

Embracing the Horrific Other: Problematizing Identification, Cultural Relativism and Empathy in Ari Aster's *Midsommar* (2019)



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Abstract: In Ari Aster's *Midsommar* (2019), Dani (Florence Pugh) is the locus of the viewers' identification. The film encourages viewers to empathize with her as she undergoes a traumatic experience and must then deal with a failing relationship. Yet the viewers' identification with the protagonist is challenged when the character eventually joins an archaic community intent on murdering foreigners, and even finds solace in participating in the ritual sacrifice of her ex-boyfriend. This article argues that by reworking the generic trope of horror opposing normality to a monstrous other, *Midsommar* aims at questioning the process of cinematic identification as well as the very possibility of embracing the worldview of others. In so doing, the film proves symptomatic of post-horror cinema's tendency to challenge traditional understandings of cinematic identification.

Keywords: Ari Aster, Post-Horror, Elevated Horror, Identification, Otherness, Empathy, *Midsommar*

Résumé : Dans *Midsommar* (Ari Aster, 2019), Dani (Florence Pugh) est le réceptacle privilégié de l'identification spectatorielle. Le film encourage les spectateurs à développer un lien empathique avec le personnage tandis que celui-ci subit des traumatismes et doit faire face au délitement de sa relation amoureuse. Néanmoins, ce lien identificatoire est remis en cause lorsque le personnage rejoint une communauté archaïque déterminée à massacrer tout étranger, et finit par trouver du réconfort en participant au sacrifice rituel de son ancien compagnon. Cet article suggère qu'en retravaillant le trope horrifique d'un conflit entre normalité et altérité monstrueuse, *Midsommar* interroge le processus d'identification cinématographique ainsi que la possibilité même de pouvoir partager le point de vue d'autrui. Ce faisant, le film témoigne d'une tendance

partagée par de nombreux films dits « *post-horror* », qui tendent à interroger le concept d'identification cinématographique.

Mots-clés : Ari Aster, *post-horror*, *elevated horror*, identification, altérité, empathie, *Midsommar*

Introduction

With his critically acclaimed first feature film *Hereditary* (2018), Ari Aster established himself as a leading figure of the post-horror cycle, notably due to the film's exploration of such themes as trauma, mental illness and atavism, but also because of Aster's willingness to play with the codes of the genre – notably by killing off the suspected monster child in the first half of the film – and to produce a “film literate” form of horror.¹ *Hereditary* circumvents viewers' expectations yet if anything, the film's metageneric self-awareness only enhances its raw emotional impact. Similarly, Aster's second feature film *Midsommar* (2019) also subverts some of the most firmly established aesthetic and narrative tropes of horror in a way that does not preclude the viewers' emotional investment – the film has been widely received as one of the most poignant horror films of the last decade.² This article aims at exploring how, by reworking traditional horror tropes, *Midsommar* problematizes the process of cinematic identification, not to produce a form of Brechtian distancing effect³ nor to adopt a *Scream*-like postmodern self-aware experience of ironic distancing, but to complexify the viewers's emotional and cognitive investment in the film characters and, through this, question one's relation to otherness.

Not unlike Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), it is by rejecting the conventional association of horror with darkness that *Midsommar* most obviously – and perhaps most superficially – subverts the codes of horror, as the film explores the horrific potentialities of a story set in an Edenic, bright and flowery Swedish meadow. Like Kubrick's film, *Midsommar* never relies on shadows, dark corners or night-time scenes to allow for a

1. Matt Zoller Seitz, “Hereditary”, June 08, 2018, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/hereditary-2018>
2. See, for instance, the opening line of Tomris Laffly's review published in Rogert-Ebert.com: “One thing is certain: writer/director Ari Aster comprehends stifling dread in the most profound sense” (2019). “Midsommar”, July 01, 2019. <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/midsommar-2019>. However, some (mostly New York – based) critics expressed dissatisfaction at a film seen as too intent on offering an art cinema reworking of the horror genre, losing its capacity to affect the viewers in the process. Manohla Dargis notably wrote in *The New York Times* that “Ari Aster's hyper-aware movie builds a scary mousetrap [...] but it has more virtuosity than vision” (2022).
3. Brecht's theory of the distancing effect posits the necessity to suppress the audience's identification with characters. To Brecht, “any identification is dangerous” since, as Aumont *et. al.* summarize, “it suspends judgement and the critical mind” (2004: 182, my translation). This article will suggest that *Midsommar* questions identification without developing a form of Brechtian distancing, challenging the viewers' emotional involvement instead of seeking to suppress it.

horror of the unseen, its constant depth of field and total clarity precluding the possibility of any off-screen threat about to assault the protagonists and surprise the viewers.

Beyond this obvious distortion of horror conventions, the film also circumvents various generic expectations by mixing the narrative and aesthetic tropes of several genres and subgenres. *Midsommar* has often been categorized as belonging to the sub-genre of folk horror, due to its obvious narrative similarities with Robin Hardy’s 1973 *The Wicker Man* (Di Rosso, 2019). Indeed, the plot focuses on a group of American students visiting Sweden to attend the traditional Midsummer celebrations of a secluded community maintaining a highly traditional way of life, The Hargas, only to discover that their visit was part of the celebrations, as the group was lured in so the Hargas could use them in ritualistic human sacrifices. However, the film complexifies its generic association, notably as it also relies on the generic tropes of the melodrama, a genre which at first glance seems ill suited to be hybridized with that of folk horror – in fact, Ari Aster claims he envisioned the film as first and foremost a breakup movie (Rao, 2019).

The film centers on Dani (Florence Pugh), a woman who, after going through a traumatic event – her sister killed herself and their parents – ends up accompanying her boyfriend Christian (Jack Reynor) to Sweden. Christian, obviously disinterested in Dani, had decided to leave her behind when attending the Harga Midsummer celebrations with his friends – but he ends up reluctantly inviting her along once she finds out about the trip. The idea of this journey had initially been suggested by one of Christian’s friends, Pelle (Vilhelm Blomgren), a member of the Harga community studying in the United States. Once it becomes clear that Pelle had in fact planned to lure the group into the Hargas’ so they would be killed in ritualistic sacrifices, it also becomes apparent that Dani, far from counting among the victims, will in fact integrate the Harga community (she is chosen as their May Queen during the celebrations) and even find solace in one of their ritualistic murders, which enables her to heal from her toxic relationship with Christian. The film, characterized by Aster as a “wish fulfilment fantasy” (Koresky, 2019), ends with Dani’s troubling cathartic release as she watches her former boyfriend, whom she selected as one of the ritual’s victims, being burnt alive.

