

The Wicker Man, The Uncanny, and the Clash of Moral Cultures

Stefan Gullatz

In a seminal paper entitled 'The Uncanny' (1919), Freud defines the eponymous phenomenon as something familiar in the subject's history that has, however, become de-familiarised by repression, so that the encounter with the uncanny object appears to strike a chord in the subject's unconscious, while conscious perception somehow remains uncomprehending.¹ The fear induced by this object reverberates with a fear of castration, the initial agent of repression. Freud cites the Sand-Man in E. T. A. Hoffman's fairy tale, whose threat to the hero's eyes connotes, Freud asserts, an underlying castration anxiety.² Freud's originary coinage forges an intimate link between 'uncanniness' and subjective experiences of fear sparked through confrontation with assumedly forgotten past desires and practices which nonetheless bizarrely reappear in the present, deeply disquieting revenants; hopefully, seen in these terms, it becomes apparent - even at this early stage - that *The Wicker Man's* structuring premise makes it eminently readable as an 'uncanny' filmic text. However, in isolating the uncanny undercurrents of *The Wicker Man* (Hardy, 1973), we shall move beyond Freud's literal conception to encompass Lacan's notion of symbolic castration, the action by which the paternal metaphor of the Name-of-the-Father intervenes, subjecting the pre-existing Lacanian orders of the Real and the Imaginary to a radical revision.³

This essay will demonstrate how the pervasive atmosphere of the uncanny in *The Wicker Man* can be adduced as a retroactive signification of its 'phenomenal surface', a process whereby the attention of the viewer is captured by a range of 'phallic' details - sticking out from a deceptively ordinary surface - that cast a different light on the passage of events. These details either introduce 'abyssal' double meanings (meanings dependant on repressed desire, which have never been made explicit) or, alternatively, create new meanings. In other words, the uncanny dimension of the film rests on the fact that the initial, 'naïve' audience perception of it is supplemented with desire.

Let us begin with a brief excursion into Nicolas Roeg's *Don't Look Now* (1973), shown in conjunction with *The Wicker Man* at its London premiere, in order to illustrate the role of the symbolic in generating a sensation of *das Unheimliche*. The former's symbolic dimension crystallises in a prophecy, issued by a mysterious couple of elderly ladies who warn John Baxter - an architect who is pursuing a reconstruction assignment in a historic Venice church in the wake of the tragic death of his daughter - that he must leave immediately in order to avoid a danger to his life. The piercing blue eyes of one of the ladies are uncannily at odds with her blindness, suggesting that she is capable of seeing 'through' time. When Baxter is stabbed to death towards the end, the prophecy is fulfilled in a sudden outburst of murderous violence. This moment is 'overdetermined', insofar as it does not exhaust itself in the surface - the graphic assault - but also conveys a sense that Baxter has consummated his symbolic destiny, that his murder gives him his preordained place in the overall

¹ Freud, 'The Uncanny'.

² See Freud, 'The Uncanny', pp. 230-31. See also Gullatz, 'Exquisite Ex-timacy'.

³ For a detailed outline of the mechanism of retroversion in both subjectivity and signification, consider chapter 9 of Jacques Lacan's *Écrits*, 'The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious'.

scheme of things. The film is extraordinary in maintaining a high level of suspense throughout, which is a direct consequence of the sinister atmosphere, the unbearable feeling of brooding anticipation created by the prophecy. Yet, when it finally comes true, we are still not able to categorise the event; we cannot evade its profoundly disturbing and disorienting effect, which is rooted in the uncanny sense of an abrupt suspension of time. At this point, when all the threads are woven together and everything is resolved, the film imposes upon us the truly traumatic sense of a radical dislocation, a blurring of the boundaries between meaning and absurdity, time and eternity, and life and death that is condensed in a single instant.

