of powerlessness and impending doom that permeates the narrative.

Furthermore, the framing of characters as small resonates with the broader theme of domesticity and femininity. Briefel's analysis highlights Susan Stewart's concept of the

dollhouse as a materialized secret, wherein the miniature realm serves as a metaphorical space for delving into hidden facets of domestic life and female experiences. By visually reducing the characters in relation to the miniatures, "Hereditary" delves into the intricacies of the domestic sphere, exposing its secrets, tensions, and repressed emotions. This approach aligns with the longstanding tradition in horror, wherein seemingly ordinary or confined spaces contain untapped terror and suppressed horrors.

In essence, the deliberate framing of characters as small within the scene featuring the miniatures in "Hereditary" reinforces the film's exploration of the horror genre's fascination with "small things." It heightens the characters' vulnerability and insignificance, while also serving as a visual representation of the hidden depths within the domestic sphere. By examining the miniaturization of horror and harnessing the power of small-scale elements, the film offers a disconcerting and unsettling viewing experience, unveiling the profound terror that can reside within seemingly ordinary and unassuming aspects of life.

Now that the setting has been established, along with the motif of miniatures, the movie gives a surface-level introduction to the characters in the family. The initial character introductions in the movie are noteworthy as they are accompanied by locations that foreshadow their respective character traits. For instance, Peter is found lying asleep in his room, symbolizing his withdrawn nature and suggesting a sense of detachment from his family. Steve, the father, is depicted constantly on the move in this scene, hinting at his difficulty in paying attention to familial matters. His efforts to awaken Peter convey a sense of powerlessness, emphasizing his inability to effectively engage with his son. Annie, the mother, is positioned in the passenger seat of the car, implying her role as a passive observer who must navigate the consequences of her mother's actions throughout the plot. Lastly, Charlie is shown asleep inside the treehouse, underscoring her distinctiveness from the rest of the family and her perceived lack of belonging within the household. Drawing upon the

horror genre's tradition of portraying unsettling children, Charlie, as the youngest family member, serves as a catalyst for the supernatural and psychological horrors that unfold as the narrative progresses.

The final character to be introduced in the family dynamic of "Hereditary" is Ellen Leigh, the recently deceased grandmother. Ellen is a character shrouded in mystery, and a significant portion of the plot revolves around unraveling her hidden life. She is initially presented to the audience through a memorial portrait in a full-frame shot, accompanied by the ominous sound of a horn at 3:39. Annie, Ellen's daughter, delivers a eulogy that provides further insights into Ellen's character, emphasizing her enigmatic nature, inscrutability, and stubbornness. The eulogy carries a foreboding tone as it touches upon the theme of familial trauma, where the consequences of one mother's lifestyle and beliefs manifest perilously for her daughter and the entire family. Additionally, the eulogy hints at the traits inherited by Ellen's descendants, which are bound to manifest in various distinct ways throughout the course of the narrative.

Examining the family dynamics depicted in "Hereditary," the aftermath of the funeral serves as a revealing lens through which the bonds between the family members can be explored. Interestingly, Annie, Steve, and Peter appear relatively indifferent to the death of Ellen, their recently departed matriarch. In contrast, Charlie, the youngest member of the family, seems profoundly affected by the loss. Her reaction suggests a unique and significant bond shared between Charlie and Ellen. This is evident when Charlie directly questions her mother, Annie, about who will assume the role of her caretaker in the absence of Ellen (8:51). The implication is that Ellen held a prominent role in Charlie's life, potentially overshadowing Annie's role as the maternal figure. Furthermore, Charlie discloses that her grandmother had expressed a desire for her to be a boy, which introduces an element of gender dysphoria and offers a platform for social commentary.

It is worth noting that existing analyses and discussions surrounding "Hereditary" have not extensively delved into the theme of gender dysphoria embedded within the narrative. While the significance of this theme becomes more apparent as the plot unfolds, Charlie's initial remark about her grandmother's preference for her to be a boy does not directly relate to her own perception of gender identity. However, upon deeper analysis, it becomes evident that Charlie is not what she initially appears to be. Instead, she embodies a masculine entity named Paimon, the King of Hell, either in a shared body or as a complete embodiment.

