

Pagan Pastiche: *Midsommar*, Paganism, and Empathy

"By working the soil / we cultivate the sky."—Coil, "Broccoli"

Introduction

The exaggerated depictions of Paganism and the occult in the landscape of modern media is, sadly, to a practitioner, an all-too-familiar phenomenon: and one that both misinforms seekers and arms skeptics. I personally have yet to come across an introductory book on magic or Paganism that doesn't first attempt to address this sensationalism. However, I believe these attempts act just as reductively as its subjects, and rid the conversation of any sense of nuance. When we see, for instance, the whimsical fantasy world of *Harry Potter*, with its soul-splitting necromancers and magical power being given to a chosen few, etc.—we lose sight of the interesting little ways in which these media depictions are actually true, as magic in *Harry Potter* still has roots in basic magical principles, such as the focusing of intention (hence the use of wands, spoken words, etc.). In popular culture, the fantastical is the weed that grows from seeds of truth.

No other film I can think of better represents this liminal area in relation to Paganism than the 2019 Ari Aster-directed film *Midsommar*. While heavily pulling from Pagan traditions, its horror genre trappings cloud the subtleties of its antagonists, the people of Hårga. Looking closer, we can find an inextricable relationship with magic, tradition, and nature, often juxtaposed to much of what we call "modern life", and wrapped around what I believe is the unifying center of modern Pagan communities: an rapturous sense of empathy.

A Disclaimer On Horror

We cannot begin to discuss *Midsommar* without first reflecting upon the obvious: it's a horror film that uses the sensational and grotesque to elicit emotion in viewers. The genre of horror encompasses everything from so-called "torture porn" and gore-filled mania to more bleak portraits of human psychology and a sort of grisly shadow work; but *Midsommar* falls somewhere in between these poles. Its horror doesn't quite feel like a "portrait" or an "exploration" of our more morbid realities, and doesn't treat gore as a subject but an ornament. We can't deny the horror of the film, but we also can't say it serves to accentuate its positive parts either. Therefore I propose that we try to, however briefly, suspend our instinctual and visceral reactions to these elements going forward, for the sake of a more focused, detailed, and interesting discussion.

What is Paganism?

I see spirituality as a part of our existence that primarily rests in the lands of the intuitive and the experiential, with only its most slender tendrils reaching into rational discourse. Therefore, definitions and distinctions, while not without their use, can only be helpful here with the caveat that what we study is the map, not the territory. I don't intend to empirically or "objectively" define anything, but to cordon off a section of our map for the sake of understanding; and even then I wish to only use the loosest parameters in this zoning process. I find Ronald Hutton's usage of the British Pagan Federation's definition of Paganism mostly sufficient for our purposes:

The first component is an acceptance of the inherent divinity of the natural world and a rejection of any notion of the creation of that world by an external power. [...] The second component is the rejection of any concept of a divinely prescribed law for human behavior, and therefore of the concepts of sin and salvation. In place of those is an ethic of freedom to express and gratify needs and desires, and to pursue personal growth and happiness, with the

single major limitation of an understand to avoid harming others in the process. [...] The third component is an acceptance that divinity can be both female and male. (Hutton 409)

We can also add more components from Hutton's findings on Pagan witchcraft:

First, it aims to draw out and enhance the divinity within human beings. Second, it abolishes the traditional Western distinction between religion and magic. Third, it is a mystery religion, or a set of mystery religions. Fourth, its essence lies in the creative performance of ritual. Fifth, it is eclectic and protean. (410)

I don't believe the village of Hårga practices witchcraft; but these definitions nonetheless give us a general idea of the scope of this writing, and the manifold nature of Hårga's creation by the filmmakers matches this. (Despite the setting of the film [in Hälsingland, Sweden], the appearance of and reference to Nordic runes, and a single reference to the Norse deity Ymir [0:37:31], *Midsommar* pulls from various Pagan ideas to such a degree that director Ari Aster has described it as "a stew" [Han].) The point of this writing isn't to assume perfect correlations or categorize beyond any sense of doubt (if such a thing were even possible), but to point out interesting, but broad, parallels. And our first such parallel comes in the form of Hårgan traditions.

Nature

The most clearly significant example of Hårga's veneration of and relationship to the natural world comes during the scenes comprising the *ättestupa*: the ritual suicide of an elderly couple (0:57:17). Everyone in Hårga knows this custom, as all must jump from the cliff's edge once they reach the age of seventy-four. The village matriarch, Siv, explains that this is "a great joy for [the elders...and] when it is my turn it will be a great joy for me [...]" We view life as a circle, a recycle." (1:05:00). We can see much of the Pagan Federation's first statement of belief here: the elders and the village as a whole consider themselves a part of the natural world and its processes,

and strive to remind themselves of that inextricable connection. Hårga doesn't view death as final, but as a transition point in existence of the planet.

