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## How Films and Television See Cults

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# How Films and Television See Cults

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From  
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By

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# **How Film and Television See Cults**

Kami Vigilant

Anthropological Honors Thesis

**Abstract**

This thesis intends to outline how cults—commonly defined as “a system of religious veneration and devotion directed toward a particular figure or object”| “a relatively small group of people having religious beliefs of practices regarded by others as strange or sinister (Oxford Language Dictionary)”—are created through popular films and documentaries. Cults may be defined as highly regulated and organized social groups with religious and political affiliations. Many create idiosyncratic languages of terms members know and understand, rituals, initiations, and punishments. There are leading scholars in sociology, psychology, and anthropology that do not capture the gaps in the definition of cult. They have written about how why the word cult is pejorative, what leaders do in cults, depersonalization, and the truth about why young people join cults(Richardson, E. Levine, S. Levine, Eister). More holistic accounts of cults that include their inception, political influence, attraction to new members, or how extreme such groups are, how the news—both textual and visual—describe them, television, and documentaries. It is, therefore, particularly important to examine how cults are represented through media, which has perhaps become our main source of information. This project examines representations of cults in film and television that follow the journey of (ex-)members<sup>1</sup> of cults, who critically and pejoratively view their respective group as a cult, and the eventual demise of these groups that were used for this thesis specifically. Focusing on the demise offers readers perspectives in how extreme the information in the group can make members.

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<sup>1</sup> Most of the people who speak in the documentaries and docuseries are not active members and describe how leaving changed their lives. Members who are currently active do not speak for fear of harm and legal issues.

“How Film and Television Create Cults” is a scholarly analysis, by Kami Vigilant, of the fictional and non-fictional film and television representations of cults. It is an argumentative essay based on watching television, series, films, and movies and taking notes on how they show and display cults. It is a comparison of these two types of media—nonfiction and fiction. I also review academic literature on cults. I compare my academic research (which itself creates a representation of cults) to films and documentaries, and compare the latter two with each other. Just as written research is not entirely holistic, television series and films simply do not create critical views of what cults are, their relation to political participation and voting habits and choice issues because such topics are not discussed or displayed as they in written research. Moreover, the idea of cults is clearly impacting our culture.

In 2021, Patricia Aufderheide and Marissa Woods wrote for the Center for Media and Social Impact, “The State of Journalism on the Documentary Filmmaking Scene.” Their essential question, “As documentary becomes an ever-larger feature of the media landscape, is journalism addressing documentary’s role in the informational environment for public life? And where are there weaknesses? What would help?” Proved productive in how documentary standards and executions require more and better accuracy. The authors state there are not enough processes for ensuring documentaries do not produce misinformation, nor enough ensuring “responsible conduct (Aufderheide, Woods, 2021.) The two argue documentaries are growing before appropriate standards can be created, stating that places for streaming and platforms to watch this are becoming more accessible; “The number of annual documentary theatrical releases has more than tripled since 2000. Nonfiction programming on TV has experienced a similar upward trend... The documentary genre, up 120% from 2019 to 2020, was the fastest-growing genre on

streaming in 2020 (Fischer, 2021) (Aufderheide, Woods, 2021).”Americans are consuming cults and I am interested in exploring just what ideas of cults they are ingesting. Ultimately, this thesis considers the potential harm of misinformation and/or naive portrayals. In order to see how media—written and viewed—show cults, this work is important because disinformation permeates our society and film and television, and can also create ‘fake news’. Such have real consequences for democratic processes—voting, election certification, policy discourse—and social groupings or the ways that individuals find community and cohesion that is not always violent.

**Methods:**

This project began with a fascination for cults because of what I had watched. As a Generation Z adult, I am accustomed to getting my news, my information from online sources. I love documentaries and horror movies. Upon noticing that much of the information I was learning about cults and horror were from the things I had watched, I was able to understand that there is a large market for creating films that are seemingly factual. In that case, my research was not limited to what I could read about cults or what I was reading about cults. It shifted to studying that I was learning about cults through films and television as a whole separate process from reading about it in scholarly articles. Because scholarly articles tell observations and cite research, visual media is a different process because it can be externally created by other and external people. It was such a conclusion that prompted beginning my research on how cults are created through film—as in, how do the ways the shows and movies show us that a group is a cult.

My academic research is focused on anthropological and political science literature in which scholars discuss both cults and the role of media and film in truth-making and what cults are affecting what parts of American politics. The political science literature explains how cults and large ideologically exclusive groups—including alt-right militias, White Christian Nationalist groups— that affect voting, legislation, and the democratic process as a whole (Levine, Adams and Osman, Moss, Rayna, Margolis, Hunter, Lienesch, Campbell, PRRI). While the research is not explicit in separating cults from the alt-right groups, the separation is cults are considered wholly religious, not involving religious members. Cults are born from political turmoil, not intending to be political entirely. Cults are small groups with one mission, while many of these group have had many missions and intentions. This research gave me a critical foundation through which to view the films and television. Based on the characteristics set forth by scholars in sociology, anthropology, and psychology, the film sources can be watched to view consistencies, anthropological markers of ethnographic film, and cultic tenets. I chose to focus on films and television because Americans' knowledge of the world is shaped by these types of media before it is shaped by printed publications (Pew Research Center 2021). For this project, I divide the work into fictional and non-fictional media which was classified by the viewing platform and by the type of content—documentary vs. movie, therefore categorizing docu-series and documentaries together. While there are not the same type of content, there are different lengths, timing is slightly different, they both intend to portray a semi- or wholly factual viewing experience with similar formatting—member and ex member interviews, clips from the leader, clips from non-members, clips of news articles and broadcasts.

Films in this thesis are defined fictional movies whereas television series describes fictional television shows. Non-fictional work creates ‘visual facticity’<sup>2</sup> for educational and entertainment. Members and ex-members serve as narrators in documentaries, and their monologues are often juxtaposed with other footage from the cult, new stories, and sociological and psychological experts. Active members describe their experiences with the leader, the sanctity of the leader, how they got involved and why they stay. Ex-members are critical and are more inclined to call the group a cult, be clear about how they were lured in and manipulated, and explain how dangerous these cults can be. Fictional films do not pretend to be factual representations, but they nonetheless equally project an image out into society. Moreover, I chose to focus on films and television because cults and films are more alike than different. Both create and shape feelings and beliefs. They both lure and seduce people. It is not my intention to be able to assert what is and is not a cult, nor is it my intention to be able to say if the reality that cults create is accurate or not; I argue fictional and non-fictional visual sources are responsible for creating stereotypical versions of cults.

I did not passively consume the images represented by any genre, but engaged in ‘critical viewing’. I began finding which genres most consistently encompassed fictional content on cults such as horror and then took tedious notes. For example, I took avid notes on narration, music, editing, lighting, and what characters talked about. In addition, I assessed how characters and plot lines developed, looking to see if the political and/or anthropological theories—namely Turner’s theory on ritual and secrecy, Durkheim on the theory of knowledge and knowledge-making, Marxism and value-making, and Robert Garder’s theories on anthropological film—I

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<sup>2</sup> This is a term that I have come to use that aids in describing the type of output that occurs in such media.



had studied became apparent. The notation for documentaries and docu-series was split into to categories:

- Assessing the cult itself; this included: how the leader acted toward women and other men,
- How the leader came into power and how he<sup>3</sup> leads the cult,
- How the cult teaches, its symbols and rituals, its oppression and rules for members, daily or regular actions of the group, how the cult come to “an end” or hiatus, and how media and the cult interact.
- Tracking who spoke and their affiliation to the cult, why they left,
- What they were subjected to in the cult, how they worked/interacted with other member, how the cult separated them from the outside world, and how the cult created their environment entirely.

The following non-fictional media are included in this analysis:

1. *The Vow (2020, NXIVM)*
2. *Keep, Sweet, Pray, and Obey (2022, FLDS Mormonism)*
3. *The Way Down (2021, The Remnant Church)*
4. *Heaven's Gate: The Cult of Cults (2020, Heaven's Gate)*
5. *WACO: American Apocalypse (2023, The Branch Davidians)*
6. *Wild Wild Country (2018, The Rajneeshi)*
7. *January Sixth (2022, Trump Followers and QANON)*

The fictional media watched includes:

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<sup>3</sup> While I will refer to many leaders as he, there is one, non-fictional female leader of noted

1. *Midsommar* (2019)
2. *Get Out* (2017)
3. *American Horror Story: Cult, Season Seven* (2017)
4. *The Handmaid's Tale: The Series, Season one* (2017)
5. *Them That Follow* (2019)
6. *Don't Worry, Darling* (2022)

The primary pieces of evidence for my thesis are from films, documentaries, “docu-series” and television shows. Although this project began with the intention to study how cults in film depict female characters, It was difficult to center my project solely around that because the bigger concept was not just what information I was getting but *how*. I expanded my view to how movies and television are created with the intention to visually immerse viewers into the world of the cults or highly regulated groups. Docu-series and documentaries made within the past seven years served to give a visual primary source to individual experiences within these microcosms. This research was then catalogued by highlighting and consistencies could be found between the sources, both watched and read.

Film and television are unique forms of media because they show what a specific person, the director or writers, view of how these groups *should* appear. With such intentions, fictional media consumption for this project was done after the non-fictional research was completed and notes were taken to assess the following things: identifying the main character and their potential age, the manner in which they are introduced to the cult, what in their life pushes them towards the cult, the physical setting of the organization/or plot, the lighting used for different scenes,

with whom the protagonist interacts, the ways that the cult creates internal systems of hierarchy, ritual, and symbols of the group of interest, moments of power assertion and/or violence.

### **Defining a Cult:**

Culture is an agreed upon system with beliefs and rituals (Anderson-Levitt, 2012). A cult is also an agreed upon system with beliefs and ritual. The difference is, one is perceived as negative and the other as positive. What makes ‘cult’ and ‘culture’ different? I believe culture shifts to be defined as a cults after the amalgamation of intentional events based in fear, according to the will of others. Culture, derived from the Latin work cultus is the root of where the word cult comes from. As we practice culture—in any definition—we are following systems, practices, norms, and sociality demanded by the majority. We are individuals that conform, and we cultivate, just as colere means to till in French, what we will become within a culture that is appropriate. In the “The Meaning of Culture”, Arthur Asa Berger asks “If cults can exercise enormous power over individuals and groups of people, can’t we say that cultures also can do the same thing, though usually not to an extreme degree? (Berger, 2000)” Berger writes that just as bacteria needs to grow into culture, humans can be the result of similar effects. According to Berger, it is a process of social acquisition that informs our behavioral patterns, speech, achieves, and artifact.

But as we know, sociality and hierarchy beget factions, groups, and separation. In other words distinction. Although culture is overarching, allows for some deviation, is positive in uniting people and heritage, the differences within the culture can be found too. In every day life, we are confront with the values and artifact and messages that create hierarchy—Confederate

Statues, unsafe cities, memorials of fallen people. But we are not left without our ability to state what parts of our culture should change or adjust; our individuality is not entirely lost to the greater majority. It is my opinion that the shift for culture to cult, begins with a difference in priority—what is important, what has been lost by the dominant culture—and the intention to reevaluate a better way to run or lead or conduct a society. It is that cults become radical, foster anonymity and depersonalization, encourage full dependence on the leader, and leave little room for discursive moments. In essence, just as the word *cult* comes from culture, it is in this divide that sinister and dangerous deviations occur.

It is necessary that I define what a cult is before beginning. It was difficult to understand from the academic articles on cults what a true definition looked like. However, initial searches produced preliminary definitions from dictionaries. According to the Oxford Languages Dictionary, those in a cult may be “excessive” in worship or admiration and state that the groups are small. On [dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com), cults are “a particular system of religious worship, especially with reference to its rites and ceremonies” | “an instance of great veneration of a person, ideal, or thing, especially as manifested by a group of admirers.” This definition, similar to the first does not differ from how to define “religious”— According to Merriam-Webster: “relating to or manifesting faithful devotion to an acknowledged ultimate reality or deity.” | “of, relating to, or devoted to religious beliefs or observances” | “scrupulously and conscientiously faithful”; According to [dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com): “of, relating to or concerned with religion” | “imbued with or exhibiting”; According to the Cambridge Dictionary: “relating to religion” | “having a strong belief in a god or gods” | “of, relating to, or involving with.