The primary argument of this analysis posits that the central plot of "Hereditary" revolves around a metaphorical gender transition, wherein an otherworldly demon, Paimon, liberates itself from a female form to assume its true identity in a male form. This transformative journey underscores the film's exploration of gender identity and challenges conventional expectations surrounding gender roles and expression.

Returning to the narrative progression, a notable scene unfolds as Annie sifts through Ellen's belongings, eventually stumbling upon a book titled "Notes on Spiritualism" (11:15). This discovery takes a pivotal turn when Annie uncovers a letter, explicitly addressed to her by Ellen. The contents of the letter demonstrate Ellen's remarkable foresight regarding the impending events that will befall the family. Its profound significance lies in its dual interpretation. From Annie's perspective, the letter serves as Ellen's final farewell and an acknowledgment of her elusive nature, seeking forgiveness for the undisclosed truths. Conversely, for the astute viewer, particularly upon subsequent viewings, the letter unveils Ellen's premonition of the immense tragedy that will be inflicted upon the family through her machinations.

Of particular interest is the letter's concluding sentence, which assumes an ominous tone and gradually provides subtle hints about the impending horror that permeates the film's

narrative. Within the diegetic realm, this final sentence assumes a foreboding quality, gradually enlightening the audience about the imminent manifestation of the movie's horrific elements. Moreover, this moment serves as a key transition point in the story, drawing the viewers deeper into the macabre themes that underpin the unfolding events.

The scene culminates in a subversion of a conventional horror trope, wherein Annie extinguishes the light source and directs her gaze into the enveloping darkness. Accompanied by an eerie drone resonating in the soundscape, the viewer is prompted to question the presence of hidden entities within the shadows or the plausibility of Annie experiencing hallucinations. The composition of the shot itself, characterized by its brevity and dimness, intentionally fosters ambiguity, leaving the audience in a state of self-doubt. Mirroring this atmospheric uncertainty, the disconcerting music abruptly ceases as Annie promptly illuminates the room, revealing the absence of any ominous figures. This subversion, likely an archetype in its own right, evokes the sentiment encapsulated in the often attributed quote by video game director Hideo Kojima: "The story does not trick the player, it is the player that tricks himself."

In this particular instance, the viewer enters the scene with the expectation of a conventional horror film experience. As the narrative unfolds and the characters and plot are gradually introduced, an anticipatory atmosphere is cultivated, with the audience bracing themselves for imminent frights. However, the film cunningly subverts these expectations by employing a fakeout, successfully instilling a sense of paranoia without resorting to jump scares involving the apparition of the deceased grandmother. This intentional diversion not only elicits emotional tension but also prompts reflection on the viewer's preconceived notions and the role they play in influencing their own psychological responses to the film's unfolding events.

The subsequent sequence of events in "Hereditary" exhibits a prophetic quality akin to the previously discovered letter. Within a shared setting, specifically the school, two characters find themselves intertwined, albeit attending different classes. Nonetheless, a palpable connection is established between them. In Peter's classroom, a discussion ensues concerning ancient Greek mythology, with particular emphasis on the notion of a hero's fatal flaw and its consequential role in their downfall. Drawing upon the myth of Heracles, the students explore the protagonist's tragic flaw of arrogance, as he steadfastly refuses to acknowledge the myriad signs consistently presented to him throughout the play (14:07).

The professor, in response to this analysis, introduces an intriguing question regarding Heracles' lack of agency in determining his own destiny. The inquiry probes whether the absence of choice renders the hero's story more or less tragic. Concurrently, as Peter becomes engrossed in willful ignorance towards the signs that are overtly extended to him, another student intervenes, positing that the tragedy is intensified by the characters' inherent lack of hope. According to her perspective, the characters are hapless pawns ensnared within a malevolent and inescapable mechanism (14:45).

While this dialogue serves its natural purpose within the classroom environment, it also straddles a delicate line between addressing the viewer directly and assuming a metatextual role unto itself. The discerning viewer, attuned to the narrative's nuances, will recognize this exchange as a form of Chekhov's gun—an element introduced early on with the implicit intention of being later employed. The deliberation on the characters' hopelessness and the nature of a tragic hero emerges as a thematic foundation that cyclically reemerges throughout the film, interweaving its plot elements and fostering a sense of interconnectedness. Thus, this recurrent exploration of established themes contributes to the film's narrative cohesion and structural coherence.

