CINEJ CINEMA JOURNAL
ISSN 2159-2411 (PRINT) ISSN 2158-8724 (ONLINE)

Mindspacing, Mental Health Discourse, and *Midsommar* (2019)

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Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.715 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

Abstract

Numerous cultural analyses of mental health representation in visual media examine the discursive codes through which mind, mental health, and mental illness become intelligible. However, critical concepts for analyzing the spatialization of these phenomena in visual narratives remain underdeveloped. Building on the conceptual lenses of mindscapes and mindspaces from literature, film, and game studies, the present essay develops the conceptual tool of *mindspacing*. Where previous perspectives read the folding dreamscapes of Nolan's *Inception* or the mythical fantasy world of *Pan's Labyrinth* as visual externalizations of inner states, the praxeological perspective developed in this essay reads them as instances of mindspacing, the ongoing discursive accomplishment of relating and co-constituting the elements of *mind* and *space*. Exemplifying the new perspective, the folk horror film *Midsommar* (2019) is analyzed as a self-aware instance of mindspacing that critically engages Western mental health discourse.

Keywords: mindspace; mental health; visual media; space

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Introduction: Mental Health Representation and Visual Media

Reflecting upon phenomena of mental health necessarily involves pondering our knowledges of/about the mind and the cultural codes, images, and metaphors we use to map them. Besides the institutional discursive practices of medicine, psychiatry, and psychology, manifold cultural studies have contributed to the reflection of mental health representation in society.

There is a growing body of research on media representations of mental health and mental illness (Anderson, 2003; Cutcliffe and Hannigan, 2001; Francis et al., 2005; Gallagher et al., 2023; Gu and Ding, 2023; Hildersley et al., 2020; Klin and Lemish, 2008; Nairn, 2007; Philo et al., 1994; Stuart, 2006; Wahl, 1995) with a strong focus on print media and newspapers (Allen and Nairn, 1997; Anderson et al., 2018; Aragonès et al., 2014; Barnes and Earnshaw, 1993; Bilić and Georgaca, 2007; Carpiniello et al., 2007; Coverdale et al., 2002; Day and Page, 1986; Hazelton, 1997; Lawrie, 2000; Magliano et al., 2011; Matas et al., 1986; McGinty et al., 2016; Meagher et al., 1995; Nairn et al., 2001; Nawková et al., 2012; Olstead, 2002; Rhydderch et al., 2016; Stark et al., 2004; Sultana et al., 2019; Wahl, 2003). A major branch of this field of research has specifically addressed visual media such as social media and online community

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websites (Devendorf et al., 2020; Kang et al., 2017; Thompson, 2012), photography and art (Eisenhauer 2008; Gilman, 1988, 1982), film (Anderson, 2003; De Carlo, 2007; Forceville and Paling, 2021; Goodwin, 2014a, 2014b; Harper, 2008; Hyler, 1988; Hyler et al., 1991; Kalra et al., 2018; Kondo, 2008; Lawson and Fouts, 2004; Pirkis et al., 2006; Riles et al., 2021; Rosen et al., 1997; Wahl, 1995; Wedding and Niemiec, 2014), television, seriality, and streaming (Diefenbach, 1997; Francis et al., 2004; Myrick et al., 2014; Nordahl-Hansen et al., 2018; Peña and Sarrionandia, 2023; Pirkis et al., 2006; Rose, 1998; Signorielli, 1989; Wahl and Roth, 1982; Wilson et al., 2000, 1999), and, in the last decade, video games (Anderson 2020; Buday et al., 2022; Ferrari et al., 2019; Kasdorf, 2023; Morris and Forrest, 2013; Schlote and Major 2021; Shapiro and Rotter, 2016). While this body of research could still be expanded in scope and methodological variety (Stout et al., 2004), the predominant finding in the literature is a generally negative one: portrayals of mental health phenomena and disorders are mostly read as forging associations with violence and danger, relying on exaggeration, stereotyping, and stigmatization, and underreporting recovery and accomplishments. Furthermore, these negative depictions often extend to the roles of therapists, doctors, and the medical institution as a whole. Few studies report exceptions from stigmatization (Francis et al., 2004; Harper, 2008; Kasdorf, 2023; Meagher et al., 1995) and if positive changes in representation are noted, studies depict this as a rather recent development (Hildersley et al., 2020; Rhydderch et al., 2016).

