



COLOR, HORROR, AND THE UNCANNY: ARI ASTER'S USE OF COLOR IN *MIDSOMMAR*

FELICIA COSEY
JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY

Horror filmmakers capitalize on the inevitable fear and dread that darkness elicits, from *Alien's* (Scott 1979) Ripley walking down dark spaceship corridors to evade the monster, to *Us'* (Peele 2019) Adelaide/Red traversing the funhouse Hall of Mirrors that lead to the Tethered. Directors take advantage of the audiences' feelings of claustrophobia by coloring the *mise en scène* in darkness (see Chen, Wu, and Lin 2012 & Newman 2019). Ari Aster, however, uses a different approach. In his 2019 film *Midsommar*, Aster uses light—specifically, the 24-hour period of daylight from the Midnight Sun, a phenomenon that takes place once a year in the Arctic Circle—to create perhaps the most disturbing “breakup movie” to date.¹ The film's uncanny images characterized by intense light and bright colors—yellow, red, and green—create a foreboding dread. Brightness in every scene engenders dread of being exposed and watched, but unable to tell by whom. This dread stems from an awareness that behind the beautiful scenery and bright sunshine lies the most primal beliefs and instincts of humankind—the belief that death is necessary to beget life and renewal.

For Freud (2003, 132), the uncanny is defined by that which is familiar and homely, what he describes as *heimlich*, but was intended to remain secret or repressed. By coming to light, the uncanny appears to be both homely and unhomely, what Freud describes as *unheimlich*. Freud (2003, 124) notes “the uncanny is that species of frightening that goes back to what was once well

¹ Director/writer Ari Aster suggests the impetus for writing *Midsommar* was a recent romantic separation. He adds “I wanted to write a breakup movie because I needed to write a breakup movie, because I was going through a breakup” (Rapold 2009).



known and had long been familiar.” That which is repressed belongs to the “realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread” (Freud 2003, 123).

Scholars have regularly connected this notion of “the uncanny” to horror films. For example, critic Robin Wood identifies the uncanny in otherness. He writes, “otherness represents that which bourgeois ideology cannot recognize or accept but must deal with ... in one of two ways: either by rejecting and if possible annihilating it, or by rendering it safe and assimilating it, converting it as far as possible into a replica of itself” (Wood 2002, 27). This otherness Wood refers to is most prominent in *Midsommar*’s approach to racial anxieties and female independence.

PART ONE: HUES OF PASSION

For feelings of fear and dread to materialize, Aster juxtaposes Sweden’s *Midnight Sun* with the bluish-gray hue of an American winter presented at the beginning of the film. *Midsommar* starts with the death of Dani’s parents. Her sister Terri, suffering from bipolar disorder, kills herself and their parents through carbon monoxide poisoning. Dani leans on Christian, her boyfriend of almost five years for support. He, however, wants to end the relationship. One feels Christian’s dread as he walks in the evening snow to Dani’s apartment after learning of her family’s demise. He knows he cannot breakup with Dani because she needs him for support.

Christian and his friends Josh and Mark plan a summer trip to their friend Pelle’s commune in Sweden to observe the commune’s midsummer festival. Although it was initially a trip for Christian and his guy friends, he reluctantly, and to the dismay of Mark and Josh, invites Dani. To his friends, her presence dominates the trip not only because she hampers any sexual debauchery the guys had planned, but because her grief dampens their fun. Christian’s behavior in the commune, called Hårga, vacillates from caring boyfriend to treacherous philanderer. To illustrate this treachery, Aster uses warm hues such as yellow and red in the *mise en scène*.

