In Search for Alternatives: Queer Theorizing, Affect, and the Horror Film

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that queer theories of affect not only offer an alternative approach to analyzing the horror film in the twenty-first century, but also that a new wave of horror media negotiates its social criticism in newly queer ways. Analyzing Ari Aster's 2018 film *Hereditary*, it becomes clear that its horrifying effect stems from queer affects within its narrative that both its character and audience share. In this, *Hereditary* goes beyond traditional forms of criticism regarding its deconstruction of normative family structures, present in horror films as early as 1974's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, as it not only points to potential horrors within the traditional family but instead lays open the inherent, inescapable affective horrors of these normative structures and narratives of belonging, necessitating the need for alternative forms of self-determination and community. Doing so, the film utilizes the established forms of the genre but plays both within and outside of its conventions, affecting its audience beyond mere shock. In applying queer theories of affect and negativity to the film, this article demonstrates a critique of the horrors of real-life institutions and systems that plague (queer) existence in our neoliberal society: normative family structures, sexual and romantic normativities, and complex feelings of (not) belonging. In this reading, *Hereditary* serves as a powerful counternarrative to the cruelly optimistic narratives of everyday life.

KEYWORDS

Ari Aster, *Hereditary*, psychoanalysis, queer theory, cruel optimism, happy objects

The horror film has often found itself being cast as an *alternative* genre. Given that a majority of horror can be categorized under the umbrella of speculative fiction, engaging with alternate realities and the supernatural, this characterization does not come as a surprise. In addition, the generic framework of horror has frequently been chosen for filmmakers' debut productions, oftentimes resulting in independent and low-budget, yet effective films, offering innovative and stylistically unique means of working within this field of cultural production. Nevertheless, it is particularly horror's transgressive nature in what is shown on screen "in terms of gore, shock, provocation, and politically incorrect titillation" (Benshoff, "Preface" xiv) that earns it this moniker, oftentimes pejoratively. Despite this, the genre has been a successful mainstay within cinematic history. Regarded as cheap thrill without meaningful content, what then makes horror alternative appears to be up to subjective outside assessment rather than a characteristic of the genre itself. As a consequence, this produces differently nuanced meanings of *alternative* when ascribed to the genre. Yet, this attribution as alternative also points to horror as a genre setting itself apart from other forms of filmmaking. Horror seems to offer a different kind of viewing experience.

Within cultural studies, queer theory finds itself in a similar place, in the double bind of a characterization as both alternative and offering alternatives. *Queer*, from its reclamation both within activism and academia, has served as a designation of "being *different*, but unapologetically so" (McCann and Monaghan 2, original emphasis). Simultaneously, it can be recognized as an effort to find "a *different* kind of thinking and engagement with questions of sexuality, gender, identity, power, and the politics of oppression" (3, my emphasis). In doing so, the alternatives of queer theorizing are not relegated to one aspect of questioning established frameworks but rather search for alternatives wherever they offer to be promising, from alternative approaches and archives to alternative imaginations of what constitutes a good life in opposition to the established structures of marginalization and oppression.

What queer theory offers then to an analysis of horror is a rereading exactly at a point where the genre is oftentimes lacking regarding alternatives, namely in its narrative. Having by now established itself as a major genre of narrative film, horror often follows conventional plot structures that reaffirm and reproduce hegemonial social hierarchies and reassure audiences that the status quo can be maintained. Yet, this is where a queer analytical perspective and a more recent wave of films interfere: By veering away from traditional genre tropes and accentuating the potential horror of society's structures, both the cinematic and the critical lens through which we engage with on-screen horrors can offer alternative viewing experiences, rendering these films counternarratives to traditional notions of the stories horror can tell. This article argues for the reexamination of these narratives to highlight readings that can

challenge these patterns, and in doing so, offers its own search for alternatives – as the title suggests – to explore horror's characterization as alternative and the potential therein. Additionally, it answers the question of *to what* these attributions offer alternatives. This search foregrounds and expands upon the promising nature of reassessing horror through a queer theory of affect.

Alternative Approaches to Horror

Academic interest in horror as a cinematic genre has been on the rise since the modern 'Golden Age' of the horror film, i. e. the 1970s and early 1980s. Scholars, given the traditionally psycho-sexual basis of the genre's narrative structure and its characters, turned to psychoanalysis as preferred approach to the genre. Following horror scholar Robin Wood and his methodology of utilizing Freudian ideas, we can clearly see how a psychoanalytical analysis of horror works productively. What horrifies is fueled by representations of repression and the Other, jointly manifested in the figure of the monster (Wood, "Introduction" 109–13). Yet, what is repressed and recognized as Other is closely tied to specific social and cultural contexts. Thus, in US-American culture, repression aims at anything hindering individuals from becoming "monogamous heterosexual bourgeois patriarchal capitalists" (109), potentially othering anybody veering from the dominant norms regarding aspects such as sex, gender, sexuality, race, ability, and class. Wood epitomizes this in teasing out a formula for the horror film and summarizes its narrative pattern thusly: "normality is threatened by the Monster" (116). Traditionally, this threat constitutes the plot: The monstrous Other endangers the dominant social order. It needs to be, and ultimately is defeated in order to reestablish the status quo and reaffirm the value of these social norms. This not only gives a simple psychoanalytical framework to horror as a genre but also establishes the dominant narrative reproduced again and again within it, instituting a tradition regarding how and what kind of stories are being told. While, as Wood points out and showcases himself, there are horror films that play with and subvert the tradition of this formula, a strict obedience to this narrative pattern is the most prevalent within the genre. The same can be said regarding psychoanalytical analyses of these genre films: They find themselves repeatedly adhering to a framework that requires a reading through the lens of this traditional narrative structure in order to produce their arguments.

