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‘Once upon a *Midsommar*...’: Nature, nationalism and the Swedish folkloresque

ABSTRACT

This article examines Ari Aster’s 2019 folk horror film, Midsommar, in the context of Swedish ethnonationalist ideologies and their connections to environmental and cultural preservation. Reading the film through Michael Dylan Foster and Jeffrey A. Tolbert’s concept of the folkloresque, I draw correlations between its structural, fairy tale framing and manipulation of folkloric imagery in order to interrogate its deliberate representations of cultural and historical inauthenticity. Further, this article analyses Midsommar’s transnational milieu and its narrative emphasis on the ambiguous traditions and rituals of the rural Swedish commune, the Hårga, to argue that the film gestures towards a nostalgic appropriation of folkloric culture which highlights the ethnonationalist, anti-immigrant agenda of the far-right in Sweden. Midsommar thus provides a generative space for illuminating the complex relationship between folk tradition, nature and ethnic homogeneity at the intersections of environmental preservation and Scandinavian/American politics.

KEYWORDS

folk horror
 ethnonationalism
 popular culture
 folklore studies
Midsommar
 environmental
 preservation
 cultural continuity
 transnationalism

In Ari Aster’s 2019 horror film, *Midsommar*, a group of American doctoral students are presented with the opportunity to travel to Sweden for an extended stay over the summer. One of them, Josh (William Jackson Harper), intends to research the remote and rural commune of the Hårga. Home to

their Swedish friend, Pelle (Vilhelm Blomgren), the Hårga is a small and seemingly idyllic village, whose harmonious denizens practice the ancestral customs and traditions of their culture. One of these traditions is the midsummer celebration which occurs only once every 90 years and honours many of the sacred practices native to the area and its people. The film is perhaps most widely recognized in the horror genre as one which lays out all of its scares 'in broad daylight' (Chang 2019: n.pag.), and, to be sure, most of the Hårga's horrors are made apparent throughout the course of the midsummer festivities. Nearly all of these daytime terrors are implicated in the Swedish commune's numerous traditional practices which are shown to be increasingly disturbing and ultimately gruesome as the film's narrative unfolds.

Though undeniably shocking and unsettling, these purportedly ancient cultural traditions have ambiguous origins and obscure real-world justifications, the dubious quality of which can be identified as what folklorists Michael Dylan Foster and Jeffrey A. Tolbert term 'the folkloresque' or 'popular culture's own (emic) perception and performance of folklore' (Foster 2016: 5). The apparent cultural traditions of the Swedish Hårga likewise evoke a semblance of folk customs and practices but have no distinguishable or material roots through which we might trace those theorized origins. The manipulation of the folkloresque makes *Midsommar* a particularly critical space for grappling with the cultural commodification of both folkloric and environmental values. Perceptions of and interactions with the environment have historically been critical to folk culture in Scandinavia; more recently, environmental conservation efforts (particularly in Sweden) have been enmeshed with the commodification of eco-spaces in the form of ecotourism as well as the resurgent right-wing nationalist ideologies of the twenty-first century. Sweden's political divisions of late are thus made palpable through this conflation and expropriation of nature and folk tradition within the film, owing much to the longstanding motif of landscape in the folk horror genre to which it belongs.

In this article, I propose that *Midsommar* is particularly suggestive – and critical – of a kind of nostalgic appropriation which capitalizes on the ambiguous nature of the folkloresque in the film, gesturing towards an alternative agenda centred around ethnonationalist and anti-immigrant ideologies. That nature is romanticized as a space of 'purity' in this nostalgic reorientation likewise highlights *Midsommar's* entanglement with such cultural anxieties and points to Sweden's long history of associating a 'return' to nature and the landscape with an idealized notion of ethnic uniformity. I also laterally draw out the narrative implications in the structure of the film, which itself is framed as folktale and implements numerous recognizable conventions of the classic fairy tale. This constitutive framing employs a distinct treatment of folk horror which draws upon similarities with Adam Scovell's (2017) framework of the genre, while also expanding transnationally to explore Anglo-American conceptions of foreign folk culture.

