



In-Between Discipline And Control: Ari Aster's *Midsommar* As An Allegory For Hypercapitalist Society

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ABSTRACT

Horror's disruptive quality in that it continually demonstrates how the monstrous and evil circulate, invading complacent individuals, turning them into what they think as their opposites. This means that horror films possess a potential to show people that there is a possibility that the evil of the primal and primitive resides behind the veil of moral superiority and intellectual achievement of the modern world. Ari Aster's horror film entitled *Midsommar* (2019) exploits the metaphorical power of the horror in revealing how the archaic is actually in the possession of the modern/"cultured"/"civilized". The film is a reflection of the monstrosity of the systems that govern the contemporary society—a hypercapitalist society that is in-between Disciplinary Society and the Society of Control; Society of (Semi-)Control. This study mainly draws from Deleuze, Foucault, and Neo-Marxists. Data is collected by using observation method. As for data analysis methods, this study utilizes formalist technique called close reading and then apply the theoretical frameworks in an accordance with the methodological implications found in them. It is found that the narrative and visual elements of the film allegorically depict crucial aspects of a Disciplinary Society, Society of (Semi-)Control, and hypercapitalist society. The film unveils the oppressive and repressive nature of late-stage capitalism and Society of (Semi-)Control. This is shown through the customary suicide of old people because they are assumed to have past their productive years in a ritual called *ättestupa*; the strict division of labor; the deliberate reproduction of disable people; and the restriction to express one's ownership of personal pain and sadness could be interpreted as elements that construct an allegory for a hypercapitalist society. Moreover, through its heroine, Dani, *Midsommar* also explores the process of how Disciplinary Society transforms into Society of (Semi-)Control.

Keywords: Horror, Hypercapitalism, Disciplinary Society, and Society of (Semi-)Control

INTRODUCTION

The term 'elevated horror' or 'prestige horror' entered the public discourse after the release of critically acclaimed films such as Robert Egger's *The Witch* (2015), Trey Edward Shults' *It Comes at Night* (2017), Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017), and many more.¹² The usage of term indicates that it is a new version for films previously labelled as 'arthouse horror'. There is a sense of dismissiveness in the term toward most horror films. Elevated horror heavily implies that the vast majority of horror films are not "elevated", hence could be seen as nothing more than empty spectacles unworthy of serious attention. As the name for a sub-genre, elevated horror seems to be conceptualized based on the perceived artistic and

intellectual merit of certain horror films, which is impractical and reflects an ambition for cultural hegemony of the people who coined and welcome the term. Consequently, it created quite a stir in the world of cinema. A number of non-academic film critics see the term as problematic and exuding an elitist sentiment aimed at establishing an arbitrary line between highbrow and lowbrow horror cinema.³ However, while the term is very questionable and can be easily dismissed as an attempt to institutionalize certain cultural authority, films categorized as elevated horror normally differentiate themselves from mainstream horror films—especially those produced by giant studios in Hollywood—in regards to how they utilize horror tropes and imageries. “Typical” horror films produced in Hollywood function primarily as a source for escapist entertainment with a limited trace of cultural and political awareness. This is in accordance with the main reason of their production; as commodities for generating profit. In order to fulfil this purpose, Hollywood-made horror films need to abandon ideas that challenge the status quo. Ideas that provoke their audience to re-evaluate their sense of morality and conception of the world would minimize the films’ ability to tap into their audience’s primal fear that is responsible for the production of escapist pleasure. Hence, they often use tropes such as ‘underdeveloped minority characters’, ‘promiscuous girls die earlier’, and ‘death by sex’ that only reproduce internalized and institutionalized anti-black racism, misogynistic belief, and puritan phobia respectively.

