

Freire in *Midsommar* (2019): Performative Critical Consciousness as Social Ritual

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the horror film Midsommar through the lens of Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, centred on the concept of critical consciousness and its modern renditions as digital and performative activism. Midsommar extends upon familiar narratives to present a blurring of the binary between those who only appear critically-conscious and their adversaries. The stark contrast between a murderous religious cult, the Hårga, and a group of graduate students in anthropology fades throughout the film as the director meticulously presents ritual among the former group in relation to gaslighting among the latter. The emphasis on gore which almost borders on exploitation serves to emphasize not just the perils of compromised critical-consciousness, but also how individuals likewise can choose to exploit social justice towards personal gain. Midsommar breaks through the digital divide to illustrate that even in the film's "screenless society", those who only claim to be critically-conscious observe with stillness through an invisible barrier between the self and the victimized other. As a theoretical application, Midsommar presents an opportunity to critically reflect on the current state of critical consciousness in terms of concrete actions taken against the myriad of modern inequalities. The lethal religious ceremonies held by the film's antagonists ultimately remind us of our own dissemination and simultaneous dilution of critical consciousness towards performative activism as our parallel dogma.

Keywords: Digital media; inequality; pedagogy; performative; social justice

1. THE HÅRGA AS EPITOME AND EXTREME OF CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Critical consciousness, popularized by Freire, has been described as "the core of social justice teaching" (Styslinger et al. 2019). For the purposes of this paper, critical consciousness will be defined with an interdisciplinary lens, focusing on Freire's definition of the ability to identify social oppression and inequalities in addition to the ability to take action to change these realities - as suggested through his framework of critical reflection, critical motivation, and critical action (Freire 2000). Theoretically, the application of critical consciousness in relation to *Midsommar* is categorized into four thematic areas to be discussed: action against classism, action against colonialism,

action against sexism, and actions against environmental injustices. With these alignments, *Midsommar* presents itself as a sandbox to further explore the paradoxical interrelations between Freire's critical consciousness and its application in modern society. The pagan and cult elements in *Midsommar* are unmistakably present, and invites consideration of critical consciousness in intersection with religion. The rationale for selecting *Midsommar* for discussion of Freirean philosophy rests in the film's capacity to reflect on society's potential fanaticism with superficiality in social justice, towards what can be considered a theology of modernity.

The Hårga, as the main antagonists of the film, can be interpreted as equally primitive and modern in their uptake of social justice positionalities. One would find it at least challenging to differentiate between the Hårga from a 21st century intentional community (Sargisson

2009) formed by modern progressives. The Hårga's way of life represents clear alignment with four thematic areas within contemporary social justice discourse. First and foremost, the Hårga are represented as an anti-classist *commune*, embracing equality between all human beings - and extending their embrace to a complete oneness between all members of society. All tasks are performed collaboratively by the Hårga, with participation and engagement that is inclusive to everyone. Notably, even the individual living with severe physical and developmental disabilities - Ruben - holds an honored position in society, contributing as a spiritual figurehead. The integration of all members of society leads to the nullification of the concept of the core family, which is replaced by a greater societal family to the point where children are raised by all adults together. As an example, Pelle - a member of the Hårga who invites the group of protagonists to the commune - reaches adulthood without any noted financial troubles as an orphan, and even gains access to American postgraduate education. With the exception of respect for their elders, the Hårga do not exhibit any power structures that potentially compromise the integrity of their anti-classist alignment.

With regards to modern emphasis on post-colonialism or de-colonialism as objectives towards restoring justice in society, the Hårga are depicted as a pristine tribe untouched by the spread of imperialism. Racism is absent among the Hårga due to an ethnic purity reminiscent of pre-colonial periods, and, even when a mixture of races is introduced - most notably through an African-American visitor - the Hårga are shown to treat every non-white outsider without any discrimination from their white peers. While the very concept of Freire's critical consciousness arises from the oppressive colonialist regimes Europeans imposed upon indigenous peoples of South America, the Hårga in many ways have built an antithetical society: remaining distinctly in their northern homeland, the Hårgas name no second-class citizens among them nor embrace any discrimination that would compromise complete societal unity. Even when given an opportunity to reach foreign lands, the Hårga showed no interest in disseminating their ideology. Akin to how the Hårga exhibit a social structure that exceeds expectations for anti-classism in moving from equality to oneness, they likewise outperform in their decolonial practices. The Hårga neither invade nor subdue. In fact, the entire film outlines a social process that is a reverse process of colonialism, as the Hårga actively invite outsiders to share in the harvest of their homeland - and even gives one such outsider a leadership position to which all members of the Hårga willingly and joyfully submit.