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Though the state of literature thus offers a rich pool of knowledge, it is noteworthy that most studies follow a *representational* paradigm. According to the dominant mode of questioning, a series of what is understood as objective phenomena of unmediated reality is distorted and misrepresented in a second-order representational process. Often, the discourse of psychology (e.g. classificatory systems of diagnoses from clinical institutional contexts) is explicitly consulted for a seemingly objective benchmark of authentic representation (see, for example, Hyler, 1988; Nordahl-Hansen et al., 2018). Of course, some of the shortcomings of representational paradigms have long been noted (Barad, 2007; Deleuze, 1997a, 1997b, 1994; Thrift, 2007). In the context of research on mental health depiction, however, extremely few studies have examined the specific mechanisms and contexts through which such portrayals emerge in mainstream media (Harper, 2008; Nairn, 2007; Olstead, 2002). Moving away from an exclusive focus on the question of "correct" or "better" depiction, Gilman (1988) argues that visual representations of the mind and mental illness in the context of art need to be regarded as "expressions of myths about the world, the ideas that we project onto it and that shape our understanding of the realities that we experience" (p. 18). However, conceptual tools for this post-representational approach to visual media remain scarce.

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The present essay aims to add to the conceptual toolkit of cultural research on the visualization of the mind, mental health, and mental illness by developing a praxeological, process-oriented, and spatial perspective on discursive visual practices. It attempts to do so by reviewing and extending the concept of *mindspaces* developed in film studies. Drawing on films that specifically address the placing and spacing of the mental on screen, the concept is first reviewed, then extended, and finally applied in a reading of the film *Midsommar* (2019), a recent cultural text that expresses a spatial critique of Western stigmatization of mental problems. Finally, the potential benefits of the concept are outlined by tying the cultural studies branch of research to ongoing tensions and problematizations of space/mind from the fields of psychology and psychiatry.

The Concepts of *Mindscape* and *Mindspace*

Besides ticking off diagnostic checklists in the assessment of images, films, or games about mental health, how can researchers account for the specific doings and accomplishments of visual media? Addressing this problem, Anh-Thu Nguyen has recently applied the concepts of *mindspace* and *mindscape* to the media of video games and film. Her work carries a powerful analytical potential for those invested in how issues of mental health and mental illness are thematized in visual media.

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In her 2022 essay "Mindspaces - The Mind as a Visual and Ludic Artifact," Nguyen begins to bring perspectives from literary studies in contact with those on film and video games. To start with an example, think of Terry Gilliam's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1998): Hunter S. Thompson's drugged-out alter ego Raoul Duke, played by Johnny Depp, is sitting at a bar and watches the peanuts on the counter in front of him suddenly turn into worms. As we see a close-up of his puzzled face (Fig. 1, top still), the camera zooms out and links his reaction to the bar that has transformed into a bizarre scene of obscenely partying reptiles (Fig. 1, bottom still). The space is bathed in red and blue light, surreally spinning as the camera moves out and tilts to reveal more and more creatures waving back and forth in rhythmic ecstasy. Further examples easily come to mind: the folding horizons of Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010) in which dreams turn out to be a space one can break into like a public bank; the mythical fantasy world of *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), which depicts an inner sanctum and refuge of a mind affected by fascist violence and trauma. Whether engaging in drug-induced hallucination, the sceneries of dreams and memories, or worlds of the imagination, these examples show landscapes and visual spaces as much as what Nguyen calls *mindscapes* or *mindspaces*.

Via the term *mindscape*, her work highlights "spaces that express the cognitive process of a character. These spaces tap into feelings, dreams, fears, and memories, and, as such, they

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are typically surreal, confusing, and even fantastical" (p. 51). Drawing from three sources of literary studies and the humanities (Beil, 2010; Lindemann, 1993; Slusser and Rabkin, 1989), she thinks of mindscapes as the "backcloth of the human mind" (Nguyen, 2022, p. 53). While she points out that the concept remains "vague," she understands it as "a subjective experience occurring either within oneself or created by someone else" (p. 54). Moving from mindscape to "mindspace," she then conceptualizes the latter as "spatial manifestations of a mind*scape*" and "a visual experience [. . .] linked to mental and emotional trauma" (p. 54). In her subsequent analysis of the game *Persona 5* (2016), she argues that in-game locations such as "Futaba's palace specifically [address] themes such as trauma and depression as a manifestation of [a character's] mental state" (Nguyen, 2022, p. 59).

Figure 1: Two shots from *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1998).

Nguyen's emphasis on the spatialization of the mental expresses long-standing concerns of Western visual culture.[1] More specifically, it attends to themes of mental illness and mental health addressed by many recent visual media while convincingly highlighting the role of space

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within their strategies of meaning-making. However, by embracing the idea that mindscapes "give internal states–feelings and memories–a shape in landscape form" (p. 52), the concept of mindspace risks presupposing the mind itself as a spatial entity: an *inner* space projected onto an external spatial canvas that itself appears as an empty, abstract, and pre-given container. As the present account aims to expound, these conceptions sediment rather than expose a set of often implicit discursive maneuvers that produce the concept of the inner mind together with its external visualization. Rather than treating inner mind and outer space as given categories, the present account reconsiders them as discursive and embodied accomplishments emerging between visual texts and their recipients. From this perspective, Nguyen's concept can be reformulated through a practice-oriented approach to visual media.