A. YELLOW

Yellow is the prominent color in the midsummer backdrop of Hårga. This hue would seem appropriate for a commune that lives on subsistence farming and is isolated from the rest of its province, Hälsingland because yellow signals both sun and growth. It is a warm color because it reminds the audience of fire and flame (Fabri 1978, 28). But yellow is also an attention-getter because of its unforgettability and its deep saturate nature, thereby serving as a warning to



its viewer. In his chapter on the meaning of colors, Ralph Fabri (1978, 63) suggests yellow represents envy, treachery, and cowardice. In *Midsommar*, the viewer's first introduction to yellow is the flowers that lead the path to the Hårgan commune. Young members like Pelle have returned to the small community with their visitors, people referred to as "the new blood" by Hårgan leaders Siv and Odd. As the visitors walk through the forest and discuss Sweden's tick problem, Dani seems mesmerized by the yellow flowers that lead the way. This is a sign of the uncanny because the flowers inhabit the realm of both *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. The flowers are homely and inviting, but because *Midsommar* is a horror film, the flowers are unhomely as well, a harbinger of something bad. While they walk through the dense forest, discussing Lyme disease, the ground suddenly appears bathed in yellow flowers. The image is both beautiful and unsettling because while Mark and Christian focus on the hidden danger of ticks, the viewer understands there are greater dangers not yet seen. The yellow flowers along the pathway serve as both an invitation and a warning.

Every ninety years, the commune has a nine-day midsummer festival to celebrate the summer solstice, which is associated with the annual Midnight Sun. The festival's purpose is to purge all the community's sins. This is done when the Hårgans crown a new May Queen and sacrifice nine humans. The ceremonial sacrifice entails burning humans inside the sacred temple. At the end of the film, the viewer sees inside the temple the stuffed remains of four humans, killed by cult members earlier in the film, and two elderly Hårgans who committed suicide in a ritual called *Ättestupa*. Additionally, three living humans are placed inside and burned alive. The Hårgans offer up four of their own for sacrifice as well as four visitors. The May Queen then decides whether the ninth sacrificed will be a Hårgan or a visitor.

The yellow flowers leading the path to the commune serve as a warning for the visitors to turn back. Notably, even though yellow signals growth and the warmth of the Sun, it is also used as a symbol of warning. For example, yellow is used in traffic signs and signals to caution drivers, and the yellow aposematic coloration of bees and wasps warn predators to keep away. Yet, the beauty of the yellow flowers carpeting the ground leading to Hårgan lulls the visitors into believing the commune is safe and inviting. As they enter the commune grounds, they walk through a giant, pale yellow sunburst threshold made of wood. The visitors are greeted by Hårgans playing wind instruments. Some of the Hårgans hug them, offer them food, and take their luggage. The scene is quite enchanting, but also peculiar. Americans Mark, Josh, Christian, and Dani seem perplexed at the warmth they receive from the commune members.

The sacred temple, an A-frame building built of wood, is bright yellow, similar to a sunflower hue (see fig. 1). British visitor Simon asks his host Ingemar about the building. Ingemar responds that it is their sacred temple, and no one is allowed in it. This is not true because later Hårgans are seen putting the corpses of those sacrificed inside.



Figure 1. Sacred Temple, Pelle taking one of the human sacrifices inside (Midsommar 2019).

The yellow hue features itself prominently in the drinks consumed as well. Later in the film, Christian drinks a urine-colored potion during the May Queen competition, an event which consists of its participating maidens drinking a different yellowish drink, a tea laced with a hallucinogenic plant and then subsequently dancing around the maypole. Before drinking the yellow potion, Christian asks Ulla what's in the drink. She responds giddily that it is "spring water with special properties." She explains that the potion lowers one's defenses and opens the drinker up to influence. The ambiguous influence Ulla refers to is that of Hårgan Maja. Maja, a virgin, has chosen Christian to impregnate her, unbeknownst to him. Throughout his stay, Maja conducts a series of love spells on Christian, such as serving him a meat pie infused with her pubic hair. The spell and potion clearly work on Christian as he's drawn to Maja while watching the May Queen competition. Additionally, the potion liberates him from his previous obligations to Dani. With the consumption of the love potion, he casts off any guilt associated with his infidelity or ambivalence towards their relationship.



Dani is the last standing maiden and therefore wins the May Queen contest. Following the meal in the May Queen's honor, Dani, still disoriented from the hallucinogenic tea, is carried off in a yellow carriage drawn by the other maidens. The yellow potion and the yellow carriage illustrate the envy, treachery, and cowardice of Christian.

