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HIERARCHY AND RESPONSIBILITY IN MEDIA: CULTS, CULPABILITY AND CULTURE

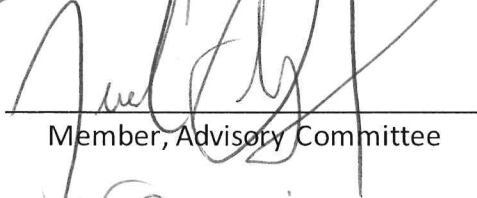
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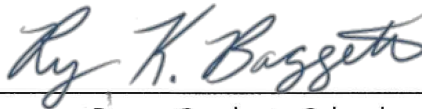


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HIERARCHY AND RESPONSIBILITY IN MEDIA: CULTS, CULPABILITY, AND CULTURE

BY

MAX HARGETT

Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Eastern Kentucky University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

2022

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank and acknowledge Dr. Bill McClanahan for being the chair of my thesis committee, as well as Dr. Victoria Collins and Dr. Judah Schept for being committee members. I would also like to thank my graduate cohort for the support. Lastly, I would like to thank my family and my dog, Winston, for the emotional support after long days of writing.

ABSTRACT

This is a descriptive research project that investigates how popular entertainment media portrays cults. My intention is to see how the selected films and television shows portray issues of hierarchy and culpability within the cult and to explore how the genre and theme of the content was utilized in order to evoke certain reactions and sentiments in the audience. The selected films were *The Sacrament*, *Martha Marcy May Marlene*, and *Midsommar*. The selected television shows were *Waco* and *American Horror Story: Cult*. Each film and series is given its own analysis. Findings indicate that a common theme of the rigid hierarchy common in media portrayals of cults, with groups consisting of one cult leader on the top with everyone else below, is a distinct concentration of culpability in leaders, not followers. Unlike leaders, members' culpability is often shown to be significantly more complicated, as members are often portrayed primarily as victims. The project also raises critical questions about the fine lines dividing cult and culture, dark tourism and the role of spectatorship, and tensions between socially sanctioned religion and cults.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Literature Review	3
Sampling	7
Methods.....	9
Findings	11
Waco	11
The Sacrament	17
Martha Marcy May Marlene	24
American Horror Story: Cult.....	30
Midsommar	36
Culpability, Leadership, and the Single Moment	41
Conclusion.....	43
References	45

Introduction

Humans have a natural need to feel wanted, safe, secure, and loved. These needs are often expected to be met within the family structure in the home. However, when the home cannot or will not meet these needs, people will turn towards other avenues to find their needs met and in turn find a new driving force in their lives. Oftentimes these alternative avenues can include institutions such as religion, schools, clubs, etc. Other times the person might find themselves involved in more dangerous organizations to meet their needs in life. These organizations can include gangs or delinquent peer groups. One type of dangerous group often sensationalized in the media are cults. From incidents like the Manson family killings, the Jim Jones mass murder-suicide, or the siege on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas making headlines, the trend is clear; stories of cults seem to captivate the public. Even when the line between religious organization and cult are blurred, as we see with scientology and violence isn't as forthright, people are fascinated by the cult mythology and its stories.

Cults are formally defined as organizations of people who are devoted to a single person or idea that exert harmful control over their members. Often the object of devotion is religious in nature, but it doesn't have to be. The source of devotion could be a movement or even a work of art (Ross, 2009). Destructive cults are generally characterized by three main features: a leader with a strong authority over the group, a process of indoctrination, and the exploitation of the members of the group (Lifton, 1981). While there is some debate on the use and application of the 'cult' label, the historical use of the word and the effects of the organizations captured in the

terminology, and its representation in media, are important and significant. In each of the analyses offered here, the group at the center of the narrative conform to these and other standard definitions.

One thing that seems certain is that the cultural fascination with cults will lead to movies, television shows, and documentaries. Media representation matters and how these popular mediums portray the cult is important in understanding how the public view cults as a whole. Whether it be the cult itself, its members, its victims, or its leader, the way the media portrays these individuals can have a significant impact. In this study I analyze several media depictions of cults, focusing on how the movie, show, or documentary portrays the different members of the cult and noting different creative decisions such as musical association, character dialogue, character's presentation of self, and other things which invoke a certain response to the cult as a whole or the individual member/leader. This study is descriptive, utilizing qualitative content analysis. My goal is not to compare the media with real life events to analyze how accurate a given movie or show is, but instead to look at the creative and conscious decisions made in various portrayals of these cults.

There are a couple of key features that I look for in each of the movies and television shows in this project. The first is how each unique narrative interprets the hierarchy and culpability of the members within the cult. Each movie and television show takes a different approach to culpability, assigning blame for the harms generated by the group. Here, a fine line between victim and perpetrator emerges, bringing with it critical questions about mediated constructions of deviance.. Another key feature I

find important to explore for each is how the genre impacts the atmosphere bringing out a certain emotion from the audience.

As highlighted in the literature review, considerable research has been conducted in cult studies. However, there has been limited cultural and media examinations of cults, with most work often focusing on religiosity within the cults or psychological approaches. For this project, I do a general broad analysis while focusing on hierarchy and culpability. With this in mind, I do take note of both the importance of religious and mental health portrayals, they are just not the main focus of this project. While there is no definitive theoretical frame put on this project, there are a few key theories, projects, or cultural sensations that I explore in the literature review that play an important role in the analysis of this project.

In chapter 2 I give a literature review looking at previous research that studies cults as well as media influence. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology and sampling technique used for this project. In chapter 4 I break down each film and television show that I analyzed separately. Chapter 5 is a discussion about the findings of each exploring common themes or overarching ideas in fictional cult media. Lastly, I conclude by discussing the limitations this study faced and offer some suggestions on how this research could be conducted in the future.

Literature Review

Psychology and sociology provide the most natural foundations for the study of cults. Given the dynamics between people within cults, both fields are rich with research

and relevant insights. In psychology, for example, Gallanter examined the psychology behind group affiliation within the groups that the author calls “charismatic groups” given the negative connotation associated with the word “cult”. This study looks at all different types of groups ranging from religious, political, and non-religious groups (Galanter, 1996). Other research, meanwhile, has examined members of cults after they have left the organization (Langone, 1985; Singer, 1979; Wright, 1986, 1987). These studies often look at the needs of former cult members and abuses endured during time spent within the cult. When it comes to criminal justice and the study of cults, meanwhile, there research is largely focused on satanic cults (Kahaner, 1988; Lanning, 1989; Ogden, 1993). These studies often look at the violence that was widely thought to be caused by satanic cults during the “satanic panic” of the 1980s and 90s.

Many studies look at cults through the framework that cults often take a religious form. While cults can take many shapes, religion tends to be a focal point for a lot of the research (Bromley & Melton, 2002; Lewis, 1996). Many high-profile cult stories seem to involve either an offshoot of Christianity (e.g., Waco’s Branch Davidians) or some sort of higher power (e.g. the “Heaven’s Gate” cult). In a 2001 study, Beckman explores the line between religious organizations and cults, explaining that there are barriers that need to be crossed to consider a religious group as an extremist cult organization (Beckford, 2001). However, some argue that the line is much finer between traditional religion and religious cults: Hickman and McLendon (2001), for example, discuss how religious organizations can easily be characterized as cults by news media.

Clearly, the relationship of religion and cults seems to be an important focus for many cult researchers.

