Menacing Environments

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Though it features numerous scenes with gore and graphic bodily violence, Ari Aster’s Swedish folk horror film *Midsommar* (2019) ends with a smile. The enigmatic grin belongs to Dani (Florence Pugh), an American college student grieving the recent tragic loss of her entire family, as she watches a bright yellow wooden structure burn to the ground. The building is a folk temple dedicated to human sacrifice that contains her boyfriend, along with several other living and dead bodies, all of which will be immolated in a neo-pagan midsummer ritual. She has been a guest of a Swedish folk commune called Hårga for their days-long midsummer festival along with her boyfriend, Christian (Jack Reynor)—a graduate student in anthropology writing a thesis on folk ritual—and a small group of his friends from university, including Josh (William Jackson Harper) and Mark (Will Poulter). They were invited to the festivities by their Swedish friend Pelle (Vilhelm Blomgren), a member of the commune who has been studying abroad in America. Pelle frames the Hårga festival in reverential terms for his American friends, though he also warns them that they may find the folk rituals and costumes strange.

The film more than bears this out, showing the American visitors—and the viewers—that the close-knit folk commune is held together by the glue of human sacrifice and rigid, ethno-separatist isolationism. One by one, the outsiders are brutally sacrificed—after first witnessing the violent ritual suicides of aged commune members—and Dani and Christian are the last outsiders to
survive in the final scene. After being crowned the commune’s May Queen, Dani has been given the responsibility to condemn one of two people to be the final sacrifice of Hårga’s bloody midsummer festival: she must choose between Christian and a randomly selected community member. Having been drawn into the perverse social collective of the commune in her grief, Dani chooses to sacrifice her boyfriend. After Christian’s limp body—rendered docile by a paralyzing toxin—is clad in a sacrificial bearskin, then wheeled into the yellow wooden temple which has been built for the sacrificial fire, and is being consumed by the fire, the penultimate shot of the film, showing us a view of the burning temple, slowly dissolves to the final shot. In it we see Dani’s smile, artfully framed in close-up by the ceremonial gown and crown of flowers in which she is clad as the Hårga May Queen. Echoing this final edit, the entire film may be seen as a slow dissolve of a different kind. As Dani works through the grief of losing her entire family in horrifying and tragic fashion—the victims of a double murder-suicide by her mentally ill sister—her own identity slowly dissolves into the seamless collective meld of the Hårga commune. No longer merely Dani the grieving American college student, she has not only been taken in by the Hårga folk—she has been absorbed by them.

The horror subgenre most frequently assigned to Midsommar is folk horror, a small but coherent tradition that has witnessed a resurgence in the last several years. According to historians of the genre, folk horror originated with a trio of decades-old British horror films that have collectively come to be known as the “unholy trinity” of folk horror: Witchfinder General (dir. Michael Reeves, 1968), The Blood on Satan’s Claw (dir. Piers Haggard, 1971), and The Wicker Man (dir. Robin Hardy, 1973). Though there is no widely accepted definition of the genre, Adam Scovell has tied it to the anxieties modern cultures retain about the threats posed by rural environments, writing that folk horror is about “the evil under the soil, the terror in the backwoods of a forgotten lane, and the ghosts that haunt stones and patches of dark, lonely water.” In his recent book on the subject, Scovell has pointed to several hallmarks of the genre, including the use of folklore (or folkloresque “fakelore”) to imbue the work with “a sense of the arcane for eerie, uncanny, or horrific purposes”; staging “a clash between such arcana and its presence within close proximity to some form of modernity”; and creation of its “own folklore through various forms of popular conscious memory.” Robin Hardy’s Wicker Man—by far the most popular of the three seminal films—has been particularly important in establishing
the tropes of the conventional folk horror film, a template that *Midsommar* follows assiduously. In this template, an urban outsider is drawn to an ostensibly benign rural community where pre-Christian folk traditions, beliefs, and ritual are doggedly upheld in a folk community that sees itself as a bastion of tradition against the rising tide of cosmopolitan and urban modernity. By the end of the film, the apparently innocent traditions and rural isolation of the folk community have been revealed as a cover that hides more sinister and brutal folk practices, and the outsider is eventually sacrificed in a bloody or fiery ritual in devotion to the pagan gods of an agrarian cult. In generic terms, then, folk horror fits *Midsommar* as a description because it hews quite closely to the narrative expectations of the subgenre.

In another sense, however, *Midsommar* can be described as *folk* horror because it centers on the horrors of one *particular* imagined folk community, namely the Swedish concept of the *folkhem* (people’s home), a metaphor of national belonging that has been central to Swedish identity and public policy over the last century. Though the concept of the *folkhem*—and the robust Swedish welfare state to which it gave rise in the postwar years—has traditionally been seen in a benevolent light as a social model that provides national cohesion and promotes material prosperity, its shortcomings have become a subject of cultural critique in recent decades, particularly because of the ways it excludes or fails marginalized groups such as minoritized racial communities, women, and children. *Midsommar* joins this chorus of voices criticizing the shortcomings of the Swedish *folkhem*, using a fictional folk commune as a vehicle for evoking the real-life phenomenon of resurgent right-wing populist (RRP) politics in Sweden in recent years. This Swedish variant of right-wing populism traffics in a form of national nostalgia that grasps for folk symbols and touts supposedly “authentic” and “traditional” values—many of which rest on white Nordic identity as an unstated foundation—in the name of reforming the Swedish *folkhem*. In the populist rhetoric of parties like the ascendent Sverigedemokraterne (Sweden Democrats, sD), a right-wing populist party that traces its roots to neo-Nazism in Sweden, a rigidly closed, ethnically homogenous, implicitly white vision of the Swedish *folkhem* is a central pillar, even if the overt white supremacy of this discourse has been softened by sD’s efforts to achieve bourgeois respectability as it has gained more parliamentary power in recent years.

As with the provocative polemics forwarded by Nordic right-wing populism,
folk horror stages cultural conflicts that play out along multiple fault lines. Besides the gender divide, there are clashes between tradition and modernity, rural and urban societies, pagan and Christian belief systems, Europeans and Americans, community members and outsiders, and white people and people of color. So while Aster has somewhat reductively described his film as a “Wizard of Oz for perverts” and a “breakup film” about the horrors of codependency within couples and families, the film’s many lines of tense and agonistic togetherness mingle and intersect, tracing complex and tangled matrices. In their eagerness to foment right-wing provocation, culturally conservative critics have seized on Dani’s enigmatic smile at the end of the film as proof that *Midsommar* is in fact a moral indictment of the cultural emasculation of men in modern America. In *The American Conservative*, commentator Sohrab Ahmari writes that Dani’s smile “burns with the contemporary American’s subdued rage at weak, absent men and fathers.” To reduce the film to such a direct reading of Dani’s smile and the apparent misandry of the pagan cult’s sacrifices is not only to ignore Aster’s obvious use of irony and cultural parody; it is also to turn a blind eye to the many other cultural divides in the film, which go far beyond a gendered, heteronormative conflict between women and men.