However, a wholistic relationship with the natural world needn't be so gruesome either; and Hårga shows this in other ways, such as Pelle's note that the villagers view their lives in cycles mirroring the seasons (0:46:42). They cook for themselves using foodstuffs they grow (1:24:24), they make their own clothing (0:21:58), and they purposefully live away from urban life. We can go deeper than basic survival, though, and notice the liberal attitude the village has to sex, and to their own bodies, as just as the elders return to the earth, new life springs from the soil. Hårga's (presumed) mothers don't just approve of and help Maja seduce Christian; they stand, surrounding the coupling, completely naked, unashamed of the coitus taking place, nor the shape or exposure of their own flesh. All of this implies Hårga's connection with the earth isn't, in juxtaposition to us, a convenience many take for granted, hardly recognize, or associate with deep, often culturally conditioned, psychological scars¹. In fact, juxtaposing everything mentioned above is the way Aster portrays the natural world for the first fifteen minutes or so of the film that take place in North America—which is to say, he simply doesn't. We could easily explain this away with time constraints, as and America isn't the primary setting of the film—but the contrast is too interesting to ignore. Not a single character is actually seen outside during these segments, and the parts that take place indoors are full of hard cuts and/or dramatic, surreal scene transitions, such as the setting of Dani's panic attack changing by way of an overhanging shot, from Christian's bathroom to the bathroom of the airplane that takes everyone to Sweden (0:22:54).

¹ As in, the modern beauty standard and the many, many issues that it births.

Magic and Ritual

I would like to turn again to Hutton's components, to argue that Hårga's "essence lies in the creative performance of ritual" (Hutton 410). We can take this to mean both folk customs as well as the practice of magic, both of which appear in the film. In terms of the former, we can turn again to the *ättestupa* (0:57:17), but that's hardly the end, as Dani's tasks as May Queen are perhaps the most noticeable following that grisly scene. She's asked to try to eat a salted herring in its entirety; and later is transported around the village in a carriage and asked to perform rituals to maintain the village's crops (1:51:21), where the "creative" part of "creative performance of ritual" gets highlighted. Just as the oak tree that grows through a chainlink fence is no less an oak tree than one that grows straight and tall, her ritual might be slightly different, done with less confidence: but her status as May Queen is what makes it important. The Maypole dance (1:38:00) works in similar ways; it serves a purpose (i.e. to decide the May Queen) but will never work the same way twice: new women will win, others will no longer be in the contest, etc., and the sheer act exudes a mixture of fecundity and joy amidst its traditional importance. As Dani says in Swedish seconds before winning the Maypole dance, "We don't need words to talk! It's dancing!" (1:47:10).

Although mostly pieced together from subtle hints and nods, magic does exist in *Midsommar* as a practice. Pelle points out children being taught to carve runes that they sleep with to dream about the powers embedded in those symbols (00:43:30), and later on he refers to Maja's rune carving as a "spell" (1:19:01). Spellcasting relies on magical power, and at one point one of the older Hårgans mentions to Josh a "source" (1:25:47) of power. But the best example of magic in the film is how Maja seduces Christian. Broadly, Maja uses magical means to attempt this, utilizing in particular the aforementioned love rune she places under Christian's bed, and the combination of a pie she bakes with her pubic hair inside and a drink she spikes with what seems to be either her urine or menstrual blood (as indicated in the tapestry Ingemar shows Connie and

Simon [0:45:16]). And unlike Aster's directorial debut, *Hereditary*, where the magical and the so-called "supernatural" quite literally exist², *Midsommar* takes a more ambiguous approach. One can't use deductive reasoning and/or come to an empirical conclusion about Christian. He's high and frustrated with Dani and spurred on by Siv and that could all be enough to sway him to cheat—or not. All we can say is, simply, Maja's magic worked.

Empathy & Community

Finally I want to argue that one of the key unrecognized aspects of modern Pagan traditions is a radical sense of empathy. Let's use a general definition of that word: "the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another" (Merriam-Webster). Empathy leads us to be able to create and maintain societies³; and yet, at no other point in human history have we generally had less of either than we do now. The internet, despite its immense potential as a way to bring people together, paradoxically keeps them apart, both physically and metaphorically. Corporate capitalism and increasingly centralized governmental structures make so-called "third places" a rarity at best and a privatized commodity at worst. We aren't completely devoid of community or empathy, but its lack is apparent. And it seems rare in these days of brainwashing cults, organized religious oppression, and the cooption and manipulation of organized religions by world powers, for a spiritual community to blossom, and for its members to be able to be vulnerable enough to have empathy; and yet, Paganism seems ripe with these possibilities.

