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MIDSOMMAR

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**UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL ASSIMILATION THROUGH THE
ENGLISH-SPEAKING INTERNATIONAL FILM MIDSOMMAR**

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Prohlašuji, že jsem práci vypracoval samostatně s použitím uvedené literatury a zdrojů informací.

V Plzni dne 28. dubna 2023

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis analyzes the 2019 folk-horror film *Midsommar*, directed by Ari Aster, and its depiction of cults and indoctrination, white supremacy, and the manipulative power of empathy. The study examines how the film portrays these themes through its characters, storyline, and cinematography. The thesis argues that *Midsommar* presents a critique of cults and their ability to manipulate vulnerable individuals through tactics such as control of time and activities, information control, ritualistic drug use, and love bombing. Additionally, the movie explores the dangerous allure of white supremacy, particularly in the context of a pagan community that glorifies Nordic ideals. Similarly to today's alt-right groups, *Midsommar*'s cultists too, abuse the Norse mythology and imaginary history of Vikings. Finally, the thesis focuses on how the movie portrays the manipulative power of empathy. The thesis argues that the cult members know emotions' affiliation function and deliberately use it to indoctrinate the protagonist. Overall, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the complex themes presented in *Midsommar* and their relevance to contemporary society.

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I. INTRODUCTION

To better understand the phenomenon of cultural assimilation, we must first try to define it. The expression itself is used in the field of cross-cultural interactions, but nowadays, most people associate it with immigration. Consequently, due to the current political climate characterized by a rise in white nativism and hate crimes against immigrants, people of color, the LGBTQ community, and religious and other minorities, the term cultural assimilation carries a negative connotation (Lash, 2018). An early definition of assimilation was formed in 1921 by Park and E. W. Burgess and reads as follows: “a process of interpretation and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons and groups and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in common cultural life” (Alba et Nee, 1997 as cited in Lash, 2018). This definition was later deemed insufficient as it lacked what many critics called a defining quality of assimilation, that being the erasure of all signs of one’s ethnic origins. It is essentially a process of cultural subtraction, in which a person’s ethnic elements are stripped away so that they may embrace new cultural and linguistic norms instead (Lash, 2018). In the 2019 folk-horror movie *Midsommar* directed by Ari Aster, cultural assimilation is realized through the controversial process of cult indoctrination.

Ari Aster is an American movie director, screenwriter, and producer. He was born into a Jewish family in New York City on July 15, 1986. In an interview with *The Verge*’s Bryan Bishop, Aster talks about how he fell in love with film at an early age, exhausting the horror sections of every video store he could find – before he turned to the creative side of the process (Bishop, 2018). Unlike other filmmakers, Aster could not pursue his passion when he was a child as he “did not know how to assemble people who would cooperate on something like that.” Consequently, this was the main reason why he began to indulge in an activity of the filmmaking process one can do by themselves – writing screenplays. At 18, he enrolled at the College of Santa Fe, from which he graduated in 2008 with a BA in film. While he was still in his undergrad program, it became apparent to Aster that the life of a screenwriter would be painful for him: “You have to relinquish control and give the movie to somebody else, who then realizes it to their liking.” It was then that he realized he needed to be a director as well. To have complete control of the creative process, Aster entered the directing program at the American Film Institute Conservatory, where he subsequently earned an MFA. At the AFI, Aster began working with cinematographer Pawel Pogorzelski who is now a long-term collaborator of his. He also started writing and directing a number

of disturbing short movies, many of which were shown at film festivals and received significant critical praise. The word disturbing is essentially the quality that most of Aster's projects have in common. The main topic of many of them being dysfunctional families, it is apparent that Aster likes to delve into the genre of melodrama, where the main focus is on the individual characters and their relationships. Eager to push audiences well beyond their comfort zones, he utilizes strong acting performances as well as creepy visuals to achieve his goal. *Hereditary*, Aster's first full-length feature film, is in this area no different from his earlier projects.

In 2018, *Hereditary* premiered to critical acclaim at the Sundance Film Festival under the A24 production company. The story revolves around Annie Graham, an artist, grieving the death of her estranged mother. As the plot progresses, Annie and her family uncover their terrifying legacy and are forced to battle malicious forces beyond their control. *Hereditary* is very much different from Aster's second full-length feature film, but they do share some similarities as they both explore themes related to grief, trauma, and the breakdown of family dynamics while simultaneously using horror as a way to delve into deeper psychological and emotional themes. Aster himself still calls it "almost the exact opposite" of his first picture (Wilkinson, 2019).

Midsommar stars Florence Pugh, who plays the role of Dani Ardor, an American psychology student. Dani is traumatized after her sister commits a murder-suicide, using carbon dioxide fumes to kill herself along with their parents. Dani is half-heartedly consoled by her increasingly distant boyfriend, Christian, who is unhappy in the relationship and wants to break up with her. Due to the tragedy, he is unable to do so, as he does not want to hurt Dani even more. Months pass, and summer nears. Still grieving, Dani finds out that Christian and his classmates Josh and Mark have been invited to attend a midsummer festival in an ancestral commune of their friend Pelle. Josh, writing a thesis on European midsummer festivities, sees this as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. After having a row, out of pity, Christian invites Dani to come along with them; she unexpectedly agrees. Upon arriving at the Hårga commune, the group meets Pelle's communal brother Ingemar and his friends Simon and Connie, a couple from London. The group is offered to take psychedelic mushrooms; Dani, hesitant at first, eventually takes part. Regrettably, she has a bad trip and hallucinates about her dead family. The next day, they are all heartily welcomed to the village, but the warm feelings soon wear off. The next day, the group is witness to the Ättestupa ceremony, where two elders commit suicide by jumping from a cliff. After one of them survives the fall, the Hårgas mimic his cries before mercy-killing him with a mallet.