Approaching horror films psychoanalytically as "our collective nightmares" (Wood, "Introduction" 116) has, however, been successful. Psychoanalysis has brought forth seminal studies on the genre itself, as well as concepts pertaining to the experience of horror that have been used productively. Feminist approaches to psychoanalysis, chief among them Julia Kristeva's work on abjection in *Powers of Horror* (1982),

fueled other scholars such as Barbara Creed (1993) and her conception of the monstrous-feminine, and have been widely used within the field (Kristeva 1–32, Creed 1–16, Chare et al. 1–34). Carol J. Clover's (1987) application of Freudian gender dynamics to the horror film has helped tremendously in establishing a conception of the inner workings of genre conventions to evaluate how these depictions on screen position themselves regarding dominant logics of our own culture. In doing so, these ideas have even found their way into popular culture. Clover's concept of the "Final Girl" (201–04) has become a mainstay in discussions within groups of horror enthusiasts, the trope even being memorialized in its own horror film in *The Final Girls* (2015).

Yet, there are discrepancies in fixating exclusively on psychoanalytical theories to horror, manifesting themselves strongly in the cultural spheres of horror that can be found in the current moment and inevitably leading to an only partly satisfying assessment of where and how horror is used and becomes useful today. One of these issues is based on the position of horror as a film genre: Both scholars and critics agree that it has been and mostly still is being regarded as disreputable, as low-brow entertainment aimed at young adult audiences. Simultaneously, the horror genre has also proven to be tremendously successful economically (Wood, "Introduction" 115; Turnock 1). This has not changed within what has by now been over a century of cinema. As to why this has been the case, psychoanalysis solely suggests the endless return of the repressed, coming back repeatedly clothed in different aesthetics and manifestations, always dependent on current cultural anxieties (Wood, "Introduction" 121–22 and "What Lies Beneath?" 401). While the assessment surely holds some truth, it necessarily analytically generalizes the inner makings of horror and why it appeals to an audience: Repression becomes the blanketed answer to any kind of way in which horror affects an audience. Following this argument, what has been repressed might slightly change over time, yet this reading does not differentiate between varied narrative approaches or technical means used by different horror media or their effect on a diverse range of audiences. It also, again, presumes an adherence to traditional genre plot structures. These circumstances become complicated further if one regards recent horror films: One can surely apply this logic to the material of franchise cinema and its endless prequels and sequels, yet it begins to run into problems taking into account what has been described as a new wave of horror productions, as "elevated" or "post-horror" (Church 1–3). These ventures into cinematic horror clearly play with and step away from established genre conventions, including plot structures, and do so successfully, horrifying in new ways and being lauded for it both critically and financially. In addition, horror found its way into a wide spectrum of media and other spheres of culture, ranging from children's television and toys to

even the marketing of consumer goods such as cereal. Thus, these horrors seemingly have become pacified and domesticated, far removed from a potential site of resurfaced repression.

A second issue that appears in solely focusing on horror psychoanalytically manifests itself in a neglect of the immediate and heavily individual effect horror has on those directly interacting with it, or in the case of the horror film, its respective viewers. The interaction with horror is not necessarily based in an immediate recognition of its inner logics – even though by now audiences have a familiarity with the genre's conventions – but much more so in an emotional and physical reaction to what is presented. As Linda Williams already argued in 1991, the bodily excess of violence, sex, and emotions shown on screen marks horror as a "body genre": Such displays of the human body trigger a bodily response in the viewer, not a cognitive but a physical reaction first and foremost, as the body of the spectator in part mimics the sensations of the cinematic bodies (3–4; see also Clover 189; Twitchell 10–11). Thus, encounters with these films first elicit affective responses as the audiences' bodies mirror the bodily responses of those on screen. As the monster's potential victim becomes nervous, we become nervous; as they cower in fear, we move deeper into our seats; as they scream, we scream. These bodily and emotional audience reactions are the initial stimulus that is only later conceptualized cognitively.

Arguably, the effectiveness and cultural permanence of horror relies as much on this affective experience of an encounter with it as on the larger psychological structures behind it. This notion has been picked up by Xavier Aldana Reyes, who corroborates the predominance of psychoanalytical readings of horror that, while opening "fertile ground for understanding some of the metaphoric and/or psychological implications . . . [,] are reductive" ("Beyond" 4). Affective approaches can intervene in recognizing horror's potential to be understood as "a lived-in experience" (4) and thus not supplant psychoanalysis but shed light on hitherto neglected aspects. Utilizing affect as an umbrella term "from a phenomenological point of view" to describe viewer responses on "emotional and somatic levels" (*Horror Film* 5) but nonetheless distinct from "more rational and cognitively engaged emotions" (6), Aldana Reyes argues that affect theory can deliver "a language that describes the way [h]orror films do things to viewers and their bodies" (5). While I agree with this simultaneously precise and flexible definition of affect and utilize the term in the same way, Aldana Reyes and many other scholars reading horror through affect tend to do so with a focus on the somatic, both in the display of bodies on screen and the bodily responses to them, strongly present in iterations of body horror films and similar displays of blood and gore ("Beyond" 7–8 and "Mobilising" 35–36). While the argument that the physical distress of these cinematic bodies causes distress in its viewers is

to be made, my focus is more so directed at the cause of this real-life distress being the emotional distress both depicted on screen and through the narratives of these films that interweave more traditional features of horror with queer feelings of unhappiness.

