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Beau is Afraid: of the Sociological Imagination

Introduction

Beau is Afraid, afraid to stand up for himself against the societal pressures that continuously force him down. Ari Aster, who is also recognized for conceiving the masterpieces *Hereditary* (2018) and *Midsommar* (2019), wrote, directed, and produced this semi-horror/comedy film. He presents this gift with a colossal run-time of 2 hours and 59 minutes, starring lead actor Joaquin Phoenix as a “Beau” on top. Every single frame of this film exudes stress, anxiety, confusion, awe, wonder, disgust, and fear through its gorgeous cinematography, convoluted plot, and incredibly unique score. While confusing at times, the plot seems to be heavily influenced by sociological concepts and real-world societal situations, in this interpretation. The concepts that are more prevalent in this film include social control, Foucault’s Panopticon, the social construction of reality, the nature of reality, and the sociological imagination. Ari Aster and the other filmmakers involved with this film input manifest content, which is the surface level, true content visible in the film; nevertheless, overanalyzers, like me, take the manifest content and reinterpret it into a different perspective, outputting latent content. In this essay, I list specific instances of manifest content that produce sociological latent content, overview the sociological concepts that emerged, and explain how filmmaking techniques were able to produce sociological concepts on a small and large scale (See Figure 2).

Quickly, this psychologically demented film follows the overthinking and anxious Beau Wassermann through his odyssean trip to his mother's house. Throughout every moment of the first three parts, Beau encounters a series of mishaps and disturbances preventing him from reaching his mother's home; it almost seems arranged. The final part, though, decides to make a massive U-turn, unless you utilize the sociological imagination and see the social forces influencing everything Beau encounters, foreshadowing the ending clearly.

To simplify this essay, I split the film into four parts and an interlude, which I label as Part 1: Beau's Apartment. Part 2: Grace and Roger's Utopia. Interlude: Beau, Beau, Beau. Part 3: Nature, or Nurture? And Part 4: Finally Home (The Finale). In the chart I generated (See Figure 1), I recognize each piece of manifest content from the film that I interpreted in a sociological context. I label the order, event (manifest input), timestamp, presented form, and the associated concept (latent output). Throughout this essay, I will consistently refer to this chart as I will analyze only select, strong events/inputs.

Disclaimer

This is only my interpretation of the movie from a sociological perspective. Everyone is subject to their own opinions on this film, whether that be none of it is real, some of it is real, or all of it is real. Film is *always* subjective and all opinions and interpretations should be welcome in every discussion space.

Filmmaking Techniques

Films have a huge cache of different methods of evoking emotion and sending messages without directly stating them. Meaning is always found within the concept of a film. The original idea is the foundation, and the process of shaping an entire world around it only amplifies that meaning even further. The writing of the screenplay follows conceptualization, which is

necessary for infusing characters, dialogue, setting, and plot into the sprout that originated the process. Many different techniques can be applied when writing a screenplay to exude specific messages; the primary method of such secretive communication comes from semiotics.

Semiotics, or symbols, are arguably the most efficient agent to integrate hidden meanings into film. Making their appearance throughout all stages of production, semiotics can be found in many different forms themselves. The baseline form of semiotics is through color. Human minds associate specific colors with specific meanings and emotions, and implementing color into films allows the human mind to make those associations easily. Next, is through motifs; for example, brands often curate their logos to represent very specific things. Whether it simply showcases a brand name or implies some philosophical meaning, it is a representation of the interpretation of the audience. The most successful implementations of semiotics, though, are discovered when colors and motifs are synthesized, or dialogue is framed very intentionally. If you look out for costumes, makeup, set dressing, props, setting, and cinematography, and listen for intentional framing of dialogue and music, you are fully prepared to analyze a movie.

The primary driving force of my sociological interpretation of *Beau is Afraid* is semiotics, present in every frame. Ari Aster intentionally details every single prop, wall, clothing item, and rug with the most absurd but necessary representations of specific ideas, boosting his film to my conception of perfection. In an interview with Vox, Aster states the generation of symbols and motifs ““was part of the fun of creating this world. (He) wanted to make sure that every billboard, every poster, every product, every newspaper was made from scratch, and was made in the spirit of the world: evil comedy. All the comic details;”” (Wilkinson). Every sociological concept present in this film was reasonably integrated through semiotics, which I will recognize and analyze later on.

Sociological Perspectives, Broadly

This film, through my interpretation of the manifest content Ari Aster placed within this film, reveals multiple different sociological concepts. The primary concepts revealed through semiotics include social control, Foucault's Panopticon, the social construction of reality, and the sociological imagination. The nature of reality, though, is primarily revealed through the latent functions of the entire film itself.

Social Control

Social control is the set of agents and mechanisms that influence and force compliance to the norms in a society; abiding by those norms is considered "normative compliance," while rejecting the norms is called "deviance". There are two types of social control; ideological social control refers to the manipulation of a group's conscience, to force a group to accept a new ruling ideology, but direct social control explains external mechanisms that control and punish those who deviate from the norms (Eitzen).

Michel Foucault's Panopticon was a high method of social control: a prison with a guard tower in the middle, preventing the prisoners from confirming when they are and aren't being watched. Whether or not they are truly being watched, the power is visible but unverifiable to the prisoners. Surveillance society theories illustrate a world in which everyone is being monitored and watched by some sort of technology or agent. The culture of spectacle, comparatively, elucidates the idea that public punishments can deter deviance and reinforce social control.