The foreigners reasonably distressed are calmed down by an elder, Siv, who explains that every commune member does this at age 72 and finds it a great honor. Dani, shocked by what she just saw, decides to leave but is convinced to stay by Pelle, who tells her that he too was an orphan, but luckily he found a new family in the commune. Simon and Connie, who are also determined to depart from the village, are supposedly driven to the train station. They are not the only ones who disappear in this part of the story. Mark is lured away by one of the female commune members after he unwittingly urinates on a sacred ancestral tree. Josh, eager to gain as much information as possible, sneaks away at night to take photographs of the commune's sacred texts. Consequently, his head gets bludgeoned by a person wearing Mark's skinned face. After being confronted by the elders about their friend's suspicious disappearance, Dani and Christian are separated to attend different ceremonies. Both of them are once again given hallucinogenic drinks. Dani wins the maypole dancing competition and becomes the festival's May Queen. Siv tells Christian that he has been approved to mate with Maja, a young girl who has just reached the age of maturity. The Hårgas often bring foreigners into the village for mating purposes so as to avoid incest. Christian refuses at first, but after he is drugged, his defenses are broken down, and he participates in the ritual. Older females also attend this ceremony, standing around the pair, mimicking Maja's moans. After she is crowned as the May Queen, Dani witnesses the copulation ritual through a keyhole. She has a breakdown and is comforted by some of the commune's women, who likewise mimic her cries of sorrow. After the ritual, Christian is paralyzed by an elder. For the final ceremony, nine human lives must be sacrificed to rid the village of evil forces. The first four lives were the foreigners brought in by Pelle and Ingemar; the other four must be from the commune. The last sacrifice is chosen by Dani, the May Queen, who may either pick Christian or a random villager. As a symbolic way to finally end their relationship, Dani chooses Christian to be sacrificed. He is then stuffed into a disemboweled bear and put into a temple along with the others to be burned alive. The structure is set alight, and the commune members mimic the screams of the people burning inside. Dani begins to sob uncontrollably in horror and grief, but eventually, a frightening smile appears on her face.

Midsommar is by some referred to as a folk horror, by others a dark fairy tale; Aster himself sees it as a breakup movie and not a horror. If it is a horror, he says, it is a horror about codependency, a story about Dani going from one codependent relationship to another. I consider it a movie about finding family, where in the beginning, our protagonist loses theirs but by the end becomes a part of a different one. The process which Dani has to go

through to find her new family is somewhat untraditional, as it, in parts, clearly resembles the process of intense indoctrination used by many extremist and predatory groups.

The main focus of this thesis is on the process of indoctrination depicted in the movie *Midsommar*. I will also focus on why the plot of the movie takes place in rural Sweden and what consequences stem from this choice of setting. Lastly, I shall try and understand what role the feeling of human empathy plays in the process of indoctrination and how predatory groups can insincerely use it to manipulate potential members. The thesis argues that not only is the main character of the movie brainwashed to join a white supremacist group, but we, as the viewer, are also, in a way, brainwashed to feel happy for Dani and sympathize with the cultists.

II. CULTS AND INDOCTRINATION

In the introduction, I mentioned the term cult and wrote about the process of indoctrination, which is both key concepts of this thesis. As the original meanings of these words changed through time (Richardson, 1993 and Puolimatka, 1996), I must first, at the beginning of this chapter, clarify the sense in which this thesis uses these terms. After explaining their meanings and relevance in regard to *Midsommar*, I shall focus on the prerequisite factors which made the protagonist a suitable candidate for indoctrination.

Cults

The term cult has been a long-standing concept used in the field of sociology of religion, deriving from the works of Troeltsch and later being elaborated on in the works of a number of other theorists (Richardson, 1993). As Richardson (1993) notes, Campbell (1972) points out that the concept is essentially a “Cinderella term” as it is being overlooked in favor of concepts such as sect, church, and denomination. In his efforts to develop and generalize the term cult so as to describe entities and groups not fitting the typology of sect, church, and denomination well, Nelson (1969, as cited in Richardson, 1993) created a piece of work that became the backbone of Richardson’s (1978, as cited in Richardson 1993) sociological definition of the term. He defined it as follows:

...a cult is usually defined as a small informal group lacking a definite authority structure, somewhat spontaneous in its development (although often possessing a somewhat charismatic leader or group of leaders), transitory, somewhat mystical and individualistically oriented, and deriving its inspiration and ideology from outside the predominant religious culture.

As Richardson (1993) himself states, the definition is not without controversy as it had been criticized as too culture-bound. But before a better and more precise definition could be formulated, the term itself had started to be used with a rather different meaning. As extremist and predatory movements and groups emerged in the late sixties and early seventies (Campbell, 1977), cult has become a widely used popular term usually used to denote a group that is either unfamiliar or even disliked and feared (Dillon and Richardson, 1991 as cited in Richardson, 1993). Due to its new usage, a new definition of the term needed to be invented, and Robbins and Anthony (1982) came up with a definition as follows:

...certain manipulative and authoritarian groups which allegedly employ mind control and pose a threat to mental health are universally labeled cults. These groups are usually: (1) authoritarian in their leadership; (2) communal and totalistic in their organization; (3)

aggressive in their proselytizing; (4) systematic in their programs of indoctrination; (5) relatively new and unfamiliar in the United States; and (6) middle class in their clientele.

The cults we know and hear about are religious cults, but there also exist psychological, political, commercial, and New Age cults that control their members' lives just as ruthlessly (Hughes, 1993). The latter is not the focus of this thesis, but *Midsommar*'s Hårga commune is precisely what we could categorize as a religious cult.

In his article on cults and cultism, a Dominican priest, Louis Hughes, writes also about the number of members these types of groups have: "Cults can have memberships running as high as many thousands. I am aware of one-to-one cult-like relationships within which the life of one person is under the total mental domination of the other" (1993). It is therefore possible to argue that the relationship between Christian and Dani might also be classified as such, but firstly the movie does not provide us with enough information about their relationship history prior to the plot, and secondly, the idea exceeds the bounds of this thesis.

Possibly the most important feature of a cult is its leader or a group of leaders, as they are the ones who control and keep the community together. They exercise an almost irresistible power over their followers (Hughes, 1993). Hughes (1993) goes on to describe that the power the leader has over the group usually stems from their charisma, which gives them the ability to command unquestioning obedience over every aspect of the members' lives. As Ayrapetova (2020) points out, leaders of a number of these destructive religious organizations often declare themselves to be the new prophets or, in some cases, even claim to be God.

As the majority of literature related to cults and cultism usually speaks of a leader and not leaders, one might argue that the Hårga commune is not a cult. At first, I also believed it to be the case, as the power over the members lies in the hands of multiple elders who form a sort of government. My opinion on the matter is that when it comes to cult leadership, more important than the number of leaders is the overall system under which the group is governed. As the new aforementioned definition of cult states, the group is to be authoritarian in its leadership. Authoritarianism, meaning a political system in which the power is concentrated in the hands of a leader or a group of elite, can also be referred to as a principle of blind submission to authority (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In *Midsommar*, the council of elders (members of the commune aged 54-72) are seen to be the ones who perform the ceremonies, but as we learn further on, they hold much more power and competence than it might seem. Not only do they assign jobs and roles to the members, but they also control

even the more intimate parts of their lives. For example, after Christian decides to do his thesis on the Hårgas and starts to do his research, one of the elders tells him that in order to avoid incest and preserve the bloodlines, mates must be approved by the elders; showing what authority in the group they possess.