In contrast, elevated horror films are said to veer from mere regurgitating horror film tropes for the sake of instant entertainment. Unlike stereotypical horror films, elevated horror films are seen approvingly for their (perceived) intellectual ambition along with its social and political awareness. Peele’s *Get Out*, for instance, could be interpreted as a film that offers an allegorical exploration and social commentaries on the subject of cultural appropriation. The film presents an intimate look at the paralyzing effects of the colonization of a marginalized group’s culture by people from the dominating culture. It shows that cultural appropriation is the equivalent of reducing a complex individual into their exteriority, erasing their multifaceted identity, and then presenting them in a monolithic image created by a prevailing oppressive group. Similarly, *Antichrist* (2009)—a film directed by a renowned arthouse director, Lars von Trier—could be construed as a site for meditation and a provocative artistic expression that invites its audience to contemplate on the enduring nature of misogynistic discourse in a patriarchal society. Despite its heroine’s literacy and academic involvement on the subject of misogyny, she ultimately succumbs into misogynistic beliefs after struggling with navigating her grief and guilt.

Apparently, a sweeping generalization regarding the philosophical, social, and cultural importance/unimportance of elevated horror and “typical” horror films requires a more persuasive argument than a couple of assertions. Moreover, as claimed by Derrida (in Lucy, 2004: 12), deconstruction disturbs the authority of the “is”. This means that all texts (including films) are subjects to a deconstructive force. There is no text that has not already deconstructed its own totality. Based on this, a favourable interpretation that highlights elevated horror’s social and cultural importance due to its assumed enlightening qualities could be put into question. For example, Peele’s *Get Out* could be criticized for its monochromatic portrayal of cultural appropriation phenomenon. There is a case to be made about the absent of complex interaction between the metaphorical victims and perpetrators of cultural appropriation in the film. On the other hand, since subjectivity is a part of interpretation and a text cannot fully control how readers or audience formulate/interpret it, a typical Hollywood-made can be more than a source of mindless escapist entertainment for certain individuals. Thus, arguing for or against elevated or mainstream horror’s intellectual merit appears to be an unfruitful endeavour.

The fascinating part of the emergence of the term elevated horror and its implications rests on their potential to incite discussions about the nature of the horror, the connection between the horror and pleasure, and questions about the effectiveness of the horror as a tool for communication. As problematic as it is, elevated horror’s implied dismissal of the majority of horror films as, at least, escapist is not based on pure fantasy. According to Francis (2013:15), fear is horror’s main ingredient whose value as commodity is indisputable, which could be observed in how it is marketed in haunted houses, advertisement, books, TV series, and films. He (2013: 11) also claims that “the horror genre exploits fear unlike any emotion that other genres try to elicit in viewers”.

Perhaps it is the immediacy of fear and the pleasure associated with it that make fear as one of a few capitalists’ favorite commodities to exploit. It has an extremely visceral quality that seems to speak directly to its audience’s primal mind. The directness of fear in horror films is magnified by the physical

elements frequently used by the genre. Badley (1995: 11) says that horror is “the most physiological of genres—with the possible exception of pornography”. Fear is so immersive that it momentarily dissolves The Self into a formless entity, unaware of its existence. There is a pleasure in being able to quickly disappear into a void. As suggested by Cioran (1993: 106), nothingness is very likely to be our home instead of exile. This is probably why fear or, to be exact, its effect could give birth to certain type of pleasure. In addition, pleasure generated by fear in horror films might be caused by the fact that there is a realization that the inevitable danger implied by the fear is not real. Thus, what left are only thrilling and exciting experiences.

The qualities of fear seem to prohibit horror films from stimulating non-primal reactions from their audience. Yet, the type of horror films labelled as elevated or arthouse horror proves the opposite. Horror films have the ability to venture beyond merely providing their audience with momentary pleasures.