As such, *Midsommar* may also be seen as reworking the horror trope of the Final Girl, more commonly associated with the sub-genre of the slasher, since Dani, in keeping with this trope, manages to survive while all her friends get killed one by one. The variations on this archetype are manifold, and all point at the film’s ambition to challenge the viewers’

capacity and willingness to identify with Dani as she joins the Harga community, which is what this article will focus on.

Altering the trope of the final girl: Problematizing Identification

In her groundbreaking study, Carol Clover contends slashers encourage all viewers to identify with the Final Girl. By using the word “identify”, Clover, in keeping with the psychoanalysis-inspired tradition of identification theory that she draws on (notably the works of Christian Metz and Laura Mulvey), rather vaguely refers to a form of empathetic and cognitive bond with the protagonist – let us temporarily accept such a definition, although it will be discussed and criticized later in this article.⁴ Positing that slashers address an essentially male audience, Clover wonders why slashers invariably depict a female heroine, thus requiring their male viewers to accept a form of cross-gender identification. The author claims that male viewers might prefer identifying with a female character in the case of a slasher as such a process of identification enables them to revel in experiencing the “abject terror” (2015: 51) of the female protagonists, which they would be unwilling to experience should these protagonists be male.⁵ Noting that most of these Final Girls are boyish characters, Clover goes on to argue that Final Girls are in fact “transformed males” (2015: 52) permitting male viewers to experience repressed male affects such as homoerotic fantasies: “the femaleness of the Final Girl [is] only apparent, the artifact of heterosexual deflection. It may be through the female body that the body of the audience is sensationalized, but the sensation is an entirely male affair” (*Ibid.*). The ultimate empowerment of Final Girls in slasher films (as Final Girls usually end up defeating the monsters) would thus have nothing to do with a feminist subtext of female empowerment, and everything to do with male catharsis following the male enjoyment of unavowable male affects expressed through the male viewers’ identification with a “transformed male”.

Clover’s theory may be criticized, if only because women do not make up a small minority of all horror fans, as is often assumed (Boissonneau, 2021). However, it does point at the issue of cross-gender identification in a body of films overwhelmingly made by male directors and rightly

4. Such a definition only encompasses what Christian Metz (1983) refers to as “secondary identification”, i.e. identification with a character, as opposed to the “primary identification” of the viewer with the movie camera. Clover’s study implicitly only focuses on secondary identification. This article will also leave aside the issue of primary identification to focus on *Midsommar*’s problematizing of character identification.
5. “gender displacement can provide a kind of identificatory buffer, an emotional remove that permits the majority audience to explore taboo subjects in the relative safety of vicariousness” (Clover, 2015: 51).

or wrongly targeting an essentially male viewership. In this respect, *Midsommar* clearly distorts the generic expectations of the Final Girl: not only does Dani share none of the boyish characteristics of typical Final Girls, but her experience is also depicted as an unambiguously feminine one. Drawing on the melodrama, a genre historically coded as feminine – studio-era melodramas were often called “women’s weepies” – in which a viewership perceived as essentially female is incited to identify with a female protagonist, *Midsommar* incites the audience to identify with Dani as she goes through an experience characteristic of melodrama – ending a failing heterosexual relationship.⁶ Due to that, *Midsommar*, like other horror films also categorized as belonging to the cycle of post-horror (Jennifer Kent’s 2014 *The Babadook*, David Robert Mitchell’s 2014 *It Follows* or Robert Eggers’ 2015 *The Witch*) departs from the male-oriented identification strategies that have been overwhelmingly dominant in horror cinema since the 1970s – including, according to Clover, in films focusing on strong female protagonists – and renews with an earlier tradition of female-oriented gothic and horror films which, from *Rebecca* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1941) to *The Haunting* (Robert Wise, 1963), were cinematic adaptations of so-called “Female Gothic” literature. In doing so, following Clover’s thesis, one could contend that *Midsommar* – along with other post-horror films – problematizes the issue of identification by requiring its male viewers to accept a form of cross-gender identification that has become atypical of horror films.⁷

While such an assertion is inherently debatable as it posits a male-centered strategy of identification in horror films that may be questioned, it does point at the centrality of the issue of identification in *Midsommar*. I suggest that it is essentially through Dani’s eventual embrace of the Harga worldview that Aster’s film questions identification, since not only does the character’s shifting allegiance challenge the identification of all viewers (male, female or non-binary) with Dani, but it also enables the film to raise fundamental moral, ideological and cognitive questions as to the limits of one’s capacity to adopt another’s viewpoint.

6. What I mean by “inciting” viewers to identify with a film character will be discussed in the course of this article.

7. As Clover contends, the possibility for women to identify with male characters has been largely acknowledged, while the opposite has not, “presumably on the assumption that men’s interests are well served by the traditional patterns of cinematic representation” (2015: 43). Therefore, a film belonging to a traditionally male genre requiring its male viewers to identify with a female protagonist could be said to problematize filmic identification in a way that a horror film requiring its female viewers to identify with male protagonists would not.



In keeping with the trope of the Final Girl, Dani's survival is depicted as a rebirth,⁸ yet in Dani's case this rebirth is triggered not by her defeating any monster, but by becoming a part of the film's murderous community. As she joins the Hargas and kills her former boyfriend, Dani appears to heal from her trauma and begin a new life. In order to ponder upon the issues raised by this inclusion-as-rebirth, let us first examine to what extent the Hargas stand for horror's archetypal monstrous others.