Further, *Midsommar's* self-conscious reliance upon a pre-established cultural understanding of folk horror gestures towards a hauntological mimicry of 'looking back' at that which is at once recognizably familiar and unidentifiably displaced. As a principal example of the twenty-first-century folk horror resurgence, the film builds upon recognizable conventions of the genre while acknowledging new nationalist ideologies, blurring points of origin both in cinematic genre and in the rise of white supremacy movements globally. Ultimately, I argue that *Midsommar* underscores a sentimental longing for the pre-immigration era of racial homogeneity in Sweden through the ossification

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1. and reconfiguration of folk horror, articulating and dramatizing the complex
 2. schema of nostalgic nationalism, folklore and nature.
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5. **SHROUDED IN FOLKLORE, FRAMED IN FAIRY TALE**

6. In an article in *Foreign Policy*, Swedish archivist Tommy Kuusela broadly inter-
 7. rogates the function of the folkloresque in *Midsommar*, as well as in other
 8. recent horror films like *The Ritual* (2017) and *Let the Right One In* (2008), to
 9. argue that folkloric Scandinavian horror in the twenty-first century is on the
 10. rise. He contends that

11.
 12. While these movies may seem to be based on real folklore traditions
 13. native to Scandinavian countries, for the most part they’re anything but.
 14. What they are instead are creative amalgamations of folklore elements
 15. from around the world (and some that are entirely made up), designed
 16. to appeal to a global – and globalized – film audience.

17. (2021: n.pag.)

18.
 19. Kuusela recognizes this commodification and performance of impressionistic
 20. folklore in Ari Aster’s film, which, as a product of the folkloresque, is ‘imbued
 21. with a sense of “authenticity” [...] derived from association with “real” folklore’
 22. (Foster 2016: 5).

23. The film’s overall treatment of the Hårga and its people teems with evoca-
 24. tions of the folkloresque, such as the ritualistic observance of two elderly
 25. commune members committing suicide by jumping off of an *ättestupa*, or preci-
 26. pice. Though one of the other elders assures the panicked outsiders that it is
 27. a ‘long observed custom’ of theirs, this allegedly ancient ceremony has been
 28. proven to be primarily a modern misapprehension, itself based on an Icelandic
 29. legend (Odén 1996). The obscurity of the commune’s ancestral origins also
 30. extends to a sacred book, the *Rubi Radr*, which is part of an allegedly larger
 31. corpus of the Hårga’s scripture. Another more gruesome instance of purported
 32. tradition is the flaying and disemboweling of Simon (Archie Madekwe),
 33. another of the American visitors, in a ritual that is again seemingly reminiscent
 34. of the ‘blood eagle’ sacrifice attributed to the Vikings in Scandinavia. Like the
 35. senicides, though, this too has been written off as being derived from Icelandic
 36. legend; Roberta Frank notes that ‘[h]istorians have long ceased to treat Icelandic
 37. sagas as reliable sources for the viking [*sic*] age’ (1984: 334). As a final example,
 38. the film suggests that one of the commune’s mating rituals involves serving a
 39. drink with one’s own menstrual blood, as well as a pastry baked with pubic hair,
 40. to their desired mate—practices associated with witchcraft that, while reportedly
 41. documented in places like seventeenth-century Italy (Watt 2010: 676), certainly
 42. do not correlate with any authentically historical Swedish customs.

43. But whether or not these purported traditions have any authentically
 44. derivative cultural origins is beside the point, at least in terms of Foster and
 45. Tolbert’s folkloresque. Foster distinguishes the concept as separate from
 46. what we might call folkloresque’s predecessor, *fakelore* (proposed by Richard
 47. Dorson), in that the latter is primarily concerned with ‘whether something is
 48. spurious or genuine, fake or real’ (Foster 2016: 8). The folkloresque instead
 49. seeks to understand how and why certain products of popular culture feel
 50. folkloric, and consequently engages with the significance of such evocations.

