Good Old Horror, Now Elevated

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

In the everchanging horror landscape, a group of recent horror films labelled as "elevated" has become commercially and critically successful. Critics and audiences alike praise them for the 'reinvigoration' of the genre. This thesis undertakes an analysis of two elevated horror films, *Hereditary* and *Midsommar*, comparing them against traditional and mainstream horror tropes and techniques. This paper observes the nuances of the films as they fit into the horror genre, as well as the nuances of elevated horror itself with its contribution to the cinema landscape. The analysis breaks down the films into narrative and aesthetic elements, analysing them based on traditional and mainstream techniques. Notably, few distinctions in narrative functions were found between elevated and traditional horror, and aesthetic elements are the biggest differentiators. Overall, elevated horror presents familiar storylines, often focused on family drama and character psychology, but packages them into appealing visuals and symmetrical framing. The aesthetics of the films are broken down in various ways, outlining that, while generally following an arthouse direction, they also utilize a few elements from traditional horror aesthetics, like disorienting camera movement. Music and sound elements also play a large role, acting similarly to traditional horror, but, again, taking liberties that mainstream horror doesn't take. The repercussions of using the word 'elevated' as a descriptor for this subgenre are also explored, reflecting on the elitist perspective that film critics praising the genre undertake. The elevation of this genre, therefore, comes from the aesthetics-focused visuals and character-focused storytelling, that are not necessarily new to horror, only differentiating from contemporary mainstream films that are focused on scaring and shocking the viewers.

> "Something that disorients, that unsettles what's taken for granted,
> something that disturbs and disrupts reality – that's scary."
>
> **Ian Reid – I'm Thinking of Ending Things**

Introduction:

The horror genre is probably the most fruitful one in its variety. When taking about the horror genre, one may be discussing a monster movie, a campy slasher film, a serious psychological horror drama, a sci-fi cosmic horror with gothic elements, a supernatural found-footage flick, etc. It is this variety, as well as its overlap into other genres, like thriller, drama, comedy, etc., that makes the horror genre difficult to analyze, classify and dissect as a whole. On top of that, horror features distinct movements and techniques that change over time, guide filmmakers all over the world and modify what is considered horror. In the past decade or so, a new movement, labeled "post-horror" or "elevated horror" by film critics has emerged, signifying a new trend in horror-making that seems to be attracting critical and commercial success.[1]

As intriguing as the label 'post-horror' is, suggesting that the films of this category have moved completely beyond horror conventions, a more accurate title should be used. For this group of films, 'elevated horror' proves more suitable, as more often than not, the conventions of traditional horror remain, but are 'elevated' through the films' presentation. For the horror genre as a whole, this represents a new trend in horror movie-making, where traditional aesthetics and narratives give way to more intelligent, less accessible ones.

To observe the peculiarities of elevated horror, two films attributed to the subgenre will be analyzed. Narrative and aesthetic features in *Hereditary* and *Midsommar,* both directed by Ari Aster, will be compared and contrasted to those of traditional horror to determine the differences that separate this 'new wave' of horror from its predecessors. Both films were directed by Ari Aster, an important figure in horror cinema, who captured the world's attention early in his career and is already named to be among the leading contemporary horror filmmakers.[2] Moreover, the idea of elevated horror and its characteristics emerge partially from *Hereditary* and

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[1] Steve Rose, "How Post-horror Movies Are Taking over Cinema," The Guardian, last modified February 22, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/jul/06/post-horror-films-scary-movies-ghost-story-it-comes-at-night.

[2] Victoria Stuewe, "Gothtober: How Ari Aster Became a Horror Legend with Just Two Movies – Film Daily," Film Daily, last modified October 1, 2020, https://filmdaily.co/news/ari-aster-horror-legend/.

Midsommar, which do both: outline and belong to the subgenre at the same time. Therefore, the films need to be analyzed in order to understand the characteristics of elevated horror at large and determine the subgenre's difference from traditional horror.

The research question is thus as follows: *"How does 'elevated horror' approach the aesthetic and narrative elements of film construction differently to traditional horror films?"*

Methodologically, to approach answering this question, an analysis of the films' narrative, visual, and stylistic qualities will be conducted. To understand a film as a whole, scholars agree on separating narrative and aesthetic elements and analysing how they form the essence of a film through a textual analysis.[3] Therefore, larger narrative themes of the films will be extracted, forming a thematical outline of elevated horror, which will then be compared to narrative techniques outlined by traditional horror scholars. This section will be answering the following sub-question: How do themes and motifs of elevated horror differ from those in traditional horror? Then, aesthetic elements will be analyzed through cinematography, color and sound, selecting scenes that stand out through their stylistic choices to illustrate these points. The sub-question for this section is as follows: how do cinematography, color and sound in elevated horror differ from those in traditional horror? The method of textual analysis is more applicable to this thesis than a film analysis, as instead of undergoing a deep dissection of the films, I simply attempt to outline their narrative and aesthetic elements in order to understand the larger subgenre they belong to. A textual analysis will also allow me to explore the importance of elevated horror toward the horror genre and overall cinema, as well as use scholars and film critics to support my arguments. In context of the textual analysis, some visual analysis will be applied, when analyzing the cinematography of the films but it will ultimately fall under the analysis of the films' overall text. Furthermore, some historical comparisons will be made, specifically in Chapter 3 of this thesis, between the horror genre of the past and of the present, allowing me to make a larger point on elevated horror's contribution to the horror genre's cultural perception, also in the context of a textual analysis. Chapter 3 will be answering the following sub-question: What is elevated horror's position and influence within the larger horror genre? Before starting the analysis, I will construct a theoretical framework of relevant and significant scholars and film critics in Chapter 1.

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[3] Brigid Cherry, *Horror* (London: Routledge, 2009), 17.

CHAPTER 1 – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The general discussion on elevated horror will be contextualized by several scholars. As mentioned above, Steven Rose is an important name, as one of the first film critics to discuss the term 'post-horror' and provide some characteristics.[4] He brings up the idea of family in elevated horror, mentions, but does not explain the concept of "re-fashioning horror tropes with auteur sensibility" and stresses the presence of "guilt, grief, regret, and paranoia," generally not providing much detail on elevated horror's aesthetic and narrative characteristics.[5] Overall, Rose does not explore the concept of elevated horror in a profound or significant way, but is one of the first film critics to group several films under that title. J.D. Bridges, building on Rose's writing, expands the classification of elevated horror, providing explicit descriptions of narrative techniques and themes of the proposed subgenre. He, for example, describes the "family drama" element that is crucial to many elevated horror films.[6] Furthermore, the psychoanalytical aspect of personal interrelations that features in most elevated horrors is also described extensively by him, shown through collapsing or disrupted relationship between various family members.[7] This element, which he outlines as the "destruction of the home" is also a crucial one to elevated horror, with it acting as a basis for the films' horrifying events and the characters' anguish.[8] Lastly, the general themes of loss, grief, trauma and paranoia are present, similar to what Rose describes, with elevated horror exploring these emotions in profound, and unexpectedly frightening ways.[9] Bridges' writing on these elevated horror themes and motifs will serve as the backbone of the thesis' discussion of narrative in *Hereditary* and *Midsommar*.

To further contextualize these aspects, outlined by Rose and Bridges, two more film critics' writing will be utilized. Shane Danielsen writes explicitly about *Hereditary,* but his discussion of the film's aesthetic and narrative qualities can be carried over to *Midsommar* as well, due to the films' stylistic similarities. He describes the patience and the meditative-ness of the cinematography and the classic violence of the imagery, outlining as well the effect on the viewers – it feels to them as if they're "studying [the

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[4] Rose, "How Post-Horror Movies Are Taking over Cinema."

