

# Horror after Elevated: A Study of the Film Style of Ari Aster

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**Abstract:** American director Ari Aster is a representative director of the emerging horror genre of elevated horror, and his three feature films have revolutionized the language of the horror genre and gained great reputation in the industry and among fans. Through analyzing the three feature films and eight short films directed by him, from the two levels of aesthetic style and thematic expression respectively. It explains the spatial narration, mise-en-scène, the use of lens, and the use of sound present in the works of Ari Aster, and points out the thematic ideas of Ari Aster's works about pathological family relationships and the psychological dilemmas of the characters.

**Keywords:** Ari Aster; Horror; Audio-Visual Language.

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## 1. Introduction

American director Ari Aster, was born on July 15, 1986 in New York City to a Jewish family, his mother a poet and his father a musician. In 2004, he began studying film at the Santa Fe University of Art and Design, where he wrote for the local Weekly Alibi arts magazine, before graduating to the American Film Institute and earning a Master of Fine Arts degree in directing. He wrote eight short films between 2008 and 2016, and made his feature debut in 2018 with the horror film *Hereditary*, released by independent film company A24, which grossed \$82.72 million at the global box office, an all-time box office record for A24 at the time. This made Ari Aster the representative director of the new horror genre, and elevated horror became one of A24's main genres. Ari Aster continued to work with A24 on his second and third feature films, *Midsommar* (2019) and *Beau Is Afraid* (2023). His work has a strong authorial style and blends genre with artistry, revolutionizing the traditional genre of horror, using recognizable audio-visual language to show the inner workings of the characters, focusing on the theme of morbid family relationships, and all of his works have a strong cult element.

## 2. Aesthetic Style

### 2.1. Spatial Narration

Ari Aster's films contain a large number of spatial narrations, and the unfolding of the story is often closely connected with a specific building. In *Hereditary*, the Graham family home is the main location of the story, many visions occur inside the home, and the tree house next to the home plays a key role, it is both the first and last shot of the movie, and in the plot it is also the place where Baymont descends. In *Midsommar* (this article refers specifically to the Director's Cut), the protagonists enter Harga and the narrative unfolds around the yellow temple, which is always in the background whenever there is an open outdoor scene and where the characters converge to be sacrificed in the temple's interior. In *Beau Is Afraid*, each time Beau loses consciousness he enters the bathroom space that he remembers as a symbol of the womb, and little by little he remembers how he lost a part of

himself in the attic space, and in the end of the film he goes directly to that attic and reveals the truth about his father.

In Ari Aster's movie, the space of the attic has a special meaning. The psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung, in his analysis of fear in the house, said that "the action of the consciousness in such a situation is like a man who hears a noise that may come from the cellar, but rushes to the attic to make sure that there is no burglar, so as to confirm that the noise is purely imaginary. The fact is that the prudent man would have been afraid to venture into the cellar." In his book *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard explains that the experience of daytime in the attic space eliminates the fear of nighttime, so that fear in the attic is easily "rationalized". In the cellar, on the other hand, both day and night are filled with darkness, so the "rationalization" of fear is slow [1]. The attic in Ari Aster's film is precisely the role of the cellar, the attic becomes the darkest place in the house, carries the most horrifying scenes, and is also the space that can arouse people's fear the most. There are three attic spaces present in *Hereditary*, the attic on the roof, the tree house, and Charlie's bedroom, and they all have something in common; crowded, dark, triangular tops, and terrible things happen in all of them. The attic at the top of the building is where Annie first discovers Ellen's headless body and the cult symbols, and where she cuts off her own head with a piano string in the most horrifying scene of the entire movie. The Treehouse and Charlie's bedroom serve the same function as Paimon's residence. The treehouse is where the cultists welcome Paimon into the world, and Charlie, as Paimon's carrier, naturally has her bedroom as Paimon's previous residence. It is for this reason that she sleeps in the treehouse from time to time in the episode, as both places are Paimon's abode. The attic space remains important in *Beau Is Afraid* as it is the place that holds Beau's deepest secrets, and it was his mother, Mona, who imprisoned a part of him in the attic as a child, leading to Beau's current timid and cowardly behavior. The attic is also the cell where his father, who is full of fertility symbols, is held, and where Beau suffers a great fright, the most frightening scene in the entire movie. While there is no actual attic space in *Midsommar*, Harga's temple is also formally an attic space, with the same triangular top, the same wooden structure, and the same horrific events that take place there. The attic in Ari Aster's movie has become a

symbol that represents horror.

## 2.2. Mise-en-scène

Ari Aster pays great attention to the mise-en-scène of the movie, he will carefully arrange all kinds of information and elements in the scene, so that they can be presented in one shot with a sense of hierarchy and order [2]. In his movies, there is often a kind of mise-en-scène that has the function of telling the next plot development in advance.