Towards a Praxeological Perspective on *Mindspacing*

To push the concept of mindspacing beyond its current limits, the present section draws from the realm of film. Four examples of cinematic mindspaces can illustrate theconceptual potential of the term: Adrian Lyne's *Jacob's Ladder* (1990), Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000), Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook* (2014), and Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017), all of which offer strong spatial phenomenalizations of the mind, which raise the importance of Nguyen's concept while also allowing to question its conceptual composition.

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Jacob's Ladder presents protagonist Jacob Singer as haunted by bizarre visions and terrifying images in which the traumatic past of his military service in the Vietnam War protrudes into his everyday life. As fragmented and incongruent temporal layers increasingly collapse into one another, the film reveals that Jacob is dying in Vietnam as his mind relives the various moments and places of his life in the final moments of consciousness.

Memento follows Leonard, who lives with severe anterograde amnesia (a condition rendering him unable to form new lasting memories) and relies on a vulnerable system of clues, notes, and practices to navigate everyday life while searching for his wife's alleged murderer. Mirroring Leonard's condition, the film's montage fragments temporal continuity and repeatedly destabilizes the relation between memory, space, and truth as contradictory versions of the past emerge.

The Babadook depicts trauma as part of an inter-generational relationship centered on six-year-old Samuel and his mother Amelia. As a spatial personification of unresolved grief, the monster figure Babadook haunts not only Samuel and Amelia's minds but also the domestic space of the family home itself. Even after the two begin to work through their grief, the Babadook remains present in the basement, framing trauma as ongoing rather than fully resolved.

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Get Out uses the stereotypical meet-the-parents narrative to address both subtle racism and anti-Black violence: Chris Washington, a Black photographer, visits his girlfriend's White family for the first time. Through the "sunken place" (Fig. 2), into which Chris is hypnotically forced to "sink," the film spatializes the mental and bodily objectification of the Black body as a condition of external control.[2] At the same time, the assimilation of the mansion's Black servants frames this condition not as an individual experience but as part of a broader social relation of racial subjugation.

Figure 2: The sunken place in Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017).

The four titles all heavily feature mindspaces as parts of their cinematic landscapes. However, the current concept is not apt to describe the way the films deal with both space and mind beyond "giv[ing] internal states [. . .] a shape in landscape form" (Nguyen, 2022, 52). *Jacob's Ladder* frames the mind as a realm of multiplicity in depicting an entire purgatory life in the few final moments of a person. *Memento* shows the mind as part of a disabled body that

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constantly gears itself back into the world, its memories not linked to a true inner essence or self but subject to constant negotiation and iterated, performative meaning-making. *The Babadook'*s haunted domestic spaces deal with mental trauma not as an individual projection but a shared inter-personal and inter-generational web of relating, which is not contained by a single mind and cannot be resolved by a single family member alone. *Get Out*, finally, shows the mental effects of racism not as an individual problem but as part of a larger socio-cultural experience aligning rather than separating the mental and the cultural. Taken together, the four films argue convincingly that mindspaces neither necessarily show the mind as a solid (*Jacob's Ladder*) or inner essence (*Memento*) nor a matter of single (*The Babadook*) or individual (*Get Out*) bodies. At the same time, the films also do more than merely apply what psychology calls the *theory of mind*[3] to the space of the screen. Rather, they self-consciously engage in spatial discourses and raise questions of how our lives and bodies share spatial realities or are differentiated by them.

What the films engage in and accomplish, then, could be described as *mindspacing*[4] – a practice that entangles, co-positions, and imag(in)es mind and space by relating the two in particular ways. Mindspacing, as the films suggest, creates narratives of mind as much as of space. These visual narratives highlight that, to be intelligible in our current discursive configurations, the mind has to be *placed* as much as space has to express and address the

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mental aspects of social life lest it becomes disembodied, alien, or abstract.

One way of grounding the practice of mindspacing in spatial theory is offered by Lefebvre's "unitary theory" of space whose self-proclaimed aim was to:

> discover or construct a theoretical unity between 'fields' which are apprehended separately, just as molecular, electromagnetic and gravitational forces are in physics. The fields we are concerned with are, first, the physical – nature, the Cosmos; secondly, the mental, including logical and formal abstractions; and, thirdly, the social. In other words, we are concerned with logico-epistemological space, the space of social practice, the space occupied by sensory phenomena, including products of the imagination such as projects and projections, symbols and utopias (1991, pp. 11-12).

