

BECOMING THE MAY QUEEN: THE IMAGINARY, THE SYMBOLIC, AND THE REAL IN ARI ASTER'S *MIDSOMMAR* FILM

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Abstract

This article explores Ari Aster's *Midsommar* (2019) through a Lacanian psychoanalytic lens, focusing on the protagonist Dani's psychological transformation as she navigates trauma, desire, and identity within the framework of Lacan's tripartite register: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. The film, positioned within the realm of popular horror cinema, offers a fertile text for examining how contemporary narratives ritualize and aestheticize psychological breakdowns. Dani's disintegration following personal loss is restructured through her encounter with the Harga community, which functions as a symbolic order offering both the illusion of belonging and a mechanism of sublimation. Her final acceptance as the May Queen signifies not merely empowerment, but a complex negotiation between desire, repression, and the Other. Through this reading, *Midsommar* emerges as a modern cultural artifact that stages psychic trauma within the structures of popular visual culture, revealing the entanglements between horror, identity, and symbolic violence.

Keywords: Popular Fiction, Lacanian Psychoanalysis, The Imaginary, The Symbolic, *Midsommar*,

INTRODUCTION

The study of horror films within the context of popular literature provides a significant platform to examine how contemporary media expresses collective anxieties, societal structures, and psychological tensions. Horror, as one of the most enduring and commercially successful genres in global cinema, does not merely serve as entertainment; it also reflects and refracts the cultural and ideological undercurrents of the societies that produce and consume it. In particular, the rise of elevated or art-horror in the late 2010s, exemplified by films such as *Hereditary* (2018), *The Witch* (2015), and *Midsommar* (2019), signals a shift toward introspective, symbol-laden narratives that deal with trauma, gender, and ritual violence.

Midsommar (2019), directed by Ari Aster, stands as a pivotal example of this transformation. It blends the aesthetics of folk horror with psychological drama and symbolic imagery, offering a deeply layered exploration of grief, feminine subjectivity, and communal violence. The film has generated widespread academic and critical



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attention due to its ambiguous moral framing, unsettling visuals, and mythic narrative structure. While much of the popular response focuses on the disturbing rituals and psychedelic horror, the film also invites analysis through deeper theoretical lenses—particularly psychoanalysis.

Midsommar tells the story of Dani, a young woman grieving the traumatic loss of her family while trapped in a crumbling romantic relationship. Her journey to the remote Harga community in Sweden, under the guise of an academic trip, gradually transforms into a ritualistic immersion into a closed and highly structured society. Unlike conventional horror films that rely on darkness and sudden terror, *Midsommar* employs brightness, beauty, and ritual to evoke unease—inviting a deeper investigation into the psychological processes that underpin its narrative structure. This divergence from traditional horror aesthetics positions *Midsommar* within the subgenre of folk horror, which often utilizes rural or pagan motifs to critique modernity and the illusion of civilization (Scovell, 2017).

In this research, the researcher will employ a qualitative research design with a focus on textual and visual analysis. The object of study is *Midsommar* (2019), analyzed as a cultural and symbolic narrative. The qualitative method is selected for its capacity to interpret deep structures of meaning in film, especially when dealing with theoretical concepts such as the unconscious, trauma, and desire.

This article aims to explore the psychological, symbolic, and ideological dimensions of *Midsommar* (2019) through the framework of Lacanian psychoanalysis within the context of popular literature.

In this case, the researcher will analyze *Midsommar* using the psychoanalytic framework developed by Jacques Lacan, particularly focusing on Jacques Lacan's theory of the *Imaginary*, *Symbolic*, and *Real*. Dani's movement from emotional disintegration toward symbolic empowerment as the May Queen is not simply a tale of healing, but a complex reconfiguration of identity through misrecognition, desire, and subjection to the gaze of the Other. Lacan's concept of the Symbolic order—understood as the realm of language, law, and social structure—provides a critical framework for analyzing how Dani is re-inscribed into a new order of meaning through ritual and communal violence (Lacan, 1977). Likewise, the Real—what resists symbolization—haunts the narrative in the form of Dani's unresolved grief and the traumatic absence of her original family.