The Nature of Reality

This concept asks the questions: How do we know what we know? How do we know what is real and what isn't? How do individuals construct their reality? And, How do social forces shape our understanding of the world? These four questions are essential to understanding

the true nature of the society in this film. This concept also produces the idea of the social construction of reality which refers to the process of exchanging, changing, and creating “truth” and “facts” in a society. The theory mentions that members of a society far too often believe in an objective reality that everyone in a society shares. At a certain point, one must recognize that society is based on human-created ideas that have been forced into reality as true. The social construction of reality also introduces the idea of confirmation bias, the process of interpreting new evidence and information on an event or individual as a reinforcement and confirmation of the interpreter’s opinion on that event or individual (Berger and Luckmann).

The Sociological Imagination

The sociological imagination discusses the ability to view how societal forces and institutions impact and influence our daily lives at a personal, individual level. This concept explains that most of the problems in the world, individually and generally, cannot be solved by individual changes. The institutions must be altered and fixed (Mills).

Analysis and Interpretations

Part 1: The Apartment

After a graphic scene of Beau being birthed, from his point of view, Beau is at a therapy session the day before he plans to visit his mother. Tomorrow is the anniversary of his father’s death, also the same day Beau was conceived. After his session, he heads home, buying a Mother Mary idol on the way. When he makes it back to his apartment he eats dinner and goes straight to bed. Beau suddenly wakes to his alarm blaring, at a time much later than it was set. He scrambles to make his flight to his mother’s but fails as his keys and luggage are stolen, preventing him from leaving his apartment without locking himself out. Beau is forced to leave his apartment to

get water, which eventually spirals into him running out of his apartment naked and being hit by Grace's food truck.

Social Control

During Beau's therapy session, his therapist mentions his previous medication, which was causing Beau to have itchy eyes (See Item 5 Fig. 1). The therapist then proceeds to prescribe Beau a new medication that must always be taken with water (See Item 6 Fig. 1). The manifest input of this symbol is that Beau is an anxious man requiring medication to help him live equitably. In this context, I view the medication as an agent for direct and ideological social control. MW Corporations, the largest corporation and more specifically, pharmaceutical corporation, has prescribed this medication to Beau to influence specific behavior, whether that be normative compliance or maybe even deviance.

When Beau is making his way back to his apartment after therapy, he walks by a kid playing with a toy boat in a fountain (See Item 7 Fig. 1). The manifest input of this symbol is merely a kid playing with his toy boat in a miniature body of water. In the context of sociological concepts and the finale of this film, my interpretation revolves around the idea that Beau is a toy, or pawn with no autonomy in this world. The institution, his mother, has control over him fully and can move him around like a toy. To further my interpretation, a poster was released for this movie (See Figure 4) showcasing the idea of Beau being a puppet under the control of someone else. There are strings attached to Beau, preventing him from making any decisions in his life that haven't already been paved out for him.

Nearing the end of Part 1, Beau draws a bath, right after his apartment was ransacked and demolished (See Item 30 Fig. 1). When Beau gets into the bath, water starts dripping onto him from above. To Beau's and our surprise, a man is hiding, holding himself up above Beau's

bathtub, sweating profusely. The clear surface-level reasoning for this event is this man did not leave Beau's apartment in time, so he is hiding to not get caught. The cinematography employed, though, conveys a very specific power dynamic between Beau and the outside world. Beau is looking up at this infiltrator and the infiltrator is looking down. Camera angles presenting different individuals above and below each other almost always represent a lack of power in the latter. Beau is weak, powerless against the institutions present in this society, that being his mother.

Panopticon

As Beau is waiting outside of his therapist's office to be let in, we see him staring into a fish tank (See Item 1 Fig. 1). While fish tanks are incredibly common outside of doctors' offices, there is a sociological latent output from this possibly unintentional plot device. Beau is staring into a fish tank, a fish tank representing the world he is currently living in. The world he lives in is constantly being watched, but who is watching the world is blurred and unverifiable due to the refraction of the water from inside the tank.

When Beau is ready for dinner, he grabs a prepared meal from his freezer (See Item 14 Fig. 1). The packaging of the meal reveals the brand "MW Corporations" (See Figure 3). At first glance, the most apparent feature of this logo is the color red. Red is most often used to imply a feeling of danger and is used as a warning sign, like stop signs. As this makes a statement about MW Corporations itself, MW also represents "Mona Wassermann," Beau's mother. In my interpretation of these semiotic principles and manifest inputs, I conclude another relation to the Panopticon. Ari Aster indicates that Mona is keeping her eyes on Beau by placing her products in his apartment and utilizing classic semiotic principles.

Surveillance Society

During Beau's therapy session, the therapist continuously probes Beau about visiting his mother. At one point, we can see a camera recording the entire conversation over the therapist's shoulder (See Item 4 Fig. 1). The therapist is seeking out specific answers from Beau and is providing all of this information to Mona directly. She is consistently surveilling Beau's life.

After Beau's quick dinner, he begins to get ready for bed. While he is sitting in his bed watching TV, the scene is presented from a camera angle that looks incredibly similar to where a security camera would be located (See Item 15 Fig. 1). Simultaneously, in the same shot, outside of Beau's window is a neon sign of a woman with bright blue eyes, staring in at Beau (See Item 16 Fig. 1). While the camera angle may have been used for convenience of revealing the entire room in one shot, and that sign may randomly be there, I interpret it as though Beau is consistently being watched, inside and outside of his apartment.