51. It is critical here to point out the folk horror tradition from which
 52. *Midsommar* emerges, as the folkloresque and folk horror are inextricably

connected in the film and in the broader discourse of folklore studies overall. Scovell's framework of folk horror demarcates the genre's use of folklore 'either aesthetically or thematically' to evoke 'a sense of the arcane', as it creates 'its own folklore through various forms of popular conscious memory' (2017: 7). His 'unholy trinity' of folk horror – *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971), *Witchfinder General* (1968) and *The Wicker Man* (1973) – establishes some of the most fundamental attributes of the genre, namely the notions of landscape, isolation, a 'skewed' morality and the climactic narrative event which he terms 'the happening' (Scovell 2017: 17). *Midsommar* faithfully incorporates all four of these traits: the carefully selected landscape of rural Sweden; the fact of Dani's (Florence Pugh) physical and emotional isolation from her boyfriend, Christian (Jack Reynor) and through the loss of her immediate family; the Hårga's outdated practices and belief systems; and lastly, the build-up towards the film's violent and fiery climax.

Situated within the resurgence of folk horror in the 2010s and on, *Midsommar* also joins a number of recent films contributing to the expansion of the genre transnationally. Other contemporary folk horror examples include Robert Eggers' *The Witch* (2015), set in seventeenth-century New England; Valdimar Jóhannsson's *Lamb* (2021), taking place in rural Iceland; and David Bruckner's *The Ritual* (2017), which features a group of British friends on a hiking trip in Sweden. In these and in many other contemporary folk horror films, the folkloresque is especially pervasive and haunting, as it places established folk horror motifs in the context of less familiar and deterritorialized locales and landscapes. Exploring the overt correlations between the folkloresque and *Midsommar*, I extend Kuusela's intervention and Scovell's outline of folk horror through the film's engagement with the mimicry of 'authentic' folklore – and, consequently, to interrogate how these manifestations of the folkloresque are implicated in (and inseparable from) identifiably Swedish interpretations of nature.

Midsommar's opening shot fittingly contains one of the most evocative of folkloresque motifs in the film: a still-frame illustration of continuous narrative art (an illustration or image of multiple narrative scenes within a singular frame, with no demarcating or bordering lines to indicate transitions) which depicts the entirety of the film's storyline and its characters' respective trajectories (Figure 1). The flower imagery, fluid lines and foliage on the illustration's scrollwork borders are reminiscent of *kurbitsmålning*, a form of decorative folk art from eighteenth-century Sweden (Anon 2000: 19). That the painting is redolent of traditional Swedish folk art is, of course, a deliberate and manufactured association, as the illustration was uniquely produced in this evocative style for the film itself. This opening sequence offers a literal framing through which the embodied sense of 'feeling' folkloric is tangible in the first few seconds of the film.

Coupled with the romantic, non-diegetic sounds of arpeggiated strings, this illustration doubly serves to conjure an image of the fairy tale prologue in specifically detailing the character progression of Dani, the film's female protagonist. Indeed, some of the most defining characteristics of the fairy tale narrative are particularly discernible in *Midsommar*, where they naturally gesture to the film's structural ties to folklore. While some scholars like Laura Hubner (2018; see also Dokou 2017) have pointed out the fairy tale's amenability to employing horror tropes in cinematic adaptations, few have surveyed the inverse, instances when the horror film itself proves rather accommodating to fairy tale convention. Author Mikita Brottman explores this unique correlation

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Figure 1: Narrative tapestry at the opening of the film, *Midsommar*, A24, 2021.

in a chapter that reads *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) through a fairy tale framework, arguing that ‘the horror film [...] relies for its innate symbolic resonance on the structure of the fairy tale’, which is ‘controlled by a mythic order and a ritual narrative script’ (2005: 107–11). While the terms ‘mythic’ and ‘ritual’ are used rather loosely, Brottman further points out that *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* ‘begins with a fairy tale warning’ (2005: 109) that frames the film as a true account – a cinematic device that seems to echo *Midsommar*’s invocation of the folkloresque, implying a presumed authenticity to the folkloric traditions presented throughout the narrative.

