

**IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF *THE WICKER MAN*:
PERSONAL MYTHOPOESIS AND THE
PROCESSES OF CULT FILM FANDOM**

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Abstract

In contemporary cult film scholarship, the experiences of cult fans are too often subject to scholarly speculation rather than empirical observation, and tend to be limited to certain kinds of audience responses - deviant, rebellious, subversive. Even in instances where actual cult fans have been considered at all, scholars have largely produced synchronic snapshots rather than insights derived from sustained programmes of audience research. This study focuses on a faction of the increasingly visible cult following which has emerged in recent years around the British film *The Wicker Man*. Drawing on the personal testimonies of eight enduring fans of the film, I explicate and explore the range of experiences and complex processes involved in becoming and remaining a fan of *The Wicker Man*.

I develop an approach to cult film fandom which aims to provide an account of the origins and evolution of a specific cult film formation. Combining textual analysis with a rich body of ethnographic research I collected over eight years, I tease out the complexities of the film's initial import for these fans and proceed to examine how their relationships with the film develop over time. In the meantime, I engage with a number of under-explored and uncharted concepts of cult which include issues relating to personal resonance, aesthetic experiences, affects, as well as the quasi-religious dimension.

The main argument of the study is that the cult film experience can be perceived as a form of personal mythopoesis – a process which engages the individual in modes of personal and collective mythmaking, and within which the integrity and coherence of the self is at stake. Drawing on theories in cognitive psychology and concepts originating from within personal mythology, I develop an original model of cult fan subjectivity which foregrounds the self's preconscious and experiential dimensions. Demonstrating the significance of generational factors and cultural location, I propose to show how the respondents in my study share a preconscious disposition to *The Wicker Man*.

My study explicates and explores the relationship between cult film fandom and the mythmaking process by focusing on three specific trajectories through which the fan-text relationships analysed here develop. The first explores the formative experiences of these fans, emphasising early cultural investments which share aesthetic and thematic links with *The Wicker Man* and which predispose them to the film in a number of complex and fascinating ways. The second trajectory centres on the fans' initial encounters with the film, paying close attention to the aesthetic experiences they undergo and proceeding to observe the trace manifestations of these experiences in subsequent fan practices beyond the viewing context. The final trajectory examines the ways in which the fans continue to interact with the film over time, and discusses elements of their identities and experiences which uniquely position them in relation to *The Wicker Man's* dialectical treatment of myth. The conclusion draws together the main findings of the study and considers the relationship between personal mythopoesis, cult fandom and the processes of individuation to argue for ways of understanding cult mythopoesis in terms of a religious process.

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Dedication

*For my son, Simon, whose own story is filled with love, light and
laughter*

Introduction

If you want to know me, then you must know my story,
for my story defines who I am

(Dan P. McAdams, 1993:1).

‘Every concept tells a story’ (Kearney, 1998: 16) and the story of cult, as conceptualised in academia, has focused primarily on the concept of transgression; in terms of both the subversive elements of texts which accrue cult status, and in the perceived contravention of normative social and cultural boundaries enacted by the fans who celebrate them. Typically, it is the ‘mainstream’ – in all of its various incarnations¹ – which is the designated norm against which cultism defines itself. If there is an overriding belief about mainstream culture, however, it is the view that it is restrictive, mundane, and conformist. In its persistent violation of the codes and conventions that govern dominant forms of cinema, and in its challenge to the conservative ideologies they serve to uphold, cult cinema not only creates a welcomed space for the celebration of something different to the mainstream, it also provides the potential for subcultural forms of opposition.

Influential though the above narrative has proven to be in cult film studies, it is one I wish to rethink here precisely because I have found it to be empirically flawed and more reflective of academic objectives than a valid representation of the actual experiences of non-academic fans. Moreover, the relentless reproduction of this narrative amounts to the containment of differing forms of cultural expression, and precludes the possibility and exploration of a range of cult manifestations in all their particularities. As Peter Hutchings asserts, for the most part cult scholarship ‘has obscured the specificity of localized “cult” responses to particular objects in favour of constructing a broader picture of resistance and transgression’ (2003: 128). In the chapters which follow, I will be more concerned to understand cultism as it expresses itself in practice, rather than in the particular wishes and aspirations of theorists. Cult, after all, is traditionally defined by its special audience following, a fact few critics would be prepared to contest. It therefore follows that, in order to

understand more about film cultism, it is essential to prioritise the personal narratives of the fans themselves.

This study takes as its central focus the stories of eight enduring fans of the British cult film *The Wicker Man* (dir. Robin Hardy, 1973) in order to chart their particular experiences. In so doing, it brings to the surface a manifestation of film cultism which reflects only superficial similarities to the prevailing line of thinking in contemporary cult film scholarship. In their accounts of where the film's difference and appeal lies, many fans articulate what might be deemed as anti-mainstream sentiments. For example, the film is often admired by these fans for its narrative and thematic departures from dominant forms of cinema, and nowhere was this clearer than in the overwhelming negative response to Neil LaBute's (2006) Hollywood remake of the film (Ashurst 2007). It was also quite common for fans to express an investment in unconventional ideologies, and this was largely reflected in their discussions of the film's representation of an alternative British national identity (see Chapter 3), as well as its treatment of religion (see Chapter 5).

But an altogether more fundamental response was occurring here. Firstly, all of the participants in my study expressed a belief in the idea that the film – its themes, ideas, and especially its imagery – is somehow a part of who they feel themselves to be, and that finding the film awakens a profound sense of self. Their experiences with the film are characterised by an 'inexplicable familiarity', which is to say that there is a strong sense of the film piquing memories, feelings and sensations which cannot quite be placed but which carry a powerful affective charge for these fans. Secondly, each of the respondents described undergoing a powerful aesthetic experience with the film, particularly during the initial encounter. Moreover, they appear to be acutely attuned to an aesthetic quality in the text which is not readily accessible to most, and which induces magical feelings. Even though the film bears many of the major hallmarks typically attributed to the cult text – it disrupts narrative and generic conventions and expectations, it articulates a counter-cultural ideology – my findings suggest that their initial experiences with the film are characterised by fluidity, coherence and the multi-sensorial. Curiously, fan accounts of these experiences are marked by a shared idiom, and it was common for fans to use expressions such as feeling themselves 'drawn in', 'enraptured', 'stirred' and

'captivated' by the film. Significantly, the textual details fans often singled out as particularly affecting, absorbing and sensory stimulating were often those that one might objectively expect to actually thwart emotional involvement (see Chapter 4).

So profound are the affective and aesthetic experiences for these fans that the earlier phases of their fandoms appear driven by a quest to understand, as well as to re-live, the film's initial import. More than this though, I was able to discern how these experiences went on to influence their specific readings of the film, gave shape and content to their fan practices, and coloured their perceptions of their own unfolding relationship to it. Moreover, during the six year period I spent in close contact with these fans, I was able to observe subtle and, at times, enormous changes in their relationships to the film. I saw that, through their ongoing engagements with it, these fans underwent a shift in perceptions, interpretations, and sensibilities – a transformation of the self that the fans implied was emotionally, intellectually and spiritually progressive (see Chapter 5).

Clearly, there is something more vital taking place here, something that goes well beyond the surface, wholly conscious pleasures afforded by the film's transgressions. These cult fandoms emerge out of an essentially affective encounter with the text, from which they go on to develop into long-standing, passionate attachments which are ultimately transformational. How is this process to be understood? Where do its affective roots lie? What accounts for the similarity and intensity of these fans' aesthetic experiences?

The group of fans analysed here form that which I will refer to as a 'relatively spontaneous cult formation'. They did not appear to belong to a particular interpretive community, nor did they lay claim to a specific subcultural identity (e.g., Pagan) prior to becoming a fan of the film. In all cases, they had little or no previous knowledge of the film before they viewed it first. In short, it was difficult to pinpoint a specific frame of reference which might have granted these fans a point of entry into the film, and harder still to account for the intense responses and prolonged attachments they have subsequently forged. During the initial phase of my research, I was concerned to ask fans their particular reasons for becoming and being a fan of the film. I wanted to gain a sense of what the film meant to them, how and why they

invested so much of their time and energy in it. I soon realised, however, that this line of questioning was inadequate. Most fans, I discovered, were vague about the exact motivations for continuing to engage with the film, and were even less clear about the reasons they became a fan in the first place. The more I listened to fans, and the more I got to know them, the more I began to realise the extent to which they felt themselves compelled to embrace the film. Thus, the more pressing question, I realised, was this: What are the generative mechanisms and sustaining factors underpinning the spontaneous cult formation?

My answer, in essence, is that it is determined and maintained by the largely unseen mythmaking processes involved in the construction and reconstruction of the self. Each individual creates and develops throughout their lifetime a 'personal myth' (Feinstein, 1979, 1997; Feinstein & Krippner, 1988; McAdams, 1993), a story constructed out of the fragments of childhood experiences (McAdams, 1993) which goes on to influence the choices made in adulthood. The personal myth is endlessly reworked across the stages of the life course, and is periodically revised so as to accommodate new experiences and resolve intrapersonal conflicts. It is central to the ongoing psychosocial task of reconciling time-honoured beliefs with the changing realities of outer experience (Feinstein, 1979, 1997).

I argue that the respondents' personal myths predispose them to *The Wicker Man* in a number of complex and fascinating ways. Whilst certain cultural experiences shared by these fans in their formative years influence the affective and aesthetic experiences they undergo with the film, the changing socio-historical milieu in which they grew up renders them especially susceptible to the cultural myths the film mobilises. Moreover, whilst the former triggers in these fans a new and intense phase of personal mythmaking, their relationship with it is not entirely unproblematic. The film may offer them the tools for revising their personal stories, but in other ways it thwarts and contradicts this process. Through their ongoing negotiations with the text, these fans are forced to confront and negotiate some of their innermost beliefs and values.

The term I use in referring to this process is 'personal mythopoesis'. 'Mytho-*poesis*', as Harry Slochower asserts, derives its name 'from the Greek word *poiein*, meaning

to make, to create' (1970: 15). In its usage in literary studies, the term refers to the deliberate interventions of writers into a given culture's mythologies intent on revitalising and reworking them so as to accommodate the changing beliefs and values of a society at a given time. Moreover, works of literary mythopoesis, Slochower asserts, emerge 'in periods of crisis and cultural transition', and 'when faith in the authoritative structure is waning'. They 'redeem the values of the past and present in their *symbolic* form, transposing their historic transitoriness into permanent promises' (1970: 15, original emphasis). My concern in this study is to explicate and explore an inadvertent variant of this process as it occurs at the level of the individual. Through the processes of personal mythopoesis, I argue, the film is transformed into an object of awe and trust – a cult object.

The Audience Study

My argument is applied to a particular faction of *Wicker* fans, and so it is not my intention herein to offer an account of the film's widespread appeal *per se*. Indeed, the cult of *The Wicker Man* is large and heterogeneous; its appeal traverses national, cultural and generational boundaries, and it is admired by both male and female viewers. Whilst the film has a long-established following in Britain and America, it is increasingly becoming an object of cult focus in other countries, including Australia and especially France. Moreover, the film is appropriated differently by a number of specific interpretive communities and subcultures. For example, as a cultural artefact of the early 1970s, it has some resonance for the retro-gaze.² Its treatment of unorthodox religious practices has earned it high esteem in the Pagan community,³ whilst its accomplished musical score has been a genuine source of inspiration for musicians in diverse genres⁴ and music festival goers.⁵ Furthermore, it has proved to be a genuine source of inspiration in other areas of popular culture, and one can find references to it in a host of contemporary film and television texts.⁶ In short, the film has become a cultural phenomenon in its own right over the past four decades. Whilst interesting in itself, an attempt to explain its widespread influence is well beyond the scope of my concerns in this study.

The audience research is comprised of two components: a 'focal' and a 'peripheral' study. The focal study can be characterised as a sustained and longitudinal

investigation of eight enduring fans of the film. As Table 1.1 illustrates, the main participants are predominantly British and of a similar age (median age: 41). There is a higher male to female ratio and the sample is exclusively white (see Chapter 2 for further comments).

Table 1.1 Demographic profiles of the main participants

Name	Gender	Ethnic origin/ Nationality	Age in 2006*
Tim	M	White British	44
Kevin	M	White British	42
Felicity	F	White Scottish	41
Gemma	F	White British	41
Jen	F	White British	40
Chris	M	White British	39
Adrian	M	White British	37
Sadara	M	White Australian	36

*2006 marks the final stage of the audience study

Through sustained correspondence and interviews conducted over a period of six and, in some cases, eight years I was able to obtain biographical and life history information from the main participants (see Appendix 5). Moreover, by accompanying many of them on visits to the filming locations and in watching the film in their company, I was granted a privileged insight not only into their viewing strategies, but also their personal beliefs and feelings. In addition, I gathered information on their religious and political beliefs, as well as their taste preferences, including those cultivated by the texts they avidly consumed in childhood.

The ‘peripheral’ study comprises information drawn from a total of eighty seven questionnaire responses (see Appendices 2-4) and an unquantifiable number of unsolicited letters, emails (see Appendix 7) and images (see Appendix 10) I have received from fans since 1998. In the September of the same year, I launched the first issue of *Nuada*, a journal dedicated to *The Wicker Man* and committed to providing a forum for fan expression and discussion. A further two issues were

produced in 1999 and 2000, and in January 1999 I launched a website devoted to the venture. My involvement with *Nuada* brought me into contact with *Wicker* fans from all over the world. Where appropriate, I draw on their narratives as means of comparison with the focal sample, which is not to say the research presented herein constitutes a sustained exercise in comparative analysis. Rather, I use the broader sample to indicate significant overlaps and consistencies with the focal data.

Whilst the focal study cannot be taken as representative of the wider sample, two aspects of these data are significant and deserve special attention. Firstly, the large majority of fans tend to be aged between 30 and 45. Notably, moreover, the link between the more ardent expression of *Wicker* fandom and this precise age group has been observed elsewhere.⁷ Secondly, a large number of fans demonstrated having had an early investment in Gothic/horror fiction, and British horror in particular. In both the focal study and the wider sample, it was highly common for fans to say that British horror films and related television was something they ‘grew up with’. The ‘British horror factor’ thus provides a consistent variable across the data. I argue that both of these trends can be identified as significant factors in determining how and why these individuals, and not others, are especially receptive to *The Wicker Man*.

An underlying argument here is that *The Wicker Man* registers differently across generational boundaries, even more so than that of gender, class or national divides. This I realised, was evident in, for example, the pleasure younger viewers from all walks of life take in laughing at the film’s dated fashions, thus mirroring that variant of Seventies nostalgic discourse which looks back on the period as ‘the decade that taste/style forgot’ (Hunt, 1998: 1). This attitude, however, stands in sharp contrast to that of the fans in focus here, where the film’s camp or dated aspect was much more likely to be marginalised or else fervently denied. Unlike those younger viewers who find it difficult to get past the film’s dated fashions, for the age group analysed here the film is typically said to be ‘timeless’ and ‘self-defining’. I was also able to observe responses to the film from fans above the age of 45. Although these fandoms were often no less passionate than the age group studied here, it was nonetheless rare for the experiences of older fans to translate into a spiritual one or else catalyse an active quest for meaning. Nor did they undergo the type of aesthetic and transformational experiences which were characteristic of the 30-45 age range.

The significance of the participants in the focal study belonging to the generation born between 1961 and 1979 (often referred to as 'Generation X') suggests a need to explore aspects of the specific social and cultural milieu within which they grew up. There is a long tradition of generational analysis in the social sciences, beginning with Karl Mannheim's (1927) essay, 'The Problem of Generations'. Individuals belonging to the same generation, Mannheim asserts, share 'a certain characteristic mode of thought and experience, and a characteristic type of historically relevant action' (1927: 291). In this study, generational experience is taken to be a factor of utmost importance, not only in shaping and characterising an individual's mode of thinking and feeling, but also that which predisposes them to experiencing specific conflicts of identity across the life stages, as well as in the face of social change. As I developed a closer relationship with the respondents over time, it became clear to me that the conventional models of religion they grew up with (see Appendix 5), as well as the rapidly changing landscape of religious practices from the late 1960s onwards, helped to create a set of conditions which I believe are integral to understanding how these respondents experience and appropriate the film (see Chapter 5).

Similarly, I found strong and intriguing evidence to suggest that the British horror texts these fans consumed in childhood and early adolescence accounts for one of the ways in which they are emotionally and imaginatively predisposed to *The Wicker Man*. I argue that these early cultural investments have influenced the ways in which these fans consciously and unconsciously perceive rural Britain, fostering in them a set of time-honoured imaginative associations that would link Britain to an alternative and, in some ways, Gothicised cultural heritage. Moreover, in observing the affective charge the British rural landscape carries for these fans, I have come to believe that the affective import of *The Wicker Man* not only has its roots in this early cultural resource, but that discovering the film reactivates elements of their past experiences (see Chapter 3).

Rationale

How might a sustained theorising of the processes involved in the origins and evolution of a particular formation enhance our understanding of film cultism? And why does an investigation of these processes demand that the focus be both

empirical and localised? With these questions in mind, in this section I want to clarify the underlying concerns which have motivated the particular delimitations of my research.

One of my initial motives for undertaking this research was born out of a frustration with the gaps in existing literature, coupled with a desire to enable fans to articulate their own experiences. As I have suggested, in 1998, four years prior to undertaking this study, I was myself becoming increasingly involved in *Wicker* fandom. Before this time, my fandom consisted mainly of repeated viewings - an occasional indulgence in a film which had a considerable impact on me when I first saw it at the age of sixteen. My involvement in *Nuada* brought me into contact with fans from all over the world, and alerted me to the different ways in which the film is appropriated. Mainly though, I came to see a pattern occurring amongst the more invested fans which pointed to the significance of the kind of generational susceptibility outlined in the previous section. Yet when for the purposes of this research I came to read the existing literature on cult film fandom, I found very little which would begin to account for these experiences. Moreover, I was unable to find anything like the map I needed to navigate my way through the complexities that my time spent with fans had presented to me. However, one of the main surprises that awaited me in coming to search the available literature on cult film was the sheer dearth of existing work on actual cult fan responses.

There has been a wealth of academic interest in the cult film in recent years. The cult film has been at the centre of several academic conferences, has spawned a growing number of university courses,⁸ and has formed the sole subject of a growing number of academic publications. Despite this increased interest, however, there continues to be a striking absence of empirical work on fans. Given that few theorists would dispute the centrality of the audience as a factor upon which definitions of cult depend, this is surprising.

If fans remain of marginal interest to many scholars currently involved in mapping the field, then it has to be asked: what accounts for this neglect? It could be argued that the dearth of audience research stems from the fact that many cult scholars are working with the concept from within Film Studies, which has a tradition of

privileging textual analysis and a suspicion of empiricism.⁹ Indeed, much more work on fans has been carried out in cultural studies, wherein ethnographic research on fans and audiences is an established practice (although the focus here has tended to centre on fans of cult television programmes).¹⁰ Nevertheless, it is precisely because of the centrality of the audience in cultism that the glaring lack of empirical research to date needs to be understood not so much in terms of a disciplinary custom, but rather a regrettable omission.

My feeling is that the reluctance of theorists to empirically test their claims is, in part, a deliberate strategy enabling the concept to be used to certain academic ends. The semantic instability surrounding the term 'cult' has greatly served unorthodox academics who have sought to challenge institutional norms and cultural hierarchies. Cult, or 'paracinema' (to use a term Sconce uses interchangeably with cult), has, as Steve Chibnall asserts 'provided opportunities for (predominantly) young straight white male academics to reclaim marginalised areas of cinema's history and to resist the dominant paradigms of film theory which have tended to problematise and pathologise male heterosexual pleasure in the text' (1997: 87-8). Moreover, 'the attribution of cult status to exploitation film would be the result of subjective discursive practices rather than observable audience response' (1997: 88). Arguably then, the failure of cult film scholars to subject their claims to rigorous empirical investigation suggests that much existing literature tells us more about the theoretical, political and subjective leanings of scholars than that of non-academic fans who invest in these texts. In the absence of any sustained effort to engage with actual audiences, cult film scholarship has, in the main, simply tended to overwrite the fan's story with its own.

Originally it was my intention to clear a space for the fan's story to be heard on its own terms. But, as I have suggested, after beginning this research my motives broadened to incorporate an exploration of the more fundamental processes underpinning cult formations. Given the sheer magnitude of texts in public circulation, one would think the significance of a collective investment forming around a single film is remarkable. There must be some underlying process which occasions this phenomenon.

However, there is a consensus in cult criticism which would deny the occurrence of the 'one-text cult'. This is evident in the way in which it is increasingly taken for granted that cultism refers to a mode of appropriation which is 'wholly promiscuous in its choice of object' (Sconce, 2003: 31). Sconce bases his claim here on a particular social demographic – the white, middle-class male – which he takes to be the definitive model of the cult fan. Whilst I remain unconvinced of this particular premise, my point here is that the one-text-cult is becoming an increasingly sidelined area of interest in cult criticism. Cult status, of course, no longer depends on the audience interest it generates; the now fairly common marketing strategy of labelling texts as 'cult' even before they are released to an audience is an obvious case in point. Nor do I suppose that all cult fandoms are restricted to a single text. Still, the occurrence of a collective formation for a particular text is hardly an extinct phenomenon. *The Wicker Man* is evidence of this, with most fans claiming to be not so much film buffs as passionate about *this* film.

The question of the origins of individual film cults is not merely a deficit of cult film scholarship, but is also a largely under-explored area in work on fandom more generally. Henry Jenkins (1992) skirts around the edges of the question in his book *Textual Poachers*. For whilst observing that in most cases fan attachments begin with an intensely emotional response to a text in which there would seem to be some pre-existent affiliation, this remains an insufficiently explored element of Jenkins' book, and is treated as secondary to his analysis of fandom's resistant consumer practices. As Daniel Cavicchi asserts 'for many [fan] scholars, "fan" is a kind of consumer category where interest on 'being a fan', rather than 'becoming a fan' is the order of the day (1998: 41). This is reiterated by Matt Hills (1999, 2002) who (following Cavicchi) asserts that most existing work in fan scholarship 'treat[s] fan communities as already established communal facts rather than accounting for their generation and formation' (2002: 63). More recently, Cornell Sandvoss (2005) has engaged with the question of origins, again prompted by empirical observations of how the emotional import registered by fan objects is instantaneous. With the exception of Jenkins, each of the above scholars have been concerned with the affective and subjective dimensions of fandom, and have proposed theories which would account for them. (I discuss Jenkins' and Hills' models in more detail in Chapter 1).

Even so, none of the above studies have utilised an approach which mobilises a sustained ethnographic analysis of a specific fan formation.¹¹ Hills (1999, 2002), judges the ethnographic approach to have ‘a highly limited purchase’ on questions related to the origins and formation of fandom (2002: 88). And whilst both Sandvoss (2005) and Jenkins (1992) utilise empirical methods, they, like Hills dispute the relevancy of focusing on individual fan formations. Jenkins (1992) argues that fandom is characteristically ‘nomadic’. Hills (2002) suggests that the focus ‘on fans of single texts [...] tends to close down the investigation of how [...] subjects negotiate [...] multiple fandoms of varying intensities at different times’ (2002: 89). Suspicious of ‘the assumed uniqueness of the particular fan culture’, Sandvoss turns his attention to an exploration of ‘the parallels between fans of different texts and genres’ (2005: 8).

In response to the work in fan scholarship outlined above, it is my contention that an understanding of the origins and evolution of particular fan formations can only materialise from a sustained engagement with individual manifestations. As I will demonstrate, the focus need not remain rigidly on the fan-text relationship. But nor can the intricacies of the processes involved be sufficiently explored if the focus is too dispersed. In response to cult film scholarship itself, it is my belief that scholars need to acknowledge the necessity of addressing questions related to the processes of cult. But what factors have so far prevented the type of research I advocate here? And just how amenable are existing perspectives in cult film scholarship to realising and mobilising these concerns? These questions frame my approach to reviewing the relevant literature on cult film.

Approaching cult film: A review of the existing literature

A significant factor in precluding an investigation of the processes of cult film fandom to date stems from the way in which the subject continues to be approached. The study of cult film has largely been subject to partial explorations, by which I mean it has tended to be divided up into its constituent parts of texts, audiences and contexts. Thus, depending on where critics’ theoretical and/or political commitments lie, such practices often result in the foregrounding of one of these dimensions at the

expense of the other two. Text-based approaches, as the term implies, have tended to single out specific textual qualities in order to argue that cult status emerges from the film text (Eco, 1987; B.K. Grant, 1991, 2000; Mendik and Harper, 2000; and Smith, 2005). Umberto Eco's (1986) much-quoted essay on the textual properties of cult films is exemplary of this approach. Taking *Casablanca* as his example, Eco proposes that cult film texts are fashioned together by that which he refers to as an 'intertextual collage'. Insofar as they allude to and replay many of the narrative scenarios of earlier movies, they are 'not *one* movie, but *the* movies' (1986: 210). As such, cult films appeal to the viewer's knowledge of and familiarity with the cinema, creating pleasures in the processes of recognition. At the same time, the intertextual nature of the cult text gives these movies an 'unhinged', 'ramshackle' and 'dislocated' quality, the cultic pleasures of which involve an engagement with its disconnected images – 'visual icebergs' which not only increase their memorability for audiences, but can also accrue a 'magic flavor' (1986: 198). In short, cult films 'live on' because of their 'glorious ricketiness' (1986: 199).

Viewer-dominant approaches, on the other hand, prioritise the interpretive strategies and appropriative practices of audiences, albeit mostly from a speculative position. In some instances, the viewer-dominant approach positions itself in diametric opposition to the text-centred perspective. For example, in an explicit refutation of Eco's thesis, Timothy Corrigan argues that cult has 'less to do with any strictly textual feature of those movies than with how these movies are historically acted on from outside their textual peripheries' (1991: 80-81). For Corrigan, cultism 'pinpoints [...] an instance of dominant viewing and a semiotic practice that *wilfully refuses to play by the traditional rules of the game*' (1991: 84, my emphasis). Moreover, cult texts 'are those films that become the property of any audience's private space, and in this assumption of public images into private space, they become furnishings or acquisitions within which any modern viewer temporarily inhabits and acts out different subjectivities' (1991: 81).

The contexts in which cult films are exhibited and consumed have long been a concern for critics and scholars of cult film (see for example, Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1983; Peary 1981, 1983; Taylor 1999; and Waller 1991; Jerslev 1992; and Staiger 2000 respectively). Yet, it is also becoming increasingly commonplace

in cult film scholarship to account for the formation of film cults by observing a text's critical reception (Staiger 1993; Mathijs 2003). From this perspective, cult is seen in part as an effect of critical discourses, such as those which circulate in reviews and related ancillary texts. For example, critical discourses may influence a given film's rise to notoriety, either by contributing to its forbidden, outlaw status (see Barker 1984), or else by framing it within specific discourses which shape its meaning so as to produce a sense of cult fascination (see Staiger, 1993; Mathijs, 2003). Such discourses may shape the viewer's expectations, readings and particular experiences.

Typically, text-based approaches have focussed on the perceived transgressive qualities of cult films. B. K. Grant (1991/2000) explores examples of cultural and aesthetic transgressions in films as generically and stylistically diverse as *Pink Flamingos* (d. John Waters, 1974), *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (d. Jim Sharman, 1975), and *Showgirls* (d. Paul Verhoeven, 1995), thus suggesting that 'despite their surface differences of iconography and conventions, many cult films share a common deep structure' (2000: 15). Thus, Grant proposes that cult films mobilise a 'double feature' - a structural dynamic enabling them 'to be at once transgressive and recuperative' (2000: 19). In his discussion of *Showgirls*, for example, Grant argues that whilst it offers a critique of male voyeurism it nonetheless gratuitously trades on images of 'female nudity' designed to satisfy the male gaze (2000: 27).

If the radical potential of the cult film's transgressive qualities is, for Grant, ultimately curtailed on account of its recuperative mechanisms, it has elsewhere been aligned with both opportunities for oppositional cultural practices and a relative freedom from the ideological constraints of the normative processes of viewer identification. Jeffrey Sconce's (2003) concept of textual 'faultlines', and Justin Smith's (2005) notion of the 'pleasures of unevenness' offer respective examples of these tendencies. Notably, Smith uses *The Wicker Man* as his example, thus observing therein a number of 'nodes and interstices' - 'cracks' in the form of 'narrative ruptures' (2005: 135), 'hyperbolic flaws and visual excesses' (2005: 137). Smith not only suggests that all cult films share these qualities but that it is precisely these elements that the 'cultist adores' (2005: 135). These 'cracks' impinge on the

emotional involvement of the viewer, thus thwarting the processes identification and thereby creating instead a mode of engagement which is characterised by self-conscious forms of play (2005). (I discuss Smith's approach in more detail in Chapter 4).

However, the concept of transgression also informs many viewer-dominant approaches. In his influential essay 'Trashing the Academy', Jeffrey Sconce (1995) discusses a typology of cult cinema which he refers to as 'paracinema' – 'a most elastic textual category' but one which includes 'just about every [...] historical manifestation of exploitation cinema from juvenile delinquency documentaries to soft-core pornography' (1995: 372). For Sconce, however, the significance of paracinema is to be found in the subversive and political practices of its audiences. Whilst fostering an ironic 'reading protocol' (1995: 372), the paracinematic attitude is one which deliberately embraces low forms of culture – 'trash' – in a self-conscious bid to challenge cultural hierarchies of taste. Whilst the paracinematic attitude is not restricted to academics, Sconce suggests that it depends on similarly high levels of cultural competency and expertise. Building on Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) influential class-based theories of cultural tastes and dispositions, Sconce indicates a way in which cult practice reflects the point in Bourdieu's model where high cultural and low economic capitals intersect. Thus the perception of the cultist emergent in Sconce's model is that of the bohemian intellectual.

The emphasis in Sconce's model on the educated rebel is echoed more generally in the scholarly perception of film cultists as deviant, rebellious, and armed with high levels of cultural competency. This is evident in those approaches which foreground how cult films appeal to subcultural sensibilities which engage cultists in acts deemed to transgress accepted boundaries of moral codes and tastes. Even those approaches which centre on the media-savvy and theoretical sophistication of cult audiences, producing in the meantime categories such as 'smart' and 'critical fans' (Barker *et al.*, 2006), and 'Avids' (Mendik and Harper, 2000) often imply an outlaw status attached to these practices.

There is little room in the prevailing line of thinking on cult film formations which would concede to there being contributory factors which are not of a wholly

rational/self-conscious and/or anarchic nature. The very idea that fans necessarily always *choose* the texts they champion is surely an overstatement, as is the notion that cult fans and cult texts are generally joined by a particular subcultural affiliation (c.f. Jancovich, 2003). What of the more shadowy areas of the fan-text relation - the very real sense in which fans typically struggle to account for the affective import and personal resonance which occasions their entry into fandom? It seems clear that contemporary approaches are less than ideally placed to explore these issues. Again, how do we account for the significance of the way in which this relationship tends to endure? Even Sconce, whose own approach has considerably influenced the transgressive/resistant story of cultism very much in evidence today, nonetheless concedes that there may be 'complex social, cultural and even psychoanalytic reasons [which would account for why cult fans - GA] have dedicated a significant portion of their life, not just to watching movies but to knowing about movies in incredible detail' (Sconce, 2003: 31).

Yet, the shadowy areas involved are unlikely to be illuminated as long as cult is restricted to investigations of its discreet dimensions. Cult is the sum of its parts. This is implicitly acknowledged in contemporary criticism; theorists, after all, must at least invoke a sense of cult's constituent parts regardless of their particular focal interests. As the foregoing review demonstrates, those approaches which, for example, prioritise textual analyses to explore concepts of cult can rarely do so without relying on assumptions about its affects on viewers. Furthermore, approaches to cult film must move beyond the synchronic level. This, I believe, is a factor underpinning the limitations of some recent approaches which have sought to combine the constituent parts of cult. For example, in their discussion of the cult reception of *Ginger Snaps*, Barker *et al.*, (2006) attend to its textual elements alongside the film's critical and audience receptions. But in terms of recognising the complex processes of cult fandom, such work is still restricted insofar as the claims it makes about cult fans are founded on the basis of a snapshot, rather than a sustained analysis of particular cult formations.

My own approach combines an exploration of the text, fans and contexts of cultism in an attempt to understand the processes involved in the generation and evolution of a particular cult film formation. I am concerned with mobilising a tripartite mode of

investigation which continually strives to ascertain answers to the questions: Why *The Wicker Man*? Why these fans? Why now? In other words, I am concerned with the relationships between the constituent parts of cult, and with finding ways to explore how and why they coalesce and collide at various stages across the enduring attachment. In the remainder of this section, then, I want to clarify my approach and the way in which it relates to, as well as departs from, existing work in cult film scholarship.

The text is central to my investigation of the mythopoeic processes of cult. Positioning my approach in alignment with those theorists who have sought to discover the cult-pull in the properties of the text, I am working on the assumption that it is possible to speak of a 'cult aesthetic'. This suggests that at the level of form and content cult films do something different from non-cult texts. However, the notion of the cult aesthetic will be under critical investigation here; its properties suggested, and its affective potential explored at the local level. Whilst scholars have drawn up an elaborate inventory of the many types of transgression the cult text performs – generic, narrative, ideological, cultural, social, technical, aesthetic – the precise *affects* of these transgressions on differentially situated audiences has remained largely under-explored.

I propose an understanding of the cult film text which, in the first instance, recognises it as a form that necessarily mobilises a dynamic I will refer to as the 'dialectic of myth'. What this means is that there is an accentuated co-presence of myth and anti-myth in the cult text. In this study, 'myth' is used in a number of ways. In this precise context, it broadly refers to the naturalisation of aesthetic and ideological codes and conventions, as well as the codes which govern traditional modes of storytelling.¹² These conventions usually serve to order reality into a coherent whole, within which the complexities of the real world are often smoothed over. Whether by design or default, cult films generally tend to disrupt this order in some way, and at the same time create a potential for reflection on the very processes of their construction. As I will demonstrate, *The Wicker Man*'s own project of transgression is disruptive on several levels, with some elements appearing to be more accidental than others. Yet, rather than perceiving the cult text as a tool of cultural demystification, and one which automatically allows for resistant readings, I

want to nuance the terms of this debate. Cult films, I argue, are necessarily built on a formative tension. After all, in order to break the rules they must first invoke them. At the very least, cult films are characterised by a double-codedness, which not only enables them to be received in a multiple number of ways, but also generates a degree of ambiguity.

A number of theorists have indicated the cult text's double-codedness (see for example Telotte, 1991; B.K. Grant, 1991, 2000; Vonalt, 1991; Mendik and Harper *et al.*, 2000). Rarely, however, have theorists sought to hold these opposing elements in tension so as to consider how this dynamic may affect actual fans. Grant's aforementioned notion of the cult text's 'double feature', and his explication of this in relation to Verhoeven's *Showgirls*, is a prime example here. Instead of asking how the film's ambiguous treatment of male voyeurism might address itself to the viewer in a range of contradictory ways, and how this might be a contributory factor of the film's cult status, Grant simply closes the tension down. Indeed, Grant judges that *Showgirls* is a cult film precisely because it 'fails so spectacularly' to be either a convincing soft-porn or indeed its critique (2000: 27).

There are two notable exceptions here which deserve special attention. Telotte suggests the cult film text mobilises a 'dual pull', a heightened reflexivity of the cinematic and generic codes and conventions it mobilises, but also deploys these codes in ways which otherwise ensure the viewer's participation in the narrative. This 'dual pull', serving as it does to make the viewer aware of the 'cinematic imaginary', nonetheless encourages viewers to surrender themselves to its lure. For Telotte, this produces a 'contradictory quality' which he suggests may ultimately help viewers cope with real world conformity and the contradictions involved (1991: 11). Larry Vonalt's (1991) rather under-acknowledged article on that which he refers to as the cult film's 'doubled visual style' similarly foregrounds the potential contradictory experiences of cult film. Taking *Casablanca* as his example, Vonalt observes that its 'doubled visual style results from a blending of what Richard Schickel describes as the "artfully glamorous" (35) tradition and the visual techniques of the then-evolving *film noir* form' (1991: 55). Whilst the former 'has been a dominant visual guide' for perpetuating the American dream at the heart of classical Hollywood cinema (1991: 55), the latter, by contrast, 'represents its

underside' (1991: 56). Thus, for Vonalt, the cultic embrace of *Casablanca* is confirmation that cult audiences 'can feel comfortable *with* contradiction' (1991: 55).

These latter two examples, I want to suggest, implicitly refer to aspects of the 'dialectic of myth'. Yet, precisely how this dynamic does affect fans, I suggest, depends on the extent to which individual viewers are invested - consciously or otherwise - in the specific myths the text mobilises and calls into question. Given that cultural myths shape our innermost beliefs and values (Dan McAdams 1993; David Feinstein 1979, 1997; Feinstein and Krippner 1988), and to the extent that they are embodied in the individual's preconscious dispositions (e.g., our memories, imagination, and thought patterns), and cognitively primed affective and associative networks (Westen, 2005), the dialectic of myth operational in the cult text has the potential to affirm, *but also disturb*, the coherency and integrity of identity and selfhood.

In this respect, academic overuse of the mainstream/alternative dichotomy is one way in which scholars are able to sidetrack issues related to any serious investigation of specific empirical social groups (Thornton, 1995: 114). A similar criticism can be levelled at those scholars who appeal all too readily to notions of the postmodern in approaching cultism, especially where the concept is used to make claims about the relationship between cultural forms and subjectivity based on ideas about the decentred self and the resistant pleasures of an increasingly sophisticated and media aware audience (see Corrigan, 1991; Mendik and Harper *et al.*, 2000). In all such instances, too much emphasis is placed on that variant of postmodern logic which insists that mediated realities are resisted precisely because we have grown accustomed to its conventions. Hence, the cult text's transgressions become a site of new forms of self-conscious play and or irony. Missing from these accounts is any real sense of how fans may be implicitly – as well as explicitly – familiar with and/or invested in elements of the myths the text draws on and subverts.

In this study, I am concerned to explore the implications of cultural familiarity insofar as it relates to the formation of individual preconscious dispositions. The fact of being media experienced and knowledgeable about cultural conventions, whilst it

can lead to critical detachment, does not preclude the potential for emotional involvement (Lury, 2001: 134). Moreover, given the long-term accumulation of cultural experience it is crucial to appreciate how cultural conventions become embedded in the individual's implicit forms of knowledge. Cult, after all, motivates forms of behaviour which are in excess of other forms of consumption.

Thus, for the purposes of this study, I am conscious to treat claims about postmodern subjectivity with caution, not least because I have found them to be empirically unviable. The assumption in much cult scholarship that prior familiarity with normative codes and conventions leads to self-conscious play, also implicitly works to safeguard against succumbing to the lures and traps of selfhood. This is evident in the emphasis scholars place on the notion of 'gaps' occurring in the cult text, variations of which come under the guise of for instance 'faultlines' (Sconce, 2003) or 'nodes and interstices' (Smith, 2005). These approaches demonstrate a preoccupation with the cult film's potential to thwart the ideological processes of identification, often at the expense of observing how the rupturing elements of the text may be experienced by actual fans. Thus, only those viewers possessing the 'appropriate' levels of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1984) and/or 'subcultural capital' (Thornton, 1995) are granted access to the cult text's self-conscious ironies, and intertextual references thought to be denied to the less competent majority (i.e., the mainstream).

In this study, by contrast, fans are treated as individuals with personal histories and implicit cultural investments, rather than self-conscious players engaged in a game of cultural resistance. Moreover, fans are herein conceived of not as media-savvy experts playing in the 'gaps' of culture, or else revelling in the pleasures of intertextuality, but as individuals vulnerable to the pleasures and contradictions of the cult aesthetic precisely because of the fact they have been shaped within and through culture. One of my concerns is to explore how fans negotiate different readings at different times and to ask: what psychological and social needs do selective readings fulfil at a given time?

My approach thus shifts the emphasis away from the strictly conscious ways of participating in culture in order to accommodate questions related to the implicit

dispositions which inform the individual's experiential realities. As such, I argue for the necessity of an approach which demands an engagement with complex questions of how identities are forged in culture. More specifically, I attend in detail to the social and cultural contexts in which embodied self formations occur and develop. This approach is conducive to grasping the generative mechanisms involved in the cult formation. As I have stated, a central aim of my study is to provide an account of the affective and aesthetic processes of the cult formation in focus here. Taking into consideration the embodied nature of self formations in culture may help to explain the profound sense of personal resonance and feelings of inexplicable familiarity which characterises the respondents' formative experiences of the film. But it also seems clear that for a film to similarly affect some viewers, and not others, there has to be an element of shared receptivity at some level. Otherwise, how can we account for the way in which it affects certain viewers and not others? I argue that that the roots of this receptivity stem from the cultural investments viewers have made at an earlier time in their lives. Hence, I am concerned to situate the film within a context which allows for a consideration of the ways in which the film is already inextricably bound up with the respondents' personal histories, and specifically, their emotional and imaginative life-worlds.

To summarise, my approach treats cult films as mythopoeic texts: insofar as they rework cultural myths they may provide new ways of imagining the social order and provide tools for reworking elements of identity. But their mythopoeic potential is still more far-reaching: they may speak to certain viewers at the preconscious level, tapping into explicit and, more importantly, implicit networks of embodied beliefs and memories (see Chapter 3) and they may generate novel forms of identification and sensory experiences (see Chapter 4). In stressing the mythopoeic potential of cult films I seek to caution against falling into the trap of locating cult solely in the text, viewer or contexts of cult. Such a move would obscure the dynamic processes involved. Instead, the cult film's mythopoeic potential is entirely dependent on the ways in which these elements coalesce and collide in specific instances.

Approaching the quasi-religious dimensions of cult fandom

The core language used by the respondents to articulate their experiences of becoming and remaining a fan of *The Wicker Man* was characterised by a broadly religious vocabulary, both in explicit use of the word, 'spiritual' and in the more implicit instances where it was implied that the film is a source of ultimate truth. In addition to theorising the significance of this discourse as it is operationalised by the respondents herein, it is also one of my aims in this study to extend existing debates in this particular area.

The quasi-religious dimension of cult film fandom has been addressed by scholars since its inception in academia in the early 1990s. For example, in the first academic volume on cult film, J.P. Telotte suggests that 'every cult constitutes a community, a group that worships similarly and regularly, and finds strength in that shared experience' (1991: 13). Kawin refers to cultists as 'worshippers' whose faith in the cult object is harnessed and strengthened on account of the way in which the cult text 'tells them *something* they realize as the truth, *something* they have been waiting to hear and to have validated' (1991: 24, my emphasis). But as is evident from these examples alone, early cult film scholarship relies on invoking religious metaphors rather than offering concrete models. Still, judging by the way in which, almost two decades on, the cult pendulum now swings in favour of a wholly irreverent cultural space, we might say that the story of cult has undergone a shift from the sacred to the profane.

Recently though, the link between fandom and religion has been an increasing concern for fan scholars, albeit not always specifically in relation to cult film (see Cavicchi 1998; Hills 1999, 2002; Jindra 1999; McLaren and Porter *et al.*, 1999; and Sandvoss 2005). Whilst all recognise the necessity of producing apposite models, the religious dimension of fandom remains a particularly thorny issue for many of these same scholars. One of the most consistent problems in this respect relates to the singular difficulties apparently incurred in attempting to define what the term 'religion' means. For example, Matt Hills (following Derrida) problematises the term, stating that it lacks 'a stable reference point or referent' (2002: 118). Yet, given

the deconstructionist thrust of Derridean theory we could take issue with any and all concepts, including Hills' own substitute term: 'neoreligiosity': 'neoreligiosity, not religion, is what we must consider when thinking about cult fandoms' (2002: 117). In other words, 'religion' is no more difficult a concept to define than, say, 'culture', but rarely do fan theorists worry over their usage of the term to the point that it necessitates a substitute.

Cornell Sandvoss raises a different, perhaps more viable, concern: 'there are no (significant) transcendental points of reference in fandom. In contrast to religion, fandom lacks an absolute, other-worldly framework through which social realities are constructed and legitimized' (2005: 63). Yet the 'religious' need not be restricted to the belief in a supreme transcendent god or else the existence of a spiritual realm. As Feinstein asserts, the 'religious' can be defined 'without metaphysical speculation, as an enhanced attunement to the subtle patterns and hidden forces in nature that comprise the wider context of the human story' (1997: 511). Thus, instead of seizing on religion as something singularly difficult to grasp or else intrinsically related to the unknowable, it is far more productive to establish a few basic ways of thinking about it.

Firstly though, it needs to be remembered that religiosity is not a feature of all fandoms, but would seem to emerge only in particular instances (Jenkins, 1992; Sandvoss, 2005), which is all the more reason to delimit for study individual fan formations. Secondly, fans rarely describe their fandoms as a religion, and in many cases explicitly refute this link (Jindra, 1999; Hills, 2002). Although I am not convinced that the religious sentiment is, as Hills suggests, purely 'an "effect" of fan discourses and practices' (2002: 119). Nor do I concur with his assertion that 'discourses of "cult" within media fandom cannot be read as "return" of religion in a supposedly secularised culture' (2002: 119).

