

***Midsommar*, dir. by Ari Aster** (A24, Nodisk Films, 2019)

Midsommar (2019) is Ari Aster's second feature film, coming on the heels of his critically acclaimed *Hereditary* (2018). As Aster has made clear in interviews, he intentionally shaped *Midsommar* as folk horror, although he has also said that it is a break-up movie and 'a fairy tale with horror elements'.¹ Despite Aster's interest in evading generic categorisation, however, *Midsommar* seems a veritable exemplar of the folk-horror narrative, and it is marked by the unmistakable influence of two canonical folk-horror films, *The Wicker Man* (dir. by Robin Hardy, 1973) and *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (dir. by Piers Haggard, 1971).

Midsommar follows four Americans – Josh (William Jackson Harper), Mark (Will Poulter), Christian (Jack Reynor), and Dani (Florence Pugh) – who are invited by their Swedish postgraduate friend, Pelle (Vilhelm Blomgren), to visit his small community, Hårga, during its nine-day midsummer celebration. The motivations of the Americans are varied. Josh, Mark, and Christian are all Anthropology graduate students, and Josh plans to study the small community for his thesis on cult rituals. Dani is going because her boyfriend, Christian, invited her (reluctantly) – and because she is trying to move past the devastating family tragedy with which the film begins. The five friends arrive at Pelle's village, which is nestled in a beautiful natural landscape, and, in short order, the nine-day celebration begins. The residents of Hårga adhere to an idiosyncratic set of practices and beliefs. They all wear white, live in communal wooden houses, and eat together at large tables. Stones inscribed with strange runic characters litter the landscape; there's a bear in a cage; and a bright yellow steepled temple, which no one is allowed to enter, stands on the edge of the village. Excitedly intent on gathering material for his thesis, Josh asks one of the elders how they support themselves; he answers that they have a water-driven power plant, engage in homeopathy, weave linen, and grow their own food. They are self-sufficient, in short – intentionally cut off from the markets, ideologies, and religions of the modern Western world.

If alarm bells aren't yet ringing for the four Americans (and they aren't), they certainly should be, as things start to skew even more toward the strange. One of the elders explains how their community is organised around the stages of life and aligned with the seasons. Spring represents the stage from birth to eighteen, during which period children sleep together in a large communal hut. From the ages of eighteen to thirty-six, the villagers

¹ David Sims, 'What Kind of Movie Ari Aster Wanted *Midsommar* To Be', *Atlantic*, 3 July 2019 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/07/ari-aster-midsommar-interview/593194/>> [accessed 13 September 2020].

(in the ‘summer’ of their lives) go on ‘missions’, as Pelle had done, bringing back his four newly acquired friends from the US (no one thinks to ask what the ‘mission’ is, exactly); in the fall of their lives, aged thirty-seven to fifty-four, the villagers presumably work in and for the sustenance of the community; and lastly, those aged fifty-five to seventy-two – in the winter of their lives – serve as the elders of the community, advising the young and ensuring that traditions get passed on. When one of the Americans asks what happens at age seventy-two, the elder draws his hand across his throat and smiles. He’s not joking, however, and the first ritual of the midsummer celebration soon makes that shockingly clear. Two of the elders, who have presumably attained the age of seventy-two, leap from a high cliff onto the rocks below. In this scene, which reveals exactly what the villagers are capable of, Aster offers up some of the relatively few grotesquely violent images of the film, as red splinters the film’s otherwise white, yellow, and green palette.

As the above description makes clear, *Midsommar* tracks closely to the ‘folk-horror chain’ described by Adam Scovell. Drawing from the ‘unholy trinity’ of folk-horror films – *Witchfinder General* (dir. by Michael Reeves, 1968), *The Blood on Satan’s Claw*, and *The Wicker Man* – Scovell maps out the constituent parts of folk horror. Landscape is the first link, he writes, in that ‘elements within its topography have adverse effects on the social and moral identity of its inhabitants’, which then becomes critical to the second element, isolation: the ‘landscape must in some way isolate a key body of characters’, who become ‘cut off from some established social progress of the diegetic world’. The pressure of the landscape, and the isolation it shapes for its central community, leads to its members’ ‘skewed belief systems and morality’, which then inexorably prompt the conclusion of the folk-horror plot and the final link in the chain: the ‘happening/summoning’, often a ‘violent and supernatural’ event such as a sacrifice.² The village in *Midsommar* is certainly isolated, its views and practices ‘skewed’, and more than one violent ritual/sacrifice punctuates its second half.

If *Midsommar* can be generally understood via Scovell’s ‘folk-horror chain’, it also, more specifically, follows the narrative arc of Robin Hardy’s *The Wicker Man*. Indeed, writing in *Variety*, Owen Gleiberman claims that *Midsommar* is a ‘veritable remake’ of *The Wicker Man*.³ Aster would not be pleased at Gleiberman’s assessment, since he has insisted

² Adam Scovell, *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange* (Leighton Buzzard: Auteur, 2017), pp. 8, 17-18.