This chapter focuses on the many lines of togetherness in *Midsommar*—not only lines that draw people together into social collectives that provide protection and a sense of belonging, but also the lines of tension and conflict that exist in any social collective. These lineated meshworks of coexistence and mutual dependence—as well as deadly conflict—are aptly expressed by the ecological materialism of British anthropologist Tim Ingold, who argues that the principle of human and ecological togetherness is the line, a model of interpersonal connection that joins organisms together in family unions and communities. Ingold’s theory contrasts the social principle of the line with the traditional figuration of the living organism as a “blob,” more or less distinguished from its surroundings and from other living “blobs” by its membrane-like surface. Ingold’s theory of the ecological “mesh” resulting from the innumerable lines of correspondence and mutual dependence in the material world is a vision of symbiotic togetherness that allows for individual variation, individual will, and individual identity. Collectives that are figured as a mesh thrive because of their diversity, their complexity, and their internal tensions. This model of the social mesh contrasts with the classical sociological theory of Émile Durkheim, whose seminal methodological work rested on
a notion of social organisms joined together into groups in which individual identities dissolve and the demands of “social facts” seamlessly join beings together into alloy-like social collectives that may be described as a “meld.” The meld is indifferent to individual will and agency, since individuals can no longer be meaningfully parsed from one another within the homogenous social compounds described by Durkheim.

The two images of social cohesion described by Ingold and Durkheim—the mesh and the meld—provide a basis for my analysis of the depictions of horrifying togetherness in Midsommar. The horror of Midsommar centers on the ways social collectives that seem to be meshed together in symbiotic relationships of mutual dependence and generosity are suddenly revealed to be in fact sinister social melds bound together by an ethno-racial sense of shared identity. In the paradigmatic meld-like social collective of the film—the neo-pagan Hårga cult—individual identities, wills, and desires are subsumed into cultivating an ethnically homogenous collective folk identity. Moreover, the meld-like connection between folk identity and the rural landscape suggests that the film is preoccupied with what ecocritic Ursula Heise describes as a fetishistic “sense of place” in modern environmentalism. As the Hårga cult encourages ethno-racial identification with the soil of their territorial domain in a Blut-und-Boden-like model of belonging, the film fixates on the tight unity between ethno-nationalism and environmentalism in the Nordic cultures. Like Reykjavík Whale Watching Massacre, Aster’s film fixates on the beguiling rhetoric of cultural isolationism in contemporary Nordic cultures. Even more importantly, Midsommar extends the Nordic environmental racism and privilege on display in Shelley to its logical conclusion. What makes Midsommar distinct from these comparison cases is the degree to which it couples the social critiques of Nordic ecohorror with a spectacle-driven and hypnotic iteration of modern folk horror. Midsommar, then, not only uses the tried-and-true plot devices of the folk horror subgenre but also focuses on the practices of exclusion and other forms of ethno-racial violence that have been perpetuated in the name of the Swedish folkhem. As this chapter argues, recent material-ecocritical theory on the mechanics and ethics of human sociality can provide more humane and ecologically sustainable alternative ontologies for human society.
The absorbing, violently attractive pull of the folk collective is on full display in a scene that sets up Dani’s chilling and enigmatic smile at the end of *Midsommar* and her preceding decision to sacrifice Christian in a ritual blaze. In this scene, Dani emerges from her honorary carriage after the conclusion of the maypole dance and peers through the keyhole into a room where she catches sight of her boyfriend in flagrante delicto as he completes a mating ritual with a young woman of Hårga. Dani immediately collapses in anguish, overtaken by a primal and panic-tinged grief at Christian’s betrayal. As she moans and screams in emotional agony, she is surrounded by a group of young Hårga women who usher her away from the scene. The women embrace her and begin to mimetically echo Dani’s tormented screams and frantic breathing, ensconcing her in a circle of sympathetic grief until the worst of the panic subsides. Dani’s private trauma becomes a shared affective experience. The boundaries between self and community blur as the circle encompasses Dani and they become a nearly indistinguishable cluster of women in anguish.

This scene of Dani’s grief being absorbed into a communal expression of pain is important in a narrative sense because it sets the stage for her acceptance of her place in the new family-like collective of Hårga. More importantly for this chapter, however, the scene expresses a certain model of sociality and community that helps account for much of the horror of *Midsommar*. In this version of community, group identity is secured through the rejection and exclusion of difference, which results in individual agency and identity dissolving into communal experiences of emotion and ritual practices of social cohesion. In this model, individual experience is caught up in a seamless collective meld. Although this particular scene implies emotional support and acceptance, the rest of the film unveils the violent and exclusionary logic of this group identity, which derives from a cohesion based on racial and cultural homogeneity and is strikingly indifferent to the value of individual life within the all-encompassing collectivity of the community.

Similar notions of social cohesion are central to the classical sociological theory of Émile Durkheim, whose seminal methodological work helped lay a foundation for academic sociology. The actions and even feelings of any individual person, writes Durkheim, are constrained by duties, commitments, and beliefs that “existed before he did,” an indication that they “exist outside him.”
In this sense, “there are ways of acting, thinking and feeling which possess the remarkable property of existing outside the consciousness of the individual.”7 Because of their externality, social facts can be studied by empirical observation and subjected to rigorous analysis through the methods of scientific sociology established in Durkheim’s Rules of Sociological Method (1895). Durkheim ends his first chapter with an unambiguous definition of sociology’s object of study: “A social fact is any way of acting, whether fixed or not, capable of exerting over the individual an external constraint . . . which is general over the whole of a given society whilst having an existence of its own, independent of individual manifestations.”8

Durkheim’s sociology fixates on the ways in which these “social facts,” alien to the individual, nevertheless set the parameters for individual beliefs and practices. Because of this dynamic of an external entity structuring and even, in some sense, dictating or controlling individual choice, Durkeime repeatedly emphasizes that social facts are agents of coercion. As these external forces “are invested with a coercive power” and “exercise control” over the individual, their nature is to penetrate individuals’ consciousness and intervene in their lives.9 Durkheim writes that “it is indisputable today that most of our ideas and tendencies are not developed by ourselves, but come to us from the outside [and] penetrate us by imposing themselves upon us.”10 Here we see that an undercurrent of violence on the individual body underlies Durkheim’s notion of the social fact. Social facts are an intrusive force that naturally arises in societies of all kinds, binding otherwise separate individuals to the social collective by means of penetrating the individual’s mind and consciousness. Social cohesion, then, is figured as a penetrative force in Durkheim’s Rules, an image that resonates with the penetrative bodily threats posed by various horror subgenres, most notably the slasher film. In Midsommar, we see this notion of the penetrating, binding pull of the “social fact” in the way Dani is drawn into the commune through a shared bodily performance of grief. As the women of Hårga encircle Dani and mimic her emotional outburst, her individual ownership of personal grief is ceded to the group, her own particular experience becoming indistinguishable from the collective performance of anguish.