The film’s overt manipulation of fairy tale conventions might be most readily perceived through Dani as the bona fide ‘rags-to-riches’ heroine of the story – even completing the picture with a full costume transformation in which her baggy, casual ensemble is ultimately replaced by an extravagant gown of colourful flowers (and a crown to boot), marking her status as the Hårga’s ‘May Queen’. After this impromptu coronation, a Cinderella-like carriage adorned in flowers is even drawn up for Dani, which carts her around the commune for various celebratory activities afterwards. Aside from this overt visual fairy tale imagery, *Midsommar* also underscores Dani’s trauma – the loss of both her sister and her parents in a murder–suicide – as a primary catalyst for her trajectory as the protagonist of the film. These catalytic deaths form the ‘inciting incident’, which is demarcated as the necessity of ‘absentation’ in the family, a critical function of the folk/fairy tale in Vladimir Propp’s foundational *Morphology of the Folktale* (1968: 26). Along the same lines, Brottman draws on the semantic comparisons between the fairy tale and the horror film in observing that ‘[m]ost fairy tales deal in one way or another with family relationships’ (2005: 120). To read *Midsommar*, then, as the same sort of ‘inverted fairy tale’ to which Brottman refers would appear to be less of an imaginative undertaking and more of an intentional arrangement on the part of the film itself.

The integration of the fairy tale structure further suggests a degree of self-awareness in the film regarding its own engagement with the folkloresque. Folklorist JoAnn Conrad identifies the same brand of self-awareness in the

fairy tale genre, which she calls ‘a genre that overtly and self-consciously rejects any claim on reality; a form that revels in its own artifice and resides in the realm of the marvelous’ (2018: 258). This characterization of the fairy tale also mirrors Scovell’s delineation of the folk horror genre, where he writes that

Folk Horror, whilst often appropriating various aspects of folkloric themes and aesthetics (as well as history itself), is never all that fussed with a genuine, accurate recreation of folklore. It instead plays it through broad-stroke ideas which, in a populist medium, often build into genuine forms of rewrites of history and culture [...] As long as it retains just enough essence of recognisability to work, it can be both an uncanny validation in the Freudian sense and an enjoyably horrific realisation.

(2017: 29)

Although Scovell’s folk horror model surprisingly does not address Foster and Tolbert’s notion of the folkloresque, it speaks to the idea of a conscious artifice that is present in both the fairy tale and in folk horror. That *Midsommar* seems to play with both genres is, I argue, an almost unquestionably cognizant configuration which depicts the Hårga – for all its claim that it is built upon the traditions of its longstanding folk culture – as a space of inherent inauthenticity.

Indeed, the film *wants* its manipulation of the folkloresque to be recognized, just as much as it desires to be perceived as a facetiously re-framed fairy tale, for in its narrative artifice arises the equivocal and unstable relationship between the contemporary, constructed perceptions of nature and the Swedish nation-building project.

NATURE, NOSTALGIA, ETHNONATIONALISM

Indeed, while Brottman’s assertion that both the fairy tale and the horror film ‘[work] to universal dimensions’ (2005: 113) is somewhat opaquely generalizing, *Midsommar* does frame itself within a multiplicity of milieus that firmly anchor the film in a specific, yet ambiguously constructed, Nordic tradition. Following Scott Harshbarger’s essentializing observation that fairy tales are often understood to be set in places ‘where normal frames of reference don’t easily apply’ (2013: 491), the film spares little time in making the transition to rural Sweden. Representing ‘the preindustrial, agrarian pastoral’ (Wolfe 2021: 211), the Hårga offers a fitting socio-environmental space for displacing the Anglo-American gaze far enough that the commune’s social conventions and traditions are understood as foreign and strange. At the same time, Wolfe writes that *Midsommar*’s viewers immediately encounter

Recognizable cultural images: flower crowns reminiscent of Coachella music festival garb, the fields and rustic buildings of whimsical fashion editorials, and outdoor meal table-settings straight from the bohemian-hipster wedding handbook. The film speaks to its millennial audience and tempts it to fall in love with its monster and experience its danger.

(2021: 210–11)

In this way, *Midsommar* works to effectively shroud itself in the folkloresque, emphasizing and playing with both the familiar and the unfamiliar through folkloric pastiche.

1. Within this folkloresque framing, the film also integrates traceable corre-
 2. lations between nature and Swedish national identity. Helen Andersson
 3. remarks that, since the nineteenth century, 'nature was considered to consti-
 4. tute the basis of democratic nationalism' wherein the 'Swedish landscape and
 5. scenes from the Swedish folk life [...] became key signifiers' in Swedish iden-
 6. tity-making (2019: 585). Continuing, Andersson writes that in the twenty-
 7. first century, despite tensions between varying conceptualizations of Swedish
 8. nation-building, there emerges a

10. strong ethno-nationalism characterized by ideas of cultural conformity
 11. and social cohesion [...] At the same time, the role that nature plays
 12. in Swedish national identity has remained largely unchanged, in turn
 13. giving the sense that [the qualities of] pureness, openness, and fairness
 14. [remain] a core value of this new 'Swedishness'.

