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A Condition of the Inevitable
The Deterministic Nature of Gender, Madness, and Mental Illness in Hereditary (2018) and Midsommar (2019)

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1. Introduction

The shape of a story is never innocent of the forces that produce it. Working from Roland Barthes' proposition that narrative and the Oedipus complex are structurally linked, Teresa de Lauretis advances a foundational insight for this thesis by putting forth the notion that "(male) desire generates narrative" (262). For her, all spectators – female or male[1] – are "constrained and defined within the two positions of a sexual difference thus conceived: male-hero-human, on the side of the subject; and female-obstacle-boundary-space, on the other" (265). What de Lauretis suggests is that narrative form itself is gendered and determines, in advance, the distribution of subjectivity. This insight offers a way into the central problem of this thesis.

Few contemporary filmmakers have explored the convergence of narrative structure and inevitability as rigorously as Ari Aster. His feature debut, *Hereditary* (2018), follows the Graham family in the wake of the death of its matriarch, Ellen Taper Leigh (Pat Barnett Carr), whose passing sets in motion a slow unraveling of the family's history. Her daughter, Annie (Toni Collette), son-in-law Steve (Gabriel Byrne), and grandchildren, Peter (Alex Wolff) and Charlie (Milly Shapiro), find their relationships disintegrating under the pressure of what surfaces. Ellen, as the sovereign of a demonic cult, has consecrated her bloodline to Paimon, one of the great kings of hell. Together with the cult, she arranged for the conditions required for his incarnation, confident that their "sacrifice will pale next to the rewards" (Aster, *Hereditary* 99). Charlie's sudden, violent death – after having served as Paimon's initial, inadequate host for thirteen years – paves the way for his overtaking of Peter, as the cult had always intended. *Midsommar* (2019), Aster's second feature-length film, opens with a parallel tragedy that leaves its female protagonist, Dani Ardor (Florence Pugh), alone in a way that will prove similarly exploitable. After learning that her sister, Terri (Klaudia Csányi), has murdered their parents and taken her own life by means of carbon monoxide poisoning, Dani is left isolated and increasingly dependent on her boyfriend, Christian (Jack Reynor). When Christian invites her to join him and his friends – Mark (Will Poulter), Josh (William Jackson Harper), and their Swedish host, Pelle (Vilhelm Blomgren) – on a trip to Hälsingland, Sweden, for a once-every-ninety-years midsummer celebration, Dani accepts, mainly because she has nowhere else to turn. Upon arrival, the Hårga commune appears almost utopian in its unity and warmth. The Hårga's traditions, however, require something far more sinister, which the

[1] I retain the female/male binary throughout this thesis because it is the central mechanism through which the films, the genre, and the broader cultural discourses under discussion regulate meaning. This is by no means an endorsement of its validity; the binary is the object of critique, not its method.

outsiders have been brought to supply. In the end, Dani is absorbed into the community as the people she arrived with are sacrificed one by one.

Critical responses to *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* have proceeded in several directions and across multiple interconnected themes, including trauma, mental illness, gender, and genre. Approaching the films through psychoanalytical and trauma-theoretical lenses, Sara Pjetrushaj and Erika Melonashi argue that *Midsommar* is an exploration of grief and its transformative potential (40) whereas Jasmine Crittenden suggests that *Hereditary*'s blurring of the real and imagined reflects "the psychology of the characters as they waver from grief, anger, and fear to possession" (24). Running alongside these psychologically oriented readings are those that emphasize the films' progressive and empowering character arcs (Schultz; Craciun; Hazra and Bhattacharjee). Soumik Hazra and Abhinaba Bhattacharjee, for instance, read the films as feminist interventions in the genre, arguing that Aster centers female perspectives and celebrates the abject rather than punishing it (86–7). In contrast, reading *Hereditary* as paradigmatic of recent horror's engagement with the weakened patriarchal family and *Midsommar* as an attempted but ultimately failed departure from that model, Adam F. Braun finds that both films reinscribe patriarchal power (54–5; 60). Scholars such as Matthew B. Bicakci and Angela M. Smith extend this critique, contending that the films reinforce regressive narratives by framing survivors as pathological or threatening. While the films have been analyzed – predominantly in bachelor's and master's theses – through visual (Craciun), material (Bicakci), and genre lenses (Varaksin), no existing work fully addresses the narrative and symbolic determinism embedded in Aster's depictions of trauma and mental illness, nor how that determinism shapes the films' gendered representational politics. This thesis aims to fill that gap.

American horror cinema has, from its infancy, been preoccupied with the disturbance of normative orders. In early American horror cinema, for such moments of transgression to be possible, the boundaries themselves first had to be constructed as absolute and inviolable. Normal and abnormal, human and non-human, self and other – these boundaries, as Isabel C. Pinedo argues, needed to be "as firmly drawn as the imperative that good must conquer evil" (89). Classical horror cinema, exemplified by films such as *Dracula* (Tod Browning, 1931), *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931), or *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956), challenged and destabilized various boundaries before ultimately attempting to reinstate them. Firmly resting on the dichotomy between good and evil, external threats are cast as disruptions that must be contained or destroyed. This containment, Pinedo writes, is enacted "largely in the figure of the masterful male subject," whose agency restores the boundaries that the evil or

monstrous threatens to dissolve (89). For Andrew Tudor, such threats are primarily associated with individuals with "'abnormal' motives and interests," whereas their 'abnormality' is "presumed as easily identifiable" (218). As such, classical horror locates danger in external or deviant forces that can be clearly identified, isolated, and, finally, eliminated.

Such a resolution became increasingly problematized from the 1960s onward when the security rooted in good triumphing over evil, or 'normal' over 'abnormal,' gradually gave way to a more pervasive sense of paranoia. In what Tudor describes as paranoid horror, human intervention (in confronting the non-human or abnormal threat) became "routinely unsuccessful," revealing that order is far more fragile and "boundaries between known and unknown are rarely as clear as they might at first seem" (215). This shift fundamentally alters the genre's thematic core. Whereas more classical horror externalized the source of disorder, paranoid horror suggests that "the roots of disorder are to be found within ourselves and our institutions" (Tudor 217). Tudor links this shift to wider socio-cultural anxieties, briefly noting the erosion of faith in social legitimacy across Western societies (222). This sense of disillusionment called into question the ideological foundations of institutions, resulting in a pervasive sense of dread – one that is amplified in paranoid horror as it refuses the audience the comfort of any stable or absolute resolution. Unlike classical horror, which resolved its disruptions, paranoid horror remains in a state of unresolved, lingering tension.

Traditionally, much of horror's cultural significance derives from its ability to expose and interrogate societal anxieties. Yet, as Kim Newman suggests, the genre's turn toward irony and pastiche during the second half of the 20th century signals a degeneration of this critical function. Horror's engagement with "the horrors and neuroses of the age" was displaced across hybridized genres, dissipating its thematic force (Newman qtd. in Pinedo 87). This concern coincides with Fredric Jameson's critique of pastiche, which he defines as an ironic, self-conscious appropriation of past styles that replaces modernism's pursuit of originality (qtd. in Pinedo 112). While Pinedo acknowledges this characterization, she challenges the view that pastiche is unique to postmodernism. Horror, she argues, has long relied on recycling and repetition, as seen in the remakes and sequels that defined the genre's early cycles in the 1930s and 1940s (Pinedo 112). What distinguishes postmodern horror is the intensification of this practice, where pastiche is a dominant mode of production rather than a byproduct of genre evolution (Pinedo 112). This tendency makes fragmentation and repetition the expected modes of postmodern horror.

This fragmentation gave rise to an array of subgenres that diversified and further complicated the genre. Daniel Gilon notes that even though certain decades were dominated

by distinct subgenres, "the others did not simply disappear" (95), indicating that horror's development is less about replacement than accumulation. Despite thematic variations, these subgenres continue to be tethered to recognizable narrative and aesthetic patterns and the genre's core structures, ensuring, as Brigid Cherry notes, that it remains "easy enough to recognize a horror film when one sees one, regardless of whether it is a slasher, zombie, or supernatural film" (15). Its status as a "heterogeneous collection of conceptual categories," however, makes its defining features increasingly diffused, complicating any "easy definition" (Cherry 17). This exposes horror as a genre dependent on and destabilized by its own hybridity.

In response to its growing, potentially disrupting variety, horror leaned further into its self-referential, self-perpetuating, and increasing metareferential tendencies. What Pinedo ascribes to postmodern horror, Nicholas de Villiers extends to films that emerged during the turn of the century, stating that "postmodern horror cinema has taken a *decidedly* 'metareferential turn' in the past several years" (357; emphasis added).[2] To him, this meta-referentiality manifests in a threefold way: overt intertextuality, sequels, and mockumentary-style films (de Villiers 373). While de Villiers highlights the specific techniques through which horror has become increasingly meta-referential, Savanna R. Teague situates metacinema as a structuring principle that stabilizes the genre's fragmentation. Horror, for her, depends on metacinema for cohesion as films using metanarratives "must engage with the genre as a whole" (Teague 29). Metacinema thus is an essential tool for maintaining coherence across horror's numerous subgenres and stylistic shifts, which allows audiences to engage with horror as a dynamic, evolving discourse, not a collection of isolated works.

Instead of merely reproducing established modes of introspection, contemporary horror, Teague suggests, is starting to push past its inherited boundaries as "more overt, self-referential meta-horror has given way to socio-meta" (75). Self-awareness, in this mode, is not just an exercise in genre deconstruction but a way to interrogate larger social issues. Though horror has long engaged with social anxieties, for Teague it "has not always dealt with issues of race and gender directly with representation being the focus" (75). Listing films, such as *The Babadook* (Jennifer Kent, 2014), *The Witch* (Robert Eggers, 2015), and *Hereditary,* Teague highlights their "victim-centric" approach that emphasizes protagonists' "anguish […] to

[2] For Kimberly Jackson, metahorror (i.e., "films overtly concerned with the horror genre and its conventions") is not a new phenomenon (*Technology* 11). Characterized by self-awareness, self-referentiality, and "a self-conscious use of image technology," metahorror dates back to as early as the 1960s (Jackson, *Technology* 11). By the turn of the century, films that engage with "not only […] the more anxious aspects of visual technologies" but more explicitly with "their use in the production and reproduction of horror/the horror film" emerged (Jackson, *Technology* 12). This corroborates de Villiers observation of a shift toward an increasingly overt engagement with the self-aware and self-referential nature of horror.

provoke thought on social issues" (75). The films Teague associates with this new development are frequently categorized under the term post-horror. Christopher Sharrett similarly situates these films within what he describes as a "renaissance in sociopolitical scariness" (27), suggesting that horror's most recent evolution has reoriented its self-awareness toward cultural critique.

Post-horror, as a distinct phase of this development, signals yet another transformation in the horror genre's ongoing negotiation of boundaries. Popularized in the 21st century, post-horror has been described by Steve Rose as contemporary horror that "stray[s] beyond [horror's] cast-iron conventions" ("How post-horror movies are taking over"). He writes:

> Considering that horror is the place where we explore our mortal and societal fears, the genre is […] one of the safest spaces in cinema. More than any other genre, horror movies are governed by rules and codes […]. The rules are our flashlight as we venture into the unknown. (Rose, "How post-horror movies are taking over")

Post-horror filmmakers, for Rose, are switching "the flashlight off" to offer a less structured encounter with the unknown in favor of a more disorienting, uncertain experience ("How post-horror movies are taking over"). Taken literally, then, the prefix *post* suggests a sense of finality or a definitive break from the horror genre, implying that current developments collectively 'moved past' its predecessor. Such an implication is problematic, if not outright dismissive, given that much of what is labelled as post-horror continues to draw heavily on themes and narrative structures that have long been associated with the genre, indicating continuity rather than radical departure. The horror genre is "marked by a sheer diversity of conventions, plots and styles" (Cherry 2). To affix a prefix such as *post* to the genre implies singularity within traditional horror, a notion that disregards its intrinsic diversity. Horror stories themselves are "as old as mankind" and can be "traced back to as early as ancient Greece" (Cherry 2; Gilon 80). Horror cinema has existed for well over a century. Its various subgenres and conventions intersect and evolve across time, which resists any easy classification and categorization. By suggesting a supposed end point to horror, the term post-horror risks erasing the fluid, iterative processes that have historically defined the broader horror genre.

Post-horror attempts to reframe horror conventions in ways that appear more intellectually and aesthetically refined, thereby presenting itself as a more sophisticated and culturally legitimate iteration of the genre. Although Church does not employ the term exactly as Rose intended (Rose, "I called it 'post-horror'"), he provides a much more structured and comprehensive definition. He points out:

> Variously dubbed 'slow horror,' 'smart horror,' 'indie horror,' 'prestige horror,' and 'elevated horror,' [these] films all emerged from the crucible of major film festivals

> […] with significant critical buzz for supposedly transcending the horror genre's oft-presumed lowbrow status, and succeeded in crossing over to multiplexes. (Church 2)

Films that fall within the post-horror paradigm, he lists films such as *It Follows*, *The Witch*, and *Hereditary,* infuse complex narratives with nuanced character psychology and sophisticated sound and visual design to distance themselves from horror's 'lowbrow' reputation (Church 18). This rhetoric of elevation – through a heightened emphasis on abstraction and ambiguity – presupposes that traditional horror lacks intellectual or artistic sophistication, reinforcing hierarchies between 'high' and 'low' culture (Church 45). Post-horror's claim to greater complexity does not translate into greater critical depth. It instead rearranges horror's existing structures to accommodate dominant notions of cultural prestige.[3] Post-horror's distinction from horror, then, is more about perceived cultural value than actual genre innovation.

What appears on the surface as a repetition of tropes and cycles is suggestive of a deterministic structure that shapes the genre from within. For Matt Hills, horror's "completely controlled […] fictional repetitions" are structurally bound to determinism (*The Pleasures* 65). Because such controlled repetitions, by their very nature, limit innovation, they enact on a formal level what many films, especially within the horror genre, dramatize as what Thomas M. Puhr calls a "decidedly deterministic worldview" across narrative, style, and theme (1). A pronounced preoccupation with determinism emerged in films of the late 20th century and has resurfaced in contemporary productions, specifically in what Puhr describes as "genre efforts" – works that operate within and through the conventions of genre (7). Notably, these resurgences coincide with moments when postmodern and post-horror sought to destabilize or transcend established boundaries. In other words, precisely when theoretical and critical discourse has emphasized subversion, hybridity, or the erosion of genre, a countercurrent of films stayed deeply invested in determinism and in the reaffirmation, or inheritance, of generic identity. Puhr's examples are telling. He lists *The Tenant* (Roman Polański, 1976), *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980) and *Psycho* (Gus Van Sant, 1998) – films often read as postmodern – alongside recent post-horror works such as *Hereditary*, *Midsommar*, and *Us* (Jordan Peele, 2019). Even when theoretical discourse insists strongly on their transgressive potential, these films reaffirm the deterministic principles that underwrite the genre.

[3] This concern echoes the critiques raised about postmodern horror. Horror risks being reduced to an aesthetic or intellectual exercise rather than a genre capable of sustained ideological interrogation. In that sense, post-horror, through its focus on psychological depth and slow-burn storytelling, mirrors its predecessor's tendency to prioritize aesthetic refinement over thematic urgency.

Applied to film, determinism refers to the narrative and formal structures that subject all events, "past, present, and future," to external causes that are beyond individual control (Puhr 1). While he acknowledges that this definition simplifies a more complex philosophical tradition, Puhr clarifies that for his purposes, and mine, determinism and free will are understood as mutually exclusive (131). Informed by Tzvetan Todorov's concept of pan-determinism, Pete Falconer similarly recognizes that, within certain narratives, "everything happens deliberately, with a specific cause and purpose" (298). This cause may be presented explicitly or take effect in a less specific manner, as with fate or destiny (Falconer 298). Staging it in its recognizable and ineffable forms, horror adopts determinism to interrogate "what many fear to be true about life, so-called fate, and whatever it is that waits for us in the maze's center" (Puhr 9). Thematically, this can be conveyed through an emphasis on inheritance and fate; narratively, through foreshadowing, "circular storytelling," or intertextuality; and formally, through "filmmaking techniques [that] embody deterministic concepts," such as the employment of still imagery (Puhr 7, 59). These strategies foreground entrapment and inalterability and, much like meta-horror's intertextuality and self-referentiality, reaffirm coherence across narrative and, by extension, genre.

Moving past technical considerations, Falconer suggests that diegetic worlds – even if they have no "independent intelligence or agency" – can seem spiteful and "actively malevolent" (297). Though his concern lies with what it means to *be* in a horror world and how audiences perceive the dissonance between what they know and what characters are aware of, Falconer draws attention to the hostile, conspiratorial nature of the horror world's reality. Within such an environment, details that seem trivial turn into constituents of "inexorable processes" from which a central logic of predetermined fatality transpires (Falconer 299). Through a series of (un)likely events, characters are trapped in a world that appears intrinsically antagonistic and "skew[s] toward cruelty and mayhem;" one where escape is "futile," ordinary strategies of defense prove useless, and resisting frequently has disastrous consequences (Falconer 297–300). Horror worlds, then, do not simply host the monstrous but become monstrous themselves.

Horror distributes agency ambiguously. Even within seemingly conspiratorial worlds, it remains unclear whether a "monstrous agency" orchestrates events or such impressions are mere products of coincidence and imagination (Hills, "An Event-Based Definition" 146). Accordingly, Hills proposes that horror – particularly art horror – relies on a "primarily event-based" model that, in certain instances, may be "supplemented" by entity-based horror ("An Event-Based Definition" 139, 152). Falconer resists reducing horror solely to a question of

whether events or entities form the genre's core, emphasizing the interplay through which both contribute to the genre's effects (299–300). Expanding on Noël Carroll's insight that ordinary antagonists can acquire "fantastical" qualities (37 qtd. in Falconer 300), Falconer argues that unordinary, human antagonists are still terrifying insofar as they inhabit a world that ensures their efficacy (300). This insight helps clarify why films like *Hereditary*, despite featuring overtly unordinary antagonists, continue to be rooted in a fatalistic event-structure, and films that situate their rather ordinary antagonists within a world that appears actively malevolent, like *Midsommar*, achieve comparable force.

Horror's investment in inevitability parallels real-world determinisms. Lancy Kurakar and Deeptha Achar identify deterministic structures at a character level, pointing out that since the late 20th century, horror has appropriated the "'cycle of abuse' theory" – a theory that posits that individuals who have been subjected to abuse later become abusive themselves and thus "perpetuate the abuse" – to account for a monster's origin and "to give it the stamp of determinism, of inevitability" (152). To root narrative logic, horror borrows from deterministic theories of trauma, making monstrosity the inescapable legacy of abuse while dissolving the boundaries between victim and perpetrator. Besides trauma, the genre also mobilizes biological determinism, or genetic determinism, which assumes that human nature is entirely governed by heredity (Comfort 461). Despite being scientifically untenable, this perspective is "very much alive" in contemporary discourses for it is upheld by arguments that ensure the preservation of dominant power structures and ideologies (Best and Puzio 237; Perry and Albee 123). Similarly untenable, cultural determinism asserts that identity and behavior are contingent on social and ideological systems that, even in their variation, treat their conceptions as natural and universal (Best and Puzio 240–47; Miller and Costello 593). Monstrosity and victimhood, then, may be presented as the inevitable result of inheritance or the order imposed by a society, which raises significant and deeply problematic implications. These implications will be the guiding concern for this thesis. Horror reflects "aspects of the non-fictional world that are overwhelmingly monstrous" (Falconer 303, 298); its most profound monstrosity lies in the imposition of roles and predicaments that society insists upon as natural.

Whether order is restored or rendered meaningless, horror seldom leaves its outcomes open. From its origins to more recent developments in so-called post-horror, American horror cinema has repeatedly sought to expand its limits, whether through genre hybridization, metacinematic self-awareness, or aesthetic refinement. Yet, this impulse toward innovation is not without limits as it often reveals less about the genre's capacity for progress than about the ways through which it reaffirms its own conventions and genre-specific principles. This is, of

course, not unique to horror – every genre relies on conventions. My concern lies with the ideological work those conventions are made to perform. Horror is especially prone to recurring symbolic logics that dictate who is made a victim, who is punished, whose suffering is aestheticized, and whose bodies are pathologized. Such restrictive principles anchor horror's representational politics, which in turn naturalizes certain outcomes as inevitable and others as impossible. In the chapters that follow, I will expand on these dynamics to interrogate the ways in which horror's inheritance informs cultural imaginations of gender and mental illness. Chapter 2 offers a critical engagement with key analytical concepts and terms to provide the theoretical foundation. I survey representations of mental illness across four horror subgenres, namely slasher, psychological horror, possession narratives, and folk horror – subgenres into which both *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* fall – (2.1) before focusing more narrowly on the cultural construction and pathologization of female madness, grief, and rage (2.2). In chapter 3, I take up *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* as case studies and apply this theoretical framework to examine Aster's construction of determinism across narrative and form (3.1), his instrumentalization of mental illness as a narrative precondition (3.2), and the gendered dynamics through which his female protagonists are made 'mad' on screen (3.3). Finally, I will demonstrate that both films substitute more insidious forms of narrative fatalism for explicit stigmatization and, while granting their female protagonists visibility and centrality, they ultimately portray them as prisoners of their genetic and social histories.