Durkheim recognized that his notion of the social fact would meet resistance from liberal individualists and would be particularly hard to swallow for acolytes of Herbert Spencer, Durkheim’s predecessor in sociological theory. From the perspective of the market-fixated liberal individualism of the
industrial age (which Spencer argued for), the problem with Durkheim’s *Rules* was that he failed to adequately retain some sense of an operative individual will, or even an individual consciousness as such. Violence lurks just beneath the surface of Durkheim’s social collectives. Individual will and identity are obliterated as they are coerced into line with the collective consciousness. This illiberal tendency is apparent in Durkheim’s chosen metaphors. He describes social coherence as a kind of melding in which individuals are melted down in their absorption into the alien entity of the society. “Whenever elements of any kind combine,” wrote Durkheim in his preface to the second edition of the *Rules*, “by virtue of this combination they give rise to new phenomena.” In their assumption into the collective of society, then, individuals no longer exist as individual agents; they are instead melted indistinguishably into the whole. As if to underscore society’s indifference to the mere individual, Durkheim uses the metaphor of melting down separate metals and combining them to form an alloy: “The hardness of bronze lies neither in the copper, nor in the tin, nor in the lead which may have been used to form it, which are all soft or malleable bodies. The hardness arises from the mixing of them.”11 In societies, as in alloys, the qualities of individuals dissolve as component raw materials are blended together into a seamless whole that is greater than the sum of its component parts. As Durkheim says here, the hardness of the alloy far exceeds that of the individual metals brought together in the mixture. It is difficult to imagine an image more at odds with liberal individualism; classical liberals like John Locke and Herbert Spencer would be as horrified by this image of societal melding as latter-day neoliberals such as Margaret Thatcher and Alan Greenspan.

Cultural anthropologist Tim Ingold articulates an individualist rejection of the Durkheimian social collective in his theoretical work on social life. Ingold’s critique is grounded not in the laissez-faire economics of neoliberal capitalism, however, but rather in an eco-materialist approach to art and creativity. Ingold points out that in classical liberalism, “individuals may transact with one another through external contact, as they do in the marketplace,” whereas in Durkheim’s model, society is “seamless.”12 Ingold rejects out of hand this idea that individual minds, identities, and wills are seamlessly fused in the society, as Durkheim’s metallurgic metaphor would suggest. Ingold’s own preferred images are instead the “blob” and the “line,” a dualism upon which Ingold formulates his theory of social life.
Conventionally, writes Ingold, living things are thought of as blobs. Blobs have insides and outsides. They can clump together along their surfaces; they can “collide, aggregate, and meld.” But for Ingold, this model of the blob is not sufficient to explain the vital interconnection of living organisms in the meshwork of organic life. What blobs cannot do, writes Ingold, is “hang on to one another, or interpenetrate”: “For like drops of oil on the surface of water, whenever they meet they meld into a new blob in which their respective essences so run together that they are no longer distinguishable, while their surfaces dissolve in the formation of a new exterior. Or to put it in more general terms, blobs can have no direct access to one another’s interiority save by their blending in the constitution of compounds in which any trace of joining immediately disappears.”

Since social life, like biological life, depends on interconnections and the durable intermeshing of otherwise distinct beings, Ingold writes that we ought instead to think of the living organism as “a bundle of lines.” These lines entwine with other lines “to form a boundless and ever-extending tangle” that Ingold terms the meshwork. In Ingold’s thinking, Durkheim’s sociological method is too bounded and homogenously compounded. Durkheimian blob-like collectives fail to account for the mutual dependence of organisms in social and ecological meshworks.

Rather than the social fact, then, Ingold’s principle of social cohesion is the knot. “In a world where things are continually coming into being through processes of growth and movement,” writes Ingold, “knotting is the fundamental principle of coherence. It is the way in which contrary forces of tension and friction, as in pulling tight, are generative of forms.” Importantly, knots do not have insides and outsides, like blobs. Instead, they have interstices. The most important difference between Ingold’s notion of the knot and Durkheim’s melded collectives is that the knot allows for the persistence of individual identities even within enmeshed societies. Two strings that are joined together in a knot, after all, do not have their surfaces dissolved and their individual essences melted together in their joining. Rather, says Ingold, social cohesion is defined by a principle of “interstitial differentiation,” whereby “difference continually arises from within the midst of joining with, in the ongoing sympathy of going along together.” Ingold’s collectives, then, are tangled meshes in which individual components express their individuality in response to ongoing social relationships with others. Social collectivity, then, does not dissolve individualism; it is a precondition for it.
But what of the images of social togetherness in *Midsommar*? How do Durkheim’s blob-like, superorganic social collectives and Ingold’s image of knotted lines that form more or less durable social entanglements help account for the horrors offered by the film? Looking more closely at how *Midsommar* frames different models of togetherness, it is clear that the film oscillates between these two models, turning vertiginously from the differentiated “mesh” of classically liberal communities to the seamless “meld” of holistic communalism in moments when Dani (and the viewer) are most unsettled. While Ingold’s notion of living beings as bundles of lines that tangle with others in an ever-extending meshwork of vital interconnections might be unsettling to ideologies that posit the human individual as separate from and superior to nature, his theory still retains some sense of an individual identity even within a social and ecological web. Durkheim’s model, by contrast, presents itself as more obviously challenging and often violent toward the individual, and in that sense has more potential as a source of horror. But *Midsommar* takes an eclectic approach to the problem of individuals and collectives, presenting multiple visions of what social cohesion can look like—be it within a couple, a family, a community, a nation, or an ecosystem. The horror of the film arises from the unexpected oscillation from one sense of cohesion to another, often from benign meshes to menacing and violent melds.

This type of oscillation can be seen in a sequence early in the film, just after Dani and the rest of the American travelers have arrived in the vicinity of Hårga. Almost immediately, they are offered psychedelic mushrooms by an apparently well-meaning host. Dani is reluctant to take any, urging the others to go ahead without her. But when Mark makes his annoyance clear and insists that everyone must start their trip at the same time, she quickly succumbs to the group pressure. In that sense, Mark serves as a stand-in for the “social fact” of Durkheim’s social theory, bluntly expressing the expectations of uniform behavior within the social group.

What follows is the first of the film’s multiple psychedelic sequences. It is also the subtlest and most aesthetically sparse of these hallucinatory scenes, yet also perhaps the most unsettling, since it serves as the first hint of the terrors that await Dani and the group during the midsummer festival. Dani’s trip begins on a relatively calm foot. After the group simultaneously takes doses of the drug—an event ritually marked by calls of “cheers!” and “skål!” from the group—they all sit together listlessly on a grassy hillside next to a
lone tree. Mark immediately becomes paranoid about the sun and blue sky at 9 p.m.—“That’s not fine! Why is it like that? That feels wrong, I don’t like that!”—but calms down when he lies down and basks in the late-evening sun. “Everybody else lie down,” he insists to the group. “Guys, do it, it feels so nice!” Mark’s behavior in this scene serves as a kind of insecure glue that holds the group together. As a villager walks by and jovially greets them—“Hej hej!”—Mark reacts with immediate suspicion and says, “I don’t want new people right now!”

