

Summerisle Versus Civilisation
or
The Radicalism of The Wicker Man



J. Fraser & Ll. Summer

Summerisle Versus Civilisation began its nasty, brutish life as J. Fraser's *Order Set Alight* in the 2021 anthology *Wickerpedia*. It was resurrected in the Spring of 2022 by J. and Ll. Summer. We present it here as a work in (anti) progress.

FORGED BOOKS print dangerous book(let)s. Our titles include *I Was a Teenage Luddite* by J. Jones, *My Anti-Cull Philosophy* by Julian Langer, and *Monster Megaprojects are Consuming the World!* by Alexander Dunlap.

A thousand thanks from FORGED to Julian Langer.

One for every badger trap.

I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and
self-contain'd,
I stand and look at them long and long.

They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
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 is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of
owning things,
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of
years ago,
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.

- *Song of Myself*, Walt Whitman

The original 1973 release of *The Wicker Man* coincided with a surge in horror cinema which has arguably never been matched since. While the 1980s saw the rise of the slasher and the 2000s the rise of found-footage, the 1970s contained a range of now-classic horror movies that, rather than being bound together by similarities in content or form, were much more arguably held together by theme. Perhaps most emblematic of these themes – only truly rivaled by 1974's *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* – *The Wicker Man* stands as a towering behemoth above many of its contemporaries. While it has been argued by critics as well-known as Mark Kermode that Hardy's film, in which Police Sergeant Neil Howie travels to, and is horrified by, the paganised Summerisle, narrates the events of a clash of civilisations, this appears to miss a key element of the story. *The Wicker Man* does not show a clash of civilization – rather, it demonstrates the possibility of the abolition of civilization.

Separating a movie as strange and reliant on slow atmospheric building as *The Wicker Man* into constituent pieces is a bizarre and at least partially reductive exercise, however, doing so reveals at least two clear pieces which allow a more thorough understanding of this radical implication. Firstly, the protagonist of Sergeant Howie can be taken as synecdoche for civilization itself – order, law, and carceral practices. The reasons for this are obvious; a police officer, Howie’s job is literally to enforce these things, and as has been explored thoroughly elsewhere, his heightened and conservative religious beliefs only bolster these positions. Police, whilst presented in many cases as the agents of peace and justice, are in fact simply armed bureaucrats, to paraphrase the late David Graeber. Inevitably, then, Howie comes into conflict with Summerisle. While the accuracy of *The Wicker Man*’s presentations of pagan ideals is somewhat suspect, it is nevertheless evident that Summerisle operates on a different set of rules than those with which Howie is familiar. First and foremost, there appears to be no local police presence. Secondly, codes of

conduct and behaviour vary wildly from those known to Howie, and the traditional stuffy conservatism of British culture is dispensed with entirely; nudity and sexuality run rampant and, as we eventually come to learn, festivals and celebrations reach a level of display which places conservatism directly into the flame. To put it simply, Howie can be taken to represent, all in one figure, British conservatism, law, order, control, and restriction: Summerisle and its inhabitants, the free release and appreciation of desire as driving force.

It does not take thorough investigation to realise that these two elements are in inherent conflict. The mephitic closing scene of the film, in which Howie is bundled into an effigy and burned before the forging heat of the setting sun, melting the boundary between land and sky, serves as a declaration of war – *The Wicker Man* is not so much a film about the clash of civilisations as it is a film about the death of civilization, and the liberating possibilities which can be found therein.

The abandonment of the standards of modernity runs throughout the film from the beginning. Elements of ritualism and magic abound, much to Sergeant Howie's dismay, and while none are quite so prominent and powerful as the closing scenes, the incorporation of the magical into the everyday life of Summerisle is telling. Not only are people so quick to revert, as Lord Summerisle himself proclaims, to the ideas of the old gods, but in many ways this reversion does not even require major adjustments to their ways of life. Residents on the island may place toads in their mouths to avoid a cough – something which may be somehow less pleasant for the toad than the patient – or engage in graveside rituals holding eggs to provoke increased fertility, but this does not prevent them from bawdy 1970s flirting in a quintessentially British pub alongside precisely the expected quantities of booze. It does not appear accidental that the remnants of civilised life which appear to have survived this long in Summerisle's reversion to traditional concepts of faith and medicine are those which are associ-

ated – positively – with leisure, and also – more negatively – with addiction, and losses of self control.

