Deterministic Dollhouse: Metafictional Determinism in Ari Aster's *Hereditary*

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This essay argues that Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2018) is a filmic example of metafictional determinism, a type of naturalism. The main contribution of this article is to demonstrate how *Hereditary* depicts naturalistic themes in new ways via techniques unique to the medium, ultimately uncovering new formal techniques of naturalism. Naturalism's resurgence post-9/11 and its differences from the literary naturalism of roughly a century earlier have been extensively covered in existing criticism, as have naturalist themes in contemporary texts across a range of media. However, how film does new things *formally* with naturalism has been largely overlooked.

I argue that the characters in *Hereditary* are represented in a similar manner to characters in naturalistic fiction in that they are depicted as having no free will, but with a meta-twist: I read the characters in *Hereditary* as intentionally depicted as characters trapped within a horror film. The characters within *Hereditary* have limited agency over not simply their circumstances but also the genre conventions within which they are entrapped, and are represented as ultimately subject to the whims of the film's omnipotent and sadistic horror director. *Hereditary* presents a fatalistic narrative whereby characters unknowingly work through a predetermined plot, as their horrific fates are signposted to the viewer. I explore how cinematic equivalents of the metafictional-determinist devices found in naturalist fiction are employed in *Hereditary*. These include the film's combination of naturalist themes with supernatural elements; its exploitations of the specific characteristics of the film medium and horror genre to uniquely rework techniques of metafictional determinism; the representation of the text's world as created and determined by the writer; and the intrusion of the text's writer via an autobiographical persona. In doing so, this article frames *Hereditary*'s themes and tropes, including the relevance of the film's miniatures, the nature of inheritance, and familial and intergenerational trauma, via a theoretical application of metafictional determinism.

Naturalism, Horror, and Metafictional Determinism

Before conducting this analysis, it is first necessary to outline this article's definition of terms and the literary contexts for this article's argument. Rehearsing a full genealogy of naturalism

and the reasons behind naturalism's return is beyond the scope of this article and already covered in existing criticism. In summary, however, naturalism is a form of writing that encourages a view of humankind as controlled by deterministic forces including social, hereditary, biological, and environmental, and features characters lacking in free will. Prominent elements of naturalism include characters shaped by fate, and plots focusing on individual and societal decline. A further naturalist theme is a reduction of life to its barest realities by 'peeling away social and cultural conventions to explore the non-contingent humanity/animality that undergirds our existence', meaning that characters are reduced to their biological limits.[1] Naturalism came to prominence in the nineteenth century, and experienced a resurgence in the United States in the period between the destruction of the World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001 and the election of Donald Trump as president in 2016. This period appears deterministic because it reflects the view 'that in neoliberal America individuals' choices are diminished, and that behaviour is thus determined'.[2] Naturalism's resurgence is evident in a diverse range of twenty-first-century American texts including Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004), Paul Auster's *Man in the Dark* (2008), Philip Meyer's *American Rust* (2009), and Lionel Shriver's *Big Brother* (2013). Michael Tavel Clarke observes that 'the work of Cormac McCarthy in particular suggests […] a resurgence of naturalism'.[3] Popular culture and filmic examples of naturalism's return include Shawn Ryan's *The Shield* (2002-08), James Manos Jr.'s *Dexter* (2006-08), Vince Gilligan's *Breaking Bad* (2008-13), Gilligan and Peter Gould's *Better Call Saul* (2015-22), and the more recent horror fiction of Stephen King, such as *The Dark Tower* series (1982-2012).

Naturalism and horror are inextricably bound up with one another. The pessimism that naturalism articulates regarding free will is fundamental to the horror film. Among the primary defining characteristics of the horror film is the characters' lack of choice and control. Bruce F. Kawin says that the goal of horror film is to 'frighten' viewers and 'give us characters in terrible situations'.[4] Kawin observes that horror films access a core set of fears that 'we may share as humans', including 'endangering some less tangible aspect of being or behaviour we value, such as our free will'.[5] This connection between naturalism and the gothic has been

[1] Bill Hardwig, 'Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and "A World to Come"', *Studies in American Naturalism*, 8.1 (2013), pp. 38-51.
[2] Alan Gibbs, '"Things Happen to You They Happen": Cormac McCarthy, Morality, and Neo-Naturalism', *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, 18.1 (2020), pp. 56-77 (p. 58).
[3] Michael Tavel Clarke, 'The New Naturalism: Cormac McCarthy, Frank Norris, and the Question of Postmodernism', *Studies in American Naturalism*, 9.1 (2014), pp. 52-78 (p. 52).
[4] Bruce F. Kawin, *Horror and the Horror Film* (Anthem Press, 2012), p. 5.
[5] Kawin, *Horror*, p. 5.

considered at length by Monika Elbert and Wendy Ryden, who assert that what they call 'Naturalist Gothic' appears to be a contradiction in terms, because the gothic is known for its sensational effects, and emphasises horror and the supernatural. Conversely, naturalism as a mode of representation is defined by extreme realism, and generally works within the laws of probability. However, Elbert and Ryden point out that what unites the gothic and naturalism is a shared pessimism and the perception of a fearful, lingering presence that haunts an impending modernity. In a number of nineteenth-century naturalist works, due to the alienation and despair of the modernist moment, reality is so harsh as to be depicted through gothic tropes.[6] For example, Dian L. Shoos' examination of the intersection between the horror genre and domestic-violence films argues that the latter employ the conventions of the gothic romance to represent male characters' abuse of their wives, with the irrevocable movement towards a final face-to-face confrontation, immersing the viewer in the sense of entrapment and helplessness experienced by the female victim.[7] Similarly, Tony Williams explores the family in the American horror film, and describes the institution as deterministic, one that can cause 'great personal unhappiness', but one which individuals are 'born into and [have] no escape from at a vulnerable age'.[8] From the early twentieth century onwards, then, naturalist texts are essentially gothic because modern realism is gothic.