[5] Rose.

[6] J. A. Bridges, "Post-Horror Kinships: From Goodnight Mommy to Get Out," Bright Lights Film Journal, last modified December 20, 2018, https://brightlightsfilm.com/post-horror-kinships-from-goodnight-mommy-to-get-out/.

[7] Bridges, "Post-Horror Kinships."

[8] Bridges.

[9] Bridges.

characters] rather than simply watching" them.[10] As a counterpoint to the elevated horror discourse, Michael Brown writes about his disagreement with the concept, suggesting that elevated horror films feature timeless horror narratives.[11] For him, horror was always able to explore domestic themes, and reflect current social anxieties.[12] Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, his article features a discussion of the evolution of horror, writing about how elevated horror fits into the genre's overall landscape. Brown reflects on the "ambivalence" of the elevated horror genre, describing how directors and reviewers attempt to both capitalize on the idea of horror, while simultaneously rejecting it as a lower artform.[13] This is used in elevated horror by promoting the films as belonging to the horror genre, while simultaneously claiming that they exist in a liminal stage, alongside family drama and psychological thrillers, thus benefitting from the popularity of horror, while distancing itself from it at the same time.[14] Brown's argument, alongside Adam Hart and Mark Jancovich, who will be discussed below, will be used in Chapter 3 of the thesis to discuss the importance of elevated horror in genre studies and to explore its position in the cinema landscape.

After discussing elevated horror qualities, other scholars will be used to explore traditional horror and its influence on elevated horror. In order to discuss mainstream horror narratives, the concept of postmodernity in horror will be explored. As defined by Isabel Pinedo, in a 'postmodern' world, boundaries are blurred, "institutions fall into question, master narratives collapse," etc.[15] For the horror genre, this means that the distinction between good and evil, normal and abnormal is unclear and the characters' morality and motivations becomes uncertain.[16] The emergence of postmodern horror is tied to the 1960's, according to Steve Neale.[17] Before that, films threatened the viewers "largely from outside," with the presence of visually unsightly monsters.[18] In pre-1960 films, the distinction between good and bad was "firmly drawn," and the objective of the

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[10] Shane Danielsen, "The Elevated Horror of Ari Aster's 'Hereditary'," The Monthly, last modified June 6, 2018, https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2018/june/1527775200/shane-danielsen/elevated-horror-ari-aster-s-hereditary#mtr.

[11] Michael Brown, "The Problem with 'Post-Horror'," Overland Literary Journal, last modified May 15, 2019, https://overland.org.au/2019/05/the-problem-with-post-horror/.

[12] Brown, "The Problem with "Post-Horror."

[13] Brown.

[14] Brown.

[15] Isabel Pinedo, "Recreational Terror: Postmodern Elements of the Contemporary Horror Film," *Journal of Film and Video* 38, no. 1 (May/June 1996): 18.

[16] Pinedo, "Recreational Terror," 20.

[17] Steve Neale, "Major Genres," in *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2005), 89.

[18] Neale, "Major Genres," 89.

'good' characters was to defeat the 'bad' monster.[19] The 1960s correspond with a general societal shift towards individualism and freedom, with people rejecting "authoritarian systems of modernism," and turning to individual freedoms and identity expression.[20] This shift is reflected in horror cinema in the focus on psychological fear, dealing with threats and anxieties that come from within, "a profound insecurity about ourselves."[21] Therefore, it can be said that postmodern horror tackles fear that originates from the inside – viewers' fears and anxieties that are reflected in the films' characters, while pre-1960's horror deals more exclusively with physical threats from the outside. Furthermore, Pinedo provides a list of characteristics of a postmodern film's narrative. According to her, it features the following elements: "1) a violent disruption of the everyday world; (2) a transgression and violation of boundaries; (3) the validity of rationality is thrown into question; (4) there is no narrative closure; and (5) the film produces a bounded experience of fear."[22] This list of characteristics will be applied to the case studies, determining whether the latter lean more closely towards postmodern horror or a separate subgenre.

When discussing elevated horror aesthetics, traditional horror will be used to contextualize them and bring forward their characteristics. For this, Bridgit Cherry's writing will be used, discussing both early and contemporary horror aesthetics, which will be useful in the comparison. She writes that general aesthetics of horror film cinematography consist of "rapid visual movement, claustrophobic framing, sudden reaction shots, etc."[23] In the chapter "Horror Aesthetics and Affect" in her book *Horror,* Cherry outlines a variety of techniques for horror cinematography – Dutch angles and "unnaturalistic camera movements," the phenomenon of the "shock cut"(often known as jump scare), and expressionistic lighting and camera angles.[24] Furthermore, Cherry also writes about horror film music, which is traditionally used to "create sensations of tension, alarm and anxiety in the viewer."[25] She describes horror film music as operating "in conjunction with the images of cinematic horror," where it is used to add tension to scenes and elevate scary imagery.[26] These will all be used in the analysis of *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* and matched to techniques of cinematography and

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[19] Pinedo, "Recreational Terror, 20.
[20] Cherry, *Horror,* 173.
[21] Neale, "Major Genres," 89.
[22] Pinedo, "Recreational Terror," 20.
[23] Cherry, *Horror,* 86*.*
[24] Cherry, 64.
[25] Cherry, 69*.*
[26] Cherry, 70.

musicality in the films, in order to figure out which traditional methods are present and which are not. This way, a nuanced understanding of the aesthetic techniques of elevated horror that are present in the films will emerge.

Specifically discussing film music, Cherry will be contrasted with Beth Kattelman, who writes about *Hereditary's* unusual use of sound.[27] She discusses the creation of tension through "unusual instrumentation," such as "clarinets and other reed instruments," which evokes an unfamiliarity and strangeness in the viewers.[28] Kattelman also mentions the jump scare, a contemporary horror movie technique, where a loud musical shriek accompanies a sudden camera movement to evoke fear and surprise, which Cherry terms as the "shock cut."[29] But in *Hereditary,* according to Kattelman, this is rather different, with the opposite occurring and an "ongoing loud drone" being cut short by sudden silence.[30] Therefore, the texts seem to confirm that there is some difference in the way that elevated horror treats sound, and an inclination that it doesn't generally follow the traditional route.

In Chapter 3, Brown will be used again to engage in a debate with Rose and Bridges, arguing that 'family themes' have been featured in horror for a significant amount of time already.[31] Cherry further confirms this point of view, writing that "fragmentation of family" is featured in many horror films of the 1970's.[32] Opposing Cherry and Brown, Bridges reiterates that family trauma "doubles as the haunting," rather than serving as the background for character development, playing a much larger role in elevated horror narratives than in traditional ones.[33] Furthermore, it is the presentation of these traditional tropes that differs in elevated horror, as Danielsen also writes, which can explain the changed perception of those films by audiences.[34] Therefore, though some scholars seem to agree that elevated horror does not differ significantly enough to be separated into a separate subgenre, there are arguments to be heard about the way that those films present traditional horror tropes – in a way that makes them seem more elevated and less accessible.

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[27] Beth Kattelman, "TRIGGERING FEAR: POSSESSION AND SOUND DESIGN IN HEREDITARY" (presentation, The National Conference of The Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association in the Horror Studies Area, Washington DC, April 9, 2019).

[28] Kattelman, "Triggering Fear."