As Robin Wood famously analyzed, American horror films typically depict a deadly conflict between protagonists embodying normality and a monster embodying otherness. The other is therefore represented as a monster threatening normality, one who can only be dealt with "in one of two ways: either by rejecting it and if possible annihilating it, or by rendering it safe and assimilating it, converting it as far as possible into a replica of itself" (2018: 77). Wood's theory suggests horror films rely on a conflict between diametrically opposed embodiments of normality and of monstrous otherness, which does not mean that the monster is necessarily feared and shunned as many "progressive" horror films are characterized by their propensity to encourage the viewers to identify with the monstrous others (2018: 83). However, in the recent *Horror Film and Otherness*, Adam Lowenstein argues that Wood opposes normality and monstrous otherness in an excessively rigid and dichotomic way. Many, if not most, horror films rather stage "variations on self and other that cannot be fixed but are always shifting, always metamorphosing" (2022: 06). To Lowenstein, George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1967), a film that blurs the boundary between the self (the humans) and the monstrous others (the zombies) and "insists on a constantly transforming otherness rather than on a neatly delineated 'self versus other', 'normality versus monstrous' structure" (2022: 11), is highly representative of how most horror films associate normality and otherness. Blurring the boundary between normality and otherness, rather than simply dramatizing their conflict, is what constitutes the veritable basic formula of horror films according to Lowenstein.

At first glance, Wood's thesis seems particularly well suited to describe *Midsommar*, whose narrative structure is typical of folk horror, a subgenre focusing on the violent confrontation between protagonists embodying normality and a community embodying a form of "primitive" otherness – be they the cannibal Amazonian natives of Ruggero Deodato's

8. While Clover does not mention rebirth as a narrative characteristic of the Final Girl, she does identify Ellen Ripley, who undergoes a literal rebirth in the *Alien* franchise, as a quintessential Final Girl (2015: 40).

Cannibal Holocaust (1980),⁹ or the Pagan Scottish islanders of *The Wicker Man*.¹⁰ In addition, *Midsommar* does suggest that both groups have diametrically opposed and antagonistic worldviews, as I suggest below. On the other hand, Aster’s film also seems to fit Lowenstein’s theory of horror films questioning and blurring the boundary between normality and monstrous otherness, not only because Dani eventually crosses the gap between both groups by joining the Hargas, but also because, as we shall see, one may not unequivocally consider this community as monstrous. However, both Wood and Lowenstein posit that horror films enable viewers to identify with the monstrous other, at least to some degree. I suggest that it is by challenging this fundamental trope of horror that *Midsommar* most radically subverts the generic expectations of horror, and initiates a reflection on the very possibility of identifying with others.

The ambiguous monstrosity of the Hargas

While the concept of monster is central to most theories of horror cinema, it is unclear whether the antagonists of folk horror films may indeed be deemed monsters. Of course, the term monster does not solely apply to supernatural creatures, but humans were historically qualified as monsters when they possessed physical deformities, which the antagonists of folk horror often do not, the Hargas being a case in point. Nonetheless, as Jean-François Chassay argues, the word “monster” is now widely understood as an exclusively moral quality: one deems “monstrous” a human being with moral – and ideological – beliefs that one utterly rejects as alien, distinct from one’s own and unacceptable (2021: 11-14). It is with

9. Needless to say, the term “primitive” is a highly problematic one, conveying various Eurocentric biases. As soon as 1954, Claude Lévi-Strauss warned that “the idea of a primitive society is a delusion”. As Lévi-Strauss points out, the main criteria used to deem a society “primitive” are usually their existence outside of industrial civilizations, and their lack of a written language. Obviously, such criteria do not apply to all the communities of folk horror. The community of *Midsommar*, for instance, seems to evolve outside of industrial civilizations, yet it does have a written language. As the “folk” of “folk horror” implies, another criterion to define the communities of this subgenre is their belief in archaic folklore – another problematic concept one may be hard pressed to define. In this article, I use the term “primitive” keeping in mind that *Midsommar* questions its Eurocentric biases, given the film’s focus on one’s difficulty to understand a worldview deemed as other.
10. Deodato’s *Cannibal Holocaust* is not always included as part of the folk horror corpus. For instance, it is absent from Adam Scovell’s 2017 study of the subgenre. Nonetheless, the film does meet two of the criteria listed by Scovell to define folk horror: “a work that uses folklore, either aesthetically or thematically, to imbue itself with a sense of the arcana for eerie, uncanny or horrific purposes / a work that presents a clash between such arcana within close proximity to some form of modernity, often with social parameters” (7). My assumption is that Deodato’s film is not usually included as part of the Folk Horror corpus due to its plot opposing American embodiments of modernity to a foreign tribal culture deemed “primitive”, whereas folk horror films such as *The Wicker Man* typically display a clash between a folkloric community and embodiments of modernity from the same country (typically Great Britain). Since *Midsommar* also stages a clash between American “moderns” and non-American “primitives”, I propose to adopt a larger view of folk horror that would include every horror film staging such a cultural confrontation between “modern” individuals and “primitive” communities.

this moral definition of the word that the communities of folk horror may be said to also embody a form of monstrous otherness.

However, even before Dani’s eventual inclusion within the Harga community, *Midsommar* carefully prevents the viewers from easily categorizing the Hargas as monsters, whose worldview ought to be fully rejected as an unacceptable departure from the Western norm. Which is not to say that the film reverses the trope – turning the other into a utopian alternative to a monstrous Western norm – as the viewers cannot easily disregard the murderous practices of the Hargas and consider human sacrifice as a morally acceptable practice.

While the community initially appears as a loving, eco-friendly and tightly knit group of whom the American characters are in awe, any viewer used to the codes of folk horror expects this idyllic façade to hide a monstrous quality about to resurface, yet when the first sign of the Hargas’ darker nature emerges – the characters witness the violent ritual suicide of two elders jumping off a cliff – the American characters, while shocked, refuse to cast off the Hargas as monsters. Instead, they display an openness to cultural diversity in keeping with the liberal views to be expected from a group of contemporary young American social science students, and especially from a group composed of several anthropology students desirous to study and understand other worldviews. Christian even (awkwardly) tries to comfort a shocked Dani by openly advocating the necessity to be open to cultural differences: “that’s cultural, you know? We stick our elders in nursing homes. I’m sure they find that disturbing”. Upon discovering the ritual murders, viewers are therefore prevented from unambiguously considering the Hargas as monsters, as the film has stressed that their ritual sacrifices serve a religious and cultural purpose which, from their perspective, is in no way immoral. And yet, how can one manifest cultural openness towards a murderous community?

