The Wicker Man (1973)

Director: Robin Hardy
Producer: Peter Snell
Screenplay: Anthony Shaffer

Cast:
- Edward Woodward – Sergeant Howie
- Christopher Lee – Lord Summerisle
- Diane Cilento – Miss Rose
- Britt Ekland – Willow
- Ingrid Pitt - Librarian

Plot Summary

A deeply religious Police Sergeant, Neil Howie flies to Summerisle, a remote island off the coast of Scotland to investigate the disappearance of a young girl.

He shows a photo of the missing girl to the locals, but they deny her existence. Sgt. Howie starts noticing the islander’s bizarre customs and lifestyle with increasing incredulity. Eventually, he meets Lord Summerisle who explains that they are all practicing Pagans. Howie is deeply offended, and accuses them of murdering the girl as part of a bizarre ritual. He then attempts to leave the island in order to report his suspicions to the chief constable of the West Highland Constabulary, but finds that his plane has been sabotaged.

Cleverly attempting to catch the islanders at whatever twisted game they are playing with the girl; whom he decides is still alive, but destined to be sacrificed, Howie is instead snared by the islanders. They imprison him in a giant "Wicker Man" and light it afire. It is their belief that his virginal, Christian life will appease their Pagan gods, and bring success to the next harvest.

Genre

One of the key themes of The Wicker Man is that of deception. Even from the very first frame, where the film suggests that it is based on true events and leads us to the expectation that this could possibly be a documentary. The writer said of this device that;

"I think Peter Snell (producer) first thought of it, to lend some outward reality to this implausible tale. The intention was to say to people who perhaps were not putting too much attention on the film. "Look this is real". And it did the trick."

The difficult locals in the quiet bar are a clichéd moment that occurs in several horror films and helps to set out the key oppositions of the plot.

Because of the deception throughout the film subversion of expectation becomes an expectation itself. But even this is subverted again in the final moments of the film. As we finally believe that Sgt. Howie has solved his puzzle and is about to escape the island – we discover the gloomy reason he was in fact there in the first place. It is this bleak ending that confirms The Wicker Man as a horror; as this moment is dripping with horror codes and conventions – humiliation, torture, sacrifice and the idea of being burnt to death! The fact that this scene also takes place in the day time only serves to heighten the horror.
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Response

The Wicker Man is generally well regarded by critics and film enthusiasts. Film magazine Cinefantastique described it as "The Citizen Kane of Horror Movies", and during 2004 the magazine Total Film named The Wicker Man the sixth greatest British film of all time. It also won the 1978 Saturn Award for Best Horror Film. A scene from this film was #45 on Bravo's 100 Scariest Movie Moments. The success of the Wicker man is that you feel Sgt. Howie's fear.

Background

Christopher Lee is a well known Hammer Horror regular, probably most famous for his role as Dracula (although now to you perhaps more so for his role in Lord of the Rings). Lee is a cinematic figure of evil, and his casting in The Wicker Man is both predictable and at odds with our expectations. We expect him to be the villain, but actually for the majority of the film he appears as warm and gentle, sympathetic and loyal. He is shown to be calm, intelligent, aware and considerate – not your average representation of the villain. Obviously in the final moments this is all flipped on its head and we see his true ‘Vampiric’ nature showing through with bloodthirsty glee!

Lee teamed up with British Lion head Peter Snell and playwright Anthony Shaffer to develop a film based on a David Pinner novel. Though all that actually survived from Pinner’s book is the scene in which Howie presses himself against his bedroom wall as a means of communing with the siren-like calls of Willow next door, the idea of an idealistic confrontation between a modern Christian and a remote, pagan community continued to intrigue Shaffer, who performed painstaking research on the topic. Brainstorming with director Robin Hardy, the film was conceived as presenting the pagan elements objectively and accurately, accompanied by authentic music and a believable, contemporary setting.

The film was produced at a time of crisis for the British film industry. Because of this the film needed to be made quickly and this meant that The Wicker Man, a film set during spring, was actually filmed in October: artificial leaves and blossoms had to be glued to trees in many scenes. While filming took place, British Lion was bought by EMI Films.