[29] Cherry, *Horror,* 85.

[30] Kattelman, "Triggering Fear."

[31] Brown, "The Problem with Post-Horror."

[32] Cherry, *Horror, 173.*

[33] Bridges, "Post-horror Kinships."

[34] Danielsen, "The Elevated Horror of Ari Aster's 'Hereditary.'"

Lastly, Chapter 3 will also deal with the exploration of genre theory and will utilize writing by Mark Jancovich, Adam Hart and Joe Tompkins. Genre theory features discussion on the evolution of various genres, observing how they, and the perception around them, change over time. Genre, according to Altman, serves various functions, acting as a blueprint for future films, an umbrella for existing categories of films and a label for audiences to recognize their preferences.[35] It is important to analyze this concept in cinema, as well as within specific genres, observing how they develop. Detailing the changes and peculiarities within the horror genre, Jancovich writes about the film *Silence of The Lambs,* discussing how promoters and reviewers were quick to associate the film with "the pleasures" of the mainstream horror genre, while at the same time "creating a distinction" from it.[36] This is a similar situation to that of *Midsommar* and *Hereditary,* which was briefly mentioned above, with an "ambivalence" described by Brown, through both supporting the public's perception of horror and rejecting it. This chapter, from Jancovich's edited book *Horror, The Film Reader* will be useful in understanding the relationship between specific horror films and the overall genre and this "ambivalence" described by Brown, supported by Jancovich's writing will also be interesting to explore. Adam Hart, in his book *Monstrous Forms,* writes about the usage of jump scares in horror films.[37] There, he briefly moves onto a discussion of elevated horror, or 'arthouse horror' as he calls it.[38] For him, what separates elevated horror directors from the mainstream horror ones, based on director Cary Fukunaga's point of view, is the "prioritization of character … over sensation."[39] In other words, elevated horror directors focus on telling a story that happens to feature scares, rather than starting with scares and building a story around them. Nevertheless, Hart writes that elevated horror films utilize the same "sensational" techniques of fear-creating that mainstream horror films do, but because of their focus on narrative, the effect of those techniques on viewers is different.[40] In general, for Hart, elevated horror films evoke "respectability" through their presentation, which allows for a more direct reaction from audiences.[41] The films weave the traditional horror scares and surprises into an 'art-

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[35] Rick Altman, "What is Generally Understood by Notion of Film Genre?," in *Film/Genre* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 14.

[36] Mark Jancovich, "Genre and The Audience," in *Horror, the Film Reader* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2001), 157.

[37] Adam Hart, "I'M SCREEEEEEEEAMING!!!! The Lowly Art of the Jump Scare," in *Monstrous Forms: Moving Image Horror Across Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2019), 59.

[38] Hart, "I'M SCREEEEEEEEAMING!!!!," 81.

[39] Hart, 82.

[40] Hart, 83.

[41] Hart, 84.

house' presentation, and are able, without using jump scares, to still assault the sensations of the viewers into shock and fear.[42] Lastly, Joe Tompkins' writing will be used, to discuss the current state of affairs in the horror genre and the way that contemporary horror is perceived.[43] He writes specifically about the reasons why mainstream horror is considered low-quality – mainly due to its focus on extreme violence and the lack of reasons for, or commentary behind that violence.[44] His writing will be useful in discussing elevated horror's position within the horror landscape.

It is evident that the writing of the above scholars goes deep into an analysis of elevated horror in genre theory, which is undoubtedly useful to this thesis' discussion. With the theoretical framework completed, it is now necessary to apply the above scholars to *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* to move closer to answering the research question.

CHAPTER 2 – HORROR AND ELEVATED HORROR IN *HEREDITARY* AND *MIDSOMMAR*

In order to answer the research question and apply the theories discussed above to specific examples, the case study of two films will be examined. *Hereditary* is a 2018 directorial feature film debut from Ari Aster, featuring Toni Colette, Gabriel Byrne and Alex Wolff playing a dysfunctional family confronted with grief and evil.[45] *Midsommar* is Aster's second film, produced and released very soon after *Hereditary,* in 2019, and features a group of young people visiting Sweden on holiday that soon devolves into violent ritualism, starring Florence Pugh and Jack Raynor.[46] For the purpose of the analysis, the films' narrative elements will be compared and contrasted – through general themes and motifs, as well as their aesthetics – through cinematography, sound design and color choices. In the end, a conclusion about the position of the films within the overall horror genre will be specified.

Themes and Motifs

To discuss the themes and motifs that can be found within the plots of *Hereditary* and *Midsommar,* I will use the scholars from Chapter 1 to outline narrative conventions of

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[42] Hart.

[43] Joe Tompkins, "The Cultural Politics of Horror Film Criticism," *Popular Communication* 12, no. 1 (February 2014): 33, doi:10.1080/15405702.2013.869335

[44] Tompkins, "The Cultural Politics of Horror Film Criticism," 33.

[45] IMDb, "Hereditary (2018)," IMDb, last modified June 7, 2018, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7784604/?ref_=nm_knf_i1.

[46] IMDb, "Midsommar (2019)," IMDb, last modified July 3, 2019, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8772262/?ref_=vp_back.

horror and compare them to such elements in the case studies. J. A. Bridges explains a variety of narrative characteristics that are present in films of elevated horror. Firstly, according to him the "destruction of the home" plays a central role in these contemporary films.[47] This is often represented by a collapse of family values or family relationships, or shown through contrast between the happy, idyllic home life shown at the beginning and its desolation in the end. In *Hereditary,* destruction of the home is present both physically and visually, seen through deaths of family members and conflicts between characters, as well as the gradual deterioration of their living space, as the family succumbs to the cult's rituals. *Midsommar* confronts its protagonist with the death of her family in the opening scene, dealing explicitly with the "destruction" of Dani's family that traumatizes her for the rest of the film. Secondly, Bridges writes that in elevated horror, families often find themselves "unable to fully love or accept one another," due to traumatic events or behaviors by one of the family members.[48] Both *Midsommar* and *Hereditary* feature dysfunctional families to some extent. In *Hereditary,* Annie – the matriarch of the family, deals with complicated feelings about her mother, who recently passed away. In the speech at the funeral and at a grief support group, she recounts her traumatic childhood, with many relatives suffering from mental illnesses, also describing her mother as manipulative. When in the middle of the film, Annie's own daughter Charlie dies a violent, accidental death due to her son Peter's oversight, the relationship between Peter and Annie is damaged, as Peter is unable to take accountability for his actions. Annie, in turn, grows cold and hostile towards her son, who finds himself isolated in his feelings of guilt over Charlie's death. In this sense, the characters are unable to "fully love" one another, as their relationship is complicated by the pain that they inflicted on each other. In *Midsommar,* Dani and Christian are also unable to fully commit to their relationship, as it is built on Dani's need for emotional support after her family's tragic death, with Christian revealing to his friends early in the film that he doesn't see a future to their relationship. Their inability to fully "accept one another" becomes clear throughout the film through their strained relationship and their fights, which expose their lack of care for one another.

What also becomes clear is the extent to which elevated horror films, especially *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* rely on family drama tropes. Bridges argues that elevated horror films often share a large part of their narratives with the genre of family drama,

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[47] Bridges, "Post-Horror Kinships."
[48] Bridges.

which are often most evident in the film's first act.[49] The same can be said for *Hereditary* and *Midsommar,* which take time to explain the psychological background of the characters that leads to the film's events and exacerbates conflicts. From the first moments of both films, complex interpersonal relationships between the characters are established, which are only further complicated as the films progress, inviting the viewers into the characters' psyche from the very first scenes.

