Overtones Ege Journal of English Studies

Vol. 4 (2025)

Research Article

Citation: Sonat, İsmail Onur. "'As Hårga takes, so Hårga also gives': Approaching Trauma through the Lens of Carnivalesque in Ari Aster's *Midsommar*." *Overtones* 4 (2025): 29-36.
Received: 17 July 2024
Accepted: 3 December 2024
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"As Hårga takes, so Hårga also gives": Approaching Trauma through the Lens of Carnivalesque in Ari Aster's *Midsommar*

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Abstract: This article scrutinizes Ari Aster's 2019 film *Midsommar*, utilizing the theoretical framework of Dominick LaCapra's theory of empathic unsettlement and Mikhail Bakhtin's the carnivalesque as a means for recovery. The carnivalesque is based on the idea of subverting and destabilizing societal hierarchies, dogmatic thoughts, traditions, and institutions using humor, parody, and satire as well as embracing "grotesque" possibilities. Accordingly, the main character of the film, Dani, who has been traumatized by the tragedy of losing her whole family, is depicted in the beginning as being unable to manage the psychological distress, compounded by the apparent lack of empathy and support from her emotionally distant partner, Christian. During a midsummer festival in Sweden that Dani and Christian attend, a diverse array of bewildering customs and rituals related to death, sex, body, and relationships take place, initially causing utter shock, yet subsequently inducing a gradual feeling of acceptance that grows into a sense of healing purification in her. Thus, in *Midsommar*, the carnivalesque functions as empathic unsettlement for its traumatized protagonist, presenting alternative modes of healing through its subversion of power relations whereas putting an emphasis on the body, laughter, and role-play in the face of trauma.

Keywords: *Midsommar*, Ari Aster, Mikhail Bakhtin, carnivalesque, grotesque, Dominick LaCapra, empathic unsettlement, trauma

Introduction

Ari Aster's 2019 film, *Midsommar* begins with Dani, a psychology student, who stumbles upon a worrying email from her bipolar sister, Terri, while she is alone at home. Seeking comfort, Dani reaches to her boyfriend, Christian, an anthropology graduate student, who is spending time with his male friends. Reluctantly, Christian agrees to meet with Dani later that night. However, Dani learns that Terri has killed their parents and herself. Months later, Christian, along with his classmates Josh and Mark, is preparing for a trip to Sweden under the influence of Pelle, another classmate who is from Sweden. Initially planned as a male bonding experience with the allure of Swedish women, Christian has kept the trip a secret from Dani until shortly before their departure. Despite his hesitations, Christian reluctantly invites Dani to accompany them. Deeply traumatized and clinging on to her

visibly crystallizing relationship, Dani accepts the invitation, and they find themselves at a summer solstice festival that occurs only once in every ninety years. This festival takes place in a secluded pagan commune located in the remote Swedish province of Hälsingland. However, they discover that the festival involves a sequence of ritualistic murders.

As my argument revolves around healing from trauma through the empathic unsettlement that carnivalesque provides, I employ both trauma theory and Bakhtin's the carnivalesque in this article. An interdisciplinary field that derives from psychology, literature and cultural studies, trauma theory examines representations and effects of trauma in narratives. Sigmund Freud, in his seminal work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* lays the groundwork for trauma theory by introducing concepts such as consciousness and repression. Upon observation, he realizes that a one-and-a-half-year-old child is playing a game called "fort/da" (53). During this game, the infant would throw a spool attached to a string from his cot, making an "'o-o-o-o' sound" when it disappeared, and then retrieve it by pulling the string, saying "*Da!*" which means "here" (Freud 53) (emphasis original). The child's mother, Sophie, explains to Freud that the "'o-o-o-o' sound" represents "*fort*" meaning "gone" conversely (53) (emphasis original). Analyzing the infant's reactions, Freud interprets this game as the child's unique way of coping with anxiety caused by his mother's temporary absence in the room (53). By controlling the object, which, in Freud's interpretation, represents the mother's safe presence, the child seeks to master the experience and find pleasure in symbolically managing her "comings" and "goings" (53). This symbolic satisfaction serves as a "cultural achievement", allowing the child to substitute immediate gratification of his desires for a more symbolic form of pleasure (53). However, as Freud notices, sometimes the boy abandons the "fort-da" game without completing it. Instead of retrieving the spool and continuing his game, he would throw it away and not even attempt to retrieve it. This, therefore, raises the question of how to explain this behavior if the child's aim is to gain mastery over the trauma caused by his mother's absence. In this context, Freud views trauma not as a merely consequence of fear but as a reaction to the intrusion of an unfamiliar event. Thus, trauma as far as Freud is concerned, stems from "the element of surprise" rather than the actual traumatic experience (51).