Closer attention needs to be paid to relevant fan-generated terms within particular instances of cultism, and models developed accordingly. As I have suggested, the respondents herein often use the word 'spiritual' in attempting to convey their experiences with the film. Curiously, it was common for respondents to draw explicit distinctions between the terms religion and the spiritual, thus rejecting the

former. Yet, during my time with fans I was able to observe subtle differences in their use of the spiritual. I learned that its expression has many tones; sometimes invigorative, often mystical, but becoming increasingly sombre. I saw that it emerged in relation to specific aspects of their cult experiences, and in a multiplicity of contexts. Thus, I argue that the religious element of cult fandom is fundamentally in process; it is not something that can be pinpointed and categorised once and for all, but is instead something which has to be scrupulously and continuously observed and pursued. My approach to the quasi-religious dimensions of cult fandom is therefore essentially, and necessarily, flexible.

Theorising the processes of cult fandom

In attempting to theorise the complex processes outlined in the opening section, I have drawn on an eclectic range of theories culled from disciplines as diverse as cognitive psychology, psychoanalysis, cultural anthropology, memory studies, aesthetic theory, and cultural studies. Still, the overarching theoretical concept informing this study is that of personal myth, particularly as it has been developed by David Feinstein (1979; 1997 Feinstein & Krippner 1988), and Dan McAdams (1993).

The concept is at base a theory of identity formation and, for me, offers the most nuanced and accommodating set of ideas for our purposes here. Feinstein defines a personal myth in terms of ‘an internal system of imagery, narrative, and affects’ which influences the shape of the individual’s ‘characteristic styles of perceiving, feeling, thinking, and acting’ (1997: 510). Moreover, this ‘submerged mythology’ operates largely outside of conscious awareness and is involved in interpreting sensations, constructing explanations, and directing individual behaviour and choice (1988: 1-4).

An important underlying principle shared by most theorists working with the concept is that the personal myth is a relatively recent phenomenon. According to Feinstein, the emergence and widespread development of the personal myth is largely due to ‘the unprecedented speed of social change, the democratization of information, the breakdown of community, and the ascendance of the individual ego in the structure

of the Western psyche' (1997: 510). At the same time, the conditions which give rise to the personal myth also render it particularly vulnerable in a society, such as ours, which is characterised by rapid change. Hence, the myth we develop in childhood, and thus the bedrock of our experiential realities, is riven with contradiction at every level by the time we reach early adulthood. Personal myths, then, are never complete, but subject to revisions and reconstruction across the life course.

Myth, as it is used in relation to submerged individual schemas, also exceeds Barthesian definitions (Rees, 1996: 16), which have been highly influential in British cultural studies and Film Studies. For Barthes (1957), myth is an ideological construct; a tool of the bourgeoisie which serves to naturalise the processes of social and cultural models and representations. The only way to deal with myth is to be liberated from its deceptions, therefore, is to expose and deconstruct it. From the perspective of personal mythology, by contrast, the inevitable complicity in a culture's mythologies is viewed not as ideologically right or wrong, but rather a necessary involvement which needs to be thought of as functional or dysfunctional at the level of the individual (see Feinstein, 1977, 1988, 1997). Thus, it is precisely because of the ways in which individuals manage to forge and maintain a coherent sense of self within and through culture that renders this process fundamentally mythic.

Personal myths begin to take shape in the individual's formative years and are constructed out of the cultural resources available at a given time. Thus, they are historically and culturally specific and are in many ways a reflection of the culture from which they originate (Feinstein 1979, 1997; McAdams 1993). Although, given the conditions of modernity which enable cross-cultural experiences – the increased flow of global images, increased mobility, and migration and so on - the individual's myth is less culture-bound and is likely to draw on resources from other cultures. Cultural resources can refer to a number of things, from language to shared objects within a given culture. In this respect, the concept adheres closely to a view which is generally accepted across the humanities, but one which divides that same consensus in relation to the degree to which identity formation is biologically or socially and culturally inscribed. Feinstein, in particular, casts his net far and wide in this respect, taking into account both cultural and biological determinants. Related to the ongoing

debate about subjectivity and identity is the issue of how, if at all, it is possible to conceive of the individual as a coherent subject. Generally speaking, from the perspective of personal myth theory, there is an emphasis on the psychological mechanisms which function to establish a degree of order on our experiences of the past and the present.

For Feinstein, a personal myth may be thought of in terms of a 'cognitive structure', an inner model which develops through ongoing interaction between psychobiological processes and external stimuli. Drawing on the influential theories in cognitive psychology of Jean Piaget (1951, 1977), and more recently Seymour Epstein (1983, 1991), Feinstein asserts that all interaction with the external world undergoes a filtering process according to the innate capacities through which the individual makes sense of his/her environment. This mechanism is determined by and in turn determines individual experience. But these myths are prone to becoming dysfunctional and outmoded with the passing of time, as well as in the face of conflict. As Feinstein asserts: 'when new input is dissonant with one's personal mythology, the new data may be assimilated to fit the myth, or the myth may accommodate itself to fit the new data' (Feinstein, 1979: 208). In this way, the individual's personal myth functions to maintain a balance between the individual's psychical and external reality. In moments where the myth is out of synch with the needs and desires of the individual, then this can lead to what he refers to as the 'dialectic of self' (Feinstein 1979: 207).

Dan McAdams' approach, by contrast, is rooted in narrative psychology and developmental theory.¹³ Like all narratives, the personal myth comprises a beginning, middle and end, and similarly works to establish order and coherency on past and present experiences, as well as projections about the future (1993: 12). Moreover, these personal narratives operate along 'thematic lines' and comprise a distinctive 'tone' (McAdams, 1993). Unlike Feinstein, who asserts that personal myths begin to take shape in early childhood, for McAdams these narratives begin to take shape proper in adolescence, since this is the period during which the individual develops his/her storytelling skills. Nonetheless, McAdams concedes that the accumulative sources from which the personal myth derives some of its main content dates back to a much earlier time in the individual's development.

For McAdams, then, personal myths indicate one of the ways in which our lives are narratively configured. For Feinstein, they are cognitive schemas which have their roots in childhood and which shape behaviour, core values and guide choice. What they share is the view that personal myths are stories we create, consciously and unconsciously from childhood experiences, and which continue to affect our sense of a self in adulthood. Whilst McAdams' position edges closer towards a constructivist position, Feinstein (and Feinstein & Krippner, 1988) is more keen to retain a psychodynamic emphasis. And whereas Feinstein has written extensively about the concept from a theoretical perspective, McAdams (1993) usefully incorporates personal testimonies and thus constitutes an empirical investigation of the concept. Elements of both approaches are drawn on in my research.

It should be noted that the ideas outlined above derive from an American context; outside of which the concept of personal myth has been slower to gain currency. I am therefore drawing on American theorisations of the self in order to broaden the remit of existing conceptions of subjectivity. A good deal of extant work on fandom, as I have said, draws heavily on British cultural studies, within which there has been an emphasis on the politics of power relations in wider cultural formations, and a neglect of individual experience and formation (Couldry, 2000: 45). Again, this would explain why conceptions of fandom have tended to hinge around the concepts of subversion and resistance, as opposed to its affective and personal dimensions.

The advantages of personal myth theory for our purposes here are manifold. First it provides a way of conceiving of the self, culture, and the relationship between them in an altogether more phenomenalist way. It offers a convincing account of the processes through which the self is formed and continues to develop via the dynamic relationship between cultural and personal forms of mythmaking, within which the emphasis is placed on personal experience. The processes of individuation, together with the significance of individual cultural experience are factors which have been sorely lacking in British cultural studies (see Couldry 2000: 45; Hall 1996: 13), and thus in most cultural theories of fandom.

The idea of the personal myth shares with postmodern and poststructuralist theories a view of the self as an unfixed, discursively produced entity, subject to the ongoing

discursive processes of construction and reconstruction. As Feinstein notes, retaining the concept of myth acts as a reminder of the 'hypothetical nature of any construct of reality' (1979: 203). That said, it allows for a much more intricate and sensitive understanding of how a sense of self is experienced as a continual, coherent and, at times, fixed phenomenon. As we shall see when we come to examine the empirical data, fans' efforts to make sense of their experiences, as well as their understandings of the self reflect a sense of continuity, and a struggle for continuity, which contradicts assumptions about subjectivity in cult theory.

Secondly, the uses of personal myth for exploring the generative mechanisms of cultism are multiple. Feinstein's idea of a personal myth as an underlying cognitive-affective schema which guides choice and behaviour allows us to ask a number of productive questions about the ways in which it might be operational in the cult formation. For example, how might the initial 'pull' of the cult object result from the way in which it resonates along the individual's affective networks and 'thematic lines'? This line of questioning may help to explain the strong sense of personal resonance which typically occasions the cult responses here. More specifically, it might shed light on issues related to the inexplicable familiarity which characterises the experiences of the fans in my focal study. As I have said, fans report feeling deeply stirred by the text. Thinking about the ways in which the cult text is linked to other cultural texts which the fans invested in during childhood is thus a productive trajectory, since it allows for the possibility of a shared cult predisposition. I also ask how personal myths might be operational in granting access to or making some individuals more susceptible to a particular aesthetic quality or 'structure of feeling' (Williams 1961) in the text. This has the potential to engage with the specificity of the study. It is in dialogue with these questions that my aim to show predisposition is mobilised.

A third advantage relates to its usefulness for exploring the 'emerging dissonance' which characterises the enduring cult attachments under focus herein. As I suggested earlier, the growing sense of uncertainty fans' experience with the film appears to be complexly related to an identity crisis. For Feinstein, the quest for individuation involves working through the contradictions generated by the widening gap between the inner world of long-established beliefs and values and the ongoing necessity of

adapting to the changing realities of the external world. This process constitutes 'an unending human dilemma, reactivated with each passage along the life span, [and] involves reconciling a personal mythology which is strongly rooted in childhood experiences with the ever-changing realities of adult living' (Feinstein, 1979: 199). In relation to this, my questions are as follows: how might the cult text eventually come to impact upon fans' core beliefs and values? More specifically, how might the 'dialectic of myth' operational in the cult text challenge and destabilise the sense of self afforded by the personal myth? (see Chapter 5)

A number of methodological issues follow from this. If personal myths can affect the way in which individuals think, feel and behave, as well as influence how they select from the range of cultural texts in circulation, it is crucial that analysis begins with those schemas. Having said that, how does one gain access the inner worlds of respondents? Given that I discuss my methods in detail in Chapter 2, I will provide only a brief outline in what follows.

I have used a number of methods in conducting this research, including questionnaire, interviews, and participant observation, always with the aim of gaining entry into the mythic concerns of the respondents. For example, the protocol I used in carrying out interviews with the main respondents is loosely based on McAdams' 'life story' approach (1993), which involves asking participants to recall memorable events in their personal history and to discuss their beliefs and values. In addition to building up a picture of the contents of respondents' psychological worlds, this method is useful for observing the processes of assimilation and accommodation; that is, of mythmaking directly. As Samuel and Thompson assert, 'any life story, written or oral, more or less dramatically, is in one sense a personal mythology...[M]any, maybe most, of the facts will be true. It is the omissions and the shaping that make these stories also myth' (1990: 9- 10).

In addition to using oral and written accounts, I have drawn on a range of visual source materials, such as photographs, original artwork, postcards and other personally meaningful images which I obtained from participants during the course of this research. It is my contention that these sources provide clues into the respondents' mythic preoccupations, as well as their implicit fantasies, beliefs and

values. McAdams notes the centrality of personal imagery in the personal myth, which he asserts can be examined for evidence of a recurring theme and a characteristic set of motifs and symbols. In this spirit, I seek to compare the recurring themes and motifs within this collective 'image bank' to that imagery in *The Wicker Man* the majority of fans found especially appealing (see Chapter 3). I also draw inspiration and insights from recent work in visual ethnography and, in particular, the concept of 'image-work' as espoused by Iain Edgar (2004).

Yet, working with personal testimonies raises important questions about their ontological and epistemological status: to what extent can they be said to have a substantive basis in reality? This is a complex area of inquiry and I want to interrogate and challenge the poststructuralist claim that personal narratives cannot reasonably be expected to impart anything beyond the discursive contexts in which they are contained and performed (see Chapter 2). Here my approach draws on and develops insights from the existing research on film audiences, and specifically that which combines memory and personal testimony (Stacey 1994; Kuhn 2002).

For the reasons above the research presented herein does not constitute an ethnographic piece of work in the traditional sense. Even while it utilises a number of long-established ethnographic techniques, such as 'participant observation' (see Chapter 2), my purpose in writing up the research has not been to document using 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) the practices and pleasures of a particular fan culture. Instead, it treats fan testimonies not only as vital documents into the mythic consciousness of respondents, but also as texts which bear the trace of events which have a basis in 'reality' beyond the research context. More accurately, then, it can be said to put into effect something like the strategies outlined by oral historians' Samuel and Thompson *et al.* (1990), which seek to apprehend the imaginative, emotional and mythical elements in personal testimony.

Between 'fan' and 'cultist'

My use of the term 'cult fandom' requires some unpacking and explanation. More and more, scholars have demonstrated a concern to theorise the distinctions between the categories fan and cultist. To date, there is no widely accepted consensus on

where the difference lies. But a number of proposals have been put forward. Sandvoss (2005), for example, draws a strict division between the 'fan' and the 'cultist', whereby the former is more likely to become complicit with the ideological forces of 'consumer capitalism' (2005: 162). Unlike the cultist, the fan's insistence on preserving a degree of narcissistic self-reflection with the fan object not only raises worrying questions for Sandvoss about the scope of their experiential horizons, it also suggests the 'further integration of the self into a one-dimensional society' (2005: 163). But there is an ideology at work here, one which reserves the term 'cult' for a mode of consumption devoid of the narcissism Sandvoss ascribes to fans. It is no coincidence that Sandvoss conveniently categorises his own fan practices as 'cult'. In short, Sandvoss reproduces the value-judgements which underpin cult scholarship more generally.

Hills, on the other hand, tends to use the terms 'fan' and 'cultist' interchangeably, even whilst conceding that:

'[C]ult fandom' does [...] imply a social identity which is partially distinct from that of the 'fan', in general, but I would suggest *that this relates not to the intensity, social organisation, or semiotic/material productivity of the group concerned but rather to its duration, especially in the absence of 'new' or official material in the originating medium*

(Hills, 1999: 23, original emphasis).

I find Hills' suggestion essentially thought-provoking, especially his observation that cult may well be linked to a media attachment which endures of its own volition rather than through the processes of commercialisation and public presence. This seems to imply a degree of spontaneity which I am concerned to explore and understand herein.

Even so, my feeling is that the differences between fan and cult responses, if indeed there are any, can only emerge from sustained empirical analyses aimed at challenging existing concepts of cult. Some work has attempted to dislodge prevailing conceptions of cult by unearthing the implicit elitism and unsound sexual politics which loom large in the cultural distinctions which underpin it. For example,

the aforementioned anti-mainstream sentiment which underlines cultism has been shown to 'other' the more 'average' viewer along lines of class difference and differing levels of cultural competency (Jancovich, 2002, 2003). Furthermore, it has been argued that insofar as cult sets itself up in opposition against the values associated with femininity, this process of othering also operates along gendered lines (Hollows, 2003; Read, 2003).

Whilst this work constitutes a productive and persuasive critique of the implicit value judgements of current conceptualisations, it has nevertheless tended to uncritically accept academic conceptions of the 'cult fan'. Instead of questioning the lack of empirical evidence upon which claims about cult fans are made, these theorists have tended to leave the logic of the 'cult fan' in place, thus conflating fans 'out there' with those 'in here', so to speak. Much more convincing in this respect is the small body of work carried out by those academics who have actively sought to utilise audience research as a means of highlighting the discrepancies between academic theory and fan practices (Caine, 2001; Hutchings, 2003). An element of my own approach to the diverging practices of fans and academics seeks to continue in this critical vein (see Chapter 4).

This study does not seek to offer a final definition of cult, largely because I do not think its meaning can be fixed, once and for all. But I do want to argue for a way of broadening the remit of existing conceptualisations. Even while cult is commonly used to delimit a transgressive textual practice and/or ironic/rebellious/active mode of consumption which is resistant to the 'mainstream', work on cult film fandom needs to attend to the factors involved in the formation and evolution of specific manifestations. Cult cinema is not the uniformly or unambiguous project in cultural demythologisation some theorists purport it to be, nor are cult fans somehow immune to the myths and values which can be said to constitute mainstream culture. Approaching cult as a complex process enables one to suspend the fixing of definitions from the outset in order to focus on that which it involves. I will therefore return to the issues raised in this section in the concluding chapter of my study.

My Contribution

My thesis is an attempt to provide an account of the generative mechanisms and sustaining factors of the cult film formation. It argues for an understanding of the role of personal mythopoesis in its creation and evolution, and is intended to contribute to existing research in five main ways. Firstly, in providing a sustained account of a specific instance of film cultism, I would like to position my study in relation to Peter Hutchings' call for 'a more localized investigation of particular aspects of cult culture' (2003: 139). As Hutchings found of the fan response to Argento's cult oeuvre, it 'reveal[s] a specificity [...] that in various ways does not fit neatly with more general notions of what a cult response actually entails' (2003: 139).

Secondly, my study is intended to redress the gap in audience research on cult film fans and, specifically, the more under-explored questions relating to the origins and longevity of individual cult formations. Here, my work builds on elements of the well-established theories of Henry Jenkins and Matt Hills. But it also departs from them in a number of new and significant ways.

Thirdly, I follow recent scholars in an attempt to provide a sorely needed reformulation of the quasi-religious cult paradigm. In arguing for the religious dimension in terms a multi-faceted, context-specific, and ultimately processual phenomenon, I aim to offer a fresh perspective on this debate.

Fourthly, it introduces a body of theory which, to my knowledge, has not previously been deployed in research on cult fandom and thereby offers a new map of cult fan subjectivity. Moreover, it is my contention that the concept of personal myth provides the seeds of a model which can accommodate and integrate the dispersed elements of cult culture, not least the paradox its irreverent reverence.

Finally, I experiment with a combination of methods, thus incorporating nascent developments in the field of visual and embodied ethnography, as well as the more established approaches in historical film studies, and specifically Annette Kuhn's

(2002) 'ethnohistorical' approach and Jackie Stacey's (1994) work on memory and film audiences.

Structure of the thesis

Chapter 1 extends my discussion of the central theoretical concerns of this study and develops a number of original concepts pertinent to realising its main aims. Beginning with a discussion of the socio-cultural and psychosocial perspectives of Jenkins (1992) and Hills (2002) respectively, and in acknowledging therein the particular strengths of this work, I will nonetheless go on to assert some of its limitations. For the remainder of the chapter, I will be seeking to develop a theoretical framework for understanding the processes of cult fandom which draws largely, though not exclusively, on the relevant literature on personal mythology.

Chapter 2 provides a detailed account of the research process and discusses the methodological choices I made in designing and executing my study. In addition to developing the epistemological issues previously introduced, this chapter also broaches questions related to the multi-method approach and explores elements of how my own subjectivity may have affected the findings.

Chapters 3 to 5 comprise the empirical chapters, each of which explicate and explore a particular trajectory of the mythmaking processes of cult fandom. In an attempt to explain the affective bond and feelings of inexplicable familiarity which characterises the respondents' experiences with the film, Chapter 3 focuses on the ways in which *The Wicker Man* may be complexly bound up with elements of their personal histories. More specifically, I consider how the film is rooted in the formative cultural experiences these fans have in common. Here the 'British horror factor' is discussed, not only as an important early cultural resource for these fans but one which has left a legacy of personal images and associations which these fans re-experience and rediscover in coming to *The Wicker Man*. My focus turns to the cultural milieu in which these fans were accumulating the raw materials which would go on to give shape and content to their personal myths: the late 1960s and 1970s. Emphasis is placed on a number of specific film and television texts of the period which were consistently mentioned by fans, and which, as I will demonstrate,

appear to be embodied in implicit memory. The trajectory I develop in Chapter 3 can be characterised as one which has its far roots in elements of the respondents' formative experiences, and near roots in a process involving the retrieval of those experiences in the present. I argue that the effect of these experiences involves the quickening of the mythmaking process.

Chapter 4 attends to the respondents' accounts of their aesthetic experiences with the film, particularly in relation to their initial encounters with it. Combining close textual analysis with a discussion of fan responses, I will be seeking to discover the processes involved in enabling these fans to discover in the film an 'aesthetic of enchantment and transcendence'. This aesthetic is not, however, to be understood as an inherent property of the text waiting to be experienced by the viewer. Rather, it should be thought of in terms of a potential aesthetic activated by viewers whose personal myths render them more susceptible to the film's particular thematic and formal qualities. In addition, I explore how these experiences give shape and content to the respondents' subsequent fan practices. Thus, the trajectory I develop here begins with the respondents' aesthetic experiences with the film and proceeds to trace the extension of these experiences in manifest mythmaking practices beyond the viewing context.

Chapter 5 moves away from an exploration of the origins of the cult formation to an investigation of its sustaining factors. Drawing on the longitudinal component of my research, I explore how the respondents continue to engage with the film and, in particular, the kinds of social and psychological needs the film fulfils for these fans at a given stage in their fandoms. I proceed to track changes occurring over time, thus demonstrating how the respondents' ongoing relationship with the film becomes increasingly problematic. It is here, I argue, that the 'dialectic of myth' plays an integral role, threatening to undermine the stability of previously held interpretations which require the respondents to revise their readings. In attempting to negotiate a stable reading of the film, these respondents, I argue, are more fundamentally attempting to safeguard the coherency of their own personal narratives, within which the integrity and stability of the self are at stake.

The conclusion draws together the main findings of the study and explores the temporal orientation of the mythopoeic process. Returning to the issue of the quasi-religious dimensions of cult fandom, my discussion draws on relevant theories of the links between religion and individuation in order to ask how far the mythopoeic processes of cult can be related to a religious process.

¹ Sarah Thornton (1995) offers a thoroughgoing critical discussion of the vague and often contradictory meanings of the 'mainstream' which circulate in subcultural ideologies as espoused by academics and youth subcultures alike. Thornton's argument here informs Mark Jancovich's (2002, 2003) work on the cultural distinctions which underpin media cult discourses.

² For a discussion of how the 1970s have been heavily mythologised in popular culture over the course of the last decade, see Leon Hunt (1998).

³ For a discussion of the significance of the film for the Pagan community see Judith Higginbottom (2006).

⁴ For instance, both *The Sneaker Pimps* and *The Medieval Fairies* have produced cover versions of 'Willow's Song'. For a discussion of the ways in which the film has influenced musicians more generally, see Will Hodgkinson 'It was a way into a magical world', *The Guardian*, Friday 21 July, 2006.

⁵ *The Wicker Man* Festival, launched in 2001, is an annual alternative music event which takes place in Dumfries & Galloway. For more details visit: <http://www.thewickermanfestival.co.uk>.

⁶ An obvious example here is Neil LaBute's 2006 remake of *The Wicker Man*. See also Danny Boyle's *Shallow Grave* (1995) and Eli Roth's *Hostel* (2006). For examples of television programmes influenced by the film, see *The League of Gentlemen*.

⁷ In 1999, British actor, Edward Woodward (Sgt. Howie in *The Wicker Man*) claimed that 'one in five' fan letters he receives are from *Wicker Man* fans who are 'all in their thirties' (See *In-XS*, Scottish BBC television documentary, 1999).

⁸ For example, 2007 witnessed the launch of an MA in Cult Film at Brunel University. See www.brunel.ac.uk for more details.

⁹ Jackie Stacey (1993; 1994) has written at some length on these issues.

¹⁰ See for example Henry Jenkins (1992); Camille Bacon-Smith (1992); John Tulloch and Henry Jenkins (1995); Roberta Pearson and Sara Gwenllian-Jones (2004).

¹¹ In his exclusive focus on Bruce Springsteen fans, Cavicchi is an exception here. Even so, given the difference in mediums here my point is that the origins and evolution of fan formations around a single film text has yet to be sufficiently explored.

¹² My use of the term, in this instance, comes closest to Levi Strauss' (1963) definition, who contends that the function of myth is to eradicate contradiction. The unambiguous logic which underpins binary thinking can thus be seen to work mythically, as can the traditional narrative structure in Western culture which operates along the trajectory of order/disorder/order resolved.

¹³ The narrative psychological approach to identity starts from the premise that human psychology has an essentially narrative structure. See Michele L. Crossley (2000) for an in-depth discussion of this approach. McAdams draws on the developmental theories of Erik Erikson (1950, 1959, and 1980).

Chapter 1

Theorising the Processes of Cult Fandom

In this chapter I will develop a theoretical framework within which the processes of cult fandom and its relationship to personal mythopoesis can be understood. Of particular concern here are questions related to the mechanisms of personal resonance and inexplicable familiarity. In examining the generative mechanisms of film cultism, I am necessarily broaching questions of how and why certain cultural texts manage to register both profoundly and personally for a relatively small but by no means insignificant number of individuals. Hence, I am concerned with the processes involved in the collective as much as the individual cult response. Furthermore, as is the case with many cult formations, the attachments herein tend to endure. Thus, in addition to uncovering a generative source it is also essential to theorise the processes involved in their longevity. Of particular importance here is the issue of 'emerging dissonance', which I have said characterises a stage in these fans' ongoing relationships with the film.

Approaching cult fandom as a process allows us to move beyond the limitations of endlessly reproducing synchronic snapshots of cultists as resistant, rebellious, ironic and/or self-conscious readers of texts. I concentrate instead on the mechanisms through which particular cult formations emerge and develop. The importance of working towards a consistent model of subjectivity which can sufficiently accommodate its formative moment as well as its ebbs and flows cannot be overstated. Media fandom, of course, goes beyond the viewing context, but it nonetheless initially emerges from it. It is crucial, then, that any model of fan subjectivity brought to bear on the processes of fandom sufficiently engages with the processes of spectatorship involved which, in turn, raises questions about identification, affective involvement and the aesthetic experiences of fandom.

In the first part of this chapter I will consider two theoretical accounts which have (albeit in very different ways) explicitly approached fandom in terms of a processual phenomenon. In the first instance I will discuss Henry Jenkins' (1992) socio-cultural approach. I will then go on to discuss Matt Hills' (2002) psycho-cultural model.¹

Significantly, there are in each of these accounts elements particularly suggestive of my own contention that the fan-text relation coalesces and collides. However, I am not convinced that the model of subjectivity implied in Jenkins' account, and explicitly deployed in Hills' own approach, sufficiently accommodates the insights they raise. Thus, in surveying this work I will be particularly concerned to illustrate its extant gaps. This is necessary in order to set out my own theoretical concerns in more detail and to justify the need for a new map of fan subjectivity. In the remainder of this chapter, I will go on to develop a theoretical model of cult fandom based largely, although not exclusively, on some insights drawn from work pertaining to personal myth theory. I will argue that this work provides the starting point for a model of the self's formation and development especially pertinent to the processes involved in cult fandom.

Theorising the processes of cult fandom: 1

From fascination and frustration: Jenkins

Henry Jenkins is explicit about the processual nature of fandom, and rightly argues that only a 'diachronic' approach can 'fully account for the constant shifts within the audience's relationship to the primary materials' (1991: 26). Significantly, Jenkins asserts that fandom emerges out of the gap between 'fascination' and 'frustration': 'if the text failed to fascinate, fans would walk away; if they were fully satisfied with it, they'd walk away.'² It is this argument which forms the basis of Jenkins' influential book, *Textual Poachers* (1992).

A central argument of his book relevant here, is that fandom develops out of an 'intensely emotional experience' with the text (Jenkins, 1992: 75). By way of example, it is instructive to attend to the following sentiment in one fan's account of her initial response to the cult television series, *Beauty and the Beast*: 'It was as if someone had scanned our minds, searched our hearts, and presented us with the *images* that were found there' (1992: 34, my emphasis). This comment supports my own contention that the fan text is often already complexly inscribed in the fan's sense of self. Like the participants to be discussed herein, there are elements within

the text's *imagery* which resonate on a profoundly personal and emotional level. Indeed, Jenkins concedes that there does appear to be some 'pre-existing affinity' between fans and their favoured texts (1992: 34). Significantly, Jenkins states that this precise comment is typical of the sentiments expressed by most fans upon their initial discovery of the fan text (1992: 34).

Yet, Jenkins quickly proceeds to strip this factor of all its significance; in the first instance, by overplaying the idea that fans consciously 'choose' texts which reflect their 'ideological commitments' (1992: 34). Secondly, it quickly transpires that Jenkins' real purpose for incorporating the above fan citation is to inject a note of caution into his argument, otherwise committed to celebrating the active and subversive practices of fandom. He notes that fan responses 'are not always resistant', their readings of texts are not always 'progressive'. Rather, they are often replete with that which Stuart Hall refers to as "stone-age elements" (1992: 34). But this dimension of the fan's response is, for Jenkins, something of a short-lived aberration; the sheer frustration fans come to feel when the text fails to provide them with the stories they want to hear acts as a catalyst for cultural and social forms of resistance and activism.

Jenkins' apparent refusal to engage with the initial emotional import of the fan text is evident in his discussion of 'how texts become real'; by which he means to discover the processes through which texts become personally significant and meaningful. Given that Jenkins begins his discussion with a citation culled from Umberto Eco's considerations of 'the requirements for transforming a book or a movie into a cult object,'³ the question of how texts become real is also inextricably bound up with how texts become cult. Drawing on Michel de Certeau's (1984) theories of the cultural production of meaning, and his concepts of 'poaching' and 'nomadic reading' in particular, Jenkins seeks to politicise fan practices. Fans do not merely consume texts but actively *wrest* them of their images, themes and characters from across a broad range of film and television texts, so as to rework them into a creative assemblage that is more personally meaningful. Focusing on activities such as fan writing, artwork and 'filking' (the term fans use to describe their practice of producing songs related to their fandom), Jenkins suggests that fans are cultural producers caught up in an ideological struggle to assert their own meanings over that

of commercial producers. Thus, despite the evidence suggesting the fan text holds emotional import for the fan prior to their active appropriations of it, Jenkins goes to great lengths to have us believe that it is only once texts have been poached, reworked, and have passed through interpersonal networks that the text takes on any personal meaning for fans.

Whilst Jenkins' approach enables him to construct a version of fandom in terms of an essentially active and subversive cultural practice, it does so only by repressing from analysis any serious consideration of its affective dimensions (Hills, 1999, 2002). Yet it is not difficult to ascertain why Jenkins prioritizes the fans' active participation. Indeed, Jenkins' account all too conveniently reflects the broader concerns of cultural studies and the tendency therein to treat fans both as sophisticated readers of texts, and agents of social and cultural resistance within the broader power relations of their consumption practices. In other words, Jenkins' approach to fandom is somewhat determined by his careful negotiation of the long-standing debate within cultural studies regarding the politics of pleasure, wherein the slightest suggestion of passive consumption is assumed to be a sign of ideological collusion. It is also important to recognise that the development of fan theory in cultural studies has been partly determined by the way in which the discipline has pitted itself in opposition against the claims of '*Screen theory*',⁴ within which spectators have been conceived as textually determined. For Jenkins, there is also the additional concern to debunk the negative fan stereotypes which were in circulation during the time of his writing; a factor which he explicitly concedes in the book's introduction.⁵

The problem here is that in seeking to extricate fans from the popular perception of fandom as populated by mindless obsessives, and in wanting to challenge the presumed passivity within textually-determined theories of spectatorship, Jenkins exaggerates the autonomy of the viewer and produces a subject for whom the pleasures of the text are predicated strictly on its own terms. In other words, Jenkins' implied model of subjectivity is one within which fans are presented as entirely rational and purposeful individuals freely choosing amongst a range of texts, and within which there is little room for accommodating those elements of fandom which are not strictly conscious. In his steadfast determination to prioritize the fan's

agency, Jenkins never sufficiently provides a theoretical account of the *formative moment* of the fan attachments he stipulates as central to fan formations. One question which remains unanswered in his approach is this: what accounts for the existing affective rapport between the fan and the text *prior* to their attempts to dismantle and rework it?

If Jenkins seems unprepared to sufficiently engage with the question of why the texts he discusses initially exert such a strong fascination over the fan, he demonstrates a similar reluctance to draw out the full implications of his findings in relation to the root sources of fans' frustrations. Since he locates fandom within the larger power relations of consumerism, for the most part its conflictual dimensions are discussed specifically in relation to the hostility fans' feel towards commercial producers in response to unwanted narrative developments or else the abrupt cancellation of a programme they have invested in. That which Jenkins does not sufficiently unpack, however, is the underlying idealism which would appear to motivate these fans' activism. This is evident, for example, in the case of the *Beauty and the Beast* fans' refusal to accept anything short of the conventional fairy-tale ending to the series see Jenkins, 1992).

An even more striking example of the inherent romanticism displayed by Jenkins' participants is revealed, by default, in some of his more passing comments about certain fan practices. In his discussion of 'filking', for example, Jenkins notes that 'a fair percentage of filk songs involve idealized representations of childhood' (1992: 264-5) and at the same time 'speak of the impossibility of re-experiencing the vividness of the child's imagination' (1992: 265). Moreover, the self-produced identity of the fan within these songs is one which is opposed to the emotionally and imaginatively bankrupt condition of adulthood, which they refer to as 'Mundania' (1992: 268). Furthermore, these fans see themselves as 'people who carry the dreams and fantasies of childhood into adult life' (1992: 268). These are all significant findings, especially given the prevailing demographic profile of the fans Jenkins analyses (i.e., mostly professional and semi-professional women in their mid-thirties). Yet Jenkins has nothing to say about this except that it remains 'unresolved' as to what these sentiments mean when expressed by the adult (1992: 265).

But these sentiments may be pertinent to an understanding of cult fandom. At the very least they are indicative of the limitations of focusing exclusively on the social subject at the expense of fans' psychological inner worlds. The link between romanticism and cultism has been discussed elsewhere, but it remains a largely under-explored area of research.⁶ Yet, as we shall see, some of the conflict experienced by fans emerges from the deep-rooted desire to hold onto the myths of childhood (see Chapter 5). I would argue that these sentiments need to be understood in relation to the formation of personal myths and the ongoing psychosocial task of reconciling impractical inner longings with ever-changing external realities.

Theorising the processes of fandom: 2

Cult fandom as 'an unfolding project of the self': Hills

The link between childhood and fandom is central to Matt Hills' (1999, 2002) work in the field (see also Brooker, 2002; Cherry, 1999; Sandvoss, 2005), and is a significant factor underpinning my focus on his ideas in this chapter. But there are many other aspects of his work which are especially relevant herein - in particular, his ideas in relation to the formation of fan culture, as well as the affective and quasi-religious dimensions typically involved. Hills' work is expansive and meta-theoretical in its approach. He has tended to postulate a series of innovative ideas for approaching fandom, as opposed to producing sustained, empirically-supported accounts of that which it involves. As a result, many of his theories remain underdeveloped and untested. Still, Hills' work comes closest to my own and so my concern is to extract, amplify and evaluate the logical core of his work; the mainstay of which can be found in his postulating of cult fandom in terms of 'an unfolding project of the self' - a process which he has intermittently attempted to link to a sense of the cult's sacredness (Hills, 1999, 2000, 2002). In my view, Hills has not managed to successfully integrate these elements, and this is evident in some vague and awkward descriptions of his approach. For example, with reference to Hills (2000), Mathijs and Mendik summarise his approach to cult fandom thus: 'a near spiritual attempt to develop one's cultural identity' (Mathijs and Mendik, 2008: 133).

However, given my concern at this stage to evaluate theories of subjectivity which have been brought to bear on the processes of fandom, I will discuss Hills' ideas on religion and fandom in a later section in this chapter. Here, I will begin by briefly outlining those of Hills' concerns which I share, and which are relevant here. I will then go on to outline and evaluate the major core of his work which I have identified above; I will argue that the shortcomings of his work - and those precise elements of it which will be built upon herein - stem from his usage and particular negotiations of psychoanalytic concepts of the self.

A central concern for Hills is the affective dimensions of fandom: 'without the emotional attachments and passions of fans, fan cultures would not exist' (Hills, 2002: 90). Although this dimension of fandom has not been entirely overlooked in cultural studies work on fans (see Grossberg, 1992), Hills stresses the need to produce a non-constructivist account of affect, one which allows for the significance of 'outlaw emotions' (2002: 93) and is therefore conducive to producing a more fully 'subjective' model of fandom (2002: 95). Additionally, he has demonstrated a concern with that which he refers to as the 'seemingly irrational' elements of fandom, by which he means its 'feelings of ownership and possession' and its 'self-absent subjectivity', that is, the difficulties fans experience in accounting rationally for their intensely emotional attachments (Hills, 2002: 109). It is the presence of all of these elements within the fandoms to be explored herein (as indicated in the introduction), that marks Hills' work out as being especially important.

A central premise underpinning Hills' work is that these elements of fandom cannot be sufficiently understood either by ethnographic methods (see Hills, 1999, 2002, especially Chapter 3), or else the deployment of any single theoretical approach (i.e., sociological or psychological). Rather, he asserts the necessity of producing a theoretical model of fandom which preserves a space in which to consider its cultural experiences *and* its psychological dimensions (2002). With reference to the emphasis on conscious agency and resistance in cultural theories of fandom, Hills pointedly suggests that a model of fandom which concedes its affective and 'seemingly irrational' dimensions would constitute a less 'heroic' version of fandom (2002: 28). Conversely, in relation to existing psychological approaches to fandom (see Hoexter, 2000), he is critical of the evidence therein which suggests how the dangers of

producing psychoanalytic accounts which ultimately leads to the pathologisation of fans.

Critical of most existing cultural theories of fandom, which he asserts treat fan cultures as 'already established facts' rather than seeking to account for their formation (2002: 63), Hills attempts to develop a theory of the affective origins of the fan-text relationship. Drawing on the work of object-relations theorist D.W. Winnicott, Hills postulates a model of fan subjectivity which has its far roots in the cultural experiences of childhood and its near roots in the mechanisms of that which he refers to as 'affective play' (2002: 90). Thus, the starting point of Hills' argument is Winnicott's notion of the 'transitional object'; that is, the infant's first emotional bond with an external object, such as toys, teddy bears and blankets, and which functions to manage the lost sense of wholeness experienced on account of the newborn's initial inability to distinguish between object and subject. Thus, as with other object-relations theorists, Winnicott perceives 'lack' as central to the formation of the self. For Winnicott, the infant's discovery of the first object marks an important formative event in its development precisely because it is here that an intermediate realm or 'third space' is created; a realm of experience which is situated between inner reality and the external world. According to Winnicott, whilst transitional objects are gradually deattached, the third space provides a 'resting place' for the individual involved in the ongoing task of integrating reality and fantasy' (Hills, 2002: 104).

The concept was first introduced into fan studies by Harrington and Bielby (1995), who sought to account for the intensely emotional pleasures of soap fans by arguing that soap opera functions for its fans in much the same way as the original 'transitional object'; enabling fans 'to challenge the boundaries between external and internal realities' (quoted in Hills, 2002: 105). More recently, Sandvoss (2005) has suggested that the concept holds good for an explanation of *cult* fandom, most notably in relation to the recent upsurge of cult appreciation around children's programmes from the 1970s and 1980s amongst individuals who grew up in the period. According to Sandvoss, their cult appeal may be related to the pleasures afforded in 'the fleeting return to a regressive experience of wholeness' (2005: 91-3).

However, as Sandvoss himself acknowledges, this explanation depends on their being a direct biographical link with these texts in childhood (2005: 91).

Given his efforts to produce a non-pathologising psychoanalytic account of fandom, it is not surprising that Hills is critical of the 'wholesale application' of Winnicott (2002: 105). To compare the fan object to the original transitional object (which is, after all, supposedly deattached in the case of 'normal' development) would threaten to reproduce a pathologising theory of fandom. Thus, instead of linking the fan object to the first or 'proper transitional object' ('*pto*'), Hills develops the idea of a 'secondary transitional object' ('*sto*'). One important difference between the first and second order transitional object is that whilst the first is experienced by the infant as an 'unshareable possession', the second is 'reconstituted' in the cultural field by the adult who concedes its intersubjective status (Hills, 2002:108-9).

Hills proceeds to determine two ways in which the secondary transitional object comes about. First, 'it may be *a transitional object which has not altogether surrendered its affective charge and private significance for the subject, despite having been recontextualised as an intersubjective cultural experience.*' Secondly, 'it may instead be arrived at by virtue of its absorption into the subject's idiosyncratically-localised third space'. In this latter instance, Hills notes that where the text has not been directly 'retained' from infancy 'the secondary transitional object enters *a cultural repertoire which 'holds' the interest of the fan and constitutes the subject's symbolic project of the self*' (2002: 109, original emphasis). This, he suggests, 'helps to explain how fans' interests can be extended and relocated by the contagion of affect, with fan interest being channelled through intertextual networks of texts and icons' (2002: 109). Thus, for Hills, fandom takes place within Winnicott's transitional realm within which fans appropriate the fan object so as to play creatively across the boundaries of fantasy and reality. The emphasis Hills places on the playful potential of secondary transitional objects thus marks a distinction from the Winnicottian approaches outlined above which suggest that fandom is in some sense a re-enactment of the original emotional bond between the self and the first external object. Through play, the affective charge of early textual attachments can be 'channelled' into related intertexts which form the interests of the adult fan, and can be extended into the cultural practices of fandom beyond the fan-

text relationship. It is in this way that Hills sees cult fandom involving 'an unfolding project of the self'.

Now, elsewhere in his work, Hills has sought ways to link the foregoing model of fan subjectivity to a theory of the religious discourses emergent within cult fandom (see Hills 1999, 2000, 2002). In so doing, he considers work pertaining to the sociology of religion, namely, Emile Durkheim's theory of 'the elementary forms of religion' (1964 and 1995), and Thomas Luckmann's (1967) concept of 'privatised religions'. Durkheim's model stresses a primary link between religion and sociality, as well as the arbitrary nature of the sacred - arbitrary in the sense that it involves the sacralisation of objects closest to hand. Moreover, as Hills notes, Durkheim's model proposes that the social production of the sacred involves a 'misrecognition' whereby 'society mistakes its own forces for those belonging to something external and other to it' (Hills, 2002: 125). In a re-reading of Durkheim, Luckmann emphasises how in the latter half of the twentieth century, religion is becoming an altogether individualistic phenomenon. Moreover, he asserts that privatised forms of religion revolve around 'loosely connected themes [...] deriving from the individual's experiences (both familial and consumerist) in the private sphere' (Hills, 2002: 127). It is worth noting at this stage the parallels between Luckmann's theory of personalised forms of religion and the personalisation of myth within the theories of Feinstein and McAdams I am drawing on herein.

Whilst conceding the explanatory power of the above literature for a theory of the religious dimensions of fandom, and the work of Luckmann in particular, Hills remains cautious of its applicability on the grounds that 'the media 'cult' is emphatically *not* a 'religion' in the traditional sense of the word, despite possessing elements of 'religiosity', as this is defined...within literature in the sociology of religion' (Hills, 2002: 128-9, original emphasis). Thus Hills' suggests the substitute term 'neo-religiosity'; a term which in his highly specialized usage of it is three-fold. Firstly, it is intended to caution against the conflation of fandom with essentialist definitions of religion. Secondly, it serves to avoid falling into the trap of deeming cult fandom in terms of a relocation of the sacred in otherwise secular contexts (i.e., 'religiosity'). Finally, the term is used to preserve a space in which to consider that which Hills refers to as the 'cultural work' of 'religious' terminologies within

fandoms; that is, the way in which the appeal to religious discourses may function to deflect the taint of irrationality when fans fail to justify their intensely emotional attachments to specific texts.

Noting how 'religious discourses are not called upon to defend the precise qualities of the 'inspirational text', Hills suggests that their function within fandom is to enable 'a particular relaxation of 'rationalisations' and 'justifications' which fans may otherwise be called upon to produce' (2002: 122). This is not, however, a strictly conscious tactic, but is a form of what Hills (in a reworking of Anthony Giddens) refers to as the 'practical unconscious' - that is, 'all the things that actors tacitly *do not know* (i.e., fans cannot ultimately answer the question 'why this text?') but which allow them to go on in their subcultural and subjective activities' (2002: 123, original emphasis). For Hills, this explains the paradox whereby fans will frequently draw on religious vocabularies in attempting to articulate the import of their favoured text whilst simultaneously refuting the suggestion that their fandoms are in anyway tantamount to a religion (see Jindra, 1994; Doss, 1999; Cavicchi, 1998). In the end though, Hills suggests that the 'sacredness' of the cult object for its fans 'may well be arbitrarily produced out of the everydayness and ready availability of media texts' (2002: 130).