Furthermore, Bridges outlines elevated horror's relationship with loss, trauma and grief. According to him, characters in elevated horror are often "stuck" in a certain life stage, which they're "unable to get beyond" due to their struggle with their trauma.[50] As discussed above, this is true for both *Hereditary* and *Midsommar,* as in both films, the characters find themselves traumatized by tragedies within their family.

Moreover, in both films, the protagonists' personal issues often make them unable to focus on more prominent threats to their lives, perhaps attempting to convey trauma's strong effect on one's point of view. In both films, trauma serves as the jumping-off point for the events that follow, with Dani's fragile state forcing her boyfriend to postpone the break-up he was planning and to bring her on the trip to Sweden, and Annie's more protective attitude towards her distant daughter playing a role in sending her to a party with Peter, which ends tragically. The films show how inner psychological threats that postmodern horror often features can develop into outer threats that threaten the protagonists' lives. Partially based on *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* themselves, it is clear that these elevated horror tropes, outlined by Bridges, feature very prominently in those two films.

The opposite perspective can be seen in the writing by Brown, Cherry and Pinedo. This point of view suggests that *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* fall into the larger category of postmodern horror, rather than elevated horror, with the way that they explore inner threats and psychological terrors. Postmodern horror has been present in the cinema landscape since the 1960's and has expanded its influence in the genre at large, becoming mainstream in contemporary horror filmmaking. Therefore, it will take the position of traditional horror in this thesis and will be used to explore the nuance in the classification of the films. Gathering from Pinedo's text and comparing the case studies with her list of characteristics of postmodern horror, some connections can be visible.

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[49] Bridges.
[50] Bridges.

Firstly, postmodern horror features a "violent disruption of the everyday world," according to Pinedo.[51] This violence is shown through explicit focus on the "mutilated body," creative character deaths, and the presentation of violent elements in an "act of showing," rather than telling.[52] In my reading, both *Midsommar* and *Hereditary* explicitly feature those elements, presenting gratuitous violence as sole focus of several scenes in explicit "acts of showing." This can be seen, for example, in *Hereditary*, where a close-up of Charlie's decapitated head is displayed for several seconds, crawling with ants, accompanied by a loud musical crescendo. Similarly, in *Midsommar,* in one of the rituals, a man is violently bashed in the head with a large hammer, also in a close-up but in almost total silence, focusing on the violence and reflecting the protagonist's visceral reaction to this in the following scene.

Secondly, postmodern horror deals with "irrational, chaotic forces of disruption," which the protagonists usually have to embrace in order to survive.[53] In the case of the two films, these chaotic forces are represented by the relative sects that are present, the cult in *Hereditary* and the commune in *Midsommar.* In the latter, Dani ends up embracing the commune as her second family, seeing her boyfriend's inability to comfort her, as he, in turn, is sacrificed for his rejection of the commune's beliefs. Notably, Pinedo notes that "the rational skeptic" character, who is usually a man, is "punished or killed" for his skepticism, which also plays out in *Hereditary* with the death of rational Steve, who remains stoic in his belief in the natural order, not believing in Annie's supernatural version of events.

Lastly, Pinedo outlines the collapse of "causal logic" that occurs in the postmodern horror film.[54] Often, there are no reasons for the death or suffering of a particular character, things are left unexplained, and language is superseded by visuality of horror in the film's climax.[55] In both *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* this is true, seen by the random targeting of the seemingly innocent people by malevolent groups in both films. Moreover, in *Hereditary,* the last third of the film has almost no dialogue, with possessed Annie chasing her son around their house in order to transfer the evil

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[51] Pinedo, "Recreational Terror," 20.
[52] Pinedo, 21.
[53] Pinedo, 22.
[54] Pinedo, 23.
[55] Pinedo.

spirit to him. Similarly, in *Midsommar,* dialogue is only used to "demonstrate how demented" the commune is, explaining their reasoning for targeting the group.[56]

Despite this, there are differences to Pinedo's postmodern interpretation as well, in the way that she describes the typical endings of the films. For her, they are "open-ended," suggesting that despite the protagonists' victory, the threat isn't completely absolved, leaving the viewers with unease, or hinting at a sequel.[57] Both *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* have clear conclusions to their storylines, where the protagonists find themselves submitting to the cult's power – willingly in *Midsommar,* and through spiritual possession in *Hereditary.* Therefore narratively, the films seem to pursue both - specific post-horror motifs and themes, as well as those of traditional horror, with similarities and differences to Pinedo's description of a postmodern narrative. Despite this, there is some truth to the argument that elevated horror narratives don't differ much from those of traditional horror. To complete the analysis, and observe how the films' narrative elements are embedded into their aesthetics, I will be looking at aesthetic and stylistic differences between traditional and elevated horror.

Cinematography

Academically, elevated horror aesthetics have not been systematically researched, which is why traditional horror aesthetics will be used to contextualize the subgenre. I will be doing this by analyzing *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* through the lens of traditional horror cinematography and evaluating the differences those films bring forward. In both films, cinematography was done by Pawel Pogorzelski.[58] In order to discuss cinematography in elevated horror and compare it to traditional horror cinema, writing on horror aesthetics by Bridgit Cherry will be used. In terms of camerawork, she writes that horror films traditionally use "disorienting camera movements," such as dolly zooms or Dutch angles, where the movement through the scene is destabilizing and confusing.[59] According to Cherry, such an approach to cinematography attempts to reflect the chaotic narrative of the film and emphasize the characters' "excessive emotion or psychological trauma."[60] In *Midsommar* or *Hereditary,* cinematography can

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[56] Pinedo.
[57] Pinedo, 24.
[58] IMDb, "Pawel Pogorzelski," IMDb, last modified 2020, https://www.imdb.com/name/nm1850507/.
[59] Cherry, *Horror,* 65.
[60] Cherry, 68.

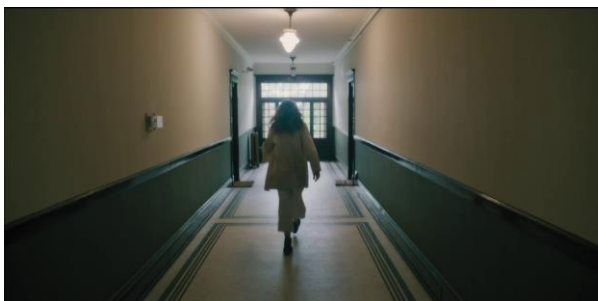hardly be called chaotic, with its slow pans, steady medium shots and a general lack of rapid camera movement. Despite the former, there are some exceptions, with scenes in both films in which the camera moves in an unusual, notable way. In *Hereditary* this occurs at the very beginning of the film's third act, where Annie begins to unravel the mystery behind her mother's heritage and explicit danger to her family's wellbeing is presented. As can be seen on Figure 1, there is a shot that begins upside-down, moving in a vertical panning motion while following Annie as she walks down the corridor, ending right side up. This can be seen as a reflection of the protagonist's confusion and agitation, where the beliefs solidified throughout the film start to come into question. *Midsommar* features a very similar shot, closer to the beginning of the film (Figure 2), as the characters are on their way to the village. It starts with a shot of their car, moves over the front and continues until the shot is fully upside down. It is followed by a cut to the upside-down view from the car, as it passes under a sign, and the camera, again, follows it and dissolves into the sky, followed by a transition to the next scene. In this case, the shot seems to serve as foreshadowing for the events of the film, suggesting that the characters are heading into a

Figure 1: *Hereditary's* Upside Down Tracking Shot

dangerous situation. In both cases, the upside-down shots are an exception to the traditionally smooth, direct and symmetrical shots of the rest of the film, which makes

them particularly important in understanding the cinematographer's vision. Therefore, camerawork in *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* differs from that of traditional horror, presenting contemplative, slow shots, rather than fast-paced ones, with few exceptions. Agreeing with such a description, Shane Danielsen also describes the camerawork as "meditative," and claiming that such an approach forces the viewers to study characters more carefully.[61] The pacing of the films is also generally slow. This is substantiated by their length – they're both over the traditional 90 minutes, with *Hereditary's* 2 hours and 7 minutes and *Midsommar's* 2 hours and 28 minutes.[62] Therefore so far, *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* stand out in their style, focusing on a measured and deliberate presentation that lets the action unfold naturally as scenes gently flow into one another.

