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8 November 2021

Found Family: Trauma & Cults in Ari Aster's *Midsommar*

Much of the research and discussion done about trauma theory in literature is in reference to trauma experienced by groups. Especially since narratives exploring the expression and cognition of trauma changed and became more abundant after the events of 9/11. Traumatic narratives have continued to expand into film, including movies that attempt narrate the horrors of the Holocaust, like *Schindler's List* (1994). In 2019, Ari Aster released *Midsommar*, a film he refers to as both a “folk horror movie” and a “perverse wish fulfillment fantasy” (“Ari Aster on *Midsommar*”). The interesting direction that Ari Aster's film takes is how the traumatic experiences of one person can become a shared traumatic experience with a group of people who did not directly experience the trauma. In this essay, I will apply Dominick LaCapra's literary theories of trauma to Ari Aster's *Midsommar*, showing Dani's unique form of dissociation, a common result of trauma, and the way the Hårga play an essential role in allowing her to undergo LaCapra's method of working-through.

The film begins in the winter, where Dani Ardor, away from home to attend college, finds out that her parents and sister have died in a horrific murder-suicide. Dani's sister funneled car exhaust fumes into her parents room before taping a tube to her own mouth. Dani is emotionally destroyed and receives little to no real comfort from her boyfriend, Christian. To make matters worse, Christian has been planning a trip to Sweden to experience the midsummer celebration with his friends (one of which is writing his thesis on midsummer traditions) and an exchange student, Pelle. He did not tell Dani about it until two weeks prior because he intended to break up with her before he left. In perhaps the only shining moment from Christian in this film, and I use

“shining” loosely, he reluctantly invites her because he doesn’t think she’s actually going to come. But, she does. Contrasting the biting cold at the beginning of the movie, their arrival in Sweden takes them to the Hårga community, nestled in a field of seemingly never ending sunshine. The foreigners are taken aback by the Hårga’s customs, including senicide (a ritual where the oldest members of the community voluntarily plummet from a high cliff) and the communal sharing of emotional and sexual experiences. The latter of which Christian becomes a part of and, unfortunately for him, Dani witnesses it. Dani is crowned May Queen and it is her responsibility to choose the last of nine sacrifices to purge the evil from the community. Dani is given the choice between Christian and a randomly chosen member of the community, and she chooses Christian. In the final scene of the film, Dani wanders in front of the burning temple containing the nine sacrifices, including three living and four of the foreigners. Behind her, the Hårga wail with Dani, until she finally stops, and smiles.

The medium of film enables the artist to include specific instructions for audio and visuals. LaCapra discusses this specifically in the way that footage of interviews with victims of traumatic experiences “[enables] one to hear the grain of the embodied voice in relation to facial expressions and bodily gestures...” (382). Actual footage is better able to reveal aspects of trauma that written text would have a harder time capturing, such as showing an audience exactly how someone sounds and how someone looks. This is especially evident in cinema, where everything is written, directed, and acted in a certain way for a certain reason; no inclusion is arbitrary. There is little room for unconscious fidgeting or inflection changes like in an authentic interview, but the principle is the same. Aster’s intentional uses of breathing and visual hallucinations throughout the film demonstrates Dani’s dynamic emotional state as a result of her trauma.

In the beginning of the film, in the number of times that Dani cries, she struggles to breathe as ragged and guttural sobs shake her whole body. Upon arriving in Sweden, Aster includes a number of moments where the sound of characters breathing is put into focus. During a psychedelic mushroom trip, there is a moment where all other sound in the film is deafened and we focus on the sound of Dani breathing. Once the story properly takes us into the Hårga's community, we hear a number of members letting out forceful exhales, a sort of "hoh" sound. We hear Maja do it before she exits the bathroom and sees Christian for the first time, the elders when they stand up from their last meal, and before they light the fire in the final sacrifice. This deliberate focus on the sound of breathing is similar to the therapeutic practice of controlled breathing. Dani has been clinically diagnosed with anxiety (evidenced by the prescription bottle of Ativan in her apartment) and likely knows about coping mechanisms. With the death of her parents, she forgets how to manage her emotions and anxieties, which is represented by her numerous moments of irregular breathing. The Hårga encouraging her to breathe deliberately to center herself is just another way that they do a much better job of helping her work through her trauma in a matter of days than Christian has in the past few months.

Narratively, Dani's hallucinations are a result of drug usage: mushroom tea when she first arrives and then an herbal tea that all the girls drink before the competition for the May Queen. The content of her visions are exclusively related to her family. Her sister appears in the bathroom after she drinks the mushroom tea and both her mother and sister appear after Dani is crowned May Queen. According to LaCapra, visions "whether as a metaphor or as a hallucination [are] a form of traumatic memory or post-traumatic effect" (LaCapra 379). LaCapra cites Nicholas Abraham's assessment of Prince Hamlet to demonstrate this, where Hamlet's father returns to haunt Hamlet because of his own unresolved trauma. Dani feels some

culpability for the death of her family. She, per the advice of Christian, convinced herself that she was being strung along by her sister because, as Christian says, she “does this every other day...and only because [Dani] lets her”. Once Dani is crowned May Queen, a woman from the crowd touches her and as she turns, Dani calls out to her, recognizing her own mother before she gets lost in the crowd again. Visions and reality blend in this moment, where instead of seeing her mother dead, she is alive, tangible, and helping congratulate and welcome her into the Hårga as a new member. As she disappears into the crowd, so too does Dani’s guilt, as she feels that this is a sign that the Hårga can be her new family.