³ Owen Gleiberman, ‘*Midsommar*: Destined to Be Controversial’, *Variety*, 4 July 2019 <<https://variety.com/2019/film/columns/midsommar-destined-to-be-controversial-ari-aster-florence-pugh-1203259778/>> [accessed 8 September 2020].

in an interview that he strove to evade the shadow of Hardy's cult film: 'I tried to avoid it as much as I could. I think what [*Midsommar*] tries to do is point to *The Wicker Man* and set up expectations native to that film, then take a left-turn from there and go somewhere surprising.'⁴ That 'somewhere' happens to be a culminating sacrificial fire, so it's hard to agree with Aster that he actually goes 'somewhere surprising'.

Indeed, *Midsommar* evokes not only the plot of *The Wicker Man* but also its narrative strategy of planting 'clues' that foreshadow what will happen to its protagonist, clues of which Sergeant Neil Howie (Edward Woodward) is quite oblivious. Hardy has famously said that the film is constructed as a kind of 'game', 'the hunter leading the hunted'.⁵ Howie goes to Summerisle thinking that he is searching for a missing girl, that he's the hunter, but he doesn't realise until the very end that he is in fact the 'hunted', led to Summerisle precisely so he can be sacrificed. In *Midsommar*, similarly, the American students think they are pursuing data on rituals at the Swedish community, completely unaware that they have been designated for sacrifice. As he did in *Hereditary*, where he littered the film's landscape with evidence of the cult's presence, Aster plants clues that the Americans have been chosen as victims from very early on. There is even the suggestion that the deaths at the beginning of the film of Dani's parents and sister – an apparent suicide/homicide – were the work of Pelle and the villagers.⁶

Midsommar also contains some striking resemblances to other folk-horror films from the late 1960s and 70s. Late in the film, for instance, Christian is given some mind-altering substance and raped in a ritual that resembles the ritual rape of Cathy (Wendy Padbury) in an abandoned church in *Blood on Satan's Claw*; just as the onlookers in that film seem to undergo a kind of sympathetic ecstasy, so too do the women that surround Christian and Maja (Isabelle Grill). *Midsommar* also echoes Peter Sasdy's 1972 hybrid folk-horror/sci-fi film *Doomwatch*. Both films focus on a small, closed community (in *Doomwatch*, it's the fictional Cornish island of Balfe), and both communities struggle to manage the consequences of inbreeding. In *Hårga*, the occasional inbred child becomes a kind of oracle, embodied by Ruben (Levente Puczkó). *Doomwatch*'s suggestion of inbreeding, however, is

⁴ Ben Travis, 'Midsommar Director Ari Aster on Avoiding the Influence of *The Wicker Man*', *Empire*, 3 July 2019 <<https://www.empireonline.com/movies/news/midsommar-director-ari-aster-on-avoiding-the-influence-of-the-wicker-man/>> [accessed 8 September 2020].

⁵ Robin Hardy, 'The Genesis of *The Wicker Man*', in *The Quest for The Wicker Man: History, Folklore, and Pagan Perspectives*, ed. by Benjamin Franks, Jonathan Murray, and Stephen Harper (Edinburgh: Luath, 2006), pp. 17-25 (p. 19).

⁶ Chris Snyder and Meredith Geaghan-Breiner, 'All the Hidden Meanings You May Have Missed in the *Midsommar* Ending', *Business Insider*, 8 July 2019 <<https://www.businessinsider.com/midsommar-ending-explained-hidden-meanings-symbols-clues-2019-7>> [accessed 7 September 2020].

ultimately turned back by a plot that indicts the dumping of dangerous experimental growth hormones in the waters off the island.

Indeed, the connections between *Midsommar* and earlier folk-horror films do more than simply emphasise the shaping power of the folk-horror plot, the narrative ‘chain’, in the present moment. *Midsommar*, I argue, picks up on and elucidates a strong thread of environmental politics that has run through the folk-horror tradition – evident not least in *The Wicker Man* and *Doomwatch*. At a crucial moment in *Midsommar*, one of the elders of Hårga notes that this year’s solstice celebration, including a banquet that only takes place every ninety years, is occurring on ‘the hottest and brightest summer on record’.⁷ At least one reviewer, Keith Phipps, has positioned *Midsommar* as a climate-change film, writing that both *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* serve as ‘previews of what could emerge after a political or climatic breakdown’; they gesture, among other things, to how ‘the damage visited on the Earth reaches a tipping point that threatens to drive the ground beneath our feet and the air we breathe into revolt’.⁸ Is *Midsommar* indeed a commentary on global warming and ecological destruction? Is it an environmentalist film? Aster’s film, like *The Wicker Man* before it, *seems* to depict a community living in apparent harmony with nature. Both of these cinematic celebrations of a pagan community wedded to the cycles of nature can, however, actually be seen as offering a scathing critique.

