Hereditary's Intergenerational Curse

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Abstract

Hereditary (2018) is a film about the horrors that occur in families. The film starts with the death of the matriarch in the family, and it is unsubtle in the examination of grief and the secrets that the family holds. Hereditary is about Annie, whose mother has died. She gives a distant and controlled eulogy at her mother's funeral saying, 'It's heartening to see so many strange new faces here' when describing a 'secretive, suspicious' woman who was a difficult parent. However, the grief, that bubbles forth becomes the conduit to the abject and uncanny and starts an unravelling of the family. A common trope in horror is that houses are the scariest places of all, and just as old houses have adapted to modern lifestyles, haunted-house stories have accommodated our generational anxieties and, in this house, and family the build-up of horror is placed in the family home. The haunted house in this film for example demonstrates that the family home rather than locking troubles out, they live within. This chapter explores the horror of the decay of this family in Hereditary, and how this family reflects an intergenerational terror by demonic devotion.

Hereditary (2018) is the debut feature from American director and screen writer Ari Aster. The film arrived in cinemas with much anticipation after audiences were stunned by what many critics named as a modern-day horror masterpiece after its initial screening at the Sundance film Festival (Ryan 2018). The film was quickly declared as part of the new movement in horror films which began in 2010 that both thrill and scare audiences, while tapping into serious political and contemporary issues (Lane 2018). Journalist Donald Clarke stated that 'After generating the noisiest buzz at the 2018 Sundance Film Festival, the disturbing, emotionally draining horror film has gone on to secure ecstatic reviews from practically every organ'. *The Irish Times* joined *The Guardian* and *Time Out* in awarding the full constellation of five stars (Clarke 2018). Don Kaye (2018) added 'believe the hype: *Hereditary*—which rattled jaded audiences earlier this year at the Sundance Film Festival—is an instant horror classic, a terrifying chronicle of the destruction of a family that also serves as an outstanding feature debut for writer/director Ari Aster'. There are many recent horror films that are described as belonging to the new Golden age of horror where the films continue the conventional techniques used in horror while challenging some of the cliches (Benson-Allott 2018; Virtue 2018). Meslow (2017) asks 'What's the single trend that unifies all the horror movies being released right now? The answer: they're all so damn good, … What spawned this horror renaissance? It starts with the talent making it. Horror is the ideal genre for an up-and-coming filmmaker to cut his or her teeth'.

This chapter explores how *Hereditary* reimagines key areas of horror in innovative ways. One such area is trauma and grief, and the other is the complicated area of motherhood. These areas are hinted at throughout the film to create a disturbing portrait of a family that has been haunted and possessed by forces they do not understand and can do nothing to withhold. One of the central tensions within the film is whether the mental illness of members in the family is passed down and/or was it the participation in the occult that has haunted the family for generations. The title *Hereditary* serves to warn how families can be exposed to dark forces. 'In its seriousness and hair-raising craftsmanship, *Hereditary* belongs to a proud genre lineage, a legacy that stretches back to the towering touchstones of American horror, unholy prestige-zeitgeist classics like *The Exorcist* and *Rosemary's Baby'* (Dowd 2018). Truitt (2018) says the film is ...crafting a visceral experience so unsettling that you don't feel right afterward. Dirty, even. So, unclean a church visit wouldn't be out of the question.'

The trend in horror films of the 2010s onwards is summed up by Rose (2017) who says that from, '*It Comes at Night* to *A Ghost Story*, a new breed of horror is creeping into the multiplex, replacing jump-scares with existential dread'. Graves (2019) describes the generic shift as 'no longer merely a *horror* film, but instead such films as *The Babadook* (Kent 2014), *It Follows* (Mitchell 2014), *The Witch* (Eggers 2015), and *Split* (Shyamalan 2016) are defined as 'smart horror' or 'elevated horror'. '...the designation of 'smart' or 'elevated horror' arose as a shorthand to describe the recent spate of horror films exemplified by *Get Out*-box office high performers that have been lauded by critics for their cerebral narratives and pointed social criticisms' (Graves 2019, 127). Horror has found a new place to examine existential threats and social anxieties fitting for this century which is a strong departure from the more generic horror iterations. This chapter is not a comparison of generic horror texts, debating the merits of slasher films and post-horror films, but it considers how *Hereditary* demonstrates the aspects of post-horror and forges a different approach to previous horror representation, in this case, the family, cults, and impacts of grief and supernatural events. Post-horror as Church (2021, 2) says:

Variously dubbed 'slow horror,' 'smart horror,' 'indie horror,' 'prestige horror,' and 'elevated horror,' films such as *It Follows* (2014), *The Witch*, *It Comes at Night* (2017), and *Hereditary* (2018) all emerged from the crucible of major film festivals like Sundance and Toronto with significant critical buzz for supposedly transcending the horror genre's oft-presumed lowbrow status, and succeeded in crossing over to multiplexes.

Wells (2000, 1) says 'the history of the horror film is essentially a history of anxiety in the twentieth century' and 'horror narratives reflect the cultural moment- in other words, how horror changes and adapts to the social, cultural and historical anxieties of the

time and place in which the films were made' (Cherry 2009, 170). *Hereditary* was made in the time of Trump's presidency and reflects the uncertainty around elements of life that were traditionally thought of as stable. I argue, that one of the biggest challenges that the film throws is how unstable the family unit can be, and what was thought of as secure can be unstable and dangerous. Trumps Presidency pushed the world and America into an unstable place especially socially. Instead of unifying America he delighted in setting America into a place of discord and fighting. He was so provocative that Twitter permanently banned him from its platform. It could be argued that as he upended the expectations of presidential behaviour that this inversion of facts meant that it played out in that other most stable of institutions, the family. Afterall, there were numerous examples of families that were split among voting lines before the election. This very divide demonstrated the level of unease and deep feelings held in families as they attempted to navigate that divisive president. Platts and Majuto (2019) noted the burst of critique and commentary linking the election of Trump to the rise and change to horror film. The film is a challenge to the idea of nuclear families as resilient and able to withstand pressure, and how forces outside human control can devastate them. Possibly its biggest critique is that it is the unsaid things, the unprocessed trauma within families where the real danger sits.

The changing nature of horror is an area of interest for scholars as some critics believed that the horror genre in the early twenty-first century was in trouble as slasher horror, derivative material took over from more thoughtful stories. Hantke (2010, 7) says:

Ask fans, however, and they will tell you that American horror film in the last decade-from roughly the mid-1990s, though the turn of the century, and far into the first decade of the new millennium-has fallen into a slump…From a pessimist's point of view, the last ten years have seen American horror film at its worst.

While the horror genre was thought to be in trouble in the early 2000s, with recycled tropes, and few original or novel approaches, horror films and programmes from the later 2000s have struck a different note. In contrast to Hantke's view of horror covering the mid-1990s to the first decade of the millennium, Virtue (2018) says:

Horror, it seems, will never die. The undermining of traditional releasing strategies by Netflix premieres and simultaneous releases of movies in cinemas and on demand has led to Hollywood anxiously doubling down on safe sequels, reboots and expanded universes. Yet a legion of smart, subversive, and downright scary horror movies has been packing them in.

Hereditary as a recent horror sits among one of the most prominent for style, content and a new representation of family drama and grief. This era of horror films then explores more fully the psychological states of its characters and make wider commentaries on the political and social aspects of the actions and characters in these

films. These new horror films it can be argued are connected directly to the unsettling times that the Trump presidency brought in.

Hereditary brings two key parts of horror together; the supernatural threat running through the heart of the film, and the never-ending pain of trauma, resentment, and guilt that can sit at the centre of the family. However, it is in these explorations that *Hereditary* takes the horror genre further into social commentary about family, grief, and trauma. Crittenden (2019) says *Hereditary* is 'A spine-chilling exploration of the destructive impacts of trauma, heritable illnesses and supernatural malevolence on a grief-stricken household' (23). For all their middle-class life and trappings, this is a family full of despair and on a trajectory to destruction.

