

The Wicker Man: Comments

Two things caught my eye when watching the opening sequence to *The Wicker Man*. The first was the motif of the titles projected over an image of an aircraft flying low over rural terrain - I was instantly reminded of the opening sequence for *M*A*S*H* (Robert Altman, 1970) and its litany of "introducing"s projected across medical helicopters traversing the Korean landscape or the helicopter gunships that hover over the Vietnam countryside that is the opening sequence of *More American Graffiti*¹ (Bill Norton, 1979). But there the resemblance ends.

The music is folksy and the atmosphere pastoral, heralding an earthier time. The eye on the dinghy which carries Sergeant Howie to the island (and back to his seaplane in his abortive attempt to leave) symbolizes the all-seeing. While not exactly the Eye of Providence, it's purpose is similar. Howie is being watched. While it is tempting to relate the eye to the Eye of Providence and relish the irony of its Christian tradition, the eye as a symbol of divinity has its roots much earlier by Pagan faiths (Lloyd, 2018) and, as such, can be seen as serving both purposes; irony and foreboding.

Another interesting aspect of this film's construction is that only faith is retro. Fashions, architecture and basic British culture remain the same as mainland Britain of the time (with one exception that I saw: in one scene towards the end we see a late 19th Century plate glass camera).

Along with the 70s being the decade when the world went color-blind (source unknown), it also excelled in experimenting with nudity in film in strange ways, such as *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971) or *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975).

According to Patrick Maitland (Ben Miles) in *Coupling*, Season 1, Episode 6: *The Cupboard of Patrick's Love* (Martin Dennis, 2000) "Britt Eckland spells naked" and is included in a list of memorable nude performances including the male cast's favorite recurring sex goddess, Jenny Agutter. Apparently, according to Maitland, *Walkabout* (Nicolas Roeg, 1971) "is the industry standard for frontal work". *The Goodies* list Britt Eckland as a contender for the "Mixed Doubles Boring" at the "International Festival of Le Boring", along with singer Rod Stewart² in Season 6, Episode 3: *Daylight Robbery on the Orient Express* (Jim Franklin, 1976). Speaking for myself, I think her work in *The Wicker Man* is definitely better than the appalling performance she gave in *The Man with the Golden Gun* (Guy Hamilton, 1974), failing as both actress and Bond girl.

¹ George Lucas had nothing to do with this underrated sequel to his greaser classic *American Graffiti* (1973). This isn't surprising as this film goes beyond his childhood interest in cruising (Biography, 2019), depicting the four main characters celebrating New Year's Eve in four different time brackets during the 1960s.

² The two were dating at the time (Songfacts, n.d.)

Nudity aside, the hotel dance scene (the scene referred to by the bar patrons in *Coupling*) was perhaps one of the best scenes in the film. It was shot using a "fog filter" - a special lens filter that gives an image a blurred or foggy look (Welch, 2007); a harsh juxtaposition to the sharp cutaway scenes of Sergeant Howie battling his inner demons which shows clear reality with no filtration at all. It is clear that her intentions in this scene go beyond simple lust; she is tempting the Sergeant to save his life, or to test if he is the one - there is emotion and concern behind her song. In an ironic twist from the promises of Christianity, it is only through succumbing to the temptations of the flesh that Howie can achieve salvation, physically as well as spiritually as, apparently, abstinence can cause prostate cancer (WebMD, 2017).

However, martyrdom is ingrained in the Christian tradition, starting with Christ's own self-sacrifice. I remember a story from one of my ancient history classes at Macquarie University - possibly apocryphal but poignant: during the time of the Christian persecutions by the Emperor Nero, on whom he blamed the great fire of Rome (Cavendish, 2014), a governor (unnamed) of a northern province discovered Christians in his midst. In an attempt to convert them back to traditional paganism he had them stripped naked and placed on an ice floe where they were to stay until they renounced their new faith or died.

Slowly, they froze, one by one, singing a faithful, mournful song, as they do in the best Christian Roman epics, firm in the belief that they would be delivered to heaven. Finally, one little guy comes shivering over to the governor and tells him that he's convinced - he renounces the whole thing; he doesn't believe in the Christ anymore, to which the governor responds, having watched the whole spectacle:

"You may not believe anymore, but now I do."

The point being that Christianity managed to survive because people were so willing to go to their deaths which convinced people that the promised afterlife was true and we see this in *The Wicker Man* - even though Howie struggles in horror when he realizes his fate, when it is inevitable he clings to his belief in Christ and the Christian faith (the very same faith, ironically, that preventing him from succumbing to Willow's temptations in the hotel and, thus, saving him from this fate). While it didn't quite have the effect that it did on Rome's northern governor, the passionate devotion to the faith is visible.

At this point I'd like to mention the "sudden zoom"³. This is a technique that I see often in 70s movies, particularly cheap science fiction. We see it here, on Miss Rose drinking from the glass when Howie asks about Morrison and again, later on the clipper in the harbour. George Lucas even used it during the final

³ My term for it. Also called a "Snap Zoom" (Baker, 2016) and various chat forums mention a "BSG Zoom" (from *Battlestar Galactica*).

battle sequence in *Star Wars: Episode II - Attack of the Clones* (2002). It's a very fast zoom into a particular part of the scenery, apparently designed to focus the viewer's attention on whatever the director wishes the viewer to notice - Miss Rose's expression, the boat, a big, ugly attack thing. I don't care for it, myself and, judging from the forums, I'm not alone. I think it's distracting and just looks goofy.

The *Wicker Man* contains all of the elements that should make for a terrible film: gratuitous nudity, poor goofy camera work, a bizarre plot and, in places, questionable acting. But it comes together, and it works. The nudity is artistic, the shoddy camera work adds to the ambiance, the plot is engaging and the acting charming. It is a tragedy in the true Shakespearean sense; every objection Howie presents is countered. There is no hope. The lovers die.

And the chaos and disorder of the mob mentality (also gleeful, like the carnival atmosphere in the hanging scene in *True Grit*) is reflected in Christopher Lee's hair in the final sequence: it is disorderly and wild, much like the society.

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