As William Hughes has brilliantly argued, the pagan cult of *The Wicker Man* is actually a fabrication by an aspiring capitalist, intent on getting as much work as possible from the inhabitants of Summerisle, and squeezing equally as much from the natural resources of the island.⁹ In *Midsommar*, the cult appears to be an authentic community, with an organic set of beliefs that emerge from the ‘folk’ rather than being imposed by an (aristocratic) outsider, as is the case with the succession of lords of Summerisle. *Midsommar* is, nonetheless, offering up this community, I suggest, as a satirical commentary on environmentalism, not as itself an exemplar of a more ‘green’ way of living. Indeed, it is

⁷ Jake Wilson asks without answering, ‘[i]s there an environmentalist subtext, as we might gather from a throwaway comment about global warming?’ See ‘Horror Comes out of the Shadows in *Midsommar*’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 August 2019 <<https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/movies/horror-comes-out-of-the-shadows-in-midsommar-20190806-p52edw.html>> [accessed 8 September 2020].

⁸ Keith Phipps, ‘*Midsommar* Offers a Vision of What Awaits Us after Society Collapses’, *Pacific Standard*, 24 July 2019 <<https://psmag.com/ideas/midsommar-by-ari-aster-offers-a-vision-of-what-awaits-us-after-society-collapses>> [accessed 8 September 2020].

⁹ William Hughes, “‘A Strange Kind of Evil’: Superficial Paganism and False Ecology in *The Wicker Man*”, in *EcoGothic*, ed. by Andrew Smith and William Hughes (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 58-71.

difficult to watch how *Midsommar* plays out without grasping its darkly comic satire of environmentalism's excesses.

The inhabitants of Hårga live by the tenet that humans are fundamentally entwined with nature, not the dominant species or even particularly exceptional. They kill Mark for urinating on the 'ancestral tree' they worship, for instance, establishing a hierarchy that certainly doesn't privilege the human. What this ecological vision translates to, however, is a conclusion in which a petulant and vengeful Dani-as-May-Queen, covered with flowers, enacts vengeance on her faithless boyfriend. And the community's enactment of living in harmony with nature involves stuffing vegetation in the eyes of their murdered visitors, attaching branches to bodies, and burning Christian in the skin of a bear. In one particularly notable scene, we see Josh's leg sticking out of a garden plot. Such moments beg to be seen as satirising ideas about the mutual imbrication of human and nonhuman – claims like Donna Haraway's, for instance, that humans are compost: 'We are humus, not homo, not anthropos; we are compost, not posthuman.'¹⁰ The villagers of Hårga seem not merely to accept this tenet but actively to pursue it. 'We are compost' becomes here less an assertion that humans are part of nature, not at all exceptional, than it is a rallying cry, a call to *render* humans compost. The so-called 'deity of reciprocity' worshipped by the people of Hårga demands the routine sacrifice of the village's elders when they attain the age of seventy-two, as well as the sacrifice of an equal number of people to those who are born that year. Humans are forcibly returned to the earth, in short, as a means of sustaining the community. Living in harmony with nature, including making sure the community can sustain itself, feed itself, comes with a heavy cost.

Rögnvaldur Hannesson provocatively claims in *Ecofundamentalism* that '[e]nvironmentalism is not an ideology justifying the struggle of the poor for a better lot, it is a malaise among those who have more than enough'.¹¹ *Midsommar* can be read through this lens: it centres a homogenous, white community that seemingly wants for nothing; lush banquets punctuate the narrative. To propitiate their 'gods', moreover, the villagers lure in outsiders who are more vulnerable both emotionally (as in Dani's case) and racially (as in the case of Josh, Connie, and Simon). *Midsommar*'s environmentalist critique seems to be directed, then, not at the usual suspects (urban westerners with their smart phones, chronic

¹⁰ Donna J. Haraway, 'Staying with the Trouble: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene', in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. by Jason W. Moore (Oakland, CA: Kairos, 2016), pp. 34-77 (p. 59).

¹¹ Rögnvaldur Hannesson, *Ecofundamentalism: A Critique of Extreme Environmentalism* (Lexington Books, 2014), p. 2.

over-consumption, and frequent plane travel) but at those who live an extreme version of a 'green' life and who are here, not coincidentally, depicted as uniformly white). *Midsommar*, in other words, seems to be critiquing, not the conspicuous consumers vilified by environmentalists, but extreme environmentalists themselves.¹²

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¹² This reading intersects with a couple of analyses of *Midsommar* as a film about white supremacy. 'Is this, in some fashion, a movie about whiteness?' asks Wilson (n. p.). See also Xine Yao, 'Midsommar: The Horrors of White Sympathy', *Avidly: The LA Review of Books*, 13 August 2019. <http://avidly.lareviewofbooks.org/2019/08/13/midsommar-the-horrors-of-white-sympathy/> [accessed 8 September 2020].