

# STUDENT ESSAYS

## The spaces of genre and power in *Audition* and *Midsommar*

Discussions of genre in film often refer to the limitations of individual genres, or the divisions between them, as 'borders'. Rick Altman notes that most generic criticism assumes that 'genres must have clear borders' (1999: 18), whilst Brian Taves' writing on the adventure film has as one of its aims 'to distinguish its [the adventure film's] borders from other forms with similar elements' (quoted by Altman: 18). I would contend that these 'borders' are often literal, physical borders; that genres can be to some extent signified by the spaces in which they take place. Not only do these spaces serve as recognisable visual signifiers for their respective genres and their aesthetics, they also work to help establish the figurative worlds of the genre – what is important in them, who has power, who has the audience's sympathy, and what values are affirmed. For example, the prairie homestead is a quintessential space of the western, conveying perseverance against the elements and the sanctity of the family; similarly, seedy nightclubs and desolate city streets under the high-contrast glare of neon lights are the cornerstones of film noir's lurid, paranoid worlds. Movements in space can even signify shifts in genre; in *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), the film transitions from

noir to horror as protagonist Marion Crane travels from the city (bustling, energetic, sleazy) to the Bates Motel (remote, shadowy, confining).

This essay will discuss the relationship between space and the dynamics of genre in the horror films *Ôdishon / Audition* (Takashi Miike, 1998) and *Midsommar* (Ari Aster, 2018). The horror genre is one with a particularly strong relationship to space and environment. The genre's plots typically involve elements of the supernatural, improbable, or inexplicable which we would tend to regard as unrealistic – demonic possession, hauntings, apparently human killers who seem all-seeing and can survive any injury. Often, films in the genre create a context in which audiences will accept these unrealistic or outright fantastical elements through the use of space – by styling (through production design, lighting, colouring, framing, and editing) the physical environments in which the story unfolds such that they appear menacing, uncanny, or otherworldly. Consider as especially prominent examples the intensely saturated Technicolor palette and labyrinthine architecture of the dance academy in *Suspiria* (Dario Argento, 1976), captured from extreme angles, or the circuitous, discontinuous lay-out of the clinically over-lit Overlook Hotel in *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1979). Through such stylisation, many horror films situate themselves in a kind of nightmare reality, creating a visual shorthand in which the audience will implicitly accept improbable or paranormal events.

The two horror films here discussed partake of a complex relationship with space and genre, undergoing stark transitions in space which signal transitions in genre – and, with them, transitions in their central power dynamics. Through analysing the films' respective spatial trajectories, I hope to show the centrality of space to the creation of our narrative understandings and expectations of various generic categories and the horror genre's particularly potent ability to upset or disturb these spatial dynamics.

Both *Audition* and *Midsommar* begin in mundane, everyday locations, devoid of the kind of stylised or menacing flourishes which might serve as signifiers that we are in the macabre territory of the horror film. In these spaces, a relationship is established between the films' lead male and

female characters, in which the former has power over the latter. This is reflected in the construction of spaces, which seem to visually privilege and empower the male character over the female.

*Audition's* opening scenes establish the life of widower Shigeharu Aoyama (Ryo Ishibashi) and the spaces that he occupies. A scene depicting Aoyama speaking to his friend Yoshikawa (Jun Kunimura), a film producer, at the latter's office, dwells for a long time on a medium shot of the two men standing on either side of a desk. The desk, covered in papers, and the shelves around it, are clearly visible, giving the setting a clear spatial geography. The back of the frame is taken up by the city skyline seen through a window – linking the space to a wider world, thus lending it a greater, more concrete sense of realism. As the men walk through the office, the camera follows them in a gradual, fluid movement, which makes the space feel continuous and self-contained. They discuss Yoshikawa's plan to find Aoyama a new wife – holding a mock audition to draw in actresses. Through this scheme, Aoyama meets Asami Yamazaki (Eihi Shiina), with whom he is immediately infatuated. Much of the first act is dedicated to establishing their unbalanced relationship, in which Aoyama has power over the sensitive Asami, who is unaware of the deception.