Cathy Caruth, likewise, in *Unclaimed Experience*, suggests that traumatic events overpower an individual's ability to fully grasp them when they occur (6). Hence, these experiences are immediately suppressed in the unconscious mind, only to resurface later. However, these suppressed memories continue to affect the person's mental well-being albeit retroactively. According to Caruth, trauma finds way to resurface through involuntary repetitions, flashbacks, or other expressions in the survivor's life, as the unresolved traumatic experience seeks to be acknowledged and comprehended (1991, 59-60). In pursuit of acknowledgment, the traumatized individual continuously edits past events. Similarly, Kirby Farrell defines trauma as a history that interprets and re-interprets the past, since trauma, "[l]ike other histories, […] attempts to square the present with its origins. The past can be personal or collective, recent, or remote: an artifact of psychoanalysis or an act of witness; a primordial myth or a use of ancestral spirits to account for misfortune or violation" (14). Therefore, one of the most prominent aspects of trauma is that it needs to be unveiled in a way that it is understood either by the survivor or by a witness. Trauma cannot be objectively represented as it, in its core, is a heavily edited recollection of the experience that may have lost its connection to the experience itself, but it yearns to be recognized.

From this standpoint, Dominick LaCapra puts forth the concept of "empathic unsettlement" which he describes as a sensitivity that is "responsive to the traumatic experience of others" (41). Apparently, empathic unsettlement involves both the victim and the witness, and brings down the barriers between the two through letting the witness put himself/herself in the victim's "position while recognizing the difference of that position" (78). LaCapra, thus, calls empathic unsettlement a "desirable empathy" since it functions as an outlet which "stylistically upsets the narrative voice and counteracts harmonizing narration or unqualified objectification yet allows for a tense interplay between critical, necessarily objectifying reconstruction and affective response to the voices of victims" (109). This sense of desirable empathy serves as a protective mechanism for victims, enabling them to share their trauma with an empathetic witness without the risk of overidentification from either party.

Throughout the festival in Aster's *Midsommar,* Dani experiences numerous traumatizing events ranging from the deaths of her friends and his boyfriend's betrayal. Surprisingly, rather than traumatizing her further, these shocking instances gradually provide channels with which she can steer away from her own trauma regarding her parents and Christian. The underlying reason behind her unexpected process of healing is the fact that these events disrupt the binary of victim/witness and demonstrate that there might be other ways of working through the trauma without re-interpreting the past in a subjective way. At this juncture, Mikhail Bakhtin's "carnivalesque" becomes

instrumental, as what Dani witnesses at the festival fits the carnival's temporary suspension of existing order and subversion of dominant ideologies. The carnival, according to Bakhtin "frees human consciousness, thought, and imagination for new potentialities" (49), and thus, in the case of Dani, watching these strange people, Hårgans, circle around the societal taboos of death, sex, and body, both literally and metaphorically, helps her come to terms with her trauma. For Dani, with each disturbing experience she goes through at the festival, comes a sense of objective understanding of her condition and a purification without resorting to a recollection of the original traumatic event she has repressed. Thereupon, in *Midsommar*, Bakhtin's carnivalesque functions as empathic unsettlement for its traumatized main character, presenting alternative modes of healing through its mockery and subversion of power relationships while putting an emphasis on the body, laughter, and role-play in the face of trauma.

Trauma in *Midsommar*

Beginning with the first scene of the film, trauma shapes the narrative. The main traumatizing event occurs when Dani learns that Terri has killed herself and their parents. From that point on, Dani is shown to be in emotional distress, constantly on the verge of tears and using medication to cope with her pain. When she closes her eyes, she is transported to horrifying flashbacks of her parents' corpses—a scene, she has never witnessed, but is shown to the audience. The actual scene following their death has the parents being put in body bags by paramedics, so Dani's unconscious edits, reinterprets and even completely rewrites the traumatizing experience in an attempt to give it a meaning but fails to do so. In other words, from the very beginning we are informed that Dani has never faced their deaths the way that might give her closure nor is she able to move on because of this.