Recent scholarship on *Midsommar* (Aster, 2019) has explored the film's engagement with grief, cultic violence, feminine subjectivity, and trauma through a range of disciplinary approaches. Scholars such as K. J. Donnelly (2020) and Alexandra Heller-Nicholas (2021) have addressed how the film contributes to the emergent genre of "elevated horror"—a style that emphasizes psychological complexity, visual symbolism, and emotional realism over conventional scares. Within this frame, *Midsommar* is often interpreted as a feminist allegory of empowerment and a disturbing reinvention of the breakup narrative.

Critics such as Bernice M. Murphy (2022) situate *Midsommar* within the lineage of folk horror, alongside classics like *The Wicker Man* (1973). Murphy emphasizes the role

of the rural cult and its cyclical rituals in reflecting societal unease with non-Western or archaic traditions. In contrast, Adam Lowenstein (2005) explores horror films as sites of uncanny returns and cultural memory, a lens that helps illuminate the symbolic disorientation that haunts Dani's journey in *Midsommar*.

Several feminist scholars have debated the nature of Dani's final smile, interpreting it either as a gesture of emancipation or as a sign of deeper ideological entrapment. Carol J. Clover's (1992) notion of the "Final Girl" has also been retroactively applied to Dani, although her narrative deviates from traditional slasher tropes. Meanwhile, Barbara Creed's (1993) theory of the monstrous-feminine provides a useful framework for understanding how Dani comes to embody both sacred and abject roles through her initiation as May Queen.

Lacanian interpretations of film, while less common in *Midsommar* scholarship, offer a valuable lens for decoding its deeper symbolic structure. Todd McGowan (2007) and Slavoj Žižek (1991; 2012) provide conceptual pathways for applying Lacan's Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real to cinema. Their works support an understanding of horror as a genre uniquely equipped to express what remains unspoken or repressed within the social order.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate *Midsommar*'s significance as a contemporary cultural text. They also underscore the need for further work that bridges Lacanian theory and horror genre analysis—particularly in relation to popular literature and mass psychological narratives.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This section interprets the findings of the analysis using Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory—particularly his registers of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real—and demonstrates how these concepts function in Ari Aster's *Midsommar* to articulate themes of subjectivity, trauma, and ritual. The discussion is structured into thematic sub-sections, each enriched by references to relevant literature.

The Disintegration of the Imaginary: Dani's Grief and the Collapse of Self

Dani's psychological state at the beginning of *Midsommar* is marked by severe emotional dependence on Christian, functioning as a mirror for her self-image. This dynamic illustrates Lacan's concept of the Imaginary, formed in the mirror stage where the subject identifies with an idealized image of unity (Lacan, 2006, p. 2). However, the murder-suicide of Dani's family violently disrupts this identification and results in psychic fragmentation. Her recurring panic attacks, dream sequences, and emotional isolation reflect what Žižek describes as the return of the lack—a moment when the subject confronts the void beneath symbolic and imaginary stability (Žižek, 1992, p. 9).

The aesthetic strategy of *Midsommar* supports this reading. The prolonged shots of Dani crying, the visual motif of breathlessness, and the film's opening tableau all signal a collapse of the imaginary coherence that once structured Dani's fragile sense of self. As Brinkema argues, the affective horror of trauma resides not only in narrative content but

in cinematic form itself—where repetition, stillness, and visual tension materialize the Real—precisely what *Midsommar* achieves through repetition and disorientation (2014, p. 44).

The Harga as Symbolic Order: Law, Ritual, and Social Rebirth

The Harga community represents what Lacan terms the Symbolic Order: a structured set of laws, traditions, and signifiers that provide meaning and stability (Lacan, 1977, p. 66). The communal meals, seasonal festivals, prescribed roles, and runic codes offer Dani a coherent—if terrifying—framework for reintegration. When she is crowned May Queen, she is not merely honored but symbolically rewritten. Her transition into this new role illustrates what McGowan describes as symbolic realignment: the process through which a subject's trauma is absorbed into a social structure that offers identity and place (McGowan, 2007, p. 19).

