
International Journal of Creative Multimedia

Breaking the Cult of Masculinity – *The Other Lamb*, *Midsommar* and Empowerment on Screen

Daniel Finnemore
ad7568@coventry.ac.uk
Coventry University, United Kingdom
ORCID iD: 0009-0001-5806-8636
(Corresponding Author)

Abstract

It is not only cult cinema but also the representation of the ‘cult’ on screen that can provide vital opportunities to de-centre destructive masculinity and ask questions about wider gender power struggles. Female characters that are at the centre of cult cinema, driving the narrative and breaking the rules of masculine control are not a new phenomenon. From Pam Grier’s ferocity in films such as *Coffy* (1973) and *Foxy Brown* (1974) to Kurt Russell’s brutal takedown in Tarantino’s *Death Proof* (2007), cult film has long been a platform for destabilising the notion of traditional gender hierarchies. The notion of the ‘cult’ itself, however, has long been thought of and (represented on screen) as an all-male power trip with disastrous consequences for those that believe. As far back as *The Seventh Victim* (1943) and *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968), there have been many manifestations of cult violence towards woman on screen but there is also a cannon of films that use cinematic representations of the cult to change the narrative and bring wider gender politics to the surface. Two such contemporary examples of this are Małgorzata Szumowska’s *The Other Lamb* (2020) and Ari Aster’s *Midsommar* (2019). Both films offer nightmarish manifestations of cult mechanisms and control that at first seem to once again place men and masculinity in pole position. This paper will examine how the narrative, character and cinematic language of both films offer a more complex and subversive discourse linked to female empowerment. They use the medium to offer cautionary, and often shocking, on-screen representations that attempt to

disrupt traditional, male led power structures and can also be read as a commentary on wider society and not simply the cults that they portray.

Keywords Cult cinema; Masculinity; Empowerment; Narrative

Received: 07 August 2023, **Accepted:** 26 September 2023, **Published:** 30 April 2024

Introduction

The discourse surrounding masculinity and cult cinema is complex and far reaching. This paper however looks at how the ‘cult’ itself can be used on-screen as an arena for deconstructing traditional gender power structures whilst promoting empowerment and progressive ideology. The definition of ‘cult’ can be fluid and often open to interpretation. *Masterclass* offer a relevant and useful perspective however for the purposes of this paper by defining the concept of ‘cult’ as a ‘group of people with usually atypical beliefs living in relative isolation’ who ‘tend to centralize around one charismatic person—the cult leader.’ⁱ By looking critically at Małgorzata Szumowska’s *The Other Lamb* (2020) and Ari Aster’s *Midsommar* (2019), a discourse emerges around films about ‘cults’ that provides important and subversive dialogue about masculinity and female empowerment as well as providing cult film horror audiences with the more familiar gratifications with which they are accustomed.

Some of the most relevant critical debate surrounding cult film has revolved around gender representation and ideology. David Church suggests that ‘violence and sexuality of a deviant or perverse variety are generally the key motifs in most cult films.’ⁱⁱ Both themes are at the heart of the films being investigated here, but it is the relationship between violence, sexuality and gender power struggles that allow both texts to be explored beyond a cult film/horror discourse. Cult film can be a very masculine arena and instead of being a space for progressive ideological rebellion, supports outdated and traditional notions of male dominance and power. Brenda Austin-Smith argues that ‘cult films tend to observe or recuperate distressingly conservative representations of gender and sexuality.’ⁱⁱⁱ She is sceptical of ‘women’s self-conscious embrace of cult’s masculinised practices and attitudes’ (ibid). Mathijs and Sexton echo these concerns by warning that ‘cult cinema has a worrisome reputation when it comes to gender equality’^{iv} and Hollows has even graver concerns suggesting that cult cinema has been ‘culturally constructed as masculine.’^v In reference to Chantal Akerman’s seminal *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, Mathijs and Sexton argue that the cult classic’s ‘style, structure, narrative, acting performances, and even its title are a deliberate challenge to mainstream cinema’s androcentricity.’^{vi} This essay will attempt to argue that both *The Other Lamb* and *Midsommar* are equally as subversive and offer on-screen narratives that may be an antidote to conservative representations for

audiences that want to see cult horror film question old traditions and power structures rather than perpetuate them.