Considering the horror film in relation to naturalism, specifically metafictional determinism, helps to extend this prior conversation. Metafictional determinism, as asserted above, is a type of naturalist writing. There is a significant difference to be noted between naturalism and metafictional determinism, however. While naturalism implies the wresting away of agency and choice, showing that humans are subject to forces beyond their control, a slightly different philosophy emerges in metafictional determinism, one in which characters, but not the creators of the text, are bereft of agency. This evokes the naturalist writing of Émile Zola, whereby the novelist is 'a scientist or "experimental moralist"' who develops characters 'as figures in a grand experiment to test [their] physical and emotional responses'.[9] According to Alan Gibbs, the neo-naturalist counterfactual form used in contemporary fiction similarly considers 'alternate histories' as 'a form of neo-naturalist experiment', with the naturalist writer constructing 'scenarios and characters and […] let[ting] them play out at will'. Such texts

[6] Monika Elbert and Wendy Ryden, 'Introduction', in *Haunting Realities: Naturalist Gothic and American Realism*, ed. by Elbert and Ryden (University of Alabama Press, 2017), pp. 1-16.
[7] Diane L. Shoos, *Domestic Violence in Hollywood Film: Gaslighting* (Springer, 2017), p. 12.
[8] Tony Williams, *Hearths of Darkness: The Family in the American Horror Film* (University Press of Mississippi, 2014), p. 3.
[9] Donna M. Campbell. 'American Literary Naturalism: Critical Perspectives', *Literature Compass*, 8.8 (2011), pp. 499-513 (p. 501).

'apply variations to history and existing historical traumas as we recognise them', and 'these counterfactual narratives are […] used […] as a means of isolating the ways in which traumas, both structural and historical, are experienced by individuals'.[10]

Where metafictional determinism diverges from such neo-naturalist writing is the inclusion of metafictional themes and techniques. In works of metafictional determinism, 'the course of action is established by an outline early on' in the narrative, and the author will make their 'own presence known in [their] fiction'.[11] This is generally achieved through framing the novels by a 'rough plot outline', foreshadowing future events.[12] The readers know from the beginning of the text that the characters are doomed. For example, Bo Petterson asserts that the opening of Vladimir Nabokov's *Laughter in the Dark* (1932) is an example of 'summary' in fiction, and 'a supreme instance of metafictional determinism because of its initial position and the limits it sets to the story'.[13] Heidi Strengell observes similar devices in King's fiction. For example, Strengell highlights the rough plot outlines of future tragedies in *Carrie* (1974).[14] This is also evident in *The Stand* (1978), in which, Strengell argues, King 'delights in flaunting that he possesses more information than the reader'. In works of metafictional determinism, the author may also intrude the narrative via an 'autobiographical persona'. Strengell positions King's appearances in *The Dark Tower* series as exemplifying this intrusion, serving to remind the reader that the narrative is a world 'created and determined by the author Stephen King'.[15]

Metafictional determinism in the contemporary horror film is yet to be explored in existing criticism. I argue that the particular blend of horror, naturalism, and metafiction that Strengell describes above is evident in *Hereditary*, but depicted in new and uniquely cinematic ways.

Hereditary and Naturalism

Aster describes *Hereditary* as containing two halves, beginning as a family tragedy, but gradually becoming a horror film.[16] *Hereditary* centres on the Graham family, Annie (Toni

[10] Gibbs, *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 207-08.
[11] Bo Petterson, *The World According to Kurt Vonnegut: Moral Paradox and Narrative Form* (Abo Akademi University Press, 1994), p. 138.
[12] Heidi Strengell, *Dissecting Stephen King: From the Gothic to Literary Naturalism* (Popular Press, 2005), p. 246.
[13] Strengell, *Dissecting Stephen King*, p. 138.
[14] Strengell, p. 247.
[15] Strengell, p. 250, p. 246, and p. 247.
[16] Mallory Yu, 'Director Ari Aster Says *Hereditary* is a Family Drama at its Core', *NPR*, 11 June 2018 <https://www.npr.org/2018/06/11/618975688/director-ari-aster-says-hereditary-is-a-family-drama-at-its-core?t=1644338625267> [accessed 8 February 2022].