Media, of course, plays a powerful role in shaping the social perceptions of the viewer. New media play a central role in formation of social and political opinions, and multiple studies have looked at how the news affects individual perceptions (Kepplinger, 2008; McCombs, 2002; McCombs & Valenzuela, 2020; Zucker, 1978). Media framings, of course, inform social perceptions and individual opinions on a range of topics. Shapiro and Kroeger, for example, examined romance films and how the relationships portrayed in those films create unrealistic expectations for real world dating (Shapiro & Kroeger, 1991). Young and Harper (2013) explore how popular media about infectious disease and its spread shape public perception on pandemics and disease. Theobald, meanwhile, examined popular media effects on the cosmetic dentistry industry (Theobald et al, 2006). These few examples show how media analysis can be applied across fields of study. What existing research is there, though, on popular media portrayals of cults?

Neal's 2011 research is one such study, a landmark examining at the portrayal of cults in popular media from various tv sources between 1958 and 2008. The study looks at the common themes of violence and dangers that the show associated with cults. It also looked at the hierarchy within cults. It made a broader point about how these shows further define what is allowed and not allowed within religious boundaries (Neal, 2011). Feltmate (2016) continues the trend, discussing how American adult cartoons humorously portray religious cults and how this may further a stereotype about other

religious groups. One study calls attention to the movie *Fight Club* and argues that the movie is an analogy of the forming of a new religious cult-like organization (Lockwood, 2008). As in social sciences, much of the media research seems to look at cults through this religious lens. While this tendency has proven results, I want to focus on the hierarchy of power and the culpability of certain cult members as represented in media portrayals.

One common thread found throughout this project that related to hierarchy and power is the prevalency of the patriarchy and gender dynamics portrayed within the cults. The patriarchy is a male dominated society that reinforces beliefs and hierarchies that give more power to men opposed to women. Multiple studies have looked at a modern day patriarchy and how the power shifts, but continues to stay patriarchal (Patil, 2013, Johnson, 2013). While there doesn't appear to be much research for gender and hierarchy within cult's, there are studies looking at how the patriarchy is prevalent in social sanctioned religious organizations. For example one study looks at Mormonism and how they adopted surrounding hierarchies while creating their religion (Park, 2013). Another study looks at multiple religious and spiritual organizations and examines how each uphold ideals of patriarchal society (Wee, 2006). While gender was not a focus entering this project, I found that every portrayal of cults had gender play an important role to show how the hierarchy within the cult upholds the prevalent main hierarchy in society.

Finally, I will include some analysis drawn from dark tourism or thanatourism. (Blom, 2000; Lennon & Foley, 2000; Edwards, 2020). Dark tourism is the phenomenon

in which there are an abundance of tourists who visit a given place that has a dark or morbid history. Whether it be a supposedly haunted location or a site of tragedy, these places have a certain hold on the tourism industry. Certain research have explained that the morbid curiosity seen at these places have transferred into our media bringing the morbid locale to our homes (Edwards, 2020). While this media based dark tourism is a relatively newer idea, we can trace back people's fascination with the paranormal and macabre back hundreds of years (Puhle & Parker, 2021). Drawing on these and others in tourism studies and 'thanatotourism' (Blom, 2000; Lennon & Foley, 2000; Edwards, 2020), I will describe how and why the public seem so compelled by cult media. The obsession with darkness has followed people from Victorian era seances, to sensationalized killings such as the black dahlia, the contemporary films analyzed in this project.

Sampling

For this project, I made the decision to utilize a convenience sampling technique for a few reasons. Firstly, movies and television shows with the focus being on cults already limits the overall population of available films. I also wanted the content to be relatively recent, having a range of around 10 years, and with the primary story set in the United States. As mentioned earlier, my interest was in fictional media and narratives, so this removed the option of adding documentaries or other nonfictional media into the sample. All of these parameters I set for the project limited the

population size, allowing me to pick and choose the content that would best fit with the topic from a relatively small pool.

When choosing the media for this project, I wanted to ensure that the content varied enough to give different viewpoints on the same topic. Each of the movies and television shows were selected with this in mind. *Waco* (2018) was selected as it was a fictionalized retelling of the well-known siege of the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas. It was told through the perspective of both the members of the cult as well as the government agents who were holding the siege. It gave a broad view of the incident, as well as events leading up to it and the aftermath of the siege. This television series is the only selection that attempts to retell an actual event with actors portraying real people involved in the Waco siege. Despite its relatively strong grounding in real-world events, it can largely be understood as fictional.

The Sacrament (2013) is a found footage thriller set in a fictional cult community. This film was from the perspective of two news media personnel. One reason I selected this movie was because it reflected the outsider perspective of journalists who were unaware of the cult completely prior to the start of the film. The film was also heavily influenced by the Jonestown mass suicide, but unlike *Waco*, was not a retelling and the characters were ostensibly fictional.

American Horror Story: Cult (2017) is one season of the anthology series which focuses on a completely fictional cult that takes inspiration from multiple famous cults. With this being a season of broadcast television and not a film, the show allows the viewer to see the cult through many eyes. Members of the cult are portrayed in scenes

that take place before, during, and after their time in the group. We see the perspectives of outsiders, victims, media and more. This wide array of viewpoints was the main reason it was chosen for this project.

Martha Marcy May Marlene (2011) is the oldest of the content I selected it, but I decided that it was modern enough to include in this project. Most of this film follows a former cult member through her escape and the following aftermath of PTSD she faces as a result of her time in the cult. Most of the other selections did not show many *former* cult members and their experiences after leaving, so this selection offers a different narrative and temporal perspective.

Midsommar (2019) was my final selection, and I was hesitant to include it here as its status as a film about cults is questionable. As an examination of the fine lines between conformity and deviance (Beckford, 2001, Hickman and McLendon, 2001), though, *Midsommar* explores the culture of a foreign community that has observed traditions alien to the American protagonists for several decades. This line between cult and culture was worth exploring, and so I decided to include it

Methods

Given that this research project is descriptive, utilizing a qualitative content analysis, there is no independent or dependent variable. However, the data I collect will have no ranking, but they will have categories, so this will be nominal data collection. Also, with this form of research, what I describe can vary wildly depending on the media itself. With this project, I utilize latent coding in an attempt to see what the content is

trying to get across to the viewer. However, I do believe it is also important to take note and code certain phenomenon as I notice it happening. I do not use manifest coding as I am not trying to find specific decisions made by the filmmakers. However, if I noticed recurring themes among the cult content, I believe coding that information is beneficial. Coding systems typically only measure text but looking at the four characteristics that the coding system looks for helps in my research. The first being frequency. Throughout the different media how often do we see characters act in a similar way? How often does the show play certain music to invoke an audience emotion? How frequently do these shows and media play on certain genre tropes? The second I find particularly useful is intensity. The shows I analyze are all made with the first intent of entertaining the audience. Though they may follow different genre such as horror, drama, or even comedy; they all have the intention of entertainment. Intensity shows exactly how strongly the writers and directors want the audience to think or feel a certain way. Intensity of scenes is important for this reason.

One thing I want to make clear is that there is a broad number of ways I could have analyzed the content for this project. I could focus on the storyline and analyze the plots message. I could focus on characters and their meaning. I could even focus on audio and visual directions the film took. With all of this in mind, when collecting the data, I had multiple viewings of each media in an attempt to look at it through different perspectives in order to get a broader picture of the message the movie intended to give. Important to note that each of the films and television shows was analyzed on their own. The main goal is not to compare and contrast the shows with one another, but to

see what each of them tell the viewer about hierarchy and culpability. Only after each has been analyzed is when I make some comparisons.

