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## Cartographies of the Grotesque: A Geocritical Reading of *Midsommar*

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**Abstract:** *Midsommar* (2019), directed by Ari Aster, follows Dani's journey into a remote Swedish commune and explores the complex relationship between place, ritual, and cultural identity. This paper examines how the film constructs space as an active force in the production and maintenance of communal practices, with particular attention to the role of the grotesque in shaping the representation of place. Rather than functioning as a neutral backdrop, the rural Swedish landscape becomes a dynamic site where ritualized behaviors are enacted, legitimized, and reproduced through collective participation. The paper attempts to show how meaning is conveyed through environment, spatial design, and repeated interaction with space rather than dialogue alone.

The study draws on the concept of the grotesque developed by Mikhail Bakhtin, which understands degradation, bodily excess, death, and renewal as interconnected processes of transformation. Using this framework, the paper analyses scenes of ritual violence, corporeal transgression, and communal performance to demonstrate how the film blurs conventional boundaries between the sacred and the profane, the human and the natural, and the individual and the collective. In addition, the paper employs geocritical approaches to investigate the representation of geographic and cultural space, focusing on how landscape, architecture, and ritual environments contribute to the production of meaning within the narrative.

By bringing Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque into dialogue with geocriticism, this study argues that the text presents place and practice as mutually constitutive forces. Rituals are shaped by the spatial environment in which they occur, while repeated cultural practices simultaneously transform and reinforce the meaning of that environment. Through this reciprocal relationship, the film depicts cycles of breakdown, continuity, and renewal as processes embedded within the landscape itself.

**Keywords:** *Grotesque, Geocriticism, Space, Body, Geography, Landscape, Environment*

Spatial studies have gained considerable momentum in recent years, and the understanding of space has evolved significantly with the emergence of postmodernism. Dismantling the traditional spatial and geographic boundaries, postcolonialism, globalization and technological advancements brought space to the forefront of literary and cultural studies. Spatial studies are centered around understanding of spaces through literary theory and literature. Geocriticism, a spatial literary theory, studies the real and the fictional spaces in texts so as to emphasize the ways in which literature interacts with the world. As an exploratory critical practice, it helps us to make sense of the world around us through an understanding of the spaces (Westphal ix-x). By adopting the geocritical theory, the paper attempts to understand space as an active force in shaping the reality of the narrative, and not just a passive entity:

...to make sense of the ways we make sense of our world, our places in the world, and of our various and complex mappings of those worldly and unworldly spaces (Westphal xii).

When physical, social and geographic environments are not just passive backgrounds, they indulge in active generation of meaning, and the concept of grotesque is used to understand how space participates in the shaping and production of meaning. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin explains the exaggeration of the inappropriate to monstrous dimensions as the basic nature of the grotesque. The violation of boundaries, the tendency to, transgress all limits, excessiveness, hyperbolism, are further attributed to the grotesque (306). Grotesque body is the body in the act of becoming. Bakhtin argues that the grotesque body is constantly changing and never complete. Body swallows the world and is in itself swallowed by the world. The essential role belongs to those part of the grotesque and body in which it outgrows its own self, transgressing its own body. In its extreme form, the grotesque does not represent the body as a complete and separate entity. Instead, it focuses on openings and protruding parts of the body, showing how the inside and outside can merge with each other (317-318).

“Geocritics have long advocated a “geocentered” approach to literature and cultural studies, which would allow a particular place to serve as the focal point for a variety of critical practices” (Kashikar 14). In the movie *Midsommar*, Harga is an active spatial cultural system, and a study of the grotesque reveals how that space operates. Space functions as an active cultural and representational force that attributes significance to the narrative. The geography of the Harga community actively conditions how grotesque bodies, rituals, violence, and death are perceived and understood. And that exactly is the reason why the bizarre events could not be relocated elsewhere without significantly altering the meaning. Hence grotesque becomes meaningful because of the particular spatial

organization of Harga, primarily through the spatial contradiction. Its physical environment has an Arcadian charm, that encompasses flowers, lush greenery, sunlight, and pastoral landscapes. Within that same space, however, exist death, blood, ritual violence, and manipulative sexual acts, all of which starkly contradict its outwardly idyllic nature.