In Lacanian terms, *Don't Look Now's* death scene describes the point where Baxter must acknowledge that the meaning that has been created in the 'capital Other' (the impenetrable, external circuit of the symbolic order), identifies his own most intimate truth. The moment of death is therefore paradoxically a moment of 'subjectification'. This, at first sight, provocative thesis is understood more clearly once we recall that Lacan had always been emphatically opposed to any notion of the subject as an autonomous self able to deliberately construct a narrative of his/her life. To Lacan subjectivity is understandable only with a view to the original symbolic castration of a narcissistic ego tightly circumscribed by being installed as an *object* in a pre-existing web of social and semantic relations, the consistency of which is guaranteed by the Other – the locus of speech represented in *Don't Look Now* by the ladies' prophecy. The subject of psychoanalytic theory is touched from the beginning by a profound recognition of limitation and mortality. Accordingly, the haunting image of Baxter's death, his 'I' snuffed out, with lifeless flesh all that is left occupying its former position, could be seen as an almost archetypal condensation of the Lacanian self drained and 'mortified' by its *subjection* to an oracular Other.

In ancient Greek mythology, we discern the same resonance triggered in the Other the moment a subject realises his symbolic destiny as can be found in modern film texts such as *Don't Look Now* and *The Wicker Man*. Accordingly, a brief detour to clarify the emergence of 'subject' in the myth of Oedipus might enhance, rather than digress from, this essay's proposed reading of Robin Hardy and Anthony Shaffer's celebrated horror classic.

The oracle's pronouncement that Oedipus will kill his father and sleep with his mother precedes a chain of events that serves to confirm this chilling prophecy. However, the crucial feature is not Oedipus' acting out of the prophecy as such, but rather the terrifying moment when he realises that he has fulfilled the 'word', the symbolic destiny that has been 'stalking' him. Only by fully identifying with the network of signifying traces that preceded him, prefiguring his existence before he was born, does he actualise himself as a subject. It is precisely through the act of seeing himself through the eyes of the Other, of internalising his fate, that he installs himself in the symbolic order.

We could argue, in a first approach, that the Summerislanders - taunting Howie with his accession to 'martyr' status within the particular symbolic order the latter so assiduously aligns himself with - produce similar signifying effects as the oracle in the ancient myth, and that both protagonists are linked insofar as their blinding, burning and banishment from the 'Kingdoms' (or in *The Wicker Man's* case, perhaps 'fiefdom' is better) they inhabit and think they can effectively 'police' reduces them to nothing at all.

The prediction of the oracle, which gives Oedipus his unique identity, materialises the signifying mechanism of the symbolic order. In other words, the prediction corresponds to Lacan's 'phallic metaphor', which is, in the final analysis, a 'fatal

signifier', signalling the limitation and finitude of the symbolic subject, nothing but the void that is left-over when all organic substance has been subtracted. Accordingly, Oedipus' subjectification depends upon an implied trajectory from his fate – an absurd contingency in the real, the confluence of natural causes and effects – towards his tragic destiny as the inner kernel of his being. A very similar analysis can be applied to *The Wicker Man*'s central protagonist, who, despite his apparently 'mundane' status, is in this sense broadly comparable to a tragic hero. According to Lacan, by installing himself in the Other, where the answer to the mystery of his being and sexual identity are expected, the subject articulates an implicit question: 'What am I there?':

It is a truth of experience for analysis that the subject is presented with the question of his existence, not in terms of the anxiety that it arouses at the level of the ego [...] but as an articulated question: 'what am I there?', concerning his sex and his contingency in being, namely that, on the one hand, he is a man or a woman, and on the other, that he might not be, the two conjugating their mystery, and binding it in the symbols of procreation and death.⁴

The abyss of this existential question, ostentatiously displayed in *Oedipus Rex*, also troubles Howie is, at *The Wicker Man*'s climax, about to face the forcible revelation of 'what I am' in the 'there' of Christian Heaven (assuming it is not 'nowhere').

However, we must now accomplish an additional turn of the screw and look beyond Howie's adherence to his Christian identity, to consider the way in which he is literally 'bound into' a symbolic order that is entirely foreign to him. For is it not the elaborate ruse of the islanders itself, the cunning trap they have laid out to lure Howie to his sacrificial death, that matches the symbolic significance of the oracle in the Oedipus myth? To see this, consider the fundamental incompleteness of the islanders' symbolic network, marked by an 'empty site' at its core; to match their requirement for a substantial sacrifice following a prolonged drought, they have set their eyes on a combined virgin, fool and king of a day who came willingly. Howie is inserted into this vacant site and becomes a *subject* in the islanders' symbolic network, in the precise Lacanian sense of the term: he is made to see himself as an object in the eyes of the Other, represented here by the empirical others of the islanders. Of course, Howie never in any way identifies with this role on a narcissistic level, but if both the myth of Oedipus and *The Wicker Man* reverberate strongly with a sense of the subject's original symbolic castration, it is in part because of these narratives' intuitive grasp of the way in which any socio-symbolic identity is *per se* alien.