Asami and Aoyama meet for the first time when she enters the audition room. As in Yoshikawa's office, the mise-en-scène here is decidedly muted in terms of colour palette and furnishings – large looming grey walls, the room entirely empty save for a chair, a camera and a white desk behind which Aoyama and Yoshikawa sit. Their power over this environment has been illustrated by the preceding montage depicting the various actresses who attend the mock audition. This sequence employs a shot / reverse-shot pattern between Aoyama and Yoshikawa behind the desk, asking questions of the auditionees, and the actresses (all of whom are oblivious to Aoyama and Yoshikawa's plan) seated on the other side of the room, responding. The men, particularly Yoshikawa, behave in a domineering fashion, asking invasive, sexually charged questions. The actresses' responses are shown alternately in medium shots imitating Aoyama and Yoshikawa's point of



view, and through a camera set-up to the side of the desk. The visual schema of this montage serves to establish the space of the audition room as controlled by Aoyama and Yoshikawa, aligning it with their gaze, their power, and their desire.

Asami thus enters the room already in a position of vulnerability. As soon as Aoyama and Asami occupy the same space, the film's visual style stresses their inequality – her vulnerability, his power. As Tom Mes notes in his analysis of the film, the wide shot in which her entrance is shown 'makes her look very frail in the environment of the spacious room' (2006: 18) – alone at the centre of an otherwise empty frame and with an ominous black blind looming large behind her, she appears defenceless and fragile, isolated by negative space and minimised by the camera. Asami's audition begins in a long shot from the back of the room. Asami is positioned in the right foreground of the frame, her back to the camera, as she introduces herself, bows, and sits down. Aoyama and Yoshikawa, meanwhile, are seated in the shot's far background. While Asami is the most prominent figure in the *mise-en-scène* here, her positioning does not grant her significance so much as continue to emphasise her vulnerability and lack of power in this space. Returning to Mes' comment, she still appears small and isolated in the wide, expansive audition room. The placement of the camera behind her back denies us access to her facial expressions as she talks, thus robbing her of visual expressiveness. When combined with her stiff, static pose – both standing and sitting she is poised and rigid – this framing renders her less as a character in the scene's drama than an element of the *mise-en-scène*, an

object in space to be surveyed rather than a human being with agency or interiority.

Meanwhile, although Aoyama and Yoshikawa appear small at the back of the frame, they maintain a position of power as the figures looking out in the image, appearing to fix Asami in their gaze from across the room. The frame appears to extend outwards from their vantage point, reinforcing their status as the organising authorities in this space. As Asami talks, the camera begins to dolly forward, gradually moving past Asami (while still pointedly leaving her face obscured) and towards Aoyama and Yoshikawa, making the two men and their desk progressively larger and more imposing. The camera completes its trajectory by arriving at Aoyama's face in close-up, dwelling on his visage for an extended period as he continues to question Asami, gazing fixedly at her all the while. The continuous camera movement from the wide view of the room, with Asami rendered as a posed object, to Aoyama's gazing face, cements Aoyama and his desires as the dominant force in this space, organising and controlling every aspect of it – including Asami. As Aoyama further questions Asami, his inquiries growing increasingly personal and obsessive, the scene returns to a variation on the shot / reverse-shot pattern used to convey Aoyama and Yoshikawa's mastery over the space and the women occupying it during the aforementioned montage. The close-up on Aoyama is alternated with centred shots of Asami responding to him, hemmed in on either side by two black blinds, between which she looks small and vulnerable in her white dress. Each time we return to this view of Asami, the camera is closer to her, creating the impression of her gradually becoming ever-more confined, her apparent capture by Aoyama's gaze and his deception conveyed by her increasingly claustrophobic framing within a space under his control.

In a later scene where Asami and Aoyama go out for dinner, the *mise-en-scène* once again emphasises his power over her. Aoyama is shown in close-ups in which he takes up most of the frame, exerting absolute authority over the space. Asami is shown in shots from over Aoyama's shoulder, marginalised to the back of the frame and appearing trapped between Aoyama's body and the table behind them. This scene upholds the portrayal of romantic and sexual relations as 'on the whole

forced, unpleasant, and violent' (2006: 32) that Mes identifies across Miike's films; however, rather than the grotesque excess found in a film such as *Ichī The Killer* (2000), this sequence is resolutely grounded in its aesthetic. The colour palette is subdued, dominated by the white of the tablecloth and the light brown of the wooden table and the walls. *Audition's* first act



thus weds Aoyama's patriarchal authority, and particularly his power over Asami, to a strictly realistic milieu.