2. Stigmatizing the Sick, Pathologizing the Deviant

To read horror critically requires attention not only to its provocations but to the limits that are enforced by its repetitions and what those repetitions ask us to accept as inevitable. In this chapter, I lay the groundwork for analyzing *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* by contextualizing the portrayal of mental illness in horror cinema, focusing on the ways it intersects with historically gendered and pathologizing representations. This includes a closer look at the narrative and aesthetic strategies through which female madness and, by extension, female rage are constructed and sensationalized within the genre. In chapter 2.1, I examine how mental illness functions within horror, considering it as a pretext for spectacle as well as an implicit indicator of moral failure or social threat that repeatedly conflates psychological instability with danger or Otherness. The female protagonists in *Hereditary* and *Midsommar,* Annie, Ellen, and Dani, are unmistakably portrayed as suffering from mental illness(es), which the films construct through multiple indicators. Rather than making any clinical claims about their diagnoses, my analysis relies solely on diegetic cues, such as the visible use of prescription medication and

the reactions or remarks of other characters in relation to the protagonists' mental health. Many of their behaviors within the narratives – those centered around grief, emotional volatility, impulsiveness, or even rage – are depicted in ways that implicitly invoke the trope of the 'mad woman,' a figure historically shaped by patriarchal anxieties surrounding female affect. For this reason, in chapter 2.2, I shift focus to madness as a cultural construct, one that exceeds psychiatric discourse. In this section, I show how madness, when feminized, becomes a site of ideological discussion in which emotional expressions are pathologized. Any analysis of Annie, Ellen, and Dani's character portrayals must first attend to the slippages and tensions between psychiatric discourse and cultural representations of female madness. Together, these chapters prepare for a deeper exploration of *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* as they provide the necessary lens through which the films' complex engagement with gendered aspects of mental illness and madness can be understood or critiqued.

2.1. Pathology as Plot: Mental Illness in American Horror Cinema

Mental illness is often weaponized to construct individuals as either unstable and threatening or as inherently monstrous. In horror films, as Michael Markus critiques, mental illness is "almost never depicted with sympathy or accuracy" (35). According to Susan M. Henney and Krista S. Gehring, mental illness is frequently portrayed in close association with incapacity and social dysfunction across "all media," yet horror movies additionally "emphasize the capacity of the mentally ill for chaos, violence, and aggression" (82). Hence, particularly negative stereotypes of people experiencing mental illness have become "associated with the horror genre" (Goodwin 203). Although horror films may exaggerate for dramatic effect, deliberately exploiting 'entertaining' and "narratively convenient" emotional struggles, these portrayals are not harmless as they migrate into cultural common sense (Heath 3). Aliya R. Webermann and Bethany L. Brand, for instance, attribute the stigmatization of conditions like schizophrenia and dissociative identity disorder (DID) to such "harmful and inaccurate stereotypes" (2). Danny Wedding, drawing from data provided by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) and the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI), points out that only about half of individuals with mental disorders seek treatment and a significant portion of the public, i.e., "one in three US citizens," continues to conceptualize "mental illness in terms of evil and punishment for misbehavior" (4). Such characterizations discourage open conversation and keep mental illness "hidden," further invisibilizing an already largely invisible experience (Shand et al. 424). In this way, horror risks creating a potentially dangerous

feedback loop in which distorted media representations influence public perceptions, which in turn legitimize and reproduce those same depictions.

The notion that individuals suffering from mental illness(es) are disproportionately violent is a strikingly persistent myth, one that Webermann and Brand set out to debunk (2). In fact, data provided by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) shows,

> Most people with mental health conditions are no more likely to be violent than anyone else. Only 3%–5% of violent acts can be attributed to individuals living with a serious mental illness. […] people with severe mental illnesses are over 10 times more likely to be victims of a violent crime than the general population. ("Mental Health: Get the Facts")

As multiple studies suggest, "the highest rates of violence [are found] among individuals with substance use disorders, rather than schizophrenia, BPD and other psychotic disorders" (Webermann and Brand 2). This statistical reality, however, is scarcely reflected in horror cinema. Stereotypical misrepresentations of mental illnesses can be traced back to early 20th-century horror films[4] and remain prevalent across numerous subgenres today. In this chapter, I evaluate the four relevant subgenres – slasher, psychological horror, possession films, and folk horror – with close attention to how each constructs and represents those mental illnesses most relevant to the subsequent analysis.

For this discussion, I will use the term *mental illness* when the filmic source specifies a clinical diagnosis of a mental disorder. In cases where the medical framework is either absent or inapplicable within the text, I will use the term *mental distress*[5] to refer to psychological or affective states that are depicted as severe, continual, or disruptive, and thus suggestive of pathological suffering, but lack a specific diagnostic label within the narrative. This distinction is necessary not to delegitimize the medical model, which, in recent years, has played a critical role in destigmatizing mental illness, but to avoid imposing diagnostic language where the narrative does not support it. Further, through this distinction, I aim to avoid reproducing a rhetoric of mental illness as a generalized category, which risks flattening the heterogeneity and specificity of psychological disorders. At the same time, mental distress is not offered here as a vague or catch-all term. It reflects a deliberate methodological stance to refrain from

[4] Shand et al. specifically name the American silent thriller film *The Maniac Cook* (David Wark Griffith, 1909) and the German silent horror film *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920) as examples of this.

[5] I have chosen mental distress over more familiar phrases, such as mental health crisis, as the term more accurately captures a broader, temporally extended experience of psychological suffering rather than a singular, crisis-based event.

retroactively diagnosing characters who are not explicitly constructed as such within the diegesis.

The slasher subgenre offers some of the most overt examples of misrepresentation in its depictions of mentally distressed killers as violent and irredeemable. As Stephen Harper notes, some of the subgenre's most notorious male antagonists, such as the *Friday the 13th* films' Jason Vorhees or Freddy Krueger from the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series, are emblematic of "mentally distressed killers" that cater to the "image of the 'axe-wielding psycho'" – an image that has been widely and justifiably critiqued for how reductively it portrays mental distress (91). Wedding expands this critique and, adding Kamilla Lanae's *The Adopted One* (2020) to the mix, observes that these films "perpetuate the pernicious misconception that people who leave psychiatric hospitals are violent and dangerous" (3). Apart from the problematic association of mental illness with violence and danger, such depictions enable a discourse of irredeemability. By implying the ineffectiveness of psychiatric treatment, the prospect of a cure is effectively ruled out. Consistent with the horror genre's tendency for determinism, this depiction hints at the absence of individual agency and suggests that mental illnesses and the corresponding distress are predestined and immutable; an implication that will be explored in depth in the subsequent analysis of *Hereditary* and *Midsommar*.

Contrary to its widely criticized misogyny, which has garnered significant scholarly attention (Zogall 58), the slasher subgenre's depiction of mental distress is surprisingly even-handed: it stigmatizes antagonists regardless of their gender. Female slasher antagonists are indeed scarce and when they do appear, they are usually denied the mythologized, often near-supernatural standing afforded to male antagonists. Pamela Voorhees (Betsy Palmer), the antagonist in Sean S. Cunningham's *Friday the 13th* (1980), is one of the earliest examples of a female slasher antagonist. Her descent into homicidal vengeance is linked to her inability to process the trauma of her son's drowning. Her mental state, akin to that of her male counterparts, is described in simplistic terms and acts as a narrative catalyst for violence. Over four decades later, Ti West's *Pearl* (2022) follows a comparable trajectory. The film depicts the titular character's psychological deterioration through a stylized descent into delusion and murder. Its aesthetic and performative qualities offer some degree of self-awareness but do not prevent it from instrumentalizing mental distress as the root of its horror. Not limited to isolated examples, this speaks to a larger, persistent pattern in horror cinema where mental illness is employed as a "lazy recourse [for] a gruesome explanatory backstory" (Harper 91). Despite

gradual shifts in cinematic language, the slasher subgenre continues to weaponize mental illness as a convenient source of horror.

Psychological horror holds the potential to offer a more layered investigation of the human mind. On par with Tudor's classification of paranoid horror, Mark Jancovich asserts that psychological horror destabilizes clear binaries as the monstrous "erupts from within the individual's own mind," collapsing the "distinction between […] the hero, the monster and the victim" (165). Reminiscent of post-horror, psychological horror offers "a more refined and restrained aesthetic […] more at home in the art house," often mobilizing "the fear of the 'other'" and increasingly engaging with broader societal concerns (Church 7; Hellermann). Films such as *Black Swan* (Darren Aronofsky, 2010), *The Babadook*, *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017), *Unsane* (Steven Soderbergh, 2018), or *His House* (Remi Weekes, 2020) address structural issues, such as racism, gendered violence, toxic perfectionism, institutional gaslighting, social neglect, and displacement, and effectively situate mental illness or distress within those socio-cultural contexts. Additionally, these films interrogate the systemic failures of mental health care, including the risks of misdiagnosis and the structural injustices inherent to a profit-driven psychiatric system. Through that, they offer a more humanizing and socially responsible engagement with mental distress or illness that remains equally, if not more, effective in generating fear compared to more irresponsible counterparts. Put differently, more reductive horror externalizes mental distress or the mentally ill individual as the monstrous Other, as will be discussed shortly, while more nuanced psychological horror suggests that the true horror emerges from the social and structural circumstances that allow mental distress to spiral without meaningful support or intervention.

Psychological horror is not synonymous with depictions of mental illness or distress. Still, the subgenre lends itself to exploring these themes as part of an inquiry into subjective experience itself. By rendering characters "explicitly subjects in crisis" who are unable to feel in control of their actions, psychological horror foregrounds subjectivity and the instability of perception and memory (Jancovich 164). One of the most effective ways for generating such uncertainty is the deployment of unreliable narration and the refusal of narrative closure. Through this unreliability, Hellermann points out, the "audience is left questioning the sanity and perception of the protagonist, blurring the lines between reality and delusion [and] leaving the viewer unsure of what to believe." Church adds that by "filter[ing] their diegetic visions through […] characters' distressed psychological states," these films often refuse "to confirm or deny" the veracity of the events taking place (16). Matt Sobel's *Goodnight Mommy* (2022), a film that is unreliable in its narration and refuses narrative closure – unless, as Church

suggests, "overwhelming death" is understood "as a type of narrative closure" (86) – exemplifies this distorted perspective of a psychologically distressed protagonist and the suppression of clear indicators of objective reality. Importantly, this does not straightforwardly pathologize the protagonist as mentally ill. Instead, through constructing a mediated experience of (cognitive) disorientation, the audience is enabled to experience, though at a safe distance, the disintegrative effects associated with losing control over one's environment and self and, by extension, the unpredictability of mental distress or unregulated severe mental illness. In this sense, fear is not elicited by a character coded as mentally ill but through the dissociative experience of psychological breakdown itself.

Regrettably, there exists a body of horror movies classified as psychological horror that relies on a very distinct antagonist, one that "literally turn[s] out to be split personalities" (Jancovich 164). Movies, such as *Primal Fear* (Gregory Hoblit, 1996) or *Identity* (James Mangold, 2003), present DID and psychotic disorders with significant inaccuracies as they rely on "multiple personalities" to explain homicidal behavior or stage psychosis "as the cause of violent crime" (Henney and Gehring 86–7). Although this characterization closely resembles the aforementioned slasher archetype, the psychological horror antagonist exhibits another increasingly noticeable dimension. In her analysis of *Split* (M. Night Shyamalan, 2016) and *Glass* (M. Night Shyamalan, 2019), Diana R. Newby highlights how the character Kevin Wendell Crumb (James McAvoy) is made "threatening by virtue of his multiple personalities" and "embodies an entrenched belief that to be mentally ill is to be not only violent but less than human." This process of dehumanization conveniently distances the audience from the character's actions, which "makes the content more consumable by general audiences," most of whom have no firsthand experience of psychotic symptoms (Henney and Gehring 89). Forensic and clinical psychologist Jeremy Clyman further points out that the term *split personality* is merely a "catchy placeholder" for a process that continues to be "largely a mystery to the field of clinical psychology." This vagueness allows horror to construe mental illness (i.e., DID and/or psychotic disorders) as an alien pathology, which secures the audience's moral insulation from the violent Other. This insulation, in turn, legitimizes both the voyeuristic consumption of violence and trauma and the condemnation of the Other that can never be fully understood or humanized.

As a response to the unknown or invisible, possession films often mobilize superstition and dehumanization to question or obscure the psychological dimensions of the characters' experiences. Possession films that deal with or imply mental illness or distress, including *The*

Exorcist (William Friedkin, 1973),[6] *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (Scott Derrickson, 2005), or *The Rite* (Mikael Håfström, 2011), indicate a causal or metaphorical link between mental illness and "possession by the devil" (Wedding 3), which, for Johanna Braun, takes its cue from "discussions of mental illness and demon possession from the Middle Ages" (218). Amy C. Chambers, in her discussion of *The Exorcist,* locates the film's central tensions to be "between science and religion, the representation and treatment of mental health, and the position of religion in contemporary North America" (33). These tensions are first articulated through the medicalization of Regan's (Linda Blair) increasingly erratic behavior in the early stages of the film, where she is subjected to a series of "visceral invasive medical procedures" (A. Chambers 34). These procedures, as embodiments of a modern, empirical approach, ultimately fail to provide a satisfying explanation or effective solution – a recurring structure that, as Carol J. Clover shows, has become prototypical within the possession subgenre (83). Only after this failure, Regan's mother, Chris (Ellen Burstyn), turns to religious authorities, in this case the Catholic Church, for answers. A. Chambers notes that "[w]here a clinical and at times seemingly barbaric adherence to science fails, ancient ritual and the power of restored faith save the possessed child from her demons" (35). The limits of psychiatric knowledge are portrayed as vulnerable to more 'absolute' forms of truth, i.e., religious truths.

The binary between science and religion is not presented uncritically. Both A. Chambers and J. Braun acknowledge the significance of *The Exorcist* as a cultural text through which anxieties surrounding institutional authority as well as the impact of deinstitutionalization can be examined (47; 218). Science and religion, as A. Chambers points out, were "critiqued *together* as fallible institutions despite their apparent incompatibilities" (47, emphasis added). This reveals a larger mistrust in institutions, especially those traditionally tasked with explaining or managing human suffering. Indebted to the influence of religious censorship,[7] *The Exorcist* depicts medicine as both spectacular and horrific, often through outdated or painful treatments, which conveys a sense of uncertainty rather than authority (A. Chambers 41–2). Still, science is shown as "unstable and inconclusive but evolving," implying that even if contemporary medicine cannot yet explain Regan's condition, it eventually might (A. Chambers 40). In the absence of immediate medical clarity, religious interpretations can gain traction, leading to real-life consequences. As Igor J. Pietkiewicz, Urszula Kłosińska, and

[6] J. Braun recognizes *The Exorcist* as distinctly influential, noting that the film "was instrumental in creating and promoting stereotypical images of disability" (J. Braun 217).

[7] A. Chambers further contextualizes this, noting that from the 1930s to 1960s, "religious censors" ensured Hollywood's portrayals of science were compatible with their (Christian) faith. Even after formal censorship ended, the Catholic Church's attitudes and concerns about the portrayal of science on screen endured (36–7).

Radosław Tomalski demonstrate in their qualitative study of individuals with schizophrenia who believed themselves possessed, religious explanations frequently replace psychiatric ones due to their cultural significance and alleged reduced social stigma (2, 5, 8). In all four cases they examined in detail, participants noted that "religious motives" were absent in their initial delusions and only developed in response to environmental influences. Beliefs in possession – reinforced by religious authorities and family members – often delayed clinical diagnosis and "negatively affected compliance" (Pietkiewicz et al. 5, 8). Though religious belief may offer comfort and a sense of meaning to some individuals and communities, when dealing with a diagnosable psychiatric disorder, medical intervention should at least be considered. After all, contemporary psychiatric care avoids the deeply dehumanizing label of being possessed, which can carry damaging implications for an individual's identity and treatment prospects.

Following *The Exorcist*, most possession films no longer conclude with the protagonist's recovery. The "cure narrative does not last" (J. Braun 220). This shift away from the cure narrative reflects cultural and political discourses that emerge from disability rights activism and Crip theory, which challenge the construction of disability and mental illness as conditions to be cured, corrected, or rehabilitated (J. Braun 223–4). While I agree with Braun's reading and regard this critique as necessary, it may overlook specific implications that arise when mental illness is mediated through the conventions of horror cinema. The genre's tendency toward determinism can result in a problematic depiction of mental illness as incurable or inherently destructive. In possession films like *The Possession of Hannah Grace* (Diederik Van Rooijen, 2018), the protagonist's mental illness, i.e., depression, is reduced to the sole cause of her possession, which turns psychological suffering into a moral or supernatural failing (Zigler). Representing mental illness as a curse – as J. Braun also critiques (222) – or as the catalyst for supernatural contamination reanimates harmful tropes in which the mentally ill individual is actively constructed as a monstrous, non-human Other. Such representations disregard the need for support or medical intervention. Instead, they construct mental illness as a threat to be eradicated or contained, thereby reaffirming the very logics of exclusion that disability and mental health advocacy seek to dismantle.

Beyond the critiques grounded in disability studies, possession narratives also demand critical attention for their depiction of mental illness and distress in relation to femininity. Prominent examples within the subgenre overwhelmingly feature young, female protagonists[8]

[8] Clover, in her discussion of *The Fury* (1978), advances that "possession is gendered feminine, […] even when the portal is a male" (72). Thus, even though female protagonists clearly dominate possession narratives, male characters who occupy similar roles are similarly constructed through feminized tropes.

who are vilified, objectified, isolated from society, and treated – often ineffectively – by a rotating cast of male figures of authority. They are subjected to psychological suffering and, at the same time, denied meaningful agency in managing or interpreting it. These representations map closely onto earlier depictions of female hysteria, rooted in "historical medical, artistic, and religious sources" (J. Braun 208), that have long misconstrued women's emotional and mental expressions as disorders to be managed by patriarchal institutions (see chapter 2.2). In the context of possession films, the mentally distressed woman is not a "subject in crisis," to use Jancovich's term (164). She is vessel that is defined by what enters and inhabits her. The notion of woman-as-vessel has long been central to patriarchal constructions of femininity, with the maternal body as the embodiment of a patriarchal fantasy of passivity – as vessel or passive carrier. The possessed woman or girl offers a variation of this figure. She remains a carrier, yet one that carries something unnaturally evil. In either case, she is defined by what she contains, never by interiority or autonomy. If possession "threatens the established order," postulating "a highly personal attack upon our being" (Olson and Reinhard 8; Tudor 63), the horror lies not in her suffering per se, but in the disruption the possessed girl poses to systems of order that require her to stay legible and controlled. Her possession lays bare the fragility of the ideological structures that aim to contain her, evidenced by the repeated failure to provide efficient treatment, and exposes the extent to which these female characters are already claimed and spoken for by patriarchal institutions. To be a girl in possession narratives is to be owned; to be *possessed* by systems of medicine, religion, ideology, and the narrative itself.

Folk horror that engages with mental illness often converges with possession narratives as the two derive much of their horror "from the unknown" and a terror-evoking "determination to preserve 'traditional' belief systems" (Maguire 161; Murphy 139). Where the latter frequently stage a conflict between science and religion, folk horror reframes this as a confrontation between (sub)urban capitalist modernity and the perceived 'backwardness' of rural communities. This 'backwardness,' according to Bernice M. Murphy, is associated with "barbaric and outlandish" practices that, "evoke […] fascination" through their "apparent 'authenticity'" and their readiness to push back against "the expectations of a society […] defined by the conventions of capitalist modernity" (140). Unlike the science-religion dichotomy, which pits two established institutions against one another, folk horror presents (sub)urban capitalist modernity itself as fragile and vulnerable in the face of 'authentic' rural belief systems.

That same vulnerability characterizes the protagonists who enter these "unstable environment[s]" (Woofter 171) from the outside world, where it often manifests as a struggle

to distinguish reality from illusion. In films like *Let's Scare Jessica to Death* (John D. Hancock, 1971) and *The House on Pine Street* (Austin and Aaron Keeling, 2015), this disorientation is directly tied to the protagonists' histories of mental illness. The films begin with a prior breakdown or hospitalization that compels the protagonists to retreat from (sub)urban environments into more rural settings. Adam Scovell makes a similar point about the British film *Images* (Robert Altman, 1972), which features a disoriented female protagonist whose "perception of the self is deluded by the perception of the land," i.e., the rural (95). Rather than offering refuge or healing, these spaces exacerbate the characters' suffering by either isolating them or mirroring their internal disorientation back at them. As Maguire observes more broadly, supernatural phenomena are frequently employed to "exteriorize internal trauma or mental illness" and "blur the boundaries between interior (psychic) and exterior (physical) worlds" (165). What might otherwise be understood as delusion or hallucination assumes an ambiguous, exteriorized form. Consequently, neither the protagonists nor the audience can reliably discern between what is real and what is not.

What sets folk horror apart is its distinct Othering of the rural as hostile and destructive. As the genre is "premised upon complex fetishizations of […] Otherness" (J. Chambers 10), these films utilize the fear of the Other to deflect attention from systemic failures onto individual or communal aberrations. The (sub)urban environment and its failing institutions may offer no healing or adequate treatment, but the rural, as the Other, confronts characters with something 'even worse' than the neglect they sought to escape, i.e., the (oc)cult entities that prey on them. The reason for this escalation lies in folk horror's generic orientation. Belonging to "a cinema of culture shock," folk horror works towards a final "horrific fallout: that of the happening/summoning" (J. Chambers 10; Scovell 18). With this inclination toward such an irreversible catastrophic event, folk horror presents the rural as a space that offers nothing but destructive alternatives or ends. The implication, then, is that (sub)urban modernity, for all its failings, remains the lesser of two evils.