The strength of Hills' argument for our purposes here initially lies in his suggestion that the personal resonance and affective significance of a particular object of fandom is linked to the fan's sense of self through an affective continuity derived from childhood cultural experiences. Implicit in Hills' work, then, is an idea which is central to my own thinking herein - that is, that individuals may well be emotionally predisposed to the cult text on account of their formative cultural investments which may or may not be wholly conscious. Secondly, Hills' model of subjectivity implies a degree of continuity and coherency which I have said is important in grasping the processes of fandom and also development through relationship to fan texts to extend the project of the self. Finally, Hills' attempt to synchronise subjectivity and religiosity at the very least demonstrates an incisive awareness of the need to retain a focus on the quasi-religious thrust of cultism.

There are however a number of problems and gaps with Hills' formulation. Firstly, the feelings of ownership and possession which Hills determines to hold on to are only really accounted for in relation to the first account of the *sto*, wherein a direct biographical continuity with a specific text can be proven. In this instance, Hills is able to confidently assert that the 'seemingly irrational' features of fandom stem from the continued investment with a text forged in childhood:

'It is this struggle between intersubjective cultural experience and personal significance which helps explain fans' seemingly irrational claims of 'ownership' over texts and icons'

(Hills, 2002: 109).

Yet in relation to his second account of the *sto*, where a new text may enter the fan's existing cultural interests, it is significant that intersubjective tension and irrationality are lost from focus. In other words, Hills' model, and his emphasis on creative play in particular, is unable to accommodate an explanation of the 'seemingly irrational' elements of fandom except in instances where fandom is based on a text first invested in during childhood.

Where, then, does this leave those instances of fandom which exhibit the 'seemingly irrational' features of fandom despite the unavailability of the fan object in childhood? *The Wicker Man* is a compelling case in point. The vast majority of participants in my study stated that they discovered the film well into late adolescence or adulthood and yet their testimonies, as we shall see, clearly illustrate the highly personal sense of resonance, the feelings of ownership, as well as an inability to articulate its significance. In other words, tension does not magically evaporate. As Sandvoss asserts, fan texts are never experienced by fans as fully intersubjective (2005: 90).

I would suggest that this discrepancy stems not from the singularity of *Wicker* fandom, but from Hills' conscious determination to produce a non-pathologising psychoanalytic interpretation of fandom.⁷ Indeed, Hills' emphasis on play ascribes too much creative agency to the fan - a factor which he has more recently acknowledged (see Hills, 2007). Here, I want to reinforce the importance of retaining

a focus on the profound personal resonance of the cult object and all the feelings of ownership and possessiveness involved, regardless of whether or not it has played a direct role in the fan's formative experiences. As I have argued, the initial experience of *The Wicker Man* for the fans is characterised by profound feelings of inexplicable familiarity, within which a partial recognition occurs, and which convinces fans that the imagery is in some way related to who they feel themselves to be. This raises questions about the validity of Hills' claim in relation to status of fan texts discovered in adulthood as enabling fans to play creatively and non-competitively.

Cornel Sandvoss (2005) comes close to identifying the way in which fan objects may be complexly inscribed in the fan's sense of self, insofar as he asserts (rightly) that fan objects are never experienced by fans as fully intersubjective but 'as part of the self' (2005:90). However, he ultimately attributes this phenomenon to the superimposition of the self onto the fan object via processes of projection, and thereby excludes the possibility of the fans' claims having any factual basis.

A second problem with Hills' formulation is that it is essentially abstract. In his second account of the *sto*, for example, suggesting as it does a process whereby a text *enters* 'a cultural repertoire which holds interest for the fan' (2002: 109, my emphasis), it is not at all clear how this happens. Hills merely suggests it operates through a 'contagion of affect' (2002: 109). Whilst this idea is, as we shall see, a pertinent one herein, it remains particularly unelaborated in Hills' account; the processes involved in enabling a text to enter the fan's 'third space' along circuits of affect are, after all, far from obvious. Such a process, at the very least, presupposes a form of a remembered self, or at least some mechanism of memory. Furthermore, the idea of entering is passive and fails to capture the impact which Hills identifies as central to the cult response.

This brings us to the third, more fundamental gap in Hills' account: it lacks a sufficiently explained theory of the self. Although his work is littered with references to notions such as 'an affectively-charged narrative of the self' and 'a biographical self', or else 'an unfolding project of the self' (see Hills 1999, 2000, 2002) we never get from Hills a sufficient theorisation of how the self selects, processes, stores, and retrieves its cultural experiences. Hills' reliance on object-relations theory may be

operant here insofar as it would seem to reproduce the same vagueness in relation to how the self is engaged with external object. As Ian Graham asserts, 'the self is taken for granted in object-relations theory; too much emphasis is placed on the object at the expense of the self concept' (1999: 10).

In locating the fan-text relationship primarily within an intermediate realm between fantasy and reality, and where self-reflexive play occurs, Hills neglects to consider how the fan and its favoured text are also necessarily situated within specific socio-historical and cultural contexts. This lack of a more situated model of the self not only enables Hills to exaggerate its autonomy, it also allows him to overstate its idiosyncratic and subjective relationship to the cult object. Whilst I concur with Hills that there is a need to attend to the subjective experiences of fandom as opposed to always reading affect off from a wholly constructivist position, this nonetheless needs to be tempered. As David Bordwell puts it, 'constructivism, in one guise or another, furnishes the only viable theories of learning that we have' (1989: 21). In other words, Hills' emphasis on the idiosyncratic, free-floating and subjective dimensions of fandom prioritises agency over structure. Yet if the affective dimensions of fandom are so diffuse and idiosyncratic, how do we explain the similarity of affective experience occurring amongst fans for a given text? That is not to say fan experiences are identical in any way, but as I have suggested in the introduction, they do form a distinctive 'structure of feeling'. As it is one of my aims to discover a shared affective basis which would shed light on this, I would argue that it is essential to approach the issue of affect in a way which retains a balance between a constructivist and a subjectivist models.

Finally, I am unconvinced by Hills' account of the quasi-religious aspects of cult, particularly in his account of fans' (albeit unconscious) tactical deployment of religious discourse to deflect the taint of irrationality when called upon to justify their fandoms. For one thing, fans are not typically asked to rationalize their fandoms except within the research context. Even so, when fans draw on religious vocabularies they do so in order to convey a sense of the psychological import of the text. In other words, the religiosity of cult emerges from the experiential dimensions which occur in the fan-text relationship. Thus, Hills' determination to find an explanation of the 'sacredness' of the cult object within strictly sociological accounts

neglects to consider important work pertaining to the psychology of religious experience. Again, Hills' approach enables him to avoid the more thorny territory of the 'religious experience'.⁸

My theoretical concerns in this study are thus situated between cult film theory and cultural studies work on fan audiences. Like the work I have discussed in this chapter so far, I am concerned with the processual nature of fandom - that is, the various stages through which the fan-text relationship originates and develops. This level of analysis, as I have argued in the introduction, is wholly absent from work pertaining to cult film studies. Despite frequent claims with regard the devotional nature and ongoing commitments of cult film fans, cult scholars, where they have seriously considered fans at all, continue to produce synchronic snapshots which fail to shed light on the processes of cult (see Mendik and Mathijs, 2008). By contrast, my foregoing discussion of cultural studies work on fan audiences has revealed a set of findings which in a very real sense match my own. This work indicates the intensely emotional and profoundly resonant beginnings of the fan attachment, as well its moments of tension. Even if these aspects are downplayed or else tailored to fit the concerns of theorists, they are nonetheless foregrounded. Whilst Hills' focus on the affective and religious dimensions of cult fandom usefully provides a way beyond the insistence on ironic and/or rebellious fan practices prevalent in cult film studies, Jenkins' work, despite its exaggeration of the subversive practices of fandom, reveals the extent of its conflictual aspects.

Like Hills, then, I am concerned with the extent to which cult fan formations are affectively driven, but I am not convinced by his emphasis on play. This seems to reproduce the type of 'heroic' fandom which Hills explicitly sets out to avoid. Nor am I convinced that a fan object is ever experienced as fully intersubjective. In this respect I want to keep hold of Sandvoss' contention that fan objects are experienced as part of the self, but I also want to develop a way of understanding this process outside of strictly psychoanalytic concepts of subjectivity. I also want to preserve the tension prevalent in Jenkins' work but gradually written out of Hills' account. More specifically, I want to develop an understanding of how the emotional import and intersubjective tension involved in fandom can be understood even when the fan text has not formed a direct part of the fan's experience in childhood. As we saw, this

was a sticking point in both Hills and Sandvoss' Winnicottian approaches to cult fandom.

Still absent from their work, then, is a sufficient concept of the self which would accommodate the specific processes involved, and my aim here is to develop a model within which the full range of fan experiences can be better accommodated and understood. As I noted earlier, the task of this research is not to identify but to integrate these elements into a theoretical framework. The theoretical challenge here, then, is broadly two-fold. Firstly, it is necessary to account for the affective rapport which would appear to pre-exist the fan's initial discovery of the fan text, attested to by the profound sense of personal resonance fans experience in their initial viewing of the fan text. Secondly, it is essential to theorise the psycho-social conditions and mechanisms involved in the emerging conflict which characterises enduring fandoms. Given the presence of religiosity in the fan experiences under focus here, a third challenge is to account for its manifest significance.

In the remainder of this chapter, my aim is to work with a more fully integrated model of the self which can accommodate the experiential dimensions of cult fandom; namely, its affective, aesthetic and conflictual dimensions.

Towards a theory of cult fandom as a process of personal mythopoesis

To recapitulate, the central argument of my study is that the spontaneous cult formation is fundamentally enabled and sustained through a set of largely unperceived mythmaking processes. It is my contention that an understanding of this process can illuminate the generative mechanisms and sustaining factors involved in the cult formation.

My argument rests on five central propositions:

1. The self may be understood in terms of a personal myth; that is a personal narrative which is constructed out of the fragments of past experience which become intricately woven through mechanisms of mythmaking and memory so as to produce a stable sense of self. The self myth is endlessly reworked

across the developmental stages of the life course and engages the individual in the ongoing psychosocial task of reconciling inner and outer experience.

2. The cult text plays a decisive role in facilitating this process, in the first instance, because it is complexly inscribed within the fans' personal myth. The cult text overlaps with the fans' mythic concerns (both conscious and otherwise) to the extent that they can be said to be emotionally and imaginatively predisposed to it.
3. The origins of the spontaneous cult formation may stem from an interaction with a text which taps into elements of the individual's personal myth thus activating preconscious imagery, sensations and associations which were originally forged in childhood.
4. Mythmaking is the principal means through which these experiences are articulated and extended beyond the viewing context.
5. In the second instance, and in relation to enduring cult fandoms, the mythopoeic potential emerges out of a set of conditions that reconfigure the individual's relationship to his/her own self myth. These conditions include factors occurring at the level of the textual challenges but also alternatives, and also developmental and or circumstantial changes in the individual's life which cause them to reflect differently on the text. Fresh experiences will be brought to bear on the text, but the text will also be read differently in accordance with changing priorities in the individual's life.

Each of the above components of my argument will be discussed in more detail in the following sections. In order to maintain clear linkages between the conceptual framework and its relevance in informing my approach, I will divide my discussion of the proposed model into two separate sections, dealing with the generative mechanisms and sustaining factors respectively.

Theorising the generative mechanisms of the spontaneous cult formation

The idea of a 'submerged mythology' (Feinstein, 1997: 501) which is culturally and historically determined, and is rooted in the individual's formative years and continues to exert a powerful influence on choice, behaviour and perception is pertinent for theorising the generative mechanisms of cult, namely the mechanisms of attraction which involve pre-existing affinity and inexplicable familiarity. A key implication of personal myth theory is that the individual's personal myth plays a significant role in the orientation towards specific external objects. Thus, the way in which individuals 'select' from the multiple texts surrounding them is significantly informed by, and depends upon, the extent to which texts are compatible with their existing schemas. This is a fundamentally affective orientation, rather than a conscious selection. Thus, the special draw of the fan text, as much as the strong sense of personal resonance which fans typically experience in relation to it may be fundamentally connected to the complex and subtle ways in which the fan text hooks into the individual's personal myth. In other words, elements of the personal myth position the fan in a special relationship to the text. What aspects of the myth might be particularly pertinent?

Cult/ural predispositions: Embodied imagery

Imagery is a fundamental component of the personal myth and plays an important part in the individual's emotional and experiential lives. All theorists working with the concept have stressed as much. Feinstein, for example, has defined the personal myth in terms of 'an internal system of imagery' which 'guides' the individual towards and away from external objects (1997: 510). Stephen Larsen has suggested that imagery pertaining to the personal myth is the 'depth factor' of human experience (1995: 21). Moreover, on a broader theoretical level, the preconscious dimension – the level at which personal myths develop – has been characterised as operating primarily in imagistic and associative modes of 'thought' (Epstein, 1998: 72-4). In all of these accounts, then, the defining quality of imagery pertaining to the personal myth is that it is deeply embodied in the individual's experiences of self.

The relationship between embodied imagery and personal myths has been usefully discussed by Dan McAdams (1993), whose extensive empirical investigations in this area have led him to conclude that each individual's personal myth comprises not only a characteristic set of 'personal imagery,' but that these self-defining images are prone to becoming mobilised along distinctive 'thematic lines' (see McAdams, 1993, especially chapters 2 and 3). Through experience, embodied images become elaborated into larger personal themes which not only assign them a distinctive shape and content, but become visibly manifest in the individual's 'choice' of wider, particularly long-standing, cultural interests (McAdams, 1993: 47).

McAdams suggests that the accumulation of personal imagery begins early in life, where images are unconsciously collected in childhood from a range of available cultural resources and institutions including the family, religion and, more increasingly, the media (and especially television) (1993: 60-4). Together they form the 'raw materials' from which the myth will be constructed (1993: 46). The range of images competing for the individual's attention is, of course, immensely vast, and so an understanding of the processes involved in the acquisition of personal imagery is important. McAdams suggests that amongst the child's early experiences with culture, certain images will capture the imagination in such a profound and compelling way that they will become assimilated into the myth. McAdams (1993: 35) uses the term 'arresting imagery' so as to capture the emotional gravity of their import. Crucially, 'these emotionally charged images may become parts of the self, continuing to exert an unconscious influence on behaviour and experience throughout one's adult years' (McAdams, 1993: 60-1). Thus, prior cultural experiences leave a legacy of embodied images which will influence the kinds of representations an individual will be drawn to and, significantly, in ways which are not wholly conscious. According to McAdams, an important feature of arresting images, and thus the imagistic basis of the personal myth, is that they are 'pre-rational' - experienced and assimilated at a time in the child's life before it has developed more advanced cognitive skills. Hence, McAdams suggests that the qualitative status of arresting imagery is to be understood in terms of 'a synthesis of feeling, knowledge, and an inner sensation, captured by an episode in time'; a synthesis which he states 'children are especially open to' (1993: 65).

The notion of embodied imagery carries important implications for understanding the affective roots of the cult formation, helping to explain, as well as lending credence to, the fans' insistence on the personal significance of a text's imagery. As I have suggested, *The Wicker Man's* imagery has a special status for the fans in my study - something therein is felt to be particularly resonant and inexplicably familiar. Moreover, this would seem to be a feature of cult attractions more generally - recall that for Jenkins' fans, the imagery they found in their favoured texts was felt to reflect those which reside in their own 'hearts' and 'minds'. It follows that in order to apprehend the special affinity which pre-exists the fan-text relationship it is essential to know more about what fans' personal images are like. Thus, ascertaining where they come from and how they might link to the cult text become pressing questions in the challenge to account for the formative mechanisms of the cult formation.

This is a particularly challenging area as I am necessarily dealing with those latent dimensions of experience which the fan might not be conscious of, let alone be in a position to articulate. There are however a number of factors which come together to suggest an appropriate method. Firstly, if embodied imagery has its roots in the individual's formative experiences with culture, then the cultural milieu of these fans' childhood is an especially pertinent place from which to begin an exploration. Secondly, if embodied images tend to become woven into specific themes then it should be possible to observe instances where fan desire clusters around a specific aspect of the fan text. Moreover, we should expect to see some correspondence between particularly resonant themes in the text and long-standing interests held by fans. Finally, there is the relationship between association and affect to consider. As Westen asserts, it is '[t]he feelings associated with representations [which] motivate individual actors toward and away from various ways of thinking and behaving' (2001: 42). It follows that, by ascertaining the characteristic emotions a person exhibits in relation to a particular representation, it should be possible to make reasonable inferences about the nature of the affects involved.

Having outlined the concept of embodied imagery informing this study, as well as offering a preliminary methodological criterion for its becoming an operationalised area of analysis, I now want to clarify how all this relates to the two most significant

elements of my data. As I stated in the introduction to my study, each of my participants fell into the generation which grew up in the 1970s and 1980s, and all invested in British horror in their formative years. This provides an incontrovertible site of mythmaking in the formative years of these individuals, and my interest lies in finding out how, if at all, this shared resource has played a role in preconsciously disposing these fans to *The Wicker Man*. Whilst many of my participants would not consider themselves to be fans of the genre now, the important thing to keep hold of here is the role these texts may have played in shaping their personal myths. In other words, the extent to which their personal imagery may be comprised of horror imagery at a preconscious level might be an important factor of how the film registers.

Two caveats follow: firstly, although embodied imagery is in many ways unique to the individual, it is important to remember that the cultivation of the personal myth does not exist in a vacuum, but is instead largely determined by the specific historical and cultural location in which it is forged. Moreover, the implicit mechanisms through which personal myths are generated are subject to shared neurological processes. For both of these reasons even the most subjectively-felt experiences can bear out similarities in some respects. In other words, my intention to explore embodied imagery at the collective level is not a contradiction in terms, but is instead made possible by the fact that these fans have invested in the same cultural resource at a similar age.

Secondly, it is important to state that I am not convinced by McAdams' argument in relation to the specific timing of arresting imagery. McAdams' account of personal myths is chiefly concerned to map their progression onto a developmental framework, and it seems that in wanting to account for its specifically 'pre-rational' dimension, he assigns the cultivation of 'arresting imagery' to the developmental stage he sees as being most appropriate: infancy.⁹ I would argue that arresting imagery can be cultivated at a much later stage. Since most of our experiences with external stimuli bypass the processes of conscious cognition (Westen, 2001), internalised images necessarily involve a pre-rational dimension. I would also suggest that the development of arresting imagery depends very much on the nature of the material the individual is exposed to. My concern here with the reception of

horror is a case in point and demands an appreciation of how its striking images would arrest the attention of much older children and adolescents.¹⁰ Viewing contexts are also likely to be important. Whilst some of my participants were able to watch horror with a parent, many others described accounts of watching in secret; a factor which is bound to have given these experiences an added memorability dynamic.¹¹

There are, of course, far more obvious ways in which I could proceed to link the film to this precise cultural resource. *The Wicker Man* is a British film made in the horror vein and, as I will show, some of the appeal of the film emerges from the recognition of familiar conventions and, importantly, their becoming inverted in the film. Generic competency is therefore a factor underpinning the cult embrace of *The Wicker Man* for these fans. Yet, this does not explain the feelings of inexplicable familiarity and resonance which cannot be articulated. The need to go beyond the more obvious linkages is thus necessitated by the sheer difficulty fans characteristically experience in accounting for their fandoms, and therefore promotes an approach which is committed to understanding cult fandom upon its own terms.

The significance of the cult import of a text residing in the fans' personal imagery, suggesting as it does a preconscious disposition, is merely the first step towards apprehending the mythopoeic potential of cult fandom. Given that these images are intricately organised along affective-associative cognitive schemata, an understanding of the processes involved in their reactivation carries far-reaching implications for the generative mechanisms of cult, as well as its relationship to the mythmaking process.

The activation of embodied imagery: Affective, aesthetic and mythic implications

A central premise of personal myth theory is that elements of the myth can be brought to consciousness when something in the environment touches upon that schema. This is largely due to the extent to which the personal myth is operationalised at the preconscious level - material stored at this level is not strictly unconscious but resides at a 'low threshold' (Westen, 2001: 29). Crucially, there is a

consensus amongst personal myth theorists that the activation of mythic schemata quickens the mythmaking process. Dan McAdams, for example, asserts that experiences involving the resurfacing of elements of the personal myth act as a catalyst for a particularly active phase of personal mythmaking - such experiences focus the individual's attention on the self experience as well as the object at the centre of that experience (1993: 66). Stephen Larsen's typological account of the modes of mythmaking has described a similar process in terms of a 'spontaneous mode of mythmaking' (1995: 76). In all accounts, emphasis is placed on the sense of magnitude and urgency with which the individual will strive to make sense of such an experience. As McAdams puts it, emergent aspects of the myth become 'headline news,' and priority is given over to discovering the personal significance of such events (1993: 77).

Recent developments in the study of cognitive-affective structures and implicit memory offer a good theoretical explanation as to why access to affective-associative networks (i.e. personal myths) would register in terms of an intensely emotional and profound experience. This theory rests on the perspective of connectionist model of the mind discussed earlier in relation to Drew Westen's work (2001: 34). As Sandra Russ asserts, 'access to affect-laden thought and imagery [...] would activate other memory nodes and permit a wide range of associations to occur' (1993: 12).

I want to propose a model of the generative mechanisms of the spontaneous cult formation which combines the above perspectives. This model is intended to capture the formative moment of the cult attachment in a way which can accommodate the emotional impact and related sensations of inexplicable familiarity and personal resonance, whilst simultaneously indicating its relatedness to the mythmaking process. The origins of the spontaneous cult formation emerges out of an event involving a text's capacity to reactivate preconscious material shared by a group of individuals, thus generating a range of implicit and explicit associations and affects to occur simultaneously. This process therefore helps to explain the intensely emotional experience in terms of an experience within which preconscious ways of knowing and feeling are in some sense disturbed and stimulated by the text. Given that this process involves the resurfacing of deeply embedded and embodied

elements of the self's past experiences, it elicits a spontaneous mode of mythmaking which involves the individual becoming engaged in an introspective turn towards the self story and search for ways of making meaning of this event give it meaning in the present.

This does not mean that the preconscious material elicited in this experience is identical for all fans, although the chances of overlaps are significantly increased if it can be proven that a) these fans have built their myths on a similar cultural resource and have thereby cultivated similar personal imagery; and b) it can be shown that it is this aspect of their myths which is reactivated by the cult text. (I will be attempting to demonstrate this link in Chapter 3). What is important here though is that the re-emergence of older sensations would similarly register in terms of an experiential event whereby the film becomes central in the quest for determining the significance of its relationship to the self. This preserves a space for the subjective dimensions without losing sight of the potentially collective processes involved, and forms the basis of a strategy which is intended to provide an account of how and why it is that fascination clusters around the same object can be characterised by a distinct, shared structure of feeling.

A preliminary question in relation to my proposed model is: How might the cinematic experience be particularly conducive for the activation of spontaneous modes of mythmaking? Significantly, theorists have linked this mode to experiences which occur in 'moments when the mind is taking time off'. As Larsen states, 'the key here is that the experience happens without your own volition or effort' – in moments where the conscious mind is swept away by an experience (1995: 77). There is a wealth of work addressing cinema's capacity to access differing levels of consciousness. Psychoanalysis has been concerned with the unconscious mechanisms of film, whilst cognitive film theory has sought ways of discussing how film emotions act as cues to corresponding emotions in the viewer. Much work in cult film theory has been concerned with conscious modes of cognition - the playful ambiguities and intertextual references of the cult text provide viewers with a series of puzzles to work out. My interest, by contrast, is with cinema's capacity to access the preconscious dimensions of experience, enabling an appreciation of how it interacts with memories and affects stored at a low level of conscious awareness.

Walter Benjamin's concept of the 'aura' is relevant here, for not only does he specifically link it to the 'cult value' of a work, he also cites film as a last refuge of modernity where the aura might still be experienced. Benjamin's concept is multi-layered, notoriously complex (Crowther, 1993: 6) and is developed across several of his essays (see especially Benjamin, 1936, 1939, and 1929). Typically, it is his discussion of the aura in his essay, 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction' (1936) which has provided a reference point for cult film theorists (Welch Everman, 1993; Hills 2000; Mathijs and Mendik, 2008). Here the aura is largely discussed by Benjamin in relation to a special quality projected onto an artwork typically rooted in ritual, or else a particular tradition or style so far removed from our own cultural perspective that it introduces a pronounced perceptual distance. This notion of perceptual distance generated by certain artefacts holds good, for example, in accounting for the cult appeal of a text which differs in style or format from expected aesthetic conventions so as to provoke an air of curiosity, and even reverence. Benjamin's concept is also implicitly invoked in many accounts of transnational cult texts, particularly in instances where texts which generate curiosity outside of their original cultural context because of their perceived exoticism, difference, and strangeness. Here, the cult text's mysterious aura is generated in accordance with our own cultural perspective. In each case, the cult value of a work is linked to perceptual distance, a factor which Benjamin emphasised as being a condition of the aura.

But there is another, lesser well-known, aspect of the aura discussed by Benjamin which supports my own argument that cult can be generated by an affective embodied experience. Indeed, Benjamin linked the auratic experience to a process involving the activation of deeply embedded memories, notably of a different quality to conscious memories. Drawing on Marcel Proust's notion of 'involuntary memory', Benjamin linked the auratic experience to a chance encounter with the experiential self. The essential feature of this form of memory is that it involves the resurfacing of 'indirect and profound senses of time, feelings, places, which are involuntarily triggered in response to something in the environment with which it is linked by association' (Crowther, 1993: 3).

In this version, the cult value of a work is linked to an experiential transaction between an external object and an embodied subject. This shifts the cult value of a work away from its dependence on a strictly perceptual distance of a text to an altogether more embodied experience with it. One important question here is this: how does the affective process described above influence the aesthetic processes involved? Although Benjamin's concept is linked to aesthetic perception, he does not offer a theoretical explanation. But the cognitive processes involved in an experience within which affective -associative memory is disturbed carries its own implications for the aesthetic process.

Aesthetic implications

The reactivation of cognitive-affective schemas has been linked to a number of cognitive processes which can help to illuminate the aesthetic experiences to be explored herein. As I indicated, the fans in my study undergo a powerful experience with the text characterised by magical sensations and transcendent feelings. I want to suggest that these aesthetic experiences are enabled in the first instance by the processes of affective reactivation discussed in the previous section. My argument rests on the theoretical concept of 'affective openness', which has been discussed by cognitive psychologist, Sandra Russ (1993) in relation to the creative process. Russ suggests that access to affect-laden thoughts and imagery increases the individual's ability to be open to experience, thus triggering a range of neurological processes which have been linked to creative and imaginative modes of thinking. It follows that the intensely affective states induced by the reactivation of cognitive-associative memory networks simultaneously increases the individual's capacity to be open to experience the text itself in imaginative ways.

An important dimension of the fan's aesthetic experiences, as suggested in my introduction, is that they are characterised by a response which would appear to be un-fazed by the narrative ruptures and other dissonant elements of the text which can be objectively perceived. Instead, these fans appear to be intuitively feeling their way through the texts rhythms and moods. The result is that of a surprisingly unified and coherent experience with the film's aesthetic properties.

Significantly, Russ (1993) suggests that access to associative–affective networks generates the conditions for ‘divergent thinking’ and ‘transformational thinking’. Divergent thinking involves ‘thinking that goes off in different directions’ and abilities of ‘free association’, fluidity of thought and feeling’ (1993: 5). Moreover, this broader associative ability ‘would also benefit the transformation process, the ability to break out of an old set and see something in a new way’ (Russ, 1993: 101). Divergent thinking is also linked to analogical thinking. That is, ‘the ability to discern similarities between superficially disparate aspects of reality and to derive insight from those similarities’ (Russ, 1993: 160). Crucially, these modes of thought are linked to that which Russ refers to as an increased ‘tolerance for ambiguity’ (1993: 18).

This notion of fluidity of thought and feeling is important because it implies a process involving an increased ability to forge unusual or surprising connections between otherwise dissonant textual units. Thus, the potential to see latent connections in the film’s imagery, or else between image and form, is therefore likely to be significantly increased in instances of high levels of affective openness in viewers. One implication of this is that these viewers may be able to circumnavigate the need to generate a cause and effect relationship between the onscreen events, therefore enabling the narrative ruptures and other dissonant elements to be experienced differently from the expected break on emotional involvement. In other words, in an intensely affective state the cognitive processes related to rational modes of thinking, and thus the tendency to want to perceive a logical relationship between the disparate elements of the text are likely to be secondary. It is therefore instructive to attend to the way in which fans specifically experience the potentially dissonant aspects of the film.

Affective openness is also linked to the expansion of normative states of consciousness which, in turn, is thought to heighten the individual’s aesthetic sensitivity at the level of the sensorial (Russ, 1999). Whilst I would argue that film, by its very nature, necessarily involves a multi-sensory experience, it follows that in intense moments of affective openness, the sensory faculties will be especially receptive. As Stanley Krippner asserts, ‘sensory input during alternative states of consciousness should be viewed as distinct from restricting sensory input in a normal

waking state' (Krippner, 1999: 68). This process carries implications for approaching the magical sensations which form these fans experiences with the text. Classical film theorists often emphasised a relationship between the sensory experiences of film and the magical. Moreover, these ideas have been developed in more recent work concerned with the magical and transcendence of cinema (see Chapter 4). In exploring the aesthetic experiences I will be particularly concerned to treat them as affective reveries rather than cognitive puzzles. It is therefore important to appreciate how the experience of the film in this heightened state might involve sensations which register directly on the senses.

An additional factor to consider in thinking about the relationship between affective and aesthetic processes is the significance of the original context within which the encoding of embodied imagery first occurs. Experiences which involve the reproduction of affective-associative content cognitively primed at an earlier period in the individual's personal history are likely to involve the reactivation of implicit perceptions and competencies. Russell describes implicit perception as 'an ability to make visual discriminations among stimuli that are not consciously seen' (2002: 184). Given my concern to ascertain how early experiences of watching British horror might have predisposed fans to the film, an understanding of implicit perceptions carried over from those events is important. In other words, early experiences with texts may foster implicit modes of perception which can be unconsciously called upon in the event of watching a text which bears a similar aesthetic quality and mood. Krippner goes as far as to say that 'an implicit knowledge of visual relationships among objects [...] may constitute the fundamental mental operations inherent in much of creative thought' (Krippner, 1999: 67).

Mythmaking implications

A final consideration requires us to think about how these processes might affect the developing fan-text relationship. For instance, what kind of power is imparted to the film as a result of these experiences? The fans in my study consistently expressed experiencing transcendent feelings, particularly in relation to the early stages of their fandom and, as I will show, the motivations underpinning certain fan practices appear to be driven by a need to articulate that which is felt to be beyond words.

The concept of personal myth has much purchase on the quasi-religious dimensions of the cult experience, and much work has been conducted in the field by scholars concerned to address the implications of such experiences for the developing myth. Feinstein suggests that experiences involving the production of transcendent feelings are often followed by a particularly active phase of personal mythmaking in which the individual will attempt to assimilate the experience into his/her existing schemas. Moreover, such experiences involve the raising of mythic and spiritual consciousness (Feinstein, 1997). Glenn Hughes suggests that 'the discovery of transcendence is the discovery of a mystery of ultimate meaning; therefore, it is a discovery that leaves our deepest questions fully alive as questions, indeed, more intensely alive than ever, resonant as they now are with awareness of the mystery' (Hughes, 2003: 23). Along similar lines, Arthur Warmouth (1965) has discussed the affects of a 'peak experience' on the developing personal myth. The idea of the peak experience was introduced by Abraham Maslow (1964), and refers to an experience which stands out from the routines of daily life and is in some way revelatory for the recipient. Crucially, Warmouth notes that the object at the centre of an epiphanic experience would take on a mythic quality for the recipient (1965).

Once this mindset has been activated it is likely to colour the interpretive process - not only in terms of subsequent viewings but also in relation to the fan's own developing relationship. It is therefore important to explore the links between the aesthetic experience and the ways in which fans strive to interpret this. Moreover, it is necessary to consider how the initial experience influences the interpretive process. Furthermore, the ways in which individuals seek to explore and modify the significance of experiences produced in altered states of consciousness is particularly important, and I will suggest that the 'spiritual' sentiments of this fan faction need to be explored in relation to these processes.

My approach to the generative mechanisms of cult thereby seeks to foreground a set of discrete, yet interrelated, processes which would link the affective and aesthetic dimensions of cult fandom to the mythmaking process. Whilst I have suggested that the cult text may already be complexly linked to existing elements of the fans personal myths, and notably, embodied imagery, I have outlined a number of

subsequent related processes which enable a preliminary understanding of how the film would go on to become a tool in the ongoing processes of mythmaking.

The advantages of my approach are as follows. Firstly, the highly personal significance of the fan text does not depend on there being a *direct* biographical continuity in the form of a specific text which has served as a proper transitional object for the fan. Rather, it opens up a space in which to consider an altogether more complex set of links through which the cult text might be linked to the formative experiences of culture. Moreover, intersubjective tension makes sense in this context precisely because the cult object is intricately rooted within the personal experience and innermost beliefs and desires. In some respects, my argument comes close to Hills' model of the second transitional object, insofar as this relates to a text entering the existing interests of the fan linked by a contagion of affect. But as I have said, Hills' conceptualisation of this process not only loses the focus on intersubjective tension, it also flattens the impact. By contrast, my own model enables the moment of impact to be theorised within the context of a broader process of personal mythopoesis.

Secondly, my approach does not depend on overdetermined concepts such as 'choice' or 'affective play' which have a tendency to downplay the emotional import theorists otherwise set out to explore. From the perspective of personal myth, these factors are never strictly conscious acts. As Rees suggests:

The process of choice is both more subtle and more complex. By using the notion of personal myth we avoid the error of positing an over-rationalised model of the individual freely choosing between alternatives whether it be for instrumental benefit or affective fulfilment

(Rees, 1996: 21-22).

Thirdly, whilst concentrating on a single fan culture, my focus extends beyond its perimeters so as to incorporate an exploration of the respondents' prior cultural investments. Such an approach puts into action something like the recent call in cultural studies to attend to the individual's 'textual fields' (Couldry, 2000: 76). That is, the texts which have featured significantly in the individuals' personal history and

which may help to produce a better understanding of the way in which individuals select texts from the vast range of texts competing for his/her attention. For Couldry, such an approach is necessary in order for cultural studies to redress its previous neglect of the experiential dimensions of personal experience. My own specific exploration of textual history is to hopefully discover the affective roots of the cult attachment.

Finally, the proposed framework is apt for analysing the *collective* dimensions of cult fandom. Even though the individual's personal myth is in many ways unique, it also reflects in important ways the specific socio-cultural and historical contexts in which it was created and developed. Thus, to the extent that cultural sources are shared, we should expect to find that the personal myths of individuals who have grown up in a specific socio-historical and cultural context bear out similarities. Whilst I want to preserve a space for the subjective elements involved, I am cautious not to fall into the romanticist trap of seeing fan responses as wholly idiosyncratic and devoid of constructivist elements.

The modes and mechanisms of myth-work: Towards a model of enduring cult fandom

A second major concern of my study is to explore the significance of, and motivational factors involved in, the essentially enduring nature of cult film fandom. Whilst this area of research has remained particularly under-explored in cult film scholarship, work on television fandom has provided some insights, many of which pivot around moments of interpersonal tension. The example of fans seeking to preserve a sense of ownership and exclusivity over their favoured text in the face of external corporate change is a case in point, as is the fan's efforts to negotiate the line between the personal and intersubjective status of the fan text. Whilst retaining an emphasis on its conflictual dimensions, my concern is to situate enduring fandom within a theoretical framework which can highlight its relationship to the processes of personal mythopoesis.

My argument is that continued engagement with the cult object, and the conflictual dimensions involved, may be fundamentally related to the mechanisms of 'myth-work' (Larsen, 1990). Myth-work is a term used by personal myth theorists to encapsulate the processes involved in the individual's ongoing task to maintain a balance between the functional and dysfunctional aspects of their personal myths, within which the individual's successful negotiation of cultural experiences is important for its stability. On the other hand, mythmaking depends on moments of rupture and discord. As Feinstein asserts, challenges to the myth provide an opportunity for change and development (1997: 507). Myth-work can therefore engage the individual in activities which either build on existing myths, or else involve the 'working-through' of discordant experiences which threaten their stability. Often, it is centred on attempts to negotiate the transition from an old to a new myth.

A crucial question here is this: How, and for what reasons, might cult fandom become implicated in the processes of mythwork? By way of offering a preliminary answer, it is instructive to turn to that which I have referred to as the 'dialectic of myth'. As I suggested earlier, the term is intended to capture both the structural and ideological ambiguities of the cult film text, as well as the nature of the fan-text interface which sees the relationship transformed into a dynamic interaction between personal and cultural myths. At the level of the text, the dialectic of myth emerges from the interplay of two opposing tendencies: mythologisation and de-mythologisation, a factor many cult films seem to share.

I have said that the film's treatment of religious ideologies and alternative, spiritual cultural practices are central to the ongoing concerns of the fans in my study. Moreover, religion is both a principal trope through which conflict is articulated, and is also the central theme around which these fans work-through and reconfigure elements of their myths. One aim, then, is to investigate how prolonged use of the film enables the processes of mythmaking and thus identity formation: what specific aspects of the film's myths are these fans drawn to and through what means are they incorporated into their life-worlds? Equally important here is a consideration of that which potentially threatens the stability of the myth. If, as I argue, the film frustrates its own myths, then the question of how this dynamic may come to pose a problem

for the fan is an important one. In other words, it is likely that whilst some elements of the text will be readily assimilated into fans existing mythic schemas, many other aspects would be discordant. How fans negotiate the dialectic of myth and the ways in which their interpretive practices might shed light on the processes of mythic assimilation and accommodation are concerns central to my approach.

Cult counter-myths

The cult film is often identified by virtue of its ability to stand outside of its own culture's favourite (i.e. dominant) mythologies. In varying degrees of political intent, these texts can either deliberately position themselves antagonistically against prevailing cultural norms, or else call them into question by default. As such, cult texts provide viewers with a rare opportunity to look in on the myths that have become naturalised in their culture, or else offer an alternative myth to live by.

In terms of a description of cult mythologies, the above narrative is familiar enough. Similar accounts can be found in almost every book dedicated to the subject. But it is one which often leads scholars into making trite statements, not only about the films but the viewers' relationship to them. Such perspectives are implicitly informed by postmodernist notions of texts and subjectivity: the text's self-conscious play with ideological norms and/or artistic conventions is aligned with the viewers increasing awareness of, and sophisticated play with, the constructedness of media images. All too often it is simply assumed that cult viewing involves high levels of educational, cultural and/or subcultural capital enabling the recognition and resistance of cultural myths. In turn, the processes of spectatorship tend to be characterised by a break on emotional involvement, thus paving the way for rebellious modes of appropriation. Of related significance here is the notion of the increasingly self-reflexive basis of consumer identities: here, viewers are perceived as self-consciously trying on and discarding at will a range of identities from the multiplicity of alternative ways of being offered by cult texts.

Now, although many personal myth theorists share with the postmodern perspective the view that culture has become more increasingly self-conscious about its own

myths, and that the media is particularly implicated in this process, they nonetheless attend to the psychological and neuro-physiological implications of this increasing ability to 'see through' cultural myths. Individuals embody culture; thus, whilst elements of the culture's mythology might be consciously rejected by the individual, in other ways they are internalised so as to significantly inform person's experiential realities. From the perspective of personal myth, the increasingly self-reflexive nature of culture therefore poses a (often internal) dilemma for individuals, the effects of which are bodily-felt and can alter behaviour in significant ways. In other words, the negotiation of cultural myths involves an adaptive process. It is this perspective which informs my own approach to the essentially ambiguous dimension of cult texts and the conflictual dimensions of cultism, which I argue are intimately related. Thus, rather than asking how fans might be engaged self-consciously in the ideological subversions of the text, I want to ask: How might the ideological ambiguity of the text challenge fans sense of ontological security and mythic stability to the extent that they are forced to confront the contradictions in his/her own story?

In order to provide a theoretical context for my argument here, I want to briefly discuss Feinstein's concept of the countermyth which, at its most basic level, refers to a process involving the emergence of a new myth which competes against elements of the existing schema. Countermyths can result either from a conscious readiness to accept a more advanced cultural myth or else emerge in response to an experience within which a new myth initially presents itself as an attractive alternative. But this is not a smooth transition. As Feinstein asserts, 'adapting even to an inspiring new myth often requires substantial focus and commitment' (1997: 519). An underlying factor here stems from the fact that personal myths are ultimately founded on childhood ideals, beliefs and values and as such, they are unable to adequately support the adult experiences. At the same time, because they are so deeply embedded within the individual's thoughts, feelings and perceptions, they are not easily abandoned. Thus 'when a countermyth challenges an outmoded myth, the person is caught between two worlds – no longer able to thrive under the guidance of what has been, but not yet having developed guiding images for the new direction that is being intuited' (Feinstein, 1997: 519). In other words, challenges to

the existing myth, as much as attempts to adopt a new one, involve a process of working through.

But there is another process by which a counter-myth develops which is particularly relevant when thinking about the intrapersonal implications of the dialectic of myth for the ongoing fan-text relationship. In this second definition, counter-myths are 'dissociated conceptual subsystems' - that is, 'a critical mass of unassimilated material that can neither be ignored nor integrated and thus constantly re-emerges so as to pose an experiential dilemma for the individual' (Feinstein 1997: 506). Countermyths are thus the by-product of significant experiences with new stimuli which, whilst relevant enough to become incorporated into the existing myth, contain certain elements which are at odds with its basic postulates and therefore resist assimilation. For the most part, this process takes place outside of conscious awareness, but becomes manifest in feelings of disorientation and an underlying sense of conflict.

There are two important reasons as to why the enduring fan-text relationships under focus here might be more prone to involving the development of a countermyth. The first relates to the aforementioned dialectic of myth, and raises questions about the long-term effects of selectively engaging with a text so as to assimilate only those elements which are in accordance with the individual's explicit beliefs and values, whilst offsetting its more discordant elements.

The second requires a consideration of its development within the broader processes of cult and, specifically, the formative stage, which is characterised by an essentially affective experience. Crucially, Feinstein asserts that 'when emotionally significant experiences' are in any way 'inconsistent with an individual's personal myth' those discordant elements are likely to become 'dissociated, denied, or distorted' (Feinstein, 1997: 518). It follows that if experiences high in emotional content involve the dissociation of any potential conflictual elements, then the chances of a countermyth eventually developing are significantly raised. Like a ticking time-bomb, then, the seeds of mythic tension are built into the structure of the cult film, and may become activated through mechanisms related to the cult process.

This might explain the significance of that which I have identified as 'emerging dissonance.' As I was able to observe, prolonged involvement with the film eventually leads to a sense of inner conflict. These fans appeared to undergo a shift in sensibilities, perceptions, and their interpretations of the film; and this shift was marked from by conflict. For all of these reasons, then, it is instructive to observe the interpretive strategies of fans in relation to the film over time. What aspects of the film do they assimilate and how might these aspects be in harmony with existing elements of their myths? Conversely, what, if any, elements of the film are marginalised or ignored by fans?

Mind the gap:

Socio-historical change and the evolving personal myth

I do not want to suggest that this is solely an intrapersonal process whereby the fan is at the mercy of the text. Rather, it became apparent from spending time with these fans and becoming aware of the finer details of their accounts, that the process of mythopoesis was intimately bound up with conditions specific to their own historical and cultural experiences. In the introduction to my study, I suggested that the ways in which fans relate to the text may have a generational specificity which can only be understood by taking into account aspects of the historical milieu in which they have cultivated their myths. Of importance here is a consideration of cultural models available during a particular historical period and the way in which they may have been affected by social change, and in my analysis of the fans' responses to religion, I have indicated the significance of their status as the first generation to have grown up in an emerging post-Christian society. The religious landscape in Britain underwent a profound change in the period between the 1960s and 1970s (Bederida, 1991), and it was this cultural climate that *The Wicker Man* sought to comment on.

The effects of social change on the evolving myth are a central concern for myth theorists, particularly on an intergenerational level. As Feinstein asserts, each generation will see elements of its formative myths explode under the weight of new myths bequeathed to them by the previous generation (1977: 211). It is not only that individuals are offered a broader range of sources in the ongoing construction of

their myths; even more significant here is the potential conflict which might be generated as a result of their discordance with the implicit beliefs carried over from their indoctrination into traditional forms of religion. The proliferation of alternative religious myths available to these fans during adolescence and young adulthood makes the process of mythic assimilation around the issue of religion a much more likely concern for these fans. It is therefore important to consider the ways in which dissonance may emerge from the particularly contradictory experiences of religion which is specific to these fans personal experiences. The widening gap between implicit and explicit beliefs as a result of social change is a central concern here, as is a consideration of how the film might specifically speak to these contradictory experiences.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I have been concerned with the relationship between subjectivity and models of fandom, and have suggested that work in the field which has attended to the processes of fandom has tended to apply models of subjectivity which do not accommodate important aspects. Within this scenario, important elements are either subject to reductionist explanations, or else repressed from analysis altogether. The models of subjectivity informing existing work on the processes of fandom have fallen short of providing a consistent account of its formative moment and the various stages through which it develops. More specifically, this work has been unable to provide a satisfactory model of fan subjectivity which would account for the intensely emotional experience which accompanies the onset of the fan attachment and the intra and interpersonal forms of tension which characterises subsequent stages. Hills work is valuable, but I have argued that his approach to fan texts as transitional objects enabling fans to play creatively across the boundaries between fantasy and reality hinges on a particularly vague, if not slightly idealistic, conception of subjectivity.

