

ISSUE NO. 27: NOSTALGIA

YEARS OF TRENDS REVEALED HOW FREQUENTLY SAD TO THE BONE TEN

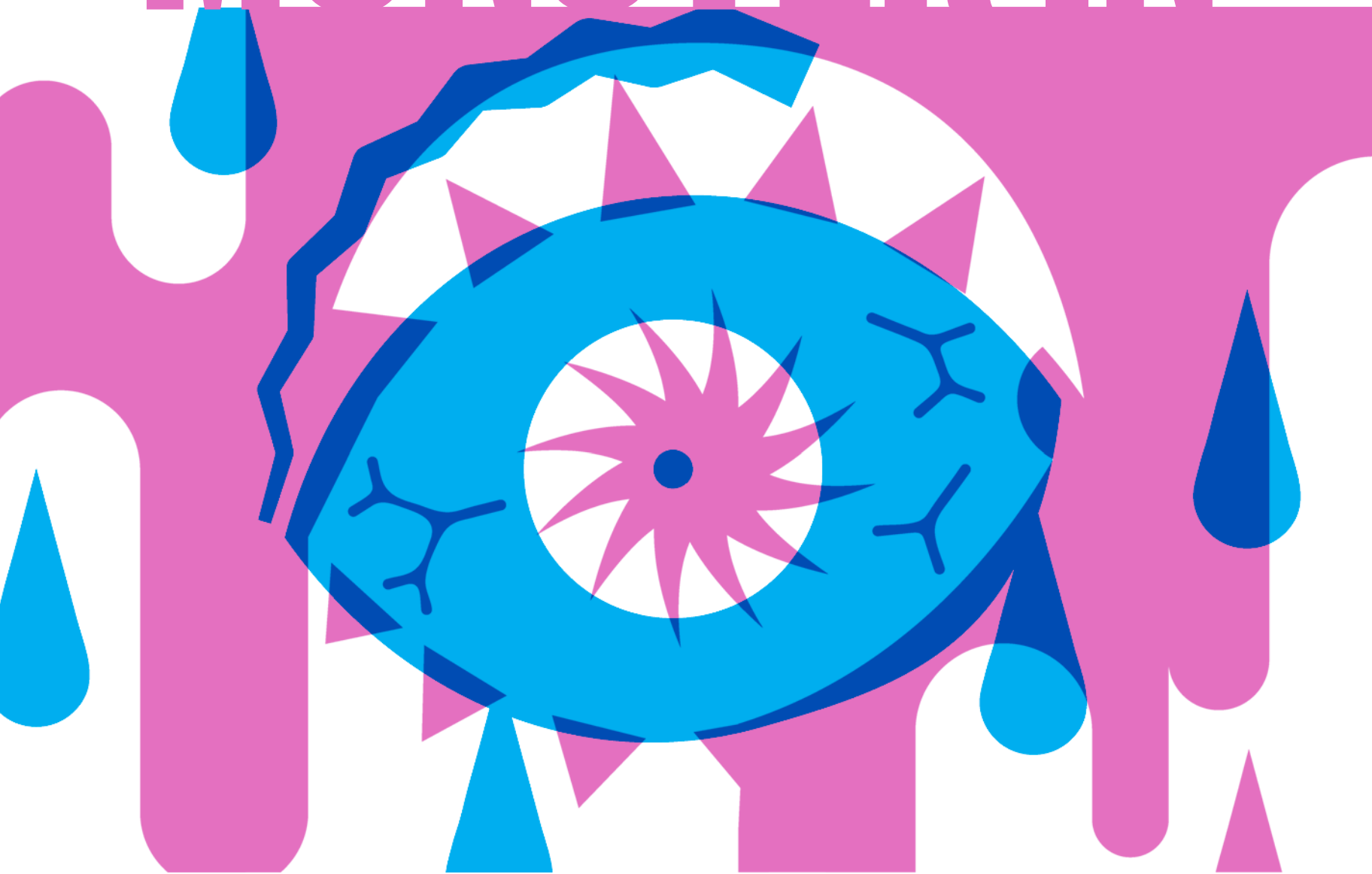
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MONSTER IN



The uncanny acuity of Ari Aster's *Hereditary*

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The horror movie genre can often times be something to laugh at. Its conventions become so clearly and didactically sedimented that the intention to evoke fear seems almost comical. Many considered classics, from Cunningham's *Friday the 13th* to Craven's *Scream*, fall short in stimulating any significant response, leading to a general consensus that horror film is rightfully excluded from any canon of cinematic superiority.