*Midsommar's* early scenes similarly embed an unequal central male / female romantic relationship within mundane settings. The apartment where protagonist Dani Ardur (Florence Pugh) lives is one of the primary locales of the film's first act. The apartment is rendered in drab fashion, with dark blue walls, lit by a single bulb. Dani's laptop is also often prominent as a light source, firmly connecting the setting to modern technological reality – a contrast to the environments which the film will later explore, which derive some of their eeriness from their anachronistic styling, appearing as preservations of an archaic vision of country life cut off from the modern world. After receiving a worrying email from her distressed sister, Dani calls her boyfriend Christian (Jack Reynor) for support; the ensuing dialogue establishes the unequal nature of their relationship. He is dismissive of her concerns and subtly blames Dani for her own anxiety. Despite initial protestations, she eventually relents and agrees with Christian, even thanking him. The dialogue plays out in a continuous close-up on Dani's face which isolates and confines her. As Christian's tone grows more scolding and Dani capitulates, the camera pushes closer to her, making the frame even more oppressive. After the phone conversation,

Christian is first seen in a shot which opens on a close-up of his face then expands outward to reveal him sitting at a restaurant table with his friends. With dark grey walls and low lighting, this is another decidedly naturalistic, realistic environment, in which Christian appears comfortable and in control, at the head of the table and framed by his friends. Where such ordinary spaces confine Dani, Christian is at ease and in power in them. Furthermore, Christian is introduced in a shot which emphasises movement and spatial expansion, moving out from his face to reveal his environment, whereas our initial images of Dani in her apartment tend to be static, narrow close-ups; he appears free within space, she is contained within it. The contrasting natures of the two spaces in which Dani and Christian are respectively introduced also serves to illustrate the unequal nature of their relationship – she is isolated in private space, whereas he is in an open, free public space.

When Christian and Dani are finally in the same space, her weakness and dependency on him is made clear. Christian rushes to Dani's apartment after she receives the horrific news that her sister has killed their parents and herself. The camera slowly dollies toward them, she hunched forward and he upright with his arms around her. Dani's vulnerability is heightened by the arrangement of the décor such that it appears to be confining her: she is hemmed in by curtains, paintings and lamps on both sides, seemingly imprisoned by the suffocating symmetry of the space.

Both films thus begin by grounding their unequal, casually cruel central relationships in realistically rendered spaces; their natural lighting, use of real locations, and the largely subdued mise-en-scène and editing used to capture them (no erratic editing or extreme angles) encodes them as straightforward representations or reproductions of reality and real places, as opposed to the heightened or figurative environments of genre cinema. Within these spaces, the primary male characters are visually situated in positions of power, privilege and ease, while the female leads appear marginalised and oppressed.

Both films' narratives explicitly enter the horror genre only as they transition into more stylised, menacing spaces – what I would refer to as *spaces of horror*. I will here define what



I mean by this term. These spaces are defined by a heightened style of mise-en-scène, which employs framing, lighting and colour in striking, extreme and sometimes deliberately disorienting fashion (examples of which are discussed later) to create a frightening, unnerving atmosphere – and by their jarring ruptures in narrative logic and continuity. I would contend that the sinister formal presentation and apparent disconnection from realism exhibited by these spaces defines them as *spaces of horror* – on a visual and narrative level, they are permeated with a sense of dread and uncertainty, of the nightmarish and unreal. They create an environment in which the viewer understands that bizarre, horrific and macabre events beyond the purview of ordinary life can and will unfold. In both films, the transition into spaces of horror results in a shift in the central power dynamic – the male character who initially held power finds himself disoriented; the initially disempowered female character, meanwhile, seems in tune with and empowered in these spaces.