When Beau sleeps through his alarm he ends up missing his flight to his mothers. After the chaotic event that ensues after he misses the flight, he calls his mother again, but this time, a UPS driver picks up the phone. He tells Beau that there is a woman on the floor with no head: Mona (See Item 28 Fig. 1). Prompted by Beau asking where her head went, he cries out "I'm sure it's here, it's everywhere" (*Beau is Afraid* 00:32:55). The surface level function of this dialogue is explaining to Beau that her head and brain guts are truly all over the room. Within a sociological context, her head, or her eyes, are everywhere, always watching Beau.

Culture of Spectacle

During Beau's walk home from therapy, he encounters a group of citizens recording a man trying to commit suicide (See Item 10 Fig. 1). Not a single one of the citizens has any care for this suicidal man, only recording him and telling him to kill himself. The manifest purpose of

this plot piece is to foreshadow the finale, where Beau is slaughtered in front of hundreds of people recording him. My interpretation of this event closely aligns with the culture of spectacle, where people view one's public pain for pleasure.

Social Construction of Reality

Beau is consistently the victim of being framed as an instigator and perpetrator. When Beau is trying to go to bed before his flight, his next-door neighbors are blasting music loudly. Due to this disturbance, one of Beau's neighbors slides five different notes under Beau's door, each accusing him of blasting music and demanding him to be quiet (See Item 17 Fig. 1). Beau has done nothing wrong, but is being framed for someone else's actions. His neighbor, most likely under the control of Mona, formed a mindset where Beau was blasting the music and causing the disturbance, creating their own truth and reality.

When Beau first calls his mother to inform her of his absence on his flight, she offers the idea to come to him (See Item 20 Fig. 1). Rather than a purely understanding offer, she frames it negatively against Beau by saying maybe it wouldn't be "such a pain" for him (*Beau is Afraid* 00:18:57). Mona chooses to construct a reality in which Beau is purposefully missing his flight as an insult to her. She frames her dialogue in a way that accuses Beau of this treachery, even though Mona is controlling every event within this film.

The Sociological Imagination

When Beau's therapist probes about his current medication, he specifically asks if Beau's eyes are still itchy (See Item 5 Fig. 1). Beau responds by saying they only get itchy if he doesn't blink often, but this is reason enough for a new prescription. Itchy eyes are a common side effect of some medications, but from a sociological perspective, they reveal something much more interesting. I interpreted Beau's "affected" eyes as though his vision was being impaired. The

sociological imagination outlines the ability to see and recognize how social forces influence our daily lives, which Beau time and time again proves that he does not hold. This instance, specifically critiquing Beau's vision, feels like a heavy reference to his inability to see how his mother is influencing and controlling his entire life.

Similar to the previous example, when Beau is looking out of his window, scoping for water to drink with his new medication, we can tell his window is incredibly foggy (See Item 23 Fig. 1). From Beau's perspective, in a manifest content sense, he looks to the outside world from his window, which is foggy. The latent interpretation that arises in my mind is that Beau's view of the outside world is blurry, foggy, or inaccurate; once again, a critique of Beau's inability to see how social forces control his life.

Part 2: Grace and Roger's Utopia

Beau wakes up in a bright pink room after being brutally stabbed by the "Birthday Boy Stab Man" and hit by a fairly large truck. Taken in by surgeon Roger and businesswoman Grace, Beau is stuck in their house, injured and anxious to get to his mother's. Beau continuously makes attempts to leave but is prevented each time. The household tensions rise throughout this part until Toni eventually drinks paint and kills herself. Grace accuses Beau of her death, and sends the PTSD-infested veteran living in their house, Jeeves, to "rip (Beau) apart" (*Beau is Afraid* 01:23:03).

Social Control

Following from symbols in Part 1, Grace and Roger incorporate medications into their daily lives (See Item 38 Fig.1). Knowing that MW Corporations is a "mega-corporation" and specifically has a pharmaceutical division, it is impossible to not associate pills with direct and ideological social control from Mona Wassermann over her "followers." On top of the excessive

pill use by everyone in this family, they display a heavy obsession toward the use of incapacitating drugs, sedatives, and medications. Toni, for example, peer pressures Beau into smoking her joint (See Item 52 Fig. 1). When Jeeves starts going after Beau, at the order of Toni, Grace has to sedate him heavily (See Item 64 Fig. 1). Only a few minutes later, Toni swallows a massive amount of paint (See Item 68. Fig. 1). Drugs are mentally and physically harmful, preventing people from carrying out specific duties and actions, in a way disabling them. Drugs, in this film, are used as agents of direct and ideological social control, influencing specific mindsets by incapacitating people mentally and forcing physical compliance simultaneously.

When Beau is finally coming down from the high Toni inflicted on him, he overhears Grace on the phone outside (See Item 65 Fig. 1). She is arguing about a contract that she was forced to sign and adds the phrase “I am a mother too you know,” heavily implying she is either talking directly to Mona, or someone working under Mona (*Beau is Afraid* 01:16:39). Mona has forced Grace, Roger, and most likely Toni as well into signing a contract having to do with the controlling and watching of Beau. Mona directly controls Grace and her family by making them sign a contract and further controlling them to control Beau.

Surveillance Society

When Beau wakes up in Grace and Roger’s house, he immediately notices an ankle monitor strapped to his leg (See Item 36 Fig. 1). Roger brushes it off as a health monitor, but it is meant to track and keep an eye on Beau in case he escapes. The next day, Beau is just walking around the house, but notices a man standing in the backyard, staring at him intensely (See Item 49 Fig. 1). Beau is consistently being surveilled by different people in different places, it feels like he has no escape: he’s trapped. The manifest intent of these symbols is identical to their latent interpretations, which is a rare occurrence.