A reclamation of magical thinking is particularly fundamental to the understanding of *The Wicker Man* as anti-civilisational text. Most famously put forward by Silvia Federici, but also argued convincingly by Hêlîn Asî amongst others, capitalism has a particular disdain for magic and magical thinking; the possibilities and flexibilities implied by magic run contrary to the reasonable, logical and legally enforced boundaries of capital and the state, and the potential for a force to be wielded by the individual without profit or control available to the state was unquestionably seen as beyond the pale. Magic, magical thinking, witchcraft, local medicine, et cetera, were therefore crushed with vengeance, bodies put to the flame in a historical mirror of Sergeant Howie's fate but with none of the affection, and primitive accumulation allowed the state to sweep all such concepts into its own grasp. While scholars have since disputed details in Federici's figures, they do

so ignorantly and ensorcelled by the magic of ideology; the numbers do not actually matter much at all – rather, the importance is on the concepts and movements.

With this in mind, how is a viewer of *The Wicker Man* to interpret the reintegration of magic and ritual, even in such a weakened and clumsy form as is shown in the movie, other than a signal of the state's grasp receding away from such areas of interest? Historical practice floods in to fill the gap; ideological re-wilding. In a now deleted scene, Howie is told explicitly that despite the number of telephone poles littering Summerisle, there is no connection to the system; 'the telephone hasn't worked here for years', he is told by Mrs. Morrison, and when he asks after the reason for this dilapidation he is brushed off with a mere explanation that it was left in disrepair due to laziness. Whether this is a slight element of humour or not is for debate, but it seems perhaps more likely that at least on some subconscious level this atrophy was allowed on purpose – after all, would electronic communica-

tion fit in with the remainder of Summerisle as presented in the film? Would constant, easy contact with the mainland allow for the transition towards an extremely different way of life? It is fair to question how much of the change would even be possible were there a continuous stream of messages from England proper; physical distance is no barrier for a statehood that, at time of filming, had already set men on the moon and, at time of writing, is sending billionaires into space for comedic sojourns with far too much fanfare and far too little flame. Rather, it seems contiguous with the wilting police presence, the faltering of the role of leadership, for the means of connection to propaganda and state bureaucracy to also fall to dust and time and for the residents of Summerisle to embrace such a decline.

Despite all this, there are some elements of civilization remaining in Summerisle. Howie's investigations are not entirely fruitless, and while the sergeant is ultimately caught up in the machinations of the island – the mystical power of the isle's libido

proving impossible for him to escape entirely – progress is certainly made by him with regards to unraveling the mystery he has arrived to solve. Discoveries are made and clues are found via the school, a visit to Lord Summerisle's manner, the exchange-system present in the pub. Put simply, Howie is able to gain a foothold in his analysis wherever remnants of recognisable state and capitalist systems remain. It is no mistake that the moment in which the police officer is overthrown and cast into fire is precisely the moment at which the people of Summerisle are away from the village, dressed in garb which is alien to modernity and order, and throwing law to the ground in front of the setting sun, watching over the water, not a school or prison or office to be seen. It is at this moment, when the people of the island see fit to abandon entirely the trappings of civilization, that they are able to extinguish the carceral instinct. Therein lies the didacticism of *The Wicker Man*. Just as the master's house will never fall prey to the master's tools, neither shall the restrictions of civilisation be evaded when

its constructs flourish; desire can only be truly freed when these things are cast into flame.

The contingency of civilised things is further exposed by the film's treatment of sexuality and gender. While somewhat clumsy in its depiction, there can be very little question of the open acknowledgment of sexuality and the freedoms of sexual practice differs starkly from the public self-image of Britain at the time; despite the famed experimentation of the 1960s, the 1970s saw the onset of a severe economic crisis and culminated with the election of one of the arch-villains of contemporary British life, Margaret Thatcher. Reeling from the liberalised 'radical' 60s, Britain was still unavoidably barreling towards a more conservative future, one which would be characterised by repression of overt and free sexual and gender expression – perhaps most well remembered today by Thatcher's introduction of the Section 28 towards the end of her tenure – it is difficult to imagine a more antithetical presentation of sexual norms than that offered in *The Wicker Man*. The

film, however, avoids the wanton lasciviousness that might be implied by such a contrary stance; while there is no doubt that this more lustful side of sexuality is present, most notably in any scene involving the innkeeper's daughter, Willow MacGregor, there are also neutral depictions of people engaging in intercourse openly in public, and positive depictions as children are taught of phallic symbolism in school with neither celebration nor condemnation.