15. (2019: 587)

17. This kind of collective, identifying attachment to the land and nature mirrors
 18. the tendencies of classic folk horror to, in Scovell's words, build upon a 'sense
 19. of rurality' which necessitates that a community's 'livelihood is derived from
 20. the land' (2017: 82).

21. Film scholar Robert Spadoni makes a similar observation to Andersson's
 22. in his essay, 'Midsommar: Thing theory', in which he notes the efforts of the
 23. Swedish 'right-wing, populist' agenda 'to reclaim and revitalize its national
 24. heritage by casting a nostalgic eye to folkloric traditions' (2020: 711). Spadoni
 25. also identifies another one of the film's most obvious allusions to the ongoing
 26. re-emergence of ethno-nationalist sentiment: 'an early scene in which a book,
 27. *The Secret Nazi Language of the Uthark*, can be seen on a coffee table cluttered
 28. with items' (2020: 711). In the film, Josh, whose graduate research included a
 29. reading of the book, later identifies the same referenced language carved into
 30. a large stone in the Hårga. Fabricated as it is, this association establishes an
 31. indisputable link between white supremacy and the longstanding traditions of
 32. the commune, setting the stage for expanded correlations between Swedish
 33. nationalist ideology and the appropriations of nature and folk culture.

34. It is additionally no coincidence that Josh would be the one to identify
 35. this connection, being both highly educated and Black, and notably the only
 36. non-white member of the American group of visitors. His academic back-
 37. ground positions his character as directly opposed to the highly guarded,
 38. folkloric traditions of the Hårga, effectively playing out the enduring binary
 39. of 'academic knowledge versus folk knowledge' in the film (Wolfe 2021:
 40. 218). That the Hårgan stores of knowledge are framed within the binary of
 41. the traditional nature/culture divide reinforces the social construction of the
 42. commune as the 'idealized pastoral'; this dichotomy is again arguably reiter-
 43. ated when the Hårgan elders explicitly forbid Josh from 'visually recording
 44. folk knowledge and tradition' by taking photographs of the Rubi Radr on his
 45. phone (Wolfe 2021: 219).

46. The nature of Josh's Blackness further marks him as a threat to the safe-
 47. guarded customs of Swedish folk culture and, by extension, the ethnically 'pure'
 48. and homogeneous white society. Although sociologists Catrin Lundström and
 49. Benjamin R. Teitelbaum note that many Nordic countries have adopted 'colour
 50. blindness' regarding race 'in an effort to achieve a postracial society', the effect
 51. is more troubling than progressive. Especially in Sweden and Norway, these
 52. efforts result in an ideology that perceives race 'as a distraction, a fictitious and

unscientific concept that erects artificial boundaries between people' (2017: 153–54). Ironically, independent researchers have observed that 'Nordic societies appear to have an appreciable level of racial segregation' when compared to their western counterparts (Lundström and Teitelbaum 2017: 154). To be sure, despite the Hårga's superficial treatment of Josh as no different than the other Americans who came with him, his role as the apparent 'meddler' of the group ultimately leads him to a particularly grisly end, further suggesting that the possibility of mixing different ways of knowing, looking and *being* is a risk that the Hårga is not willing to take.

Ethnographer David Kaminsky observes that certain right-wing political movements, such as those of the Sweden Democrat Party, have conceived of such threats against cultural essentialism well into the twenty-first century with the belief that 'there must be a Swedish culture and there must be immigrant cultures, and for them to bleed together is problematic' (2012: 87). Sweden Democrats have also historically appropriated Swedish folk tradition as a part of their nationalist movement; Kaminsky points out that their agenda proposes 'increased government spending for the preservation of pre-industrial Swedish folk traditions, effectively ceding those traditions to an anti-immigrant party platform' (2012: 82). The film further exhibits an awareness of Swedish anti-immigration sentiment with an inverted shot from the perspective of the car as the Americans first drive into the Hårga, where a banner hanging above the road reads upside-down and in all capital letters: 'Stoppa massinvandringen till Hälsingland – rösta på Fritt Norr i höst [Stop mass immigration into Hälsingland – vote for Fritt Norr this autumn]' (Wiberg 2019). Josh's educated status in conjunction with his Blackness therefore make him an especially malignant threat against which the paradigms of ethnic purity and folk knowledge must be protected. Indeed, when he sneaks out at night to take pictures of the Rubi Radr after being expressly forbidden to do so, he is killed with a primaeval weapon, striking him accordingly on the head.