Collette), Steve (Gabriel Byrne), and their two children, Peter (Alex Wolff) and Charlie (Milly Shapiro). Annie's mother, Ellen Leigh (Kathleen Chalfant), dies and is gradually revealed to have been the leader of a demonic cult, who has for years plotted the resurrection of the demon Paimon, using her grandson Peter as a vessel, and the rest of the Grahams as sacrifices. Ellen had initially arranged for Paimon to possess Charlie as a baby; however, Paimon covets a male human body. *Hereditary* depicts the Grahams' varying failed attempts to escape the sinister fate they have inherited as Ellen's scheme plays out. The cult orchestrates the following sequence of events to ensure the possession of Peter: the death of Charlie; the meeting between Annie and the cultist Joan (Ann Dowd); and Joan's manipulation of Annie to perform a ritual that is essential for Paimon's summoning. The ritual results in Steve's death, Annie's temporary possession and suicide, and Peter's attempted suicide having encountered these events via jumping from the Graham's attic window, after which Paimon enters his body.

The Grahams are thus subject both to natural and supernatural forces beyond their control, the demonic cult being employed as a metaphor for the naturalist theme of hereditary, and of biological and environmental forces. The title of the film refers to both the Grahams being products of family circumstances, genetics, and history, and their direct bloodline's ability to resurrect Paimon. Analogous to Williams' observation that the family has long served as a major locus for the modern horror genre, Aster asserts that *Hereditary* 'is a movie about inheritance – the notion of having no choice in who your family is or what's in your blood […] the horror of being born into a situation over which you have no control'.[17] Jasmine Crittenden likewise notes that the supernatural is employed to explore individuals' lack of 'control over [their] own lives' through themes such as apparitions and possession. However, Crittenden adds that the film 'blurs the line' between the natural and the supernatural, stating that, 'depending on the viewer's interpretation, the demon could represent' a range of unstoppable forces including 'unchecked grief, inherited mental illness, the impact of a controlling matriarch or a combination of all three – or, indeed black magic or fate'.[18] It is via this 'blurring', I argue, that *Hereditary* combines naturalist themes with supernatural elements.

In particular, the Grahams are subject to mental illness inherited from Ellen, which can be read in literal terms as a biological determinant, and metaphorically as a supernatural force. The decapitation of Ellen, Annie, and Charlie as a necessary sacrificial offering for Paimon's

[17] Daniel Dercksen, 'Writer-Director Ari Aster's *Hereditary* – A Work of Operatic Horror', *Writing Studio*, 10 June 2018 <https://writingstudio.co.za/writer-director-ari-asters-hereditary-a-work-of-operatic-horror/> [accessed 30 September 2020].
[18] Jasmine Crittenden, 'Inner Dread: Psychology and Fate in *Hereditary*', *Screen Education*, 94 (2019), pp. 22-27 (p. 26).

arrival (Paimon's symbol, the Seal of Paimon, features a man on a horse carrying three severed heads) suggests that the Grahams are subject to hereditary mental illness via the imagery of literally losing their heads. Likewise, when Annie attends a support group for the bereaved, her monologue suggests that her family trauma stems from both mental illness and Ellen's attempts to resurrect Paimon. Annie explains that Ellen had dissociative identity disorder, that Annie's father committed suicide via starvation 'because he had psychotic depression', and that her brother Charles had schizophrenia and hanged himself at sixteen. Charles left behind a note attributing his suicide to Ellen, accusing her of being controlling, manipulative, and 'putting people inside him'. Annie also has a history of psychotic episodes, on one occasion almost burning herself, Peter, and Charlie alive while sleepwalking. This suggests that Annie is as abusive to her children as Ellen had been to Charles, behaviour that is possibly symptomatic of early bipolar disorder. As Donna M. Campbell describes the Zolaesque experimentations of classical naturalism, 'characters […] face an inevitable downward spiral through their hereditary predispositions to […] violence'.[19] At the same time, however, Annie, her father, and Charles may have been trying to prevent Ellen from resurrecting Paimon, jettisoning any potential hosts; through suicide, the family wanted to deprive Paimon of human bodies to occupy. Indeed, Annie says in a dream sequence to Peter, 'I wasn't trying to kill you, I was trying to save you', explaining that her attempted murder of Peter was a way of preventing Paimon's possession of him. Moreover, the passing down of hereditary mental illness, familial abuse, and a literal curse from Ellen suggests intergenerational trauma specifically, meaning the transference of traumatic experiences and/or stressors from one generation to the next. Annie abuses Peter in a similar way to how Ellen abused Annie; Peter repeats Charles' suicide by leaping from the window; while the image of the decapitated Ellen, Annie, and Charlie shows three generations of Graham women as subject to the same traumatic fate.

