

Of Other Homes

Creating Space for Belongingness in *Midsommar*

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ABSTRACT

Using Michel Foucault's concept of "heterotopias" (other spaces) and "heterochronies" (other times), this essay argues that space and time are essential to understanding Ari Aster's *Midsommar*. It examines how Aster uses Hårga's bygone civilization as a counter-space of deviation that exists outside of modernity. Aster's spatiotemporal filmmaking techniques serve to visualize the heroine's journey of finding a place to call home. The Swedish village creates a heterotopic space that allows her to belong. Hårga becomes an *other home* for the film's protagonist.

"There's no place like home." – Dorothy, *The Wizard of Oz*

Ari Aster's *Midsommar* (2019) remaps the construct of home by exploring the seasonal nature of identity, community, and family. *Midsommar* is a female coming-of-age film that borrows from fairy tales and folk horror myths. Told in broad daylight, the narrative follows the white American heroine Dani (Florence Pugh) as she travels to an all-white Swedish village with her boyfriend (Jack Reynor) and his anthropologist friends (Will Poulter, Vilhelm Blomgren, and William Jackson Harper) to partake in a pagan midsummer festival. Set against this all-male group, Dani is seen throughout the film as a female outsider who is socially detached from others and emotionally estranged from her boyfriend. While Dani's toxic relationship with Christian is on the brink of collapsing, the death of her biological family keeps them together momentarily as they travel abroad. Upon their arrival in Sweden, a grieving Dani is spatiotemporally transported to a pastoral land that exists outside of modernity. The trip enables her to enter a faraway commune that is drastically different from her home back in the United States. Over the course of the film, Dani begins to see Hårga as a magical place—somewhere over the rainbow.

Aster uses "movement" as a filmmaking aesthetic to display Dani's dislocation and alienation as a displaced white woman with no family or home (Giannetti 95). Camera movement, character movement, and visual effects movement serve to visualize Dani's emotionally unstable state of being. According to Louis Giannetti, the technique of "moving the camera enhances three-dimensional space" because it immerses viewers into the shot's space (117). This movement of the camera, combined with the flow of bodies, locations, objects, or frames per second within the composition, creates what Gilles Deleuze calls the "movement-image" (Deleuze 2). It helps to see the movement-image as an "imaging-of-movement," reframing the term as a verb rather than as a noun (Vitale). From this angle, movement-images report the world in motion through visual artistry. Thus, filming modern Americans within Hårga's bygone civilization accentuates current tensions about belonging. *Midsommar* displays how movement-images establish an important link between the actor and the environment in a "costume film" (Deleuze 163). Aster's movement-images displace viewers by showing Dani move through this ancient space that uses sets, wardrobes, and rituals to indicate a former time. Studying



Fig. 1 | Car en route to Hårga, 00:24:38. A24, 2019.

Midsommar through this Deleuzian lens focuses attention on how movement can present anxieties and fears happening now in the global imaginary.

Movement-images visualize Dani's "no sense of place" and lack of belonging (Appadurai 29). Arjun Appadurai accounts for such displacements by using the suffix of -scape: "Technoscapes" (flows of technology), "mediascapes" (flows of media), "financescapes" (flows of capital), "ideoscapes" (flows of ideology), and "ethnoscapes" (flows of people). Appadurai's anthropological framework helps moviegoers understand the ever-shifting viewpoints, ever-changing relationships, and ever-surprising contradictions found within a globalizing environment. To Appadurai, today's "imagined worlds" are rootless and constantly in flux (33). In addition to the death of her parents and sister, the age of modernity uproots Dani, making her feel neither here nor there. She is seen utterly devoid of forming national attachments to her country, social attachments to her community, or sexual attachments to her boyfriend. Instead, she must travel from America's multiracial and multicultural heterogeneous society to Sweden's monoracial and monocultural homogeneous society. Unlike the diversifying nature of modern America, whiteness connects the Hårga people because they are a civilization that has carefully preserved the bloodline of their Northern European heritage. Aster uses geographic displacement and cinematic movement as storytelling techniques to illuminate how identity, geography, and anthropology relate to the film's theme of finding a place to call home.