Agency and the process of Othering implicate structures of epistemic and institutional power, which raises the issue of who has the authority to define and diagnose mental illness and how that authority is mobilized – or abused – within systems of knowledge and control. Departing from the tropes and patterns discussed thus far, there exists a body of films, including *The Ward* (John Carpenter, 2010) and *Stonehearst Asylum* (Brad Anderson, 2014), that refrains from depicting the mentally ill or distressed character as the personification of fear. Figures of institutional authority, such as priests, nuns, doctors, or nurses, assume that role by exerting control over patients through physical and emotional restraint, supposedly for "protection and

safety from contagion" (Heath 70). The anxiety is redirected "from the patient to […] authoritarian powers and their ability to gaslight individuals" (Heath 69), which implicates both the diegetic world and the audience, who are made to question the legitimacy of the systems that claim to protect or cure. In their analysis of *American Horror Story: Asylum* (Ryan Murphy, 2012), Jessica Rosenberg, Samuel Rosenberg, and Adrienne Rosenberg focus on the tensions between (pseudo-)science and religion in the construction and maintenance of power within the fictional institution of the show, Briarcliff asylum, as well as the "relationship between morality and madness" (167–8). Rosenberg et al. characterize Briarcliff as

> a total institution in which control is exerted by the captors over the inmates through psychiatric treatment-torture, such as lobotomies and hydrotherapy […], and by brutal physical punishment for rule infractions, like acts of freedom or defiance, i.e. trying to escape or to have sex. (169)

Although the show's depiction of violence is extreme, it reflects well-documented historical practices of physical abuse and control (Rosenberg et al. 169). The dynamics at work in Briarcliff coincide with depictions of mentally ill individuals as subhuman or animalistic, which, as Newby notes, "directly influenced the treatment of asylum patients." While Phyllis Chesler points out that "[m]ental patients are [perceived as] less 'human' than either medical patients or criminals" (95), Rosenberg et al. emphasize that the authority figures within Briarcliff, or "the captors," are depicted as "more monstrous than the inmates" (170). This inversion of moral authority within the institution is not a self-contained phenomenon. As Federico Leoni argues, such institutions, fictional or real, do not act in isolation. They are upheld by "a certain society, […] urban planning, and […] set of laws" which in turn are linked to "executive powers, habits and, ultimately, to countless functions, attendants, and tricks which work as guarantors of such space and its effectiveness" (88). In other words, the psychiatric institution is part of a larger socio-political apparatus that organizes and legitimizes power. Understanding the institution means understanding the society that sustains it.

In fact, from a Foucauldian perspective, psychiatry can be critiqued as "an institutional discourse" that dismisses mentally ill individuals "as irrational, therefore incapable of productivity, and therefore, subhuman" (Derby 97). The fear surrounding psychiatric institutions stems largely from this history of dehumanizing treatment of those deemed irrational and, consequently, socially unproductive – a category with alarmingly fragile boundaries. Expanding on this, Leoni writes that

> Depending on the circumstances, illness can be seen in different ways: as a kind of pathology or deviance, as an anomaly waiting to be cured or a guilt deserving punishment, as an eccentricity to hide, as a sin to confess or as a possession to exorcise. (86)

This interpretive flexibility carries material consequences. It determines how individuals are treated and influences how they are socially and institutionally perceived and understood: as patients, criminals, outcasts, or threats. Control over psychiatric discourse, exercised through academic research/publishing and medical funding, further regulates which narratives gain legitimacy without exposing those who benefit from these definitions. The power to define what counts as mental illness cannot be separated from the structures that uphold institutions like Briarcliff.

Among the films discussed thus far, those that showcase a more pronounced preoccupation with mental illness share a marked skepticism toward the legitimacy and efficacy of medical intervention. Although such mistrust is often grounded in the real histories of institutional abuse and systemic neglect, and, as such, is warranted, these films exaggerate or distort empirical realities in service of narrative or affective goals, i.e., the generation of fear. As a result, they amplify public mistrust in medical diagnoses and, albeit subtly, privilege supernatural or moral interpretations of mental and neurological conditions. This hints at a broader cultural inability, or perhaps refusal, to confront the complexities of mental illness outside of sensationalized, moralized, or supernatural frameworks. To reiterate Leoni's statement, the perception of illness depends on circumstance. Circumstance is not always incidental or short-lived. It may take the form of an enduring ideological system that defines the boundaries of pathology, often in ways that are neither neutral nor benign.

Mental illness or distress, across the four subgenres examined, rarely appears as a complex, treatable condition shaped by social contexts. The slasher subgenre presents it as the sole explanation for homicidal, irredeemable behavior. Psychological horror, while capable of more nuanced explorations of subjective disintegration, also perpetuates dehumanizing tropes, most notably the split personality as a simplistic explanation for violence or the representation of psychotic disorders as alien pathologies. Unreliable narration and the absence of narrative closure ensure that protagonists and audiences alike are unable to separate what is real from what is imagined. Folk horror, in pitting (sub)urban modernity and the rural Other against one another, extends this perceptual instability to the environment itself. Possession narratives, on the other hand, amplify that unreliability by setting science, i.e., psychiatric knowledge, and religion in conflict and offering no conclusive understanding of a protagonist's condition. Because the protagonists' own minds and the institutions tasked with explaining or managing suffering cannot be trusted, these narratives are unable to imagine recovery or meaningful agency. None of these frameworks treats the mentally ill or distressed individual as an individual with subjectivity or belonging. Female characters, in particular, are objectified and

denied interpretive authority over their own suffering. The authority to define and diagnose mental illness resides almost exclusively with patriarchal institutions, including religion and medicine. While the failure of those authoritative systems is partially – and mostly subtly – acknowledged across these subgenres, the narrative consequences never fall upon them. The mentally ill or distressed individual, in contrast, is left with neither reliable perception nor meaningful recourse.

2.2. The Female Faces of Madness, Grief, and Rage

What counts as madness has hardly been self-evident. Discourses on the concept regard it as historically contingent and culturally variable, which is reflected in the multiple and ever-evolving definitions that have shaped Western conceptions of madness. In *Mental Illness and Psychology*, Michel Foucault critiques the retrospective imposition of modern psychiatric categories onto the past as he writes that

> all histories of psychiatry up to the present day have set out to show that the madman of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was simply an unrecognized mentally ill patient, trapped within a tight network of religious and magical significations. (64)

Such retrospective pathologization disregards madness' discursive instability and its ambiguous status inside and outside medical discourses. Lillian Feder, in *Madness in Literature*, insists that madness has *never* been a purely clinical construct. For Feder, the term is semantically unstable and highly contextual, so that a behavior considered radical or visionary in one context may be pathologized as madness in another (xi). Feder identifies three discursive functions of madness: politically, it can symbolize "a long-repressed sense of injustice" or operate as a mechanism of control against dissent "that carries the penalty of incarceration in a mental hospital;" socially, it may appear as a genuine psychological disorder or as a conscious rejection of normative values; and aesthetically, it can represent either creative transcendence or "the ultimate self-expression that is inevitably self-destructive" (xi–xii). Across these domains, madness consistently signifies a deviation from normative cognition or affect (Feder xii). Chesler, in *Women and Madness,* situates madness within systems of power and interprets it as a kind of deviance against social order, defining it as "the acting out of the devalued female role or the total or partial rejection of one's sex role stereotype" (93). Madness, thus, is never neutral or self-contained but always mediated by its reception and interpretation within a given context.

Shifting the focus from the all-encompassing 'madman' to the rather specific 'madwoman' reveals how the latter reflects and reinforces societal anxieties about women who deviate from or, paradoxically, conform to patriarchal expectations of womanhood. Indebted

to the frameworks developed by Chesler and Feder, I adopt the term madness to describe culturally inscribed forms of gendered (non)conformity that are portrayed as irrational or dangerous and I understand its purpose as a means of regulating and pathologizing women's emotional expressions. Madness is a cultural construct that functions symbolically and ideologically, not diagnostically. As later sections will show, the horror genre toys with this dynamic through its depiction of monstrosity and victimhood. Although critical attention has largely settled on corporeality, leaving the female mind strikingly undertheorized, I argue that horror's investment in victimhood and monstrosity extends equally to the body as to the mind. I employ Barbara Creed's *monstrous-feminine,* as defined later in this chapter, and link it to my theory of female madness to account for the ways horror pathologizes women's expressions of 'unruly' or 'inappropriate' emotions and behaviors.

Madness, according to Chris D. Frith, has been conventionally described "as a loss of reason" (636). This loss, under Enlightenment principles, has been persistently feminized and placed in binary opposition to reason, whose presumed custodian was masculinity. Elaine Showalter expands on this, explaining that women "are typically situated on the side of irrationality […], while men are situated on the side of reason" and "madness, even when experienced by men, is metaphorically and symbolically represented as feminine" (4). Jane M. Ussher similarly situates madness as a "disorder linked to the essence of femininity itself" (*The Madness of Women* 9).[9] As such, madness, when experienced by men and described through traits stereotypically linked to women (Showalter 4), registers as failed adherence to the cultural 'ideal' of patriarchal masculinity. To lose reason, then, is to lose one's alignment with masculinity itself. In contemporary understandings, these clear-cut oppositions have grown increasingly unstable. As "[e]motion is no longer thought to be the enemy of reason" (Frith 637), madness may no longer be the enemy of sanity.

The cultural logic linking irrationality to femininity and reason to masculinity, on the other hand, is very much alive today. It is, in Nataša Polgar's formulation, a "procedural occurrence" that is "rooted in restrictive and patriarchal culture" (59). Polgar compellingly asserts that the mere act of naming certain behaviors as pathological, especially when they are exclusively attributed to women, exposes the operations of ideological power (63). Historically, this power enabled institutionalization for acts as varied as melancholia and "quarrelsomeness"

[9] In *The Madness of Women*, Ussher does not differentiate between the terms mental illness and madness. She rejects the term mental illness on the grounds that it obscures the social dimensions of diagnoses (4). Her discussion of madness includes diagnostic categories that I would classify as mental illness. I do not reject the biomedical model to the extent that Ussher does, yet the underlying thrust of our arguments is congruent.

to simply "thinking too much" or "forgoing household duties" (Polgar 63). Such expansive definitions of pathology made female deviance symptomatic of a condition in need of correction. Across many medical and spiritual institutions, such correction was normalized. The "abuse of women" was "a common social practice," and women's right to self-expression was severely limited (Polgar 69). Socio-political and medical reforms have altered the most overt expressions of these practices, yet the underlying structures endure, albeit in subtler forms. Lisa F. Barrett and Eliza Bliss-Moreau find that women's emotions are still attributed to their inherent "emotional nature," whereas men's are treated as rational and "caused by a situation that warrants it" (651).[10] Crucially, male socialization – as it enforces the suppression of emotions – only upholds this 'ideal' of masculinity and feminizes any discernable, 'irrational' emotional expression. In this way, the same double standard that once justified institutionalization and abuse adapted to newer contexts to maintain the authority and values of a male-dominated society.

Within this system, female madness cannot be likened to a clinically diagnosable mental illness, much like cultural understandings of "female insanity […] cannot be tabulated or translated into the statistics of mental health" (Showalter 17). As Ussher observes, definitions of mental health in the late 20th century "were found to coincide with definitions of masculinity, whereas femininity was seen as psychologically unhealthy" ("A Critical Feminist Analysis" 73). In the male-dominated fields of psychology and psychiatry, conceptual boundaries of mental health have been and continue to be calibrated to a masculine norm – like (almost) everything else in a patriarchal society. As a consequence, women have frequently been misdiagnosed and mistreated by professionals "whose use (or abuse) of power" needs to be questioned (Ussher, *The Madness of Women* 1). When hysterical personality disorder appeared in the DSM-II (1968), its diagnostic criteria relied heavily on these calibrations, presenting what Mary A. Jimenez calls "essentially a caricature of exaggerated femininity" (158). The "typical patient" outlined in the DSM-III (1980) is described as "attractive and seductive," "overly concerned with physical attractiveness," seeking to "control the opposite sex," and continuously demanding "reassurance, approval or praise" (American Psychiatric Association 348 qtd. in Ussher, "Diagnosing Difficult Women" 65). Still, as Ussher asks quite

[10] Clover notes that in horror, "[f]emale killers are few and their reasons for killing significantly different from men's. […]; their anger derives in most cases not from childhood experience but from specific moments in their adult lives in which they have been abandoned or cheated on by men" (29). At first glance, Clover's description seems to contradict Barrett and Bliss-Moreau's finding. Far from empowering, however, fictional female killers still draw inspiration from real-life misogyny as their acts of violence are constructed as a reaction to male actions, implying that their aggression is contingent upon male provocation.

rightfully, "[i]sn't this how we are taught to 'do girl' through teenage magazines, romantic fiction, and 'chick flicks?'" ("Diagnosing Difficult Women" 65). When femininity itself is the pathology, women face an impossible situation where conformity and deviation alike are symptomatic.

Hysteria lost traction as a diagnostic category after the 1970s due to major societal changes. In its place, borderline personality disorder (BPD) became the new female illness (Ussher, "Diagnosing Difficult Women" 65). Dana Becker characterizes BPD as a feminized psychiatric diagnosis, citing its disproportionate assignment to women, with reported ratios ranging from 3:1 to 7:1 (qtd. in Ussher, "Diagnosing Difficult Women" 65). Although clinical descriptions of BPD also include "more masculine characteristic[s]," i.e., anger and aggression, the prototypical patient is usually depicted as a "demanding, angry, aggressive woman" (Jimenez 162). BPD is a recognized mental illness, but its diagnostic label can be misapplied to pathologize women's expressions of anger or assertiveness – behaviors deemed "perfectly acceptable in a man" (Ussher, "Diagnosing Difficult Women" 66). Further, Ussher points to a gender bias embedded in standardized diagnostic tools as they categorize certain experiences that are "part of the feminine role (such as crying, sadness or loss of interest in sex) as 'symptoms'" (Ussher, "A Critical Feminist Analysis" 73). This indicates that, regardless of how the parameters of normative womanhood are defined, women's emotions and behaviors are transformed into pathology whenever they become inconvenient to or threaten the patriarchal order.

Systematically disassociating emotions like rage and anger from acceptable femininity obscures their political dimensions. Soraya Chemaly notes that, even if girls are socialized to talk about their emotions more openly than boys, anger remains conspicuously absent from these conversations (12). She emphasizes that anger is "the first line of defense against injustice," which makes it "least acceptable for girls and women," whose social value is often tied to their compliance and emotional docility (Chemaly 24). To believe that one "has the *right* to use [one's] anger with power reflects multiple, overlapping social entitlements" rooted in patriarchy and white supremacy (Chemaly 24). Women's anger and rage are thus actively disqualified as valid forms of social participation. Although Chemaly's observation gestures towards larger conversations about power imbalances – within the female/male binary and

across intersecting mechanisms of oppression[11] – the central point is that the social legitimacy of anger is always conditional. Based on Ussher's assertion that women's "distress" can be viewed "as a reasonable response, not a reflection of pathology within" (*The Madness of Women* 1–2), experiencing and articulating anger signals awareness of the socio-political realities of womanhood. In this case, legitimacy is granted by context. This legitimacy is swiftly lost once female rage challenges or threatens to dismantle the very structures that produce it. Female rage comes to be constructed as irrational by tethering it, in Sophie Rehlaender's words, "to hysteria or mania," or by reducing it to a temporary 'symptom' of womanhood, specifically in relation to menstruation. Assimilating female rage with irrationality, Kimberly Bautista notes, discredits "an angry woman's capability to make sound judgments," which ultimately silences her and confines her to the very structures that originally incited her anger. Here, Annette Schlichter's description of the madwoman comes into view: to be a madwoman is to be one of the "representative victims of and rebels against a patriarchal order" (309). Madness is the name given to the threat of female rage – rage that patriarchal systems strive so forcefully to disqualify.

Grief, much like rage, is regulated through gendered expectations that construct women as excessively emotional. In their study, Alexis Versalle and Eugene E. McDowell indicate that women and men do not evaluate the "appropriateness" of grief alongside gender stereotypes (64). Nonetheless, women demonstrate greater sympathy toward grieving individuals. The authors suggest that cultural expectations that require women to take on nurturing roles may enhance emotional identification with others (Versalle and McDowell 65). Cultural norms surrounding masculinity, on the other hand, demand men to act "stereotypically masculine" which in turn may result in men viewing sympathy as something "inherently feminine and thus something to be tempered" (Versalle and McDowell 65). To define women as innately sympathetic and men as detached effectively prescribes 'appropriate' expressions of grief. For men, restraint is normalized whereas for women, sympathy is expected. Once this sympathy exceeds an unspoken threshold, as Lisa C. Taylor notes, a patriarchal society labels "a grieving woman overly emotional." Both women and men are policed in their grief, yet femininity alone

[11] An in-depth exploration of these intersecting power dynamics lies beyond the immediate scope of this thesis. Still, it is necessary to briefly acknowledge the 'angry Black woman' stereotype, which entails a racialized and gendered trope that has long delegitimized Black women's emotional expression. As Jacinta Kent notes, this stereotype has informed both public and private discourse since the early 19th century by labelling Black women who express anger, frustration, or assertiveness as "'aggressor[s],' 'intimidating,' and/or 'overly sensitive'" (Kent 358). The trope reinforces a double standard wherein Black women are denied the complexity or legitimacy of their emotional responses, especially in comparison to white women or men of any 'race.' For further reading, consider Audre Lorde's "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism" (1981).

is linked to excess and disruption. To put it differently, the visibility of women's emotional expression makes it continually vulnerable to being labeled excessive. Grief is thus another domain in which genuine emotional expressions are sidelined in favor of performing an externally sanctioned rationale.

To outline the concept of female madness is to inevitably confront the social roles assigned to women in a patriarchal society. Writing in 1975, Shoshana Felman observed that from her early life onward, a woman's role "is that of serving an image, authoritative and central, of man: a woman is first and foremost a daughter/a mother/a wife" (2). While very much of its time, Felman's insight anticipates later concerns with the persistence of limiting gender roles. The concept of the *Mother Wound* captures how these limitations, internalized by women as cultural norms and inherited through maternal lines, articulate a kind of determinism that makes them appear almost inevitable. Bethany Webster defines the Mother Wound, on a cultural level, as the "systemic devaluation of women in […] patriarchal cultures" (*Discovering the Inner Mother* 13). Elsewhere, she describes it as the "cultural atmosphere of patriarchy" that renders women inferior and "penetrates every aspect of our culture" (Webster, "About"). For Webster, the Mother Wound is "a product of […] living in a culture in which domination of women by men is at its core" ("Mother Wound as Missing Link"). Webster's definition enables me to situate the Mother Wound as more than an interpersonal phenomenon, i.e., more than a "loss or a lack of mothering" (Gaba) or a "type of attachment trauma" (Balan) as it is predominantly viewed in psychology. Instead, because it influences and is influenced by cultural conceptions of womanhood, the Mother Wound captures the specific, disproportionate ways in which patriarchal systems appropriate essentialist understandings of female identity.

Motherhood is one aspect through which the Mother Wound takes shape. For Adrienne Rich, motherhood has two meanings, "one superimposed on the other: *the potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution* which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control" (13). Motherhood, as a patriarchal institution, exerts power by defining and enforcing ideals of 'good motherhood.' As Andrea O'Reilly explains, these ideals first culminated in "sacrificial motherhood" through which caregiving was defined as women's innate duty, so that mothers become the sole, full-time caregivers whose children must always come before work or personal fulfillment (23–24). This model later developed into "intensive mothering," an ideology demanding that

> (1) children can only be properly cared for by the biological mother; (2) this mothering must be provided 24/7; (3) the mother must always put children's needs before her own;

> (4) mothers must turn to the experts for instruction; (5) the mother must be fully satisfied, fulfilled, completed, and composed in motherhood; and finally (6) mothers must lavish excessive amounts of time, energy, and money in the rearing of their children. (O'Reilly 24)

This impossible ideal, she argues, produces a "new discourse of motherhood" in which guilt and shame are "deliberately manufactured and monitored," ensuring that women feel perpetually inadequate and that personal fulfillment or work stay in conflict with motherhood (O'Reilly 28). Within this context, maternal 'failure' is heavily pathologized, for it represents a deviation from the script prescribed by patriarchy. Even minor departures provide grounds for labeling women deficient, irrational, fundamentally flawed – or mad. Women's exhaustion or refusal of assigned roles, inevitable given the impossibility of the ideal, becomes culturally constructed as pathological. In contrast, paternal inadequacy is far less rigorously assessed, despite men sharing equal responsibility for child-rearing. The oppressive force of this discourse lies not in the recognition that "children have needs, but [in how] we, as a culture, dictate that only the biological mother is capable of fulfilling them" (O'Reilly 28). Motherhood, of course, can be deeply empowering for women. The concern here lies with its institutionalization under patriarchy. Rich expresses this most clearly: this "is not an attack on […] mothering except as defined and restricted under patriarchy" (14). The Mother Wound arises from an institutionalized framework that instills ideals of 'good mothering' as well as guilt and inadequacy, as proof of maternal devotion, to be internalized and reproduced across generations and thus systematically sustained.