The subsequent segment of the film presents a parallel scene that I previously alluded to as interconnected. This sequence centers around Charlie's experiences during her day at school. The ordinary classroom atmosphere is abruptly disrupted when a bird collides with the window, capturing Charlie's attention. Departing from the classroom, she proceeds to decapitate the creature and preserves its severed head (15:16). While Charlie's eccentricities have already been established, this particular incident delves deeper into the realm of the aberrant and disconcerting. Consequently, this scene also possesses prophetic qualities, foreshadowing a pivotal moment later in the narrative when Charlie herself will meet a tragic end by decapitation.

Moreover, this scene assumes significance as it represents the initial evidence of external supernatural influences. Charlie's gaze extends across the road, where she perceives the apparition of her deceased grandmother. Given Charlie's enigmatic character, it remains uncertain whether the spirit of Ellen genuinely haunts her, thereby leaving room for interpretation. Nevertheless, the film employs several tropes associated with Charlie, which bear resemblance to those prevalent in "The Witch." One such trope involves young children's ability to perceive and communicate with supernatural entities. While distinct from the conventional "children being cruel to animals" trope, this motif draws upon similar thematic elements. It exhibits an uncanny absence of empathy, a characteristic that, although not uncommon in children, contributes to an overall impression of Charlie's atypical emotional development for her age. This portrayal aligns coherently with the notion of Charlie as a demonic entity confined within an incongruous human form—a being that is inherently incomplete in its development. Furthermore, it underscores the macabre nature of the true entity residing within Charlie's body.

The subsequent scene serves to reinforce the notion that either Ellen's spectral presence lingers within the family's midst or the family members themselves are succumbing

to psychological unraveling. Annie, gripped by a sense of paranoia, becomes unsettled when she discovers the door to Ellen's room ajar, prompting her to label her own behavior as erratic (16:55). Urging Steve to secure the door, her apprehensions intensify when they receive an unexpected call from the cemetery, divulging the desecration of Ellen's grave. While these omens can be attributed to plausible explanations and mere coincidences, one must exercise caution against dismissing them with the same arrogance displayed by Heracles, who stubbornly ignored the signs that were presented to him. It is within this context that the film endeavors to steer the audience's emotional disposition toward a particular inference, albeit only to a subtle degree, generating an atmosphere of ambiguity that engenders heightened tension.

Adding to the prevailing ambiguity, Annie attends a crisis support group where she shares the burdensome history of mental illness that plagued her mother, father, and brother. Within her monologue, certain key phrases assume significance. Notably, she states, "so that was my mom's life" (20:19), underscoring the idea that her own identity is distinct from the predisposition to mental afflictions and mortality that defined her mother. This emphasis can be interpreted as an attempt to deflect any assumption that her psychological well-being may be the underlying cause for her actions, such as securing the door to an unoccupied room or perceiving apparitions in the darkness. Additionally, she accentuates the perception of being blamed, stating, "I feel like I am to blame, or not TO blame, but that I AM blamed" (21:43). The ensuing dialogue prompts her to address the nature of this blame, to which she responds with uncertainty. Consequently, we are compelled to scrutinize her motives behind such a statement. One plausible explanation may lie in her internalizing a sense of responsibility for her family's mental health struggles or their untimely demises, manifesting as a distorted form of survivor's guilt. This psychological turmoil aligns with the film's thematic exploration of familial trauma, and it is conceivable that Annie's belief that she should suffer

from mental instability, akin to her family members, gradually erodes her psyche throughout the course of the narrative. This ambiguity, whether we are witnessing her gradual descent into madness or the manifestation of actual supernatural occurrences, instills a lingering sense of uncertainty within the viewer.