The film's culminating sequence, wherein nine bodies (most already deceased but a few still living) are ceremonially burned in a sacrificial offering inside a yellow wooden temple, simultaneously completes the 'Folk Horror Chain' as defined by Scovell (2017: 15–19) and solidifies the commune's white supremacist convictions. In his own example, Scovell uses the pilot episode of the BBC series *Play for Today*, 'Robin Redbreast' (1970), to describe the emblematic 'landscape mechanism' of folk horror. He writes that the show foregrounds an 'isolated village in the vast, rural landscape, harboring an old cultish religion that requires a violent sacrifice [...] leading back into the landscape and, in a sense, *for* the landscape' (2017: 64). A tradition intended to purge the village of evil, the sacrifice in *Midsommar* appears undiscerning in its sacrificial choices, such that the bodies consist of the murdered visitors and two select locals. However, the only other female sacrifice is Connie (Ellora Torchia), one of the two British visitors who vanishes early on in the film following the disappearance of her partner, Simon (Archie Madekwe). From one perspective, it could be argued that the British couple's hasty, unseen disappearance points to the shrinkage of patently Anglocentric folk horror amidst the genre's contemporary expansion on a global scale, that their deaths in themselves signify the always-already nature of folk horror existing elsewhere and outside of British landscape and culture. But even more critical to the film's location in the folk horror tradition is the presentation of Connie and Simon as the only other people of colour, aside from Josh, who are visiting the commune. When positioned against Dani – white, blonde-haired and light-eyed – Connie

1. represents the very kind of female body that cannot be assimilated into the
 2. all-white commune, much like Josh, due to his own Blackness along with his
 3. academic background. She especially threatens the hierarchical white feminist
 4. structure of the Hårga, which seemingly allocates most of the power to the
 5. elder (white) women, as evidenced by Siv, the commune's apparent matriarch.

6. Indeed, folk horror's outward preoccupation with whiteness and female
 7. authority has been touched upon somewhat broadly in the field but remains
 8. a tangential point at best. Scovell offers little in the way of examining the
 9. intersections of race and gender, remarking with a certain nebulosity that
 10. 'modern Folk Horror films can be extremely visceral because of their ques-
 11. tioning of complex political conundrums involving class, the treatment of
 12. women, and other issues' (2017: 175). One scholar, Amy K. King, explores
 13. some of these unmapped social and racial implications embedded in the
 14. distinctive figure of the 'white witch' in her essay on monstrous white femi-
 15. ninity in relationship with Black subjectivity (2017: 564). Building on Barbara
 16. Creed's theory of feminine abjection in horror, King writes that the repre-
 17. sentation of white monstrosity depicts 'white dominance as abjection. The
 18. past is always bleeding into the present [...] [and] threatening the present
 19. with its violent whiteness' (2017: 564). Similarly, *Midsommar* draws upon the
 20. recognizable image of the 'white witch' in Siv – and in other female charac-
 21. ters like Maja, who selects and seduces Christian as her desired mate – to
 22. render palpable the power structures which exclude people of colour. Beyond
 23. the issue of exclusion, the film also marks that Connie and Josh, the two
 24. non-white bodies, are effectively recycled as fodder in the commune's sacri-
 25. ficial offering 'for the landscape', in Scovell's words. Figuratively and physi-
 26. cally manipulated into serving the values of the dominant white community,
 27. Connie and Josh furthermore exemplify the threat of the foreign Other which
 28. must be effectively stamped out for Swedish folk culture and ethnonational-
 29. ity to thrive.