Ambiguity in the aforementioned definition (e.g. "another") lends credence to the idea that empathy can extend to nature itself: which solidifies this central Pagan idea. It's not coincidence

² Aster and his team show great meticulousness in both this film and *Hereditary*. In the latter, they purposefully use an altered version of the seal of Goetic demon Paimon that features three figures instead of four to, one assumes, connect it with the relationship of the protagonist, her mother, and her daughter.

³ Which isn't to say that the natural world is incapable of such qualities.

that many of the Pagan communities falling under the banner of the so-called "California Cosmology" (Hutton 364) often pursue environmental activism: they're as attuned to the biosphere as two close siblings might be to each other, and view this political work as an innate part of their spiritual life. The Wiccan coven is perhaps the best example of a largely positive Pagan community, and also a good comparison with which to contextualize Hårga. Both recognize their connection with the natural world. Both view nudity and sexual act as essentially positive. Both base their holidays on the processes of the natural world (indeed, they share Midsummer as a holiday). Both share meals—for Wiccans, the tradition of "cakes and wine" (Sabin 182); in Hårga, literally no villager is shown dining alone. But these comparisons feel surface-level, like underneath there's something else, something that binds the members of both groups to each other; and I think that comes in the form of sharing and connection: empathy. To many it seems like in being a part of a "strong coven, the bond is, by tradition, 'closer than family': a sharing of spirits, emotions, imaginations." (Starhawk 59). A group brings people together, but not just because a collective activity naturally works as social glue: it's because one is metaphorically and sometimes literally naked before one's fellow practitioners. What one hides in this space will be felt. Sensitive understanding surrounds and suffuses a group like this. Even a Pagan group like the Discordian Society, which can sometimes have the tone of a parody religion akin to the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster⁴, acknowledges something beyond themselves: how indeed shall Discordians stick, apart or together, without a bond? (Adler 547).

Hårga exists perhaps solely because of this. They feel each other's pain, and that's very literally seen in multiple scenes. The end of the *åttestupa* (1:03:13), when Dani finds Christian and Maja *in flagrante delicto* (2:04:13), and the final sacrifice (2:20:30) all feature Hårgans working themselves into a frenzy, hiding nothing, putting themselves in the moment, *feeling*. But it needn't be so dramatic, with screaming and shaking; as Pelle says to Dani:

⁴ A comparison that I'm sure Discordians are all too eager to encourage.

I never got the chance to feel lost [by my parents' death] because I had a family here, where everyone embraced me, and swept me up. And I was raised by a community that doesn't bicker over what's theirs and what's not theirs [...] I have always felt held. (1:11:20)

Dani experiences this; she is only outsider who survives the ordeal, and is also the only one who is gifted with the extreme transcendental empathy the village's people contain within—the villagers who know little to nothing about Dani other than that she's the May Queen throw themselves around and scream themselves hoarse, just to feel what she feels. This sense of empathy, ultimately, I think, isn't a quality one ticks off on a list: it's the murky subtext underlying every one of the Pagan Federation's (and Hutton's) components: how can one truly venerate nature, or feel divinity within oneself, without intimately recognizing this underlying current, this energy?

Conclusion

The final image of the film is a closeup on Dani's face, as her sadness and horror at sentencing her now-ex to death turns to smiles and laughter, though why this is we can't entirely be sure. I like to think that, after so much death—not only of her friends but her family, too, we mustn't forget—she has risen like a phoenix. Before coming to Hårga, the only hint of Dani having a friend comes from someone she calls before learning of her sister's suicide (00:06:13), but who is never actually shown on screen or even named. The people she surrounds herself with during the film—Christian and his friends—aren't friends by choice, but by a sense of guilt and moral obligation. And yet, at the end of *Midsommar*, she's joined a family. Whether she's aware of it or not, whether she believes in tradition, magic, or anything of the sort, she's nonetheless with the Hårgans, who have seemingly put more effort to feel for her than anyone else has whom we as viewers have come across. After spending the film as a sad, quiet, lonely soul whose hardships often threaten to swallow her whole, she's now capable of smiling, of feeling again.

As we close, Margaret Murray's Goddess religion theory comes to mind, and the plethora of misinformation that it birthed in the decades following its introduction: it, like the mainstream perception of Paganism, posits notions that have been largely, if not totally, debunked—and yet its imprint on the zeitgeist remains. But that doesn't mean neither Murray's theories nor pagan pastiche are without use or importance. As the Rosicrucians have said, a seed is useless and impotent unless it is put in its appropriate matrix. And I think the way we properly contextualize these things is through recognizing subtlety and nuance: through feeling and intuition. And we need to smile amidst the burning, just like Dani did, knowing that, in recognizing connections everything we do, we can make sense our place in the world.

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