Christian is too cowardly to tell Dani how he feels about their relationship. His treachery can be seen when he pilfers Josh's thesis idea of studying the Hårgans' midsummer rituals, even though Josh has been researching European midsummer rituals for years. Christian is too lazy or intellectually deficient to find his own thesis topic. Finally, Christian is envious of the attention Dani receives from the Hårgans as the May Queen. She effectively becomes a Hårgan and leaves him behind. As the Hårgans celebrate Dani's win, Christian is notably conspicuous, dressed in outsider street clothes, while everyone else—including Dani—wears white. Even though the Hårgans commit horrific murders, the white seems to bathe them in wholesomeness, while Christian's street clothes paint him as an interloper. His envy, treachery, and cowardice drive him to engage in sex with Maja while Dani is away with the maidens. The yellow carriage that takes Dani away reminds viewers of Christian's unscrupulous character and forewarns them of what Christian will soon do with Maja.

Peeping through a keyhole, Dani is devastated when she discovers Christian and Maja having sex. Though disturbing, it is not surprising when May Queen Dani chooses Christian to be the ninth sacrificed human. The corpses of Mark, Josh, Simon and his fiancée Connie, as well as the two elderly Hårgans are placed in the sacred temple. Additionally, Hårgans Ulf and Ingemar enter the building as volunteer sacrifices. Finally, Christian—who cannot move because he's been given a paralytic drug—is sewn into a disemboweled brown bear and placed with the other sacrifices. The temple is set ablaze, and Ulf, Ingemar, and Christian are burned alive. Yellow flames engulf the bright yellow building. The film ends with Dani adorned in a mound of undulating yellow and green flowers, standing before the burning temple and smiling for the first time. Yellow is warm and inviting but in Aster's hands the visual serves as a warning and precautionary tale. The warning tells visitors that the Hårga commune is not what it seems. The precautionary tale is that envy, treachery, and cowardice will lead to one's demise.



B. RED

Like the color yellow, red is a warm color because it reminds us of fire and flames (Fabri 1978, 28). It indicates sex appeal. According to Patti Bellantoni, red “can activate your libido, or makes you aggressive, anxious, or compulsive. In fact, red can activate whatever latent passions you might bring to the table” (2012, chap. 1 Red the Caffeinated Color). The viewer sees these latent passions not only in Christian’s sexual encounter with Maja, but also in Dani’s response to his infidelity. First, she wails with rage and despair after witnessing them having intercourse. Dani’s maidens surround her and wail in unison with her. This scene is one of many illustrations of the Hårgans experiencing pain or passion collectively. The first is when the elderly man survives his leap from a cliff during the Ättestupa ritual. He is clearly in pain as he gasps for breaths. Community members wail as he suffers, until he is killed with a finishing blow to the head with a mallet. The second instance of collective emotions is when Christian and Maja have sex. Several older female Hårgans stand in the nude around the couple, chanting, and at times assisting the couple. It is as if Christian is not only copulating with Maja, but the entire community in that moment.

Most prominent, though, is the uncanny nature of red. Red, with respect to the body, represents both life and death. The dark red hue of blood reminds us of the precariousness of life. We know blood is used to carry oxygen and minerals to all parts of our body, and this function is necessary for our survival. When people see blood, particularly their own, they know there is a possibility of death if the bleeding does not or is not stopped. A gruesome example of this can be seen when Simon is killed by way of the blood eagle. Immortalized in Norse skaldic poetry, the blood eagle corresponds to a ritual that entails cutting the victim’s ribs from his spine and pulling his lungs through his back. The victim’s bloody lungs look like wings, which is why the execution is called the blood eagle. When Christian stumbles across Simon hanging from the barn ceiling, still alive but his lungs exposed, Christian, and the viewer, are horrified by the image. They know Simon’s time is limited as he will eventually die from blood loss or suffocation.

Menstrual blood is also referred to in *Midsommar*. Cult member Ingemar shows Simon and Connie a wall carpet, or tapestry, that foreshadows the events of Christian and Maja’s coupling. Several frames in the tapestry illustrate a woman using her menstrual blood and pubic hair to cast a spell on her love interest. Maja hides her pubic hair in Christian’s meat pie. She mixes her menstrual blood in the yellow love potion that Ulla gives Christian, the



potion that “opens him up to influence.” Just as iron bonds to protein to create the red hue in blood, Maja uses her menstrual blood to bond Christian to her.