Despite this immediate sense of paranoia and anxiety, Dani’s trip starts as a benign experience. The film’s sound becomes amplified and echoed, emphasizing Dani’s own exaggerated feeling of embodied immediacy on the drug. Her breathing becomes deep and slow, her body relaxes, and she closes her eyes, becoming lost in the sound of her own breathing and the gentle commentary of Pelle. “Can you feel that?” asks Pelle. “The energy coming up from the earth?” Dani looks down at her hand, which rests on the ground, and as the camera pans down to follow her gaze, we see that earth and flesh have become unexpectedly enmeshed: the grass appears to grow through her hand in the shot, an image that reads as a decidedly trippy vision of transcorporeality. This image of interconnection with the earth fits well with Ingold’s model of the meshwork of social and ecological connection. The grass and Dani’s hand do not become indistinguishably one in a Durkheimian experience of melding, as copper and tin are melded together to form bronze; instead, like Ingold’s meshwork, the two organisms have become entangled in each other’s mesh-like matrices. Even in the midst of their intimate enmeshment, Dani and the earth remain resolutely distinct entities.

Pelle’s languid commentary continues, directing both Dani’s and the viewer’s gaze to a landscape suddenly enlivened with a vital pulsation. “Look! The trees too, they’re breathing,” he tells the group. Dani looks up at the tree next to her, which seems to be pulsing and fluid, its trunk and branches distorting into subtly surreal swirls, under which we hear Dani’s slow and steady breath. “Nature just knows instinctually how to stay in harmony,” Pelle continues. “Everything mechanically just doing its part.” The camera cuts to a close-up of Dani’s face, and we see that she is unself-consciously absorbed in gazing at the tree, while the grass in the background sways in the gentle breeze, continuing to swirl as the pulsing liveliness of the tree has now spread throughout the well-lit landscape.
At this point, however, the trip turns bad. Mark, who seems to have calmed down under the influence of Pelle’s comforting narration, says from off-screen, “You guys are like my family. You’re like my real, actual family.” At the mention of family, Dani suddenly snaps back into hypervigilance—her eyes shoot open, and her breathing stops. Mark’s comment precipitates an uncanny return of Dani’s trauma after the horrific loss of her “real, actual” family the previous winter, and she is suddenly thrown into a drug-tinged panic attack. She jumps to her feet and looks over at Christian, whose face seems to have melted into a subtly distorted mask. Dani hurries away from the group and off through the fields, telling them she wants to go on a walk alone. Passing a nearby group of celebrants—presumably also under the influence of psychoactive substances as they sing along with accordion music—she berates herself under her breath in an attempt to calm herself down: “No, no, no, no, no. Don’t think that! You’re fine. It’s almost your birthday. You’re okay. You’re fine . . . you’re fine . . . you’re fine . . .” As she nears the group, they turn to Dani and seem to be laughing at her, so she turns away again, now even more panicky and paranoid. Ingmar, Pelle’s brother, catches her attention and tries to comfort her, insisting that the group wasn’t laughing at her. He then invites her to interact with yet another new group—“You wanna come meet my friends?”—and suddenly his face seems to have melted and stretched into a disconcertingly exaggerated smile.

Dani, now even more panicked, rushes away to a nearby outhouse. When she strikes a match and looks at herself in the mirror, she sees a fleeting, flickering image of her sister’s corpse behind her in the mirror—the deadly tube filled with carbon monoxide still horrifically duct-taped to her face. Dani’s face, like Christian’s and Ingmar’s, is now also unnervingly distorted in the mirror, her right eye having become enlarged and her face unrecognizably asymmetrical. The image reads like an allusion to Ingmar Bergman’s famous composite image of Bibi Andersson’s and Liv Ullmann’s faces horrifically fused together in an asymmetrical mask from *Persona* (1966), a plausible connection given Ari Aster’s well-documented admiration for Bergman. Though *Persona* has no clear environmental or ecocritical message, the way it unsettles and mingles the identities of its two central characters as the women grow more and more intimately connected provides a potent template for psychological horror that environmentally conscious films like *Midsommar* and *Thelma* have drawn on both thematically and iconographically.

How can the horror of this scene be conceived in terms of Durkheim’s and
Ingold’s social theory? The sequence initially reads simply as a mushroom trip gone bad, which plunges Dani back into her traumatic experience of loss, opening up wounds that have hardly begun to heal. However, it is not merely loss and trauma that are threatening in this scene; it is also the pull of social connections that press in on the individual, threatening autonomy and bodily integrity. Horror thus arises from our own connections to other humans within couples, friend groups, communities, and families. Taking into account this emphasis on the social, it may be further observed that the sequence starts with a benign image of organisms becoming entangled in a mesh of sympathetic togetherness, much like Dani’s vision of her hand permeated with living grass easily fits within Ingold’s model of social cohesion, with its tangled lines and its maintenance of distinct individual identities. From there, the pleasantly mesh-like model of socio-ecological togetherness espoused by Ingold suddenly shifts to horrific images of social collectives as Durkheimian melds: individual bodies begin oozing into grotesque new forms that try to cling to Dani. Individual identities melt, and panic arises from Dani’s inability to escape the social connections that press in all around her: the boyfriend who morphs into a stranger and calls out her name, the menacing joviality of the singers who seem to laugh at her as she passes, the acquaintance with a Cheshire cat smile who wants to introduce her to new friends, the uncanny return of her dead sister, and the sight of Dani’s own unrecognizably distorted visage in the mirror. All of these forces of individual dissolution within the alloy-like bonds of social cohesion that relentlessly pursue Dani in her panic remind her of her own debilitating psychological and social dependencies on others. The terror of the scene for Dani is that it shows how social connections can go horribly wrong in experiences of self-estrangement and loss of identity.

**SECLUSION AND EXCLUSION**

This early scene, in which Dani’s drug-fueled panic attack reveals the social and ecological world around her as a melded collective entity, is just a hint of the more hostile and bloody horrors that await her and the other American tourists as they are invited into the Hårga commune’s midsummer festival. Impelled by academic curiosity, since Josh and Christian are writing their anthropology theses on folk ritual, the American visitors continually ask Pelle questions about the spiritual beliefs and social practices of the community. For Josh and
Christian, the villagers are anthropological informants rather than existential threats. Among other things, they learn about the community’s understanding of human life as cyclical and seasonal, with social policies that enforce a rigid sequence of the seasons of the human life span. From infancy to age eighteen, Pelle tells them, members of the community are considered children in the springtime of their lives. From eighteen to thirty-six, they are sent on a pilgrimage in which they travel abroad and live in other communities. At that point, members of the community return to Hårga and enter their autumnal period from thirty-six to fifty-four, when they are considered productive, working members of the agrarian collective. Finally, from fifty-four to seventy-two, community members have entered winter and are considered mentors for the younger generations. When Dani asks the obvious question—“What happens at seventy-two?”—Pelle (in a joking tone) mimes the death of such aged-out members of the Hårga commune, slashing his hand across his throat and sticking his tongue out to mimic the face of a corpse.

Exactly what kind of death the elderly members of the community can anticipate is revealed to the horrified outsiders—and gorily captured for the viewers—in a scene at the film’s midpoint, when the tourists are told they are to witness a ritual practice described simply as the åtestupa. Pressed on what this entails, Pelle only says, “It’s too hard to explain. You’ll get a better sense tomorrow.” As non-Swedish speakers, all of the visitors are left in the dark about what this ritual involves—all except Josh, whose expansive reading on the beliefs of such communities has clued him in to what might be expected—until they are invited to witness the ritual in all its spectacular gruesomeness.