The Lefebvrian account of space attempts to re-relate the "perceived" with the "conceived" (p. 38). To Lefebvre, "space considered in isolation is an empty abstraction" (p. 12). His critical project points to the wrongly naturalized "distance that separates" (p. 14) the physical from the mental: "In actuality each of these two kinds of space involves, underpins and presupposes the other" (p. 14). Lefebvre himself was highly skeptical with regard to an *inner* realm, which is why the terms *psyche* or *mind* do not feature in his *Production of Space*. This, however, is exactly why his philosophy is valuable for a perspective that wishes to examine and defamiliarize itself from the implicit spatialization of mind as much as the mentalization of space.

For a perspective that neither presupposes a single dimension of Lefebvre's "entirety of space – mental, physical, social" (p. 20) nor the mind as an individual, separated inner spatial

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essence or container, the concept of mindspacing asks how visual texts relate the mental and the spatial by negotiating the relations between the perceived and the conceived as much as the subjective and the objective[5]. From a processual and praxeological perspective, moreover, mindspaces need to be linked to their embodied counterparts in cinema audiences, viewers of streaming services, or players of a game. These two aspects can be developed by revisiting earlier accounts of mindscapes, which Nguyen draws from.

Slusser and Rabkin's 1989 anthology on mindscapes in science fiction links the concept to what the authors call the "two realities question," which, according to them, "derives, in Western culture, from the constant need for a relation between mind and some being external to mind" (p. x). Framing imagined landscapes as literary expressions of the mind, they view mindscapes as links between "mental and nonmental worlds" (p. xi). Similarly, Benjamin Beil's later work on mindscapes or Erinnerungsräume conceptualizes "walk-in memory spaces" ("begehbare Erinnerungsräume"; my trans.; 2010, p. 4) produced through the "interweaving of memory world and filmic reality" ("Verschachtelung von Erinnerungswelt und Filmrealität"; my trans.; p. 5). Like Slusser and Rabkin, Beil ultimately regards mindscapes as a "cinematic form of the representation of subjectivity" ("filmische Darstellungsform von Subjektivität"; my trans.; p. 7) or, short, as "subjective structure" (p. 13).

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As both previous accounts of *mindscapes* show, the images evoked through words or shown on screen often involve the dichotomies of space and mind, inner and outer reality, subjectivity and objectivity. In this regard, mindspacing certainly appears as a necessary and ubiquitous strategy to create intelligibility in the context of Western metaphysics. At the same time, such dichotomies need to be approached as specific accomplishments of texts rather than accepted as the necessary outcome of visual media. While many texts individualize and internalize the mental, the cinematic examples discussed above demonstrate that mindspacing does not necessarily reproduce the mind as a stable inner essence or subjective phenomenon.

Finally, as a practice of mutually co-constituting and placing the mental with the spatial in visual media, mindspacing is not only a textual but also a *material* and *embodied practice* (Reckwitz, 2002a, 2002b).[6] A critical perspective on mindspacing has to consider both visual media texts (such as films, photographs, paintings, or video games) and the living bodies (such as readers, onlookers, and players who may also be directors, writers, designers) that receive and posit them as intelligible "carriers[s]" (Reckwitz, 2002b, p. 250) of the practice.[7] Lindemann's early work on mindscapes is helpful in this regard because it shifts attention from textual construction to unconscious and habitually shared reception strategies. He describes mindscapes as "cognitive system[s]" that activate particular "webs of connections" between

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knowledge elements (1993, p. 193). Drawing from his analysis of Robert Coover's "The Babysitter," Lindemann asks how readers navigate unstable shifts in perspective and temporality without relying on fully conscious strategies. Mindscapes, in this sense, resemble embodied and habituated "frames, scripts, [and] scenarios" (Lindemann, 1993, p. 194) that structure reception.

Drawing from Lindemann, the lived body as reading, watching, or playing body needs to be regarded as a vital carrier of mindspacing practices. Mindspaces are therefore tied to the embodied production and negotiation of spatial meaning in moments of what Stuart Hall called "reception" (2019, p. 259) or "decoding" (p. 258). The ambiguous ending of Nolan's *Inception* (2010), for instance, illustrates how mindspacing emerges through the active bodily negotiation of intelligibility between medium and audience. Beyond *Inception*'s more singular self-aware ambiguity, however, the current account of mindspacing regards the practice as an ordinary yet pervasive dimension of visual culture whose specific effects often remain unnoticed precisely because they are routinely shared and immediately intelligible.

