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Sacrificial Rites in Modern Contexts: An Integral perspective on the ego-centric in Robin Hardy and Anthony Shaffer's *The Wicker Man* (1973) and Jean-Luc Godard's *Week-end* (1967)

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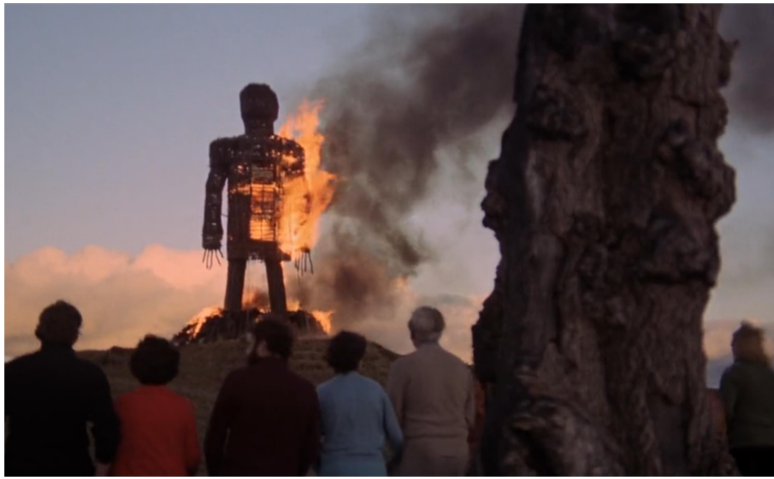
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Sacrificial Rites in Modern Contexts

An Integral perspective on the ego-centric in Robin Hardy and Anthony Shaffer's

The Wicker Man (1973) and Jean-Luc Godard's *Week-end* (1967)

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
Chapter 1: Stage Theory.....	5
Chapter 2: <i>The Wicker Man</i>	16
Chapter 3: <i>Week-end</i>	35
Conclusion	45
Works Cited	48

Introduction

In *Totem and Taboo* (1913) Freud analyzed the resemblances between the psychology of what he then called the “primitive man” and the modern neurotic. This primitive side of human beings has often been the subject of novels and films.¹ A reason for this might be that “everyone has a touch of paganism in him” as Christopher Lee stated in the Mark Kermode documentary *Burnt Offering: The Cult of The Wicker Man* (2001). Paganism, or rather, the ego-centric in modern civilized human beings is the topic of this master thesis. I will explore this topic in two different films: Robin Hardy’s *The Wicker Man* (1973) and Jean-Luc Godard’s *Week-end* (1967).

My research questions with regard to the films are: How is regression portrayed in each film? In which similar and/or different ways do traditionalism, modernism, and postmodernism relate to the ego-centric stages of human development?

The two films that I will discuss both give us an uncompromising idea of the more primal aspects of human nature. Specifically, I am talking about all of the rituals on Summerisle (*Wicker Man*) and various elements like magical thinking, cannibalism and sacrifice in *Week-end*. By talking about the primal in human beings one automatically assumes the existence of earlier stages of human development; they belong to the past chronologically, and they can be considered more infantile or ego-centric developmentally. This presupposes a hierarchical relationship between the stages. The presumption of superiority or exclusivity is an important topic in both films. In *The Wicker Man*, Howie’s Christianity is criticized through his encounter with paganism. He ends up a perfect fit for the role of scapegoat precisely because he considers his Christian-rational worldview as the one and only truth. In *Week-end*, the primitive elements can be seen as a satire of consumerist society (literally) eating itself up. The hierarchical element of cultural stages is constantly challenged: The paganism of Summerisle seems very seductive at times, and modernity looks empty and meaningless

¹ Recently, Ruben Östlund’s *Triangle of Sadness* (2023), and Ari Aster’s *Midsommar* (2019).

in *Week-end*. The idea of the primitive as an “other” is criticized by both works, but this does not mean that the idea of stages of cultural and psychological development is completely overthrown. It is present as an idea that is challenged and yet necessary. I will argue that *The Wicker Man* tends to equalize the different worldviews only to a certain degree, keeping the developmental path intact, but that Godard pushes it to an extreme as *Week-end* seems to question the ideas of regression and progression itself. In the former film there is a fight between different moral sensibilities, whereas in the latter film the many transgressive crimes are treated with a sense of disconnection and indifference.

There are major differences in the attitude of each film’s meta-perspective towards the ego-centric. I use the term “meta” here because the films do not give us one single perspective, but they show us the (lack of) interaction between different perspectives. In both films multiple worldviews are at odds with each other and the perspective that we as viewers get somehow includes all of them. But it is not only the worldviews in the film but also the way that these points of view are shown to us. In *Week-end* pluralism creates chaos and therefore the film seems to discourage the viewer from trying to make sense or take serious any of the monologues or situations. When someone dies, for instance, we as an audience are not invited to care because the characters do not acknowledge different gradations of suffering. In *Wicker Man* the contrast between Howie and the islanders is presented as a musical with a few jarring notes. For the audience and Howie it is clear in the end what the different voices are, even though it is already too late for our protagonist. We are both seduced by and terrified of the pagan rituals together with Howie as we are trying to make sense of what is happening on Summerisle.

Another important difference is the content of the worldviews. *The Wicker Man* is about a clash between sociocentric Christianity and ego-centric paganism. Howie ends up becoming a part of an important rite that makes him both a sacrificial lamb and a Christian martyr. In *Week-end* the main characters (or the society as a whole) regress to an earlier stage (which is made explicit especially near the end of the film) but they do so not from a traditionalist worldview but from a

modern/postmodern one. The paganism is placed within a (post)modern society. Godard therefore shows us a different path to regression. It is not the absolutistic adherence to a worldview, but the total absence of any kind of coherent narrative that allows a deeper truth about human beings to come to the surface.

In the first chapter I will define important concepts for the analysis, such as the various developmental stages like magic-animistic, traditional, modern and postmodern, which are the most relevant worldviews in the films. For my analysis I will use stage theory as explained and elucidated in Ken Wilber's integral theory. Ken Wilber uses the insights of many developmental psychologists in order to come to a balanced and updated synthesis that will provide a good overview of the ego-centric, ethno-centric, and world-centric stages of psychological and cultural development. Other important sources that I will discuss are *The Golden Bough* (1890) by James George Frazer and *Totem and Taboo* (1913) by Sigmund Freud. Of these two, the former has been an important source for Robin Hardy, and the latter is interjected as a title in *Week-end*.

Chapter two will deal with *The Wicker Man*. I start with the film that has been released later because the clarity of the style provides a better foundation for the comparison. Godard's films often deconstruct themselves because they constantly try to break the established narrative style. Therefore, for the sake of structuring my argument, I will discuss Hardy's film first. In this chapter I will explain how Robin Hardy and Anthony Shaffer show us the differences and the similarities between Christianity and paganism and how they present the phenomenon of regression in a modern context.

In the third chapter I will discuss the pagan elements in the modern society of *Week-end* in relation to the analysis of chapter two. What I find especially important is the way in which Godard's film differs stylistically from *Wicker Man* in how regression is portrayed.

Chapter 1: Stage Theory

For my theoretical framework, I adopt notions from Sigmund Freud's and James George Frazer because, as mentioned in the introduction, they have directly influenced the filmmakers that I analyze. Freud is also influenced by Frazer: In his book *Totem and Taboo* (1913) he provides psychoanalytical interpretations of the descriptions in *The Golden Bough* (1890) of earlier stages of culture. The main source for this thesis, however, will be Ken Wilber's integral meta-theory. According to this theory, each stage of individual and cultural development transcends and includes its predecessors. This means that every structure of consciousness, while being a complete system in itself, will simultaneously become integrated as a part of an emergent next stage (Wilber *Sex* 54-59). To elucidate this, Wilber uses Arthur Koestler's concept of the holon. A holon is a whole in one context, but a part in another, and it is therefore neither whole nor part but a whole/part (*Sex* 26). For example, Christianity has elements of paganism in it, even though paganism itself is already a complete worldview and not just a part or building block of the Christian religion.

In this chapter I will give detailed examples of Freud and Frazer's concepts of stages while I keep referring to the synthesis of integral theory. This is possible because integral theory itself transcends and includes many other theorists without distorting their original insights.² One of the ways in which Wilber achieves this is by making a distinction between "levels" and "lines" of development. There are many different lines of development, but they all run through the same levels. Examples of lines are: psychosexual (Freud), cognitive (Piaget), needs (Maslov), and worldviews (Gebser or Frazer) (Wilber *Everything* 60-62). Each line does not have the same levels but they share "many important similarities across a developmental space (...)" (Wilber *Psychology* 16). By using a meta-theory it is possible for me to focus on the developmental model (or line) of Freud without being constrained by the limits of his particular monism.

² "Stages" is only one of the ingredients of integral theory so this thesis should not be used as a way of understanding integral theory as a whole.