LaCapra lends credit to an interesting approach to dissociating in the documentary *A Nazi Legacy: What Our Fathers Did*, where in an interview, the daughter of a high ranking Nazi politician “[splits her] father into good and bad personas” in her head. The good father is the “private family man that the children can still love” and the bad father is the “political man involved in...Nazi ideology” (LaCapra 381). In a twist on conventional understandings of dissociation, the one affected by the trauma projects dissociation onto something else. In order to resolve the person’s inability to comprehend the seemingly dual personalities of the perpetrator, they essentially split it into two different people, rather than splitting themselves into one personality that holds the trauma and one or more that protects the brain from processing that trauma.

Similarly in *Midsommar*, Dani, herself, does not dissociate after the trauma. Instead, her psyche splits into and is represented by two groups, like the father mentioned above; the group of students that she comes to Sweden with are the “bad persona” and the Hårga are the “good persona”. At the turning point of the film, Dani has a nightmare where she sees Christian and his groupthink friends abandoning her in the middle of the night. Red and blue flashing lights are

easy to see as this is the darkest moment in terms of lighting since the beginning of the film. Images from the senicide ceremony follow and are interstitched with images of her parents and sister, concluding with the two scenes coming together, with her family lying at the bottom of the cliff. Christian and his lackeys represent the part of Dani that does not or cannot deal with her trauma. This is largely manifested in Christian, the one that Dani is supposed to have the strongest connection with. Yet, Christian gaslights and dismisses Dani's concerns a number of times throughout the film, invalidating her emotions. Mark and Josh, equally, couldn't care less about Dani, as they both awkwardly leave the room when they find out Dani is coming to Sweden with them. The person left in the room, Pelle, demonstrates early on that he and his "family" (the community) will be much more capable of helping Dani handle her emotions.

The Hårga are the conduit through which Dani is able to undergo the process of "working-through", a term coined by Freud but adapted to literary trauma theory by LaCapra. In essence, working-through trauma occurs when the one who has been traumatized is able to recognize that the trauma happened but that it was in the past. It enables the person not to totally forget the trauma but to understand that "gaining critical distance" and "re-contextualizing" the event will help them focus on the now and the future (Bond 78). This is in contrast to the other reaction, acting-out, where the person is unable to think about anything other than the past trauma. It is through Dani's assimilation into the community that she will be able to "[reconnect] knowledge and feeling, so that [she] can reengage with the present and look towards the future," which LaCapra says is necessary to move from acting-out to working-through (Bond 77). The only emotional connection Dani has following her family's death is to Christian, and that connection is weak. Dani even admits to a friend over the phone that in their four years together, she has "never even seen him cry." In stark contrast, the Hårga feel everything together. When

the second participant in the senicide ritual does not die on impact, the entire community wails and screams as they feel the pain of their suffering community member. As soon as the wooden mallet strikes his face, killing him instantly, the wailing stops. In perhaps one of the most famous scenes of the film, Dani experiences this cathartic release herself. Dani witnesses Christian having sex with Maja, sending her into another panic attack. Rather than running away, alone, like a wounded animal, the women of the community surround her and carry her back to the communal sleeping space. Sitting together on the floor, they breathe, cry, and scream in unison as the women “mirror [Dani’s] rage, to conjure it up and throw it out into exteriority, to awaken and vanquish it” (Huber). As Aster said in an interview, Dani is “forced to confront something that she’s been looking away from and then [is] presented with a different way of viewing that thing that will allow her to process it” (“Ari Aster on *Midsommar*”).

American society suffers from a phenomenon known as “surplus repression”, where the expectations of society influence the way that we express ourselves (Goldman 18). Outbursts of emotions, especially negative, are generally discouraged and met with scoldings to stop making a scene. The Hårga are separated from modern society and therefore not victims to surplus repression. Dani totally severs the connection to American society and surplus repression by extension when she chooses to kill Christian. This was the last thing Dani needed in order to gain that critical distance and dig herself out of the past. Until she saw the way the Hårga were able to unapologetically express their emotions, Dani had been burying her feelings down because that was what was expected of her. Christian and his friends were constant reminders of her trauma and constant reminders of feelings she could never express. With Christian gone as the final sacrifice, she has nothing tethering her to her old life and is free to move forward.

The final scene of the film not only concludes the story and solidifies Dani's assimilation into the cult, but it is also the point where Dani is able to "[ameliorate] trauma's cognitive void" (Bond 77). As the temple burns down in front of them, with Christian alive, dressed in a bear skin, the part of her projected dissociation that ignores the trauma is purged and she is left with the community, literally standing with her, encouraging her to express her emotions. The cult is howling in mutual pain with their members being burned alive while Dani cries for being reminded of loss and perhaps any lingering reservations she has for sentencing her boyfriend (well, ex-boyfriend) to death. She sees them all screaming with her, the only people in the entire film that have shown any kind of real emotion. The Hårga do this ritual to "purge [their] most unholy affeks" and cleanse their community from negative spirits and influences. The ritual has a whole other meaning for Dani, where her most unholy affek *was* Christian. A liar, a gaslighter, and a thesis-stealer (which I'm sure in a room full of academics is considered the unholyest of affeks), Christian is the "mighty and dreadful beast" that represents Dani's repressed emotions. Dani has purged the part of her projected psyche that stunted her ability to process it, rise above it, and leave it behind.

It might seem that this film and Ari Aster are championing the idea of joining a cult in order to encourage inner healing and resolution but that is not the case. Dani's excursion to Sweden represents an emotional vindication that can be found without the need for minute-long bouts of screaming (although that may help). Ari Aster's film champions LaCapra's theory of "working-through", where Dani goes to the extreme to break through and leave behind her trauma, distributing it to the rest of the Hårga community so it's less of a burden for her to carry on her own. This film also lends some advice on what it means to be a good partner and a good

friend: do the opposite of what Christian does. And don't worry, the irony of writing my senior thesis on a film where a character literally dies for their thesis is not lost on me.

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