Perceptions and Behavior in Ari Aster’s *Midsommar*

Amidst Ari Aster’s telling of a breakup story, *Midsommar* (2019) brings the audience’s attention to religious and moral agendas – implementing both written and cinematic language – and their effect on the human psyche. While the plot revolves around Dani – who is mourning the recent loss of her family – the world of *Midsommar* is one of competing storylines. Between coping with the emotional distance of her loved ones and adjusting to the Harga community’s foreign lifestyle, Dani struggles to find validation within herself as well as where she fits in, emotionally and socially. In this paper, I will show how in the film *Midsommar*, Ari Aster reveals the boundaries of the human psyche by his creation of a fanatical environment based in Swedish Folklore, through his use of Horror film elements such as the technicolor processes and high-pitched music, along with formalistic devices from Old Hollywood films.

One aspect of the film’s focus is the characters’ perceptions and reaction, which is where the formalistic destruction of the “illusion of reality” comes in. This concept implies we all process and filter events or certain concepts separately; therefore, no interpretation is exactly the same or necessarily “correct,” leaving an air of ambiguity and lack of barrier. Religion and the presence of cult-like behavior are major themes in the film, especially when the first few main characters we are introduced to – this includes Christian, Dani’s distant boyfriend – are anthropologists. From the time we witness the murder-suicide of Dani’s family – inflicted by Dani’s sister – all through the midsummer celebration the group spends with the Harga, the
audience is able to differentiate between her emotional responses to traumatic events and those of Christian’s anthropologist friends. The same can be said for her acceptance of another set of beliefs – that being the Norse-based beliefs of the Harga – which is a taboo in a majority of cultures. According to Douglas E. Cowan’s “So We’re Just Going to Ignore the Bear” Imagining Religion at Midsommar, Dani takes the approach of “mov[ing] toward[s] conversion as a function of shifting social ties” (55). Taking Dani’s current relationships into account, she is alienated and contained in her relationship with Christian, who is slowly trying to separate himself from her but feels guilted into staying once Dani’s family passes. Mark – one of Christian’s anthropologist group – is the most adamant about leaving her, compared to Pelle and Josh. As the film goes on, Dani usually comes to focus back on Christian and his increasing emotional distance, causing argumentative outbursts between the couple. As this, along with many traditions that are foreign to her, starts to take a toll on Dani, we see that Pelle wants Dani to realize what is best for her well-being, whether that be separating herself from Christian or the latter being a decent person towards her. Pelle, who gives the initial impression of a minor character, actually triggers a turning point for Dani, when he attempts to comfort her: “My parents burned up in a fire and I became technically, an orphan. So believe me when I tell you that I know what it’s like … Yet [our] difference is, I never got the chance to feel lost, because I had a family here … I have always felt held. By a family. A real family … Do you feel held Dani?” (Pelle, Midsommar). It is an easy enough question, but the implications of it are far more extreme and when Dani realizes her answer – she does not express it verbally – she sets herself on the path of, more or less, cleansing her life of what is bad for her. Her feelings of unfamiliarity and alienation with Christian start to shift into security, but with the Harga.
As is the tendency of a general audience, a film is taken at face value and expectations are born from that. How far can a film’s meaning stray away from its overall look? A crucial part of creating *Midsommar*’s fantasy, dreamlike world was Aster’s use of technicolor, which was meant to give it an overall bright, saturated, and almost exaggerated look. Any way its viewed, there is an apparent contrast between Dani’s original, bleak environment, and that of the Harga’s midsummer celebration. Halsingland, Sweden – where the Harga reside – can be considered as an “othered” place, implying that an individual is in some way, shape, or form, separated.