When a person joins a cult, they become a part of a greater whole which is to serve as their new family (Hughes, 1993). Fitting into this new group often results in abandoning their previous families or acting indifferent towards them, as connectedness to one's prior life is denied in destructive cults (Collins, 1982). In *Midsommar*, it is likewise made impossible for Dani to go back to her previous life. Not only is she, at the end of the movie, indirectly forced to actively take part in a murder (sacrificing Christian) and therefore becoming a criminal, but she also becomes dependent on the Hårgas as their village is secluded from civilization, essentially trapping her in the middle of nowhere with people that killed her only friends. As she knows that killing a human does not pose a problem to the Hårgas, even if Dani had not been "brainwashed" at that point, it would be safest for her to stay in the village and become an obedient member of the community. One might even argue that apart from their murderous rituals, they are a loving and peaceful people. And rightfully so, as up until the disappearance of Simon and Connie, the Hårgas are nothing but welcoming and helpful towards the foreigners. Their philosophy of life might also attract many; in a dog-eat-dog world, becoming a part of an intoxicatingly nice community who farm and take care of each other sounds rather soothing.

As Hughes (1993) notes, in recent years, there has been a tendency to denote as a cult any group or organization whose appearance and philosophy seem strange and whose teachings are unorthodox. In his article, he argues that the one thing cults have in common is not formal teachings and spreading philosophies but rather the act of unethical mind control processes used by them (Hughes, 1993).

Indoctrination

Mind control, brainwashing, manipulation, and coercive persuasion are all terms used in literature to refer to the process of indoctrination and will therefore be used interchangeably throughout this thesis.

As already mentioned, the term indoctrination originally had a different meaning to its today's use. In the English language, the word initially had a more neutral meaning, almost equivalent to educative teaching (Puolimatka, 1996). As time passed and new phenomena in the world of education occurred, the term began to be used in a different way and consequently gradually assumed the connotations of coercive teaching and got therefore

disassociated from the overall concept of democratic education (Puolimatka, 1996). It was during the twentieth century that the term finally acquired its derogatory connotation, similar to propaganda and brainwashing, and came to be considered as the antithesis of education for life in a democracy (Gatchel, 1972 as cited in Puolimatka, 1996).

A consensus on a precise definition of indoctrination has not yet been reached through a philosophical discussion (Puolimatka, 1996). The goal of both indoctrination and teaching, in general, is the acquisition of certain beliefs; what they differ in is how they are perceived, as teaching is positively valued; indoctrination, however, is negatively valued (Puolimatka, 1996). The general definition that indoctrination promotes the adoption of beliefs without a proper understanding of their grounds (Young, 1989, as cited in Puolimatka, 1996) is insufficient to prove that the processes of cult recruitment are indeed indoctrination. To prove that Dani truly is a victim of indoctrination, we must briefly focus on the method, content, and intention of the teaching in question, as these are the defining features of indoctrination.

In the early debates over the nature of indoctrination, Willis Moore's analysis pointed out that the process of indoctrination was often thought of as a method, a theory later supported by R. F. Atkinson (Casement, 1983). The method theory notes that certain means are used which make the learner accept answers to certain questions blindly and without considering alternative answers, essentially identifying indoctrination with things like propaganda, censorship, absolutism, and the aforementioned authoritarianism (Casement, 1983).

It was later suggested that the method point of view alone might not be satisfactory, and therefore the subject matter which is taught, commonly referred to as content, must also be considered when describing the nature of indoctrination. Wilson (1964 as cited in Casement, 1983) sees the distinguishing feature between educative teaching and indoctrination in the truthfulness and verifiability of the content, stating that the beliefs taught through indoctrination (doctrine) are uncertain and cannot be backed up by evidence. When applying this point of view to the beliefs and teachings of the Hårgas, we can say that their pagan rituals are a prime example being the mass sacrifice goal of which was protecting the village from evil, is uncertain and cannot be supported by empirical research.

Hare, who criticized both the method and content theories, believed that the key to indoctrination was in neither of them but more in what has commonly come to be termed the intention of the teacher (Casement, 1983). He uses the intention theory to once again try and differentiate between teaching and indoctrination. Hare states that: education or teaching

occurs when the teacher's objective is to help the learners think for themselves as well as think critically about beliefs they are confronted with; indoctrination occurs when the teacher suppresses the learner's critical thinking and instills blindly accepted beliefs (Casement, 1983).

As many philosophers believe, it is precisely the combination of these three features that is necessary to sufficiently describe indoctrination (Casement, 1983). When it comes to the indoctrination done by cults and other destructive religious groups, we will be focusing on the method part of the process as it is the one we will be analyzing from the viewpoint of selected cultural value dimensions in a later chapter.

Doctor of philosophy, Alyona G. Ayrapetova, (2020) writes that the result of successful cult indoctrination is a recruit that unconditionally accepts the doctrine as well as behaves and has the personality traits that are prescribed to all followers of said doctrine. She also notes, that the leaders use their power to deprive their followers of their individuality and free will resulting in them surrendering to the crushing embrace of the collective. The methods of various cults may vary, but there are a number of common tactics used in the indoctrination process, which also appear in *Midsommar*.

Control of time and activity is part of the process where potential members must adhere to a given time schedule full of physical and mental activities, resulting in the recruit not having enough time for self-reflection and rest (Ayrapetova, 2020). The film *Midsommar* takes place during the summer solstice celebrations; therefore, there is a given program and order that must be followed not only by the members of the community but also by the foreigners alike. Eating and sleeping are also limited (Ayrapetova, 2020). The amount of festival activities is not the only factor that affects the amount of sleep the main characters get. As the viewer is told, due to the time period and geographical location where *Midsommar* takes place, the sun never fully goes below the horizon, meaning it never gets fully dark. This, I believe, causes Dani to have trouble sleeping, as shown by her repeated borrowing of sleeping pills from Josh. As for the food, we cannot be sure if a sufficient amount is being provided to the characters. What we do know is that all the food is prepared by the villagers, giving the foreigners no other alternative but to make do with what they get. As a consequence of these limitations, the psychological defense is to become weaker, physical and psychological exhaustion occurs, and the ability to critically evaluate the given group decreases (Ayrapetova, 2020).

Information control essentially stands for cutting off the recruit from external sources of information such as television, radio, newspapers, and communications with people outside

of the group (Ayrapetova, 2020). As the commune is secluded in the Swedish wilderness, it is unlikely that mobile devices like smartphones or computers would have a stable functioning network for the protagonists to be able to communicate with the outside world. Since there is no instance where we see a character use their phone, it is safe to assume that they know they would not get any service on it.