Though it is crucial to stress that Nguyen's project of engaging mental health topics through visual media (which the present account shares) by no means exhausts the phenomena of mindspacing as they are conceptualized here, the latter offer an extremely fruitful field for

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said project. Through its strategic use of mindspacing, the film *Midsommar* (2019) convincingly links issues of mental health, trauma, and healing to Western discourses on space, individuality, and subjectivity. In the following analysis, the film may serve as a site/sight of recent thematizations of mental health and a text that requires and highlights a novel mode of questioning spatio-mental discourses via explicit mindspacing.

Mind and Space in *Midsommar* (2019): Raising Mental Health Topics via Mindspacing

Ari Aster's 2019 film *Midsommar* offers a gruesome tale of cultural horror (Santilli, 2007; Wischert-Zielke, 2021) that revolves around the confrontation between its protagonists, a group of young tourists, and an opaque Swedish cult serving as an uncanny collective Other to the set of individualized American characters. Contrary to the genre's dominant reliance on dark gothic settings, expressionist shadows, and heavy chiaroscuro, the action of the film plays out in bright never-ending daylight, as the American characters attend a nine-day midsummer festival in which night hardly ever falls. The film's narrative explores the realm of anachronistic white (North-)European folklore, isolationism, and eugenics together with the interpersonal difficulties of an unhappy but ongoing relationship. Additionally, however, an alternative reading of the film may highlight its convincing spatial critique of current Western discursive configurations of mental health, trauma, and individuality.

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The two main protagonists, Dani and Christian, are an American couple who have grown apart after the traumatic death of Dani's family by her sister's extended suicide. When invited to a remote once-in-a-lifetime midsummer celebration in Hårga, Sweden, together with his friends and fellow anthropology students, Chris plans to break up. Yet, she finds out about the trip and is invited reluctantly by her distant boyfriend. Losing all bonds with each other throughout the film, they partake in an intense series of disturbing rituals and limit experiences within a collectivist cult from which only Dani emerges alive.

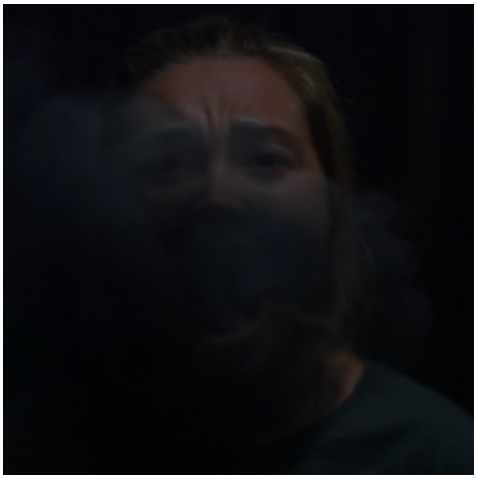

Figure 3: Midsommar's visualization and construction of Dani's inner trauma (1:13:10).

Like many other films, *Midsommar* narrates its story via images that express phenomena of the mind and mental health: one such instance of mindspacing is the close-up of Dani's face

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in her nightmare. As with the previous example from *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, the camera first isolates Dani's face in a close-up, individualizing her as a mental black box, a container of psychic experience, an inside to be externalized and accounted for by the shot. Then, she opens her mouth, and black smoke, visualizing her trauma and fear of being left alone, comes out to fill the screen (Fig. 3). In the case of this more conventional dream scene, the concept of mindspacing can account for the composition of the shot and the way the montage implicitly communicates the scene to be different from the action of the previous and following scenes. The example shows that the immediate intelligibility of such a complicated shot is accomplished through the communicative interplay of the camera, the lighting as well as sounding and editing techniques without their roles having to be made explicit: The flash-frames of the scene quickly recall and suppress phobic images while the lighting simulates flashing police lights, adding a further intrusive layer to the images. Even as screeching string sounds draw her into Dani's panic, the viewer routinely and immediately recognizes the scene as a visualization of the main character's mind, whose troubles are shown rather than told.

However, beyond this ubiquitous level of mindspacing *Midsommar* shares with so many other visual media, it also mounts a more complex commentary on the marginalization of mental problems in the West through a critical and self-referential use of cinematic space. This

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layer of narration is highlighted in a tracking shot that shows the protagonists' journey to the new spatial regime of the cult: as the camera follows their car, the tracking shot abruptly shifts into a dizzying 180-degree vertical arc that switches the positions of ground and sky (0:23:57). The inversion shot shakes the very foundations of the spatial composition of the image and draws attention to the way the film utilizes both the spatiality of the shot and the narrated world thereby explicating the usually implicit elements of cinematic practices to which mindspacing belongs. In the course of the film, *Midsommar* constructs two separate settings that serve as imaginations of geographical places as much as explorative discursive sites for the questioning and placing of the mind. Dani's transformation throughout the film is tied to an explicit thematization of how the mental, trauma, and healing are framed, (dis)placed, and given shape as lived experience in the West. Hence, the present reading of the film requires a perspective of mindspacing to come to terms with the implicit and explicit arguments about mental health conveyed and offered to its viewers.