A third thematic area of critical consciousness the Hårga are shown to uphold to the extreme is gender equality. Depicted as a traditional matriarchal society, all ceremonies are led by an elderly female figure who has no discernible male counterpart. The female elder initiates all rituals, speaks on behalf of the community when the Hårga are questioned by the outsiders, and oversees arranged consummation between woman and man. The lines between tradition and a modern North American liberalism are blurred as the director depicts degrees of sexual liberation that border on shocking. Females are free to use sex as coercion in the film, as they did with Mark - an American visitor - who is lured to his demise. The protagonist's boyfriend is likewise groomed for sex under the influence of psychedelics. While modern society strongly condemns drug-facilitated sexual assault (Schwartz, Milteer, and LeBeau 2000), the Hårga are shown to embrace it as cultural tradition, even depicting it on public art. Most importantly, the process is open to females who wish to groom males, but approval for male-on-female grooming is not shown at any point throughout the narrative. When the film depicts a clear male-female duo in which the male can be seen as an equal-power counterpart, the female is still implied as the superior. In the ritual known as the *ättestupa*, both a male elder and a female elder who reached the age of seventy-two are to be sacrificed for reincarnation. The female elder is visibly in a superior physical and mental condition. She participates in the ritual first, to be followed by the man. Even in the act of dying, the male is shown to make a mistake: his accidental survival leads to excruciating pain, and a more humiliating death that appears to be punishment from the other members of the Hårga. The female, contrarily, accomplishes her ritualistic death with fluency.

Finally, the Hårga are also protectors of the environment. Their closeness to the land can be seen in their rejection of modern technologies (Sutton 2022) which are associated with pollution. With the exception of the mention of driving a vehicle - which actually did not even take place in order to trap their visitors - the Hårga are depicted as environmentally-responsible. Their oneness with each other as equal-status human beings also extends to include a oneness with the ecosystem. The rustic nature of their lifestyle almost reflects an Instagrammable aesthetic (Arts et al. 2021), once again blurring the boundaries between the primitive and the contemporary. Right from the beginning of the protagonists' entry into the commune, the significant difference in wardrobe is highlighted. The Hårga collectively dress in a gender-neutral off-white which is characteristic of natural fibers, while the outside

visitors share no color uniformity with synthetic textiles and denims. Beyond ethnic attire, the director provides detailed shots of architecture of the Hårga, with hand-painted wood as their material of choice. Cooking is done by fire and the macroeconomy is defined by agriculture. Almost all aspects of life of the Hårga are molded by nature, and the film also hints at their own version of traditional ecological knowledge (Turner et al. 2011): the yew, mushrooms, and other unnamed botanical concoctions are featured at various points throughout the film. With these substances meant for ingestion, or, the act of allowing nature into the human body, the Hårga demonstrates radical subordination to the natural environment. Just like how they can be seen to practice colonialism in reverse, the Hårga do not interfere or artificially alter the natural environment around them - instead, the multitude of ethnobotanical products the Hårga use as hallucinogens, painkillers, and other psychoactive substances opens up the human body and human mind to be altered by nature. Of note, Dani, the female protagonist, sees nature in the form of grass blades penetrating through her own body as her first vision upon entering Hårga territory.

2. EXTENDING BEYOND THE LOTTERY (1948)

Amidst these radical manifestations of critical consciousness among the Hårga, a key practice places them as antagonists which contribute to the core of *Midsommar* as a horror film. The Hårga are shown to engage in human sacrifice - and just like the community depicted in Shirley Jackson's short story (Jackson 1948), the purposes of sacrifice are identical: blessing the harvest and respecting cultural tradition. The film features no depiction of technology nor any machinery with the exception of one oversized metallic structure which emulates the modern lottery ball machine. With this allusion to the short story, *Midsommar* offers a visual representation of the cruelty that Jackson could not depict with pure text. Whereas Jackson's narrative self-terminates prior to any actual killing, *Midsommar* presents the killings, and the aftermaths beyond death. Specifically, the *ättestupa* as the film's first lethal ritual features unnecessary cruelties - blunt trauma and burning - performed on the human body after death.