Throughout the centuries, menstrual blood has been described as “the curse.” Yet it also holds power in some cultures. As Alma Gottlieb (2020, 146) argues, the mysterious nature of menstruation, as based in Judeo/Christian and later Islamic religions, enables menstruation to become subject to taboos. This is because menstrual blood differs from venous blood in that it comes solely from one part of the body, starts and stops flowing on its own accord, and is only associated with one type of biological body. Denise Malmberg explains that 19th-century Swedish farming societies viewed menstrual blood as having magical powers. It was called “the red power” (quoted in Dahlqvist 2018, 41). Anna Dahlqvist (2018, 41) elaborates by suggesting that menstrual blood “had a special status in the supernatural imagination” in early Swedish farming society, “and could be used both to cure and to bewitch, not least as a kind of ‘love potion.’” This explains why what seems perfectly natural for Hårgans, a pagan cult living on subsistence farming, is horrifying for a spectator steeped in Judeo/Christian beliefs. What seems like familiar, monthly menstrual flow, suddenly becomes uncanny because of its use as a means to bewitch and seduce.

After Christian and Maja have sex, she looks different, more mature, more matronly and less maidenly. An intricately embroidered red vest is added to her white tunic, and she wears blood red lipstick where before she wore no lipstick at all (see fig. 2). Her new appearance seems to confirm what she affirmed earlier after Christian ejaculates inside her. She says to one of the Hårgan women standing around her and Christian during sex, “I can feel it. I can feel the baby.” It is at this point the color red comes full circle in the film, from death to menstrual blood to entry into womanhood to the creation of life.



Figure 2. Hårgan Maja after sex with, and impregnation by, Christian (*Midsommar* 2019).

C. GREEN

According to Ralph Fabri (1978, 63), “green generally means hope, the color of spring, the renewal of life, feed for animals, and thus, food for humans.” The *mise en scène* in *Midsommar* shows this renewal: a coming of life. Dani experiences the first inklings of renewal when she consumes psychedelic mushrooms upon her arrival in Hårga. Green grass appears to grow through her hands. This sequence foreshadows Dani’s future in the commune. She will inevitably find her new home and new family in the Hårgans, and thus, the green grass welcomes and literally integrates her into the community.

However, green can also have ominous meanings. In medieval folklore, green represented the Devil, dragons, and fairies (Robertson 1954, 472 & Vries, 1976, 228). As Dani, Christian, and his friends drive along the Swedish highway, the trees surrounding them give the viewer a foreboding and disorienting feeling, which is heightened as the camera pans upside down in a wide shot (see fig. 3). Surrounded by forests, Hårga seems bathed in green. While enchanting, the forests also create a barrier between Hårga and the outside world. This barrier enables them to remain hidden, open only every ninety years when they need new blood. The “new blood” is necessary not only for human sacrifices but to expand the commune’s gene pool. The gene pool is open to those of Nordic features, i.e., White and blond. Therefore, where green can symbolize growth and rebirth, in *Midsommar* it is growth and rebirth for those deemed white. Consequently, green in Hårga embodies racial separation.



Figure 3. Upside-down wide shot of highway as American visitors and Pelle enter the province of Hälsingland (Midsommar 2019)

The viewer's first indication Hårga is a dangerous place is the banner hanging over the highway that reads in Swedish, "Stoppa massinvandringen till Hälsingland," which translates to "stop the mass-immigration to Hälsingland" (see fig. 4). The danger lies in an outsider's feelings of hostility from the locals. Consequently, for the Black American spectator, this image may seem reminiscent of warning signs posted for Blacks in sundown towns in the US.²



Figure 4. Anti-immigration banner, which is upside down in the scene, that the American visitors of Hårga drive under (Midsommar 2019).

² Sundown towns in the US are towns where only White people may reside. People of color are allowed to work in these towns, but they must leave before sundown.