31. MYTHIC NATURE, FABRICATED FOLKLORE

32. The ways in which the Hårga creates and perceives its own folk tradition,
 33. such as the processes involved in writing the Rubi Radr, additionally shape
 34. the imagining of folk values and Swedish ethnic purity. All of the Hårga's
 35. scriptures are interpretations of the drawings contributed by their designated
 36. 'oracles' who, as one of the elders proudly states, are 'deliberate products of
 37. inbreeding' – the most recent of which is shown to have a mental disability as
 38. well as some other physical malformations. That these proclaimed clairvoy-
 39. ants are said to be 'unclouded by normal cognition' and thus more enlightened
 40. than others – a rather common tradition that equates cognitive disability with
 41. divine knowledge and sight – would suggest a rather morbid gesture towards
 42. the perceived superiority of racial purity in the film. The circumstances of
 43. this heightened mental state, resulting directly from inbreeding, also appear
 44. to be a direct reference to Swedish ethno-nationalist programmes, which
 45. are 'directed towards strengthening the nation by making it more ethnically
 46. homogeneous' and 'by returning to traditional values', according to sociolo-
 47. gists Gabriella Elgenius and Jens Rydgren (2019: 584). *Midsommar* thus satir-
 48. izes this ethno-nationalist paradigm by realizing the 'creation' of the oracles
 49. as extreme, hyperbolized manifestations of ethnic homogeneity.

50. The overt caricaturizing of the Hårga and its traditions might further
 51. be read as a corrupted envisioning of a 'utopic' Sweden which has
 52.

successfully returned to the idealized pre-immigration era of contemporary ethno-nationalist movements. Dawn Keetley similarly acknowledges the parodic nature of *Midsommar* and suggests that the Hårga commune is '[offered] up [...] as a satirical commentary on environmentalism', considering that its 'uniformly white' (2020: 271) inhabitants 'live by the tenet that humans are fundamentally intertwined with nature' (2020: 269). *Midsommar*'s emphasis on the commune's racial uniformity thus inherently correlates with white environmentalism, an exclusionary discourse of environmental awareness and belonging which privileges whiteness over other racial and ethnic identities. Grounded in the notion of perceiving wilderness and nature as pure, protected ecological spaces, white environmentalism is recognized as the most 'mainstream' variation which remains, as Abby Hickcox writes, 'an exclusionary white and middle- or upper-class social institution' (2018: 502). In this way, the Hårga epitomizes a self-established, white environmentalist space whose members pride themselves on their longstanding folk traditions, connections with nature and white homogeneity – all of which successfully and intentionally separate them from the Other.

Scholars like Kaminsky and Andersson who comment on these political connections also acknowledge the conception of nature as a protected landscape, itself imagined as a point of return for Swedish cultural continuity. This construction of nature as inherent to folk culture is keenly explored in Jonah Hultman and Erika Andersson Cederholm's 'The role of nature in Swedish ecotourism':

The fusion of [folk] culture and nature, implied by the notion of the Origin, raises the expectation of a tacit and inherited knowledge among local people of how to preserve and cultivate nature [...] Knowledge of nature and traditional culture is not only regarded as inherited, but also as mysterious and essentialist.

(2006: 80–81)

To this end, protecting an emblematically 'Swedish' nature also necessitates that it be fundamentally intertwined with folk tradition, such that both folk culture and nature are perceived as important signifiers of Swedish national identity and therefore should, and must, be preserved. Conrad likewise identifies the Scandinavian North as a socio-geographical space where 'nature and [folk] culture mix freely [...] not constructed by but constituted of culture, and by a similar logic tales from the North naturally emerge from the environment' (2018: 257). Out of this fusion of nature and folk culture emerges a 'discourse of conservation' which 'actively contributes to the protection of nature and safeguards cultural values' (Hultman and Cederholm 2006: 79). That these cultural values are envisioned as a path to 'cultural continuity' is certainly quite close to the anti-immigrant sentiments which constitute the ideal of ethnonationalism. To protect Swedish culture and tradition, therefore, is to also protect the natural environment from which it is inextricable and from which it springs forth.

Ultimately, this framing results in an equivocation between nature and folk culture in ethnonationalist discourses which, paradoxically, results in a frequent observation that Swedish folk culture is itself a fabrication. Swedish musicologist Lars Lilliestam, for instance, is reputed to have once said the following in response to the Sweden Democrat Party:

1. There has never been and there never will be anything that is genu-
 2. inely Swedish. Because cultural things [...] [change] over time, and that
 3. means if you designate something as ‘genuinely Swedish’ you’re making
 4. yourself responsible for some kind of historical fabrication.