The most unarguable interpretation I discovered of surveillance society in this film occurs when Grace tells Beau to turn on the TV and flip to a specific channel (See Item 66 Fig. 1). When Beau turns on the TV, it is a live recording of him, inside Grace and Roger's house. Beau begins to rewind, looking into what just happened over the past few minutes, and then goes forward. The footage goes forward to the end of the film, revealing a few specific, but unidentifiable stills, unless you have seen the film before. This tells the audience that Beau is being watched at all times, everywhere. Further, his life is fully planned out.

Culture of Spectacle

When Beau is talking to Roger about when he can get a ride to his mother's house, Roger repeatedly reshapes the conversation. Beau is incredibly anxious, feeling immense guilt for not making it to his mother's funeral in time. While he is severely injured, his status as a Jewish son introduces the necessity to go to his mother's funeral immediately, so she can be buried. Referring to the funeral (See Item 43 Fig. 1), Roger says "after the show," framing this sad event as just a show, or a spectacle (*Beau is Afraid* 00:53:20).

Not even ten seconds later, Toni starts recording Beau having his panic attack about missing his mother's funeral (See Item 44 Fig. 1). Toni turns Beau's pain and suffering into just something to record and post later.

Social Construction of Reality

When Beau wakes up in Toni's room, he is overwhelmed with the multiplicity of posters covering almost every inch of her walls (See Item 34 Fig. 1). Every poster was intentionally placed where it was, some with the text "Only 1" or "Final exam" printed on them. The manifest content here is placing K-pop posters in Toni's room, giving her character more depth. My interpretation, though, reveals Ari Aster's foreshadowing and explaining what is going on in this

film. This whole film surrounds Beau, the only one in focus in this reality. Building off of surveillance society ideas, Beau is always being monitored in this world that Mona constructed, testing him to see if he truly loves her, hence his “final exam.”

Before Grace has to leave the house for a business meeting, she brings Beau a cup of water with a napkin under it (See Item 48 Fig. 1). Written on the napkin is “stop incriminating yourself.” Beau, when he reads this, freaks out and has no idea what it means. While Beau has not intentionally or objectively done anything to hurt his mother, his mother is the primary institution with the power to create whatever truth she wants. It is impossible for Beau to stop “incriminating himself,” though, because of the lack of an objective reality in the world. Everything is up to Mona’s interpretation and her reproduction of truth.

Interlude: Beau, Beau, Beau

Intertwined through Part 2 and Part 3, Beau has multiple flashbacks to different childhood experiences. His first major flashback occurs when Toni forces Beau into smoking. He remembers a vacation he took with his mother, on a cruise, where he met the love of his life Elaine. They partake in slightly deviant actions on the cruise, until Elaine’s mother drags her away, and Mona asks Beau if Elaine was “the one.” His next flashback reveals Beau in a bathtub, looking at his possible brother getting locked up in the attic. Mona yells at Beau in the flashback and he is brought back to reality.

Social Control

Mona, on multiple occasions, phrases her dialogue with Beau very intentionally. She consistently places an idea of what she wants Beau to respond with (See Items 56, 57, 59 Fig. 1). When Mona asks Beau if he is attracted to Elaine, she tells him “You don’t have to feel embarrassed,” even though he shows no signs of embarrassment (*Beau is Afraid* 01:10:20).

Mona is controlling Beau's mindset, essentially making him think he should be embarrassed, so he becomes embarrassed. This ties directly in with the self-fulfilling prophecy, where Beau internalizes others' perceptions of him, especially powerful perceptions like his mother's.

Another example of ideological social control occurs when Elaine asks Beau to wait to have sex until they can do it together, as she is dragged off of the cruise by her mother (See Item 63 Fig. 1). This one instance had a significant impact on Beau for the rest of his life. A combination of his mother telling him if he has sex he will die (See Item 91 Fig. 1), but also Elaine asking him to wait for her, adds a huge strain to Beau. Due to both of these factors, Beau never engages in sexual activity until Part 4. Ari Aster explained, in one sense, that this film is only about a man who needs to finish. Aster is not wrong, as his lack of ever having sex has heavily impacted Beau's physicality, somehow giving him incredibly large testicles, but also affecting his mind, always thinking about Elaine and being scared to do it in the first place.

Panopticon

In the first flashback, which takes place right after Beau is hit by Grace's car, he is taken back to his memory of being in a bathtub. His mother looks over to him and starts yelling, but all that comes out is the screeching of a bird (See Item 33 Fig. 1). The manifest input is simply a disturbing and unnerving interpretation of what a dream feels like; my interpretation, on the other hand, explores why a bird's screech was used. Birds are all around, you can hear them from all over as long as there is some sort of tree near you. Often, the birds are incredibly audible, but not very visible, as they are hiding in the trees. By replacing the birds with Mona, I conclude that Mona is all around, watching every move. Mona, like birds, is visible (or audible), but not verifiable.

Culture of Spectacle

Beau, as a child, overhears Elaine running around the cruise ship, knocking on everyone's door claiming that a dead man is in the pool (See Item 54 Fig. 1). Elaine asks Beau to take a photo of her with Gene, the dead man, in the background. Time and time again, the characters in this film are shown to have little to no respect or care for others, everything is just a joke or unimportant.