In addition, her boyfriend Christian's emotional distance triggers her trauma of sudden loss, therefore she desperately clings on to a relationship where she is obviously undervalued, as her only alternative is loneliness. Apparently, Dani's fear of losing Christian harkens back to Freud's aforementioned example of the "fort/da" game he uses to explain the infant's anxiety of losing her mother and yearnings to have control over her presence. Due to her fear of being alone so soon after she has lost her family, Dani pretends that she is not aware that Christian no longer has any sexual or romantic interest in her. Christian repeatedly refuses to answer her phone calls on the night Dani receives a suicide note as a text message from her sister, shows an interest in the waitress at the bar, and engages in conversations with his friends where he discusses the doomed nature of their partnership. This evidence suggests that their dwindling relationship was effectively over prior to the death of Dani's parents. After the tragedy, Christian's attitude makes it clear that he is still dating her out of pity. Hence, Christian's neglectful behavior and nonchalance towards Dani correspond to Maria Root's concept of "insidious trauma" which Cathy Caruth refers to in her study on traumatic explorations on memory to explain the traumatizing "effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent" or extremely dangerous (1995, 107). Accordingly, what Dani goes through can be described as "a prolonged process in which one experience follows another and where, really, you eventually have a summation, and more than a summation, a piling up of experiences" (Fromm n.p.). This is the reason why whenever Christian dismisses Dani, her facial expressions reveal her emotional turmoil.

Likewise, evident from her depressed state, neither Dani's social life nor her academic life in the form of her own psychology department can help her cope. As a result, she drifts aimlessly or is dragged along with Christian. At one point Dani mentions that she has taken a break from her studies for the semester, but in the process, she turns into an extension of Christian as opposed to a woman with goals or agency. Apart from the apathetic Christian, who goes to parties until dawn while Dani is trying to recover from an immense tragedy, and his friends who definitely do not hold her in high esteem, Dani does not have a semblance of a support system. Apparently, in addition to the lack of interest and care from her boyfriend, the utter failure of the academic environment she is in also feeds into her insidious traumas as they are "rooted simultaneously and inextricably within cultural, historical, domestic, and psychological forces" (Horvitz 55). Dani has become so accustomed to being treated as a nuisance by others by that point that she looks visibly amazed when Pelle treats her kindly and shows a sketch of her that he has drawn. A similar amazement can also be observed in Dani during a later scene at the festival when Pelle remembers her birthday, which Christian, much to nobody's surprise, has forgotten.

Akin to how interpersonal relationships and institutions are rendered as inadequate in the face of trauma, universally accepted scientific methods of healing in the modern world such as medication and therapy do not

seem to help her manage her psychological distress. Additionally, the movie conveys a strong sense of mistrust toward medical professionals by mentioning that Terri had bipolar disorder and was receiving therapy before she passed away. Terri's wording in her final communication to Dani strongly suggests that either she has already attempted suicide, or she has discussed the issue with Dani before. As a result, the movie's narrative is critical of the institutions of family, psychology, and modern medicine because Terri could not have survived even with the aid of these support systems. Given these factors, *Midsommar* subverts what is expected from modern societies in terms of dealing with trauma and generates an alternative and unorthodox method of healing: The carnivalesque.

The Carnivalesque in *Midsommar*

In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin traces carnivals as locus of "man's second nature", situating laughter as a response to "the monolith of the Christian cult and ideology" (75). Accordingly, in *Midsommar*, the summer solstice festival is very reminiscent to his depiction of the carnivalesque, since it directly, using bodily materiality, foolishness, mockery, depicts a harmonious pagan society in "an indivisible whole" (19). The Bakhtinian carnival is presented in subversive and disturbing humor, parody, and satire in the festival rituals. Role play, dress up, laughter and public mockery, as suggested by Bakhtin, are prominent features of the rituals. Here, role play takes the center stage as Dani ultimately transforms into the May Queen, meanwhile Christian transforms into the Bear at the end, and their friend, Mark morphs into the Fool. All these transformations involve dressing up: A process that paradoxically reduces the body down to its material level: For example, Dani, in her crown and dress made of flowers, becomes one with the soil. Likewise, Christian ends up in the skin of a bear, with only his face and penis are visible, revealed to be a mockery of the superior "man". Finally, Mark, skinned and filled with grass, turns out to be a spectacle of foolery. These transformations not only destabilize the Cartesian duality between body and mind, but they also break down the binary thinking that separates humans from nature. Indeed, in the carnivalesque world of *Midsommar*, there is no place for Enlightenment ideas that privilege man, logos, and mind over nature, emotion, and body.