I then went on to discuss a number of key tenets pertaining to personal myth theory and suggested its overall explanatory power for understanding the essentially processual nature of cult fandom, and its relationship to personal mythopoesis. My

discussion elaborated on five central propositions which I have suggested can be usefully applied in explicating and exploring the particular stages and affective experiences involved, these propositions are as follows:

- I have utilised ideas of personal myth in order to explore concepts of self and have suggested ways in which they may be related to fan subjectivity. Recognising preconscious dispositions which are historically and culturally specific provides us with a more nuanced conception of that which constitutes the viewer before the screen. One aim has been to show how subjects are constituted in culture and how elements of cultural experience become embodied within the self. I have suggested the need for an approach which seeks to explore elements of personal myths in relation to cult object.
- I have suggested that the origins of the cult attachment may ultimately stem from an interaction with a text which taps into elements of the individual's personal myth thus awakening preconscious imagery, sensations and associations which were originally forged in childhood. This may help to explain the initially intense feelings of personal resonance which typically accompany the cult experience, and which fans invariably struggle to articulate. In view of this, I have argued that it is instructive to explore individual fans' personal imagery in conjunction with the text's imagery as a means of discovering significant associative links.
- I have opened up concepts in personal myth theory which allow us to think about the different types of intra and interpersonal conflicts which may emerge from the ongoing interaction with the ambiguous dimensions of the cult text. Moreover, I have suggested the importance of socio-historical and developmental factors which would allow the text to represent itself in new ways at various stages, and in different circumstances the fan finds themselves in.

In the following chapter, I will discuss further many of the above ideas in relation to the methodological strategies I developed in designing my research. More specifically, I will be concerned to operationalise the concepts which inform my study.

¹ Two caveats should be heeded. Firstly, this work has tended to concentrate on cult television rather than film. In the main though, the broader aspects of their discussions holds good for thinking about the processes of film cultism. Secondly, and in some ways more problematically, neither of these theorists can be said to be using the terms 'cult' and 'fan' in the same way. I have already discussed this factor in relation to Hills (see Introduction). Whilst Jenkins discusses fans of programmes which are considered cult (e.g., *Star Trek*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Blake's 7*, *Babylon 5*, and so on), he only *implicitly* refers to cult (cf. Hills, 2002). Again, the lack of consensus is a cautionary reminder of the inherent problems of attempting to split 'cult' and 'fan' into two distinct identities. As I have said, I will be using the terms interchangeably herein, but will address this issue again in the conclusion.

² See 'A Conversation with Henry Jenkins': Interview with Taylor Harrison at the Console-ing Passions: Television, Video, and Feminist Studies Conference, April 1994. Available at: <http://web.mit.edu/cms/People/henry3/harrison.html>.

³ 'What are the requirements for transforming a book or a movie into a cult object? The work must be loved, obviously, but this is not enough. It must provide a completely furnished world so that its fans can quote characters and episodes as if they were aspects of the fan's private sectarian world [...] I think that in order to transform a work into a cult object one must be able to break, dislocate, unhinge it so that one can remember only parts of it, irrespective of their original relationship with the whole (Eco 1986, 197-8)' (quoted in Jenkins, 1992: 50).

⁴ Screen theory derives its name from the British academic journal, *Screen*. Established in the 1970s, the journal has traditionally fostered semiotic, ideological and psychoanalytic perspectives on film, and has tended to conceptualise the spectator in terms of an abstract subject position determined by the ideological mechanisms of the text, rather than a flesh and blood viewer seated in the audience.

⁵ In the introduction to *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins concedes that the 'book is written on the assumption that speaking as a fan is a defensible position within the debates surrounding mass culture. Rejecting media-fostered stereotypes of fans as cultural dupes, social misfits, and mindless consumers, this book perceives fans as active producers and manipulators of meaning' (1992: 23).

⁶ See Thomas Whissen's (1992) discussion of cult literature and cult readers.

⁷ See Roger Silverstone (1994) for a discussion of Winnicott's 'clinical gaze'.

⁸ Hills' reservations about the relationship between fandom and religion are noted by Jenkins in an interview with Hills. See an Interview with Henry Jenkins': Interview with Matt Hills at the Console-ing Passions: Television, Video, and Feminist Studies Conference, April 1994. Available at: <http://web.mit.edu/cms/People/henry3/harrison.html>.

⁹ McAdams' (1993) development model is significantly informed by the work of Jean Piaget and especially Erick Erickson, both of which have sought to relate the child's acquisition of specific cognitive skills to specific stages in child development. Although McAdams acknowledges the limitations of working with universalistic models, and elsewhere in his book offers a more nuanced discussion, his conceptualisation of arresting images seems to suffer from the narrow and rigid scope within these models.

¹⁰ Annette Kuhn's (2002, especially chapter 3) consideration of how children experience the cinema is both insightful and relevant, since her discussion is centred on children watching horror films in the 1930s.

¹¹ Cultural studies work on television audiences has emphasised the importance of domestic viewing contexts (see for example, Morley 1989, 1991). In film studies, Alexander Dhoest's (2006) discussion of early Flemish television offers insightful observations about the link between context and memorability.

Chapter 2

Introducing the Audience Study

My aim to ascertain the role of personal mythmaking in determining and sustaining the cult film formation raises a number of important questions in relation to the efficacy of the methodological choices I made in designing and executing this study. For example, it was necessary to consider the extent to which the ethnographic method of asking the audience permits us access into the affective, aesthetic and subjective experiences of cult fandom. Moreover, I was forced to confront important questions relating to the epistemological and ontological status of the testimonies I draw on in this study, and upon which my arguments are largely based. There again, I had to ask whether or not it was possible to observe instances of personal mythmaking by way of qualitative means and, if so, which methods might be most effective?

Many of the concerns I seek to empirically investigate herein have been specifically challenged in existing work on fandom. Matt Hills has argued that ethnographic approaches have 'limited purchase on the affective dimensions of fandom, and cannot explain how fan desire becomes stuck in the form of an enduring media attachment which persists over time and in different cultural contexts and stages of life' (Hills 2002: 88). Elsewhere in fan studies, it has been suggested that the ethnographic method is 'inevitably' more suited to gaining insight into the social worlds, as opposed to the 'inner worlds', of participants (Thomas 2002: 9).

Yet, it is surprising that this scepticism still persists given the small but growing body of work on media audiences which has produced experience-near accounts of the subjects they study using ethnographic methods. Jackie Stacey's (1994) attempt to 'bridge the gap' between psychoanalytic theory and empirical audience research, as much as Valerie Walkerdine's (1997) 'ethnography of the unconscious' and Annette Kuhn's (2002) empirical journeys through film audience memories, should serve to remind us of the value of ethnographic enquiry beyond social processes. What these individual studies demonstrate is a need to address the subjective and experiential dimensions of film audiences, albeit without losing sight of important social and cultural processes involved. In positioning my own approach in relation to

this body of work, I will nonetheless be concerned throughout this chapter to demonstrate the ways in which my own study differs from it.

The origins of this research did not grow out of a conscious desire to 'bridge the gap' between psychological and cultural approaches to media fans. In fact, I did not begin this research from within any specific theoretical position. As I stated in the introduction, the initial phase of the project was conducted over a period of approximately four years prior to beginning the thesis in October 2002. Hence, my long-term immersion in *Wicker* fandom and the impressions I formed along the way led me to seek out and test suitable methodological and interpretive frameworks. Since the 'story' of my research predates the official undertaking of the thesis itself by four years, it is necessary to go back to its origins in order to account for factors which have shaped its main foci. In discussing the trajectory of the research process, then, I will be concerned to demonstrate its evolution over two distinct phases. The first stage is a story of immersion and discovery, and one which was as demanding of my sensory as much as my cerebral faculties. But it is also a story of missed opportunities; in that I was not consciously preparing to write a thesis at that time some of my methods were admittedly somewhat haphazard. Whilst not rendering this phase of the research invalid, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge its limitations.

The Chronicles of *Nuada*: Phase 1

My initial contact with fellow *Wicker Man* fans occurred when, in September 1998, and in the early stages of collating the first issue of the fanzine – *Nuada* - I decided to write a letter to the *Galloway Gazette* (see Appendix 1). My specific purpose was two-fold. First, I wanted to contact would-be-participants in my venture. The rationale behind *Nuada* was, after all, that it should be a publication for fans, by fans, and I was sure that the film must have some fans in Scotland. I had recently returned from a weekend trip to Dumfries & Galloway, the purpose of which had been to photograph and gather information about the specific filming locations for an article I had planned for inclusion in the first edition. The gaps in my research - which I was sure could be cleared up by knowledgeable locals - provided a second reason.

My letter was printed on 16-10-98. Curiously, it featured in a column on the front page where it was made to serve a dual purpose. Seemingly prompted by my letter,

the editorial team seized the opportunity to turn my 'quest' into one of their own. Indeed, a four-part essay covering the film's production and post-production history featured over four consecutive weeks. This may have partly accounted for the overwhelming response I received in the weeks to follow. For, in addition to receiving calls and letters from local people who kindly provided me with the information I sought, I was also contacted by BBC Radio Inverness (who invited me to participate in a live radio show about the film); the editor of the Scottish *Sunday Times* (who was in the early stages of researching a book on the film); and a producer from BBC Scotland (who was planning to make a *Wicker Man* documentary for Scottish television).

Crucially, I also received dozens of letters from fans and more fan-generated material than I had space to accommodate in the 28 pages I had allocated to the first edition. Yet, much of the material I received in these early weeks was not purposefully sent for inclusion in the fanzine - many fans sent images and artwork requesting that I did not print them. There was a good reason for this. Upon first glance most of this material appeared unrelated to the film itself - images of sunsets, moonscapes, seascapes, in some cases featuring deific/vampiric/witch figures within them, even photos depicting wizened tree trunks, were posted to my home address. Significantly, these investments were not necessarily more common in the case of Pagan fans, where a pantheistic and/or polytheistic worldview or at least some sympathy with nature might be expected. Indeed, while some fans openly declared themselves as Pagan, many others simply revealed an interest in mythology, folklore, rural traditions and the occult. Fans, Pagan and non-Pagan alike, also demonstrated a taste for gothic and horror-related fiction. Thus, I was alerted to the different reading formations surrounding the film and the material also suggested a degree of overlap between them.

Furthermore, judging by the accompanying letters, it was also clear that for most fans these investments were particularly long-standing and appeared to inform their sense of self-identity. Many, for instance, sought to contextualise their chosen image(s) in relation to a personal memory, or else attempted to suggest ways in which these images encapsulated an essence which fans felt to be of personal significance. Crucially, most felt strongly that this essence also resided in *The Wicker Man*. Moreover, with the launch of the *Nuada* website in January 1999,

similar material regularly turned up my inbox (and still does!). Collectively, this material forms a kind of 'image bank'; a repository of mythscapes which not only communicated a powerful feeling, it was also a feeling with which I myself strongly identified.

Questionnaire 1: The 'cult event'

In September 1998 (and, in fact, the very same week I wrote to the *Gazette*), the Manchester Cornerhouse hosted a season of cult films which featured *The Wicker Man* alongside other titles such as *Eyes Without A Face* (d. Georges Franju, 1959), *Dr. Strangelove* (d. Stanley Kubrick, 1964), *Beyond The Valley of the Dolls* (d. Russ Meyer, 1970), and *Bladerunner* (d. Ridley Scott, 1982).¹ This seemed the ideal opportunity to contact enthusiasts directly and so I designed a questionnaire specifically for the event although, at the request of the venue management, I distributed it at the screening of *The Wicker Man* only. I received 28 completed questionnaires out of a possible 50, 24 of which were completed and handed back to me at the event. The remaining four were sent to my home address shortly afterwards. Respondents were asked if they would like to participate in future research and, although eight supplied me with contact details, only three of the respondents were successfully contacted for a follow-up interview.

In retrospect, I had radically underestimated the popularity of the film - the fact that the screening pulled in a 300-strong audience would no doubt have resulted in a much larger sample. But, bearing in mind that my specific purpose at the time was to produce only a modest profile of *Wicker* fandom for an article in the fanzine, I had not thought it necessary to enquire in advance as to how many tickets had been sold and thereby produce an exact number of copies. Indeed, although the resulting sample was predominantly white, male (71 percent) and middle-class (see Appendix 2), with 46 per cent falling into the 26-35 age range, the relatively small size of the sample means that it cannot reasonably be representative of the larger audience, and hence I am reluctant to make any broad claims regarding the social composition of the cult film audience. At the very least, though, the sheer size of the audience is indicative of the film's growing reputation at that time.

The questionnaire (see Appendix 2) comprised a mixture of open-ended and closed questions; participants were asked to provide information to specific questions, but

were also invited to comment at length on the film's appealing elements. An additional question, asking respondents to state any 'other interests', was incorporated into the questionnaire for the specific purpose of obtaining a broader profile of taste preferences and life styles. Moreover, there was a question relating to favourite films so as to obtain a picture of cultural tastes. Furthermore, in order to assess viewing habits, participants were asked to specify the number of times they had seen the film previously and to state whether they preferred to watch films alone or in company.

Given that the event was specifically organised around the concept of 'cult', the questionnaire was also designed for the purpose of obtaining audience-generated definitions of cult. Respondents were invited to offer a definition of 'cult' and to list at least three other cult films or television series which they held in high esteem. It also seemed pertinent to ask participants if they intended to view any of the other films which were being screened in the season, as this might be indicative of a particular commitment to the film, or else signal a wider investment in cult cinema.

Predictably, the questionnaire yielded only a broad picture of the film's appeal, yet it did reveal points of interest and some patterns emerged. In thematic terms, 56 percent cited 'religious conflict' and/or a 'clash of cultures'. In addition, 76 percent were impressed by the film's visuals, noting everything from its use of scenery and Pagan imagery to its use of lighting and colour. Interestingly, while many noted the film's idiosyncrasies a small number of respondents attempted to pinpoint where the film's originality and difference resides.

Curiously, the idea that the film harbours a 'secret' which has the power to transform those susceptible to it transpired in two of the completed questionnaires. While one fan said that 'once the film draws you into its secret you're never quite the same again'. Another similarly declared: 'I don't know what its secret is but it turned my life around some years ago and has yet to relinquish its hold over me'. Such findings, although a minority in this particular exercise, stood out for me not because they appeared bizarre. Rather, I saw something in them of my own experience and that of other fans I had met and/or corresponded with.

It also produced a degree of insight into discursive understandings of and attitudes towards 'cult' more generally. In response to the question: 'How would you define a

cult movie?' 74 per cent referred to characteristics such as 'narrow appeal', 'made on a low budget' and a film dealing with 'controversial themes'. A further 19 percent said they did not know, and seven percent did not answer.

Interestingly though, the sample also produced conflicting meanings of cult: 55 percent of the fraction which did respond to the question included terms such as 'camp', 'cheesy' and 'tasteless', while 19 percent suggested that cult films in some way elicit devotional responses from a minority. Curiously, a small but significant number of respondents (5 out of 28) explicitly refuted the term in relation to *The Wicker Man* and sought to draw a distinction between the film's potentially 'cultish' attributes and their own personal reasons for liking it. Here, elements such as its camp humour, 'subversive' and/or the presence of iconic stars such as Christopher Lee and Ingrid Pitt were offered, followed by statements such as: 'but that's not why I like it.' It is likely that the venue and accompanying literature played a role here. The programme distributed at the event stipulated that the cult film season:

is designed to offer a new generation of filmgoers the chance to catch up with the late-night classics of the recent past. The midnight movie is a rapidly disappearing tradition [...] But it has proved invaluable over the years as a way of generating support for films that sniffy critics might disapprove of. So, in that tradition here you'll find satanic thrillers, fast-talking teen movies, blaxploitation and Japanese manga, in other words the perfect recipe for widening those horizons into areas not wholly respectable.²

Clearly, for some respondents at least, the way in which the notion of cult was constructed by the event organisers failed to register with how they viewed their own attachment. Moreover, even where respondents appeared to acknowledge the disreputable connotations of cult cinema, there was an acknowledgement that *The Wicker Man* was strangely affecting and absorbing. In retrospect, it is likely that my increasing discontent with the way in which contemporary cult discourse alienates certain attachments, my own included, was a significant factor in motivating this research.

Questionnaire 2: *Nuada* readership

In January 1999, having built up a sizeable readership for the fanzine, a second questionnaire was designed and posted to individuals who had ordered the fanzine (see Appendix 3). I received 34 out of 50 questionnaires, 23 of which agreed to participate in future research. Although previous experience had taught me that asking respondents to account for personal appeal tended to produce little in the way of qualitative data, I wanted to look for similar themes. And, again, respondents were invited to provide information with regard to their viewing habits, the number of times they had seen the film, and to suggest factors which may have determined the film's cult status. The latter question was incorporated into the questionnaire for two reasons: a) to look for signs of any objection to the term 'cult'; and b) in order to compare the reasons given for liking the film and those proposed as contributing factors of its cult appeal.

The results were significant: many fans again distanced themselves from what they perceived to be a more cult-like appropriation of the film. What seemed important here was not the display of cultural capital, but commitment. It highlighted the discrepancies between theory and practice and further compounded my increasing suspicion that it was the personal experience of cult that was important to most fans (see Appendix 9). Significantly, the results revealed an indisputable connection between the general interests stipulated by respondents; 'the occult', 'earth mysteries' were frequently mentioned and this was also reflected in choice of favourite texts: with many respondents stating a preference for British horror, mostly Hammer and related films.

Participant Observation: *Wicker Man* conventions

Between January 1998 and May 2002 I attended three *Wicker Man* conventions, two of which I helped to organise. Whilst the initial event came about as a result of my corresponding with two Scottish fans, both male and in their late twenties, who suggested an informal weekend get-together with other fans, the latter two were organised primarily by the proprietor of the Ellangowan hotel in Dumfries & Galloway. Although the latter two events (both of which took place on May Day

weekend) were advertised on the hotel's website well in advance, the number of attendees at those I attended never exceeded 17 people.

While I actively involved myself in discussions, screenings and touring the locations, I also made extensive field notes and conducted informal, semi-structured interviews with fans at opportune moments throughout the duration. Whilst some interviews and discussions were taped using a dictaphone, there were times, especially when we were out visiting the locations, where I would rely on scribbling down a few notes. In my experience, introducing recording equipment leads to an unproductive self-consciousness and guardedness which ultimately thwarts spontaneity and flow of speech. For similar reasons I was always conscious to keep my taking of notes to a minimum whilst speaking to fans, preferring instead to log in more detail my overall impressions once I had retired to my room for the night.

Ideally, participant observation requires the researcher to live amongst the community under focus for anything from six months to one year. Obviously, individuals who can be said to constitute an individual fan culture are geographically dispersed and thus making it possible to examine collective forms of behaviour at specific fan events only. But if, as Fetterman maintains, participant observation involves a balancing act of 'immersion' and 'professional distance' (1998: 35) then these events provided me with an opportunity to intermittently observe *Wicker* fandom from the perspective of the participating observer.

Discussion of the early findings

During phase one a number of significant trends and consistencies emerged. Firstly, the majority of *Wicker* fans with which I came into contact fell into the 30-45 age range. Secondly, many of these fans appear to share a similar affective disposition which, for want of a better term might be broadly encapsulated under the term 'Paganistic'. Not only was this evident in the topophilic sentiments expressed by fans in talk about the text, it was also reflected in their existing cultural investments. Of particular importance here was the 'British horror factor'. Findings suggest that most of these fans had similarly invested in gothic and horror-related material in their formative years and that a taste for such material was still strong in some

instances. It seemed clear to me that there was a link between early investments and affective dimensions of *Wicker* fandom, and I wondered how much the profound resonance of *The Wicker Man* for these fans stemmed from this earlier shared imaginative resource.

Whilst it is true that these conditions do not apply to all *Wicker Man* fans, it is significant that they appear to form the backdrop in the case of the vast majority. Despite differences in social background and geographical location, these fans are thus linked in so far as they belong to the same generation. Even more clearly they have each formed a passionate and enduring attachment to *The Wicker Man*. All of these elements come together to highlight the most 'significant data arrangement' in my early findings and as, such, largely dictated the direction and focus that this thesis was to take.

Over the years I have received countless letters and emails from fans spontaneously recounting their stories of discovering the film, thus expressing how it impacted upon them and continues to play a pivotal role in their lives. More so than data generated by some of the more formal research methods I was later to deploy, this data promised to be the richest, not least because it was the most unmediated.

Throughout this first phase of the research fans continued to send images, artwork, and their own stories of 'finding' the film. In the meantime I continued to return to the same three questions: what are the processes involved come to share a similar same private reality? How and why did it fixate on *The Wicker Man*? What are the processes involved? If the collective insistence on the film's power to enthrall, resonate, captivate, awaken and stir held me to the cause, the fact that I myself strongly identified with some of these sentiments was further confirmation that an understanding of the affective dimensions of media cultism must be sought after.

Investigating the Cult film audience: Phase 2

In 2002, after beginning the thesis, my first step was to tackle these very questions. The significance of a shared affective basis underlying *Wicker* fandom initially led me to compile into an album some of the images and artwork I had been sent over the years. Apart from anything else, it proved to be a highly effective visual aid

throughout the research process and I often used it to refocus my thinking when it became swamped by the masses of data with which I was often struggling to navigate my way through. For even the most casual glance through its pages revealed thematic consistencies and networks of association. Additionally, I drew up a comprehensive 'theme map' in order to observe patterns of similarity occurring across the data. One thing which seemed clear to me at this stage was that *Wicker Man* fans appeared to share a similar predisposition. Discovering precisely how and why this shared predisposition fixated on *The Wicker Man* was but one of the early challenges I set myself. It was also necessary to explore the cultural currents and prevailing conditions which might have shaped this.

In pursuit of a theoretical framework capable of illuminating and accommodating the kinds of questions which now dominated my thinking, I turned to sources on cultural myth and identity formation. Early on in my search, I discovered Kenneth Rees' article: 'The Tangled Skein: The Role of Personal Myth in Paganism' (1996). It was a crucial find, not only because it introduced me to theories of personal mythology which I went on to read widely, but it also seemed to capture elements of the process I was at that time struggling to grasp. In order to explore how and why an increasing number of individuals enter Paganism today, Rees turns to theories of personal myth, noting that:

Seekers' personal myths inform the individual's anticipation. What a 'seeker' can expect (or hope) to find on entry into pagan groups is informed by the individual's personal myth; such expectations are typically an amalgam of images and stereotypes derived from the mass media, one's friends and acquaintances...popular books read on the subject...distinct fantasy projections and wish-fulfilments, e.g. the past as desired in the case of the ancient Druids, the present as hoped for in regard to the presumed sabbatical orgies of modern witchcraft, the future ideal for an earth undefiled in respect to eco-paganism and so on

(Rees, 1996: 18-19).

What initially excited me about the article was how, in explaining a specific cultural phenomenon, Rees sought to uncover factors not wholly readable off the surrounding

evidence. Rees looked beyond the verbal explanations people gave for joining Pagan groups toward the unarticulated reasons behind their entry into Paganism. He considered the pre-existing cultural investments which give shape and content to these individuals' personal myths to be central to their motivations, in ways which elude the consciousness of the individual. Thus, the more I read of work in this vein the more convinced I became of its potential for explaining the generative mechanisms of film cultism.

But it also became apparent that I would need to conduct further qualitative research for, although I had accrued a massive amount of data by 2002, a sizeable fraction was drawn from questionnaires which I felt to be inadequate for the kinds of avenues I now wanted to explore. As Rees states: 'the nature of an individual's personal myth is such that it might not necessarily be significantly revealed by methodologies of a wholly empiricist nature, i.e., interviews and questionnaires [...] in-depth qualitative research and prolonged observation, tracking and monitoring yield the best insights into individual (and collective) myth' (1996: 18). At the very least, then, I decided that it was crucial to incorporate a longitudinal component into the research which would involve working closely with a smaller group of fans over a long period of time. Not only would this allow me to observe the processes of personal mythmaking across a concentrated and more manageable sample, it also promised to yield a more comprehensive set of findings which could be cross-checked, triangulated and compared with the wealth of existing data I had accrued. Given that the data collection began in 1998 the idea of a longitudinal dimension was perfectly feasible, providing I could recruit a reasonable number of fans to take part.

Tracking the *Wicker* fan: the longitudinal study

Before setting out to contact would-be-participants I drew up a criteria comprising of three main factors. Firstly, in order to maximise the efficacy of the longitudinal study it would be necessary to select fans I had been in contact with in the very early stages of my research. Hence, I restricted my search to fans I had corresponded with between September 1998 and December 1999. Secondly, those fans who I had met at conventions and on location were automatically included in my shortlist as this is where I had rich research and would provide a much needed head-start in the

proceedings. Finally, in that the study would require of participants an ongoing commitment, it was important to recruit those fans that might be willing to be in it for the long haul. A useful strategy here involved taking into account the longevity and intensity of individual fan attachments - my logic being that the more enthusiastic fan might well remain sufficiently interested enough to participate throughout the duration of the research process. In the end I was left with a list of 44 possible participants fitting my criteria, which was slightly more than I had anticipated. Rather than refine my search at this stage, though, I decided to contact all of them as it was highly likely that some would not wish to participate.

A preliminary letter, briefly outlining my study and intentions for the longitudinal study was dispatched to everybody on my shortlist. Since I was asking people to participate for the duration of at least two years, I proposed a number of possible ways of conducting the research in order to be as accommodating and flexible as possible. For instance, I suggested that where distance and/or time was an issue interviews could be conducted via email or telephone, rather than face-to-face. Both methods are fairly standard practice and remove some of the anxieties and biases of the actual interview (Cavicchi 1993: 42). I also asked would-be-participants to suggest ideas of their own about how they would like the research to be conducted, as well as any concerns they might have.

Over the course of approximately three weeks, I heard back from 29 of the 44 people I had written to. Given the time lapse of three to four years since first establishing contact with many of these fans, this was a satisfactory result. In the end, a total of eight main participants took part in the longitudinal component of the study (a comprehensive demographic profile of the main participants is provided in Appendix 5). On the whole, most fans indicated that they would be happy to be interviewed face-to-face but agreed that email might be quicker and easier. Whilst many fans expressed delight and enthusiasm for the study, others raised concern about their identity being revealed and requested that their anonymity be preserved. I responded with a collective email to all eight participants stating that I would not be using real names.

In the first instance, my main objective for the longitudinal study was to build on relevant elements of the information I had already obtained from respondents. As I

have indicated, all of the main participants were selected on the basis of having already been interviewed or in contact with me during the initial phase of my research. Building a picture of the cultural repertoire these fans were exposed to from an early age was integral to my objectives, and, given that the findings collected from the initial phase suggested important links between an early investment in British horror and their affective predispositions for *The Wicker Man*, this was an obvious starting point. The films and television programmes analysed and discussed in relation to this aspect of my study were selected on the basis of the special status they were given by the participants, as was revealed in the research process. To some extent, then, this particular investigation covered similar ground to that which I covered in earlier research - the significance of similar taste preferences and outlook led me to examine the types of texts these fans invested in from an early age. Here though I refined my questions so as to specifically recover how these texts came to constitute an imaginative resource which the individual then drew on in the construction of their personal myths. Hence, I incorporated questions designed to prompt specific memories of watching these texts in childhood.

Other important elements of the research in phase two involved asking questions designed to build on the nature of the aesthetic experiences retrieved in early data. In addition to gathering information relating to taste preferences I sought to construct a picture of participants' social backgrounds. Specifically, I gathered data related to their educational and religious backgrounds, as well as their political outlook.

The significance of emerging conflictual feelings in the fan-text relationship became more apparent as the research process wore on and so the longitudinal component was useful in establishing factors involved in the deactivation of previously functional interpretations and the negotiation of new readings. It was these elements which eventually carved out the approach I took with regards to enduring fandom. I incorporated questions designed to ascertain stable interpretations and fan practices early on in the second phase, with a view to coming back at a later stage to assess changes occurring over time. In the final analysis however, my discussion was produced by way of comparing earlier with later interpretations, whereby the period of a six year gap, as we shall see, in most cases proved to be sufficient to reflect significant changes in fan readings (see Chapter 5).

Three methods were used in collecting data from the main participants: interview, email, and telephone interviews. The interviews were conducted at several stages in the research process and at different locations (specific details of where and when each informant was interviewed are provided along with biographical information in Appendix 5). Telephone interviews were used to follow up on specific questions in 2003 and again to re-establish contact in 2005 and 2006. I made recordings of these interviews using a dictaphone, but I also made extensive notes in anticipation of problems with audibility. However, it should be noted that all of the main participants completed the second and third questionnaires. Respondents also continued to send me unsolicited letters within which they often enclosed images, photographs and self-penned sketches, and these are brought into the research where appropriate. Finally, all of the data was archived; and relevant data was transcribed by myself and analysed manually.

Questionnaire 3

In the summer of 2006, I was contacted by a large number of fans, all of whom expressed some apprehension in relation to the forthcoming Hollywood remake of *The Wicker Man* which was released in September of the same year. Originally, I had thought of devising a short survey in order to record attitudes to the remake. As it happens I was at that time growing increasingly more dissatisfied with the way in which my focus centred on a small, although rich, sample of only eight participants. Hence, I decided to combine my original objective with an opportunity to compare the findings of the longitudinal study to a broader sample.

I distributed one hundred questionnaires (see Appendix 4) to a mixture of old and more recent contacts on my mailing list. My objective here was to re-establish contact with fans who had demonstrated an interest in the film from as early as 1998/9. In this way, there was a greater possibility of recording changes in their fandom. In the end I received 32 questionnaires, 17 of which were completed by participants who I had been in contact with before 2000. The result was disappointing. It would seem that the time-lapse of seven and in some cases eight, years since initially establishing contact with many of these fans may well have affected the response rate. Indeed, it is likely that some had moved on or else

changed email address. Either way, the result cannot simply be interpreted as an indication of dwindling enthusiasm.

To a large degree I repeated elements taken in my approach in the longitudinal study. Section one, for example, asked participants to recall their first viewing of the film in detail, paying particular attention to any elements which stood out and made an impact, and to state any elements of the film which have grown in significance with repeated viewings. In that the questionnaire had been sent to a significant number of participants that had 'discovered' the film relatively recently, and in light of the increasing commercialisation of the film, I inserted an additional question: 'which did you encounter first: the film or the film's legend?'

The questionnaire comprised a mixture of closed and open-ended questions. In my objective to observe continuities in taste preferences, I introduced questions directly related to themes which were prominent in my existing data, such as landscape, horror and 'Britishness'. Whilst some of these topics were framed in the form of open-ended questions, such as 'Do you find the landscape in *The Wicker Man* appealing?' I also organised related questions into a scaling format whereby participants were asked to choose between describing the landscape as 'highly significant', 'part of the appeal', or 'not very significant'. A similar method was employed in section five. Here I listed sixteen statements drawn from the existing data and asked participants to rank them in order of personal relevance. The statements selected covered a broad range of fan sentiments, from the emotional to the cerebral pleasures of the film. Finally, in order to build up a profile of individual fan identities, a significant portion of the questionnaire was designed for the purposes of generating information regarding respondents' ethnic origins, religious background, political orientations, and taste preferences.

Another method which had been utilised to great effect in the longitudinal study was word association, which was again incorporated to observe categories of symbolic thinking, and aimed at analysing the particular associations these individuals harbour in relation to ideas seemingly connected to their place myths. As such, participants were requested to state the first three words which came to mind in relation to the following words: city, countryside, nature, England, Scotland (a comparison of the results is discussed in Chapter 3).

A note on the multi-method approach

This study clearly utilises both a multi-method and a multi-sited approach to fan audiences. While I have used a combination of questionnaire, telephone interviews, participant observation, informal focus groups, face-to-face interviews, email and the life story method, the research has taken place across a number of contexts, such as festivals, conventions, screenings, and accompanying fans on tours of the filming locations. In this section, then, I want to briefly consider some issues related to combining methods and conducting research within a plurality of contexts.

Although in the early stages of this study my experimentation with different methods was in large part dictated by opportunity and convenience, my increasing concern with the processual nature of fandom, and my subsequent decision to monitor a selection of participants over time, demanded an engagement with fans across multiple contexts. Whilst some degree of combining methods is standard practice and in some cases positively encouraged, it must be recognised that data produced by different techniques varies in terms of its qualitative status and cannot be neatly amalgamated (Silverman, 1993). The implications of this observation are considerable. For example, responses gleaned from electronic email differ qualitatively from those drawn from face-to-face interviews. Whilst virtual methods of interviewing do not necessarily flatten the dynamism of the resulting material, the use of emoticons alone affords emailed responses a degree of vitality, it obviously lacks the opportunity to analyse the potential meanings registered in tone of voice, intonation and pauses which are more likely to occur in actual face-to-face situations. That said, data gleaned from larger surveys can be compared with smaller-scale case studies in order to enrich the research.

Silverman's critique of triangulation is specifically levelled at approaches which seek to produce a totality without considering the discursive and context-bound nature of social interaction. It is crucial therefore to acknowledge and assess the significance that context plays in producing different types of fan-talk and behaviour. Yet, as Thomas notes, data drawn from different methods can be 'usefully compared' (2002: 48). For instance, fans will speak differently in online participation where their discourses are open to public scrutiny than in the more intimate setting of the convention or pilgrimage. Indeed, I found that informal focus

groups, in particular, engendered competitive forms of fandom in which displays of fan-knowledge and cultural competency were prioritised. By contrast, in the context of visiting the filming locations, fans were much more likely to reveal feelings of a decidedly less rational and self-reflexive nature. The multi-method approach, then, is vital for appreciating how context works to restrict or encourage certain forms of behaviour.

It is also important to consider how my own presence affected the types of data produced. A good deal of discussion has generated precisely from thinking about such questions, beginning with Valerie Walkerdine's (1987) criticisms of early cultural studies research on television audiences which tended to overlook the researcher's own impact on the resulting data. Although in the initial phase of the research process my status was that of fellow fan as opposed to academic researcher that is not to say that I was unquestionably accepted by all fans in all contexts. Indeed, my role as fanzine editor appeared to complicate matters to an extent. The first convention I attended was a case in point. On the one hand, given the fact that we were all strangers to one another at that time, a degree of reticence might be expected. On the other hand, even as we grew more and more familiar with each other over the course of the weekend two members of the group in particular, both male, continued to question my motives if I so much as raised a new topic or requested permission to take a photograph. This was most apparent during a visit to one of the locations, whereupon some fans spontaneously linked arms and burst into a rendition of 'Summer-is-a-coming-in', mimicking the islanders in the climactic scene. It was all done in good humour and yet when I requested an encore in order to take a photo, they told me, all joking aside, only on the condition that I too participated in the re-enactment thus allowing my own photo to be taken. For these fans, it was important that they had their own 'incriminating' evidence in reserve despite my promise that I did not intend to reproduce the photo in the fanzine, or indeed anywhere else.

My gender also significantly affected my insider status. This was particularly marked at the second convention where I was often made to feel like I was intruding on male territory. In the context of viewing the film with six men whose collective prerogative appeared to lie with displaying trivial forms of knowledge about the text, the discussion rarely ventured beyond aspect ratios and comparing versions of the

film. Thus, any attempt on my behalf to discuss themes was met with a wall of resistance. During an informal screening, moreover, I was told on two separate occasions that I was 'reading too much into the film'. That this charge carried with it gendered connotations was made plain when one of the participants used the word 'emotional' in characterising my own interjections into the discussion.

Yet, these fans *did* engage emotionally with the film, but they also strove to hide this when they became conscious of it. It is therefore crucial to consider the processes of self-regulation which are operant here. Had I relied on focus group only I would not have gained access to the emotional level of fandom. I want to suggest, then, that an eclectic approach highlights and captures something of the dialogical nature of fandom. Thus, attending to the discrepancies arising from a multi-contextual approach can safeguard against closing down the dialogic nature of fandom and reproducing partial accounts of fandom. Hence, in attending to the dynamics of resistance it is important to ask: under what conditions are fans more likely to deploy a more distanced and rational discourse, and why? Whilst the dynamics of fan-talk are undoubtedly affected by the shifting dynamics of context, and might therefore seem to run counter to my aim to discover coherent personal myth, I want to suggest that the dialogical factor actually helped me to arrive at a favourable position in relation to the epistemological status of personal narratives.

Quantifying the mythmaking process: some basic assumptions of working with personal narratives

The question of what constitutes the self is a particularly contentious and enduring concern for humanities scholars in the current intellectual climate, and the range of theoretical approaches available for the study of identity is vast. Broadly speaking, the debate is divided between realist and constructivist positions which, in turn, have important implications for the status of empirical research. What is the relationship, for example, between what people say and what they think and feel? Do verbal utterances in any way reflect the psychological and experiential worlds of the speaker? Whereas the realist position might see data elicited from an interview as having important things to say about the beliefs and perceptions of respondents, the constructivist position, by contrast, would stress that such a context produces

performed identities which have no meaning beyond that context. Working with personal testimony, then, raises important questions about their ontological and epistemological status. Hence, before turning to a discussion of the analytical procedure used in my study, I want to clarify some of the basic assumptions with which I am working.

My decision to use ethnographic methods to facilitate an investigation of the experiential dimensions of cult fandom is already suggestive of the degree of optimism I hold out in terms of their compatibility. As I have indicated, research on the affective, aesthetic and subjective dimensions of cult are particularly under-explored and, in my view, audience research can only help to enrich this inquiry. Admittedly though, there are issues related to the practicality of my investigation which demand some level of unpacking and negotiation.

Matt Hills' less than optimistic views about the status of fan-ethnography provide a good basis from which to mount my own argument to the contrary, for whilst recognising the need to engage with fans' emotional and imaginative experiences, he explicitly refutes the validity of ethnographic inquiry 'in this precise context'. Hills' objections are broadly threefold: first, the affective dimensions cannot be accessed by the ethnographic method since all we can ever hope to uncover are 'affective discourses' (2005). Second, fans are not the source of 'pristine knowledge' - to believe otherwise is to accept that which he refers to as the 'fallacy of internality' (2002). Third, the process of asking the audience propels fans into a 'justificatory position' within which they are more likely to deploy a 'discursive mantra' (2002). All of these points are founded on the premise that the affective dimensions of fandom, by its very nature, cannot be readily verbalised by fans. Hills' use of the term 'discursive mantra' is intended to capture the process whereby fans draw on discourses circulating in the fan culture so as to mask the extent to which they are unable to rationally account for their passionate attachments. These are all pertinent issues, and something like Hills' discursive mantra was operant in the discursive practices of self-regulation discussed in the previous section (see for example interview with Tim, Appendix 8). However, Hills' explicit reluctance to empirically test his claims and his emphasis on the performative aspects of fandom seems unbalanced, and adheres too readily to the poststructuralist assumption that personal

narratives cannot reasonably be expected to impart anything beyond the discursive contexts in which they are contained and performed.

In terms of the epistemological and ontological status of modes of fan-talk discussed herein, it is my contention that they both reflect the real and can be seen as constructed. So too, I contend that what people say can and does reflect elements of their personal myths. As McAdams asserts, testimonies produced in the interview context 'hold the outline of internalized personal myths' [...] an individual does not suddenly invent a personal myth in the course of an interview. The myth is there all along, in the mind' (1993: 20). As I have suggested my methods provided me with the opportunity to observe consistencies in fan testimonies collected in different contexts over time. That there was a consistency in the favoured imagery and themes occurring for individual participants was readily observable across the data. At the same time, I am not arguing that individuals are not also performing aspects of their identities. Rather, I am suggesting that the status of personal testimony cannot be reduced to performance in all cases. Instead, I am working on the assumption that what fans say does have a basis in reality and that these testimonies can also bring us closer to the mythic consciousness. I am aware that it could be argued that my study is operating from within opposing epistemologies. However, it should be recognised that far from being a contradiction in terms, this approach is a perfectly acceptable 'middle position' (Smith 1995: 10), and is conducive to researchers who see the benefits of retaining a 'productive tension' in their approach to the epistemological status of personal testimonies (Radstone, 2000: 9).

My position on the status of fan-talk holds good for that of memories and memory processes used to facilitate aspects of the research process. As Jackie Stacey asserts: '[a] critical analysis of the forms and mechanisms of memory is pertinent to all ethnographic studies of media audiences, since the process of retelling is necessarily at stake in some form or another; audiences always represent their readings to researchers retrospectively' (1994: 63). Just as current opinion on the status of data retrieved in the interview context is subject to ongoing debate, so too the status of memory as constitutive or constructed has long divided opinion (Radstone, 2000). Hence, negotiating a position in relation to this debate has been central to work on media audiences which has utilised memory as a central analytical concept (see Stacey, 1994; Kuhn, 2002; Dhoest, 2006).

Kuhn's own position appears to come down more heavily on the side of the constructed. Although she acknowledges that our memories do make us, her own brand of 'memory work' is, as Radstone observes, 'directed towards practices of collective and self-transformation in the present' (2000: 12). Stacey also emphasises the constructed nature of memories: '[m]emory is not a straightforward representation of past events to which we have direct access'. Moreover, '[t]hese histories of spectatorship are reconstructions of a past in the light of the present' (1994: 63). Both, however, do suggest that questions related to the ontological and epistemological status of memory depends on their type. Significantly, Kuhn (2002) has suggested that there are certain types of childhood memories – 'bodily memories' – which not only appear to preserve the past, but would also seem to enable subjects a direct access to the past (I discuss this in more detail in Chapter 3).

The significance of there being different types of memory which, in turn, differ in terms of their relationship to the past and present is a view I also share, and one which can be made more explicit by way of drawing attention to the relationship between memory and mythmaking. As Samuel and Thompson assert, 'myth, like memory, requires a radical simplification of its subject matter[...]that demands a selecting, ordering, and simplifying, a construction of coherent narrative whose logic works to draw the life story towards the fable[...]It is the omissions and the shaping which makes these stories also myth' (1990: 8-9). Much of the mythmaking discussed herein is viewed as a construction made in the present. At the same time, though, it views many of the affective experiences which I argue motivate these modes of mythmaking, as evidence of the past. I am therefore treating the data as both a tool for eliciting information about the respondent's affective inner worlds *and* at other times as an exercise in mythic construction.

Data Analysis: Operationalising the mythmaking process

It should be clear from my discussion of the phases through which my thinking progressed that the analysis took place throughout the research process rather than after all the data had been collected. It is this factor which constitutes the inductive status of my study. Given the multi-faceted nature of the process to be discussed

herein, it was important to be theoretically and methodologically flexible so as to do justice to the multiple dimensions involved. The analytical procedure therefore incorporated several methods and conceptual frameworks, and involved a number of specific stages.

However, two basic methods underpinned the analytical procedure at every stage: re-reading and coding. Re-reading is a basic requirement of working with data and provides a means of re-familiarisation important to observing elements which might only become more apparent on subsequent reading. Coding involves annotating the transcripts, categorising the findings under appropriate headings and, finally, organising the data into various subject maps. The data collected herein produced a number of such maps, including 'themed maps', 'affective modality maps' and 'sensory metaphor maps', which I will discuss in more detail below.

The most challenging aspect of the research process, by far, was related to finding ways to operationalise some of the theoretical concepts which inform my study. The concept of embodied images, for example, whilst integral to my research, inevitably posed problems when it came down to the task of attempting to identify concrete examples within fan testimonies. So too, I had to find ways to measure the sensorial and visceral aspects of fans' aesthetic experiences with the film. In addition, the modes and mechanisms of mythmaking which concern me were rarely transparent, but were instead brought to the fore by way of analytical methods which attend to the particularities of narrative construction. The following subsections, then, are intended to provide a concise account of the steps I made in realising these objectives.

Analysing the affective processes of cult

My concern to provide an account of the generative mechanisms of the cult formation was shaped by some of my early findings within which I was able to observe a number of, often subtle, connections between the affective import of the film for these fans and a prior investment in British horror. In wanting to understand how this early resource might in some way predispose these fans to the film and, in turn, might be implicated in the affective processes of cult, my approach was to take place over a number of stages. My method might be described as one of 'amplification' - a term which, when used by personal myth theorists, refers to the

process of exhausting data generated at one level before moving on to a different level of analysis. The aim is to accrue a broad picture of associations cultivated and preserved at each stratum, thus serving to build a more complex picture of the socio-historical, cultural and personal dimensions of the individual's personal myth.