It is my opinion, thus the reason for the project, cults are not defined by members but rather non-members who view such a group as extraordinary. It is not enough to define such a group as highly devoted, small, or ritualistic—most religions that are not considered cults follow the same processes. Although a cult may be “a religion regarded as unorthodox or spurious” or “a great devotion to a person, idea, object, movement, or work...especially: such devotion regarded as a literary or intellectual fad”, “a system of religious beliefs and rituals (Merriam Webster),” members of the groups do not always pray or worship in a typical sense. It would in fact require that the cult define itself as a fringe group, or “noun, a group that is on the periphery of a larger organization because its views are more extreme than the majority (Collins)” rather than immediately calling themselves a cults. The definitions are sinister and evil and quite vague. James T. Richardson cites the 1931 work of the sociologist Troeltsch but Richardson states that the distinction has become a pejorative distinction within sociological religion; the definition outlined is that “a cult is usually defined as a small informal group lacking a definite authority structure, somewhat spontaneous in its development (although often possessing a somewhat charismatic leader or group of leaders), transitory, somewhat mystical and individualistically oriented, and deriving its inspiration and ideology from outside the predominant religious culture.”

Richardson is well-versed in the distinction between cults being dangerous and cults being cultural phenomena stating that there are two classes of cults—“mystical-rational” and “individualistic-collectivistic” causing for the difference between how a dominant cult does or does not cause the growth of a cult. Richardson continues to state that the current use of the word is negative and that the word itself has become weaponized, causing legal issues that change

perception, discourage new and “deviant” religions, and that “cult phobia” is creating deviation and delineations between cult and culture. However, it is my opinion that cult cannot be a neutral term but rather should be expanded beyond religion and “small” groups to include our new world of increasingly polarized politics. It is my position and intent to assert that political groups on the right, Trump’s followers, alt-right Christian Nationalists, etc. should be considered cults so that we can critically assess the role of such groups in altering the course of democracy instead of being concerned with the term “cult” as negative or pejorative. Satanic cults that commit murder and alter law-making should be the example for how to spread the definition—it must include such groups because of their radicalness, violence, isolation, and deviation. Motivated by the potential decline of the United States, built on gender hierarchy, loss of individuality for a cause, and the aim to make the humanly leader—Donald Trump—the image of God on Earth, Trump supporters can be likened to a cult.

I argue that dominant culture is based in Whiteness and heteropatriarchy. Similar to how cult leaders manipulate, abuse, and use their followers for their pleasure and gain, the same practices have been used to create Trump’s followers. Such rooting has been why groups of people of color have faced personal and systemic oppression because we have not yet created a fully-equitable system. In 2016, the election of Donald Trump was set to improve conditions for the White working class, and, in turn, gave way to the radicalized ideology that encouraged alt-right, Christian, White nationalist groups to congeal to form a support base for Donald Trump. In a 2023 article titled ““God, Guns, and Guts”: Christian Nationalism from a Psychoanalytic Perspective”, Pamela Cooper-White describes how Trump’s conjuring of “paranoia” while claiming the way of life for White people was at stake has further fueled Christian Nationalism.

In addition Cooper-White distinguishes that is it not just Christians but rather *white* Christians that have taken their view of Christianity, mixed with their white hetero-patriarchial systems, to make Christian shaped values and laws in which she calls it a “theonomy.” As I describe how cults present to the greater public, it will become clear that such groups, politically charged groups, can also be considered cults and are responsible for the dangers that come from misinformation, fake news, and public perception.

It is important to remember that not all cults are violent, highly exclusive or dangerous. Not all cults end in a grand demise. It is possible that the tenets of cults can be applied to multiple types of groups—universities, sororities and fraternities, clubs, universities. I would consider my experience at a boarding school had cultic essences. But because we have received so many extreme versions of religious and religious-adjacent cults who *do* have violent demises, the social perception of defining cults as only radical.

### **An academic representation of cults:**

The Manson Family, Heaven’s Cult, and the People's Temple were cults that began in the 1950’s, 1960’s, and 1970’s with the intentions to amass large followers to participate in specific ideas of sociality and community. With extreme ends such as the mass suicides for the first and third, to the murders committed by the second, non-members and members alike ask what is compels a person to commit such actions? How can someone make you do something so extreme? First, we must cognize why these groups are considered cults. Academia, documentaries, and films each posit the definition of cults differently. Here I focus on academic interpretations.

Academic research on cults intends to observe groups's actions and rules, their potency and their rise, their fall, and the truth about how people join them (Bainbridge, Doyle, Stark, 1979; Levine, 1982; Eister, 1972.) Haya Davan, a sociologist, (2018) sets out to describe cults as they are related to sexual abuse and charismatic leaders. Dayan's article observes the connection between the charisma of leaders and the sexual abuse that can be done to their followers under the guise of sanctity and holiness. The sociological factors that cause a cult's potency relies on the belief and conviction that the leader is holy and correct and their ability to assert control in a multitude of ways, the isolation of members with others who are like-minded, and the emotional dependence on the leader. With their contributions, Dayan defines a cult by its characteristics like a leader and the construction of subordination dependency of participant—victims as referred to by Dayan—and obedience that encourages the work and sharing of participants to benefit the leader and community.

Dayan cites other articles used for references: Levine, 1989, Wilson, 1961, Galanter, 1989, Hampshire and Beckford, 1983, Lifton, 1985, and Zablocki, 2001. Edward Levine, a sociologist states that cults influence how their members vote and come about from the political sect. Thus, cults may have the potential to entirely alter the democratic process (page 35). Levine argue that because of the ways that young people in particular are moved to join cults, their connections to greater politics, meaning outside of their cult, make lack critical participation and involvement as social and political gaps, or dislocations as aforementioned, are critically affected. Levine also posits that because cult leaders gain such potent influence on their members and the media influences outward perceptions of such groups that are both negative and positive, the unconventionality of their ideas and beliefs spread, causing extreme



polarization and anxiety within an already polarized American society. It is not just that cults and politics inform one another, it is that we are producing information in a wholly sensationalized manner that hold true and fictionalized radical view simultaneously, changing how the social world digest such information. This is why the assessment of media, most tangible being movies, films, and television, require critical viewing that is not quick to spread disinformation or cause panic.

Saul Levine, a psychiatrist referenced in Dayan's article, writes often about what motivates a person to join a cult and how their personality would push or move a person that way (No year, p. 131). In his chapter, "The Joiner's" describes the people he spoke to were young in age (18-26), looking to develop themselves and their lives, are looking to deviate or self-preserve in the face of capitalism, the middle-class, and pressures of adulthood and self-identification (S. Levine, n. d. p. 138). The sociological writings of Hampshire and Beckford's writing "Religious Sects and the Concept of Deviance: The Mormons and the Moonies" accounts for why, then, and influx of members that are labeled as deviant increase the religious groups escalating of isolation and radicalness (1983). When public hostility towards the group becomes apparent to members, and the label deviant is created, the push to cling harder to the leader and the group, which becomes a place of social safety and definition prompts a radicalizing effect (Hampshire and Beckford, 1983). It is such escalation and fervor of the groups that perpetuates the cycle of such group-making.

The radical nature of cults and their escalation, such as intensifying rhetoric, further isolation, and internal abuse are written about by sociologist and anthropologist Allan W Eister. As separation form the outside world comes forward, need to self isolate and internal investment

increases. Eister outlines that there must be a large shift in what happens in society, which he states is the “need for orientation” that cause people to look for a place that arranges value, clarity and identification, which cause the movement to religion—a faith based system of explanation. It is Eister’s perspective of cultus emergence that makes the cultural impact of cults so clear; cults are not isolated or accidental. Eister’s work is on the positions in which cults emerge from times when “dislocations” occur within societies that allow such groups to grow. He is clear to state there is a difference between cult and sect in that sect is more closely related to large events that deviate from a larger religion whereas cults are a religious group that can independently form. In this thesis, ‘religious’ is a term of ritual, practices, worship etc. Defining cults and observing their inception are different processes. The second observes how people move toward or away from them, what makes a person susceptible and the contingency of belief or of group that makes people stay (Eister). They are the result of what happens when people are looking for clarity in a culturally-ambiguous context. In fact, Eister cites Malinowski’s criteria for institution-making that requires personnel and working, hierarchy and organized stratification, and means of enforcing and carrying out the mission. From Eister and Levine particularly, the argument forming states that the relationship between cults and culture is cyclical in nature and continues to intensify as time goes on because what prompts a person to join a cult compounded with the cult’s response is what causes intensified cohesion within the group.

Lynn Neal’s research on how fictional television stereotypes cults—which she refers to as “New Religious Movement”—and problematically places them to the side of society. Neal argues that the hyper radical and violent representation of cults reduces the ability of society to

understand them properly, continues the policing of religious deviance, and delegitimises such groups. Neal's argument is that how we see cults in fictional television is a reflection of what we think cults are in the greater society. It is such portrayal that delegitimizes cults as abnormal and promotes anti-cult ideas. Hampshire and Beckford assist in the creation of this argument: The representation that we have of cults matters because outward perception and portrayal is responsible for the intensity of such groups, and the message produced from the non-cult society, fictional or non-fictional can be problematic. It is not the work of this thesis to disagree or agree with such a claim. It is to say that cults and culture influence each other, to argue that films are better at displaying how society views cults, and that the definition should not be reduced to how they are or should be on paper. However, it is the intention of this project to assert the media we have on cults, both written and visual, is not entirely holistic; such gaps are problematic in that we do not accurately know how to define or depict a cult because there are competing definitions and thoughts about their impact. What we produce about cults affects how we define them culturally. This limits our understanding of how cults show up in our cultural and political landscapes because we do not realize how common they are and how easy it is for a group to become cultic.

Adams et al (2023) examine how critical misinformation is to “truth-making”<sup>4</sup>. The writers argue that because there are gaps caused by misinformation that mean the truth is different from reality, there will be detrimental effects caused to the “established norms of liberal democracy.” By creating the term “dynamic lensing of information”, readers of the article—and this thesis—may understand that what we understand from outside perspective or what we

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<sup>4</sup> I have put the word “truth-making” in quotes because it a term I will use throughout that I consider captures how truth is often fabrication and based on perception, not necessarily actual reality.

intentionally mis-identify does have consequences. It is my opinion that it is two sided: we learn inaccurately about cults because they have become perverse examples of radical behavior that we wish to squash without understanding how they begin in the first place. Leaders, politicians, powerful people, also produce misinformation for their own gain which poses a threat to the greater sociopolitical systems. In a graphed out model, the consistent production of misinformation is responsible for the disregard for accurate information meaning consumers of the information refuse to distinguish truth. Biases exist as well because they do not believe their information could be skewed. “Essentially the illusion is expressed in such a way that if “I” take a particular stance on a topic (including beliefs, preferences, choices), I will view this position as one that is objective. I can then appeal to objectivity as a persuasive mechanism to convince others of my position, along with supporting evidence that is supposedly unbiased (Adams et al. 2023).” It is also important to note that other authors who write about the Alt-right such as Jordan Moss, a psychologist, and Christine Reyna, are clear that media production and consumption fuel the culture war and the fears and insecurities of White Nationalists reforming and reaffirming what fuel they need to anger and violence.