The Mother Wound also influences other facets of women's lives, including romantic relationships. Emotional labor, or emotional work, defined as the often invisible (and unpaid) work performed to maintain relationships and resolve conflicts, is culturally feminized and – in heterosexual relationships – disproportionately expected of women (Derrick and McClanahan; Ferrara and Vergara 394). Such expectations, as Noémi S. Unkel and Helena de Sá Carvalho Leonardo[12] note, emerge from a cultural determinism that assigns responsibility for the "private sphere" to women, conditioning them into nurturing roles (36). To classify emotional labor as an extension of 'female nature' rather than something socially imposed essentially reduces it "(unfairly) to being undervalued and […] often […] [unacknowledged] as real work," despite being fundamental to the maintenance of "functioning relationships,

[12] The original title of this study, "'I Ain't Your Mamma': A Study on Women's Emotional Labour in Heterosexual Relationships," inadvertently reinforces the cultural assumption that caregiving is innately maternal and emotional labor should naturally fall under a "Mamma's" domain. The title was later changed, and the article is now only available as "Women Working Emotions – Emotional Labour in Heterosexual Relationships."

families, [and] communities" (Derrick and McClanahan). Through socialization, then, women inherit the practices of care modeled by their mothers (or female relatives) and the internalized constraints of femininity as sacrifice and submission. Webster interprets this inheritance as part of the Mother Wound and as evidence that "for women, patriarchy conflates emotional labor with a false sense of ethics;" a conflation that, she argues, "causes us [women] to perpetuate our own internalized oppression" ("Women and Emotional Labor"). I disagree with this absolutist perspective since not all emotional labor immediately translates into oppression. As Angelica P. Ferrara and Dylan P. Vergara note, "[p]erforming emotional work is not 'bad,' nor is it inherently a site of social inequality" (394). What makes it oppressive is the asymmetry of expectation.

Patriarchal discourses that pathologize women's (emotional) noncompliance often inherit their principles from older, culturally embedded narratives. Cecilia Tasca, Mariangela Rapetti, Mauro G. Carta, and Bianca Fadda summarize this history incisively. They observe that, under the influence of Greco-Roman thought, reproductive capacity was often taken as the central measure of female health and moral worth, which causes women to be "guilty" when they violate social expectations by 'failing' to procreate (Tasca et al. 110). In *Timaeus* (c. 360 BC), they explain, Plato describes the uterus as "sad and unfortunate" when it does not "join with the male" to produce offspring (Tasca et al. 110). Elsewhere, he likens the womb to "an animal which longs to generate children" and to remain "barren," then, results in the uterus becoming "distressed and sorely disturbed" which brings about "the extremest anguish" and "all manner of diseases" (Plato qtd. in Chodoff 546) – an opinion shared by Hippocrates (Tasca et al. 110). Hippocrates, who was the first to use the term *hysteria*, attributed its origin to the movement of the uterus. In Roman medical thought, figures like Aulus Cornelius Celsus and Claudius Galen advanced detailed descriptions of hysteria yet continued to categorize it as a disorder of the uterus. Soranus of Ephesus, considered to be the founder of scientific gynecology, "revolutionized" these views as he saw the root of this 'disease' in "the toils of procreation" and insisted on "perpetual virginity [as the] ideal condition" for women (Tasca et al. 111). Far from a radical break, Soranus' perspective replaced one reproductive imperative with another. Consequently, women's physical and mental health continued to be conceptually tied to reproductive function.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, Greco-Roman medical knowledge was preserved, expanded, and eventually spread widely across late-medieval Europe. Unsurprisingly, Renaissance physicians still explained women's "vulnerable physiology and psychology" as caused by the uterus (Tasca et al. 113). It was not until the 18th century that hysteria began to

be gradually reinterpreted as a 'disorder' of the brain rather than the uterus. This shift in anatomical focus did little to unsettle the underlying misogyny. In the 19th century, it was still seen as the "consequence of the lack of conception and motherhood" (Tasca et al. 114–5). By reconceptualizing hysteria as "a lack of libidinal evolution," Sigmund Freud inverted this paradigm: the absence of motherhood became a consequence, not a cause, of the disorder (Tasca et al. 115). This conceptual shift, however, reiterates the same patriarchal logic that had long treated women's bodies and minds as deficient and leaves intact the broader structures of male authority. As with Plato's proclamation that "[s]uch is the nature of women and all that is female" (qtd. in Chodoff 546), these assertions often rest upon sweeping generalizations authored by men who have claimed for themselves the right to define and control women's health. This overview certainly cannot capture the full diversity of historical or cultural perspectives. Even in its brevity, it makes apparent that male-authored narratives and, by extension, male-dominated professions determine prevailing understandings of womanhood.

Apart from philosophical and medical discourses, the pathologization of women's minds and emotional expressions has deep roots in religion and folklore. From the Middle Ages through the Modern Age, in many Western contexts, 'scientific' interpretations of women's supposed deficiencies existed alongside narratives that constructed women through a lens of moral corruption. These parallel traditions sustained the notion that women are inferior to men and inherently dangerous (Tasca et al. 111–2). In the Christian creation myth, for instance, Eve may not be pathologized in a medical sense, but she is still portrayed as inferior to Adam – derived from his rib – and as morally defective. She is the original sinner for succumbing to temptation and leading Adam astray. Where Eve represents weakness and deceit, Lilith embodies something even more disruptive: defiance. Originating in Mesopotamian demonology, Rebecca Lesses points out, so-called *lilith* spirits were imagined as "seducer[s] or slayer[s] of children" who could appear in either "male or female form," and, over time, came to be predominantly represented as female. In the *Alphabet of Ben Sira* (ca. 1000 CE), this takes the shape of Lilith as Adam's first wife (Lesses). According to Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Lilith was "[c]reated not from Adam's rib but, like him, from the dust," and "[b]ecause she considered herself his equal," she refused to submit to him sexually; when Adam tried to force her obedience, she responded with rage (35). Her 'defiance' drove her from Eden to the Red Sea, a place of demons, where Lilith herself became one. She is consistently constructed as "an antitype," the embodiment of a woman "whom society cannot control" (Lesses). In patriarchal culture, Lilith's voice and her revolt are deemed "daemonic" because

they disrupt male authority (Gilbert and Gubar 35).[13] In demonizing her, Lilith is marked as "both the first woman *and* the first monster" (Gilbert and Gubar 35), substantiating the claim that a woman who demands equality is invariably configured as monstrous.

To consider mythology "as the psychology of history," as Chesler suggests (85), is to see how stories preserve cultural desires and taboos. Demonic or vengeful women like Lilith are hardly unique to one culture or tradition. Comparable figures include the Greek Medusa, the Mesopotamian Lamaštu, or the Latin American La Llorona, among many others. For Aviva C. Zuckoff these myths represent either the remnants "of the dying Matriarchy" or the deliberate attempts aimed at discrediting female authority. The outcome, as Gilbert and Gubar clarify, is binary: submission demands silence and rebellion demands silencing (36). In cultural expression, especially within horror, these binaries resurface as female victimhood and monstrosity, each a strategy of regulation and control. The horror genre offers progressive expressions of female monstrosity and female victimhood, of course. To think of horror as only negatively representing women would be to disregard those contributions that offer alternative ways of imagining female subjectivity[14] and, as such, an overgeneralization. Still, my focus remains on those representations which most clearly expose the regulatory logics embedded in the genre. Only by mapping this terrain can the significance of both subversions and continued reliance on these logics be fully appreciated.

Inheriting the genealogy of fear and repression, the horror genre produces female monsters that Creed identifies as descendants of the "images that haunted dreams, myths and artistic practices of our forebears" (1). Female monstrosity can be conceptualized through what Creed terms the *monstrous-feminine*. For her, "[a]ll human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine," or, in other words, a perception of femininity as "shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject" (Creed 1). This formulation extends from Julia Kristeva's theorization of the abject, which denotes "the place where meaning collapses" and identity is destabilized for the purpose of "separating […] the human from the nonhuman and the fully constituted subject from the partially formed subject" (2 qtd. in Creed 11, Creed 10). The abject must be "radically excluded" and relegated beyond a conceptual boundary that "separates the self from that which

[13] Zuckoff suggests, "Had Adam accepted her [Lilith's] equality, these negative traits would be absent; in fact, there would be no war between the sexes at all, a war based on men's unwillingness to accept women's equality." Zuckoff is right to point out that many negative traits ascribed to women arise from systemic inequality, but men's position cannot be reduced to unwillingness alone, for their own social conditioning under patriarchy is equally significant.

[14] I take as representative – but by no means exhaustive – examples Lucky McKee's *May* (2002), Ana Lily Amirpour's *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014), Julia Ducournau's *Raw* (2017), Jennifer Reeder's *Knives and Skin* (2019), Alex Garland's *Men* (2022), and Brian Duffield's *No One Will Save You* (2023).

threatens the self" (Kristeva 2 qtd. in Creed 11, Creed 11). Reworking Kristeva's psychoanalytical framework into a cultural one, Creed sees the construction of the monstrous-feminine to come out of "ancient religious and historical notions of abjection" with reference to "religious 'abominations'" such as "sexual immorality and perversion" or "the feminine body and incest" (11). Yet, Creed stresses that the monstrous-feminine is less an articulation of "female desire or feminine subjectivity" than a projection of male fears (8). Ultimately, what is configured as abject is not what women are, but what phallocentric and patriarchal discourses fear they might signify. Part of why the monstrous-feminine exists, then, is because patriarchal masculinity requires a figure against which to define itself.

The reductive understanding of women primarily in terms of their reproductive capacity spreads to horror's expression of the monstrous-feminine, including "the monstrous womb, the possessed pubescent body and the archaic, all-engulfing mother" (Harrington 3). Similarly, Creed insists that representations of women as monstrous are "almost always" tied to "mothering and reproductive functions" (9). She further differentiates between three distinct mother archetypes: the archaic mother, the oral-sadistic mother, and the dyadic mother (118–19). The *archaic mother* represents the primordial source of all life and, simultaneously, the abyss that "reabsorb[s] what [she] once birthed" (Creed 27). This "all-devouring cannibalistic aspect" shades into the *oral-sadistic mother*, who has less of an "originating aspect" but is feared to derive pleasure from consuming the very children who once fed from her (Creed 23, 118). The *dyadic mother*, firmly placed inside a patriarchal family constellation, represents an overwhelming bond between mother and child, symbolically threatening "to engulf the infant" and "thereby risking the loss […] of the totality of his living being" (Creed 119, Kristeva 64 qtd. in Creed 14). These archetypes of the monstrous-feminine are emblematic of the anxiety surrounding the uncontrollable, primal forces of creation and destruction as well as the attempts to contain or discredit the power of the feminine within a phallocentric imagination.

Mobilizing the maternal as a site of abjection, or the "monstrous-maternal," as Harrington terms it, additionally exposes the cultural ambivalence ingrained in two distinct paradigms of motherhood (17). Harrington differentiates between *essential motherhood*, a term she uses self-consciously to denote the "biological and emotional necessity that sits at the heart of the female experience," and *ideal motherhood*, understood as "the imperative for women to mother in culturally, socially and historically specific and ideologically complicit ways" (17). In line with O'Reilly's critique of intensive mothering, Harrington highlights the danger inherent in these categorical constructions of the maternal since they "demand […] a perfection that can never be attained" (17). The monstrous-maternal suggests that the failure to attain these

goals surpasses deficiency or madness, as outlined earlier, to imply that "motherhood itself […] sparks and breeds monstrosity, and that this is something that women cannot escape" (Harrington 17). Regardless of their efforts to mother 'properly,' women are "always-already monstrous" (Harrington 17). For Harrington, all mothers, 'good' and 'bad' alike, are sites where discourses and ideologies compete and negotiate (182), which makes apparent the socially imposed expectations that solidify maternal success as unattainable and 'failure' monstrous.

Apart from fertility and maternity, the monstrous-feminine is equally configured around her sexuality. She can either manifest as the castrated woman, defined by her supposed 'lack' of the penis, or the castrating woman in the form of "the deadly *femme castratrice*" or "the *vagina dentata*" (Creed 5, 9). This dualism stems, in part, from Freud's problematic theorization of female sexuality and the Oedipus Complex, which reduces women to the effects of penis envy and dictates that they must either become "too dominant or too submissive; hypersexual or frigid" (Fitzpatrick 3). Female sexuality is coded as failure or threat, whereas the latter is the "real problem" that horror cinema seeks to investigate, as Stephen Neale argues (61). He understands female sexuality as "that which renders them [women] desirable – but also threatening – to men" and eventually constructs them as monstrous (Neale 61). Horror is predominantly structured through the male gaze and male-defined threats, as already established. Hence, as Creed explains:

> The myth about woman as castrator clearly points to male fears and phantasies about the female genitals as a trap, […] which threatens to swallow them up and cut them into pieces. The vagina dentata is the mouth of hell – a terrifying symbol of woman as the 'devil's gateway.' (116)

Consistently defining women in relation to male fear and desire leaves little conceptual space to understand female sexuality on its own terms. It appears primarily as something demonic that must be feared or contained – and, quite ironically, castrated.

Returning to what Creed, reading Kristeva, describes as the "partially formed subject" and its separation from a "fully constituted subject" (10), it is difficult not to recall the Freudian notion of penis envy or Aristotle's infamous description of woman as a "deformed male" (175). Western cultural understandings have repeatedly contributed to depicting women as partial or incomplete, as lacking the coherence attributed to men who are viewed as whole and rational. This partiality, Christine Battersby argues, shapes women's subjectivity by suspending their selfhood "between freedom and rationality" and "passive and thing-like embodiment" (11). Building on this, Harrington's concept of *gynaehorror* delineates how "female sexuality, subjectivity and reproductive embodiment" are discursively constructed as "failure and

entrapment" (7). As a result, a woman is imagined as a subject-in-tension defined by contradiction and always in negotiation.

Harrington's understanding of female embodiment as failure and entrapment finds one of its most enduring expressions in the Madonna/Whore dichotomy (MWD). The MWD either idealizes women as the 'good' and virtuous Madonna – entrapment of passive virtue – or demonizes them as the 'bad' and promiscuous Whore – failure to adhere to patriarchal femininity (Bareket et al. 519; Kahalon et al. 348). Apart from the assumption that female sexuality and nurture are mutually exclusive, what unites both poles is their objectification of women, who are either admired 'objects' of affection or sexualized 'objects' of desire. The former are valued for their purity, the latter devalued for their transgression (Kahalon et al. 349). This objectification essentially denies women sexual agency. It constructs them as passive recipients of male affection, lust, or condemnation because "[w]omen are expected to be desired, but not desiring or responsive" (Kahalon et al. 349). Patricia Y. Miller and Martha R. Fowlkes expand on this, assessing that men are socialized to enact autonomy through unrestrained sexual activities whereas women are responsive 'objects' whose sexuality derives its legitimacy only from its relation to male desire (786). It is undeniable that "women's sexuality is affected by […] the subordinate status attached" to the female (sex) role (Miller and Fowlkes 786). Reducing female sexuality to a reproductive function, permissible only when the intention is to procreate, further naturalizes women's subordinate status and effectively ties a woman's identity, once again, to her reproductive capacities (Chan). Ultimately, a woman who desires sex outside reproduction is dismissed as Whore, while one who renounces desire is entrapped as Madonna. Female autonomy, either way, continues to be undermined.

Horror cinema reworks this dichotomy into narrative, wherein 'agreeable women,' who perform patriarchal femininity satisfactorily, are rewarded with survival. Clover, tracing the evolution of female protagonists in the genre, delineates the archetype of the Final Girl: the lone surviving female character "from whose vantage, even through whose eyes, we see the action" (x). While such a female-centered storyline approach might initially appear as progressive, this archetype should not be accepted as uncritically empowering. The Final Girl is often "boyish," her femininity minimized through traits such as an androgynous or masculine-coded name or physicality (Clover 40). Her virginity, Shannon Slade points out, is "mandatory." Hence, even if the Final Girl emerges as a survivor, her survival is predicated on the erasure of femininity, a willingness to perform traditionally masculine traits, and a "refusal to engage in licentious behavior" (Weaver et al. 32). In this sense, the Final Girl is required to

secure her 'virtue' through self-policing and submission, which places her in a state of entrapment similar to that of the Madonna archetype, albeit one that is less passive. The Final Girl occupies a precarious space. She is not so much a triumphant hero as she is a "tortured survivor" or "'victim-hero,' with an emphasis on 'victim'" (Clover x). She may live, but she is "profoundly damaged" (Erwin). Though she is comparatively favored over those women who could not, or would not, conform, the underlying "essentialist view that woman, *by nature*, is a victim" endures all the same (Creed 8). Sustaining a system that rewards proximity to patriarchal approval – proximity that is only achievable through self-policing and submission – ensures that no woman escapes the structures that define and oppress them, regardless of whether they make it to the credits.

Horror films rarely grant survival to those who do not conform to notions of moral purity. Although this rule generally applies to both female and male characters, their punishment is neither equal in numbers nor in manner (Clover 34). A male victim's death is usually immediate, "viewed from a distance" or even "not to be viewed at all," as it happens offscreen (Clover 35). The deaths of female victims are shown in more graphic and prolonged detail (Clover 35). Most interesting, perhaps, are the voyeuristic implications here. Audience reception studies suggest that "for male subjects only, the enjoyment of pornography was a strong predictor of the preference for graphic horror featuring the victimization of women, but not the victimization of men" (Tamborini et al. 529). Horror and pornography, Linda Williams points out, traditionally cater to a (heterosexual) male spectator and rely on female bodies "as the primary *embodiments* of pleasure, fear, and pain" (4). This objectification feeds directly into the voyeuristic consumption of female suffering. It marks the non-Final Girls, or Whores, as disposable which in turn normalizes the violence against women as it holds up the idea of woman as innate victim.

The spectacle of women's suffering and its voyeuristic consumption also includes women's emotional responses, in particular female rage or anger. When pathologized, rage and anger are frequently associated with monstrosity, even if this association is not always immediate. In films like *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976), *Jennifer's Body* (Karyn Kusama, 2009), or *Gone Girl* (David Fincher 2014), among others, these emotions are predominantly embodied by attractive (white) women. For Megan Nolan, these portrayals make female anger "fetishizable" and "easily consumable" and, as Bautista observes, contextualize female rage "in a way that satisfies the male gaze and reaffirms sexist stereotypes." Rage, then, loses much of its political power because its expression is met with objectification. Paradoxically, such objectified anger, despite being contextually justified, is still constructed as inacceptable in

these diegetic worlds – Carrie's rage literally kills her, Jennifer needs to be killed because her rage has always been monstrous in nature, and Amy's punishment leaves her trapped in the very structures that caused her rage – which replicates the contradictions that underlie female rage, as explored earlier.

The subversive potential of female rage, even when it is 'all the rage'[15] on screen, remains contested. Reflecting the same dynamics Feder describes in political madness, both madness and rage can be mobilized as productive forces of rebellion. Indeed, for many women, to "[go] mad" is to resist repression and "the powerlessness that it signifies" (Chesler 98). Female rage, on the other hand, has "often ignited movements for social change and progress" (Traister xxxviii). Hence, in films like *May* (Lucky McKee, 2002) or *Raw* (Julia Ducournau, 2017) women are not monstrous for their rage. These films expose the monstrousness of the structures that confine women, implicitly asking whose reality is truly distorted. This affirmative view, however, represents only one side of the debate. According to Elizabeth J. Donaldson, madwomen may have become "a compelling metaphor for women's rebellion" (100), though one that carries "problematic implications" as it offers only "the illusion of power" (100, Caminero-Santangelo 3 qtd. in Donaldson 101). Felman, by contrast, sees madness as "the opposite of rebellion," primarily because it is a state in which "cultural conditioning" leaves individuals "deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation" (2). Madness, in this view, is a form of disempowerment. Nolan moves entirely beyond this debate, turning instead to the fundamental issue of women "not being afforded the space to live without constant justification." She maintains, "I don't want to have to be of use to be allowed to exist" (Nolan). Female rage and madness, thus, might be most radical when they insist on existence without usefulness and justification.

Many horror movies, including *Hereditary* and *Midsommar*, establish grief as one of their core themes and structuring forces of the narrative. In horror, Tuğçe Kutlu notes, grief is rarely rendered in the same way twice (154). As much as grief differs in every person, it does so in every horror film. What unites these variations is the utilization of grief as a catalyst or animating presence, almost like a character in its own right. When linked to child loss, as in *Hereditary*, or to suicide loss, as in *Midsommar*, grief acquires an additional moral dimension: guilt (Kutlu 156–7). Alongside survivor's guilt or the parental guilt that can follow the loss of a child, women are also subject to a culturally imposed guilt. The latter stems from the gendered

[15] As the title of Bautista's essay, "Beneath the Cool Girl Exterior: Why Female Rage Films Are All the Rage," might suggest.

expectations that hold women primarily responsible for the emotional and physical well-being of others and, by extension, for preventing loss. As established throughout this chapter, women's behavior is strictly scrutinized and grief, anchored in 'appropriate' forms of expression, is no exception. Perceived transgressions are judged disproportionately and more susceptible to representations of excess and monstrosity. The close readings of *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* in the following chapters will further demonstrate how grief, guilt, and the scrutiny of women's behavior converge to shape the (mad)women in horror.