Remake

A remake, starring Nicolas Cage and directed by Neil LaBute was released in 2006. After its release, Hardy, who had expressed concerns about the remake, simply described it as a different film rather than a remake. The remake was a failure at the box office and slammed by many critics. Today it has a significant cult following as an unintentional comedy, with several scenes on YouTube boasting Cage brutalizing various women throughout and terrorizing children, a fan-made comedy trailer of the film, and more.

Themes

Religion/Belief

Nearly all the themes throughout the film link to or are governed by some sort of religious pretext.
The issues this film speaks of are timeless. The film's central character spends the movie struggling to understand the beliefs and customs of a culture that is alien to him. There's a real palpable sense of paranoia and fear that is brought about by this struggle.

Howie is constantly conflicted in this film between his desire to accept and respect the beliefs of others, and the ever growing reality that something might really be wrong with these people.

The horror in this movie does not come from "jump scares" or "scary monsters", but directly from the fear that somebody could make you give up your beliefs and change, "convert" you into a person you don't recognize.

Howie demonstrates that he has a faith so strong and so pure, he's willing to cling to it, even in the face of certain death, and it's admirable. He could renounce his faith, to curse his god, but he does not. He essentially makes the ultimate sacrifice – much like Christ himself.

In the film nature and fertility are worshipped, and Christianity is treated with scorn as a religion preoccupied with 'rotting flesh'.

In the momentous final sequence the clash of the religions is shown through music; Howie breaks into Psalm 23 (the lord is my shepherd) in a desperate counterpoint to the islands joyful singing

**Some other key themes include...**

**Sexuality/Freedom**

One of the key sequences in this film occurs when Howie is forced to put his chastity to the test. Britt Eckland (Willow) does everything in her power to seduce him, but to consummate the offer, would mean admitting his whole life had been a lie, that his chastity is all for nothing, and that he'd lived most of his life in vain. This coupled with the singing of crude songs to Willow in the pub and the phallic shaped hedges in Lord Summerisle’s garden could be seen as a reaction to the previous decade (60s) - This decade became synonymous with individual freedom and led to new and original approaches to art, cinema music and fashion. It also impacted on youth culture through the 'hippie movement'. This inevitable caused a divide between youth and establishment, where one preferred to stick to the status quo and the other wanted greater self expression.

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**Trivia**

Christopher Lee appeared in the film for free.

Although the film is set in Scottish territory and all the characters are meant to be of Scottish nationality, several of the main actors are not Scottish; Christopher Lee and Edward Woodward are English, Diane Cilento is Australian, Ingrid Pitt is Polish and Britt Ekland is Swedish.
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Community and the Law

There's a very strong sense of community spirit on the island, such a sense of solidarity and concern for communal well-being - a far cry from Protestantism's isolating emphasis on the primacy of the individual conscience before God.

Howie is a policeman, a control freak, he believes in the law and he has his faith. Law - in the form of Howie, the prudish virgin - is mocked and finally destroyed, whereas sin - in the form of unshameful sex and a deep concern with fertility - structures community life.

Howie’s Three Costumes

- **Costume 1** – Police Uniform - This costume is invested with symbolic power it implies authority and strict control.
- **Costume 2** – The Fools - Dressed as Punch Howie is now literally playing the fool. The idiot who is unwittingly dancing to his death.
- **Costume 3** – The Virginal Christ - His final costume can relate both with its colour and simplicity to Howie's virginal status. This costume also can be seen as very Christ like and a clear representation of his undying faith.

Binary Opposition in 'The Wickerman'

- Repression & Liberation
- Civilisation & Barbarism
- Present & Past
- Christianity & Paganism
- Close Minded & Liberated
- Belief & Blasphemy

Some Final Thoughts

Both sides believe that they are unquestionably right and neither is willing, or even capable, of seeing the world from any other perspective.

The Wicker Man suggests that paganism could still be found alive and well in 70s Britain, if you knew where to look.

It's interesting that in Britain the only way such a vision could be realised was under the rubric of 'horror'. 'The Wicker Man' dramatises a clash of ideologies much greater than what we might think of today.