THE HORROR IN THE MAKING: A FEMINIST FILM THEORY AND ECOMEDIA STUDIES APPROACH TO *HEREDITARY* AND *MIDSOMMAR*

by

MATTHEW B. BICAKCI

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Student: Matthew B. Bicakci

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Stephen Rust	Chair
Stacy Alaimo	Member
Sangita Gopal	Member

and

Krista Chronister	Vice Provost for Graduate Studies

Original approval signatures are on file with the University of Oregon Division of Graduate Studies.

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THESIS ABSTRACT

Matthew Bicakci

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Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2018) and *Midsommar* (2019) serve as unique and illuminating entry points into a discussion of how to take up both textual analysis of film and production studies through an attention to the material highlighted in both narrative and trade publication interviews. I intend to apply a materialist reading to these texts as well as to specifics surrounding the production of the set and cinematographic choices outlined in interviews with the director, director of photography (DP) and art director. I will discuss how attention to the material reveal critical links between film production, representation of women, and the merchandizing across the two films. By pulling back the curtain, through readings of the films as ecohorror text and by reading between production and narrative, we get a dual sense of horror: one that comes with viewing, and one that comes with seeing in material intensity of production.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In recent years scholars in the field of ecomedia studies have intentionally shifted toward analyses of texts that do not have an overtly environmental frame (Rust, Monani, and Cubitt 2016). By moving to consider and call attention to the ecological underpinnings of any media artifact or infrastructure, the definition of an environmental media text expands to include more than just natural disaster films, nature documentaries, and the like (Cubitt, 2005). This thrust in ecomedia studies echoes another scholarly development originating in the related field of media industry studies – to understand media artifacts as more than decontextualized works of art. Films are a source of and components in an engine of cultural sovereignty that are also the results of a cluster of culture industries (Miller et al, 2001). Keeping these recent scholarly trends in mind and with the purpose of bringing together modes of analysis that are often kept separate, this essay focuses on director Ari Aster's first two feature-length films: *Hereditary* (2018) and *Midsommar* (2019). Drawing from a desire to expand the definition of ecohorror (Rust and Soles, 2014, Tidwell and Soles, 2021), I will attempt to combine textual analysis and production studies through attention to some of the material – the stuff, bodies, and carbon – that go into the production and merchandizing of these films. Through analysis of Aster's sensational bodily and emotionally traumatic cinema informed by feminist film theory, I propose that ecohorror texts continue to rely on the objectification and elimination of the possibility of the female subject despite a modernization of the horror genre's character archetypes and plots. Through accounts of the highly specialized filmmaking equipment and the multiplicative nature of set design, I propose that independent mid-budget filmmaking relies on the intentional obfuscation of the material demands of production despite public initiatives and marketing campaigns championing

sustainability. Through attention to the products marketed to fans of Aster, *Hereditary*, and *Midsommar,* I further propose that distribution companies cultivate an image of the art-film auteur director to generate additional sources of revenue similar to models employed by blockbuster and other big-budget films. In short, my analysis of Aster's films alongside their production and marketing strategies demonstrates that the lip-service often paid in contemporary cinema to ecological responsibility continues to be little more than greenwashing.

A key challenge to combining production studies with ecocritical textual analysis remains access to relevant documentation and records. Available information is notoriously limited, perpetuated by both the "trade secrets" narrative and a lack of transparency from major studios and their conglomerates. This lack of accessible information has stifled not only academic inquiry and analysis on the material costs of film but also the public awareness of the industry's monumental carbon footprint. Corbett and Turco's *Sustainability in the Motion Picture Industry* report (2006) remains one of the most comprehensive and exhaustive quantifications of how the industry contributes to not only greenhouse gas emissions, but also energy consumption and the production of hazardous waste. Its focus on the Los Angeles metropolitan area, the permanent home for some of the largest media production facilities on the west coast of the United States, centers big-budget film and nearby on-location shooting. While enlightening, the report is becoming dated and cannot attend to the majority of mid-budget and small budget filmmaking that occurs outside this region or internationally. Material and carbon demands of independent mid-budget films (~$10 million dollars) do not receive the same critical attention as larger productions from major Hollywood studios despite a similar if not identical ideology of "getting the best shot through any and all means". Trade publications also provide a limited view into the inner workings of film production. Reliance on public sources of information must always "take

into account industry discourse and spin" (Perren, 2013). Any insider interview with a director, actor, cinematographer, or other high-ranking creative involved in the production of a film is almost always done to drum up publicity to increase ticket sales or sales of affiliated merchandise. Most critical interventions have come decades after the fact on particularly egregious scenes or sets, or from scholars who managed to obtain information from confidential sources related to a particular film through insider connections and/or exhaustive archival research (Vaughan, 2019). While maintaining attention on the "spin", I argue that a close reading (or an intentional misreading) of these interviews and other extra-filmic consumer-facing media paraphernalia can allow for a meaningful glimpse behind the curtain/camera. As both film production and exhibition become increasingly digitized, the need to recognize the multiple registers of materiality that exists at every level of a film's conception and life cycle becomes even more important: the construction of physical sets, the energy costs of visual effects and CGI, the physical and digital copies of a film, and the merchandising after the film's theatrical release. This approach will not be able to attend to each of these registers and will not be able to provide a quantitative claim or critique. However, I believe that drawing attention to what we can see both textually and through related media events reveals additional layers of horror in the making of (horror) films: a layer of horror stemming from the lack of knowledge publicly available about the immense material/carbon costs of filmmaking and a layer of horror stemming from the active role of industry practices such as the publicity interview in cultivating an image of filmmakers into an instrument of additional revenue generation.