Subsequently, the narrative shifts its focus back to Charlie, who occupies the treehouse, engrossed in the creation of dolls and playthings utilizing the recently acquired bird head. However, her concentration is disrupted by an enigmatic blue light, captivating her attention (23:06). Curiosity compels her to venture outside, where she once again encounters the spectral presence of Ellen, seated amidst a fiery conflagration. This evocative imagery conjures associations with the infernal realms, a connection that gains significance as the plot unfolds, revealing Ellen's affiliation with a malevolent underworld. Concurrently, this scene is juxtaposed with another, in which Peter approaches Annie, seeking permission to attend a party on the condition that Charlie accompanies them. An air of antagonism permeates their interaction, as Annie, burdened by the strain of completing her intricate miniature art project, displays negligence toward her children. Steve, the father, is noticeably absent from this scene. Annie's behavior mirrors a pattern of estrangement reminiscent of her own relationship with her mother, thereby establishing a parallel between the familial dynamics of the present generation and the preceding one.

The subsequent party scene, though of limited significance, serves to further develop Peter's character as a typical and introverted teenager (27:13). It underscores his normalcy, while also revealing his negligence towards his family, as he becomes preoccupied with girls and marijuana, allowing Charlie to consume the cake despite her known allergies. However, when he realizes the gravity of the situation and witnesses Charlie experiencing an allergic reaction, he demonstrates genuine concern by swiftly leaving the party to rush her to the

hospital. This event marks a pivotal moment in the film, as the subsequent car ride proves to be a turning point with profound implications.

Tragically, during the frantic drive, Charlie, seeking relief, leans out of the car window, inadvertently colliding with a pole, and gets decapitated (31:52). The impact of this sudden and shocking event on Peter cannot be overstated. Overwhelmed by shock and horror, he is unable to confront the gruesome sight of his sister's lifeless body. In an attempt to cope with the traumatic event, Peter dissociates from reality and proceeds to drive home. The ensuing sequence is characterized by near-silence, as Peter retreats to his room and the scene seamlessly transitions to the following morning.

This pivotal scene confronts both Peter and the viewer with the stark reality of the tragedy. Peter is awakened by his mother's anguished screams, which pierce the air, amplifying the sense of despair and grief (35:16). Simultaneously, the viewer is confronted with a lingering close-up shot of Charlie's decapitated head, exposed to the sun and overrun by swarming insects. This juxtaposition serves to intensify the emotional impact on both Peter and the audience. It represents a crucial breaking point for Annie, whose uncontrollable wails and tears become a continuous, audible presence, perceptibly bridging the editing transition from her distraught state on the floor of their home to her appearance at the subsequent funeral. This stylistic choice reinforces the overwhelming anguish and highlights the profound psychological and emotional toll exacted on the characters in the wake of the tragedy.

Following the devastating loss of Charlie, the family's collective descent into turmoil becomes increasingly apparent, instigated by the machinations of the deceased grandmother's sinister plan. This tumultuous period unfolds shortly after the tragedy, as each family member grapples with their own psychological unraveling.

Annie, consumed by the weight of grief and trauma, finds solace in the treehouse, depicted in the film with an ominous red lighting scheme (39:16). This visual representation evokes a sense of being immersed in a hellish realm, heightening the intensity of Annie's emotional turmoil. The choice to portray her in this setting suggests a symbolic connection to the eternal torment associated with hell.

Steve, attempting to forge a connection with his departed daughter, delves into her sketchbook. This act can be interpreted as a desperate endeavor to understand Charlie better, to grasp her inner world and gain insight into her experiences. By exploring her sketches, Steve seeks a semblance of connection, a way to bridge the divide between the living and the deceased.

Meanwhile, Peter remains detached from reality, struggling to confront the harrowing truth of his sister's demise (40:00). The film employs auditory and visual techniques to convey his dissociative state. We are offered a glimpse into Peter's perspective, as sounds around him are muted and the world appears blurred. This artistic choice effectively illustrates his profound detachment from his surroundings. Notably, the presence of the rearview mirror, a symbol of reflection and self-confrontation that Peter avoided earlier during the car ride, resurfaces in a classroom setting, serving as a stark reminder of the traumatic events he has been trying to suppress. Its striking clarity amidst the blurry world signifies the inescapable confrontation with reality that Peter must eventually face.