To call a woman mad is less to diagnose an illness than to label her refusal to conform and discredit her emotions and her voice. Female madness cannot be understood outside the patriarchal frameworks that have historically regulated, and continue to regulate, women's emotional and embodied lives. Greco-Roman medicine tied women's minds to their wombs, treating the uterus as a source of female irrationality and reproductive function as the measure of mental health. Judeo-Christian mythology views women as morally flawed and susceptible to corruption. It reads any refusal of submission as further proof of that inherent 'defect.' From the pathologization of female rage and grief to the policing of sexual and maternal performance: the horror genre draws on these real-life circumstances and produces narratives that construct as monstrous what cannot be understood or tolerated. As I have shown in this chapter, the female victim and the monstrous-feminine, in their respective ways, are representative of what patriarchal culture fears most: women who do not comply. The female survivor, or Final Girl, demonstrates that compliance offers no true reward either. She survives only by separating herself from anything other than what patriarchy deems acceptable femininity. The subversive potential of female madness and rage, however, is still open to debate. Some read them as metaphors for rebellion, others as the opposite, namely as conditions of disempowerment that strip women of the very means of protest. Female madness is always mediated by context and interpretation. In the end, whether they are truly mad matters less than how the label itself sustains the very systems that suppress women's resistance.

3. Made to be Monstrous

Horror cinema inherits and reshapes generic and cultural formulations in ways that are as varied as they are predictable. I have already attended to the theoretical underpinnings of two such formulations: the formal determinism that threads through the genre's repetitions, and the ideological imperatives that demand the designation of what counts as illness and what counts as disobedience. In what follows, I direct my focus toward their convergence in *Hereditary* and *Midsommar*. In chapter 3.1, I examine Aster's employment of narrative and formal techniques

that aid in creating his complex and uniquely deterministic worlds. The camera, the space, the imagery, the edit – all insist on an outcome already decided. Chapter 3.2 picks up where this analysis leaves off. I inquire what this prewritten structure requires of its protagonists to function. The answer, in both films, involves mental illness. It is the condition that the narratives depend on without ever fully interrogating it as something produced rather than simply given. In chapter 3.3, I narrow my focus further, turning to the gendered dynamics that make female characters, especially mothers and daughters, available for this kind of narrative use. I move from the frame to the mind to the body; from what the camera and diegetic worlds do, to what the protagonists are told they are, and, finally, to what they are made to become.

3.1. "A nightmare is fed before it is born:" Determinism Across Form and Narrative

Determinism, as a thematic, narrative, and formal concern, lies at the heart of *Hereditary* and *Midsommar.* From the outset, each film traps its characters within worlds governed by inevitability. Rather than leaving this inevitability abstract or purely narrative, Aster weaves it into the audience's visual experience. His characteristic "use of slow camera movements," which contributes to a sense of inescapable motion, effectively captures what Church describes as the "'mechanical' feeling" of inevitability (90). Mechanical, indeed, the camera movements simulate an external, regulating intelligence and establish a visual hierarchy in which agency is displaced from character to camera. Even when the camera holds still, the persistence of the frame – its refusal to follow the characters – makes any attempt at movement inconsequential. Inevitability is seen before it is ever told. Through the integration of additional narrative, visual, and formal strategies, determinism is constructed to be one of the core aspects of each film.

Hereditary's narrative gradualism and spatial suffocation, as opposed to *Midsommar*'s immediacy and visual literalness, render the film's approach to determinism more subtle and ambiguous – ironically so, given the suggestiveness of its title. In an interview, Aster told Jordan Crucchiola that he wanted to make "a conspiracy film without exposition," i.e., a film in which the forces at work behind the scenes are never explained directly. *Hereditary*'s audience must piece together what might be happening from the same limited vantage point as its characters. Crucchiola thus contends that there is no "omniscient" viewer in *Hereditary*. While this perspective has merit – the film does withhold explanatory clarity – audiences are made aware, however subtly, of the inevitability guiding the narrative right from the beginning. The film's prologue, which presents an obituary in plain text, introduces the main characters and central themes, grief and family, that structure the narrative and thereby links the film thematically to the most inevitable condition of all: death (*Hereditary* 00:25–49). Aside from

its expository function, the prologue creates a sense of foreboding, owed largely to its sound design. Genre expectations prime viewers to enter the film already aware that the unfolding horror is not a question of if, but how. Hence, though audiences learn alongside the characters, they are inclined to anticipate tragedy.

Hereditary opens with a sharp visual contrast to the stillness and darkness of its prologue. The camera cuts to a daylit exterior, framed by a window from inside the house, with a treehouse in view. It then tracks backward into the room before executing an almost 360-degree pan of Annie's workspace and coming to rest on a miniature house. This model, created by Annie, is a precise replica of the Graham family home. As the camera slowly zooms toward the model, specifically toward Peter's bedroom, the shot enters its interior space and transitions, without a visible cut, into a full-scale shot of Peter's actual bedroom. When his father, Steve, enters the frame, "the miniature seems to come to life" (Church 87). The camera zoom here acts analogously to the sightline of a gun fixed on its victim and, at the same time, confines the narrative within a controlled space. In doing so, it visualizes the film's negotiation of agency that echoes Hills' account of horror's ambivalence between orchestrated and imagined causality. The movement suggest an organizing force without concretizing it as a visible or singular agent, which preserves the ambiguity over whether causality is imposed or inferred. Church further characterizes this moment as "uncanny" (87), invoking the *unheimlich* in its literal sense of the *non-homely*. The domestic space appears both familiar and estranged, natural and composed, controlled and controlling. These aspects, in sum, remove any real distinction between the space the characters inhabit and the space that controls them.

Midsommar declares its deterministic order more overtly and complicates it with conflicting genre cues. In the prologue, the colorful mural, painted by artist Mu Pan, outlines the major symbols and coordinates of Aster's story in five distinct panels: the parricide-suicide; Dani's ensuing grief and her boyfriend Christian's faltering support; the group's arrival to Hälsingland; the Midsommar festivities; and the climactic May Queen ceremony. The simultaneity of vision situates the film's world within a single ritual continuum wherein events unfold according to a pre-written symbolic order. The film, hence, is "an exploration of that which has already been seen" (Puhr 49), of that which is inherently devoid of change and bound to a preordained outcome. The prologue adopts the visual and auditory language of the fairytale genre, including mythical drawings and whimsical melodies, to invoke the tonal innocence and optimism associated with this genre. Audiences, however, already recognize the work as horror, which generates a dissonance in their expectations. This dissonance does not rely on deceit as, regardless of its emotional valence, the ending is foretold by the prologue. The genre cues

simply stylize this foretold conclusion and push viewers to consider how the film's genre hybridity guides their reading of it. Whether seen as triumph or terror, the conclusion stands fundamentally unchanged.

From the outset, *Midsommar* establishes its world as one that is ruled by cyclicality. Set to a "spare Swedish lullaby" (Aster, *Midsommar* 1), the ensuing sequence of tracking shots of the snow-covered forests of Hälsingland contrast sharply with the visual and tonal density of the prologue. Winter, initially depicted in the mural's first panel through barren trees and snowflakes drifting from a skull, (pre)figures the death of Dani's family and, as the inaugural image of its visual cycle, anticipates the film's culminating return to death. The juxtaposition of night and day in the prologue, between panel one and five, further reinforces this pattern. Following day, nightfall comes; following the end, all begins again. In this way, death itself is the mechanism through which renewal occurs. *Midsommar*, like *Hereditary*, establishes mortality as its central organizing principle yet conceives of death and rebirth as interdependent forces within an inescapable, continuous cycle.

Spatial structures are of utmost importance to how the films construct and uphold their vision of determinism. *Hereditary* is defined by claustrophobia and incompleteness, with the narrative largely contained within suffocating interiors, above all the Graham family home and Annie's miniature replicas. Even when the story occasionally ventures outside, the characters continue to be visually entrapped in a world that asserts a quietly malevolent and coercive presence. Exterior environments, such as the desolate woods surrounding the family home or the darkness of night, seemingly conspire in directing the characters back indoors, toward their predestined fates,[16] which hints at a reciprocity between the interior and the exterior. This reciprocity initially points to Karl Bell's notion of "spectral geography," in which the spectral is always capable of momentarily "erupt[ing] into the mundane" (43), but the film's persistent spatial pressure contradicts this argument. Building on Bell, Kristopher Woofter argues that "any environment […] somehow confined by territorial borders that become[s] claustrophobic, disorienting, or suffocating" manifests its own kind of spectrality "suffused with and preceded by determinism and morbidity" (Woofter 172). The spectrality Woofter identifies thus depends on the perception of space as experientially inescapable, as exerting a deterministic effect, that encompasses the environment as a whole. In *Hereditary*, this spatially enforced determinism structures characters' actions and aids the story in its construction of an inescapable fate. The

[16] The narrative itself confirms the significance of the characters staying indoors: Annie is told that for the resurrection ritual to succeed, "every member needs to be in the house. […] [This is] very important" (*Hereditary* 1:08:03–08).

characters are left circumscribed by meticulously curated and omnipotent spaces that determine and ensure their every move.[17]

Aster demonstrates that territorial borders need not be complete to produce such an ineluctable effect. *Hereditary*'s sets were intentionally left incomplete to "allow for freer movement," a decision that "exposes his [Aster's] world's artificiality" (Puhr 49). Combined with Aster's frequent staging of scenes to cultivate a voyeuristic atmosphere and his use of a custom-built camera to achieve the "desired 'lived-in dollhouse' effect," the film blurs any clear distinction between real spaces and their replicated counterparts (Aster, "On Building"). The film trains the eye to accept this slippage, which allows for the final cut to land accordingly, namely as a confirmation. *Hereditary* ends in an abrupt cut to a miniature replica of the preceding sequence (2:02:49), which retroactively recontextualizes the entire narrative as unfolding within an artificial environment that structurally negates the possibility of genuine spontaneity or meaningful agency.

Rather than functioning as a separate antagonistic force, the cult in *Hereditary* integrates into its spectrality as the supplementation of the event-based by the entity-based (cf. Hills). This integration reveals itself through an intricate arrangement of symbols. The Paimon sigil, for instance, marks places or people pivotal to the narrative's resolution and binds the latter to their fate. The inscriptions found on the walls of the Graham family home – *Satony, Zazas*, and *Liftoach Pandemonium* – further attest to this embedded presence. Much like the sigil, they assume an organizing character and delineate the film's three major plot segments. For Kati Littleton, Satony entails "part of a Ritual of Necromancy" intended to expel a spirit from its host. Its presence in Charlie's room signals Paimon's expulsion from her as the initial, unsuitable vessel. The inscription Zazas, found in Annie's and Steve's room, indicates the invocation of a demon (Littleton) and prefigures a more complex stage of the ritual, where Annie's grief is weaponized against her and turned into an unwitting conduit for demonic summoning. Lastly, Liftoach Pandemonium, which essentially means to "open up for the demons" (Littleton), marks the point in which the ritual reaches its intended resolution: the transference of Paimon into his new, more suitable host. Through this symbolism, the cult, whose only goal is the completion of the ritual, visually merges with the spatial environment.

Midsommar makes its constructedness and corresponding inevitability, much like its deterministic order, explicit. The film, Raymond De Luca notes, "collapses [its initial] interior

[17] This point could, of course, be applied to any narrative, since all reflect an author's intentions. That said, in Aster's films the artifice of construction serves to enact the very determinism the narratives themselves thematically explore.

spaces" and immerses its characters almost entirely in exterior, sunlit environments. These spaces, though seemingly open, remain equally confining. In the film, the group's host, Pelle, states that in nature everything is "mechanically doing its part" (30:33–36). Characterizing nature as mechanical implies that it operates under a system of deliberate, almost artisanal design. The film's "geometrically arranged mise-en-scènes of intersecting lines and concentric circles," exemplified by the arrangement of the Hårga's communal dining table or their ritual dances, further accentuate this concern for spatial and visual order (De Luca). Many of these compositions "overload the frame with visual information to disorienting effect" (De Luca). Combined with carefully planted, disorienting upside-down drone shots, this visual excess enacts a dialectic of order and chaos. The more visually controlled and saturated a scene is, the stronger the sense of disorientation. Paradoxically, this disorientation compels the characters to act – fleeing or seeking direction – and in acting, however chaotically, they restore the film's order.

The visual density carries over to *Midsommar*'s production design, which embeds a sense of determinism directly into the diegetic environment. The artworks displayed in and around the main house and in the home of the cult's matriarch, Siv (Gunnel Fred), most notably concretize this concept. In openly depicting the film's central ritual events, including the Ättestupa ceremony, the 'mating' rite, the maypole dance, and the final human sacrifice, they reveal that the characters' fates are, unbeknownst to them, spelt out right in front of them. These artworks evidently predate the group's arrival in Hälsingland and likely document rituals from earlier midsummer celebrations. The Hårga reenact the same sequence of rituals once every 90 years and, therefore, these artworks need to be understood as both archives and scripts. They prove that nothing within this world is accidental, neither past, present, nor future, and make apparent, once more, *Midsommar*'s preoccupation with cyclical temporality.

The ritual that most embodies this cyclicality is the Ättestupa, the ritualized senicide performed by all Hårga at the age of seventy-two. Pelle explains that the Hårga "think of life like the seasons," spring signifies childhood (until 18), summer early adulthood (from 18 to 36), fall "working age" (from 36 to 54), and winter a period of mentorship preceding death (from 54 to 72) (*Midsommar* 46:48–47:07). Winter, again, is conceived not as an end but as a prelude, a period of rest and regeneration, to renewal. As Siv explains,

> We view life like a circle. A recycle. The lady who jumped: her name was Ylva. Yes? That baby, who is not yet born, will inherit this name and also be Ylva. Instead of getting old and dying in pain and fear and shame, we give our life. […] Before it can spoil. It does no good dying, lashing back at the inevitable. It corrupts the spirit. (*Midsommar* 1:05:18–48)

By offering their lives before they "can spoil," the elders preserve the integrity of the cycle and affirm the community's immunity to decay. In passing on their name, the elders' voluntary death, which marks the end of winter, becomes an essential precondition for the return of spring and the renewal of life. The Hårga's willing submission to "the inevitable" sustains this endless, regenerative process.

Cyclicality is inherently tied to the notion of return. Throughout the film, Dani experiences recurring visions of her deceased family: arriving in Hälsingland, Dani first sees her sister's face reflected behind her in a mirror (*Midsommar* 32:14–17); in a nightmare, her entire family appears arranged at the Ättestupa site (1:16:11–15); following the May Queen dance, Dani spots her mother among the onlookers and her sister's face in the surrounding trees (1:48:33–36, 1:49:32–36). These apparitions suggest that Dani's family has, in some sense, always been part of the Hårga, which inspired a popular fan-theory that posits that Dani's parents were former members who fled the community. According to this theory, their deaths, allegedly orchestrated by Pelle, secured Dani's return to the community and guaranteed her staying there, since with her family gone, she has, as writer Adrienne Tyler points out, "no reason to go back home." There are moments in the film which can be interpreted as evidence of this theory, including when Father Odd (Mats Blomgren), a Hårga elder, greets Dani with "welcome home" upon first arriving, telling her – and only her – that they "are so very happy to have [her]" (37:13–20). Despite the suggestiveness of the dialogue, none of this is ever directly confirmed in the film. In fact, each time Dani had such a vision, she was under the influence of hallucinogens or sedatives, which makes them more plausibly drug-induced hallucinations or manifestations of unresolved grief. Still, grief, like the film's narrative structure, is cyclical; it tends to return and reassert its presence.

Hereditary's imagery is not as densely layered as *Midsommar*'s. Inevitability is largely articulated through networks of visual and corporeal correspondences. The recurring visual juxtaposition of Charlie's and Peter's heads, together with 'clucking' sounds and their shared difficulty breathing, draws a symbolic and physiological parallel between the two Graham children. For Charlie, the sensation of her "throat […] getting bigger" (*Hereditary* 32:05–07) is a direct symptom of her severe nut allergy, which is repeatedly emphasized throughout the film.[18] As Peter rushes her to the hospital, Charlie, struggling to breathe, sticks her head out of

[18] Early in the film, Steve asks Charlie, who is eating a chocolate bar, "there aren't nuts, right?" and Annie, immediately after, asks "does that have nuts? Because we don't have the EpiPen" (*Hereditary* 5:47–55). Peter, although only in the script, tells her on a different occasion, "[n]o nuts, Charlie" (Aster, *Hereditary* 16). At the night of the fateful party, nuts are deliberately shown being cut (28:40) with the same knife that is then used to cut the chocolate cake that Charlie eats (30:26).

the car window and is decapitated by a telephone pole. Dealing with the aftermath of Charlie's death, Peter later experiences the same choking sensation while smoking weed with his friends, describing it in almost identical terms (43:09–12). This repetition encourages a reading of bodily continuity across the siblings, which, for Puhr, "foreshadows their ultimate fusion into one body" (55). However, the final scene, the one to which Puhr presumably refers, does not support a literal fusion. Joan (Ann Dowd), the leader of the cult, initially addresses Peter as Charlie because his demeanor is "more like Charlie than Peter," before naming his true identity as Paimon (Aster, *Hereditary* 117; *Hereditary* 2:01:43–46). Peter appears like Charlie because, by this point, he has become Paimon's new host. His repetition of the clucking sound, previously distinctive to Charlie, only confirms Paimon's presence in Peter, not a merging of selves. That is to say, the correspondences between the siblings track a transfer, not a fusion. As the story dictates that the demon will not settle in an inadequate host, this transfer and, with it, the fulfillment of the cult's plan are inevitable.

Mirroring also occurs between Charlie and her mother, Annie, through their shared dedication to crafts. Unlike Annie's sober miniatures of the family home and history, Charlie makes figurines from eclectic, often macabre components, including animal remains or discarded objects. Their creations externalize an unconscious effort to impose order on an inescapable reality, though the temporal orientation of their work differs. Whereas Annie's work reconstructs past events with obsessive precision, Charlie's materializes those yet to come. For instance, her sketch of a decapitated pigeon head, decorated with a crown, serves as a prototype for a figurine for which she collects an actual pigeon head (*Hereditary* 15:54–16:02). This figurine, later used by Joan in a ritual, forebodes Charlie's end, with her severed, crowned head mounted on an inorganic substitute body (1:31:34–40, 1:59:34–41). Through these acts of assemblage, Charlie externalizes knowledge she does not – or could not – consciously possess. Annie, on the other hand, primarily externalizes knowledge she (un)consciously seeks to suppress. Their engagement with material objects binds past and future alike. Neither memory nor fate can be fully escaped.

Crowns are a visual prefiguration of the films' fatal conclusions. In each film, a coronation, of Peter as King Paimon and Dani as May Queen, marks the ultimate stage in the characters' absorption into predetermined ritual structures. In *Midsommar* this is already visually in place in the opening sequence. A framed photograph beside her parents' bed shows Dani in front of a bouquet of flowers that visually forms a crown upon her head (*Midsommar* 01:59–02:33). Aster acknowledges this visual parallel in the script: the film's iconic final scene, where Dani smiles into the camera, is intended to echo "the photo of Dani in her parent's [sic]

bedroom" (Aster, *Midsommar* 115). In *Hereditary*, the crown is a fixed attribute of Paimon's iconography. Via visual cues, such as the aforementioned drawing of the crowned pigeon or the illustration that Annie finds in one of Ellen's books, the film's final ritual is subtly anticipated. By introducing the crown motif early on, the films set a canonical endpoint that the plot must inevitably reach. For Puhr, this "foreshadowing adds a conspiratorial edge to the most innocuous of scenes" (56), which resonates with Falconer's observation that trivial details become part of "inexorable processes" (299). This conspiratorial tone, however, is inherently deceptive. Whereas a crown is typically associated with authority or triumph, *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* develop it into a harbinger of the characters' expected submission to their respective cults. This subtle yet substantial subversion accentuates the insidious nature of the conspiracies that precede and preordain the narratives' conclusions.

Both films reiterate a sense of predetermination through written language. In *Hereditary*, for instance, two phrases – "[e]scaping [f]ate," "[r]elationship between knowledge and responsibility" – and the quote "'[n]o man considered fortunate until he is dead'" are written on the chalkboard in Peter's English class (*Hereditary* 15:22). These concepts inform the class discussion of Sophocles' *The Women of Trachis* (450–425 BC), a Greek tragedy that examines the death of Heracles by way of fate and knowledge. A student identifies Heracles' fatal flaw as his refusal "to look at all the signs that are being literally handed to him" (14:44–50). Mr. Davies (Morgan Lund), the teacher, develops this reading by asking whether the absence of choice renders a situation "more tragic or less tragic," to which another student responds that it is "more tragic because if it's all just inevitable, then that means the characters had no hope and […] they are […] just like pawns in this horrible, hopeless machine" (15:03–34).[19] At last, the discussion locates the real tragedy of Heracles' fate in the illusion of choice and, as such, of hope. For Peter, this insight holds no meaning as he, too, is oblivious to the signs handed to him throughout the film. He refuses to confront the possibility of his own story as similarly predetermined, as does the rest of the Graham family, matching Heracles' fatal blindness.

