FILM/ TELEVISION REVIEW ESSAY

Hereditary (dir. by Ari Aster, 2018) **and *Sharp Objects*** (HBO, 2018)

In *Madness in Civilisation*: *A Cultural History of Insanity*, Andrew Scull observes of post-war psychoanalytic perceptions of the American nuclear family that

> Freud's theories had discerned the roots of psychopathology in this setting, and his American followers laid a host of problems at the feet of the family. And especially, the analysts indicted America's mothers, as the source, it would appear, of an ever-expanding array of illnesses and debility, and even a threat to the health of the nation.[1]

It wasn't long, Scull notes, before a host of these 'Pathological Mommies' appeared in popular fiction and film. As evidenced by well-known films such as *The Bad Seed* (1956), *Psycho* (1960), *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), and *Carrie* (1976), this preoccupation with 'bad' and/or conflicted motherhood represents one of the most significant tropes found in American horror cinema from the 1950s onwards.

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

Hereditary neatly establishes from its opening frame that this will be a story of malign influence exerted from beyond the grave. It begins with the text of a local newspaper obituary, neatly establishing that elderly matriarch Ellen Taper Leigh (the actor remains uncredited, and is only ever depicted onscreen in photographs) has passed away after a long illness. The film opens on the morning of Ellen's funeral service, at which her only surviving child, Annie Graham (Toni Collette), gives a subtly strained eulogy. Ellen was, Annie admits, a complicated and self-contained woman who had, ominously, 'her own private rituals'.

[1] Andrew Scull, *Madness in Civilisation* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2016), p. 342.

We learn that Ellen had an unusually close but complex relationship with her granddaughter, Annie's youngest child, a thirteen-year-old girl named Charlie (Milly Shapiro). 'Grandma always wanted me to be a boy', Charlie fretfully confides. Like the 'private rituals' line, it's a statement ultimately meant to be taken literally. *Hereditary* belongs to that long lineage of horror films one watches in an entirely different way the second time round. Trailers for the film slyly implied that it was going to be yet another entry in the 'evil child' canon, and things certainly seem to be going that way when Charlie's off-kilter emotional affect, social awkwardness, and compulsive vocal tic (an oddly unsettling 'cluck') become more pronounced than ever in the days following Ellen's burial. She performs odd little rituals in the woods that surround the family home, and methodically decapitates a dead pigeon. The extent to which Charlie's alarming behaviour is focused upon during the opening scenes means that, when she is killed off less than half an hour into the film's running time, it comes as a complete surprise.

The impact of this development is compounded by Aster's skilful staging of the bizarre accident which takes Charlie's life. Her older brother Peter (Alex Wolff), who is sixteen, has been browbeaten by Annie into taking his decidedly anti-social sister to a teenage party. Soon after their arrival, Peter heads upstairs to smoke pot, telling Charlie to stay put and eat a piece of chocolate cake that has been left on the kitchen counter. This Charlie does, apparently unaware that the cake has been contaminated with nut particles (her allergy having been referenced earlier). Peter, upon realising that she is in anaphylactic shock, frantically sets out to drive Charlie to hospital. The child writhes in suffocating agony in the backseat, and we begin to fear that she may not make it. And then Charlie, gasping for air, leans out of the window and is decapitated by a telephone pole. It's a moment which leaves the audience reeling.

What really drives home Aster's masterfully unsettling treatment of this horrific incident is Peter's reaction, which is to drive home, say nothing, and catatonically hide under the bed covers until Annie, off-screen, discovers her daughter's headless corpse in the backseat of the family car. As her screams of gut-wrenching loss penetrate Peter's fugue state, the film completes its superbly assured move in to an exhilaratingly unpredictable gear. For Annie, Peter, and her long-suffering husband Steve (Gabriel Byrne), things are only going to get worse. *Much* worse.

The death of a child, the guilt felt by an older sibling left behind, and the malign influence of a monstrous mother also constitute the basic narrative building blocks of *Sharp*

Objects. The eight-part series opens as Camille Preaker (Amy Adams), a self-loathing and hard-drinking crime reporter, is asked by her editor to return to her hometown of Wind Gap, Missouri, to investigate the circumstances surrounding the disappearance of a young teenager, a mystery that is all the more ominous since another local girl was found murdered only a year before. As with *Hereditary*, viewers expecting a conventional treatment of the subject matter – in this case, the small-town-based, 'Dead Girl'-focused murder mystery of the kind neatly dissected by Alice Bolin in her 2018 book of the same name – will find these expectations confounded.[2] Although the need to discover who has been murdering Wind Gap's girls is important for both the show and the main character, the series is, arguably, more accurately understood as an ambitious, impressionistic character piece genuinely invested in representing the ways in which a wounded psyche attempts to process unresolved trauma.