Figure 2: Upside-Down Tracking Shot in *Midsommar*

To further analyze the cinematography of the films, the phenomenon of the shock cut, or jump scare, will be examined, as a traditional and widely-used tool of the mainstream horror film. Cherry describes it as a traditional horror device, "designed to emulate the … physical experience of a moment of shock."[63] It is a purposefully startling effect, where an event occurs rapidly – a character is suddenly attacked or killed, or perhaps discovers a violent situation. It is often accompanied by a sudden loud noise, either within the narrative or through soundtrack, and can be preceded by a building of tension

through music as well.[64] Such a reaction from the audience is involuntary, as they are simply reacting in surprise to the film's sudden imagery, instead of fear through the film's competent construction of tension. Neither *Midsommar,* nor *Hereditary* use this
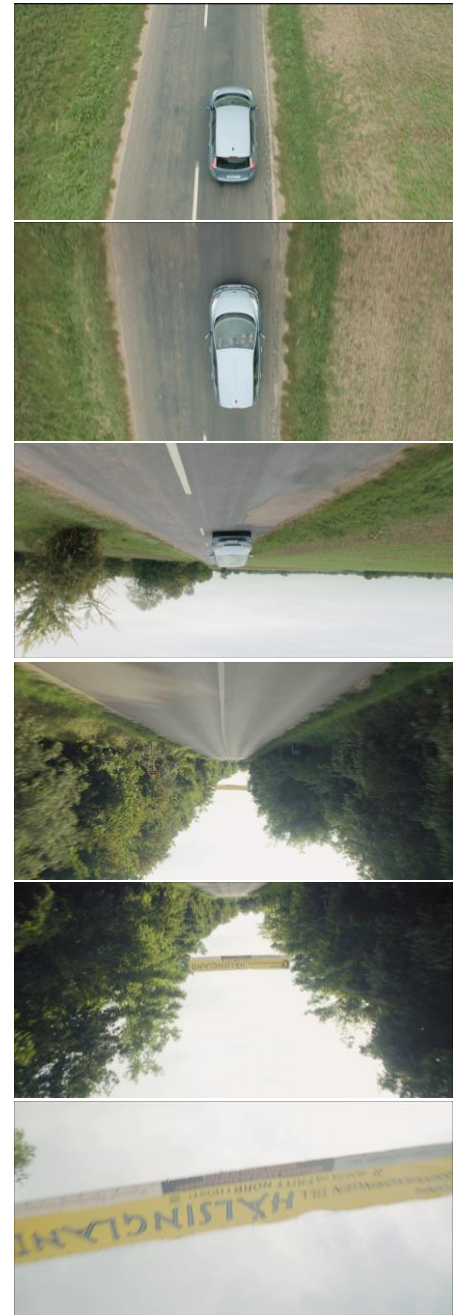
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[61] Danielsen, "The Elevated Horror of Ari Aster's 'Hereditary'."
[62] IMDb, "Hereditary"; IMDb, "Midsommar."
[63] Cherry, *Horror,* 85.
[64] Cherry, 86.

technique, but rather, as Kattelman outlines, an opposite one.[65] Often, Aster chooses to build tension trough a gradual increase in sound volume and intensity, creating an "ongoing loud drone."[66] Instead of punctuating that drone with an unexpected loud sound to create a jump scare, the films both accompany sudden or violent imagery with a direct cut to silence, which brings the viewer's focus to the imagery itself and imitates a reaction expected in real life– a moment of shock. Removing the music as a supporting element, the films present the violence in a raw, unflinching way, allowing the viewers freedom to react, instead of pushing for a specific reaction. Music and sound in general play a large role in both films as well, with their analysis following in the next section.

Figure 3: Burning ritual transitioning to Dani

Other than the shock-cut, other notable types of transitions are present in the films that give them a unique style. Both *Midsommar* and *Hereditary* use the dissolve cut to give the film flow and connect scenes. It is present more in *Midsommar* than *Hereditary,* but always deals with a transition from, or into, a human face or figure. In many such transitions in *Midsommar,* an image of Dani is transposed over a burning fire, as can be seen in Figures 3 and 4. In the first instance, she looks upset, after witnessing a traumatizing ritual and having a flashback to her own traumatizing past. The choice of such a transition could be reminding the viewer of the danger to Dani's life, as well has her fragility, resulting from the trauma. It directly links the source of her upset – the burning bodies – to her negative emotional state, while also creating the

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[65] Kattelman, "Triggering Fear."
[66] Kattelman.

impression that Dani is surrounded by cult-members, in a form of foreshadowing. In Figure 4 on the other hand, the dissolve transition reads as more powerful, moving into the film's final image, where Dani smiles coyly as the burning temple collapses, with her

Figure 4: Burning temple transitioning to Dani

passionless and distant boyfriend inside. Here, this likely symbolizes the collapse of her inner trauma, with the fire now emphasizing the power she holds over the issues that plagued her throughout the film.

In *Hereditary,* dissolve cuts are used in the most heart-wrenching moments of the films, to illustrate the passage of time and visualize a connection between two characters. Again, characters' faces are often dissolved into, or transitioned from. Figure
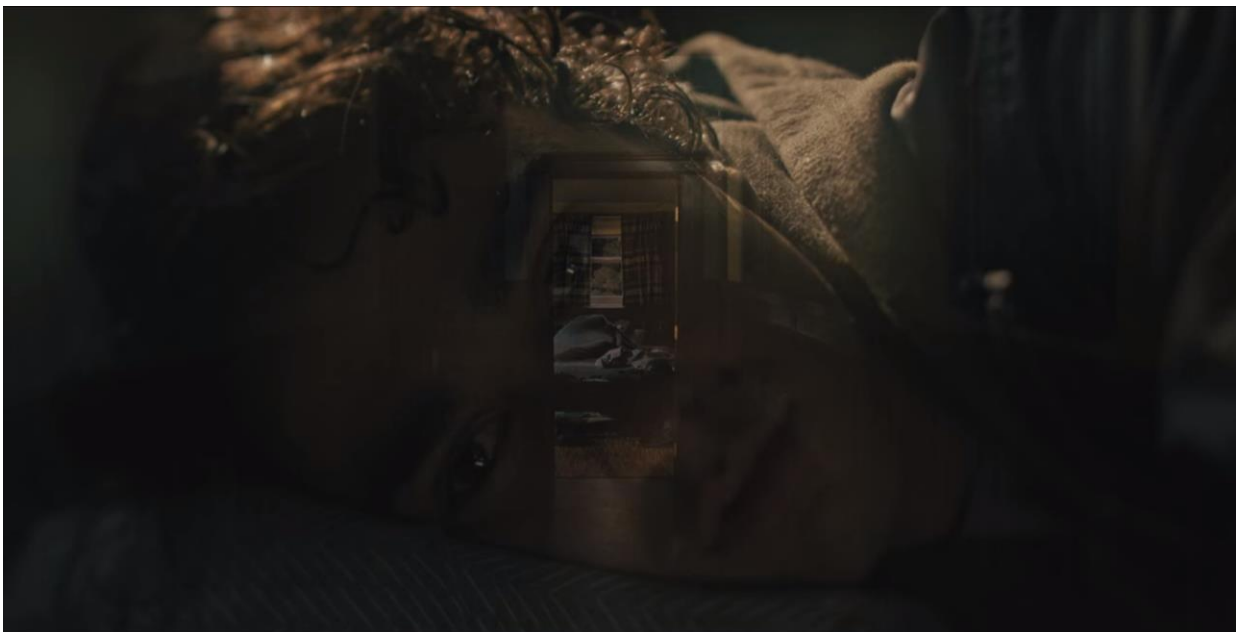
Figure 5: Peter's return home transitions to close up of his face.