Hårga becomes an *other home* for Dani that disrupts the time and space of modernity. Building on Michel Foucault's concept of "heterotopias" (other spaces) and "heterochronies" (other times), Aster has Dani move through both space and

time to gain a sense of belonging (Foucault 26). In "Of Other Spaces," Foucault contests the traditional notion of linear time, asserting that concepts of time have been understood in various ways, under varying historical circumstances. Foucault's idea corresponds with how people understand spaces over time. Unlike a "utopia" that Foucault describes as an unreal space, a heterotopia is an actual space that is impacted by culture (24). According to Foucault, all cultures are heterotopias. Foucault postulates that a heterotopia is a "simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live" (24). These counter-spaces of deviation are bound together because they are all outside of the ordinary, containing a disruption of time and space.

In *Midsommar*, the Swedish village serves as a heterotopic space that allows Dani to spatiotemporally move into a community that treats her like family. The cinematography echoes Foucault's theory and foreshadows Dani's journey when the group is en route to Hårga. As they drive towards the isolated commune in the province of Hälsingland, the camera flies over the car and flips upside down once it reaches the other side of the vehicle (Fig. 1). This one-hundred-eighty degree drone shot displays that they are entering a strange counter-space that will upend Dani's world and turn her life around. Aster uses his camerawork to comment on anxieties and fears that have been heightened by global flows. This is especially evident in the preceding upside down shot where the car is seen driving underneath a strategically placed road banner. Translated from Swedish, the sign reads "Stop mass immigration to Hälsingland," which aligns with the Hårga people's worldview of securing and preserving their white culture in today's global era.



Fig. 2 | Americans take psychotropic drugs, 00:29:06. A24, 2019.

The narrative follows Dani as she moves from the United States to Hårga and from the present to the past. As Foucault suggests, heterotopias have both a disrupting spatial dimension and an unsettling temporal dimension. Since heterotopias are “often linked to slices in time,” they often arise from an “absolute break with their traditional time” (26). Aster develops this heterochronia by having the film centered around the celebration of midsummer. This holiday time ruptures normal time by providing a special occasion that exists outside of contemporary festivities and everyday activities. It is also crucial that the group’s arrival date at Hårga coincides with Dani’s birthday. Traditionally, holidays and birthdays are celebratory moments in time that are spent at home with family. However, Aster challenges these conventional ideas of time by having Dani enter a foreign terrain and time with no familial connections. Christian forgetting Dani’s birthday illustrates that, in addition to having no sense of place, Dani has no sense of time. Dani’s most basic temporal relationship with the world is treated as unimportant and insignificant to those closest to her.

Aster particularly sheds light on Giannetti’s, Deleuze’s, Appadurai’s, and Foucault’s ideas during the liminal scene right before the group officially enters Hårga. Upon their arrival, the Americans all take psychotropic drugs together under Sweden’s midnight sun (Fig. 2). Bolstering Foucault’s notion of a heterochronia, this twenty-four-hour period of sunlight disrupts the characters’ and spectators’ perception of time. As the heterotopic scene progresses, Dani begins to experience panic-stricken anxiety from the mushrooms once Mark (Will Poulter) says “You guys are like my family.” Emotionally impacted by the drugs and Mark’s reference to family, Dani undergoes a bad trip. Aster subjectively presents Dani’s hallucinatory experience from her

altered perspective. The steadicam single take follows Dani as she stands up and walks away from the group. Simultaneously, Aster uproots the shot and creates a fluid camera movement that makes the wondrous natural landscape appear somewhat surreal because nothing in nature moves this way. Tracking her actions, the digital Panavision Millennium DXL2 camera moves a full three-hundred-eighty degrees. This three-hundred-eighty degree movement-image showcases the instability that Dani brings to the already unstable nature of the global era. In addition to the physical movement produced by the camera and character, Aster uses visual effects to digitally move Dani’s surroundings. This digital movement created through modern post-production technology immerses viewers into Dani’s subjectivity by distorting environmental elements and warping human faces. The tripping visual effects become fully exaggerated when Dani races toward a nearby outhouse. As the effects become more pronounced, spectators get to experience Dani’s heightened sense of disorientation firsthand. Aster uses various cinematic movements to express the liminality of Dani’s Othered state of being.