Initially, the affective responses are limited to their cinematic experience, neatly distinct from 'real life.' These depths of feeling, the shock and terror triggered by these films, are enticing, but the actual scenarios leading to their experience and not only their mimicry are relegated to the screen. Nobody would find enjoyment in having to live out the imagined scenarios of horror films in real life. Their audiences are granted a safety by the narrative patterns these films traditionally follow, a circumstance that viewers have become accustomed to. Given the wide applicability of Wood's formula of horror and the films' adherence to these dominant narratives, viewers usually know what to expect when engaging with horror as a cinematic genre. There is an understanding between horror audiences and horror filmmaking in upholding narrative promises. Most of these films promise the experience of the extremes of negative feelings without having to live with their real repercussions, with the eventual outcome being a positive one. The horror on screen only manifests itself as the characters or the circumstances they find themselves in veer away from social scripts. Living our lives according to the dominant social order, the traditional narrative conventions of horror ultimately promise happiness, a positive experience of our interaction with these cultural productions: an enjoyable thrill ride through the depths of emotion, safely simulated within the confines of the cinema, as long as viewers continue to follow social norms in their own lives once they leave the theater.

But what if they do not? What if the horror presented on screen is not sparked by transgressing social norms but by upholding them? These matters have been productively negotiated by queer scholarship on the horror film. The genre has been a point of interest as early as Richard Dyer's 1988 reading of vampirism as an analogy for homosexuality (74–83), picked up again by Ellis Hanson's application of the theme in relation to the AIDS crisis in 1991 ("Undead" 324–30). The centrality of monstrosity in horror has become a particular focus towards the new millennium, enabling readings of Gothic and horror fiction that aim to both problematize the figure of the monstrous queer as well as highlight its potential as a celebratory point of identification.[1]

Yet, in reviewing queer horror criticism over the last decades, one can mark out certain strains: on the one hand, there is a clear divide between interest in implicit, symbolic manifestations of queerness and analyses of its explicit representation (see

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[1] For two landmark studies of lasting relevance, see Halberstam's *Skin Shows* (1995) and Benshoff's *Monsters in the Closet* (1997).

Elliott-Smith 1–3; Elliott-Smith and Browning 1–2). The latter enables a focus "on the anxieties *within* gay subcultures" (Elliott-Smith 3, original emphasis), rather than within general culture *about* queerness, centering queer identities both in front and behind the camera. On the other hand, pointed out by Hanson, queer film criticism seems to fall into either strictly representational analysis that runs the risk of relegating itself to matters of respectability ("Introduction" 5) or, again, purely psychoanalytical approaches. Where Hanson sees the most potential for a queer approach to film is in a critical mode that aims "to theorize the process of production and consumption rather than simply to expose it" (10), allying itself with queer theory's endeavor to question established frameworks of thinking.

Thus, it is with particularly queer theories of affect that I turn to more recent, non-explicitly queer horror's on-screen negotiations of the real-life consequences of transgression and the potential horrors of their continuation. A turn to affect opens an alternative theoretical approach to horror via its nature of eliciting a strongly felt experience and interconnects with theoretical fields picked up by queer theorists within the last two decades, arguing that the promise of positive feelings is not universal. Assessing horror through this lens then offers an alternative approach to theorizing horror not just as a film genre but as just one striking manifestation of our larger social and cultural frameworks and narratives. This puts into perspective more recent cinematic negotiations of the genre that do not promise happiness within the bounds of society, but rather demonstrate the horrors of our real-life institutions and systems, allowing the potential for readings of these films as counternarratives.

Alternatives to the "Good Life"

Lauren Berlant speaks of the "cruel optimism" of our attachment to "objects of desire" – objects that hold a cluster of promises to us that this someone or something might provide or make possible. These attachments are highly individual, yet what makes them cruel is our maintenance of them despite their potential to impede our happiness, our actual possibilities of fulfilling such promises of "the good life" (Berlant, *Optimism* 23–24). Their maintenance, sustaining the fantasy of the good life regardless of the potential harm, reveals their cruel nature: Upholding this fantasy, the optimistic promises of something in the future, allows people to go through their everyday lives without breaking, even though the conditions of their lives have become unbearable. Berlant themself emphasizes that "it's not the object that's the problem, but how we learn to be in relation" ("Citizenship"). Importantly, these attachments might be individual, but they are learned. They are socially and culturally preconditioned and, thus, our previous experiences in life influence how we form these attachments.