An additional barrier to the integrative approach I am attempting concerns the lack of disciplinary connection between the analysis of a film as text and the analysis of a film as a process constituted by labor, energy, and material. On the one hand, film analysis often

disregards or neglects the energetic entanglements and consequences of cinema – labor, electricity, waste, carbon – in favor of addressing of the representational modes of the film as text; what is symbolized, what is referred to, and/or the anthropocentric urges behind these symbols and referents. Feminist film theory in particular has roots in Freudian psychoanalysis that often fail to consider the material investments of the medium of film through its emphasis on the interrogation of the spectator and the gaze (Mulvey, 1975). On the other hand, production studies is typically grounded in a practice of film history that often neglects to connect with film theory in favor of contextualizing the practice of filmmaking in a given cultural time and space (Balio, 2013). To relate the interconnectedness of these ideas, I employ the model of film ecology proposed by Adrian Ivakhiv (2013) as well as the concept of the "resource image" developed by Nadia Bozak (2012). For both the construction of film worlds and for the experience of watching film we can conceive of multiple connected spheres of relationality: these spheres are broadly material, social, and perceptual. Looking past the materiality of the film medium (the chemical and digital relations that create the image displayed on a screen), I attend to the materiality of the social and perceptual ecologies (Ivakhiv, 41). The social ecologies refer to the often inaccessible "behind-the-scenes" processes as described above: the collection of people, labor, and stuff that goes into the making of a film. The perceptual ecologies are the generative relations that come from attention to how the reception of the film as a media artifact affects the extra-filmic world, including but not limited to scholarly criticism and fan-made content. In her groundbreaking work *The Cinematic Footprint,* Bozak attends to critical gaps in film theory and popular conceptions of cinema as both popular environmental awareness and widespread digitization complicate the interrelations of consumer, producer, and industry.

In summary, the critical methodologies and scholarly fields I will attempt to connect seem incommensurate because they conceive of film in distinct abstract modes. However, a growing chorus of scholars seeking to unsettle and disrupt the traditional separations between disciplines that attend to film as object and image, film producing and film viewing is emerging that I add my voice to. Materiality of film and representation in film cannot be understood as separate; it matters what matter is used – bodies included. Genevieve Yue and her work on the China Girl image "offers a methodological intervention in feminist film analysis – moving inquiry away from representation, which looks at the image onscreen, and toward industrial and institutional processes which, though hidden from view, are no less gendered" (2021, 2). The China Girl, or "girl head" is a "reference image that has been used in film laboratories since the mid- to late 1920s to calibrate color, density, and ideal appearance for the film image…"touching" everything a viewer sees, even if not in a way that can be readily recognized" (3). In an extension of this definition of the "girl head", we can understand all the material and cultural processes that go into the creation of a film (world) as conditioning the nature of film spectatorship and filmic representation. Ecocriticism studies has also been slow to take up the material of moving-image media in the same way it has done literature as cultural products and resources that shape how we think about our world and how we might imagine new ways of being in it (Bozak, 12). Ecomedia studies moves to consider the stuff of media in and of itself as well as the reasons behind our hesitancy to ignore or neglect it while also not abandoning the critical analysis of cinematic narrative and representation. In this way I hope to take up Bozak's call for individual consumers of "resource images" like cinema to be more mindful of the differential costs of convenience and accessibility while also acknowledging that

greater demands for reducing the opacity of natural resource use in the film production industry is also imperative for these practices to change (Cubitt, 2020).

Horror has always been a site where humanity encounters its deepest-seated fears and anxieties, typically to reassert its control or dominance over them through well-defined yet constantly evolving tropes (Hanich, 2010). Ecohorror studies takes up that frightening nature of nature – often by unsettling the underlying human/nature divide that pervades much Western thought. Aster's films, much like Ivakhiv's spheres of relationality, blur the lines between these traditionally separate theoretical genealogies as nexus of generative tension between production and text, social ecology and perceptual ecology. I offer this analysis of *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* as ecohorrific texts and as ecohorrific productions as evidence of the critical gaps and slippages between the filmic and the real that come into focus when we understand film and its representations emerging from multiple registers of cultural and material relations.