Audience Reception

Though *Hereditary* was mostly greeted with success, it met with some resistance due to its unusual representation of horror. Some mainstream audiences were thrown by the unusual and disturbing representation of the family. It first played in January 2018 at the Sundance Film Festival. 'They think the movie is slow, odd, goofy, arty, inexplicable' (Gliberman 2018). '*Hereditary*, by contrast, tells the story of a splintered family that's being not just haunted but slowly infiltrated by ghosts, who are mounting a spiritual takeover of the here and now. This is an afterlife movie that deals its Tarot cards one at a time, asking you to piece together the puzzle of what's going on beneath the surface of the everyday' (Gliberman 2018).

The production budget was $10 million (Clarke 2018), and *Hereditary* became A24's highest grossing movie with 78 million box office in 2018 (Tartaglione 2018). *Hereditary* exceeded industry expectations taking $13 million on its opening weekend in the United States. This was the biggest opening for the distributor A24, the same company that produced *The Witch* (2017)*, Ex Machina* (2014), and *Room* (2015).

Critics and audiences were divided in how they responded to *Hereditary*. The film received high praise from most publications and got a near perfect 92% score on Rotten Tomatoes while receiving a D+ on Cinemascore 'The ravishing cinematography and meticulously choreographed editing will scorch your eyes. When this modest suburban family begins to self-immolate, you'll go down in flames with them' (Nero 2018). *Hereditary* is the opposite of fun, with continued tragedy lumped on top of tragedy, where there is no hope for the family or even any member of the family to be saved. In many horror films for example, the final girl is left standing, or apocalyptic horror, the family survives, with its worth reaffirmed through survival but, in this film, there is no hope, no ability to fight the demons and supernatural power.

Perhaps this explains some of the poor audience reception of *Hereditary*, a movie that, while at times bending the genre cliches to give us jump scares and spooky creaks in the night, boldly shows a side of horror that is more truthful and immersed in the

psychological, rather than the material or the creature-oriented (Nero 2018). Nero says, 'The last hour of the movie, a hellish onslaught of the senses, had audience members in the comfy suburban Queens AMC multiplex where I saw the film screaming in shock, with some folks rushing out of the emergency exit in a trail of popcorn and panic, yelling 'fuck this'! as the door slammed behind them' (Nero 2018). The dynamics in the film are far more layered than most horror films demonstrate, a subtlety in grief and repressed ambivalence around parenting all within what is a formidable and unstoppable journey to the end of the film. This horror film is firmly placed in family dynamics and drama. 'It's a psychological family drama, in which grief, anger, fear and deeply troubled personal relationships play out through supernatural elements: apparitions, poltergeists, waking nightmares, the blurring of the real with the imaginary and, ultimately, demonic possession' (Crittenden 23, 2019).

There is a sense of confusion watching *Hereditary* the first time, but Ari Aster says, 'I wanted to make a conspiracy film without exposition', meaning that the viewer is not meant to be omniscient, instead learning about the plot along with the Graham family' (Crucchiola 2018). Horror writer Stephen King states in *Danse Macabre* (1981), that if a horror movie is going to work and be memorable, there must be something beyond spatter, a story that functions on a symbolic level to help us understand our deepest fears (Fanelli 2018). In this film, there are layers that unfold and demonstrate the complexity of the story and the complexity of the horror. *Hereditary* is considered one of the best modern horrors and some even say it is the best—While the horror genre has seen some worthy titles, Weiss (2021) says *Hereditary* is the best horror of the twenty-first century for the following reasons: It defies expectations, It's a drama, Toni Collette's performance, Possession Scenes, Realism, Surrealism, and Fantasy.