Teaching causing trance methods usually encompass techniques such as meditation, monotonous singing, self-hypnosis, or even controlled breathing exercises which deplete or supersaturate blood with oxygen-altering brain activity (Ayrapetova, 2020). Although neither of these is explicitly shown in the movie, inducing trance is a technique the Hårgas do indeed use. Both Dani, prior to her dancing competition, and Christian, before his copulative ritual, are offered drinks that are described as having “special properties” and “breaking down one’s defenses.” As I mentioned before, all the meals and drinks were prepared by the Hårgas, making it possible for them to spike the foreigners’ drinks, therefore, increasing their suggestibility.

Love bombing is practiced in all destructive religious organizations (Ayrapetova, 2020) and should therefore be considered the most influential and important part of indoctrination. Professor of psychiatry, David A. Halperin (1982), describes the experience as supposedly enjoyable; new members are invited to dinner, offered home-cooked meals, quizzed about their past, and approved without judgment. The goal of love bombing is to mimic the symbiotic relationship between a mother and her child, where unconditional love is practiced, and unqualified approval is shown (Halperin, 1982).

Prerequisites for successful indoctrination

As one of the goals of the indoctrination is to weaken the potential candidate, therefore bringing their defenses down, resulting in increasing their suggestibility and becoming conformist, it is logical for the cult recruiters to target people who already are weakened and submissive so as to make the mind control process faster. This assumption is supported by Halperin, who points out that a significant number of prospective cult affiliates are severely dysfunctional prior to the cult affiliation or come from a problematic family environment (1982). Many of them have feelings of alienation and disengagement and try to establish themselves and find their place in the world (Eckstein, 1978, as cited in Halperin, 1982).

A person like Dani, one who just lost her family and has either no or distant friends, becomes trapped in a feeling of immense solitude. Since people are social beings by nature, being in this state of mind for too long can eventually lead to losing one’s sanity to an extent.

The devastating parricide, along with her sister's suicide, cast Dani in an unstable condition, leaving her to deal with it all by herself. She turns to her boyfriend, who is acting very cold towards her at that point, the tragedy being the only thing making him stay. Not only does Dani feel abandoned by the people closest to her, but due to the tragic character of her family's passing, trauma engulfs her mind, and strokes of depression cause her to suppress the pent-up emotions in her. Dani is also very early on established as having problems with anxiety by showing her taking Lorazepam (National Center for Biotechnology Information, 2023) when dealing with her sister's alarming e-mail. At the beginning of the movie, Christian also mentions that Dani already has a therapist indicating that she has battled with mental health issues in the past. Experiencing the bereavement of the whole Ardor family on top of already being mentally unstable causes Dani to develop a post-traumatic disorder (Peter, 2020). Throughout the movie, she exhibits illusionary symptoms of paranoia, hears imaginary voices, and has visual hallucinations of her deceased family.

The first time we see Dani seem genuinely happy is upon her arrival at the commune. She immediately receives a warm hug when greeted by the elder (unlike the other foreigners who get a handshake). When embracing her, he says, "Welcome home!" providing her with a sense of community and belonging, a feeling she has been longing for since the tragedy. From this point forward, the process of love bombing begins, targetting Dani's most vulnerable part – the desire to have a family.

II. WHITE SUPREMACY IN MIDSOMMAR

Ari Aster is a highly regarded filmmaker known for his unique and unsettling horror films. One of the critical aspects of Aster's creative process is his dedication to research. In order to create a compelling and authentic world for his characters, Aster delves deep into the subject matter of his films, exploring everything from cultural myths and legends as well as medical conditions. This attention to detail and commitment to authenticity is evident in his movies, which often feature richly layered and complex narratives that draw heavily from the research he has conducted. His preparation before writing the script for *Midsommar* was no different in this sense. When asked where he went looking for inspiration for his new movie, he replied: "Sweden – the north of Sweden. I did a lot of research into folklore and mythology. I especially did a lot of research into spiritual communities and spiritual movements" (Wilkinson, 2019). Given the knowledge of how much preparation Aster does prior to making a movie, it is worth questioning why he chose this particular setting. Why, of all places, does *Midsommar* take place in Sweden, and why is this choice so important in regard to the movie's themes?

Why Sweden?

There is more than one possible reason why the plot is set in Sweden. One of the main reasons that I already briefly touched upon when mentioning Aster's research is the unique and distinct cultural practices associated with the midsummer holiday in Sweden. The vivid and colorful rituals and traditions, as well as the decorating of homes with flowers and greenery that take place during this time, could have been the deciding factor as they provide a rich and visually striking backdrop for the film's storyline.

Additionally, Sweden's, more specifically Hälsingland's remote and isolated landscape, also appealed to Aster as it provided a sense of isolation and vulnerability for the characters of the film. Not only is the remote village a convenient setting for a horror movie, but it also plays its role in the process of indoctrination by cutting the visitors from the outside world, essentially making them dependent on and at the mercy of the cultists.

And I already mentioned how Ari Aster went to Sweden when doing his research, collecting information, specifically focusing on folklore and mythology. These two factors are major components of the movie, such as the legend of Ättestupa, which involves elderly individuals voluntarily jumping to their deaths as a way of avoiding becoming a burden to their families. The ritual which is considered to be a myth by historians as well as linguists (Dillon, 2023) played a significant role in the film's plot and added to its disturbing and unsettling themes.

Another theory we shall now focus on suggests that *Midsommar* does not take place in Sweden due to its landscape, festivities, or rich folklore but more because of how Swedish and overall Scandinavian culture and history are being abused and misappropriated by white nationalist groups all around the world. Norse mythology is a rich and complex system of myths and legends that originated in Scandinavia. It is often associated with the Vikings, who are known for their raids and conquests throughout Europe. In recent years, however, Norse mythology has become increasingly popular among white supremacist groups, who have appropriated it to promote their beliefs (Weber, 2018). These groups view Norse mythology as a symbol of their own superiority and use it to justify their racism and xenophobia.

It is first necessary to point out that although Scandinavian mythology is currently being hijacked by the ultra-right, not every group that adopts it is racist. The brightest example of a peaceful way of this adoption is the neopagan religion of Ásatrú. Founded in 1972 by an Icelandic farmer Sveinbjörn Beinteinsson, the Asatru Fellowship was even granted recognition as an official religion in Iceland (Paulas, 2015). It is based on the beliefs and practices of the ancient Germanic peoples of Scandinavia. Michael Nielsen, a professor of Viking History at Copenhagen University, writes: “The Asatru has a holistic, environmental touch—and they feel very closely connected to Mother Earth” (Paulas, 2015). *Midsommar*’s Hårgas are very much the same in this sense, but that is about where the similarities end. They rather incline to a more radical form of worshipping the ancient pagan gods. The way the made-up commune of Hårga is portrayed resembles how the current wave of ultra-right groups tends to hijack the neopaganistic religions to promote their racist and xenophobic views.