However, this symbolic assimilation is double-edged. For feminine subjects, symbolic entry often entails the loss of personal agency in exchange for representational coherence (Ruti, 2012, p. 77). Dani's new identity is less a product of self-discovery and more the result of ideological submission to the Harga's ritual system.

The Haunting of the Real: Hallucination, Ritual Violence, and the Unspeakable

The Real, according to Lacan, is what resists symbolization. It returns in *Midsommar* through Dani's hallucinations—her sister's face in the woods, the undulating landscapes—and through the violent rituals that the Harga normalize. The death of the elders in the *åttestupa* ceremony, and the subsequent communal wailing, reveal moments when the Real disrupts the Symbolic. Horror cinema often uses shocking imagery to confront the audience with historical and psychic trauma that cannot be assimilated (Lowenstein, 2005, p. 104).

These scenes do not function as isolated scares, but as ruptures in the symbolic fabric of Dani's new world. Her inability to articulate her grief in conventional terms is displaced into collective expressions of pain and sacrifice, revealing the Real's persistent disruption.

Jouissance and the Feminine Subject: Dani's Smile and the Final Sacrifice

The final image of *Midsommar*—Dani smiling as Christian burns—has generated intense critical debate. For Lacan, jouissance is the ecstatic and painful enjoyment that transgresses the limits of the pleasure principle (1992, p. 74). Dani's jouissance comes not from vengeance, but from symbolic fulfillment. She is no longer invisible, no longer the dependent girlfriend. She has become a signifier—the May Queen—within the Harga's symbolic economy.

This transformation, however, is not purely empowering. Horror often positions women at the threshold of abjection and sacredness (Creed, 1993, p. 15). Dani becomes both the vessel of community renewal and the figure of monstrous femininity. Dani

becomes the object of the community's gaze, aestheticized, adorned, and stripped of interiority (McGowan, 2007, p. 43).

Horror, Ideology, and Popular Literature

Midsommar exemplifies how horror can operate as a form of popular literature: encoding societal anxieties and psychological processes into accessible, emotionally resonant narratives. Folk horror in particular is concerned with ritual, landscape, and archaic power structures (Scovell, 2017, p. 13). *Midsommar*'s fusion of pastoral beauty and grotesque violence dramatizes the ideological fantasy of escape through immersion in tradition.

Rather than offering therapeutic resolution, the film replaces individual trauma with symbolic myth. Dani's grief is not healed—it is transferred into ritual. Ideology works through fantasy, and *Midsommar* presents the Harga as a seductive fantasy of meaning, belonging, and sacrifice (Žižek, 1991, p. 33). Thus, the film not only visualizes Lacanian registers, but also critiques the ideological mechanisms embedded in popular horror.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined Ari Aster's *Midsommar* through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis, focusing on the registers of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, as well as the notion of jouissance and the feminine subject. Through a close textual and visual analysis, the film is revealed as more than a horror narrative; it emerges as a symbolic and affective exploration of trauma, identity, and ideological transformation within the framework of popular literature.

Dani's psychological journey—from emotional dependency and psychic collapse to symbolic incorporation into the Harga community—reflects Lacanian structures of subjectivity formation and dissolution. Her transformation into the May Queen illustrates how trauma is not necessarily healed but restructured within a new symbolic order, one that both empowers and subjugates her. The Harga's rituals offer her a role and meaning, but also demand conformity and sacrifice.

Moreover, *Midsommar* exposes how horror, as a genre of popular literature, stages ideological fantasies and psychic conflicts in forms accessible to mass audiences. The film merges folk horror aesthetics with psychoanalytic thematics, showing how cultural rituals, symbolic orders, and fantasies of belonging operate to manage grief and loss.

Ultimately, *Midsommar* demonstrates how horror cinema can serve as a narrative and visual system that mediates trauma, desire, and ideological assimilation. By applying Lacanian theory to this film, the study underscores the relevance of psychoanalysis for interpreting contemporary popular culture and contributes to ongoing discussions in literature, film, and cultural theory.

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