If we take the horror film as an example, there are clear attachments regarding conventions and their promises: What is presented as the threat is what is Other; those that go against the norms of society become monstrous or lose their humanity entirely. Those that position themselves outside these norms, especially regarding sexual and gendered politics, are punished within the narrative. This traditional formula of the horror narrative upholds the cruel optimism within the viewer that if they tread carefully and move within these normative bounds in their own lives, instead of violating them as is shown on screen, they are in no danger of these threats being realized in their lives. Thus, the audience is reaffirmed in their promised place, in their attachment to rightfully belonging to the social order. In this, the dominant narrative of the horror film reflects real-life circumstances: If being Other becomes the ground for becoming monstrous within these narratives and justifies not only social ostracization but even punishment to rectify social norms and fulfill the narrative promises of these films, viewers can happily apply the same logics to their own lives. To be able to enjoy what these narratives promise them, audiences need to adhere to normative social structures, lest they be recognized as Other themselves. Berlant criticizes this in their thoughts on genre as crucial in upholding both these circumstances and narrative fantasies. Genre acts as a tool

> whose conventions of relating fantasy to ordinary life and whose depictions of the good life now appear to mark archaic expectations about having and building a life. Genres provide an affective expectation of the experience of watching something unfold. (*Optimism* 6)

Genres become models of life narratives in their setup in relation to the promise of the good life and inevitably also entail the promise of society's institutions.

One such institution, if not the social institution par excellence, is of course the family. Sara Ahmed speaks of the family as a happy object, with its happiness functioning "as a promise that directs us toward certain objects, which then circulate as social good. Such objects accumulate positive affective value" ("Objects" 29). Like the potential promises of attachments to the concept of the family, the family in its form as a normative social structure is circulated and loaded with this positive affective value. However, Ahmed argues that this positioning can only work and be maintained by the process of exclusion: "[T]he family sustains its place as a 'happy object' by identifying those who do not reproduce its line as the cause of unhappiness" (30). While an identification as not belonging to the family might be reason enough for individual unhappiness, even an acceptance of this outside position by those who do not fit into the hetero-patriarchal structures of the idealized, normative form of the family, such as the queer subject, cannot secure happiness for themselves. They do not share in the promises of these happy objects or other forms of happiness

potentially gained by refusing these objects. Even worse, they must "live with the consequences of being a cause of unhappiness for others" (44). Yet, there is potential in this unequal distribution of happiness. In Ahmed's words, "it is the very exposure of these unhappy effects that is affirmative, that gives us an alternative set of imaginings of what might count as a good or better life." An exposure to the horrors of social structures and feelings of not belonging can offer "an alternative model of the social good" (50).

Returning to the horror film, in 1979, Robin Wood writes about the family and the horror classic *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* from 1974. In this film, we follow sexually liberated youths as the film's protagonists, being hunted and killed by a grotesque, monstrous version of the traditional family. The horrors of family life overwhelm the film, becoming absurdly comedic. Whereas the traditional family comedy of the time utilizes humor to contain the potential horrors of family life, trying to make them palatable and numbing its viewers to these horrors, within *Massacre* "such containment is no longer possible, though ideology continues to repress the imagining of constructive social alternatives." Instead, the film becomes "a comedy of despair: as everything is hopeless, there is nothing left to do but laugh" (Wood, "Family Comedy" 179). Both within queer thought and the horror genre, in Ahmed and Wood, there is a strong call for alternatives to our ongoing normative structures of life, especially to the potentially horrifying confines of the family. Contemporary horror, in opposition to the traditional narrative patterns of the genre, illustrates the consequences of not constructing those alternatives, both within real life and the stories told. Bringing the social horrors of the family to the forefront, these films confront the affective results of a lack of alternatives, establishing counternarratives whose effectiveness relies on the horrors *felt* on screen, rather than the ones *seen*.

No Alternative: *Hereditary* (2018)

Ari Aster's 2018 debut film *Hereditary* finds itself among the stream of current horror films breaking away from established traditions and offering alternatives. Aster has become (in)famous as a horror filmmaker in recent years, following his first feature-length film with 2019's *Midsommar*. Both films sparked discourse in online spaces, from traditional press outlets to fan discussion, with *Hereditary* having been named the scariest film in recent years (Crittenden 26). This assessment closely ties the deeply affective nature of the film to its effectiveness as a piece of horror media.

The film follows the Grahams, a traditional nuclear family, consisting of the mother, Annie, a professional miniaturist, the stoic and narratively almost absent father, Steve, a psychiatrist, and their two teenage children, the peculiar daughter, Charlie, and her stereotypical teenage brother, Peter. The film opens shortly after the

death of the distant maternal grandmother of the family, Ellen, with the family attending her funeral. Here, we see no interaction between the family and the rest of the guests, with Annie in her eulogy noting her surprise to see "so many strange, new faces here today" (00:04:07–08). The cinematography focuses on Annie and her closest relatives, showing her speech in a 180-degree close-up pan rather than the congregation in front of her. Even when the other family members appear in medium shots, the camera focus remains shallow, obscuring the other guests. From the start, the focus is on the tightest bonds of the family, as strained as they might be. What starts out as a narrative of troublesome family dynamics unravels into their utter destruction, both physically and foremost emotionally. Unbeknownst to them, the family is in the clutches of a cult orchestrated by their dead grandmother, fully revealing itself only when it is already too late. While this might appear as a generic horror film synopsis, Aster's focus in telling the story lies with the terrifying family drama rather than a narrative of demonic possession. The latter serves as a constant unnerving background this drama plays out in, adding to a sense of predetermined dread, as well as the horrifying denouement of the film, as the family we are following annihilates itself. Aster weaves the details that lead to the downfall of the family so intricately that the audience might only fully grasp their nature on a second viewing, realizing that the entirety of the plot unfolds at the behest of the cult. These unexplained details and gaps in knowledge of the characters and the audience heighten the tension of the film and contribute to the atmosphere in which the story unfolds: With a complete lack of agency for its members, the family structure the film presents is destined to destroy itself and its individuals. The horror is, quite literally, hereditary, as within the narrative, there is no ability to save oneself from the family or to save the family itself as a supportive form of community.