In the long shot at the beginning of the first hour and thirty-six minutes of *Midsommar*, the viewer first sees the villagers placing the ashes of the old man who died earlier into the upside-down tree, and then as the camera pulls back to bring in Pelle, who is tending to the garden at the moment. Later, as Mark greets Pelle, the camera pans to the right as Pelle moves, bringing Josh and Mark into the picture, followed by Ulf and the other villagers performing some sort of ritual in which they use tools to break a wooden model of an animal. At the same time Josh and Mark walk toward Pelle and the camera pans left causing the back view to change again. Josh and Pelle are talking about the thesis, Pelle is in the garden where Josh's body was dumped after he was killed, and Mark is looking for a place to pee and walks in the direction of the upside down tree. The viewer can see more villagers in the background at this point, each doing different things, such as a villager next to them grinding up herbs, which sets up the plot of the characters being drugged later on. Ulf in the rear view is burying the head of the animal model that has just been smashed into the ground, and he also leads up to Christian's entry into the picture. And in the distant view several female villagers are arranging flowers into the ground, an element of action that will recur later in the episode. As Christian walks toward the foreground, several more villagers appear in the rear view walking by with sheep, cows, horses, and other animals. After Christian joins the discussion about the thesis, Pelle introduces him to Maja, and as Christian looks backward, the camera shifts focus so that the viewer sees that Maja is one of the female villagers who are arranging flowers on the ground in the distant view, and foreshadows, through her lines, the episode in which Maja and Christian will engage in a sexual relationship. Later, as Ulf suddenly runs toward the upside-down tree in the rear view, the camera pans to the right again to the same angle as at the beginning, and shows the audience that the cause of Ulf's anger is that Mark is peeing next to the upside-down tree.

The same technique is used in the clip that begins around the sixth minute and sixty-five second mark of "Beau Is Afraid," which is a long panning shot of Beau as he walks down the street. The shot begins with a close-up of Beau taking his pills and slowly pulls back to a panoramic view, and Beau's action of taking the pills foreshadows the later episode in which he is in distress due to the fact that he didn't drink any water with the pills. At the same time, Beau is listening to a message from his mother, which is meant to explain Beau's motivation for returning home. Although the mother's tone in the message is very gentle, an angry mother walks by in the foreground calling out for her child, a contrast that symbolizes Beau's mother's true attitude toward her child. Following the traverse, Beau passes a gun stand, and the gun element could foreshadow Beau's subsequent pursuit by the soldiers. There is also an ice cream stand with a middle-aged man eating ice cream, and in Beau's recollection of meeting Elaine for the first time, the viewer can see, through Beau's subjective camera, a similar middle-aged man eating ice

cream at the ice cream stand with the same action. At this point in the rear view there is an advertisement for dental floss, foreshadowing Beau's later episode in which his keys are stolen because of the floss. The foreground then shows a child playing with a remote control boat in a pool, only to be yanked away by the angry mother who had previously called out to the child, causing the boat to tip over on its side, which directly foreshadows Beau's end. Beau arrives at a grocery stand to purchase a gift that he will later give to his mother, but with the reflection of the container's glass, sees a man about to jump off a building. The fact that the jumper is surrounded by a crowd echoes the ending in which Beau is judged in front of the crowd. Such mise-en-scène enhances the narrative efficiency while foreshadowing to the audience the possible plot and the elements that will appear afterward.

## 2.3. Use of Camera

As Robert Flaherty said "You can't express as much as you can in writing, but you can say what you want to say with great conviction." [3] Ari Aster is very aware of the importance of the language of the movie itself, and he is able to use a very precise camera language to convey a message to the audience.

Ari Aster's films often show subjective shots of characters using distant shallow depth of field shots of a single subject. Examples include the shot of the female cultist looking across the street at Charlie from a distance around the sixteenth minute and fifteenth second of *Hereditary*, the shot of the cultist Joan casting a spell on Peter across the street around the first hour, thirty-two minutes and eighteen seconds, and the shot of Mona's staff in the backyard seen through the curtains of Beau's house while he's making a phone call to Dr. Roger's house around the first hour, minute, and twenty-two seconds of Beau's *Very Fearful*. Shots like this possess a natural eeriness because they simulate the character's point of view. The distance of the vista makes it impossible for the character to see the details of the subject even though the focus of the character's vision is on the subject, but the subject is always gazing at the character. Neither the characters nor the audience know what they are up to, nor can they predict what will happen next, thus creating a strong sense of unease that the audience empathizes with the characters. In addition to this, in the long shot that begins around the first hour and thirty-seven minutes and thirty-eight seconds of *Midsommar*, Ari Aster uses a similar format and a technique of changing focus to capture both the foreground and the background of the two subjects at the same time. The focus is first on Mark in the foreground, and then quickly shifts to the female villagers in the rear view to simulate Mark's point of view after he sees them coming out of the temple. From the first turn to the two greeting to the second turn to watch, three times the rapid zoom shows that at this time Mark has a strong interest in the female villagers, but also foreshadowed Mark's death. Afterwards, the camera also pulls back to put Mark in a center shot, with a local child appearing in the foreground to inform Mark of the meal. This also allows the front, center, and back of the shot to have subjects at the same time, greatly improving the narrative efficiency, and it is the shallow depth of field of the distant shot that gives the corresponding expressive space.