The horrific spectacle is prefigured the night before, when Dani wakes up from a sleep made restless by the crepuscular semidarkness of summer nights in northern Sweden. Her eyes are drawn toward one of the many folk murals painted on the whitewashed wooden walls of the communal dormitory. The camera traces Dani’s upward gaze in a vertical pan that shows us the painted scene: a pool of blood on the earth, which is revealed to be dripping from a sedate villager who has plunged a dagger into their own wrist while standing between two growing sunflowers. As the camera pans up, we see that the scene is watched over by a benevolently smiling sun, which radiates down on the agrarian community that fertilizes the earth—and marks its territory—with its own blood. The image resonates with the undercurrent of Blut-und-Boden-style ethno-communalism that solidifies the rigid and exclusionary group identity...
of the Hårga commune. Taking up the iconography of vitalistic nature worship discussed in connection with Shelley in chapter 4, *Midsommar* makes explicit the predatory and exclusionary implications of Nordic environmentalism, spectacularizing what remains a suggestive undercurrent of white supremacy in Abbasi’s film.

The actual spectacle of the *ättestupa* is sprung upon the group the next day. After the first of a series of highly ritualized community meals—held outdoors at a rune-shaped arrangement of banquet tables—the two participants in the *ättestupa* enjoy a solemn toast and are carried off on honorary sedan chairs by robed men wearing flower-garlanded straw hats. The rest of the villagers and their visitors are led off to a chalky-white landscape, where they are pictured gazing up at a high cliff in front of them. As the American visitors look on from the rear along with their guide, Pelle, the film cuts to a shot of the crowd looking up at the cliff, and we see a young man who looks directly at the camera. Similar direct looks at the camera are repeated a number of times in the film, a metacinematic gesture that implicates the spectator in the brutality of the folk rituals we witness.

The participants in the *ättestupa* function as an ominous illustration of the brutal endgame to which members of the Hårga collective commit in staying with the community. The ritual is ostensibly a freely chosen sacrifice of individual life to the continued vitality of the community. Aster’s focus—and the spectator’s gaze—is thus directed at the grim aftermath: the compound fractures and smashed skulls that await commune members at the end of their life cycle. And because *Midsommar* is a horror film shot entirely in sunlight, the horrified spectators can see everything. Rather than relegating horror to the “blind space” afforded by darkness and strategically evasive cinematography, *Midsommar* creates a horror of hypervisibility. In that sense, although the brutality and racism of the commune are never expressly stated aims, they are strikingly out in the open.

As Dani and the others watch Hårga’s *ättestupa*, we see (from their perspective) the first of the two participants walk to the edge of the cliff. Dani’s breathing becomes erratic and panicky as she looks up at the woman, who seems to lock eyes with Dani before plunging off the cliff and landing face-first on a large rock situated below. The British visitors, Connie and Simon, immediately start loudly objecting to the ritual—“Why are you standing there! What the fuck!”—and the camera cuts to a quick succession of slow-motion
shots showing the gory impact and aftermath in transgressively gruesome detail. A similar spectacle is repeated for the second participant, who comes to the verge of the cliff a few seconds later and similarly plunges off the edge. His attempt is less successful, however—he only horrifically injures his leg in the fall, so a small group of villagers wielding a wooden mallet come to put him out of his misery with several blows to the head shown in graphic detail.

Beyond the spectacular body horror of the scene, the åtestupa is noteworthy for the way it indicates the style of togetherness that establishes the Hårga community. Drawn in as implicated spectators witnessing the bloody sacrifices crucial to the commune’s sense of a coherent group identity, the visitors are compelled to make a choice either to continue to witness the rituals as disinterested observers (as the American visitors, driven by the academic ambitions of Josh and Christian, do) or to reject the community’s values and attempt an escape (as the British visitors do). But this apparent choice is, of course, constrained by the genre conventions of folk horror, which dictate that outsiders—whether curious observers like the Americans of Midsommar or investigative antagonists like Sgt. Neil Howie in the genre-defining classic The Wicker Man—must be sacrificed by the rural folk commune in the end.

As a genre, folk horror is structured according to the insider/outsider logic of closed communities. Although there is no wall overtly marking the territory of Hårga—only a sun-shaped wooden portal that visitors walk through as they enter—the village is located in a remote clearing apparently surrounded by woodlands, seemingly far removed from any other communities. There is no cellular service in the area—an important detail that most present-day horror films are now obligated to include—and the village is accessible only by hiking paths and one small dirt road. A sense of isolation is, of course, crucial to the terror experienced by outsiders drawn into rural communes in folk horror films; without this distance from civilization, terrorized visitors could easily escape, or even just scream to get the attention of the outside world. In folk horror, isolation situates outsiders in a location where no one except the commune members brutalizing them can hear them scream.

There are numerous signs that this isolation from the outside world is not only an intentional choice of the community but one specifically rooted in the commune’s xenophobic and racist ideologies. The signs of this racist undercurrent are at first only fleeting and marginal clues strewn throughout the early part of the film as “Easter eggs” for eagle-eyed viewers to catch. In a scene
before the Americans’ departure for Sweden, for instance, a thick tome titled *The Secret Nazi Language of the Uthark* sits on the coffee table facing spine out. The book is captured in a wide-angle shot as part of an initially indistinguishable clutter of books on the coffee table in Josh and Christian’s grad student apartment, only noticeable to most spectators upon a second or third viewing more attuned to marginal details than to the narrative center of the scene. The runic symbols that proliferate throughout the Hårga commune—as well as the twentieth-century ideas about the esoteric and mystical properties of such symbols captured in so-called Uthark theories—are thus early on connected with fascism and ethno-nationalism.

Another marginal clue about Hårga’s xenophobia that appears before the group’s arrival in the village is seen from the rental car that Pelle and his American visitors drive northward after landing in Sweden. In a remarkable aerial drone shot tracking the car as it drives into the region of Hälsingland, where Hårga is located, the camera sweeps over the car and rotates vertically to capture the car’s path along the highway in a head-on, upside-down shot that lasts several seconds. After a cut to a reverse shot, the camera then sweeps vertiginously back into an upright position as the car passes under a banner that reads, “STOPPA MASSINVANDRINGEN TILL HÅLSINGLAND” (Stop mass immigration to Hälsingland) and urges passers-by to “RÖSTA PÅ FRITT NÖRR I HÖST!” (Vote for Free North this fall). This political banner promotes the fictional political party Fritt Norr (Free North), a name that possibly references the Fria Nationalister (Free Nationalists)—a network of aligned extreme right-wing political parties (including the party Nationell Norrland)—as well as the push for the political autonomy of Norrland that has gained steam in recent years, a movement driven by regional and cultural resentment toward the more populous and demographically diverse regions of central and southern Sweden. More broadly, the banner connects the type of nostalgic rural isolationism we see in Hårga to the rise of far-right anti-immigration parties in Swedish national politics in recent years.

This development is especially embodied by the unprecedented success of Sverigedemokraterna in the 2018 general election, in which SD secured sixty-two seats in the Swedish Riksdag. Like other radical right-wing populist parties that have gained a significant foothold in parliaments across Europe over the last several decades, the most salient feature of SD’s political platform is a pronounced skepticism toward immigration and multiculturalism. According
to the doctrine of ethno-pluralism that is one of the ideological cornerstones of RRP parties, the social cohesion and cultural identity of modern nation-states is under existential threat because of lax immigration policies and the opening up of international borders. According to the ethno-pluralist doctrine, this threat to national cultures can be alleviated only by drastically limiting immigration, particularly from non-Western cultures originating in largely Muslim countries of the Middle East and North Africa. According to this logic, ethnic groups should be contained in regionally bounded territories across the globe, and legal restrictions should be put in place to discourage mixture between these ethnic groups. 