As the audience is introduced to the family, the daughter Charlie can immediately be recognized as a character who fits into generic horror conventions. Both her appearance and behavior are clearly marked as Other: She behaves atypically to our expectations of a teenage girl, building dolls out of debris and dead animals, neurotically clicking her tongue, and being introverted to the point that she strikes up a conversation with her mother about death rather than talking to her peers at a party (00:09:30–10:10, 00:30:15–45). When Charlie gruesomely dies in an accident, being decapitated as she leans out of the window of a car driven by her brother in the first third of the film (00:33:41), the audience loses the character most clearly identifiable as a marker of the genre. The accident, later identified as part of the cult's plan, marks the descent of the narrative into the horrors of family drama rather than conventional shock, as well as the descent of its characters into the depths of trauma, grief, and guilt. In accordance with this shift in the narrative, *Hereditary*'s most

terrifying scenes are those devoid of any supernatural elements or other means of horrifying an audience within the traditions of the genre (Koresky 43–44).

Following Charlie's death, Annie is on the floor of her bedroom, writhing in the grief of losing a child. She repeatedly wails that she "just want[s] to die," that she "need[s] to die" as the camera slowly pans to the hallway just outside of the room and reveals Peter, listening but unable to share his mother's despair or console her, unable to so much as move towards his mother, faulting himself for causing the accident (00:38:00–53). Annie's cries remain throughout the scene, even when she is not shown anymore, transitioning into and persisting until Charlie's casket is finally lowered into the ground. The initially on-screen, then enduringly off-screen sound of Annie's agony creates and broadens an affective space in which no character (inter)action is shown in the frame. In these scenes, the only focus possible is the immediate emotional response to the shock of this sudden loss. The audience sees and especially hears the impact of this trauma on a mother and is enveloped in the feeling of sharing these deeply negative affects. However, the unnerving and raw performance of Toni Colette as Annie is so shocking that one finds oneself unable to react in any appropriate manner, helplessly watching a moment entirely too personal to be comfortable. The audience's inability to react mimics Peter's helplessness on screen: unmoving in the hallway, his face obscured, unable to show any form of proper response. Annie, already before but more so after Charlie's death, manically tries to seize control of her family's life, fixatedly holding on to her perception of how it is supposed to work, only for this idealized form of family to shatter repeatedly. In this, Annie becomes the driving force of detrimentally holding on to the attachments of what, with Berlant and Ahmed, can be described as a *good family*. Yet, she is repeatedly confronted by her inability to achieve happiness for and within the family, instead sealing its and her own fate.

While the relationship between Annie and her son becomes increasingly distant after the accident, Annie futilely tries to work through her trauma by detaching herself from it. She builds a miniature of the scene of Charlie's death to the shock of her husband Steve (00:55:13–56:22), denying the unhealthy nature of this response to her loss and the need of her family to talk to each other about their experience. This scene clearly highlights Steve's helpless passivity within the family, unable to remedy the situation or initiate conversation within his family. Trying to bring his wife and his son closer together over family dinner, he concedes and leaves the room after Annie's refusal to engage in conversation: "Come, stay, whatever you want. I don't really give a shit" (00:56:22–23). In contrast to Steve's absence, *Hereditary* utilizes Annie's profession as a miniaturist to illustrate her controlling but unsuccessful hold on her emotional state and her family life, or rather her attachment to the good life

of the family. Annie repeatedly works on personal scenes that challenge and undermine her idealized perception of the family and cause her emotional distress. Going beyond the scene of her daughter's death, the film presents miniatures of such events as nightly visits of Annie's own estranged mother to the married couple's bedroom (00:29:30–35) or Ellen breastfeeding her own grandchildren (00:13:17–23), highlighting Annie's incapability of confronting these feelings rather than representing them in miniature form. Yet, this attempt at control also fails professionally, with her familial circumstances hindering her from finishing pieces meant for a gallery exhibition, resulting in her destroying her own work in a fit of frustration (01:23:40–24:53). The motif of the miniatures is taken up by *Hereditary*'s cinematography; the Graham house is not only represented in miniature form by Annie but repeatedly by the film itself. Wide shots of interior scenes show entire rooms, rendering the house itself a miniature through the lens of the camera (e. g. in the film's opening scene, 00:02:12–03:05). Metonymically standing in for the family, the house at once becomes uncanny in the Freudian sense (74), intimately familiar yet with details being terribly off, and the "Terrible Place" (Clover 197–98) of conventional horror films where the misery plays out on screen. Here, both Aster's film and the genre generally pick up the Gothic motif of the suburban house becoming a mirror of the terrors of domestic life for women, inevitably ending in familial violence (Wallace 75–77, 85). What happens within the house, Annie's unsuccessful attempts at (re)creating dominant ideals of family and the film's cinematic framing of these domestic scenes, is "rendered Gothic by the emotional and metaphorical excesses which express the violent forces beneath ordinary family life" (80). If the house becomes a rendition of itself, a miniature stage for the unfolding narrative of the film, its inhabitants, especially the futilely controlling Annie, become its puppets determined by outside forces, by both the cult and the cruel optimism of being a good family.