Harga's spaces are organized around communal ritual. The buildings, communal dining areas, sleeping arrangements, ritual spaces, the cliff, the temple are not random locations. Instead these places are assigned certain cultural functions and in the communal living spaces the boundaries are gradually resolved. The cliff can be seen as a ritualized space of death. During the *attestupa* ceremony two elders commits suicide as an act of sacrifice by jumping off the cliff (1:10:05). Towards the end of the movie it is the temple that becomes the space of sacrifice (2:41:50). Harga gives different meanings to the body. Within the community's spatial-cultural system the body is incorporated into the life cycle, rituals, reproduction, sacrifice and communal identity. What appears unusual to outsiders like Dani is normalized within Harga's spatial order. The real question then is how does Harga's space constructs particular meanings around the body. To cite an instance, we see Simon's body transformed into a blood eagle, with his body cut open and mutilated to resemble wings (2:31:40). This act has a ritualistic significance to place of Harga.

Harga is not a passive space because it transforms outsiders like Dani. Dani become spatially and emotionally incorporated into the community by her being literally positioned at the centre of the community as the May Queen (2:09:45). The community rituals, which initially appear gory and chilling to her, eventually become practices she actively participates in. Further, the community resorts to manipulative tactics to influence the outsiders. When Dani was disturbed by the ceremonies, Pelle, a commune member, gains Dani's trust by revealing that he too was orphaned after his parents died in fire. He told commune became his new family after that. This creates an emotional bond with Dani and makes her feel that Harga is going to offer the belonging she lacks. He also questions whether Christian truly understands her, planting doubt about her relationship (1:22:40). "Grotesque ignores the impenetrable surfaces that closes and limits the body as a separate and completed phenomenon" (Bakhtin 318). Dani's vulnerability is penetrable, and Pelle exploits her experience of loss and reframes it within the Harga's communal structure using his shared grief. His questioning of Christian's ability to understand her further weakens her connection to to her existing social world. Pelle's manipulation can be seen as the beginning of the erosion of individual boundaries that is characteristic of the grotesque. This emotional manipulation anticipates the later rituals in which Dani's bodily and emotional responses become synchronized with those of the community Pelle's story about him losing his parents in a fire sounds like an empathetic disclosure, but later we understand Harga themselves use fire and human sacrifice as part of their ritual system. His trauma is therefore a

way of making the Harga's disturbing practices appear emotionally familiar. The culmination of her transformation occurs when "Dani chooses to allow the Harga to sacrifice Christian by sewing him up in a bearskin and burning him alive" (Reinhardt). Christian is transformed from Dani's intimate partner into a sacrificial body within the communal ritual. As Baumann points out in his article for *Frieze*, "effectuating a metamorphosis, the grotesque creates an eccentric, hybrid space in which everything can be something else". The grotesque therefore becomes a means of demonstrating the active function of Harga's space that gradually transforms and incorporates them into its grotesque collective body.

According to Bakhtin, the grotesque body represents the entire universe. It connects to universal elements like earth, water, fire, and air, and is closely tied to the sun and stars (318). Josh's leg is planted in the soil like a flowering plant showing grotesque body's openness to earth (2:30:25). Christian is placed inside the hollowed-out body of a bear before sacrifice (2:40:20). The human is literally incorporated into the body of a creature associated to the natural world. The boundaries between two bodies become unstable. He ceases to function as an autonomous individual and becomes part of the Harga's ritual and material environment. The bodies are not treated as a closed human body, but is incorporated into Harga's natural environment. The grotesque body is not represented as an autonomous and bounded entity but as something that can become materially continuous with the place. In *Midsommar*, this relationship is evident in the treatment of the human body within Harga's landscape. The incorporation of Josh's remains into the garden collapses the distinction between human corporeality and vegetation, as the human body becomes part of the cultivated environment. During *Attestupa*, death places body within the physical landscape through the violent contact of the body with the earth (1:10:44). Such representations recall the grotesque body's openness to the earth and its larger natural surroundings. Dani's floral transformation further produces a visual continuity between the human body and vegetation. Her body becomes surrounded by flowers, making her almost indistinguishable from the flowers in Harga's ritual environment. (2:33:05). The victims' bodies are taken to the temple as part of the sacrificial ritual. This removes them from their normal human context and turns them into ritual objects within Harga's sacred space. The movement of the bodies, together with their physical incorporation into the landscape and ritual setting, demonstrates how Harga assign meaning to the body through its relationship with place.