Engaging an explicit and self-aware style of mindspacing, *Midsommar*'s narrative and cinematography construct and clash two distinct experiences of mind/space. The seemingly trivial scene of the birthday cake combines and relates both in one and the same image (Fig. 4). After forgetting about Dani's birthday, Chris awkwardly, unenthusiastically, and unsuccessfully attempts to light the candle on her birthday cake. Dani, however, is drawn

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towards a group of women from the cult community, whose joyful celebration of an infant in the background appears so much more genuine. The displacement, inauthenticity, and failure to communicate and exchange emotions surrounding the Western characters find their diametric counterparts in the radical empathy and affective collectivism of the cult.

Figure 4: The birthday-scene from Midsommar (0:47:06).

The Western experience of mind and space in *Midsommar* hinges on individualism. The film's opening depiction of American society frames the main character, Dani, as isolated and singled out: the establishing shots of the first few seconds first individuate the city (0:01:48), then the block of houses (0:01:52), finally, the family home (0:01:59). The individual is thus placed in its private sphere, it is framed and made accountable separate from others. It is for this reason that the already traumatic experiences of Dani and her family come to further displace and isolate her in her socio-cultural milieu. The mental problems of her sister and her own suffering and grief can only vaguely be referred to as "the sister situation" (0:04:48) in

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conversation with others and need to be controlled rather than allowed expression. In her relationship, she suppresses her own emotions while her distant boyfriend blames her for allowing her sister's condition to affect her. Unable to articulate her grief and inhabit social space comfortably, Dani feels like a "chore" (0:06:59), and Chris's (all male) friends, adding shame to guilt, call her need to talk about the issues in her family "abuse" (0:08:26). With no place left for her experiences and feelings, Dani places them with herself and frequently isolates herself from the group to cry (0:22:13; 01:04:14) while Chris further encourages her to "take some time for [her]self" (1:03:47). In short, Western individualism, with its internalization and de-socialization of affect and the construction of moral accountability on the level of the individual, is shown to contribute to the perpetuation and escalation of trauma thus constricting processes of healing.

In the cult community, of which Dani eventually becomes May Queen in the violent catharsis of the film, an entirely different relation of social space and the mental becomes visible. While strongly gendered, racialized, and organized by ritual, traditional community roles, and age, the cult society lacks the same social organization around individuality: the body is part of a collective that does not necessitate secrecy, guilt, or shame, which have previously shaped and stifled Dani's emotions. Several scenes show what Deleuze calls *affection-images*[8] highlighting the radical empathy and collective affectivity of the body in this community.

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Figure 5: Shared affect and radical empathy in *Midsommar*'s cult.

In one scene, Dani finally breaks down after stifling her emotions again and again: she falls to the ground and screams in agony. Strikingly, the young women surrounding her fall to the ground, too, joining her crying and bodily expression: first, they bring their faces close together exercising a receptive sensitivity and establishing the possibility of reflection. Then, they synchronize their breathing (2:00:25) and, as Dani finally lets go, they all join her with facial and vocal expression (2:00:37; Fig. 5). In the radical empathy of this scene, the exchange of gazes and affects is re-configured fundamentally. It is no longer the Western idea of empathy as a secondary process of identification, an act of representation between separate individuals, but a radical movement of affect through bodies that are already and always in relation.

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Figure 6: Affection-images of liquid perception (top) and lyrical abstractionism (bottom still).

The emphasis on the face in the affection-image is crucial. Deleuze writes, "it is the face, with its relative immobility and its receptive organs, which brings to light these movements of expression while they remain most frequently buried in the rest of the body" (1997a, p. 66). Other shots, like the flowing and merging images of the ecstatic May dance (Fig. 6, top), which further deconstruct the body as an individually bounded realm and detached psychic container by steadily transforming the image itself into an abstract and lyrical canvas (bottom still), further extend the perception-image's logic of the face to the entire cinematic space. In these scenes, the screen becomes face in adopting what Deleuze aptly calls "characteristics of faceicity" (p. 88).