CHAPTER II

HEREDITARY (2018)

I start this analysis by situating each of these films in the subgenres they draw inspiration from to create an entry point by allowing for an understanding of how they subvert and follow their respective genre formulas. For example, *Hereditary* borrows heavily from the occult psychological horror popularized by *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *The Exorcist* (1973) – encounters with demons thick with atmospheric dread, fear of the unknown, and paranoia concerning potential conspiracies that underly every seemingly mundane action and lurk around every corner. A summary of *Hereditary*: miniature artist Annie (Toni Collette) and her nuclear family become targeted by a demonic cult following the death of her estranged mother Ellen. Daughter Charlie (Milly Shapiro) dies in a tragic accident, causing major rifts between Annie, her psychiatrist husband Steve (Gabriel Bryne), and son Peter (Alex Wolff). Convinced by a cult member who disguises herself as a fellow grieving mother, Annie conducts a séance that catalyzes a cascade of events that lead to her death, her husband's death, and the supposed permanent occupation of Peter's body by a demon. Aster has gone "on the record" calling *Rosemary's Baby,* an "obvious touchstone" and equates the role of his character Joan to that of Minnie Castevet (iHorror, 2018). If *Hereditary* was intended to be some sort of spiritual successor, how do we interpret any differences from the source material?

A comparative analysis of female agency and the nature of the objectification of women between these time periods through feminist film theory proves generative. There have been significant cultural shifts in the fifty years between the films' theatrical releases; the drugging, subsequent rape, and the dismissal of Rosemary's account of her tale by male doctors would have been unacceptable to a 2018 theatrical audience. Can the absence of these plot devices in

Hereditary be understood as the film industry reckoning with heteronormative and patriarchal modes of representation? As a preliminary answer, I offer the words of feminist film theorist Christine Gledhill, "…the media appropriates images and ideas circulating within the women's movement to supply a necessary aura of novelty and contemporaneity. In this process, bourgeois society adapts to new pressures, while at the same time bringing them under control" (1999). In *Rosemary's Baby,* female agency seems non-existent; husband Guy and "fertility expert" Dr. Sapirstein collude with the cult in the Bradford apartment building to manipulate Rosemary emotionally and physically while learned friend Hutch acts as objective confidant, information broker, and eventually doomed white knight. *Hereditary*'s Steve, in comparison, attempts to control Annie by withholding information but remains oblivious to the nefarious forces surrounding her in a dilute version of the expert medical (read: male) opinion to invalidate a female subject. Counterbalancing Steve's pared-back role, Annie takes on some agency through her role of leading the family séance. These minute but noteworthy changes read as attempts to achieve the aura Gledhill describes while continuing in a long tradition of subverting female subjectivity through bodily mutilation and possession.

The body enters the conversation surrounding female agency in *Hereditary* through attention to matriarch Ellen. All representations of Ellen are as object: laying in state at her funeral, haunting her daughter as a ghostly apparition, laughing in photos. Before and after death, her body is wholly dedicated to the rearing of the demon-king Paimon in the physical world; at first any potential agency she demonstrates is either off-screen and/or implied. However, a brief cut away to a photograph hanging in the treehouse/house of demon worship reveals that Ellen is/was "Queen" of the cult. This information, paired with the ambiguous nature of the "prolonged illness" that led to her death, complicates the objectification of her body. If her death was

intentional, serving as the initial spark for the chain of events leading to Paimon's manifestation, then Ellen's body as object refers to a high degree of female agency not seen in horror of previous decades; despite Minnie Castevet's involvement in Rosemary's drugging, the satanic cult of the Bradford apartment building was led by her husband Roman. Ellen willingly gives up her body to forward the desires of the cult she leads, allowing for a reading of all post-mortem objectification as potentially consensual. A note found shortly after the funeral indicates that Ellen is aware of what is to befall her daughter's nuclear family. It reads: "Forgive me all the things I could not tell you. Please don't hate me and try not to despair your losses. You will see in the end that they were worth it. Our sacrifices will pale next to the rewards" (12:00). As matriarch, she wields absolute power over the events of the film and in doing so manipulates the other characters, consigning them to a horrific encounter with the supernatural. Despite her overwhelming presence in the plot, the actress who plays Ellen is uncredited, her absent presence in this film allowing for this technicality. This, the coding of demon Paimon as male, and its reliance on a familiar narrative trajectory indicates *Hereditary* does not stray far from the formula popularized by *Rosemary's Baby* half a century before.

The modes of violence afflicting women in the film provide evidence of a sensationalizing of the destruction of the female subject that must be read alongside the material demands of this process. By shifting the perpetrator of the worst of the violence toward women to a force of supernatural origin rather than a manipulative cult led by a man, the film sidesteps much criticism while reaping the benefits of adding graphic spectacle to the genre beyond that typically utilized and depicted in psychological horror. The film features three decapitations, two of which happen to some degree on screen and all three of them inflicted on women. These deaths and others, alongside the corresponding amplification in the amount of material required

to produce these effects (discussed in more detail below) suggest a sort of genetic anticipation in rendering this form of horror; much like an inherited disease, the deaths of the women in the Graham family escalate in spectacle and onset with each subsequent generation. The ambitious decisions surrounding the use of decapitation as a thematic plot device in *Hereditary* comprise a substantial production footprint hidden under layers of referentiality and precision. The lens of psychoanalysis colors the act of decapitation as an obliteration of the locus of reason and objectivity in the human body. Headless humans typically are not the masters of their own fate, in this case possessed after death to show reverence to a demon king. The choice to enact such symbolic violence on only women in the film invites a feminist reading. The horror genre is typically understood as a site of dramatic encounter – where the limits of the reason, order, and the hegemony of dominant culture are challenged but ultimately reaffirmed. This continual and repeated recuperation often occurs through a re-subjugation of the feminine or the destruction of an oft-related counterpart, the monstrous (Clover, 1999).