By understanding what misinformation can do for the creating or the production of certain social phenomenon, the pull or pervasive watching that viewers do, and understanding that such information has a role in producing more cults and more radical behaviors, such a project is necessary. This project will offer a cohesive name for cults, while looking into how limited our understanding of cults seems to be although we have articles that seem to capture the range. However, as will be demonstrated by my content from the January 6th documentary, my thesis will criticize the fact that if our information is so readily available online but is incorrect,

then defining things in such a category is incorrect as well. This contributes to the literature that assumes that misinformation, politics, and cults, are separate—they, in fact, are not. For the study of anthropology, such research is the exemplification of how we continue to our society and culture by producing and consuming information that alters our actions and norms.

Although I began my research with watching films and documentaries, it is my argument that literature is inaccessible when competing with visual media, limiting in arguing the term cult is negative or that cults are only religious, and does not create a version of cults that can be imagined for a non-academic eye. While the written literature offers a basis of how cults develop, which cults were relevant to the researcher, and how the name for cults may change, it is not consistent with our use or view of cults or cultic behavior today.

### **A filmic representation of cults in both fictional and nonfictional media:**

In recent years, an influx of visual sources—films, documentaries, television shows—have become apart of how society gains access to information about cults. The study of cultural anthropology attempts to discover and discuss how people are creating and contextualizing their worlds. It is an observational field that requires the access to data and collection to create fact and consistency. This strongly correlates with the impression that such fictional sources are classified as horror and that demand for such nonfictional documentaries as a perverse viewing experience. Gardner (1957) sought to bring anthropology, film, and ethnographic work together. Gardner's article creates guidelines on how anthropologists who choose to use visual sources as a resource must reproduce information observed. He states that cinematic work is adept at

capturing the detailed to be interpreted by viewers while creating sources that are moving, in-real time, and capturing lots of moving data.

A strong scholar of cultic studies, the sociologist and anthropologist, Paul Olson adequately situates the research about public perception of cults intending to answer if perceptions of cults will change when the names of them change and will they be able to receive new members into greater society. Olson's assessment of public perception is classified by who is within the "anti-cult" groups who are composed of family and Christian groups who are afraid of the dangers. It is that such groups encourage that communities police such groups in legislature, and that media has a large role in producing biased and dangerous media: "A majority of newspaper reporters who reported on NRMs had an unfavorable attitude toward the Unification Church, Scientology, the Churches of God, the Way International, Hare Krishnas, Bhagwan Rajneesh, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the People's Temple... Given the negative attitudes journalists have toward many NRMs, their stories about the groups must be taken as suspect; but as we have seen, the general public appears to glean most of its information about cults from these sources."

The anthropologist John W. Adams (1979) writes that films become ethnographic when the creator intends to produce an ethnographic study, which can be both what is and is not in the films. In addition, the work of ethnographic work includes how and why the film has been created and the context in which the film was produced. In creation, the films are do not require discussion from actors or members but rather allow for the gaps of information requisition to be examples of "example" and ritual (J. Adams, 1979). There are notes Adams cites: intensity, lighting, music, and setting might show what should be conveyed to viewers and how the creator

is producing the information to the viewer. Combining the research of Gardner and Adams centers my argument—films are an important way of research and influence. But research that claims to be ethnographic can still be intrusive; such works do not become innocent of such fact with an ethnographer present or director attempting to be observational. If the person producing the research is not part of the in-group, perversion and intrusion can be possible.

To be clear, this thesis is not an ethnography on cults. This is not an ethnographic study because it is not taken from first-person accounts, I am not actively participating, interviewing, or physically observing cults and their members. It seeks to define cults through filmic bodies of work, such as television series, movies, documentaries, and docu-series, and other media. The literature that follows is solely based on what scholars have written about cults, what has been written about films as resources, and my personal questions and arguments for exploration. Through the lens of films and media, this is a study of how we get our information and in turn our knowledge. My interest is with both cults *and* films and how cults are described in media and print and their impact on society as whole.

Anthropologists Xiong and Li (2021) produced the distinction between ethnographic film and documentary in Chinese media. While this is not a study on media produced in or about China, such tenets of their work rings true within this project. They reference that documentary and media intend to produce truth-making works that may do the opposite; such works battle with authenticity and reality. They are clear that the context in which ethnographic research is produced should be to create accessible modes of written ethnography for a larger audience. Ethnographic films have methods, evolution of ritual and groups, and intend to create a holistic vision, not an opinion on the research body. They argue that ethnographic film is to show and

display while documentaries are an aesthetic visual aid for opinion-creating. I agree with such perceptions; it is evident that research I have done using documentaries and movies is with the acceptance that both intend for viewers to create an opinion and/or feel a specific way about the group “researched” which is the basis for which such a project on filmic anthropological study lies.

In order to discuss films accurately, there is a process of becoming well informed about how to discuss films based on their filmic criteria. Timothy Corrigan’s book, *A Short Guide to Writing about Film*, assists such a research project in giving specific ways that we should understand how viewers and how creators alike ask for specific words and evidence to be used in the critique and digestion of the media. The book explicitly aims to teach its readers to be able to compare visual media. The scholarly research to follow argues that there is a difference in how films, documentaries, documentary series, television series show cults. This study is the recognition that both types of media, nonfictional and fictional, are produced with the intention to elicit a response from the view and present a pervasive depiction of the group. Such is why many of the fictional resources are considered horror or thriller.

### **Section 1: Contextualizing The Cults—inside and outside media**

While watching films that intend to “accurately” give insight into cults or movies that want to showcase the scary and haunting features of cults, we must understand that understanding how the media—news and sources for the cult—are included in the documentaries and docuseries. I posit their inclusion in the source is to show that news perceptions of the group were created to shame the group and force non-members to inform on their action and call



authorities. Focusing on how internal media was produced also makes the case for how a group becomes insular and radicalized. The media is responsible for giving clues about whether a group is a cult by showing certain members in similar clothing, or stating they are foreign, and stating how isolated they are. They are following notions that have been previously set forth by scholars and society. By including this section in my research, it will be abundantly clear that there is a role that access to media and outside media are simultaneously pushing the group out of society and working to keep the members inside of the cult. By creating and adding media to sources and understanding how media is involved in cult is a reason we must mind the gap between what a cult produces and what society produces.

Fictional movies about cults are much more sensationalised, based in creating horror and inciting fear. The study how these films change culture can be demonstrated by the way that creators intend to present such information in nonfictional works. The intention of the fictional films is to cause a perverse investigation into these groups as malicious and dangerous that solely recruit members to harm them, or to cause harm initially. Media plays a huge role in the rise, maintenance, and fall in the cult and similar groups because its exposure is both positive and negative. The documentaries show the time, the media, and the people. There is a clear relationship between what is aggravating the media and the people and how that relates to what the government is or is not doing for the people. The purpose of documentaries is to shed light. It is easy to assume that people would be unlikely to join but because this is a natural method and many parts society reflect such methods of hierarchy. Media and the vast spread of media, information and content influence the consensus of what is and what is not occurring within these groups and what could possibly happening. Each documentary describes how media has

been limited to the members unless it is media that has been vetted and/or created by members, approved creators, or the leader. It is intentional that media is censored when it enters the community as not to sway members but can be clearly describes how the group has been positive for active members. Many of these groups are consistently recording, producing visual content, and keeping a clear control on their media consumption and exportation.

“Heaven’s Gate: The Cult of Cults (2020)” used previous members, psychologists, and sociologists who were able to infiltrate the group. Heaven’s Gate was scientific cult that intended to allow for members to ascend to a celestial bodies of following the teachings of Ti and Do. Its first episode begins with a teaching video produced by Heaven’s Gate. The leaders are speaking about the organization, wearing plain gray shirts. Immediately, we are presented with visual cues about what is to be taught, by whom it is taught, and how it the rules are taught. In using internal media, the background with a wood and starry background, and the start of the series being begun at the video creates a filmic ideal, a god-like figure. In the outfit, with the promotional video, is part of the creation of realism. Corrigan talks about what realism and how a mise-en-scene—or the components of the opening scene—is crucial to setting up a documentary. Reality, and reality-making, is a purposeful process that sets up how a viewer is supposed to infer and understand the reality of the film. Using the argument of Lynn Neal, viewers are presented with the soothing voice, confident assertions, and stereotypical teachings that accompany such groups. The lighting spotlights the leader, almost with intention to create a view of “beam of light.” The filter is cooler tones, with speckles of older films, both of the time and to create time distance from the viewer. Do is graying, in a brownish-grey suit. He is soft-spoken and talking in an inviting tone. To write about film is to also write about contrast. The portion of this part of the

research is to describe how setting up the documentary or docuseries is as crucial as the first scene, set up best by the creating a scene—the news footage, a promotional, teaching videos from the leader—sets up how we grasp the reality or the topic of the films. Corrigan is also clear that what people are wearing is important for the creation of the realism—it gives an idea if what is and is not important to the followers such as uniformity. In essence, the first clip of such a source offers clear outlines of what is to come.

In “The Vow (2020)”, another docuseries about the cult NXIVM, previously led by the now incarcerated Keith Raniere, also begins its docuseries with a clip of Keith Raniere in a promotional clip, people smiling and laughing, embracing, and waving to a camera. The generic scenes with multiple people hugging and smiling is then contrasted with the presentation of Keith, alone, in a room, sitting on a chair. With the intention to present Keith as inviting, and kind, and passionate, such footage is reproduced with the intention—particular stated by the videographer— to create an appealing and affectionate guy that intended to create a euphoric utopia that was enticing for more and more members to have the “ideal lifestyle.” The scene are slow motion pans, which are important for the viewer to grasp tie, the amount of things to seem and possibly a dream-like or above-realistic state (Corrigan 75). In fact, the book used here for filmic analysis describes crane shots as intending to emphasize “the smallness of the characters in relation to the rest of his or her space,” in addition to the juxtaposition of the clear wide-frame shots of Keith makes him the victor, controller, and most powerful person at hand. Such promotional videos are also important for classifying the teachings of the leader as clarification, preaching, quieter to cognitive dissonance and the power to control based on information that is only accessible to members that are willing to participate.

Looking at the work stated before in *The Vow*, it is not necessary that all media produced by and of the cult be placed at the very beginning. It can be scattered throughout, both as clear visual media and voice over. The voiceovers create a “holier-than-thou” impression that the speaker is above the people, out of sight, and omniscient. It is that the visual media too, sometimes pictures, helps to classify documentaries and docuseries as cultic observation because some of the footage is an internal observation of the cults daily lives—this creates our own unique ethnographic source shot through the lens of a member from the inside. Such examples are found in the docuseries “Keep, Sweet, Pray, and Obey.” The docuseries follows a radical sect of Mormonism led by Warren Jeffs, who is now incarcerated and still considered a revered leader. Throughout the series, each episode shows family footage, zooming in and out on the children, footage from the news after the raid to save the children of the compound occurs, and photos of Jeffs with his underage children. Some of the footage is taken from inside services, some at funereal processions. The zoom-ins on Jeffs states also create the intention of the media—to outline his power and progress to extremity.

“The Way Down”, following to events of the Remnant Church, begin with Gwen Shamblin, the leader, in a deposition. To begin such a viewing with a deposition tells viewers her actions were nefarious and potentially illegal. Shots from her television show come in as well; her life is lavish, her house is large, she has her own helicopter, she is thin, blonde, and married. What we see of Shamblin is idyllic and represents the benefits she has reaped from such a lifestyle. Footage of her church services are there too, showing how large and how lavish her services are, how outlandish they are. There are interviews with Gwen on news shows, her promotional videos, etc. This reinforces what we have learned from the aforementioned groups

about how such groups encourage outward positive perception, draw in members. Once again, and have to work to create a positive self-image that reflects the brand of people they want to attract and the type of person they want to project. Shamblin wants to make women, particularly, fall for the group as both Christians and Americans who are both looking to glorify God and to glorify thinness in a country where obesity is common. In the South, Shamblin is appealing to the greater context of Southern-American vulnerabilities, such as obesity and eating, marriage and family, and hospitality. Editing such footage into the interviews from members, non-members, and onlookers makes such content potent and builds the tension between normalcy and deviance.