Unable to stay in control through her means as a mother and her meticulous miniature work, Annie's resentment and blame towards Peter, for her daughter's death and the inability to sustain the fantasy of the good life for her family, culminate in a bloodcurdling monologue at the dinner table. The fact that this climactic confrontation and unrestrained expression of emotions is set here is no coincidence: No location in the domestic space is so strongly marked as a place of family as the dinner table. It is here that the family unit gathers, where who does and does not belong to it is clearly delineated. On the level of the film's plot, the setting clearly emphasizes Annie's wish and subsequent failure to unite her family again. Yet, it is Peter's position as the subject of Annie's condemnation for destroying both her literal family and her idealized fantasy of it that dooms this attempt and predicts Annie's outburst. Peter, while still literally a part of the family, finds himself affectively shunned from

being a part of the family, the person whose presence at the dinner table disturbs the familial structure. This attempt at reuniting the family without acknowledging the causes of its disruption mirrors Ahmed's description of assimilationist "calls for a return to the dinner table, as the presumed ground for social existence" (*Phenomenology* 173). Upholding the fantasy of the happy family gathering at the dinner table necessitates the ignorance of those differences, those unhappy feelings, and those not fitting into these norms to sustain itself. Failing to do so as in *Hereditary*, the dinner table must become the scene of the family's disruption, much like the scene at the dinner table in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Yet, *Massacre*'s family gathering at the dinner table becomes horrifying and farcical by inversion, the all-male family of murderers forcing their female victim to sit at the table and enjoy dinner together. The horror of *Hereditary*'s dinner table scene stems from its forceful expression of the depths of unhappiness within the bounds of what is supposed to be a happy family. In *Massacre*, the family at the dinner table becomes monstrous through the nature of its family members. In *Hereditary*, it is the farce of forcedly adhering to the normative fantasy of the family that turns this idea itself monstrous.

As the Graham family sits at the table in darkness and silence, Peter's attempt at initiating a conversation with his mother sparks Annie's disturbing tirade, powerfully delivered by Colette. With all other measures to potentially remedy the strained relationship taken, or rather ignored, Annie jumps up from the table and bluntly hurls her rage at her son:

> Don't you ever raise your voice at me! I'm your mother, you understand? All I do is worry and slave and defend you, and all I get back is that fucking face on your face! So full of disdain and resentment and always so annoyed. Well, now your sister is dead! And I know you miss her and I know it was an accident and I know you're in pain – and I wish I could take that away for you. I wish I could shield you from the knowledge that you did what you did – but your sister is dead. She's gone forever. And what a waste. If it could've maybe brought us together or something! If you could have just said "I'm sorry" or faced up to what happened: maybe then we could do something with this! But you can't take responsibility for anything, so now I can't accept. And I can't forgive. Because – because nobody admits anything they've done! (00:58:19–59:27)

The camera cuts back and forth from Annie's furious expression to the speechless faces of her son and husband, only dimly illuminated by the pendant light above the table. Towering above the rest of her family, Annie's outrage is framed as the horrifying manifestation of the dysfunctional family system to the shock of her family and the audience. Being unable to cope with her own feelings of loss of both her daughter and the good family, Annie projects her anger at her son. Peter then, to an extreme degree, becomes the cause of her unhappiness, the sole thing that destroys her chance of coming closer to what she imagines to be her object of happiness. While from the start of the film Annie's heavily strained relationship with her own mother

already marks this as a retroactive projection of a fantasy long gone awry, the emotional depths of her current situation blind her to any other option. Peter must become the only object of her scorn, standing in the way of realizing her presumed happiness.

In this, Annie's notions of her own role as a mother become tied up and create tension regarding the necessary family structure to achieve happiness: Her feelings toward motherhood encapsulate care for her children, a task evidently failed with Charlie's death, yet in a double bind when it comes to Peter. He becomes affectively alienated, being the subject Annie feels compelled to shield from the horrors of real life, to be the mother the good family necessitates her to be. At the same time, he is the sole reason why this is an unachievable fantasy, the one who fractures the family with his actions, his inability to communicate his feelings, and his incapability to fulfill his role as the son. The horror witnessed is based in this affective experience: The audience watches a family break apart due to the tremendous grief of losing its youngest member, but even more so is confronted with the depths of emotional negativity of realizing that the desired family structure itself, the supposedly ultimate object of happiness, is nothing more than a fantasy. *Hereditary* only later reveals that Annie's cruel imagination of a happy family and its ties to her own relationship to her children are a farce: She never wanted to be a mother and only gave in to the pressure of her mother to become pregnant, while trying in vain to have a miscarriage (01:12:02–13:00). Even after the birth of her children, this disidentification with motherhood manifests itself with Annie recounting her supposedly unconscious attempt at murdering both of her children and herself while sleepwalking (00:53:06–54:50). While this could be read as hypocritical considering her current manic behavior in desperately holding on to her idea of what it means to be a good family, it rather exposes the cruel nature of the attachment to these structures: Despite Annie's initial unwillingness to have children, outside pressure, both textually her own mother's and thus by extension the cult's as well as subtextually society's pressure to conform and find happiness in the traditional idea of the family, is forceful enough to make Annie invest into the promise of this form of community, only to be ultimately torn apart by it.