Decapitation in *Hereditary* functions as a rejection of the tainted woman. Afflicted by possession, regardless of its temporary nature, the female body becomes unintelligible to a gaze defined by masculine dominance through objective reasoning. Therefore, it must be destroyed. What are the consequences of the instances of decapitation depicted in the film? Each act necessitates the creation and manipulation of at least one full set of inanimate doubles for the characters of Ellen, Annie, and Charlie, with the technical demands for each killing becoming more elaborate. Ellen's decapitation occurs offscreen, her body dug up and "desecrated" by the cult. A static headless version of her body is shown twice: laying on the floor for a dramatic reveal in the attic and again prostrating to the demon king in worship in the final scene. Annie's death is more theatrical. Shot from the perspective of a terrified Peter looking up, there is a rather

awkward 30-second shot sequence: a full shot of a body suspended from the attic's rafters, medium shot, close-up of "Annie's" eyes (unblinking), back to full-body as mechanized arms saw at her neck with piano wire in a clunky and unnatural timing (1:55:40-1:56:10). The camera follows Peter out of the attic window, the completion of the decapitation indicated to the audience by a dull thud. Although the first to appear on-screen, Charlie's head-removal is the most complicated of the Graham women. In a press interview, Shapiro recounts extra rigging built into the car and the presence of a stunt double to create the infamous "telephone pole decapitation scene" (Vulture, 2018). In real time, the practical effects are almost impossible to process. Only through a frame-by-frame move through the scene does a hooded dummy torso attached to the vehicle at the point of impact become clear. While there is no shot of the decapitated body in the backseat, there is a cut to Charlie's disembodied head the next morning. It appears again in the final scene, mounted on a mannequin. The most minimal of estimates for the number of bodies required for the decapitations is seven, the bodies of the three actresses and at least one set of inanimate bodies plus a stunt double although the number could be much higher. This additional layer of horror is only revealed when an account of the replicate bodies required to produce the intimate atmospheric dread of *Hereditary* comes into focus.

The multiplicative material demands of the film go beyond that of the dismembering of the female body. The miniatures motif in the film evinces multiple registers of materiality. At the level of the narrative, Annie and Charlie develop this theme as miniatures artists. In addition to a source of income, Annie uses the process of creation in coping with the death of her mother. Read from the viewpoint of filmic psychoanalysis Annie uses miniatures to position herself as a voyeur, a role typically associated with the dominant heteronormative patriarchal gaze (Mulvey, 1975). Through the psychological and material distance she creates by objectifying traumatic life

moments, she seeks control over them and her own emotions. Charlie also participates in some rather macabre tinkering, using the heads of pigeons and other odds and ends to create humanoid figures that litter her desk. This behavior is troubled by the development that the girl the audience knows as Charlie never truly existed. Aster explains that the demon king Paimon occupies her body, "from the moment she's born. I mean, there's a girl that was displaced, but she was displaced from the very beginning" (Variety, 2018). Aster's use of the word "displace" is fitting here. The death of these women (or their potential subjective positions) can be read as the rejection of the idea of a feminine voyeur. At the level of production, the use of miniatures in *Hereditary* relates recursively to the exacting nature of the filmmaking process. Aster's directorial vision and his aesthetic considerations for the film insisted on excess. A whole team of miniaturists was involved in creating multiple scaled-down versions of the Graham house and the miniature art featured in Annie's workshop. Many of these miniatures were created off-site and shipped to the filming location. The construction and destruction of these models allows for some of the more ambitious shots in the film, while some models are shown only in passing. In an autobiographical retrospective describing how Aster was frequently anxious on set about getting the right *feel* for the film, the reader gets a small glimpse into the decision-making process: "Steve [head miniaturist] gave me the option of either sawing off the front of the miniature house…or rethinking the whole sequence by keeping the front wall intact…I took a gamble and sawed off the front wall" (Moviemaker, 2020). While this is presented as a potential consequence of disconnects between the direction and the production-design teams and the difficult decisions a director must make, it also suggests that *nothing* should stand in the way of getting the "right" shot. By centering the creative vision of the director, any consideration of labor and the amount of material wasted in these decisions goes unattended.

Other elements of the production of *Hereditary* mentioned in trade interviews indicate that a multiplicity of set design undergirded the whole production. The film was shot on-location in and around Salt Lake City and the exterior shots of the house coming from a neighborhood in nearby Sandy. An interview with production designer Grace Yun reveals a great amount of detail about the production process. The exterior treehouse seen in the film was also "built and installed on location. The entire interior of the Graham house was built on a stage, along with the attic and interior treehouses (there were *two* sizes [emphasis added]). The dimensions of the build and flow of the rooms was designed to function with Ari's meticulous shot list." (Bright Lights, 2018). While building interiors on soundstages is not uncommon in feature-length film production, *Hereditary* multiplies this practice in miniature, and then again through set design. In addition to the demanding production schedule and the raw materials required to create duplicates of the same interiors at different scales, Aster and director of photography Pawel Pogorzelski insisted on custom filming equipment. "For our desired "lived-in dollhouse" effect…Pawel worked with Panavision to create special prime lenses for us that had never been used before" (Moviemaker). This choice for bespoke lenses may stem from a desire to shoot in a specific aspect ratio popularized by previous auteur directors such as Ingmar Bergman. In a conversation with contemporary director Robert Eggers on the A24 podcast, Aster indicates that he prefers a 2:1 aspect ratio in contrast to the traditional "academy" ratio of 1.375:1 or the 1.75:1 more commonly used in human-centric genres like thrillers and comedies (*The A24 Podcast,* 2019). This extra width allows for wider wide shots – forcing characters in the center of the frame to compete with a greater amount of screen space devoted to their surroundings – and more jarring close-ups. Again, the focus of the conversation is an unrelenting desire to achieve a specific directorial vision, no matter the cost. At almost every level of production mentioned in