Charlie's unusual appearance and behaviour are also indicative of forces stemming from either Paimon's possession or a developmental disability, which is again evocative of the naturalist tradition of characters doomed by their biological limits. The actress Milly Shapiro suffers from a rare genetic disorder called cleidocranial dysostosis.[20] Charlie also displays an extreme insouciance and lack of emotion, which can be read as Paimon's moral ineptitude that is interpreted as mental illness by observers; indeed, it is suggested that Paimon has possessed Charlie since she was an infant. Charlie barely speaks, instead making clicking sounds with

[19] Campbell, 'American Literary Naturalism', p. 501.
[20] Milly Shapiro (@millyshapiro), 'It was such an honor', Instagram, 8 March 2019 <https://www.instagram.com/p/BuuiPMxnnvN/?hl=en> [accessed 26 September 2026].

her tongue. This noise is either a symptom of her disability or Paimon's name, as Peter makes the same noise when he becomes possessed by Paimon. That Peter exhibits similar behaviour further suggests the hereditary nature of Charlie's condition. Additionally, Charlie partakes in unusual activities such as beheading a bird, which she uses as part of one of her homemade sculptures. This behaviour may be symptomatic of her disability or of Paimon's possession, as her sculptures match those featured at the altar in the Grahams' treehouse at the end of the film when Paimon is resurrected.

In this representation of Charlie, we get another dual metaphor whereby the illness can be attributed to both hereditary conditions and supernatural forces. These metaphors are relevant to metafictional determinism. Strengell observes that metafictional determinism such as King's combines horror with naturalism thematically. They note that 'a deterministic view of humankind […] links the Gothic and literary naturalism in King's fiction', adding that 'in Gothic fiction, fate rules human beings, and they are driven by their instincts'. Strengell asserts that King 'examines naturalistic themes by means of horror' and 'supernatural elements', with the gothic providing the 'background' of the narrative and naturalism lending the 'worldview'.[21] They further remark that *The Shining* (1977), for example, contains 'the supernatural motif of the haunted hotel' and that such 'horror elements [in] the story thematise the disintegration of the Torrance family'.[22] Likewise, the horror in *Hereditary* can be taken as stemming from either natural or supernatural sources.

Rough Plot Outlines

The natural and supernatural forces in *Hereditary* also double as metafictional references to the Grahams as characters within a horror film who are subject to the conventions of the genre and the control of a sadistic horror director. According to Aster, 'we are with the family in their ignorance […] but then there's […] this more sadistic, knowing perspective […]. The film itself knows what's happening […] we riddled the film with […] clues as to where we're going.'[23] In the film itself, this notion of rough plot outlines is evoked through dialogue. Annie's description of her family trauma at the bereavement group foretells the fate of the Grahams: Annie's description of Charles' suicide foreshadows that of Peter. Peter, like his uncle Charles, attempts to commit suicide so as to escape Ellen's cult, while Annie's suicide is similar in

[21] Strengell, *Dissecting Stephen King*, pp. 12-13.
[22] Strengell, pp. 23-24.
[23] David Fear, '*Hereditary*: Inside the Making of a Modern Horror Classic', *Rolling Stone*, 12 June 2018 <https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-features/hereditary-inside-the-making-of-a-modern-horror-classic-629141/> [accessed 10 July 2020].

appearance to a hanging, which is how Charles' killed himself. Annie, when possessed, levitates towards the attic ceiling and saws off her head with piano strings. These events are also foreshadowed in the horror film watched by Peter and his friends at the party that he and Charlie attend earlier in the film, in which an individual is shown being beheaded. *Hereditary*'s plot and central themes are likewise foretold via the lecture from Peter's teacher (Morgan Lund), who discusses Greek mythology, specifically the different legends of Hercules (or Heracles), who kills his children having been driven insane. Sophocles' play *The Women of Trachis* (c.450-425 BC) is also discussed, in which Heracles' death is foretold by an oracle, which dooms him to his fate. Peter's teacher ponders whether it is more tragic when a character causes their own downfall due to a fatal flaw or when their fate is predetermined. A student replies that the latter is 'more tragic, because if it's all just inevitable, that means the characters […] never had hope […] they're all just pawns in this horrible, helpless machine'.

Hereditary is naturalist in this latter sense, then, as Ellen's cult has orchestrated a number of different scenarios that will lead to Peter's possession, echoing the Zolaesque concept of the novelist as a scientist or experimental moralist, whereby characters are depicted as figures in a grand experiment to test their physical and emotional responses. Aster says that the cult's scheme is 'absolutely inevitable', and that if Annie had not performed the ritual, it 'would've happened anyway' because '[w]e're seeing one of the ways [the scheme] could play out'.[24] Aster asserts that any attempt by Annie to escape her fate is 'an empty gesture. Ultimately it's not her choice to […] There is a malicious logic at play.'[25] For instance, while Joan (the cultist who manipulates Annie into performing the summoning ritual for Paimon) meets Annie at the bereavement group, a shot of the Grahams' mail slot shows a pamphlet advertising a psychic medium, evidencing that Joan had originally tried to reach Annie in this way. This meeting, then, was going to take place no matter what because the cult is so powerful and has an extensive reach.