As the first act draws to a close, a new enigmatic character named Joan enters the narrative. Annie encounters Joan in the parking lot before a group grief meeting (43:03). Although Joan presents herself as a stranger, she offers a sympathetic ear and a comforting presence. However, it is noteworthy to examine the deliberate choice of Joan's costuming in red, as it later becomes apparent that she had colluded with Ellen in a plot to summon the king of hell.

The introduction of Joan serves a pivotal role in the development of the story, particularly in the context of the occult elements intertwined within the plot. Her seemingly benevolent demeanor and willingness to console Annie belie the underlying malevolence associated with her character. The deliberate use of red in Joan's costuming provides visual foreshadowing, hinting at her true intentions and affiliation with the malevolent forces orchestrated by Ellen.

The film employs additional symbolism associated with demonic elements as it progresses. A notable instance occurs when Peter is depicted lying in bed, his eyes emitting a red glow due to the heater in the treehouse (46:45). This visual detail serves as a subtle foreshadowing of his eventual possession by malevolent forces. Furthermore, akin to his mother's earlier experiences, Peter begins to display signs of paranoia and potential hallucinations concerning the darkness surrounding him. Although this psychological response can be attributed to posttraumatic stress stemming from the traumatic events he has endured, the inherent terror lies in the blurred boundaries between reality and imagination that afflict individuals grappling with such mental afflictions.

The portrayal of Peter's eyes emitting a red glow from the treehouse's heater underscores the ongoing theme of demonic presence and impending possession. The visual cue connects Peter to the supernatural forces at play, hinting at his susceptibility to becoming a vessel for evil. This symbolic element serves to heighten the suspense and anticipation surrounding Peter's fate.

Moreover, Peter's growing paranoia and potential hallucinations are characteristic of posttraumatic stress disorder. The traumatic events he has witnessed, particularly the decapitation of his sister and the ensuing psychological turmoil, contribute to his distressed state. The film explores the psychological impact of trauma, illustrating the debilitating effects of posttraumatic stress on an individual's perception of reality. The inability to

differentiate between actual threats and imagined dangers adds an element of fear and uncertainty, amplifying the psychological tension experienced by both the character and the viewer. By intertwining supernatural symbolism with psychological manifestations, the film delves into the psychological dimensions of horror.

Annie takes the initiative to meet with Joan, seeking to uncover hidden truths about her family's past (49:00). Their conversation serves as a catalyst for revealing significant insights into the intricate dynamics of Annie's life. Through their dialogue, various elements emerge that shed light on the shared history between Annie and Joan, deepening the sense of mystery and tension within the story.

One notable aspect of their interaction is Annie's observation regarding the doormat at Joan's house, which bears a striking resemblance to the one her own mother used to make. This subtle detail hints at a connection between Annie's family and Joan, suggesting a shared history or lineage that has yet to be fully explored. Such revelations contribute to the building of suspense and intrigue surrounding the characters' backgrounds.

Furthermore, Annie discloses a harrowing incident from her past, recounting a chilling episode in which she unconsciously sleepwalked and unknowingly doused herself, her son Peter, and her daughter Charlie in paint thinner. The gravity of this event underscores the theme of Annie's powerlessness and her inability to control the circumstances that have shaped her family's life. Her admission of being unaware of the situation until she struck the match accentuates her profound sense of powerlessness and the repercussions of her unconscious actions. By emphasizing that the incident occurred while she was asleep, Annie highlights her own estrangement from her son and the feeling of helplessness that accompanies it.

This theme of powerlessness and the inability to alter the trajectory of one's life resonates throughout the film. Annie's revelation serves to deepen our understanding of her

complex character and the burdens she carries, as well as the potential impact it may have had on her relationship with her son. The exploration of these themes adds layers of psychological depth to the narrative, inviting further analysis of the character's motivations and the intricate dynamics that drive the story forward.

The tension within the narrative increases as Annie and Peter engage in a heated confrontation during a dinner scene, each casting blame despite their shared understanding that the tragic event was an accident (53:58). This stark contrast between their strained relationship and Annie's interactions with Joan further deepens the complexities of the characters and their individual journeys. Moreover, one could posit that the recurring motif of parking lots throughout the film holds symbolic significance, representing Annie's psychological stagnation and her struggle to progress beyond the past.