The term neopaganism refers to the modern revival of these ancient pagan religions, often characterized by the veneration of nature, polytheistic worship, and a rejection of mainstream Abrahamic religions such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). While many practitioners of neopaganism are peaceful and inclusive, there has been a disturbing trend of neopaganism being co-opted by white supremacists and neo-Nazi groups, particularly in Europe and the United States (Paulas, 2015). White supremacist groups have been drawn to neopaganism due to its association with pre-Christian European cultures and its rejection of Judeo-Christian values, which are seen as foreign and corrupting to European identity (Weber, 2018). Neopaganism also provides a convenient framework for justifying and glorifying white supremacy, as it emphasizes racial and cultural purity and portrays non-white cultures as inferior or threatening (Weber, 2018).

One example of the influence of neopaganism on white supremacy is the Odinist movement, which emerged in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s (Paulas, 2015). “A lot of people who don’t know any better, usually very new people, will consider themselves Odinists because they like Odin, they think he’s cool. But they have no idea they’re referring to themselves by a term that’s connected to a movement that’s racist,” said Joshua Rood, an expert on Old Norse Religion at the University of Iceland (Paulas, 2015). While many Odinists reject racism and embrace a diverse community, a significant minority of Odinists have embraced white supremacist beliefs and use the religion to encourage racial segregation and exclusion, as according to some reports, 15 percent of American Odinists are “overtly racist” (Paulas, 2015).

Odinists and other groups alike appropriate Norse mythology and Viking history to promote their ideology of white supremacy. The Vikings, as previously stated, were known for their raids and conquests across Europe and are often portrayed as a symbol of white strength and superiority. White nationalists, who believe in the superiority of the white race, see the Vikings as an ideal representation of their worldview.

The appropriation of Viking history by white nationalists is also rooted in the desire to create a mythical, romanticized version of European history (Downham, 2017). They view the Vikings as a symbol of a bygone era, a time when white people were dominant and unchallenged. As experts on the matter say, these ideas are often distorted or exaggerated in order to fit their ideology, creating a narrative that portrays Vikings as a heroic, superior race (McMaster, 2020).

Additionally, white nationalists often view the Vikings as a symbol of resistance against multiculturalism and diversity. They argue that the Vikings were able to maintain their culture and identity in the face of outside influence and that modern white people should do the same. They see the appropriation of Norse mythology symbols and imagery as a way to promote their resistance to globalism and to create a sense of white identity and unity (Weber, 2018).

However, it is important to note that the white nationalist appropriation of Viking history is a distortion of the truth. The Vikings were a complex and diverse group of people, and their history cannot be reduced to a simple narrative of white superiority (Downham, 2017). Neither did they see themselves as a “white” race but rather as a group of people who shared a common cause and language. Similarly to the later pirate groups, Viking crews would often lose members and therefore need to pick up new recruits as they traveled

(Downham, 2017). This combining of dissident elements from different backgrounds and cultures resulted in a racially diverse community of peoples.

Despite that, nowadays, we know of the multicultural aspect of Viking history, academic medieval studies have historically been the reason for upholding this imaginary past. As Dorothy Kim (2019), a medieval literature specialist at Brandeis University, writes in her *Time* article, the false image of the Scandinavian people dates as far back as the 19th century. According to her, this was the time of the rise of Romantic German nationalism that eventually led to the Völkish movement. She describes this movement, which was mostly reinforced by late 19th and early 20th-century scholars, as dedicated to constructing a white German nation state and relying heavily on historical narratives to support its ideology. As Kim (2019) notes, it created a new interpretation of the past that was rooted in folklore, such as that of the Brothers Grimm and medieval epics, which aimed to uphold the concept of white supremacy by celebrating the valor of white Germanic warriors. Vilhelm Grønbaek's multi-volume work *Vor Folkeæt i Oldtiden (The Cultures of the Teutons)*, which imagined an ancient Germanic genealogy running from Tacitus through the middle ages, was also instrumental in shaping the idea of a superior race (Kim, 2019). Further propagation of this idea, Kim adds, happened during the eve of the Third Reich. "Authors like Gustav Neckel and Bernhard Kummer blamed socialism, Jews, and class revolutions for the 'decline' of a Germanic race they saw descending from this Viking past," she adds (Kim, 2019). Another German scholar, Otto Höfler, built upon Grønbaek's work and created the term Männerbund, which scholar Stephanie von Schnurbein described as "all-male warrior associations in so-called primitive societies" (Kim, 2019). This notion of camaraderie was later employed as an explanation for the past and present Germanic race and fueled the idea behind Nazi groups such as the SS and SA. Despite the defeat of the Axis powers, these beliefs did not go away after World War II but instead laid the ground for the various aforementioned far-right neopagan groups.

Ari Aster is well-known for his dedication when it comes to pre-production research for his movies. It is, therefore, very much probable that the reason he chose for *Midsommar* to take place in Sweden was deliberate and heavily based on his knowledge of these Norse mythology-related ideologies and their relevance in Europe's history as well as their role in today's world. In this part of the chapter, we shall highlight some of the moments from the film that support the idea that *Midsommar*'s Hårga is a metaphor for the dangerous expansion of white supremacists.

Why are the Hårgas white supremacists?

The movie opens up with a colorful fairytale-like mural that essentially functions as an overture that describes what is about to happen. Then the panels slide open, and we are presented with a forest landscape. The sky is dark grey, and the black trees and frozen ground are covered with snow, which simultaneously absorbs all the sounds. When seeing this landscape, one cannot help but feel isolated, scared, and needing comfort. A sense of relief and absence of these negative emotions is provided to the viewer when the plot progresses, and a change of scenery occurs. While the movie begins darkly, as soon as Dani and the rest arrive in Sweden, they are bathed in high-key lighting unconventional for a horror movie. As they drive to their destination, the camera rotates us vertically on the road, signaling a change of sorts while also disorienting us. Then we arrive at Hårga. The constant sunlight, along with the clothes worn by the members of the commune, already suggests that whiteness has its role in this village. Not only that, but it also symbolizes the unity of the cult, a unity broken by the clothes of the foreigners and the skin color of three of the visitors.

It does not take the viewer too long to notice that not only are the Hårgas' clothes solely white, but so too are the Hårgas themselves. The fact that the community is exclusively white is one of the most significant factors of white supremacy in *Midsommar*. Besides the three aforementioned people visiting the village, there are no other people of color present in the film. Also, staying true to the horror movie trope of people of color dying first, the first to be murdered by this white supremacist cult are Simon, Connie, and Josh, as they are the only non-white people in the film. Josh's murder being the only one to happen at night also emphasizes how the Hårgas do not value his life the same way they do with a person of lighter skin color.