These instances of dissatisfaction with the reality of Annie's familial relations compared to her fantasy retain their affective force in their shared experience of them on screen. Yet, viewers become aware of the fact that the majority of them have been carefully planned by Ellen and her cult. While our awareness only heightens the tension within the family drama, Annie can only make a final gesture towards remedying her relationships and her resentment towards her son after encountering the supernatural at play in her family. Believing that burning Charlie's sketchbook will break

the apparent demonic curse on her family but kill her, she throws it into the fireplace, only to see her husband Steve burn (01:46:45–47:03). Aster himself states that

> that scene is meant to play as Annie's big redemptive moment . . . It's a beautiful gesture but part of the cruel logic of the film is it's an empty gesture. Ultimately, it's not her choice to make. She thinks there's a design here and she can end things if she sacrifices herself. But there's no design and there are no rules. (qtd. in Crittenden 26)

Annie's cruel optimism of being able to reinstate the good life of her family by her death as a martyr go up in flames just as Steve does. The working family system is revealed to be as much of an unrealized and unrealistic fantasy as Annie's hope for a systematic resolution against the already predetermined doom of herself and those that, despite her own anger, she claims to be her loved ones. Instead of this act saving the family in a physical sense and the idealized fantasy of the family in Annie's construction of it, Steve, the stoic but powerless father, dies. With Steve's presence within the family and the plot of the film being barely felt, *Hereditary* necessarily emphasizes the "weakness of the father." The same can be said about traditionally patriarchal power structures of the family "in relation to matriarchal power and the matrilineal ('hereditary') power that eventually rears its head in the final horror scenes" (Braun 53), as well as in relation to the affective power that resurfaces repeatedly in the horrors of the family life. With any hope for Annie's cruelly optimistic reestablishment of the family burning down in front of her and the demon now having taken hold of her, Annie chases down the final vessel.

Peter, having become guilt-stricken after the death of his sister, deteriorates further emotionally, becoming detached from the rest of his family and seemingly life itself. He apathetically goes through his day-to-day life, unable to pass time with his peers without having a panic attack (00:42:08–43:21) and repeatedly lying awake in bed at night (00:48:46, 01:20:15, 01:27:10). Rather passively drifting than actively expressing his sorrow, Peter is unable to find any outlet for his emotions. Only in the film's last third, in scenes of supernatural horror, does Peter's expression contrast his father's powerless rationalism and his mother's overbearing anger. Having been the subject of his mother's scorn and now openly witnessing the cult's approach, Peter finally breaks. Unable to stay within the bounds of neither the detached teenage boy Peter aspired to be before Charlie's accident, nor the fulfillment of the responsible adolescent son Annie wants him to be, his responses become motivated by unmediated affect.

While Peter's declining mental state becomes a feminized form of "male hysteria," he "mirrors many of the hysterical responses of his mother" (Posada 192–93). Peter bursts out into negative emotions when presented with the horrors of having become the centerpiece of the cult's machinations and the sole reason for his family's

unhappiness and demise. He emblematizes Ahmed's "unhappy queer [who] is made unhappy by the world that reads queers as unhappy" ("Objects" 43). Even before Charlie's death, Annie is not satisfied with Peter's uninvolved position within the family, not wanting to interact with his sister and avoiding family gatherings, thus not working towards the goal of the idealized happy family. Already presumed to be unhappy with the promise of the family by Annie, Peter becomes the epitome of this unhappiness once he is blamed for his sister's death. To retain the family fantasy as a happy object, Peter's unhappiness must be made the ultimate cause.

Peter's apathy renders him a queer figure in relation to the institutionalized structure of the family. He signifies this before Charlie's death as a detached participant in the lives of his relatives and afterwards in his helplessness in navigating his position as both part of the family and its saboteur. Elizabeth Freeman speaks of "families depend[ing] on timing" in their "choreographed displays of simultaneity" (28), such as the ritualized coming together at the dinner table. Yet, this temporal structure, as in the dinner scene in *Hereditary*, is fragile in establishing these bonds. They can be interrupted by the likes of Annie's animosity, or by temporalities that do not align with spending time together and orienting oneself towards achieving common goals, but instead going against the homogeneous order of time (Freeman xxii; Halberstam, *Queer Time* 2). These queer temporalities offer alternative orientations of non-productivity, regarding how this time is spent and what kind of outcomes they (re)produce. Jack Halberstam argues that the homogeneous order of how we narrate our lifetimes, this "logic of reproductive temporality," supports our "notions of the normal," such as traditional family life. Thus, "we chart the emergence of the adult from the dangerous and unruly period of adolescence as a desired process of maturation" (*Queer Time* 4). In Peter, this order is reversed: Whereas before the events of the film, his unwillingness to move forward with his life in a manner productive for the family stems from being at the brink of adulthood, his reaction to the assault on his family goes against this forward movement. His apathy, as in doing nothing either to prevent what is happening in the background or in remedying his emotional state and relationships within the family, do not mirror Annie's futile, yet future-aligned attempts at upholding the family. Instead, Peter reverts to being the child rather than the adult. He lets unrestrained emotions wash over him. Even his drug use speaks to a desire for a "ludic temporality" (5) that interrupts the constructed time that his family maintains, privileging the "rapid bursts" (4) of experiencing drugs, in both their numbing and affectively heightening quality. This also leads to the harshest interruption of family life, the death of his sister: While Annie forces Peter to take Charlie with him to the party as a productive means of spending time together, easing both of them into expectations of becoming well-adjusted adults by Peter taking

responsibility for his younger sister and Charlie socializing in a proper manner, Peter fails by prioritizing his own appetite for drugs and sex. Peter structures his life in queer temporalities that are undesirable for normative society, through drug use and doing nothing, and in this non-commitment to reproductive temporality positions himself against the fantasy of the family.

