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# **Blood and Tears and Potions and Flame: Excesses of Transformation in Ari Aster's Midsommar**

**By Sandra Huber**

*There are fissures. There are cracks in the surface. We realize suddenly we are weeping. I heard a wail, she said, my voice. Alluvial Cone. Alluvial Fan. (Sediment, Sand, Silt.)*[\[1\]](#)

*Of all the glad new-year, mother, the maddest, merriest day;  
For I'm to be Queen o' the May, mother, I'm to be Queen o' the May.*[\[2\]](#)

## **The Blooming**

I'd like to talk about revenge. Not the kind of revenge that is well thought out or strategized, but revenge that spills out in excess of the event that caused it, a reflex, an initiation, an incendiary action in the most literal of senses - revenge writ so large it turns mythical. Ari Aster's *Midsommar* (2019) opens and extends like a spilled wound. Hoarse wailing, blood-soaked rocks, and ritual burnings fill in the background of what in the forefront is an exhale of tears. All this under a blistering sun, a waxing and shimmering portal into an endlessly exteriorising labyrinth. "What poetry that it's now the hottest and brightest summer on record", announces Siv (Gunnel Fred) during her speech to welcome the guests into what they perceive as a quaint pagan festival - and, as everyone who has seen *Midsommar* knows, is actually a nine-day sacrificial rite, whose victims are the guests themselves. But even more pointedly, the victims are the bonds and affects that we hold closest and dearest - those between family, lovers, friends - a purging and exorcism of the ties we create in order to keep ourselves contained. The film, which director Ari Aster has described as "an operatic break-up movie and a dark, contemporary fairy tale", centres around five graduate students visiting a midsummer festival in the secluded community of Hårga in Hälsingland, Sweden.[\[3\]](#) Dani (Florence Pugh), the protagonist of the film, has only just experienced the death of her family - a murder-suicide carried out by her sister - and is stuck in a relationship with Christian (Jack Reynor), whose emotional availability fluctuates between near affectlessness to active gaslighting. In the midst of this, Dani is loosely invited to accompany Christian and three of his male friends and PhD colleagues on their trip - which also happens to fall on her birthday. By the end of the film, Dani will be the only one of the visitors to survive.

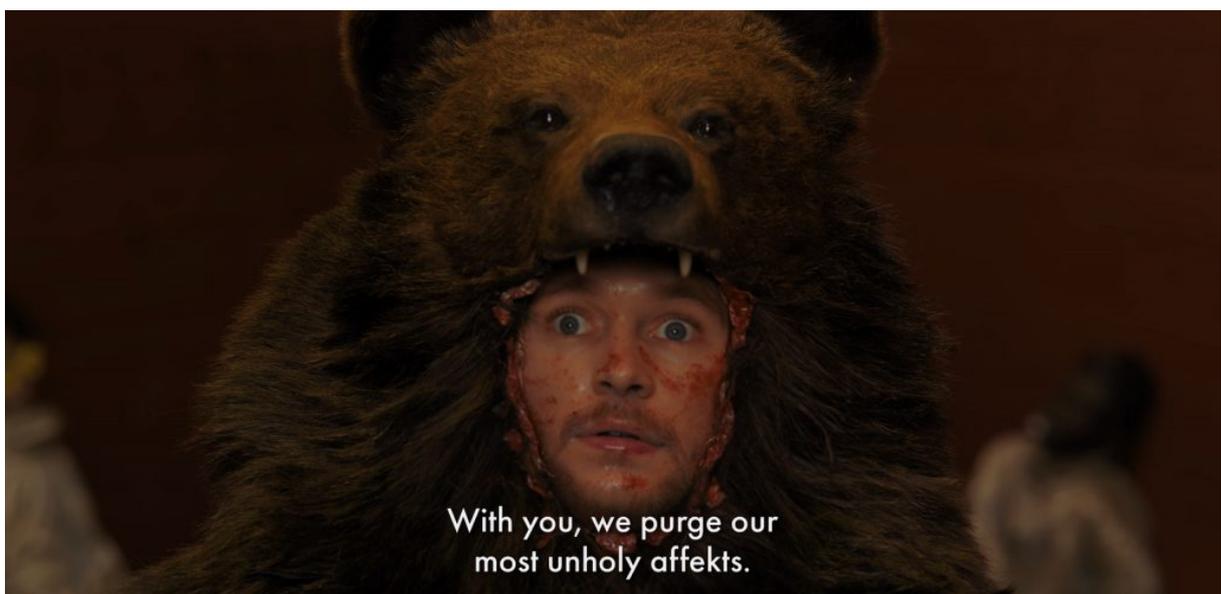
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But survive is the wrong word. Dani transforms throughout the course of *Midsommar* and quite literally expands or grows in excess of herself, her environment, and the structures that both bind her and hold her. By the end of the film, Dani will not only externalise her rage, horror, and grief, but incrementally become covered in a lush overgrowth - livid, grotesque, campy (and sometimes even pulsating) blossoms.



*Midsommar* (Ari Aster, 2019)

Christian, in turn, externalises his own monstrosities: “Mighty and dreadful beast”, Christian hears, as he is stuffed into the hollowed-out carcass of a freshly killed bear, “with you we purge our most unholy affekts”.



What are these externalisations? These *unholy affekts*? And how do they speak of the horror and necessity of the transformative process of vengeance in its most raw, most ancient forms?