Lodge (2018) says 'It's an unsubtle, unforgiving horror nightmare for which not everyone will have the upturned stomach; for those who do, *Hereditary* plunges about as deep into the abyss of familial loss, ensuing blame and paralysing sorrow as it is possible to go'. The grief extends beyond the most obvious around the first death in the family and extends to a grief about all the various levels of toxic mothers. There is a continued trope of the pathological mother appearing in fiction and film and *Hereditary* continues the preoccupation with 'bad' and conflicted motherhood. It represents one of the most significant tropes found in American horror cinema from the 1950s onwards (Murphy 2018). Church (2021, 87) says 'Perhaps the best example of post-horror cinema about mourning, trauma, and maternal influence is Ari Aster's aptly named *Hereditary*, which roots its story of demonic possession in a mother's fears about inheriting and passing along mental illness to her children'.

Hidden Secrets

The film begins with a title card reproducing the obituary death notice for Ellen Taper Leigh 78 who passed away after a prolonged illness on April 3rd, 2018, followed by a

view of the daughter Charlie's treehouse, framed through Annie's workshop window, which then pans across her workshop, and tracks into a model of the Graham house. Annie is an artist who creates miniature models. She likes to use her talents to reconstruct models of her own life. Peter (Annie's son) is asleep in bed, on the morning of his grandmother's funeral, and Charlie the 13-year-old girl sleeps in the Treehouse.

Director Aster says while viewers and the characters are oblivious to the family's impending troubles, thanks to the film's dollhouse motif, 'there is also the feeling that we're watching everything from a more knowing, sadistic perspective'. He compares the larger household to the scaled-down models noting 'These are people who have no agency, and in the end, they are like dolls in a dollhouse' (Marotta 2018).

Initially the family seems remarkably unaffected by the loss of the matriarch, where Annie, the mother, Steve, the father, teenage son Peter, teenage daughter Charlie set off to the funeral. Annie delivers a tight constrained, contained eulogy and says: 'My mother was a secretive and private woman. She had private rituals, private friends, private anxieties. She acknowledges there are strangers attending that she does not know, and there is more than a hint at the distance and disconnection in the family and not just between the mothers and daughters'.

After the funeral, the story unfolds with Annie acknowledging her mothers' secrets, and how distant things were. It does not take long for Steve to take a phone call, telling him there has been damage done to Ellen's grave, and although a brief innocuous call, it has enormous significance later in the film, where it becomes clear that the cult that dominates the film has been interfering in the family affairs for years. While still grieving her mother, Annie discovers a note in a book stored in a box which says, 'Our sacrifice will pale next to the rewards'. Annie does not understand the note, it is however her own mother's acknowledgement that she has been playing with supernatural entities and shows how Ellen was deeply committed to this cause.

In an interview with Toni Collette, when asked about the eulogy scene, the interviewer suggests this is the most neutral that Annie's character is seen in the film. Asking how she conveyed the grief that character does not even seem to know she is feeling. Collette says of the grief:

All these feelings have been the undercurrent of her life, that she's never understood, that made her feel so horrible because she's so lost without understanding why-they suddenly come to the fore. During the eulogy, I tried to neutralize it. If I said it really neutrally, she would get away with it. If I said it with any vindictive passion, it would have been like "You can't say those things! There are people looking at you! It was almost like a performance from Annie, in that she was censoring herself as she was doing it and almost performing for the people. (Handler 2018)

One of the most interesting aspects of this Horror renaissance is the complicated representation of women, and *Hereditary* presents a complex tale of motherhood. The women in these films often do not focus on their children in prescribed ways while the spectator's alignment sits with Annie, a woman who is troubled with issues from her past that get in the way of being a good mother, though primarily her issues centre on whether she has passed her mental illness on to her children.

The funeral, the main pivot of the opening, demonstrates the distance between mother and daughter when Annie says, 'It's heartening to see so many strange new faces today'. Charlie is scared after her grandmother dies and has sightings of people around the school and home. She could be viewed as suffering from a mental disorder, but her dissociative behaviour is, however, all part of her grandmother's involvement with the cult. Within the story it becomes clear that mental illness has shadowed the family for generations.