The parking lots serve as liminal spaces where pivotal encounters occur, marking significant moments of revelation and confrontation for Annie. Notably, the lighting within these settings contributes to the ominous atmosphere. In previous instances, Annie has met Joan in the darkness of night, immediately following the tragic accident. However, in this particular encounter (59:04), the low-hanging sun casts an eerie glow, serving as a forewarning of impending darkness and further turmoil. This subtle yet impactful use of lighting enhances the tension and foreshadows the narrative's descent into deeper realms of fear and uncertainty.

Beyond the visual elements, the body language displayed by the characters in this scene conveys essential information about their dynamics. Joan attempts to persuade Annie that she possesses the ability to communicate with the deceased, yet her physical mannerisms betray a sense of desperate urgency. Although Joan may present herself as a caring friend, it is crucial to recognize that she and Annie are, for the most part, strangers. Therefore, Joan's

forceful insistence on Annie performing the seance appears unnatural, potentially hinting at ulterior motives or hidden agendas.

Seances have become a recurring motif in the horror movie genre, often serving one of two narrative functions. Firstly, they can be portrayed as serious attempts to communicate with the deceased, seeking answers from beyond the grave. Alternatively, seances may be portrayed in a postmodern and playful manner, where unwitting individuals engage in the paranormal and inadvertently conjure spirits. In the case of *Hereditary*, the film takes a more original and naturalistic approach to the depiction of seances.

When the seance sequence unfolds in *Hereditary*, Annie's initial skepticism is evident and persists throughout the ritual, even as supernatural manifestations begin to occur (1:01:43). This skepticism serves as a significant source of terror for Annie, compelling her to search under the table for evidence of fraud and resist believing what her own eyes witness. Despite her emotional distress, characterized by tears and trembling, Annie remains quick to dismiss and shut down the inexplicable occurrences unfolding before her.

This depiction of Annie's response to the seance offers a nuanced exploration of human psychology in the face of the supernatural. It showcases the complexity of the human psyche when confronted with phenomena that challenge conventional understanding and defy rational explanations. Annie's simultaneous fear, skepticism, and desire to disprove the inexplicable highlight the internal conflict between her inherent disbelief and the mounting evidence that confronts her during the seance.

Moreover, the film's portrayal of a seance as a naturalistic event deviates from the typical tropes associated with seances in horror movies. Rather than employing exaggerated or contrived setups, *Hereditary* opts for a more authentic and grounded approach, enhancing the film's overall realism and intensifying the audience's immersion in the story. This

departure from convention adds a layer of intrigue to the narrative, creating a sense of unpredictability and psychological tension.

Following her encounter with Joan, Annie embarks on the journey back home, where the film employs a narrative technique established earlier in the story (1:05:43). Charlie, Annie's deceased daughter, was characterized by her distinctive habit of making clucking sounds, a trait that has been prominently highlighted throughout the film. As Annie drives, a sudden loud cluck resonates from the backseat of her car, coinciding with Joan's earlier assertion that Charlie is "still there." This particular moment marks a significant convergence of the supernatural and psychological themes within the film.

The blending of the supernatural and psychological realms in this scene serves to intensify the sense of unease and ambiguity that permeates the narrative. The film blurs the boundaries between reality and the supernatural by juxtaposing the familiar sound of Charlie's clucking with her physical absence. Annie's reaction to the cluck further underscores this fusion, as her visibly disturbed expression reveals a deep-seated fear and a growing awareness of the tenuous distinction between the internal manifestations of her psychological trauma and the external presence of supernatural forces.

Annie's descent into a nightmarish realm persists as she is plagued by unsettling dreams involving her son, Peter, prompting her to contemplate the idea of conducting a seance with her family. Throughout this progression, Steve, Annie's husband, assumes the role of a grounding force, questioning the nature of their actions and fostering doubt regarding whether Annie's psychological state is unraveling or if genuine supernatural forces are at play (1:11:17). This duality between psychological unraveling and supernatural occurrences becomes increasingly ambiguous, particularly when Steve and Peter bear witness to inexplicable phenomena that defy rational explanation.