5 shows a transition from Peter's arrival home immediately after causing his sister's untimely death. After showing him arrive home in shock, he is seen getting into bed, as the scene transitions into a close up of his face and the sound of his mother discovering her daughter's body is heard from outside. The transition here shows that he has not slept since his return, underlining his shocked and paralyzed state, as well as continuing the flow of the narrative smoothly. In Figure 6, the transition also occurs soon after Charlie's death. In this case, Annie is seen sleeping in her daughter's treehouse, with a transition dissolving to a close-up of Peter's face in class. The color red of the heaters in the first shot reminds the viewers of the violence of Charlie's death, placing the color directly over Peter in the transition, as if placing blame. This transition

Figure 6: Annie sleeping transitions to close-up of Peter in school

also links Annie's suffering to Peter, again framing him as the reason for her pain, and illustrating her inability to forgive him, as is made explicit in the following scene, where they have a heated confrontation.

As evident by the above analysis, transitions play a large symbolic role in *Hereditary* and *Midsommar,* used as a tool to enhance narrative or direct its flow (seen also in Appendix 2). Speaking generally on the visual elements of the two films, they can be said to be very different in their presentation. As seen in a variety of shots, (see table in Appendix 1) *Hereditary* has a dark, brooding atmosphere, with warm green and cold blue tones, as well as many scenes with very minimal lighting, enveloped in darkness. *Midsommar* is on the opposite end of the spectrum, with its light tones, deceptively bright daylight and vibrant colors. The latter film takes place almost entirely in bright

daylight, which creates an uneasily safe atmosphere, one unique to a horror film. Despite the difference in their color choices, the two films are similar in their shot construction, with their very symmetrical framing that often centers consistently on the main characters. Furthermore, the aesthetics of both films are consistent throughout, presenting the events in their respective styles and focusing on the macabre beauty of violence, grief and death. It is clear that the films approach horror film style in an unusual way, creating visually appealing aesthetics and relaying the story at a slower pace. Beauty and pleasant aesthetics are generally an unfamiliar element to horror, according to Cherry, as violence and fear form horror's unpleasant, negative aesthetic aim.[67] In that sense, elevated horror's visual aesthetics act as the differentiator from mainstream and traditional horror, employing arthouse-like, visually pleasant aspects of film presentation.

Music and Sound

Other than its interesting usage during a shock-cut, as described above, sound plays an important role in *Hereditary* and *Midsommar,* truly adding to their significance in the elevated horror subgenre. The films have a similar approach to scoring, despite using

different instruments and melodies. In *Midsommar,* traditional Swedish instruments can be heard in the diegetic sound – played by the villagers of Hårga, and the non-diegetic sound – overlaid as soundtrack.[68] Their melodies sometimes intertwine, creating obscure and tense droning

Figure 7: Dani is shown a peculiar way of breathing out after taking a drink

sounds that add to the film's tone, building a sense of unease through traditional instruments. In *Hereditary,* a very specific atmosphere is created through the composer Colin Stetson's use of clarinet and "reed instruments."[69] There are also vocals in the score, which are very guttural and deep-sounding, creating a threatening atmosphere. Both films step away from traditional horror soundtracks, like "synthesizer and strings,"

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[67] Cherry, *Horror,* 89.
[68] Peter Helman, "The Haxan Cloak – "Fire Temple"," Stereogum, last modified July 3, 2019, https://www.stereogum.com/2049972/the-haxan-cloak-midsommar-soundtrack-score-fire-temple/music/.
[69] Kattelman, "Triggering Fear."

opting to create a distinct atmosphere that works particularly well with the film's tone.[70] Notably, other parts of the films' sound are also important. According to Cherry, it is typical for a horror film to use sounds of "breathing and screams" to achieve a terrifying atmosphere.[71] In both films, these two noises play an important role. In *Hereditary* breathing can be used in total silence to represent the character's vulnerability and fear. When Peter accidentally kills Charlie, his panicked, hesitant breathing aims to remind us of his humanity and innocence, despite the horrific situation that just occurred. Screams in the film are used with the soundtrack to convey overwhelming emotion, as for example when Annie cries and screams over the pain of losing her daughter. Or similarly, in the classroom scene, when the soundtrack goes quiet and Peter's scream is the only sound heard, emphasizing his pain, as well as his isolation (Figure 8). In *Midsommar,* breathing plays a role in the film's rituals, seen on Figure 7, where one of the villagers teaches Dani to breathe in and out after taking a drink of a mysterious liquid. The sound of breathing, despite being so normal, seems to hold a sinister purpose, with the way the villagers methodically reproduce it throughout the film. Screaming and crying also serves a particular audible purpose in *Midsommar,* as often Dani is shown crying by herself over the pain of losing her family, while at the end of the film, the villagers embrace her and replicate her screams of pain, creating an overwhelming choir of cries and screams. Therefore, it is clear that sound plays a large role in the two films' aesthetics, using unusual instruments to create a foreign, tension-filled sound, and utilizing human-made sounds like breathing and screaming to emphasize the character's emotional state and create an ominous feeling in the viewer. The sound emphasizes elevated horror's unusual approach to aesthetics, using traditional horror sound

Figure 8: Peter (Bottom Left) screams as he is possessed by the evil spirit

effects in unique ways and approaching instrumental soundtrack from a different

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[70] Kattelman.

[71] Cherry, *Horror*, 71.

perspective. This, yet again, emphasizes elevated horror's distinct point of view, and its different development process – focusing on emotions and character.

Analysis Conclusion

After completing the analysis, it becomes clear that although aesthetic and narrative horror conventions are present in *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* to an extent, their presentation takes on a completely different approach to contemporary mainstream horror. Cherry writes that horror imagery in cinema tends to move away from "sociocultural notions of beauty," but as evident from the analysis of the films above, these notions of beauty are often followed, rather than rejected by *Hereditary* and *Midsommar*.[72] They feature visually appealing cinematography, symmetrical framing and a distinct style that shines throughout the whole film, allowing the narrative to flourish and the viewers to study the characters and their emotions.

CHAPTER 3 – WHAT'S ELEVATED ABOUT ELEVATED HORROR?