Social Construction of Reality

After Beau sneaks out of his room to meet Elaine on the cruise ship, they stroll on the deck looking at different desserts (See Items 60 and 61 Fig. 1). Elaine asks Beau about each dessert, and each time he brings up a new “fact” about them and why he doesn't eat them. Mona has created a reality in which Beau is afraid of truly everything. She constructs her truths and exchanges those truths with Beau, fully affecting his perception of the world and what type of place it is.

Part 3: Nature, or Nurture?

Beau, during his escape from the utopia, hits his head incredibly hard on a fallen tree. He wakes up, wanders around, and discovers a traveling theater troupe in the forest. Beau is welcomed into the community immediately and sits down to watch the production they have put on. From the start, the play heavily resembles Beau's life, yet he doesn't know it. If it wasn't clear to the viewer, the play quickly becomes immersive and fantastical, putting Beau in the main character's position and following an exaggerated version of his life. He is brought back to reality when Jeeves finds his way into the forest, tracking Beau through his ankle monitor, and inciting a massacre. This part makes the audience ask the question, is this Beau's reality? Or was this cultivated specifically for him?

Social Control

As the play begins, a man also dressed in a costume starts winding up a machine that produces a unique humming noise (See Item 81 Fig. 1). When the noise starts playing, everyone in the audience begins to fall asleep and lose consciousness. The manifest intention of this sound is incredibly unclear, but the sociological interpretation I uncovered was the machine as an agent of social control. This rainbow machine's hum somehow got into Beau's mind and placed him inside of the play rather than just as a viewer. In the film, the theater troupe did claim that they wanted to blur the lines between the audience and the stage.

Before Beau is fully immersed in the play, though, the lead actor is revealed to be chained down to the stage (See Item 82 Fig. 1). This chain directly represents the lack of control Beau has over his own life: he is chained down to the ideology that Mona has generously influenced everyone to believe. In the play, the man breaks the chain, but Beau does not have the pleasure of doing so until he recognizes the chain tying him down.

Surveillance Society

Nearing the end of Beau's immersion into the play, he is sitting in a blue forest of trees. Every tree surrounding him has drawn-on eyeballs blinking at him (See Item 89 Fig. 1). The manifest function of this inclusion is to evoke a sense of unease in the audience, especially because Beau pays no attention to the eyes. The latent, sociological output of these symbols, though, is directly related to the idea of a surveillance society and Beau being constantly watched at all times.

Sociological Imagination

During the play, there is a specific shot of Beau writing in a journal about his sense of some force coming after him, specifically referring to an attack dog sent after him. (See Item 86

Fig. 1). As a manifest input, the play represents Beau's real life and refers to Jeeves currently tracking down Beau. In my interpretation, this scene connects to the sociological imagination. Beau, in the fictional, fantastical world of the play has finally gained the ability to recognize the societal forces that control the world around him. While real Beau fully lacks this ability, "play" Beau is proficient.

Part 4: Finally Home (The Finale)

After Beau escapes Jeeves, again, he reaches his final destination, or so he thinks. Beau missed his mother's funeral, but strolls around while listening to the recording of the funeral, looking at all of the collages and posters on her wall. As he scans, Elaine suddenly appears at Mona's house, also missing the funeral. Beau promised Elaine he would wait for her and lose his virginity to her. Elaine did not wait for him, but they still took their party upstairs to Mona's room. After rustling the sheets and finishing, Elaine turns to stone, and Mona appears from the shadows. Beau is very afraid, but also unsurprised that his mother is still alive. She reveals her knowledge of every action Beau has committed and introduces Beau to his father, who is genuinely a massive dick. Beau is once again afraid, but now upset. He strangles his mother and runs out into a boat conveniently placed outside her house. Beau paddles away into the starry night until the stars are revealed as flashlights and Beau is on trial in a massive arena. Beau is convicted of being guilty of abusing his mother's emotions and is sentenced to death.

Social Control

When Beau enters the house, he immediately looks down at his mother's open casket, where she is missing her head. Above the casket are plaques/headstones engraved into the wall for his father, his mother, and one for him without the ending year filled in quite yet (See Item 101 Fig. 1). On one hand, the idea of the plaque already being placed for Beau represents his

lack of choice over his own life. He, once again, has no control or autonomy. But, when you look at the date of his birth, concerning what day he was conceived, we learn Beau was in the womb for 10 months, rather than 9. Mona has such an attachment to Beau she has to control his entire life and couldn't even let him go when he was in her womb.

After Beau falls asleep on the couch, he wakes up to Elaine entering the house (See Item 107 Fig. 1). To present a very specific power dynamic and to explain who has control in their relationship, Aster utilizes their spacing in the setting and cinematography. Elaine is upstairs and is filmed from below, making her look down at the camera and down at Beau. Beau has to look up to her and is filmed from above, making him seem small and powerless. Elaine has power over Beau in this situation and has been able to and still can control Beau in any way she wants to, all due to the promise he made her when they were children.

Panopticon

When Elaine suddenly dies when she finishes on top of Beau, Mona appears in the shadows, watching Beau (See Item 109 Fig. 1). Oftentimes, people hallucinate when they look into the dark for too long, making them question whether something is there. The manifest intention was to slightly hide Mona in a dim hallway. Using this unique cinematographic and lighting technique, the audience and Beau both question whether Mona is truly there. This questioning of Mona's existence in the hallway relates to the Panopticon in the sense that she is visible but difficult to verify.