If Howie has been walking around this trap with a false sense of security, this is because he failed to take account precisely of his own, subjective role. However, once he is placed inside the phallic statue of the wicker man and given to the ancient gods as a sacrificial offering, everything that has transpired must be subjected to a radical revision. This is apprehended by the viewer as an uncanny schism in the film's narrative, as if a hitherto 'invisible' parallel plot has suddenly emerged into full view. The audience is hereby provided with the ominous, 'true' answer to its desire for interpretation, thus satisfying its quest to make sense of the proceedings. Thus, the police investigation that seemed to be the substance of the film is reduced to a false

⁴ Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 194.

appearance, while the true symbolic meaning of events comes into sight as if in a sudden epiphany: the ultimate object of Howie's search is himself, not Rowan Morrison, and the loss of this object is precipitated only by his own libidinally charged quest. It turns out that everything Howie did formed part of islanders' scheme, which stands as a cipher for the external signifying mechanism of the symbolic order. The islanders' machinations produce a meaning that identifies Howie, yet from which he is also radically de-centered. Thus, the outlines of an oracular pronouncement – curiously placed at the *end* of the narrative – come into focus as Howie is identified with the phallic/fatal signifier that marks him as an objectified nothing, a void in the Other. The harrowing image of the burning effigy is therefore superimposed with a sense that Howie consummates his symbolic destiny only by having his own desire, to find the missing girl, diverted into the desire of the Other. Howie's sacrifice is an image of the uncanny par excellence: a re-staging of the subject's primordial access to meaning and identity that can be acquired only through symbolic castration.

In film, a sense of the uncanny is always produced by a dislocation, either in terms of a historic or a spatial dimension that is focalised in a single object, thereby reflecting the dislocation introduced into the subject by the phallic signifier.⁵ The trajectory whereby Howie is constituted as a subject only by the imposed identification with an object that has always already been lost (himself) could be conceived as the 'main artery' of the film from which flow a range of secondary level uncanny superimpositions and dislocations.

The islanders' parochial culture has a surface appearance, which in many respects does not differ so much from what we would expect from an isolated island community in the West Highlands. Everyday life with its division of labour – fishermen, agricultural workers, an inn-keeper, a post-office official, a teacher, etc., who go about their daily business – captures the typical social life of a remote agrarian community, so that we often require a second glance before we get the impression that something is amiss. Yet, as Howie proceeds with his investigation exploring different layers of the island culture, he consistently comes across a small, phallic detail, a strange object that 'sticks out' and upsets the outward appearance of tranquility. For instance, the islanders continue to bury their dead in the churchyard in the traditional fashion, yet there is the incongruous image of a tree sticking out from each grave, which is related to the Pagan idea of the transmutation of the corpse into another organic form of life, thus implicitly dismissing any Christian conception of a resurrection of the soul.

And as Howie visits the local school, we see the familiar image of a teacher facing her class of children neatly stacked up behind tidy rows of desks. Here, the phallic detail does not enter in terms of any visual effect, but rather on a discursive level. A student is a little embarrassed when she cannot answer the teacher's question on the symbolic significance of the maypole; the eagerness of the rest of the class to volunteer the explanation – that it is a phallic symbol – produces a hilariously comical effect, precisely because the surplus enjoyment that a social institution like a school is designed to keep at bay subverts institutional discourse, rendering the scene charmingly incongruous. Finally, while the merry pub scene close to the beginning may have been too much for uptight Sergeant Howie, the boisterous celebration is

⁵ This sentence and portions of the introductory paragraph have been adopted from Gullatz, 'Exquisite Ex-timacy'.

perfectly within the bounds of an island's social life. It is only the juxtaposition of this scene with the copulating humans and snails outside that renders it uncanny.