Upon first impression, viewers are immediately grasped by what the cults wanted others to know, or what should be known about the cult—danger, illegality. Viewers are shown images of the members as a facade, leaders teaching to understand the manipulation, and a deposition to show how the law had to get involved. In the docuseries on Waco<sup>5</sup>, named “The American Apocalypse” includes news clips of what the ATF (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms) as they describe how long they were intending to wait out the Branch Davidians, what their plans were, how members are being relocated, who was being saved. In fact, members of the ATF and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) worked to manipulate the leader, David Koresh, by allowing him to ‘broadcast his message’ so that his word and beliefs could spread and change how outsiders would view the compound. Every documentary and docuseries employs outside media to show how the world is viewing them through news footage, articles, and in the case of Waco, press conferences.

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<sup>5</sup> Referring to Waco, Texas. This is where the Branch Davidian Compound was. SEE ALSO Appendix

“January 6th” also began with news footage. Situating the cults between the content produced and what would be produced contextualizes how such groups are created by content—January 6th—and how other produced content of the groups is intentionally creating an enticing and sinister image. There’s yelling, and skewed lens shots, flags, fighting. People are being shoved, congresspeople are cowering, police officers running and shouting. Then, it cuts to images and footage of Trump’s speeches throughout the day. In fact, the first person to speak is a black filmmaker/documentarian. He is automatically an outsider, so his perspective and his footage is classifying a radical, strange, hateful perspective. There are French newswomen there too. They speak of the sights they did not expect to see. They discuss how strange it is to be accompanying people to commit treason. To contextualize what is happening inside and outside of the Capitol, just like the produced media of Trump stands for the rhetoric produced by leaders, and the filmic works of the French women and videographer that creates the news media produced. To use this documentary was not accidental. Such documentary is not classified as about a cult but will serve to establish the same characteristics.

In the docuseries about the Rajneeshis, from *Wild Wild Country*, members are often appearing on talk shows, particularly the leaders second in command. She frequents local news channels and talk shows describing the group, defending their political actions, and their decisions to expand within a small Oregon town. It is within the footage that documentaries and docuseries create cults. But this opening and continuing phenomenon can be found in non-fictional films in another way. I posit that such phenomena shows up in fictional films in a different way because fictional sources have a different intention. They are not working to explore and depict explicit truths but rather perceived truths—both perceived by the creators

with the intention to scare or frighten viewers and for viewers to be afraid or confused or enticed by how strange cults may be. Fictional media's mise-en-scene are working to establish horror, unsettling feelings, and story arc.

## **Section 2: How Do You Know Its a Cult? Creating Horror in fictional sources**

During my research with the intention to pick sources, I noticed the fictional sources were classified as horror and thriller. I do not think this is a coincidence. As this thesis discusses misinformation and the ways fear is conjured, it is necessary that horror is the classification because it is the motive and purpose to make a cult as devious, scary, a threat to society, etc. This is a dangerous output that makes a cult seem solely terrifying and solely dangerous. It is because of certain factors combined with the tag of horror, is creating and perpetuating that such groups are sinister, reinforcing their deviance and scariest part of the society. By having this section, I argue defining and creating a film about cults through horror techniques, is part of the reason that cults can be considered scary and is a reflection of how producers see these groups.

I argue that both nonfictional and fictional media present cults as sinister, dark, violent, and strange groups in order to set up how a viewer should receive such information; this is social perspective we have and are intending to project specifically in fictional sources. Corrigan's book classifies horror as "linked to the violence of a certain kind of perception and vision." Films are made to be able show you what you should feels; such a dark and empty space creates a dark and empty feeling, just like a forest that is secluded might make a view feel distant as well. It is through lighting the can create the sentiment of doom or not. Fictional films must be classified as horror or thriller because we have collectively decided that cults are scary,

abnormal, and classified as religiously deviant<sup>6</sup>. Elements such as lighting, beginning scenes, and the establishment of myth are the points of discovery in this section.

The television series *American Horror Story: Cult*, season seven, begins in an evening setting—its dark, there are glasses of wine—the characters are rushing, telling their children its time for bed, watching and the news describing how Donald Trump is projected to win the 2016 election, while a woman turns to her partner with fear that the news are correct. The scene switches to Kai, a young man with dyed purple and grey hair, laughing while watching the same news report. He laughs as the camera zooms in close on his face; we learn from these moments about the contrast in experience. He is sitting in the dark, the only light is from the television. He is alone. His sister is upstairs in the house, sitting at her computer in the dark, crying. One of the wives is in therapy; she fears she is agoraphobic, afraid of clowns, claustrophobic. She fears that she is followed, that she is unwell as the things she sees are not seen by her partner, others around her, or her children. Scenes are mostly dark and in evening, and the scenes in the day are short, with little sun. Since the beginning scenes outline the political changes, we see how voters are running to polling stations, wearing “Make American Great Again” hats, and creating a society that establishes their authority. Most of the activities of the cults are set in the evening or dark lighting. This is intentional. Acts of brutality are publicized—by the news—by a member who is a news anchor, he assaults Latino men to cite the rise in hate crimes, and overall works on the anxiety that viewers and townspeople alike are beginning to fear. This series is the coupling of the political antecedence and the social turmoils that prompts people to join or look into cults.

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<sup>6</sup> This is why the scholarly works from earlier prove so important. It reinforces that there is a public perception of cults and they are abnormal. Thus, it would be consistent with what we see in the films and television.



The movie *Get Out* starts with a Black man, walking alone on a street on the phone. It is dark, the music is brooding and goes and stops as he walks. He stops and he is kidnapped in a white van. This is the establishing scene—the story is linked to the gap between when we see the main characters to how this all relates. To sharp cut after, the main character, a dark-skinned black man is with his white girlfriend as they pack to see her family. The colors in the scene are brown, blue, white, and black. No grand positive feelings can be gathered here. We see the two kiss and embrace and from the lighting, we can really gather that she and him are different races. She even expresses that she didn't tell her family that he was Black because it wasn't necessary, her family isn't racist. Culturally, our understanding of the interracial relationship prompts us to beware of the white partner with the “non-racist family.” The creator of the film, Jordan Peele, is a Black man with the understanding that such a comment is terrifying. So *Get Out* is a realistic reflection of the fear of White people and the sinisteress of who they are. While the film continues, sudden movements of other characters, the stares and the scenes of the main character in a grande house standing or sitting in rooms opposite of his white co-stars prompts tension for the viewers.

It is not just that we are faced with the realistic fear that makes us aware that this is a horror movie, it is also the music. In addition, such films create paranoia, that their experience or gut feeling, that is supposed to be shared by the viewers because characters do not get to be omniscient. It is why when the main character in *American Horror Story* feels like she is being frightened and followed in the store and tells her therapist, we find ourselves feeling the same paranoia when we watch Daniel Kaluya's character in *Get Out* find his cell phone unplugged, or when he is confused by the way that the other Black people who work on the house act around

him—they don't understand his slang. Such feelings creates an allure that makes viewers ask for clarity. The draw-in of content makes viewers vulnerable to the peak of the film where it may be too late for the protagonist to reach safety—exactly how certain members may or may not fall into the trap and allure of cult. We hear little music. The sounds in this movie are for viewers to pick up on: a spoon in a teacup, the whispers of a silent auction, the ways we should be listening to the words that characters say that are micro-aggressive towards to the Black race.

So while horror movies are not dissimilar in their creation and premise from cults, another example of such a beginning can be found in the first season of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Based off of the novel written by Margaret Atwood, it follows how a mother, June, is forced into sexual slavery as a handmaid after a large religious group takes over the government in the United States. Ironically<sup>7</sup>, the groups takes over with a violent coup. The first scene, June running in the woods with her daughter, Hannah, as they wear winter coats, run through a forest, and are running from angry male voices and the sounds of gunshots. Immediately we are given violence and fear, we see a mother with a child. When the scenes switches to show her in a red uniform, her hair covered, not makeup or jewelry, we recognize the uniformity and the stark change of her life. To situate the editing to go from before the time we are watching to how her life was before American became Gilead—the name given by the religious groups—we understand that something radical put her their. In fact, we also get her narration which gives us her candor and anger and we continue to watch the episode. All are dark and shadowy, she is angry and pale, and the are often on candles or dim light bulbs for lights. There are no decorations, she is not in denim and she is not in pants. We are now given two indications about

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<sup>7</sup> Reference made to the January 6th event

the two ways this film watch us to digest information—religious uniformity, ruin, and intimidation. This classifies the show early for viewers as they see the ruins of the area, the lackluster color, and that the mother is not with her daughter.

Light and positivity can still create horror movies beginning that are impactful. The films *Don't Worry Darling* and *Midsommar*, both follow a female protagonist (ironically played by the same actress in both) who is blonde and white. *Don't Worry, Darling* follows a housewife in a cookie-cutter town, as she kisses her husband as he leaves for work, as she gets dressed to make breakfast, cook, clean, and shop. Upon first glances, especially as his car pulls out of their driveway at the same time other men pull out with their wives wave at them with smiles on their faces, we have no reason to be afraid. While such uniformity and the lifestyle of the women might tell us something is at foot, the music is jazzy, bright, and romantic. All we can assume is that the couple is deeply in love. While we follow her routine, as she glides through her bright and yellow-interior, homes, as the music plays from the record player, as she laughs and shops with the other women of the town, we follow the main character as having a charmed life. But as little things happen, like her eggs are empty, and she wishes to go further than where the bus stops can go, and she sees one of the wives as unhappy, her paranoia builds with ours. While the horror aspect is clear and the cult part is not, it will be clearer that the tenets of horrors are based in the filmic symbols that are consistent with cults like uniformity and synchronicity. So as the film *Don't Worry Darling* unfolds and the questions increases, the fear of the brightness of her life in this down, in opposition to dark clips form her life outside of it causes this paranoid and anxious sense that forces viewers to question which comes first.

This film and *Midsommar* are unique films. Both have lots of light. They put the woman at the forefront of discovering what we are all looking to know. When director Ari Aster was interviewed about his film, he described that most horror movies are set in dark scenes, that are not colorful or excited so he set out to change that. So while the film begins in a snowy area, with a dark apartment, we are introduced to Dani as she is on the phone with her friend. She tells her she is worried about her sister, that she is unsure how to lean on her boyfriend, and that maybe her sister's texts about "the end" are a ploy for attention and that her boyfriend should be relied on as much as she'd like. Once again, we are beginning with confusion, isolation, coolness, and darkness. Cut then to the scene of her boyfriend out with his friends. It's dark here too and he is talking about how he and Dani should break up. His friends cheer him on; they remind him that he'll want to be single for their trip to Sweden. While he is here, we discover that Dani's parents and sister have been killed in a murder-suicide. Dani is now alone<sup>8</sup>. Until she, her boyfriend, and his friends land in Sweden, the film is incredibly dark. We learn that in Sweden, there are 22 hours of sunlight. Now Dani will never be in the dark. Because we have witnessed the beginning images, the linger of death and loneliness, that we may not have all of the answers. We also learn that Dani is in a vulnerable and lonely position which puts her at risk—stereotypically—for her to join a cult. The assertion that everything happens in the light makes a viewer think that all that is there for them to know will be there for them to see. However, we do not have all the answers. When Dani dreams, for example, or when she is alone and upset, it is dark. We feel the anxiety and fear that Dani feels.

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<sup>8</sup> Viewers are immediately confronted with the stereotype that "of course she'll join a cult! She's sad and vulnerable"

We know cults because we see story, horror, extreme groups and we fill in the gaps. The presentation of these films is that the horror or the fear or the anxiety that you feel as you watch them makes a viewer anticipate the ways that they may learn to explain their fear as the movie or show continues. It is the filmic duty to keep the viewer entertained so that they may also look to fill-in the gaps that happen. Choices from the director and creatives give clues as to how the film wants to present the information such as the choice to use or not to use music, to create films that happen in the dark and the create content that makes someone wonder what each part of the movie means. Cinematographically, horror films and television intend to project what we are afraid of, such the downfall of American, the loss of family, the loss of self-identity or freedom.