Any discussion about film's power to subvert masculine control and abuse by offering narratives of empowerment, must engage with existing observations regarding dominant or hegemonic masculinity. A valuable reflection on the dangers of non-conformity to masculine demands comes from Rada and her deconstruction of *Moonlight* (2017). She suggests that 'men are taught to show no emotion, to be impervious to pain, and to be the strongest man in the room. They are caught in an endless struggle to maintain their status in the social hierarchy, and when they under- perform, social policing of masculinity ensues to make an example of weakness and reinforce that there are consequences for those who don't conform.'^{vii} A reaction by those 'who don't conform' is crucial to this analysis of both films and their subversive nature.

Another viable approach to the issue of defining masculinity has come from Connell and Messerschmidt. It is suggested that 'the concept of hegemonic masculinity is not intended as a catchall or as a prime cause; it is a means of grasping a certain dynamic within the social process.'^{viii} For Connell, problems with hegemonic masculinity come out of struggles linked to 'power and political leadership, public and private violence, and changes in families and sexuality.' (ibid). The notion of 'public and private violence', the manifestation of this on-screen and the relationship that this has with subverting gender power hierarchies is why both films offer much more than just horror, drama, and spectacle through the vehicle of cult film.

Khan, Holmes and Brett contribute to this discourse and although they suggest that 'definitions of masculinity differ across time, culture, and among individuals.'^{ix} They also state that 'in the western world, themes of dominant masculinity include such aspects as emotional control, homophobia, risk taking, autonomy, power over women, competitiveness and aggression.' (ibid) Most of these characteristics are at the heart of both films being investigated here. Whether it is the emotional control or power over women that *The Shepherd* thrives on or the competitiveness and risk taking that the American male characters embody in *Midsommar*, both films call into question these destructive traditional ideologies surrounding gender hierarchies. Laura Mulvey's longstanding and vital work regarding the

male gaze is also still hugely relevant regarding cult film, masculinity on-screen and progressive ideology. The overarching notion that the arena of cult film ‘is constructed for the pleasure of the male viewer’^x may unfortunately still hold weight regarding many on-screen representations but this is certainly not the case with *The Other Lamb* and *Midsommar*. Both the lead protagonists Selah and Dani demonstrate agency throughout and make decisions that drive the plot and subvert Mulvey’s theory. It is in this agency and motivating forces that both films can be seen as examples of cult film that offer more than tales of masculinity in crisis but actively push the envelope regarding progressive gender representation. Referring specifically to Turkish horror film and gender, Koçer quotes Clover in suggesting that ‘behind the female “cover,” there is always the story of a man in crisis.’^{xi} This argument could be applied to *The Other Lamb* and *Midsommar* but this would be reductive in many ways. Positive messages exist in both films regarding not only the power, but also the vulnerability and empathy of female identity on-screen and how this can positively affect audience ideology and wider thinking around the power of cult film to promote positive gender representation.

There are other exceptions to the rule to acknowledge before switching our attention to both films and their relationship with these themes. As Hightman suggests, ‘Horror films about cults often place women in positions of leadership,’^{xii} even if this is problematic. Films such as *Suspiria* (1977) *Sound of My Voice* (2011) and *Martyrs* (2008) are examples of cult cinema that deal with the concept of ‘cult’ itself whilst positioning female characters at the centre of any violence, control, and abuse of power. In *Sound of My Voice* for example, Maggie (played by Brit Marling) portrays the leader of the cult as opposed to a follower. She is also a leader who is complex in both her authoritarian and empathetic ways which makes for a richly dark, unsettling, and fresh approach to portraying the ‘cult’ on film. This perspective is worth further investigation and may act as a counter argument to the discourse provided by this critical examination.