Findings

Waco

On February 28th 1993, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearm (ATF) attempted to raid the compound of the Branch Davidians in Waco Texas. The Branch Davidians were a religious group overseen by David Koresh, a charismatic Christian preacher, that had been based in Waco for many years. After repeated investigations into the Branch Davidian's trade in arms, the ATF began the longest siege on US soil, a siege based entirely on allegations and rumors of child abuse and neglect and illegal weapons. In the high-profile event, the ATF attempted to save their poor public image which had been significantly tarnished after the failed raid at Ruby Ridge, Idaho just one year prior to the siege at Waco, in which agents from the ATF and other federal law enforcement agencies killed the son and wife of Randy Weaver, a white nationalist survivalist who made his money selling and modifying weapons. Waco, for the ATF, was supposed to be a second chance, an opportunity to regain favor with the public. Despite their plans, the ATF-initiated raid failed, and the FBI ultimately took over the operation, largely under the control of Attorney General Janet Reno. After 51 days of failed negotiations with Koresh and only a handful of Davidians being allowed to leave the compound, the siege tragically ended in flames after federal agents breached the walls of the Davidian's home with tanks, concussive and incendiary grenades, and offensive

gunfire. The buildings quickly caught fire under the assault, resulting in the killing of 76 Branch Davidians, including over 20 children (Wood, 1993).

In 2018, FX TV released a television miniseries based on the Branch Davidian siege simply titled *Waco* (Dowdle & Gordon, 2018). The show is a dramatic retelling of the true events. The series begins shortly before the beginning of the siege, with most of the series' 6 episodes taking place during the siege. The show features the point of view of both members of the cult and the governmental organizations conducting the siege. The end of the show features the fiery conclusion of the compound and most of the members inside dying. The show takes a close look inside the compound so the viewers can get an inside look at the lives of the Branch Davidians. When the siege was happening in real life, the only narrative the country had was based solely on new footage from the outside. This series attempts to show what was happening on the inside.

One reason the television format is useful for telling a narrative is the extra time the viewer gets to spend with characters. A movie about this same topic would cut out things that were crucial to the television show to give more screen time to the unfortunate end of the Branch Davidians. By retaining these human stories, *Waco* tells a story not only about a cult and its leader, but about community. Of all the content analyzed for this project I felt the most compelled by the Branch Davidians, and the series representation of their love for one another was entirely convincing. While some shows and movies will show a violence and darkness within a cult to sell one narrative, *Waco* takes an alternative approach. The show makes it abundantly clear from the get-

go that the Davidians were largely about community and spending time with one another. With a dining hall, close sleeping quarters, a chapel, and even a go kart racetrack, the show portrays the organization like a big family. Throughout the story you learn that whole families joined the Davidians, breaking up the commonly shown theme of families being torn apart by these types of groups. The Davidians are mostly white, and their ages range largely between 30-50. More men than women are shown on the screen, but the series also focuses quite a bit of its attention on children, a constant reminder of the human cost of the siege. However, even though the Branch Davidians seem to be more equal compared to the other cults in this project, the gendered hierarchy is still present. The women portrayed in the show are shown working as the main caretakers of the children, men were not even allowed in the quarters of the children, just the women. The show never portrays any member abusing children, despite it being a significant piece of the reasoning offered by the ATF for the raid. Prior to the raid, the show gives its audience a look at the Davidians playing music at a local bar for money and going to a gun show to proselytize and sell clothing made by the women of the group. This healthy and happy community portrayal does little to vilify the cult's members, and in fact instead generates a significant degree of compassion in the audience. This image of tranquility, in the series as in the real-world Waco siege, is all shattered by the criminal justice agencies (FBI and ATF) who are given an intensely unflattering portrayal.

These two agencies are featured prominently in the series and neither have a particularly good portrayal. On one hand is the incompetent and politically driven ATF,

tasked with building a case against Koresh and the Branch Davidians. The ATF starts an investigation against the Branch Davidians in an attempt to redeem themselves in the eyes of the public after the disastrous event at Ruby Ridge not long before. Given this public failure, the ATF had a crucial need for a win. They saw the Branch Davidians as an easy win where not only do they confiscate guns, but appear to the world as child rescuers. The FBI is portrayed as the ruthless and unforgiving agency which must step in at Waco after the ATF fumbles in securing any arrests, starting what would be the longest siege in American criminal justice history. The show gives a looming feeling to the viewers that the FBI will make matters worse, and the disaster waiting to happen is preceded by a few important things. The militarization of the FBI, the incompetency of the ATF, the lack of police accountability, and the lack of communication between members of the various law enforcement teams and departments all foreshadow the disaster. The show portrays most of the federal police personnel as stubborn, impatient, and outright wanting violence. In many ways the series, with its sharp critique of these agencies, feels more like a broad commentary against militarized criminal justice agencies and agendas as much as it is about the specific events at Waco.

There are two specific characters who I think should be highlighted from the two opposing sides of the siege at Waco. The first being the leader of the Branch Davidians, David Koresh. Throughout the series, David was the only member of the Davidians that the show regularly portrayed in a bad light. David is also, conversely, seen as kind, charismatic, and empathetic often throughout the show, but many media portrayals give these characteristics to “cult” leaders only to soon show these same traits as tools

for manipulation. The show often shows the viewer that darker more expected side. In many scenes David steadfastly refuses to take others' opinions into account. In one scene he refuses to allow one of his many wives to leave the compound with their new baby. He is portrayed as self-centered and manipulative, often telling people they are free to leave, but then hinting at their punishment from God should they extract themselves from the group. Interestingly, I believe he is only seen yelling in anger at his followers one time following the death of a few of their own. Waco's portrayal of David locates him far from the other Davidians who are portrayed as *regular folks*, but also far from the stereotypical manic leader of a cult. On the other side we have Gary Noesner, the by-the-book and morally sound member of the feds opposite Koresh's Davidians who is spearheading negotiations with the group. He is often frustrated by the government and with the lack of accountability within his own agency. He is methodical with his approach, but butts heads often with agents who disagree with his negotiation tactics. To further this opposite comparison, whereas Koresh is the unquestioned leader, Gary must push back hard to get his voice heard. Gary represents the hope in reform, the hope that a broken system could still have a chance in doing some good.

With both characters having such a prominent role in their respective organizations, I believe they are intended to offer mirror images of one another. While David is the lone antagonist within the Branch Davidians, Gary is the lone protagonist within the governmental agencies. These flattened moral personalities echo the 'bad apple' narrative that is often utilized as an excuse for things like police misconduct. The argument is that the misconduct or bad actions are simply the results of one "bad apple"

in the organization that is causing issue. By locating an individual scapegoat, further investigation is abandoned in favor of individualized punishment. Do the actions of David Koresh spoil the viewers opinion entire Branch Davidian organization? Alternatively, does Gary redeem the audience's faith in the government? Or, do both men come to represent the 'bad apples' of their respective organizations? I would suspect that the answer would vary viewer to viewer, determined by the direction in which their sympathies develop.

Many television series and movies, of course, will attempt to offer commentary on an important issue, either overtly or with nuance. That context matters, of course, and so it is important to consider current affairs and their impact on cultural representations of cults and criminal justice. *Waco* was released in early 2018 which was a year into the Trump presidency. Adam Raviv (2021) explores the intricacies of government ethics in the Trump presidency era. Raviv explains that public trust in government agencies dipped low during this presidency. He looked at the policies and how they rarely enforced any punishment on wrongdoing. I would also argue that Trump himself added fuel to the distrust in government while running for and in office. He did not always have favorable things to say about the FBI, CIA, or other agencies. This show came out in a prime time for distrust in these agencies, the show could be a commentary on this by showing an example of poor governmental practices.