The highlighting of the *unnecessary* in the film invites self-reflection: while Jackson implores readers to turn away from murderous practices documented in human history, *Midsommar* takes a step further to consider our own reactions as members of modern society towards these injustices. On paper, it could be challenging to

find individuals who support the killings performed by the Hårga - yet in reality, not a single protagonist in the film proactively stopped the murders. After the *ättestupa*, two of the film's protagonists planned their departure from the community of the Hårga; the rest of the protagonists carried out their daily activities. No one took action to stop the bodies from being burned on open fire. If *The Lottery* espouses a sense of aversion against perpetrators of cruelty, *Midsommar* allows modern society to consider aversion of our own stillness amidst contemporary injustices by moving the focus on critical reflection to critical action.

3. RATIONALIZING ACTION AS UNNECESSARY

Freire defines critical consciousness as not just the ability to see injustices in our world, but also the ability to take action against said injustices (Freire 2000). Action against the injustices committed by the Hårga is entirely absent in *Midsommar*. The protagonists potentially sought to justify that their stopping of the cruel practices beyond death would be unnecessary, as it would not bring the two elders back to life. Conversely, stopping the burning of human remains on open fire could also be seen as unnecessary if the burning can be interpreted as cremation. The film does not offer either of those responses as reasons for inaction among the millennial protagonists. Rather, the protagonists discussed "keeping an open mind"; respecting "cultural" practices; and ultimately, exploiting the phenomena for a doctoral dissertation to climb the academic ladder. While it is not unreasonable to assume all modern readers of *The Lottery* will be ready to put an end to barbaric practice if they witness one, *Midsommar* suggests that immersing the readers right in the middle of physical cruelty may lead to nothing more than emotional response - much like what is shown by the film's protagonists.

4. DIGITAL ACTIVISM IN A SCREENLESS SOCIETY

Film as a medium allows space for visual metaphors which further explore the theme of inaction amidst injustice. The Hårga have been described as founders of a screenless society characterized by "absence of information and communication technologies (ICTs)" in opposition to "the otherwise ubiquitous cell-phones, social media, and screens" (Sutton 2022). Yet, the arrival of the protagonists has brought and reinforced an invisible screen which separates them in a clear binary between the victims of injustice and viewers of injustice.

In the *ättestupa*, all the observers of the ritual stand still, facing one direction, as if all watching the event on the same digital screen. As the elders commit ritualistic suicide on top of pristine all-white cliffs in the white garments of the Hårga, a flock of black birds take off to the sky and leave the scene. Conversely, all human beings on site stand in their original positions, watching the ritual until it comes to a full close. As if a screen divides the protagonists and the victims, none of them cross the boundary to walk up to the victims to intervene – even when the male elder was experiencing continued abuse from the Hårga. The first action that the female lead, Dani, takes is featured in a closeup: she grabs the arm of her partner beside her, almost as if she is seeking something to hold onto for her own support, or, wanting to hold him immobilized by her side in case he did wish to cross the invisible screen.

Despite the many horrific deeds and religious rituals performed by the Hårga throughout the film, only two rituals involve harming a human being. When compared to the first ritual in which two elders die for the sole reason of reaching a certain age, the second and last ritual of *Midsommar* also features a parallel screen. Earlier in the film, not a single protagonist nor the Hårga themselves stop the burning of human bodies. The second ritual features a combination of outsiders and Hårga being burned as a final offering in the nine-day festival. After the flames have been set, all viewers – including Dani as the last surviving protagonist – likewise respect the rigidity of the invisible screen between themselves and the victims. A specific scene is dedicated to Dani walking *horizontally* along the invisible screen in her grief, but never crossing over the predefined boundary to get closer to her boyfriend dying in the ritual.

In the film's climax, all members of the Hårga dramatically display their emotions as they watch the death of the nine offerings. A number of Hårga scream in agony, attempting to echo the anti-classist oneness which suggests they also feel the exact pain of the Hårga dying in the ritual. Pelle, the Hårga who is responsible for collecting outsiders for the human sacrifice, is absorbed in self-indulgent sobbing for the victims as if he had played no role in their death. A female Hårga is depicted as almost playing the role of a cheerleader, inciting emotional response from the other members of the Hårga with her arm movements. She is so invested in triggering collective emotional response that her performative expressions of grief could not conceal simultaneous ecstasy. Amidst ostentatious visual display of emotions, there is complete absence of action against injustice among all survivors, and there is no physical crossing over the invisible screen.