5. (Kaminsky 2012: 84–85)

6.
 7. To envision Swedish culture as inherently contrived would seem verifiably
 8. detrimental to an ethno-nationalist ideology built upon the tenets of glorify-
 9. ing the authenticity of that very folk tradition. However, the construction of
 10. folk culture is instead an avenue of opportunity *for* the nationalist agenda. As
 11. Kaminsky writes, ‘the notion of a self-contained Swedish ethnic identity and
 12. tradition’ would imply that ‘there is nothing to stop conservatives from reap-
 13. propriating that currency’ (2012: 84). Elgenius and Rydgren also agree on this
 14. account, writing that ‘[r]adical right-wing parties share an emphasis on ethno-
 15. nationalism rooted in myths about a shared history and cultural continuity’
 16. (2019: 584). The idea of a ‘shared history’ founded upon ambiguous points of
 17. origin echoes Hultman and Cederholm’s claims and, in turn, envisages the
 18. perceived authenticity of a Swedish national heritage as ‘an essentialist image
 19. of cultures and natures preserved and of time standing still’ (2006: 80).

20. *Midsommar* similarly works within this fabricated sense of timelessness
 21. in its treatment of the folkloresque. The Hårga is not only spatially removed
 22. from urban society, but it also imitates, reproduces or outright invents a vari-
 23. ety of purportedly ancient cultural traditions which stem from anywhere and
 24. nowhere, anytime and outside of time all at once. Indeed, the genre of folk
 25. horror universally seems to maintain this exact hauntological structure, which
 26. Scovell describes as ‘[mimicking] this idea of looking back, where the past and
 27. present mix and create horror through both anachronisms and uncomfortable
 28. tautologies between eras’ (2017:10). He goes on to further argue that ‘Era and
 29. temporality are linked by esoteric, inexplicable events; things that unnerve
 30. through a sheer recognisability of darker ages that are beginning to reoccur.
 31. Folk Horror, the horror of “folk”, is out of time and within time’ (2017: 10).

32. Mythographer Marina Warner, too, invokes a similar motif of ‘imaginary
 33. place and imaginary time’ in the classical fairy tale template, demonstrat-
 34. ing that the lingering and recursive natures of the fairy tale, folk horror and
 35. the folkloresque collectively build upon and unfurl from one another (2018:
 36. 28). In this undefined and hauntological milieu, *Midsommar* correspondingly
 37. establishes itself as unplaceable and untraceable, its narrative seemingly far-
 38. removed from any realities we could possibly determine.

39. But in this imaginary space, fragmented truths emerge in between the
 40. lines of the folkloresque that gesture to the nationalist yearning for an apothe-
 41. osis of ethnic homogeneity: the fabricated paradigm which itself is propped
 42. up by conflated authenticities and stores of folk knowledge embedded and
 43. obfuscated in nature. The nascent ethnonationalist movement nostalgically
 44. longs to return to the pre-immigration Golden Age of the early twentieth
 45. century notably marked by an ‘absence of foreign ethnic minorities’ (Elgenius
 46. and Rydgren 2019: 591); yet at the same time, there exists the argument that
 47. there is no ‘old Sweden’ to which anyone can expect to return in the first place,
 48. that ‘boundaries of nation and genre have always been porous’ (Kaminsky
 49. 2012: 84).

50. *Midsommar* provides a generative space for critically examining the complex
 51. relationships between Swedish folk tradition, nature and ethnic homogeneity,
 52. integrating the folkloresque and drawing on conventions of the fairy tale in

the popular imagination to consider what a place without multiculturalism might look like – and just how horrific one could imagine it to be. This exploration gestures towards numerous parallel dialogues which contemplate how we might properly, and ethically, support endeavours to preserve traditional folk knowledge and the natural environment. Hultman and Cederholm significantly comment upon the always-already troubled association between the two, observing that one of the many emergent responses to climate change ‘is a discursive and material race to define the last white spots on Earth’ (2006: 80). It comes as no surprise, then, that in the context of the film and broader ecological discourse, ‘the last white spots’ refer chillingly to more than environmentalism alone.

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