When looking at the hierarchy and culpability within the cult portrayed in *Waco* things become a little tricky. *Waco* stands out as the only project on this list that does not portray the cult as actively dangerous. They show Koresh as manipulative and

psychologically domineering, but the show paints the Branch Davidians as mostly victims in a governmental agency screw up. They still fit the bill of being a cult and there is still a clear hierarchy with Koresh at the top. He has a few that seem to be his closest confidants, but after that the cult is seen as largely equal. With this being a dramatized reenactment of a high profile news story made for entertainment purposes the atmosphere of the show is mostly tense. With it being in a television show format we do get more time to know the characters and this emotional bond the audience forms with these characters makes the ending even more tragic. First and foremost, this story is sold as a tragedy despite how controversial the victims of the tragedy are. The creators of *Waco* want to bring out these complex emotions out of the audience.

The Sacrament

On November 18th, 1978, a shocking news story rocked the world about a mass suicide/massacre of over 900 people in the community of Jonestown in the South American country of Guyana. Jonestown was a settlement that was originally formed in San Francisco as a religious movement called the Peoples Temple, a group led by Jim Jones, a charismatic Christian preacher who offered a blend of Christian redemption and socially progressive politics. Fearful of the media scrutiny during the mid 70's the church leader, Jones moved the group to a remote settlement in Guyana. After concerns among family in the United States about the welfare of those in Jonestown, US congressman Leo Ryan went to visit the group. After observing the group and making it clear that he intended to escalate concerns about the community, the congressman was shot and

killed at the airstrip as he attempted to escape, setting in motion a chain of events that famously ended with most of the cult members dead after Jones ordered his followers to drink a punch with cyanide mixed in it. Those who resisted were injected instead, and Jones himself took his own life with a gunshot. Jonestown was the largest number of American civilian casualties in a single non-natural event prior to 9/11.

The Sacrament (West, 2013) is a horror-thriller that utilizes a found footage format popular in horror movies from this era. The film follows two journalists (Sam and Jake) and their friend (Patrick) who are visiting Patrick's sister Caroline after she invites him to her community of Eden Parish, what they believe is a sober living community in the United States. Patrick, however, is given a location in another country that is never disclosed in the film. The two journalists work for VICE news and have a background in this type of immersive journalism. Eden Parish is an isolated community nestled in a dense forest, its gate and borders are patrolled by armed men. Most of the events of the film slowly build tension, providing viewers with the sense that something is off in the community. Not long after the journalists interview the head of Eden parish, simply called "the Father," the true end game is revealed. The Father's fears of outside worldly intervention lead him to enforce a mass poisoning of his followers. The two journalists barely escape the gunmen and the film's final shot features an overhead view of Eden Parish with bodies littering the ground.

The Father stands out as the clear leader of the organization as every other member reveres him and is in total awe when he speaks. He never seems to speak to people, but at them and with a tone not unlike a church preacher. In every scene you see

him he constantly wears sunglasses and rarely appears to look directly at the person he is talking to, but to the crowd as a whole. While most of the members of the cult lack a presence in the crowd, the Father's presence is always known as the crowd faces him. Taking inspiration from Jim Jones himself, the movie's portrayal of the Father tells the audience exactly what kind of man he is: manipulative, cruel, greedy, and violent. Looking at just his name reinforces the idea of him being the leader. In society, fathers are seen as the leader and head of households. This further sets him as the leader in the eyes of the audience who is living in a patriarchy society.

One of the reasons I chose *The Sacrament* for this project was the format in which it was filmed. Found footage perspectives are typically utilized in horror films, seemingly offering little to other genres. Popularized by 1999's *The Blair Witch Project* (Sanchez & Myrick, 1999), horror movies continued to employ this approach throughout the early to mid 2000's and early 2010's with productions like the wildly successful *Paranormal Activity* series (Peli, 2009). Sawczuk (2020) explores the popularity of the form, drawing comparison to how gothic horror literature pulled similar tactics on their reader through the device of the "found manuscript". By utilizing the found footage or found manuscript, the representation is immediately given a sense of credibility that may otherwise be missing. Oftentimes these movies give off a voyeuristic vibe, as though the audience is watching something forbidden or lost that shouldn't have been seen. Obviously, in most of these cases the found footage is totally fabricated, but often feels incredibly real when comparing the films to other conventionally photographed films that do not utilize the found footage sub-genre. These are exactly the forms that

the found footage format lends to *The Sacrament's* portrayal of cults. Realism and credibility.

The first half of the movie gives indications that the viewer is watching a documentary. Common documentary tactics are highlighted, such as voice-over narration, mock interviews, etc. Even when the tension begins to build and the horror elements come into play, the style of the film changes only a little: throughout, all of the scenes are shot as if a person were holding the camera to document a small religious community. Should someone stumble upon this movie not realizing it was fictional, it could very easily be mistaken for a true story. The clear inspiration of Jonestown only adds to the realism. Also the addition of VICE news makes takes this film to another level of credibility seldom seen in found footage films or the other content sources in this project. With such high credibility and believability any statements the movie makes about cults in general become heightened to the viewer.

The hierarchy within the Eden Parish cult is fairly simple. The Father is the leader without any question. He is the one to bring everyone together and convince his followers to put their lives and livelihoods into the parish. He is a religious man who constantly quotes the bible. In his interview with the journalists, he wears sunglasses despite being nighttime and he hardly even faces his interviewer and instead speaks to his crowd of followers. While he does little to seem particularly imposing, his dialogue is rife with small red flags and tiny threats. The muscle of his operation comes from the men who patrol the border. The Father also has a group of members whose devotion to him is strong enough that he trusts them with certain tasks such as mixing the poison

for the compelled mass suicide. The Father's motives seem a bit foggy. On one hand The Father expresses the sort of progressive political ideologies about leaving behind certain aspects of the larger world such as racism or poverty that characterized Jones' real-world ministry. Yet members remark that order in the group is enforced by violence, that The Father beats those who dissent, and later he not only directs his followers to end their lives, he also has those who try to avoid the poison shot by his armed guards. The Father's portrayal is someone who is in control while being simultaneously unpredictable and unstable. His control, then, is not entirely over himself, but of his followers.

Religious faith is a running theme in *The Sacrament*, which is no surprise given the film's relationship to its source material. As discussed earlier, a significant chunk of cult research investigates the religious nature of cults, often highlighting the unseen prejudices of religious organizations that are perceived as cults, as opposed to more socially integrated religious organizations. One study in particular (Olson, 2006) surveyed Nebraskan residents on their thoughts and emotions about cults vs "new religious movements" (a term often used to destigmatize groups often seen as cults). New religious movements could be utilized to describe organizations such as scientologists or Mormonism. The research showed that most people were more likely to respond favorably to an organization titled as a new religious movement. While this argument offers a nice complement to criminological labeling theories and the relationship between social perception and negative labels, I think it instead indicates how fine the lines are, even in contemporary societies, between conformity and

deviance. Cults and new religious movements have very similar attributes and this movie highlights that well. Eden Parish on the surface was a simple religious community of like-minded folk, an environment that viewers would have seen little wrong with prior to the red flags presented by The Father.