In *Audition*, this shift begins when Asami goes missing. Aoyama goes in search of her, which leads him into increasingly bizarre locations and scenarios. As Mes notes, the film's visual style here shifts toward 'garish lighting and tilted angles' (2006: 187), jarring stylistic choices that cement these locales as spaces of horror. One such space is the stairwell to a bar where Asami once worked: Aoyama ventures here in search of information concerning her whereabouts. Aoyama's entrance is captured in a shot from the bottom of the staircase; this dramatic angle (the frame extending sharply upwards rather than being laid out before us) creates a sense of disorientation, while making Aoyama appear small and vulnerable at the top of the steep stairs. The identification that the film has established with Aoyama's experience of space is maintained, but now this experience is no longer defined by mastery and ease but by uncertainty and anxiety. This impression is heightened as Aoyama descends the staircase and the camera adopts his point of view in an unsteady shot of the stairs stretching downwards before him – an image of uncertain, vulnerable movement into the unknown. The palpable feeling of descent which this perspective creates combines with the hot, stifling colour palette of the stairwell's red walls and pink neon lighting to give the space a chthonic air.

Aoyama's entrance into the stairwell marks a shift into the surreal and the macabre. Aoyama is told by a passer-by of a grisly murder committed at the (now closed) bar a year prior – unbeknownst to him, perpetrated by Asami. As he receives this information, he envisions the gruesome crime scene, shown in quick flashes – including three severed fingers, an ear and a pulsing tongue in a pool of blood. This vision sends him doubling back in fear.

The scene closes on a high-angle shot of Aoyama framed between the walls of the narrow stairwell. This image of him hemmed in by space, the camera glaring down on him in an inversion of the low-angle shot in which he began the scene, illustrates the loss of control Aoyama undergoes as he enters the film's spaces of horror.

Aoyama's descent into powerlessness within spaces of horror culminates when he finds himself in Asami's apartment – a sequence which may be real or the hallucinatory result of his being drugged by Asami. The apartment is rendered in a



dramatic, high-contrast aesthetic. The main body of the apartment is brightly lit and has yellow wallpaper, whilst a room at the back is completely dark, with the night sky seen through a window. Here, reality and continuity break down, as Asami appears to morph into Aoyama's secretary (with whom he is heavily implied to have had an affair), his son's girlfriend and then into her childhood self. The fact that these visions may be caused by Asami's drugging Aoyama heightens her power over the film's spaces of horror – this is not just her domain, she dictates how Aoyama and the audience experience it.

Even more gruesome imagery occurs in this space, as a man missing three fingers, an ear and tongue emerges from a sack. Entering from the shadowy back room (aligning her with the space's darkness), Asami presents the man with a bowl of vomit – which he attempts to drink, in a harrowing held shot. Asami sadistically wields power in this moment of heightened grotesquery. Stumbling helplessly, Aoyama is left

disoriented in this nightmarish new space – a site of horrific acts, over which Asami has control.

In *Midsommar*, this transition comes as the protagonists venture to Pelle's ancestral Harga commune in Sweden to attend a traditional midsummer festival. As if to signal a departure from reality, their entrance into the commune is captured in a series of unmoored camera movements which crane over and around their car, eventually tilting up to the sky, a disorienting flourish which departs from the subdued visual schema of locked-off medium shots and close-ups which the film has employed so far.

In contrast to the drab palettes employed in the first act's mundane spaces, the Harga commune is rendered in vibrant colours: the bright blue of the sky and the deep green of grass predominate, occasionally supplemented by pink and purple flowers. The rich, thick yellows of the sun saturate almost every image.

Where the spaces of the earlier scenes were modern in décor, the wooden structures of the commune, as well as the flowing white tunics and flower crowns worn by the Harga, are decidedly archaic. While seemingly idyllic – and, as Kim Newman points out, notably not the 'gothic ruin' one might expect from the rural domain of the antagonists in a horror film – the overwhelming brightness and anachronistic aesthetic of the commune are menacing in their incongruity (2019: 47). The effect of going from dark furnishings to fields of bright flowers, from scenes lit by lamps and laptop screens to ones lit by bright yellow sun, is jarring and discomfiting – immediately imbuing the space of the commune with a certain strangeness, a sense of unreality, which, I would argue, marks it out as a space of horror.