Through these representations, Harga emerges not merely as the setting in which grotesque acts occur but as an active spatial environment that facilitates the body's incorporation into nature. These instances destabilize the conception of the body as a closed and self-contained entity separated from its surroundings. The grotesque thus reveals the permeability of corporeal boundaries and demonstrates how Harga's spatial environment participates in shaping and transforming the body.

“Geocriticism is a new means for reading and literary criticism, a new interdisciplinary method of analysis that prioritizes space, places and geographical practices in literary criticism” (Kashikar 13). The urban sequences are consequently important to a geocritical reading of *Midsommar* because they establish the initial spatial conditions through which the characters understand themselves. The opening of the movie establishes an urban and domestic spatial environment through which the lives of its characters are initially situated. Before the narrative moves to the Harga commune, Dani and the other characters are primarily associated with spaces that belong to their contemporary Western life. These spaces are not presented merely as neutral geographical locations, but form part of the characters' everyday experiences and contribute to the ways in which they relate to one another, themselves, and the world around them. The film's urban spaces are particularly significant in relation to Dani, whose experience of grief and emotional isolation is established before the journey to Sweden. In the beginning of the movie, Dani loses her parents and sister after her sister kills herself by inhaling carbon monoxide. Simultaneously, Dani's parents are asphyxiated in their bed while sleeping (09:20). Her surroundings are familiar and recognizably contemporary, yet they do not provide a corresponding sense of emotional or communal belonging. Space in these early sequences is therefore closely connected to individual experience. Dani occupies spaces that are physically shared with others while remaining psychologically isolated within them. The communal nature of Harga is absent here.

The apartment functions as an important domestic space in the opening of the film. In the apartment Dani feels estranged and alone. This is particularly relevant to Dani's position within her relationship with Christian. Her attempts to connect with Christian over phone calls from her apartment expose the fragility of her relationship with her boyfriend (03:50). Dani's communication with Christian takes place across a relationship that is already marked by emotional distance. Moreover, Christian's friends repeatedly urge him to end his relationship with Dani, perceiving her emotional dependence on him as a burden. Mark, in particular, criticize Dani's emotional needs and see the relationship as burdensome to Christian (07:20). Although the apartment is conventionally understood as a private and intimate space, Dani's emotional needs remain insufficiently acknowledged within it. The spatial environment thus becomes connected to the condition of the individual subject who inhabits it. This understanding of urban space is also connected to the film's representation of Dani's grief. Her experience of loss is initially contained within spaces that emphasize individual psychological experience. Grief appears as something that belongs to the individual subject and that must be privately endured, unlike the shared grief hinted in Pelle's conversation with Dani. The spatial organization of her life therefore reinforces a conception of the self as bounded and individualized. Even when Dani communicates with others, her suffering remains fundamentally her own. The spaces she inhabits do not provide a collective structure through which grief can be physically shared or

ritualized. In this sense, the urban environment contributes to the film's initial construction of the body and the self as separate entities.

The urban spaces surrounding the characters similarly contribute to the film's construction of individualized experience. Private and public spaces place the characters within a broader social environment, but these spaces do not necessarily establish communal belonging. Individuals move through them as separate subjects because city allows proximity without necessarily producing connection. This spatial organisation is significant because it establishes the body as relatively autonomous from its surroundings. The characters, though they inhabit their environments, their bodies are not materially or symbolically incorporated into the spaces around them. The body moves through space rather than becoming part of its material or cultural structures. The film's treatment of urban space is therefore important because it establishes a particular spatial logic. The urban environment is organized around individual movement, private interiors, interpersonal relationships, and socially differentiated spaces. The individual body remains separated from the surrounding environment. This distinction between body and surroundings becomes particularly significant when considered alongside theories of the grotesque body, which emphasize the openness and permeability of bodily boundaries. The early urban sequences therefore establish a spatial framework in which the body appears comparatively closed and self-contained. The body occupies a room without becoming part of the room and it encounters other bodies without necessarily becoming integrated with them. Such a spatial configuration is visible in Dani's experience of isolation. Her body remains physically situated within a social world while her emotional experience remains separated from it. What changes later in the film is how visibly the relationship between space and the body is expressed.