The strategy of plot outlines is also achieved visually. In *Hereditary* we see, as Gibbs says of Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), an 'indeterminate bleeding between initially separate discursive layers'.[26] Analogously, when discussing Stanley Kubrick's 1980 film version of King's *The Shining*, Elisa Pezzotta states that the extradiegesis is recalled

[24] Jenelle Riley, '*Hereditary* Filmmaker Ari Aster Answers Burning Questions', *Variety*, 11 June 2018 <https://variety.com/2018/film/awards/hereditary-ari-aster-answers-burning-questions-1202841448/> [accessed 10 July 2020].
[25] Riley, '*Hereditary* Filmmaker', n. p.
[26] Gibbs, *Trauma*, p. 108.

through 'the evocation of the making of the film'.[27] In other words, there are metafictional references in the film to its production and behind-the-scenes content; in *The Shining*, for example, we see miniature models of the hotel that are in fact part of the film's set-design process.[28] I argue that in Aster's film, the plot outlines are likewise achieved in the way the extradiegesis is recalled through the evocation of the making of *Hereditary*. This includes the incorporation of miniature models of narratively significant props and film sets into scenes. Annie is a miniaturist artist, and her dioramas are miniature models of all the key locations in the film, including the Graham house, the nearby highway where Charlie dies, Peter's school where he will get possessed by Paimon, and the hospice where Ellen resided before her death. Annie's dioramas are detailed reproductions of the traumatic events in her life, and failed attempts to exercise power over these events. Bernice Murphy notes that it is 'as if, by recreating these sites externally, Annie can safely work though her obvious internal conflicts'.[29]

Dioramas and miniatures are also used by other characters and outline future scenes. As noted, Charlie's bird sculpture resembles that which appears in the treehouse in the final scene: after she is decapitated in a car accident orchestrated by the cult, Charlie's rotting head is placed atop a wooden statue that is holding a staff; her head is also crowned, and a bird cage hangs beside her. In this same scene, Peter possessed by Paimon is crowned by the cult and the crown itself resembles Charlie's bird sculpture. Charlie's drawings also foretell these events, in particular her sketch of a crowned bird and that of Peter with his eyes crossed out, while the cult possesses a photograph of Peter with holes punched through the eyes, which Peter finds in the Grahams' attic. That Peter's eyes are removed in the photograph and Charlie's drawing further foreshadows Peter's possession, as eyes are traditionally considered representative of the soul, and also references Sophocles' Oedipus, another character from Greek mythology who unwittingly fulfils a prophecy. Moreover, a miniature model of the final treehouse scene is visible in Joan's apartment. Joan's diorama features a crowned, bird-headed miniature with a number of smaller figures crouched before it. The diorama is surrounded by candles, sits atop a cluster of small tree branches, and again features an eyeless photograph of Peter at the centre. In the treehouse scene, the crowned Peter/Paimon stands before the cult members, who kneel before him in a similar manner to Joan's crouched figures and the group is surrounded by candles, while the headless bodies of Ellen and Annie are positioned in the same kneeling pose.

[27] Elisa Pezzotta, *Stanley Kubrick: Adapting the Sublime* (University Press of Mississippi, 2013), p. 142.
[28] Sean Travers, *Trauma in American Popular Culture and Cult Texts, 1980-2020* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), p. 57.
[29] Bernice M. Murphy, '*Hereditary* and *Sharp Objects*', *Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, 17 (2018), pp. 179-85 (p. 185).

Miniatures are a frequent trope in horror and horror-adjacent texts.[30] However, the incorporation of miniatures is especially apt for a metafictional deterministic horror such as *Hereditary*, in which lack of agency and the illusion of control are themes. For instance, Aviva Briefel says that 'dollhouses are akin to smallscale worlds over which one has some control'.[31] Similarly, Dagmar Motcyka Weston notes the history of the use of miniatures in establishing personal and religious control: 'The size of a doll's house provides us with a marvellous power to see and control the life within. […] In medieval representation of the creation, God is sometimes portrayed as the great designer.'[32] In using miniatures in this way in *Hereditary*, Aster achieves a new cinematic way of depicting the metafictional determinist trope of the rough plot outline.

Certain scenes in *Hereditary* also appear like flashforwards. As Pezzotta says of *The Shining*, the diegetic world is also 'evoked in the diegesis itself through the presence of scenes that recall previous scenes' and 'foretell subsequent events'.[33] The latter scenes 'work like flashforwards', which 'announce events that are to follow', or can be interpreted in terms of 'cross-references and repetitions' between scenes.[34] Similar techniques can be found in *Hereditary*, which I interpret as a specifically cinematic variation of the rough plot outline, which determines characters' fates in naturalist texts. Such scenes signal the presence of Aster as an omnipotent director in a similar vein to the characteristic of metafictional determinism of the author making 'his own presence known in his fiction'.[35] That is, the way in which a number of sequences mirror one another in *Hereditary* underscores that the Grahams are trapped in a predetermined chain of events devised by Aster. In doing so, Aster marries the feminist naturalistic trope of characters trapped in circular narratives of familial stasis (such as how the protagonist in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) falls prey to the same fate as her mother) with gothic repetitious narratives, where progress and escape are constantly thwarted for female protagonists (such as Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892)).

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[30] Examples include Shirley Jackson's *The Sundial* (1958), Stephen King's miniseries *Rose Red* (2002), Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* (2002), Chuck Palahniuk's *Lullaby* (2003), Marti Noxon's and Jean-Marc Vallée's series *Sharp Objects* (2018) based on Gillian Flynn's 2006 novel of the same name, and Mike Flanagan's *The Haunting of Bly Manor* (2020).
[31] Aviva Briefel, 'The Terror of Very Small Worlds: Hereditary and the Miniature Scales of Horror', *Discourse*, 44.3 (2022), pp. 314-27 (p. 314).
[32] Dagmar Motycka Weston, '"Worlds in Miniature": Some Reflections on Scale and the Microcosmic Meaning of Cabinets of Curiosities', *Arq: Architectural Research Quarterly*, 13.1 (2009), pp. 37-48 (abstract).
[33] Pezzotta, *Stanley Kubrick*, p. 142.
[34] Ibid.; and Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (Routledge, 1981), p. 56.
[35] Petterson, *The World According to Kurt Vonnegut*, p. 138.