The power shift that occurs between Dani and Christian within the space of the commune is succinctly illustrated by two sequences late in the film. In the first of these, Dani competes with a group of other women in a maypole dancing competition, the winner of which will be crowned 'May Queen'. Set outside in broad daylight and centred on a floral maypole, the sequence sees the heightened nature of the commune's mise-en-scène in full effect. As Dani dances, she gradually grows more confident, smiling widely for the first time in the film in contrast to the claustrophobic close-ups of

her anxious expressions in the earlier stages of the film. The camera remains focussed on her, following her movements – we experience the space *with* her. She is wearing the same white outfit as the other Harga, blending in with the group in wide shots, aesthetically aligning her with the space through costume. As the sequence nears its end, one of the other girls speaks to Dani in Swedish: Dani discovers that not only can she understand what has been said, she can also respond in the same tongue. She becomes one with the space's literal foreignness, is empowered and granted freedom to belong by its dreamlike illogic. After winning the contest, Dani is crowned May Queen. At the centre of the frame, she is surrounded by identically dressed revellers as she is adorned with a flower crown, ensconced in and harmonious with the space and its heightened aesthetic. One of the flowers on her crown pulses as if breathing, an uncanny touch which serves to both establish the space as one of horror and align Dani with it (her costume matching the environment). During her coronation, she is seated at the head of a vast table, in command of the



space around her. Christian, meanwhile, is sat some way down the table, shown only in fragmented close-ups, in an ironic reversal of his introduction at the head of a table. Where initially we experienced space through his point of view and saw him occupy a visually privileged position, he is now banished to the margins as Dani's perspective predominates.

The second of these incidents highlights Christian's disempowerment, as he is drugged and coerced into having sex with a Harga girl in a ritual. Once he snaps out of his trance, he flees through the commune – while still nude. Several wide shots show the naked, vulnerable Christian isolated in negative space and dwarfed by buildings; his disempowerment and humiliation are illustrated *spatially*. At the scene's conclusion, Christian is caught and given a paralytic drug by a Harga elder, his collapse to the floor captured in a shot from his perspective.

In both *Audition* and *Midsommar*, then, we can observe a transition in space which signifies a transition both in genre



and in power. As the films begin to enter the horror genre, they transition away from mundane, drab, realistic settings into stylised, nightmarish spaces of horror: dramatic and high contrast in visual style, ruled by inexplicable illogic. Within these spaces, the male character who had been firmly in power in realistic, everyday spaces finds himself disoriented and disempowered by the strangeness of his new environment. The previously subservient and oppressed female character, meanwhile, is attuned to and able to exert power over these spaces of horror. In both cases, the films' climax consists of the humiliation and punishment of the male character by the female for his transgressions against her, in a sequence wherein the visually menacing and dreamlike nature of space and the female lead's power over the male are at their height.

In *Audition*, this sequence comes when Aoyama awakens from his drugged reverie to find himself paralysed on the floor of his home. Asami, now clad in a black apron and gloves, stands over Aoyama. After berating him for failing to love only her, she tortures him. Although Aoyama's home was initially a mundane, realistic space, here its *mise-en-scène* shifts toward the dramatic and sinister – its flat lighting replaced by a dramatic *chiaroscuro* created by a single orange bulb, casting a furnace-like glow (evoking the aesthetic of the stairwell). Its former realistic aesthetic replaced by a striking high-contrast glare, Aoyama's home is transformed into a space of horror – thus completing the film's spatial transition. Where once Aoyama was at ease in the home in the film's early scenes, he now 'lies more or less castrated on the ground' (Jeng 2015: 19) while Asami stands over him, in command of the frame. An initially mundane space is thus visually transfigured into a space of horror – and with it Aoyama's authority overturned by Asami.

As the torture takes place, Aoyama's body is captured in close-ups of individual, distressed body parts – his torso filled with needles, his foot as piano wire saws through it. As Jonah Jeng notes, this has the effect of 'turning the male body into an object' (2015: 19), reducing Aoyama to suffering flesh with no agency. This reverses his earlier objectification of Asami and also prevents identification with his perspective. Aoyama is eventually rescued by his son, who subdues Asami. The film closes on canted, off-centre shots of Aoyama and Asami lying



on the floor, as dialogue from an earlier romantic exchange between the pair is heard in non-diegetic voiceover – a final, surreal rupture in continuity. Even as Asami is seemingly defeated, then, the film ends still firmly situated in the spaces of horror (bizarre in appearance, unbound by conventional logic) with Aoyama still helpless. There can be no escape back to normality – or to patriarchy.