The notion of language as a vessel for meaning and control likewise applies to Hårgan society, where it takes on an almost sacred character. The Hårgan runic alphabet, loosely derived from the historical Elder Futhark, is known as the *Affekt* language or "emotional sheet

[19] In an interview, Aster himself describes his characters as "cattle" (Film at Lincoln Center, 38:03). The uncritical use of a term steeped in histories of racialized objectification and colonial exploitation introduces metaphors of oppression that remain entirely uninterrogated in his work. Seemingly casual discourse must not reproduce oppressive conceptual frameworks.

music" and consists of sixteen runic symbols (*Midsommar* 1:24:44–58). As critic Jeva Lange explains, these runes form part of a larger linguistic system that serve a narrative purpose in how they suggest hidden meanings and foreshadow certain events. For instance, Peorð (ᛈ), a rune prominently displayed in the main house, is "associated with 'mystery' and 'hidden things' [and] hints at the shrouded and sinister intentions of the cult" (Lange). The Hårga also embroider their clothing with runes, including the dress given to Dani, which features Raido (ᚱ) and Dagaz (ᛞ) in their inverted form. ᚱ denotes "travel, journey, or reunion" and when inverted, it instead "suggests 'crisis' or 'death'" (Lange). ᛞ stands for "an awakening, dawn, or a new beginning," but indicates a general "hopelessness" when inverted (Lange). This means that the same linguistic unit can alternate between benign and more ominous meanings, depending on its contextual deployment. Although Lange asserts that, due to "their imbued meanings," runes are occasionally employed to predict future events, the Affekt language does not possess such clairvoyant qualities. The a priori presence of the runes, similar to the previously mentioned paintings, indicates instead a preordained narrative structure. The runes, in this context, reveal a fixed destiny rather than foretell an uncertain future.

Just as the Affekt language requires specialized knowledge to be accessible, so too do the film's cultural and spiritual references. Drawing on several elements of Norse mythology and Scandinavian folklore, Aster constructs a story that challenges linear temporality and Christian theology. Traditions, such as the Maypole dance or the Swedish folksongs, and sacrificial practices, such as the blood eagle or the Ättestupa, hint at the persistence of cosmologies that predate Christianity. The bear, traditionally associated with strength and courage, here becomes a key symbol to represent the idea of seasonal regeneration. Its hibernation metaphorically deconstructs linear temporality in presenting regeneration – death and rebirth – as a continuous process, making it emblematic for Hårgan, i.e., Pagan, alterity. The bear is inherently un-*Christian* – a notion substantiated by Aster's choice of the character sacrificed inside a bear carcass – and antithetical to Christian notions of salvation and absolution. Multiple layers of mythological and genre-specific signifiers allow for *Midsommar* to mediate on temporality and belief systems to present a world where human actions are predetermined to the point of absolute necessity. Such a world supersedes the notion of redemption and the promise of (Christian) salvation.

The films use sophisticated visual and narrative techniques to dismantle the illusion of free will, thereby making determinism a visceral reality. Creating such an environment requires spatial, visual, and narrative order. Determinism is thus an intentionally cultivated state that

needs to be progressively established by accumulating and reinforcing constraints throughout. To put it differently, "a nightmare [needs to be] fed before it is born" (Gabrielle). *Hereditary*'s thematic concern, first introduced in the prologue, lays the foundation for a nightmare that feeds on an artificial, claustrophobic world whose symbols, cult rituals, and bodily correspondences repeatedly point toward a singular, unavoidable outcome. *Midsommar* employs similar techniques but with greater explicit ritualization. Through visual motifs of cyclicality – from drawing parallels between human life and the seasons to depicting death as a necessary condition for renewal – the film deconstructs linear temporality and instead places its characters within a looped narrative structure. The prologue's mural exists as the foundation for a film that is both overtly mapped by its conspicuous foreshadowing and subtly veiled by its genre-blending cues and niche artistic references. These constructed worlds embed the rules and expectations into settings and spaces and, through that, shape the behavior of and predefine the outcome for each character. The characters in *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* are not brought down by an individual fatal flaw; fatality is inherent to the worlds they inhabit. By systematically exposing the limits of individual agency, Aster reveals how deeply constructed our sense of choice can be. Fed incrementally, the nightmare's birth can only be witnessed, not prevented.

3.2. Inherited, Imposed, Inevitable: Mental Illness as Structural Precondition

The freedom of choice, like its absence, is mediated by circumstance. Among the most potent mediators of such freedom is mental illness. As forensic psychiatrist Gerben Meynen notes, mental disorders are frequently theorized "as conditions that compromise free will and reduce moral responsibility" (429). In practice, the attribution of diminished agency and responsibility often enables stigmatizing judgment and fails to prompt inquiry into the circumstances that produce and perpetuate mental illness. In *Hereditary* and *Midsommar*, mental illness assumes multiple, often incompatible forms: it may be an inherited curse, a medical condition, a justification for violence, a marker of Otherness, a gateway to possession, or a reason for dismissal. Such stereotypical representations risk reifying the theorization Meynen outlines: that mental illness compromises agency. Once a character becomes their illness, as the cursed, the diagnosed, the possessed, or the dismissed, their suffering or violence requires no further context. Despite this shared pull toward reduction, there is a clear difference in how overtly the films 'diagnose' their protagonists. *Hereditary* states its clinical framework plainly and immediately counters it with a supernatural one, establishing a pronounced unresolved tension between the psychiatric and the occult. *Midsommar* leaves more subtle traces for the viewer to

piece together. It presents a more diffuse set of explanations, including Western pathology and cult ideology, without privileging either. In this chapter, I argue that, despite these divergent approaches, the films share a reliance on compromised perception to destabilize any final interpretation. Aside from inviting this interpretative instability, I argue, mental illness is a structural precondition that the narrative requires to advance.

Through medicalized language, *Hereditary* oversimplifies the causes and effects of mental illness and facilitates audience distancing. Early in the film, Annie highlights the impact mental illness had on her family at a support group meeting. She explains,

> "My mom [Ellen] was old, and she wasn't altogether there at the end. […] She had DID, which became extreme at the end, and dementia. And my father died when I was a baby. From starvation. Because he had psychotic depression and he starved himself […]. My older brother had schizophrenia and when he was sixteen, he hanged himself in my mother's bedroom and, of course, his suicide note blamed her, accusing her of putting people inside him. So, that was my *mom's* life." (Hereditary 20:25–21:15)

In grounding the narrative in a realistic discourse of mental illness, the film offers a secular explanation for its subsequent events. The title thus acquires a second interpretive dimension, that of heritable illness. Clinical literature locates DID in histories "of early, repeated, and severe […] abuse and/or neglect" (Raison and Andrea). *Hereditary* acknowledges this systemic understanding, largely by invoking that "family environment, or attachment style, could influence the onset of DID" (Raison and Andrea). Any genuine exploration thereof, however, the film soon abandons. In the aforementioned scene, Annie reveals that she sees herself as separate from her family's lineage. She does not consider this her life, only her mother's, because she perceives mental illness as something external to her identity, something she has escaped. She isolates it as an individual problem and insists on her distance, never acknowledging its systemic or intergenerational dimensions. In doing so, Annie comes to embody a larger societal impulse to other and contain mental illness. Ellen's diagnosis is not evidence of what happened to her, but of what she is: the Other, an exceptional case rather than a person with motives or history. Having Annie cite the 'extreme' deterioration of Ellen's mental health, the film implies that her DID is the primary reason for her involvement with the (oc)cult, substituting a single, individuated clinical cause for what may just as well be the result of ideological or social processes. This decontextualization of DID redirects attention away from systemic failures and onto individual challenges, a strategy characteristic of certain strands of folk horror. Ellen is left villainized and victimized by an illness that the film portrays as an inherent, self-contained defect.

Hereditary constructs mental illness as an inescapable inheritance that pathologizes female characters while granting male characters narrative complexity. DID is not directly inherited in the same ways psychotic depression or schizophrenia are. Still, the film leverages Ellen's condition to imply that her illness and, with it, the role of the monstrous mother are passed down to Annie irrespective of her disavowal. Annie's own psychological unraveling then appears as a necessary consequence of Ellen's illness. Since Annie's brother and Peter display similar behaviors based on having 'people put inside them,' one might reasonably infer that the film presents these traits as part of an inherited condition, i.e., schizophrenia, too. Peter, however, is presented to the audience as possessed, not schizophrenic. Put differently, possession in *Hereditary* is a literal supernatural event that exists alongside mental illness. The film's final images 'confirm' the supernatural as real, awarding Peter a more forgiving interpretation of his actions, given that he is fully perceived as a passive victim of a tangible demon. Its refusal to extend this supernatural explanation to Annie and Ellen, who are more readily diagnosed and condemned, shows how women's suffering is preemptively seized upon by medical discourses. By reserving the possibility of possession for Peter while confining Annie and Ellen to psychopathology, *Hereditary* demonstrates how gendered assumptions shape interpretation without ever fully endorsing either framework.

To dramatize mental illness, doubt in medical authority needs to be sown first. Annie's husband Steve, a psychiatrist, refuses to acknowledge supernatural explanations, which aligns him simultaneously with the psychiatric institution, as a system of knowledge and control, and the archetypal "Supernatural-Proof Father."[20] It also blinds him to the escalating danger and causes him to be incapable of providing effective help. In an email to a colleague he writes, "I hesitate to write, but I'm worried that Annie might be on the verge of (or in the middle of)" (1:53:23–26). The hesitation – to finish or send the message – exposes his own uncertainty regarding the seriousness of Annie's situation and his own professional or personal capacity to respond to it. In another scene, omitted from the final cut, Steve "has typed into his search engine 'Paranormal evidence, voice channeling,' but he pauses and then deletes this. He instead writes 'Symptomatology and management of grief hallucinations'" (Aster, *Hereditary* 85). Grief hallucinations themselves are not indicative of mental illness. Still, the search terms Steve uses demonstrate a tendency toward a medicalization and pathologization of affect. Steve,

[20] Although not a widely recognized cinematic trope, this archetypal figure is best described as the "dad [who] is always the last person to see and believe" the "supernatural events [or] other bizarre occurrences" that take place in a household ("Supernatural-Proof Father"). Paradoxically, his initial disbelief ultimately validates the supernatural, as its undeniable presence forces even the most skeptical figure to acknowledge it, which makes him the *supernatural proof* father.

despite his growing awareness of the limits of what he can offer, remains committed to a clinical framework. The ineffectiveness, or outright inapplicability, of this approach only proves that the medical perspective, however authoritative, is unable to offer meaningful footing.

Stigma and denial surrounding psychiatric diagnosis prevent Annie from seeking help and thereby accelerate her decline. Possession films typically feature the possessed as actively rejecting clinical intervention. *Hereditary* displaces this rejection onto Annie, so that the film's skepticism toward psychiatry is mediated through a caregiver's doubt rather than the resistance of the (supernaturally) afflicted body. Annie's dismissal of medical explanations and of evident danger parallels Heracles' fatal flaw, making denial a driving force in her trajectory. Where Steve stays anchored to a clinical perspective, Annie's denial draws on alternative or competing frameworks – in this case, her willingness to adopt supernatural explanations. The turn to the supernatural absolves her of the sustained clinical engagement and personal accountability that psychiatric treatment demands. Consequently, as Annie's unaddressed symptoms intensify and her support network falls apart, the promise of recovery is withdrawn. The film offers no way past the social mechanisms that block access to care (e.g., stigma, denial), so her deterioration meets no counterforce.

If Annie initially occupies the position of the caregiver who withholds or continues to be skeptical of intervention, her progressive decline gradually repositions her as the one most in need of it. In this reversal, the film refracts the predicament of the female possession victim, i.e., confinement without agency, through a realist lens. Annie is just as effectively immobilized – first, by her own denial and later by the absence of care she failed to seek – and denied meaningful interpretation of her own suffering. Where Regan in *The Exorcist* is subjected to invasive procedures that fail to explain her symptoms (A. Chambers 34), Annie is subjected to *no* meaningful intervention at all. The patriarchal authorities who claim to help, Steve and, by extension, the psychiatric establishment, are ineffective and ultimately complicit in her isolation. Annie is claimed and abandoned by the very systems that supposedly offer care. By the time her suffering is undeniable, the relational networks that might have responded meaningfully to it have already eroded. She is, like her possession-film predecessors, a figure whose suffering is spectacularly visible yet structurally 'unmanageable,' except she achieves this status without ever being possessed in the first place.

Hereditary's larger thematic preoccupation hinges on the tension between spectral and secular explanations. The film refuses to settle the question of whether the family's suffering stems from an inherited predisposition to mental illness or from what scholar Sarah Baker calls

the "participation in the occult that has haunted the family for generations" (77–8). In this context, the motif of the family curse and the scientific rendering of hereditary illness are mutually reinforcing, not mutually exclusive. Medicalized discourses tend to rationalize and contain suffering, as exemplified by Annie's expositional monologue. It provides diagnostic vocabulary and, at the same time, is mediated through her detached perspective and insistence on distance. The occult's inclination is to dehumanize suffering, leading to mental illness and its associated distress being viewed as gateways for possession. Either framework constructs the characters as passive subjects exposed to forces exceeding their immediate control and suggests that they are condemned by virtue of their lineage. The horror, then, lies not in confirming which of these explanations is true but in realizing that both are systems of control that (pre)determine how suffering is interpreted.

In *Midsommar*, mental illness is established through small, deliberate details, which together reveal how relational neglect and alienation, not inheritance or possession, drive the narrative. From the beginning, the film makes clear that mental illness is present and medically recognized. A brief shot shows a prescription bottle of Ativan, a medication commonly prescribed to treat anxiety disorders, in Dani's bathroom (*Midsommar* 06:37–06:38). When Dani expresses concern about her sister Terri's increasingly erratic behavior, Christian dismisses her worries. He claims Terri "does this every other day […] and only because you [Dani] let her," to which Dani responds, "I don't *let* her. She's bipolar." Christian reduces Terri's behavior to "another obvious ploy for attention, just like every other panic attack she's given you [Dani]" (*Midsommar* 05:03–29). Following Dani's second call to him to reach out for support, his friend Mark resentfully remarks that "she needs a therapist," to which Christian replies, matter-of-factly, "she has a therapist" (08:22–08:24). Since he is unable to relate to her, Christian neglects Dani's emotional needs and holds her at a distance to preserve his own comfort. This pattern of downplaying distress – avoiding emotional responsibility and offering only detached, perfunctory consolation – makes Christian representative of the same patriarchal modernity that folk horror implicitly endorses, recognizable in its failures yet still the default. Dani and Terri, on the other hand, are characterized as individuals whose mental health is already medicalized and socially stigmatized within their immediate relational circle.

Mental illness is the prerequisite and emotional entry point for the narrative, not part of a nuanced character study, which inadvertently reinforces stigmatizing tropes. *Midsommar* introduces Terri simply as 'the bipolar sister,' who is never developed as a character with motivations or circumstances unrelated to her illness. Her destructive, violent behavior is directly linked to her bipolar disorder (BD). Given that the film follows a logic of determinism,

it treats the murder of her parents and her suicide as inevitable plot requirements and uses her diagnosis as a retroactive justification for whatever dramatic trajectory the script already intends. For Zo Fitz, Dani's grief, caused by this traumatic incident, is similarly converted into "a plot device" so that her panic attacks are "more commonly understandable." Although panic attacks are generally associated with anxiety disorders, through this portrayal, the film implies that "those suffering from mental illness need a reason" for their suffering (Fitz). The narrative depends on Terri's BD to initiate conflict, using it as the reason to explain or justify her violence and legitimize Dani's display of symptoms. Hence, mental illness is a functional story element rather than a part of a fully realized person.

By juxtaposing Western rationalism with communal spirituality, *Midsommar* critiques the limitations of scientific objectivity in addressing emotional suffering. Dani, a psychology student, is presumably trained to approach emotional and psychological crises through clinical reasoning. This situates her within a Western intellectual tradition that, as Vanessa W. Simonds and Suzanne Christopher explain, prioritizes scientific objectivity, rationality, and individualism in approaching psychological processes (2189). Dani, despite being emotionally in "crisis mode" (*Midsommar* 05:32–34), attempts to understand her sister's mental state through such a rational, diagnostic lens. The affective restraint this requires ultimately nullifies her efforts. In contrast, the Hårga approach affect as a collective, embodied experience that is neither pathologized nor privatized. Dani gradually abandons her academic grounding and reliance on rational explanation and assimilates into the Hårga's communal belief system. When a group of Hårga women mirrors her expression of anguish, Dani's individual suffering is turned into a "shared affective experience," as scholar Benjamin A. Bigelow describes it (140). This validates Dani's emotions and allows her pain to be witnessed and shared, which provides the support that would have been inaccessible to her in her previous environment. Scientific or diagnostic reasoning, valuable within its own paradigm, is implied to not suffice in addressing the complexities of human affect. Through this implication, the film inverts the folk horror trope of the 'backward' Other. It uses the Hårga's practices and beliefs to suggest that modernized Western approaches to suffering and grief may themselves be 'backward' or even harmful. Although *Midsommar* does not provoke the same degree of doubt in medical authority as *Hereditary* does, it shows that collective, non-clinical modes of understanding can address dimensions of suffering that clinical reasoning overlooks. While the Hårga's approach produces apparent therapeutic effects, including shared witnessing and a reintegration of pain, those outcomes do not negate the ethical and practical failures of a murderous cult. The film

also warns, albeit implicitly, that such modes of understanding can be coopted by institutions with questionable intentions.

A central feature of folk horror and psychological horror is the unreliability of its narrators. Annie and Dani are unreliable in that their perception is compromised by actions and events of which they are not consciously aware or which they actively suppress or ignore. They struggle to differentiate between reality and illusion, each for their own reasons. Returning to Maguire's observations regarding the externalization of trauma in folk horror, supernatural phenomena are understood to bridge the gap between interior and exterior worlds (165). In *Hereditary*, the supernatural affiliates the cult with the Graham family and forces Annie's interior world, her fears, anxieties, and unresolved trauma, to spill over into the exterior world. This is most unambiguously presented through Annie's miniatures and assumes a more oblique dimension in how Annie's advancing decline is accompanied by intensifying auditory and visual hallucinations that primarily mimic her late mother, Ellen or her deceased daughter, Charlie. Viewers can no longer reliably discern whether these phenomena have an actual supernatural cause or result from Annie's mental disintegration. *Midsommar* achieves a similar effect without relying on overtly supernatural components. Dani's interior world, saturated with persistent grief, likewise converges with the exterior world through hallucinations. Her deceased family appears to materialize in the physical environment around her. Like *Hereditary, Midsommar* does not conceal that its protagonist is suffering from mental illness. Still, neither Dani nor Annie nor the audience can draw a definite boundary between what is real and what is imagined. Each film employs unreliability to ensure that no singular explanation for suffering is confirmed.

Midsommar's representation of the Hårga as hospitable hosts who are simultaneously dedicated to a covert white-supremacist ideology introduces an alternative form of narrative unreliability. This unreliability is rooted not necessarily in the cult's deception but in the false promise of belonging itself. For Ben Furstenberg and Johanna Isaacson, the Hårga's "uniformly Aryan appearance" signals an investment in "racial purity" that does not require a clear announcement of "a policy of eugenic breeding." The film further communicates this ideology through, for example, a banner that reads "[s]toppa massinvandringen till Hälsingland" (stop the mass immigration to Hälsingland) or the cult's treatment of nonwhite individuals, whose bodies are discarded and, unlike white bodies, excluded from ritual purposes (*Midsommar* 0:25:10–19). The social model offering solace to Dani is ethically compromised insofar as it validates the experiences of those who fit the Hårga's idealized profile and systematically enables the victimization and erasure of others. Just as medical discourse dictates whose

suffering is prematurely claimed, the Hårga's ideology determines whose suffering is recognized as meaningful. The supposed truth the commune offers is partial and partisan. Even if Dani, as a white woman, is racially eligible for the validation she seeks, eligibility is not the same as genuine inclusion. Dani's isolation makes her dependent on the Hårga and blinds her to this distinction. Put differently, the Hårga's convincing performance of empathy and inclusivity succeeds because Dani's psychological vulnerability compromises her capacity to recognize it as such. Her desperate need for validation and her mental vulnerability are exploited as weaknesses that make her susceptible to their promise of belonging and unable to fully reckon with what that integration requires, which is precisely what allows the narrative to progress. The protagonist and, by extension, the audience are seduced by a façade that the film itself refuses to fully expose, implicating both in the uncomfortable recognition that belonging depends on a willingness to overlook the violence it entails.

The films deny the clarity of vision required for any definitive judgement and when perception is compromised, so too is the basis for allocating culpability. Though *Midsommar* more readily presents the Hårga as a coercive, antagonistic force, it still refuses to offer a straightforward indictment. The Hårga may be violent and manipulative yet still intelligible within their own cultural context. The film, therefore, withholds any authoritative reading of the Hårga's intentions and of how Dani's integration into the cult is to be understood. This elusiveness shifts the interpretative burden of assessing Dani's fate onto the viewer. In contrast, *Hereditary* sets up a binary between the supernatural and psychopathology and tension arises mainly because neither perspective fully subsumes the other. Each supplies plausible evidence, but not without retaining significant blind spots. Hence, no single reading can fully account for all the evidence presented and no perspective is granted final, unquestionable dominance. Dispersing explanatory authority in this way forces viewers to confront the limits and consequences of any interpretive commitment. That is to say, audiences cannot passively receive meaning; they must actively commit to an interpretation, knowing that such commitment is necessarily imperfect.