The inverted shot is likewise a common camera technique for Ari Aster. In the shot of Annie going to Joan's apartment in the first hour, thirty minutes and fifty-seven seconds of *Hereditary*, the upside-down shot shows the gradual collapse

of Annie's inner sense of order after she realizes the family's various anomalies. In the second hour and two minutes and twelve seconds of *Beau Is Scared*, the shot of Beau taking a ride to Mona's house, the window glass is cleverly used to reflect an upside-down image of the highway and superimposed on Beau's head, showing the trauma caused by the difficulties and obstacles Beau encounters along the way. And in the set of shots of the protagonists driving to Harga at around 27:41 in *Midsommar*, the camera shows the journey on the way through almost 360 degrees of rotation, giving the viewer a strong sense of vertigo and uneasiness, foreshadowing the impending danger. Such an inverted shot has a strong subjective suggestiveness, which can externalize the inner emotions of the characters as well as shape the atmosphere of the film.

## 2.4. Use of Sound

The use of sound in Ari Aster's films is also very unique. He uses the characters' voices as a tool to form a kind of "sound bridge" connecting different scenes.

In the series of shots starting at around 36:54 in *Hereditary* Luck, the "sound bridge" formed by Annie's screams of grief connects four scenes: the discovery of Charlie's body, Charlie's head, Annie in pain in the bedroom, and Charlie's funeral. *Midsommar* also makes similar use of sound. In the beginning of the clip at around the 10:56 second mark, Dani's cries connect the scenes of Christian on the road and Anne crying in Christian's arms. This unique use of sound creates both a sad and depressing atmosphere and enhances the efficiency of the narrative.

In addition, in the second hour, 28 minutes and 38 seconds of *Midsommar*, the rhythmic synchronization of the sounds of Anne and the villagers crying with the moans of the villagers during Christian and Maja's ceremony also creates a "sound bridge" that connects the two scenes. The contrast between the two scenes is further emphasized by the fact that the different voices form the same rhythm.

## 3. Theme Expression

### 3.1. Morbid Family Relationships

All of Ari Aster's current feature films and most of his short films focus on the depiction of pathological family relationships [4]. In an interview, he once described *Hereditary* as "One of the ways I described it, when I was trying to find financing, was simply as a family tragedy that curdles into a nightmare-in the same way that life can feel like a nightmare when things are falling apart." [5] The key to a morbid family relationship is the role played by the mother and father in it, so he often portrays very unique mother figures and father figures in his films.

#### 3.1.1. Dangerous Mothers

The mother figure in his movies is often strong and dangerous for her children. For example, the mother in *Munchausen* is worried that her son will gradually leave her when he goes to college, so she chooses to poison her son to keep him by her side, which then directly leads to his death, even though she doesn't want him to die. The mother in *The Strange Thing About the Johnsons* kills her son herself at the end because she is afraid of him. Ellen, Annie's mother in *Hereditary*, is responsible for the curse on the Graham family, and it is Ellen's cultish plan to summon Baymont that leads to all the tragedies that follow for the Grahams. Annie also indirectly caused the death of her daughter Charlie through

her decisions, and later complained very forcefully about her son Peter, even revealing that she had tried to abort him, causing both of their traumas to be deepened. There's also the fact that her ritual of summoning spirits directly curses the entire family, which then leads to the subsequent tragedy. The mother Mona in *Beau Is Afraid* is even more iconic in that she expects her son Beau to be submissive, dependent, and loyal to her for the rest of his life, and projects an excessive amount of love on him, displaying an extremely manipulative streak. And the entire movie is a test that Mona devises for Beau, just to test Beau's loyalty to herself, and in the end, she even grows to hate her son out of love, blaming Beau for all her misfortunes, and choosing to let Beau die after becoming completely disillusioned with him. The mother figure in *Beau Is Afraid* also pays homage to the mother figure in *Beau*, both of which reflect the mother's powerful desire to manipulate, even at the expense of traumatizing her son.