The material and the sensual consistently employed in horror films can become commanding forces in regards to making audience take a few steps back and reassess their belief system or conception of the world. This idea is related to the way humans think and reason. According to Kövecses (2010: 7), “our experience with the physical world serve as a natural and logical foundation for the comprehension of more abstract domains”. In other words, humans heavily rely on metaphors in understanding unfamiliar or new ideas and concepts. Lakoff and Johnson (in Kövecses, 2010: x) state that metaphor is used “...to understand certain concepts...”, and it is “...an inevitable process of human thought and reasoning”. Since metaphorical language and thought emerge from humans’ empirical experiences—as proposed by cognitive linguists,⁴ the physiological nature of horror films makes it as one of better mediums to communicate certain ideas to their audience or provoke their audience to ruminate on certain ideas.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1 Data Collection Method

The data collection method of this study is observation method. Faruk (2012: 168-169) states that observation method is conducted through observing all of texts related to the main object of the study as required by the chosen theoretical framework. The primary object of the study is Ari Aster’s *Midsommar*. Hence, it is a requirement that this study collects the data from the film. Narrative elements such as characters, diction, plot, themes, settings, symbolism, and point of view found in the film are some of the data that will be employed as the main objects of analysis. However, since film has a distinctive feature from literary works, this study must consider cinematic languages such as frame, shot, scene, camera angle, color filter, foley as the other primary data to be analyzed. Furthermore, due to the fact that this study treats the film as an allegory (extended metaphor) for a phenomenon that exists in the reality, this study will have to include secondary sources that are related to the phenomenon such as texts discussing the phenomenon in details.

2.2 Data Analysis Method

In analyzing the film, this study will apply formalist concept of ‘close-reading’ in order to be able to translate the literary devices and cinematic languages used in the film. According to Guerin *et al* (2005: 93-94), close reading or intensive reading requires sensitivity regarding the denotative, connotative, complex, and multiple meanings of words in a text. Context becomes of a crucial significance in close reading. Having an extended knowledge about words used in a text or certain parts of a text as well as willingness to explore the labyrinthine path to meaning(s) that a text suggests are the foundations of close reading. For example, a bright filter is usually employed to communicate happiness, bliss, or freedom in a film. Nevertheless, the contextuality of language, including cinematic language, opens the possibility that the bright filter could mean the opposite of happiness, bliss, or freedom.

After conducting the ground level interpretation by using close reading, the analysis will move on to the discursive content of the film, exploring how and to what extent it functions as an allegory for a hypercapitalist society that is in-between Disciplinary Society and Society of Control. This study, then, will attempt to identify the elements found in the film that fit with the characteristics of the working of hypercapitalism, Disciplinary Society, and Society of Control. Neo-Marxist’s ideas on a

hypercapitalist society along with Foucault and Deleuze

conceptions of surveillance will dictate the entirety of the analysis. However, since Foucault and Deleuze did not experience, observe, and comment on the radical technological transformation in the last 20 years, this study will also try to investigate the expandability of their theories in explaining the relationship between the current state of information technology and the structure of today's society. Naturally, the investigation will be conducted within the context of allegorical elements found in *Midsommar*.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From Disciplinary Enclosures into a Hypercapitalist Semi-Open Space

Looking at the state of today's world, it is relatively not inaccurate to claim that Deleuzian Society of Control—that also implies the existence of hypercapitalist society—has manifested itself in its definitive final form. The long-standing existence of free-floating control of giant corporations along with the commanding power of the stock market and stakeholders in the economy are quite approving of the claim. This is also supported exceedingly by; the heavy reliance of “first world” countries on “third world” countries to produce the majority of consumers' products; the pervasivity of governing and surveilling bodies that give the impression of having reached the level of omniscience; the seemingly explorable infinite space of the digital world; and the use of big data gathered from people's activities in the cyberspace to divide them.

However, it would be remiss to ignore the fact that enclosures—whose existence were essential in Disciplinary Society—are losing their footing in the contemporary world as hegemonic forces in a system of subjugation. Despite the proliferation of the Internet, which could potentially reduce or even eliminate the significance of enclosures and give way to the emergence of quasi-omnipresent and quasi-omnipotent corporations, disciplinary spaces such as schools, factories, offices, and prisons are still being relied on. For instance, a *Forbes*' contributor, Bendor-Samuel (2021), reported that most of Fortune 500 CEOs and some senior leaders of large enterprises wanted their workers to be fully back to office sooner due to irreplaceable benefits of working in office. He (ibid) said that the CEOs and senior leaders viewed that “a high-productive work culture” proves to be challenging to maintain outside of office.