*Midsommar* could be broken down into three separate sections, which is a structure indicative of ancient rites of the underworld: the first is the loss and the search, the second is the descent, and the third is the transformation, accumulation, or ascent.[4] The first part of the film, so demarcated from the rest as to be an autonomous short, ends at 13:00, where a picture of waxing and waning moons hangs behind a wailing and traumatised Dani held (but not *held*) by Christian, pointing perhaps to the thirteen full moons in a year: cyclicity, magic, luminosity. The transition to the last part of the film is a fade to black, a saccade before the real festivities begin and Dani, as the Hårga community's new May Queen, will choose her sacrificial victim. This tripartite structure invites not only a discussion of underworld themes, but Dani's transformation also opens an examination of the magical women who dwell there in their darkest and most vengeful forms: the banshee, the furies, the goddess Persephone, and the ghostly May Queen herself. Like *Midsommar* and like the magical women I will be discussing throughout, my methodology will move in the direction of extreme variations. I mean to pull out themes of vengeance, grief, and even joy in their most visceral forms: fluids. Blood, potions, tears, and fire flow throughout *Midsommar* not only as imbrications between the various bodies within the film, but as voids, as loss, as the very real need for separation that is at the heart of vengeance.

In their essay "An Inventory of Shimmers", Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth speak of a "bloom-space of ever-processual materiality" as well "an inventory of shimmers", the latter of which they borrow from Roland Barthes, pointing to the quick inflection of affects passing one to another so quickly that they appear as shimmerings. [5],[6] Both terms are more than at home in *Midsommar*, as *bloom-space* is exactly Dani's point of extension, both in costume (designed by Andrea Flesch) and in affect, while *shimmerings* suggest the drenched-out light that pervades the frames of the film. "As much as we sometimes might want to believe that affect is highly invested in us", write Gregg and Seigworth, "... as if affect were somehow producing always better states of being and belonging - affect instead bears an intense and thoroughly immanent neutrality".[7] Though "neutrality" may seem a stretch in a film filled with such overt purging of emotions, it is precisely the neutral of horror, of grief, of separation, and of ultimate metamorphosis that *unholy affekts* point to. The neutral quality of affect is also the quality that makes Aster's

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*Midsommar* hit similar tones of melodrama and terror as ancient tragedy.

When asked how he pieced together the festivities of the nine-day festival that takes place in the film, Ari Aster answered: from “tradition, folklore, and pulling from many spiritual movements ... hundreds of things woven together”.<sup>[8]</sup> As such, my focus will not be on pulling out the facts of Swedish midsummer festivals but rather exploring the mythical underworld that the film conjures forth. In their examination of the Eleusinian mysteries, Wasson et al. write that in the Minoan-Mycenaean period of Greek mythology, there is a theme of the “visionary experience [being] encountered by women engaged in rituals involving flowers”.<sup>[9]</sup> To this mythical bloom-space, *Midsommar* offers itself as a shimmering and immediate canvas. The excess of fluids in the film signal both transformation and vindication, both of which reach baroque heights. The May Queen comes forth in the final scene, drenched in light and wreathed in seething, outrageous blossoms, alive and wild and fully exterior in a place where it is always day, the maddest and merriest May.

### **Blood and Potions**

In case one starts to feel too sorry for Christian right out of the gate, it is important to announce that Dani is not the only character in the film who has an axe to grind with him. For Josh (William Jackson Harper), however, vindication is less sweet. In this section I will be speaking of fluid in the forms of blood as well as potions - both being markers or harbingers of underworld journeys and the affect of fear. Blood and potions are connected, ironically, by a love spell: the blood that is also a potion, the menstrual blood used in a spell by Maja (Isabelle Grill). In *Midsommar*, both potions and blood are gateways between destruction and creation. Each have their own rubrics, their particular alphabets. Josh is the character in *Midsommar* most connected to written language, both in his profession and in the way he is killed. He is the one student out of his group of friends with the most investment in visiting Sweden: he is writing an anthropology dissertation directly on European midsummer festivals. He is also one of the few people of colour to show up at the festival, along with Connie (Ellora Torchia) and Simon (Archie Madekwe), both of whom are the first to be killed off. As such, Josh presents the greatest counterpoint or exteriority to the inhabitants of Hårga, and could be seen as having a fluid role: he who overflows from a community that has become ostensibly so tight-knit that the residue of their culture is a burning molten core, the fire of daylight, a death current. And ultimately, Josh knows too much.

Shortly before he is murdered, there is a close-up of Josh’s fieldnotes. They have to do with the strangeness of the Hårga runes, a language that Josh mostly cannot make out - but a glimmer in his eyes suggests he

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could. In Rebecca Onion's article, aptly titled "*Midsommar's* Real Villains Aren't Murderous Pagans. They're Grad Students", she notes that "[n]one of these students are going to save the day", and yet, in an alternate ending, Josh just might have.<sup>[10]</sup> Were it not for Christian. The first of the *unholy affekts* are pointed to as Christian decides to piggyback on Josh's hard work and write his own thesis on the Hårga culture, dazzled by the violence and poignancy of an *Ättestupa* ritual in which elders plunge to their deaths from a rock. Apathy and passivity are major motivations for Christian, which are violent in their own right - it is Christian's decision, perhaps, that drives Josh to such a point of competition that he oversteps the Hårga's boundaries. For trying to understand their most well-guarded secrets, for trying to literally read their codes, to lift their knowledge from secrecy to the light of academic thought - a light that has been, in the hands of anthropologists, equally as garish as the light that saturates the all-white community of Hårga - Josh must go. Josh's blood is spilled by Ulf (Henrik Norlén), who is wearing the skin of Josh's friend, Mark (Will Poulter), a move that brings to mind Frantz Fanon's 1952 book *Black Skin, White Masks* - yet in *Midsommar* it is a white man wearing a white mask. A smear of Josh's blood on the ground as he is dragged away vaguely resembles a viscous rune.