Horror film has always had a special place for the portrayal and examination of the nuclear family. It is a site where gender relations play out and tensions are clear to see. 'Focused as they are on our most basic fears and desires, horror films are located in spaces where such anxieties are born: the family home' (Jackson 2016, 1). *Hereditary* is more perplexing. It has the nerve to suggest that the social unit is, by definition, self-menacing, and that the home is no longer a sanctuary but a crumbling fortress, under siege from within. That is why there are no doctors in Aster's film, and no detectives, either, urgently though both are required; nor does a man of God arrive, as he does in *The Exorcist* (1973), to lay the anguish to rest. Nothing, in short, can help Annie, Steve, and the kids, and they sure can't help themselves, stationed as they are inside their delicate doll's house of a world (Lane 2018).

Pomerance (2008, 1–2) offers an elegant description of the symbolic significance of the family to Western culture:

The family is a cultural dream obsession to which we return and return. The felt home of our music and our torture, birthplace of pleasure and wonder … the family is our rationale, our license. The family is our logic, our repository, our sacred fire, and source of light; and also, of course, the origin of a darkness we project outside of it.

In this film, the significance of the family is inverted and there is no saving the dream of the middle-class family in *Hereditary*.

While the general disturbing nature of film is important and is a genre game changer, with its intense examination of grief, trauma, and horror, much of its impact arose from superb casting and acting. It is important to talk about the cast and the force that is brought to *Hereditary*. Toni Collette brings a rare subtly and force to her characterisation of Annie and displays a wide and compelling set of emotions rarely seen in horror. She displays fury, ambivalent affection towards her children, and even dark humour. 'The

direction, shooting and orchestral score are all brilliant, but it would be nothing at all without the terrific performance of Toni Collette in the lead, her face a mask of fear and anger' (Bradshaw 2018).

This bravura, perspective-bending opening scene teases an insidious blueprint sinister forces operating just beyond the line of sight, conspiring a secret... You could say that misfortune runs in the Graham family. In fact, it seems to get passed from generation to generation like a curse. Early into the film, Annie attends a support group for the bereaved, and an awful personal history comes pouring out of her, through a monologue that relays the shattering losses she's endured since childhood. (Dowd 2018)

In a pivotal scene, which accelerates the pace of the narrative, Annie is at the bereavement support group though she says she is going to see a movie. Though reluctant to speak Annie gives in to her grief and explains that her family have a long history of mental health issues hence the name of the film *Hereditary*. Ellen, her mother suffered from dissociative identity disorder and dementia. Her brother suffered from schizophrenia Annie carries the psychological burden of childhood trauma and family dysfunction. She tells the group how her brother killed himself because her mother Ellen was 'trying to put people inside him' which is essentially the drive of the demon Paimon who eventually destroys the family (Sokol 2018). Ellen was either possessed or part of the cult worshipping the demon Paimon. Ellen, then put demonology before her own family, with little care that her desire for the rich rewards of Paimon and cult set about killing her family. In the same meeting Annie says her father starved himself due to depression, her schizophrenic brother hanged himself and blamed the mother, and her mother became estranged from her family over time.

After the unexpected death of Charlie her daughter, the support group sits in stunned suppressed silence as Annie lists her extensive list of trauma and grief that appears to have been unexpressed for a long time. Much of the film, alongside the horror scenes are the lingering burden of grief that haunts the family. The family dynamics are completely ripped open through the sudden and unexpected death of the child, the guilt of Peter, and the subtle yet present feeling of malevolent forces starts to take this family disintegration into a whole new level. These events shift the focus of the film from family drama to mental illness, and demonic possession.

However, it becomes clear by the end of *Hereditary* that the supernatural has always driven the enormous intergenerational tragedy that haunts the family, yet it seems the family is unaware of this. In the case of Annie, she is believed to be mentally unwell, just as her brother had been diagnosed with schizophrenia.

Benson-Allot argues the shift in horror is either:

Loved or hated, the films of the current horror renaissance remain notable for what they are not: slasher movies, torture porn, remakes or reboots, sci-fi thrillers, or action-horror hybrids. They are not, in other words, business as usual.