Thus, although the current level of information technology allows for massive and all-encompassing surveillance by corporations, panopticonic structure of enclosures like office spaces lend themselves to a more practical mode of subjugation, resulting in a more controlled and discipline group of people. Moreover, one cannot deny the vital role played by schools in planting the seed of obedience in the masses in the current time. Schools make sure that ideological perspectives of hypercapitalism become “common sense”, minimizing the birth of various degree of class consciousness and producing an army of “commonsensical” people who are unable to even imagine structural flaws in hypercapitalist system.

It can be concluded that Society of Control has not reached its ultimate form that meets Deleuze theoretical description. Yet, it is very likely that today's society is not Society of Control in its early infant state that is still profoundly at the mercy of disciplinary enclosures. Current society is one that occupies a space in-between disciplinary and controlling space.

This is the type of society that is being portrayed allegorically by *Midsommar*. Furthermore, the film also lays out—mainly through its setting, plot, and heroine's arch—the difference between Disciplinary Society and Society of (Semi-)Control, the in-between society, along with how the former transforms into the latter.

Constricting Enclosures

Midsommar begins with what appears to be a painting (Fig.01) displaying an artistic representation of the main events that would be presented later in the film. The painting could be divided into five sections, from left to right, reflecting the film's five-acts structure. In regards to this study, it also functions as a still representation of the differences between Disciplinary Society and

Society of (Semi-)Control.



Fig.01. The painting being displayed in the the very first few frames of the film.

The first section of the painting, left side, is an abstraction of the first main event of the film; the tragic death (multiple murder-suicide) of Dani's entire core family members, her sister and both parents. This event is represented in the painting by; three seemingly floating dead/unconscious bodies (Dani's sister and parents) and one skeleton being connected to a pipe; a living woman (Dani) in the middle who is surrounded by the seemingly dead/unconscious bodies and the skeleton; two black birds that seem to be diving diagonally on the upper left and right; and a giant skull, ominously overlooking the people below. The giant skull could be interpreted as the all-seeing eye that ensures order in a panopticonic enclosure of Disciplinary Society. Skull is frequently used as a symbol of death or looming horrific consequence. This makes the artistic representation of panopticonic all-seeing eye in the form of a giant skull in the painting quite fitting due to the fact that, in Disciplinary Society, fear of punishment is the intended effect of panopticonic structure (making people aware that "big brother" is observing). The skeleton in the lower part of the first section of the painting can be said to be an agent of the panopticonic all-seeing eye represented by the giant skull hovering above all entities. It is portrayed as the only entity who is standing on the ground, emphasizing its possession of control of its body and movements. This stands in contrast with how other entities in the lower part of the painting, especially Dani, is depicted. Dani is floating above the ground, visibly lacking an ability to fully control her body in order to stand firmly on the ground. Her body is portrayed to be powerless, similar to the lifeless bodies that surround hers. However, unlike the dead bodies, Dani appears to be less uncoordinated. It is a metaphorical portrayal for how constricting enclosures in Disciplinary Society are.

The allegorical representation of Disciplinary Society continues in the first part of the film after the display of the painting. The film is set in two main settings, which is considered to represent Disciplinary Society and Society of (Semi-)Control. The first setting is a relatively contemporary America, which is utilized heavily to exemplify characteristics of Disciplinary Society regardless of the fact that it has already transformed into Society of (Semi-)Control in the real world. This problematic interpretive hurdle is rendered irrelevant due to the fact that this study is treating the film as an allegory. The second setting is rural Hälsingland in Sweden, home to The Hårga people, representing Society of (Semi)Control.

As discussed before, Disciplinary Society is primarily typified by its dependant on multiple enclosures that regulate, restrict, and discipline its members in order for it to function. In the allegorical context of the film, this is symbolized through the use of a number of constricting enclosures. The events that take place in America are always inside enclosures, restricting movements and expressions. Dani, her boyfriend, and her boyfriend's circle of friends are shown to be moving from one enclosure to the next when they are in America (Fig.02).