interviews and publicity articles (stunts, set design, cinematography, aesthetics), there lurks an understanding but little attention to the reality that the spectacle created on-screen requires an inordinate amount of labor and material. Presented as offering the audience the "best representation of the director's vision", this industry mindset perpetuates a culture that at best fails to understand its ecological impact, or worse chooses to skirt responsibility to maintain the status quo despite paying lip service to ecological responsibility.

The merchandizing of *Hereditary* offers a view of how the image of Aster as an auteur director cultivated in interviews with him and his colleagues, one who imbues any film he creates with a certain aesthetic style by any means necessary, is constructed to function as a sort of advertising for film-related products. As the dominant mode of viewing film moves to streaming on web devices, the market for DVDs is on the decline. Despite grossing over $80 million in the worldwide box office, film industry data aggregate site The Numbers indicates that *Hereditary* has made less than $5 million in domestic home video sales[1]. In what sort of ways can film production and distribution companies attempt to prevent any decreases in revenue from this corresponding decrease in physical home video consumption? In the case A24, how does a smaller production studio or distribution company gain access or generate new sources of revenue in a changing media consumption landscape? Major studios have plenty of revenue streams to help absorb losses stemming from changes in consumer behavior: theme parks, corporate collaborations for demographic-targeted merchandising, licensing film libraries (Balio, 2013). Many film conglomerates are also attempting to compete with Netflix and Hulu by offering their own streaming services, hearkening back to the heyday of the Hollywood studio system in which studios enjoyed vertical and horizontal integration of the industry. Smaller

[1] https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Hereditary-(2018)#tab=summary

distribution companies like A24 have fewer options. What they can do is attempt to establish themselves as niche. A24 has become well-known for two things: out-of-the-box marketing campaigns and art-house style films. These have potential for success at major film festivals and high praise from critics while also alienating the average movie goer in favor of cultivating a distinct aesthetic and atmospheric feel. Trade publications have noted the discrepancy, reporting that *Hereditary* earned a "D+ from audiences" according to the market research firm CinemaScore (Hollywood Reporter, 2018). A24 leans into this "cinema for cinephiles" identity, offering merchandise on their website ranging from apparel, office goods, beach towels, and dog leashes[2]. Among these is the screenplay book, a faux-leather hardcover tome including a foreword, the screenplay itself, and some additional "extras" tailored to each film. Playing off the narrative well-established in his and other trade interviews, the *Hereditary* screenplay book gives the consumer a beautified version of "Aster's meticulous shot list from the family séance scene" (description from product listing) with a foreword from Bong Joon Ho of *Parasite* fame, and glossy, two-page, high-resolution spreads of significant stills. Other popular and critically acclaimed films distributed by A24 received the same treatment: you can buy screenplays books for *Lady Bird* (2017), *Moonlight* (2016), and *The Witch* (2015). At home on a coffee table or a bookshelf, these hefty volumes (almost 3 pounds) at a high price point ($60) cater to the cinematic elitist and the hardcore art-house film fan. The séance scene shot list included in the *Hereditary* edition allows the reader a privileged look behind the scenes. Camera directions are abbreviated but not defined (CU for close-up, BG for background), and the use of jargon (BOOM DOWN) plays into the "meant for Ari's eyes only" illusion. With DVDs falling out of style, this product may represent the upper end of a new iteration of the Bonus Features product

[2] https://shop.a24films.com/

that came included with a typical disc purchase. The screenplay book product operates in much of the same way as the building of miniatures; a medium designed to trick those engaging with it into believing that they have entered a zone of exclusivity that offers a heightened understanding either through control or access to privileged information. The merchandizing of *Hereditary* relies on the same principle that both its narrative and mode of production falls back on – a masculine-coded desire to know the unknowable that fails to consider the material consequences of such an endeavor.