Although this question enables *Midsommar* to mock the cultural archetype of the young, open-minded American liberal – Christian’s call for cultural openness is particularly ironic given the character’s fate –, the film does not problematize one’s desire to understand otherness so as to advocate a reactionary worldview whereby only the Western viewpoint should be valued and respected. In fact, such a perspective is implicitly criticized as the Hargas are driven to murder because of similarly xenophobic beliefs.¹¹

11. The Harga ritual serves a dual purpose: using the foreigners as mating partners to ensure the community’s genetic renewal, then symbolically purifying the community by killing off these aliens. Interestingly, the aforementioned whiteness characteristic of the Hargas, combined with their habit of murdering all foreigners, has been interpreted as a criticism of white supremacy (Albin and Ward, 2020). Such a reading is notably legitimized by the various scenes during which *Midsommar*, echoing Jordan Peele’s 2017 *Get Out*, stresses the

It is in such a context of morally ambiguous characterization of the Hargas that Dani's rebirth as one of them initiates a reflection upon the philosophical and ethical issues related to one's capacity to understand otherness and experience the point of view of an other.

Modern Americans and the Hargas: Two antagonistic viewpoints



While problematizing any moral assessment of the Hargas, *Midsommar* also depicts the community as radically distant from the Westerners from an ideological and cognitive standpoint, thus further complexifying the viewers' identification with Dani once she joins them.

Through a strategy of aesthetic dissonance, the opening scene foreshadows the conflictual opposition between two diametrically opposed, antagonistic worldviews that the rest of the film will stage. The first shots evoke a harmonious relationship between humankind and nature through the melodious association of Swedish traditional singing with still shots of the wilderness, a harmony nonetheless eliciting a certain sense of dread, as the mournful singing emphasizes the threat of the inhospitable natural setting. This harmony is brutally interrupted by the ringing of a phone and a synchronous cut to a long shot of an American suburb, followed by several shots closing in on a particular house. The jarring quality of this brutal change of tone, setting, and editing rhythm, establishes the conflictual opposition between a modern American (or Western) perspective and a more traditional, archaic viewpoint.

Once the American characters arrive at the Hargas', the gap separating the viewpoints of the two groups is constantly emphasized. The Americans bear many attributes of modernity that jar in the traditional community. Christian's friend Mark (Will Poulter), whose presence brings comic relief through the first half of the film, smokes an electronic cigarette in the middle of a timeless ceremony and is afraid of catching Lyme disease while walking in the woods. His incapacity to fit in with the community gives rise to some tragicomic episodes, such as when he urinates on a tree which happens to be sacred for the Hargas, thus antagonizing them.

Josh (William Jackson Harper), and in a lesser degree Christian himself, are defined by their academic, rationalistic perspectives, due to

contrast between the whiteness of the Hargas and the blackness of Josh, the only African American protagonist, in order to emphasize the threat looming upon the latter, isolated within a potentially hostile racially homogeneous group.

which they often appear cold, calculating and self-centered. Both characters are anthropology students planning on writing their Ph.D. theses on the Hargas, yet their desire to analyze and document the society (up until the Hargas’ murderous intentions are revealed) does not enable them to breach the cultural divide separating them from the community: competing against one another in search of academic glory, they end up disrespecting the Harga culture, in spite of their willingness to appear culturally respectful. Josh notably sneaks into the Harga temple to take pictures of their scriptures even though he had been explicitly forbidden to do so. This rather bleak depiction of a heartless, self-centered and rationalistic American perspective contrasts with the Hargas’ arguably even more upsetting mistrust of rationality. Indeed, the community willingly produces mentally ill individuals through inbreeding in order for them to act as oracles in charge of writing the scriptures. As an elder explains to Josh, the oracle is “unclouded by normal cognition”. The sacred rules followed by the Hargas are therefore dictated by an oracle willingly selected for their incapacity to use rationality to lead and organize the community.

But it is certainly in their animist worldview that the Hargas are the most culturally and intellectually distant from the American characters and from the viewers – an immense majority of whom, one may safely assume, share the worldview of the American characters on that point. The Hargas share a radical animist belief whereby everyone is connected to a larger whole and nothing fundamentally separates humans, animals, plants, and non-organic matter – a worldview inherently incompatible with the belief in individual consciousness that is so essential to modern (Western) sensibilities. Communion, acting as one being, seems to be a central Harga value, as indicated by their homogeneous clothes as well as by their many rituals, such as dancing and singing, filmed with long shots stressing the perfect coordination of the participants. As the film unfolds, the viewers come to understand that the Hargas believe in a form of inter-subjectivity, each member acting as though they are feeling and thinking what every other member is simultaneously feeling and thinking. Several disturbing scenes show all the Hargas screaming and writhing while only one of them is in actual physical pain, or seemingly experiencing sexual pleasure while only one of them is actually having intercourse. Such belief in inter-subjectivity is accompanied by a belief in reincarnation so strong that several Hargas happily commit suicide through the course of the film, convinced that they shall continue to exist as part of the super-organism that is the community.

In addition, various elements suggest the group believes in the inter-connectedness not just of humans, but of all things. The film esthetically alludes to this belief through its evocative use of lighting, as the bright Swedish Midsummer sunlight that the Hargas worship constantly radiates

over everything – reverberating upon the members’ white garments and blurring the boundary separating human from non-human elements.

Beyond the gruesome murders (essentially left off screen and only evoked through a few shots of the bodies of the victims), *Midsommar* mostly relies on the depiction of the inter-subjective and anti-rationalist qualities of the Harga worldview to produce its most disturbing effects. This worldview becomes a source of dread, and sometimes disgust and disbelief – such as when Christian finds a pubic hair was intentionally put in his glass in a seduction ritual. The American tourists – and the viewers alongside them – progressively discover the extent to which the Hargas’ beliefs depart from the modern Western norm, thus making these characters fundamentally unpredictable and upsetting.

All this being said, one may assume that Dani’s eventual embrace of the Harga worldview ought to appear as fully incomprehensible for the audience. Yet several elements enable the viewers to understand the psychological motivations of the character. Throughout the film and especially at the beginning – before the characters travel to Sweden – the modern world appears singularly cold and scary, so that even the radically alien Harga belief in inter-subjectivity may feel like an attractive alternative to that world. The scenes taking place in the United States are pervaded by a deep-seated feeling of loneliness, that the film stresses through the use of symmetry and geometrical framings. In the United States, the characters never seem to truly coexist within the frame, even when they share the same space, as various devices stress the fundamental distance separating these disconnected individualities. For instance, when the grieving Dani confronts her boyfriend, whose intention to go to Sweden she has just found out, Only Christian’s reflection in the mirror is seen alongside Dani, so that the two characters seem distant and disconnected from one another even though they occupy the same room. Once they are finally reunited in the same frame later on in the scene, their disconnection is emphasized by their opposed postures (one is standing while the other is sitting before the positions are reversed).