The film also made nuanced decisions in its production that reliably evoke a certain feeling or emotion out of the audience. The movie relies on mostly natural light until we meet the Father, who brings with him a sickly florescent blue lighting. This change evokes an uneasiness, indicating that The Father is presenting a false narrative of himself and of Eden Parrish. The next time the viewer sees natural light is moments before the poisoning reveals the true nature of the Father and of Eden Parish. The film's score features a simple and suspenseful theme that is very effective in suggesting the hidden dangers awaiting the protagonists.

The members of the cult fall into two categories, what we might consider *the devout* and *the fearful*. It would be easy to call the members of the devout brainwashed, but the movie largely avoids those simple narrative explanations, except for Caroline who compulsively follows the father until the end before harshly ending her own life (as well as her brother's). The fearful were members of the Parish that once devoutly followed the father but wanted to leave Eden Parish due to earlier incidents, while the devout are still active followers. Despite some of the devout actively encouraging and poisoning the other members, those moments are characterized mostly by remorse and regret. This narrative decision largely absolves even the devout, putting the blame solely on the Father. Given the chance to show remorse, The Father only regrets that the mass

suicide happened so soon: it was always his plan that his followers die in tribute, but he would have liked to control the timing. The muscle of the parish, the men with the guns, were locally hired by the Father. While their violence is of course despicable, the movie still frames them as an arm of the father. All of the cult members that were given names and dialogue, except Caroline and the Father, had either become afraid of the Parish or regretted their actions as they were dying by the poison. Caroline could also be understood as an antagonist more than a victim, but it is heavily implied that she had been a victim of extreme sexual violence at the hands of The Father. This movie puts the members of the cult into the role of victim far more than instigator.

Finally, we might question the motivations of The Father. Many of The Father's intentions seem pure, or even politically progressive, such as an end to racism, commercialism, and poverty. He even goes as far to call himself a socialist or communist. He explains that he saw the issues with the United States so he left to try his own way. The issue with having such an unlikable man proposing these ideas is the narrative it gives to the audience about social change: associated with The Father, political reform is presented negatively. Many movies and television shows about cults reproduce similar stories, often pushing the narrative that cults and their members are those who go against the status quo to their own detriment and demise.

When looking at the hierarchy and culpability portrayals in *The Sacrament* there are a few things to note. The first is that all of the culpability falls on the Father. The movie makes it clear that there is a hierarchy within the cult with the father on the top, his enforcers next, and then the members. This leaves the rest of the cult in a pool of

people at the bottom of the list, dominated by the central authority of The Father. The film allows for the eventual redemption of the others and makes it clear that even the enforcers are only there for a paycheck from the father. The creators want to make the Father stand out as the true and only aggressor after giving every other perpetrator some form of redemption. The film also suggests a critical interpretation of religious domination and hierarchy and the potentially corrupting influence of faith. The movie draws several parallels to religious groups that are sanctioned by society, allowing the audience to empathize with the dominated devout, to see themselves or people they know in the members of the cult. This could be seen as a warning to how far devotion can go. As for the atmosphere of the movie, this is a horror film. They want the audience to feel a sense of dread and impending doom. By making this movie so heavily inspired by the Jonestown Massacre gives viewers more context on the seriousness of the topic. With Jonestown being a major media event that spawned sayings such as “don’t drink the Kool-Aid,” *The Sacrament* forces viewers to watch in a contemporary “real time” what happened all those years ago. With this genre and atmosphere they want to inspire a wariness and fear of cults out of the audience.

Martha Marcy May Marlene

Martha Marcy May Marlene (Durkin, 2011) is an exploration of the psychological effect on a person who was formerly a member of a cult. The plot follows Martha, a young woman who reconnects with her sister Lucy after leaving an abusive cult that she had been a part of for the past two years. Throughout the film, Martha struggles to

reenter the world she knew before and to find common ground with her sister or her sister's husband Ted. Most of the film shifts between the present-day moments between sisters and flashbacks of Martha's time in the cult. As the film progresses, Martha becomes increasingly paranoid that the cult had located her. With her erratic behavior becoming less manageable, Lucy and Ted make the decision to sign her into a mental health facility. Martha's fear and paranoia remain, though: the film's final shot is of a car as it follows the trio, Martha certain that the driver is a member of her former cult. While other movies and films give more screen time and narrative attention to the cult itself, giving more depth to multiple members and demonstrating more of the day-to-day lives of members, this movie is unique in its character study approach, which allows Martha's character to be richly developed.

Martha Marcy May Marlene is constituted by two competing key settings and scenes, between those from within the cult and those after Martha's escape. While my analysis will follow chronologically and start with the cult scenes, the movie interweaves the two settings. This technique allows the viewer to see in real time how certain triggers cause Martha to have certain reactions because we just saw a scene from the cult that explained it. Similarly, the cult's rustic and rundown environment is starkly different than the modern, clean, and large vacation home owned by Lucy and Ted. While both types of scenes are in a similar environment of a pine tree forest, the houses and characters give a clear sense of distinction and difference to the viewer that implicates the class distinction between the cult and Martha's rescuers.

A few things are made very clear about the cult from the first scenes in which we see it. There is a clear hierarchy between the men and the women in the cult, although leadership roles are not quite as immediately clear as in other cult stories. The women do most of the cooking, cleaning, and chores; they tend to do things like eating only after the men are done. Among the men, the clear leader is Patrick. Unlike in other cult movies, Patrick often takes a backseat in the narrative, and we do not see him too often. While he is more of a shadowy leader, his presence is heightened when he does come on screen. This cult does not pursue the offshoot variation of Christianity often depicted in other films, but worship is still present: rather than a cosmic deity, though, members worship Patrick. Participating in sex with Patrick is a rite of passage and required for entry for any woman who joins the cult. The women are drugged and raped and expected to have sex with Patrick at his behest and whim throughout their time in the cult. The other men in the cult are wary to attempt any form of relationship with the women in fear of Patrick's retribution. The group appears to be largely organized around sex and Patrick's sexual domination, with sex acts themselves shown to be a vital part of the cult.

The cult's intentions are also important to note. Members talk about wanting to be self-sustaining. They are often seen working on a garden so they can totally cut themselves off from the world around them. In a scene with her sister, Martha alludes to this lifestyle further, asking about the life of consumerist excess her sister seems to live. The cult members discuss also needing money, which they earn by selling blankets in town, although it is later revealed that the cult also has a lucrative business breaking

and entering into the homes of wealthy people nearby. The intentions of self-sustainability as well as community should not be causes of concern; it is the actions they take to achieve these goals, as well Patrick's additional motives that raises a lot of red flags in the eye of the viewer. However, with such a poor representation of noble goals, this could cause the viewer to have an aversion to ideas of anti-consumerism or being self-sustainable. These ideas very much go against the ideals instilled in American culture. Just like in Waco, then, we see the 'cult' values of sustainability and community set in opposition to the individualism of consumer capitalism.

While Patrick is clearly the main source and antagonist of the violence and abuse within the cult, not all the blame falls on him. The first time the cult commits an act of violence against an outsider is during a robbery gone wrong when one of the male members of the cult murders a man who discovered the cult within their home, despite the domineering Patrick pushing for a nonviolent end. This is presented as the moment Martha begins to have doubts in her community. The film shows Martha, from this point onwards, largely as a victim, although she does later slip briefly into the role of instigator as she becomes the guiding force for a new member of the cult, drugging the young woman in preparation for her first sexual assault at the hands of Patrick. However, unlike the other members, Martha displays deep regret for her participation in Patrick's sexual domination and violence, and that regret overtly informs her decision to leave the cult. Even when quietly leaving the cult in the early morning hours, Martha appears to regret leaving her young compatriot behind.