Further they are 'allegories for contemporary anger and despair' and that 'their interest lies in the emotional fault lines between the characters, not in some external menace' (2018, 71).

The hallmarks of post-horror movement, then fit perfectly with this film and its domestic space full of turmoil, where the family curse leaks into the domestic space. Characters are going through internal anxiety and suffering, though they all try to pretend that all is alright. Broadening the examination further is the idea that in the heart of this middle-class American family is decay—which sits almost as an allegory for the distress of middle-class American families. For all the material comfort like the middle-class house with one parent who is a therapist and the other an artist, there is much that is disturbing. The film is among all other aspects, an examination of grief, with truthful angry and disturbing outbursts, and the challenges of motherhood. As an artist she is unable to work among all the trauma that occurs.

Family Disintegration

Stubbs says, 'Hereditary is not a wilfully deceptive film, more one that refuses to bombard the viewer with exposition' and Aster says that he tried to 'riddle the movie with clues', … and ultimately, you're only given shards and fragments of the whole story' (Stubbs 2018), like the feel that is set up in the opening of the film. After repeated watching it is then clear that the fragments provide clues of the true situation.

The entire trajectory of the narrative is upended when Charlie's brother Peter is persuaded to take his sister to a party, and he is unwilling to do this. Charlie who is younger, and socially awkward stands around alone at the party and starts to eat some of the chocolate cake in the kitchen. Charlie begins to have an allergic reaction to nuts in the cake, and Peter realises that she is going into anaphylactic shock. He sets out to get her to hospital and Charlie, gasping for air, leans out the window. Charlie is gruesomely beheaded on the frantic drive to the hospital, as he swerves to avoid a stag lying across the road. It becomes clear through the film that decapitation is a huge element of Paimon's mystery and process.

This marks the turning point to the complete destruction of the family. This death is completely unexpected and does not follow Hollywood norms around family, where children normally live. The grief and destruction that the family endure accelerates. The following morning Annie discovers her daughter's headless corpse in the backseat of the family car. The controlled and detached grief that Annie had previously displayed for her dead mother is completely undone, with Annie seen screaming uncontrollably and heaving with grief.

The central tension in the film is the role of mental illness together with the impact of the cult that seeks to summon King Paimon, a demon that serves Lucifer. The events unfolding could be deemed a result of Annie's madness, or because of the orchestration, plotting and meddling of the cult. The truth is finally revealed that it is the cult that has been interfering in the family for generations. The clicking noise that Charlie made, for example, appeared strange but innocent, however, it was a signifier for Paimon's presence. Sadly, the perceived reality was the family was riddled with intergenerational mental illness and tragedy, when in fact it was always connected to the cult and curses. *Hereditary* shows the defiance of a mother who will stop at nothing to put an end to the chain of mental illness but in the finale, evil prevails (Nero, 2018). However, unlike so many horror films where the evil is vanquished, this film offers no such resolution.

By the end of the film, it is clear the deceased grandmother Ellen, had dedicated her life and that of her family to bringing the demon Paimon to earth. She sacrificed her first granddaughter Charlie, after imprinting her evil intentions onto the child. In this demonised family the grandmother has breastfed granddaughter Charlie, and she wished she had been born a boy. This is significant as Paimon, needs to enter a male body to continue his reign.

Bad Mothers

Women have occupied a central position in horror films with females taking up various positions. Harrington (2017, 1) argues that:

Women occupy a privileged place in horror film. The horror genre is a site of entertainment and excitement, of terror and dread, and one that relishes in the complexities that arise when boundaries – of taste, of bodies, of reason – are blurred and dismantled. It is also a site of expression and exploration that leverages the narrative and aesthetic horrors of the reproductive, the maternal and the sexual to expose the underpinnings of the social, political, and philosophical othering of women.