The Other Lamb & Subversion

It is in the previously mentioned perspective of the ‘self-conscious embrace of cult’s masculinised practices and attitudes’ (ibid) that both films provide examples of subversion and resistance not only within the narratives, driven by certain characters, but also in the ideologies that these may offer audiences regarding gender hierarchies and empowerment. In

The Other Lamb, the ‘bearded, bossy’ cult leader (The Shepherd) has obvious designs on playing the Jesus role to his flock. Director Małgorzata Szumowska has even gone on record to say that her younger self saw Jesus as a ‘sex icon’ and would ‘imagine he was her boyfriend.’^{xiii} This early infatuation may have been some inspiration for The Shepherd’s character, but many elements of the film including the narrative, characters and cinematic language all converge to dismantle the idea that the leading man is always the one with ‘power’ and superior ‘leadership’ qualities.

The most identifiable force for empowerment in the film is the lead protagonist - Selah. In the opening scene she appears in a pure white robe, setting a striking image of purity submerged in dark murky waters. Her face obscured, Selah appears to be in the midst of a baptism of sorts and at this point in the film’s narrative, she is as invested in The Shepherd’s beliefs and control as any other one of his wives and sisters. In one of the *Lamb*’s early striking moments, the group are literally shepherded into a makeshift pen in the woods where they partake in a ceremony of religious ecstasy involving speaking in tongues and having the blood of lamb smeared over faces. The intensity and fervour of the scene establishes The Shepherd as the figure of authority and control with all concerned fully submissive to the ceremony. As the camera moves in a tightly framed circular motion around the group, the rapture is fully present, and the scene establishes the power structure within the group in a startling and uncomfortable style. At this point, Selah is just as mesmerised by their leader and his teachings as rest of the group and during this initial ritual Szumowska’s camera repeats its motif of slowly creeping towards her face but in this instance draws us in to her reverence and wonder. Selah’s first rebellious moment comes from a place of jealousy and resentment at a fellow wife and reveals the first glimpses of her as a force to be reckoned with within the community. There is a simmering anger and strong will inside Selah right from early on even if it is not at first directed at The Shepherd.

Szumowska’s framing of the landscape is also vital in exaggerating the fermenting tensions within the various group dynamics. The forest landscape of the community’s initial home is forever eerily still and calm throughout whilst various moments of unease and drama unfold within it. In fact, the outside wild and untamed surroundings offer more peace and tranquillity than the man-made cabins that are spaces of repression, control and violence for many of the wives and sisters. It is not until the group are forced to move on by outside

civilian forces that the landscape around them and forces of nature begin to turn against them reflecting the fractures and discontent within the camp. Driving winds, rain and bleak grey horizons accompany the nomadic journey that the cult now finds themselves on.

It is during this deteriorating situation that Selah begins to ask more and more questions her own past. She is drawn to 'broken thing' Sarah who is being persecuted by The Shepherd for a multitude of sins. When she learns of The Shepherd's cruelty and neglect which ultimately caused her mother's death after giving birth to her the screw begins to turn. The inclusion of a fantasy sequence at this point in which there are two Selah's on screen simultaneously reveal her break and moment when her own personal empowerment begins. We see a 'free' Selah, warm, dry and confident riding in a car past the group as they battle the elements. She seemingly mouths a warning to her other self who looks on, tears staring down her face as she imagines another life slipping away from her.

When one of the group dies during pregnancy, Selah becomes fully emblazoned against the destructive consequences of the Shepherd's actions. This is once again reflected in Szumowska's powerful *mise en scene* and the backdrop for the funeral pyre scene is one of death, decay and hopelessness symbolised by the dead trees and desolate horizon. Broken thing Sarah openly rebels and accuses The Shepherd of causing this death and countless others whilst addressing him simply as Michael. The scene that follows sees Selah staring into the burning funeral pyre as rage takes over as she will no longer accept the violence and manipulation that the Shepherd inflicts on his 'flock.'

When the group arrive in their new 'Eden' it appears as if their leader has been right all along, and faith is momentarily restored as baptism's are performed and joy amongst many of the wives and sisters is palpable. Selah's nightmare however has only just begun as she is violently raped by The Shepherd. It is here, at the end of the narrative where once again, fantasy, violence and retribution unfold on screen to solidify Selah's defiance and changing fortunes. She smears her own blood on her face as war paint and a slow-motion hallucination is presented as The Shepherd is violently attacked and killed.