Fig.02. Enclosures in the first setting of the film.

The enclosures could easily inspire the feeling of alienation and powerlessness, similar to how disciplinary enclosures inspire helplessness and estrangement in real Disciplinary Society. Those feelings are enhanced through the constant use of dark color palette, as can be seen in the group of screen-capture above. In the first section of the painting displayed in the first few frames of the film, the alienating effect of enclosures is symbolized through how the skeleton severs the pipe attached to Dani that would otherwise connect her to the rest of her core family members. This turns her into a lone individual whose power is enormously limited. Her condition mirrors how individuals in Disciplinary Society are being led to believe that they are single, no-unified, entities who happen to occupy the same enclosures. These individuals are alienated from each other. The panopticonic structure on enclosures minimizes the possibility of a collective uprising produced by the realization about the possible existence of their communal power instead of mere individual responsibilities and liabilities. Furthermore, the film also emphasizes the prevalence of enclosures and how the characters are essentially being governed by them in the first setting by repeated use of transitions where the camera moves from the outside of enclosures into the inside of the enclosures. In Fig.03, the camera functions as a stand-in for all-seeing eye in a panopticonic structure. It is shown to be observing all of enclosures—represented by a collection of suburban houses—before zooming in toward a part of them, then one of them, and finally the inside of one of them. Fig.04 is part of a scene shot in the perspective of a figurative enclosed individual. The camera is gazing outside from the inside of a room. The tall buildings scattered outside offer no possibility for escape from the current one. There are just enclosures after enclosures.

4. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Horror films have rarely received accolades from critics as works worthy of serious attention. The stigma about them as mere escapist entertainment persists until today. This could be observed in the emergence of the term ‘elevated horror’, which means ‘artistic horror’ or horror films that contain “thought-provoking” qualities. Although the term is problematic and could be dismissed as a myopic elitism, there is a connection between the implication of the term—that most horror films are pure entertainment—with the main ingredient of horror, which is fear. As the primary aspect that drives the horror, fear is a powerful commodity. The physiological element and effect of fear seem to prohibit horror films from functioning as a site for introspection. Its immediacy appears to bypass the cognitive part of human brain and speak directly to human’s primal processing, which is filled with emotion and irrationality. However, it is actually the physicality of horror films that gives them the ability to be what drama films are often claimed to be for their audience; a meditative site capable of expanding thoughts. This idea is supported by the concept of metaphor; how it depends on empirical world and functions as the primary cognitive tool for our understanding of the world.

Moreover, horror’s disruptive quality in that it continually demonstrates how the monstrous and evil circulate, invading complacent individuals, turning them into what they think as their opposites. This means that horror films possess a potential to show people that there is a possibility that the evil of the primal and primitive resides behind the veil of moral superiority and intellectual achievement of the modern world. Ari Aster’s horror film entitled *Midsommar* (2019) exploits the metaphorical power of the horror in revealing how the archaic is actually in the possession of the modern/“cultured”/“civilized”. The film is a reflection of the monstrosity of the systems that govern the contemporary society—a hypercapitalist society that is in-between Disciplinary Society and the Society of Control; Society of (Semi-)Control. This study mainly draws from Deleuze, Foucault, and Neo-Marxists. Data is collected by using observation method. As for data analysis methods, this study utilizes formalist technique called close reading and then apply the theory in accordance with the methodological implications found in them. It is found that the narrative and visual elements of the film allegorically depict crucial aspects of a Disciplinary Society, Society of (Semi-)Control, and hypercapitalist society. The film unveils the oppressive and repressive natures of late-stage capitalism and Society of (Semi-)Control. It is shown through the customary suicide of old people because they

are assumed to have past their productive years in a ritual called *ättestupa*; the strict division of labor; the deliberate reproduction of disabled people; and the restriction to express one's ownership of personal pain and sadness could be interpreted as elements that construct an allegory for a hypercapitalist society. Moreover, through its heroine, Dani, *Midsommar* also explores the process of how Disciplinary Society transforms into Society of (Semi-)Control.

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