Modern humanity thus appears trapped in a nefarious individualistic lifestyle which prevents any intersubjective relationship, a fact highlighted by the scene unveiling the suicide of Dani’s sister, who killed herself and her parents by poisoning the air with their cars’ exhaust gas: following a close-up on the cars’ exhaust pipes strapped to two hoses, the camera slowly follows the path taken by the hoses, across two doors and up one flight of stairs; the first hose is taped on the parents’ bedroom door, the other directly taped on the sister’s mouth, whose dead body is revealed alongside a laptop displaying Dani’s unanswered emails. Not only does this murder/suicide suggest the distress of modern life, as it was

committed with the symbols of modernity that are cars and their poisonous emissions, it may also be interpreted as a desperate plea for interconnection, the hoses linking the young woman to her parents through the perverted and lethal intermediary of exhaust fumes. No matter how culturally strange and morally unacceptable the Hargas may seem, then, this initial representation of modernity as a nightmare of individualism and isolation ensures that all the viewers empathizing with Dani will understand her relief in joining a community, which, in addition to offering her the chance to take revenge on her failing boyfriend, praises communion, inter-subjectivity and a radical form of familial bond.

Dani as a challenging locus of identification



These precisions now enable us to come back to the topic that is the focus of this article: the film’s challenge to the process of identification. Let us first examine the assumption that the character of Dani is the primary locus of identification throughout *Midsommar*. Dani is the main focalizer of the film: the character is present in most (though not all) scenes and her perspective guides the viewers through most of the film. According to the psychoanalysis-inspired school of identification theory, this alone would suffice to affirm that Dani is the privileged locus of identification, as most theoreticians since Christian Metz have argued that film viewers identify with the characters whose point of view they share. Yet, as Murray Smith points out in *Engaging Characters*, “most models of ‘identification’ [overstate] the importance of point of view to ‘identification’, and at the same time occlude the wide variety of other functions that point of view may perform” (1995: 83-84). Indeed, films often perceptually align the viewers to characters they tend not to identify with, and, on the other hand, viewers may identify with characters whose point of view they barely share throughout the movie.

Such confusion between point of view and identification is one of the reasons that led Smith to propose a new theoretical model that would distinguish three distinct processes former theories often indistinctly mixed up together under the concept of “identification”:¹² recognition (recognizing a character as character), alignment (which not only comprises perceptual alignment – sharing a character’s perceptions – but also emotional and cognitive alignment – having access to a character’s knowledge, thoughts and feelings) and allegiance (sympathizing with a character).

12. Smith is so critical of the confusion raised by former identification theories that he proposes to suppress the term “identification” altogether to replace it with the less connoted “engagement”. While I agree with Smith, this article still refers to the process as “identification” for the sake of clarity, notably as I refer to other identification theories which keep using that term.

Aligning with a character, Smith argues, may strongly help viewers sympathize with a character (and therefore develop the cognitive and affective link usually described as 'identification'), but alignment and allegiance remain two distinct processes.

Relying on this theory, one may safely conclude *Midsommar* does make Dani the key locus of identification throughout the film. Indeed, viewers are predominantly aligned with Dani not only on a perceptual level, but also on a cognitive and emotional level, as Dani's thoughts and feelings are more readily accessible to the audience than those of any other character. Florence Pugh's performance, combined with various narrative and stylistic devices, enables viewers to easily identify Dani's emotions and thoughts. Viewers are notably given access to Dani's subjective worldview through repeated use of what Edward Branigan terms "projection shots", i.e. shots in which "we understand what the character sees, thinks or experiences through 'metaphors'" (1984: 82) – for instance in two scenes in which the viewers see Dani's body merging with vegetation, thus reflecting the character's own distorted perception due to the hallucinogenic drugs she has then consumed. Several mental images also give viewers access to Dani's dreams.

The viewers' alignment with Dani is therefore maximal, which facilitates the process of identification permitted by the various narrative and stylistic strategies encouraging viewers to give their allegiance to the character. Chief of all, the initial traumatic sequence – her sister's murder-suicide – followed by the various scenes showing Christian's unsatisfactory emotional support, enable the film to encourage viewers to develop a strong emotional and cognitive bond with Dani that will define their engagement with the character throughout the rest of the film.

Such a bond strongly determines the viewers' reactions to Dani joining the Hargas in the second half of the film.¹³ As noted above, her joining the Hargas is depicted as both an emotional and an intellectual rebirth. Given the viewers' established identification with Dani, this raises the following question: does *Midsommar* expect viewers to also experience an emotional and intellectual "rebirth", i.e. to experience the Harga worldview alongside Dani?

13. By referring to the viewer's emotional and cognitive bond with the character, one may object that this article posits a homogeneous reaction from all viewers, whereas actual emotional and cognitive responses to a film are manifold. While reception theory has indubitably proven film scholars should refrain from assuming all viewers react to a film as one, it is not the purpose of this article to study the variety of actual reactions to *Midsommar*. Instead, its focus on the film's challenge to identification requires me to shed light on the stylistic and narrative strategies it develops to favor a certain type of reaction from its viewers. The identification to Dani I refer to should therefore be understood as the identification posited by the film from an "ideal viewer", to adapt Umberto Eco's concept of the "model reader". In other words, the viewer this article discusses is the viewer as posited by the film text, rather than any empirical viewer.

While I will eventually suggest that the film does not, and that instead it reflexively points at the limits of identification, one may notice that *Midsommar* maintains the viewers' alignment with the character as she goes through her transformation. Her perceptions, as well as her emotions and thoughts – and in particular the emotional and intellectual benefits she draws from joining the Hargas – remain accessible to the viewers.