*Midsommar* (Ari Aster, 2019)

"I ascribe a basic importance to the phenomena of language", writes Fanon. "To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of civilization".<sup>[11]</sup> He continues: "A man who has language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language".<sup>[12]</sup> With the spilling of Josh's blood, the

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spilling of the Hårga community into the outside world is contained – whether that be the claustrophobic confines of their racial lines or their well-guarded customs and rites, produced and kept guard over by Ruben (Levente Puczkó-Smith), an inbred oracle. The Hårga’s books that Josh is trying to photograph when he is killed are filled with a writing system that Aster in part created and calls “affect runes”, which are, according to the director, “a combination of runes and emotional hieroglyphs”.[\[13\]](#) It is no accident that language seals Josh’s fate: in trying to *grasp the morphology* of their culture – a tactile description on Fanon’s part – Josh is expelled from the Hårga community with the force of a blunt blow to the head, to the brain, to the part of Josh that was trying (and succeeding) to understand the community. Josh is violently expelled not only by the Hårga with their white-upon-white ancestral masks, but also by his own friends: by Christian mostly obviously, and also by Mark through the fact that his skin covers Ulf’s face when Josh is killed.

There is something both artful and garish to Josh’s spilled blood on the floor (garish because artful), and it is reminiscent of the Hårga’s own artwork that the viewer encounters previously in the film: a depiction of a love ritual drawn on fabric (by artist Ragnar Persson), wherein droplets of menstruation blood are shown as ingredients in a love spell.



*Midsommar* (Ari Aster, 2019)

This love spell, later put into actuality by Maja, who desires to be impregnated by Christian, is a contrast to Josh’s death. Whereas Josh’s blood is the signal that he is being drawn out of the film, removed, Maja’s blood serves to draw Christian ever further in, an inward spiral that will eventually swallow Christian whole. Whether in the grips of the death

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current or the life current, there is no escape from Hårga. In her thoughtful and intimate article “The Satanic Death Cult Is Real”, Sophie Lewis breaks down the ways that *Midsommar*, and Ari Aster’s previous film *Hereditary* (2018), rile against the family structure. “[T]he family is not an innocent organism upon which traumatic events descend from the outside”, Lewis writes. “Ari Aster ... knows what I’m talking about”.[\[14\]](#) Blood in both Josh’s death scene and Maja’s love spell is not a binding material, but one of separation. It is not Christian that Maja wants, but his seed, her own mother-child relationship, perhaps, that Dani has just lost. The creation of family in the Hårga community, including the exclusion of those not desired in this structure, is in Aster’s film a move of isolation rather than union.

The imbrication of death with life, and the way that fluids have of transporting the visitors either to their deaths or to hallucinatory visions (or both), is indicative of mythical ordeals. As the visitors cross the solar portal into the community of Hårga - literally a giant wooden sun, which has an oval, mirror-like shape - they cross over into another world, one that only Dani and Pelle (Vilhelm Blomgren) (returning to his people) will survive. As Aster notes, “for the characters visiting the festival, this is a folk horror movie”, but for Dani, “it’s a sort of perverse wish fulfilment fantasy”.[\[15\]](#) Once over the threshold, the visitors are given small strings of red berries. These berries could be any variety native to Sweden, such as cranberries or lingonberries, but the red berry also points to the pomegranate seed, which is sacred to rituals involving Persephone’s trip to the underworld, enacted by initiates of the Eleusinian rites in ancient Greece. The Greek goddess Persephone is interesting to *Midsommar* in part for her connection, like Dani, to the worlds of both the living and the dead, but she bears other similarities. Often, Persephone is depicted as a young woman carrying a torch, not unlike the torch Dani carries after being crowned May Queen. Persephone, furthermore, is associated with spring growth and is the mistress of the Furies, or Erinyes, the *daimones* of revenge.[\[16\]](#)



*Midsommar* (Ari Aster, 2019)

Bride of the underworld, Persephone is the goddess who ties the fecund to the funereal. It is while picking flowers that Persephone is abducted by Hades, specifically the *narkissos* flower of a hundred heads, and it is by eating pomegranate seeds while in the underworld that Persephone is subsequently bound, at least for half of the year, to the place where the berry grew.<sup>[17]</sup> Thus, one of the oldest, most complicated, and even most poignant mythical journeys is triggered, where Demeter, Persephone's mother, goes to search out her daughter and bring her home. At the heart of the Eleusinian mysteries is the mother-daughter relationship. And particularly the gulf that lies between them. Dani's family is the missing part of *Midsommar*, the mystery at the heart of the film, the loss. It seems significant that just after Dani is crowned May Queen, the ghost of her mother passes her in the crowd - she is dressed in Hårga clothing, and she touches Dani as if to mournfully welcome her. There is another layer to this scene that the Eleusinian mysteries bring forward into *Midsommar*: though it is Dani's grief that is the most pronounced in the film, there is perhaps some ghost of grief that her mother is expressing here as well, grief for the fate of her daughter, not to the Hårgas (she is, after all, dressed as one of them, and perhaps even ancestrally connected), but grief for Dani's relationship with Christian, which she must have been privy to during life.

The potions throughout *Midsommar* can be seen as affect runes all their own: a language, like blood, that signals the descent or ascent into another state. There is a mythological component to the flora and fauna in *Midsommar* in general, and one that brings the viewer closer to the world of the dead. Production designer Henrik Svensson has noted the

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importance of plants to the film and mentions the pervasiveness of rapeseed on location as inspiring, in part, an homage to yellow that runs throughout the foliage of the film.[18] But the potions throughout the film are largely unnamed, which leaves the arena open to speculation. Out of curiosity, I asked Montreal horticulturalist Brendan Birkett to help identify some of the plants in various scenes. He isolated *Atemisia ludoviciana* or white sagebrush, a sibling to mugwort that itself “has long been used by skyers”, according to alchemist Heliophilus, “for awakening the third eye prior to ritual”. [19] Birkett identified *Solidago* or goldenrod as the yellow flowers spread out on the Hårga dining tables throughout the film and noted that the flowers ground into potions in a mortar and pestle bear a resemblance to *Hamamelis* or witch hazel. The variety of potions in *Midsommar* seem to have an equal variety of functions - Dani drinks a potion infused with yellow flowers before beginning her dance around the Maypole, and a yellow potion is coaxed onto Christian by Ulla (Liv Mjönes) before he is used to impregnate Maja. Psilocybin mushrooms literally start the visitors’ “trip”, and solar fluids are mixed and presented to the guests throughout the festival.