Social Construction of Reality

After Elaine turns to stone on top of Beau, Mona reveals herself and begins to lay out how she feels about Beau's actions against her, the actions he was forced into by the control of his mother (See Item 115 Fig. 1). For example, Mona screams at Beau "Do you think I hear the

absurd story of you missing your flight and that I don't absolutely know, that I have any hint of a doubt, that you never, from the very start, intended to make that flight?" (*Beau is Afraid* 02:30:05). Mona falls victim to the concept of confirmation bias, a branch of the social construction of reality. She uses this new information that Beau presents as evidence of his betrayal and disrespect towards her.

In the unfair trial arguing Beau's extent of guilt of mistreating his mother, everything argued utilizes confirmation bias (See Item 123 Fig. 1). Mona and her lawyer together accuse Beau of intentionally and deliberately offending and humiliating her throughout his entire life. Even when it is clear that Beau never meant any harm, Mona, her lawyer, and the audience interpret Beau's actions as calculated and harmful. Everyone watching this trial is influenced to believe these blatant lies from Mona as the truth; she has constructed her own truth with her excessive power within this society. Beau's lawyer, already appointed to him, can't even get all the numbers in the phone number to spell "Defense" (See Item 124 Fig. 1). Mona ensured that Beau had no chance of escaping this conviction.

Culture of Spectacle

As Beau is riding into the starry night, post-strangling his mother, he enters a cave. The stars seem to be moving and even flashing, at times. When the lights abruptly power on, all the stars are revealed as cameras, watching Beau ride into his trial and demise (See Item 122 Fig. 1). Mona and her lawyer proceed to accuse Beau of countless crimes against Mona, all leading to the conclusion that Beau does not care about her in any shape or form. Everyone in the audience of the trial continues to watch as Beau is devastatingly slandered and thinks nothing of it: they are here for the show.

Once Beau is sentenced to death, his boat quickly flips over and Beau begins to drown (See Item 126 Fig. 1). Immediately when the boat flips, the trial audience begins to get up and leave the arena. But for the next six minutes and twenty-two seconds, the viewer is forced to watch the boat slowly stop shaking from Beau's movements, and Beau slowly passes away. Ari Aster forces us to participate in the culture of spectacle. Evil.

Sidenote

My all-time favorite moment from this entire film occurs from 01:14:20-01:14:30 when Toni in the real world yells "NOW!" and it is heard by the characters in Beau's flashback.

The Nature of Reality, or the Nature of this Film

The nature of reality within this film is found through the analysis of semiotics in various sociological concepts and the plot synthesized. Ari Aster approaches this concept very literally, as well. Not only does the audience have to ask themselves: "What is real? What do we know?" but Beau has to learn what is real in his own life. So, what are the answers to the four primary questions about the nature of reality: How do we know what we know? How do we know what is real and what isn't? How do individuals construct their reality? And, How do social forces shape our understanding of the world? These four questions must be answered together, in the context of this film.

First of all, what is known by Beau, is not real. Mona shapes Beau's known reality by controlling and limiting his opportunities and surveils every blink and breath. As the viewer, we can understand that Beau's reality is not real through the semiotics and foreshadowing present in the film from the start. Beau is subject to the idea of a social construction of reality, where he

assumes the reality he lives in is the same reality as everyone else, he may just have more unfortunate incidents than others.

Mona, conversely, *thinks* she knows what is real and what isn't. Mona views Beau as a careless, lazy, and ungrateful son. While Beau is not truly what she believes, she decides to physically construct a reality in which Beau can be framed as what she views him as. Her first method of constructing this reality is making him live in one of her rehabilitation centers as a resident assistant (See Item 105 Fig. 1). This relates to social control in the sense that she has quarantined and ostracized him into a place where she has total control. She owns the building, and most likely the entire city he lives in as well. Every action that occurs in his nearby surroundings is up to her imagination. Along with his apartment, she has countless employees working for her around the world, willing to do her every deed (See Item 106 Fig. 1).

Mona heavily leans into confirmation bias in her practice of viewing Beau's actions (which she has total control over) as insults to her. She interprets his actions as wrong, labeling him as a deviant in her society. While it is nearly impossible for Beau to not be labeled as a deviant by Mona in these scenarios, she uses his actions to confirm her suspicions of Beau being a bad son. This is wholly invalid on her end, but there are no consequences for Mona. Her social standing allows her to take advantage of any individual or organization below her.

Conclusion

Beau is Afraid is Ari Aster's most ambitious film. Said to be inspired by Aster's nightmares, this film somehow also correlates perfectly with a plethora of sociological concepts that seem impossible to be unintentional. Spanning from social control to the Panopticon, and the

nature of reality, this film heavily represents the way our world works today in an extremely exaggerated format.

Beau, a truly innocent but tormented man, struggles to make his way home after hearing of his mother's death. As the film unfolds, we understand that his mother planned out this entire scenario just to prove a point. Mona Wassermann, *the* institution within this film, constructs a reality in which she can label Beau as a bad son and, in sociological terms, a deviant. She enforces ideological and direct social control throughout the film, which Aster presents through dialogue, plot, and semiotics. Mona's constructed reality, which solely surrounds Beau, is a combination of surveillance, spectacle, and the Panopticon, due to the apparent presence of something watching Beau, but our inability to locate and identify who is watching him.

This film, in my opinion, succeeds in every message it means to send. To start, it critiques powerful institutions that manipulate individuals and organizations beneath them. More simply, it tells the story of a man grieving the death of his mother and father with a rack of guilt weighing him down throughout his life. Thirdly, a purely nonsensical nightmare, influencing people like me to overanalyze it, and making fun of me for doing so when I fully interpret it wrong. Lastly, this is a critique of individuals in society who lack the sociological imagination. This entire film follows Beau with the inability to see how controlled and fake his reality is, and in the end, laughs at him for it. The film even influences us to make fun of him. Now that is something everyone should be afraid of.