The introduction of unnatural phenomena serves as a turning point in the film, solidifying the presence of supernatural elements and blurring the boundaries between the mundane and the metaphysical. It is during this phase that Peter's possession becomes apparent, as he begins to perceive the same ethereal blue shimmer that Charlie previously encountered. In a scene characterized by pronounced uncanniness, Peter finds himself in a classroom, confronted by his reflection on a glass surface (1:17:39). While his appearance remains familiar to himself and the audience, an eerie smile adorns his reflection, evoking a profound sense of the uncanny.

This uncanny experience operates on multiple levels, heightening the film's psychological and supernatural tension. Peter's reflection represents a distorted mirror image, unsettling in its departure from conventional notions of identity and self-perception. The presence of the enigmatic smile, foreign and disconcerting, disrupts the expected familiarity associated with one's reflection. This dissonance accentuates the uncanny nature of the moment, eliciting a profound sense of unease in the viewer.

Moreover, the uncanny smile serves as a visual manifestation of the supernatural forces at work within the narrative. It symbolizes the intrusion of the otherworldly into the realm of the everyday, blurring the boundaries between the natural and the supernatural. The juxtaposition of Peter's familiar physical appearance with the unfamiliar and unsettling smile reflects the film's overarching exploration of the uncanny as a thematic device. It provokes a sense of discomfort and disorientation, evoking both fear and fascination as viewers grapple with the uncanny nature of the visual representation, this theme is similarly explored when Annie tries to burn the sketchbook and consequently sets herself aflame (1:25:53). By attempting to cast out the evil, she is symbolically shown to be a part of that same evil.

Hereditary demonstrates its ability to weave together psychological and supernatural elements, engendering a sense of ambiguity and heightening the narrative's overall sense of

dread. By invoking the uncanny through the disconcerting reflection and the supernatural blue shimmer, the film subverts traditional notions of identity, reality, and the boundaries of the horror genre. This fusion of the psychological and the supernatural not only intensifies the film's thematic depth but also accentuates its capacity to unsettle and challenge audience expectations.

In the final act of the film, *Hereditary*, a significant revelation occurs as Annie unravels the clandestine connection between her deceased mother, Joan, and the malevolent entity known as "The King of Mischief," Paimon. Concurrently, Peter undergoes a forcible expulsion from his own body by the demonic presence (1:33:49). This narrative development introduces a unique form of horror that centers around the violation of bodily autonomy. The juxtaposition between Peter's distorted point of view, accompanied by droning and pulsating music, and the subsequent transition to a naturalistic school scene with ambient sounds serve to enhance the sense of unease and reinforce the film's underlying social messaging.

The violation of bodily autonomy is a recurring theme in horror cinema, and in *Hereditary*, it assumes a particularly unsettling form. Peter's possession and subsequent loss of control over his own body manifest the horrors of external forces encroaching upon individual autonomy and agency. The stylistic choices employed during this sequence, such as the blurred perspective and disorienting auditory cues, contribute to the audience's sense of unease and immersion in Peter's disintegrating reality. By presenting the possession in a naturalistic setting, the film heightens the psychological impact of the supernatural intrusion, blurring the boundaries between the ordinary and the extraordinary.

One can argue that this narrative element reflects the social messaging embedded within *Hereditary*. While one obvious theme is the transmission of generational trauma originating from Ellen, the film also explores the intricate link between the disintegration of the family unit and its collective inability to accept one another. Steve, the patriarch,

stubbornly refuses to believe Annie's claims despite the mounting evidence before his own eyes. Peter, burdened by the estrangement resulting from the sleepwalking incident, struggles to accept his mother's presence in his life. Annie, driven by grief and a desperate longing to reclaim what she has lost, refuses to accept the finality of Charlie's demise, leading her to pursue ill-fated attempts to resurrect her. These dynamics contribute to the gradual disintegration of familial bonds and reinforce the film's thematic exploration of the destructive consequences of familial discord and the failure to embrace acceptance and empathy.

Moreover, the external malevolent force represented by Ellen's legacy can only truly manifest itself through the process of familial disintegration. The fractures within the family unit provide fertile ground for the infiltration and manipulation of outside forces, culminating in the possession and subsequent expulsion of Peter. This narrative dynamic suggests a complex interplay between internal conflicts and external influences, highlighting the symbiotic relationship between individual vulnerabilities and external malevolence.