Similarly, the festival's activities emphasize the potential of the body and fickleness of the mind, subverting these deep-seated dichotomies; for example, attendees engage in a dancing contest after drinking alcohol. The same contest, which is different from the modern world's beauty pageants, determines who the new May Queen will be. In the contest Dani, surprisingly "dances past the fallen women. She does not immediately realize that she's just won the competition. She still looks determined as she continues dancing manically around the maypole" (Aster 101). Indeed, there is no need for cunning tactics or strategies to win; if one's body is strong enough to endure strenuous physical activities, the intoxication of the mind does not alter the outcome negatively. In the same vein, the heavily guarded scripture of this community is a product of the mind of a mentally disabled character, only referred to as "The Disabled". His incomprehensible writings, often come across as random babbling and symbols which point to the notion that official speech is devalued, and "travestied sacred texts [are] turned inside out" (Bakhtin 87) as Hårgans consider what has been documented as the holy messages of a prophet.

Furthermore, the film also presents a strong sense of degradation in relation to what is official and what is institutionalized, as "Christian", Christianity and institutional religion, is mocked by pagans in the festival. In an ironic way, the film reimagines Christians' arrival to the Nordic lands, but this time, as opposed to the official history, pagans do not turn out to be the ones who are assimilated into Christianity. Paganism, throughout this carnivalesque midsommar festival, reigns over the official religion of Christianity:

> CHRISTIAN. Who was he praying to?
> PELLE. Uh - well, that wasn't really "praying." But he was just addressing
> the...everything. The harmony and the balance.
> JOSH. Can you translate what was said?
> PELLE. ...I can get an *exact* translation later.
> CHRISTIAN. (Jumping in) Yeah, please, that would be amazing. (Aster 38) (emphasis original)

The scene given above demonstrates the discrepancy between what is deemed as the official speech and the carnivalesque, since Christian, upon hearing a Swedish chant mistakenly assumes that it belongs to a foreign prayer. This ritualistic scene is reminiscent of the carnival's "talking image of the crowd […] built exclusively on

oaths, in other words, outside the norms of official speech" (Bakhtin 191) which shows the significance of gestures and the transcendence of the crowd. It should also be noted that Pelle, who is originally from Hälsingland, immediately corrects him by underlining the fact that lyrics are about harmony and balance. However, harmony and balance ironically are what constitute the subject matter of a common prayer. Therefore, Pelle in his gesture of correcting Christian draws attention to the fact that the latter is only satisfied when they can categorize, name, and interpret what is supposed to be a thoroughly spiritual experience within the rules of the official speech. Remarkably, Josh and Christian are only interested in the translation of it for their academic purposes. Meanwhile, the rest of the pagans seem to get lost in a transcendent experience that, indeed, brings them harmony and balance. Christian literally jumps in when Pelle mentions that he can provide them a translation of it, which highlights his need to make meaning within the official speech, logos, and usurp what can be exploited for his own gain.

On the whole, the film involves many examples of embracing the grotesque and subverting societal norms in the Bakhtinian sense. In the system of grotesque, as Bakhtin asserts, "copulation, pregnancy, birth, growth, old age, disintegration, dismemberment" keep their traditional contents, but are given new meanings that challenge "the classic images of the finished, completed man, cleansed, as it were, of all the scoriae of birth and development" (25). Thus, there is some strong emphasis on the lower half of the body, dirt and reproductive organs in the film; for example, when Christian is being "groomed" for Maja, he is tricked into consuming a piece of pie that contains her pubic hair. Likewise, it is heavily implied that the drink served to Christian contains Maja's menstrual blood. Furthermore, during the infamous sex scene between Christian and Maja, the involvement of other people and the elderly woman's intrusion invoke a subversion of how reproductive organs and sexual acts are taboo in modern societies. Each of these rituals of the festival is heavily telegraphed using illustrations and projections that depict each step including the love spell, the fool, and the bear. Nevertheless, these grotesque scenes are not rejected by the Hårgans. On the contrary, knowing that all of these events will take place, they cheer for what is shown to them. According to the screenplay of the film, Christian and Josh are also delighted:

> INTERTITLE (in Swedish): Three droplets of menstrual blood for the spell to take effect.
> *Three drops of blood DRIP from between the girl's legs. They LAND in the coffee.*
> IN THE AUDIENCE, Dani and Mark WINCE at this. Christian and Josh (along with the surrounding Hårgans) are delighted.
> ON THE PROJECTOR SCREEN: *The girl brings the coffee to the boy. She smiles mischievously as he takes a SIP.*
> *In the KITCHEN, the girl now props her leg up onto a chair. She takes a pair of SCISSORS and snips between her legs. She pulls a few STRANDS OF PUBIC HAIR from her groin.* (Aster 47) (emphasis original)

Thus, one can argue that for Christian and Josh, watching grotesque scenes is a part of the entertainment this festival brings at first, but as these images stop being merely images and transform into "grotesque realism" that might potentially affect them and their well-being, both men show signs of disgust and subsequently try to escape (Bakhtin 18). Yet, Dani, who winces at the grotesque imagery manages to embrace the fact that in grotesque realism "the bodily element is deeply positive" (19).