A specific reason behind the absurd display of emotions from the Hårga during the film's climax is arguably their lack of physical screens and technology. If the Hårga had allowed themselves access to social media, they would be able to put on a parallel emotional performance simply by writing posts, retweeting links, or tapping on a string of *emojis* (Graham 2019). Without access to digital media, the Hårga are limited to their own physical bodies as platforms for performative allyship and performative activism. Their self-imposed need to appear socially-woke and sympathetic of the victims force them into exaggerated physical expressions, never minding that their performance appears entirely artificial to the point of being absurd to the audience (Spadoni 2020). With this, the film begins to blur the boundaries between the modern outsiders – consisting primarily of American graduate students – and the Hårga: both groups share the common traits of strategically crafting human emotions for self gain, as well as refusing to take any concrete actions towards stopping social injustice beyond mere emotional display.

5. INTENTIONAL BINARIES AND UNDERLYING ONENESS

At first glance, the Hårga and their victims cannot be more different. Our protagonists who end up being objectified as ritualistic offerings are a group of American graduate students following millennial tropes. Wolfe reviews close to a dozen of the binaries that the film presents between the protagonists and the Hårga (2021). Firstly, the protagonists hail from a “perverse urban” environment in contrast to the ideal pastoral community in northern Sweden. The film begins almost entirely in darkness, with an American metropolitan triple-homicide from vehicular carbon-monoxide. This shifts to the bright, flowery aesthetic of the Hårga festival, which is dedicated to the search for a feminine lead: their new May Queen. In contrast, the original set of protagonists was going to be an all-male cast embarking on a summer sexcapade. The male protagonists did not simply intend to objectify Swedish women during their trip, but also “exploit Hårga hospitality in exchange for social capital in US academia” (Wolfe 2021). Their capitalist pursuits stand in stark contrast from the communist economy of the Hårga, who are shown to be self-sufficient in living off the land and sharing all things. As two male protagonists fight over ownership of the lifestyles of the Hårga as intellectual property for their academic dissertations, the Hårga are shown to remove themselves from this conflict – prioritizing their own folk knowledge over academic knowledge of any kind. Most significantly, their folk knowledge dictates a set of rituals

that will allow the Hårga to establish the most important binary of all: by the end of the film, all protagonists save one will die as objects to the Hårga as objectifiers.

Dani, the female lead who managed to tag along with the male protagonists due to the death of her entire immediate family in America, is an odd one out. Gender aside, among the anthropology grad students, she is an undergraduate student majoring in psychology. And through analyzing the underlying psychological interplays depicted throughout the film, one finds a way out of the binary just like how Dani escapes the binary herself as the only outsider alive by the end of the film.

Firstly, the use of psychoactive drugs is prominently featured as a cultural practice of the Hårga. Upon their arrival, the protagonists all ingest mushrooms through the invitation of a young Hårga male. Later throughout the festival, hospitality of the Hårga dictates that all food and drink of the protagonists are to be prepared by the Hårga community-kitchen, which was implied to serve mysterious cultural dishes such as meat from untraceable origins. The precise number of times that the protagonists are drugged by the Hårga is therefore difficult to trace. This is further complicated by the fact that the Hårga may have partaken in the exact same psychoactive substances through sharing the same meals, in the sense that drugging the outsider is not their goal but simply sharing their cultural and communal co-intoxication. Still, Dani's boyfriend is shown to be drugged intentionally multiple times throughout the film. Upon being drugged for non-consensual mating, Dani's boyfriend escapes the bizarre ritual into a chicken coop where he is knocked unconscious again by an unnamed white powder. While these drug-related practices appear to form another layer of binary between the Hårga and the protagonists, the film's narrative dedicates moments to Dani participating in a similar routine of taking modern psychoactive substances. In the beginning of the film, she is shown taking anti-anxiety medication in response to her bipolar sister's ominous social media message. Even after witnessing the cruelties that the Hårga are capable of committing, Dani asks a fellow visitor for sleeping pills more than once amidst her precarious surroundings. In a nightmare sequence, she herself acknowledges the risk of taking sleeping pills as she could not catch up to the rest of her American peers driving off into the distance and leaving her alone with the Hårga. Modern society's analogous dependency on pharmaceutical psychoactives cannot be justified by the trauma that Dani has experienced, as the true owner of the sleeping pills is Josh - the student who is well-positioned to complete his doctoral degree. The absurdity of the Hårga's reliance on psychoactive

substances begins to dissolve as the director implants details of our parallel inclinations.