Through its exploration of generational trauma, family dynamics, and the violation of bodily autonomy, *Hereditary* presents a layered and multi-faceted social commentary. It underscores the perils of familial discord, the consequences of unresolved trauma, and the vulnerability of individuals when confronted with external malevolence. The film's intricate narrative construction and stylistic choices serve to deepen the thematic resonance and engage viewers in a thought-provoking exploration of the inherent fragility and complexity of human existence.

Conclusion

The Witch and Hereditary have proven to be pivotal films in the emergence and exploration of the subgenre known as elevated horror. Through an in-depth analysis of these two films, we have uncovered their narrative complexities, thematic depth, and stylistic choices that have positioned them as seminal works within the genre. Moreover, we have examined the uncanny elements and social messaging present in these films, shedding light on their contribution to the evolution of horror cinema.

One of the defining characteristics of elevated horror is its departure from traditional horror tropes, opting for a more nuanced and intellectual approach to fear. The Witch and Hereditary exemplify this artistic evolution, presenting narratives that transcend mere scares and delve into the depths of the human psyche and societal anxieties. These films challenge preconceptions of horror, infusing the genre with intellectual and allegorical depth.

In *The Witch*, director Robert Eggers immerses viewers in the grim and puritanical world of 17th-century New England, where religious fervor and superstition intertwine. Through meticulous period detail and atmospheric storytelling, Eggers explores themes of religious hysteria, isolation, and the erosion of familial bonds. The film transcends its genre boundaries by delving into psychological terror and exploring the complexities of human nature.

Similarly, *Hereditary* delves into the realms of familial trauma and psychological horror, masterfully directed by Ari Aster. The film combines domestic dysfunction, occult rituals, and supernatural elements to create an unsettling and deeply disturbing experience. With its exploration of grief, inherited madness, and the disintegration of the family unit, *Hereditary* pushes the boundaries of horror, leaving a lasting impact on audiences.

Both films employ the uncanny as a narrative tool, blurring the lines between the supernatural and the psychological. *The Witch* introduces elements of witchcraft and the supernatural, but it is the psychological unraveling of the characters that truly terrifies them. The audience is left questioning the authenticity of the supernatural occurrences, as the film explores the power of suggestion and the fragility of human sanity.

In *Hereditary*, the violation of bodily autonomy and possession serve as powerful manifestations of horror. The blending of naturalistic scenes with moments of supernatural dread creates an unsettling contrast, emphasizing the disruption of the natural order. This violation of bodily autonomy speaks to the fear of losing control, both on an individual and societal level.

Moreover, the social messaging present in these films contributes to the definition of elevated horror. *The Witch* touches on themes of female empowerment, religious fanaticism, and the consequences of isolation. It challenges the patriarchal structures of the time and raises questions about the destructive power of blind faith.

Hereditary, on the other hand, explores the disintegration of the family unit and the generational trauma caused by inherited darkness. It confronts issues of familial secrets, denial, and the destructive nature of unresolved grief. The film serves as a reflection on the breakdown of communication and the consequences of suppressing emotions within the family dynamic.

By examining these thematic elements and the use of the uncanny, we can gain insight into what makes elevated horror distinct. It is a genre that goes beyond superficial scares, inviting audiences to confront their deepest fears and societal anxieties. It challenges conventions, blurs boundaries, and offers a platform for meaningful storytelling and introspection. There is one important caveat that should not be neglected; what word we use for this genre is less important than what elements constitute the genre. There is no reason, as

of 2023, that 'elevated' is a better term than 'art' or 'post' horror. Furthermore, this new type is still just an evolution of something that came before, yet the lines are blurry. There is no reason one could not call 'The Shining' an 'elevated' horror movie, other than its temporal placement within culture.

In conclusion, this study suggests that the examined films, *The Witch* and *Hereditary*, demonstrate several key elements that align with the characteristics often associated with elevated horror, including subversive storytelling techniques, a nuanced exploration of psychological terror, and the ability to evoke introspection and unease. These findings contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding the nature and significance of elevated horror, suggesting that these films exemplify certain features commonly attributed to this emerging subgenre.

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