Healing through the Carnivalesque

Dani's initial shock and discomfort at the festival are obvious during the first days of the festival. In her early reactions that involve disbelief, revulsion, and fear, she occupies a similar position to her friends. Noticing the peculiar rituals and the disappearance of their friends, Dani tries to flee from the festival but when she realizes that there is no escape at least for a while she gradually begins to adopt a mindset that goes along with the carnivalesque and the grotesque. As soon as she is invited to make pies with other women, Dani's transformation begins, since she stops displaying any symptoms of her trauma and seems to be enjoying contributing to the festival to some capacity. Her eventual transformation into the May Queen stems from this participation in the activities, facing grotesque acts, and finding a support system among others.

In the light of LaCapra's theory of emphatic unsettlement, the scenes where we see Dani react to the various disturbing occurrences in the festival are worthy of discussion. First and foremost, Dani's experience seeing the old people's suicide is a turning point for her traumatized state of mind since it symbolizes the start of her entry

into the carnivalesque by accepting what is regarded as grotesque. According to the traditions of this society, the elders must kill themselves in the summer solstice festival. The film comments on how elderly people are sent to nursery homes in Western culture so that there is no witness to their demise. Here in this pagan society, conversely, the elderly people die while everyone else is watching. Based on their reactions, this notion of normalizing death seems alien to Dani and her American friends, and they cannot understand why everyone else is standing there watching people fall from a cliff without any objections. The juxtaposition between the reactions of the pagans and the newcomers showcases how the carnivalesque turns what the latter take for granted upside down. In contrast to contemporary Western societies, where death is dreaded, death here is not only embraced but also post-mortem modifications of the body are accepted. This scene correlates with Bakhtin's take on the "former youth transformed into old age; the living body turned into a corpse. It is the 'mirror of comedy' reflecting that which must die a historic death" (197-8). Since the grotesque is treasured and maintained in the carnivalesque, the inhabitants of Hälsingland during the festival do not find corpses, blood, or the sound of breaking bones repulsive. Moreover, when the fall does not kill the male elderly, a chosen person comes and carries out the finishing blow:

> The man LAUNCHES HIMSELF OFF THE CLIFF. Connie GASPS. The man plummets straight down, landing not only ON HIS FEET, but also on the fresh corpse of his friend. This softens the blow, preventing the fall from killing him. The man, all broken bones now, WAILS in horrible pain.
> The community grumbles with concern. Everyone turns to THREE MEN, each the oldest of their respective generations (the youths, the laborers, and the mentors). They understand what they must do.
> SIMON (CONT'D). Why did that just happen? We need to call an ambulance. (Aster 55)

The spectacle of this "historic death" watched by a group of people also paints a stark contrast to how Dani's parents were put in body bags in the beginning. That is why, when she closes her eyes again, she sees her parents' bedroom, but this time, her mother appears to be asleep and then wakes up. It is worth noting that this instance marks the last scene where Dani is shown to be dwelling in her painful thoughts related to her parents. Thus, the film underlines that witnessing this scene of traumatic suicide in broad daylight without any reservations about it helps Dani face what she has been repressing. When we apply LaCapra's theory of empathic unsettlement to the scene, it becomes clear that Dani is finally able to let go of her traumatic memories by reacting to a subsequent traumatic event in a way that both allows her to approach it empathically and prevents her from becoming absorbed in what is happening.

