

# *Midsommar*: Illuminating nothing

Carlos Delgado  
9 August 2019

*Midsommar*, written and directed by Ari Aster.

*Midsommar* is the latest film from writer-director Ari Aster, who made something of a critical and commercial splash with his 2018 film *Hereditary*. This latest film, like its predecessor, attempts to straddle a line between a tense interpersonal drama and a violent horror spectacle.

Dani (Florence Pugh) and her boyfriend Christian (Jack Reynor) are two American college students whose relationship has begun to deteriorate. They appear to be headed for a breakup when a horrific family tragedy sends Dani into an emotional and psychological tailspin.

Christian, either out of sympathy for Dani's circumstances or guilt over his waning feelings for her, invites her to join him and his friends on a trip to Hårga, a remote pagan commune in northern Sweden, to participate in "Midsummer" festivities celebrating the summer solstice. The group is invited to the commune by Christian's friend Pelle (Vilhelm Blomgren), a member of the commune who serves as the group's interpreter and guide—and who, it becomes clear, has a sinister motive for inviting "outsiders" to the festivities.

Upon arriving at Hårga, the group—which also includes Christian's friends Mark (Will Poulter) and Josh (William Jackson Harper), as well as Simon (Archie Madekwe) and Connie (Ellora Torchia), a young British couple invited by another commune member—are both bewildered and charmed by the anachronisms of the apparently tranquil pagan commune. They take psychedelic drugs in order to "feel the energy from the Earth." They sleep in a communal room covered with bizarre paintings depicting various rituals and myths. The smiling commune members, clad in all-white garments and under the perpetual "midnight sun" of northern Sweden, appear idyllic, even heavenly.

Dani, meanwhile, continues to struggle emotionally with the aftermath of her trauma. She becomes increasingly isolated from Christian and the rest of the group. She is plagued by disturbing flashbacks and hallucinations, and is prone to panic attacks.

The outsiders' illusions in the peacefulness of the

commune are broken when they are invited to a ritual in which two elderly community members commit suicide in grisly fashion as an end to their 72 year "life-cycle." The ritual, described by the commune leaders as a "great joy," is a brutal ordeal that severely impacts Dani, though her horror is perhaps tinged with fascination. She is not alone in this; Christian and Josh develop an unhealthy admiration of the custom. Christian expresses his desire to write his thesis paper on the community, to the consternation of Josh, who has devoted his academic life to the study of "Midsummer" rituals. Ambition and cutthroat competitiveness drive a wedge between their friendship.

Tensions rise between the outsiders and the cult members, as well as within the group of outsiders themselves. Simon and Connie vanish after attempting to leave the commune before the festivities have ended. Mark vanishes after unwittingly desecrating an object of religious significance. Josh attempts to photograph a book of sacred texts and paintings and meets a bloody end.

Meanwhile, Pelle reaches out to Dani and insists that he understands her suffering and her desire for belonging, a need that he insists could be fulfilled by the Hårga cult. He says of Christian, "He's my good friend and I like him. But do you feel held by him, Dani? Does he feel like a home to you?" The implication is that the cult itself could become her "home."

Dani participates in and wins a maypole dancing competition and is crowned the May Queen. Meanwhile, under the influence of psychedelic drugs, Christian is coerced, more or less, into having sex with a commune member in order to introduce "new blood" into the commune's insular genetic pool. Dani witnesses the sex act and has an emotional breakdown. Her wailing is mirrored by other commune members in an apparent act of ritualized empathy.

In the end, after a series of bludgeonings, dismemberments, immolations and a disembowelment or two for good measure, Dani ends her relationship with Christian in violent fashion, having found, we are led to

believe, a new “freedom” in the world of the cult.

The genre imperatives of horror films, the need to frighten and titillate, often leave little room for any serious artistic probing of social or psychological issues. Nevertheless, certain filmmakers, working under the right conditions, have been able to inject genre pieces with a bit more substance than the usual routine of violence, gore and beastly monsters (though there is still plenty of that). One can find interesting moments or sequences in films like *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968), *Rosemary’s Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968), *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980), *The People Under the Stairs* (Wes Craven, 1991), and in episodes of *The Twilight Zone* (Rod Serling, 1959).

For the most part, however, contemporary horror films have degenerated along with the rest of filmmaking. Films in the genre generally range from nauseating “torture porn” works like *Saw* (James Wan, 2003) to shrill, big-budget monstrosities like *It* (Andy Muschietti, 2017).

A handful of recent horror films have attempted to differentiate themselves from this crass, commercialized crop. Films like *It Follows* (David Robert Mitchell, 2014), *A Quiet Place* (John Krasinski, 2018), and Ari Aster’s own *Hereditary* and *Midsommar* have displayed relative restraint with regards to the blood and gore, have relied on suspense more than “jump scares,” and have even made oblique attempts at social commentary.

*Hereditary*, which chronicled a family’s descent into psychological and supernatural hell in the wake of back-to-back tragedies, contained a few sequences which were genuinely disturbing. The film was powered largely by a strong performance from Toni Collette, who was able to provide a grounding and humanizing force for the narrative, at least until it spiraled into hysteria and incoherence in its third act.

*Midsommar*, on the other hand, lacks any such force. Dani is a mostly passive and undeveloped character, and her relationship with Christian is limp and uninteresting. Despite the nearly two-and-a-half hour runtime, none of the characters has much flesh on their bones in Aster’s half-baked script, which makes it difficult to care when that flesh comes under assault.

Certain intriguing ideas are touched on: the underhanded careerism of academia, the unhealthy and dishonest petty-bourgeois fascination with backwardness, the absurdity of religious superstition. The elders of the commune base their religious text on “interpretations” of splattered hand-paintings created by a mentally disabled child who has been deliberately produced through

inbreeding in order to make him “more open for the Source.”

In interviews, Aster has hinted that the commune’s hostility toward “outsiders” is intended to comment on the growth of anti-immigrant chauvinism.

None of this makes much of an impact, however, and in any case, the film discards all of it in order to make room for grotesque violence in its later sequences. As with many films of the genre, the turn toward killing and violence becomes a convenient escape hatch to avoid pursuing any artistic idea to its conclusion. The knives cut down to the bone, but the ideas remain skin deep.

Aster himself seems somewhat ambivalent in his attitude toward the Hårga commune. On the one hand, they are depicted as a violent and savage cult. On the other, it is implied that at least some of their victims have gotten what they “deserved” and that Dani’s life is better off for having encountered the commune. The film’s final shot is a close-up of Dani’s smiling face as she watches an act of violence that is presented as being at least partly cathartic. Does Aster share Christian’s and Josh’s positive view of this way of doing things? Would barbarism be a “freer” way of life than civilization? There are middle class illusions here that have not been worked through.

Tonally, the film mistakes self-seriousness for artistry, and, despite a certain visual flair, cannot maintain narrative plausibility over its interminable runtime. Even as a work of macabre entertainment, the film lacks either the foreboding atmosphere of Roman Polanski’s *Macbeth* (1971) or the dark irony of Robin Hardy’s *The Wicker Man* (1973), both films that *Midsommar* references.

Aster is a visually talented filmmaker, and, if he wishes to continue making films in this genre, there are certainly no shortages of horrors in the world to chronicle. Yet, he will have to develop a more clearly worked out attitude toward social life if he wants to seriously disturb his viewers. At present, his work is merely dull.



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