6. POLITENESS AND POLITICAL CORRECTNESS AS RITUAL

As the Hårga dedicate themselves to unnecessary rituals involving cruelty, a most significant blurring of the binary is revealed: the protagonists are shown to engage in unnecessarily cruel gaslighting against other human beings. Minutes into the film, the audience learns that Dani's boyfriend has been wanting to leave her for over a year - and has kept the appearance of a relationship to protect himself against potential regret. The boyfriend offers words of affirmative comfort to Dani, assuring her that her sister's message will not result in any negative consequences just so he could hang up the phone sooner and resume partying. Within minutes, Dani's sister has killed all of Dani's immediate family members. The boyfriend can be seen comforting a crying Dani as he looks nonchalantly into the distance. After Dani finds rare moments of sleep, her boyfriend uses the opportunity to leave her once again for a party.

Dani finds out about her boyfriend's plans for the Swedish sexcapade, and confronts him about purchasing plane tickets behind her back. He attempts to convince her that he has always wanted to invite her to the sexcapade with his friends as a surprise. Of course, that narrative is too absurd even for Dani who desperately needs someone by her side. The boyfriend uses her emotional weakness to his advantage, and suggests to Dani that he will leave the relationship permanently if she does not forgive him. This effectively threatens Dani into a series of her own apologies, during which she states: "I know I get paranoid...I just got crazy for a second". The labels Dani applies on herself seem less like ones which were conjured on the spot, but rather labels that her boyfriend has applied in the past so that her soliloquy can show submission to her partner's ongoing narrative for her. After the conversation, the boyfriend secretly turns to his travel buddies to prepare a collective lie that would convince Dani that they wanted her for the sexcapade all along.

Once with the Hårga, the gaslighting continues as the boyfriend forgets Dani's birthday (which he would have missed by pre-booking the trip) and then attempts to convince her he had not forgotten with a makeshift celebration. When Dani expresses concern about a female visitor who has been abandoned by her boyfriend, the boyfriend repeats his everything-will-be-ok narrative, this time with a different goal. He shuts

down Dani's attempts to communicate with him so he could continue to collect qualitative data from a Hårga member on the topic of cultural incest.

The gaslighting does not happen simply between these two characters. Josh, the graduate student who has a solid foundation on anthropology of the Hårga, helps Pelle create the illusion of the *ättestupa* being a regular summer festivity. The group is gaslighted into watching the full carnage of two elders committing suicide by throwing themselves off cliffs. Dani's boyfriend is not disgusted, but rather becomes inspired to do his thesis on the Hårga – and attempts to convince Josh that he has planned this topic all along. All the American students similarly gaslight all of the Hårga into believing that they are fine with the brutality of the *ättestupa*, perhaps out of respect for cultural difference, out of politeness, or out of their selfish desire to document the ritual for academic fieldwork. Josh proceeds to collect his own independent data for his thesis, and when turned down in his request to photograph religious scripture of the Hårga, he pretends to respect their boundaries in the moment but fashions a plan to take photos later that night.

Throughout the entirety of the film, all protagonists are committed to their politeness and political correctness as a parallel ritual that they must adhere to. The actions of the protagonists become almost predictable with the exception of one character, Mark, whose blunt honesty places him in the ostentatious role of the Shakespearean fool. Mark is simultaneously comedic relief and the victim in a Hårga children's game called *Skin the Fool*. The only character who neither cares about being polite nor politically correct is also the only one who does not engage in gaslighting out of his own volition. Yet in the eyes of both the Hårga and the American students, this same character is not virtuous but witless.