### **Section 3: The Workings and Structure of the Cult—Ritual, Symbols, Knowledge**

In a highly Christian-based society, with ideals that are based in society and God and not remaking religious connections is really closely aligned to the thesis. I find that by outlining their groups through knowledge and how they create knowledge is part of how we try to imagine how cults operate and how extreme these groups seem. Making symbols especially those that are outside of American stereotypes and confining knowledge to within the group are, in fact, part of how they see a deviant process.

The collective of a cult works to explain their workings and requires the loss of the individual interest. The requirement of authority is to create a common group so that they begin to create their own conclusion despite cognitive dissonance. It is this theory, that knowledge is spread from the relationship between universality and necessity is reflected as such: “It is the very authority of society, transferring itself to a certain manner of thought which is the

indispensable condition of all common action.<sup>9</sup> In film, similarly, knowledge is a slow process because viewers only know what they have been shown. Such a group works based on how symbols interact with the intention of the leader and the intentions of the group.

In the non-fictional content, the sources present knowledge as something acquired with time, status, proximity to the leader, and sometimes gender. In addition, it is also gifts/symbols. In *Keep Sweet, Pray, and Obey*, the former member that we hear most from describes that to gain access to the celestial kingdom is based on the number of wives a man has and if he is part of an elite group of people close to the leader, Warren Jeffs. Warren Jeffs, himself, had at least 70 wives, many of whom were minors. The creation of women as a symbol of power also means that sex and relations with high-level officials is a manifestation of power as well. As Dayan stated earlier, sex and sexual manipulation becomes an important part of such group's powers. Another symbol for this radical sect Mormonism is based in the ways that the Book of Mormon has prompted phrases of sanctity including "keep sweet, pray and obey" to remind women and girls to remain pious, prayerful, and obedient. In this documentary and other others, there were edited screens that showed definitions for the terms that the organization used—linguistically establishing different.

In the Remnant Church, the Bible, thinness and a family become symbols. The push to be thin encourages members to find themselves closer to God by being thinner—it allows them to focus on God because instead of eating you are praying. It is the intention that to emulate the leader is to be close to her. By controlling how people eat, including when and how, members are victims of strict dieting. Coupled with the teachings of the group, Shamblin becomes a symbol

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<sup>9</sup> Durkheim

herself—wealth, fame, thinness, and her marriage. In fact, there is footage of Shamblin highlighting her members who are extremely pious and devoted, i.e. the thin members. It is the projection of clear language such as devoted as thin. It is that knowledge, at least in the case of the Remnant Church, is the ability to know how to devote your life to Christianity so much so that eating is the outward example of your membership.

In the case of outward symbols and its relationship to commitment, the members of NXIVM, within the docuseries, *The Vow*, the symbols for members as well pertains to their relationship to the leader, but it is also demonstrated through building, sashes, and group-leadership. The ex-members in the series discuss that as they moved higher on the ranks and worked through understanding the language of NXIVM (also defined by some editing and comments) required full commitment to get closer to being able to meet Keith and make money. In fact, the sashes signify where you are in your process, the ability to own a building to lead your own workshops are also with the intention to spread the message and benefit from the program. The language then promotes exclusivity and investment to be able to understand why certain members are where they are in the organization—how close they are to Keith. For example, there are groups for men only, women only, ex-actors, etc. To be able to be a member, you must go through radical emotional changes through a process of EM-ing or explorations of meaning that members should explore why they are feeling a certain way, utilize “rational inquiry” as in clear practices of thinking and behavior, to become successful. Thus, the creation of DOS, “dominos obsequious sororium”, was to create an increased exclusivity that even members of JNess, the organization for women, were not able to enter.

Such symbols—language, outwear, women, sex— are not limited to documentaries and non-fictional sources. It is extremely important to the creation of the fictional stories. Symbols in films are necessary for giving enough information for a viewer to be curious and invested in how the source will progress, just like how symbols encourage members to remain cults. Films, characters, and their object are related creating and presenting an image (Corrigan, 68). Methods such as coloring, perspective, lighting all give something a significance and “symbolic” message, but, in the case of cults, symbols must be clearly asserted for their religious purpose not just for visual connection and cueing. Referred to as “Easter eggs” and hidden messages, symbols or small things in the film enhances the story and its meaning. In the movie *Them That Follow*, the opening scene is a man preaching with a snake in his hand. The preaching and the snake, the volume of his voice, the fear we get when we see someone hold a snake invites a terrified feeling. The snake and the church and the man become symbols. Throughout the movie, snakes and the instances of secrets and lies are throughout as both symbols of the storyline and symbols for the group.

The film *Midsommar* is possibly the most potent example for this research as it sets up symbols for the entirety of the story and for the characters in the cult. After Dani learns of the death of her parents, she lays beneath a tapestry with an image of a bear towering over a little girl. In a sense, we might see this as a metaphor to mean “overbearing” but it also outlines what we see at the end—that the bear is a symbol for the group in Sweden. Then we have the colors and the flowers, such as rebirth or spring, and beauty. The film shows members collectively doing certain breaths, or humming, which are physical symbols that extend past their clothing. The movie is rich in color and little darkness once they arrive in Sweden, seemingly implying the



movie moving into a brighter or happier place. In fact, Dani and the other characters ask about the yellow building that sits in the background, and what the significance of the bear in a cage is—all to find out that at the end, the building is where all the characters but Dani will be sacrificed. As the movie continues, the symbols such as language, their religious texts, the ways that certain people are chosen to die in their final ritual reinforces that symbols serve to create and preserve tradition. A great symbol that stands for a symbol and for an easter egg is the use of their symbol for the group, a Rune. Symbolism for the group is clear but so are the symbols that enhance the plot such as the motifs of death, the paintings in the background that seem to depict the movie from start to finish, altars, and events such as the crowning of the May queen—the moment that Dani is officially a member of the group.

In fact, gifts such as new sashes in NXIVM, new wives, closer alliance with the leader become incredibly intricate and moves members to want to continue to thrive. Clear symbols are established. Symbols encourage participation, traditions, and explain moments of cognitive dissonance that often happens in a group this exclusive. This may also be the reason that cults recruit such educated people; the educated populous can use their high-value knowledge as a way of creating and recreating the validity of the cult and making sure that it can be run efficiently. This is where stratification becomes increasingly important. Members must see a reason to move further up to the perceived ‘divinity’, ‘awe’, or ‘blessing’ of the leader. The power of the leader lets the cult run itself. Such groups follow Gramsci and his methods of Coercion and Consent which preserves the relationship between people and groups. This method of coercion and the relationship of symbols and cohesion will be further discussion in the membership section.

**Section 4: The Members/Victims/Participant—Membership, Retention, Coercion**

Showing that groups are choosing who they want for the group are creating a cause for the fault in society that certain people are falling through the cracks. It is by showing that these “poor, poor, members” are unable to see how “crazy” they are and how vulnerable they are does not allow for critical truth that media and dominant culture control and affect how people engage in the greater world. There is a parody made of how members join without acknowledging that the culture and society are the at fault for factors that contribute to people joining these groups. In fact, most of these sources don’t show a crumbling society, they just show how that person was vulnerable or dumb enough to join.

The process of attracting, acquiring, convincing, and retaining members is a multi-step process that is either explicitly told by ex-members in documentaries or docuseries or shown in fictional sources. It can be a familial invitation or upbringing, it can be a voluntary process, and it requires certain reasons a group would be interested in such a person. To gain new members, the process should encourage potential members to learn and participate without the weight of full membership, get to know others, and then engage in highly emotional processes. While there is the stereotype that only people who are uneducated, “hippies”, or emotionally vulnerable join, it may be shown by the sources that the emotional vulnerability is a forced process rather than a voluntary process. Giving and offering intimate information about oneself connects you to another person while giving them power to use such information against you to remain a member. This section will demonstrate what membership in such groups looks like physically—outfits, hair, etc., emotionally, and how members are integrated and initiated.

Value and hierarchy, both necessary to social structures, are reflected in such groups making knowledge, power, and land. Cults allow individuality to be lost for the greater alignment within the group's intention. Naomi Haynes and Jason Hickel's article *Hierarchy, Value, and the Value of Hierarchy*, hierarchy becomes beneficial for distinction and progress; "While individualism and egalitarianism are central to Western conceptions of justice and the good, many people in the hierarchical societies see them as immoral and destructive, as eroding the relationships that make meaningful personhood possible....hierarchy draws out attention to the way that values are organized with respect to each other, since values are hierarchically ranked, with some being more important than others.(Hynes and Nickel, 2016.)" This positively affects how membership works for the benefit of the cult to allow for member retention.

The most explicit view of membership and the stratification of members is what members are required to wear, what they cannot wear, and what certain members wear based on their status in the organization. Uniforms are necessary for making conformity, erase individuality, and require members to see themselves as a collective. This is consistent in the films. Members of NXIVM have sashes, often wearing business casual, and participate in volleyball games with other members and the ways that people can connect and remain social with each other. In the *Handmaid's Tale*, the wives are shown in teal, long dresses, with long sleeves, modest wear. When giving birth, a handmaid will change from their white bonnet, red hat and red smock with long sleeves (and capes if it is cold) and into white long-sleeved dresses. Marthas, the women who cook and clean for the homes, are dressed in grey with hats. It is also important to note that not all cults will target the fashion of women, but it is unsurprising that the bodies of women are policed the most and first.

Within *Midsommar*, most of the characters are wearing white, flowing, linen, outfits. Men dressed in pants and shirts while women are in skirts and tops. As the rituals continues, the accents, and flowers. In the Heaven's Gate cult, men and women are dressed in a grey-brown outfit, of a box-y top and pants with a short bowl cut. Another example of collective uniforms are the red, magenta and orange outfits that similarly display an androgynous and cohesive look. Even *Get Out*, has its own version of uniformity—whiteness. The members of the Mormon sect in *Keep Sweet, Pray, and Obey* enjoyed creating videos and books full of “pious” hairstyles to accompanying their long sleeved dresses. It is incredibly common that groups are intended to make members feel similar and connected to each other by creating community by enjoying the process. In the fictional film, uniforms are incredibly important so that viewers are not confused about what the group wants to do.

In the same ways that cults eliminate personality to create a sense of depersonalization through uniformity in outfits and the use of language, members receive extensive assertions are clear media that is regulated and produced by the cults itself. This reduces the information acquired that would be alternative to the information pertinent to remaining a loyal member of the organization. While this is a part of the isolation that compounds with cults on them have, it is also necessary to understand that cults, especially ones that intend to create generational membership, will produce an academic curriculum that is also based in what they want to inscribe in members. For example, the children in *Midsommar* are raised collectively, with only the access given to them by the other members. For the Mormons, films, books, and movies were made with this religion in mind and ex-members in the docuseries describe their televisions were limited but they were required to celebrate only certain holidays that were recognized by Jeffs. In

the *Handmaid's Tale*, the men who are considered “commanders” or the most elite men in the society are able to write and read, but their wives, including the woman who wrote the book for the basis of their organization, also cannot read or write. The women specifically are not allowed to read or write because knowledge is power. In Heaven’s Gate they had reduced knowledge of outside of the group and intended to produce works such as pamphlets and newspapers. It was intentional in spreading knowledge. In this way members were motivated to really engage with the content.