Cult fascination begins with an experiential encounter with the text's imagery. In the first instance, then, I sought to identify those images in the text which held specific appeal for my respondents and, as I have suggested, much of the fascination revolved around its depiction of place. The fact that respondents often singled out specific scenes and even shots from the film prompted me to produce a visual aid consisting of screen captures from the film which were consistently mentioned. From here, a second level of analysis involved ascertaining the particular associations these images carried for fans. In the early stages, I relied on data produced through questionnaires, but eventually managed to accrue more detailed accounts in the follow-up interviews. Moreover, asking fans to talk about their feelings on location was also an important aspect of establishing the significance of place for these fans.

The findings generated at this level tended to yield a mixture of symbolic and imaginative associations which in turn reflected the relationship between the collective and the personal imagination. For example, whilst the landscape in the film might be associated with the collective notion of a 'Merrie Olde England', a lost golden age, and thereby signify a shared national imaginary, it nonetheless registered in terms of a personal truth. Of related importance here was to decipher the characteristic emotions and sensations which accompanied fan accounts of the associations conjured up by the imagery (see Chapter 3).

Assuming that the deeply-felt significance of the film's imagery might be related to these fans' embodied images, it was necessary to analyse how these spatial associations connected to the respondents' personal histories and shaped their perceptions. Empirical work on personal myths has highlighted some particularly useful ways of ascertaining evidence of embodied imagery in personal testimonies. One such method involves observing instances where the deployment of 'self-statements' are brought to bear on talk about personally meaningful imagery. Self-statements are, as McAdams asserts, proclamations involving time-honoured values, associations and ideas. In instances where they are used in support of favourite

images, they become linked to properties within representations which are linked to an 'enduring belief' (1993: 47). Significantly, the participants in my study, as I will demonstrate, often use self-statements in talking about the film's representation of place, as the following example is typical: 'I've *always* associated the British countryside with magic and witches'. Thus images accompanied by self-statements were taken to be particularly suggestive of embodied personal imagery (see Chapter 3).

My next step was to establish the genesis of this imagery, and so the question of where these images came from, and the conditions within which they were cultivated, were pressing concerns. Now, to use the above example, an association of the British countryside with witchcraft and magic could derive from a familiarity with historical and/or mythological sources. Yet, for these images to have become embedded within the experiential life-worlds of these participants, they would need to have been cultivated at an early age, and it is this factor which prompted me to concentrate on the significance of the British horror factor for this fan formation.

Significantly, many respondents made specific reference to these texts in accounting for their attraction to *The Wicker Man*, and some of the pleasures involved were linked to knowledge of generic conventions and familiar associations. But as I suggested in the previous chapter, beyond the conscious associations, there was something in excess which was comparatively more difficult for these fans to articulate but which provided a motive for their continued engagement with the film. I observed how the intensely affective register of the text and the fans' need to make sense of its mysterious import is indicative of one of the ways in which a text is transformed into a cult text. Thus, it is the feelings and vague sense of recognition involved which give these images their potency. Establishing how far these images had been cultivated in early viewing experiences of watching horror was therefore important.

My method here involved asking participants to recount their memories of watching these texts in childhood. My concern was to explore latent qualities shored up in these memories, particularly in descriptions of moods and sensations. This was important insofar as it might help to explain the affective processes of resonance and inexplicable familiarity which characterises their response to *The Wicker Man* which

are reactivated in later experiences with the film. As I will demonstrate, many of the memories generated by this particular method produced the type of 'arresting imagery' discussed in the previous chapter. Thus fan memories of these early cultural experiences offer the clearest potential for identifying embodied images, as well as detecting unarticulated implicit associations carried over in these memories. Moreover, I would suggest that implicit associations are made manifest in verbal accounts through subtle use of language which the speaker does not consciously seem aware of, but which can be seen by the objective eye to be of immense significance by virtue of their consistency alone.

Close readings of the texts mentioned by fans also helped to generate further information in relation to the visceral quality of these memories: through their accounts, I often felt able to 'enter' into the structure of feeling which characterised this formation. This might seem dangerously subjective. As Douglas Hollan suggests: 'how do we convince our audiences that the senses, perceptions, and bodily experiences that we have discovered among a group of people are really those of our subjects [...] and not our own physiological, sensual, and perceptual projections or preoccupations?' (2001: 57). This is a pertinent question, and one which I was forced to confront many times. Recent work in visual ethnography is relevant here, and particularly work on methods cultivated based on the growing recognition of using imagery to access experiences which cannot be consciously verbalised. As Iain Edgar suggests, working with images 'is a particularly powerful tool for accessing unarticulated embodied views of individuals and groups in the research process', since it may provide the researcher with the opportunity to empathise with, but also experience first-hand, the sensory embodied feelings of subjects (2004: 96). As I stated in relation to the images I began receiving from fans in the early days of my research, I felt certain that they enabled me to experience sensations and moods similar to that which these fans might be feeling.

In order to establish how these memories of British horror may have a particular role to play in producing feelings of inexplicable familiarity and resonance which characterise these fans' later experiences with *The Wicker Man*, it was necessary to ascertain the extent to which these explicit and implicit associations were present in *The Wicker Man*. Hence, the findings produced by this level of inquiry were used to inform my textual analysis. Moreover, if the processes of affect might be linked to

the way in which the film taps into these emotionally charged images, it was essential to attend to the language participants used to describe the import. Could they be suggestive of a process involving the coming to consciousness of latent content? Therefore, anything in the data produced by recalling their early memories of British horror which might be suggestive of such a process was a particular concern.

Sensory metaphors featured prominently within fan accounts concerned to articulate the aesthetic experiences involved. Here too, then, I combined textual analysis with close attention to the linguistic detail in the data. The following quotation, within which film scholar Vivian Sobchack outlines the relationship between film and bodily experience, is particularly rich in sensory metaphor and imagery:

[t]he way we are in some carnal modality able to touch and be touched by the substance and texture of images, to feel a visual atmosphere envelop us, to experience weight, suffocation, and the need for air; to take flight in kinetic exhilaration and freedom even as we are relatively bound to our theatre seats; to be knocked backwards by a sound; to sometimes even smell and taste the world we see on screen

(Sobchack, 2004: 65).

In describing their initial experiences with the film many fans, as we shall see, deploy sensory metaphors reminiscent of the above within which bodily sensations of movement, are all foregrounded (see Chapter 4).

Analysing modes of mythmaking

As mythmaking is central to this research it was particularly important to establish how the experiences emerging at the first two levels of analysis were related to the larger narrative contexts within which they were articulated. The narrative constructions produced by my participants so as to make sense of their experiences with the film, and the claims they make for its personal significance, signal one of the ways in which these fan accounts are ushered into the realm of the mythic.

Oral historians Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson (1990) have highlighted a number of useful methods for identifying those elements which provide 'clues' to the processes of 'mythic transmission' in personal testimonies (1990: 8), the underlying methodological issues of which are largely concerned with the processes of remembering and forgetting: 'we can learn to spot in these accounts the typical tricks of "dream-work": the condensations, reversals, substitutions, metaphors, and word-play through which symbolic messages are conveyed' (1990: 7). The psychoanalytic premise upon which their methods are largely based can be accommodated within the cognitive-psychodynamic model of mythmaking which informs my study, though my emphasis on the preconscious usefully broadens the scope of the psychological mechanisms involved.

Since personal investments shape the kinds of interpretations a person will make of a particular event or experience (McAdams, 1993) it was important to look at the frames of reference brought to bear on the cult experiences described herein. One of the ways in which a personal narrative becomes mythic is through its link to a magical worldview. Magical thinking was a characteristic mode through which many of my participants constructed their narratives. Typically, the first viewing registered as 'momentous' and was invariably expressed in terms of a 'turning point'. Significantly, many of these narratives appeared to be further linked in so far as they suggest that the discovery of the film and its ongoing significance is in some way predestined. Respondents often speak of discovering the film 'by chance' or by 'fate'. Moreover, in recounting the trajectories of their attachments, fans more often than not speak of 'accidentally stumbling across' related artefacts, and/or feeling 'drawn' or 'compelled' to visiting the filming locations and are thus suggestive of a magical world-view (see Chapter 4).

Such feelings are not uncommon in instances where certain objects arouse a deeply affecting experience. As Samuel and Thompson note, it is fairly typical to find in personal testimonies a degree of fantasy projection onto particularly personal possessions and objects. Thus in such instances 'inanimate objects take on a life of their own' (1990: 10). Indeed, these stories of 'first encounters' (see Chapter 4) forcibly suggest the idea that the film has a life of its own. But these feelings are likely to be significant to the transcendent feelings fans report in relation to the aesthetic, and might be linked to fan attempts to make sense of peak experiences.

It is important to ascertain why fans continue to shape narratives of being 'chosen' by the film, of feeling that it is somehow tied up in their fate. Crucially, sustained observation highlighted that these precise features of fan narratives occurred in peaks and troughs. That is to say, it was possible to detect a sudden and collective surge in these types of sentiments. Hence the task here was to observe the circumstances in which these aspects of fan narratives were attributed a greater or lesser significance. In one such example, correlations can be drawn between these peaks in magical modes of mythmaking and significant developments surrounding the cult text (see Chapter 4). The suggestion here is that mythmaking in this instance serves to retain the personal significance feelings of ownership by reference to special status.

In their reconstructions of their ongoing relationships with the film, the text is invested with mystical significance (see Chapter 4). Fans select salient points in their own stories of how their fandoms progressed. As will be demonstrated, the ways in which fans select and reconstruct elements from their past and ongoing experiences of being a fan of the film are inherently subjective and reveal the extent to which their continued attempts to make sense of their relationships with it are characterised by magical thinking. In this study, such examples are taken to be reflective of the centrality of the mythic imagination to the ongoing development of fan attachments. As Larsen suggests, in the mythmaking mode, individuals appear more willing to draw on a 'frame of reverence' (1995: 78),

The significance of age-related stages of personal mythmaking is also relevant to a discussion of the types and mechanisms of memory produced herein. McAdams' approach highlights how the specific modes of mythmaking are differentially determined at various developmental stages across the life course. Given that the average age of participants in my study falls into the range of 30-45, it is unsurprising to find that their testimonies are markedly different from that of Stacey or Kuhn's. The testimonies herein reveal elements of a myth still very much in the making and are characterised, at times, by a youthful idealism. In short, these testimonies reveal that their authors have rarely reached the degree of 'retrospective wisdom' described by Stacey (1994: 65). I will discuss the relationship between memory, mythmaking and developmental stages of the life course in Chapter 5.

Concluding summary

In this chapter, I have attempted to explicate the research process and rationalise the steps I took from conception through to design and analysis. In addition, I have outlined the methods used in this study and have suggested the benefits of working with several methods and across many research contexts. Specifically, I have suggested that engaging with respondents in a multiplicity of situations and scenarios provides an insight not only into the dialogical nature of fan-talk but also, more importantly, shows a continuity occurring in their self-narratives.

In terms of the ontological and epistemological status of personal testimonies used in this study, I have argued for the importance of maintaining a productive tension between 'realist' and 'constructivist' positions. I have suggested that my methodological concerns position my study in relation to existing work in film and cultural studies which has utilised the ethnographic method in order to explore elements of audience experiences which are not wholly conscious. But, I have also suggested that my work departs from this research in certain respects, and specifically my focus on the cognitive unconscious, rather than a strictly psychoanalytic model.

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- ¹ The Primal Screen Cult Film Tour was sponsored by Stella Artois and *The Guardian* and ran until December 3rd 1998 at select cinemas around the UK.
- ² Andrew Pulver, (1998) 'Primal Screen: Celebrating Cult Cinema with Stella Artois' (event programme), no pagination.

Chapter 3

From Memory to Mythmaking: An Archaeology of the Cult Formation

The processes by which a certain image (but not another) filmed in a certain way (but not another) causes one person's (but not another's) pulse to race finally remains a mystery

(Carol Clover, 1993: 110-11).

[...] to influence an individual's actions, cultural models need to be represented in the person's associational networks and associated with the appropriate affect

(Drew Westen, 2001: 38-9).

The processes involved in enabling the affective register of certain filmic images for certain viewers, as noted by Carol Clover in the above quotation, can often appear to be shrouded in mystery. This 'mystery' is magnified in instances where we witness groups of individuals appearing to be spontaneously and similarly drawn to a particular text, and for reasons they often struggle to articulate. Likewise, for the observer, it is precisely the intensely emotional pull of a text for its fans which ascribes to cultism its mysterious cultural force – the cult-pull as it were.

This is the first of two empirical chapters concerned with the generative mechanisms of the cult formation. In this chapter I focus on issues related to the profound personal resonance of the cult text. As discussed previously, the imagery of the cult text holds a special appeal for the fans in my study. Moreover, this factor has been shown to form the initial experiential basis of cult fans more generally, as my discussion of Jenkins' work shows (see Chapter 1). Elements of the text's imagery would appear to be already complexly inscribed in the individual's sense of self, and it is the fan's apprehension of this factor which draws them close to the text.

One aim here, then, is to provide an account of how the text's imagery is already rooted in the fan's experience. I will argue that the affective import of the film has its roots in elements of the fan's personal imagery, the particular texts they have drawn on in childhood and the implicit associations they have forged in relation to these texts, for ways of understanding how these fans may be emotionally and imaginatively predisposed to *The Wicker Man*. Here the 'British horror factor' is discussed, not only as an important early cultural resource for these fans, but also in terms of a genuine source within which this precise bond can be seen to have its collective roots. Such an approach underlies my contention that the personal myths we begin to develop in childhood exert a powerful and long-lasting influence on the cultural 'choices' we make in adulthood.

For the purposes of this chapter, I will limit my focus to the representation of place in *The Wicker Man*, as it is here that the affective bond is at its most compelling. In-keeping with the underlying concern of my study to retain a focus on the generational-specificity of the respondents, my approach will be to uncover in *The Wicker Man* a distinctive mode of representation which links directly to these fans on account of their having drawn from the same cultural resource in the construction of their personal myths. It will be argued that *The Wicker Man* mobilises a number of seductive place myths in relation to the British countryside which are comparable to those found in many of the texts these fans invested in during their formative years. Whilst there are other elements in the film which clearly resonate, I will argue that place – and specifically rural Britain – carries a very distinctive cultural resonance for the generation of fans who grew up with British horror in the late 1960s and 1970s. Drawing on the empirical data, I will show how these fans come to *The Wicker Man* with a pre-existing investment in many of the associations it makes in relation to the rural. Furthermore, I will argue that in the depiction of place, these texts exhibit a shared aesthetic, traces of which are actually preserved in these fans' memories of watching British horror in childhood.

My use of the term 'archaeology' in the title of this chapter thus serves as a metaphor for my approach, which is to uncover from the layers of these fans' early cultural experiences evidence of the ways in which the film's representation of place is embedded in their existing personal myths. Hence, in accordance with Drew

Westen's model, I will argue that the film's depiction of place is powerfully affecting for these fans precisely because it is represented in their shared associative networks and is linked to a corresponding affect.

The concluding section discusses the findings in relation to the concept of 'mythic awakenings'. Drawing together a number of theoretical threads introduced in Chapter 1, and specifically the literature on memory processes and mythmaking, I will argue that a key generative mechanism of the cult formation is to be found in the way a text can tap into and reactivate elements of a shared, embodied mythology. In so doing, I will advance my argument of the mythopoeic potential of cultism by way of demonstrating how embodied images brought to the fore by the cult experience become the source for, as well as the trigger of, the mythmaking process.

Theorising the cult-pull: 'topophilia' and *Wicker* fandom

The purpose of this section is threefold. Firstly, I want to introduce material from the fan study so as to provide a sense of its complexity in relation to the film's representation of place. Secondly, I will be concerned to reveal within the data a collective idiom - that is, shared patterns of speech which would illustrate the degree to which these fans' experiences with the film bear out remarkable similarities. Finally, this section is intended to provide the necessary groundwork for my discussion in the concluding section, wherein the experiences outlined here will be further discussed in relation to the broader theoretical concerns of my study.

There is an unmistakable 'topophilic' sentiment underpinning *Wicker* cultism. Topophilia - 'the affective bond between people and place' - is as Yi-Fu Tuan asserts a bond which can exist in relation to actual or imagined places (1974: 4). Here, it is the intense and essentially intuitive bond which exists between these fans and the fictional island of Summerisle the film portrays that concerns me, an 'island' which, in reality, is an amalgam of several Scottish locations from the south-west coastal villages of Dumfriesshire to the Highlands.

The subject of place featured prominently within my data, ranging in degrees of personal significance from pretty backdrop to spiritually evocative. Furthermore, 'pilgrimage' to the filming locations is a more typical way in which *Wicker* fandom is made visibly manifest. '*Wicker Country*' (Ashurst 1998) has, to my knowledge, attracted fans from all over Britain, America, Australia and, to a lesser extent, Germany and France.¹ Again, as far as I am aware visits have been occurring since the early 1980s.²

Location is central to the film's storyline: *The Wicker Man* centres around Sgt. Neil Howie's (Edward Woodward) investigation of a 'missing girl' on the Scottish island of Summerisle. Devout Christian and upstanding citizen, Howie is disturbed to discover that the islanders worship Pagan Celtic gods under the auspices of the enigmatic Lord Summerisle (Christopher Lee). Thus the stage is set for an unprecedented clash of moral cultures, in which Howie is ultimately rendered powerless.

It is often supposed by academics that the cult appeal of *The Wicker Man* lies in its subversive, 'counter-cultural' themes (Krzywinska 2000; Franks 2005; Higginbottom 2006; Harper 2005). Although Hardy and Shaffer have both publicly denied any counter-cultural intent (see Franks *et al.*, 2005), the defeat of the prissy 'Christian copper' at the hands of a sexually and spiritually liberated Pagan community has been read as a voicing of counter-cultural concerns. In the meantime, an appealing supposition for many academics is that the current celebration of the film might suggest a disjunction between authorial intention and cult appropriation. Elsewhere, conjecture about the film's cult appeal has been linked to escapist fantasy, which in turn leads to faintly derogatory speculations about *Wicker* fans. Murray and Rolston, for example, suggest that 'Summerisle perhaps offers an almost *child-like idyll* to [cult] viewers which in turn might offer an escape [...] to an island populated by old-fashioned eccentrics and lush scenery' (2002: 17, my emphasis). According to Lesley Stevenson, the film's construction of place is 'so potent' that it would seem 'to cloud any sense of objectivity' for some fans (2005: 118).

Yet, the cultural resonance of the film, and indeed its provocative sense of place may be more complex than has heretofore been supposed. At least for those fans who

participated in my study, as I will demonstrate, the film's depiction of place has a distinctive cultural resonance which has less to do with a self-conscious subcultural choice than with a submerged predisposition. Furthermore, far from offering a 'child-like idyll', there is much evidence in my findings to suggest that the affective pull of the film is actually rooted in childhood experience. Thus, if some fans seem unable to find an objective distance from the text, it might well be due to the profoundly intimate and implicit level on which the film resonates, on account of the way in which it is already complexly inscribed in their personal histories.

So how do fans convey the personal significance of place in the film? I recorded the following statements during a number of successive research trips to the filming locations between 1999 and 2000. Each of these fans would go on to become key participants in the longitudinal component of my study, thus it is their experiences which are closely charted throughout this chapter. It should be noted here that their experiences are typical of the many fans I have come into contact with over the past eight years:

I had to come here, the *scenery* [in the film] absolutely haunted me and I had to find out why. I still don't know. *But it somehow a part of me*; this place, where I've never stepped foot in before today, is so significant in my life

(Kevin, 1999, my emphasis).

The *imagery* in the film really does get to me: it resonates with me in ways I can't explain [...] the *scenery* in the film is utterly magical, and somehow *weirdly familiar*

(Gemma 1999, my emphasis).

I wanted to come and see the locations because the film had such an impact on me the first time around [...]. It's very difficult to explain

(Chris, 1998).

These statements illustrate well the complexity of the cult response. There is in all instances a profound gap between feeling and understanding. Like many who

participated in my study, these fans struggle to account for the intensely emotional responses the film arouses in them. Moreover, the fan's awareness of this gap extends well beyond the viewing context, appearing to motivate thought and behaviour.

Yet if the above examples shore up a sense of incomprehension in relation to the film's import, they bear testament to the powerful rapport which exists between this film and these fans. That which is repeatedly expressed within them is the extent of which the film's imagery, notably in relation to its depiction of place, is already rooted in the affective terrain of these fans. It is felt to be 'weirdly familiar'. Thus despite this gap there is something vaguely known which the fan attempts to bring into consciousness.

A similar mode of experience is evident in the following statement, within which the film critic Mark Kermode relates his own account of becoming a fan of horror cinema:

I [...] sensed from the very beginning that there was something incomprehensibly significant about the actions being played out on-screen, something which spoke to me in a language I didn't quite understand [...] I felt from the outset that beyond the gothic trappings these movies had something to say to *me* about *my* life. I just didn't have any idea what

(Kermode, 2001: 126, original emphasis).

Notably, this precise quotation has been interpreted by Matt Hills as marking an instance whereby the fan's testimony is 'strikingly *self-absent*':

Exactly at the point where we might [...] expect a rational explanation of the self's devotion and fandom, we are instead presented with a moment of self-suspension and radical hesitation. We are confronted by a moment where the subject *cannot* discursively and 'rationally' account for its own fan experience

(Hills, 2002: 7, original emphasis).

There again, Cornel Sandvoss insists that Kermode's statement provides an instance which more properly 'reveals a self-projective reading position' (Sandvoss 2005: 107).

However, neither theorist has sufficiently attended to the way in which Kermode's statement is shot through by a deep sense of inexplicable familiarity. Like the testimonies (above) drawn from my own research, Kermode senses something 'incomprehensibly significant' about the text - something vaguely recognised which 'spoke' to him 'in a language' he did '*not quite* understand'. This element of fandom needs to be explored, not only because it is a recurring sentiment in fan testimonies but because it is suggestive of the eruption of implicit schemas, a point I will come back to at the close of this chapter. Thus, rather than treating such moments of inarticulacy as all the justification one needs to abandon ethnographic research as unreliable (as Hills does), and instead of interpreting instances of fan subjectivity as inherently symptomatic of unconscious psychological mechanisms (as Sandvoss does), it is important to work inductively with fan testimony, which involves attending to its linguistic qualities and experiential dimensions. Such an approach not only enables a more sensitive treatment, but may also provide clues as to the specific processes involved.

The feelings of inexplicable familiarity the film's depiction of place produces in these fans was sometimes linked to the idea of a homecoming, as is explicitly illustrated in the following comments recorded during two separate research trips to the filming locations:

It's like *coming home*! It's so weird; just being here now reminds me of how I felt the very first time I saw the film [...] No film before, or since I was a kid has *awakened in me feelings as strong as The Wicker Man* did.

(Kevin, 1999)

It [the film] felt like coming home; that's the only way to describe my response. Though exactly what I was coming home to is anybody's guess

[...] there was something about the landscape in the film that felt familiar to me.

(Chris, 1998, my emphasis)

The idea of a homecoming was subtly reflected in a number of fan testimonies, wherein it was suggested that the film generates a sense of returning to somewhere vaguely remembered. Often, this would take the form of a period in the individual's past, and particularly childhood, as is evident in Kevin's statement (above). Similar sentiments featured prominently in the questionnaires, of which expressions such as: 'It awakens the dormant, innocent child in us all' (male, civil servant 36-45) were typical.

On the one hand, this discourse might be seen as an effect of the many 'scenes of childhood' at work in the film: the nursery rhymes, the games, and the faintly fairy-tale like quality of some of the characters. Hardy, the film's director, hoped that viewers would recognise 'all the little echoes of childhood' in the film (quoted in Bartholomew 1977: 12). Having said that, it is clear that the film does not encourage these fans to identify with specific childhood objects, nor does it arouse specific childhood memories. Rather it is the feelings fans associate with that time which surface in these accounts. In fact, there is nothing whatsoever within these statements which should lead us to propose that a process of recognition is occurring. If anything, they indicate a set of partial recognitions - an 'awakening' of some unacknowledged part of the self.

Significantly, some fans actually used the term 'awakening' in attempting to describe the affective import of the film's representation of place.³

It's not only that the film shows images I find appealing; it touches on something which moves me deeply. It's the way it's filmed, perhaps? No, maybe not. I don't know. *It awakens in me a feeling which I cannot explain*

(Gemma, telephone interview, 2003).

There was also a strong tendency amongst fans to animate and anthropomorphise the landscape in talk about the film, as is evident in the following examples:

I woke up one morning with the maypole song whirling around in my head and I thought I've had enough of this; what is it about that film? I could picture it all so clearly; you know, the blossoming trees, the *brooding* ruins, the *silent* gravestones. And I thought - I want to go there
(Gemma 1999).

The landscape in the film is a character in its own right. Don't you think? [...] It has a life all of its own
(Chris, 1998).

There is then a significant degree of consensus in relation to how these fans experience the film, which in turn produces shared patterns of speech. Whilst the first two discourses – ‘inexplicable familiarity’ and ‘self-awakenings’ – are indicative of an essentially visceral process of identification with these ‘*Wickerscapes*’, the final discourse – the tendency to animate and anthropomorphise the landscape - suggests a shared mode of perception.

Inexplicable familiarity, animism and *Wicker* fandom: A case for the Uncanny?

A brief consideration of Freud's essay ‘The Uncanny’ (1919) is necessary at this stage, and for three reasons. Firstly, Freud developed the concept in order to account for experiences similar to those which I am seeking to grapple with here, thus responses might seem ripe for such an application. Secondly, Freud has discussed at length a variation of the uncanny within which animistic encounters are squarely placed as a progenitor of uncanny sensations. Finally, the concept of the uncanny has not only informed recent academic analyses of *The Wicker Man* (Harper 2005, Gullatz 2005), it has also been suggested that Freud's essay may have provided a direct source for the filmmakers (Harper 2005).

Freud defines the Uncanny in terms of an essentially ambivalent, strange and disorientating experience characterised by a feeling of something familiar and yet unfamiliar occurring simultaneously. This experience, according to Freud, has two types of origin. First, it can 'proceed[s] from repressed infantile complexes, from the castration complex, womb phantasies, etc.' (Freud 1919/1990: 371); and, secondly, it can occur on occasions where 'primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed' (1990: 372). It is in relation to this second definition that Freud discusses the relationship between animism and the uncanny.

Like many thinkers, most notably James Frazer (1922) and Jean Piaget (1951), Freud supposed that an animistic mode of perception is linked to a stage of childhood development which is outgrown with the onset of rational thinking. Hence, later encounters with objects in the environment, within which the line between the animate and inanimate is blurred, can recall this earlier stage of thinking, thus producing uncanny sensations in the adult. Within this schema, then, the fleeting returns of 'primitive beliefs' is understood in terms of a regression to infantile modes of thinking.

At first glance, there would seem to be a remarkable fit between Freud's theory of the Uncanny and the sentiments of my respondents. Yet, it would be a mistake to interpret the latter through a strictly Freudian lens, and for three reasons. Firstly, Freud's formulation of the uncanny is essentially rooted in a universal perspective and so fails to take into account the specificity of uncanny experiences. This precise limitation is reproduced in the first half of Stephen Harper's (2005) essay, 'The Other Coppers', within which the author proceeds to single out 'uncanny visual elements' in the film. Harper notes, for example, the liminal status of objects such as the girl in the wardrobe discovered by Howie during his search for Rowan. For a split second Howie (and the viewer) believe her to be dead, only to witness her open her eyes and grimace (2005: 174). In this respect, Harper's rather general discussion of uncanny objects literalises and replays the universalistic perspective in Freud's argument which I am concerned to avoid herein.⁴ Thus, whilst bearing the hallmarks of the uncanny, fan experiences with the film are characterised by a number of specificities: firstly because they are localised to a specific faction of *Wicker* fandom (i.e., not all fans respond in this way), and secondly in light of the specific images

that are particularly affecting (i.e., the landscape). There is a need, then, to be vigilant to the historicisation of the uncanny and to thereby explore fans' relationship to the film's representation of place in relation to the specific socio-cultural and historical roots.

Secondly, and more spuriously, Freud assumes that animistic modes of perception are outgrown with the onset of rational thinking. As such, our acceptance of his theory is subject to the proviso that animistic thought modes are normally limited to a stage in child development. Yet, this is a view which is difficult to sustain in a culture such as ours which is saturated by animistic and anthropomorphic images. Indeed, this mode of thinking is all-pervasive in literature, art, commercials, even language itself (see Guthrie 1993).

Thirdly, it should be remembered that Freud expressly classified the uncanny in terms of an essentially *fear-provoking* experience: 'the uncanny is that class of the *frightening* which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar' (1919/1990: 340, my emphasis). By contrast, the overriding affect characteristic of fan testimonies is linked to visceral sensations inductive of enthrallment rather than fear.

All that remains to be said at this stage is that I am not convinced that the fan experiences outlined in the previous section constitute the uncanny proper - that is, in the Freudian sense. Freud's concept, as I will demonstrate, might be more relevant in discussing these fans' early experiences with British horror. But in terms of the import of *The Wicker Man's* landscapes, a more historically and culturally specific approach is called for. A first objective, then, is to trace the relationship between horror and rurality depicted in the texts these fans invested in during childhood and adolescence. At the same time, I will be paying particular attention to the role of these 'horrorscapes' in the *Wicker* fans' imagination. What particular associations of the British rural landscape are fans invested in? And to what extent have these been shaped by British horror?

Bewitching Britain: The *place* of British horror and fantasy in *Wicker* fandom

In his seminal book, *A Heritage of Horror*, David Pirie (1973) asserts that ‘on commercial, historical and artistic grounds [...] the horror genre, as it has been developed in this country by Hammer and its rivals, remains *the only staple cinematic myth which Britain can properly claim as its own*, and which relates to it in the same way as the western relates to America’ (Pirie 1973: 9, my emphasis). If shortly after the time in which Pirie was writing, the British horror film would fall into rapid decline,⁵ its ‘myth’ would go on to give shape and content to the personal myths of an emerging generation. In this section, then, I want to begin the process of tracing the affective rapport which exists between the film and these fans back to a veritable source.

My use of the term ‘place’ in the title to this section serves a dual purpose. On the one hand, it means to shore up actual representations participated in a shared mythology of the British rural landscape. On the other hand, it refers to the position British horror holds in these fans’ imaginative and emotional worlds, and thus the importance of place in these texts as a predisposing factor of *Wicker* cultism

There was overwhelming evidence in the data to suggest that British horror and fantasy have played a significant role in the construction of these fans’ personal myths. This was not only evident in questionnaires and interviews, where fans were specifically invited to list and discuss their favourite and influential texts (see appendices 1-3), it was also strikingly apparent in much of the unsolicited data I accrued throughout my research. Moreover, the subject of British horror often found its way into discussion within the context of more informal gatherings I have attended, such as the conventions. Again, the aforementioned ‘image-bank’ also attests to an investment. As such, the ‘British horror factor’ provides us with a compelling and constant variable across the data, with most fans stating that they once had a profound taste for domestic horror cinema and television, even if in some cases that taste had now dissipated.⁶

Crucially, the taste for these texts was cultivated in childhood; most participants recalled early experiences of watching horror films and related television programmes in the 1970s. Given that British horror was frequently broadcast on television at this time it is perhaps not surprising that a large number of fans referred to the genre as something they 'grew up with'. The period during the late Sixties and mid-Seventies was also an important one for the development of televised horror. The BBC's *Ghost Stories for Christmas* series, which ran from 1971 to 1978, featuring in the main film adaptations of the stories of M.R. James, quickly developed into something of a seasonal tradition which, for many fans in my study signified an important event.

Amongst the most popular film titles cited by fans were *Witchfinder General* (d. Michael Reeves, 1968), *Blood on Satan's Claw* (d. Piers Haggard, 1970), *The Witches* (d. Cyril Frankel, 1966), *The Devil Rides Out* (d. Terence Fisher, 1968), as well as television programmes such as *Children of the Stones* (1977), *The Stone Tape* (1972) and *Robin Redbreast* (BBC 'Play for Today', 1970). The film adaptations of M.R. James, especially, *A Warning to the Curious* (1972), *Whistle and I'll Come to You* (1968) and *The Ash Tree* (1975) were also frequently listed as texts these fans watched in childhood. Additional ghost stories typically broadcast at Christmas included *The Signal Man* (1976). Other noteworthy, though less popular, choices included Nigel Kneale's *Beasts* (1976) anthology, as well as various episodes pertaining to the *Mystery and Imagination* series. (See appendices 1-3 for a comprehensive list of texts mentioned in the audience study).⁷

It is highly significant, therefore, that we find in many of these texts a similar mythology at work in relation to the British rural landscape as that of *The Wicker Man*; namely, the persistence of its becoming more and more associated with the Occult (Krzywinska 2000; Hunt 2002; Hutchings 2004). More specifically, in many of the texts mentioned above, the British rural landscape is linked to: 'what now might be called a psycho-geography of Britain, in which the landscape and cultural practices of the land were imbued with pre-Christian paganism' (Krzywinska, 2000: 74).⁸

Crucially then, these associations emerge at a specific time in the historical development of British horror and culminate into a distinctive aesthetic, both stylistically and thematically. As Peter Hutchings (2004: 35) observes, Paganism is not a subject which is given any significant treatment in British horror until the late 1960s. Leon Hunt has argued that these films need to be understood in terms of a distinctive subgenre akin to the 'British vampire film' and the American cycle of 'demonic films' (2002: 82).

Like *The Wicker Man*, then, there is in some of these texts (i.e., *The Witches*, *Blood on Satan's Claw*, and *Children of the Stones*), a strong association between rural Britain and Paganism. Remnants of Britain's prehistory are highly visible on the landscape, most notably, Stonehenge. Moreover, as Leon Hunt observes of this cycle of films, by the late 1960s the English countryside becomes the 'prime locale' for 'magic' practices, thus aligning rural Britain with the Occult (Hunt 2002: 83).

Some of these texts also exhibit fertility rituals thus drawing their inspiration, as did *The Wicker Man*, from James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. *The Golden Bough* is a mammoth work in fertility religion and magic ritual, published in twenty two separate volumes in 1922. The myth at the centre of Frazer's work is the 'king of the wood' - a male whose role it is to inhabit a secluded wooded grove, awaiting the day when in his prime his blood will be shed and offered as a sacrifice to the gods for the good of the land. Interestingly, this idea is central to the plot of John Bowen's BBC television play, *Robin Redbreast*, which acknowledges Frazer's work directly, and is also given a new twist in *A Warning to the Curious*.

Significantly, it is those texts which can be said to share *The Wicker Man's* distinctive visual style - *The Witches*, *Blood on Satan's Claw*, *A Warning to the Curious*, and *Witchfinder General* - which proved most popular with fans. Like *The Wicker Man*, these texts in particular contribute to what I will refer to as a 'greening of the gothic'. In these texts, traditional gothic tropes such as graveyards, moss-covered ruins, and abandoned abbeys feature predominantly, and yet as in *The Wicker Man*, they are bathed in sunlight as opposed to moonlight. We might compare *Wicker's* sunlit, blossom-strewn *mise-en-scene* with the deceptive sunny security of the rural scenes in *The Witches*. Indeed, a notable visual quality these

texts share is to be found in the contrast between the intense beauty of the landscape with the dark and uglier themes. There is a tendency within many of these texts to display their most disturbing and horrific highpoints against a glorious blue sky.

It was clear that many fans derived a self-conscious pleasure from the specific associations *The Wicker Man* mobilises in relation to the British rural landscape, and the recognition of some of the more familiar 'horrorscapes' they have grown accustomed to:

Like many British horrors, it [*The Wicker Man*] suggests that there are remote pockets within the British Isles where anything might happen. I like the idea of a remote community untouched by the modern world, dabbling in the occult

(Kevin 2000, questionnaire 2).

It's this whole idea that every British country village hasn't quite severed its ties with the primitive past that I particularly like [...] the every country village has its very own resident witch or witch-doctor kind of thing [laughs]

(Gemma 2003, telephone interview).

There is irony in both of these comments: both respondents recognise in these representations familiar generic tropes, as is particularly evident in Gemma's statement. Yet, as my research progressed it became strikingly apparent that these fans were not simply admiring *The Wicker Man* from an ironic distance. Rather they were identifying in the film a set of imaginary associations with the British rural landscape within which they appeared to have a pre-existing investment. That these associations derive from a childhood fascination for British horror was made explicit in the following:

The Wicker Man is for me a beautiful collage of everything I've ever liked, all those enchanting landscapes I've seen in British films, especially horror, like *Blood on Satan's Claw* and *Witchfinder General*

[...]. They absolutely fascinated me as a child [...] *The Wicker Man* has it all, the atmosphere, the music, the scenery [...] I live near Shropshire and love to take walks in the countryside. My imagination runs riot on those walks! You know, I'm just - I'm always half expecting to bump into Mathew Hopkins on horseback. Sad, I know [laughs] *but I've always been like that*. It keeps me young!

(Gemma, telephone interview, 2003).

Most fans were not as explicit as Gemma is here in linking her imaginative perception of 'green spaces' to an earlier investment in rural-based horror fiction. There is nonetheless an unmistakable thread of 'green gothicism' underpinning fans' rural imaginings. The following comments are typical in this respect:

The film [*The Wicker Man*] is set in my kind of landscape – it's bright, it's beautiful, it's lush. But it's laced with a foreboding menace [...] *I've always thought of the countryside as being ever so slightly macabre; a place where anything might happen, and where anything might be creeping around in the trees [...] I've felt that way for as long as I can remember. I don't know why. That's probably got something to do with the appeal of the film*

(Kevin, telephone interview, 2003).

For me, personally, the British countryside is the best stage there is for showcasing magic ritual. *The two surely belong together, don't they?*

(Chris, email, 2003).

Again, that which is notable here is that in both instances, fans use terms which appear self-conscious in their allusion to modes of representation. Chris's comment is especially interesting in this respect insofar as his use of terms such as 'stage' and 'showcasing' suggests an instance of detachment. But note the affirmation which follows, in which he suggests that the association between the countryside and magic is one which carries for him an internal reality, as is demonstrated by his sentiment that they 'surely belong together'. In this respect, Chris's statement seems to capture the paradox at the heart of most fans' experiences: it's obviously a representation

(fans are fully aware of this) but it has a place in the experiential realities of these fans.

The deep-rooted significance of these 'horrorscapes'; the ways in which they continue to permeate the imaginative inner worlds of these fans, and colour their perception of the rural, attests to the significance of early experiences with British horror in the construction of the fan's personal myth. Just as telling in this respect is the repeated use of appended statements, such as: 'I've *always* thought of the countryside as being ever so slightly macabre'; and 'I've *always felt that way*'. For such sentiments are in fact 'self-statements' which, as both McAdams and Feinstein have suggested are integral features of the personal myth and can be seen to provide fleeting glimpses into the myth; they are instances where elements of the myth surface (McAdams 1993).⁹

In wanting to test the specific findings of my focal study on a broader sample, I sought to incorporate into the third questionnaire a number of questions which were specifically designed to elicit information that would enable me to look more closely at the relationship between an early taste for horror and a topophilic interest in the film. The questionnaire was sent to a mixture of 'hard-core' fans and more casual followers of the film. In section two (see Appendix 4), I asked participants to respond with the first three words which came to mind in relation to the following terms: city, countryside, nature, Scotland and England. Here respondents were asked to provide details as to whether they held a preference for the genre, and specifically, to state if they had invested in such texts in their childhood. In addition I asked participants to compile a list, if appropriate, of related texts they consumed.

The results were significant. As the data capture presented in Table 3.1 (see below) clearly illustrates, there is a strong correlation between an early investment in rural-based British horror and a distinctive set of associations which mirror the findings in my focal sample. Note, for instance, those examples which link the 'countryside' with 'witches', 'ruins' and 'magic'; associations which, as we have seen, coalesce into a fully-fledged myth in British horror by the mid-1970s.

Table 3.1:
Significant 'horror history' showing associations/questionnaire 3 (2006)

Gender	Age	Number of times seen the film	'City'	'Countryside'	'Nature'	'England'	'Scotland'
F	64	'lots'	Noise, crowds, money	Natural, folklore, secret	Crows, water, earth	Tory, middle-class, narrow-mindedness	Wild, music, ancestors
F	39	'about 29'	Chaos	magical	lost	Mythical	ancient
F	38	50+	Noise, grime, the Victorians	trees, moonlight, witchy, mist	Alive, powerful, spiritual	Ghosts, myth, magic	Kilts, Robert Burns, castles
F	35	countless	Capitalist greed, soulless,	Country house, dark cellars, secret passages	Primeval, soulful,	Old, mystical, Stonehenge	Stone circles, history
F	36	'More than 30'	Cathedral spires, Charles Dickens, ghosts	Mysterious, watchful, hidden	'see countryside'	English ghost stories, haunted castles, Oxford	Desolate castles, swirling mist, windswept
F	36	10+	Smoke, chimneys, noise	Energising, cleansing, creative	Beauty, life, death	Flag, countryside, church bells	Flag, rugby St Andrew's
M	42	50+	Noise/ Pollution/ London	Customs, pageants, May queen	Many faces unpredictable		Robert Louis Stevenson
M	41	'More than 50'		'All is not well in the countryside!'			Battered coastlines, ferocious sea, crying fog horns
M	41	Too many to count	Depraved, money, dirt	Witches, scarecrows, Trees	Green, real, soulful	Myth, folklore, rolling countryside	Untouched, ruined kirks, cold
M	39	'lost count!'	London, taxis, Jack the Ripper	Magic, fishing with dad, hay fever	Powerful, woods, the Green Man	Rugby, Dad's Army, Ghost stories	Rain, Wicker Man, Isle of Whithorn*
M	38	6 or 7	London, pin-striped suits, share shares	Fields, rivers, trees,	Mountains, wildlife, trees	Green fields, London, rain	Mountains, islands, freedom
M	35	'87'	Noise, people, work	Trees, water,	Animals, plants, water	Countryside, castles, sea	Mountains, sea, whisky

*The climatic scenes of The Wicker Man were filmed in the Isle of Whithorn

Note also how these sentiments correspond in generational terms. It is precisely those fans that 'grew up' in the heyday of British rural horror that display a tendency to gothicise the rural. It is also highly significant that where some participants did not restrict their responses to the requested 'three words', opting instead to deploy several so as to create an impression of the countryside, we find again images which

reflect the conventions of horror. A striking example here is evident in the train of association which proceeds from 'country house' to 'dark cellars and secret passageways'. Witness again the presence of horror motifs in the rather more self-conscious instance where one participant wrote: 'All is not well in the countryside!'

The idea of England for some of these fans was shot through with references to the occult. Consider the recurring association of 'England' with 'ghosts', 'myth', 'folklore', the 'mystical'. In fact, national identity was often linked to the gothic imagination as suggested in the explicit examples linking 'England' to 'M.R. James' and 'Scotland' to 'Robert Louis Stevenson' (see Table 3.1).

Crucially, there are a small, but nonetheless significant, number of subtle anthropomorphisms present in the data. Consider those examples within which 'nature' is perceived to be 'alive', 'watchful' and 'brooding'; or the more explicit reference linking nature to the 'Green Man'. Notably, such sentiments were expressed by self-described Pagans and atheists alike.

It is interesting, then, to compare the above findings with those presented in Table 3.2 (see below) which charts the responses of those participants who have never been invested in the horror genre. Note the comparatively mundane associations expressed therein. Here the countryside registers in an altogether more conventional way, reflecting in the main contemporary touristic discourses which promote the countryside as a site of well-being and escape from city life.¹⁰

A comparison of the two tables also yields a correlation between an early taste for British horror and a more avid manifestation of *Wicker* fandom. Fans that demonstrated a more passionate investment in *The Wicker Man* (evident in the number of times they claim to have watched the film) were also far more likely to have consumed horror texts in childhood.