In all these instances, the protuberance of the phallic element that hints at a hidden excess of enjoyment is tied to the film's narrative of nature's exuberant, burgeoning fertility. In this pagan perspective, an unbridled will to enjoyment drives the natural universe, as expounded both by the teacher and Lord Summerisle, who explains the islanders' return to the 'old Gods' to an incredulous Howie. The 'old Gods' supplement the ordinary, external appearance of the island community with the intimation of an uncanny surplus within the community, an object that exceeds it, that is 'in the community more than the community itself'. Effectively, the islanders pose a problem that is akin to the central theme of the *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Kaufman, 1978), where unfeeling alien organisms – embodying the register of drives – take on a human form and thus blend in perfectly with the rest of society. In *Body Snatchers* also, the uncanny effect hinges on the supposition of an excessively exuberant organic substratum that is deemed to lie beneath the outwardly ordinary aliens, which is underscored by the soundtrack which is composed of an eerie, thumping heartbeat and grotesque mucus related sounds suggesting the environment of an embryo in the womb. In *The Wicker Man*, however, there is an additional twist, insofar as the Pagan enclave that has somehow assimilated to the appearance of its mundane Christian host culture is not a spatially extraneous, but rather a 'temporal' Other. The blurring and superimposition of the two cultures is all the more uncannily strange because it confronts us with our own past, our own descent from pagan origins.

At its climax towards the end of the film, this temporal dislocation is ratcheted up to the point where the uncanny is transfigured into the sublime. Thus, just as we have productively traced the 'intellectual etymology' of uncanniness, so to better inform a reading of *The Wicker Man*, the same can be done with reference to seminal framings of 'sublimity'.

In the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Immanuel Kant defined the sublime via its partial convergence with beauty, from which it can be differentiated precisely, insofar as the sublime object (e.g. the sea) is apprehended as 'formless', and as having no limits. Crucial to the Kantian sublime is the incapacity of the mind, thus struck with awe, to find an appropriate correlative in the imagination to the sublime feeling. Accordingly, Kant states that the sublime 'shows a faculty of the mind surpassing every standard of sense'.⁶ In *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* (1994), J.-F. Lyotard re-cast this notion in postmodern terms, describing the 'abyss' between imagination and reason characteristic of the Kantian sublime as a 'differend'. The sublime here reveals itself to be related to the uncanny, a confluence which has been captured by Thomas Huhn who, in a review of Lyotard's *Lessons*, described the sublime as 'the uncanny attempt by subjectivity to feel something other than itself'.⁷

The boisterous, concluding scenes of *The Wicker Man* should be re-read in the light of these ideas. Consider Howie's research of historic paganism in the island's parochial library, which yields a book illustrating the masquerade of carnivalesque pagan rituals. There are hints that remnants of the May festivities survive in some areas, albeit stripped of their real substance involving human sacrifice, and just as he leaves the library and we are back outside, the illustrations from the book appear to have come miraculously alive, populating the streets in an astonishing display of

⁶ Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, p. 110.

⁷ Huhn, Review of Lyotard's *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, p. 91.

pagan revelry. This juxtaposition strikes a note not only of terror, but also of timelessness, as if the bizarre pagan community, with its cult of human sacrifice, were to be somehow understood as an uncanny ‘other’ of modernity. However, the spectacle of the islanders’ display must remain incommensurable with the Idea it is alluding to, which is why the film’s colorful concluding scenes provoke in the viewer an effect of the sublime, instigating in him/her a search for an ‘absolute comprehension’. The superimposition of the book’s symbolic explanations with the contemporaneous image of the costumed revelers hints at the supremely menacing possibility that the long lost real substance of these rituals, the surplus enjoyment of human sacrifice which is strictly forbidden by Western civilization, describes a metaphysically real category. In *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887) Nietzsche has captured the terrible essence of joyous pagan rituals in a manner that seems closely related to the perspective taken in *The Wicker Man*:

The Gods viewed as the friends of *cruel* spectacles – how deeply this primeval concept still penetrates our European civilization! [...] No cruelty, no feast, that is what the oldest and longest period of history teaches us – and punishment too has such very strong *festive* aspects!⁸