*Midsommar* (Ari Aster, 2019)

These potions could be classified as *entheogens*, a term coined in the 1970s to describe “a chemical substance, typically of plant origin, that is ingested to produce a nonordinary state of consciousness for religious or spiritual purposes”. [20] The most ancient entheogens were also a component of the most ancient rites of mourning.

In his *Essay on the Eleusinian Mysteries*, 19<sup>th</sup>-century scholar Sergey Uvarov notes that the Eleusinian rites, like “most ancient ceremonies

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were expressive of grief and lamentation”.<sup>[21]</sup> These rites of lamentation were divided into three distinct parts: the loss or the disappearance; the search; and the finding.<sup>[22]</sup> Carl A. P. Ruck posits that the initiates of the ritual drank a psychoactive potion called the *kykeon* at the outset of the ceremony in order to travel to the underworld to encounter the goddess. “After their descent”, he writes, “she [the goddess] would surface back up with them all, amidst a brilliant light, a fire”.<sup>[23]</sup> Ruck suggests that potash, or ash, could have been an ingredient in Eleusinian potions, as “[f]iery immolation of the human so-called volunteers and funeral pyres are frequent in the traditions of Eleusis”.<sup>[24]</sup> The other known ingredients of the *kykeon* are listed in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, written seven hundred years after the first enactment of the ritual: water, barley, and pennyroyal. <sup>[25]</sup><sup>[26]</sup> The psychoactive component of this drink would then have most likely been ergot, barley’s rust.

What are the Eleusinian mysteries? No one knows exactly. They are the “most famous of the secret religious rites of ancient Greece”, and associated with the goddess Demeter’s search for her daughter Persephone, kidnapped by Hades. According to Ruck, some 30,000 initiates may have participated in the rites, which involved a procession from Athens to Eleusis.<sup>[27]</sup> <sup>[28]</sup> “The final solution”, according to Wasson et al. “is to heal the universe into which death has now intruded by admitting also the possibility of return into life. Rebirth from death”, they continue, “was the secret of Eleusis”.<sup>[29]</sup> It is curious that the painting *Phryne at the Feast of Poseidon in Eleusis* (1889) by Polish painter Henryk Siemiradzki bears more than a resemblance to cinematographer Pawel Pogorzelski’s sun-drenched atmosphere of *Midsommar*.



Henryk Siemiradzki, *Phryne at the Feast of Poseidon in Eleusis*, 1889, Oil on canvas, 390 × 763.5 cm, St Petersburg, Russian State Museum.

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There is something here about otherworldly light: not of life, and not of death, but of rebirth. It is also curious that there are several instances in the film where the visitors to Hårga are given mysterious herbs, potions, and mind-altering substances that, in the end, could be seen to fatally bind them, like Persephone, to the place where those herbs have grown.

Among all the mysterious potions in the film, there is one overt reference: to the sap of the Yew tree, which is given to the sacrificial Hårga men before they are burned up in the temple, purportedly to ease their pain. The Yew tree is significant as one of the only named substances – it is the sacred plant of the Furies, who are under the guidance of Persephone, and exclusively sent out on errands of blood and vengeance.<sup>[30]</sup> The tie between Persephone, potions, blood, and the underworld points, on the one hand, to the different perceptions that can arise from the spillage of conscious experience, and, on the other hand, to the way that such spillage re-evaluates units such as family, friend, couple; loss and mourning. It is not, perhaps, that Dani longs to have her mother back (we know nothing of their relationship), but she longs to feel the longing, the rite, the search. It is through loss that Demeter and Persephone are reunited at all, and that spring blooms from winter, and that the Eleusinian rites were put into enactment for thousands of initiates through the ingestion of the *kykeon*. With Josh and with Maja, the spilling of their blood – in death and in bringing forth new life (no matter at what cost) – signals the malefic conservatism of traditional family units. The fluids that speak most to Dani's experience are neither blood nor potions, but private tears that turn to vengeful flames. These are shimmerings and bloom-spaces not for the shy of heart.

### **Tears and Fire**

If we counted all the tears that Dani sheds throughout *Midsommer* we may fill a well, a pupil, a moon. Tears are often an inner affect, like grief. Yet in a film where all the darkness is unleashed into the garish light of day, tears, too, become a public phenomenon, a rite. One of the most visceral moments in *Midsommar* comes after Dani is crowned May Queen. Here, Dani's full grief and rage spill over and are mimed back at her, not by Christian, but rather by a group of Hårga women who are not there merely to listen to or comfort her, but to mirror her rage, to conjure it up and throw it out into exteriority, to awaken and vanquish it. Dani has seen too much. Through a keyhole, she witnesses Christian's ritual sex scene with Maja, and we as viewers witness Dani's eye pressed up against the keyhole witnessing. This distance with which Aster allows us into Dani's encounter is a preface and reversal to the absolute closure of distance that the Hårga women will receive Dani's grief with. At the moment that her tears finally flood in, Dani's reflex is to flee, cat-like, to

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nurse her wounds. But she is quickly caught up and carried off by a group of Hårga women who have a different way of emoting. Hanna (Louise Peterhoff) holds Dani's face in her hands and wails back at her while other women surround Dani in a physical, emotional group lament.