The other half of the film is set primarily in the vacation home of Lucy and Ted. While the couple are very present during these scenes, they are used largely as a plot device to aid in the illustration of Martha's poor mental health and of the toll her time in the cult had cost her. These scenes, more than those in which the cult is portrayed directly, constitute the film's central message on cults. The viewer sees not only how destructive the cult was to Martha while she was a member, but also the intense aftershocks of trauma that Martha faces even in the safety of her sister's home. While these scenes are slower and heavier in dialogue, they are crucial to show how Martha struggles to reconnect with not only the world around her, but also with her family and her pre-cult self. These scenes do the heavy lifting of elevating this movie into a fascinating character study that explores the emotional scars often left in the wake of a person's involvement in cults and similarly dangerous organizations.

The film also offers a critical commentary on why Martha joined the cult in the first place. Early scenes of her time in the cult feature dialogue with Patrick about how she felt abandoned by her father and family. It is clear to the viewer she is looking for a replacement to get the emotional support from those members. Another reason that is heavily implied is Martha's search for independence in an adult world. In one crucial scene with Lucy, Martha explains how their aunt (who was raising Martha) never liked her. Lucy expresses regret for not coming around more when she was in college, wishing she had helped usher Martha into adulthood and college. Yakoleva (2018) describes some of the characteristics of youths that could predispose them into joining an abusive cult. One of the characteristics Yakoleva notes is the new independence of youths and

the need some youths feel after this new independence to find a hierarchy that they are used to. We see this clearly in Martha, as we know that she joined the cult almost immediately after leaving her Aunt's house at the age of 18 and when she finished high school. To add to this search of hierarchy in a world of newfound freedom, we also see a more classic justification for joining a cult, one highlighted by an interview with a former cult member (Jenkinson, 2013) detailing the different reasons someone may join a cult. The most basic reasoning, one often utilized in film and movies like *Martha Marcy May Marlene* is that victims were "missing something in their life" and saw the cult as a beneficial way to fill it. We see this in Martha, who felt estranged from her sister, and who felt a more general lack of family support. This makes the sisterly reunion that much more devastating and heartbreaking, as despite failing to fully understand Martha, Lucy still takes painful steps to help her sister.

Returning to the initial questions of hierarchy and culpability, *Martha Marcy May Marlene* continues the trend of the cult as constituted by an unbalanced hierarchy wherein the sole leader exerts total control over their followers. What sets this movie apart, however, is how gendered the power dynamics are within the cult. While the other media portrays a gendered hierarchy, it is most prevalent in this movie. With how strongly the movie portrays gender dynamics and a hierarchy with all men on the top, *Martha Marcy May Marlene* sets itself apart by truly commenting on the prevalency of the patriarchy. The men in the cult are closer to Patrick's level than the women, and with sexual violence and coercion playing a large role in the cult's community, the women in the cult are portrayed largely as victims, despite the only murder in the movie

being committed by a woman in the cult. Despite this subtle presentation of the collective nature of the group's violence, the movie ultimately tells the audience that the abuse, manipulation, and sexual violence endured by the cult's members absolve them of responsibility. The atmosphere of the narrative genre of the film further this feeling, giving us an intensely psychological drama that heightens the paranoia felt by Martha as she tries to move on from her past. The audience goes on the journey with her of moving forward. The use of the genre tropes of family drama giving the audience a feeling of frustration and compassion for Martha.

American Horror Story: Cult

FX's anthology series *American Horror Story* takes a different theme each season to create a standalone story set within the same broader universe. The show has taken many different twists over its 10 seasons, from the classic haunted house story to the apocalypse. In its seventh season, the show tackled cults (Murphy, 2017). The fictional cult was led by Kai Anderson, a young character seemingly inspired by the political turmoil of the 2016 election. He creates his cult by manipulating members of the community. With a core set of followers, Anderson's group commits violent crimes in disguise in to create fear in an attempt for Kai to rise to a position of power by promising protection. As the show progresses, the cult grows as do Kai's ambitions. Eventually, the show features the end of Anderson's cult and the potential start of another. Overall, the show had a wealth of content from multiple points of view. While the cult portrayed in the series was completely fictional, it was inspired by die hard political factions as well

as some real-life cult incidents, including those like Waco and Jonestown. Of all the movies and television shows discussed here, *American Horror Story: Cult* stands out in that it critically challenges core social notions of what makes a cult.

Horror cinema has always been an important site of social commentary. Sharrett (2021) describes how films such as *Hereditary* and *The Witch* offer feminist commentaries about the role of gender in contemporary society, while the Academy Award winning *Get Out* (Peele, 2017) provides a critical commentary about race in the United States. Aistrophe and Fishel (2020) show how horror is the perfect avenue to express political beliefs and anxieties. *American Horror Story: Cult* presents the competing political parties in the United States as cults. While the series doesn't spare either party, it is plainly much harsher towards the Republican party, the political right, and Donald Trump. Given that the show aired during the first year of the Trump presidency, it's success is evidence that the show harnessed a lot of uncertainty many Americans faced in that time. After seeing the feverish and unrelenting support for Donald Trump, many found themselves questioning their own perception of what makes a cult a cult. While religious affiliation and political ideology have always been at the center of social definitions of cults, suddenly many people felt that they were faced with a cult of enormous proportions (one that seemed not to represent the rebel of Koresh or Jones, but the status quo) infiltrating public institutions. The Democratic Party doesn't escape critique, however, as the show generally portrays liberal characters as caricatures of themselves who only care about critical social causes when it benefits them most. Ally, the main protagonist of the show and its most clear representation of

American liberalism, ends the series as a potential leader of a shadowy feminist cult, highlighting that both parties could have the characteristics of a cult.

Kai's cult seems to walk the line between both dominant American political parties at first. The first half of the show we see the cult mostly in recruitment mode, with Kai offering his new members help in whatever they desire, with no meaningful distinction or tensions between left and right. As the show goes on, however, Kai and his cult lean more clearly right. However in the first half of the show we see Kai as giving a helping hand to his disciples. He promises equality and power to his followers, offering the core members a chance of revenge, power, and the realization of all their desires. For example he promises one of his members, Ivy, that he would help her get out of her marriage and gain full custody of her son. Another example is when Kai recruited Beverly Hope, a news reporter who was feeling looked over at her job by another reporter who was favored by Beverly's boss. Kai promised her revenge. At this point in the show we see more of a team environment. We see Kai as the clear leader, but the hierarchies are less enforced, as the thoughts and ideas of the other members are listened to and taken into consideration. We see most of Kai's and the group's actions have the dual purpose of deepening the trust of each member and furthering the goal of spreading fear into the town. At this stage, the show portrays the hierarchy and culpability between members of the cult as equal. Once this trust was gained Kai utilized his new followers to start killings around the city. With evidence of a serial killer in town, Kai utilizes this spreading fear by running for city council with the promise of safety and protection, all

while he is orchestrating the fear itself. At this point all of the members participate in these killings as they believe in Kai.

The second half of the season portrays the cult in a much more traditional sense. We see Kai beginning to emerge as the only member allowed to have a voice or opinion. The cult grows in numbers, and the members who were used to having a voice in the early days of the cult are being systematically murdered by Kai in an effort to further his overall plan to grow as a political figure and ultimately become the president of the United States. During this phase of the cult, we see that all the new members are white men, and all new members wear the same clothing. The original members of the cult who were more diverse in gender and race were set to the side. The women who almost equalled the men in numbers were suddenly relegated to traditional gendered roles of cooking, cleaning, and serving the men upholding a societal hierarchy. Kai utilizes these new members as a security force throughout the town after he was elected into city council. The show seems to want to emphasize that the cult has entered a more traditional interpretation by giving flashback scenes of real-life cult incidents. Jonestown, Waco, Heaven's Gate, and the Manson Family are all given dramatic reenactments, with Evan Peters, the actor who plays Kai, filling the roles of the cult leaders in each incident. These flashbacks are important, as they further solidify that Kai's political cult is the same as these infamous cults that are known to the general public.