When the empty robes of the wives sacrificed in Eden are discovered along with The Shepherd by the Sisters, it is here that full control is taken back by Selah. She refuses his

grace in defiance and retaliates with her own display of violence. After this The Shepherd's mutilated body is discovered strung up in a Messiah like pose, ram's horns placed upon his head. The final shot of the film places Selah front and centre as she cradles a young lamb, in full control of her own destiny and perhaps the sisters that look on from a far. Although control over and violence against women has been a constant throughout, the destruction of The Shepherd and removal of his command over the all-female flock leaving Selah as the leader reinforces the powerful notion that change is possible.

***Midsommar* & Empathy as Rebellion**

An important aspect of understanding *Midsommar* and empowerment on screen is the notion of empathy as rebellion. From the very start of the film, *Midsommar* sets out the stall for this discourse in its knowing first few scenes. Dani is the vulnerable, emotional and paranoid female whilst Chris and his friends clearly represent some the atypical traits of hegemonic masculinity: distant, devoid of emotion and wielding the power within the relationship. The dialogue and power play in this scene are jarring in their stereotypical approach to masculine/feminine ideology but what happens next shatters the illusion that Dani is overly emotional, 'needy' or paranoid. In the first moment of sheer horror, her worst fears are realised and Chris is suddenly lost and out of his depth as he struggles to process that death of Dani's family and demonstrate the qualities needed to comfort and support her. This is the first instance in the film where the idea of lack of empathy and masculinity is exposed, but as the narrative unfolds, we see how Dani's character and the fate of her male companions is vital to the notion of empathy as empowerment.

She is dismissed, isolated and ostracised on many occasions by her own partner and his friends right from the start of the film. This continues when she decides to accompany the group on their ill-fated trip, reinforced by the disgust and peer pressure applied when she has second thoughts about taking the psychedelics offered by the hosts. When she is confronted by the initial ritual led by two of the many dominant female cult leaders, Dani is mesmerised by the power they yield. Immediately after this in stark contrast, she finds herself suddenly in an apologetic state, making excuses for her partner who has forgotten her birthday. The female cult leaders represent the thing she is not able to be in her own life. Strong, influential and with the ability to hold people accountable for their actions.

During the first moment of ritual sacrifice there is a moment when Dani represents the complete opposite of the hysterical female trope. As the two leaders commit suicide in a shocking and violent manner, Dani is calm and contemplative as other's unravel around her at the sight of such horrors. Later in the film when Dani is confronted by the sight of Chris committing adultery, she is seen screaming and wailing much like her outpour of emotion at the start of the film. The difference here is she is encompassed by the support of the female cult members who appear to be supporting her both emotionally and physically in her trauma and grief. There is a certain empowerment in this scenario whereas before it was pure vulnerability and isolation. It also worth noting here than even though Chris finds himself in the act of sex with a cult member, this itself becomes an exploitative endeavour against him as he is used for his seed and then prepared for sacrifice. Another role reversal in the final third of the film that calls into question traditional masculine behaviour.

There is a clear turning point at the start of the third act when everything unravels for the male, non-cult characters in *Midsommar* whilst Dani reclaims more power than at any point in the film. She becomes a queen to the new community instead of a distraction. She is intoxicated with the all-female, full costume hedonistic ritual while the fate of Chris, Josh and Mark is either sealed or hanging in the balance. The actions of these characters have strong ties with hegemonic masculinity in that their respective downfalls are linked to traits such as arrogance, greed, entitlement and sexual desire even if their destinies may have been pre-determined as sacrificial offerings. Mark is undone by his predatory disposition, Josh by his entitled ambition and Chris by both. At the end, Chris' lost and vulnerable state as he desperately seeks the comfort of the woman he has neglected mirrors that of Dani at the start of the film. It could be argued that his lack of empathy has put him in this position, if he had cared at the start, he may not be where he unfortunately finds himself.