After exploring the films' themes and aesthetics analytically, I will be looking at their contribution to the overall horror genre, as well as their distinction from it, to outline their impact on modern horror cinema. The name 'elevated horror' for the wave of films in question directly implies a slightly condescending separation from the horror genre as a whole. It suggests that horror itself is not elevated, and other labels such as 'post-horror' or 'horror-adjacent drama' only exacerbate this perception. It is therefore important to analyze the reasons for such a name, and explore whether the title of 'elevated' is applicable or even necessary for this category of horror films.

The contemporary horror genre is a very mixed bag. There are cheap, cliché-ridden films, large studio horror franchises such as *It* (2017), *The Conjuring (2013),* the new *Halloween (2018),* independent horrors produced by smaller studios, as well as many outliers that don't fall under these categories. Today, this genre is seen as a way for studios or directors to make money fast – horror films cost much less, don't need 'expensive' actors, and earn a lot of money.[73] According to scholar Joe Tompkins, the "problem" with many contemporary horror films is that they forego "social criticism and psychological themes" in favor of gratuitous violence and gore, which serves no narrative

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[72] Cherry, 89.

[73] Nicholas Barber, "Is Horror the Most Disrespected Genre?," BBCpage, last modified June 14, 2018, https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20180614-is-horror-the-most-disrespected-genre.

purpose or symbolism.[74] Historically, the horror genre has instead used violence to make commentary or provide "social-allegorical critique," according to Tompkins, and this aspect has reduced over time until the violence remained by itself.[75] While horror films in the past needed to be legitimized by their moral, social or cultural input, a transition into postmodern horror, described by Pinedo in Chapter 1 of this thesis, allowed the genre to present violence and scares with no particular reason, other than to shock or frighten viewers. This, in Tompkins' view signifies the downfall in the perception of the horror genre, due to the focus on fear- and disgust-based aesthetics in many mainstream horror films of the past years.

According to Adam Hart, what then differentiates 'elevated' horror films from these mainstream flicks is the return to generally pleasing aesthetics and a focus on an 'arthouse' presentation.[76] Because in elevated horror, the traditional "sensational address" to the spectator through violence, fear and disgust is "incorporated into the arthouse and the avant-garde," according to him, as can be seen in Chapter 2 of the thesis.[77] Both *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* feature gratuitous violence, in fact, more than in some mainstream horror films, but it is presented through a different lens. Like in Hart's argument, in the case studies the violence plays a purpose and always causes an equally visceral, outward reaction from the characters – underlined by the films' arthouse pacing and aesthetics. Furthermore, Hart writes about the allegory that is embedded in elevated horror films, which is also responsible for their 'elevated'-ness.[78] A lot of the films from the subgenre can be viewed and understood through the lens of the character's inner troubles. For example, in *Hereditary,* Annie's inner struggle with her complex feelings towards her mother and hopeless grief at the death of her daughter transpose outwards, as a physical threat to her and her family's life. Therefore, the violent events of the film can allegorically represent grief and pain affecting one's life. Same in *Midsommar,* where a couple's inability to emotionally support each other is very clearly represented in the protagonists' foreign-ness in the Swedish village – they feel alienated, physically threatened, unable to communicate. But once Dani is understood and welcomed by the commune, language seems not to be a boundary, as can be seen in one scene where she suddenly understands Swedish for a few moments

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[74] Tompkins, "The Cultural Politics of Horror Films Criticism," 33.
[75] Tompkins.
[76] Hart, "I'M SCREEEEEEEEAMING!!!!," 84.
[77] Hart.
[78] Hart.

(Figure 9). Therefore, the events of the film can be seen as an allegory for the couple's deteriorating relationship and a break-up, ending in Christian's death, after which Dani finds peace.

Lastly, Hart writes about audience reactions to elevated horror films. Due to their marketing, in the case of some elevated horror films released since 2015, many viewers didn't get what they expected, as Hart claims.[79] To explore that further, Jancovich writes about reviewers and promoters focusing on the horror elements in horror-adjacent films, often marketing them as "gripping, terrifying, shocking," while simultaneously separating

Figure 9: Dani briefly understands and speaks Swedish while participating in a ritual

from the genre through a higher "aesthetic quality" and social politics.[80] As argued previously, this is similar to *Hereditary* and *Midsommar,* and elevated horror films in general, where studios, in an attempt to achieve more financial gain, mislead audiences into believing that the films in question will employ traditional fear-making techniques and aesthetics. When those are not present, the films' arthouse storytelling and sensational affect does not work on the audiences, who are expecting thrilling action, fast-paced scares and inconsequential, or non-existent, socio-political meaning.

Regardless of the above, the term 'elevated' in itself suggests a more high-class, elitist background to elevated horror. According to Bridges, this is reflected in elevated horror narratives as well – they usually concern "white, middle class families", in expensive homes and comfortable living situations.[81] This is true for *Hereditary* and *Midsommar,* of which neither mentions the white protagonists' financial matters, both films showing them living comfortably. For Tompkins, elitism also shines through in the critique of elevated horror films, giving them more credit than the so-called lower forms of horror, like slashers or found-footage.[82] It can be argued, as a counter-point to the

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[79] Hart, 85.
[80] Jancovich, "Genre and The Audience," 156-157.
[81] Bridges, "Post-Horror Kinships."
[82] Tompkins, "The Cultural Politics of Horror Film Criticism," 34.

introduction of elevated horror, that films that are seen as less-subtle and less valuable to the horror cinema landscape are just as worthy of analysis and positive critique, reflecting cultural landscapes of their time and embedding social commentary. The world 'elevated' in the title of the genre should contribute to that notion, not retract from it.

Hence, the importance of elevated horror to the genre at large comes from its return to fundamental principles of horror and cinematic aesthetics, which contemporary mainstream horror lacks.

CONCLUSION

To offer a conclusion to the analysis it is necessary to finally answer the research question, guided by the smaller conclusions that were made throughout. The question at the heart of this thesis is *How does 'elevated horror' approach the aesthetic and narrative elements of film construction differently to traditional horror films?* The answer is as follows. In terms of aesthetics, elevated horror employs arthouse techniques of slow-moving shots, unusual music, symmetrical and pleasant framing, etc. It features some similar aesthetics to mainstream horror, such as disorienting cinematography and graphic violence, but generally employs polar opposite ones, like using smooth and flowy dissolve cuts over regular sharp cuts. Narratively, elevated horror is not so different to traditional and even mainstream horror, linking closely to postmodern storylines of the 1970's about family disconnection. Therefore, although it significantly stands out in the contemporary mainstream horror film landscape, elevated horror closely relates to traditional horror and cannot be substantially separated from it.

As a counterargument, it is important to mention that both films that were analyzed as part of the elevated horror wave were directed by Ari Aster, so their implications for the genre can be limited, due to, perhaps, this director's distinct vision and focus. Even so, *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* are films-originators of the elevated horror genre, and, therefore, inseparable from it. Future research can be conducted on other films and directors within this wave, to determine whether their narrative and aesthetic qualities differ from traditional horror, as those do in Ari Aster's films.

To conclude, elevated horror signifies the return of the horror genre to socially-relevant and affective storylines, higher-grade aesthetics and allegorical elements, which give horror an art-house feel and successfully influence audiences without senseless violence or jump-scares. It is important to emphasize that this is a return, a reinvigoration of aesthetics and narratives that horror has already seen, ones it has been known for

before, but it's still a refreshing break from formulaic and often profoundly aimless mainstream horror films. It is interesting to see where horror will move in the future, but also already clear that audiences and critics alike seem to appreciate the less-accessible, arthouse-like films of elevated horror that both stretch and revitalize the potential of the genre.