CHAPTER III

MIDSOMMAR (2019)

Midsommar draws on a temporally related but regionally different set of subgenre tropes than *Hereditary*, revealing the beginnings of a pattern for Aster: adding superficial alterations to an established plot to focus on creating a visual spectacle. Folk horror – or more accurately European folk horror – has received significantly less scholarly attention than psychological horror. That may have to do with European folk horror's popularization outside of Hollywood; Adam Scovell points to the countercultural movement in Britain of the late 1960s and 1970s as the genre's historical origins. I insist on the designation European folk horror here to recognize other culturally specific mechanisms of horror that operate within regional and national folklore systems that are understood in the west with designations such as Japanese and Korean folk horror. Any attempt to position European folk horror as folk horror writ large is Eurocentrism. Coming out of smaller production houses, audience appeal for these films typically spreads by word-of-mouth instead of advertising by studios. The "unholy trinity" of *Witchfinder General* (1968), *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971), and *The Wicker Man* (1973) serve as foundational texts in this canon. Another obstacle to the study of European folk horror remains assigning key thematic and stylistic tropes to a genre defined by three films of wildly differing styles and narratives. Scovell settles on four key but loosely related linkages: landscape, isolation, skewed belief systems of morality – I prefer Other(ed) belief systems or moralities – and the happening/summoning (2017). In the same way that I invite a reading of *Hereditary* as a modern reboot or retelling of *Rosemary's Baby,* I invite a reading of *Midsommar* as a spiritual successor to *The Wicker Man*. A summary of the plot: The struggling romantic relationship of Dani (Florence Pugh) and Christian (Jack Reynor) receives an additional blow when Dani suffers a

family tragedy. They travel to Swedish friend Pelle's (Vilhelm Blomgren) isolated hometown/commune Hårga for the purposes of studying the community and their midsummer festival as an anthropological case study with other graduate students. The invited guests balance reverence for folklore and terror as ritual elements of the celebration escalate to suicide. Winnowing the number of guests over the course of the festival as cultural transgressions mount, the community homes in on the fragmenting couple. After winning the title of May Queen and witnessing Christian's involvement in a sexual ritual, Dani is assimilated into the community and Christian is killed in a ritual conflagration. In much of the same way that *Hereditary* modernizes the psychological horror genre, *Midsommar* updates and complicates the European folk horror formula through impressive cinematography surrounding the moments of both isolation (both geographical and psychological), the representations of landscape, and the introduction of the relationship drama between the interlopers. It also engages in the same escalation of material costs under the auspices of Aster as burgeoning auteur.

One potential reading of *Midsommar* empowers the female subject in a sharp critique of contemporary monogamous relationships and the isolation they breed in Western society. Dani fails to receive the emotional support she needs to contend with chronic anxiety and the loss of her nuclear family from emotionally unavailable boyfriend Christian. The Swedish commune functions as a potential lifestyle alternative with a twist – their cultural Otherness setting the stage for the horror of the narrative. For Dani, this community offers togetherness in a form she never knew and has now lost the ability to obtain. Her emotional vindication comes in the final seconds of the film, a wide smile creeping across her face as she watches all vestiges of her previous life going up in flames with a temple. But does Dani not give up her female subjectivity by assimilating into a community that believes in a cycle of life and death potentially

incompatible with conceptions of the self as we know them? What are the ramifications for the Western self as it approaches a collective/entity like Hårga? The annihilation of personal identity frequently operates within the subgenre of ecohorror as stand-in characters for audience members, or in this case director Aster, encounter and often become assimilated by systems of disparately connected sentience (Keetley, 2020). Coupled with Dani's emotional arc, the killing of fellow visitors Mark and Josh, hyperbolic representations of the sexual and the exploitative nature of the Western objectifying gaze, also supports this alternative framing. Mark sees every interaction with women as a potential sexual encounter and every sexual encounter as a personal conquest. This attitude is married to both a lack of cultural awareness and a lack of motivation to consider the validity of indigenous religious practice and ideology. After urinating on a dead tree that is linked to all the dead in the community, a woman of the commune lures him to his demise through the implication of sex. Foreshadowed by a brief allusion to a traditional children's game in the village, "Skin the Fool", Mark's integration into the festival culminates in his literal embodiment of that punishment. Disappearing after following a young girl from the community to an undisclosed location, his skinned face becomes a tool utilized in Josh's death. Putting himself and others in potential danger to secure access to rare and exclusive knowledges, Josh represents the voyeuristic urges of the objective gaze. He purposefully withholds information from his fellow visitors about an upcoming ritual human sacrifice, choosing to prioritize his ability to bear witness to the event over the potential traumatizing of his friends. His intent to decipher the ancient texts of the community fail in part to their unknowability – the commune presumably relies on the interpretative powers of their elders to divine meaning from the abstract art of "prophets" created through intentional in-breeding.

This Otherness paired with a mythology centered around attention to nature and its cycles situate the village as a more-than-human collective characterized by a shared emotionality. The mythos of Hårga frequently refers to a desire to stay in harmony with the natural world and the cycle of life and death, often in conjunction with the use of psychotropics. The members of the community seem to feel, or at least act out sympathetic affective responses to the most emotionally evocative elements of the festival. As part of the "lifecycle of the community members" two elders jump to their deaths from a cliff in a scene both evoking the European folklore researched in the making of the film as well the mechanism as a popular dystopian horror trope. Community onlookers wail in pain as attendants bludgeon the head of the male elder after he fails to kill himself on impact. The outsiders look on in horror and repeatedly entreat the community leader to cease the ceremony, only to be met with the familiar folk horror refrain: "What you just saw was a long, long, long observed custom…And you need to understand it as a great joy for them" (1:05:00-1:05:15). As the members of the invited parties are culled and as Dani and Christian become more increasingly targeted by the community, the actions of the interlopers become the catalysts for these emotional events. The will of the committee works to dismantle the weak monogamous link between the couple; gathered nude around a drugged Christian and village girl Maya, older women of the community moan with pleasure in rhythmic unison and assist Christian in penetration by placing their hands on his back, timing his thrusts. The younger women tend to Dani, wailing and breathing in time with her as she attempts to reckon with the emotions that arise from witnessing the aforementioned union. At this level, the narrative of *Midsommar* advocates for a transcending of the material bounds of bodies to find and create emotional connections with the humans and nonhumans around us to escape the terrifying isolation of what we know. However, the sheer amount of