The cinematic language of *Midsommar* is something to behold for many reasons. There are moments of mise en scene in the film however that are used to symbolically support the notion of female empowerment on screen and question gender hierarchical norms. The spaces occupied by Chris and his friends at the start of the film are dimly lit, musty spaces that emanate negativity. In one wonderfully framed scene, we can barely see Dani reflected in the apartment's mirror as the group awkwardly discuss her addition to the upcoming trip. The use of space and cinematography here come to represent the lack of

visibility for Dani from even her own partner. This is in complete contrast to the communal space within the cult's sleeping quarters. Bright, lofty and beautifully adorned with intricate paintings this space represents something completely different for Dani where she is in every sense of the word, seen.

Both *The Other Lamb* and *Midsommar* position the idea of a cult as an entity of violence and control but one that provides the arena for female resistance and self-discovery. If, traditionally speaking, films about cults helped to reinforce a notion of masculine dominance and coercion, then the films in question here offer something much more progressive and subversive. Selah and Dani endure horrific circumstances but ultimately find some stronger version of themselves out of the situation they face. In many films with cults at the heart of their narratives, agency is removed and manipulation reigns for female members. In the case of both *The Other Lamb* and *Midsommar* however, it is either external situations that isolate and oppress or it is the cult itself which creates a situation where a clearer understanding and expression of self is required for survival. The shock and awe of the films in terms of the horror and spectacle that unfolds is matched only by the resistance and rebellion from their respective female leads and it is in this reading that both *The Other Lamb* and *Midsommar* represent a move away from the norm regarding controlling cult male leaders on-screen to something way more seditious and vital.

References

- [1] Masterclass. (2022). What Is a Cult? 4 Types of Cults and Common Characteristics. *Masterclass*. <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/what-is-a-cult>
- [2] Church, D. (2007). Notes Toward a Masochizing of Cult Cinema. *Off Screen*. 11 (4)
- [3] Austin-Smith, B. (2019). Cult Cinema and Gender in *The Routledge Companion to Cult Cinema*. Routledge.
- [4] Mathijs, E and Sexton, J eds. 2011. *Cult Cinema: An Introduction*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- [5] Hollows, J. 2003. "The Masculinity of Cult," in Mark Jancovich, Antonio Lázaro-Reboll, Julian Stringer and Andy Willis, pp. 35–53.
- [6] Mathijs, E and Sexton, J eds. 2011. *Cult Cinema: An Introduction*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- [7] Rada, M (unknown). Moonlight: An Exploration of Masculinity and Homonegativity. *The University of Oklahoma*.
- [8] Connell, R. W & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept. *Gender & Society*. 2 (19).

- [9] Kahn, S. J, Holmes, R. J & Brett, L. J. (2011) Dialogical Masculinities: Diverse Youth Resisting Dominant Masculinity, *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 24 (1)
- [10] Mulvey, L., 1975. Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. *Screen*, 16(3), pp. 6-18.
- [11] Clover, J. C. (2015). Men, women and chain saws: Gender in the modern horror film (Princeton Classics ed.). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- [12] Hightman, H. (2019). What female cult leaders in popular movies and TV can teach us about patriarchy. Yahoo Finance. https://uk.finance.yahoo.com/news/female-cult-leaders-popular-movies-205631593.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAHSkFe-wg1aMv4WfAytNChSoPiljSA8AZeNLBUgWieaZJQXXta0zREJ1Qc6lhcB1_t-uxUW5O1GZejEH94e9cEKCI9iowYtr2DEulapQCUR4Op9dcbGyQhfj1etTCfKUmI6XQqQFXTv6vvgUygU3XGxAhCO2WhUk3SkOTjOPYN4
- [13] Chen, N. (2020). The all-female cult horror film that's being compared to Midsommar. *Dazed*. <https://www.dazeddigital.com/film-tv/article/50746/1/malgorzata-szumowska-the-other-lamb-cult-interview>

Funding Information

The author received no funding from any party for the research and publication of this article.

Author's Bio

Daniel Finnemore is currently lecturing in film at Coventry University as well as researching for his PhD which focuses on destructive masculinity and on-screen representation. Starting out in television after completing his MA at the University of Birmingham, he began lecturing in 2009 as well as continuing to produce short narrative film, music videos and documentaries. His practice now focuses more on composing and soundscape work for features and television with his latest project, the UK indie crime thriller *Fixed*, a winner at the 2022 National Film Awards amongst others.