In the documentary of the events of January 6th, symbols of the flags, don’t tread on me, all become parts of constructing the identity. In fact, this documentary is an impressive example of how information and from whom is important. When Donald Trump said that justice was not accurately being carried out and that it was their “duty” to take back the vote that Pence and others were stealing, it caused Trump’s followers to hastily descend on The Capitol, intending to carry out justice. It wasn’t cops that stopped them. It wasn’t fear of treason or harm on them that stopped them from attacking the Capitol. In fact, the French news women spoke to members, who were there, asking if they were planning on stopping or leaving the Capitol or recognizing their harm. Many said they would only retreat if asked by Trump himself. They went to the Capitol knowing that they wanted to “Take back the capitol” and walked through the building disrespecting the building. This is an example of how information, such as how the United States democratic systems work, how law and treason should be large barriers for certain actions, and that the cause is above reproach. In this documentary, we see that the words of Trump caused a volatile reaction.

Each documentary describes how media has been limited to the members unless it is media that has been vetted and/or created by members, approved creators, or the leader. It is intentional that media is censored when it enters the community as not to sway members but can clearly describe how the group has been positive for active members. Many of these groups are consistently recording, producing visual content, and keeping a clear control on their media consumption and exportation. Through tactics of time ownership, giving the recruit to the organization, physical presence and work in the cult, and their designated duties, new members find routine. Often members relinquish themselves to the cult in multiple way, men are either without their pre-cult wife but rather she belongs to the leader, their may have multiple partners in the group, and their names and style are altered either slightly or entirely uniformed by the organization. It is this process that the identity of members become one with each other and stifle reasons or ways of dissenting under the guise that such behaviour is a betrayal.

Each member is responsible for other members, whether the slave-master system, recruiter and recruit, or partner given by the leader. In the Heaven's Gate, anyone who was previously married would be responsible for the actions and the feelings of the other person. This system means that each person is ultimately pitted against another to see who will be closer to the leader. It is this process that changes couples to partners and spies. This is also possible for members of NXIVM; ex-members of the group describe their within their relationship, it began increasingly difficult to tell their partner (I should emphasize meaning to tell their male partners) that they are feeling disconnected, upset, or worried about the state of the organization, they wouldn't because their concern was that they would be reported or told it wasn't true. For one member, Bonnie, upon telling her partner, he reported her, she was insulted by Keith in a one-on-

one meeting, and manipulated and threatened to stay in the cult despite the fact he did not respect her decision to separate. The tension increased between the group and it continued as she separated further for the organization. Isolated and alone, Bonnie's experience made it harder for her. This makes it harder to leave because deviation will be obvious, and most cults operate in that no members are alone. Their family is the cult. There is a holistic elimination of individuality and outside family.

Member acquisition and subordination is a process that starts when they begin to be interested in the cult and increases as they encourage separation from dissenting family, changes based on the gender and age of the recruit, and the veracity of the allegiance. Through tactics of time ownership, giving the recruit to the organization, physical presence and work in the cult, and their designated duties, new members find routine. Often members relinquish themselves to the cult in multiple way, men are either without their pre-cult with but rather she belongs to the leader, their may have multiple partners in the group, and their names and style are altered either slightly or entirely uniformed by the organization. It is this process that the identity of members become one with each other and stifle reasons or ways of dissenting under the guise that such behaviour is a betrayal.

There are clear role of members: To vet each other; to work with each other to explain the cult's gaps in knowledge (explaining their cognitive dissonance); some are in an inner alliance with the leader; the people who regulate members through violence or strict rules. These groups tend to recruit smart and wealthy people as knowledge and money are capital and serve a purpose in funding a moving the "company". Recruiting high-earning individuals allows for skill division. Women stand in as a resource or a commodity. Violence, especially violence against

women, is a large part of submission and so is sexual violence. When each member has a task that they deem fruitful for the progress and the recognition of the cult and the leader, members are incentivised to help run the cult without all of the guidance from the leader. In the cult of the Rajneeshi from the docuseries *Wild, Wild Country* were previously lawyers, doctors, and other well educated officials that all offered their respective skills to making of their compound, how to legal use and hold onto the land, and how to protect their members. Such processes meant that their were rules that were in place for how to structure member duties to keep the area running, including the protection of the group. Similarly, in the case of Waco, had their compound's mailman not been out looking to collect and mail things, the raid on the compound would have been a true surprise. This phenomenon is most effective when using people are capital when making integrated membership in which adults have collectivized their beliefs instead of growing up in it—generational.

The member acquisition is not dissimilar but there are clear distinctions that can be made. The people who join and young adult to middle aged adults often in relationships that are not healthy with their partner and/or family. The antagonist has a traumatic experience that prompts a change in area or place of the film. There are methods of integration—there are ways that the main characters will be initiated or integrated that are more clearly outline the difference between initiating and integrating. Initiated: AHS Cult, they must murder to remain part of the group; Get out, he must become one of them by giving up his brain, The Handmaid's Tale, against her will she made a handmaid and she must submit. Integrated: Midsommar: Dani helped cook and clean and dance; Them that Follow: The protagonists are forced under the pastors wing; Don't worry Darling: While it is with, the main character is put into a society and a



routine. Characters are forced to immediately integrate without the awareness of the degree of aggressiveness.

Many of the members involved are quite wealthy which is subtly depicted in the events of the cults, or the production of events for the cults. Overt depictions of wealth are the conversations in *Don't Worry, Darlings* among the housewives, the discussion the leader in *American Horror Story* has about tuition for his sister, his brother's profession, and his ability to get out of working. Lastly, *The Handmaid's Tale's* shows of wealth are in the status of members of Gilead and what certain male members can and cannot do. This allows for funding and livelihood. Within the compound upon which the Mormon sect of the FLDS resides has their own bank, utilize child labor for exporting goods, and profit from letting men go out of the compound to work. This allows for an increase in money. This is consistent with what could be said for the fictional resources because money is required for advertising, pamphlets, and overall sustainability. For example, money and access can be a tool of control—members who leave and forced to pay legal fees, find their own housing, and explain their time as external people in society. This how societies like cults—referred to as such because they have hierarchy, money, capital, and land—are able to function as highly exclusive environments that make it difficult to leave and difficult to enter.

The protagonists of the films—excluding *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Get Out*, and *Them That Follow*—were depicted as spatially and emotionally in a dark place through lighting, we are convinced that their vulnerability and loneliness is the reason that such a group can have such a strong hold on the individuals. It was not the majority of the cases in any of the documentaries or series and shows that the social projection about the true of membership is by vulnerability. In

addition, the films make such groups small and intimate when, according to the documentaries, such groups can have hundreds of members—see the Remnant Church. The groups are much smaller in most of the films and shows and are not typically large or largely organized groups. In each group, there are clear tasks that each member serves a purpose for the protection of the organization, the progress of the message, and the overall recruitment of new members. There is a clear council and the main characters are brought in unsuspectingly and the film is very short term with the movies spanning a few days when the documentaries discuss their membership lasted years. Many members are not immediately placed in highly radical situations. Besides the fictional movie *Them that Follow*, such groups only receive members and do not have generational recruitment. All fictional members are recruited against their will or without their knowledge. There is a reason each member shown or person enticed by the cult is picked or has joined. They are made to feel that they have a reason to be there. There is a division of labor so that the grand scheme of killing someone or forcing the main character in is effective. The only films that depict full familial connections to cults are *Them that Follow*, where the protagonist's father is the leader and *Don't Worry, Darling*, where the main character, her husband and his friends are involved with the group with the intention to "change the world" based on a secret project. While all the men know that this area is a computer simulation in which they have all forced their wives to join through drugging their real bodies and bringing them into a fictional one, the process means that when a member's wife begins to question reality, they are highly abused. Making violence a clear and apparent tool of manipulation such as in *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Them That Follow*, or in *American Horror Story: Cult*, it is typically more hidden in cults and begins closer to when the leader fears that his cult is in a place to ramp up the radical nature.

There are themes of drug use such as a tea and hypnotism. Land, which creates the scope of influence, set the groups apart in a comfortable place that allows for clear boundaries for rule setting, for ritual, for associate to the group as members. The territory is capital and belongs to the leader so control over members is clear in the preservation of space. These “programs” or groups are isolated to a headquarters but often encourage members to live nearby. The people who are enticed to join are typically those who attend occasional information meetings and slowly increase their involvement.

#### **Section 4: Who is the Leader, What Are Told about Them:**

The fictional and the nonfictional media are clear to keep the leaders, their personalities, and their actions separate from the members. It is not clear who the leader in *Midsommar* is so it will not be included in this part of the analysis. The leader in the Remnant Church is the only woman leader, Trump is an outward anomaly, and the leader of the Rajneeshi is a man with a woman counterpart. As such grand powers, there are clear characteristics of leaders. The leader is charismatic, attractive, aggressive and present power with tenets of masculinity. By presenting and a protector, confident, and using his sexuality to appeal to women and heteronormativity, leaders must present as a closer to God and holiness, whether it uses God and Christianity or not. To demonstrate such, Keith Raniere from NXIVM referred to himself as Vanguard, addressed members by their names, kissed each on the mouth, and worked on hyper masculinity with actions, words, and his relationships with multiple women. Members who surprised the tragedy at Waco said because of the “holiness” of David Koresh, she felt once they had intercourse, she could be enlightened. In the cult of the FLDS Mormons, Warren Jeffs was considered the prophet

who was closest to God, had direct communication with him. To create the sense that such leaders are above, images of them are used with bright backgrounds and extensive lightening.

The leader, male or not, will be commanding and sensitive, passionate and intend to make the potential member understand that they know it might “sound crazy” or that there could be moments of cognitive dissonance but it is in fact possible that may their teaching do work. Out of all the non-fictional content consumed, only one leader was a female, and only her leadership was possible because she had a male council beneath her. All male leaders have at least one female-identifying counterpart who helps them make decisions, understand women, and serve as a sexual partner for the leader. This means that each leader gets to present typicalities of masculinity and leadership which entices men, and encourage the balance and relationship with women which draws in female members. There was not any research done that spoke to non-cisgendered members or non-heterosexual members. In the Heaven’s Gate Cult, Ti and Do, who were previously under different names, worked together to access men and women, and explain why they were sure we needed to learn about their mission. In using such a counterpart, I posit leaders get to argue that their powerful masculinity is always in opposition to femininity. The leader of the Rajneeshi is not spoken often in the series because his counterpart, a woman, did so much press and conversing for him that her glory overshadows his. At that point, she took the fall for how terribly the organization fell, not him. Raniere had many women beneath him, thus results in the cult being considered a sex cult. Finally, Gwen Shamblin had multiple men beneath her to advisor her on decision, carry out threats and “discipline” members.

Leaders are also described as cunning and passionate. The deviance of members becomes personal to them; footage in lots of the documentaries have ex-members describing the

harm they have been through. It takes a lot of members to recognize their abuse. Shamblin's pull is that as a thin woman who kept the weight off and in fact lost more weight because an example of what people could be. For the Rajneeshi, the leader is untouchable and must be revered and protected, thus members decided to use weapons to protect him. In *Them That Follow*, the leader often brings snakes to his services, describes how he is family for members, and ensures a sense of security. In the fictional American Horror Story season, Kai says he will protect all of his members, is sexual with each but his sister and brother, and is often yelling when speaking to the members. In the fictional movie *Get Out*, the male leader is kind and welcoming to Daniel Kaluyaa's character, mirroring his body language and his "lingo" and using slang. He also states that he "would vote for Obama a third time" if he could—he seems relatable. When Bonnie, an ex-member of NXIVM, tells Keith she is leaving, he states he is hurt and saddened and warns things will be more difficult for her. When a member of the FLDS tries to leave, Jeffs tells her she can't, forces her to marry, and continuously watches her.