For instance, the cultists present at the beginning of the film appear later when Peter is possessed, and they exhibit almost identical gestures and facial expressions to those in the earlier scenes. These cultists include the man at the funeral who smiles at Charlie, who later emerges nude from a darkened room when Peter is pursued by the possessed Annie, and who exhibits the same pose and smiling expression. Likewise, the woman who waves at Charlie through the school gates as she decapitates the bird is present in the attic and waves in a similar manner at Peter. Furthermore, when Peter is briefly possessed at school, Paimon compels Peter to slam his head against his desk and raise his arm, contorting Peter's hand into an unusual position. This sequence parallels the later imagery of Annie banging her head against the attic door when possessed, while Peter's hand gesture is a similar shape to that of the sculpted hand at the end of the staff held by the Charlie-sculpture. The sequence of Annie repetitively banging her head also parallels the earlier close-up of the nuts being chopped for the cake that Charlie consumes at the party, in terms of sound, movement, and their combined rhythm. Similarly, David Church observes that Charlie's decapitation echoes the earlier scene where the bird strikes her classroom window and her subsequent beheading of the bird, and is an early intimation that 'Charlie's tragic death has been predestined all along'.[36] The entire film is a series of tightly interrelated images that echo off one another and bind the characters in a web of meaning and foreshadowing that they cannot escape.

Aster the World Creator

In this way, *Hereditary* continuously reminds the viewer that the world of the film and its characters are created and determined by an omnipotent director. Aster asserts that Annie's 'miniature figures and dollhouses' are 'a perfect metaphor for the situation'; the characters are 'dolls in a dollhouse being manipulated by outside forces'.[37] Further, Aster employs various techniques to make the Grahams appear like figures in one of Annie's dioramas, rendering them as doll-like beings that are controlled and manipulated by a larger outside force. This dramatises the naturalist theme of the non-contingent humanity/animality that undergirds human existence, as the Grahams are dehumanised and reduced to their movement. *Hereditary* opens with a shot of the Graham treehouse outside a window in a miniaturist's studio. The camera pans to a miniature of the Graham house with the front wall removed, and zooms in on a replica of Peter's bedroom. This shot transitions into a shot of Peter's actual bedroom, with

[36] David Church, *Post-Horror: Art, Genre, and Cultural Elevation* (Edinburgh University Press, 2021), p. 90.
[37] Riley, '*Hereditary* Filmmaker', n. p.

Peter sleeping in his bed and Steve entering to wake him. This dollhouse aesthetic is achieved throughout the film. The Graham house was built and shot on a soundstage, so the crew could remove walls and film the actors from further away than would be possible if shooting in an actual house, enabling them to pull out and get wider shots. As with the 'sadistic, knowing perspective' described by Aster (above), this filming technique can be read as a cinematic approach to the naturalist, objective representation of violence and tragedy.

Campbell says of naturalist texts that 'what is shocking is not […] [the] violence […] but the naturalistic story's casual acceptance of violence […] as an ordinary part of life'.[38] Annie's dioramas further evoke this objective, naturalistic perspective when Steve chastises her for recreating a miniature of Charlie's death, to which Annie replies: 'it's a neutral view of the accident'. The diorama depicts the accident exactly as it was shown in the film; Charlie is not emphasised in the diorama and is merely an object among many, including the car and the post. Annie's neutrality links with the overall mechanical pacing of the film. Indeed, Church notes that 'Aster affectively conveys the "mechanical" feeling of inevitably unfolding events via his predominant use of slow camera movements, as if largely indifferent of the raw human emotions on display'.[39] Church adds that Aster employs long and wide shots, rather than jump scares, to reveal horrific content, such as Annie's levitation and the coven members standing outside the house (to ensure that their plan to manipulate Annie into resurrecting Paimon plays out as intended). In a number of scenes, such as Charlie's burial, the camera sinks as if below the ground, to make the Grahams appear as though inside a terrarium. Similarly, the day-to-night transitions in the establishing long shots of the Graham house at the beginning are filmed in jump cuts, the house taking on the appearance of a dollhouse in a life-sized room in which someone turns off a light switch. An analogous day-to-night transition sequence frames Peter as a doll; a shot of Peter sitting on his bed at night jump cuts to one of him sitting in the same position at his school desk the next day. Likewise, Ellen, Annie, and Charlie are all reduced to life-sized, doll-like figures belonging to the cult: Ellen and Annie's beheaded corpses are positioned by the cult as kneeling before Paimon, and Charlie's head is made into part of a sculpture. Church notes that this closing long shot is rendered 'as yet another miniature tableau'.[40] These techniques again render the Grahams as doll-like figures bereft of agency and moved around by larger forces.