Table 3.2:
Responses of fans who claim never to have been interested in horror fiction
(questionnaire 2006)

Gender	Age	Number of times seen TWM	city	countryside	nature	England	Scotland
M	56	2 or 3	London	Escape, peace	Forceful	Home	Whisky, Celtic connections, <i>The Wicker Man</i>
M	55	5 or 6	Big, dirty	green	nature spirits	'flag waving'	Home
M	51	approx 10	Urban sprawl, crime, disregard for nature	Pastoral, farms, wildlife	Stewardship, peaceful, wildlife	History, castles, monarchy	Independence, heritage, roots
M	51	'too many to count'	NYC	Fields, hills, farms, clouds	I think in images, not words	Queen and country	The brave, flag, freedom
M	44	6, maybe 7	Dirty, history, music scene	Rivers, fields, fishing	Walking, camping, birds	Football, tradition, flag	Skiing in childhood, snow, rain
F	40	3 or 4	'Drinking smart cocktails in smart bars'	Hills, grass, bit too quiet	Green, lakes, lake district	Flag, Cotswolds, ice-cream	Heather, thistle, bleak
M	40	6 or 7	Noise, hectic, traffic	Happy, healthy, inviting	Comforting, rewarding, special	Green pleasant land	Magnificent, breath-taking scenery
F	34	Less than 10	Pollution, noise, crowds	Pure, freedom, peace	Happy, peace, escape	Green, proud, eccentric	Mountains, lochs, kilts
F	33	Approx 12	Chaotic, busy, stifling	Peace, connection, beauty	Entwined, green, primitive	Home, myths, landscape	Rugged, wild, tempestuous
F	26	'about 6'	Noisy, polluted, vibrant	Farms, sunshine, winding roads	Gods, flowers, clouds	Green, royalty, London	Hills, rain, castles

Clearly, childhood experiences with British rural horror have significantly contributed to the shape and content of these fans' personal imagery, influencing the highly distinctive and imaginative ways in which they have come to perceive rural spaces. We have seen how *The Wicker Man* holds a particular resonance precisely because it ascribes to the British rural landscape an identity within which these fans rediscover something of their own identities. Thus, despite the difficulties these fans experience in accounting for the personal resonance of the film, there are clear links

between *The Wicker Man's* mobilisation of place myths and those which suffuse the fan's private imaginings. Moreover, the foregoing discussion does suggest that much of the emotional import of the film arises from the way in which it resonates along these fans' associative networks.

Clearly though, there is an affective source to be found which runs deeper still; well beyond the ideational. This is typical of the cult response; there is always something in excess, always a sense in which the text resonates in ways which cannot be expressed. This should not, however, lead us to suppose that the emotional and experiential dimensions of cult fandom are beyond the reach of the empirical approach (c.f. Hills 2002). Thus, our next step is to approach that which I have identified herein in terms of a 'topophilic structure of feeling' from a fresh angle. Given that this precise structure of feeling would appear to have been cultivated in childhood experiences with British rural horror, it is essential to consider how these texts might have suggested themselves to the child's imagination. As Tuan points out, '[t]opophilia is not the strongest of human emotions. When it is compelling we can be sure that the place or environment has become the carrier of emotionally charged events or perceived as a symbol' (Tuan 1974: 93, my emphasis)

In order to gain a sense of how these texts might have been experienced in childhood it is instructive to return to the significance of the subtle anthropomorphisms in the data. *The Wicker Man*, as I will go on to show, is replete with anthropomorphic imagery and devices, almost to the point of overabundance. Indeed, Harper has suggested that the 'uncanny' tropes which are more 'obvious' in the film (Harper 2005: 181). Yet it is clear that this dimension of the film is experienced in an altogether more visceral and intuitive way by fans.

I will argue that the answer to this question lies, in part, in the distinct aesthetic of rural horror produced in Britain of the period in question. As Williams asserts, the structure of feeling culminates in the cultural texts of the period which produces it; 'the arts of a period, taking these to include *characteristic approaches and tones in argument, are of major importance. For here, if anywhere, this characteristic is likely to be expressed*' (1965: 65, my emphasis). In the following section then I will be concerned to explore the visceral aesthetic of green gothic: how do Pagan and

occultic themes become transposed onto the formal qualities of these texts? Can we find in the aesthetics of these texts a quality which would shed light on the animistic perception of the landscape amongst *Wicker* fans that grew up with British horror?

The Aesthetics of 'Green Gothic'

In their representation of rural Britain, many British horror films and related television programmes of the late 1960s and 1970s can be seen to mobilise a number of shared formal devices whereby the landscape is animated, deified, and anthropomorphised by turns. I will refer to this aesthetic under the term 'Paganistic gaze', my logic here being that these ideas – animism (the attribution of consciousness to inanimate objects); anthropomorphism (attributing human form to non-human objects); deification (attributing god-like qualities to objects) – find collective expression in various strands of Pagan belief systems and mythologies.

The Paganistic gaze is particularly well developed in *The Wicker Man*; the *mise-en-scene* is saturated with anthropomorphisms (priapic hedges, sun-faces, the 'Green Man'). Natural elements and animals are anthropomorphised and deified by turns. As Miss Rose (Diane Cilento) suggests, on Summerisle it is believed "that when the human life is over, the spirit returns to air, to fire, to water, to trees, to animals." These ideas are literalised, for example, in a scene depicting 'naked' girls jumping over the bonfire "in the hope that the god of the flame will make them fruitful." Relationships in the film are organically interwoven: it is a world steeped in myth and folklore where the line between human, nature, gods and animal is not only blurred, but colourfully entwined. Scenes depicting the islanders' parading in animal masks and skins serve to bring to life the various personalities and qualities of these creatures: the 'salmon of knowledge', the teasing hobbyhorse', the rampant bull. The cosmic order of Summerisle is overseen by sea-gods and earth goddesses; the image of the sun-god, Nuada, is emblazoned on the Summerisle flag. It is fitting, then, that the sun is a major presence in the film.

An altogether more subtle example of the film's Paganistic gaze occurs during the 'chop, chop' scene, where the islanders stage a "game of chance" involving six

swordsmen who link blades so as to create the pattern of a star. Each of the islanders must enter the circle of men and risk being decapitated; their fate determined, it would seem, not merely by the timing of the end of the song, but more significantly, at the discretion of the sun god. To achieve this effect, the scene is interspersed with repeated cutaway shots to the sun. At the precise moment the singing stops, the camera cuts back to the sun, which is personified in the way it is brought into sharp focus through the branches of a tree, thus heightening the suggestion of it as a conscious presence. Immediately following the mock decapitation we cut back to the sun, now shown retreating rapidly from focus. Moreover, the shot is accompanied by a puckish musical sound appearing to suggest an essentially mischievous aspect of the sun-god.

A similar deification of the landscape occurs in the aforementioned Frazer-inspired *Robin Redbreast*. In a scene depicting the protagonist searching for Robin in the woods, the presence of something decidedly ethereal inhabiting the landscape is suggested through the combined use of camera angles, repetition, movement and sound. The penetrating rays of the sun breaking through the trees are synchronised with awesome, eerie noises on the soundtrack lending it a god-like stature. The trees themselves, their branches swaying violently, become animated through a series of slow provocative pans; the low positioning of the camera working to enlarge their uncanny presence. A series of intermittent flashbacks to this scene work to strengthen the idea as the protagonist comes closer to discovering the truth about the villagers' belief in nature gods.

A less deific but nonetheless powerful anthropomorphisation of the rural landscape is mobilised in *Witchfinder General*. In the scene which follows the opening credits, for example, the camera slowly pans a great oak, the gently swaying branches of which look arm-like (see fig. 3.1 below). Accompanying this extended shot is a male voice-over, serving to establish the story in the context of the seventeenth century English Civil War. Yet the way in which the scene is shot; the fetishisation of the tree, together with the use of a disembodied voice, enables it to transform under the gaze of the spectator so as to become sentient being, witness to the human atrocities which have occurred down the centuries.

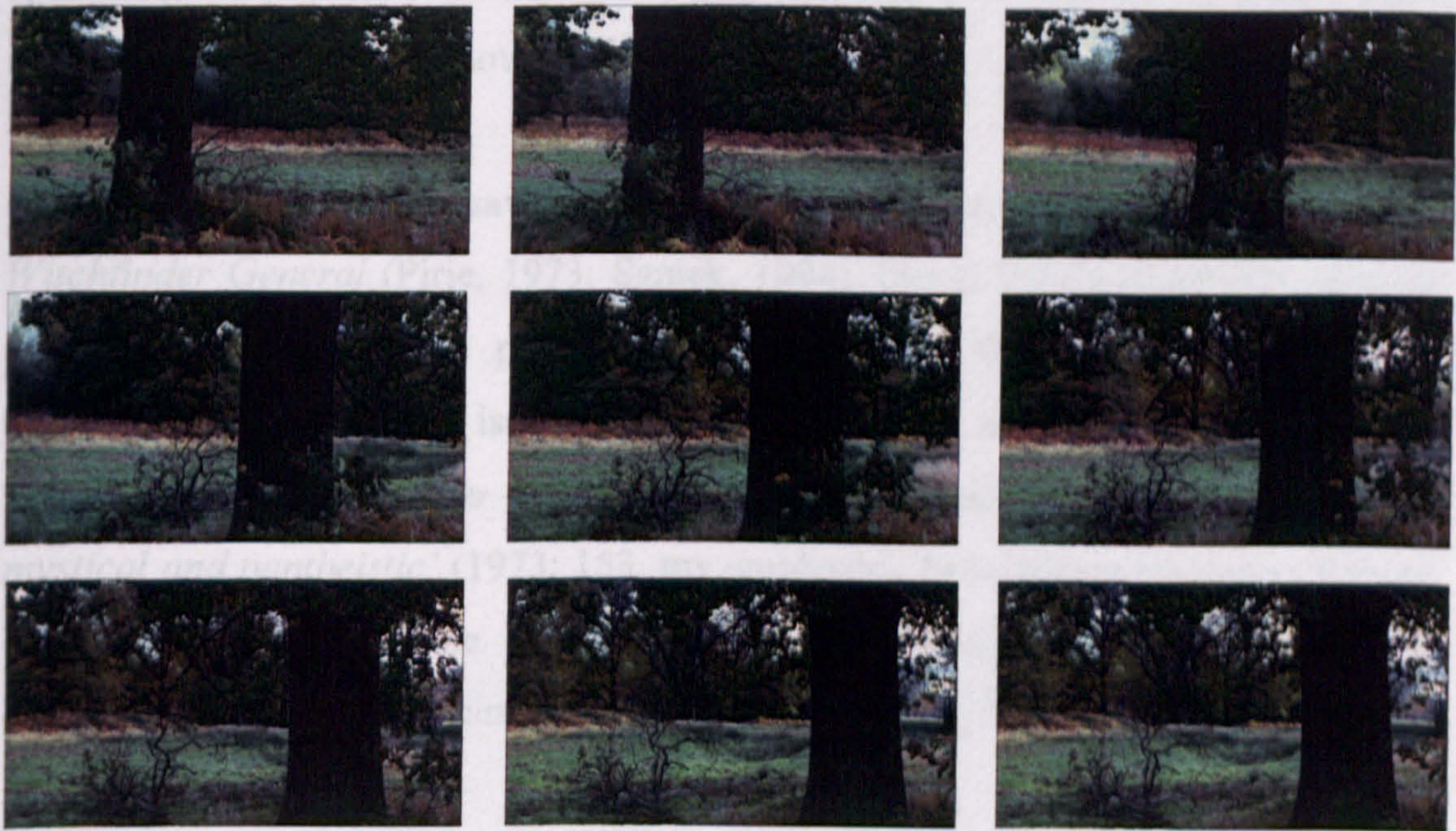


Fig. 3.1 Witchfinder General fetishises the English landscape

The natural world is intensely fetishised in the film; director, Michael Reeves regularly invites the viewer to observe the gentle rhythms of nature. A number of new scenes begin with slow pans of the trees, always lovingly shot, and often shown from a low angle to increase the suggestion of their majestic potency. Reeves' tendency to minimise sound in these moments means that there is little to distract, thereby allowing the viewer to experience their living, breathing, existence. Moreover, when we do cut to the actors we find them comparatively banal. In this way, the landscape is imbued with an integrity found to be lacking in most of the characters.

For the Hungarian film critic, Béla Balázs, film's capacity to animate the landscape far surpasses that of any of the arts. In the hands of a competent filmmaker, parts of the countryside can become transformed into a 'moving landscape which has not only a physiognomy, but mimicry and gesture too' (1972: 97). This was something Reeves clearly understood. In a scene depicting Richard (Ian Ogilvy) alone with his horse in the woods, now momentarily separated from his band of men, it is Nature that becomes his substitute companion. The scene opens with a signature shot of the trees; the camera pans slowly downwards to reveal Richard stood amidst its

sprawling leafy splendour tenderly stroking his horse. The branches of which appear to caress him in a gesture now mirroring his own.

A number of other critics have noted the imaginative use of the British landscape in *Witchfinder General* (Pirie, 1973; Sanjek, 1994). David Pirie's insightful, although sketchy; observations are particularly interesting in this respect. 'The English countryside', Pirie asserts, is not just 'a major thematic and symbolic constituent of the structure of *Witchfinder General*', but is imbued with quality which is '*almost mystical and pantheistic*' (1973: 153, my emphasis). Pirie also perceived in Reeves' 'overpowering' use of the landscape, 'the seeds of something which could yet develop into an important cinematic idiom in this country' (1973: 155).

Curiously, Pirie's words seem almost prophetic in light of subsequent works exhibiting similar formal qualities. For example, there are many parallels to be found between *Witchfinder General* discussed above and *A Warning to the Curious* (hereafter, *Warning*). Like Reeves' film, *Warning* utilises a combination of slow, provocative pans of the Norfolk landscape and a male voiceover recounting the ghoulish legend of the 'Three Crowns of Anglia'. The effect, in this instance, is not as evocative as it is in Reeves' film, but the use of the landscape elsewhere in the text does take on a definite animistic quality. In a scene depicting the protagonist receiving a sermon about local legend from the village vicar, the dominating presence of a solitary overgrown gravestone on the right of the frame means that everything else in the composition is subordinated to its mighty presence. Again, this effect is mainly achieved through composition; the positioning of the actors in relation to the landscape is one where the latter is often in the foreground, making its presence felt on the edge of the frame, whilst the characters are held at medium distance.

A similar technique is deployed in *Oh Whistle and I'll Come to You* (hereafter, *Whistle*), another highly atmospheric film adaptation based on the ghost stories of M.R. James. Also set in Norfolk, *Whistle* makes full use of the surrounding landscape so as to heighten the increasingly disturbed state of mind of its protagonist, Professor Parker (Michael Hordern). Significantly, the source of Parker's anguish comes directly from the land as he discovers a whistle abandoned

beneath the grassy sand-dunes. From the moment he blows in to it he senses (rightly) that he is being hunted by a ghostly figure. The landscape is a major presence in the text; the actors are mostly depicted as shrunken figures moving within it. More than this though, the landscape becomes the carrier of human and non-human emotion. Given that for the vast duration of the film the 'ghost' is suggested rather than shown, it is in the various guises of the landscape that it makes its presence felt. In the roaring sea, as much as the sighing wind and the tossing reeds, we are made to experience the shifting and increasingly volatile mood of both hunter and the hunted.



Fig. 3.2 Images from *Blood on Satan's Claw*. In the image (above right) the bird can be seen nestling on a branch watching Ralph make his discovery of the 'devils' skin.

Not all British horror films of the period cultivate the benign or mischievous anthropomorphisms at work in *Witchfinder General* and *The Wicker Man* respectively. In *Blood on Satan's Claw*, the natural world is shown to be in collusion with the evil forces at work in the small West Country village, most notably in the scenes depicting the witches' familiar in the guise of a large black crow (see fig.3.2 above). This idea is largely suggested through a combination of framing devices and close-ups. In earlier scenes, the creature is shown in close-up, silhouetted against the moon in the background. The idea is amplified later in the film, this time the use of an extreme close-up allows its brooding presence to swell and fill the screen. The effect is so convincing that we are left in little doubt later on in the film of its role as a spy for Angel Blake (Linda Hayden), leader of the witch-cult. As Ralph (Barry Andrews) makes his dreadful discovery - a patch of the 'Devil's skin' growing on his leg - the bird is shown nestled in the branches watching, waiting.

The distinctly unsettling mood of the landscape in *Blood on Satan's Claw* is carefully crafted into the opening credit sequence, depicting skeletal branches, sprigs of decaying plants, silhouetted against a misty background. The mood is amplified through a combination of slow, provocative cross-fades and a haunting musical score, thus, heightening the suggestion of a malevolent presence in nature.

The timing of sound and image proves to be an effective way of subtly ascribing to the natural world a personality all of its own in a number of these texts. In *A Warning to the Curious*, for example, a shot depicting the sun's reflection in a woodland stream is synchronised with a flourish of tubular bells, which not only lends the shot an aura of magic and liveliness, but is suggestive of a boastful, narcissistic aspect of nature.

Music is an essential ingredient in anthropomorphising the landscape in *The Wicker Man*. 'Corn Riggs', for example, deriving its lyrics directly from the poetry of Robert Burns, and serving to set an eroticised tone, narrates a story of love among the rigs of corn and barley. Through song, the landscape is attributed human traits; the wind is still, the sun shines 'gaily'. In the sequence depicting the boys dancing around the maypole, moreover, their instructor recounts the legacy of the 'Summerisle woods'; here again we find a synchronisation of the landscape and human. In an innovative rewriting of the Adam and Eve myth perhaps, it is the male spirit of the tree, we are told, which begets Man.

In the green gothic universe everything within the landscape is alive. Solitary, overgrown gravestones, whether captured in close-up (*The Wicker Man*) or allowed to dominate the edge of the frame (*Warning*) transform beneath the spectator's gaze from inanimate object to a living, breathing, entities. The longer the camera lingers over such spectacles, the more powerful is the suggestion. Trees, flowers, grass, stones; they are not there to be looked at, but to *look back*. This effect might be achieved by means of object-fetishisation (*Children of the Stones*), or else it can be produced by way of lingering on objects depicting human features. Such poetic touches lend the setting an aura of secrecy and enchantment. The mood and motivation of the landscape may vary within and between these texts. But there is

always a presence in the undergrowth, in the swaying branches of the trees, and in the silent crumbling moss-covered ruins.

In the next section I will be concerned to demonstrate how the Paganistic aesthetic of these texts is preserved in participants' memories of watching British horror in childhood and/or adolescence. In so doing, I will be attempting to reconstruct something of the affective import of these experiences: the impressions they made and the associations forged.

Remembering British horror: Locating the Affective-Associative Roots of *Wicker* Fandom

This section is concerned to explore fan memories of British horror as a means of exploring its affective legacy on the development of their personal myths. If, as I argue, the import of the cult text has its roots in an ability to tap into a shared affective source deriving from early experiences with related texts, then it is essential to explore that which this source consists of. Thus, apprehending the time-honoured associations and implicit beliefs which have become embedded in personal myths as a result of these early experiences is a necessary step in our inquiry. Of concern here, then, are those elements in memory which are suggestive of the cultivation of personal imagery and, specifically, arresting images. Arresting images, as discussed in Chapter 1, are rich in affect - they retain sensations experienced in their original making as well as capturing a moment in time. Thus the feelings and sensations associated with these memories, as well as the influence of the viewing contexts, are important factors to consider when ascertaining the specific features of the topophilic structure of feeling.

A first concern though, is to explore how the Paganistic aesthetic discussed in the previous section might have registered with the younger viewer. As noted earlier in my discussion, several critics have alluded to the imaginative and overwhelming use of the British rural landscape in a number of horror texts during the period in question. Imagine, then, the affective import of horror's bewitching landscapes for the child's imagination.

The ‘Paganistic gaze’ in memories of British horror

An analysis of the respondents’ memories of watching British horror as children in the 1970s demonstrates the extent of which the Paganistic aesthetic was a potent shaping force of their experiences. Animism and anthropomorphism are central and recurring features in fan recollections of watching British horror and related media in childhood. A striking example of this was preserved in reminiscences of the 1970s children’s television series, *Children of the Stones*. Like *The Wicker Man*, this text centres round themes of Pagan ritual and is set in the British countryside, and specifically in the Wiltshire village of Avebury. The famous megalithic stone circle which stands on the plains of Avebury is a prominent presence in the series and is central to the plot, within which it transpires they harbour the souls of the villagers. As such, the stones are often fetishised through a combination of sound and canted camera angles, particularly in the opening credit sequence to the series (see fig. 3.3 below). Crucially, it is not so much the plot details but the emotional import of the animated stones which are preserved in these memories:

To be honest I don’t recall much about the story itself, I was very young at the time. But it was the groaning stones that stood out for me. My god, they were terrifying! I was gripped by that series, it fascinated me

(Chris, telephone interview, 2003).

Children of the Stones had a massive impact on me as a kid. The title credits alone were scary. In fact, it’s the credit sequence I remember most – those god-awful stones coming out of the screen at you, all contorted and moaning like a banshee

(Kevin, telephone interview, 2003).

The above accounts capture well the concept of ‘arresting imagery’ discussed in Chapter 1. Both statements convey a strong sense of intense emotion in a way which would seem to preserve the original sensations and impressions formed. Although fear is a marked emotion in these accounts, the sense of fascination is equally strong. The language used in the processes of recollection similarly pivots around the moment of impact, and is indicative of the ways in which these images of the animated landscape have become emblazoned on memory.



Fig. 3.3 Images from the opening credits of *Children of the Stones*.

Although the Paganistic address is consistently foregrounded in the respondents' accounts, and with striking clarity, I would argue that its import is latent rather than consciously recognised; at no point in the data was it possible to discern explicit references to this precise aesthetic or else the techniques used to generate it. Rather, it is a quality which is implicitly conveyed in these memories and which can be read off these accounts. The following quote, which draws comparisons between *Children of the Stones* and *The Wicker Man*, is exemplary in this respect. That which is pivotal in memory here is an identification of a shared affective quality:

Incidentally, *Wicker* reminds me very much of the classic children's programme, the *Children of the Stones*. Like *The Wicker Man* it has that same indefinable, haunting quality which absolutely captivated me as a child

(Tim, comment included in questionnaire 2, 1999).

The attention to detail in relation to the landscape and objects within it as opposed to characters is a striking feature in many of these accounts. It would seem that the Paganistic address of these texts is so powerfully affecting that it renders the more obvious iconic moments of horror as secondary. Consider the following example within which one respondent recalls her initial experience of watching *Blood on Satan's Claw*:

Blood on Satan's Claw is one of my own favourites [...] I remember the very first time I saw it, I must have been six or seven at the time [...]. It absolutely fascinated me, and oh god, that bird; *that huge menacing bird: all-watching, all-knowing!* That crow frightened me more than anything else

(Felicity, telephone interview, 2003).

As discussed in the previous section, the black bird, although not a major presence in the film is repeatedly anthropomorphised through elements of the cinematography. Clearly, it is this quality which most sharply suffuses Felicity's own memories of the film, evident in her description of it as 'all-watching, all-knowing'. As with the accounts discussed in this section so far, the emotional import of these landscapes largely derives from their suggestion as alive.

The television series *Beasts*, an anthology of six horror tales written by Nigel Kneale, and broadcast on the ITV network in 1976 was remembered by some fans. Of all the episodes mentioned by fans, it was *Baby* – a sinister tale of a couple's new life in the countryside turned upside down by the dreadful discovery of a corpse (a witch's familiar) hidden in their kitchen wall) - which was remembered most vividly. A story about a baby's corpse bricked up in the kitchen wall is horrific. It is all the more significant, then, that it is not the ghoulish corpse but rather an uncanny encounter in the woods that piques in memory, as the following example demonstrates:

There's this one scene in the woods. [...] a woman is searching for a cat or something, and the trees; I remember the trees - drenched in this really vivid green moss. And then it all starts to go very dark and the trees close in on her and begin making these eerie noises

(Gemma, telephone interview, 2003).

Clearly, the Paganistic address is significantly foregrounded in fan memories of watching these texts in childhood. It is precisely those images of the landscape 'brought to life' by the combined use of sound and cinematography which are recalled as particularly affecting. The respondents display a special sensitivity to this

address, and in a way which sees them donning a Paganistic gaze. It might well be that the age of the respondents upon first viewing these texts is a factor in enabling this gaze to germinate. As discussed earlier in this chapter, animistic modes of thought have often been linked to a stage in childhood development. That said, such a view is decidedly myopic in view of, say, the preoccupation with animism and the cinema in much classical film theory (see Chapter 4). In-keeping with my aims to highlight the historical and generational specificity of the structure of feeling for the faction, I would argue that the Paganistic gaze identified in this section needs to be understood as a mode of perception cultivated in direct response to a 'British rural uncanny' which was prevalent in the texts these fans consumed in childhood.

Annette Kuhn's (2002) 'ethnohistorical' work on film audiences is relevant here, and particularly her discussion of the memories of movie-goers for horror cinema who were children in the 1930s. Notably, Kuhn suggests that the specific images and scenes preserved most sharply in her informants' memories 'are the ones which are particularly cinematic' (2002: 96). Moreover, she notes a tendency amongst her respondents to isolate specific shots which she suggests appear to have left a primal imprint, bodily memory. This is surely akin to the concept of the arresting imagery informing my own approach. Concerned with the intensity of the child's cinematic experience, Kuhn also addresses the question of how the child 'looks' at the screen image. Significantly, whilst observing that 'the untutored cinema spectator is highly susceptible to the uncanniness' of cinema (2002: 84), she nonetheless seeks to produce a category of the uncanny specific to the generation of filmgoers for horror in the 1930s, which she refers to as the 'Oriental Uncanny'. Kuhn draws a link between the proliferation of oriental imagery in the horror cinema of the 1930s and the salience of frightening moments in the memories pivot around images of Chinese faces disembodied in close-up. Thus Kuhn suggests that the Oriental uncanny carries a particular resonance for this generation of viewers, and therefore highlights an important relationship between a distinctive generic trope and its impact on a historically situated audience. The significance of this is that it is indicative of distinct structure of feeling exposed to in formative years.

The memories discussed in this section demonstrate that early experiences with British rural-based horror cultivated in these fans an implicit belief in the living landscape.

Mood-laden imagery and memory

In remembering the British horror texts they grew up with, many fans referred to the 'mood' of the landscape, and it is here that the structure of feeling comes into clearer focus. For despite the inevitable difficulty involved in the articulation of moods, it was nonetheless possible to discern a number of consistencies. In this section, then, I want to focus on elements of memories which centre on the mood generated by these horror landscapes and identify distinctive components of this structure of feeling. This is important because mood has a significant bearing on memorability. As the literature referred to in Chapter 1 suggests, mood and memory work in tandem; feelings and sensations experienced during the making of new memories become stored along associative-affective networks. Thus, encounters which later recall these memories have the potential to reactivate the moods and feeling states linked to particular cognitive schemata.

Amongst those texts discussed in relation to moods, *Witchfinder General*, *Blood on Satan's Claw* and the various film adaptations based on the ghost stories of M.R. James proved to be the more evocative. The following selection of examples is typical of many fan accounts:

Ah well, there was something quite magical about the landscape in *Blood on Satan's Claw*: it oozes an ancientness somehow, and there's a strong presence of something very unsavoury going on, just in the mood of it. It's the feeling I still get from it...it looks beautiful and lush, but there's a distinct feeling of menace about the imagery

(Kevin, telephone interview, 2003).

Witchfinder General is absolutely haunting [...] and, you know, there was lots of shots of the landscape in the film, and I remember thinking how green and beautiful it looked, and the atmosphere, you know, the atmosphere of the locations was absolutely incredible [...] and I know

that sounds odd because it was also a very grim and dark piece [...] And there was this incredible vibe, and I remember being struck by it [...] I don't know how to describe it [the 'vibe'] really, it really does go quite beyond words. It's just impossible to put a finger on it really

(Felicity, telephone interview, 2003).

The countryside always figured predominantly [in many British horror texts of the period] so that you almost felt enveloped by it somehow; it was like watching them allowed you to peer into some ancient England. And so it's a world which looks familiar, but you're uncovering a dark past. And you've got all these sunny green spaces filled with lurking, creeping terrors. And as a kid I often felt very drawn to this combination of horror and the countryside

(Tim, personal interview, 2005).

Whilst the above statements invariably link the mood of the British rural horror to the evocation of particular landscapes, for example, ancient England, they are for the most part characterised by feelings which elude the respondent. As Felicity suggests, moods conjured up by these landscapes go 'beyond words'. At the same time, it is clear that those early encounters with these texts cultivated in these fans strong indiscernible moods and feeling states.

In these accounts, it is interesting to observe how the Paganistic address, discussed in the previous section in terms of an implicit mode of perception translates here into a quality engaging other bodily sensations. An acute awareness of there being an unseen energy at work in the landscape is consistently conveyed in the language, whether explicitly so as in Kevin's use of the word, 'presence', or else more subtly in Felicity's term: 'vibe'. Yet here, there is an emphasis on feeling states and their affects on the body as a whole. The clearest expression in this respect is the use of the word, 'enveloped' in Tim's comment; and is itself suggestive of how this quality may be experienced as all-encompassing. The suggestion here then, is that the Paganistic address I have identified in these texts has become powerfully inscribed in these fan's emotional worlds.

Significantly, in each of the above examples mood is often linked to colour, and there is a marked sensitivity to the 'greenness' of these horror landscapes in particular. Notably, these sentiments convey a strong sense of ambivalence: there is a feeling of things out of place, of something in the look and feel of the imagery being not quite right. That which the respondents appear to be responding to here is the aforementioned inversion of colour and light which I have suggested is distinctive to the British rural horror of the period. These memories imply a process involving a semantic scrambling: we learn from an early age to associate the monstrous with the dark; such lessons are instructive of fairytales. Thus, the play on some of our most primal fears are here shown to be given a fresh experience, suggesting that the 'greening of the gothic' was an important factor of how these texts captured the imagination of respondents in childhood.

The significance of mood in these memories of British rural horror is that they suggest the laying down of strong feeling states at the time they were originally primed. Talk about mood illustrates how the rural gothic is for these fans connected to powerful, though indiscernible, mood states linked first and foremost to visceral sensations of a living, breathing landscape.

Contextual influences on memory

The context in which these texts were originally viewed is also central to the construction of memories. The significance of context in the shaping of viewing experiences has been ascribed increasing importance in cultural studies work on the consumption of television (see Morley 1989, 1991) and is now often incorporated into discussions of film audiences, particularly historical audience research (see Stacey 1994; Kuhn 2002; Dhoest 2006). Whilst the former has tended to concentrate on power relations, such as the gendered differences regarding access to television in the domestic setting (see Seiter *et al.*), the latter deploys context as a means of indicating its influence on the shaping of experiences, and the ways in which it is preserved in memory. It is this latter use of context which interests me here.

Elements of the individual's physical surroundings meld with the memories of the viewing experiences, as the following example illustrates:

I have a very clear memory of watching *A Warning to the Curious* with my brother one Christmas. I must have been about eight years old[...] Watching ghost stories at Christmas-time was a bit of a family tradition back then [...] And I remember it was raining and windy outside, and I mean the wind was *really howling*, and it was all very atmospheric [...] we had a few candles lit, and there were smells of Christmas filling the air [...] The scenery [in the text] was striking, and the colour – I mean it's actually the contrasting colours I remember most[...] Well, the room was still quite dark, and I remember how vivid the colours looked on the television screen[...] So I've got this lasting impression of being sat in the blackness of the living room with this green world opening up in front of my eyes. And just this feeling of being totally mesmerised. That's it!

(Chris, telephone interview, 2003).

The way in which context feeds into fan memories of watching British horror takes a number of different forms; some recall sneaking downstairs, feasting on milk and biscuits, and watching through parted fingers. Yet the above account falls into a category of context-specific memories which in my analysis I coded under the heading: 'sensory amplification'. What I mean by this is that contextual elements can actually serve to enlarge and intensify the viewing experience in a way which sees the foregrounding of the senses. Like many accounts I grouped in this category, the above example is replete with visceral descriptions in which smells and sounds are persistently highlighted. The sensitivity to colour, to the 'greenness' of the text's landscape is again foregrounded, and constitutes a lasting impression for the respondent. Yet there is a sense in which the mood of the landscape belonging to the diegetic world of the text becomes fused with that outside the respondent's own living room window. The 'howling wind' is here given special emphasis and it is suggested that it adds to the atmosphere. The candles and distinctive scents of Christmas 'filling the air' do more than paint an anecdotal picture. Instead they provide evidence of how these viewing experiences have accrued a surplus dimension. The significance here is that these memories also carry the subtle charge

of impressions forged in relation to one's surroundings, and may serve to anchor the viewer to a time in one's personal history.

Of related importance here is the fact that Chris refers to watching these films at Christmas in terms of 'a family tradition'. For in linking these texts to a habitual aspect of childhood, further underscores the way in which these texts are related to personal identity. The notion of a tradition suggests experiences which are repeated over time and which provide a sense of grounding, but remembering may also provide a conduit to the past.

Such memories also link to a time in the past which has itself become mythologised in personal memory, as is evident in the following example:

I've probably seen all of the BBC ghost stories for Christmas. It was the highlight of the festive season back then. Forget Santa [laughs]
Christmas was always about ghost stories around the hearth

(Tim, personal interview 2005).

Early experiences with British horror are remembered through the nostalgic glow of childhood. As is evident above, the language takes on a decidedly mythical quality linking the home to the cosy hearth, alerting us to the way in which early memories become associated with a past as wished for rather than a past as lived. Samuel and Thompson (1991) have repeatedly observed in oral accounts of childhood a striking tendency to romanticise the facts, and they attribute this tendency to factors related to the present. For example, in observing 'the myth of the self-made man', the authors note how the conditions of childhood will be exaggerated so as to support the 'rags to riches' motif underpinning this myth (1990: 9). Yet, in terms of the example which concerns us here, it seems more likely that the romantic use of the term 'hearth' is likely to be influenced by the domestic settings within which the ghost story was traditionally told.

The memories discussed in the previous three sections are testament to the way in which these early experiences with British horror have produced a legacy of shared affective-associations. The associations and affects which link to these texts crystallise into a distinctive structure of feeling connecting to the imagery of the

British rural landscape represented in the horror vein, and the green gothic in particular. What I hope to have shown is that these memories carry a strong affective charge, and have become attached to indiscernible feeling states, sensory experiences, as well as implicit beliefs which the subject may not be conscious of. What this means is that the features identified as constitutive of the structure of feeling pertain more properly to the realms of involuntary rather than voluntary memory. What happens, then, when this affective source is reactivated by an experience with a text at a later stage? And how does an understanding of this process shed light on the generative mechanisms of cult and its relationship to mythmaking?

Conclusion: cult as mythic awakening

A central aim of this chapter has been to explore the role played by personal myth in the emergence of the spontaneous cult formation. More specifically, I have been concerned to investigate how early cultural investments cultivate affective-associative networks which form the basis of the personal myth. In Chapter 1, I drew on research in personal mythology and cognitive psychology to argue for ways in which elements of a personal myth can be shared by groups exposed to the same cultural sources in a historically specific context. To this end, I have pursued the importance of these fans belonging to the same generation and the significance of British horror as an early cultural resource. I then went on to demonstrate ways in which the affective import of *The Wicker Man* might be said to have its roots therein. My findings suggest that early experiences with British horror enabled these fans to partake in a shared imaginary of the British rural landscape, which continues to implicitly shape their experiential realities well into maturity. More than this though, early experiences with horror texts were shown to have cultivated in these fans a preconscious disposition for a mode of representation which I have identified at work in the representation of *The Wicker Man*.

In the final section of this chapter, then, I want to bring together a number of theoretical and empirical threads to argue for a process through which these earlier dispositions are not so much rediscovered in *The Wicker Man*, but more clearly

reactivated by it. I will argue, in turn, that this process triggers a new phase of personal mythmaking, within which the cult text becomes a central tool.

I began this chapter with a discussion of fan sentiments I recorded on location and observed three consistent patterns. Firstly, the gap between the deeply-felt significance of the film's place imagery and the respondents' limited capacity to explain it consistently induced feelings of inexplicable familiarity. Secondly, in attempting to convey the film's import, the respondents similarly drew on a vocabulary indicative of a process involving sensations of the past returning. This was evident in moments of direct reference to the past or else captured in terms such as 'homecoming' and 'awakening'. Thirdly, I observed an implicit tendency within these accounts to anthropomorphise the landscape, and went on to suggest how this quality appears to initially motivate trips to the filming locations. Collectively, these aspects form that which I described as a 'topophilic structure of feeling', and which is distinctive to the faction of fans under focus here.

Having demonstrated throughout this chapter how the film's representation of place links to these fans' associative-affective networks on account of early investments in British rural horror, we are now in a better position to appreciate the processes through which certain cult formations might be initially forged. A key generative mechanism of the cult formation explored herein stems from the way in which *The Wicker Man* resonates along these networks, reactivating embedded associations, implicit beliefs and feelings cultivated in past experiences. The images of the landscape the fan discovers in *The Wicker Man* are complexly linked to prior experiences with that which I have termed 'a Paganistic address'. Given that these fans do not consciously recognise this particular mode of address, either in their memories of horror or else their subsequent experiences with *The Wicker Man*, that which the latter produces in these respondents is an unconscious ability to look again through the Paganistic gaze. It is these factors which help to explain the significance of implicit anthropomorphisms in fan accounts.

The Wicker Man also taps into indiscernible moods and feeling states which have become associated with rural horror. As discussed in Chapter 1, experiences with objects which recall affect-laden thoughts and mood-congruent memory would

activate other memory nodes and permit a wide range of associations to occur (Russ 101). The emphasis fans' place on the bombardment of feelings triggered by the film is highly suggestive of this process, and it is likely that the experience involves the re-emergence of feelings and sensations which may have bypassed conscious awareness. These factors not only illuminate the sense of 'awakening' reported by fans, but also lend credence to the fans' insistence on experiencing a homecoming. Indeed, that which these experiences involve can be likened to a cultural homecoming. Here though, it involves an intuitive rather than a conscious homecoming which in turn lends these experiences an auratic quality. As discussed in Chapter 1, Benjamin links the aura in all instances to distance. The uniqueness and distance of the feelings recalled by the film is precisely that which evokes the aura adding to the mysterious quality of the film. A significant generative mechanism underpinning the cult-pull of *Wicker* fandom, then, is the film's capacity to tap into and awaken older sensations forged in childhood. It is these feelings which give this faction of *Wicker* fandom its underlying cultic force.

My argument at this point raises questions about the nature of the cult identification. Clearly, that which fans experience is not a straightforward recognition, but nor can it be explained in terms of a misrecognition. Rather, it is akin to that which Yvette Biro has described as an 'experiential identification.' That is, an encounter which 'resuscitates the past by stirring former experiences, and whereby we are touched by a peculiar magic: as if transported beyond the immediate present, we simultaneously experience the movement of the past, the present, and the possible future' (1982: 13). This would explain the temporal disturbances fans experience with *The Wicker Man*. As we saw earlier, the sentiments recorded on location illustrate how fans feel simultaneously pulled towards the past and yet are focused on a search in the present. As noted earlier in this chapter, fans feel compelled to visit the locations in order to make sense of the film's import.

It is precisely this search for meaning which enables us to make the transition towards an understanding of how the mythmaking process is triggered in the cult experiences discussed herein. As John McCole asserts, 'the most potent manifestations of involuntary memory elude our deliberate grasp because they arise from a layer of preverbal, sensory experience' and, as such elicit the conscious

search for meaning when they are reactivated (1993: 260). This factor has been noted by several critics concerned with the experiential dimensions of involuntary memory, albeit in different ways. For McDaniel *et al.*, such encounters elicit a need to identify the source, whilst Schwarz *et al.* (1991) suggest they generate the search for 'lost time'.

Of particular value here is Genevieve Lloyd's (1993) own suggestions. Lloyd notes that encounters with involuntary memory momentarily close the gap between the past and the present, so as to provide a fleeting sense of 'being in time'. Moreover, 'the pleasure of finding the past in the present [...] is associated with a pleasure in making contact with one's true self' (1993: 134). A similar idea is discussed by Evelyn Ender who claims that: 'the remembering subject finds again and again the necessary memories that reconnect him to his biography and his identity' (Ender 2005: 34). In both accounts, then, the search for the meaning triggered by encounters with involuntary memory is implicitly linked to personal mythmaking.

I want to briefly extend and develop this link between involuntary memory and the rediscovery of a past self to argue for the significance of its role in personal mythmaking. What I want to suggest here is that the fragments of embodied imagery brought to the fore by the cult experience become the source for the mythmaking process. By way of example, it is instructive to attend to a mode of practice which engages fans in acquiring *Wicker*-related memorabilia in the form of self-produced photographs of the filming locations. Whilst it is common for fans to photograph the iconic landmarks which appear in the film, many of which are still beautifully preserved, it is highly significant that their collections often exhibit a set of rather more anomalous images. Typically, this latter type demonstrates a preoccupation with atmospheric images of the natural landscape. Indeed, so apparent is the attention to the ambience of nature in these images that they might be referred to collectively as 'mood shots'.

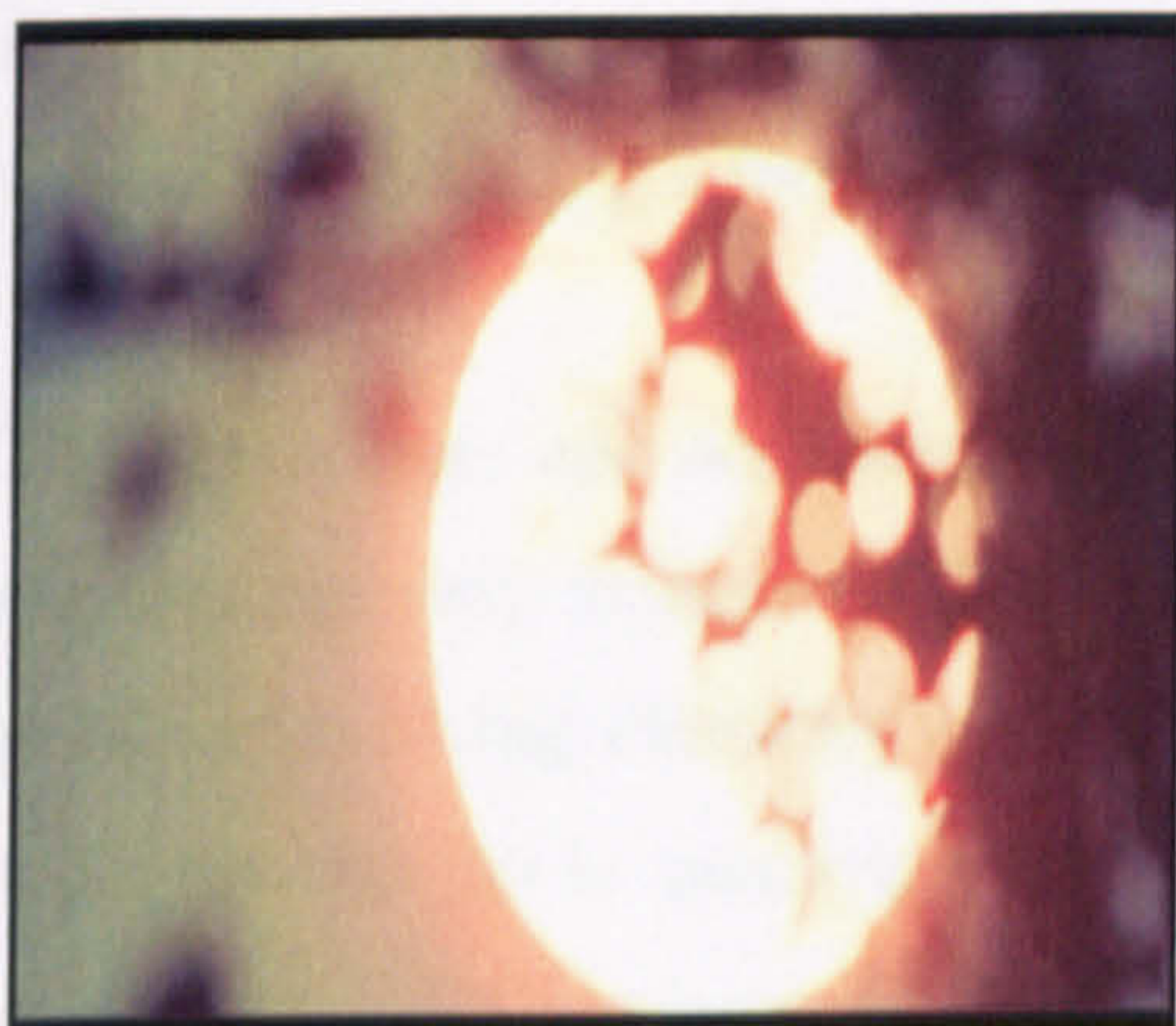


Fig. 3.4 Shot from The Wicker Man



Fig 3.5 Chris's location image



Fig. 3.6 Opening shot from Witchfinder General.

The selection of examples above enables a comparison between fan-produced images and those taken directly from British rural horror. Figure 3.5 (see above) is an example of a photograph taken by Chris during his trip to the filming locations in 1999. The similarity between Figures 3.4 and 3.5 is striking; we might say that the latter signifies an attempt to emulate the distinctive ambience of *The Wicker Man*. Moreover, the respondent's image not only speaks from within the mythos of the film, but also from within the British horror mythology more generally.

This is one of the ways of understanding the mythopoeic potential of the cult experience. *The Wicker Man* partially restores to consciousness impressions of a former self by way of reactivating the fan's personal imagery. As I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, the British rural horror's Paganistic address was clearly influential on the shaping of the respondent's personal imagery. Thus, the images the fan finds so resonant in the film ultimately serve as a catalyst for the

mythmaking process. Through these images, the fan finds a route back to the past, a way of re-accessing a formative element of identity, which feels more real.