In the Swedish context, SD has exploited the metaphor of the *folkhemmet* (the people’s home), an ideal of national solidarity and egalitarian social policy first articulated in the 1930s that has been a central pillar of Sweden’s Social Democratic Party, the dominant political party for much of the twentieth century and the faction that did the most to build the modern Swedish welfare state. According to SD, the cohesion of “the people’s home” in Sweden—and the generous safety net offered by the welfare state—has been undermined by a far too expansive view of who counts as people who belong in the national home. The unprecedented success in recent years of SD, a party with clear historical ties to neo-Nazism, is thus rooted in metaphors of nation connected to a national territory—with cultural blood being tied to a regional soil—whose boundaries must be rigorously policed, as well as notions of national identity with a clear distinction between insiders and outsiders. A central tenet of SD, then, is a radically restrictive sense of what it means to be a member of the collective body known as the Swedish *folk*. According to one recent study, this sense of belonging had much to do with cultural clichés of typical Swedishness such as the love of *fika* (coffee-based work breaks) and an adherence to the cultural notion of *lagom* (a sense of being content with “just enough”) as well as more prescriptive metrics like speaking fluent Swedish. Such a territorial and restrictive notion of belonging fits with Durkheim’s model of collectivity, since ethno-pluralism creates ethnically homogenous collective blobs with clear territorial boundaries between them.

This highly circumscribed notion of social belonging is also a clear feature of folk horror. According to Adam Scovell’s recent authoritative monograph on the subgenre, this sense of belonging is reinforced by the notable feeling of isolation that all folk horror films share. There is a sense in these films that characters have been “banished” to an isolated landscape that is figured as an
“inhospitable place because it is in some way different from general society as a whole and not simply because of a harsher topography.” Though this isolation is most often reinforced by geographic distance—captured in the alternative name for the subgenre, “rural horror”—folk horror films can also take place in urban environments. *Midsommar*, like most folk horror films, is situated in a geographically isolated, rural setting with an agrarian economy and a society that is based on a skewed system of morality.

One of the innovations of *Midsommar* within the folk horror subgenre, however, is that it overtly highlights the racism and xenophobia that animates rural folk belonging in such isolated and skewed communities. Beyond the clear references to neo-Nazism and far-right, anti-immigration politics, *Midsommar* further unmasks the coded racism that lurks in the restrictive ethno-pluralism of rrp parties such as the Sweden Democrats in subtler and more indirect ways. The cloaked white supremacy of the Härga commune is especially highlighted by the frequently blinding, bleached-out landscapes captured by cinematographer Pawel Pogorzelski. The summertime setting in northern Sweden justifies such a blindingly bright lighting scheme from a narrative perspective, but in the *ättestupa* scene, we see how other stylistic choices reinforce this sense of the oppressive, exclusionary whiteness of the folk commune. Set among chalky cliffs and a sparsely vegetated setting, the *ättestupa* becomes a kind of crucible of white rural identity as the commune practices its sacred, brutal ritual and spills the blood of the old onto its territorial soil with the stated goal of guaranteeing the continued survival of the racially and culturally homogenous community. The implicit goals of the ritual are to reinforce a group identity founded on violence and racial purity, an ideology communicated by the chalky hills and the white clothing, which sets a baseline expectation of ultra-whiteness as a criterion for community inclusion. Against this decolorized background, the highly melanated skin of Josh, as well as the British visitors Simon (Archie Madekwe) and Connie (Ellora Torchia), stands out as a damning marker of racial and cultural difference that the commune does not tolerate. These Black and Brown visitors are the only people of color to be found in Härga during the midsummer festival, and they are significantly (and predictably) the first outsiders to be murdered. Just as other ethno-nationalist movements in contemporary Scandinavia cultivate shared spaces that are implicitly white—that is, de facto spaces of exclusionary whiteness, rather than spaces that de jure exclude people of
color—Hårga’s brutal racism is expressed indirectly and implicitly. Hårga is, in short, a community that hides its white supremacy behind the friendly face of folksy hospitality and ethnographic openness. *Midsommar,* then, centers its horrors on a kind of predatory hospitality strikingly similar to the parasitic environmentalism discussed in connection with *Shelley* in chapter 4. According to these two films directed by cultural outsiders to the region, when an outsider is welcomed into a Scandinavian society, such a welcome is highly conditional, predicated on an expectation that the outsider must either assimilate and be absorbed to the social collective or perform reproductive labor for the community before being killed (like Christian in *Midsommar*) or cast aside (like Elena in *Shelley*).

**CLOSED CIRCLES AND CLOSED COMMUNITIES**

The midsummer festival at Hårga culminates in another ritual of rural white identity and communal cohesion: the exhausting spectacle of the endurance dance around the maypole, a contest in which the woman who is able to continue dancing the longest is crowned the commune’s May Queen for the year. The ritual is deeply connected to the commune’s mythology and sense of shared racial identity as upholders of a tradition of rural, agrarian paganism. One of the female elders inaugurates the dance by recounting a community folktale about how the “the Black One lured the youths of Hårga to the grass and seduced them into dance. And when they began, they could not stop, and they danced themselves to death.”

The elder frames the current ritual in quasi-Nietzschean terms as an act of *livsbejakende* (life-affirming) defiance of Mörkret (the Black One, according to the subtitles, but which could also be translated as “darkness”), in which contestants literally dance until they drop. Dani has been drafted into the ritual, despite her initial reluctance, and is given a shot of a drug-laced liquid described as “tea for the competition.” The first view of the actual dance is an overhead shot showing the crown of the maypole pointing majestically up at the sky, while concentric circles of female dancers grasp hands down below and musicians off to the side are poised at their instruments. As the tea takes effect, Dani looks down at her feet, perhaps in an effort to steady herself before the dance begins. Instead she is met by the sight of her feet appearing to fuse with the grass. This second transcorporeal image of body fused with ground is no longer the benignly trippy image of her hand
with single blades of grass poking out of it, but instead is a more troublingly seamless fusion in which the flesh of her legs seems to dissolve into grass. No longer a harmless image of environment entangling and knotting with the body in the mesh, Dani is confronted here with a hint of a Durkheimian meld threatening to absorb her. The sight also has more troubling existential implications for Dani now, as she has witnessed the horrific ritual suicide of community members whose lives and bodies are voluntarily and violently given to the earth and has also seen one after another of the outsiders go missing in recent days. At this point in the film, transcorporeal unions thus signal for Dani the possibly imminent threat of her own death and absorption into Hårga’s richly fertilized soil. As Dani looks more closely to confirm her vision, she begins to hyperventilate.