The idea of pathology in families has been portrayed in film and fiction before. The portrayal has not always been nuanced or considered, especially in horror films. *Fatal Attraction* (1987) and *The Shining* (1980) are two films that demonstrate some extreme and violent portrayals of madness. 'Twentieth-century pop culture is littered with examples of how not to represent mental health. Most cases are two-dimensional sketches of something that deserves much greater care and consideration' (Lunn 2018). Mothers have come in for some especially harsh representations over time. In *Hereditary* there is enormous ambivalence displayed with how mothers are portrayed, mixing the idea of madness, and evil as pathological and dangerous. Freud's theories had discerned the roots of psychopathology in this setting, and his American followers laid a host of problems at the feet of the family. And especially, the analysts indicted

America's mothers, as the source, it would appear, of an ever-expanding array of illnesses and debility, and even a threat to the health of the nation (Murphy 2018, 179).

Many critics have noted that *Hereditary* and the portrayal of the pathological mother hits new levels in the film. Murphy (2018) argues that:

The traumatising potential of the 'Pathological Mommy' is elevated to particularly disturbing heights in two of 2018's most high-profile gothic narratives: writer/director Ari Aster's debut feature *Hereditary,* and the HBO TV mini-series *Sharp Objects*. They proffer eerily overlapping visions of toxic mother-daughter relationships so bleak- and so extreme- that to observe that both teeter on the verge of hysteria by the time their respective denouements roll around is something of an understatement. There's hardly a crumb of comfort or of hope to be found in either production, both of which focus on the trauma endured by the children of controlling matriarchs whose influence is as inescapable as it is corrosive.

This maternal interference however comes from beyond the grave and it becomes clear that the entire history of the family has been impacted by Ellen's membership of and following of a cult and demon Paimon. Here the text takes an interesting turn in that the madness that appears to be medically identified, and the supernatural attack and control are interwoven in a way that is fascinating for horror and portrayals of madness. The problematic relationship between mother and daughter extends into the relationship between Ellen and her granddaughter Charlie who, Ellen has a close but complex relationship with. One of Annie's models is a replica of Eileen breast feeding Charlie as a baby while Annie watches Charlie says, 'Grandma always wanted me to be a boy'. An innocent almost throwaway line only makes sense after realising the cult needs a male body to possess. In this respect, the level to which Eileen needed Charlie to be a boy is under played.

Rose (2018) says:

As magnificently terrifying as *Hereditary* is, once the panic dies down the conclusion feels a little familiar. It's the cult! It's always the cult! Invariably when it comes to these kinds of horror movies, the perpetrators turn out to be a secret bunch of malign old people. They are overwhelmingly white, they worship demons, they hold powerful positions in society they enjoy being naked.

Film and horror films specifically have been full of monstrous women in various representations. Fusco suggests that for all the focus on supernatural evils and emotional trauma, one of the most intriguing aspects the films portrayal of motherhood and creativity. Annie's work and art are the making of elaborate miniatures. She says:

Of *Hereditary'*s 'many horrors, it's something minor that touched me most acutely: The persistent interruption of Annie's work by her family. Relative, both living and dead, feel

free to pop into her studio and disrupt her whenever they like- to ask for her car keys, to announce dinner, or to leave nasty notes (2018).

Annie is a diorama artist and makes detailed reproductions of the traumatic events in her life. Initially these serve as cathartic interludes that help her process events and trauma, but later in the film become a way to document 'the decaying state of her fragile mind' and family (Bishop 2018). Collette says about Annie that:

She has unknowingly been manipulated her entire fucking life, and that is a huge betrayal. She has had no sense of freedom and no real sense of self or understanding, let alone basic nurturing and love from her family. This poor woman has not understood her existence. And she does fucking find some understanding, it ain't good [*laughs]!* It's bad news. You do associate an awakening with positive change. There is no positivity, it is hopeless. It is entrapment. Her whole life has not been her own, and she is trapped in that, and there's no way out. (Handler 2018)