Emotionally, joining the Hargas is depicted as an opportunity for Dani to externalize her pain. Following her trauma, Dani expresses her sorrow through uncontrollable sobs that break into inhuman-sounding repressed belches, as if Dani were doing her best not to throw up all her pain. Such suggestions that Dani's grief is all the more painful as it is internalized are repeated several times throughout the course of the film. While in Sweden, the character has a nightmare in which she wakes up and witnesses her friends abandoning her, before eructing a thick black smoke in a scene interspersed with rapid shots of all the dead bodies haunting her. This scene is echoed in the last one, in which she witnesses the burning of the sacrificial pyre containing the bodies of all her American friends. A long shot first associates the crying character with the burning building pouring out thick black smoke in the background. The scene then ends with a long dissolve through which the pyre is superimposed with both the figures of the Hargas and Dani's face, which eventually breaks into an elated smile: Dani's pain, previously depicted as an internalized poison struggling to get out, has been cured through a process of objectivation and externalization, the material burning of the pyre and the communion of Dani with the Hargas being directly linked to her emotional and psychological liberation.

Midsommar thus suggests Dani's emotional healing is directly related to her intellectual transformation, her adopting a viewpoint no longer determined by a form of individualism leading to isolation, loneliness, and emotional repression. In other words, it is the Hargas' very belief in intersubjectivity and reincarnation that allows Dani to experience catharsis once she finds herself integrated within the community and authorized to release her pent-up sorrow through a ritualistic sacrifice.

Various other elements enable the viewers to surmise how Dani's intellectual transformation leads her to experience the world differently. As previously discussed, the character is drugged twice, and each time the viewers are shown her hallucinations: grass leaves sprouting from her hand, her feet becoming roots growing from the ground, and flowers moving and expanding. These subjective shots imply Dani's worldview is gradually aligning with the Hargas', as not only does she see nature as alive, but the borders between individual subjectivity and objective reality collapse. In the end, Dani's embrace of the Hargas worldview is objectified

by the dress she has on once she is chosen as the May Queen, as the floral costume she wears literally erases the boundary between her body and the natural world surrounding her. As Sandra Huber describes it, “Dani transforms throughout the course of *Midsommar* and quite literally expands or grows in excess of herself, [until] she incrementally becomes covered in a lush overgrowth” (Huber, 2019).

In addition, Dani is also depicted as progressively adopting the Harga belief in inter-subjective consciousness. During the ritual suicide of two elders, Dani – like all the American characters – is shown as still intellectually distant from the Hargas, whose belief in inter-subjectivity becomes apparent for the first time. After failing to kill himself by jumping off a cliff, one of the two elders moans until he is put out of his misery. As of one voice, all the Hargas start screaming in pain along with the victim, before instantly falling silent when the man dies. Against this backdrop of perfect uniformity, the reactions of the Westerners witnessing this ritual, including Dani, chimes deeply. Each of them screams at a different time and acts out of tune, so that their belief in individuality and the Hargas’ belief in inter-subjectivity are visually and orally contrasted. On the other hand, towards the end of the film, as Dani cries after seeing Christian cheat on her, she becomes integrated within the Harga inter-subjective mindset, as young Harga women surround the protagonist and start matching their own sobs with hers, until the group seems to exist as one super-being made out of undistinguishable individualities. Tellingly, this embrace of inter-subjectivity is a crucial step towards Dani externalizing her sorrow, as her sobs grow louder and turn into screams that foreshadow her final catharsis a few minutes later.

Keeping Murray Smith’s distinction in mind, it is therefore apparent that the film maintains the viewers aligned with Dani all the way through her transformation. Not only do we keep perceiving what the character perceives, we also keep on understanding the intellectual and emotional processes she goes through. And yet, the allegiance of the viewers is strongly challenged throughout the whole process, since, as we have seen, identifying with Dani throughout the process would require one to embrace a worldview that is fundamentally other for an overwhelming majority of viewers, one that growingly appears as morally and intellectually opposed to the moral and intellectual beliefs that form the bedrock of the Western worldview(s). It is therefore by progressively widening the gap between the viewers’ alignment and their allegiance that *Midsommar* challenges their identification with Dani and, in so doing, questions the process of identification itself.

Can the viewers go through the looking glass?



According to the traditional model of cinematic identification (as well as to the more recent cognitive approach),¹⁴ the fact that the film enables the viewers to identify with Dani should mean that one should experience the character's intellectual and emotional transformation with her. Fully identified with Dani, viewers should end up feeling and thinking the way the Hargas feel and think, the character acting as a gateway enabling the viewers to progressively identify with such a challenging worldview.

However, we have seen that such a straightforward embrace of the Harga viewpoint is challenging, to say the least – and *Midsommar* problematizes this challenging identification by including various distancing elements underlining the moral, cultural and ideological obstacles separating the overwhelming majority of viewers from the Hargas. Indeed, though Dani remains the main locus of identification, the second half of the film contains several scenes during which the viewers are aligned with other American characters who come to represent a more stable, recognizable Western worldview. Given the terrible ordeal these characters are subjected to, viewers are likely to sympathize with them, thus splitting their allegiance between two antagonistic points of view. For instance, while Dani is being celebrated as the new May Queen, the sufferings of Christian are shown through cross cutting – drugged then led to participate in a disturbing sexual ritual, he is then paralyzed and stuffed into a bear skin, awaiting to be burnt alive. When seen from the perspective of the American characters other than Dani, the Harga ritual killings are thus depicted as the monstrous acts of a group cementing its unity by sadistically torturing and murdering foreigners.

Cross cutting, multiple points of view and various other film techniques thus keep the viewers torn in-between a dynamic of identification with Dani and therefore with the Hargas on the one hand, and a rejection of the Hargas as monstrous others on the other hand. Such distancing effects underline the problematic nature of the process of identification viewers are engaged in, and enable *Midsommar* to reflexively question the very possibility of identifying with a viewpoint as radically other as the Hargas'.

14. First developed by Torben Grodal, the cognitive approach rejects the psychoanalytic roots of the traditional models of identification, yet defends the same initial hypothesis, i.e. that cinematic identification enables viewers to feel and think what the characters they are identifying with feel and think. As Laurent Jullier summarizes, viewers identifying with a character “simulate [a character’s] thoughts, perceptions and reasoning” (2014: 164, my translation).