This means that events in *Sharp Objects* are largely (though not entirely) filtered through Camille's booze- and emotion-fuelled perspective. Her return home triggers the release of a host of unwanted associations, sensations, and memories connected with her unhappy childhood – particularly those surrounding the protracted illness and death of her beloved younger sister, Marian (Lulu Wilson). For twenty years, Camille has so intensely repressed her recollections about the truth of what really happened to Marian (and to her) that her only relief comes in the form of compulsive self-harming behaviours, such as cutting and alcohol abuse. From the outset, Adam's intensely sympathetic performance and closed-off body language communicate the fact that, despite Camille's desperate attempts to just keep it together, write the damn story, and retreat to the safe distance of her (tentatively) stable life in back St Louis, simply being physically present in Wind Gap has stirred up powerful emotions which can no longer be contained.

Many of the show's most effective thematic conceits are underlined by recurring visual motifs that reinforce this sense that *Sharp Objects*, in classic gothic fashion, is all about this painful process of unlocking and interpreting that which has hitherto been forcefully repressed within Camille's damaged psyche. Her frequent flashbacks tend to surface as brief, impressionistic intrusions into the present day, which slowly begin to suggest a relationship between her traumatic childhood experiences and Wind Gap's more recent horrors. This sense that Camille is being haunted by the past is underlined by the fact that we see at least one almost-subliminal ghost-like glimpse of her sister Marian in every episode.

[2] Alice Bolin, *Dead Girls: Essays on Surviving an American Obsession* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018).

As the original 'Dead Girl' whose fate lies at the heart of Wind Gap's many intertwined horrors, she is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. These flashbacks are lensed with a pastoral poetry (they often take place outdoors, away from Adora's authoritarian presence) which evokes the intermingled sense of love and loss that Camille feels as she unwillingly reconnects with the departed sibling she obviously loved very deeply.

What remains of Camille's family is dominated by *Sharp Objects*' magnificently malevolent mother-figure, Adora Crellin (Patricia Clarkson), a commanding small-town aristocrat whose ultra-feminine dress sense and viper-like stillness conceal a streak of madness and pathological narcissism that has for decades been enabled by those around her. It is obvious from their first encounter that Adora resents Camille's presence in town, never mind the family home. The identity of Camille's father, as in Flynn's source novel, is never revealed, and is in fact irrelevant (the same can be said of Annie's father in *Hereditary*, who is only referred to very briefly). She is, like her sisters, first and foremost Adora's child, whether she wants to be or not. The other residents of the palatial family estate, suggestively depicted as a plantation-era mansion, are Camille's stepfather Alan Crellin, Adora's fawning enabler (Henry Czerny), and their thirteen-year-old daughter, Camille's half-sister Amma (Eliza Scanlen). In contrast to the coldness with which she treats Camille, Adora continually ministers to Amma with hyperbolic effusiveness – smothering one daughter with love even as she freezes out the other.

Unlike Camille, who has rejected everything her mother had to offer, and Marion, who was fatally compromised by her innate desire to be a 'good girl', Amma seems to have figured out a way to somehow please Adora *and* cultivate an identity of her own. She's the classic home angel/street devil, one minute playing with her elaborate doll house (a replica of the family home), and in the next sneaking into town so that she can malevolently meander around town with her binge-drinking, pill-popping gang of roller-skating Mean Girls. In a character detail that will ultimately become important, Camille soon realises that Amma lords it over her peers in the same way that Adora, owner of Wind Gap's biggest business (a hog-butchering plant), pulls the strings of the adults in town. Although she is simultaneously fascinated and alarmed by Amma's neediness and talent for deception, Camille cannot help but begin to feel genuine affection for her volatile sibling.

As well as featuring genuinely terrifying matriarchs, then, both *Hereditary* and *Sharp Objects* present us with troubled thirteen-year old girls who are depicted both as victims and sources of potential (and actual) threat. Furthermore, both Amma and Charlie are ultimately

revealed to be the hapless pawns of powerful mother figures (Adora and Ellen). There are other central visual and thematic similarities between the two narratives. Both feature pivotal confrontations that take place at the dinner table; have ineffectual father figures (Alan and Steven); and include multiple scenes in which brooding thematic and visual significance is attributed to the interior and exterior design of the striking family home. They also have in common an overriding fear that, in one's hidden family history, inescapable doom may lurk.