One interesting aspect that *American Horror Story: Cult* has that the other films and movies did not highlight much or at all is the dangers of cults to those not in the cult

itself. While other projects have largely focused on how members within a cult are often victims themselves, most projects situate cults within a bubble or within their own world. *American Horror Story: Cult* shatters this bubble and presents this cult as a menace to the community around it. Showing little sympathy to the members of the cult and only sparingly presents them in a victim light. This show makes all the members villains first, with only some of them getting minor opportunities for redemption later in the series. In one moment of the show, Kai demands that at their next killing they perform a pseudo-satanic ritual and film the killing for the world to see, calling on the satanic panic that much of criminal justice cult research focused on in the 80's and 90's discussed previously in the literature review. Interest in cults as a nefarious force that is suddenly a threat to "normal" people is not a common theme for most cult research except for in the field criminal justice. *American Horror Story: Cult* seems to call on those criminal justice understandings of the 'the cult' in order to tell the dangers of cults to the audience in unconventional way.

The series also often gives attention to the perspective of those who were being victimized. A significant portion of the show is from the perspective of Ally, who is tormented by the cult in their attempt to have her hospitalized in a mental institution. They do this by constantly forcing her to face her deepest phobias and then gaslighting her into saying there was no threat at all. For example, multiple times they broke into her house dressed as clowns. This grand attempt of hospitalization was Kai's way of helping Ivy, who as stated earlier, wanted out of her marriage with Ally. In the series', this appears as a metaphor for those who had their doubts and fears minimized during

this era of politics. Ally can easily be understood as the protagonist of the series. Early in the first few episodes, even the viewer would have their doubts on how reliable Ally is given how they portrayed her mental state from the first episode. Following her on her journey she went from the tormented victim to the downfall of Kai's cult by manipulating Kai into trusting her while she was working with the FBI.

Returning to the central question of hierarchy and culpability in media representations of cults, *American Horror Story: Cult* shows a group that is dangerous inside and out. By giving all of the core members of the cult a backstory and their own motivations, the audience gets a much better idea of who each member is as a person. In this show culpability is on a case-by-case basis. With the television format, the audience enjoys the opportunity to get to know each character. While each member of the core cult is in some way implicated in terrible crimes, the audience is compelled to consider their motivations and their position in the hierarchy of the group. This series really tells the audience that while the cult is a collective force, each member is still an individual. The atmosphere of the show can be best described as a political horror-drama, drawing on the genre conventions and tropes of contemporary horror and drama. The series makes it abundantly clear that the political nature of the series is meant to reflect the first years of the Trump presidency. Obviously, through the use of horror and gore, the series makes attempts to heighten fears of the audience. While this show can come off as far-fetched or a bit tongue in cheek, it offers a very detailed satire of modern political organizations that are often characterized as *cults*.

Midsommar

The final media production I will discuss is also the most recent, *Midsommar* (Aster, 2019). As I mentioned earlier in the sampling section, I was hesitant to include *Midsommar* in this project. However, the film presents an interesting and unique perspective on cults, one that questions the lines between cult and culture. Given that the film takes place mostly in Sweden in a fictional community, entirely ungrounded from any real recognizable historical cults, we also get a new perspective not seen in the other films. While *The Sacrament* does take place in an undisclosed foreign country, the cult within that movie originated within the United States and its members are Americans. The group in *Midsommar*, however, is an old community that has been in a secluded valley for many generations. Given how well established the cult is and how their traditions have been passed down for so long, the viewer may have a hard time calling this community a cult. Despite the manipulation and crimes the community commits, they do not often fit the typical mold of a cult seen in the other projects on this list.

Midsommar follows a group of friends who take a trip abroad after their friend Pelle invites them to a festival in his small community in Sweden. The main protagonist, Dani, has recently lost her sister and parents in a murder suicide. Christian, Dani's boyfriend, had planned on ending their relationship but couldn't bring himself to do it after her family's death, and so he invites her on the trip (despite his friends knowing how Christian feels about the relationship). The group of friends quickly feel uncomfortable with certain rituals performed by the community, including a suicide

ritual for two elderly members of the cult who killed themselves by jumping off the side of a cliff. Pelle explains that this is an honor. As members of the friend group start to suddenly disappear, Dani continues to be welcomed into the community, ultimately winning the title of May Queen. Christian, on the other hand, is needed by the community in another way, as he is drugged and forced into intercourse with a member in order to ensure they have an outsider's genes in the pool. As the film enters its final act, we find out that Pelle deliberately brought his friends to his home to have them used as sacrifices. Dani, who joined the trip at the last second, is manipulated by the community to see it as her new home, and she chooses her boyfriend to be the final sacrifice while the film closes with Dani smiling.

Looking at the cult itself we see some interesting attributes not seen in other interpretations. First, there is no clear leader within this cult. Elder Siv is seen to be one of the leaders as she is often the one leading rituals, but it is implied that all members of her age group have a strong leadership role (until the age of 72, when their turn at the cliff comes). Another difference is the lack of recruitment efforts, which seem to often preoccupy other media representations of cults: while Pelle and his brother both brought friends from their universities in both the US and UK, these people were not brought to gain numbers, they were simply used for ritual sacrifice. A third difference is the degree of victimization within the cult. While other series and movies often portray an environment of constant emotional and physical abuse suffered by people within a cult often at the hands of their leader, *Midsommar* shows an obedience to the cult's hierarchy that results in self harm. So with all of these contradictions to other cult

portrayals, can we argue that *Midsommar* truly is a movie about a cult? Can we say confidently that audiences will get a message about cults from this movie? While it doesn't fit the typical mold, I argue that it is in fact a take on cults.

The workings of the cults all feature around spiritualistic ideals and rituals that all members must follow. Most of the members have been in the cult their entire lives being born into the community. Their entire lives are laid out for them. In one moment of the movie Pelle explains the phases of life for those in the town: Spring 0-18, Summer 18-36, Fall 36-54, and Winter 54-72. Depending on what phase of life a person is in dictates their roles; for example where they sleep, if they can leave the community, and what jobs they are allowed to do. We also know that they are manipulative to those who they do bring into the community. Christian was just a means to diversify their gene pool given how small their community is and Dani was targeted as a new member given her recent trauma and rocky relationship with the only person left in her life. Not once in the film do we see a member of the cult speak against any the brutal way they killed the foreigners. Everyone in the cult happily follow along and the few that sacrifice their own lives for the rituals happily do so. They all work towards the overall goal of the community. These types of attributes can be given to other more socially acceptable organizations, religions, or communities which is a point of the film. This further shows the fine line between cult organizations and acceptable organizations or cult vs culture.