Once the dancing begins, though, Dani is swept up in the movement and becomes happily distracted by the choreography she is forced to pick up on the fly. Aster and Pawel Pogorzelski capture the dancing in both overhead shots of the twirling circles of women and eye-level shots in which the camera spins around the pole along with the dancers. The overhead shots have a hypnotic quality as the concentric rings of women dance in alternating directions, an effect that both pushes viewers away and pulls them in. This push-and-pull quality—reminiscent of the dolly zoom technique made famous by Hitchcock and cameraman Irmin Roberts in Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958)—signals the ambivalent attraction and repulsion felt by the commune for the American outsiders and the dizzying effects of the hallucinogenic substances Dani and the other visitors are fed. We have also seen the visual motif of concentric circles in a tapestry the camera panned across earlier in the film depicting a young man caught in the thrall of a love potion administered by a young woman who has just reached sexual maturity. In the penultimate panel of the sequence showing the arc of the young man’s wooing, we see the man’s eyes filled with the swirling, concentric lines of a spiral. The swirling circle motif thus points to the treatment Christian is being subjected to during this same sequence, as he is pulled away to be propositioned by one of the female elders of the community, who tells him that he has been approved to mate with young Maja, who has taken a liking to him and already administered a dose of the potion to him—which includes her own pubic hair—baked into a pie.

As the sequence cross-cuts between the dance and Christian’s interview with the female elder about the mating proposition, we see how the swirl of
the women engaged in a dance also signifies the magical and coercive swoon that people are put under, and in that sense gestures toward the disarming of male agency in this ritual mating practice. Aster’s claim that *Midsommar* is only a folk horror film from the perspective of the male visitors to the commune resonates here, underscoring the degree to which the subgenre is animated by a gynophobic terror of the coercive pull of female sexuality. This is also evident in a well-known scene from *Wicker Man* where the prudish male detective is horrified by a female teacher who instructs a classroom full of girls about the phallic symbolism of the maypole, inculcating the children in their community’s reverence for the reproductive role of the penis. From a male perspective, then, folk horror poses a threat because of the way it reduces men to their bodies, objectifying them in a way that runs counter to masculinist fantasies of transcending the body through intellectual mastery. In being drawn into the mating ritual, Christian is both getting the wish he expressed at the outset of the film—to find a woman who is more interested in sex than Dani is—and also being reduced to pure bodily functionality. He is useful to the community, then, only because he is capable of ejaculation. It is important to my reading of the film, however, to resist the pull of this folk horror interpretation; only by looking beyond the film as a genre exercise can we understand its richness and complexity as a film in which duplicity is baked in, according to the director. Any folk horror gynophobia must therefore be countered by Dani’s fairy-tale-like retreat into a magical space where her pain and trauma are validated and sympathetically reflected in the matriarchal Hårga family she is subsumed into.

As the dancing continues and Dani increasingly becomes ecstatically swept up in the currents of the dance, we see that the synchronization of the dancers is secured by the dancers’ hands, which grasp hold of their partners to keep the collective circles intact. The principle of togetherness exemplified in this scene can be analyzed in terms of Ingold’s notion of the meshwork of social and ecological collectives, which are drawn together by the clinginess of the linear entanglements among living organisms. Citing the remarkably strong grasp of mammalian infants, who cling to their caretakers for affection and nourishment, Ingold argues in the opening paragraph of *The Life of Lines* that “in clinging—or, more prosaically, in holding on to one another—lies the very essence of sociality: a sociality, of course, that is in no wise limited to the human but extends across the entire panoply of clingers and those to
whom, or that to which, they cling.” Given the importance of hands clinging and fingers “interdigitating” with one another to Ingold’s description of the meshwork, it is no surprise that to illustrate his theory he relies on one of the most celebrated representations of dance in modern art: Henri Matisse’s painting Dance (1909–10). Ingold writes, “Matisse had a very blob-like way of depicting the human form,” describing the figures in the painting as “voluminous, rotund and heavily outlined.” Despite these qualities, “the magic of the painting is that these anthropomorphic blobs pulse with vitality,” an effect that is achieved “because the painting can also be read as an ensemble of lines drawn principally by the arms and legs.” Superficially, the dancers of Midsommar seem to resemble Matisse’s anthropomorphic blobs, especially in the way they cling to each other in a swirling dance and in the way the cohesion and synchronization of their collective movements depend on the linear entwining of hands and fingers. We see how Dani relies on her tight grasp of her more experienced partners’ hands to maintain the stop-and-start rhythm of a dance with which she is completely unfamiliar. Dani gets swept up into the circle, forgets the unsettling sight of her legs dissolving into grass, and becomes preoccupied by the perpetual swirl of the collective dance, just as Matisse’s dancers do.

However, as Ingold observes, the pulsing, vital quality of Matisse’s painting is achieved not only by virtue of the clingy linear entanglement of the figures through their hands and fingers, but because the circuit they dance in is not a closed circle—it is instead “perpetually on the point of closure—once the hands of the two figures in the foreground link up,” yet this closure perpetually escapes Matisse’s dancers. Indeed, it could be argued that the dance itself is motivated by the lack of closure—the whirl keeps on going eternally because the dancers strive to achieve a closure that always escapes them, like a dog relentlessly chasing its own tail. The gap between the dancers’ hands in the foreground, then, is the spark of life for the entire dance: life and movement are guaranteed by nonclosure. In contrast to Matisse’s painting, the aim of the maypole dance in Midsommar is precisely to maintain the closure of the revolving concentric circuits of dancers. In the Hårga elder’s introductory speech at the commencement of the ritual, the participants are told that in losing hold and falling down, they enact a symbolic death, the implication of which is that life and vitality depend on the collective closure of the circle through the clingy cohesion of the dance. It is the closure of the circle that helps Dani
overcome her ignorance of the ritual to win the endurance contest. She can stay upright as long as she holds on, and as she maintains her firm grasp on her partners, she is swept along in their movements and learns the moves as she goes. As, one by one, those around her lose their grip and fall down, they metaphorically die and are expelled from the circle. At the end, by being the last dancer standing, Dani has survived all the others who have fallen along the way. The logic of vitality in the Hårga dance, then, is a reversal of Matisse’s painting, which depicts the way longing and yearning can motivate collective action and movement.

If we read the dance according to the terms Ingold lays out, however, we see that this professed vitality achieved by closure is actually antithetical to health and vitality. The closure of the dance circle echoes the commune’s rigorous policing of its own boundaries via the careful maintenance of a limited gene pool. Though a villager insists to one of the visitors early in the film that the commune respects the incest taboo, we later find out that the commune’s oracle—a physically and cognitively disabled boy named Ruben—is in fact a deliberate product of incest. The given justification for this practice is that the oracle is supposed to have a mind “unclouded” by typical intellectual concerns, but the implicit reasoning seems to be that the holiest members of the community are those whose bloodlines are least corrupted by genetic material from outsiders. The maypole scene, then, signifies that despite the commune’s superficial gestures of vitalist nature worship—with its emphasis on the life-giving benevolence of the sun and the earth and its fixation on fecundity and procreation—the closure of the community and the violent and exclusionary tactics used to maintain that closure show that its vitality is only skin deep, a veneer that hides a deep-seated impulse toward brutality, violence, and death. Founded on a mythology of life-affirming whiteness struggling against the forces of existential (and racial) darkness, Hårga is the type of closed community that represents an extreme version of the ideal of ethno-pluralist territorialism that would please the most ardent adherents of RRP politics. In all its brutality and violence, and its use of the benign rhetoric of cultural tradition as a fig leaf to obscure more troubling ideologies, Hårga is a horrific vision of the kinds of communities that the populist movements which have flourished in recent years seek to establish. The dance sequences in the final act of the film subtly reinforce this picture by framing the ritually important maypole dance competition around mythologies of racial superiority—as the
dancers seek to affirm the vitality of their white bodies against the wiles of the “Black One” bent on their destruction—and the power of closed communities as they cling together in a collective fight against dark outsiders.