In *Midsommar*, the green hue signals renewal of Scandinavian heritage, a heritage threatened by black and brown invaders. Aster was quite deliberate in his use of contemporary politics as a backdrop to the film. In an interview he stated the following:

There are politics woven into the periphery of this film — we’re talking about contemporary Sweden, we’re talking about Swedish history, especially during the Second World War and European history in general, and again, America is not exempt from the kind of thing I’m talking about ... Even if you look at the visitors and how they’re used or not used, how they’re either discarded or used before being discarded. There is intention behind even the casting of our visitors. (McGrew 2019)

The anti-immigration sign, not only a political sign, lets Black and Brown visitors know they are not welcome. The viewer of color feels a sense of unease at Simon, Connie, and Josh’s presence in the commune, who all fall under this racial identifier. These visitors are far away from a major metropolitan city such as Stockholm and the presence of some cultural diversity. As the only people of color, they stand out in the commune and are vulnerable to racial violence.

PART TWO: HUES OF RACISM

During *Midsommar*’s production, a notable mainstream political figure made it acceptable to articulate in public feelings that were typically spoken in private, feelings of racial animus. A few weeks into his term as President of the United States, Donald Trump told his supporters at a rally, “you look at what’s happening last night in Sweden ... Sweden. Who would believe this? Sweden. They took in large numbers. They’re having problems like they never thought possible” (quoted in Ringstrom and Mason 2017). Swedish officials were perplexed by Trump’s proclamation because there was no event at the time in Sweden involving immigrants. Trump would tweet the next day: “my statement as to what’s happening in Sweden was in reference to a story that was broadcast on @FoxNews concerning immigrants & Sweden” (quoted in Ringstrom and Mason 2017). Two days earlier, the network had aired an excerpt from a short film about the alleged rise in immigrant-related crime in Sweden, which at the time had “accepted more refugees per capita than any other European country” (Becker 2019).

The hostility towards immigrants for some Swedish citizens may be rooted in their family-oriented cultural discourse. Swedish citizens pay some of the highest taxes to further the notion of “folkhemmet,” or people’s home (Becker 2019). Their dominant cultural discourse views the country as a family, and as



a family, everyone has the responsibility to take care of each other. This is achieved through publicly-funded social programs such as free health care and education for all. Many Swedish citizens believed immigrants were taking advantage of these policies and were not deserving of benefiting from them. The rise of the number of refugees from Syria and Iraq, welcomed by the Swedish government, evoked for many the senses of fear and dread, loss and a threat to national heritage, sovereignty and culture.

Midsommar's Hårgans slavishly hold on to Scandinavian traditions, using a variant of the Swedish language called Older that is based on its runes rather than the variant called Younger. They only bring outsiders, "new blood," into the commune to reduce inbreeding or for sacrifices. Hårgan Valentin explains to Christian: "bloodlines are very preserved. The elders must approve mates. Cousins can sometimes mate, but we do respect the incest taboo ... so we often need to invite outside people."

The dread from the brightness of the unending summer day and the feeling of being exposed get heightened for the viewer when it comes to Black American Josh. Josh's skin color presents itself not only as a stark contrast with the commune's population around him, but also as the very marker that identifies him as the target of his hosts' racism and animus toward the other. The sense of dread is further exacerbated by the depiction of Josh as wholly unaware of not only his outsider status but also how it is precisely his skin color that renders him the outsider. Alert viewers experience the very anxiety at Josh's precarious acceptance by the commune that they wonder why Josh himself is not experiencing this same anxiety.

Josh and the other visitors of color succumb to the most brutal deaths, while the blondest characters live on to propagate Hårga. Josh is bludgeoned in the head and dismembered. Simon, played by British Nigerian Archie Madekwe, is given the blood eagle. In a deleted scene Connie, played by Ellora Torchia, a British actress of Indian and Italian heritage, is discovered drowned. Dani, a White American, on the other hand, sitting on her green throne of leaves that shimmer and undulate from her very touch, is reborn as leader of the commune. The uncanny upside-down wide shot of trees surrounding a Hälsingland highway, and the anti-immigration sign, are divinations of the things to come: the Black and Brown visitors will be fed to the commune.