Analysis of urban space shows how space is already implicated in their emotional and social experiences before they arrive at Harga. The significance of Harga lies in the way in which the relationship between humans and geography becomes intensified. The environment no longer appears simply as a space occupied by the characters but becomes increasingly involved in the organization and transformation of their bodies. Significance of this early spatial construction becomes clearer once the narrative moves toward Harga. The journey to Sweden introduces the characters into a radically different spatial environment, one in which landscape, architecture, ritual, community, and bodily practice are closely interconnected. Harga is not just another geographical location added to the narrative, but a space organized according to a different cultural logic. Its open landscape and communal structures make visible the relationships between the individual, the collective, and the natural environment that are less apparent in the film's earlier urban spaces. The movement into Harga therefore allows the film to foreground the relationship between the body and the environment more specifically.

The grotesque aesthetic pays little attention to the body's smooth, closed, and impenetrable surface. Instead, it emphasizes its "excrescences and orifices", those features that extend beyond the body's boundaries and reveal its inner depths (Bakhtin 318). For Bakhtin, the mouth is one of the dominant features of the grotesque body because it is an especially important bodily opening. It is where the body takes in the world through eating and where the body's interior becomes connected to the exterior. The mouth therefore embodies the grotesque body's openness:

The most important of all is the mouth, it dominates all else. The grotesque face is reduced to the gaping mouth, other features are frames encasing this wide-open bodily abyss (317).

The mouth occupies a particularly significant position within Bakhtin's conception of the grotesque body because it represents one of the body's most important openings to the external world. The mouth is central to this conception because it establishes a direct relationship between the interior of the body and the world outside it. Through eating, drinking, speaking, shouting, and other forms of bodily expression, the mouth becomes a site through which the boundaries between inside and outside are continually crossed. He, therefore gives particular importance to the mouth as a dominant feature of grotesque representation, since it is through the mouth that the body takes in the material world and simultaneously expresses its interior outward. In *Midsommar*, the significance of the mouth can be considered in relation to the film's broader representation of bodies as open and relational rather than autonomous and sealed. The communal spaces of Harga provide an environment in which bodily activities that might ordinarily be understood as private or individual become collective and ritualized.

The communal meals at Harga provide one of the clearest examples of this relationship. Eating is a fundamental form of bodily openness because it involves bringing material from the outside world into the body. Eating and drinking, in particular, are repeatedly situated within communal spaces, making the mouth a point of contact between the individual body, other bodies, and the surrounding environment. Food that exists outside the individual crosses the boundary of the mouth and becomes incorporated into the body. In this sense, the act of eating challenges the conception of the body as a closed entity separated from its environment. Within Harga, however, eating is also spatially organized as a communal activity. In the movie during the supper, the characters do not simply consume food as isolated individuals; they eat together within a carefully structured communal environment (1:48:24). The mouth consequently becomes connected not only to the material world but also to the collective body of the community. The movement of food into individual bodies occur within a shared spatial and cultural framework, making eating part of the process through which the individual becomes situated within Harga's communal order.

The significance of the mouth becomes particularly striking in the episode involving the food prepared for Christian. The deliberate placement of pubic hair in the food introduces another person's bodily material into the act of consumption (1:50:52). The boundary between one body and another is therefore disrupted through ingestion because the material originating from another body was about to enter Christian's body through the mouth. The act transforms food from an apparently ordinary substance into a medium through which bodily and sexual relations are transmitted. The pubic hair placed in Christian's food destabilizes the distinction between bodily substance and food and introduces material from one body into another. The mouth consequently becomes a site where the distinction between self and other is destabilized. What belongs to another body is introduced into the individual body through an everyday act of eating. From a Bakhtinian perspective, this is significant because the grotesque body is defined precisely through its openness to what lies beyond its physical boundaries. The body incorporates material from outside and is consequently placed in continuous exchange with the world and with other bodies.

The spatial context of this act is equally important. The food is not consumed privately but within Harga's communal environment, where eating is organized according to the community's own ritual and social practices. The individual body is therefore opened to another body within a space governed by communal norms. The incident demonstrates how Harga's spatial order can regulate and manipulate the people. The mouth becomes the point through which the community's practices enter the individual body, making it receptive to the meanings and substances produced within its surrounding environment. The grotesque here is not merely located in the presence of bodily material; rather, it emerges through the blurring of distinctions between food and bodily substance, self and other, and individual and communal space.