ANTI-HOLISTIC COMMUNITY

The closure of the Hårga commune and its fixation on the good of the community at the expense of the lives and agency of individuals—a tendency most graphically on display in the åttestupa scene—may be seen more broadly as a model of collectivity that is actually quite prevalent today, well beyond far-right anti-immigration movements. This model can be summed up with the truism that the whole is always greater than the sum of its parts, which ecological philosopher Timothy Morton describes as “one of the most profound inhibitors of world sharing.”

By way of explanation, Morton writes that versions of holism that operate according to this assumption prioritize wholes that often include humans and other beings as nothing more than replaceable component parts. In the case of certain holistic versions of community, for instance, when the whole is seen as greater than its parts, the human individuals who make it up only have importance insofar as they serve the imperatives of the community. Morton says that to counter this particular version of holism, we must not grasp for the “anti-holist reductionism that neoliberalism promotes: ‘There is no such thing as society; there are only individuals.’” This would include the versions of community espoused by Herbert Spencer—collectives that see society as a collection of “lots of little blobs,” to use Ingold’s terminology, which may fleetingly transact in the marketplace but never meaningfully interconnect with one another in any lasting sense.

Instead of this anti-holism, Morton writes that sustainable social collectives should function according to a new kind of “weak holism” that sees wholes as physically larger than their parts but ontologically smaller. Morton labels this version of holism “implosive holism,” operating according to the principle of “subscendence.” In subscending their parts, wholes do not magically exceed their parts (as in transcendence); instead, the whole is seen more loosely as a collective, rather than a strictly bounded and rigorously policed community with clear definitions of insiders and outsiders. The wholes that Morton describes here are “implosive” because they become ontologically smaller (their existential significance is always less) at their surfaces, with individual parts always having
During the maypole dance sequence from *Midsommar*, Dani’s sense of belonging oscillates between benign images of enmeshment as she is pleasurably caught up in the community of the dance and more threatening images of being involuntarily melded to her surroundings. Screen grab from *Midsommar* (dir. Ari Aster, 2019).

During one of the pauses in the music during the maypole dance, Dani looks down at her feet to find they have become seemingly one with the earth. Her immediate response is to become visibly panicked at this unanticipated sense of being melded to her material environment. Frame grab from *Midsommar* (dir. Ari Aster, 2019).
more ontological value than simply their function within the whole. By way of illustration, Morton writes, “A street full of people is much more than just part of a greater whole called ‘city.’” Humankind, similarly, “is ontologically smaller than the humans who make it up.” Writes Morton, “There is so much more that humans do other than be parts of humankind.” Implosive holism, then, is a vision of holism that is meant to draw our attention to parts and to discourage us from always seeking meaning in transcendent scales; rather, it invites us to instead think smaller, valuing individuals and collectives but not in a way that frames collectivity in strictly bounded terms.

The type of transcendent holism that Morton argues against here is crucially not only the provenance of regressive and xenophobic models of community like Hårga; it is also, according to Morton, a central premise of certain ecological philosophies, notably the Gaia hypothesis put forward by the British chemist James Lovelock. According to this theory, the biosphere is a collective and self-regulating system that may be likened to a vast living organism. This superindividual quasi-organism is seen as a transcendent whole in which human beings and other living creatures are mere component parts who must continue to serve their function within the whole if they are to remain valuable members of the biosphere. Morton writes that a conclusion such holists could conceivably reach—according to the logic of transcendent holism—is that viruses have just as much right to exist as do patients suffering from the diseases viruses spread. Such claims, writes Morton, have “nothing to do with actual ecological politics,” but instead derive from a “concept of biosphere that is greater than the sum of its parts, in which every being is a replaceable component.” This indifference to the value of life at the level of the individual or even the species, according to Morton, is associated with “agricultural-age religion, the ideological support of the social, psychic and philosophical machination that eventually generated mass extinction.” The danger of transcendent holism, then, is that it is accompanied by a violent—even genocidal—impulse in which the exclusion or extermination of individuals or whole species deemed expendable within the holistic community is seen as an acceptable sacrifice for the greater good. If the community is an organism, then, a kind of surgical brutality is occasionally warranted to amputate infected extremities or remove malignant growths that threaten the closed, self-regulating system of the community.

The way in which ostensibly ecological practices can harbor the trademark
The brutality of transcendent holism is encapsulated in the final scene of *Midsommar*, when bearskin-clad Christian and the other human sacrifices (alive and dead) are being assembled within the temple to be burned in the cathartic ritual purge overseen by the surviving members of the community. Aside from the two living community members who have voluntarily placed themselves in the fire, every other sacrificial offering has been carefully decorated in notably transcorporeal fashion—their corpses having been hollowed out and stuffed with material bits of the Hårga landscape, including twigs, straw, and flowers. These transcorporeal assemblages are chilling illustrations of the type of brutal, pseudo-ecological collectivity espoused by the transcendent holism of the Hårga collective. No longer afforded the individual agency that accompanies the subscedent wholes advocated by Morton, or by the principle of “interstitial differentiation” theorized by Ingold within the meshwork of organic life, these human forms are hollowed-out husks only fit to be burned in service of the blob-like Durkheimian meld of the Hårga community. It is fitting, then, that the surviving members of the community observing the spectacle of the ritual immolation are not depicted as independent individual agents either, but instead are seen thrashing and screaming in a sympathetic echo of the screams of pain emitted from the temple as the living sacrifices are consumed by cleansing fire.

The final shot of the film, which features the close-up of Dani’s enigmatic smile, punctures the folk horror ending of the burning temple with a note of genre dissonance. Since we have been following Dani closely throughout the film and have been led to sympathize far more with her than with the callous and emotionally disconnected male American visitors who accompany her, our horror at the brutal ritual is mitigated by a sense of relief that Dani is finally free of her romantic entanglement with Christian. In the burning of all her connections to her old life in America, there is also a suggestion of a cleansing purge of her trauma and grief, and a sense of being adopted into a matriarchal society that—while clearly harboring troublingly brutal and exclusionary elements—is at least free of certain remnants of toxic masculinity that had previously clung to Dani. But such a simple interpretation immediately breaks down when we reflect on the horrors of racist and xenophobic exclusion the community is founded on, suggesting that the gap between the fairy tale and the folk horror interpretations cannot be bridged. The nonresolution of the ending suggests, then, that we should not attempt to see *Midsommar* as
a transcendent whole in which formal elements of the film are component parts serving a unified genre interpretation of the film. Instead, *Midsommar* is rather a ragged, subscendent whole made up of a remarkably diverse array of elements that are always ontologically more significant than the holistic package that contains them.