Regression

The main topic of this thesis is regression. In this chapter I am going to define this term and discuss the implications that this idea has for stage theory. Freud describes in his work two different types of regression. One is called topographical and the other temporal. Temporal regression is a regression in time, whereas topographical regression is more a change of place (topos). Freud writes for example in *Die Traumdeutung* that a dream is a regression from thinking in language to thinking in pictures (*Traumdeutung* 558). This type of regression might imply a change to earlier phases of development, but with topographical regression this aspect is not as relevant as the change of functioning itself. Whenever I mention regression in this thesis I will mean *temporal* regression (except when explicitly stated otherwise). Stanley W. Jackson states that temporal regression is “deeply rooted in evolutionary thought” (“Regression” 744). He writes:

At all times it functioned with the underlying assumption that there had been a development over time (at least months, usually years) from a simpler, more primitive, less organized stage toward a more complex, more advanced, more organized stage; and it was conceived of as a process which involved the undoing of those accomplishments.

(744-45)

Temporal regression therefore implies a developmental path. In the following section I will give an example of what the individual phases of one of those paths look like.

Temporal regression can, again, also be divided up into two different types. Ken Wilber makes a distinction between regression in service of the ego, and retro-Romantic regression. The latter is a regression where the return to earlier stages is the final goal, whereas the purpose of the former is to experience earlier stages so that the parts of the ego that have been dissociated at an earlier level can be reintegrated. When the emphasis is on servicing the ego, the person regresses

only for a little while and then returns (*SES* 110-111). In Jungian terms, this is a way of meeting “the demands of the unconscious” so that the individual can reconcile their inner life with their outer behavior (Ellenberger 704). Retro-Romantic regression however is different in that it trades the current stage for an earlier one in order to start functioning from there instead. This is another way to avoid the problems that occur at a later stage. In the following chapters I will argue that both films discussed in this thesis display the confusion between these two different kinds of temporal regression.

Stages

In *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (1917), Freud writes that both the libido and the ego can regress because they have gone through a process of development.³ In the case of the ego, the development starts at the “pleasure principle” (pure pleasure-seeking) and moves towards the recognition of “the principle of fact” (303). Thus, according to Freud, at a later stage the ego has a more direct relationship with factual reality. However, this higher education of the ego also causes more conflict with the sexual impulses (300). This is mostly because certain social conditioning can lead to the labelling of pleasure seeking activities as ‘bad’ which might therefore eventually result in repression and pathological self-denial.

For the development of libido there is a gradual developmental shift from auto-eroticism to a foreign sexual object. In the earlier stages of development (oral and anal) the sexual impulse is directed towards the infant’s own body (auto-eroticism) (*Freud Essays* ch. 2). Freud later splits this first stage into two by adding the concept of narcissism. He writes that during this (sub) stage the libido is directed to the person’s own ego (*Totem* 93). Then, in the first object-finding stage (phallic),

³ In this stage Freud would often define the ego as the self-preservation drive as opposed to the sexual drive (*Freud “Drives”* 18).

the child makes a choice for a sexual object. This first choice is often an incestuous one, but it is later transferred towards a foreign object outside of the family.⁴

Children in the stage of narcissism have a magical way of thinking that Freud describes as “an overestimation of their wishes and mental acts, the ‘omnipotence of thoughts’ (...)” (“Narcissism” 75). They believe that they have the power to magically alter the world around them. Later, the omnipotence of thoughts is transferred onto spirits that inhabit everything in the world around them, hence the term animism. The developmental psychologist Jean Piaget argues similarly that children start with an ‘omnipotence of thoughts’ that is transferred during the ages of 4-7 onto omnipotent gods (the sun, the trees, parents). Both Freud and Piaget describe this as the transition from magic to animism (Piaget 143, Freud *Totem* 95).

We can correlate these stages to yet another model. Wilber often uses the stage conception of ego-centric, socio-centric, and world-centric which emphasizes inclusivity: the ability to include more and more perspectives as development continues (*Everything* 32). Narcissism is an ego-centric stage because children at this stage assume that their wishes alone can change the world, they experience the outside world as an extension of themselves (magic). Later they project this omnipotence to outside objects (animism). This ego-centricity, according to Freud, never entirely leaves us (Freud *Totem* 93).

Even though this thesis focuses mainly on the topic of ego-centricity in film, I also briefly want to give some characteristics of the socio-centric and the world-centric because these are important perspectives that are also represented in the films. In short, the socio-centric stage is characterized by conventionalism, traditionalism, and conformism. At this stage the child learns to become a part of a system. This structure can be very dogmatic because it values order above all else. Anything that does not fit in the system is considered a threat, so there is not a lot of space to question or reevaluate the status quo. This stage is also referred to as ethno-centric. While the child is now able to take the perspective of the other, this is still limited to a single group, nation, tribe or

⁴ So there are two object-finding stages: one during the age of 3-5 (phallic stage), and one in puberty (genital phase) (Haute 126).

race. The police force is a concrete example of conventionalism in human societies. It is their job to make sure the status quo or social order is maintained. This is the role of Sergeant Howie in *The Wicker Man*. He is constantly offended by everything that strikes him as out of the ordinary and he judges it harshly.

The world-centric stages are postconventional (Lawrence Kohlberg's term). This means that they are stages that transcend mere conventionalism. People at these stages are able to be a part of the society while also having the ability to reflect on and criticize the social system that they are a part of. Postconventional world-centric worldviews attempt to include the perspectives of *all* human beings. An example of this stage is the idea of a universal human ethic that transcends any tribe or race or nation. (Wilber *Everything* 33-34).

The two films that I will discuss deal with regression to ego-centric stages of development, but I will show that there are important stylistic differences between the two films that reflect the different contexts in which these regressions takes place.

Worldviews

So far I have mostly described the psychosexual development of the individual. Freud assumes that the development of the individual moves parallel to the development of the group (Ellenberger 236). Cultural development is therefore to a certain extent analogous to individual development. This assumption has been investigated by Jürgen Habermas and Ken Wilber. Their conclusion was that indeed "certain homologies can be found" (Wilber *Sex* 596). Ken Wilber states that every phase of individual development has a correlate in culture. These cultural correlates he calls the shared worldviews of groups or the interior of the collective (Wilber *Sex* 126). In this section I will give an outline of the cultural development in the way it relates to the aforementioned stages. For this thesis there are four stages of cultural development that are particularly important. Freud and Frazer give us three: the animistic (magic), the religious, and the scientific worldview (Frazer 805, Freud *Totem* 92). Ken Wilber adds many other stages to this list, for my purposes I will describe two

more: the postmodern, and the integral/aperspectival. I will come back to these last two in the next sections.

In *Totem and Taboo* Freud compares these “evolutionary stages of man’s conception of the universe with the stages of the libidinous evolution of the individual” (94). He writes:

We find that the animistic phase corresponds in time as well as in content with narcissism, the religious phase corresponds to that stage of object finding which is characterized by dependence on the parents, while the scientific stage has its full counterpart in the individual’s stage of maturity where, having renounced the pleasure principle and having adapted himself to reality, he seeks an object in the outer world.

(94)

The development of the individual moves from: narcissism, to incestuous object-finding, to foreign objects. And their cultural correlates are: the magic/animistic, religious, and scientific worldviews. The mythological worldview of the religious phase originates during the phallic stage and endures throughout the latency stage, since it is in puberty that the relationship with “factual reality” can finally be achieved.

The relationship of the psychology of the individual and the psychology of the group is particularly important in *The Wicker Man* where the main character enters an island that is inhabited by people with an entirely different worldview than his. What happens when a single individual enters a group with a different interior experience of reality?

Freud is clear about the fact that animism is a complete system of thought (*Totem* 98). He even writes that the explanatory power of this worldview is more exhaustive than that of science (but he nevertheless does add that animism is based on superstition). Wilber argues that these worldviews are necessarily at war with each other. The scientific, the religious, and the magic worldviews do not tolerate each other because each worldview considers itself exclusive. Wilber

explains in the following passage how a structure/stage transition relates to the generation of worldviews:

In each case, the basic structures of the previous stage are taken up and preserved in the newer wider holon [stage], but the worldview which was *generated* when there was *only* or *exclusively* the previous and lower stage – that is negated and replaced by a new worldview (which will in turn fade if development continues).

(*Sex* 254, italics in original)

So there is something exclusive about a worldview. This can be illustrated with another example from *Totem and Taboo*. Freud writes that in all of the three worldviews there are leftovers from the ego-centric stages of development: they all have a certain degree of omnipotence. During the magic stage a person believes him or herself to be omnipotent, while in the animistic and (to a more abstract degree) in the religious stage the omnipotence is transferred to gods. There are no gods in the scientific worldview, but: “Nevertheless, in our reliance upon the power of the human spirit which copes with the laws of reality, there still lives on a fragment of this primitive believe in the omnipotence of thoughts” (Freud *Totem* 92).

The Postmodern/Pluralistic Worldview

The next worldview that I want to add is the postmodern. Defining postmodernism obviously goes beyond the scope of Freud and Frazer, but even today it is still difficult to define what it really is. If we take the idea stated by Freud that development ends at the ego’s arrival at “factual reality,” note that there is certain arrogance in that statement: it is the scientific worldview that has access to the really real, the rest is superstition. But what is scientific reality really? This question is a concern of the pluralistic, or postmodern worldview. In Wilber’s definition postmodernity’s main concern is the inclusion of as many worldviews as possible. So it is not about arriving at the one and only truth,

but about including all of the different truths. Postmodernism tries “to avoid a ‘hegemony’ of formal rationality that often represses the nonrational and the irrational” (Wilber *Psychology* 159). This means that “the factual” is a totalizing worldview as well. The philosopher Jean-François Lyotard describes the postmodern as “incredulity toward meta-narratives” (xxiv). That means, *all* meta-narratives, also the scientific. This ‘incredulity’ has the effect of equalizing all of the different systems of thought; every one of them can be doubted. We can see here a definite increase in inclusivity, but also the possibility for nihilism and indifference because the qualitative differences between points of view are now banned. According to Lyotard,

The narrative function is losing its functions, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages; its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements - narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on. Conveyed within each cloud are pragmatic valencies specific to its kind. Each of us lives at the intersection of many of these. However, we do not necessarily establish stable language combinations, and the properties of the ones we do establish are not necessarily communicable.