In *Midsommar*, the film's climax sees Dani, now as May Queen, called upon to select a sacrifice for a traditional ceremony of the festival. Enraged after witnessing the ritual, Dani selects Christian. At the scene's beginning, Dani is at the centre of a wide shot, while Christian sits on the margins of the frame, still immobilised – in this composition, she is the master of the space, he its prisoner. He is unable to speak or move and the camera largely remains distant from him; he is deprived of agency and of perspective. As she makes her decision, she and Christian's faces are shown in alternating close-ups – he staring blankly ahead, she tearful with hurt

and anger. Christian's close-ups show his face claustrophobically confined suggesting his helplessness, while Dani's face is surrounded by flowers from her dress and crown, putting her in visual harmony with the commune's pastoral aesthetic. (Note that both women wear dramatic costumes matching the heightened aesthetic of their surroundings during the climax.)

As Christian is prepared for sacrifice by being stuffed into the disembowelled corpse of a bear, his paralysed body is positioned at the side of frame, with the bear at the centre – marginalised and insignificant within a bizarre tableau. As he and others to be sacrificed are placed in a church-like structure which is then set alight, the space is captured in a shot from above, depriving us of a humanising view of Christian's face as he burns and further stressing an impression of his helplessness. This is followed by a closer shot of the burning Christian, his face now obscured by the flames. Like Aoyama, he is reduced to just a suffering body, robbed of interiority or subjectivity – this is compounded by his literal dehumanisation through the bear skin. The film's final shots are a series of dreamlike dissolves toward Dani's face as she gazes at the conflagration; surrounded by flowers and at the centre of the frame, she begins to smile, in tune with the space's sinister nature – and in control of it. Here, the dreamlike, bizarre nature of the commune reaches its pinnacle, through the use of dissolves to erase any clear sense of time and continuity, bizarre images such as sacrificial victims with their eyes replaced by flowers, and hordes of Harga revellers screaming in terror and ecstasy in front of the burning temple. Dani's alignment with and power over the space of the commune is at its height here, too; the final dissolve from the collapse of the burned temple to Dani's face as she begins to smile affirms her belonging within the space and her agency over the nightmarish events occurring therein – her status as the creator and orchestrator of the violent, vibrant images of the inferno. Similarly to *Audition*'s closing scene, the final shots of *Midsommar* cement the irreversibility of the film's shifts in space, genre and power; by ending on images of Dani euphoric and triumphant, looking upon a horrific scene she has created, the film offers a final affirmation of both her newfound power and the film's situation within spaces of horror – allowing no escape from either.

Both films thus conclude their spatial transitions with a complete immersion in spaces of horror and the punishment of the male lead by the female in specifically horrific fashion.



Despite their seeming disparities, then, *Audition* and *Midsommar* display similar usage of space in relation to genre and dynamics of power. Beginning in realistic spaces – ones defined by their muted visual style and use of real locations – they establish an unequal male-female relationship embedded in said spaces; they privilege *him* over *her*. They both then progress to heightened, sinister and irrational spaces as the film more overtly enters the horror genre. These spaces are rendered in a stylised, menacing fashion and are prone to lapses into inexplicable, dreamlike narrative logic divorced from realism. Within these spaces the male is overcome and disempowered by their nightmarish aspect, which the female character is in harmony with and empowered by. Both films climax in spectacular, surreal sequences wherein the female

character exacts violent punishment upon the male – thus bringing the transfer of genre and of power to culmination.

Furthermore, I would argue that the relation of space, genre and power in these films shows the subversive potential of horror – it is, after all, the specifically *horrific* aspects of space that result in the overthrowing of the male's authority and the empowerment of the female in both films. I would contend that, as a genre built on the inverted and uncanny, horror has a particularly strong capacity to carry out spatial and generic disturbances – to invade and disrupt cinematic spaces and subvert their power dynamics, to pull films into new and bizarre spaces which overturn their initially established realities.

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