The uncanny is that repressed something which comes to light and creates a sense of dread. Ari Aster taps into that light by using colors that should elicit hope and promote life, but instead unearth the very worst of humanity. While the hue yellow can represent warmth and revitalization from the Sun, it also symbolizes envy, treachery, and cowardice. Red activates sex appeal, but that desire can cause pain and irrationally based consequences, both psychological



and physical. Finally, green epitomizes rebirth. Yet, that rebirth can be based on a fantasy that never existed. Even though they attempt to stay the hands of time and remain in an era that never existed, the Hårgans recognize they must venture outside their commune to acquire new blood. This new blood bleeds into their reality and therefore must be cauterized, cut off, so that the fantasy of a Swedish utopia can live on.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

- Aster, Ari, dir. 2019. *Midsommar*. New York City, NY: A24 Films, 2019. Blu-ray.
- Becker, Jo. 2019. "The Global Machine Behind the Rise of Far-Right Nationalism." *The New York Times*, August 10, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/10/world/europe/sweden-immigration-nationalism.html>.
- Bellantoni, Patti. 2012. *If It's Purple, Someone's Gonna Die*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis Kindle.
- Chen, I-Ping, Fang-Yi Wu, and Chih-Hsiang Lin. "Characteristic Color Use in Different Film Genres." *Empirical Studies of the Arts* 30, no. 1 (January 2012): 39–57. [doi:10.2190/EM.30.1.e](https://doi.org/10.2190/EM.30.1.e).
- Clover, Carol J. 1993. *Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Princeton classics. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton university press.
- Dahlqvist, Anna. 2018. *It's Only Blood: Shattering the Taboo of Menstruation*. 1st. London: Zed Books.
- Fabri, Ralph. 1978. *Color: A Complete Guide for Artists*. New York: Watson-Guption Publications.
- Freud, Sigmund, David McLintock (trad.), and Hugh Haughton (ed.). 2003. *The Uncanny*. Penguin classics. New York: Penguin Books.
- Gottlieb, Alma. 2020. "Menstrual Taboos: Moving Beyond the Curse." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, edited by Chris Bobel, Inga T. Winkler, Breanne Fahs, Katie A. Hasson, Elizabeth A. Kissling, and Tomi-Ann Roberts, 143–62. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.
- McGrew, Shannon. 2019. "Interview: Writer/Director Ari Aster for MIDSOMMAR - Nightmarish Conjurings." Accessed August 26, 2021.



<https://www.nightmarishconjurings.com/2019/07/03/interview-writer-director-ari-aster-for-midsommar/>.

Newman, Kim. 2019. "Demons by Daylight." *Sight & Sound* 29 (8): 46–49. [https://search-ebscohost-com.ecnhts-proxy.jsums.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=hlh&AN=137316827&site=ehost-live](https://search.ebscohost-com.ecnhts-proxy.jsums.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=hlh&AN=137316827&site=ehost-live).

Peele, Jordan, dir. 2019. *Us*. New York, NY: Universal Pictures, Film.

Rapold, Nicolas. 2009. "Community Building." The Pre-Show. *Film Comment*, 6.

Ringstrom, Anna, and Jeff Mason. 2017. "Trump Baffles Sweden with Crime Comment, Says It Was Based on TV Report." *Reuters Media*, February 19, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-sweden/trump-baffles-sweden-with-crime-comment-says-it-was-based-on-tv-report-idUSKBN15Y0QH>.

Robertson, D. W. "Why the Devil Wears Green." *Modern Language Notes* 69, no. 7 (1954): 470–72. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3039609>.

Scott, Ridley, dir. 1979. *Alien*. Los Angeles, CA: Twentieth Century-Fox, Film.

Vries, Ad de. 1976. *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery*. Amsterdam: North-Holland.

Wood, Robin. 2002. "The American Nightmare: Horror in the 70s." In *Horror, the Film Reader*, edited by Mark Jancovich, 25–32. In focus--Routledge film readers. London, New York: Routledge.

SUGGESTED CITATION: Cosey, Felicia. 2021. "Color, Horror, and the Uncanny: Ari Aster's Use of Color in *Midsommar*." *PopMeC Research Blog*. Published November 2.