Regardless of the films' multitude of possible readings, mental illness determines each protagonist's vulnerability and monstrosity. Unlike many of the examples listed in chapter 2.1, where horror often directly emerges from a character's psychopathology, these films locate its source in external forces, like the (oc)cult or ritualistic violence. This marks a departure from earlier genre conventions that grants the characters a complexity earlier horror denied its mentally ill protagonists. Simon Bacon shows this departure to be misleading, as the characters' psychological turmoil "ultimately […] drive[s] and exacerbate[s] the communities' ritualistic

or supernatural powers" (219). The cult's plan in *Hereditary* is contingent on Ellen's and Annie's mental deterioration, and the Hårga in *Midsommar* depend on Dani's feeling of isolation and grief for their rituals to bear fruit. If the implication is that psychological suffering does not coexist with these forces but actively enables them, the films suggest that mental illness is no longer the monster itself, only what the monster requires to thrive. Such an implication reinscribes problematic associations between mental illness and moral or spiritual weakness, insinuating that it is a prerequisite for corruption or possession. The films thereby participate in a longer tradition of linking mental illness or distress to inherent monstrosity, albeit with more obscurity than most of their predecessors.

In *Hereditary* and *Midsommar,* mental illness takes on the role of an ever-present undercurrent that enables rather than constitutes the primary horror. The films offer explanatory frameworks, i.e., clinical, supernatural, and ideological, that allow for competing approaches to how psychological vulnerability or psychopathology are narrativized. *Hereditary* uses clinical language to flatten mental illness into a self-contained defect and to pathologize its female characters, shifting the focus from structural causes toward individual dysfunction. The clinical viewpoint, while maintaining some authority throughout the film, delivers no practical solutions. A supernatural explanation positions mental illness alongside literal possession and, much like the clinical one, dehumanizes the characters by stripping them of interiority. *Midsommar,* too, shies away from complex characterizations of mental illness and instead uses it as a narrative engine. Diagnostic language appears early in the film and provides the necessary vocabulary to pathologize characters and to retroactively justify their violence. Unlike *Hereditary*, where such language is spoken and contested, *Midsommar* treats the medical framework as a given that demands no further investigation. Still, neither film allows for a stable interpretive vantage point, which leaves no single explanation, and no institution, to be held responsible. Both films weaponize their characters' unreliability to further prevent any definitive account of suffering or simple verdict. This instability follows from the determinism outlined in chapter 3.1. With the characters inhabiting worlds structured around inevitability, their struggles cannot be resolved, only interpreted. The protagonists' mental illnesses, on the other hand, are structurally necessary for the plot, which means that Annie, Ellen, and Dani must be mentally ill for the respective plans to succeed. Mental illness is thus a condition of the inevitable.

3.3. The Curse of the M/Other

In *Hereditary* and *Midsommar*, psychopathology cannot fully account for the specific gendered processes by which women are made 'mad' on screen. In my analysis of *Hereditary*, I treat Baker's observation that the film exhibits the "continued trope of the pathological mother [and] preoccupation with 'bad' and conflicted motherhood" (81) as a starting point for examining how it pathologizes female grief and rage. From there, I examine the matrilineal inheritance of the Mother Wound, particularly focusing on how gendered expectation, rejection, and the impossible demand to perform femininity 'correctly' are transmitted across generations. This exposes the sheer unlivability of patriarchal motherhood, which condemns a woman for resisting it and for failing to feel the fulfillment she is supposed to derive from it, ensuring that no performance of the role is ever adequate. Though *Midsommar* initially appears to lack this matrilineal structure, the Mother Wound, as a matter of cultural atmosphere, does take shape as a communal inheritance. As a result, the Hårga's supposed matriarchy offers no real alternative to patriarchal modernity since it reproduces rather than replaces the hierarchies that value women for their reproductive capacities and their (un)willing compliance. Attending to what these movies do to, for, and through the women at their centers, I demonstrate that female madness persists as a label deployed to preserve patriarchal authority and that, in the end, neither film mounts a genuine feminist challenge.

Given its thematic preoccupation with family, *Hereditary* interrogates the presumed stability of the nuclear family and lays bare the unequal distribution of care that undergirds it. As Baker argues, the film poses "a challenge to the idea of nuclear families as resilient and able to withstand pressure" and illustrates instead "how forces outside human control can devastate them" (79). A seemingly mundane exchange between Annie and Charlie forces into view how internal family dynamics, no less than external forces, underlie this distress. To comfort Charlie following her grandmother's death, Annie tells her,

> ANNIE: You know you were her [Ellen's] favorite, right? Even when you were a little baby, she wouldn't let me feed you because she needed to feed you.
> CHARLIE: She wanted me to be a boy.
> ANNIE: You know, I was a tomboy when I was growing up. I hated dresses and dolls and pink.
> CHARLIE: Who's going to take care of me?
> ANNIE: Um, excuse me, you don't think I'm not going to take care of you?
> CHARLIE: But when you die?
> ANNIE: Well, then Dad will take care of you. Or Peter. (*Hereditary* 08:45–09:35)

Charlie's question – a definitive *when* instead of a hypothetical *if* – "presupposes that Annie will die before Charlie is a grown woman who can care for herself" (Puhr 56). Equally

significant as this expectation of a premature death is the implicit assumption about who can provide care. Charlie does not consider her father or her brother as possible caregivers. In her mind, that role is solely occupied by her mother and, by extension, her grandmother. For Charlie this is, of course, a fundamental question of security. However, it also indicts the family's failure to distribute care across multiple members. Confronted with her centrality in this structure – and yet offended at the suggestion she would occupy any other position within it – Annie responds defensively. Her rejoinder employs doubled negation that linguistically enacts the ambivalence it seeks to deny. It reveals what the film elsewhere confirms, namely that Annie performs care as an obligation, not an inclination. In this one exchange, *Hereditary* raises an issue pertinent to a feminist critique of the film: the nuclear family concentrates the labor of care onto the mother, then makes her resentment unspeakable, even to herself.

In *Hereditary*, the refusal of normative femininity is a transgression with fatal consequences that follows its female characters across generations. Charlie's brief, matter-of-fact statement – "She wanted me to be a boy" (*Hereditary* 08:58–09:01) – shows how deeply she has internalized her grandmother's rejection. She understands herself as a body that failed to meet expectations before she was old enough to articulate why. Annie's tomboyish behavior in her childhood characterizes her as a girl who failed to perform patriarchal femininity correctly, which later resurfaces in her uneasy relationship with motherhood and domesticity. If there is a right way to "do girl," to use Ussher's phrase ("Diagnosing Difficult Women" 65), Annie and Charlie, in their different ways, fail to perform it. Both mother and daughter are placed, from childhood, at odds with the very gender roles they are nonetheless expected to perform as adults. That these gendered expectations persist beyond the film's fiction becomes evident in film scholar Cætlin Benson-Allott's characterization of Charlie as "well on her way to becoming a difficult woman herself" (72). Charlie, not simply a child struggling with isolation or difference, is already pathologized as 'difficult.' The critical impulse to label such figures instead of interrogating them reflects a culture that punishes women for failing to be agreeable or pliable. Whereas Annie's punishment is deferred and accumulates across decades until it finally culminates in involuntary suicide, Charlie's is more immediate and absolute. She dies not for what she does or fails to do, but for what she is. In a narrative that requires a male host for its demon, a female body is inherently inadequate and disposable, which suggests that being female is in and of itself a kind of failure. The refusal to perform patriarchal femininity – or, for Charlie, the impossibility of being read as anything other than a body deemed insufficient from the start – shapes the characters' lives and deaths as well as the very language used to describe them.

The family offers no escape from gendered constraints in either film. When Dani loses her traditional nuclear family, it gives way to an unconventional substitute. Pelle presents the Hårga as a new form of belonging and as the family Dani deserves:

> My birthparents both died when I was a little boy. […] Yet my difference is: I didn't get a chance to feel lost. Because I had a family here, where everyone embraced me and swept me up and I was raised by a community that doesn't bicker over what is theirs and what is not theirs. That's what you were given. But I have always felt held. By a family, a real family. Which everyone deserves. And you deserve. (*Midsommar* 1:11:47–12:50)

The Hårga's embrace, however, is not as unconditional as Pelle suggests. They cultivate the appearance of a matriarchy, with Siv as their public-facing spokeswoman and implied leader. Their clothing leans androgynous – to honor Ymir, the first being to emerge in the Norse creation myth (McCoy), and nature – seemingly dissolving the binary logic that separates feminine from masculine (*Midsommar* 0:37:50–38:00). Their "radical empathy," in practice, "occurs only within the family" and, despite its inclusive approach, "keeps the whiteness and heteronormativity intact" (A. Braun 59–60). The Hårga's social order is structured around tightly laid out gender roles and binaries wherein women perform the "'traditional' female roles of childbearing and kitchen work" (A. Braun 61). In their rituals, roles are assigned by gender, which leaves "no space for queer imagination, particularly around issues of family" (A. Braun 61). The community continues to be "bound to continuity, (hetero-)futurity, and security" in ways that resemble the nuclear family it claims to replace (A. Braun 60). Matriarchy, in this case, denotes little more than the presence of a female figurehead. What the Hårga present as matriarchal is defined through a patriarchal imagination, one that can only conceive of female authority as monstrous or mad, and of women in power only within a death cult. Dani's absorption into the community offers no real escape from those gendered constraints.

The Hårga's gendered hierarchy mandates that a woman's value be determined by her utility to the community, namely her compliance with communal reproductive goals and her willingness to endure suffering. In the community, women are still tasked with producing offspring, but their reproductive capacity is not theirs to control. Maja is sixteen when she pursues Christian for the 'mating' ritual intended to induce pregnancy. She does so shortly after having received her "byxmyndig," or, as Pelle translates, her "pants license," which grants Hårga girls permission to have sex at fifteen (Aster, *Midsommar* 71).[21] The earlier reproductive

[21] To present her as a minor and to locate the age of sexual consent within adolescence is a decision Aster could have easily avoided without any narrative consequences. Such an omission would have spared the film a lingering discomfort that feels more exploitative and predatory than provocative.

availability can be claimed, it seems, the more fully the system extracts what it requires. Male partners are selected by the elders to keep the "bloodlines […] well preserved" (*Midsommar* 1:23:35–41), which, leaving aside its troubling eugenic undertones, is an arrangement that reduces women's status to their biological 'function.' They are essential to the community's survival yet granted no agency over the terms of that contribution. Which sexual encounters are sanctioned and which are punished depends entirely on their alignment with communal goals. The pursuit of an approved 'mate,' like Maja's pursuit – and subsequent ritualized rape – of Christian, is rewarded. Inga's (Julia Ragnarsson) implied sexual encounter with Mark, of whom the elders did not approve, earns her no such reward. In fact, her appearance during the final ritual of the film recalls the vandalized statue of the Virgin Mary in *The Exorcist* and, as such, carries similar connotations of punishment and desecration (*Midsommar* 2:10:25–33). This bifurcated outcome illustrates the MWD, wherein women are reduced to binary states of absolute purity or total corruption. The same evaluative framework transfers to other communal rituals, such as the maypole dance, where a similar pre-selection is applied. Only young women, those of visible fertility, may participate, and victory requires enduring pain longer than others. Her fertility and her capacity to suffer allow Dani to become May Queen and likewise situate her in the Madonna archetype, where she is valued for her purity and pain, not her agency or desire. This is one instance of a larger pattern in contemporary horror that, as Jackson argues,

> maintain[s] the overt victimization of women but erase[s] any reference to the deeply entrenched cultural mythology from which the horror associated with femininity and the female body springs. Rather than bringing awareness to the origins of gendered violence in our culture, such a move naturalizes the figure of woman as victim and simultaneously celebrates her destructive power. (*Gender and the Nuclear Family* 24)

Jackson's critique applies directly to *Midsommar*. The film never interrogates why and how the Hårga's reproductive logic or demand for (female) submission are culturally specific structures with a history. The film's ending, shot and scored to achieve a convincing cathartic release, obscures the fact that Dani's accession to the May Queen is entirely contingent upon her subordination. The destructive power granted to Dani is a reward for her compliance.

Annie's grief over the loss of her family members is regulated through the same gendered expectations that, as my conceptualization of female madness posits, construct women's emotions as inappropriate. In *Hereditary*, Steve's stoicism and denial go unquestioned, whereas Annie's reaction to the loss of their daughter is scrutinized and pathologized. When she builds a miniature of the accident scene that took Charlie's life, Steve does not question why she made it or what it means to her. He instead sees her grief as

unreasonable and, more damningly, as cruelty directed toward Peter, eventually telling her, "You are sick, Annie" (*Hereditary* 1:46:26–28). Grief is not the only emotion Annie is denied. Her rage – at her overbearing mother, at her husband, at the situation she did not create but is blamed for – has no legitimate outlet either. When it erupts, like in the infamous dinner scene, it becomes further evidence of her instability (*Hereditary* 57:53–59:16). Approaching the situation as a psychiatrist, not a partner, Steve aims to retain a distinction between what warrants grief or rage and what, in his view, Annie is choosing to dwell on. His decision about what qualifies as proper expression exemplifies the double standard traced in chapter 2.2: a man's emotional reaction, even when it emerges late and only after prolonged denial, is regarded as situationally warranted while a woman's is read as evidence of her nature. Annie's grief and rage, reasonable responses to catastrophic loss, are portrayed as a deviation from the normative affect that Steve's authority defines.

Dani's grief, like Annie's, situates her within the framework of excessive female emotion. Where Christian's detachment passes as restraint, Dani's emotionality is treated as irrational and burdensome – mainly for Christian. Early in the film, Dani confides to a friend that she fears that she is "scaring him off" or has "too much baggage," and even apologizes for needing support she should not have to ask for to begin with (*Midsommar* 06:52–07:06). Underlying these apologies is a distinct sense of guilt that makes Dani feel responsible for her own grief and for making that loss palatable to others. This guilt further convinces her that her survival is an imposition. What Dani never allows herself is rage, at least not until the film's final act. For most of the narrative, her anger at Christian's emotional unavailability, at his plan to leave her before this tragedy 'forced' him to stay, is suppressed beneath the performance of the 'good girlfriend.' While *Midsommar* makes the audience aware of this dynamic, showing how Christian's investment in the relationship is shallow and how he is inconvenienced by all of this, the film permits Dani's grief or anger only so long as they are manageable. For both Dani and Annie, their grief is evidence of their unfitness, either for motherhood, for partnership, or for autonomous subjectivity. Neither woman is allowed to be angry and rational at the same time, because to be angry is to be mad, and to be mad is to be unreliable. The men beside them are afforded the presumption of rationality that allows for their emotional behavior to go unquestioned or, at least, unchallenged. That is to say, the men who fail these women are never asked to account for themselves.

Annie embodies the cultural inheritance of patriarchal motherhood, and, therefore, the scrutiny she faces for her grief is inseparable from her role as a mother. Patriarchal motherhood and intense mothering demand of a woman selflessness and absolute devotion to her children.

Any deviation from this ideal of motherhood, including visible, uncontained grief, is interpreted as failure (cf. O'Reilly, Harrington). From this failure, guilt follows as its necessary consequence. Annie herself internalizes this expectation, insisting that she is "the only one who can fix this" and that "it needs to be [her], it's [her] fault" (*Hereditary* 1:28:30–33, 1:44:25–30). "Sometimes I feel like it's all ruined, and then I realize that I am to blame," Annie states, before correcting herself: "Not that I'm to blame, that I am blamed" (*Hereditary* 22:30–48). When Peter all but accuses her of being responsible for Charlie's death, because it was Annie who forced her to go to the party (*Hereditary* 59:41–55), he merely voices what Annie already knows, namely that she is blamed, whether or not she is to blame. Annie is subjected to a culturally imposed guilt for having 'failed' to properly nurture and protect her children (Kutlu 160). This guilt insists that she should have acted differently to avert what had already come to pass – a burden never placed on Steve with the same intensity. Annie's 'failure' is in her actions and in her feelings. Her inability to feel complete fulfillment and composure in her maternal role,[22] evidenced by her frustration and escape into her creative ambitions, marks her as deficient before any supernatural events or deaths even occur. These feelings, as Baker notes, "distinguish her from the idealised images of mothers as nurturing domestic angels," thereby granting her a "complexity" that the patriarchal order cannot accommodate and, therefore, can only interpret as madness (87). Katherine Fusco goes as far as to argue that *Hereditary* "belongs to a long tradition of stories that see something sinister or unnatural about artistic mothers." She contends that Annie's "relentless and steely pursuit of her work […] hurts her family." The baseline of Fusco's argument is the same as mine: the film portrays Annie's investment in something other than motherhood as inherently damaging to her family. Whereas Fusco emphasizes the *artistic mother* as a figure of suspicion, I argue that the film would pathologize Annie regardless of what she pursues, the sole exception being motherhood. What *Hereditary* makes visible, then, is the external pressure of patriarchal motherhood, its transformation into self-judgement or -blame, and the consequent pathologization of a woman who fails to meet its impossible standards.

The maternal is inextricably bound to the monstrous, either through a mother's inability or refusal to perform patriarchal motherhood – the "always-already monstrous" that Harrington sees in motherhood (17) – or because femininity, in its capacity to give life, among others, constitutes a threat to a male-centered society. Annie's portrayal mobilizes both of those maternal archetypes. Through that mobilization, the film produces what Baker identifies as an

[22] For Quigley, this amounts to an "at times extreme rejection of the nurturing maternal role" (75).

"enormous ambivalence" in its depiction of mothers, "mixing the idea of madness, and evil as pathological and dangerous" (86). Annie's sleepwalking confession to Joan recounts the film's clearest instance of this ambivalence:

> I sleepwalk. I mean, I haven't done it in years, but a couple years ago, I woke up and I was standing next to Peter and Charlie's bed, […] and they were completely covered in paint thinner. And so was I, from head to toe. And I was standing there, with a box of matches and an empty can of paint thinner. […] I woke myself up by striking the match, which also woke up Peter, and he started to scream. And I immediately put the match out. Like, immediately. I mean, I was just as shocked as he was. And it was impossible to convince them that it was just sleepwalking, which of course it was, but […] Peter always held it against me. (*Hereditary* 52:58–54:20)

By neither confirming nor denying her account, *Hereditary* refuses the comfort of externalizing Annie as a knowable monster. For *Hereditary*, a mother who nearly immolates her children while asleep is no less terrifying than one who would do so awake. The horror of the maternal, then, lies in the proximity between monstrosity and innocence rather than Otherness. This is a dynamic consistent with Creed's understanding of abjection, wherein fear emerges not from something foreign but from the collapse of boundaries, i.e., from the interplay of nurture and destruction. Peter is visibly distressed by Annie's sleepwalking because he cannot reliably distinguish safety from danger. To him, they originate from the same source. In a sequence later revealed to be a nightmare, Annie sleepwalks again and, after being woken up by him, tells Peter,

> I never wanted to be your mother. […] I was scared. I didn't feel like a mother, but she pressured me. […] It wasn't my fault; I tried to stop it. I tried to have a miscarriage. […] I did everything they told me not to do but it didn't work. […] I did not [try to kill you], I love you. […] I was trying to save you (*Hereditary* 1:11:46–12:38).

Mirroring the abject threat of the maternal itself, Annie approximates what Creed terms the oral-sadistic mother, though her threat lies less in the devouring than in the unresolved ambivalence of a mother who gives life and threatens to take it back. This unassimilable power, to give life and to withhold it, is what patriarchy must pathologize. Annie becomes monstrous in her resistance to the imposition of motherhood and her claim to bodily self-determination. Her attempted abortion is an act of self-preservation and, to her, a preemptive rescue, yet the film presents it as a violent transgression in need of confession. Throughout this scene, Annie repeatedly brings her hands to her mouth, as if to stop herself from uttering this unspeakable truth, showing how thoroughly she has internalized this judgement. What makes Annie so horrifying is that she is neither fully innocent nor fully monstrous. She is the product of a structure that demands women perform patriarchal motherhood and then punishes them for resenting that demand.

Understanding Ellen requires attending to two distinct registers of the monstrous-feminine. Ellen, to Paula Quigley, is the "most explicit incarnation [of the] archaic mother," particularly in how she is "looming over Annie as she nurses Charlie, offering her own bare breast" (74). Unlike Annie, Ellen's horror lies in the absence of distinction, i.e., the collapse of generational and subjective boundaries like self and m/Other as well as mother and child. By inserting herself in the nursing dyad, Ellen replaces Annie as the mother, making the latter expandable while also returning her to the position of a child to an overbearing mother. In her relentless destruction of two generations – Annie and her brother; Charlie and Peter – it becomes apparent that for Ellen, giving and taking are the same gesture, indistinguishable from one another. Indeed, the archaic mother, as Creed theorizes her, does not choose between creation and destruction, she simply is the space where both occur (27). Where the archaic mother collapses boundaries into indistinction, the dyadic mother claims her child so completely that no room for separation is left (Creed 119). Ellen embodies both. Though Quigley does not pursue this differentiation, the looming she describes belongs as much to the dyadic mother as to the archaic. Ellen is suffocating and controlling, even death does not loosen her hold. Everything, including the sacrifices and the summoning, depends on the family's inability to escape what she set in motion. To be at once the archaic and the dyadic mother is to make separation impossible.

Ellen's death initiates the horror rather than contains it, which suggests that matrilineal inheritance in *Hereditary* is not a chain that can be broken by the death of one link. If Ellen's death marked the end of her influence and if Annie were a grieving mother whose response to loss were not pathologized, the film would lose its central source of ambivalent horror. That is to say, *Hereditary* cannot afford for Ellen's madness to be hers alone; it must belong to Annie as well. The film never asks what shaped Ellen, because to do so would be to locate the Mother Wound in something other than women themselves, i.e., a structure or a history. Instead, Ellen is the origin-point, the one who seems to have conjured the horror out of herself. Annie, then, is simultaneously a victim of Ellen's schemes and complicit in transmitting them, albeit not through deliberate action and merely by inhabiting the role Ellen established for her. In doing so, she carries the Mother Wound forward. What passes from Ellen to Annie is not a curse in the supernatural sense, even if the film externalizes it as one, nor is it the inheritance of a genuine mental illness. What Annie inherits is a position. In fact, it is the only position the family structure makes available to a mother, and the one the film needs her to occupy for its horror to function.