The importance of this process becomes apparent in Dani's experience. As she increasingly participates in Harga's practices, her body is exposed to substances and rituals that alter her physical and perceptual experience. Ingemar, a commune member, gives psychedelic mushrooms to the group of outsiders. Once the substance enters Dani's body, the distinction between the external environment and her internal perception becomes increasingly unstable. The landscape appears to move and breathe, flowers and plants seem animated, and the boundaries of the natural environment become visually fluid (35:49). The psychedelic substance given to Dani goes further by transforming the relationship between her body and her perception of the surrounding landscape. What enters the body through the mouth subsequently alters the way in which the body experiences the space around it. A substance originating outside Dani's body enters through the mouth, produces a transformation within the body, and then alters her perception of the surrounding landscape. The relationship can therefore be understood as a continuous exchange between environment, mouth, body, and geography. This episode

is particularly significant for a geocritical reading because it shows that space is experienced through the body rather than existing separately from it. Dani's altered perception does not simply change her internal psychological state; it transforms the way in which the Harga landscape is perceived. The environment appears to participate in her altered state, while her altered bodily condition simultaneously changes the meaning and appearance of the environment. The boundary between inner bodily experience and external spatial reality therefore becomes unstable. The mouth initiates this process by providing the opening through which the substance enters the body. What begins as an intake becomes a transformation of the relationship between subject and space. The mouth can therefore be understood as more than a physical opening in the grotesque body. It acts as a point where the body connects with and experiences its environment.

The mouth becomes a point where the distinction between inside and outside is repeatedly challenged. In *Midsommar*, food, bodily substances, drinks, and psychedelic substances all cross the boundary of the mouth and enter individual bodies, while the effects of these substances subsequently alter the individual's relationship with the surrounding space. Christian is offered spring water with some special properties which in turn manipulates his free will right before the mating ritual. (2:06:40). Further, Christian's mating ritual reflects Bakhtin's concept of "excrescences and orifices" by presenting the body as open rather than closed and self-contained. Through sexual contact with the other participants, the boundaries of Christian's individual body become less distinct, connecting him to the collective ritual space

The relational nature of the grotesque mouth is seen in the collective vocal response to Dani's emotional distress. Following Christian's sexual encounter, Dani begins to cry and scream, expressing her grief and pain through her mouth. The women surrounding her respond by reproducing her cries with their own voices and bodily expressions (2:28:05). Dani's mouth thus becomes the starting point of a collective vocal response. What originates as an expression of an individual emotional body is taken up by the bodies surrounding her. Her voice is repeated, amplified, and redistributed throughout the communal space. The boundary between individual and collective expression consequently becomes unstable. The sound produced by Dani's body does not remain confined to her but becomes part of the larger auditory and bodily environment of Harga. The mouth functions not only as an opening through which material enters the body but also as a passage through which the body's inner experience moves outward and connects with other bodies. Dani's scream crosses the boundary of her individual body and is echoed by the Harga women. Thus, her suffering becomes collectively embodied when her screams are taken up by the women around her, transforming individual expression into collective bodily experience.

In each case, the mouth operates as a threshold rather than a boundary that seals the body from its surroundings. The communal space therefore participates in transforming an individual bodily expression into a shared physical experience. The mouth becomes a threshold between the individual and the collective, just as eating and drinking make it a threshold between the body and the material environment. The different representations of eating, drinking, ingestion, and vocal expression consequently demonstrate the penetrability of the grotesque body in the narrative. The grotesque mouth consequently becomes a means through which *Midsommar* challenges the idea of the body as autonomous and self-contained and instead presents it as permeable, relational, and continuously engaged with its material and spatial surroundings.

Geography of the Harga incorporates the grotesque, and the geocritical reading foregrounds the relevance of that geography through an understanding of how grotesque function inside the narrative. By way of conclusion, the paper tries to establish that these representations support a geocritical understanding of Harga as an active spatial environment. It demonstrates that the body is constituted through continuous exchanges with what lies outside it. Harga intensifies these exchanges by transforming ordinary bodily activities into communal and ritual practices. Rather than showing the body simply becoming part of the landscape, the film repeatedly produces forms in which distinctions between human, animal, and natural forms become blurred. Its particular spatial setting, idyllic landscape, ritual spaces, and communal practices meditate the representation and interpretation of the grotesque.

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