#### 3.1.2. Weak Fathers

In contrast to the mother, the father figures in Ari Aster's films are weak, harmless, and often even at the mercy of others. In *Herman's Cure-All Tonic*, Ari Aster's first short film, the father is used as a tool by his son, who imprisons him in a chair and uses the liquid from his stomach to make money, while the father is powerless to resist. Even more representative is the father in *The Strange Thing About the Johnsons*, who initially leaves the audience with the impression of a thoughtful, gentle father, but as the plot unfolds, the audience realizes that the father has suffered years of sexual abuse at the hands of his own son. In the face of his son's violence, he can only suffer in silence, and his only resistance is to write a book about his experiences, and finally dies a horrible death in front of his son. In *Hereditary*, the father's presence is so weak that he even believes until he dies that what happened to his family was not caused by supernatural forces. The father in *Beau Is Afraid* is even more subverted; he's locked in the attic by his mother, and the protagonist, Beau, doesn't even know he exists. And he takes the form of a giant male genitalia, full of irony and dark humor about father figures. It is these unconventional mother-figures and father-figures that help Ari Aster to portray a morbid portrait of the modern family.

### 3.2. The Inner Dilemma

The traditional horror genre is always narrated by an external "devil" who breaks into the life of the protagonist or makes the protagonist break into an unfamiliar environment. However, by observing the society and family, Ari Aster focuses on the psychology of the characters on the basis of the traditional narrative. Most of his characters have a certain degree of psychological problems, basically in a state of mental crisis, and at the same time, they are trapped in a cage externalized by their own psychological problems. So the protagonists in his movies are trapped both by their own internal dilemmas and those created by external circumstances.

For example, Ari Aster's early short film *Munchausen* centers around *Munchausen Syndrome*. And in *Genetic Doom*, Annie's father dies of mental illness, her brother dies of schizophrenia, and she herself suffers from some degree of schizophrenia, and needs to attend a psychiatric support group to heal after her mother's death. In the movie, Annie traps herself in sadness due to her mother's death and her daughter's death respectively, and even triggers her own psychological problems, resulting in constant nightmares. The sadness and

anxiety generated by her inner self becomes the inner dilemma of the Graham family, while the curse of the cultists on the family becomes their outer dilemma, which makes the Graham family bound by a tragic fate from which they cannot escape. In *Midsommar*, Dani's sister Terri suffers from severe bipolar disorder, while Dani herself suffers from severe anxiety and a strong emotional attachment to her boyfriend Christian. Terri's psychological problems led directly to her and her parents' deaths, and as a result, Dani's anxiety is at its worst, indirectly leading to the recurring visions she sees in the movie. Her emotional dependence on Christian is also much more severe, and she chooses to trust her boyfriend unconditionally even when she can detect that something is wrong with her relationship with him. These make Dani's inner sense of belonging to nowhere become her inner dilemma, binding her tightly to her emotional relationship with Christian, while the plans and layouts of Harga, represented by Pelle, for the protagonist's party become her outer dilemma, making the ultimate destiny unavoidable. In *Beau Is Afraid*, Beau possesses the typical paranoia of victimization, where everything in his subjective perspective of his surroundings is dangerous, so he's always afraid of touching things in the outside world. His mother, Mona, on the other hand, shares the same spiritual core as the mother in *Munchausen* - she is willing to hurt her son in order to keep him from leaving her. With such inner activity, Beau's paranoia of victimization becomes his inner dilemma, and the loyalty test Mona devises for him is his outer dilemma, making it equally impossible for Beau to escape the ultimate end. Ari Aster digs very deep into his character's inner world, making it impossible for the character to change the long foretold ending and giving his movie a more fatalistic feel.

#### 4. Conclusion

Ari Aster, as a director who has only made eight short films and three feature films so far, is very good at the horror genre. However, he is not limited to the genre framework of horror, combining genre elements with authorial elements to create a new form of horror.

In terms of aesthetic style, Ari Aster is very good at spatial narrations and gives a horror meaning to the attic space in the family home. He often uses very complex *mise-en-scène* to foreshadow subsequent plot developments and increase narrative efficiency. In terms of camera use, he tends to use distant shallow depth-of-field shots and inverted shots to present his characters' inner feelings. He also specializes in the use of "sound bridges" formed by the characters' voices to quickly connect different scenes.

In terms of thematic expression, Ari Aster is obsessed with portraying morbid family relationships, the key to which lies in the creation of unconventional mother and father figures. He also focuses on the inner workings of his characters, and his observation of society and family enables him to dig out their psychological problems as a way to portray their inner dilemmas.

It can be seen that as a new generation director, Ari Aster's works have demonstrated a very mature and innovative level of audio-visual language, and thematically, he has also shown his meticulous observation and thinking about modern society and family. He has successfully broadened the framework of horror film genre, inspired a number of horror film directors, accomplished many creators' unachieved achievements, and become one of the most influential directors in the American film industry today.

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