Despite this, there is some room for concern. While not introduced to the viewer as a shy or withdrawn woman, the film's leering depictions of Willow MacGregor (depictions made even more concerning by the knowledge of the film's production, and the usage of body doubles unbeknownst to actress Britt Eklund for nude shots of MacGregor) cannot be ignored and it is clear that Summerisle has not yet shed all semblance of patriarchal expectations. That the schoolteacher is depicted as female and the landlord of the pub as male are not accidents – it would be easy to brush these things away as coincidence, or simply the real world expectations

of the production staff leaking into the otherworldly Summerisle, but the impact created by these facts do not go unnoticed upon repeat viewings. Perhaps it is simply a case of Summerisle not having yet had long enough to separate from the British cultural inheritance upon which it is built. Perhaps it is simply only a case of time being necessary to shed these social frameworks more completely. This is a matter for some debate, and yet, the only real implication given by the film to suggest this comes in the latter stages of the film: Lord Summerisle's abandonment of the gender binary.

Because even non-sexualised depictions of gender fall into question in *The Wicker Man*. Towards the end of the film, Lord Summerisle appears in ambiguous garb, his long hair and flowing robes certainly straying from his earlier presentation. The casting of Christopher Lee in the role plays a secondary role here – while Lee was certainly a high quality actor, he was also a typically male figure. The vast majority of his career roles – Georges Seurat in

Moulin Rouge, Count Dracula in vast numbers of Hammer Horror productions, Sir Henry Baskerville in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, and indeed that archetypal symbol of masculinity's mysticism, Grigori Rasputin in *Rasputin, The Mad Monk* – were staunchly male in presentation and Lee himself, with his low bass voice and towering height, seemed to embody many of Western society's trite and boring associations with manhood. Yet here, just as the rejection of civilisation is reaching its most overt moments, Lord Summerisle appears to have shed this depiction, to have become something *between* if not entirely *other*. This can be no accident and Sergeant Howie, in his smaller stature and higher tenor, clinging to his stable identity in the face of Summerisle's fluid presentation which still bares the traces of a more bold affirmation of that same identity – maleness – being cast away, appears all the more weakened for it.

That Sergeant Howie appears in this moment dressed as the Fool of the parade may serve for an object of some concern. Upon

first inspection, the hilarity of this is evident – led into constructing the circumstances of his own demise, obsessed by his written mission to investigate as a police figure and agent of the law, Howie has become caught up and captured. Not so much as a lamb to the slaughter as a near-voluntary sacrifice. Yet, the symbol of the Fool is a powerful one. Traditionally used in theatre and literature, the Fool was often given the responsibility of conveying unpopular truth, the plausible deniability granted by his supposed stupidity allowing for these ideas to be more palatable to an audience and perhaps less threatening to power at the same time. This conception of the Fool, perhaps embodied best by Shakespeare's magnificent Falstaff, creates a more dangerous and potentially reactionary undercurrent in this moment. Howie, the living symbol of Christian conservatism, here dressed as truth-teller in disguise? While the rest of the film would imply that this is merely coincidence, the idea is worth consideration, particularly as we consider the insidious consequences of cultural ideology leaking into the film from the culturally-bound humans who wrote and produced it

in the first place. Even our opportunities for rebellion may be tinged with fascist implication, for which an individual must always be alert.

Limited in vision by its time, as well as the practical aspects of film making and the lingering cultural ideology which hangs over all things made within any given system, *The Wicker Man* fails at parts to fully embrace these lines of thought. Inevitably, the most memorable moment of the film to many – the moment which contains the power latent within the rest of the piece – is that final scene in which pretense is lifted and the messaging moves from subtext to text. However, it precisely this cloak-and-dagger presentation which lends the film its power; by building a slow sense of unease and allowing Howie the illusion of successful logic, the surreality of the final moments becomes only more gripping and thrilling. There is no destruction which is not also creative, and in the death of the civilisational order the people of Summerisle are able to become beings of intensity and affect, enraptured together

in orgiastic splendour. The strength of *The Wicker Man* is its ability to funnel the viewer into perceiving this moment beyond the limits of the society in which they live; to provide a glimpse into a world which rejects the artificial nature of order and embraces that desire which lies beyond good and evil, and is instead irrevocably human.

Sumer is icumen in,

Loudly sing, cuckoo!

Grows the seed and blows the mead,

And springs the wood anew;

Sing, cuckoo!

Ewe bleats harshly after lamb,

Cows after calves make moo;

Bullock stamps and deer champs,

Now shrilly sing, cuckoo!

Cuckoo, cuckoo

Wild bird are you;

Be never still, cuckoo!

It is at this moment, when the people of the island see fit to abandon entirely the trappings of civilization, that they are able to extinguish the carceral instinct. Therein lies the didacticism of The Wicker Man. Just as the master's house will never fall prey to the master's tools, neither shall the restrictions of civilisation be evaded when its constructs flourish; desire can only be truly freed when these things are cast into flame.

Martius

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