(xxvi)

Even though Lyotard does not necessarily aim to present the postmodern condition as a dystopia, it is not hard to argue that it could become bleak (like all worldviews can). If we all live at the intersection of many different “clouds of narrative elements” that cannot be translated to each other and that do not even necessarily have “stable language connections,” what then keeps us from total chaos? Still, there is also something really liberating about the postmodern worldview and that is that it allows us to approach every perspective on its own terms.

The problem that arises however is that by only approaching every point worldview as equal, without recourse to a meta-narrative, the concepts of regression and self-transcendence completely lose their meaning. Also the distinction between regression proper and regression in service of the

ego is not recognized anymore. Whereas the scientific worldview tries to map objective reality, postmodernity is more interested in the intersubjective space through which this reality is understood (Wilber *Sex* 774-75). When the importance of interpretation is the only thing that is being stressed however, the absence of any kind of true referent results to all of reality being viewed through a lens of detached irony. An extreme postmodern absolutism therefore can cripple its good intentions of more inclusivity.

Postmodernism is an important interpretative framework for Jean-Luc Godard's film *Week-end* where the viewer is constantly reminded of the artificiality of the many narrative clouds that the two main characters get embroiled in.

The Postmodern Critique of Stage Theory and the Integral/Aperspectival Stage

There are destructive ways of applying (implicit) stage theories. Journalist Adam Curtis shows in his documentary *The Century of the Self* (2002) how Freudian ideas of development can be used by advertising companies to manipulate people and rid them of their agency. Edward Bernays, the inventor of advertising (and Freud's nephew), believed that it was the responsibility of the state to manage the lower stages since they could not be trusted by themselves. Here (Freudian) development is used as a justification for controlling the masses.

Recently, writer and filmmaker Norah Bateson argued stage theory is a colonial hang-up. She also connects it to the origin of eugenics, which is one of the negative outgrowths of a purely scientific worldview. She said in an online debate: "I will never identify another person based on a stage or a label or a tag. I would never suppose that I could understand whether I was talking about that person or their microbiome or their family or their culture. How would I know?" She sees a threat of violence in using supposedly objective criteria to assess another person or culture (13:50-14:30). I think the criticism against using stage theory is partially valid. Stage theory has been used as a legitimization for colonialism and other forms of oppression. The problem is that it is impossible to avoid them completely since the distrust of these systems can be seen as a product of development

as well. The postmodern critics of stage theory, by undermining stages completely, undermine their own implied morally superior stance as well. Their critique of stage theory is also hierarchical; it implies at least two stages, which is something that is left hidden behind their moral outrage. “By making these value judgments in an unacknowledged fashion, they avoid and suppress the really difficult issues of just how we go about making our value judgments in the first place” (Wilber *Sex* 32-33). Susanne Cook-Greuter, who is quite an influential developmental theorist herself (ego-development), takes a more nuanced approach. She has also pointed out that the followers of stage theory are often insufficiently aware of the WEIRD aspects of their thinking. However, she does not think we should get rid of stages altogether, but instead try to be more cognizant of the possible harm of labelling others (35:20-57:09).

Important in the debate over the legitimacy of stage theory are the two opposing tendencies of modernity wanting to bring everything under one universal truth, and postmodernity wanting to deconstruct the universal into particular equal truths. Modernity presumes unity, and postmodernity diversity. Ken Wilber writes in *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* (1995) about this polarity in terms of the ego and the eco camps. The former sees the ego as an autonomous whole separated from material reality; it focuses on transcending nature and mapping out reality (Wilber *Sex* 459-460). The latter sees human beings as a part of nature and it wants to merge with it to become whole, they want to express the world instead of reflect on it from a distance (*Sex* 486-469). Both the ego and the eco camps are materialistic worldviews. This is why they are equally obsessed with sexuality, the ego with controlling it (sometimes paradoxically by describing it in detail) and the eco by liberating it (Wilber *Sex* 505-506). Too much focus on the ego camp leads to repression, but overemphasizing the eco ends in regression.

The ego-eco polarity can only be fully integrated (transcended and included) in what Wilber calls the integral worldview (a term he borrows from Jean Gebser). This worldview follows postmodernism in the *differentiation* of the many different truths but it also attempts to *integrate* those truths. This does bring with it a hierarchical relationship between the “clouds of narrative

elements” in the terms of Lyotard, while also maintaining an epistemic humility that is lacking in modernity. This hierarchy of perspectives in integral theory is not based on oppression or colonialism (ethno-centric) but on the increasing capacity for pluralism. Both the modern and the postmodern are integrated, which means that the inclusivity of the integral stage is not the exclusive pluralism of extreme postmodernism (only differences are real, the truth does not exist etc.) but one where differences and similarities are both celebrated. In fact, integral theory wants to include all former stages by including the positives from each stage.

This is why the integral framework can be seen as a credible attempt to embrace and criticize both monists like Frazer and Freud, but also pluralists like Lyotard. In the next two chapters I will argue that the two films each criticize or nuance their own (implicit) stage conception in different ways. In my opinion stage theory cannot be ignored, but the practice of deconstructing our perception of other cultures has to be honored as well.

Chapter 2: *The Wicker Man*

My analysis of *The Wicker Man* takes into account both the developmental aspects in the world of film as well as the development of the culture that gave birth to this work of fiction. One of the themes of *The Wicker Man* is the clash between Christianity and paganism. A common stage theoretical approach would translate this into a battle of worldviews: religion and magic, ethnocentrism and ego-centrism, but I think it is more complicated than that. I will argue in this chapter that in relation to the concept of regression the commonality between the magic and the scientific worldview plays an important part in the understanding of the origins of the islanders' worldview.

It is also interesting that for most of the film the pagans seem to understand Christianity better than Howie understands paganism. Here we have to take into account the cultural context in which *The Wicker Man* came into being. I will argue that the film encapsulates the more postmodern eco camp outshining the distanced scientific ego. And by taking the terrifying climax into account we can read the film as a reflection on the dark side of the 1960s and 1970s. It issues a warning both for the dangers of repression and the regressive merging with nature.

Summerisle: A Pagan Cocktail

Shaffer and Hardy did not base the religion of the Summerislanders on one single culture. Instead, the paganism in *The Wicker Man* is an "eclectic mix" of cultural practices different pagan societies of the past (Higginbottom 157, Harper 124, Hardy 7:36-44). For this they made not only extensive use of James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* but also from pagan motives as they are still present in British culture in old songs, nursery rhymes, and old names.

In the film, the origins of the animistic worldview on the island are explained by a pragmatic decision that Lord Summerisle's Victorian grandfather made in 1868. He simply wanted to "rouse the people from their apathy by giving them back their joyous old Gods" in order to motivate them to

work better (44:28-38). Therefore, in the world of the film, the Paganism of Summerisle is a reconstruction just like the way that the filmmakers themselves have re-envisioned a magic culture. And, both of them trace back to Victorian times: Lord Summerisle's fictitious Victorian grandfather was to the islanders in the film what James George Frazer was to the creators of the film.

In a televised interview from 1979 Hardy says that his goal was to make the audience experience "what a Pagan society was like" (11:55-12:11). Authenticity here does not mean a precise replication of the Celtic cultures that existed in Europe in the past. What Hardy and Shaffer were after, as they explain themselves, is a remembrance of a collective past, a past that is still with us in some form. This is why in modern times regression is still possible for a community like Summerisle.

In *The Wicker Man* stage theory is instrumental. An example: in the beginning we have the scene where Howie celebrates Holy Communion. He reads before the congregation from the bible about the last supper:

"Take. Eat. This is my body, which is broken for you, this do in remembrance of me. And after the same manner he also took the cup when he had eaten, saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood. This, oft as you drink it, in remembrance of me, or as often as you eat this bread and drink this wine, you do shew the Lord's death till he comes again."

(1 Corinthians 24-26)

The ritual of the Holy Communion is used by Hardy and Shaffer to introduce the main character's solemn devotion to the Christian God, but also to show that Howie is not as far away from paganism as he might think. Even though this custom has a very different meaning in the religious system, some elements of this structure stand out as having a distinctly Pagan origin. In *The Golden Bough* Frazer describes many such instances of magic cultures eating their gods in order to share "in the god's attributes or powers" (505-520, 520). He also refers to the similarities with the Eucharist (507). Freud relates the custom of consumption of the divine body to the primal sin of expelled sons killing

and eating their father (Freud *Totem* 141). He argues that the feelings of guilt about this violent act towards their father result in the custom of killing and eating the father-substitute. This ritual expresses both the ambivalence towards the father, and later also “the victory of the son’s tender emotional feelings over his hostile ones” (Freud *Totem* 147). Therefore, this ritual is also a celebration. First, the father-substitute came in the form of an animal, and later, in the form of another human being. Freud explains that in Christianity only a human sacrifice could absolve our sins because the divinity was in fact still a projection of this murdered primal father (149).⁵

In *The Wicker Man* there are many allusions to the killing and eating of humans and animals. In May Morrison’s shop for example, the pastries in the shapes of animals and humans hint at this practice of killing and eating representations of the gods (Racaut 65, 9:28-50). In a bakery Howie sees a coffin-shaped tray come out of the oven with a man made out of bread in it called “the life of the fields” (1:06:48). This is almost literally from *The Golden Bough*, where there is a description of a Swedish custom of making a loaf of bread in the shape of a little girl, a representation of the corn-spirit as maiden (Frazer 498). In *Wicker Man* however, the loaf is a grown man: one of the many foreshadowing moments in the film.