*Midsommar* (Ari Aster, 2019)

At last: here is the real horror at the injustice Dani has faced so far – the murder-suicide carried out by her sister, as well as Christian's inability to face up to his own emotions, leaving Dani alone and often scrambling for affection – it can all, now, be released.

“To keening” derives from the Gaelic *caoine* or *caoineadh*, meaning a “vocalized cry”, and is an “ancient Irish funeral lament”<sup>[31]</sup> performed by groups of women at wakes and prevalent in pre-Christian Ireland.<sup>[32]</sup> Keening is both a “sacred improvised chant” and an extremely raw mode of mourning – it is a song, a poem, a wail, and is made up of the *salutation* (introduction), the *dirge* (verse), and the *gol* (cry).<sup>[33]</sup><sup>[34]</sup> Its purpose is grounded in “waking the dead”<sup>[35]</sup> and helping spirits cross over into the afterlife.<sup>[36]</sup> Mary McLaughlin, in her essay “Keening the Dead”, notes that keening women, called *bean chaointe*, are often likened to banshees, *bean sí*, “an otherworldly harbinger of death”, widely “considered to be a bad omen”.<sup>[37]</sup> The banshee as a death messenger is most often encountered through aural manifestations of women crying; a cry so well-known and so intimate to certain communities in Ireland that, as Patricia Lysaght notes in her ethnographic study of the banshee, the sound is signified not just by one word, but “by a variety of terms in English and Irish”. To list them offers something of an onomatopoeia of grief: “cry, gol, wail, lament, olagón, ochón, lóg, logoireacht caoineadh, keen, moan,

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roar, scream, shriek, screech, screech, *béic, gaoch, liú*".[38] These words paint the picture of a sonorous and deeply wounded externalisation. The banshee's appearance is not so different from her wail. Rosemary Ellen Guiley, in *The Encyclopedia of Ghosts and Spirits*, notes that the banshee appears either "all in white or all in red. Her eyes are fiery red from continual crying for the about-to-be-departed ... The cry reportedly is so mournful that it is unmistakably the sound of doom".[39] Dani, dressed all in white in her Hårga dress, her eyes constantly red from crying, and her voice hoarse from wailing, is not dissimilar to the *bean sí*, especially in this scene where she is surrounded by the *bean chaointe*, the keening women. Her cry is so mournful that it does, eventually, become doom, at least for Christian. Her mourning transforms to retribution. Before it does it so, it must be witnessed.

"I am undone, before her, and for her", writes Sara Ahmed while describing how she witnessed the pain of her mother during a prolonged illness.[40] Ahmed includes a whole chapter on pain in her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, noting that pain itself "involves the sociality of bodily surfaces". This means both that the literal surface of the skin is sensate to pain and that pain needs a way to surface "in relationship to others, who bear witness to pain, and authenticate its existence".[41] This may sound a lot like empathy, but I am not convinced that is what is at stake here. For empathy, Ahmed writes, "remains a 'wish feeling', in which subjects 'feel' something other than what another feels".[42] Witnessing, however, could be something more cathartic. For it is through witnessing, as Ahmed notes, that pain is granted "the status of an event, a happening in the world, rather than just the 'something' she felt". And while pain "may be solitary", Ahmed continues, "it is never private".[43] No-one seems to know this better than the Hårga women; when they keen with Dani, they witness Dani; when they witness Dani, they activate the alchemical transmutation of pain from solitary emotion to shared event. "Our question becomes not so much what *is* pain, but what does pain *do*".[44] The *sociality of bodily surfaces* that Ahmed speaks of becomes the bloom-space that springs alive, like Persephone emerging from Hades and invoking spring. It is only after the keening that Dani's surface stretches out, making her ever larger-than-life, both mythical and vegetal. Her pain is not only evident, but shared, felt - and finally *held*. It is given room to flow, to flower.

The keening scene in *Midsommar* is perhaps one of the heaviest in the film, but it is also one of the most cathartic, and would be less so if it did not have a bit of camp and melodrama in its tone. *Midsommar*, though packed with dark themes, is also filled with dark humour - the too-muchness of the film, from the costumes to the at-times slapstick reactions of the characters, gives breathing space and giddiness to the film's more uncomfortable moments. In this sense, it is worth noting that

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the *bean chaointe* had a counterpart at ancient Irish wakes, the *borachán*, also known as the “joker”, the “fool”, or the “idiot”, usually a man who organised and directed “the pranks and games of the wake assembly”.<sup>[45]</sup> “Wherever the trickster appears”, writes McLaughlin, “the premise is the same, the ‘actors’ put aside their daily identity to don a mask that permits them to have a foot both in this world and the (mythical) Otherworld”.<sup>[46]</sup> The character of the fool in *Midsommar* is perhaps best embodied by Mark, Christian’s best friend, whose sole purpose it seems is to annoy the audience. He is brash, inconsiderate, self-occupied, and ridiculous, and thus can be seen as a liminal or trickster figure. When the nine sacrificial bodies are placed in the funerary temple at the end of the film, it seems no mistake that Mark is wearing a jester hat. Whereas the trickster or the fool makes merriment a priority on an otherwise devastating occasion, the mourner, she who keens, is the mirror, the ultimate avatar who expels grief by overwhelming it. It is no wonder that this tradition was violently ruled out in the middle ages by a polite and subdued Christian establishment. “If the wake games irked the clerical establishment”, writes McLaughlin, “then the keen inflamed them, as it was considered an example of unbridled paganism that had no place in a Christian society”.<sup>[47]</sup> No place for keening in Christian society and ironically no place for Christian in this all-female scene of mourning and rage.