resources required and destroyed in achieving this horrific cinematic vision undercut the pastoral idyll that covers the surface of the film like a cracking veneer, all the while indulging in the ideology of production excess in Aster's work we first encountered in *Hereditary*.

Any reading of *Midsommar* as post-capitalist or a call to return-to-nature is troubled by the inordinate material investment in creating the image of the commune. All the structures that make up the village of Hårga were built from scratch for the film. In an interview recounting the grueling shooting process for the film, Aster reveals, "We were scouting for a long time to find the right field, and I was also still desperately working on the shot list, because the scouting is pretty useless [without it] …Then we had two months to build *everything* (emphasis added)" (Vulture 2019). "Everything" includes but is not limited to the following:

> six (6) stand-alone habitations – a two-story sleeping quarters painted and covered in elaborate artwork, a kitchen/meal preparation building, a temple with an atrium and shelving for the storage of sacred texts, a second taller temple painted bright yellow, a small cottage with a different set of elaborate monochromatic artwork for the interior, and one unidentified building
>
> Numerous non-habitation structures: an elaborate wooden entryway to the village in the shape of a sun with rays and supports, the flower-covered Maypole, two covered stalls for the domesticated animals, multiple garden plots, a large circular stage, a firepit, a carriage Dani rides in in the closing scenes of the film, and all the tables and benches used in the various seating arrangements taken during the film.

This is leaving out all the interior decoration that was necessary to fill all these structures, the costumes for the dozens of extras in the village, and the sets from the initial scenes of the film

that do not take place in “Sweden” (Dani’s apartment, Dani’s childhood home, the scene on the plane to Sweden, and the apartment where the news of Dani’s joining of the trip occurs). Some film franchises and above-the-line creators have garnered popularity and praise for a commitment to recycling the sets produced for shooting; Corbett and Turco’s report highlights several “Best Practice Examples” of environmentally conscious film production including the salvaging of the sets of two of “The Matrix” installations to be rebuilt as low-income housing in Mexico (Corbett and Turco, 50). The fate of Hårga’s structures is relatively unknown. In the final climactic shot of the film the iconic yellow temple is filled with both a collection of living persons, stand-ins created by stuffing cloth bags with straw, and Christian encased in the body of a bear. The temple and all inside in are set alight – resulting in a towering conflagration with obvious nods to the burning alive of Sergeant Neil Howie in *The Wicker Man*. Not to be outdone by its predecessor on any metric, the number of live sacrifices in *Midsommar* overshadows the former by a factor of three; straw-filled sacs stand-in for every other visitor killed over the duration of the midsummer festival (5) for a total of eight representations of human bodies in the fire.

Labor and transportation also factor into the exorbitant carbon costs of producing *Midsommar.* Hårga as a sort of idyllic pastoral Swedish commune and jokes about American sexual tourism of young people abound in the opening scenes. However, the shooting of the film took place primarily outside of Budapest. Aster cites financial restrictions for this decision even though this film was a commission from a Swedish production company. Hungary’s foreign film tax rebate incentives are incredibly attractive: a starting percentage of 25% of all expenses potentially recouped by productions that utilize Hungarian service providers and a potential on increasing that percent savings based on further outsourcing. This may be the reason behind

Aster choosing to film in Hungary while flying in Swedish actors and extras for the on-site shooting[3]. Such a choice reveals the discrepancies between cost-saving measures for American films shot on-location internationally and the industry's apparent turn to more sustainable forms of film production as well as presenting a logistical nightmare. "Greenwashing" campaigns from major film studios act as a smokescreen for both their own major productions, often substituting one carbon-producing practice for another[4], and smaller mid-budget productions like *Midsommar* that go unreported as most of the filming occurs outside the US. Actor interviews recount communication issues on set: "…one portion of the crew is Hungarian, one portion is Swedish, one portion is English-speaking, and the same applies to the cast. There were just two people on the entire set who could speak all three of those languages." (Entertainment Weekly, 2019). I would be remiss to engage in a discussion of excess on this set without addressing the elephant in the room, or in this case the bear in the cage. Later parodied by A24 in a 90s-era commercial spot for a "Bear in a Cage" action figure posted online[5], a live bear is used in a passing shot while the American guests are given a tour of the commune. The nonchalant exchange between two characters – "So are we just going to ignore the bear then? / It's a bear" (45:15) likely required a team of handlers, experts, and animal rights representative for the ten (10) seconds the bear appears on screen. In addition, two cows and at least six sheep appear in the opening establishing shots of the commune but are noticeably absent from the rest of the film. While these details could be argued for on the pretense of cultivating a sense of realism, that goal must be balanced against more than the financial stakes of producing a feature-length

[3] https://nfi.hu/en/industry/hungarian-tax-rebate-for-film-productions
[4] Hunter Vaughan's chapter on the carbon usage of the servers required to render the CGI effects of *Avatar* in New Zealand offers additional insight on the pitfalls of assuming that digital film production is inherently less resource intensive than traditional production styles with practical effects.
[5] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MNz9nkQYag4&ab_channel=A24

film, especially as audiences are becoming more conscious of the stakes of climate instability and more inclined to act against agents understood as wasting precious resources.