The film constantly plays around with these “remembrances” of earlier cultural phases. It shows us that both Howie, and also presumably the audience of the film, do not know how intimately connected we still are to our own earlier phases of cultural development. The shots of Howie reading from the scripture are juxtaposed with shots of him participating in the Holy Communion. These are probably filmed with a diffusion filter on the lens that gives a dream-like glow to the scene of eating the bread and drinking the wine. There is also a very narrow depth of field leaving a bright background out of focus. This effect allows us to enter the subjective experience of

⁵ I am not arguing that Christianity is simply a form of neo-paganism. The philosopher Rene Girard has pointed out that it is the explicitness of the theme of the scapegoat that makes Christianity different from the Pagan mythology (*Scapegoat* 115). Christianity or the religious in general, is really a new, emergent worldview.

participation in the ritual. It brings out the mythological quality of the ritual. This same effect is used later on in the film for the scene with the fertility rite on Summerisle where a group of naked women takes turns to jump over a fire. The glow-effect suggests similarity between the rituals. The difference lies in the interpretation: drinking the wine and eating the bread has Howie reading the scripture over it, but the women jumping over the fire Howie talks of "fake biology" and "fake religion" (42:09-42:15). When Howie asks Summerisle whether the children on the island have heard of Jesus, Summerisle finishes Howie's sentence by saying: "Himself the son of a virgin, impregnated I believe... by a ghost" (42:16-42:27).





The glow effect during Holy Communion and the Parthenogenesis ritual

Universalizing Paganism

In an article by Mikel J. Koven, the filmmakers are accused of committing a “folklore fallacy”. The criticism of Koven seems to be particularly about the scientific worldview and its tendency to universalize: “(...) what Hardy and Shaffer attempted to do was to unproblematically literalise a colonialist agenda which sees the Celtic nation as an undifferentiated whole, and does not distinguish between the other cultural influences which may have affected Frazer’s descriptions of the Beltane and sacrificial rites” (115). The colonialist agenda that he refers to is a combination of a scientific stage theory and the belief in a universal truth. He writes that approaches like the ones used by researchers like James George Frazer and Joseph Campbell, might seem egalitarian but they are really colonialist, because “only from a point of cultural hegemony can one hold up one’s culture up as a template for other cultures and say that they are more or less the same” (114). The main source that Frazer uses for the actual cultural practice that involves the burning of a wicker man is Julius Caesar’s description of this ritual done by the ancients Gauls. Ironically, Frazer makes a point of Caesar being a perfect witness: “As conqueror of the hitherto independent Celts of Gaul, Caesar had

ample opportunity of observing the national Celtic religion and manners, while these were still fresh and crisp from the native mint and had not yet been infused in the melting-pot of Roman civilization” (745). For Koven, it would precisely be the fact that Caesar is the conqueror of Gaul that makes his description of their culture unreliable; a really authentic description of a culture can only be given by someone from *within* that particular culture. Caesar’s description is infused with the ideology of the conqueror. Wilber describes the difference between the modern and the postmodern as a transition from the mapping out of reality to a focus on the mapmaker and his or her prejudices (Wilber *Brief* 54). History is always written by the victors. The method of philosophers like Freud, Frazer, Jung and Campbell has been to understand our own culture (or unconscious) by looking and comparing ourselves with other cultures. In the postmodern worldview this method has automatically become suspect, since the notion of universal truth has been used to flatten out cultural specificity and ethno-centric cultures have used it to justify colonialism.

According to Koven, the solution would be “to divorce the discourse from any consideration of ‘authenticity’” and to see *The Wicker Man* as yet another legend about the Wicker colossus just like the legend that Caesar gives us (116-17). This is actually a very good interpretation of the film, since we already established that the Paganism of Summerisle is really a Neo-Paganism. However, the problem that Koven sees with the film is that it does not underline the legendary status of its story enough. Especially since the makers of the film have said that they wanted to give the audience an idea of what Paganism was ‘really like’.

I do not entirely agree with the judgment of Koven concerning the problematic colonial methods of the film. The colonial tendencies of universalizing are clearly represented by showing that Howie’s despising of the villagers’ customs is in part the result of a repression, about which I will elucidate further below. He is not a likeable character overall and the ethno-centricity of his worldview is critiqued throughout. The problem lies in the meaning of the word authentic. What is authentic about the film is the supposed reconnection to the presence of earlier stages in modern everyday life. Hardy said in an interview that this is what makes the audience feel uncomfortable

while they are watching the film: “I think this film awakes in people a kind of tribal memory, it’s full of echoes from our past from our childhood from the very things that are around us every day” (17:11-17:28). As long as the film is seen as a reflection on modern British culture, it can also be considered ‘authentic’ in a specific sense. Anthony J. Harper writes that even though the eclectic Paganism of Shaffer and Hardy “would certainly not stand up to academic scrutiny as a study of any particular religion in any particular period, the use of Frazer seems intelligent and, probably for all except academic specialists, is blended successfully with a number of other motifs” (Harper 124). Even though the religion of the villagers is a construction of a Victorian mind (as is stated in the film), this does not preclude an authentic feeling connection because it is based on a past that is both different from *and* similar to the present. The film shows us that Paganism is still present in a modern society in the opening scenes of the Holy Communion. The idea that a universalizing approach is “purely colonial” is overly critical since it implies that similarities and differences are irreconcilable opposites instead of complementary (Koven 115). The fact that stage theory is Eurocentric does not mean it is unambiguously harmful. Integral theory sees postmodern pluralism, with its emphasis on cultural specificity, as a product of cultural evolution as well. Koven himself resents the fact that Frazer is popular with a reading public that is ‘indifferent to scholarly polemics’ and that he therefore considers less qualified in the judgment about other cultures (Koven 107). Clearly his pluralism also has its gradations. Postmodern values are characterized by stage thinking as well, even though this is categorically denied, yet it is implied in their (hierarchical) denouncement of hierarchies.

I agree however with Koven and Harper that *The Wicker Man* cannot be seen as the representation of any *particular* Pagan culture of the past, be it British, Scottish, or anywhere else; whether or not there ever was a wicker man used for human sacrifice, we might never know (Sermon 42). In fact, even the term ‘Pagan’ is a modern term that implies a Western perspective since Pagans did not use this word to describe themselves (Willin 167). The function of the *Neo-Paganism* in *Wicker Man* however, is to comment on our continual reliance on customs and tropes of our own magic past, so as an audience we are just as much encouraged by the magic motives to recognize

ourselves, as we are to encounter an other. This is because the film plays with the possibility of a *modern* regression to pre-modern phases and it is precisely this play between the different worldviews with their boundary –blurring similarities that make the film so resonant.

In the next sections I want to discuss how Hardy and Shaffer have made a regression from the modern to the pre-modern plausible and elucidate the role that Howie plays in this society as a judgmental observer.

Regression on Summerisle

An important aspect of the pagan society in *Wicker Man* is the fact that it is situated on an island. Its separation from the mainland makes it possible to cultivate and maintain a different intersubjective space from the rest of the country. In order to create a plausible magic culture the filmmakers had to create a society that relied once again on the harvest: “a situation must be devised where a certain crop grew in soil to which it was not naturally suited, thus reintroducing the uncertainty our ancestors were so used to, and thereby the need for sacrifice to be performed” (Brown 35). The Victorian grandfather of Lord Summerisle furnishes this need with his scientific experiment.

What are the different worldviews represented in the film? In his essay “Sacrifice, Society and Religion in *The Wicker Man*” Luc Racaut mentions two: modernity/civilization and pre-modernity/barbarism, the former being represented by Howie and the latter by Lord Summerisle (Racaut 63). He writes that Howie represents law, and that Summerisle represents religion (even though he admits they overlap). The analysis of their relationship as a binary opposition works to a great extent and is reminiscent of Euripides’ *The Bakkhai*: the Apollonian Howie meets the Dionysian Summerisle. The contrast between the traditionalistic Howie and the paganistic society of Summerisle creates the dramatic arc for the entire film, which makes Luc Racaut’s analysis therefore very compelling. He argues that the two faiths turn out to be “co-dependent,” which is in line with the holonic way structures of consciousness are organized according to Integral Theory. One

structure, however, is more fundamental than another. Because magic is an earlier stage, it does not rely on the religious, whereas the religious does depend on the magic structure. I believe that stage theory can further complexify the analysis by adding a third worldview that accounts for the modern context of this story. The mythological polarity of *The Wicker Man* is thereby relocated to a more scientific world. I will briefly define each of the three worldviews as they appear in the film.