Aster’s exploration of heterotopias and heterochronies culminates once Dani enters the shadowy outhouse. Looking at her own reflection, Dani imagines seeing her dead sister in the mirror (Fig. 3). Once she glances over her shoulder, her sister disappears and Dani is left looking in the mirror as the digital movement of the visual effects begins to deform her face. This subjective over the shoulder shot illuminates how the film’s aesthetic use of movement mirrors Dani’s relationship with space and time. Foucault’s theory explains the deeper significance of Dani’s reflected gaze because he postulates that a mirror serves as the ideal example of a heterotopia. According to Foucault, a



Fig. 3 | Dani imagines seeing her dead sister in mirror, 00:32:13. A24, 2019.

mirror is a “placeless place” that disrupts one’s spatial relationship with the world by converging real and unreal spaces (24). Foucault writes that the mirror “makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there” (24). Similar to Foucault, Aster believes mirrors allow people to redefine the space they inhabit as heterotopic. When Dani looks into the mirror, she is looking at a version of herself that is surrounded by both an existent and nonexistent environment that suspends her in space. Aster has repeatedly framed Dani’s on-screen movement within mirrors beforehand. She is seen through the looking-glass three times prior to either grabbing her Ativan medication, talking to Christian’s friends, or crying in an airplane bathroom. However, what makes this last mirror shot in the outhouse so unique is the inclusion of Dani’s sister. Visualizing her no sense of place or time, the mirror shot shows Dani inhabiting a placeless place that spatiotemporally exists neither here nor there. In this liminal moment, Dani is seen moving in-between different places, times, and cultures. She has reached a turning point in her crisis where she must create space for belongingness.

Echoing the film’s unconventional approach to space, Dani’s ending does not mirror the traditional final girl horror movie archetype or return home fairy tale trope. As her fellow male tourists are killed off by the Hårga people, Dani instead finds a strange sense of belonging in this community. Unlike folk horror films like *The Wicker Man* (2006), fairy tale horror films like *Suspiria* (1977), or fairy tale fantasy films like *Alice in Wonderland* (1951) and *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) that all villainize matriarchies and Otherize places, *Midsommar* shows

Dani happily staying in the Swedish village. The conclusion borrows and unsettles popular genre conventions that act as spatial remnants of the past. During her journey of self-discovery, she is welcomed with open arms by the Hårga people and appointed their May Queen. She finds elation as her uncaring boyfriend burns alive alongside his dead friends in a sacrificial rite that preserves this white culture and heritage. Viewers stay with Dani as the fiery shot of the temple dissolves into the hazy image of her beaming with pleasure (Fig. 4). The liminality of this visual transition signals Dani’s emotional transformation. Framed in a close-up shot, what Deleuze calls an “affection-image,” Dani’s smiling face conveys her inner experience of catharsis (Deleuze 70). She watches joyfully as the yonic-shaped temple burns to the ground, symbolizing her rebirth. The spring flowers that make up Dani’s crown and dress reinforce this notion of being born anew out of the ashes. In the end, she is depicted as a European matriarch in the making. Her identity, community, and family are all seen in the process of becoming before the film cuts to black. Dani’s pilgrimage speaks to the fluidity of imagined spaces, communities, and worlds.

Midsommar uses geographic displacement and cinematic movement to illuminate Dani’s search for a place to call home. Aster’s aesthetic application of movement creates a complex sense of place and time by moving the audience into a heterotopic space. The visual movements, the spatio-temporal ruptures, and the genre subversions all contribute to the film’s unsettling conclusion. By showing Dani at home in Hårga, Aster challenges the typical fear embodied by horror movies that Otherize foreign terrains. The film disrupts the classical female fairy tale trope of traveling to a fantastical elsewhere only to escape and return home with a newfound sense



Fig. 4 | Dani is appointed the May Queen, 02:22:18. A24, 2019.

of enlightenment. *Midsommar* reimagines how viewers look at space, time, and genre by having the white protagonist convert to this pagan ideology rather than returning to American modernity. Unlike Dorothy (Judy Garland) who finds refuge with her biological family in Kansas, Dani is seen finding a new home

abroad. As Aster said himself, the film is “a *Wizard of Oz* for perverts” (Handler). While Dani’s journey to Hårga may be more convoluted and disturbed than Dorothy’s trip back from Oz, the sentiment still remains exactly the same. There’s no place like home. ■

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