One justification for this dismal conception can be attributed to the fact that these films are culturally and temporally specific—there was a time back in the day when the grotesqueness of Blatty's *The Exorcist* or the improbable cross-dimensional travel in Hooper's *Poltergeist* elicited genuine fear and actually incited productive social commentary. What then can we consider to be the gold star horror films of our current era, and what are they trying to say about life in the 2010s?

I was super keen walking into Victoria's Capitol 6 Theatres to watch Aster's *Hereditary* last summer, expecting something chilling having been a fan of A24's other dark releases, like Lanthimos' *The Killing of a Sacred Deer*, and Shults' *It Comes at Night*. *Hereditary*, to my surprise, was an experience I could

have never foreseen. Instead of creating a semblance of hope for viewers to hold onto in the midst of evil, characterizing the main focal node of most successful horror films, this narrative evinced any trace of redemption, rapidly launching the depicted family into literal pandemonium.

The audience follows the grieving process of the Graham family who have just lost their matriarch, Ellen Taper Leigh. Annie Graham, daughter of Ellen, slowly uncovers the life of her mother that she had kept hidden from her—a life riddled with spiritual invocation, ritualistic sacrifice, and demonic summoning. Slowly plaguing her family, especially her two children, Charlie and Peter, supernatural violence subsumes their home until we reach the film's gut-wrenching conclusion. We find out that Ellen had spent her life beckoning a demon called Paimon, the eighth king of hell, destined to inhabit a male host within the Graham family. After every family member becomes subjected to sacrificial massacre in the name of this ritual, Peter is anointed as the demon's rightful heir.

Sitting in the theatre, you could hear audible moans and gasps at the film's moments of tension and explosion. An unexpected voice yelled profanities

THE HOUSE



when Charlie gets spontaneously decapitated while sticking her head out of a car window. These responses and reactions, including my own grossly unsettled stomach and permanent death grip around my boyfriend's arm, gesture toward the poignancy of *Hereditary's* critique. Aster uses this film to hone in on the family as the structure that emblemizes society at large. Equally, the family is the fabric through which the demonic penetrates and spawns, and is the medium that mobilizes Aster's suggestion of a forced, yet desired re-ordering of our current mode of existence. The film carries the argument that an inevitable revival of a repressed societal ordering symbolized by the demonic is on its way—an archaism that is bound to burst through and consume our understood reality at any given moment.

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Horror film, to me, is an astute genre to explore cultural desires and the mapping of the collective unconscious precisely because of its lack of critical recognition. As a result, these movies have a distinct acuity in investigating and cultivating viewer response—they construct concepts that will produce the highest shock value to consequently generate wider audiences. The work of *Hereditary* does just that. It latches onto a collective anxiety regarding the structure of western society as a whole, emblemized by the family in the narrative. They stand for a society built upon discrimination and corruption, and suggest that at the core of our human experience, we are all longing for an entirely new structure. Nostalgia is conflated with violence, the escape from the horrifying logic of our everyday is presented as only possible by grisly bodily decimation. Despite this challenge, the unease upon viewing this film emerges from the realization that perhaps, our current societal framework isn't all it's cracked up to be.

To deny the visceral affect of this film is to deny the question it ultimately asks us—are we ready for a complete dismantling, annihilation, and desecration of all we have come to know? *Hereditary* suggests that this is something we've always wanted, in fact, it is something we need. What happens once we accept it?