Another proof of the Hårgas' white supremacist tendencies is their obsession with purity. The members of the cult believe in maintaining a pure bloodline, and they go to great lengths to ensure that their lineage is not contaminated by unsuitable candidates. This practice is even explained by one of the members of the commune. He talks about how not only do mates have to be approved by the elders but also about how there is the need to sometimes invite outside people in order to avoid incest. Knowing this information, it is logical to assume that while the people of color were invited to the festivities to be used as sacrifices, while both Christian and Mark were chosen as breeders. While the community respects the incest taboo, they go out of their way to practice it in the name of their religion. Ruben, a product of this deliberate inbreeding, is the writer of the Hårga's sacred texts as he is considered to be unclouded by normal cognition and, therefore, open to the source. The

cult's obsession with purity is a hallmark of white supremacist ideologies, which often place a premium on maintaining racial purity.

The use of runes by the cult also arguably functions as a way to show their affiliation with ideologies resembling those of Nazi Germany. Nazis, themselves believers that the Germanic race was superior to all others as well as that the roots of European culture were to be found in the Nordic countries, chose to appropriate the runic alphabet and therefore have irrefutably tied them to Europe's arguably darkest period (Imer, 2018). The use of runes by Nazi Germany is even directly pointed out in the movie with the book "The Secret Nazi Language of Uthark" conveniently placed in Christian's apartment (Oddo, 2023).

Midsommar is a powerful exploration of white supremacy and its dangers. Through the depiction of the cult's beliefs and practices, the movie offers a commentary on the dangers of exclusionary and violent belief systems. It tries to challenge the viewer to confront their own assumptions and biases and presents a cautionary tale about the dangers of groupthink and blind acceptance of cultural practices.

III. THE POWER OF EMPATHY

In this chapter, I will analyze two scenes in which the characters of Dani and Pelle interact with each other. Not only are these scenes pivotal in regard to the movie's plot, but so too are they important for this thesis, as their main focus is interpersonal communication. Analyzing these two exchanges should clarify how social communication and validating other people's emotions play a significant role in the process of indoctrination.

The reason for picking these two particular scenes is Pelle. Pelle plays a crucial role in both the plot and the themes of the movie. He, a member of the Hårga, serves as the gateway to the commune for the main characters. Without Pelle's invitation, they would have never learned of the existence of this isolated community, nor would they have been able to participate in the unique and terrifying rituals that take place there. Pelle provides his friends with a sense of familiarity and comfort in an otherwise foreign and unsettling environment. He also serves as a guide, a native informant who is eager to introduce his companions to his community's traditions and beliefs. Pelle is also important because of the ambiguity surrounding his true intentions. Throughout the movie, Pelle is portrayed as a friendly and welcoming presence, and his actions are often helpful to the protagonists. However, as the story progresses, it becomes clear that Pelle has a hidden agenda and that he has brought his friends to the commune with a specific purpose in mind. The male Americans, as we know, will serve the community as sacrifices for the final summer solstice ritual, but the reason for bringing Dani to Sweden is quite different. When the group travels from the Stockholm airport to Hälsingland, Mark asks why the women there are so beautiful. Josh explains to the group that the Vikings dragged the "best babes" from other countries back with them. In a way, that is actually what Pelle is doing with Dani, as there are early indications that he has feelings for her. In order to make her stay at Hårga and make her a part of the family, Pelle uses emotions, namely empathy, to manipulate her into becoming a member of the community.

It is safe to assume that Pelle, being an anthropology student, is aware of the role emotions play in social relations and in assimilation of a people into foreign cultures. Fischer et al. (2004) note that one of the social functions of emotions is the function of affiliation. According to them, the affiliation function refers to the role of promoting social bonds and relationships between individuals. Emotions such as love, empathy, and gratitude play an important role in human interactions and are essential for the formation and maintenance of social connections. Not only does the term refer to the way emotions promote affiliation by encouraging prosocial behavior or how emotions play a critical role in communication and

understanding between individuals, but it also emphasizes how altering our own emotions can be advantageous in social settings. As Fischer et al. (2004) state, adjusting our emotions and emotional expressions to others' emotional reactions can benefit our relationships with these others. The two scenes I have chosen should demonstrate how Pelle uses this knowledge to manipulate Dani into forming a close relationship with him and consequently become one of the Hårga.

Mark and Josh's apartment

This scene takes place after the big fight Christian and Dani had when she found out he did not tell her about him and the guys going to Sweden. It has been six months since the death of Dani's family. Christian, Josh, Mark, and Pelle are sitting in the living, each of them minding their own business. Christian gets a text message from Dani saying that she is coming up. He tells the group that he invited Dani to the trip but thinks that she will not come. The boys, and especially Pelle, sit frozen in silence. It is evident that they do not want her to come with them, but given her situation, out of pity, they agree for her to come. Dani then comes up to the apartment and soon reveals that she indeed plans on going. Mark abruptly addresses Christian and takes him aside to discuss this issue in the other room. Josh goes back to reading his book, not acknowledging Dani's presence. Pelle, on the other hand, makes eye contact with her, signaling that he is open to conversing with her. Pelle, having been drawing earlier, puts his notepad down. Unlike everyone else, he gives her his full attention.

Dani begins the conversation by asking about what Pelle has been drawing. "Uh, just the table," he replies. A quick awkward silence follows. She resumes the chat by asking him how he had been doing. Pelle's answers are short, almost as if he does not want to talk about himself. He steers the conversation to Dani and begins to ask her questions. There is even a bit of playful teasing when Dani talks about her being crazy because she studies psychology, to which Pelle replies: "Yeah, also that funny look in your eye." This is the first time we see Dani smile since the tragic incident.

Pelle then changes the topic to the upcoming trip. He finds out that they will be arriving on Dani's birthday, giving him a chance to wish her a happy birthday in advance as well as enough time to start drawing a picture he is later going to give her. At this point in the scene, Dani asks Pelle about the festival, making him channel his inner native informant. "Yeah, it's sort of a crazy nine-day festival my family's doing. Lots of pageantry, special ceremonies, and dressing up. It will probably seem very silly. But, it's like theater." He pulls out his phone to show Dani some photos; she sits on the couch next to him. He talks about

the Hårga being a small community where everybody does everything together. Pelle knows about Dani's family, and so too does he know about how Christian treats her. He tells her of this collectivist community in hopes of reminding her what she misses but can soon have.

Another picture comes up, and Pelle explains that it is the last year's May Queen. He looks away from the screen and looks at Dani's face. He stares at her for a moment while his sincere grin creates wrinkles under his eyes. Is he smiling because he has feelings for her, or does he find it amusing that she herself will soon inevitably be crowned as May Queen? "You know, I'm very, very glad you're coming. I... I think it's very good you're coming." Dani's smile slowly fades, both corners of her mouth pull down, and for a split second, it appears as though she is going to cry. Unlike Christian, who invited her out of pity, Pelle shows interest in her, and his words seem genuine. It is this amount of cordiality that, for a moment, overwhelms Dani and forces her to stop herself from breaking into tears.