One may wonder whether in doing so, *Midsommar* sheds light on cinema’s inherent incapacity to propagate a worldview founded on beliefs other than individual consciousness or on a clearly delineated border between the self and the outside world. Does the film underline the viewers’ difficulty in identifying with the Hargas in order to suggest cinema is fundamentally incapable of conveying such a non-Western viewpoint? This hypothesis harks back to debates concerning the ontological ideological biases of cinema as explored by the first theoreticians of the cinematographic apparatus, most famously by Jean-Louis Baudry in his 1970 article translated in English as “Ideological Effects of the Basic Apparatus”. According to Baudry, cinema inherited from pictorial conventions known as the *perspectiva artificialis*, conventions which vehicle the ideological biases of Renaissance humanism. The camera, Baudry argues, produces “a recentring or at least a displacement of the center (which settles itself in the eye) [and] assures the setting up of the ‘subject’ as the active center and origin of meaning” (1970: 40). Therefore, he argues, cinema necessarily reinforces the belief in a unified “transcendental subject” (1970: 43). As a materialist thinker, Baudry is obviously critical of the “subjectivist and anthropocentric” biases of the cinematographic apparatus (Guido, 2006: 10). Since their worldview is based on non-anthropocentric values and intersubjective spiritualism, the Hargas share a belief system that cinema would be ontologically incapable of conveying properly, according to Baudry’s theory.

Yet throughout the film, a wide array of techniques are used in order to enable viewers to experience the diegetic world according to the mindset of the Hargas. I already mentioned the special effects animating the flowers, or the way the lighting blurs the boundaries between individuals and between the self and the outside world. Both these effects do seem to enable viewers to cinematically experience an inter-subjective, spiritualist worldview. If the film simultaneously distances viewers from such a perspective, it is therefore not in order to point at some ideological pre-determination of the cinematic apparatus, since the film does develop means to convey a non-Western viewpoint.¹⁵ Instead, I suggest that such distancing effects enable *Midsommar* to reflect upon the limits of empathy – an affect playing a crucial role in cinematic identification according to most theories.

15. By enabling viewers to experience the Hargas point of view, *Midsommar* then seems to confirm the validity of the criticisms addressed to the theories of the ideological effects of the cinematic apparatus, often said to essentialize an ideologically neutral medium, the ideological effects of which merely reflect the sensibilities of the filmmakers themselves. For a critical outlook of the theory of the cinematic apparatus, see Guido, 2006.

The limits of empathy

Upon the film's release, various reviewers were critical of the film's treatment of anthropology. Richard Brody notably wrote in the *New Yorker* that Aster "uses the anthropological framework—likely unintentionally—as the basis for a smug and narrow-minded pathologizing of social science" (2019), a point of view shared by Rebecca Onion in the *Slate* article "*Midsommar*'s Real Villains Aren't Murderous Pagans. They're Grad Students." While the film may indeed appear like a gratuitous satire of anthropology, given the aforementioned irony of having anthropology students advocate cultural openness towards a community that eventually uses them as sacrificial victims, such criticism proves more meaningful than it may seem, when viewed as part of a broader reflection on empathy and on the human capacity to view the world as seen from the perspective of others.

Indeed, the question of whether anthropologists may manage to adopt the affective and cognitive worldview of the peoples they study is of crucial importance to the field. In an essay entitled "'From the Native's point of view': On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding", Clifford Geertz points out that anthropology has long been believed to rely on the researcher's empathetic identification with her objects of study. A good anthropologist, one used to believe, is someone who, through an exceptional capacity for empathy, can put herself in the shoes of the peoples that she studies and experience existence the way they do, no matter how much her own worldview might differ from theirs. Humankind, Geertz argues, is essentially incapable of such a feat. Anthropologists, therefore, should rather strive to comprehend how an other experiences the world through rational, distanced analysis: studying a culture may enable one to infer how a member of said culture views the world, but one may never hope to actually experience such a worldview oneself.¹⁶

The students of *Midsommar* have adopted the kind of distanced, rational approach to anthropology advocated by Geertz. As we have seen, this approach proves problematic due to the characters' excessive coldness – their very lack of empathy. Neither Josh (willing to break into a forbidden sacred site to take pictures) nor Christian (apparently respectful of the Hargas yet cold and calculating in his own relationships) manifest any empathy, in that they seem too self-centered to put themselves in the

16. "To grasp concepts that, for another people, are experience-near, and to so well enough to place them in illuminating connection with experience-distance concepts theorists have fashioned to capture the general features of social life, is clearly a task at least as delicate, if a bit less magical, as putting oneself into someone else's skin. The trick is not to get yourself into some inner correspondence of spirit with your informants [...] The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to." (Geertz, 1983: 58).

shoes of others and feel the emotional damage their actions cause to others. The characters therefore caricature the cold rationality of the methodology defended by Geertz, yet this caricatural dimension is but a counterpoint to the film’s more central questioning of the very empathetic approach Geertz opposes.

This approach is not evoked through one of the anthropologists. Instead, it is implicitly questioned through the film’s identification processes, as the viewers are led to ponder upon the limits of this ability once Dani has turned into a Harga and they can no longer unproblematically identify with her.

Indeed, empathy has long been considered as the ability thanks to which film viewers can experience a character’s emotions and thoughts. Yet as Murray Smith points out, the centrality of empathy in traditional models of identification – as well as in the more recent cognitive models – can be criticized. Smith does so by drawing upon the concepts of “central imagining” and “acentral imagining” theorized by philosopher Richard Wollheim. Central imagining refers to the process whereby one imagines experiencing something oneself.¹⁷ With “acentral imagining”, on the other hand, there is no such production of internal images: “I do not place myself “in” the scenario, so much as entertain an idea, but not from the perspective [...] of any character within the scenario” (Smith, 1995: 77).

Smith argues that by positing identification occurs when viewers use empathy to “experience vicariously the thoughts and feelings of the protagonist” (1995: 77), most models of identification have assumed the process of identification to be a matter of central imagining. To Smith, however, it is through acentral imagining that we engage with characters most of the time: we rarely imagine ourselves to “be” the characters, nor do we feel what they feel or think what they think. In other words, the role of empathy in the film viewer’s experience is more limited than is often assumed. Instead, Smith claims, viewers more frequently develop a link of “sympathy” with the characters, a more distanced form of emotional and intellectual engagement whereby viewers evaluate characters and react to them, instead of reacting as though they were them.