However, the key visual motif connecting the texts is the doll's house. In *Sharp Objects*, Amma's constant fussing with her prized possession underlines the extent to which she has been dangerously infantilised. It also foreshadows the show's climatic revelation that both she and Marian have been the victims of Adora's Munchausen's-by-Proxy Syndrome, a psychiatric disorder in which sufferers – usually mothers – purposefully poison those in their care, in a bid for attention, status, and the 'pleasure' of performative care-giving. Amma has, for her entire life, been a kind of living doll to Adora, a figure to be dressed up, deliberately sickened, made well, and poisoned again. We eventually discover that Camille, who refused to 'play along', has been rejected because, unlike poor Marian, she refused to acquiesce to her mother's demand for utter compliance. The doll's house also, crucially, conceals the horrific evidence that decisively links Amma, and not Adora, with the horrific murders of her classmates (the missing girls whose fate brought Camille back to town in the first place). As we already know, Camille has turned her own rage, despair, and capacity for violence inwards, deliberately harming herself for many years as a result. Amma has, catastrophically, *externalised* her fury, and directed it violence outwards – towards the girls she saw as rivals for Adora's deadly attention.

The doll's houses which feature in *Hereditary* are not a child's macabre playthings. Instead, they are eerily detailed replicas of the spaces in which key events in Annie's family and emotional life have taken place (including the hospital room in which Ellen died), as if, by recreating these sites externally, Annie can safely work through her obvious internal conflicts. She is an accomplished artist whose work, it is made clear, has acquired acclaim and critical respect. But in the aftermath of the dual tragedies which have stricken the family, her increasingly obsessive fixation upon these dioramas – which soon include a gruesome recreation of Charlie's death scene – make it clear that Annie has begun dangerously to dissociate herself from Peter and Steven. Indeed, it seems for a while that like she is likely succumbing to the strain of mental illness that is said to have cost both her father and brother their lives. Colette's remarkably visceral, intense performance plays a key role in establishing

the extent to which Annie's already fragile mental stability has been undermined by grief, rage, and justifiable paranoia.

The terrible truth about the conspiracy festering at the heart of the Graham family has earlier been telegraphed to us by the fact that Aster repeatedly frames his doomed protagonists as hapless dolls manipulated by unseen but malevolent forces. Ellen Taper Leigh may be dead, but she was (consciously at least), unbeknownst to Annie, a Satanic-cult leader who, many years before, set in motion sinister plans now coming to fruition. It's a development hastened by the fact that, when Annie (in what would, in a very different type of film, be a positive development) decides to attend a bereavement-support group, she ends up falling under the influence of yet another manipulative mother figure, Joan (Ann Dowd), later revealed to be one of Ellen's most trusted acolytes. Even as she attempts to escape Ellen's emotional (and occult) legacy, therefore, Annie becomes more and more entangled in her web – and increasingly aggressive towards her own son Peter, whose already profound emotional distress is greatly exacerbated by her dangerously erratic behaviour.

By the time *Hereditary*'s insanely hyperbolic climax occurs, it has evolved into a bracingly literal tale of demonic possession reminiscent of classics such as *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *The Omen* (1976), as well as another recent horror hit from the same production company (A24) – Robert Eggar's *The Witch* (2015). However, this seemingly unlikely swerve from stark and uncompromising family melodrama (intriguingly, Aster has cited the work of famed British realist Mike Leigh as a key influence) to full-throttle supernatural horror works surprisingly well, and is in complete keeping with the profound sense of visual, aural, and thematic unease that has saturated the narrative from the start.

Ultimately, in both *Sharp Objects* and *Hereditary*, there is nothing worse than realising that the shadow of the 'Pathological Mommy' can never be escaped, and that the corruption of once-innocent youngsters – Amma and Peter – has always been inevitable. In the final moments of *Hereditary*, Annie, reduced to a shrieking, violent pawn by her mother's scheme, carries out an act of graphically depicted self-destruction so extreme that it surpasses even the most notorious moments in von Trier's *Antichrist* (2007). Yet, despite the undeniable jolt of shock that this development evokes, the instant that elicited audible gasps from the cinema audience I watched the film with was a line of dialogue from Annie which reveals a devastating but cathartic truth – 'I never wanted to be your mother'. For all of the undisputable shock value of the film's final scenes, then, it is in *Hereditary*'s harrowing depiction of the two of the most taboo emotions associated with maternity – resentment

towards one's children and regret at ever having had them in the first place – that linger longest.

Sharp Objects also knows how to use raw emotional impact – and the painful truth – to leave the viewer reeling. Although we are briefly presented with the possibility that Amma and Camille can establish a happy and healthy life together once they are finally free of Adora, all hope is cruelly ripped away in the closing minutes. When Camille, once more prompted to probe below the seemingly stable surface of things, impulsively investigates the interior of Amma's precious doll's house, she discovers that the décor has been accentuated with human teeth (it had earlier repeatedly been observed that Wind Gap's murdered girls were missing some of theirs). As she sits in stunned silence, having instantly grasped the devastating implications of this discovery, Amma walks into the room, sees the expression on her sister's face, and utters the show's perfectly shattering final line – 'Don't tell Mama'.

Bernice M. Murphy