The ultimate sacrifice Annie makes is extracted from her to serve a patriarchal order. The iconography of Paimon presents him with three severed heads, which is an image that the film fulfills by collecting the heads of three generations of women from the Graham family. When Annie saws off her own head, she provides the third female decapitation, following Ellen and Charlie, required to summon Paimon. The women's bodies, in being sacrificed, are treated as material that can be used up. Peter's body, a male body, is worthy of preservation because it can only act as Paimon's new host when it is intact. Anne Williams captures this asymmetry as "patriarchy's secret founding 'truth,'" which renders women "mortal, expendable matter/mater" (23). The value of female bodies lies in being spent. Male bodies, on the other hand, are preserved and, with them, the dignity of wholeness that patriarchy reserves for the male subject. Peter, of course, does not escape consumption altogether. However, patriarchal systems that (inevitably) consume men do so in a way that retains for them that dignity, at least to an extent. French feminist Hélène Cixous writes, "[I]f masculinity is culturally ordered by the castration complex, it might be said that the backlash […] on women of this castration anxiety is its displacement as decapitation, execution, of woman, as loss of her head" (43). The threat of castration, even as it signifies discipline or loss, nevertheless preserves a man's status as a subject. Conversely, women, as 'partially formed subjects' (cf. Creed), "have no choice other than to be decapitated, and in any case the moral is that if they don't actually lose their heads by the sword, *they only keep them on condition that they lose them* – lose them, that is, to complete silence" (Cixous 42–3). Decapitation, in Cixous' terms, is the literal enactment of a woman's excision from subjectivity. By the time Annie loses her head, she has already undergone what Quigley sees as the "transformation into the 'madwoman in the attic,' whose blank stare reveals the loss of subjectivity this [transformation] entails" (74). Annie, like Ellen and Charlie before her, loses her head not as the cause but as the confirmation of her lost selfhood and any capacity to speak. Her decapitation merely literalizes a condition that preceded it. A patriarchal order that can only sustain itself on the expendability of female bodies and subjectivities demands Annie's sacrifice, regardless of its ritualistic purpose in the film.

This expandability goes hand in hand with the voyeuristic consumption of women's deaths. Even though Steve burns to death onscreen, the shock value lies in Annie witnessing his death. The camera closes in on her face, not his burning body, as it contorts in anguish and then abruptly turns expressionless (*Hereditary* 1:46:44–47). The former is what designates her as mad, the latter is what truly makes her monstrous. His death, though undeniably horrific, is depicted considerably less graphic than Annie's or Charlie's, which aligns with Clover's observation on the gendered treatment of onscreen deaths. Annie's decapitation is prolonged

and explicit: the camera lingers on her sawing through her own neck with a piano wire, holding the shot for an uncomfortably long time (*Hereditary* 1:55:41–56:11). Charlie's decapitation, despite being sudden, is equally graphic, with her head lying at the side of the road, overrun with ants, in a shot that is meant to land as a jump scare (*Hereditary* 37:35–43). What distinguishes these deaths, apart from their graphic nature, is the camera's insistence on making them visible and the narrative's dependence on them for its most memorable shocks.

Midsommar subverts this dynamic, albeit only partially. Apart from Dan and Ylva (at the Ättestupa) and Christian, all deaths in the film happen offscreen. The dead bodies and their mutilations, however, are shown with equal graphic intensity for women and men. Connie (Ellora Torchia), the only woman to be killed, is drowned; Josh is bludgeoned from behind and dismembered, with his body parts later used for soil; Mark is skinned, his face used for a jester costume;[23] Simon (Archie Madekwe) is tortured and killed by means of the blood eagle ritual, with his lungs pulled out through his back and displayed as wings; Dani chooses Christian as the final sacrifice and, after being raped, he is paralyzed by drugs, stuffed into a bear carcass, and burned alive. Connie and the other outsiders – along with Ingemar (Hampus Hallberg) and Ulf (Henrik Norlén), who sacrifice themselves willingly – ultimately burn together in the sacrificial tent. None of these men receives the quick death Clover identifies as typical for male victims. Crucially, the men who are killed and whose bodies are regarded as expandable material are those who fail to perform white hegemonic masculinity: Josh and Simon are POC, thus excluded from whiteness entirely; Mark is perceived as sexually inept and foolish; Christian is indecisive and passive, and the ritualized rape he is forced to endure, which, in its presentation onscreen, "bears a sense of humiliation and mockery" (Totaro), is read as confirmation of his emasculation.[24] The Hårga only retain the dignity of choice and wholeness for those men who embody this ideal of masculinity. Those who fall short are reduced to matter and, like the female bodies in *Hereditary,* consumed and discarded.

That Dani survives the Hårga is less revealing than how she survives them. The invitation to classify her as a Final Girl is immediate, as she is, after all, the sole surviving outsider. In Clover's formulation, the Final Girl distinguishes herself through active resourcefulness and a capacity for violence primarily enacted by her own hand through which she 'earns' her survival (35, 39–40). Dani exhibits none of these traits. Her gender-neutral name

[23] In an instance of foreshadowing, some Hårga children are seen playing 'skin the fool' just before Mark makes his fatal mistake of urinating on the ancestral tree.
[24] His death may also be read as punishment for his failure to perform patriarchal, i.e., protective, masculinity. Men who are unable to 'fulfill' the role of protector are themselves assigned a feminized state of vulnerability.

offers a superficial point of convergence, though one lacking any functional equivalence. She does not outsmart her antagonist(s) or arm herself and while her final act – naming Christian as the final sacrifice – arguably is one of violence, she does not perform it physically or entirely of her own volition. Just as Dani diverges from Clover's original Final Girl, she also does not fully align with its contemporary iteration. If Katarzyna Paszkiewicz and Stacy Rusnak suggest that this iteration is frequently recuperated into neoliberal narratives of empowerment and 'Girl Power' discourses, Cassidy Crane's characterization of Dani as a *Good for Her Girl* affirms such a reading (2; 37). Crane places Dani among those female (horror) protagonists who withstand sustained trauma and at last exact revenge on men and, at the same time, retain the audience's sympathy (37). Claire C. Holland, on the other hand, considers the Good for Her Girl to be "an underdog […] for most of the movie," who "[t]riumphs […] by asserting agency over her own body." Dani's character arc does not conform to either of these frameworks. Her revenge cannot be considered an act of empowerment, nor is the film's conclusion, in any meaningful sense, 'good for her.' She does not gain agency, neither over her body nor over her mind. Her survival is granted only if she embodies the passive and self-sacrificing figure the Madonna archetype entails: she performs unreciprocated emotional labor in a relationship characterized by "an uneven co-dependency" (Totero), and she has a capacity for nurturing and suffering – and even blaming herself – without demand for reciprocity. The Hårga may appear to validate what patriarchy does not, including women in positions of authority and a community that encourages emotions to be experienced and expressed openly and collectively, but they still enforce a system predicated on the subjugation of female bodies to ensure communal and, finally, patriarchal continuity. Dani gains power only by exchanging one structure of subordination for another, and her supposed empowerment is contingent on her willingness to perform whatever role authority demands. Her rage, at Christian and, more expansively, the suburban modernity she holds accountable for her family's destruction, has been interpreted by some as an act of productive rebellion and healing (Schultz 36, Álvarez-Vázquez 104). Indeed, Dani is more easily read as mad for keeping up with Christian and 'iconic' for letting him burn. Nonetheless, her smile in the final frame signals quite the opposite of liberation. "To be oppressed," Sarah Ahmed writes, "requires that you show signs of happiness, signs of being or having been adjusted" (582). Rage, in this framework, is the affect that cannot be shown as it would make Dani appear threatening, and the film needs her to be sympathetic. Unmanaged rage, the kind that is not channeled or sanctioned, might be genuinely liberating as it presents a refusal of the terms that demand women to perform compliance, even in their anger. Dani is never offered that. The Hårga do not invite her rage so much as they

redirect it toward Christian, a single acceptable target. Considered within the context of her arc and the film's logic of determinism, then, Dani's survival, granted on the condition that her anger serves the community's end rather than her own, amounts to little more than the illusion of empowerment.

The concept of feminist horror remains largely an ideal that the genre struggles to realize. This struggle, Creed suggests, is not without victories. She acknowledges significant changes in the genre, stating that "in feminist horror, the monstrous-feminine draws on her abjectification as a source of strength" (xvi). This strength becomes "a weapon with which to undermine the masculine symbolic order and its phallocentric mores," thereby enabling a female character to speak "in her own voice and [shape] her own destiny" (Creed xvi). Ellen, as the leader of the cult and the de facto head of the Graham family, exercises considerable agency in arranging for the family's destruction, yet her power serves a male entity whose ascension is built on the ritual sacrifice of women. Annie, too, appears to have more authority within the nuclear family than Steve. Regardless, she stays incapable of substantively shaping her own destiny. The structural constraints imposed upon her ensure as much. *Hereditary*, to A. Braun, "offers no real feminist challenge or analysis to patriarchal violence" (53), an assessment with which this analysis concurs. Violence against women and the subordination of female subjectivity are necessary tools through which the narrative sustains itself without ever becoming problems the film interrogates. This failing is hardly unique to *Hereditary*. Colin Doerffler and Hannah Strong extend this critique to contemporary horror more broadly, noting its superficial engagement with feminist themes and the tendency to gesture toward feminist issues without truly interrogating the systems of power that perpetuate them. They argue that "when it comes to working through the modern hell of womanhood, […] hollow gestures at very real misogyny aren't sharp enough to cut" (Doerffler and Strong). Such representational habits apply equally to figures outside the monstrous-feminine. Dani, for all her endurance, is rewarded insofar as she conforms to normative femininity or commodified tropes of rebellion. She is reprimanded less for her final act of violence than for her desperate attachment to Christian, which explains why she is so frequently misread as a Good for Her Girl. The narrative tricks audiences into celebrating Dani's 'triumph,' finding catharsis in the ritualistic murder of the man who seemingly embodied her entrapment. This satisfaction, however, conceals the film's deeper conservatism. Christian's death resolves nothing and leaves intact the patriarchal structures that produced Dani's suffering. Dani is thus a character that appears to fit a progressive archetype but, upon closer inspection, embodies the 'hollow gesture' the initial source critiques. Annie, Ellen, and Dani are granted agency, so long as it culminates in

their subordination to an order that, in its structure and its ends, continues to be unmistakably patriarchal. This observation admittedly appears pessimistic, but it highlights a fundamental limitation of horror's engagement with feminism: the extent to which it suffers from its own hereditary condition.

In this chapter, I have outlined how *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* construct female subjectivity as failure and entrapment (cf. Harrington), which reveals how women are made mad on screen. The Graham women, Annie and Ellen, embody similar yet distinct manifestations of the monstrous-feminine and the monstrous-maternal. Their horror lies in the unbearable ambivalence of figures who defy any simple classification, forcing viewers to hold multiple irreconcilable truths in suspension. Patriarchy and, at times, the film itself attempt to resolve this ambivalence by reducing the archaic mother to precisely what Ellen is: a source of horror emptied of recognizable interiority. Annie, then, is Ellen's logical extension. She inherits the role of the mother the film condemns, even if the true antagonist is to be found elsewhere. Dani, situated within a different generic tradition, appears at first to offer an alternative to the Graham women's entrapment. Her survival evokes the language of empowerment that has attached itself to the Final Girl and, more recently, to the Good for Her Girl. Yet, as I have argued in this chapter, such readings mistake the appearance of agency for its substance. The two dominant modes of portraying female protagonists in contemporary horror that arise from this analysis converge in their structural outcomes. Both grant women visibility, even centrality, while simultaneously denying them the very forms of expression – i.e., grief that is not pathological, unmanaged rage, or unpunished refusal – that might amount to genuine liberation. Far from providing the dignity of recognition, visibility turns their deaths into spectacle. Their grief is weaponized against them to recruit them into systems that demand their subordination. Their rage, when it appears at all, is either given no real outlet or redirected at an acceptable target. This manipulation succeeds because of the women's pain, which in turn exposes how even the most intimate experiences of suffering are available for co-optation by patriarchal systems. What emerges across the films is a sobering picture of horror's engagement with feminism. This is not to deny that horror has made significant strides in centering female experience or that films like *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* offer rich material for feminist critique. Rather, it is to point out that when feminism is commodified, one must interrogate whether feminist content survives beyond its superficial invocation. Too often, the story of patriarchal violence remains confined to male-centered narrative expectations.

4. Conclusion, or, Still Feeding the Nightmare?

Hereditary and *Midsommar*, at first glance, appear to deliver everything post-horror has promised. As part of the so-called elevated iteration of the genre, they offer serious subject matter paired with deliberate and artistic cinematography and a turn toward realism that lends weight to the stories of loss and human suffering they tell – a combination that has established itself as the golden standard for the 'prestige' horror of the 2010s and 2020s. The genre has moved from outwardly regressive, stereotypical representations to more nuanced, emotionally charged portrayals. Openly antagonizing the Other, it seems, sits less comfortably than it once did. What his thesis has sought to demonstrate across its chapters is that these shifts, albeit genuine in their surface commitments, have not disrupted the deeper continuity that runs through the genre. For all its evolution and claims to greater sophistication, horror remains shaped from within by the recurring structures and conventions that limit what its protagonists can ever be or become.

For female protagonists in horror, the terms of this arrangement are quite unforgiving. Refrain from promiscuity, never align yourself outwardly with female sexuality or, frankly, femininity at all, and under no circumstances express emotion or show behavior that would be considered entirely unremarkable if displayed by a man. Compliance, the genre has long insisted, is what secures sympathy and distinguishes the victim worth saving from the monster worth destroying. That is to say, the female victim is afforded this sympathy only insofar as she remains passive and compliant and her suffering, though acknowledged, is treated as collateral. If femininity itself, as Creed theorizes, is inherently monstrous then monstrosity increasingly ceases to name a deviation from victimhood and starts to look like its extension. The female monster is, after all, a victim first, made monstrous by the structures she is punished for defying. Both figures, then, are defined by what the system extracts from them. Crucially, neither position allows a woman to be both agent and subject, yet she is still expected to align herself with one or the other. What appears as a binary (victim/monster, Madonna/Whore, failure/entrapment) are, in fact, adjacent expressions of the same cultural logic, both resulting in a convergent structural outcome.

By bringing Creed's monstrous-feminine in conversation with my own theorization of female madness, this thesis isolates something neither framework alone could adequately capture. Creed reveals how patriarchal culture projects its fears and anxieties onto the female body. She does not, however, fully theorize how that projection extends to the mind, i.e., how women's emotional expressions and performances of prescribed roles, no less than their reproductive bodies, constitute sites of abjection. My theory of madness, as applied to

Hereditary and *Midsommar*, supplies that missing angle. By linking these two perspectives, I was able to show that horror makes monsters of women who refuse to comply and pathologizes, and therefore discredits, the very emotions that might fuel refusal. *Hereditary* and *Midsommar*, then, do not need their female protagonists to be turned into monsters in the traditional sense. They need only to harvest what is already constructed as dangerous and threatening in a patriarchal order – body and mind alike.

When mental illness, madness, and female subjectivity intersect in horror, the representational stakes intensify. Both *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* depend on the portrayal of the mentally ill as the Other to secure an antagonist from whom audiences can more easily detach. The narratives rely on their female protagonists to be emotionally unstable and, ultimately, unable to recover, making mental illness a precondition the plot requires. Mental illness supplies the diagnostic category that legitimizes this instability within the diegetic world whereas madness determines what that instability is taken to mean. The female characters' distress is understood less as a justified response to the conditions that produced it than as further evidence of their pathology. Female subjectivity, in this configuration, is constructed as failure and entrapment (cf. Harrington): Failure, because no performance of femininity is ever adequate, and entrapment, because the narratives offer no positions outside those performances.

These aspects become embedded in the narratives so seamlessly that the characters' distress appears like an organic consequence of the worlds they inhabit. This naturalization raises a point the films themselves may implicitly address, but which this thesis has taken as its central concern. The female protagonists of Aster's deeply deterministic worlds, either caught in a loop or pawns in a game, are constructed through mental illness and affective suffering as their essential, rather than contingent, attributes. The films never delineate these as conditions the characters might move through or beyond. When a story is arranged so that no alternative outcome is possible, the suffering it depicts cannot be understood as preventable or open to intervention, and the structures that produce that suffering ultimately go uninterrogated.

What further connects the determinism, the pathologization, and the narrative expendability of women across both films is, finally, the Mother Wound. It names how patriarchal structures reproduce themselves across generations as the inheritance of positions. What is inherited cannot be refused or interrupted by a single death – Ellen, Terri, the family itself – because the chain does not depend on any one link. In both films, the Mother Wound is

the structural guarantee that trauma will continue and that women will inhabit the roles carved out for them by a system that predates them.

Therefore, as much as *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* offer serious subject matter, where they fall short is in equating that seriousness with a genuine commitment to the perspectives they center. The female leads, particularly Toni Collette and Florence Pugh, give undeniably powerful, captivating performances, but the underlying stories, written by a male author, remain tethered to ideas and ideals of female subjectivity that are, at their core, dismissively patriarchal. The films may have been widely received as evidence that horror can take women's pain seriously, but, as this thesis has shown, aestheticizing and narratively exploiting suffering is not the same as interrogating it. *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* grant their female protagonists visibility and centrality, yet they do so while binding them to their genetic and social histories.

The findings of this thesis open onto several lines of inquiry that warrant further research. First, the analytical frameworks developed here – the ideological effects of narrative determinism as well as the abject female mind – invite application to a broader corpus of contemporary horror. Second, this thesis has necessarily bracketed the question of 'race.' The intersection of gender, mental illness, and racialization in horror demands dedicated study, particularly given the genre's long history of racial Othering and the specific ways in which emotional expressions of people of color are policed and read against different cultural standards than those applied to white subjects. Lastly, there is need for a systematic examination of how contemporary horror engages with male mental illness to determine whether the genre permits male characters forms of interiority and recovery that it withholds from its female characters.

The distribution of subjectivity that narrative form enacts, gendered and, as de Lauretis insists, shaped by desire, is the starting point this thesis took and the destination it arrived at. Across *Hereditary* and *Midsommar*, the desire of a patriarchal order and narrative structure converge in a way that makes them difficult to separate. The nightmare continues to be fed as long as patriarchy sets the table.

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6. Appendix

English Abstract

Horror cinema has a long-standing tradition of depicting the mentally ill as antagonistic figures, often reducing complex psychological realities to simplistic, fear-inducing tropes. Emerging within the era of post-horror, Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2018) and *Midsommar* (2019) attempt to complicate such reductive portrayals by centering trauma and psychological suffering as the primary narrative forces that shape the lives and fates of their female protagonists. Bringing together horror genre theory and cultural histories of mental illness and gender, I investigate how deterministic and essentialist narratives about these intersecting categories shape the representational politics of both films. Through a close reading from a feminist position, I further examine how they engage with women's agency in the context of suffering and sacrifice. Substantiated by feminist horror film theory, I show how *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* rely on a deep structural determinism that pathologizes female emotion, renders mental illness an inescapable condition, and presents women's subordination as narratively and structurally unavoidable. I thus argue that both films substitute more insidious forms of narrative fatalism for explicit stigmatization. They grant their female protagonists visibility and centrality yet ultimately portray them as prisoners of their genetic and social histories.

Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Das Horrorgenre blickt auf eine lange Tradition zurück, psychisch erkrankte Menschen als Antagonist*innen darzustellen und komplexe psychologische Realitäten auf simplifizierende, angstschürende Klischees zu reduzieren. Ari Asters *Hereditary* (2018) und *Midsommar* (2019), beide dem Zeitalter des Post-Horror zuzuordnen, unternehmen gewissermaßen den Versuch einer komplexeren Darstellung, indem sie Trauma und psychische Leidenserfahrungen als die primären narrativen Kräfte, die das Leben und Schicksal ihrer weiblichen Protagonistinnen prägen, in den Mittelpunkt stellen. Ausgehend von Genretheorie und kulturgeschichtlichen Perspektiven auf psychische Erkrankungen und Geschlechterverhältnisse untersuche ich, wie deterministische und essentialistische Narrative über diese sich überschneidenden Kategorien die Repräsentationspolitik beider Filme prägen. Ein Close Reading aus feministischer Perspektive erlaubt es mir zudem, den Blick darauf zu richten, wie sich beide Filme mit weiblicher Handlungsmacht im Kontext von Leiden und Opferbereitschaft auseinandersetzen. Mithilfe feministischer Horrorfilmtheorie zeige ich, wie *Hereditary* und *Midsommar* auf einem tiefgreifenden strukturellen Determinismus beruhen, der weibliche Emotionen pathologisiert, psychische Erkrankungen als unausweichlichen Zustand darstellt und die Unterordnung der Frau narrativ wie strukturell als unvermeidbar präsentiert. Ich argumentiere daher, dass beide Filme explizite Stigmatisierung durch subtilere Formen von narrativem Fatalismus ersetzen. Sie verleihen ihren Protagonistinnen Sichtbarkeit und eine zentrale Stellung, zeichnen sie aber letztlich als Gefangene ihrer genetischen und sozialen Geschichte.