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Via the two clashing and communicating cultural milieus and spatial settings thus shown, *Midsommar* explicitly engages in mindspacing and thematizes a pre-verbal experience of phenomena the West groups under such terms as *mind*, *mental health*, *trauma*, etc. While the U.S. socio-cultural configuration of space in the film isolates, silences, and blames Dani, the cult transforms and re-formulates her strong feelings and affects into forces that can be expressed and shared between bodies erasing the previous inside-outside dichotomy that had determined them from the outset. In this way, *Midsommar* strategically engages in mindspacing to comment on Western discourses of the mind and mental health. It thus offers a critique of the Western *forms* of spatialization of the mind as well as the dire consequences of their dementalization of socio-affective space.

Conclusion: Mindspacing and Institutional Discourse

"Within Western history," writes Jennifer Eisenhauer, "there exists a desire to visualize mental illness within art, medicine, and popular culture. This history reflects a desire to control mental illness and protect the boundaries of a presumed normality" (2008, p. 14). While research on the visualization of the mind and mental illness spans various types of visual media, there is a gap in the literature concerning critical concepts that allow the questioning and construction of the normality Eisenhauer refers to. To foster new modes of analysis, the present

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essay has developed a praxeological approach to examine the usually implicit mutual co-positioning of mind and space visual media engage in (not only) when they portray mental illness.

Mindspacing offers a perspective that does not subordinate the discursive practices of visual media to the frameworks of clinical psychology and psychiatry, a recurring problem in cultural approaches to mental health. Instead, the concept foregrounds the imaginaries of mind, space, and subjectivity visual media produce and negotiate. By relating these imaginaries back to hegemonic institutional and public discourses, mindspacing further allows visual media to be approached as political-cultural interventions that may reinforce, destabilize, or reconfigure dominant understandings of mental illness and mental health.

As the present reading of *Midsommar* through the lens of mindspacing has shown, films may not only represent mental illness in their spatial compositions but actively negotiate its intelligibility through practices of mindspacing. The film's critique of the internalizing and stigmatizing effects of the Western individualized concept of mental illness can, in this light, be extended into a critique of the institutional discourses that increasingly shape how we think about mental health today.[9] Specifically, via the epistemic frame of mindspacing, the film's text resonates with a longer history of debates within psychology and psychiatry concerning the

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relation between mind, space, and subjectivity.

In *Madness and Civilization*, Michel Foucault traces the emergence of modern clinical psychology to the institutionalization of the asylum and the "great confinement" (1988, p. 36) of the 17th and 18th centuries, through which madness increasingly became linked to an individualized interiority and the moral interrogation of the subject.[10] After psychoanalysis aimed to restore a dialogue in place of this exclusion from rational discourse at the beginning of the 20th century, counterhegemonic forces such as the anti-psychiatry movements of the 50s, 60s, and 70s have continued to attack and reformulate the way mental illness has been conceptualized well into our present times (see Whitley, 2012). Thomas Szasz's work (2011, 1974, 1960) is known particularly for arguing that the concept of mental illness is an incoherent metaphorical blend of medical and psychological ideas and should be regarded as a myth, i.e., be considered real only "in the same sense in which witches existed and were 'real'" (1960, p. 117), as he polemically argues. Much of this criticism remains unresolved in contemporary psychiatric discourse, where mental disorders continue to be predominantly framed as resulting from a "dysfunction *in* the individual" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 20). Moncrieff has recently put it as follows: "The terminology of 'mental health,' 'mental illness' and 'mental disorder' is premised on the existence of a material entity or disease, located in the

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individual" (2022, p. 2). In their joint review of both the psychiatric concept of mental illness and its anti-psychiatric critique, Thomas and Bracken have pointed to the Cartesian dualism of the "'inner' world of the mind and the 'outer' physical world with which it is in contact" (2011, p. 17).[11] In this regard, Welwood's view that "the notion of psychological space has been avoided and neglected by Western psychology for the most part" (1977, p. 113) still holds today.

In this context, mindspacing may offer a productive critical perspective because it foregrounds the mutually constitutive relation between mind and space that has repeatedly emerged as a point of tension within both psychiatric discourse and its critiques. Rather than reducing mental life to an isolated interior phenomenon, the concept highlights how psychic experience is spatially, socially, and culturally negotiated - a perspective that also resonates with recent attempts in discursive psychology to rethink the form of subjectivity through social relations, embodiment, and cultural context (González Rey, 2019), much like *Midsommar* itself. While the concept could also be of interest to institutional discourse, the present essay primarily aims at the analysis of visual media. Mindspacing, then, may not resolve the tensions between disciplines and methods, but it can sharpen our sensitivity to how visual media reproduce and (re)configure the conditions under which mental and collective life become imaginable.