In her 1978 book *Woman and Nature*, Susan Griffin mimics two main levels of discourse: on one hand, the voice of the rational yet ultimately destructive patriarchy, and on the other, “an embodied voice, and an impassioned one” - one that belongs, to Griffin, more to women and to nature.<sup>[48]</sup> In a chapter called “Transformation”, Griffin opens on a woman at various stages of her life asking questions, fairy-tale style, to her mirror. “When she was small she asked, ‘Why am I afraid of the dark? Why do I feel I will be devoured?’ And her mirror answered, “Because you have reason to fear”.<sup>[49]</sup> In relation to Christian, Dani’s reason to fear is more pernicious than magic mirrors have historically warned us perhaps: her reason comes in the form of his affectlessness rather than his affect, one that abandons her while failing to release her. Yet in taking on mythical, fairytale proportions, her grief is bigger than Christian - systemic even. Like an emic ethnographer, or like an initiate first stepping into a rite, Griffin gets inside the voice of the patriarchy in order to take it on. We could say that these two voices, patriarchy and embodiment, also relate to different kinds of logic, day logic and night logic. On two separate nights, Dani asks Josh for sleeping pills, a repetition that serves in a way to mark time in the film, but also puts the two characters together in the realm of the night and that particular syntax of sleep: dreams. Both Dani and Josh long for a way into a secret language they do not know how to decipher. Whereas Josh, ever an anthropologist, endeavours to capture the Hårga’s well-guarded runes,

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Dani yearns for a language of grief and rage, a language all her own that is a foreign tongue to her. Under the heading “*Nightmare*”, Griffin writes (italics her own), “*We dreamed we were speaking in tongues. That all we had ever felt our whole lives became clear to us ... That we were singing. That we wept to recognize ourselves in these voices*”.[50] Death is intertwined with sleep in the film from the very beginning, where the opening shot shows Dani’s dead parents ostensibly sleeping in bed – it follows, then, that death must also be intertwined with waking up, with rebirth. Awakening the dead is awakening. And the voice of the night – the keening voice – is the voice that triumphs.

McLaughlin mentions folklorist Arnold van Gennep’s theory of “the tripartite nature of a separation rite”, [51] which fits with the Eleusinian mysteries. In van Gennep’s words, these include “preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation)”.[52] The women of Hårga, in being a mirror for Dani, ignite her final transformation, for better or for worse: the movement of incorporation, the postliminal; the lifting back up of the goddess, in Eleusinian terms, into the brilliance of the light, the flames. Both the *bean chaointe* (the keening women) and the *borachán* (the fool) are liminal figures, “threshold people”;[53] like the banshee, they occupy the world of spirits and the world of the living; they are excessive and external to an ethos of polite Christianity and even to the perimeters of “realism” or “normalcy” levelled against daily life; they invite spillage, bloom-space, in which the release of all the *unholy affekts* – in Dani’s case, attachment, inhibition, misguided or unrequited love – are invited out to play, then burned off, wailed through, wrung out; ritual purification.

In an interview with Michael Koresky, Ari Aster characterises both *Midsommar* and his preceding film *Hereditary* as “intuitive in a way. They kind of spilled out of me”.[54] Spillage is key to transition; and “[t]ransition”, writes McLaughlin, “is the keynote of death”.[55] Dani, by the end scene, has grown into a different being altogether. Her dress of garish blooms is a pyramid, an entire structure, an alluvial cone, and it looks as deep as her emotional demons. Aster captures Dani as she wretches in both grief and joy in front of the funeral pyre wherein Christian, stuffed into the corpse of a bear, goes up in flame.



*Midsommar* (Ari Aster, 2019)

The blossoms that extend Dani's body meet the flames that extend Christian's body, and both their transitions are actuated: "... her body a body of rage", writes Griffin, "her body a furnace, an incandescence, her body the exquisite fire".<sup>[56]</sup> The act of keening is still alive, McLaughlin ventures, but mostly in the highly Gaelic regions of Ireland, in *An Ghaeltacht*.<sup>[57]</sup> More prevalently, keening has been used as political action: in 1984, a group of women protested US cruise missiles in Greenham, England, by forming a peace camp and keening in demonstration. "We weaponised traditional notions of femininity", writes Suzanne Moore for *The Guardian*.<sup>[58]</sup> The banshee is hated and feared for a reason: she shows that grief and tears are not a harmless emotion, but can be an active remonstrance, one that bears as much fire as water. Tears, often seen as the ultimate in private behaviour, bring with them the power of the flood, of the end.

### **The May Queen**

"Oh look! The sun begins to rise! The heavens are in glow; / He shines upon a hundred fields, and all of them I know".<sup>[59]</sup> In Alfred, Lord Tennyson's 1868 poem "The May Queen", a girl continuously addresses her mother in order to pronounce that, though she is facing immanent death, she is going to be crowned "Queen o' the May", an event she echoes throughout the poem in various registers of glee and eerie anticipation. The poem, like *Midsommar* and like rites of lamentation, breaks down into three parts; in all of them, the May Queen appears ghostly ("He thought I was a ghost, mother, for I was all in white") and has somewhat of an ominous character ("They call me cruel-hearted, but I

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care not what they say"). In the third part of the poem, which could echo the Eleusinian "ascent", the May Queen speaks from beyond the grave, washed in sun: "O, sweet and strange it seems to me, that ere this day is done / The voice that now is speaking may be beyond the sun". The poem is spatially disorienting and trickster-like: who is the May Queen? Where is she? Where and who is her mother? What is the space beyond the sun, and why does she seem so "merry", so "mad", and so ominous?