Howie is a typical example of a conformist socio-centric police officer. The reason is not just that he is a devout Christian, but also that he is a representative of the law. He represents dogmatism in various ways. It makes more sense to say that Howie is just as religious as Summerisle, than to say he is representing law as opposed to religion. Howie's religion is simply a different one and it is intermingled with his sense of duty to law and order. In the Director's Cut of the film, there is a scene in the beginning where Howie is shown the message "Jesus saves" written with graffiti on an outside wall. His reaction is to say that "there is a time and place for everything," after which he orders it to be removed (1:25-33). A little later we see the scenes of him in church. This introduction shows us that he approaches his religion with the same priggish seriousness as he approaches his job of maintaining law and order. His sense of the sacred is mediated by his sense of righteousness by the law.

Lord Summerisle and the Summerislanders represent the magic ego-centric worldview. They can find the sacred in everything. The first time we see Lord Summerisle, he stands outside of the hotel talking to Willow in the window. When he calls her "Aphrodite", Willow makes this out to be mere flattery on his part, as she does not consider herself a goddess. But Summerisle does not accept her correction: "I make no such distinction. You are the goddess of Love in human form..." (19:40-48). In the former chapter we discussed that, according to Freud, animism corresponds to the developmental stage of narcissism because there is a belief in the omnipotence of thoughts. Willow is the goddess of Love; she is not just her symbol.

Later in the scene, while Ash Buchanan and Willow are making love, the Lord recites a poem by Walt Whitman while he watches slugs copulate: "I think I could turn and live with animals, they

are so placid and self-contained. They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins. They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God. Not one of them kneels to another. Or to his own kind that lived thousands of years ago. Not one of them is respectable or unhappy all over the earth” (21:10-22:00). Lord Summerisle’s moving recitation of Whitman’s poem reveals his desire to merge with nature. He sees animals as superior to humans in some sense. Frazer writes that within the magic worldview there is no clear distinction between man and animal (532-533). The juxtaposition of the shot of Willow’s empty bedroom window with that of the copulating slugs seems to suggest just that. The triumph of the phallus is celebrated in the May pole scene that follows right after.

There is something else about the speech that is very striking: the fact that all of this is explained by Summerisle himself. One of the differences between him and Howie is that he perfectly understands the differences and similarities between Paganism and Christianity. He calls himself an enlightened Pagan (45:30). The term ‘enlightened’ could mean that Lord Summerisle really is a scientist that has integrated the earlier magic stage; a paganism that is governed by rational principles. Miss Rose tells Howie that they teach Christianity to the children at school as a comparative religion (30:48). This emphasizes the fact that the Paganism of Summerisle is a rationalized reconstruction and a conscious choice. There are many reasons why Howie might benefit from Paganism. He seems sexually repressed, whereas the people on the island are very open and direct about their sexuality. In the scene I described above, the shots of the slugs are juxtaposed with shots Howie lying in bed seemingly embracing himself. He is clearly moved by and in want of physical connection himself. The songs that the islanders sing often have quite clear sexual references in them which they combine with a trance-like reverence for nature and all its ways. Howie is very serious and often seems annoyed and uptight, which contrasts with the villagers’ relaxed and cheerful manners that are maintained even when they are being reproached by the Sergeant. These

reasons suggest that there is something about paganism that a modern ego from the mainland might benefit from.⁶

Another important reason for the regression is the similarity between the scientific and the magic worldview. According to Frazer, “Magic like science postulates the order and uniformity of nature; hence the attraction both of magic and of science, which open up a boundless vista to those who can penetrate to the secret springs of nature” (45). Lord Summerisle’s grandfather was a Victorian scientist that wanted to grow special fruits that he had developed himself. He is an example of a scientist wanting to “control” or “appease” nature through his experiments. In the scientific worldview the omnipotence of thought is visible in the desire to understand “an inflexible regularity the order of events, which,” as Frazer writes, “if carefully observed, enables us to foresee their course with certainty and to act accordingly” (805). It is no surprise that Summerisle’s grandfather found an ally in the “old joyous gods.” Ken Wilber describes this phenomenon of mixing up the two worldviews as the pre/post fallacy: there is confusion between pre-conventional stages and post-conventional stages because both of them have in common that they are non-conventional (Sex 210-211). The magic structure and the scientific structure share a hatred of the religious, which results in a confusion between the two. The fact that the grandfather was a profound cynic (“incredulous of all human good”), made a retro-romantic regression probably seem an even more agreeable solution (44:00). Here, the polarity of the ego and the eco camps is very useful. Summerisle has chosen joyful merging with nature over a cold godless observation.

The final decision of sacrificing Howie is being made through different motives. Allan Brown wrote in *Inside The Wicker Man*: “Shaffer and Hardy’s perfect sacrifice would be a checklist, would contain all the attributes which had made one a perfect sacrifice (...) a willing, king-like virgin fool” (Brown 35). In the next sections I will describe how Howie is prepared to be a worthy sacrifice and his participation in it.

⁶ It is interesting to note that the film has been very popular among actual Neo-pagans, despite the fact that they (of course) do not endorse human sacrifice (Higginbottom 154).



*The disconnect between Howie's "duty to God," and his need to comfort himself.
There is diegetic sound of poetry, song, and Willow and Ash making love.*

The Fool

Throughout the film, references are made about the mainland as a place where different laws and customs apply. The references to the mainland are often connected to the authority of Howie as a police officer. When Howie is denied access to the registration of deaths file, he asserts

his authority as a police officer. When even this is waived by the registrar he says: "Miss, if you don't cooperate here and now, you may well find yourself in a police cell on the mainland tonight" (35:35-45). This is one of several occasions where Howie uses the authority granted to him by the mainland to overrule the private rules and customs of Summerisle.⁷

Howie wants to find out what happened to Rowan Morrison. Frazer, Freud, Gebser, and Wilber all emphasize that each worldview, or worldspace, has its own internal coherent logic. In *Wicker Man* the two (main) worldspaces are clearly differentiated geographically as well as philosophically. In the language of the structuralism of Ferdinand de Saussure, Howie uses signifiers that do not have signifieds in the magic structure (Wilber *Sex* 280). It is therefore not strange that he cannot get the villagers to cooperate with his search. One of these signifiers is the word "death." Miss Rose explains to Howie that this is not a word that the islanders use because they believe in the transmutation of souls. According to Freud, the impression of death stands at the beginning of animism (Freud *Totem* 92). Because the signifier "death" does not have a signified (meaning), the actual referent of the word (the rotting body of Rowan Morrison) cannot be found.

And indeed it turns out that Rowan (in the sense that Howie means it) never actually died. Rowan = a hare (homeopathic magic: similarity = same), and the hare does not exist anymore. Mentioning the name of Rowan does not get him any satisfying response, because the names are inextricably linked to the person. Freud writes that many magic cultures had a taboo against speaking the name of a deceased person for fear of the dead. Sometimes, in order to avert this, the name of the person who had died was changed after passing (*Totem* 57-58). On Summerisle, the opposite was done: the name was transferred to a totem animal that was killed. "If Rowan Morrison existed we would know of her" says Miss Rose (29:55-30:00). Before Howie writes Rowan's name on the blackboard, he wipes out the lesson had been on there (27:22). This seems symbolic of how he uses his own religious logic to cancel the magic logic of Summerisle.

⁷ Another instance of this is when he is at the girls school and Miss Rose says "I was unaware that the police had any authority in matters of education." Howie answers: "Ah, ah, well we'll see about that" (26:38-45).

The magic worldview also does not maintain the same strong binary oppositions as the religious. Jean Gebser writes that the magic structure is “an expression of one-dimensional unity and man’s merging with nature,” and the mythical (religious) “the expression of two-dimensional polarity” (Gebser 66). The “joyous old gods” of the islanders are much closer to earth than the God of Howie who “created the heaven and the earth” and “divided the light from the darkness” (Gen. 1: 1-4). On Summerisle, no such distinctions are necessary. When Howie asks Miss Rose whether Rowan Morrison is dead, she answers: “You would say so,” which irritates Howie: “Oh, come on come on she’s either dead or she’s not dead” (30:03-13). He does not realize that this binary way of thinking (life-death) is something that belongs specifically to the religious point of view that he treats as absolute. It is interesting that the film includes a scene of Howie actually reading about the May Day festival in the library. It shows that even his study of their customs does not help him uncover what is really going on because he leaves himself as observer out of the equation.

All of these miscommunications lead eventually to his biggest misunderstanding about the nature of the sacrifice. There are many moments in the film where the impending sacrifice of Howie is foreshadowed and the audience is given hints about the continuing deceit of the islanders. While he is searching for Rowan Morrison a few hours before the May Day festival, Howie finds a girl in the closet who is pretending to be a corpse. After startling Howie by falling out of the closet in a conventional horror film fashion, we get a subjective over-the-shoulder shot of the girl from the point of view of Howie, the camera then pans up and we see Howie’s face reflected in the mirror looking at the girl running away. This short scene suggests that Howie is really searching for himself since he is of course the real sacrifice, and also that the little girl he is looking for is no more than bait to fool him with (1:05:52-6:05). An even more obvious hint is when Lord Summerisle takes Howie by the nose, literally (the nose of his mask), to urge him to join in the ‘game of chance’ of the six swordsmen. This not only fits with the costume and the role of the fool, but Summerisle also actually fools the man behind the mask by acting as if he still thinks it is the landlord MacGreagor (1:14:23-29). Earlier, during the preparations for the festival, Lord Summerisle says to MacGreagor: “I trust we

aren't going to have to let out your costume again this year," which points to the fact that this year they have found a better fool to fit the costume (1:02:48-50).