7. VICTIMS AS COMMODITY & CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AS PERFORMANCE

The protagonist's dedication to politeness and political correctness also informs their attitude towards victims. When Dani asks her boyfriend why he is not disturbed by the graphic deaths of the two elders, her boyfriend assures her that he is and states to her "that was really, really shocking!" A few scenes prior, however, he is shown to have completely calmed down enough to first

strategically declare ownership over the data with Josh, and then move straight onto charmingly conducting interviews with a few young women from the Hårga. He claims to Dani his attitude is based on keeping an open mind, and even cites self-reflexive research practices by comparing the modern American practice of letting the elderly die in senior homes. The more likely scenario is that Dani's boyfriend does not have an interest in helping neither seniors who commit suicide nor seniors abandoned in residences for care, but rather that the existence of these senior victims grant him what he wants: the appearance of caring enough to publish academically.

As the Hårga commodify victims towards a fruitful harvest and worship of the sun, the film invites audiences to consider the modern phenomena of performative allyship (Kutlaca and Radke 2023) and performative activism (Thimsen 2022). Victims are acknowledged but ultimately used for building a positive image of the self, whether this results in actual social standing within a community like the academic community that Josh and Dani's boyfriend aspire to enter, or, a digital persona on social media platforms which takes on increasing importance through the proliferation of screens in our society. Anyone who refuses to participate in pretending to care for victims amidst social injustices, like Mark, is sentenced to being the fool. In both cases of performance and non-performance, the key commonality is that the second half of critical consciousness is often missing: action against inequality is not taken, and victims are not tangibly helped. All that remains is strategic emotional expression that is no different from those put on by the Hårga, who cheer each other on towards colorful displays of anguish over victims they take no action in helping. In a particular scene, a member of the Hårga is shown to provide yew as an anesthetic to a young Hårga being prepared for sacrifice by fire. As the young Hårga later screams and wails in the flames, the audience learns that the anesthesia, too, was also a performance.

It is fitting then, for the protagonists to be a group of anthropology students, and that the entire film features a trip meant for academic fieldwork towards the study of human beings. In Sweden, these students would come to understand not the traditions of the Hårga, but themselves, and their own culture of modern performative allyship and performative activism. The foreshadowing of Pelle rings true, as he explains the entire festival to Dani before they leave for Sweden: "It'll probably seem very silly. But, it's like theater".

8. EXPLOITING VICTIMS, EXPLOITING GORE

Spadoni reviews much of the film's criticism arising from its graphic violence (2020); words such as "grotesque", "absurdity", "shock value" are used negatively by critics to describe this horror film. *Midsommar*, also described as "essentially exploitation fare" (Sachs 2019), paradoxically highlights how some individuals can exploit victims for their own entertainment. As an example, Mark missed the graphic suicides due to oversleeping, and was upset for not being woken up by his peers for the event. For the protagonists, their inaction towards helping victims does not signify neutrality, but exploitation. Having an opportunity to appear like they care through archiving the ritualistic deaths academically was more important than preventing said deaths.

Beyond highlighting the exploitative nature of performative allyship and performative activism, every graphic death of a protagonist also mirrors the modern social justice discourse. The very first death is that of Simon, a British youngster who was presumably killed for disrespecting the *ättestupa*. Killed in the fashion of the blood eagle (Frank 1984), Simon's death represents the element of air and the death of the *advocate*. Out of all the protagonists, he was the most vocal about the victims of the *ättestupa*. Although he did not cross the invisible screen to help the two elderly victims, after the ritual, he led his girlfriend to cross the boundary and directly confront Ingmar, the matriarch of the Hårga rituals. As much as the Hårga are dedicated to anti-classism and oneness, the Hårga must kill an advocate of victims of inequality - if the advocate stands in the way of Hårga's interests. Likewise, as serious as the Hårga are about anti-racism and decolonialism, they must kill the colored individual if he stands in their way. Josh, the only African American individual out of all visitors, was treated with respect until he was shown buried in the ground upside down with a decaying foot above the surface. His death represents the element of earth, and exposes how racial harmony and anti-colonialism upheld by the Hårga are likewise performances. After air and earth, Connie's death represents the element of water as she is shown to have died by drowning. Although the Hårga are distinctly matriarchal, they will also kill the feminine. Lastly, Dani's boyfriend is stuffed into the skin of a bear for the final sacrifice by fire. *Inaction* follows Dani's boyfriend to his death, as the film shows him completely paralyzed via Hårga drugging. Just like how he adhered to inaction in the face of all the victims before him, he himself is rendered incapable of even blinking throughout the process of his own victimhood

and death. After anti-classism, decolonialism, and feminism, the Hårga desecrate environmentalism via burning the animal to consummate their hypocrisy on all pre-established alignments with social justice. The four elements in conjunction with the four social justice themes seem to suggest gore is not randomly exploited, but meticulously crafted for this visual horror.