Smith’s model of identification helps shed light on the way *Midsommar* challenges the assumption that viewers may share the worldview of the characters they identify with. Once Dani has become a Harga, the limits of the viewers’ empathetic link with the character become

17. “Central imagining is often expressed in the form ‘I imagine...’ [...] If we say ‘I imagine jumping from the top of the building’, we imply that we represent this event to ourselves, as it were, from the inside [...] Central imagining [...] may also involve simulations of the internal states and values of the person or character functioning as the vehicle of the central imagining” (Smith, 1995: 76).

apparent, as experiencing the radically other worldview Dani is now experiencing becomes an emotional and cognitive impossibility. One may comprehend this worldview and therefore evaluate it (using one’s own ethical, affective and intellectual mindset to do so), but comprehending it is not the same thing as experiencing it, which the film frequently underlines by multiplying elements stressing the extent to which the viewers’ emotional and intellectual reactions necessarily chime with the diegetic reactions of the Hargas and of Dani.¹⁸

One may notably think of the film’s depiction of gore and blood. The physiological reactions these unmistakably provoke in the viewers (be it disgust, laughter, or even – in the case, let us hope, of a very small minority of viewers – sadistic enjoyment) prevent them from emotionally experiencing the Harga worldview. Bodily fluids such as blood are shown to be an inherent part of Harga culture – menstrual blood is even used as part of a love potion. On the other hand, most viewers’ reactions originate from a cultural background in which the sight of blood and other bodily fluids has long been considered taboo. Indeed, most modern cultures consider bodily fluids to be an abject source of disgust and horror. Abjection, as Julia Kristeva analyzed, arises from all that threatens the dissolution of the border separating the self from the outside world (1980) – a feeling which, as *Midsommar* shows, may only exist in a mindset believing in the hermetic unity of the human body – why would the Hargas, with their intersubjective and animist mindsets, find blood and bodily fluids repellent? The film makes this cultural divide very clear when the Harga priestess asserts that the suicides of the elders are a joyful event as the dead take part in “a cycle of death and rebirth”, an assertion that, from a non-Harga perspective, appears singularly quaint given the profusion of blood and smashed body parts the suicides led to. Any viewer experiencing abjection at the sight of smashed body parts may comprehend the Harga worldview as described by the priestess, but not experience it.

Another example is to be found in the Hargas’ sexual traditions. When a drugged Christian is forced to have sex with a young woman, the loss of virginity of the latter is celebrated in another instance of inter-subjective communion: the sexual act is performed by the couple in front of a group of naked women, whose chanting turns into a synchronized moan of sexual pleasure, suggesting Christian is (at least symbolically) procreating with the whole group rather than with a specific individual. By breaking the taboos of public exhibitions of nudity and sexuality, it is once again safe to argue that the scene distances most viewers from the Harga

18. Here too, I do not wish to imply that the viewers’ emotional and intellectual reactions are homogeneous. I simply claim that these reactions, varied as they may be, necessarily jar with those of the Hargas, so long as the viewers share such moral and intellectual characteristics as an ethical rejection of human sacrifice or a belief in individual consciousness, which, it is safe to say, is the case for an overwhelming majority of them.

worldview: one cannot but feel the disgust and unease that our modern sensibilities associate with this sexual taboo.

In addition, as Ari Aster himself pointed out,¹⁹ the aesthetics of the Harga rituals could be said to border on kitsch – at least from a “modern” point of view – due to the use of excessively colorful and richly adorned costumes, culminating in both Dani’s gigantic flowery overgrowth and the grotesque dressing up of the sacrificed American tourists, some of whom are filled with flowers, fruit and straw, while Christian is wrapped in a bear skin. Viewers may thus be led to react to such sights with the distancing laughter arising from the contrast between the ideological seriousness of the Hargas (wholeheartedly engaged in their sacred rituals) and our “modern” perception of their rituals as kitsch.

Empathy, *Midsommar* thus points out, is a limited ability: viewers may never fully experience the worldview of others as no one may fully rid oneself of one’s own subjective prism. By fully encouraging viewers to identify with Dani before having the character embrace a radically other worldview, the film forces viewers to reflect upon the nature of the emotional and cognitive link that they had previously developed with the character: those of us convinced that empathy was enabling them to feel and think what Dani was feeling and thinking must accept that no matter how much sympathy they still feel for her once she becomes a Harga, her experiences have become fundamentally alien. From a metafilmic perspective, *Midsommar* therefore shows that empathetic identification may, at the very least, be a phenomenon much weaker than traditionally assumed in most models of identification. In addition to feeling sympathy for a character, viewers must necessarily assume this character’s worldview is morally, ideologically, and phenomenologically similar to their own in order for an empathetic link to be created.²⁰

Conclusion

By challenging the fundamental generic assumption that horror films ought to enable viewers to identify with the monstrous other, *Midsommar* questions two commonly held beliefs, i.e. that both empathy and cinema enable one to experience someone else’s worldview.

19. “We [pursued] something that could very easily fall into kitsch. I don’t know if we did fall into kitsch, that’s not my call to make, but that was the fun of this” (O’Falt, 2019).
20. Such a reflection points at the ethical issue of a model of identification relying mostly on empathy: if a model posits that viewers identify with a character using an ability which, it turns out, only enables them to establish a bond with characters viewed as similar to themselves, then film and other art forms can no longer be thought of as means to open up to other worldviews. A model relying on sympathy, however, does not face the same problem.

Midsommar exemplifies the tendency of the films belonging to the post-horror cycle to subvert some of horror’s generic conventions so as to develop aesthetic and thematic concerns leaning towards the realm of “art cinema” (Church, 2021: 8). Due to its favoring such devices as non-linear narratives, non-naturalistic acting or open endings (Bordwell, 1979), art cinema is often considered as a more “intellectual” approach to film than mainstream commercial cinema. Horror, on the other hand, is frequently understood as a genre favoring raw emotional investment, if not purely physiological responses, as Linda Williams underlined in her influential study of “body horror” (Williams, 1991). It is therefore unsurprising that a cycle of films blending elements of horror and art cinema would be particularly well suited to explore cinematic identification, which is both a cognitive and an emotional process. In fact, it is my assumption that many, if not most, post-horror films, distort the traditional model of cinematic identification, although further work would be needed to support this hypothesis.

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