The Willing

Howie is slowly seduced into the role he is going to play in the ritual. After his first discussion with Summerisle he states: "Lord Summerisle, I am interested in one thing: the law, but I must remind you sir, despite everything you said, you are the subject of a Christian country" (00:45:35-00:45:46). Sergeant Howie shows us here that he really has a dual interest. He does not care *only* about the law; he also cares deeply about religion and its mythic membership. Summerisle is keenly aware of how the sergeant contradicts himself. When Howie repeats his request for permission to exhume Rowan Morrison's body, Summerisle mockingly answers: "I was under the impression that I had already given it to you," (00:45:46-00:45:57). Howie has already been drawn into the pagan sensibility of the Summerislanders. This is made evident because of his uninhibited critical questioning of Lord Summerisle and the villagers about their "fake biology" and "fake religion". The fact that he is very dismissive of the beliefs and practices that he encounters does not undermine his interest in them, but rather underlines it. He is drawn to the heathens out of feelings of disgust and the need to correct them. In this light (and of course in light of the big reveal in the end) we can read the dissuasions of Lord Summerisle and the villagers as an invitation. Lord Summerisle says: "Perhaps it's just as well that you won't be here tomorrow, to be *offended* by the sight of our May Day celebrations here" (00:49:43-00:49:50, emphasis mine). Right after that we get a close-up of Sgt. Howie's tensed face signifying that he is being tried.

The Virgin

Howie's need to correct others is also reflected in his own need to be a good Christian, for example in his dedication to stay a virgin until marriage. In the director's cut there is a scene early in the film in which two colleagues of Howie at the police station say, referring to the sex life of the

sergeant: "The only woman he's interested in is the virgin Mary" (4:00-5). This scene was meant as an introduction to Howie as a character, later considered redundant by Hardy, but it is also a foreshadowing of his battle against sexual desire later in the film. After the great temptation scene with Willow Howie says that he does not "believe in it... before marriage" (56:41-56:44). He does not only repress his desire for the occasion, he says he does not believe in it at all. This borders on the pathological considering the fact that in the night he was visibly affected by Willow's sung invitation ("Am I not young and fair?").

It is the image of innocence which binds him to the island Summerisle. Innocence can mean both "not guilty", and "naïve". The first meaning applies mainly to Howie's perception of little Rowan as a sacrificial lamb, she does not deserve the "barbarity" that she will be subjected to. Summerisle knowingly uses her as bait. But innocence in both senses applies to himself as the virgin fool king. Howie is innocent in different ways. From his own point of view he is stainless because he does not participate in the 'degeneracy' that he sees all around him. He is right and they are wrong. The islanders however, as mentioned above, do not share his way of contrasting. Freud explains that the ambivalence of emotions in 'primitive' man result in the inability to differentiate properly between the sacred and the profane (*Totem* 68). In the magic/animistic worldview it makes perfect sense to be a respected king and a clueless fool at the same time. Indeed, as I argued before, the fact that Howie even sees a difference between guilt and innocence is already part of his mythological bias. And this deludes him into thinking he has *absolutely* no part in the 'degeneracy' he sees around him. However, the only autonomy that Howie can ascribe to is a *relative* autonomy, relative in the sense that he is in part dependent on the cultural context that he finds himself in. Howie identifies himself with the autonomous ego that is floating above nature and able to observe it objectively, while he is denying his own connection to it. One of the consequences is that he presents himself as elevated above the villagers.

The King

In the beginning of the film Howie flies over the islands on his way to Summerisle. In the airplane he has a God's eye point of view. One of the first things he does when he has landed is assert his authority as a police officer. He does this by using a megaphone to reach them and request a dingy to help him onto the land. On many occasions Howie has to assert his authority and amplify his voice in order to get what he wants. The islanders let themselves be overpowered, they stay calm because they want him to be elevated in order for him to be a more suitable sacrifice. The fact that the islanders turn out to accept Howie's authority as a police officer only provides him with a false sense of security, since being an authority figure makes him only more perfect to be sacrificed.

According to Freud, in the case of a man with delusions of persecution, being considered a persecutor is an elevation to the level of an omnipotent father (*Totem* 54). When a "paranoiac" calls someone thus, this person is made responsible for all of the bad things happening to him (*Totem* 54). Howie has to take the blame because he is a king. Kings were held responsible for the failed harvest.⁸ There is a passage in *the Golden Bough* that describes that the temporary king often had magical tasks, one of those was "making the crops grow" (Frazer 259).

The audience also has an ambivalent relationship with Howie through our identification with his gaze. As in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), there seems to be something obsessive about the way the main character persecutes the perceived guilt. In both films the ending can be read as a retribution for the obsessive behavior but also as a vindication of their suspicions. While Howie's close-mindedness towards the paganism of Summerisle makes him look rather unsympathetic for most of the film, the ending rebalances this. Both films sometimes hint at the sacrifice/murder being a mere pretence, but the big reveal at the end changes our opinion of the main character considerably (Racaut 114). Howie does resemble Christ somewhat as his stubbornness starts to look more like a dignified uprightness as he holds on to his faith until the very end.

⁸ A famous example of this motive is King Oedipus being considered responsible for the plague in Thebes.

A Battle of Faiths

The fact that the film can be interpreted as a critique of traditionalism on the one hand (the harsh exclusivity of Howie's judgment of the people on Summerisle), and on the other as a warning for regression into paganism (the ghastly practice of human sacrifice by the islanders), makes *The Wicker Man* an endlessly fascinating and complex film.

The happy singing of the Summerislanders while the wicker man burns is not out of place if we remember the other happy songs (for example the May Pole song) where death is treated only as a transformation and not a transition to the beyond. In a beautifully dramatic sequence of the individual against the mass, Howie joins the singing of the islanders from within the wicker man with "The Lord is my shepherd," but he becomes completely overpowered by the choir of Summerislanders. They are like the choir in the tragedies of ancient Greece that assert the guilt of the scapegoat, but in this case they celebrate him as well. The scene is also reminiscent of Charles Laughton's *The Night of the Hunter* (1955) where Icky Spoon (Evelyn Varden) joins the false prophet Harry Powell (Robert Mitchum) in the same song. There, they sing a hymn together (Leaning on the everlasting arms), but Icky Spoon adds the name of Jesus to it which marks her moral superiority over the reverend (1:20:30-22:00). In *Wicker Man*, the name of Jesus is drowned out and the judgement of God is replaced by the judgement of the Sun. This is not a moral victory, like the ones in the faith-based movies of Hollywood's golden age, but one that relativizes both faiths.

In the end both Howie and Lord Summerisle are incapable of pluralism. Even though Summerisle is able to see both the magic and the mythic structures, he simply consciously chooses one over the other instead of integrating them both into a higher integration, which is the promise of postmodernity (equality). Lord Summerisle wants to get rid of the Christian God, but in doing so he regresses to an earlier form of sacrifice that, according to Christianity, was supposed to be outdone by the human sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Lord Summerisle treats Christianity as an irreconcilable

opposite to his revitalized paganism; the ego-centric paganism of the villagers cancels out the ethno-centric Christianity of Howie.

In the last scene, right before the credits roll, we see the wicker man fall down with in the background a beautifully saturated sun. It is as if the wooden giant is kneeling for Nuada. From the the point of view of the camera, the sun god reigns supreme. The sacrifice will have its repercussions of course, as Howie has warned the islanders about, but narratively the religious has succumbed to the magic and this gives the film a proper sense of its ending. This cannot be read as an endorsement of paganism over Christianity however; the horrifying ending merely shows us that both of them are exclusivity worldviews: only one of them can win.

Chapter 3: *Week-end*

In the last chapter, we discussed the battle of faiths in *The Wicker Man*; different perspectives clash, and this collision makes the relativity of each worldview more apparent. In *Week-end* the relative element of each worldview becomes even more pronounced. I will argue that *Wicker Man* only shows us the beginning of the process that in *Week-end* culminates into a deconstruction of everything, all perspectives, including the perspective of the film itself. To talk about stage theory in relationship to this film feels out of place and even a bit sacrilegious. The descent into madness of *Week-end* is not really a descent; in the world of the film there is no downward causation or transcending current. Jean-Luc Godard shows us that the world of *Totem and Taboo* is the only world there ever was. Still, I will argue in this chapter that the film also builds on stage theoretical assumptions, even if it is in an ironical way.

Disruptive Repetition

Throughout *Week-end* Godard uses titles. He does not use them in the way that the old silent films would use them, to explicate or enhance the narrative; instead the titles are interjected into the film in a disruptive manner. The film opens with these two titles shortly appearing after each other.

A FILM ADRIFT IN THE COSMOS

A FILM FOUND ON A DUMP

The relationship between these two titles is interesting. The first one invokes an incredible high-mindedness as if this film floats above all of the various situations that will be shown to audience. The second title brings this feeling of elevation quickly to an end by going from the more abstract cosmos (everything) to the dump (specific). This is not meant as an uplifting film; all of the

intellectual utterances are accompanied by the most violent and depraved behaviors human beings are capable of.