The behaviours and activities of fans on location therefore signal a clear attempt to express the very essence of *The Wicker Man*. Yet beyond this, they also point to a process involving elements of a time-honoured myth being brought to the fore, and whereby the fan is seemingly compelled to piece together the fragments of earlier memories. As Grossman Wimmers states, experiences involving the reactivation of memory 'intimately involve us [...] in a process of recall and recognition' which sees the individual 'becoming more focused on memory images' (2003: 102-3).

Existing work on fan-pilgrimage has suggested the ways in which visiting filming locations supports the imaginary and immersive practices of fandom, yet it stops short of seeing their significance as sites of personal mythmaking. Notably, my findings also provide a very different perspective on the relationship between sub/cultural capital and cult appropriation. As discussed in the introduction to my study, there is a common line of thinking in cult film scholarship which perceives a link between subcultural forms of knowledge and the significance of cult formations. Prior knowledge of horror conventions did enable fans to adopt an ironic stance towards *The Wicker Man*; clearly, the recognition of familiar horror tropes was not lost on these fans, and provided a veritable source of pleasure. Having said that, this is not where the affective import of the film truly lies. Rather, the cult appeal of the film stems from its ability to resonate along the fan's affective-associative networks. Thus, that which my foregoing discussion demonstrates is that the accumulation of media-related experiences does not merely equip fans with the necessary levels of sub/cultural capital to engage in forms of self-conscious play and irony. Rather, they leave in their wake an affective residue and train of associations which can be reactivated by the cult text.

This chapter has sought to explore the generative mechanisms of the cult formation by way of tracing a trajectory from memory to mythmaking specific to these fans. In the following chapter, I want to explore a different trajectory through which cult forms of mythmaking are generated. This requires us to focus on the more immediate

impact of the text's cult aesthetic and the range of mythmaking practices it gives rise to.

-
- ¹ Most fans I met on location between 1998 and 2002 were British. Having said that, I received letters from non-domestic fans recounting their experiences of visiting the locations. Mostly, these fans were from the US and Canada, but some fans living in Germany and France also wrote in with their 'pilgrimage' stories.
 - ² 'The *Wicker Man* Appreciation Society' was set up by David Lally in 1980 and ran tours to the locations between 1980-1. The society also self-published five issues of a journal dedicated to the film: *Summerisle News*.
 - ³ I incorporated Gemma's statement (shown in italics) into section five of the third questionnaire. Significantly, 38 percent ranked it as being the most relevant, whilst a further 28 percent listed this statement in their top five (see Appendix 4). Interestingly, two respondents made a point of marking the significance of the term; whilst one fan simply circled the word 'awakening' without any further elaboration, another underlined it, thus adding, 'a very apt word'.
 - ⁴ To be fair, Harper does proceed to situate his discussion of the Uncanny in relation to a specific audience faction – the 1970s counterculture. Moreover, it is implicitly demonstrated throughout his essay that uncanny experiences may not always produce fear.
 - ⁵ The British horror film's decline in the mid 1970s is usually attributed to the withdrawal of American finance, although critics often note its inability to compete with the modern horror film which were released in the late 1960s. For related discussions see Peter Hutchings (1993); David Sanjek (1994).
 - ⁶ With the exception of Tim, none of the respondents in my focal study considered themselves to be active fans of British horror in the present.
 - ⁷ In the questionnaires, respondents were sometimes less specific, referring simply to 'Hammer', 'Tigon' and 'Amicus' but without actually specifying particular titles.
 - ⁸ Tanya Krzywinska (2000) has traced a history of the perceived relationship between rural Britain and the occult in film and television programmes of the period, which might be said to have its far roots in the nineteenth century "magical revival" and its near roots in the subsequent popularisation of these ideas by the 1960s counter-culture (see Krzywinska 2000, esp. Chapter 3).
 - ⁹ Similar self-statements are reflected in Brigid Cherry's (1999) ethnographic study of female horror fandom. As Cherry notes, several fans felt they were 'born with a taste for horror' or else 'a dark streak'. Notably, most of Cherry's participants said they avidly consumed horror and related material in childhood, leading her to conclude that the taste for horror 'appears to go back to an imaginative inner world' (1999: 210).
 - ¹⁰ Notably, the data capture reveals significant cross-cultural identifications with the film. For instance, it would seem that for Scottish-Americans, in particular, 'Scotland' holds a particular attraction, thus, alerting us to yet another distinctive reading. Moreover, whilst for these fans the perceived identity of the film's landscape is markedly different it is no less intrinsic to the processes of personal mythopoesis. Indeed, the expression of mythic longings is inextricably bound up with the association of Scotland with 'independence', 'freedom', brave, 'real', and 'home'.

Chapter 4

Cult Encounters: From Transgression to Transcendence

Transcendence, transgression: names too near to each other not to make us suspicious. Might not transgression be a less compromising name for 'transcendence,' seeming as it does, to remove it from its theological meaning?

(Blanchot, quoted in Mark C. Taylor, 1987: 346).

[...] encounters with the cinematic shadow of Otherness may be as close as most will ever come to achieving even a fleeting glimpse of transcendence

(Will H. Rockett, 1988: 15).

This is the second of two empirical chapters within which I am concerned to explore the generative processes involved in the spontaneous cult formation. If, in the previous chapter, I have sought ways to understand how the fan-text affective relationship might be historically and culturally predetermined, my focus in this chapter is more fully concentrated on the actual interaction and the behaviours it gives rise to. More specifically, I want to trace a trajectory from the initial aesthetic encounter to the manifest expression of this experience within fan discourses and modes of practice, so as to demonstrate the processes whereby the cult text becomes an object of awe. At the same time, the type of behaviours this stage gives rise to clearly reveals how the cult text becomes an important tool in the service of personal mythmaking. Observing these processes advances my argument by indicating the mythopoeic potential of the cult experience. How do personal myths position individuals towards an aesthetic experience and how are personal myths affected by aesthetic encounter?

My analysis of fans' aesthetic experiences with the film operates mainly at the level of the multi-sensational, and so retains my focus is on the implicit dimensions of the cult experience. I will be concerned to show how the fan's relationship to the film's

aesthetic is based on an intuitive sympathy, thus further developing elements of my argument from the previous chapter within which I stressed the significance of preconscious dispositions. To this end, I will argue that the fan's attuned sensitivity to the text's decidedly primitive formal qualities is precisely that which enables them to initially circumvent its more disruptive elements. In the meantime, my focus on the primary sensory response enables an exploration of ways in which the cultish properties of the text generate a disturbance, giving way to an intensely profound experience and novel forms of identification. Thus, contra the common line of thinking in much contemporary cult theory whereby textual transgression leads to critical distance and/or an ironic mode of reception, I will instead be concerned to show how the cultish properties of the text lead not only to *increased* involvement, but can generate transcendent feelings in susceptible viewers.

My use of the term 'transcendence' in this chapter is largely informed by David Feinstein and Stanley Krippner (1988), who employ the term to define those experiences which 'engender awesome feelings', 'provide radiant insights', and 'take us beyond our ordinary sense of existence' (1988: 194-5, my emphasis). Moreover, such experiences can generate a heightened sense of self and/or make the recipient acutely aware of a 'moral or spiritual realm' (1988: 196). Crucially, they suggest that 'when a transcendent episode occurs, the individual is challenged to incorporate into his or her existing mythology the new understanding or inspiration that the episode bestowed' (1988: 196). A specific aim here, then, is to examine this precise process, and my strategy will be to observe the myths fans weave around the film to show how they not only fix and preserve the film's cult aura, but also enable fans to assimilate their experiences within the parameters of their own developing myth.

At stake here is the need to apprehend the ways in which the so-called 'gaps' in the cult text might produce a sensory disturbance in the fan, and thus be recognised as an integral process underpinning the cult embrace and the ensuing attachment. Cult film scholars have been more concerned with strictly conscious modes of cognition in their discussions of the cult aesthetic. In so doing, they have conceived cult to be a rebellious and/or self-conscious cultural practice. The problem here is that such a

perspective does not shed light on the intense feelings fans typically experience, any more than it explains the religious semblance of the cult response. Whilst I am not suggesting that conscious modes of cognition are not present in the first viewing of the film, I am arguing that the visceral, sensorial dimensions are more pronounced in the fan's initial response. This chapter can thus be deemed an important 'missing link' in the dominant approach to cult, and is intended to temporarily suspend, rather than dismiss, the acutely self-conscious mode of fan engagement which has preoccupied most cult scholars so far.

Unlike transgression, then, transcendence has the advantage of reintroducing the religious connotations of cult as well as a consideration of its mythic dimensions. Myths typically cluster around cult films, and yet this element, like the religious sentiment, has remained a radically underexplored area in cult film scholarship. Again, the religious sentiment, where it has been discussed at all, has yet to be considered as one which emerges from a transcendent experience with the text. I will argue that fans draw on a religious or mystical vocabulary in attempting to articulate these experiences. My concern herein with the religious, mythic and sensory dimensions of cult - elements which are empirically observable - aims to bring together a number of strands often thought to be integral to cult.

In the first section below I will consider the extent to which *The Wicker Man* conforms to existing theories of the cult aesthetic, but will go on to highlight the discrepancies between theory and practice in light of my findings. Next, I will briefly introduce a number of works pertaining to early film theory, and more recent related work, so as to establish a more apposite framework in which to consider the cult aesthetic and the specific experiences discussed here. I will then go on to discuss a range of aesthetic experiences reported by fans; each of which derives from the cultish properties of the text and which can be seen to give rise to transcendent feelings. By way of an analysis of the 'cinemyths' which have accrued around the film, and the specific ways in which these myths are deployed by fans, I will argue that they not only mirror fans' specific aesthetic experiences with the text, but also enable them to participate in and safeguard the cult aura. Crucially, I will argue that these myths provide a corroborative framework for the fan's aesthetic experiences

and thus assist in their assimilation. Finally I will discuss the significance of the transcendent encounter on the subsequent development of the individual's personal mythology.

Approaching the cult aesthetic

The idea that the cult film problematises the processes of affective involvement is a persistent one in cult criticism; the underlying assumption here being that the reflexive mechanisms which partly define the cult text generate a distancing in the viewer. J.P. Telotte, for example, suggests that the 'crude, low-budget 'look' of the midnight movie seems to make us aware of the cinematic illusion' (1991: 11). Timothy Corrigan (1991) suggests that cult films 'expose the conditions of their own materiality' thus enabling the viewer to 'construct his or her own history within the gaps and omissions of the movie' (1991: 87). A similar premise underpins Jeffrey Sconce's characterisation of the cult text: the cult text's self-reflexive mechanisms – or 'faultlines' – inevitably encourage the viewer to adopt an ironic and/or critical distance (2003: 28). Key devices used in generating this distancing include for Sconce: 'excess in performance, narrative illogic, faulty continuity editing and genre dissonance' (2003: 30).

Many such potentially anti-illusionist devices outlined above occur in *The Wicker Man*. For one thing, the film, although marketed as a horror, draws on elements of the fantasy, the musical, and the detective thriller. The makers of *The Wicker Man* expressly sought to turn the conventions of the horror genre on its head (see Bartholomew, 1977). In its own particular brand of horror, the film reworks the moral logic of the horror film, resulting in a radical departure from the Manichean structure which typically organises the genre, as well as disrupting gendered stereotypes (Ashurst 2005).

Faulty continuity editing and excess in performance frequently occur simultaneously, as is exemplified in the scene where Lord Summerisle challenges the Christian doctrine of the Virgin Birth: 'Himself the son of a virgin, I believe, impregnated by a ghost'. Apparently outraged, Howie gathers himself to his feet, retorting the word 'What?' in typically wooden delivery. Yet the next shot depicts the Sergeant casually tucking into an apple, now seemingly unperturbed.

There is also some mileage in the argument that *The Wicker Man* is marked by narrative incoherencies and ruptures; the film's narrative structure is essentially episodic, not least by the number of musical interludes it gives way to. Moreover, as with so many cult films, *The Wicker Man* was subjected to a ruthless editing process - the markings of which are highly visible within and between the various cuts of the film which are in circulation. Whilst the shortest (84 minutes) version suffers from a fragmented narrative structure, the longest cut (102 minutes) is marked with a range of oddities, including the intrusion of the director's foot in one shot.

It is similar moments of textual discord which forms the basis of Justin Smith's discussion of the film in his essay, 'Things that go clunk in the cult film: nodes and interstices in *The Wicker Man*' (2005). In deploying the terms 'nodes and interstices', Smith means to define those 'elements which seem either to stand out in bold (sometimes incongruous) relief from the narrative texture or to reveal cracks in its surface', and which, he suggests, are manifest in 'acting styles and body language', as well as in 'the use of music and in the juxtaposition of certain camera shots' (2005: 133). Smith also suggests that the film is often interrupted by 'visual gags' which have no relationship to the plot and thus work to 'confound narrative verisimilitude' (2005: 135). By way of example, he notes the apparently arbitrary 'lingering close-up of the organ stop: 'flute d'amour,' which precedes the scene where the laird sings a duet with Miss Rose. For Smith, 'it is precisely such jarring discords [...] which the cultist adores and on repeated viewings anticipates with self-conscious relish' (2005: 135).

Yet if actual *Wicker* fans behave in this way, I could find no evidence in my own lengthy involvement of both speaking to fans and observing their responses to the film directly. Notably, during a screening which took place at a convention in January 1999, the issue of the organ stop was raised by fans in order to settle a debate about the nature of the relationship between Lord Summerisle and Miss Rose. For these fans the significance of the shot was obvious: the camera lingers long enough for the viewer to register the words "flute d'amour" - the *key of love* - from which it is but a small step to understanding how it serves to signify a love interest between Miss Rose and Lord Summerisle (a romantic relationship between the

couple is made explicit in the novelization, see Hardy and Shaffer, 1977). Such an interpretation is perfectly feasible: immediately after this shot the camera pans across the room to reveal Miss Rose, scantily clad, and lounging seductively at Summerisle's feet. Crucially then, this would suggest that far from registering in terms of a narrative rupture to be anticipated with 'self-conscious relish', the shot was given narrative meaning in relation to subsequent ones.

Smith's 'nodes and interstices' can be compared to Sconce's 'faultlines'. Both are concerned to highlight the dissonance generated by the reflexive properties of the cult text and are thus, in different ways, concerned to delimit for cultism a self-conscious viewing practice which eschews the processes of affective immersion and identification. Although Smith's discussion of the pleasures to be had in the film's 'playful subterfuge' (2005: 133) do not amount to the aggressive counter-cultural politics evinced by Sconce, he nonetheless concludes that these 'cracks' work to restrict emotional involvement and encourage the viewer to take up a distanced and playful position (2005: 135). In other words, with the pleasures of illusion demystified, if not destroyed, at the level of the text, it is precisely the 'hyperbolic flaws' and 'visual excesses' that 'become celebrated and cherished' by the *Wicker* cultist (2005: 137).

In fact, there was ample evidence within my data which would suggest that, on repeated viewings, fans actually attempt to screen out, rather than celebrate, moments of textual discord. The following example is typical in this respect:

It [the story] seemed all too possible, not withstanding certain jarring anomalies and coincidences that require a liberal measure of the suspension of disbelief to fully appreciate this film. You have to look beyond the flaws and appreciate the composite elements on their own merits and how it somehow all jells, to fully appreciate why this film is indeed a flawed masterpiece

(Kevin, questionnaire, 1999).

Clearly then, the 'cult' of *The Wicker Man* is comprised of fans that are much more emotionally and psychologically invested in the film than Smith's account would suggest. These fans strive to make a serious, rather than an ironic or playful, reading of the film.

It is important to note that *Wicker Man* fans are by no means the exception to the cultic rule. In his article, 'The Argento Effect', Peter Hutchings reports similar discrepancies in his study of the differences between fan and academic responses to the films of cult director Dario Argento. Whilst Hutchings does not dispute the *potential* for a paracinematic (cult) reading of Argento's films, his point is that Argento fans have generally 'tended to avoid the ironies and acute self-consciousness of the paracinematic approach' (2003: 135). In other words, the 'faultlines' which undoubtedly occur in Argento's oeuvre do not necessarily register with fans in the way they do for academics. In fact, far from adopting ironic reading strategies, these fans practice what Hutchings refers to as 'unashamed auteurism' (2003: 134). That is, Argento fans demonstrate a concern with elevating the director's cultural profile and are concerned to take the director's works seriously.¹

The scholarly retort to such discrepancies might well be to point out that there are fans of cult cinema and cult ways of reading all cinema (see Mathijs and Mendik, 2008). But if that is the case then the former have remained of marginal interest to cult film scholars; whilst the latter has not only been privileged, but has all too often been invoked indiscriminately. Indeed, Smith's account of *Wicker* cultism is based on supposition rather than empirical research, and thus reproduces the problems inherent elsewhere in cult scholarship whereby the cultist mode of response is read straight off the surface of the text itself. And yet there is clearly nothing automatic in the relationship between the cult text and the fans who champion it to suggest that it is one based on mutual appreciation of self-reflexivity. As Robert Stam asserts, 'all the reflexive devices in the world do not necessarily preclude affective participation' (1992:138). What becomes important here, then, is to establish the factors involved which would allow affective participation to occur *in spite of* 'textbook' cases of self-reflexivity.²

The 'dialectic of myth' serves to remind us that the shattering of the cinematic illusion is a potential, rather than an inevitable, effect of the cult text, and that this might depend on factors not limited to differing levels of cultural competency (cf. Sconce 1995). As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, whilst fans were more than capable of embracing the film's ironic references to the horror genre, they were nonetheless complexly invested in its representations on account of the experiences which have contributed to their personal myths. In other words, these fans were seen to be wilfully suspending an ironic reading in order to prioritise their personal investments. Again, generational factors and the preconscious dispositions were factors shown to be integral to these fans' specific modes of reception.

In addition to there being specific historical, cultural and personal predispositions determining the level of affective participation, it is also essential to distinguish between the initial viewing and subsequent ones. All of the literature discussed in this section privileges conscious modes of cognition in their characterizations of that which the cult response entails. Like Smith, who locates cult in the anticipatory pleasures afforded by repeated viewings, most theorists have been primarily concerned to theorise how the 'cultist' reassembles the fractured text, or else plays in its 'gaps'. But this focus completely bypasses the *first encounter* with the text which, for most fans, is the defining moment of their fandom. It is my contention that the initial experience will be qualitatively different from subsequent viewings. Thus, the aforementioned tendency to screen out jarring elements on repeated viewings is indicative of a more complex process within which the fan attempts to preserve something of the initial import. It makes sense, then, to begin at the beginning, with fans' first encounters with the text. ³

The following extracts are representative of my broader sample:

It had a hypnotic effect on me [...] It offered fleeting glimpses of something more real; a precious moment of the colours of life in a grey world

(Felicity, questionnaire 2, 1999).

It was as if time stood still, or as if I'd entered a different level of consciousness – a time shift, if you like. I had the sense of *really* experiencing something all the way through it in fact [...] I became very aware of the tiniest shifts in mood [...]. I don't, you know, want to come over all mystical now, but it borders on the spiritual

(Kevin, telephone interview, 2003).

It engaged my imagination in a way that (pause), how can I put this? I felt as though I'd acquired a new set of eyes. I felt so alert, sharp and crisp but in a very odd way. As if a button had been switched, and I had this profound sense of moving in and out of consciousness. It was like, or I felt myself opening up to an undiscovered dimension.

(Gemma, telephone interview, 2003).

Crucially, there are a number of notable and recurring features in the above accounts. Each in its own way is suggestive of an essentially overpowering emotional experience within which authority is given over to the text; and the language deployed in articulating these experiences is similarly suffused with references to the magical, the enigmatic or the spiritual. Crucially, there is in all instances a strong indication that the initial experience of the film registers powerfully at the level of the sensorial; each in its own way is an attempt to express an experience in which the senses are heightened. Respondents convey a sense of becoming transformed, of seeing things in a new light. Again, there is a general feeling that they have experienced something out of the ordinary; something which goes beyond their normative ways of thinking, seeing and feeling. They each speak of altered states of consciousness and the movement towards an encounter with some transcendent order; there are 'glimpses' of 'something more real', or else the movement towards 'an undiscovered dimension'.

Whilst it is typical of fans to express feelings of being carried away by the fan object, it is less common for this to translate into an experience of transcendent

proportions.⁴ I want to suggest at this point two determining factors: the first is related to the fans' affective openness to the film; for all the reasons discussed in the previous chapter the film communicates directly to the senses. Secondly, it is precisely the transgressive elements of the text which are a catalyst for sensory disturbance.

There has, however, been a tendency to marginalise the sensory impact of cult films; this factor has been either passed over in silence or else deemed deficient by cult film scholars. A clear example of the latter is evident in Mendik and Harper's (2000) discussion of the cult import of *From Dusk Till Dawn* (d. Robert Rodriguez, 1996), which they claim emerges from the 'grand switch' from 'tough heist/ road drama to offbeat horror comedy' midway through the film, and produces a shock response in the audience (2000: 237). Whilst noting that the audience⁵ response to this generic 'switch' 'begins in the sensory', Mendik and Harper are quick to add that: 'sophisticated in their knowledge of cinematic effects, techniques and readings [these viewers] are *capable* of responding beyond [...] primary sensory reaction' (2000: 241, my emphasis).

The disciplinary importance of deflecting the taint of passivity and/or misrecognition not only risks overlooking the more fundamental ways in which the cult text might produce a sensory disturbance in its viewers, it also threatens to miss something crucial about the cult response – that it may well fulfil a desire for transcendence. What is needed, therefore, is a much more sensitive approach to the cult aesthetic and its affects; one which apprehends the relationship between film, the sensorial, and the mythic.

Critical perspectives on the sensory dimensions of film

The cult film experience is first and foremost an experience with *film*. While that might seem obvious, it is surprising how often it is overlooked or downplayed; and not merely because some cult theorists typically negate the first rule governing the cinematic experience: the suspension of disbelief. Certainly, the tendency amongst scholars to privilege the fan's media expertise and active appropriations of the cult text forestalls any consideration of the more immediate and intimate modes of

impact; namely, the way in which its 'gaps' and 'fissures' might affect the viewer at the level of the multi-sensory.

Any understanding of what I am here referring to as the 'mythopoeic potential' of the cult aesthetic demands an appreciation of the ways in which film engages the spectator at the level of the sensorial. Given that personal myths - the cognitive structure or schema informing the individual's experiential realities - are primarily based on sensory knowledge, experiences with external stimuli which subvert it may generate the potential for an alteration in the individual's perception and embodied experience. It is precisely because personal myths are so deeply rooted in the body that experiences which exceed, and thus, disturb that knowledge are thus potentially transformative. Thus encounters with texts which produce a defamiliarising affect can produce a rich source of novel experiences which, in turn, may create a new direction for the personal myth to travel in.

Work pertaining to early film theory provides a good starting point from which to observe this process. Indeed, evidence of the profound effects of the new technology on the human faculties is readily retrievable from a host of critical writings on film in the early twentieth century. As Rachel Moore puts it: 'modernity's literature tells us that the senses had been radically disturbed, if not reconfigured' (2000: 12). Moreover, several early theorists turned to concepts related to primitive beliefs – myth and magic ritual - so as to articulate film's unique formal properties, as well as its affects (Moore, 2000). Thus, the aims of this section are twofold: firstly, I want to briefly expound on the above link between the formal qualities of film, the sensorial and the mythic. Secondly, I will go on to outline more recent approaches which have sought to develop the concept of the primitive in film studies. This body of work, I will suggest, can be used to illuminate precisely how the cultish properties of a text might be conducive to generating transcendent feelings in viewers.

The idea that the coming of film had revolutionized the human sensory faculties is a consistent one in early film theory. The steadfast belief in film's capacity to transform the faculty of sight, for example, is all-pervasive in the work of Walter Benjamin, Béla Balázs and Jean Epstein. Benjamin (1970/1999a) famously

compared the cameraman to the surgeon, armed with their signature tools - the camera and the scalpel respectively - they each were able to penetrate deeply into the hidden nature of things. Epstein (1981; 1984) maintained that seeing objects and images on film allowed for a new emotionally inspired order of experience. For Balázs (1924/1972), the close-up in particular was conducive to 'broadening and deepening' the faculty of vision, for it revealed aspects of the screen object which remain undisclosed to the naked eye. Close-ups 'show us the "internal storm" of objects which from a distance looks calm' (1972: 56); they reveal 'the hidden life of little things' (1972: 54).

If the medium of film allowed for an altogether novel way of seeing, it also promised to expand the perceptible audible field. As Balázs asserts, 'the acoustic landscape in which we live, the speech of things and the intimate whisperings of nature; all that has speech beyond human speech [...] speak to us more directly from the screen' (1972: 57). That which also interested Balázs about sound in film was its unique ability to ascribe to objects an expressivity, thus transforming the perceived nature of things from the ordinary to the sublime.

Again, early film theorists emphasised the new medium's tactility. Benjamin, for example, perceived in the film-spectator relationship the erosion of contemplative and distanced observation upon which traditional notions of the appreciation of art were based. For Benjamin, as for Epstein, films' tactile mode of address may 'circumvent conscious cognition and lead to a bodily felt mode of perception' (Moore 2000: 122).

But early theorists did not only emphasise the medium's potential to generate a new order of seeing, hearing and feeling; they also stressed films' capacity to gratify that which Andre Bazin refers to as 'the proclivity of the mind towards magic' (quoted in Moore, 2000: 93). As Moore observes, early theorists' were preoccupied with films' ability to enchant the senses (2000: 66). Of central importance here was the unique formal properties of film; slow, fast, and reverse motion, pans, close-ups, and so on, encapsulated by Epstein under the term: *photogenie* (Moore 2000: 2). For Epstein, as for Benjamin, film language was essentially animistic; its capacity to emanate

shadows on the screen, a form of modern magic. Moreover, it was the mechanical nature of the camera itself, as well as its capacity to transcend the 'tyrannical egocentricities' of subjectivism, which fascinated these theorists (Epstein, quoted in Moore, 2000: 79).

From the above perspective, film calls to a very primal, elemental mode of response. What these theorists share is an acute understanding of how experience is entrenched in the sensory; the primary source of our fascination with the medium is intrinsically bound up with feeling and bodily perception, *as well as* thought. It is precisely because of films' capacity to generate visceral sensations, as well as produce a defamiliarising affect on the senses, that myth and magic become a viable means by which to arrive at a critical approach.

Arguably, we might say that these theories need to be contextualised in the period in which they emerged. Many of the theorists discussed above based their claims about film and spectatorship in relation to the conditions of modernity, and upon notions of a human subjectivity which had become 'distracted' or 'alienated' from the experiential (Kracauer, 1995; Benjamin, 1970). At the same time, film's capacity to penetrate the object world, to reveal its contours anew, offered the potential to re-establish an experiential connection with the modern world. As Moore asserts, for many theorists it was precisely this combination of the 'fatigued', 'distracted' subject and the 'thing-like quality of the [filmic] image' which produced 'the conditions for magic' (2000: 27).

Having said that, it is clear that film has not lost its power to beguile, enchant and produce a multi-sensory experience in the viewer. Thus, in more recent decades a number of film theorists have utilised classical film theory in an attempt to generate a renewed interest in the sensorial dimension of film and its relationship to mythmaking and/or the magical.⁶ In her book, *Profane Mythologies: The Savage Mind of the Cinema*, Yvette Biro (1982) looks back to the spirited philosophy of film as espoused by Eisenstein, Balázs and Kracauer so as to re-cover the sensual in film experience. A central aim of the book is 'to secure validity and gain acceptance for the morality of the imagination' (1982: vii). For Biro, this meant redeeming to film

theory its magical potential, as well as apprehending its ability to inspire a new mythology (1982: 37). Crucially, Biro points to the potential for transcendence in the cinema; part of her project involves identifying in film techniques how transcendence is induced. Notably, Biro links cinematic transcendence to film's capacity to access 'uncharted cognition'; to touch the senses in a way that elides thought processes and at the same time enables the viewer to feel as though they have been 'touched by magic' (1987: 32).

The transformative and magical potential of film via the sensorial is a central premise in Rachel Moore's (2000) book, *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic*. Here, Moore develops the insights of classical film theory so as to construct a theory of the cinema in terms of a 'modern magical fetish' which has the power to enliven the senses and produce magical sensations in the viewer. Again, Moore sets up her thesis in opposition to cognitive, psychoanalytic and ideological approaches to film which, between them, she argues, rob the cinema of its magic and 'ignored its intimacy' (2000: 2) The 'magical' or 'savage' thesis', then, can be said to signify a return of the repressed in both senses of the term. The history of film theory is characterised by attempts to overthrow the reigning dispassionate approaches, thus substituting them with decidedly more sensitive and apposite frameworks, not only for re-establishing film's unique properties but for recovering its essentially visceral affects on viewers.

Consistent across this body of work is the insistence on the link between fractured and/or excessively fetishised forms of cinema and the production of a 'primitive' mode of response. As Moore asserts, 'it is not just Hollywood narrative, but even more clearly motion-sick, time-torn, photogenic-based cinema' that produces the conditions for the 'primitive' gaze' (2000: 11). Herein lies the key to an alternative way in which to understand the cult aesthetic. Cult film, as we have seen, is partly defined by its negation of the seamless narrative and high-production values of 'mainstream film'. Thus, in light of my discussion so far, its gaps and fissures need not be treated as elements which draw attention to its constructedness. Rather, they can be reconfigured within the terms outlined herein; as the generative source for a truly magical and multi-sensory experience. It is with these ideas about the cinema in

mind that I will now go on to discuss the varieties of experience the cult aesthetic gives rise to.

Cult Encounters

This section focuses on a range of aesthetic experiences fans reported undergoing in their initial viewing of the film, and at the same time seeks to reassess a number of cult concepts in light of these accounts. Each experience discussed herein will be shown to derive from the cultish properties of the text: narrative ruptures, fetishised objects, unconventional camera work, direct address, and generic hybridity. More specifically, I will be concerned to foreground how these precise properties produce sensory experiences in fans which clearly exceed normative experiential boundaries and are thus conducive to the production of transcendent feelings. Thus, my discussion is intended to illustrate the central theme of this chapter: the movement from transgression to transcendence.

Magical Metamorphosis and 'lively objects': Circumventing narrative ruptures

In this section, I want to consider moments of textual discord alongside the fan's insistence that the film is not only cohesive, but 'magical', so as to develop an alternative and empirically grounded critical approach to the cult aesthetic. Additionally, I will be concerned to conduct a close textual analysis in an attempt to ascertain precisely where it is that *The Wicker Man's* magic lies. A related aim here is to foreground the specific conditions which enable these fans to circumvent the disruptive elements of the film. Paradoxically though, it is precisely the more obtrusive elements in the film, as I will demonstrate, which give rise to magical sensations.

The lingering shot of the organ stop which, for Smith, as we have seen, can work in no other way but to 'confound narrative verisimilitude' (2005: 135) frames my discussion in this section. As I demonstrated earlier, contra Smith, the shot was given narrative meaning by fans on repeated viewings, rather than perceived as a moment of visual excess to be 'anticipated with self-conscious relish'. However, putting aside the problems with Smith's underlying assumption that films are

predominantly experienced in a rational and linear fashion, I am prepared to agree with him for the moment that insofar as its initial emergence on the screen is objectively arbitrary, it is at least theoretically jarring. Yet given the consensus amongst my respondents that their first encounters with the film are characterized by immersion, it is necessary to ask: how might the manifestation of this specific shot initially register?

In order to answer this question, some further exploration of the respondents' relationship to the film's formal and aesthetic qualities is required. Recall that in the previous chapter I identified as characteristic of these responses that which might be called a 'primal sensitivity'. I want to briefly develop that argument here to suggest that this sensitivity extends beyond the capacity to perceive 'faces in the landscape', thus, enabling an essentially tactile and experiential identification with the film's objects. The following extract, taken from Gemma's account of her initial viewing of the film, is indicative of the argument I am here seeking to mount:

I remember every detail so vividly caught my eye. And I didn't just see all the little details, I felt them; I mean I felt the textures and moods of each and every object

(Gemma, telephone interview, 2003).

Gemma's statement eloquently captures something which I think is intrinsic to how many of my respondents first experienced the film. These fans were initially more inclined to engage with the fetishistic elements of the film, rather than focus on the narrative. For these viewers, it would seem that much of the film's emotional import derives from an awesome encounter with its array of fascinating objects; an experience made possible, in part, because there is a tendency within the film to dwell excessively on objects (cf. Smith, 2005: 133).

The affective openness and particular predispositions these fans bring to the film, once activated, paves the way for an intensely visceral and magical encounter. One of the most frequently mentioned scenes in this respect was the 'seduction scene'

which depicts Willow (Britt Ekland) performing a naked ritual dance in a bid to seduce the virginal Howie. As one respondent explained:

The seduction scene is utterly haunting [...] Britt Ekland is undoubtedly gorgeous. But to be honest, and I'm not just saying this, the first time I saw it I don't think I even noticed she was naked [...] I was enchanted, moved, knocked sideways by that scene, but not because of Britt. No, the magic of that scene lies elsewhere [...] It's all in the finer details

(Chris, telephone interview, 2003).

Significantly, this particular scene is replete with cultish elements: dubbed vocals and body doubles,⁷ none of which are entirely successful in their integration. Moreover, in the shortest version of the film (and most widely accessible print) this scene is preserved in a very truncated form - the markings of which are highly visible in the jump cut which occurs midway through. In order to discover its magic, we would do well, as Chris suggests, to observe the 'the finer details'.

The tableau begins with a shot of Howie lying in bed in the dark. He is alerted to movement outside the door at which point we hear Willow gently calling out to him. The camera pans the inside of the darkened room, from Howie's perspective, as he listens to her footsteps in the adjacent room. It is at this point the film mobilises yet another of its hypnotic musical interludes. We cut to a series of close-ups depicting hands playing a guitar, then a violin, followed by a shot of Willow's hand languidly, though purposefully, banging on the wall in a bid to lure the sergeant. This is followed by a shot of a hand orchestrating a single beat on the bongo drum. That these gestures are captured in close-up, thus disembodimenting the actions from the performing musicians, works all the better in drawing the viewer's attention to the erotic charge emitting from the instruments themselves. In the symbolic suggestion of mounting sexual desire generated by the slow throbbing of the drum, the musical instruments are lifted out of their immateriality and become every bit as complicit in Willow's attempted seduction of Howie.

Staying with the seduction scene, it is interesting to note the role other objects play within Willow's sexual incantation. During her provocative song, at the precise moment she senses Howie's presence behind the connecting door, Willow lifts both arms up and slowly draws them into her chest. In the centre of the frame, pinned to the bedroom wall, there hangs a puppet with strings dangling. Significantly, the shadow cast on the wall by Willow's gesture suggests that she is invoking the puppet into herself. This is consolidated in that here she begins moving awkwardly towards the connecting door as if being pulled by invisible strings. During her 'mating call' Willow performs a number of similar acts of magical metamorphosis. Take for instance her swirling hand gestures over the head of an owl carved from wood: with hands cupped she carefully moves over to the window before opening them out into the night in an action suggesting she has freed the creature's spirit. Significantly, Willow looks directly into the camera during this particular part of the dance, thus breaking one of the most fundamental codes of conventional cinema. While it could be argued that this action challenges the voyeuristic gaze, insofar as she appears to recant her own objectification in that she returns the gaze with a seemingly knowing, mocking stance (Ashurst, 2005: 98), it is also equally possible that, for many fans, the effect is not Brechtian. As Rachel Moore asserts, the effect of actors addressing the audience, thus appearing to 'momentarily break through the frame,' can awaken magical sensations in viewers since it suggests to the spectator that 'the film has in fact come to life' (2000: 87).

The belief in film's capacity to imbue even the most banal objects with a personality of their own is a persistent one in early film theory (Moore 2000: 8-9). For Balázs, the potential of film to reveal the inner mood of objects, to show us the 'hidden life of things', far surpassed that of any of the arts. Unlike the theatre, for example, where the props are rendered 'dumb objects' next to the overpowering presence of the actors, in film they are levelled out onto the same plane of existence, their intensity metered out in equal measures (1974: 58). Moreover, in circumstances where the conditions of the cinematic 'set-up' are favourable, such as in the juxtaposition of luminous objects and subdued actors, the former may even outshine and exert a greater presence than the latter, thus producing in the viewer an altogether more novel and awe-inspiring identification. It is along similar lines that

Rachel Moore develops the concept of cinematic 'objecthood': 'a filmic language,' she says, 'that insists on an extreme integrity of objects and valorises them aesthetically'. Here again, it is in the juxtaposition of 'muted subjects and lively objects' that Moore finds the conditions for a magical encounter with film (2000: 81).

A striking example of this precise juxtaposition occurs in the scene where Sgt. Howie first visits May Morrison's post office. On arrival, Howie loiters briefly outside, inspecting the fascinating array of confectionary on display in the shop window. On entering, he finds the counter unattended giving him (and the viewer) time to further survey the unusual goods on display. The camera slowly pans across the colourful candy canes and lollipops before reaching a large doll-cake, at which point we hear a woman's voice say 'Good afternoon'. The use of a disembodied voice here powerfully suggests that the doll has come to life, in that we hear May's voice (before we see her) at the precise moment the camera lingers on the doll-cake. The camera continues to pan across a number of chocolate hare. Their elaborate carvings and strategic positioning on the counter forcefully conveys the illusion of their velocity and vigour. When we do cut to May and Howie, they are comparatively banal, held for some time at medium range thus increasing the potential to experience a greater emotional identification with the objects than the characters. It is via such techniques that the objects are magically perceived.

A sizeable portion of the film's magic, I suggest, emerges from its pronounced animistic gaze whereby inanimate objects are imbued with mischievous and, ultimately, menacing complicity. Objects are animated via processes of defamiliarisation which has the affect of calling forth a sensory experience which fans are preconsciously accustomed to. The fetishisation of inanimate things lifts the objects out of their dumb existence thus transferring them to a plane of existence where they participate in the film's flow. For these viewers, I suggest, the objects in the film are experienced in a state of perpetual metamorphosis, which in turn generates a powerful source of cohesion and fluidity.

To return to the question posed at the outset of this section: how does the sudden appearance of the organ stop register for fans? It is essential to consider the preceding shot. Howie, having been given the Laird's permission for the exhumation of Rowan's grave, is depicted by the graveside as the grave-digger unearths Rowan's coffin. On opening it, to Howie's horror he is confronted by a dead hare. The camera steadily zooms in on the eye of the hare, before slowly cross-fading to a close-up of the organ stop. It is in many ways a smooth transition. The cross fade is accompanied by a bridging sound of the organ so that, before the keys of the organ are visible on screen we assume (mistakenly) that it is being played. The potential for a magical encounter is two-fold - in the suggestion the organ has come to life as much as in the metamorphosis of one object into another.

A notable correlation exists between *The Wicker Man's* form and content: its formal properties powerfully endorse its thematic preoccupation with metamorphosis, animism and sympathetic magic. For the attuned spectator, its 'gaps' or unconventional components – direct address, fetishisation of objects, sporadic musical interludes, narrative incongruities, and disembodied sound – work to enlarge, rather than shatter, its magic spell. The mode of response discussed here is one that is attuned to the film's rhythmic flow and amplified cinematography. To argue that cracks in the cult text increases emotional involvement challenges the more common perception that they produce a detached mode of response.

Encounters with the 'metal brain'⁸

This capacity to experience the film in an intensely visceral way was also made possible by the film's feverish mode of address and utter disregard for motivated point-of-view [POV] shots. Several fans commented, for example, on the way they felt their attention was constantly being drawn to minute details. One respondent pointed out that, 'much of the film is spent lovingly showing us the machinations of Summerisle's paraphernalia', whilst another spoke about how the 'camera suddenly zooms in on the tiniest of details'. Similarly, respondents were impressed by the 'close-ups of all this weird and wonderful stuff, like the animal foetus in the chemist shop'. Moreover, fans identified that this penchant for detail was often in excess of any particular character's point of view. As one fan puts it: 'We get to see all the

little things that we suspect Howie doesn't' (male, 31, questionnaire 2). All of these statements are suggestive of an acute sensitivity towards the way in which the camera behaves in these scenes.

It is precisely this frenetic and excessive attention to detail which led some critics to pass negative judgement on Hardy's direction. David McGillivray (1974) complained 'there is one bottle too many of pickled organs in the chemist's shop'. A reviewer in the *Financial Times* was adamant that 'the raw material is there, but in Robin Hardy's hands it remains raw material' (Brown, 2000: 207), again suggesting the film contained elements which had not been successfully integrated.

For many fans, however, this unruly, undisciplined dimension of the film, in which the camera is forever probing and fetishising objects, produced a sort of magical transcendence in which they experienced the camera in terms of a mysterious objective presence:

I had this strange, otherworldly feeling; as though I was being given a personal tour of Summerisle *by an invisible guide* [...] it's the way you feel drawn to take notice of all the nooks and crannies of every image [...] That was for me the single most memorable and enchanting thing the first time round.

(Felicity, telephone interview, 2003).

It is significant, I think, that there is no reference to the director here. Instead the appeal to some 'invisible guide' clearly suggests the way in which the camera is experienced in terms of an unknowable and 'otherworldly' presence.

Similar sentiments are abundant in early film theory. For Maya Deren the camera 'creates at times, the illusion of being almost itself a living intelligence' (quoted in Moore, 2000: 93). Moreover, as Moore asserts, 'the depersonalization of the camera, its 'itness'' is for Deren, following Epstein, 'one of the magical features of cinema as

a whole' (Moore, 2000: 93). The potential for experiencing such an 'illusion', I think, is greatly reinforced in the film, both on account of its fetishisation of objects, but even more importantly, because of its disregard for the conventions of motivated point of view shots. Here again, the potential for transcendence is shown to emerge directly from the gaps which occur in the text.

Glimpses of the 'real'

In this section I want to develop the suggestion that the film offers glimpses of something 'more real' which, as I have said, was a recurring sentiment amongst my respondents. My feeling is that this precise sensation is partly linked to the unpolished look of the film - a feature it shares with many cult films. Often this is the result of working within the confines of a low-budget, as well as within a tight shooting schedule. Like most B-movies, *The Wicker Man* is characterized by moments which appear distinctly unrehearsed and hurried. Fans did pick up on the unrefined, ramshackle visual quality of the film, but far from breaking the illusion it only increased it:

I think there's a rawness about the look of the film [...] I love the scene with the harbour master and fishermen - you know, when they're looking at Rowan's photograph and passing it around and denying all knowledge of her existence [...] You feel so totally drawn in, it really pulls you in that scene. You can smell the sea air - honestly, and I could actually taste the salt on my lips [...] I actually got a sense of the 'Fisherman'; of who he is, and what his life is like: I'm aware of his rugged, wrinkled features, battered from years of being at sea in all kinds of weather. It's amazing, you don't think about these things like normally, but with the film you've got all these little added impressions coming over you in a wave; all the time you're made to notice the little details. It's so clever like that

(Gemma, telephone interview, 2003).

Significantly, the scene Gemma refers to is, with the exception of Edward Woodward and the Harbour Master (Russell Waters), entirely populated by non-

actors. Typical of the B-movie production, where financial constraints often preclude the budget to stretch far enough to employ professionals, Hardy fleshed out a number of scenes with local residents. In this instance, the 'actors' were played by actual local fishermen. To some extent this is obvious - some of the fishermen appear conscious of the camera; one in particular (Johnny) looks as though he is trying to stifle a laugh. Significantly though, it is precisely this raw, life-like quality which is particularly affecting for the above respondent. Its impact is intensely visceral and multi-sensational, so that all the senses - sight, taste, smell, touch - are simultaneously engaged. It is also clear from the above account that in this heightened sensorial state, the respondent experiences some sort of transcendent rapture. In these images, the respondent grows increasingly aware of an extra-dimensional quality which enables her to go beyond normative ways of seeing and feeling. Again, the respondent's tendency to switch from past and present tense in recounting her experience appears to mirror her moving in and out of different states of consciousness. Significantly, the experience brings with it 'radiant insights' into the Otherness of the 'Fisherman'. Gemma senses in his 'rugged' features a glimpse of who he is and what his life is like, in ways that exceed her typical ways of thinking about and looking at things. In a later interview, Gemma reflected on this experience thus:

It has to be one of the most deeply moving and extraordinary experiences I've ever had [...]. I felt momentarily altered, more aware of things [...] It was an incredibly spiritual experience

(Gemma, telephone interview, 2005).

Generic dissonance and the numinous encounter

Several fans described their experiences with the film as 'spiritual'. Yet asking fans to elaborate on this sentiment often produced moments of pronounced inarticulacy whereby fans simply pointed towards there being an indefinable quality in the film. However, fan-produced accounts of the emotional import of specific scenes in the film did encourage the proliferation of a religious terminology - most notably, the climactic scene in which Howie is burned to death in a huge wicker man. Crucially,

my findings suggest that much of the ‘spiritual’ import of this scene derives from an affective disturbance as a direct result of its strange blend of generic tropes.