9. MIDSOMMAR AS SOCIAL JUSTICE DISCOURSE BEYOND ACADEMIA

Increasing recognition of performative allyship and performative activism is arguably driven by the participation of commercial interests (Spielmann, Dobscha, and Shrum 2023). Being in alignment with social justice interests comes with tangible benefits in modern society, including a camaraderie that can be converted and commodified into corporate profit. Performative critical consciousness is however not to be downplayed as an activity which private industry has monopoly over, but rather can be observed within ubiquitous internet activity which all members of the public can take part of (Halupka 2018); while not all such activism should be automatically attached with assumption of ulterior motives, the key is engaging young generations in critical dialogue regarding the potentially performative nature of social justice activity. There is increasing vocabulary noted by academics which reflect the fragmented but growing body of evidence on performative critical consciousness: greenwashing (de Freitas Netto et al. 2020), rainbow capitalism (Rine 2022), hashtag activism (Fohring and Horsfield 2023), and clicktivism (Cornelissen, Karelaia, and Soyer 2014) are but a few examples. The theoretical underpinning of Freire is pedagogical at its roots, and thus discourse on reorienting social justice back to its origins of serving the society over serving the self could be engaging for the public beyond academia. Films like *Midsommar* can be mobilized as such discourse brought to the masses via mass-media, one which not only stops at scholarly discussions on performative critical consciousness but directly presents its lethal horrors (Holmes 2020).

10. SEEKING TO APPEAR AS THE FOREVER SUN

The Shakespearean fool, Mark, is the only protagonist who is not killed in a ritual. The film shows an elderly male teaching Hårga children how to dissect and skin the bear in a serious lesson of cultural heritage. This de-skinning, or removal of the exterior facade appears as a

motif, as Mark was killed for a similar skinning in a Hårga children's game. Yet as the fool who had no interest in performative allyship nor performative activism, Mark was ironically the only source of truth in the film. He was the only character who accurately described what was happening to Connie: while the rest of the Hårga assured the protagonists that both Simon and Connie were able to leave the commune safely by car, Mark revealed that Connie was running for her life. Additionally, when all the protagonists meet a friendly local Hårga for the first time, Mark was the first and only one to negatively react to the presence of a new Hårga. This prompts Pelle to lie about their murderous intent, assuring Mark that "new people are good". As the source of truth, a skinned Mark also helps to defend religious truth of the Hårga even after his death: Mark's skin was donned by the spiritual figurehead of the Hårga to prevent Josh from successfully taking photos of the holy scripture of the Hårga.

Upon arriving in Sweden, Mark accurately predicts the true horror of *Midsommar*: it is not the Hårga, but the performative appearance of good that both the Hårga and the protagonists obeyed as dogma. Showered in gold sunlight at 9pm from the summer solstice, the fool offers his curt commentary on this forever sun: "That

feels wrong, I don't like that".

The film ends with Dani smiling, showered in the same gold light, much like the sun in the painting displayed at the very beginning of the film. The anthropomorphic sun dons the smile of a psychopath, while Dani likewise allows her face to be overtaken by the joy of seeing her boyfriend die. Earlier in the nightmare sequence, Dani feared being left behind with the Hårga while all her friends escaped in the middle of the night. Her greatest fear becomes her only reason to smile by the end of *Midsommar*, showing her complete transformation. Throughout the film, Dani has seen firsthand how the Hårga can put on a performative appearance of good in order to lure her friends for human sacrifice. Her ultimate self-identification with the Hårga shows that she is ready to embrace the true villain of the entire film all along: our common obsession with appearing as forever good. The horror is not that there are oppressors and victims; neither is the horror inherent in societal indifference to these realities. To expropriate critical consciousness for a facade which simultaneously conceals inaction while opening opportunities for self-profit - that, which lurks in the undercurrents of society, is the horror of *Midsommar*, the theology of modernity.

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