Whereas a traditional coming-out narrative is "an account of the move away from the family" (Woods 346), in the framing of *Hereditary* as a horror film, the film's adolescent characters are not identified as queer but rather enabled to be read as figures of queerness through their situatedness within the narrative. Thus, this move away from the family must instead become its destruction. Peter can be understood as the unhappy queer in relation to Annie's cruel optimism of the good family. But as such, for the larger societal structures of reproductive temporality and normative fantasies, he, as the one threatening to destroy the family, becomes monstrous. Laura Westengard reads Lee Edelman's concept of the *sinthomo*sexual, the queer figures that "expose as mere fantasy the ideologies on which people base their existences, subverting the closed debate of reproductive futurity," as monsters, as they "turn the sequined fabric of society's fantasy structure inside out to reveal the knotted under-belly—to make what was once familiar and homelike horrifically exposed as some-thing constructed and denaturalized" (48). Peter's positioning within *Hereditary* achieves just that: It is through him that Annie must realize that her fantasy of the good family is unachievable; it is through him that the family home becomes the Terrible Place; it is through him that the cult seeks to establish a demonic reign.

It is only in the film's finale, after the planning of the cult proves to be successful, that Peter, driven to his physical and emotional limits and becoming the vessel of the demon, reunites with his dead family and his newly found worshippers. This presents some form of resolution, being the only outcome possible for the family structure both determining the individuals' fate and leading to their downfall. *Hereditary* show-cases the utter horror of the cruel optimism of seeking the good life through and within the rigid structure of the family. The film makes a mockery of the free will of the Grahams as they struggle to maintain their attachments to being a family, only to end up dead and in futility. Its efficacy lies in a negation of the fantasy of the good family throughout its disintegration, only to present a more horrifying alternative: In the final scene, we see the family of the cult reunited, gathered around their crowned demonic leader, while all the necessary elements are present, from its idols to its members, everything as predetermined from the start (02:03:05). *Hereditary* shows a grueling counternarrative to the happy object of the family, emphasizing the need for alternatives, or being faced with suffering within even more horrifying structures of community. By no means should this be read as an endorsement of cult-like

structures instead of traditional forms of kinship, yet it makes clear where the limits of these forms lie and who is suffering within them.

Conclusion: The Need for Alternatives

Contemporary horror proves itself to be a particularly productive field of inquiry, especially taking into account perspectives of queer theory. Queer theories of affect, in particular, can open different avenues in approaching the genre, not to dispose of psychoanalytic readings but to offer up alternatives that highlight previously neglected aspects and complement more traditionally symbolic analyses. In applying these to horror, both as larger cultural phenomenon and as cinematic genre, its potential to pick up queer discourses on negativity and the anti-social come to the forefront. These horror productions can fill what Jack Halberstam calls for in a new perspective on an anti-social archive: "an archive of alternatives" that "mixes high and low, known and unknown, popular and obscure . . . where the promise of self-shattering, loss of mastery and meaning, unregulated speech and desire are unloosed" ("Anti-Social" 153). Yet, it is also necessary to point out that many of the cinematic works of horror that are garnering mainstream appeal are not produced by self-identified queers. In reading these works through the lens of queer affect theory, we can recognize a general uncomfortableness with the traditional institutions of patriarchal, heteronormative society that opens a potential point of solidarity with marginalized identities. Works by queer filmmakers tackling these issues, however, are still not sharing in this wide recognition, and an application of these theories to them would necessarily have to adjust.

Nonetheless, in tackling societal institutions such as the family in newly horrifying ways, contemporary horror can be a means of expressing the sadness, grief, and depths of emotion that are tied up in the experience of not belonging within society and of this being the cost of the good life and the happiness of others. Doing so, these approaches to horror also offer alternatives to the dominant narratives of the genre: Instead of repeating the traditional narrative patterns that reaffirm those same norms that constitute unhappiness, they can be read as counternarratives to the deluge of unachievable promises of happiness. These newer forms of narrating horror emphasize that horrors are based in affective experiences and that by investigating how these experiences are shaped in our current cultural sphere, we can glean what alternatives to social structures are possible. More strongly, we can recognize where these alternatives are desperately needed to make equal the access to happiness and a good life for everybody, or at least to truly "make everyone a little less happy" (Halberstam, "Anti-Social" 154).

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Lukas Hellmuth is a research assistant and doctoral candidate at Julius-Maximilians-University Würzburg. He finished his master's degree in American Cultural Studies in 2020, with his thesis focusing on an alternative approach to camp, negotiating the current cultural interest in camp with the concept's darker elements. In his PhD project, he is building upon these darker sides of culture, concerning himself with a rereading of horror and the American horror film through the lens of queer theory. His research interests are situated within the field of gender and queer studies, particularly in productions of knowledge and identities in twentieth- and twenty-first-century visual and popular cultures.

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