Word Count: 7695

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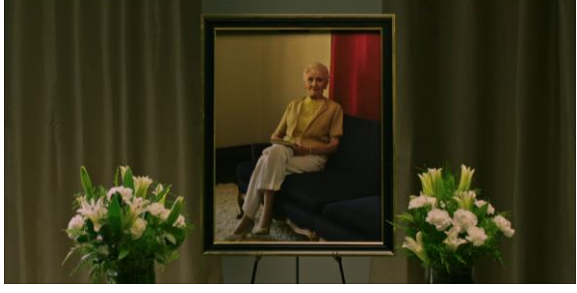
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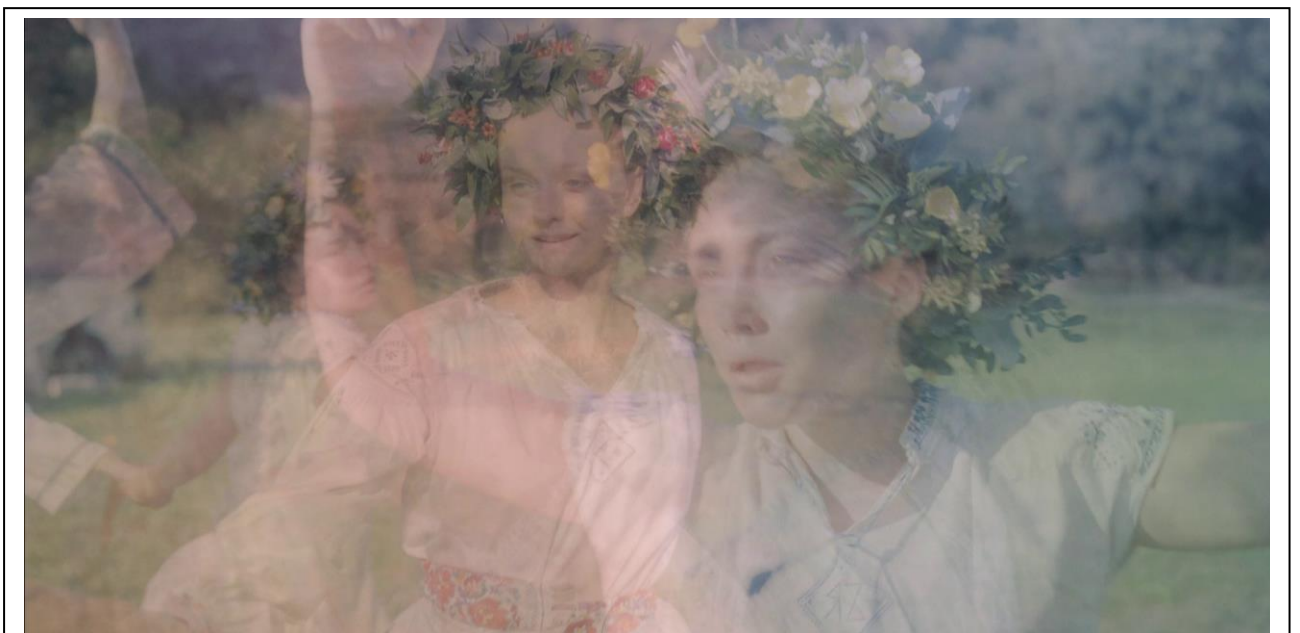
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Appendix 1: Colour Table

Hereditary and *Midsommar* – Color and Composition	
Hereditary	*Midsommar*
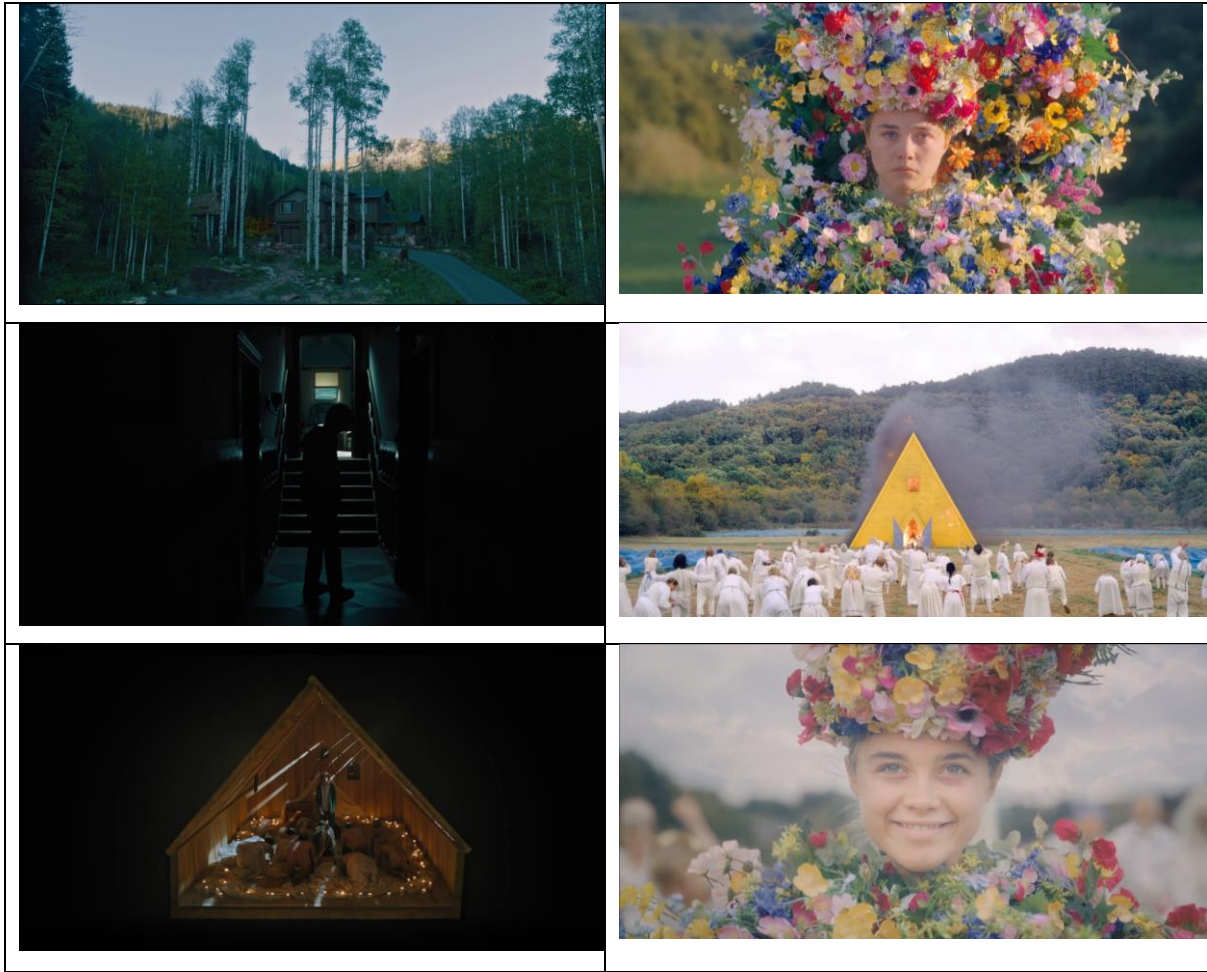
Appendix 2: Another example of dissolve imagery in *Midsommar*

Appendix 2: Dani dancing around the Maypole, as her vision clouds