In an attempt to establish a deeper connection between them, Pelle offers Dani his condolences. He demonstrates a deep sense of compassion and understanding for Dani's emotional state, having experienced his own personal losses and struggles with sorrow. He reaches out to her in a gesture of kindness, offering his condolences and acknowledging the pain she is experiencing. This validation of Dani's feelings serves as a reassurance that her grief is real and that she is not alone in her pain. The mention of her family is enough to make her fall to pieces. The scene ends with Dani having to walk away from the conversation to try and stop herself from having a breakdown. Overall, this moment is a powerful example of the importance of empathy and emotional intelligence in building meaningful connections with others. It is a reminder that small acts of kindness and understanding can go a long way. It also hints that the connection between Pelle and Dani is only going to grow stronger from this point forward.

Making Dani stay

The second scene I am going to analyze takes place directly after the gruesome Ättestupa ritual. The Hårgas head back to the village along with the foreign guests. As they enter the village, Dani starts to walk away from the group. Christian encourages this, telling her to take some time to herself, as he needs to have a talk with Josh in privacy. Pelle can be seen watching Dani as she goes to find a place where no one can see her feelings. She reaches the village temple, hides behind it, drops to her knees, and breaks down in tears. The next time we see her, she is by herself, packing her backpack to leave. Pelle enters the building.

He must have known something was wrong when Dani split from the group, but unlike Christian, he looks for her to find out how she is doing. She thanks him for the

invitation to Sweden and expresses her intention to leave. Pelle admits that making her attend the ritual was a bad idea, and he acknowledges the trauma she has just experienced and expresses his own emotions about it, indicating that he, too, is affected by what has happened. Dani cut him off. It is clear that she is still very distraught from what she has just witnessed and the memories the sacrificial suicides brought up. Tears fill up her eyes. “I don’t know why I’m here, Pelle. I don’t know why you invited us. I don’t know... I don’t know why...” Pelle rushes to her and grabs her by the shoulders in an attempt to calm her down. He sits on the bed and begs her to do the same. The viewer is not shown this amount of social support from any other character, especially not Christian, who should be the closest to Dani. Pelle, on the other hand, provides a safe and supportive space for Dani to express herself and voice her concerns.

He explains that he wanted to share this once-in-a-lifetime experience with friends who he knew would appreciate it. He admits that even though Dani is not an anthropologist and may, therefore, not completely understand the things that take place, she is the one Pelle was most looking forward to. This breaks down Dani’s defenses, as unlike Christian, who earlier in the movie did not even want to take her to a party with him, Pelle tells her how much he enjoys her company and how he wants to spend time with her. At this point, Christian is completely checked out of the relationship. We, as the audience, know it, and so does Dani. As she is the protagonist of the movie, we want her to be happy, and Pelle is the best candidate for making her so. He helps her feel seen, heard and understood.

Pelle offers her some substance to calm her down. She refuses. She does not seem to understand what he is talking about. Pelle senses that the reason for her being distraught is, in fact, her unresolved grief. “I know what you’re going through, Dani.” She does not seem to understand what he is talking about. “Because I lost my parents too.” At first, she negates it, trying to switch the topic as it is clearly taboo for her, but Pelle is persistent. Dani starts crying. “My parents, they burned up in a fire, and I became, technically, an orphan. So, believe me when I tell you I know what it’s like. Because I do, I really, really do. Yet my difference is I never got the chance to feel lost 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. That’s what you were given. But I have always felt held. By a family. A real family, which everyone deserves. And you deserve.”

In this monologue, Pelle demonstrates a crucial aspect of empathy which is putting one’s self into the position of the other. We do not know whether the story is indeed true or whether Pelle composed it so that it contained what Dani needed to hear. What we do know

is that by doing so, he recognizes and validates her emotions. He tells her that he understands what she has been going through and that it is okay to feel that way. At the same time, as Pelle opens up to Dani, he creates a shared experience for the two of them. By sharing each other's feelings, they are able to build a sense of shared emotional connection. Pelle knows how alone Dani feels, and he knows how much she misses her family. He hints that the feeling of belonging and acceptance she has been missing in her personal life can be found in Hårga.

Pelle holds Dani's hand. She does not pull it away but instead says that Christian could walk in. Pelle uses this mention of Christian to undermine him in Dani's eyes. "He's what I'm talking about. He's my good friend, and I like him but... Dani, do you feel held by him? Does he feel like a home to you?" The purpose of these few sentences is to essentially plant a bug into Dani's head. To suggest that Christian indeed does not love her but that there is a group of people who would be happy to accept her as their own. As is evident in the upcoming scenes, Pelle's tactic works as Dani becomes more and more critical of Christian's actions which leads to animosity between them. The more mean Christian is, the more the villagers love-bomb Dani and the more she feels at home.

One of the most significant themes in *Midsommar* is the importance of empathy in understanding and relating to others. Dani is struggling with a recent personal tragedy and is searching for comfort and support from her boyfriend, Christian, and his friends. However, the group's lack of empathy toward Dani's pain and emotional state only exacerbates her feelings of isolation and despair. The two analyzed scenes are crucial in regard to the theme of empathy in *Midsommar* because of Pelle. Pelle, an exchange student from Sweden, is the first person we see express their condolences to Dani. At the same time, he tries to be an emotional support to her as he himself lost his family and can therefore relate to her. In his presence, she seems relaxed, as she no longer has to bear the weight of grief alone. As the story unfolds, Dani begins to find solace in the empathy and support of Pelle's home community. The Hårgas embrace Dani and validate her emotions in ways that her own friends cannot. By sharing her emotions, good and bad, they make use of the affiliation function of emotions. As Fischer et al. (2004) say, the role of this function is promoting social connections and maintaining social relationships, as positive emotions can facilitate affiliative behaviors and strengthen social bonds, while negative emotions can sometimes motivate individuals to seek out social support from others. As the Hårgas are a white supremacist cult whose goal is to brainwash Dani into joining them, it is safe to assume that

they deliberately put emphasis on empathy and sharing emotions as they are aware of the manipulative functions these practices possess.

IV. CONCLUSION

This thesis focused on Aster's second feature-length film, *Midsommar*, released in 2019 to critical acclaim. The movie follows a group of college students who travel to a remote village in Sweden to attend a midsummer festival, which only occurs every ninety years. The festival seems harmless at first, with its colorful decorations and seemingly welcoming villagers, but as the group becomes more involved in the traditions and rituals, they start to realize that something sinister is happening. It is far too late when the American visitors find out they are in the midst of a pagan white supremacist cult, Hårga. While most foreigners are used as sacrifices in the final ritual, the protagonist, grief-stricken Dani, ultimately joins the cult. The movie follows her as she goes from being horrified by the Hårgas' violent practices to actively taking part in them. The transformative journey that Dani goes through, becoming increasingly immersed in the Swedish cult, is what we refer to as acculturation.