Where *Hereditary* departs from previous portrayals of bad mothers is that it goes into taboo areas that mothers experience but are often not portrayed and acknowledged in popular culture. There are key examples in the film, like that of the particularly intense dream sequence where Annie shouts at Peter that she never wanted to be his mother, and when her daughter Charlie is killed, she blames her son for her loss. In a particularly realistic scene at the dinner table, Annie roars at Peter with ferocious anger. Annie's feelings distinguish her from the idealised images of mothers as nurturing domestic angels, like the one recently depicted in the post-apocalyptic horror film *A Quiet Place.* Annie is caged and has her furious outrage but none of the family at the table are aware that all of the crisis is caused by Paimon and the cult. But while *Hereditary* grants Annie complexity as a mother, it doesn't extend this empathy to her role as an artist, and instead offers a relatively one-note approach to her work (Fusco 2018). Fusco further argues that 'Annie's relentless and steely pursuit of her work, *Hereditary* suggests, hurts her family'. Annie builds a miniature model of the accident where Charlie was killed complete with station wagon and tiny decapitated head, and the sigil of Paimon on the power pole that Charlies head hit. She can also be seen trying to cope with a life that is out of control, building models that can be controlled—maybe she is someone processing the strangeness of her life. Church (2021, 89) says 'Yet, her apparent inability or refusal to mourn her mother also foreshadows what will soon be Annie's inadequate attempt to properly mourn her own daughter'.

The Occult and Paimon

There are signs of the force of the supernatural throughout the film that grow more pronounced as the story progresses. The supernatural force is accelerated when Annie meets Joan, who encourages her to use seances to connect to Charlie. This subgenre, of seances and supernatural Heller-Nicholas (2018) argues is 'spawned from a complex

history that is much more significant-and-enigmatic- than simple iconographic might suggest'. Heller-Nicholas (2018) says seances are:

much more than a mere plot device or opportunity for some cheesy effects. Rather, they materially permit explicit communication between the past and present; allowing the inescapable influence of the latter, to make its voice heard in a move's diegetic moment. Whether it is as individuals, nations, or entire cultures, we are often haunted by a past we cannot escape, and the very title *Hereditary* renders this unambiguously the subject of genuine horror.

Of all the events in the film that demonstrate Paimon and the cult's hold over the family—it is the decapitations that indicate the full integration of Paimon over the family. "The ritual of summoning Paimon is completed through three decapitations: Charlie's, the grandma's, and Annie's. While the existence of the entire family seemed to be in service of some larger purpose (the starting shot of the movie portrays the characters in a dollhouse), the female body is especially futile: Charlie's body was used as a temporary vessel for Paimon—his end goal is to transfer to a male body and the decapitation of three women is in service of Paimon's eventual rise (Wang 2020). By the end of the film, the cult at the service of Paimon has taken over the family. Peter is possessed by the soul of his dead sister Charlie who was carrying the spirit of hell-demon Paimon inside her and is crowned by the cult followers who have terrorised the family. The suggestion in *Hereditary* is that Ellen may have only had children to satisfy Paimon, and the rituals seen in *Hereditary* are all designed to move Paimon's spirit from Charlie into Peter's body. By the end of the film the tree house, that so innocently looked like a place for Charlie's refuge from grief, is now littered with corpses including the decapitated body of Ellen.

Conclusion

Hereditary takes the theme of grief and mental illness of a family and poses the question of whether mental illness is instead caused by curses and supernatural interference, and other such concepts that most people would ever comprehend. The psychological and physical torture inflicted on the family and the horrors they endure, the sense of isolation and abandonment, suggest that the issues confronting the nuclear family in the twenty-first century are grave indeed. Newby (2018) says:

There is an emotional layer in horror that's shifting. The genre is built on the audience's emotional reaction, so much so that many viewers are able to predict exactly when and how they'll react. Essentially, we as audience members have been trained when to jump and when gasp—trained to fear, despite our sense of what's coming and a certain level of comfort in knowing who is safe and who is not.

The horror conventions might be old—but the tensions are a new representation of mental illness and the curses that can attack the family unit.

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