### **Section 5: Why The January 6th documentary?**

Talcott Parsons, a sociologist and political scientist, writes "On the Concept of Political Power (1963)" to discuss how power and support are created. To contextualize why I view Trump supporters—the amalgamation of multiple alt-right groups and members of the White mid-lower class (PRRI, Cox et al. 2017)—as their own type of cult. Southern Poverty Law Center define the alt-right as "The Alternative Right, commonly known as the "alt-right" is a set of far-right ideologies, groups and individuals whose core belief is that "white identity" is under attack by multicultural forces using "political correctness" and "social justice" to undermine white people

and “their” civilization. (Southern Poverty Law, No year listed).” At the mercy of Donald Trump in 2021, the concepts of power, similar to the ever-willing members of the cults in this paper, are at play with such a leader. Parsons also describes the coercion and consent paradigm as relevant to how political power is cultivated in which power gives the leader ability to make things happen, I concur in the the power of Donald Trump—both through the government and the given legitimacy by the members of his following—caused the events of January 6th and thus gave credibility to calling his supporters a cult.

It is my intention with this project to contribute to the greater impact that film and television have on creating cults for a visual audience. In data produced by the Pew Research Center in 2021 titled “More than eight-in-ten Americans get news from digital devices,” in which the article states that people are more likely to gain knowledge from online sources before written sources. In fact, 52% prefer to get information from their television. Based on this information, and the purpose of this thesis, a causal relationship can be found between why polarization, politics, and religion are intrinsically linked. Michele Margolis is the author of a book called “From Politics to the Pews” which states the relationship between religion and politics in that the church you attend, the groups you are apart of, and your beliefs are related to politics. Margolis is clear that the relationship goes both ways—religion affects politics and vice-versa. In 2014, the Pew Research center stated that the divide between Republicans and Democrats is increasing by means of the culture war. James Davison Hunter writes “the story of liberal democracy in America could be told in terms of the expansion of difference and the way the institutions of democracy has ultimately incorporated those differences into the shared

political community,” meaning the scope of politics cannot be separate from the lenses of identity and ideological perceptions of what is relevant to the polity (Hunter, 2006.)

Alt-right groups did not begin with Donald Trump or January 6th, 2021. But, there is a correlation between their rise in extremities and the Election of Donald Trump. It is my opinion that such groups—The Proud Boys, Ku Klux Klan, The Order—have created a cultic organization when they chose to consolidate to back Donald Trump. Seth G. Jones wrote for CSIS (Center for Strategic and International Studies) a briefing titled “The Rise of Far-Right Extremism in the United States.” In this briefing, he writes of the growing threat these groups place on the rest of society and the world. Jones states the amount of right-wing terrorist attacks have risen, although low in the years between 2007-2011 (Jones, 2018). Just as this argument discusses that media is giving rise to opinion on cults and encouraging their conception, Jones states the rise is related to the outreach that social media, news and events gives (Jones, 2018). But he also discussed the looks of members; “Many of these right-wing extremists are trying to be less visible and less conspicuous (Jones 2018).” In reimagining what a cult could be, then changing their look, uniting to attend events together, utilizing media as part of their indoctrination, I argue that such groups follow similar patterns that other groups have followed once deciding to vote for Donald Trump in 2016 and 2020.

As stated before, the documentaries and docuseries show that some cults intend to change the political environment they are in by amassing their followers with the intent to get them to vote based on their values, getting them to create their own ideology, and adjust democracy. I assert that cults are apart of the culture war and politics as they are a result of sociality differentiation that pushes people on the fringes—I.e deviance. Their feelings of separation and

difference make their radicality dangerous for the process of democracy and adds to polarization.

It is my opinion that what happened on January 6th was an example of how politics and identity and political identity are beyond the surface and go into the threads and fibers of a person.

David E. Campbell, in “The Perils of Politicized Religion”, describes our current polarization in the same way other scholars have described why young people and radical intellectuals might join a cult—it is that by disagreeing with the fact that religion and politics are blurred, there is push to separate oneself from such ideology to become extremely different. Campbell writes that Trump’s supporters—despite his moral, actions, and social shortcomings—were often White Evangelical people because the overlap with Republicanism and their social privileges were at stake. This proves Michael Lienesch’s argument that Christian Conservatism is becoming a political movement that is no longer separate from what politics and the polity are. In fact, Lienesch cites Durkheim—“rational society created irrational people...the emotional ties of traditional society are replaced by the rational rules of the modern organization. As shared traditions gave way to individual roles, modern people become atomized and alienated. In times of crisis, the theory held, these atomic individuals tended to revert to aberrant behavior, such as mass protest or mob action.”

Edward Levine, a sociologist previously mentioned, wrote “Religious Cults: Their Implications for Society and the Democratic Process” asserting that within defining culture’s condition that encourage or prompt certain young pole to cults and opinions and eventually its impact on the overall democratic process. As college-educated individuals are able to critically assess and learn about systemic flaws and have access to elite thinking, find frustration and exhaustion with politics. Levine argues cults that are defined as non-schismatic, then they are



non-theological because they serve the intentions of the leader and not to enhance personal sanctification—this is a result of the industrialization shift within in the United States that encourages secularization and a deviation from religion. It is from this hypothesis that I theorize how we see cults must adjust based off of how our social culture does. Thus, if members are joining to support their leader in opposition to believing in the American political system and disparities—loss of the middle class, racial gaps, healthcare, job instability, etc—force college-educated young people’s anxieties to make them susceptible to following the radical leader instead of making radical political decision.

Therefore, this phenomenon rings true when using a radical leader who is a political candidate whose dispersion of information is intending to adjust the culture, and protect whiteness, the middle to lower class, and attempting the change the landscape of American society. According to PRRI (Public Religion Research Institute), 65% of the White working class thought that American culture has been deteriorating since the 1950's. Their vote for Trump, according to statistics, was a vote placed in the candidate that was least likely to threaten their ideals. The authors of the report begin by outlines the five reasons that this demographic chose President Trump: 1. Identification with the Republican Party 2. Fears about cultural displacement 3. Support for deporting immigrants living in the country illegally 4. Economic fatalism 5. Economic hardship. The study also outlines that 52% of White working-class citizens felt there has been an increase in discrimination against them rather than People of Color, contrary to the 70% of college educated white people. This article clearly outlines the social conditioning experienced. Based on income, and their argument that college was a waste of income, social conditioning, and other financial circumstances moved this demographic to more conservative

ideals. In order to sensationalize, documentaries and docuseries have taken to create cinema before fact (Aufderheide, Woods, 2021). Fact-checking is lost, the intention is to improve the brand producing such media, and there is money in public trust. This relationship to politics, both monetarily and socially, is that information and the truth conflict with politics and biases. In fact, the authors write that extreme right sources were inclined to produce documentaries that coincided with their platforms, both taking advantage of the rise in the field and perpetuating the issue.

Through certain clues, applying such contexts and skills to movies and documentaries on a larger scale to see if content produced on any group will result in the same definition—cult. I do not believe such can be said for every highly exclusive group that they are a cult, but it may be possible that the ways that a movie, fictional show, or nonfictional film might prompt a viewer to consider it as such. The connection between anthropology and government meets at the discussion of Donald Trump and his followers. The Republican Candidate who came after Former President Obama, a left-leaning candidate. Running and elected in November 2016, he amassed followers promising a wall preventing migration from the south, fixes to assist the White middle-lower class and intending to “Make America Great Again”. It is important to note that his followers include alt-right militia groups like the Proud Boys and backing from the Ku Klux Klan. For Donald Trump and his followers, America must belong to white nationals, the rich, and the men.

To begin outside of the documentary, Trump has been known to speak radically, passionately, and harmfully. Although he was once a democrat, he chose to run and switch to be Republican. He often lied, tweeted often, and tried to extend to sympathy for dangerous groups

—thinking back to his comments about Charlottesville, Virginia that there were good people on both sides regarding a peaceful protest turned deadly. It should have been no surprise that once he lost the 2020 election to Joe Biden, he and his followers claimed that the election was “stolen”. Then, on January 6th 2021, Trump spoke to an audience of thousands of his followers, who flew “don’t tread on me” flags, Trump 2020 flags, and continued chants. Trump, boisterous and loud, riled up the crowd stating that it was stolen and it was the job of his followers to take back the election.

In January 2020, a year before the events on January 6th, Sean Illing of Vox interviewed a former cult member cult expert Steven Hassan. In this interview, he asked Hassan—the author of the book *The Cult of Trump*,—if Trumpism is a cult and why. This article became a guiding factor in how I viewed the documentary, as it offered insights from a former cult member. Hassan is clear the term cult must be reworked as it does not encompass someone such as Donald Trump. Hassan argues that there are two types of cults in the interview, ethical and unethical in which unethical cults “that are essentially based on authoritarian pyramid structures, usually with somebody at the top that claims to have total power and total wisdom, and they use deception in recruitment, which is crucial. (Illing, Hassan, 2020)” Hassan argues that certain groups chose to follow Trump because he was chosen by God, and “there was this blind-faith aspect to the whole thing (Hassan, 2020).” In producing and encouraging members to look at Trump as all-knowing, and allowing Trump to state which sources were appropriate for right-wing voters, he followed a pattern I outlined before in that Leaders controlled and produce appropriate information for their followers. In a similar sense, it is not just that Trump is leader, it is his grasp on his members, his

religious sanctity, his almighty attitude, and “amorality” that fuels the argument that Trumpism is a cult (Hassan, 2020).

The film has footage of the supporters storming the Capitol, committing treason, attacking police officers. Immediately, we understand that we are looking at the film as fearful—in the face of the impossibility of such an act being carried out at the capitol—viewers, the we, are taken aback by the trauma and fear of such treason. The film also throws in how this affects democracy will be changed by the radicalness and violence of the group. Upon this day, members under Trump refused to stop until Trump tells them to. They are willing to kill or die for such a cause to have him remain the leader of the free world. There is no stopping them for the pure fact that they solely believe in his power, revere him wholly, and intend to reinstate him. Politicians and police officers in the film are clearly in awe and traumatized as well and describe how this will change the fabric of democracy. Their fear, their separation from such an experience as those who believe in the system of the American Democratic system is with the intention to make sure that this day was extraordinary. I posit that by watching this documentary, not using people who were responsible and by keeping footage of non-Trump supporters feeling terrified prompts our understanding that this was not a typical move for followers of particular candidates.

It is my opinion that the documentary on January 6th, contains enough evidence to consider Trumpism as a cult, January 6th as the stereotypical end, and the film as having enough tenets aforementioned and established in the documentaries to display such a group as a cult. The written research that describes how cults affect democracy, how cults will garner enough supporter amongst themselves to follow their leader no matter what, follows similar patterns of

the other cults in this essay. In addition, such documentaries describe how tense and intricate members are when they are not hearing from their leaders. Trump, for hours, did not respond to call his people off. He allowed and watched as they committed crimes, faced injury and deaths, and abused the police and the political system. Trump's command of this group is unlike what has been seen by other political candidates. It is outside of our American norms to have such allegiance to a candidate that crimes like this would occur. When comparing the leaders, the collectivity of members, the commitment of members, we might classify January 6th, 2021 as a moment that exemplifies how radical a cult can become and its change on the fabric on society and democracy. This documentary displays dangerous radicalness, extreme loyalty, footage of the leader and the organization, and has individuals in the documentaries who are clearly separated from the members of Trump's supporters. Overall, the same intentions of a documentary to display how culturally deviant such a group can be is consistent with the January 6th film.

### **Final Section: conclusion: Media, What We See, What Next**

Media is highly influential and the two converge at Trumpism. The same things I saw in the other cults, I saw in the documentary about Trumpism. In fact, I argue that the impact Trump had on our social landscape and stratification is related to how cults begin—changes in the sociopolitical world. Cult movies and films are considered fictional and horror. The category evokes abnormal and strangeness. If cults are a response to politics, then the films we watch and make might be a response as well. In fact, this is why the films have been chosen from 2017 to 2020 which served as an apt time for the world to turn to radical behaviors in the name of leader,

just like what was occurring with the following groups of Donald Trump. To reassert, cults—both in fictional and nonfictional visual sources follow the same range of experiences. Cults in this research typically follow the same pattern. When watching such sources, we are taught what members feel and what seem to be truth about how cults operate.