Acculturation is the process of adapting to a new culture, and it can involve changes in language, behavior, beliefs, and values. In Dani's case, her acculturation into the cult is a gradual process that is facilitated by several key factors. The thesis focused mainly on the elements that generally contribute to the process of indoctrination and how they are portrayed in the movie. But what *Midsommar* also tells us is how the cultural environment itself can also be taken advantage of and used in the manipulative procedure.

One of the main factors that contribute to Dani's acculturation is the experience of culture shock. This feeling of disorientation and confusion is common when a person encounters a new culture. When Dani first arrives in Sweden, she is overwhelmed by the unfamiliar surroundings and customs. She feels isolated and out of place, and she struggles to communicate with the locals. This initial discomfort and disorientation are what makes her vulnerable to manipulation by the Hårga. Dani becomes more receptive to the customs and beliefs of the cult. As she begins to participate in the cult's rituals and traditions, she experiences a sense of belonging, purpose, and acceptance. This sense of communality is in stark contrast to her initial feelings of isolation, making her more willing to embrace the customs and beliefs of the cult.

Additionally, culture shock leads Dani to rely heavily on native informants. The most prominent native informant in the film is Pelle, Christian's Swedish friend who invites the group to the festival. Throughout the movie, Pelle provides valuable insight into the cultural practices and beliefs of his community, serving as a bridge between the American visitors and the Swedish villagers. Through Pelle's explanations, the foreigners begin to gain a better

understanding of the rituals and traditions they are witnessing, but they also start to understand the darker undercurrents that exist within the community. While Pelle fulfills his role of a native informant, he also uses this position of power as well as Dani's culture shock, to manipulate her into joining the cult.

As Dani becomes more integrated into the cult, she begins to adopt their values and beliefs. She starts to see the world through their perspective and accepts their worldview as her own. This is exemplified in the scene where she participates in the May Queen ceremony and chooses to sacrifice Christian, her former boyfriend, as a tribute to the cult's gods. This act of violence is a stark contrast to Dani's previous beliefs and values, but she is willing to do it because she has fully embraced the cult's beliefs and sees it as a necessary sacrifice. However, it is essential to note that Dani's acculturation into the cult is not entirely voluntary. As stated in this thesis, Dani is vulnerable and susceptible to manipulation, and the cult takes advantage of her fragile emotional state. She is grieving the loss of her family, and her relationship with Christian is deteriorating, leaving her feeling isolated and alone. The cult members use this to their advantage as they provide her with a sense of community and purpose, and they exploit her vulnerability to gain her loyalty.

Throughout the film, Dani is exposed to a number of manipulative factors that result in her acculturation, whether it is the brainwashing elements of indoctrination or the cultural environment in which she found herself. What this thesis argues is that empathy, an essential ingredient for successful intercultural relations, is weaponized by the Hårgas and too plays a role in Dani's transformative journey. *Midsommar* explores the manipulative power of empathy also through Pelle. From the beginning of the movie, Pelle demonstrates an uncanny ability to empathize with Dani's pain and trauma. Dani is struggling with a family tragedy, and Pelle is quick to offer comfort and support. He listens to her, validates her feelings, and offers her a chance to escape her problems by joining him and his friends on a trip to Sweden. Pelle's empathetic approach is disarming, and Dani is drawn to him and his group, seeing them as a potential source of healing and comfort. However, as the movie progresses, it becomes clear that Pelle's empathy is not entirely genuine. He uses it to manipulate Dani, keep her close, and push her toward the commune's dark and twisted rituals. Pelle's empathy is a means to an end, and he is willing to use any means necessary to achieve his goals. A unique way how Pelle manipulates Dani is by using her own empathy against her. Dani, a psychology student, is a deeply empathetic person, and she is drawn to the commune's focus on community and connection. However, as the rituals become more disturbing, Pelle uses Dani's empathy to keep her in line. He tells her that her participation

is necessary for the group's well-being and appeals to her sense of responsibility and compassion. By framing the rituals as a necessary sacrifice for the greater good, Pelle manipulates Dani into participating, despite her reservations.

Dani's acculturation into the Swedish cult is a complex and multifaceted process that is influenced by several factors. The experience of culture shock, the influence of native informers, and the adoption of the cult's beliefs and values all contribute to her transformation. However, it is important to acknowledge that her acculturation is not entirely voluntary and that the cult takes advantage of her vulnerability to gain her loyalty. They deliberately use empathy to make Dani stay at the commune and create close relationships with its members. *Midsommar* is often referred to as a folk horror, dark fairytale, and operatic break-up movie, but it is also a story about indoctrination, the slow surrender of individual identity to the crushing embrace of the collective. It is a fairytale where the big bad wolf convinces Little Red Riding Hood and us that happily ever after can be found in its teeth.

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SHRNUTÍ

Tématem této bakalářské práce je *Midsommar* (česky *Slunovrat*), hororový film z roku 2019, režírovaný americkým režisérem Ari Asterem, který se proslavil svou předchozí prací na filmu *Hereditary* (česky *Děsivé dědictví*). Ve filmu vystupuje skupina přátel, která vycestuje do zapadlé švédské vesnice, aby se zúčastnila pohanského festivalu, který se později ukáže být mnohem zlověstnější, než návštěvníci očekávali. Režisér věnuje velkou pozornost detailům a využívá obratné kamerové práce, aby vytvořil napětí a pocit neklidu po celou dobu trvání filmu. Charakteristickým rysem *Midsommaru* je jeho zkoumání složitých témat a způsob, jakým film vybízí diváky, aby konfrontovali nekomfortní pravdy o lidské přirozenosti. *Midsommar* se věnuje několika tématům, avšak tato práce se zabývá jeho zobrazením kultů a indoktrinace, nadřazenosti bílé rasy a manipulativní moci empatie. Hlavním záměrem této práce bylo tato témata přiblížit a vyjasnit jejich roli v zápletce filmu. Tohoto cíle bylo dosaženo za pomoci odborné literatury a následných analýz mnohých prvků filmu, stejně jako několika scén. V poslední kapitole je zároveň vyzdvížena role empatie. Ta se v průběhu filmu sice zdá být upřímná, ovšem po podrobnějším rozboru se dá předpokládat, že členové kultu znají její manipulativní účinky, na základě kterých ji využívají k indoktrinaci hlavní postavy.