[38] Campbell, 'American Literary Naturalism', p. 501.
[39] Church, *Post-Horror*, p. 90.
[40] Church, *Post-Horror*, p. 90.

A further metafictional deterministic trope employed by Aster in *Hereditary* is his overt evocation of multiple horror tropes and references to other horror films, positioning the Grahams as characters within a horror film and subject to the disturbing conventions of the genre. As noted previously, Aster was influenced by a range of iconic horror films, including Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976), with the close-up of Annie's wide-eyed expression as she saws off her head being identical to that of Carrie (Sissy Spacek) when she massacres her fellow students at the prom; and William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973) when the candle flame shoots upwards during Annie's ritual (in *The Exorcist*, Chris searches the attic with a candle for light, and the candle's flame inexplicably erupts and startles her). Kubrick's *The Shining* is also referenced via the slow zoom on the miniature Graham house, and Annie's silent scream as Steve dies (a reference to Danny's silent scream when Jack encounters the woman in Room 237). Church interprets such references, echoing the film's themes of inheritance: 'repressed traits are resurfacing within the Graham family […] much like *Hereditary*'s own relationship to its textual predecessors in both art and horror cinema'.[41]

The Grahams also appear to inhabit a host of varying roles, as though compelled by Aster to try out different clichéd horror personas and tropes. Charlie evokes the trope of the evil child; Peter can be likened to the trope of the 'final girl', as he exaggeratingly cries and screams throughout the film and is, in a sense, the sole survivor of the Grahams; while Annie's climbing of the walls of the house, levitation, and inhumanly fast head-banging against the attic door resemble demonic movie monsters popular in the zombie and possession sub-genres, such as Andy Muschietti's *It Chapter Two* (2019), Danny and Michael Philippou's *Talk to Me* (2022), and Parker Finn's *Smile* (2022). Possession is also an apt metaphor for deterministic forces, as an individual is literally controlled by an external agent. However, this theme is likewise significant to reading *Hereditary* in terms of metafictional determinism, as possession is a horror trope that renders the Grahams as horror-film characters whose actions are at the mercy of Aster. The Grahams, then, are literally possessed both by Aster and by the tropes and conventions that he wields.

Aster's Autobiographical Persona

Indeed, the director makes his own presence known in *Hereditary*, with the cult and Paimon being possible avatars for Aster. Just as Aster does in writing the film, Paimon and the cult members devise a specific chain of events that lead to Peter's possession. That the cult has

[41] Church, p. 88.

orchestrated a number of scenarios that will lead to Peter's possession adds a further, metafictional dimension to this tradition, as the different scenarios can be likened to the narrative possibilities considered by Aster, and the various outcomes to which he can subject his characters, as John Barth does in 'Lost in the Funhouse' (1968). The cult as a metaphor for Aster is also evident in Charlie's death. When Peter and Charlie go to a party, Charlie has an allergic reaction to a cake and Peter attempts to drive her to the hospital. Charlie puts her head out of the window as Peter swerves the car to avoid an animal carcass that was placed on the highway by the cult, and his sister is decapitated by a nearby utility post. This scene was preceded by a close-up of the post with Paimon's symbol carved into it as Peter and Charlie drive to the party, further establishing the cult's involvement in the event. Equally significant in terms of metafictional determinism is that fact that Aster highlights this scene as telling the viewer that they 'are no longer in control of' the narrative; they are 'in the filmmaker's hands'.[42]

The viewer is initially likely to believe that Charlie will be the film's villain due to her unique appearance and behaviour, with *Hereditary*'s initial sequences encouraging the viewer in the belief that an antagonistic Charlie will be the centre around which the narrative turns. Such scenes include Charlie's decapitation of the bird, the cultist smiling at Charlie, and Charlie staring at Ellen's corpse as though in a trance, which Crittenden notes conveys 'a creeping feeling that Ellen's influence will weigh heavily for generations to come'.[43] However, such scenes are a false lead. Murphy likewise observes that '[t]he extent to which Charlie's alarming behaviour is focused upon during the opening scenes' leads viewers to believe that *Hereditary* 'was going to be yet another entry in the "evil child" canon'.[44] Consequently, 'when she is killed off less than half an hour into the film's running time, it comes as a complete surprise', this subversion of tropes reminding the viewer that the film is a fictional world controlled by Aster.[45]

Moreover, Paimon, when not possessing one of the Grahams, is depicted as a shimmering blue light that waves across the film's sets. Paimon's light guides the Grahams to particular locations, just as Aster as director determines their movements. For example, Annie's paint bottle mysteriously spills on a piece of paper containing Joan's phone number, guiding Annie to contact Joan. The bottle in the foreground of the scene clearly falls over before Annie reaches for it, and Paimon's light is visible outside of the window behind Annie. The same light

[42] Jordan Crucchiola, 'Explaining the End of *Hereditary*', *Vulture*, 11 June 2018 <https://www.vulture.com/2018/06/explaining-the-end-of-hereditary.html> [accessed 10 July 2020].
[43] Crittenden, 'Inner Dread', p. 25.
[44] Murphy, '*Hereditary* and *Sharp Objects*', p. 180.
[45] Ibid.

flashes into Charlie's bedroom and leads her to the field where Ellen's corpse is being prepared by the cultists. In this scene, footprints are visible in the overhead shot of Charlie walking towards the field. While the footprints most likely belong to the cultists, the image of Charlie following footsteps suggests Aster's mapping out of his characters' movement, the employment of a map-like, overhead shot further underscoring this idea. Paimon's light also guides Peter to look at his reflection in class, which smiles back at him, frightening Peter to the extent that he returns home. The same light later guides Peter back to the classroom where he is momentarily possessed by Paimon.