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ENDNOTES:

[1] Deleuze argues in his cinema books that the 20th century underwent a traumatic shift from images of action to those expressing time and the mind after WWII (1997a, pp. ix-x). But even the pioneering origins of cinematic techniques in French silent film were immediately obsessed with placing and spacing the mental as, for instance, Georges Méliès's 1898 *The Astronomer's Dream* (also known as *The Man in the Moon* or, in French, *La Lune à un mètre*) reminds us.

[2] Visually, the scene recalls Fanon's thoughts on the objectification of racial violence - the state of a split being, cast-off, but never entirely resolved or integrated: "completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object" (Fanon 1986, p. 85).

[3] In general and developmental psychology, the *theory of mind* refers to the fundamental capacity of a human being to ascribe mental states as underlying motivations or factors of relevance in the actions of others. A core accomplishment of a child in this regard is to arrive at the insight that the thoughts, feelings, and beliefs of others are not necessarily identical to one's own (see Carlson et al., 2013).

[4] Note that the morphological similarity between the concept established here and the acronym used in the "MINDSPACE" framework by Dolan and colleagues (2012) is purely coincidental.

[5] The opposition between subjective and objective is used here in an epistemological rather than ontological sense.

[6] Following Reckwitz's take on an "ideal type of practice theory" (2002b, p. 244), one can think of a practice as "a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge" (p. 249). Contrary to other cultural theories, practice theory places and searches for the social in embodied and material practices (rather than in mental structures, cultural texts, or intersubjective communicative exchanges alone). Since practice theory questions mentalism's theory of "mind as an ontological realm of the 'inner' which is distinct from outward behaviour and is at the same time its cause" (p. 252), it is a particularly fruitful conceptual framework to question visual discourses of the mind and mental health.

[7] For a further application of the concept of mindspacing to games as visual media, see my related study on indie video games, which examines how three indie titles thematize mental health topics by reimagining culturally dominant forms of play (Wischert-Zielke, 2025).

[8] Deleuze's thought conceptualizes cinema as "composition of images and of signs, that is, a preverbal intelligible content (pure semiotics)" (1997a, p. xi) and, hence, offers a perspective on film that goes beyond representation and ties it back closely to a philosophical account of embodied life, movement, and time. He describes the classical structure of the image (and with it, his view on life) as a movement from perception to action via affect, each given

its own type of image on screen. The perception of a movement-image by a living being (and/or the camera) is a *perception image* – an image with its full immanence but framed by another that perceives it. Usually following the perception-image is the *action-image* in which shifts are exercised bringing forth change to a situation and the whole universe/film. Between the two images, there is a gap, an in-between: "[a]ffection is what occupies the interval" (p. 65). In the *affection-image*, characterized by the close-up of the face, which links power to quality, we absorb some of the external action but there is not yet a reaction. It is in this sense that movement-images, for Deleuze, "*divide into three sorts of images*" (p. 66).

[9] Beeker and colleagues argue for a mounting influence of psychiatric discourse and the institutionalization of clinical practices via the concept of *psychiatrization*, "a complex process of interaction between individuals, society, and psychiatry through which psychiatric institutions, knowledge, and practices affect an increasing number of people, shape more and more areas of life, and further psychiatry's importance in society as a whole" (2021, p. 3). At the same time, however, the recent discursive developments have been driven by actors and networks that are no longer exclusive to the institution of psychiatry itself, as the authors note: "it seems to be a main characteristic of psychiatrization in modern and postmodern societies that it is advanced to a significant degree by laypeople without professional ties to psychiatry or the healthcare system in general" (p. 5).

[10] Throughout the book, Foucault traces the gradual genealogy of a "distinction between the physical and the moral" that became "a practical concept in the medicine of the mind only when the problematics of madness shift[ed] to an interrogation of the subject responsible. The purely moral space, which is then defined, gives the exact measurements of that psychological inwardness where modern man seeks both his depth and his truth" (1988, p. 182).

[11] Note in this context that Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* also critiques Cartesian dualistic philosophy in current psychiatric practice, but he strongly disagrees with regard to Descartes's role in forming the institution of the asylum: "The heterogeneity of the physical and the moral in medical thought is not a result of Descartes's definition of substances; a century and a half of post-Cartesian medicine did not succeed in assimilating that separation on the level of problems and methods, nor in understanding the distinction of substances as an opposition of organic to psychological. Cartesian or anti-Cartesian, classical medicine never introduced Descartes's metaphysical dualism into anthropology. And when the separation did occur, it was not by a renewed loyalty to Meditations, but by a new privilege accorded to transgression. Only the use of punishment distinguished, in treating the mad, the medications of the body from those of the soul. A purely psychological medicine was made possible only when madness was alienated in guilt" (1988, pp. 182-3).

Volume 14.1 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.715 | http://cinej.pitt.edu