After the first dialogue the title WEEK END is shown as this repetitive pattern:

END WEEK END
 WEEK END WEE
 K END WEEK EN
 D WEEK END WE
 EK END WEEK E
 ND WEEK END W
 EEK END WEEK

David Sterritt writes in *The Films of Jean-Luc Godard: Seeing the Invisible* that the way that the title is presented reminds of “the pop-art style being catapulted to prominence by Andy Warhol and others who shared (like Godard) a refusal to draw boundaries between rarified conceptualism and earthy materialism” (Sterritt 90). Godard does not try to transcend consumerist society. He simply absorbs and defamiliarizes the different aspects of consumerism through repetition (Sterritt 90). Often he will show a title twice for example for no other reason than the repetition itself. This has the disruptive effect that we as an audience become aware of the image as image. In this way *Week-end* becomes not just a description of commodity but an expression of it.

There is a big difference in the tone of the two films. *Wicker Man* has a strong dramatic story arch from an established normalcy to an emotionally resonant but jarring ending. *Week-end* however starts out with violence and keeps an indifferent attitude towards it throughout the film. After the first title there is this line of dialogue: “When Roland drives your father home from the clinic... it would be nice if they both died in an accident” (01:08). Within this sentence there is also a sharp contrast between the first more mundane remark about Roland taking his sick father-in-law

from the hospital, which evokes empathy, and then the unsuspected blow of wishing them both to die. It is directly after this line that the title card tells us that this film was found on a dump. The next lines of dialogue spoken by the same people on the balcony have a similar effect: “Did he get his brakes repaired?” “No I managed to make him forget” (01:10-01:17). “Seven people were killed at Evreux junction last Sunday.” “That would be lovely” (01:18-01:28). It is clear from these opening lines of dialogue that the main characters are rotten materialists; they are ready to kill for the inheritance of Corinne.

David Sterrit relates furthermore that the opening scene reminds him of 40s and 50s noir films which Godard uses to predict the chaos that is going to ensue later in the film (93). The difference here however, is that the chaos does not develop gradually but is present immediately at the beginning. After the belligerent words, the couple oversees a fight on the parking lot below them. It originated out of a small car accident: it seems a bumper has touched the lights of another car. The violence between the two chauffeurs is wildly out of proportion, it looks more like something out of a gangster film and it is therefore hard to believe that the minor car damage was really the cause of it. While one of the drivers is beaten to ground we hear non-diegetic dark and sinister tones.

The Time-image

In his second cinema book, Gilles Deleuze talks about the pure optical image in relation to the work of Godard. He got the inspiration for this concept from the philosophy of Henri Bergson whom Deleuze paraphrases as follows: “we do not perceive the thing or the image in its entirety, we always perceive less of it, we perceive only what we are interested in perceiving, by virtue of our economic interests, ideological beliefs and psychological demands” (19-20). The problem that Deleuze perceives (and that he believes Godard solves) is that every image we see turns into a cliché before our very eyes, which prevents us from seeing the real image. Deleuze writes that we should try to see an image without it being a metaphor. So, images should not be linked to each other

because they are similar (for example: consumerism is like cannibalism, or, as in chapter two, the Holy Communion is similar to paganistic rites), but the image should be completely devoid of metaphoric linking (consumerism *is* cannibalism). This sounds similar to the assertion of Lord Summerisle that Willow is the real goddess of love, instead of just symbolic of her (homeopathic magic). If we apply this to pop-art, through repetition, the culture of commodities is shown for what it really is: copies instead of originality. Through this repetition, the image gets deconstructed and the commodity reinforced.

The main thesis of Deleuze's cinema books is that there is a transition from the subordination of time to the image, which he calls the movement-image, to the subordination of the image to time: the time-image (Deleuze xi, 21). The movement-image inspires action. For example, the powerful scene in which Howie sees the wicker man for the first time. We see his expression change and we hear him loudly exclaim the name of Christ. The image of the wicker man is directly related to a reaction, and therefore, according to Deleuze, indirectly to time. The time-image however, does not relate to a corresponding action and is therefore disconnected from the action-reaction pattern. This disruption of the "sensory-motor schema" makes a direct relationship to time possible.

There are countless examples of how this is achieved by Godard in *Week-end*. Overall, this can be seen in the erratic behaviors of the main characters. Their actions seem to be random. Their conversations do not amount to any definitive conclusion and are not responding to anything specific. The movement of the image is subordinated to time. Think of the long and overly detailed story that Corinne tells Roland in the beginning about her sexual experiences with two friends. It seems to go on forever. At the end Roland asks her: "Is this true, or a nightmare?" She responds: "I don't know" (12:50). It does not matter whether or not it was really true, or whether the story really leads to something in the end. By extending the time we look at the image, we end up reflecting on it, on the image itself. We just go from thought to thought aimlessly, randomly, and therefore we disconnect from the automatic reaction formation that turns every image into a cliché. This speaks to the way Godard used cuts in *À Bout de Souffle* (1960) in the scene where we see Patricia and Michel

sitting in the car together (21:55). The cuts do not have a specific function. They for example do not show that a lot of time has passed or that Michel and Patricia have arrived in a different place. We just see the Patricia from the back repeatedly. This repetition of the same makes us aware of the cut itself.

Deleuze calls this “false continuity” and he considers it an important aspect of modern cinema (Deleuze xi). What is the effect of false continuity? In a chapter on *Week-end*, Wheeler Winston Dixon likens the effect of staring at the same image for a long time to sitting in a museum looking at a painting: “We must *scrutinize* the image, deconstruct it, consider the margins and borders of the frame, and “contemplate” the mimetic structure of the iconic/representational strategies that informed the creation of this image” (Dixon 91). The most famous example of this is in the film is the tracking shot of the traffic jam (12:15-20:00). For almost 8 minutes we are watching Corinne and Roland trying to get past the other cars. On the way there we see: people throwing balls, playing cards, playing chess on the road, a group of children, caged zoo animals, a giant Shell truck, and a lot of angry people waving their fists at each other. The couple is fighting with almost everyone on their way to the end of the line. And all the while car horns are blaring. There is a moment, when the Shell truck appears, where it almost seems as if this is going to be the culmination of the scene. It is a comical scene where a small car stands opposed towards the giant Shell truck and both drivers are honking their horns and waving their fists at each other. Sterritt interpreted this scene as “a socioeconomic car clash,” the major company Shell facing the small citizen (98). It is definitely an impressive symbol, but it is not the end. In his 1969 review of the movie, film critic Roger Ebert wrote: “At some point, we realize that the subject of the shot is not the traffic jam but the fact that the shot is so extended”. We get to ponder on the tracking shot itself, and this is the lasting impression. At the end we get so impatient that we feel indifferent when, at the end of the traffic jam, Corinne and Roland drive over the blood of the people that were killed during an accident. In this way we experience the indifference to suffering just like the characters in the film. And all of the symbolic imagery we see along the way becomes just that, imagery.



Shell versus citizen, one of the many political symbols in *Week-end*

Mixed-up moments

An important difference between *Wicker Man* and *Week-end* is the continually intrusive presence of the political. It is possible to see the former film as a commentary on the regressive aspect of the 1960s, but this is never made as explicit as the references in *Week-end* to the Marxist struggle between the bourgeoisie and the working class. After their car has been crashed, we suddenly see the following title: FROM FRENCH REVOLUTION TO GAULLIST WEEKENDS. We then see Corinne and Roland walking through a field while they are accompanied by a historical figure that shouts from a book (“Can one believe that man ordered society in order to be happy and reasonable?” (35:00)). Godard said in one of his improvised talks for *Histoire(s) du Cinema* (1998) that he always wants to include both the characters and the social situation at the same time. He is interested in “mixed-up moments” (*Introduction* 319-320). Godard talks about this mixing up in the following manner:

No one has ever made a film about a workers' strike using Dracula or something like that, which could be useful. Or films on the mafia or something. I mean, between sucking blood and scooping up money there isn't a lot of difference. Either way you're screwing people.

(...)

Few films try to do both – when you make *Frankenstein*, to put him in a monstrous social situation. The 1929 Depression or something like that. It comes up sometimes, but the film doesn't deal with it. It treats them as two separate moments. I try instead to treat them (...) at the same time.

(319-20)

In this quote we see the director's relativism. He shows politics as inseparable from the violence that it commits. By putting the monsters Roland and Corinne in a social situation both become absurd. It is important to note that Godard aims to keep the mixing up as clear as possible (*Introduction* 319). He keeps presenting the different elements of the film as different elements and not as a unified whole. Roland and Corinne of course completely ignore the ranting revolutionary and walk on unencumbered. Roland asks Corinne whether she has brought the axe that they will later use to kill Corinne's mother. Once again the highminded conceptualism and the violent reality are presented together, but they mix like oil and water to create a jarring combination.