In the last scene of the film, the viewer watches Dani's face move in a shimmering of emotions: disgust, grief, and the closest thing we have seen to joy for the entire film. For me, watching *Midsommar* hit a personal note; I felt a prickle of elation at Dani's pure, joyous smile. Leaving Cinéma du parc in Montreal, it seemed *Midsommar* had galvanised some kind of inner wrath within the audience as a whole, one that came out in nervous giggles, diffuse clapping, and small cheers (this is Canada after all) - one that felt lightly explosive. The film opened questions in me that were not so much critical as emotional: whose anger is so lush? Where is the rage, I wondered, that takes root under the skin like fungi, like hives, and fruits up from the pores in blinking, olfactory shoots? What is it that smoulders, writhes, and overflows from just beneath the surface until it cannot keep silent anymore, until it cannot keep the shelter of invisibility it has tried so fastidiously to build? In retrospect, these questions point to concerns about how individuals contain love, or mourning, or grief, or vengeance within a neoliberal affective space that requires us to keep up the appearance of being contained: *self-sufficient*, *self-caring*. Yet these affects are too large for each person alone to build and hold together; they collapse, spill, or if held in become like the silent, billowing black smoke that Dani dreams of when she arrives in Hårga, pouring out of her mouth in the place of a scream. The affect runes that run throughout *Midsommar* become a way to look at containers and their spillages, for affect is that fluid that has no chalice. In the context of spillage, it may not be enough to say that new family structures are what is needed in our present system. I would posit that before the new, we need a reworking of the very oldest; transformation rites that allow us to come undone. Loss or separation allows reintegration. Ari Aster describes a break-up he was going through as being a major catalyst for making *Midsommar*: "I wanted to make a film", he says, "that felt as big as a break-up feels".[\[60\]](#) By the end of the film, it is Dani who gives the green light to Christian's sacrifice - the ninth. After all his gaslighting, he is literally *lit* on fire. Dani gets full revenge on Christian, and not just any revenge but lavish, garish vindication.

In *The Golden Bough*, James Frazer speaks of the traditional Swedish May Queen as "a Midsummer's Bride" who "selects for herself a bridegroom", dressed all white to signal "wedding attire".[\[61\]](#) Dani's

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sacrifice of Christian, in this light, could also be seen as the ultimate tying of his fate to hers; a vow. Like Persephone to Hades. Wasson et al. note that agrarian religions, from whom the Greeks took up the reins of mythmaking, were largely focused on cycles of birth, death, rebirth, where the central event was the “Sacred Marriage, in which the priestess periodically communed with the realm of spirits within the earth to renew the agricultural year ... Her male consort was a vegetative spirit”.<sup>[62]</sup> It is perhaps no coincidence that, as Barbara J. King observes, “Greek tragedies were once known as goat-songs, perhaps because goats were given to winners of Athenian drama competitions—and then sacrificed”. The way that Dani blooms from grief into vengeance brings her at once closer to myth and closer to flora and fauna, the supernatural and the ultra-natural. King continues: “goat voices too may lament a death”.<sup>[63]</sup>

The excessiveness of Dani’s costume by the end scene of the film is a celebration of all the horror of anger let raw – like a dream, it looks different in the light of day: it looks campy, excessive. She is both bride and bridegroom, birth and death; complete union, complete loss. It only takes a word. We as an audience do not hear Dani condemn Christian to death, but by now many have wanted it so bad that condemnation has lost its lust for language and fuelled its own impetus: desire. This is also the power of realisation, total embodiment, total sublimation. Within all the fluids that are melting, brewing, twirling in the fire-hot light of enlightened day are held the hallucinatory entanglings of the poisons within – Venefica herself. The imbrication of alchemy and keening lies ultimately in their affective processes of transformation and healing – processes which, like the locals in Aster’s Hårga, seem anachronistic, storybook-like, yet are, by the end of the film, the most real, and the most, literally, alive; the locals thwart capture by the student anthropologists just as witches and magical women have escaped capture by the machineries of cultural taming. In a way, *Midsommar* points toward the nature of the anthropological and / or scholarly gaze-gone-wrong, one peeled of power in the face of a subject that proves too seductive to keep up the cultivation of distance or objectivity. This is a double-edged sword that runs, on the one hand, as a cautionary tale throughout the film, and, on the other, as an exposure of the tricks that presumed objectivity can play. Instead of three separate parts to the film, or even three separate rites of deep and transformative initiation, we could see these ultimately as bloom-spaces or shimmerings, the minute (or not so minute) processes of material transfiguring, transforming, and alchemising. Not so much a radical empathy as a necessary and terrifying encounter, a recognition of separation.

Shimmerings and bloom-spaces are points of excess (the neutral cocoon from which spills out the transformed moth), where healing is imbricated with destruction; potion turns poison and poison turns elixir. The neutral

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is after all the blunt force of awakening. “I’m worried I’ll have a bad trip”, says Christian as he is handed a concoction of solar herbs dancing in a shallow glass of water, and beckoning, calling him into exteriority, into his own desires. What is it that Christian wants? What is it to be Christian in this film, this scene and scenario, and not Dani? Who identifies with Christian here? Who admits to that? And then, what power does that admonish or burn off? It is perhaps more acceptable, more standard, to identify with Christian. Dani, after all, aligns with her sister in the end: where one has committed matricide, patricide, and suicide, Dani commits mariticide, the killing of her lover, and has undergone her own irreversible transformation as a consequence. “Oh no, no, you won’t, you won’t [have a bad trip], trust me”, says Ulla as she coaxes the glass upon Christian. Drink up.

## Notes

[1] Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1978), 196.

[2] Alfred, Tennyson, “The May Queen” (1868), Bartleby.com, <https://www.bartleby.com/360/3/181.html>.

[3] “Exclusive: ‘Midsommar’ Director Ari Aster and Stars Preview the Highly Anticipated Horror Flick”, interview with Ari Aster, Florence Pugh, and Jack Reynor by Erik Davis, Rotten Tomatoes, June 18, 2019, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1MSwudqdyLA>.

[4] See Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffé (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 11; Sergei Semenovitch Uvarov, *Essay on the Eleusinian Mysteries* (London: Rodwell and Martin, 1817), 122-23. Both of which are addressed in the section “Blood and Potions” in this paper.