Thus, some of the momentum and dramatic tension in *The Wicker Man* is created by the confrontation between its neo-Pagan and Christian perspectives. What then defines the key difference between the Christian and the Pagan horizons? According to Slavoj Žižek, the Pagan universe must be conceived as an organic whole that is sustained by the eternal recurrence of disturbed and re-balanced global forces. While the Pagan perspective identifies anything that contributes to maintaining the balance with Good, correspondingly any factor that causes a disruption of the homeostasis is seen as Evil. A natural disaster afflicting a community, affecting crops and livelihood, would therefore instinctively be linked to a disturbed balance of the universal organism, so that any redress of the situation will revolve around the restoration of the natural equilibrium. For example, Gods representing natural forces – such as Nuada, the Goddess of the Sun in *The Wicker Man* – would then have to be appeased with animal or human sacrifices. In perfect analogy to the conception of the universe as a balanced organism, society is conceived as an organic whole, a natural hierarchy in which each member occupies his assigned place. Any individual who is dissatisfied with his place would upset the global social balance and would therefore represent the supreme evil. Žižek argues that the emergence of Christianity designates a radical derailment of the Pagan balance, a decoupling of social organisation from any kind of organic conception. Christianity opens up the horizon under which ancient, monolithic hierarchies could be destabilised, under which social progress with an emphasis on the individual and individual rights became possible. According to Žižek:

The very core of pagan Wisdom lies in its insight into the cosmic balance of hierarchically ordered Principles – more precisely, into the eternal circuit of the cosmic catastrophe (derailment) and the restoration of order through just punishment. [...] Christianity (and, in its own way, Buddhism)

⁸ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, pp. 46, 48.

introduced into this global, balanced cosmic Order a principle that is totally foreign to it, a principle which, measured by the standards of pagan cosmology, cannot but appear as a monstrous distortion: the principle according to which each individual has immediate access to universality (of nirvana, of the Holy Spirit, or, today, of human rights and freedoms).⁹

We see this reflected in the way in which Howie, the Christian individual with a conception of individual rights (for instance those of the ostensibly missing girl), is pitted against an organic social group. In the following, we subject the distinct Pagan and Christian conceptions of evil to a closer scrutiny. Žižek argues that the pre-Christian, Pagan universe is distinguished by the ‘suffocating’ absence of radical evil. To apprehend this, let us embark on a brief detour outlining the philosophical distinction between pathological and radical evil, in order to explain better the islanders’ actions at the climax of the film.

In the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) Kant’s notion of evil is still dependent on, and relative to, his construct of the moral law.¹⁰ Accordingly, he regards evil not as intrinsic to a transcendent ethical imperative, an ‘in itself’ like the good, but a mere weakness, a pathological deviation from the pursuit of the categorical imperative. In other words, evil is but a ‘pathological stain’ on the moral law. As man is forever bound to the law, he is imbued with an innate goodness, and evil arises only when, at some point, the sublimity of the law becomes tainted with the stain of passionate desire. By *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793), Kant holds a more pessimistic view. He no longer regards evil as an occasional, pathological deviation, but rather as radical, as lying at the ‘root’ of human nature:

In view of what has been said above, the proposition, Man is *evil*, can mean only that he is conscious of the moral law but has nevertheless adopted into his maxim the (occasional) deviation thereof. He is evil by *nature* means but this, that evil can be predicated of man as a species – not that such a quality can be inferred from the concept of his species (that is, of man in general) – for then it would be necessary; but rather that from what we know of man through experience, we cannot judge otherwise of him, or that we may presuppose evil to be subjectively necessary to every man, even the best. Now this propensity must itself be considered as morally evil, yet not as a supernatural disposition but rather as something to be imputed to man, and consequently it must consist in maxims of the will which are contrary to the Law.¹¹

We could point to the common intuition that however charitable in principle, most people are inclined to take a secret delight in the misfortune of others, even close friends, and are almost always disposed to indulge in a sense of triumph at the defeat of an enemy. In his bleak view of human nature, Kant posits an ingrained propensity

⁹ Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*, p. 120.

¹⁰ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*.