	26	“Betray your mother” poster	00:26:21	Mise-en-scène	Social Construction of Reality
	27	Jesus mural	00:27:55	Mise-en-scène	Surveillance Society
	28	“Her head, it’s everywhere”	00:32:55	Dialogue	Surveillance Society
	29	Water flooding apartment	00:35:50	Mise-en-scène	Social Control
	30	Bathtub fight	00:38:00	Cinematography	Social Control
	31	Cop accusing Beau	00:40:04	D + M	Labeling Theory
	32	Beau in bathtub	00:41:20	Mise-en-scène	Social Control
	33	Mona screeching	00:41:40	Audio	Panopticon
P A R T T W O	34	Toni’s posters	00:42:04	Mise-en-scène	Social Construction of Reality
	35	IV tube	00:42:12	Mise-en-scène	Direct Social Control
	36	Ankle monitor	00:42:57	Mise-en-scène	Surveillance Society
	37	Never goodbye sign	00:45:43	Mise-en-scène	Surveillance Society
	38	Grace and Rogers pills	00:46:37	D + M	Social Control
	39	Beau’s balls are big	00:47:01	Dialogue	Social Control
	40	Toni taking pills for fun	00:47:49	Mise-en-scène	Deviance
	41	Lawyer phone call	00:48:45	Dialogue	Surveillance Society
	42	Beau can’t fly	00:52:30	Dialogue	Social Control
	43	“After the show”	00:53:20	Dialogue	Culture of Spectacle
	44	Toni recording Beau	00:53:30	Mise-en-scène	Culture of Spectacle
	45	Roger’s negative phrasing	00:56:50	Dialogue	Ideological Social Control
	46	Beau’s wounds opened	00:58:50	Mise-en-scène	Direct Social Control
	47	Roger’s phrasing	01:00:00	Dialogue	Social Construction of Reality
	48	Grace’s napkin to Beau	01:00:50	Mise-en-scène	Social Construction of Reality
	49	Man watching Beau	01:01:25	Mise-en-scène	Surveillance Society
	50	Google search about Mona	01:02:01	Mise-en-scène	Social Construction of Reality
	51	Recording Beau	01:03:43	Mise-en-scène	Surveillance Society
	52	Peer pressuring Beau	01:03:50	Dialogue	Social Control
	53	Threatening Beau	01:04:55	Dialogue	Social Construction of Reality

	54	Dead man in pool	01:09:30	Mise-en-scène	Culture of Spectacle
	55	Beau alone in a void	01:10:07	Cinematography	Culture of Spectacle
	56	Mona asking about Elaine	01:10:30	Dialogue	Ideological Social Control
	57	Mona probing Beau	01:10:50	Dialogue	Ideological Social Control
	58	Moon spotlight on Beau	01:12:00	Cinematography	Culture of Spectacle
I N T E R L U D E	59	Mona's phrasing	01:12:30	Dialogue	Ideological Social Control
	60	Beau sneaking out	01:12:57	Mise-en-scène	Deviance
	61	Elaine asking about desserts	01:13:00	Dialogue	Social Construction of Reality
	62	Elaine and Beau kiss	01:14:00	Dialogue	Social Control
	63	"Will you wait for me"	01:15:00	Dialogue	Ideological Social Control
	64	Sedating Jeeves	01:16:05	Mise-en-scène	Social Control
	65	Grace's contract	01:16:39	Dialogue	Social Control
	66	Security camera	01:18:08	Mise-en-scène	Surveillance, Construction
	67	Toni paints "Beau"	01:20:00	Mise-en-scène	Labeling Theory
	68	Toni drinks paint	01:21:28	Mise-en-scène	Deviance
	69	"I see you now"	01:22:30	Dialogue	Social Construction of Reality
	70	Glass door broken	01:22:50	Mise-en-scène	Social Construction of Reality
	71	Mona closing attic	01:23:30	Mise-en-scène	Social Construction of Reality
P A R T	72	Traveling theater group	01:28:30	Mise-en-scène	Social Control
	73	Quote from actor offstage	01:28:58	Dialogue	Direct Social Control
	74	Man staring at Beau again	01:29:18	Mise-en-scène	Surveillance Society
	75	Cupid quote	01:29:30	Dialogue	Direct Social Control
	76	Chicken costume	01:29:53	Mise-en-scène	Social Construction of Reality
	77	"Blur the lines"	01:31:54	Dialogue	Social Construction of Reality
	78	Song before play starts	01:32:45	Audio	Social Construction of Reality
	79	The entire play	01:33:17	All	Social Construction of Reality
	80	"Mother and father gone"	01:34:25	Dialogue	Social Control
	81	Rainbow machine	01:35:50	Mise-en-scène	Social Control