1. The Society: there is a cultural shift in social Norms, or political stability or it is a time of transformation pushing people to find themselves looking to redefine what a proper and clear society is accommodating for their priorities. In addition, media coverage increases and displays the difficulties of society while documenting extreme reactions.
2. The inception: the leader sees a need for their personality in society and uses the vulnerabilities of the current society. They create a niche based in their own perception of belief, create an extreme version and attract members. It happens slowly at first and they may not be alone; they may be married, have an accomplice, or a co-leader.
3. The growth: members are intrigued and may be attracted by certain parts and not all but will eventually be required to buy in, the members that are there are confident in the cause and may not know that there is a process of recruitment, brainwashing, and manipulation that is occurring. They are participating and learning and relearning constantly. This is also the point where the cult begins to assert a clear place of meeting and worship, asserting a physical dominance and clear piece of “sacred land”.
4. The recruitment: As the popularity of the cult increases—this can be done through media, word-of-mouth, and simply an increased area of people coming—members who seem well-equipped with the missions and the priorities of the group are sent out to influence others,

typically in groups. This is where their hierarchy, rhetoric, and group-over-individual mentality grows

5. Increased Attention: The group is growing, people are recognising the group, its outfits, its words, its process. This is where the leader will increase the intensity of teachings and need for allegiance, they will describe more in-depth the future and the fear of the end of the world or the world's demise. It is their intention to establish that if we all operate like our cult and hone in on our beliefs and skills, we will be saved from destruction. This will mean that people are looking to decipher if other members are worthy and dedicated, members lose self more, the dialogue and fervour of the group changes, the media is both beneficial to leader and detrimental to the members.
6. The Attention and the end: The attention is increasing and some member have been pushed out or left, there is a seemingly large threat to their world and society and the best way to protect it is to leave before they are eliminated. That can be through mass-suicide or murder, the arrest of the leader or locked down compound.
7. The Leader: The leader may be arrested and that causes a large disbandment or pause of beliefs. The leader could die with their members in which there is a large allegiance and the leader tends to not die first. Politics relate because they create exposure to flaws in society and human function, can increase intention to access government (NXIVM) or influence within the greater sphere of the area to increase teaching and to force processes of the group such those in Wild Wild Country.

It is not my intention to argue all cults are evil or will become violent. Through this research it has become clear how cults can be misconstrued and instead of focusing on the fact

that people are members, we forget how society pushed them there and how leaders have manipulated the. However, I do view such media as limiting. Visual media does not entirely capture the nuance of membership, circumstance, and the wide array of what a cult can be. All we see if that cults all look a similar or typical way—I even asserted the norms that seem to happen in cults. How are viewers and consumers to know not all of this information is factual? How do we recognize the term cult as not pejorative and rather simply a term is our media is only willing to portray a certain kind of cult? Neal also considers cults “new religious movements” and states that the television we watch is stereotypical, posing problems for the greater interpretation of the social landscape that consumed such media: “In these ways, they reflect popular societal cows about alternative religions while simultaneously replicating and disseminating them...These programs are visual and verbal cues to uphold dominant religious and cultural norms, while marginalizing supposedly strange or deviant religious groups.” There is discussion of media and its representation is not new; the worry that media perception is inaccurate is a colossal problem and may be exacerbated by the lack of research on television and movies. This thesis aims to add the analytical research while conceptualizing why media production has increased. It is in using both Neal and Laycock (2011, 2013) that the research done on the films allowed for a contextualized process of note-taking. Changing the name will not change that some cults *do* prove to be pejorative and harmful.

Laycock (2013) aims to show that news media also aids in the public narrative and can shape opinion of such groups. Such opinions articulated will aid in the creation of how we might better understand what cults can be and look like from such literature. There is a pervasive nature to the media produced about cults. Laycock (2013) attributed it to “a phenomenon of



“media hype” in which the media selects examples of deviant behavior—ranging from crime to religious violence—and then distorts them so as to present a handful of peripheral cases as representative of a larger social problem.” By attempting to outline that our social world has a mutual reciprocity of creating cults to rise, and having films and movies that are created in out perceived images of them. The production of media, both fictional and nonfictional, is how we grasp lots of information.

## **GLOSSARY:**

### **7. Docu-series**

1. According to Oxford Languages: “a television series that follows a particular person or group of people and their involvement in real events and situations over a period of time.”
2. According to Cambridge Dictionary: “a documentary series: a series of television or radio shows that give facts and information about a subject or about real events
3. According to Merriam-Webster: “a documentary that is telecast in a series of programs.

### **8. Devotion**

1. According to Oxford Languages: “love, loyalty, or enthusiasm for a person, activity, or cause”| religious worship or observance”| prayers or religious observances

2. According to Merriam-Webster: “a religious fervor”| “an act of prayer or private worship”| the act of dedicating something to a cause, enterprise, or activity”
3. According to Cambridge Dictionary: “loyalty and love or care for someone or something”| “the fact of following religious teachings, or religious worship”|

**9. Trumpism:**

1. According to Collins Dictionary: “the policies advocated by Donald trump, esp those involving a rejection of the current political establishment and the vigorous pursuit of American national interests”| “a controversial or outrageous statement attributed to Donald Trump
2. According to Dictionary.com: “refers to the non-traditional political philosophy and approach espoused by US President Donald Trump and his supporters. The term Trumpism can also be used to directly refer to an outrageous or idiosyncratic statement made by Donald Trump.

**10. Fake News**

1. According to dictionary.com: “false news stories, often of a sensational nature, created to be widely shared or distributed for the purpose of generating revenue, or promoting or discrediting a public figure, political movement, company, etc.”| “a parody that presents current events or other news topics for humorous effect in an obviously satirical imitation of journalism.”
2. According to Cambridge Dictionary: “false stories that appear to be news, spread on the internet or using other media, usually created to influence political views or as a joke.

**11. Manipulation**

1. According to Oxford Languages: “the action of manipulating something in a skillful manner”| “the action of manipulating someone in a clever or unscrupulous way”
2. According the Merriam-Webster: “to treat or operate with or as if the hands or by mechanical means especially in a skillful manner”| “to manage or utilise skillfully”| “to control or play upon by artful, unfair, or insidious means especially to one’s own advantage”
3. According to dictionary.com: “to manage or influence skillfully, especially in an unfair manner”| “to handle, manage, or use, especially with skill, in some process of treatment or performance

## 12. Religious

1. According to Oxford Languages: “ relating to or believing in religion”
2. religion, or living and worshiping according to the belief of a particular religion”

## 9. Radical

1. According to Merriam Webster: “3A—very different from the usual or traditional” |” favoring extreme changes in existing vies, habits, conditions, or institutions”
2. According to Cambridge Dictionary: “believing or expressing the belief that there should be great or extreme social or political change”

## Film Descriptions:

1. American Horror Story: Season Seven—Cult (2017); Fictional Television Series, Ryan Murphy and Brad Fulchuk
  - This is the story of how a cult emerges in a small town after the election of Donald Trump prompts one member to lead other people in his area to solve their problems

- and follow Donald Trump's rhetoric. The leader, Kai, is able to enter political elections, create new jobs for members and include people who may not agree with Trump but agree with Kai. The cult is small and violent and serves to make it possible for Kai to be elected to the city council.
2. *Get Out* (2017); Fictional Film—Horror, Jordan Peele
    - This is a fictional film depicting a cult that take the bodies and brains of Black people so that White, wealthy members of the cult can continue to live using the biological traits stereotypically linked to Black people. The story follows the main character, a Black man, as his girl take him home to meet his family. She is a member and was intending to bring him to also become a victim.
  3. *The Handmaid's Tale—Season One* (2017); Fictional Television Series, Bruce Miller
    - Based on the novel by Margaret Atwood, the series “The Handmaid's Tale” describes the life of a women subject to child-bearing for the purpose of the greater elites of the society. Devoid of their own time with their children, their autonomy, and their names, this series shows the physical and visual delineation of social groups and how holistic such groups are in changing the world.
  4. *Wild, Wild Country* (2018); Non-fictional Docu-series; Netflix
    - *Wild, Wild Country* follows the inception to the end of the cult of the Rajneeshis and discusses with members what their time is like as members, why they joined and what happened to the group. This depicts themes of spatial ownership, why wealthy members are recruited, and international movement to the states because of religious tolerance.

5. Midsommar (2019; Fictional Film—Horror, Ari Aster

- The 2019 film was set in Sweden following a group of friends including Dani, the girlfriend of another person in the group. She is motivated to find solace in the group as the other companions are anthropologists. She is then slowly integrated into the group and ultimately become a member through integration.

6. Them That Follow (2019), Fictional Movie—Thriller, Brittany Poulton, Dan Madison  
Savage

- Following a cult in a secluded area in the woods, intending to prepare the end of times and remaining secluded no matter the circumstance. The film attempts to show how the cognitive dissonance of members results in the death of multiple members who do not seek medical advice and are limited to their group's resources.

7. Heaven's Gate: The Cult of Cults (2020); Nonfictional Docuseries; HBO Max

- Heaven's Gate was a cult run by two people, Ti and Do, and radically changes after the death of Do. The male counterpart takes over and the series follows the media influence, the outward perception, how members were regulated and separated from families as well as other topics related to cult behavior. The series also has experts and members explain how the group worked and describe what happens in the event of the mass suicide that took the lives of many members with the intention to transcend the physical body to a metaphysical one.

8. The Vow—Season 1 ; NXIVM, 2020; Nonfictional Docuseries, HBO Max

- NXIVM was a cult that was run by Keith Raniere with the intention of self improvement. Many members were former and current actors who worked to find

themselves within a community in Upstate New York and Canada. Seasons one and two are about how the group diverges to become a cult and results in the sexual abuse, exploitation, and slavery of women—identifying members. The series discusses how members are abused while inside and outside of the organization, its connection to politics, ritual and hierarchy, and why the #MeToo movement was so important to the legal conviction of Keith Raniere.

9. *The Way Down* (2021); *The Remnant Church*, Nonfictional Docu-series; HBO Max

- This is the only cult run by a woman that will be used for this project. The group is a sect of Southern Baptism that radically promotes weight loss through prayer and managing meals. As a southern megachurch, the cult is full of funds and support and take over a wealthy community. Ex-members speak in the film about how bad the experience was, the abuse they suffered and how the group changed over the years. Ultimately the series ends with the discussion of what might happen to the group after the leader dies in a plane crash with her husband.

10. *Don't Worry, Darling* (2022), Fictional Film—Thriller/Mystery, Olivia Wilde

- The main character is living as a typical 1950's housewife in a cookie-cutter town with her husband. This story follows her as she begins to critically look at the daily life and the world around her until she learns her reality is not real. In fact, the world she is in is a simulation. It is maintained by the men and husbands, with their own doctors about town boundaries. It was the intention of her boyfriend to keep her there so he could be the primary provider.

11. *January Sixth* (2022); Nonfictional Film, HBO Max

- Following the work of news reporters, documentarians, police officers, and Congresspeople, this documentary shows the events that unfolded on January Sixth, 2021. On this day, Trump's supporter sought to stop the certification of the election so that they may make Donald Trump president again. In a violent riot and insurrection, damage to personnel, the building, and people were immeasurable.

12. Keep Sweet, Pray, and Obey (2022); Nonfictional Docu-series, Netflix

- This docuseries is full of the testimonies of ex-members of the FLDS sect of Mormonism, in which polygamy, abuse, and religion are wrapped up in one. The series shows the damage the prophet has committed, the ways that women in particular are controlled, and the institution that the FLDS has become.

13. WACO: American Apocalypse 2023; Nonfictional Docu-series, Netflix.

- When David Koresh established his compound for the brand Davidians, he expected a large turn out, an end times occurrence, and to be able to protect his people. In a 54 day standoff, the ATF and the Branch Davidians were at an odds after a suppose raid plan was foiled. This is docuseries depicting Koresh's actions as a leader, the ATF and FBI harm, and the extent to which people will follow their leader.

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