Most of the film shows the cult through the eyes of the outsiders. The filmmakers did this to ensure that the audience is in the dark about the cults intentions just as the characters in the film are. Which is ironic given almost all the scenes with the cult take

place in broad daylight with vibrant colors. This use of light and color give the audience a sense of safety and comfort likely felt by the characters as well. Interestingly, one of the only dark scenes in the movie comes from a nightmare Dani has about her friends abandoning her in the dead of night. While we see the motivations of all college friends, Dani and Christian take most of the screen time with her clinging to the last relationship she has and him sticking around to not seem a bad guy but he clearly has lost most if not all his emotional connection to her. The film subverts some of the gendered dynamics we have seen in other films, because Dani ends up in control of her relationship, but it comes from manipulation from the cult. Besides Dani, most of the Americans are presented in a fairly poor light by being emotional undetached or disrespectful to the culture, with the exception of Josh who is there researching Midsomer traditions for his thesis.

When it comes to the cult's motivations and culpability of the members, things get a little vague. The cult show's its cards multiple times in the movie to the outsiders by showing their traditions openly. The suicide of the two 72-year-old members was watched by the outsiders and the cult was shocked at how the outsiders reacted. Everything the cult did was meticulous and ritualistic. The viewer knows for sure that the cult is conducting rituals and making offerings for some sort of higher power, but it just isn't clear who or what that higher power is. This could be a decision made to keep the viewer in the same shoes as the outsiders, who know only the bare minimum of what is going on and never have a clear enough vantage to see the full picture. After viewing, I only noticed one mention of a spiritual being simple titled "The Black One"

and they spoke poorly of this being indicating a potential evil entity. With no dissent from within the cult the viewer gets further conflicted drawing the differences between cult and culture.

So what does the portrayal of the *Midsommar* cult mean for the audience and what does it tell them. I've mentioned often during this section and throughout this paper the difficulty at times to define a certain organization. When does a religious organization teeter far enough into a realm where we can call it a cult? Could we call all religious organizations a cult? How far is too far in devotion? *Midsommar* takes these ideas and exceptionally explores them. By making the cult set in a foreign country for both the main characters and a majority of the viewers, the filmmakers create an environment where uncertainty and a hesitance to speak up or leave a situation is the main reaction. With the cult having generations backing them up, the red flags the audience sees can easily be written off as a foreign custom different than the norm in our own country. This movie plays off the fears of the unknown and fuses it with our fear of disrespecting others. Most cult portrayals live fast and die young with an explosive ending, *Midsommar* shows a cult with a higher degree of authority. If the viewers really think about this portrayal, they could compare it to red flags in other groups that have an accepted role in society but are often shrugged off given their own legitimacy.

Returning again to the initial questions proposed at the beginning of this thesis, we can consider *Midsommar's* response to questions of culpability and hierarchy. In *Midsommar* we see a truly collective community: there is no clear leader and only a

small idea of hierarchy and this is the only media project with no gendered hierarchy. We have a stronger sense of family, perhaps more so than in any of the other films and series appearing in this project. With such a collective of people, nobody stands out as an individual therefore the blame falls on the entire community of people. The atmosphere in the movie will no doubt bring forward unease, uncertainty, and a growing fear within the audience, leveraging the horror tropes of isolation and a building sense of danger

Culpability, Leadership, and the Single Moment

A common theme among the movies and television shows analyzed here is how many of these stories are told around a single temporal moment (or heavily highlighted by a single moment). In *Waco*, for example, almost all episodes are dedicated to the siege with the final episode dedicated to the fire. *The Sacramento*, meanwhile, revolves around the two hours immediately prior to the poisoning. *American Horror Story: Cult* features several flashback scenes showing several of the most familiar and well-known moments of real-world cults. Why do they choose to show the darkest moments? All of these examples come from shows that portray or are heavily influenced by real cults. They take the most well-known moment from their source material and highlight it on camera. This is a good tactic to pull out a certain emotion or reaction from the audience. Some viewers saw these stories in the news in real time, others have seen it portrayed before, and others are naturally drawn to these types of stories, and in all cases the familiarity of these narratives seems to consistently capture audiences. We can further

this by discussing violence in each movie and show. Every project depicted violence on differing levels of intensity. Within violence being so prevalent in every show it adds another layer of what cult media intends to tell the audience. The audience can expect to see violence in these type of shows and movies, and will naturally link the two.

A second common thread found in every project was how they portrayed how complicated culpability is within a cult. Each movie and show featured members of the cult committing some sort of crime. The crimes had varying degrees of seriousness and the victims of the crime varied between people outside of the cult and people within the cult. All of the movies and television shows wanted to create a feeling of uncertain emotions in the audience, ranging from complete sympathy for the members of the cult who seemed brainwashed to revulsion as we see members inflicting pain on each other or on those who had no affiliation to the cult. By performing this balancing act the filmmakers are able to push the blame and create audience anger towards the one who is forcing the hand of the members which is of course the cult leader.

In each film but *Midsommar*, the cult leader plays an important role, and they are often given the most screen time. It is also important to note that every project that had a leader, that leader was a man. I spoke throughout about how many cults had a hierarchy that either relied on or utilized gender to denote how it was ran. By having a man at the head of each of these cult's it further shows how these organizations utilize the patriarchy as a weapon. These projects make it abundantly clear that the cult leader is the catalyst of wrongdoing. While each project gives their own take on how malignant the leader is and in turn how culpable the members are, in almost every project the

viewer sees the cult leader as the core instigator and manipulator within the dangerous organization. It reminds me of the famous Milgram experiment on obeying authority figures even when the instructions go against a person's morality or even the law (Milgram, 1965; Milgram, 1974). These experiments were conducted after World War Two and questions of obedience rose after the world saw the horrors Nazi's imposed on Jewish people. We may not be able to compare these cults to this study given the different levels of authority, but these movies show a compelling portrayal that these cult members see the leader as their highest level of authority, often to a holy level. They make sure to show that the leader manipulated their followers so strongly that the actions of the followers fall solely on the shoulders of the leader. It allows for an interesting dialogue to be had about where blame falls in groups of devotion. While I think discussion on real life cults could easily include debates about blame, the cult movies and television shows make it clear in their depiction that the leader gets most of the blame.

Conclusion

This project has attempted to analyze popular media portrayals of cults. After choosing two television shows and three movies, I analyzed each film taking note of decisions the film made to tell a story to an audience. With each of the five selections having their own unique characteristics that set them apart from the others, common themes were nevertheless identified. All of the selections raise critical questions about hierarchy and culpability within cults and other social groups. While each of these

depictions varies in the seriousness of crimes committed by the cult, each portrayed cult members primarily as victims with the leaders being the primary villain. Each also portrays cults as psychologically and physically abusive to their own members, and in some films the community around them. Some of these productions introduce the cults they address in a positive light explaining how the cult had certain goals that are noble, but still often stray from the mainstream. By doing this they create a tension where the cult claims to reject societal norms, but at the same time upholds the very prevalent held in society such as the patriarchy and hierarchies. By utilizing creative decisions that fit the genre of the film or show, each film and series is able to create different emotions and reactions from their audience. While each had common themes, they each had their own unique perspective. In *Waco* we see a recreation of a real-life event. *The Sacrament* gives a familiar story inspired by Jonestown but elevates the horror and realism with the use of found footage and a well-worn cult aesthetic. In *Martha, Marcy, May, Marlene* we get a psychological thriller that takes a deep dive into the psychological effects of a cult. *American Horror Story: Cult* reframes some contemporary political trends, raising critical questions about the lines between cults and politics. Lastly, *Midsommar* introduces critical questions of cult vs culture by removing the audience from the familiar. While news media and other forms of media that intend to look at more factual cases is important; popular media also has a strong effect in shaping the minds, opinions, and emotions of the viewers. This project gives us a glimpse into how popular media looks at cults or groups that fall outside of the norm.

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