In addition, the climactic scene where Dani watches Christian's coitus with another woman through a hole followed by swarming of the Hårgan women who immerse themselves in Dani's cries provides the film its most rigorous example of empathic unsettlement through the carnivalesque. After all, the script calls these women in this gathering as "*sympathetically connected*. It's remarkable, and very unsettling" (Aster 109) (emphasis original). Sexual intercourse, degraded and confined to the private realm in what Bakhtin calls the modern canon, is made public at the festival. Apparently, "[o]ne of the fundamental tendencies of the grotesque image of the body is to show two bodies in one" (Bakhtin 26), making this public display of copulation in which Christian's body merge with that of Maja a carnivalesque mockery of privatization of sexuality. This union of two people, brought down to their material level of the lower stratum, is not only watched by spectators, but it is also open to other townspeople in case they decide to interfere, recalling Bakhtin's remarks on the carnival, "the collective, growing, and continually renewed body of the people with which it had been linked in folk culture" (23). This sense of collectivity is also present when the Hårgan women try to mimic Dani's reactions, leading to empathic unsettlement that breaks down the barriers between the victim and the witness. Thus, this scene, through the grotesque sexual merging of bodies and the collective moans of Hårgan women, forces Dani to face what she has been denying regarding Christian all along and finally accept that Christian might leave her, but it does not mean that she will be alone. In this sense, "[t]he cosmic, social, and bodily elements are given here as an indivisible whole. And this whole is gay and gracious" (Bakhtin 19).

The blurring of the lines between the trauma victim and the witness can also be observed in the scene in which we see Christian as the Bear towards the end. This scene recalls Rene Girard's "scapegoat mechanism" which postulates that there needs to be a victim who serves as a sacrifice upon whom a group's aggression and blame are projected (42). The community feels relieved, purified, and their social cohesiveness is restored by sacrificing or destroying this scapegoat of their choice (42). When the group members band together to fight a

shared foe, the scapegoat serves as the catalyst for unity and reconciliation within the group. Christian's metamorphosis into a scapegoat for the Hårgans begins with Dani's individual anger towards him, then penetrates into the women who feel empathetic towards Dani in this town, and arrives at its destination, which is the core of the whole community. However, the response from the community is also carnivalesque, as it is a convergence of what Bakhtin calls the king and the fool, due to the fact that Christian "is elected by all the people and is mocked by all the people. He is abused and beaten when the time of his reign is over, just as the carnival dummy of winter or of the dying year is mocked, beaten, torn to pieces, [and] burned" (197). Christian, who has been chosen by Hårgan people to prevent inbreeding, represents the king in the beginning as all rituals ostensibly point to the possibility of crowning him as a king, but he ends up being "uncrowned and transformed into a 'funny monster'" (49). In his helpless state inside the skin of a bear, he becomes an absurd embodiment of what happens when "[a]nimal and human organs are interwoven into one indissoluble grotesque whole" (223).

As the flames rise, Dani fixes her eyes on Christian, displaying a range of emotions, including grief and anger as suggested by the sudden movements of her face, but she is quickly able to regain control of them, and then her expression stabilizes. The intensity in her eyes, which are still fixed on Christian, signifies Dani's normalization of death and acceptance of the fact that people can disappear from her life. Empathic unsettlement is thus intimately linked to the trauma victim's need to regain the authority they were previously denied, aside from its therapeutic benefits. In other words, this act of watching the flames serves a purpose similar to that of the "fort/da" game, which provides Dani a "far more thorough-going control of the relevant powerful experience than was possible when [s]he was merely its passive recipient" (Freud 75).

In the final shot of the film, it becomes transparent that Dani's initiation into the world of the carnivalesque has been completed, as she finally becomes a part of her new community as their queen. Consequently, in this shot "A SMILE finally breaks onto Dani's face" (117), implying that the purification of her psyche and her liberation from trauma might have been achieved, or at least there is hope for healing lying ahead. Horvitz says, "[n]ot until the victim encounters and translates her 'unspeakable' tragedy into 'her' story can she envision a future devoid of violence" (40), and this is what happens to Dani: Through empathic unsettlement these grotesque rituals of the festival bring, she completely loses herself in "her"' own story that challenges her fear of abandonment and the tragedy of death.

Conclusion

Overall, this article examines Ari Aster's *Midsommar* using Dominick LaCapra's theory of empathic unsettlement and Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque. As the examples provided from the film suggest, *Midsommar* underscores how the carnivalesque, through its mockery, subversion of power dynamics, and emphasis on the body, grotesque, and role play, functions as a catalyst for empathy and alternative modes of healing in the face of trauma. Although literary trauma theory has not been used in dialogue with Bakhtin's carnivalesque in the field, this article demonstrates that a dialectical approach that juxtaposes the two can entirely be fruitful no matter how atypical it may be. Therefore, this analysis of *Midsommar* also invites reflection on the transformative potential of embracing unconventional outlooks to address societal structures, power dynamics, and interpersonal relationships that perpetuate and contribute to trauma.

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