[5] Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, “An Inventory of Shimmers”, in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 9.

[6] Gregg and Seigworth, “An Inventory of Shimmers”, 11.

[7] Gregg and Seigworth, “An Inventory of Shimmers”, 10.

[8] “Exclusive: ‘Midsommar’ Director Ari Aster”.

[9] R. Gordon Wasson, Albert Hoffman, and Carl A. P. Ruck, *The Road to Eleusis: Unveiling the Secret of the Mysteries* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2008), 49.

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[10] Rebecca Onion, "Midsommar's Real Villains Aren't Murderous Pagans. They're Grad Students", *Slate*, July 12, 2019, <https://slate.com/culture/2019/07/midsommar-graduate-students-villains-ari-aster.html>.

[11] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 8.

[12] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 9.

[13] "Ari Aster on *Midsommar*, Cathartic Endings, the Director's Cut, and His Favorite Films", interview with Ari Aster by Michael Koresky, Film at Lincoln Center, July 12, 2019, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPGaPTdno10>.

[14] Sophie Lewis, "The Satanic Death Cult Is Real", *Commune*, August 28, 2019, <https://communemag.com/the-satanic-death-cult-is-real>.

[15] "Ari Aster on *Midsommar*".

[16] All "Persephone", *Theoi Greek Mythology*, ed. Aaron J. Atsma, Netherlands and New Zealand, 2000–19, <https://www.theoi.com/Khthonios/Persephone.html>.

[17] Wasson et al., *The Road to Eleusis*, 48.

[18] Rab Messina, "The Creepiest Character in the *Midsommar* Movie? It's the Spatial Design", *Frame*, August 19, 2019, <https://www.frameweb.com/news/midsommar-production-design-henrik-svensson-interview>.

[19] Heliophilus, *Alchemy Rising: The Green Book* (London: Scarlet Imprint, 2016), 176.

[20] "Entheogen", *Lexico*, powered by Oxford, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/entheogen>.

[21] Sergei Semenovitch Uvarov, *Essay on the Eleusinian Mysteries* (London: Rodwell and Martin, 1817), 122.

[22] Uvarov, *Essay on the Eleusinian Mysteries*, 122–23.

[23] Carl A. P. Ruck, "Mixing the Kykeon: Part 3", *Eleusis: Journal of Psychoactive Plants and Compounds*, New Series 4 (2000): 22.

[24] Ruck, "Mixing", 21.

[25] Wasson et al., *The Road to Eleusis*, 48.

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- [26] Homer, "Homeric Hymn to Demeter" (7<sup>th</sup> century BCE), trans. Gregory Nagy, Harvard University, Center for Hellenistic Studies, December 12, 2018, <https://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/5292>.
- [27] "Eleusinian Mysteries", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, [https://www.britannica.com/topic/Eleusinian-Mysteries#:~:targetText=Eleusinian%20Mysteries%2C%20most%20famous%20of,\)%2C%20god%20of%20the%20underworld](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Eleusinian-Mysteries#:~:targetText=Eleusinian%20Mysteries%2C%20most%20famous%20of,)%2C%20god%20of%20the%20underworld).
- [28] Ruck, "Mixing", 22.
- [29] Wasson et al., *The Road to Eleusis*, 54.
- [30] "Erinyes", *Theoi Greek Mythology*, ed. Aaron J. Atsma, Netherlands and New Zealand, 2000-19, <https://www.theoi.com/Khthonios/Erinyes.html>.
- [31] Mary McLaughlin, "Keening the Dead: Ancient History or a Ritual for Today?" *Religions* 10 (2019): 1.
- [32] McLaughlin, "Keening", 8.
- [33] McLaughlin, "Keening", 1.
- [34] McLaughlin, "Keening", 10.
- [35] McLaughlin, "Keening", 2.
- [36] McLaughlin, "Keening", 8.
- [37] McLaughlin, "Keening", 9.
- [38] Patricia Lysaght, *The Banshee: The Irish Supernatural Death-Messenger* (Dublin: The Glendale Press, 1986), 67.
- [39] Rosemary Ellen Guiley, "Banshee", *The Encyclopedia of Ghosts and Spirits* (New York: Checkmark Books, 2007), 40.
- [40] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 31.
- [41] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 31.
- [42] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 30.
- [43] Both Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 29.

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- [44] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 27.
- [45] McLaughlin, “Keening”, 6. Citing Gearóid Ó Crualaoich, “The Merry Wake”, in *Irish Popular Culture 1650–1850*, eds. James S. Donnelly and Kerby A. Miller (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1999), 191.
- [46] McLaughlin, “Keening”, 6.
- [47] McLaughlin, “Keening”, 4.
- [48] Griffin, *Woman and Nature*, xix.
- [49] Griffin, *Woman and Nature*, 195.
- [50] Griffin, *Woman and Nature*, 149.
- [51] McLaughlin, “Keening”, 7.
- [52] Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 11.
- [53] McLaughlin, “Keening”, 6.
- [54] “Ari Aster on *Midsommar*”.
- [55] McLaughlin, “Keening”, 6.
- [56] Griffin, *Woman and Nature*, 209.
- [57] McLaughlin, “Keening”, 11.
- [58] Suzanne Moore et al., “How the Greenham Common Protest Changed Lives: ‘We Danced on Top of the Nuclear Silos’”, *The Guardian*, March 20, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/mar/20/greenham-common-nuclear-silos-women-protest-peace-camp>.
- [59] Tennyson, “The May Queen”.
- [60] “Ari Aster on *Midsommar*”.
- [61] James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1890) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 96–97.
- [62] Wasson et al., *The Road to Eleusis*, 48.
- [63] Barbara J. King, *How Animals Grieve* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 5.

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