T	82	Chains	01:36:18	Mise-en-scène	Direct Social Control
	83	Beau viewed as criminal	01:41:12	Narration	Labeling Theory
H	84	Beau accused of an act	01:41:27	Narration	Labeling Theory + Control
	85	Beau in jail	01:41:47	Narration	Self-Fulfilling Prophecy
R	86	Beau logging his intuitions	01:42:18	Narration	Sociological Imagination
	87	Fading family	01:43:10	Mise-en-scène	Social Construction of Reality
E	88	“Confess”	01:44:15	Dialogue	Labeling Theory
	89	Trees with eyes	01:44:49	Mise-en-scène	Surveillance Society
E	90	Beau acting with the play	01:47:50	D + M	The Nature of Reality
	91	Mona lying about Beau's dad	01:50:50	D + C	Ideological Social Control
	92	Play finale dialogue	01:54:00	D + M	Social Control
	93	Beau gives away mary idol	01:55:11	Mise-en-scène	The Sociological Imagination
	94	Jeeves destroying everyone	01:58:00	Mise-en-scène	Culture of Spectacle
	95	Elaine and Mona swapping	01:59:20	Mise-en-scène	Social Construction of Reality
	96	Mona's gaslighting	02:00:40	Dialogue	Social Construction of Reality
	97	Locking Beau in attic	02:00:45	Mise-en-scène	Social Control
P	98	MW car hitchhike	02:01:48	Mise-en-scène	Panopticon
	99	Mona's mary statue	02:03:54	Mise-en-scène	Surveillance Society
	100	“Elected not to be present”	02:05:07	Dialogue	Ideological Social Control
A	101	Beau's gravestone	02:05:34	Mise-en-scène	Social Control
	102	“Everything I Own” song	02:06:07	Audio	Social Control
	103	MW Security Poster	02:06:55	Mise-en-scène	Surveillance Society
R	104	MW timeline wall	02:07:42	Mise-en-scène	The Nature of Reality
	105	MW rehabilitation building	02:08:15	Mise-en-scène	Social Control
	106	MW employee collage	02:09:04	Mise-en-scène	Social Control
T	107	Elaine arrives at Monas	02:11:15	Cinematography	Social Control
	108	“Dragon's lair”	02:16:25	Dialogue	Ideological Social Control
	109	Mona's in the shadows	02:23:19	Cinematography	Panopticon

F O U R	110	Feeding Harry the body	02:24:27	Dialogue	Plague, Leprosy
	111	Mona's first reveal	02:26:05	Dialogue	Social Control/Construction
	112	"She volunteered"	02:28:06	Dialogue	Ideological Social Control
	113	Mona circling Beau	02:28:38	Mise-en-scène	Panopticon
	114	"You don't know anything"	02:29:00	Dialogue	Social Construction of Reality
	115	Mona's accusations	02:29:15	Dialogue	Confirmation Bias
	116	"Born without mechanism.."	02:31:25	Dialogue	Socialization
	117	Recorded therapy sessions	02:32:40	Dialogue	Surveillance Society
	118	Locked in attic	02:36:40	Mise-en-scène	Plague, Construction
	119	Beau condemning self	02:39:15	Dialogue	Socialization/Labeling/Contr.
	120	Beau strangles Mona	02:41:10	Mise-en-scène	Deviance
	121	Boat into the night	02:42:51	Mise-en-scène	Social Control
	122	Starry lights	02:44:33	Mise-en-scène	Culture of Spectacle
	123	Entire trial	02:45:00	Dialogue	Confirmation Bias, Ideolog.
	124	1-800-DEFENCE	02:46:55	Mise-en-scène	Social Construction of Reality
	125	Defense lawyer murdered	02:48:53	Mise-en-scène	Social Control, Discipline
	126	Beau's death sentence	02:52:39	Mise-en-scène	Culture of Spectacle

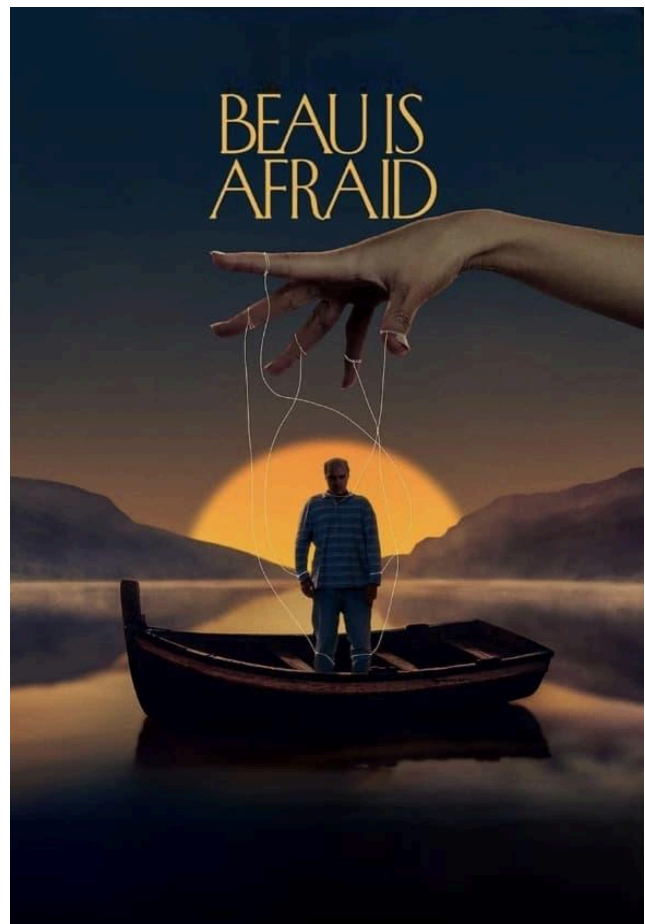
Figure 2

Filmmaking techniques alter from intention to interpretation	Manifest Content (intention)	Latent Content (interpretation)
Semiotics	Foreshadowing and evoking feelings as a plot device	Social Control, the Social Construction of Reality, the Sociological Imagination
Plot	Entertainment	The Nature of Reality

Figure 3



Figure 4



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