¹¹ Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, p. 27.

for evil that is no longer simply a pathological deviation, but a pathological stain on the very fabric of the universe itself.¹²

The later Kant's perception of evil was radicalised by Schelling, the nineteenth-century nature philosopher and Idealist, who came to regard evil as a dark force that emerges from a 'perverted unity of Existence and Ground'.¹³ This notion is tied to a definition of man as the unity of an obscure, natural Ground that anchors his being with the light of Existence, by which Schelling means his spiritual side. According to Schelling, Evil cannot be apprehended by focusing on the two strands in isolation, i.e. by considering only nature, the pre-human Ground that has not yet achieved self-illumination, or a Spirit free from material involvement. The possibility of Evil exists because in man Existence and Ground, spirit and nature, are combined. A necessary condition for man's sentient existence, nature must, however, remain submerged as the underlying ground that facilitates his being; it has to be dominated by reason or light. If this natural unity is perverted, and Ground, a neutral quantity of pure being in its pre-spiritual state, is 'self-illuminated', raised to the level of spirit or logos, it acquires the status of a will which 'has found itself', a ferocious will which wills nothing but itself. According to Schelling, this is the source of a perversion: in evil, normal animal egotism is 'spiritualised' expressing itself in the medium of the Word. We are no longer dealing with an obscure drive but with a Will which has finally 'found itself'.¹⁴

These notions can be elucidated through the context of Schelling's philosophy of nature. Schelling was originally influenced by the pantheistic philosophy of Benedictus (Baruch) Spinoza, who equated the natural world with a divine substance, but then departed from Spinoza by 'dynamising' his static conception of the world as an all-encompassing object, superimposing upon it Johann Gottlieb Fichte's dialectical construction of consciousness, of the thinking and willing 'I'. The key to Schelling's vision is this transference of the evolution of an individual consciousness onto the world as a whole which leads to the conception of an animated cosmos which is 'organic' at its core, even in all of its apparently non-organic manifestations (matter, gravity etc.). The world itself then becomes a quasi-subject participating in a mode of 'preconscious organisation', with a teleological orientation towards consciousness that is, however, only fully realised only in man. In his *Weltalter* drafts, Schelling then posits a kind of 'unconscious' within God, an archaic, preconscious rotary motion of drives that functions as the dark Ground into which he 'contracts' his being – and thereby becomes actual – yet from which he must then establish a proper distance in order to achieve the full light of freedom and self-identity.¹⁵

Thus, it becomes clear why evil definitely had to be of positive substance for Schelling, why he could not abide by the classical Augustinian, or the early Kantian view, of evil as a mere negative, an absence of the good. In nature *per se*, self-recognition of Existence has not yet been attained – the 'Light of Existence' in nature

¹² For a comprehensive review of contemporary perspectives on the issue of 'radical evil', consider Copjec, *Radical Evil*.

¹³ Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, pp. 63-7. In his analysis, Žižek relies on two key texts by Schelling: *The Weltalter (Ages of the World)* (1811-15) and *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom and Related Matter*.

¹⁴ Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, p. 63.

¹⁵ This dialectic of contraction and subsequent 'rejection-expulsion' by a free Absolute describes the essence of Schelling's view of the stages, or ages, of the world in his *Weltalter* drafts.

prior to the emergence of man remains merely implicit. But because man experiences in himself the unity of spirit and nature, he is able to posit their difference. He is aware of 'being split between the obscure vortex of natural drives and the spiritual bliss of logos'.¹⁶ As the only physical being with genuine freedom, man is placed at the apex of nature – his freedom replicates, for the first time, the freedom of the Absolute as such. Accordingly, he 'looks into the abyss' feeling within him motivations that pull him in the directions of good and evil equally, and through his inevitable (a-temporal and free) ethical choice, the nature of his character is determined. Both good and evil thus crystallise only in man as the singular point of unity of Existence and Ground, but Evil represents a perverted unity, or a perturbed tautology where 'centre is no longer centre'. Whereas Good designates a harmonious unity of Existence and its Ground – a reasoned balance between the spiritual and the sensual (under the power of the spiritual) – Evil transforms this harmony into a fanatical disposition. The shift occurs when Ground becomes self-illuminated and usurps the *logos*, the rightful centre, when the hitherto 'unconscious' ferocity of nature is spiritualised and begins to express itself in the medium of the Word. The essence of radical evil according to Schelling is thus the 'purest' conceivable form of spirituality – a diabolical will which wills only itself, destructively opposing itself towards everything outside of itself, even Ground *per se*.