Deconstruction of Reality

In chapter 1 we discussed Lyotard's notion of narrative clouds that do not necessarily translate well to each other. In chapter 2 we saw an example of this in the inability of Howie to translate between the religious and the magic structures. Even though *The Wicker Man* shows us a destabilization of the rigid perspective-taking of Howie, the subjectivity of the camera itself is never explicitly undermined. We identify with Howie even until the inside of the wicker man. As discussed in chapter 2, the author of "The Folklore Fallacy" finds fault with Hardy and Shaffer's film. In their

opinion, the film does not place enough emphasis on the fact that the rituals of the Summerislanders are themselves a Victorian reconstruction of the past and therefore not authentic. This echoes the postmodern concern with the absolute uniqueness of every worldview or culture. *Week-end* however would really pass this test because Godard is wont to break the fourth wall and to show the audiences that whatever reality the film is trying to show us, it is an *image* of reality that we get presented with. Furthermore, the paganism in *Week-end* (if you can really call it that) is completely blended with the modern society of the 1960s which, because of its excesses, is really presented as in no way superior to any form of ritualistic cannibalism. Roland summarizes it best: "What a rotten film, all we meet are crazy people" (43:18).

According to Freud: "In the animistic age the reflection of the inner world must obscure that other picture of the world which we believe we recognize" (*Totem* 89). Godard shows us however that every worldview or opinion obscures and can be doubted equally. He constantly challenges us to question our perception in his films. He poses to us the same question over and over again: "is this real?" An important moment is when Roland and Corinne are forced to take the hitchhiker Joseph Balsamo who claims that he is the son of God and Alexandre Dumas (31:50). The god of the sun in *Wicker Man* was given validity only by the beliefs of the islanders and the juxtapositions of the many shots of the sun with the events of the story. We tend to interpret this as localized subjective truth: it is true inside of the head of the believer and the psychoanalyst. In *Week-end* there is no such hierarchical relationship to truth, the subjective and the objective are completely intertwined. Suddenly there is a god incarnate who conjures up a rabbit out of the dashboard. In the world of the film there is no doubt about the power of magic being just as real as Joseph Balsamo says it is. The realness of the film lies in the constant deconstruction of any kind of linearity and therefore any kind of reality.

Week-end uses the idea of the primitive in man to criticize consumerist bourgeois society. Where Freud and Frazer talk about *similarities* between the neuroses of the modern man and the taboos of the "savage", Godard completely deconstructs the borders between the neurotic and the

wild man. Unfortunately for modern culture, the only coherent worldview in *Week-end* is the one of *Totem and Taboo* where our primal sin of killing the father is relived over and over again.

Cannibalism and Consumerism

Sterritt reads all of the crashing automobiles in the film as symbolic of materialism and aggression (93). This is a world where matter is the most important; people can only get hurt and hurt each other. Roland and Corinne, as we know from the beginning, only use each other to collect their inheritance. One of the most funny and also gut-wrenchingly painful moments in the film is when the couple, after unnecessarily reckless driving, ends up crashing their car. We see them crawl out of the burning wreck. Roland's white shirt is covered with blood. Corinne screams and exclaims: "My Hermes handbag!" (35:40-50).

Godard's film shows the ego's revenge on the aggression of the ego. He shows that materialism does really affect and hurt others in cruel ways; the world really is a dump. With his regressive vision he wants to reintroduce the buried cruelties beneath the superficial exteriors. Normally these would be covered up by capitalism's promise of wealth and prosperity, but Godard continuously reminds us of the violence that these stories, these movement images, have done: the commodification of human life. By bringing human lives to the same level as commodities like "a Hermes handbag," Godard exposes the cruelties of consumerism. Still, the film does not criticize only capitalism. One of the cannibalistic revolutionaries at the end of the film says to Corinne that "the horror of the bourgeoisie can only be overcome by more horror" (01:27:50). The fight against repressive materialism makes way for worship of regression.

In *Week-end* the ego-centric behavior of human beings is what all of them have in common. David Sterritt comments: "Ultimately, cannibalism is the carnivalesque link between theoretically minded guerillas like the African and the Arab, on the one hand, and self-serving goons like Corinne and Roland, on the other" (Sterritt 116). Cannibalism is precisely where Corinne and the revolutionaries find each other when they are eating Roland. Godard does not present the world of

Totem and Taboo as a regressive state; he presents it as a more authentic version of an already cannibalistic modern world.

Wicker Man achieves its horrific destabilization of the exclusivity of worldviews by veering between the positives and negatives of each worldview. In *Week-end* there is no such strategic deception of the audience; the transition from civilization to nature appears much more seamless. There is also no real battle of faiths since every discernible faith is free and disconnected from all of the others. There are no similarities apart from barbarism.

How does Godard achieve this? He does not simply show us a possible scenario, a possible route to take; instead he shows that society is *already* regressive. The reason that we did not see this was that the entire image or the entire truth was covered up by our prejudices. Godard shows us the entire “big club sandwich,” the civilized and the bestial in one immediate mixed-up moment (Godard *Introduction* 319).



“My Hermes handbag!”

Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis is not to make any conclusive remarks on the stage theory debate. I solely want to show that stage theory (together with its criticisms) is a useful analytical tool for these works of art. However, by arguing this I already make the assumption that at least some uses of stage theory are relevant (f. e. for cultural analysis and aesthetical appreciation). I admit therefore that I do reject the extreme deconstruction of levels on philosophical grounds because the nuancing (in the case of *Wicker Man*) or the deconstruction (*Weekend*) of stages can only be fruitful when stage theory is a presupposed context. What is important is not the fact that they are used, as stated by the postmodern critique of stage theory, but how they are used. Both films deal with the problem of different “narrative clouds” not being able to communicate with or translate to each other. The films represent this problem of postmodernity by imagining the battle between repressive conformity and regressive pluralism as a tragic conflict. From an integral perspective, the films can be understood as the pre/post confusion of the rebellious 1960s and 1970s. The horror of repressive conformity is pitted against an equally horrible retro-romantic regression that leads humanity further away from pluralism instead of closer to it.

In *The Wicker Man* every truth has a specific location; the laws of the mainland are not the laws of the island. Narratively, this does not lead to complete chaos, because there the different worldspaces are clearly held separate. Influenced by Frazer, the filmmakers have presented us with a coherent puzzle, dropping hints for the audience whenever they can. At the same time they criticize the stage map by showing the inability of Sergeant Howie to recognize his own prejudices, or rather, recognize himself, in his conception of their world. The film is incredibly nuanced in its portrayal of paganism and does not make easy villains out of anyone. Christopher Lee said about the film: “there is something for everyone in it. It operates on so many different levels. And (it) is totally acceptable in all areas at all levels” (*Burnt Offering*, 4:05-18). For this thesis all of the levels means: the magic,

the religious, the scientific, and the pluralistic. We see the pluralistic in the Summerislanders, but in them we also see the potential for regression: they confuse enlightened neo-paganism with ego-centric paganism. The film ends up staging a fight between exclusive worldviews. The negatives of both the ego-centric and ethno-centric worldviews turn into a battle of irreconcilable viewpoints that is eventually won by the sun god Nuada. *The Wicker Man* does not deconstruct, but nuance and complicate the evolutionary stage theory it assumes; it shows the dangers of coldly observing (repression), as well as of enthusiastic merging (regression), with earlier stages.

In *Weekend* the puzzle is broken and what we find on the road are the fragments of narrative structures that cannot be put together. The stages, if they can be called stages at all, are fragmented pieces that resist any kind of synthesis (which is of course the one thing they *do* have in common). We do not have to try to piece them together, the fragments as fragments are more real than they could be when edited together logically. Reality cannot be pieced together since it is the bigger picture constructed by a sensory motor scheme of images that hides the multifarious truth and keeps us from seeing a truer version of reality. Godard, with his haphazard way of cutting and false continuity, breaks the action-reaction pattern and releases the image from its sensorimotor constraints.

In *Wicker Man* we know only at the very end whether or not the villagers can be considered 'enlightened' or regressive Pagans. In *Week-end* there is no doubt about the ego-centrism of society. The film is mostly a postmodern critique on capitalism, but it can also serve as a cautionary tale about the revolutionary spirit; even though Godard delivers a truly devastating critique of consumerism, he portrays the working class and the revolutionaries hardly any better than the capitalists Roland and Corinne. In *Weekend* the magic structure is more mixed with modern society itself. We go from the more soft "under the right circumstances we could again be Pagans" in *Wicker Man*, to "we already are cannibals, we are just too naïve to see it." *Week-end* uses stage theory as an important reference point, even though its invocation is ironical.

What links both of these films is that they utilize the outlook on life which we have called “magic” in this thesis. They do this in order to contrast with or wholly undermine the other stages of culture. The filmmakers show us both the beautiful and the ghastly aspects of this worldview, and they emphasize the fact that the ego-centric is still present in our own religious or capitalist rites. Both *Howie* and the revolutionaries end up participating in what they initially fight against.

The difference between the films is the degree of deconstruction. In *Wicker Man* there is at the end still a qualitative gap between ego-centric paganism with its human sacrifice and the scio-centric values of *Howie*. Hardy and Shaffer do relativize the two worldviews somewhat by showing both of them as exclusivity structures and by shifting sympathies between the two perspectives of *Howie* and Lord Summerisle, but they do not get rid of Frazer’s stages completely. Godard however completely deconstructs any conception of reality; he presents them as random thoughts and beliefs through the use of the discontinuous time-image and he shows that all of the characters in the film are equally cruel to one another. *Week-end* deconstructs its own storytelling in full view of the audience until there are no layers left at all. At the end, the cannibalism of the capitalists and the revolutionaries merges into one undifferentiated bloodbath. The latter film therefore shows a more extreme version of regression that has lost, through its irony, any reference to a higher integration.

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