Midsommar's narrative does not lend itself as easily to attending to Aster's role in both a textual analysis and the post-production marketing of the film as does *Hereditary*. However, I believe a vantage point emerges from the industry narrative surrounding the Director's Cut and its link the status of auteur that benefits all parties involved in the production process. The new arrangement adds about twenty minutes of content that primarily focus on the splintering relationship between Dani and Christian during their stay in Hårga, in addition to another ritual that dramatizes the folk story of a child drowning in the river. This scene's tension arises from the uncertainty of the fate of a child from the village and Dani's frustration at Christian's observation of the practice. Why did *Midsommar* get a Director's Cut release and *Hereditary* not? Online articles mention a "3 hour" version of *Hereditary* but also indicate that it would never be shown; this method of film production has been normalized by the argument that this allows creatives to arrange the best film possible while reducing the likelihood of a costly reshoot (Inverse, 2019). In addition to another opportunity to profit off a film-commodity, the Director's Cut serves as a physical representation of a potentially feigned stand-off between the creative and the corporation to elevate the image of the director as misunderstood genius. Articles frequently reference a Swedish production company approaching Aster with the script and asking him to "do to this what he did to *Hereditary"*. He describes the process of attempting to balance personal desires with the commission for a folk horror film: "My first instinct was to pass on it, because it's not necessarily a subgenre that I felt compelled to work in." Aster reveals the way that creators navigate the commodification of their craft with the passions and inspirations that lead to the narrative seen by audiences: "is there a way to, like, take the money

and find a way to smuggle a breakup movie into this...a throwaway folk-horror movie?" (Vulture, 2019). I believe that the Director's Cut of *Midsommar* functions as the "movie Aster wanted to show in theaters but couldn't". Not only does this feed into the narrative that creatives frequently war with greedy production executives to try and create something beautiful in a terrible system but it creates another revenue opportunity with little to no additional filming. *Midsommar* performed well for a mid-budget original script, independent horror film, earning over $46 million in worldwide box office against an estimated $9 million dollar budget[6], but this remains slightly more than half what *Hereditary* has made. The Director's Cut may simply be an attempt to squeeze more money out of a now dedicated fanbase who crave more Aster content. Rumors and the first screening of the cut took place just two months after *Midsommar* released in theaters, and international audiences could buy physical copies as early as November 2019. US Aster fans had to wait longer, July 2020, in part due to Apple TV's exclusive rights to stream the film.

[6] https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Midsommar-(2019)#tab=summary

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Hollywood and the rest of the motion picture film industry will continually wrestle with the popularization of new technologies and changing societal preferences of audiences, permuting tried and true narratives with updated plots to continue generating profit without making significant changes to their culture surrounding production. The demonization of trans folks in *Hereditary* and the conflating of disabled folks with monstrosity in *Midsommar* further illustrates how conservative conceptions of gender and ableism continue to haunt the horror genre[7]. Following in the footsteps of traditional film analysis, I hope to have contextualized the contemporary art house horror trend by putting it conversation with the problematic representations of the female body and the female subject of a half century ago it draws inspiration from. Following in the footsteps of media industry studies, I hope to have expanded the role of the trade publication interview by linking it directly to the unique merchandizing practices of an up-and-coming distribution company. What has gone relatively unchallenged and unnoticed is the amount of material required to achieve these increasingly more spectacular offerings. For most critics, audiences, and fans, trade interviews and behind-the-scenes bonus features remain the only way to attend to film production. Each of these modes is highly mediated, the former serving mainly as publicity and the latter a calculated and edited version of what goes on behind or around the camera. They continue to fall back onto popular narratives that film theory scholars have long criticized, including the centering of the director as the creative genius behind every technical aspect of the filmmaking process. By blending modes of

[7] For a tracking of the anxiety surrounding transmasculinity in horror, see Sasha Geffen's article in *them* (2018).

analysis coming from film theory, productions studies, and ecocriticism, the overwhelming lack of information about production and its implication of perpetuating patriarchal modes of cultural representation comes into focus. Only through the demystification of film production can the academy and informed audiences demand accountability for an ideology and practice of waste and excess that cannot go unaccounted for in an era of where human consumption of resources is an ever-present threat. Although the role of the author has become fraught in the humanities disciplines, I believe that understanding the position of the auteur as a discursive one constructed to benefit the major players in the production, distribution, and the exhibition of the film can serve as a generative entry point for the slippery space between textual analysis and film production studies as well as understanding emerging trends like the "elevated horror film" cluster to which *Hereditary, Midsommar*, and many other A24 titles belong.

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