In the light of this complex philosophical framework, it can be seen that *The Wicker Man* presents a meditation on Christian and other attempts to apprehend the nature of Evil far more sophisticated than mere recourse to audience provocation and titillation via the onscreen depiction of 'shocking' pagan revels. Crucially, this philosophical hermeneutic allows us to see precisely what differentiates *The Wicker Man's* 'innocent' pagan revels from the sinister excesses of Hammer horror satanic covens, exemplified, amongst others, by *The Devil Rides Out* (Fisher, 1968). In terms of Schelling's model of God, Summerisle's dark grounds of preconscious desire - the pagan enclave's uncanny inhabitation of ancestors' cosmological and geographical terrain - appear 'ethically neutral', given the strong sense that this community *exhausts itself* within a natural Ground claustrophobically enclosed, thereby disallowing any possibility of radical evil. By contrast, Terence Fisher's *The Devil Rides Out*, strongly influenced by Aleister Crowley's opposition to the monotheistic God, represents a Luciferian illumination of dark urges and basic instincts into a self-consciously evil disposition.

Returning to the psychoanalytic paradigm that formed this essay's point of departure, it should be noted that the Idealist concepts Ground and Existence conform closely to the Lacanian registers of the real and the symbolic, so Schelling's notions can be translated into Lacanian terms: Evil can occur only within the context of a symbolic universe, its possibility being opened up by a minimal distance separating the symbolic order from the real inscribed or re-duplicated therein. This creates the potential for a disjunction between the paternal metaphor of the Name-of-the-Father and the actual, empirical person occupying its site. Thus, someone who is not the natural father may nonetheless perform the function of the paternal metaphor, i.e. the phallic signifier on which the symbolic universe is suspended: 'For that precise reason, evil can occur only within the symbolic universe: it designates the gap between a real entity and its symbolic *reduplicatio*, so that it can best be defined as a

¹⁶ Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, p. 64.

perturbed tautology – in Evil, ‘father is no longer Father’ or ‘Centre is no longer centre’.¹⁷

Thus, only modern traditions facilitated by a monotheistic faith impute to man a kind of evil depth, absent from primordial communities that are closer to nature, that remain embedded in the circuit of the eternal return of natural cycles and have therefore not yet been projected onto a historical teleology. The pagan universe could therefore be defined precisely by the absent horizon of radical, or diabolical, evil. According to Nietzsche, ‘man first became an *interesting animal* on the foundation of that *essentially dangerous* form of human existence, the priest, [...] and the human soul became *deep* in a higher sense and turned *evil* for the first time’.¹⁸ If we take this analysis seriously, a factor not only in *The Wicker Man*’s uncanny atmosphere, but also its artistic integrity suddenly comes into sight. Is not the joyful exuberance of the Pagan rituals of the islanders that involve the killing of a fellow human being, without, however, any trace of radical evil, existentially false? Paganism, in its original, historical form, will indeed have been ‘something like that’, which is not to suggest that the film reflects the practice with any ethnographic accuracy, but that it correctly apprehends the absence of a sense of radical evil. However, in modern, secular societies, the Christian conception of evil persists, informing a prevailing attitude towards violent crime that could not fail to filter through to any Pagan subculture. In other words, in a modern context, neo-Pagan ritualistic killings could never be undertaken without an accompanying sense of depravity. Examples that could be cited in support of this hypothesis include the neo-Pagan barbarism of Germany’s National Socialism, the fusion of a modern industrial society with an archaic deification of Nature, now universally regarded as evil.

Yet, the sublime-uncanny effect of *The Wicker Man*, which transports the original, *real* thing into our age, depends precisely on this falsity. Imagine what a lesser director from the Hammer Studios would have done to the film, if he had been commissioned to translate the script by Anthony Shaffer; how hard he would have found it to resist the temptation to attribute to the islanders a satanic Evil.

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¹⁷ Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, p. 66.

¹⁸ Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morality*, p. 18.

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