Whether “other” be used in the context of a spiritual realm or newly created safe space via Dani’s perceptions and trauma, Halsingland’s environment is designed to visually appeal to our standard image of a fairytale. Considering the progression of Dani’s environments, taking both lighting and general use of technicolor into account, there is a full transition from a dark natural to light natural to an intense light. In accordance with theatre’s “show don’t tell” rule, Dani’s content is directly proportional to the amount of light and color exaggeration, along with the more comforting settings: “[t]he high barnlike ceiling and deep orange browns of the color scheme suggest a homey space” (Spadoni 721). The shift in mood is not completely caused by the color exaggeration, due to technicolor, but is also credited to the change in color scheme. The beginning scenes show warm, orange light being swallowed up by cold, dark blues. While Aster found the location shooting in Hungary – and the fact that the sun barely ever sets in there – difficult, he found it worked well with the film’s mood and the technicolor effects. Although the visuals are something completely opposite of what is expected of a horror film, Aster did an interesting job of creating a distinct feeling of terror, when what is seen does not quite match up with what is going on.
While *Midsommar* challenges the traditional look of horror films, in terms of color and dark atmosphere, its soundtrack is one of the most jarring aspects of the film. Because he implements the use of unharmonious string instruments and abrupt percussive sounds, Aster is able to throw viewer expectations for a loop through our sense of hearing. Throughout the film, regardless of the actors’ movements at the time, the tracks seem to keep a consistently fast pace. An instance (of non-diegetic sound) where the music notes match the movements and mood is when the group first arrives in Halsingland and they have just taken psychedelics. Dani begins having a bad trip and runs into the woods, when the string instruments suddenly start at a single high note. It conveys, not only that time is moving too fast for Dani, but the panic she feels at that moment. On the other hand, an example of movement and non-diegetic sound not matching up in one of the final scenes in the film, is where Dani is participating in the May Queen Dance. The music keeps the same speed as before even when Dani starts to tire, and the audience experiences the rest of the scene in slow motion. Although *Midsommar* perfectly executes time manipulation with the mismatched actions and sound speed, what really comes through is the effects of the film’s exaggerated acting in terms of sound. Regarding the Harga’s cultish behaviors and celebrations, their methods of intraconnectivity and guidance included mourning wails – in this case, it only took place in death rituals – to lead the deceased into the afterlife. The mourning wails, in particular, are briefly mentioned in Sandra Huber’s *Blood and Tears and Potions and Flame: Excesses of Transformation in Ari Aster’s Midsommar*: “Keening [the act of leading to afterlife] is both a “sacred improvised chant” and an extremely raw mode of mourning … keening women are often likened to banshees, ‘an otherworldy harbinger of death’ … The banshee as a death messenger is most often encountered through aural manifestations of women crying; a cry so well-known and so intimate to certain communities” (Huber 11). When it comes
to horror films, sounds tend to have a greater impact on the scene itself and audience reactions because there is potentially strong connection between what we hear and what we feel. At the start, Dani had only witnessed the wailing rituals, but when she finds out Christian cheated on her in a disturbing sex scene, she experiences an extreme amount of pain and the Harga sisters cry with her, leading her to truly be a part of the ritual. There is, in fact, an intimate feel to it, like they are trying to indirectly communicate to Dani, “Yes, we know you are in pain and you do not have to hold back. We’ll scream with you.” This is not something experienced by many people, especially in American culture. To learn helping ourselves succeed and ask for help, only when absolutely necessary, it will definitely cause a dissonance in our minds, a rejection from those we love the most. Dani realizes that she, personally, cannot find this sense of security anywhere else.

Due to the many psychological and emotional layers to experience throughout Midsommar’s duration, Ari Aster succeeded in executing an ultimately confusing film. It can be argued that the films’ ultimate purpose was to portray Dani’s mourning and tell her breakup story, where she chooses to heal by accepting a new and genuine love into her life. Although Aster creates a somewhat unconventional situation, Midsommar teaches us about the limits of human connection and how individuals hold partial control of them, within themselves.
Works Cited


Cowan, Douglas E. “‘So We're Just Going to Ignore the Bear’: Imagining Religion at *Midsommar.*” pp. 54–56.