Similarly, Ellen's cultists are also visible in the background of certain scenes. While this suggests the cult's orchestration of events, it simultaneously positions the cultists as similar to film-crew members who are accidently caught on camera. The cultists can be briefly seen surrounding the Graham house in the night-time shot of the dwelling. Certain cultists who appear in the final treehouse scene can be spotted posing as members of Annie's bereavement group, as well as at the party that Peter and Charlie attend (which suggests the cult's responsibility for putting the nuts into the cake). Additionally, a cultist can be faintly made out standing behind Peter in the attic before Annie's suicide; and when the Grahams return home from Ellen's funeral, footsteps and a door closing can be heard. This is most likely the cultists placing Ellen's desecrated corpse in the attic, but at the same time evokes a film crew arranging the set. Furthermore, there are scenes that show the Grahams from the first-person perspective of the cult members who surround the house, likening the cult's perspective to that of Aster the horror director peering through the camera. Aster remarks that viewers are supposed 'to feel […] there are people on the periphery that are watching this family and are hovering just outside'.[46] Indeed, a plume of mist in the air is visible in the foreground of the shot outside Peter's bedroom window at night, suggesting the breath of one of the cultists.

In this way, *Hereditary*'s formal techniques and imagery can be likened to Aster mapping out the narrative. Paimon's symbol is visible in locations where pivotal narrative events occur. In addition to the post that decapitates Charlie, this symbol appears on the Graham's attic wall when Annie discovers Ellen's decapitated corpse and realises her family is at the mercy of the cult. The cult drew these symbols, indicating their hand in these events, but these drawings simultaneously render the world of *Hereditary* as a film-set map in which Aster marks significant set pieces. Annie also unknowingly wears this symbol on a necklace, positioning her, too, as a part of Aster's storyboard, while the writing scratched into the walls

[46] Crucchiola, 'Explaining the End', n. p.

of the Graham house appear like notes written by Aster as he plans the narrative. The camera zooms into the following etchings: 'satony', 'liftoach', 'pandemonium', and 'zazas'. *Satony* is a word used in necromancy, *liftoach* is Hebrew for 'open', pandemonium means chaos or the term for capital of Hell used in Paradise Lost, and *zazas* refers to a demon who is frequently conjured by Ouija boards. These words foreshadow major events and themes in the film, including the chaos inflicted upon the Grahams, the séance that Joan manipulates Annie into performing, and Paimon's resurrection from hell. Once again, these cinematic techniques emphasise the Grahams as subject to the whims of the film's omnipotent and sadistic horror director, and present new cinematic ways of depicting metafictional determinism.

Conclusion

As all of this suggests, *Hereditary* provides a cinematic representation of metafictional determinism. Aster's film combines naturalist themes with supernatural elements, and exploits the characteristics of the film medium and horror genre to rework techniques of metafictional determinism, including rough plot outlines, the representation of the text's world as created and determined by the writer, and the intrusion of the text's writer via an autobiographical persona. Aster's film is a supreme instance of naturalism's resurgence in horror cinema, and presents a unique subgenre of horror. Further examples, a full examination of which is beyond the scope of this article, include Aster's *Midsommar* (2019), Andre Øvredal's *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* (2019), Amy Seimetz's *She Dies Tomorrow* (2020), and Natalie Erika James' *Relic* (2020). In addition to running parallel with the wider resurgence of naturalism in culture, the reasons why horror specifically has turned to naturalism can be linked with Ron Breton's analysis of 2010s horror. Breton dubs this decade's horror as 'Grief Horror', and considers these fatalistic narratives as a grief response to the nihilism and extreme violence of the post-9/11 horror cinema of the 2000s, mirroring the psychoanalytic theory of the five stages of grief.[47] Grief, being inextricable from death, can likewise be considered a naturalist theme, as death is an unavoidable life event over which individuals have no control. Considering both the resurgence of naturalism since 9/11 and the theme of grief, the trend of naturalism in 2010s horror is fitting. Ultimately, *Hereditary*'s cinematic engagement with naturalism expands the

[47] Ron Breton, 'The Decade of Grief Horror: Reflecting on Shared Themes in the Horror Movies of the 2010s', *Bloody Disgusting*, 30 July 2021 <https://bloody-disgusting.com/editorials/3675480/decade-grief-horror-reflecting-shared-themes-horror-movies-2010s/> [accessed 8 September 2023].

scope of the latter as a mode of representation and demonstrates, as Campbell asserts, that naturalism has 'never really left' the American cultural landscape.[48]

[48] Campbell, 'American Literary Naturalism', p. 503.