The notion of genre dissonance, as we have seen, is often postulated as being a defining quality of the cult text. For the most part though, theorists have merely been content to mention in passing its potential for thwarting viewer expectations and/or defying conventional categorisation. Rather than replay this familiar cult discourse, I will approach the fan’s account on its’ own terms here, and build inductively towards an appropriate and situated theoretical model of genre dissonance. The relationship between affective disturbance and genre dissonance is vividly captured in the following quotation in which one fan discussed his initial response to the climactic scene of *The Wicker Man*:

What really chilled me to the marrow of my bones was the abject look of sheer horror as Howie is dragged up to crest of the hill and he finally sees what fate has in store for him. What adds an added frisson of horror to this scene is that a calf, caged within the edifice, happens to emit a “moo” at the very moment Howie sees the wicker man [...] I was absolutely transfixed. There are so many elements to this scene which are chillingly memorable – the linking of the arms of the island folk and the jovial, almost maniacal singing of ‘Summer-is-Icumen-in; Howie reciting biblical verse, asking god to receive him; the collapsing of the burning head of the wicker man to reveal the heavenly sun setting on the horizon – all coalesce to create a surreal, fascinating, but also bone-chilling closing scene [...] It’s spiritually uplifting in an odd sort of way

(Tom, email correspondence, 2002).

This extract usefully highlights a moment in the film in which its renowned generic hybridity is particularly excessive - a disturbing combination of the horrific, the religious epic, the musical, even a thread of dark, unsettling comedy. Whilst the respondent experiences a profound sense of shock and disorientation, it is significant

that it is nonetheless suggested how these elements 'coalesce', thus culminating in a 'spiritually uplifting' experience.

Rudolph Otto's (1958) phenomenological approach to the study of religion and, in particular, his concept of the 'numinous', presents the seeds of a model with sufficient explanatory power for our purposes here. For Otto, the numinous is fundamentally an encounter with the 'wholly other' in which, significantly, the recipient grows acutely aware of a spiritual presence or else experiences feelings of a deeper reality. More specifically though, it is an affective state produced in the individual in response to encounters with external stimuli which generate simultaneously feelings of awe, mystery and fascination. It is this precise combination of awe, dread and fascination which produces what he refers to as that strange 'harmony of contrasts' (1958: 57). It is highly significant, then, that the above respondent not only describes affective modalities which are synonymous with those at the centre of Otto's model, but also suggests that they 'coalesce'.

Although, for Otto, the numinous is an encounter with the 'wholly other', the fact that it develops out of an experience within which conflicting modes of affective-cognition are produced in tandem suggests its basis in sensory experience. In other words, the raising of numinous consciousness is made possible by experiences which produce a sensory and semantic overload, resulting in the production of indeterminate states of feeling for which the individual has no available cognitive schemata within which this experience can be readily assimilated. What I am suggesting here, then, is that the quasi-religious sentiment of cult, in this precise instance, emerges from an affective disturbance as a direct result of textual excess.

Otto's concept of the numinous not only provides us with the beginnings of a model within which to rethink the link between transgression and transcendence, his categorization of the numinous in terms of the 'pre-religious' is also useful for overcoming the difficulties incurred in linking cultism to religion proper. For Otto, the numinous experience underpins the development of all religions. Thus, 'it is only in a later development, when the numinous is commingled with moral and rational elements, that it becomes part of the fully developed category of The Holy'

(Varnado, 1987: 18). In other words, in discursively attempting to bring this 'unnamed something' into existence it takes on the language of religion proper. Clearly, the use of religious terminology, in the above extract, results from a discursive attempt to put into words that which constitutes the ineffable in experience with the cult aesthetic. Neither motivated by a functionalist attempt to sacralise the cult object, nor an unconscious defence mechanism (cf. Hills 2002), the religious sentiment in this precise context emerges from an aesthetic encounter with a text within which the senses are radically disturbed.

This section has demonstrated the role of the cult aesthetic in producing a range of affects which register for the fan in terms of a magical and/or spiritual transcendence. In the following section I will be concerned to demonstrate ways in which these experiences are extended in certain genres of fan discourse and modes of practice.

Manifest Magic: The Meanings and Uses of 'Cultlore'

Transcendent experiences with the film encourage specific forms of thought, speech and behaviour beyond the viewing context, but which retain key features of the initial encounter. Just as the experience of the film gives rise to magical sensations, so too magical thinking comes to inform the fan's ideas about the film's personal significance and cultural presence more generally. 'Magical thinking' is defined here as a mode of thought involving the plea to extraordinary correspondences so as to comprehend and interpret symbolically the relationship between events or objects aligned in space or time.

The clearest example of this process is to be found in observing how fans participate in the mobilization of various 'cinemyths' which have grown up around the film. Examining how these cinemyths are negotiated by fans reveals much about the import and nature of the specific attachment. My contention here is supportive of the view that 'our personal investments influence both the questions we ask and the conclusions we draw' (Vyse, 1997: 119). This is an area which has been radically under-explored, if not ignored, in cult film criticism.

In this section, then, a number of myths which have accrued around the film in recent years are discussed, as are the various ways in which they are deployed by fans. These processes engage the fan in activities which serve to fix and safeguard the cult aura, and to convince others of the special circumstances upon which their attachment to the film is based. At the same time, I will suggest, they function in the service of mythic assimilation in that they provide a viable cultural framework which these fans can draw on in order to confirm and integrate the import of their aesthetic experiences with the film. As I noted in the introduction to this chapter, Feinstein and Krippner perceive this process to be an essential part of the individual's attempt to make sense of experiences which are out of the ordinary, the success of which determines the subsequent development of the personal myth.

The film that underwent death and rebirth

In recent years there has been a wealth of coverage in the popular media given over to recounting the story of the film, from its conception to its cult success. Essentially, it is a story strung together by a succession of problems which occurred during the film's production and post-production, coupled with a series of events which ensured its eventual commercial and critical acclaim. Interestingly, the rhetoric deployed in this coverage similarly seeks to draw artful parallels between the film's major themes and its historical trajectory. The theme of death and rebirth at the heart of the film has provided journalists and critics with a productive metaphor for characterizing the film's cultural transition from 'sleeper' to commercial success. Allan Brown (2000), for example, observes a number of 'curious parallels': 'It is a film about sacrifice which was itself sacrificed. It is also a film about the life force; it has been hacked, slashed, buried, written off but it continues to live, indeed it refuses to die' (2000: xxv). In a similar vein, Mark Kermode (2001) suggests that 'the story of how *The Wicker Man* came to die only to be reborn in flames is often stranger than the bizarre pagan rituals depicted on screen'.⁹

This specific myth has grown out of the apocryphal stories which have been in circulation since the 1970s, but have now reached legendary proportions.

Christopher Lee, for his part, has done much to fuel the film's growing mythos, expressing a series of conspiracy theories as to the whereabouts of the infamous 'missing footage'.¹⁰ Whilst Lee remains adamant that the missing footage still exists, Shaffer and Hardy have generally tended to dismiss Lee's apocryphal claims, voicing instead views about the realities of the British film industry. For Shaffer, it was 'too original' for the 'old fellows at British Lion; they were baffled by it, it was unsalable' (quoted in Bartholomew, 1977: 14). Yet it would seem that the myth of 'the film that wouldn't die' has won out even here. Shortly before his death in 2001, Anthony Shaffer reflected on the film's cult status thus:

The film says something I didn't know it would. But it has. The very minimum has been done to encourage it; it has been stamped on, buried under roads, passed into hands of people we cannot identify, and it survives. It has its own life. It is insisting on being reborn. There is something in the very frames of that picture which is saying "I am living and I will go on living"

(quoted in Brown, 2000: 187).

Such apocryphal stories are often thought to be a significant factor in attracting a cult fan base in the first place (see Kermode, 2001; Justin Smith 2005: 130; Peary 1983: 164). However, I would suggest that the film's mythology does not precede, and thus influence, the cult attachments discussed herein as much as it lends them a sort of mythic credence. This is evident in the following examples:

I knew nothing about the film's legends and stories the first time I saw the film, or for a long time after, for that matter...But I wasn't at all surprised [...] I sensed from the first time I experienced the film that it had a power of some sort [...] and if you think about it, that has now been proven in the way it has literally risen from the dead

(Kevin, telephone interview, 2003).

The tendency in media and cultural discourses to reflect on mythic themes in their discussion of the film, as much as the suggestion elsewhere that it has 'a life of its own', may have played a direct role in the fan's attempt to assimilate the import of the film into their existing personal myths. The following extract clearly demonstrates the importance of culturally-produced cinemyths in this process:

The other thing about *The Wicker Man* is that it's a film that wasn't just made, it evolved [...] We all know the stories behind the making of it and the difficulties they had. And the happy accidents that went on along the way [...] the fact they had incredibly good luck when they were making it, with the weather, when they shot that final scene. It could all have gone so bloody wrong and a very different film could have emerged at the end. [...] It's grown like the crops in the film itself, it's somehow grown and the more they tried to cut it back the more it's grown back

(Tim, personal interview, 2005).

The above respondent's reference to the 'incredibly good luck [...] with the weather when they shot the final scene' is interesting, not least because it reflects the subtle appeal to some sort of mystical intervention - an idea that has been expressed on several occasions by members of the cast and crew. Despite the film's setting in the springtime, it was actually shot in the chilly depths of late October to November, 1972, and many scenes are fleshed out with fake blossom trees and clever lighting. Having said that, the climactic scene was entirely authentic, and the crew's anticipation that they would need to rely on post-production special effects to realise Shaffer's awesome, sun-filled vision of the final scene did not come to pass. As Shaffer recalls, 'it just so happened that the clouds blew away, momentarily, and we got our shot' (Shaffer, in Kermode, 2001). Much has been made of this detail in *Wicker* cultlore, and nowhere is it more poetically expressed than by Mark Kermode (2001) in his television documentary, *Burnt Offerings*:

As if the elements themselves were willing it to happen, the storm clouds, which had beset the entire shoot, broke briefly, enabling

the wicker man to be captured on film breathing fresh new life
into an ancient ritual

(See *Burnt Offerings*, television documentary, 2001).

Moreover, Kermode draws on a mystical frame of reference throughout the documentary, repeatedly pointing towards the notion that somewhere during the course of the shoot, the filmmakers managed to penetrate a transcendent reality; although the wicker man itself was nothing more than 'a vast movie prop', '[t]he burning of the colossus itself lifted the endeavour out of the everyday, and into the realm of magic' (*Burnt Offerings*, 2001).

The nature of the film's mythos, then, ascribing as it does to the film a mystical life-force of its own, provides fans with a cultural myth which further corroborates their aesthetic experiences with the film. Just as fans experience a sort of magical transcendence in their initial viewings, so too they discover in these myths a source of validation for their experiences. If cinemyths are a factor in the cult formation discussed herein, it is only to the extent that they confirm that which the fan already feels to be significant about the film. But it might well be the case that such myths help to ensure the longevity of a particular cult formation. As Feinstein and Krippner assert, 'transcendent experiences are more likely to have long-lasting effects' on the individual's personal myth if he or she is able to 'find an explanatory framework' for these experiences within one's 'culture or reference group' (1988: 195).

The Curse of *The Wicker Man*: Tall tales and synchronicities

There is, however, a darker side to this *Wicker* myth. In 2002, a curious story appeared on thepeople.com recounting a series of unfortunate events supposedly endured by a Dublin band – Mesh - within hours of obtaining a copy of the film. As well as being involved in a 'near fatal road accident', the band members all came down with a paralysing dose of flu, and even found themselves in jail. The fact that this story is obviously a spoof suggests just how widely disseminated the myth of the *Wicker Man* curse has become in recent years.

Robin Hardy has often paid lip-service to this notion in various interviews. In one such account he states: 'there does seem to be some kind of curse around *The Wicker Man*. That's what happens when you meddle with the dark forces, I suppose' (quoted in Brown, 1998). Again, the notion of *The Wicker Man* curse is frequently invoked in the fairly recent wave of journalistic coverage and other culturally-produced literature on the film. Ali Catteral and Simon Wells for example, observe how in light of the catalogue of disasters and mishaps which have dogged the film—'grudges, rampant paranoia, fractious egos, heartaches, heart attacks, and bad timing'—it is 'tempting to ascribe some sort of evil spell to its initial failure' (2001: 123).

Fans, however, have taken the notion of the curse in a different direction, which sees them attempting to draw ominous parallels between the film's cultural presence and seemingly related catastrophic events. In 2000, for example, a sea trawler sank off the coast of Kirkcudbright—a prominent location in the film—killing all on board on the very day the film was broadcast on Channel 4. For some fans, this was more than a mere coincidence, as is evident in the following examples:

It seems more than a little coincidental that such a dreadful calamity should occur on the very same day the film was shown on television. Don't you think? And you know, I still don't think they know what caused the Solway Harvester to sink to this day

(Kevin, telephone interview, 2003).

Look at what happened to the Solway Harvester [...] Never let it be said that the *Wicker Man* curse isn't for real!

(Chris, personal comment, 2000).

The above statements are not only reflective of these fans' personal investments in the film, they also reveal a latent belief in the cinema as a conduit for the occult. The idea of the cinema as a channel for destructive occultic forces was famously postulated by Kenneth Anger in his books, *Hollywood Babylon* and *Hollywood Babylon 2*. For Anger (1975), the cinema was an 'evil medium,' capable of

unleashing malevolent forces on all involved in a film's production, including the audience.

Anger's theory of the cinema informs Mikita Brottman's (2000) study of the cult appeal of 'cursed movies'; that is, 'films that have, in one way or another, resulted in death or destruction' (2000: 103). Brottman discusses 'two exemplary cursed movies' – *Rebel Without a Cause* (d. Nicholas Ray, 1955) and *The Misfits* (d. John Huston, 1960) – thus noting how certain 'images and dialogue' therein parallel the tragic circumstances within which some of their key stars met with their untimely deaths. Notably, Brottman suggests that 'such films and their stars attract a cult following because they record a *transcendental moment* in the cinema: that moment when the star is caught by the camera lens in a way that they themselves are unable to control. These films accrue cult status, not because of any 'special aspects of the film[s]' themselves, but rather on account of their becoming transformed into 'inadvertent epitaphs' in 'retroactive' readings (Brottman, 2000: 112). Cult audiences, she asserts, are compelled to scrutinise the texts for 'innocently spoken words of irony' which foreshadow real-life tragedy; and 'compelled to search more and more deeply for further connections between filmic narratives and human catastrophe' (2000: 117). Brottman's discussion is thus pertinent here insofar as she ultimately links this manifestation of cultism to a search for transcendence.

If the successful mythic assimilation of the transcendent experience partly depends on there being a cultural source available with which the individual can validate its import, where such experiences are compatible with elements of an existing personal myth, the likelihood of the experience to affect behaviour in the long term is dramatically increased (Feinstein and Krippner 1988: 195-6). Given the centrality of place in these fans' personal myths, as discussed in the previous chapter, it is highly significant that the filming locations should have become the focal point through which a sense of the transcendent is maintained. Examining the fan's interaction with these locations, the particular practices they engage in whilst on location, reveals a mythic continuum stretching back to their formative experiences. This process involves the fan engaging in activities which seek to enlarge something of the magic experienced in the viewing context onto the actual physical spaces. For

example, many fans have specifically sought to uncover local legends attached to the various sites. The following example is highly typical of this activity:

I've been doing a bit of research into some of the locations and have found some fascinating bits and pieces I thought you might be interested in... It turns out that there is a curse overhanging Cardoness Castle in Anwoth.¹¹ The castle is now derelict but the last three owners all suffered horrific deaths and bouts of misfortune!

(Kevin, unsolicited letter, 2004).

This process of recovering myth and legends can be seen in terms of an extension of the aesthetic encounter within which fans sense an unseen energy force. At the same time, these practices are linked to perceptions of the rural landscape in terms of an animate, sentient phenomenon. In this way, fan interaction with the filming locations is fundamentally and inextricably bound up with their personal myths. Put another way, elements of the fan's behaviour on location would seem to be influenced by their existing myths - the gathering of folkloric fragments thus maximising the opportunity to strengthen it.

This aspect of cult practice exceeds the meanings and uses of 'cult geographies' as suggested by Matt Hills (2002). Hills defines cult geographies as '*diegetic and pro-filmic spaces (and 'real' spaces associated with cult icons) which cult fans take as the basis for material, touristic practices*' (2002: 144, original emphasis). Hills identifies three key uses of cult geographies – they provide a 'sacred focal point' for the fan beyond the viewing context (p. 144); 'sustain the fan's fantasies of entering the text', and are spaces entirely 'prestructured' by the source text (p.157). Yet, his emphasis on 'affective play' overlooks ways in which cult spaces are also sites of personal mythmaking.¹² Moreover, that the fan's relationship with the physical spaces of cult may be partly determined by an *aesthetic encounter* with the source text also challenges Hills' insistence that they are entirely mediated by some objective narrative structure or formal quality pertaining to the original text.

Keeping the flame: the myth of the 'chance encounter'

Magical thinking also informs the ways in which fans make sense of their own relationships with the film. In articulating the personal significance of the film, or else describing their first encounters with it, fans persistently and similarly draw on a vocabulary which conveys the notion that their attachments are somehow predestined. Sentiments such as, 'I saw it by accident', 'I wasn't even planning on turning the TV on that night but for some reason I did', and 'It was purely by chance that I got to see the film when I did', are all examples of this. These sentiments afford an insight into what is felt to be at stake here: if events leading up to the moment they discovered the film had been different they might never have experienced it. In short, they reveal the sense of value which these fans place not only on the film but on the transformation it has made to their lives.

It was interesting, therefore, to observe how the idea of the 'chance encounter' was mobilized at specific times and in response to certain circumstances. In the years between 1999 and 2001, I received countless letters from fans which centred round this precise discourse. Significantly, the timing of these cult stories correspond to a period in which the film was enjoying increased cultural visibility, and which thereby witnessed a relatively prolific output of news articles, documentaries, cinema screenings and even the publication of a full-length book on the film (Allan Brown, 2000). As fanzine editor, and recipient of these letters, I was in a privileged position from which to observe this process; its peaks and troughs. Each time the film was aired on terrestrial or cable television, or else written about in a news or magazine item, a stream of fan stories turned up in my inbox or at my home address, of which the following extract is a typical example:

With the recent upsurge of interest in The Wicker Man, I thought I would write with my own story [...] I must admit to feeling both glad and disappointed at the film's recent resurrection. Glad, because I have been proved right after all these years and it's great to see new people enjoying the film; disappointed because for a long time it was just our little secret, a magical thing to be cherished and not to be

spoilt [...] *So there you have it, my story of how I was grabbed in my youth by this film and how it has followed me ever since*

(Comment in unsolicited letter, 2004, my emphasis).

I have incorporated this extract partly to demonstrate the logic – shown in italics – which frames this account; a logic which seemed to prevail in many such accounts. What seemed important here was the opportunity to record and thus secure their special relationship with the film at a time when its aura was felt to be under threat. Note the presence of religious signifiers and the use of the word ‘magical’. Note also the language used in the closing line and the suggestion therein that it is the film that does the seizing and the pursuing, rather than the respondent himself.

A much more striking example of this tendency to reflect on the attachment in terms of fate is demonstrated in the following extract:

Real appreciation involves a journey of discovery. You don't just read about it and decide, OK, I'll back this film [...] The film has meant something to me for more than fifteen years now, and a number of strange events have happened along the way [...] In the late 1990s, I was browsing through some material at a film festival and there it was – a copy of the rare *Cinefantastique Wicker* edition! I couldn't believe it! Call it luck or fate - I knew I was going to find something important that day [...] since day one, my relationship with the film's always panned out that way; you know, in the spookiest of coincidences

(Chris, telephone interview, 2003).

Here again the language deployed by the respondent is suffused with references to the enigmatic, to fate and the synchronicities. Each fresh discovery is perceived to be related to the workings of some unseen force within which the respondent indicates towards a series of events determining his attachment which lie beyond his control. It is also significant that magic is here used to reclaim ownership over the film. My feeling is that such sentiments are again related to the specific nature of their experiences with the film. At the same time, their function is to preserve that

experience by way of refusing to allow the sacred to slip into the profane, thus, reminding us that 'magical things are also sacred' (Vyse, 1997: 68).

Conclusion

My main aim in this chapter has been to seek alternative ways to consider the transgressions of the cult text in a way which reflects the experiences of actual fans but also accommodates those elements which have been sidelined in cult criticism: namely, sensory impact, mythmaking and religiosity. In so doing, I have traced a trajectory from the initial encounter with the text through to its manifestation in the form of fan discourses and modes of practice, focusing on the fan's initial aesthetic experience with the film and its subsequent expression in myth.

The impetus for mythmaking was shown to stem in part from a powerful aesthetic experience with the text which goes beyond normative sensory boundaries to produce some sort of magical and/or spiritual transcendence in the fan. Key features of this experience included a heightening of the senses, a sense of time standing still, and a more general feeling that something out of the ordinary had occurred. Moreover, my findings suggest that it is the cultish properties of the text which generates these intense experiences; for these fans, the gaps in the cult text register as sublime moments rather than producing an ironic, playful, or otherwise detached mode of response. I have said that certain characteristic elements of the cult aesthetic, in this case, genre hybridity, actually produced a sensory overload in fans culminating in an intensely disorientating but spiritual affect. Moreover, it is in attempting to articulate these experiences that fans are compelled to draw on a mystical or spiritual vocabulary. I have thus argued that scholarly proclivities to treat the sensory as secondary to conscious modes of cognition risks bypassing what might be fundamental to cult: an experience with something for which we do not have any immediate schemata to accommodate. It is precisely because of the way in which the cult text strikes at this deep sensory level that its impact is so powerfully transformative.

At the same time, it is clear that some of the experiences discussed above were partly rooted in the respondents' specific predispositions which have been discussed more

fully in Chapter 3. Early exposure to uncanny, animistic forms of cinema and television enabled these fans a point of entry both emotionally and imaginatively, which in turn allowed for the jarring moments to be circumvented. In addition, the affective openness of these fans when initially confronted with the film allowed for a communicative exchange within which the film was able to speak directly to the senses.

A further aim in this chapter has been to explore how these experiences are assimilated into fans' existing myths. As I noted in the introduction, transcendent experiences pose a challenge to the recipient insofar as they will demand assimilation (Feinstein and Krippner, 1988). The successful integration of these experiences was demonstrated most sharply by the continued theme of animating the landscape; in the retrieval of myth and legend pertaining to the filming locations, these fans were able to validate aspects of their innermost beliefs and values. It is precisely because these fans were able to assimilate their experiences with the text into their existing myths that the film becomes so integral a part of the processes of personal mythopoesis. As Feinstein asserts, the effects of transcendent experiences on the individual's developing myth are more likely to be profound and enduring when it bears some semblance to the existing myth (1997: 195-6). Existing elements of the personal myth serve in terms of an explanatory framework within which to fix and develop the new experience. Thus engaging in such activities not only serves to reinforce the cult aura of the text, it also, more importantly, enables the individual to push the myth they are living forwards

I have argued that the culturally-produced myths which have grown up around *The Wicker Man* facilitate this process insofar as they lend validity to the fans experiences with the film. The existing mythos was neither a factor in originally drawing these fans to the film or a discursive mantra they chose to appropriate. Rather, the specific nature of the film's mythos, ascribing as it does an uncanny agency to the film, affirms something of the experiences they undergo with the text. The fact that these fans are compelled to draw synchronicities between the film and external events is, in itself, a testament to the essentially magical experiences the initial encounter of the film produces in these fans. As Stuart Vyse asserts, it is 'the

magical quality of coincidences... [which] biases our memory' (1997: 110). Thus, the fans' mobilisation of the film's mythos retains only those details that enable them to construct meaningful connections. Moreover, with the ongoing accumulation of experiences lends fresh authenticity and validation to the myth, as was reflected in the way fans perceived the development of their own attachments to the film.

All of the above factors, then, are suggestive of the way in which the film takes on the status of an *object of awe* for the fan; beginning in the sensory, the film's import becomes assimilated into, and develops in accordance with, the fan's existing mythology. In the meantime the text also becomes a powerful *object of trust*, by which I mean it comes to serve as an important reference point for fans - something they go back to in order to make sense of their past and present experiences. As such, it becomes a powerful tool in the service of developing their personal myths.

¹ As Hutchings points out, this factor also poses a challenge to the commonplace assumption that cult fans are necessarily always motivated to preserve the marginal status of the texts they champion (see Hutchings 2003: 132).

² Sconce at least delimits a particular social formation in his discussion of paracinema (i.e., graduate students), and has elsewhere tested the effects of films which he considers to be 'textbook cases of self-reflexivity' on different social groupings. In 'Spectacles of Death', Sconce suggests that although the film, *Scream* can be considered in terms of a textbook case of self-reflexivity, the responses of certain factions of its audience (i.e. teenagers) are characterized by absorption. Sconce attributes this to differing social and generational factors, upon which he remains vague but it is clear he means to suggest these fans lack the cultural capital necessary to read the film ironically. Whilst I do not agree with this last point, the generational issue is vital.

³ We can think of these accounts in terms of what Daniel Cavicchi refers to as 'becoming-a-fan-stories', which form a distinct 'genre of fan discourse' (1993:42). With regard to their ontological status, these accounts, I suggest, exist between the real and the reconstructed; whilst they preserve traces of the actual experience they also reveal the processes of mythologization in their retelling. The way in which fans attribute a predestined dimension to their finding the film is a case in point.

⁴ Some of the less ardent fans that participated in my study suggested experiences of absorption in the films' 'glorious colours' and particularly its 'hypnotic musical score'. Yet this did not spill over into the affective stupor which characterizes the experiences of the fans in my focal study. Again, the failure of the film to translate into a sublime experience for younger and older fans is indicative of the generational specificity of the cult formation under focus here.

⁵ Mendik and Harper deploy the term 'avid' throughout their essay so as to delimit a type of cult viewer aged between 17 - 24, who share large amounts of media competence and subcultural capital. 'Avids' can be understood as another variant of the so-called 'smart audience' (see Barker, Mathijs and Mendik, 2006), which again seeks to promote the media savvy and culturally sophisticated cultist.

⁶ See also Andrew Moor (2005) *A Cinema of Magic Spaces: The Cinema of Powell and Pressburger*.

⁷ Due to Ekland's difficulty in feigning a Scottish accent, her lines were dubbed throughout the entire film. A body double was used in this scene as the actress refused to allow the filmmakers to show her naked from the waist down.

⁸ My use of the term 'metal brain' is borrowed from Rachel Moore (2000).

⁹ See *Burnt Offerings: The Cult of The Wicker Man*, television documentary, 2001.

¹⁰ For instance, on discovering a number of scenes missing from the final cut, Christopher Lee, Hardy and Shaffer were determined to reconstruct a more satisfying print from the outtakes. But there was

a problem: the outtakes had “gone missing”. There are rumours that the missing footage was lost, burned, even used as a land-fill.

¹¹ Anwoth village features prominently in the film and is a popular location with most fans. Scenes shot in the schoolhouse, and the ruined kirk and graveyard were filmed in Anwoth. The derelict castle the respondent refers to here does not feature in the film itself, but is clearly visible from the locations.

¹² As I suggested in the previous chapter, many fans reported feeling mystically drawn to visit the locations, and their approach once there shows them to be intuiting their way through the cult terrain. It is this dimension that the concept of ‘affective play’ does not sufficiently capture or explain.

Chapter 5

Enduring cult fandom and the ‘dialectic of myth’

A cult film is a film with an active and lively communal following. Highly committed and rebellious in its appreciation, its audience regularly finds itself at odds with the prevailing cultural mores, displaying a preference for strange topics and allegorical themes that rub against cultural sensitivities and resist dominant politics

(Mathijs and Mendik, 2008: 11).

You are never dedicated to something you have complete confidence in. No-one is fanatically shouting that the sun is going to rise tomorrow. When people are fanatically dedicated to political or religious faiths or any other kinds of dogmas or goals, it is always because these dogmas or goals are in doubt

(Robert M. Pirsig, 1974: 146).

The concept of endurance is central to current definitions of cult, serving to set it apart from the merely whimsical. As Mendik and Mathijs assert, cult film fandom is based on ‘a continuous commitment. It is not a fad or a craze’ (2008: 5). However, much existing cult film scholarship, where it has investigated the audience at all, has limited its approach to producing synchronic snapshots within which the continued dedication of cult fans is too often conflated with a self-conscious commitment to an oppositional cultural politics. Moreover, given the lack of empirical research on that which is actually involved in instances of enduring fandom, such claims remain highly speculative. This is evident in the above definition of cult which, whilst confidently asserting a relationship between commitment and rebellious appreciation, nonetheless emerges from a body of work within which research on fan audiences is notably scarce. In an attempt to challenge this assumption, as well as redress this gap in extant research, I will argue for a much more complex model of enduring fandom, within which the processes of myth-work prove to be central.

To some extent, the ways in which the fan-text relation endures has been touched on in the previous two chapters. Although not a central concern therein, continued engagement with the film was shown to be a condition of the ways in which fans successfully managed to assimilate the film into their existing personal myths. In this chapter, and as a means of specifically approaching the question of that which sustains the cult attachment, I want to focus on the more turbulent aspects of this process. As I stated in the introduction, for the fans in my focal study continued engagement with the film gradually comes to involve increasing feelings of conflict and uncertainty, and so it is this dimension of enduring fandom which forms a particular concern here.

Drawing on the longitudinal component of my study, comprising research acquired over a period of seven years with eight enduring fans of *The Wicker Man*, this chapter is intended to provide an empirically informed account of the ways in which fans continue to engage with the film. I will concentrate on religion, as this constitutes both a central theme in the film and was a pivotal concern for the enduring fans discussed herein. The text is analysed from the perspective of its dialectical treatment of its religious theme in an attempt to consider anew the question of where its mythopoeic potential lies. In the previous two chapters, this dynamic has been located at the intersection where the fan-text relation coalesces; the affective rapport that exists and develops on account of the mythic compatibility was itself shown to trigger the process of mythmaking. In this chapter, by contrast, it is one of my aims to highlight the extent of which the text's radical ambiguity is a factor in determining the ways in which the fan-text relationship collides. The findings suggest that the ongoing fan-text relationship is characterised by intermittent phases of harmony and discord, and is subject to change over time and in response to the fan's changing mythic priorities. The dialectic of myth, it will be argued, is central to this process, influencing the ways in which fan readings are activated and deactivated at given times, thus creating the conditions necessary for a new phase of mythmaking to occur.

I am concerned with the way in which this dialectic is negotiated, the uses of a particular reading at a given time, and the increasingly conflictual nature of the fan-text relationship. It will be argued that the increasingly contradictory nature of the

fan-text relationship emerges from the ways in which the dialectic generates a gap between the implicit elements of fans myths and their conscious beliefs with which they may be at odds. This develops my contention that cult films are not simply forms of cultural demystification but are more accurately tools of personal mythmaking.

Other factors play a decisive role in this process, and my approach seeks to situate the findings within a discussion of the specific socio-historical conditions which has shaped the religious outlook of these fans in their formative years. Given that this particular discussion appears late on in the chapter, it is necessary to provide some background at this stage. Suffice it to say for now that all of the fans discussed herein are linked by a shared Christian upbringing, and by their experiences of growing up within the context of a newly emergent post-Christian society. As Steven Sutcliffe notes, from the late 1960s onwards, 'religion increasingly becomes both an object of social critique [...] and a potent cultural resource for new identity-making practices' (2005: 37).

It is not only the changing socio-cultural backdrop against which these fans began to develop their myths which is important here. So too, it is necessary to consider those factors which would shed light on the cultural timing of these fans' concern with spirituality and religion. Drawing on Dan McAdams' (1993) developmental model of personal myths, as well as related research, I will argue that these fans were developmentally disposed to engage with the film's dialectic of religious myth. Taking into consideration the specific socio-cultural and developmental factors not only enables me to retain the generational focus of my study, but also helps to illuminate the ways in which the findings herein are connected to the contradictions that arose out of their historical circumstances.

In the first section below, I will conduct a close analysis of the text so as to highlight the mechanisms of myth and anti-myth at work in the film. In keeping with the concerns of this chapter, I will concentrate on the treatment of religion and morality in the film.¹ I will then go on to demonstrate how fans negotiate this dialectic over the course of time. By tracing fan responses to the film's treatment of cultural myths,

I argue, we gain a better sense of the progression whereby a film cult might endure and evolve through the ongoing processes of myth-work.

**Between the Devil and the deep blue sea:
Myth and anti-myth in *The Wicker Man*'s representation of religion**

The motivation for scripting *The Wicker Man* was two-fold. On the one hand it was an attempt by its makers to rework the well-worn conventions of the horror genre. On the other hand, it grew out of Shaffer and Hardy's mutual, long-term interest in comparative religion. As Hardy has stated: 'we were interested in the idea of making a film that on the face of it was a horror film, but instead of exploiting the usual clichés of the horror genre – you know, the stake through the heart, the garlic and the fangs, we would actually go back to the old religion' (quoted in Deardon, 1999). The resulting article - centred on a conflict between Christianity and Paganism – achieves a complex and sophisticated ethical argument about the nature of religious faith, which sets it apart from its contemporary cinematic counterparts. Typically, the moral logic of the horror film operates around a Manichean structure, within which the boundaries between good and evil are clearly drawn. By contrast, *The Wicker Man* blurs conventional moral codes in that it ultimately does not come down on the side of either religious position.

For the majority of the film, however, the religious clash is weighted in favour of the Pagan ethos. The islanders' Paganism is presented in a series of vivacious, colourful and awe-inspiring tableaux, and is punctuated by earthy folk songs, elaborate ritual and dance sequences, all of which appeal directly to the senses. Christianity, by contrast, is rendered unnatural, oppressive and dogmatic. As a representative of both the law and the church, Howie's stilted persona and puritanical worldview does very little to animate or uphold Christian beliefs. Instead its central values, by becoming negatively encoded through the largely unsympathetic portrayal of Howie's character, are shown to be as repressive and abhorrent as he is.

In addition to its sensorial appeal, the film's Paganism is underpinned by a seductive and, at times, persuasive philosophy. The Paganism practiced by the islanders is

based on a reverence for nature and animals, and like many horror films, it attempts to construct a dualism which emphasises the harmony of nature and the animal kingdom against the corruption of mankind. Yet rather than dramatise this familiar trope through violent human acts, it opts for carefully chosen literary extracts which lend the film a learned, contemplative and ultimately non-sensationalistic means of critique. In the 'Gently Johnny' scene, for example, Howie is depicted frantically praying to God in order to blot out the moans of sexual ecstasy emitted from Willow's bedroom adjacent to his. These images are juxtaposed with Lord Summerisle, who is standing in the garden below, observing copulating snails and reciting a passage from Walt Whitman on the relative freedom of the creatures of the animal kingdom who bow to no god.² The sentiment conveyed is that despite the ignorance of the animal world, they are nonetheless free from man-made dogma to live as nature intended. The scene thus serves to underscore Howie's sexual repression, and also as a means of suggesting that the Christian attitude to sex is unnatural, life-denying and against nature.

Similarly effective are those scenes which exercise a critique of Christianity by way of exposing the idealism inherent in some of its founding myths, which are shown to be no less fantastical than the Pagan ethos. When, for instance, Howie expresses mocking disbelief at the idea of girls jumping over bonfires 'in the hope that the god of the flame will make them fruitful,' and demands to know what these children have learned about Christ, Lord Summerisle comes back with the sarcastic rejoinder: 'Himself the son of a virgin, I believe, impregnated by a ghost.' It is one of a number of similar instances within which Howie is rendered powerless to respond with anything but speechless indignation, thereby enabling Lord Summerisle's argument to carry the greater weight. Elsewhere Miss Rose casually compares the islanders' belief in the death and rebirth of nature deities with The Resurrection: 'you will undergo death and rebirth: Resurrection, if you like.' It is here that the film again demonstrates its indebtedness to Frazer and his contention that Christianity, like all religions, has its origins in ancient fertility rituals (Ashurst 1999, Krzywinska 2000, Sutcliffe 2005). For all these reasons and more besides, the islanders' Paganism emerges as the more vibrant, life-affirming and philosophically sophisticated spiritual speculation.

Yet, beneath the scenes of enchanting Pagan merriment a colder, more cynical attitude prevails. For one thing, the Paganism practiced on the island is undermined on account of its spurious origins - it emerges late on in the film that the islanders' belief system was introduced as a strategic measure by Lord Summerisle's free-thinking, agronomist Victorian grandfather, and thus out of convenience and experimentation. It is this factor which contributes to the blend of the vulgar and the sublime which pervades the film. Without doubt though, it is the devastating and frenzied climatic scene, depicting Howie being burned alive in a sacrificial rite overseen by the islanders that ultimately confirms the film's cynicism. It is the finest weapon in its anti-mythic armoury. In short, it presents the viewer with an appealing counter-myth on the one hand, and debunks it on the other. Viewers may derive a sense of the spiritual, but in so doing they, like Howie, are at risk of being duped in the thrall of a false belief. Its makers set out to make a film about religion in the horror vein. In so doing they seized upon some of the most powerful myths of our time thus consigning them to rot in a meaningless existential void at best and at worst, to rot amongst the detritus of crumbled stories.

Notably, the disruption of conventional codes of morality has been seen as a defining trope of cult films, and is often linked to a mode of address cultists are seemingly attuned to. In his analysis of the British cult film, *Get Carter*, Steve Chibnall observes the readiness of its cult audience to embrace the protagonist (Michael Caine) despite his morally questionable character, thus suggesting that such a response is 'a typical mechanism of cult movie appreciation' (2003: 15).

The Wicker Man's own ambiguous portrayal of religious morality has been noted by critics and academics. Danny Peary, for example, asserts that in the film 'both Christianity and paganism are shown to be impotent' (1983: 166). Peary's assertion is taken up directly by Leon Hunt who argues that the Paganism in the film is the more favourably depicted (Hunt 2002: 96). Tanya Krzywinska resolves that the film is intended as 'an indictment of paganism'; the 'shock ending', she suggests, is designed to force viewers to reassess their complicity with the islanders' and side with Howie's plight (2000: 105). For Krzywinska, however, this strategy is not entirely successful since the film's portrayal of Paganism is for the most part positively configured in appealing, life-affirming images which prove to be 'too

powerful' (2000: 74) to be fully recuperated by the 'shock value of ending' (2000: 104-5).

Each of the above viewpoints implicitly engages with that which I am referring to as the dialectic of myth and it is highly significant that each expresses a different perspective. The discrepancy of opinion thus serves as an important reminder of the subjective nature of how this dialectic is negotiated. Moreover, it suggests the futility of textually-derived speculations and instead points to the necessity of discovering fan-generated responses. Thus, precisely how fans negotiate this tension depends on the extent to which viewers are invested – implicitly or otherwise – in the myths the film takes to task.

In his discussion of what he refers to as Shakespeare's 'anti-mythic method,' Douglas Cole asserts that: 'an anti-mythic method depends on our familiarity with a received legend and its *important associations*, which are subverted by the texture of the adaptation or new presentation'. Crucially, he goes on to argue that 'it is not merely a question of the manipulation of sources which may or may not be known to the audience; *it is rather a direct challenge to the assumptions and associations underlying the familiar myth*' (Cole: 78, my emphasis). Herein lies the cult text's mythopoeic potential: when it can access formative myths so as to strike at the level of those deeply-rooted and cherished myths, then it can be said to work mythopoetically. That is to say, it has the potential to encourage the individual to reflect on the myths they are living out. But this, I would suggest, is a very gradual and essentially troublesome process; individuals do not suddenly become conscious of the myths which inform and shape their sense of reality, and nor does an increasing awareness automatically lead to its casting out. As Feinstein observes, we do not easily abandon our 'favourite mythologies' no matter how dysfunctional they may have become (1979: 202). For the 'dialectic of myth' to be truly affecting it has to tap directly into the mythic beliefs and values - conscious or otherwise - upon which fans have fashioned their identities.

Taking all this into account one thing is certain: the dialectic of myth operational in the text ensures that whatever convictions the viewer may find in the myths the film seemingly purports to be true, they are predetermined to fragment under the weight

of the counter myth lurking beneath. It is merely a question of time. It is this factor which needs to be born in mind as we come to discuss the responses of enduring fans.

From revolt to revision: Responses to religion in the longitudinal study

In this section, I am concerned to chart the responses of seven enduring fans specifically in relation to the film's religious themes. As I will demonstrate, there is a broadly consistent trajectory along which fans' continued engagement with the film progresses, and one which can best be characterised in terms of a movement from revolt to revision. The dialectic of myth is central to this process, serving to facilitate and at other times frustrate modes of personal mythmaking. Tracking this process not only provides an opportunity to observe the relationship between mythwork and enduring instances of fandom, it also helps to produce a more nuanced account of the ongoing necessity of the cult text, beyond the limiting discourse of the pleasures of transgression and resistance.

Given the complexity of the film's treatment of religion it is perhaps not surprising that it was one of the most popular reasons cited for the film's appeal. The religious theme, invariably described by fans as a 'clash' or 'conflict', was highly significant in all three questionnaires, and was prominent in interviews and unsolicited data. Yet, evidence strongly suggests that many fans initially interpret the film as a direct attack on Christianity, rather than a clash or conflict. The following examples are typical in this respect:

It's a stunning critique on the futility of the Christian religion, and you have to admire its delivery because it's almost casually done and a bit sly. And that's what makes it so incredibly powerful [...] because it doesn't opt for any easy resolution it has the power to shock and offend stuffy conservatives and fundamentalists but then leaves them without a plausible comeback. Fantastic! [...] Now I grew up with all that

[religious] drivel, but that's long in the past, and you only need to look around you to see the destruction it [religion] causes

(Kevin, personal comment, 1999).

I saw it [*The Wicker Man*] again just recently in my local cinema [...] Some people in the audience seemed to be absolutely horrified by the ending. And you could tell they were shocked. They just didn't get it. But, you know, it's not as simple as the good Christian getting it in the neck from the bad Pagans. It's a lot more complicated than that. Maybe they're not used to films that make you think for yourself [...] Personally, when I watch I feel like I've been handed a great big beating stick. You know, I was raised in the Catholic faith, not that I went to church or anything, but and believe me, this film struck a chord with me on that front

(Felicity, personal comment, 2000).

It is not difficult to identify in these accounts those elements which might be deemed 'cultish', at least insofar as they relate to prevailing definitions. Both are underpinned by a 'countercultural' sensibility, which sees the film as having important things to say about the oppression of traditional religions, and from which a political stance can be adopted. Several scholars have linked the cult sensibility to a marginalised position from which a commitment to cult film involves articulating an underlying dissatisfaction with cultural mores. So too, these accounts express views which bring them within the orbit of cultish taste patterns; essentially rebellious in nature, both accounts are shot through with a distinctive anti-mainstream sentiment, which could be read as enabling these fans to produce their own bids for cultural distinction. This type of analysis, as I have suggested, is typical of cult film scholarship. Felicity's account, in particular, echoes the idea of the cult text as partly defined on account of its ability to elude the more 'average' cinema-goer, whilst Kevin's comment reveals the pleasures afforded by the cult text's subversive play with codes of moral taste. At first glance, in other words, these

findings would appear to present a text-book case of prevailing conceptions of the film 'cultist'.

Having said that, however, there are elements contained within each of these responses which are indicative of something far more complex than the above type of analysis, and thus the thrust of much contemporary cult film scholarship, can accommodate. Both respondents can be seen to be reflecting on the significance that religion has played in their own formative years, suggesting the personal stake involved. Significantly, it is here that a tension is introduced. Whilst this is explicit in Felicity's account, a tension is also registered in Kevin's statement, both in the sudden eruption of the personal dimension, and his immediate attempt to distance himself by becoming dismissive of religion. It is precisely such moments of tension and contradiction which concern me here, not only because I find them to be the more revealing, but also on account of my contention that it is absolutely essential to preserve the contradictions in what fans say so as to produce a more comprehensive capture of cult fandom. The fact that these examples are inherently complex, suggests a need to know more about the mechanisms of resistance and, particularly, the personal stake involved. But they also invite us to ask: What social and psychological needs are being met in an ongoing attachment to the text?

Cathartic blasphemy

All of the respondents discussed in this section had at an early stage in their fandom interpreted the film as a direct critique of Christianity. Whilst a significant portion of their testimonies was suggestive of a critical and impersonal agency, it is nonetheless highly significant that in all instances a deeply personal and emotional voice often broke through. The following examples are clear instances:

I feel it's [the film] helping me to shake off my Catholic guilt

[...] I tell myself it's a kind of therapeutic blasphemy

(Sadara, letter, 2002).

What's so appealing [about the film's handling of Christianity], and I mean on a personal level now, is that it's just so devastatingly fulfilling...as an ex-Christian myself, I felt it to be daring, and even a relief to see it being literally pulled apart, belief by belief, just completely ripped apart and in tatters... but I always get this strange mixture of satisfaction and a feeling of, well, as if you've been through it with Howie

(Felicity, personal comment, 2000).

As is clear from these examples, the anti-Christian reading enabled fans to experience a form of cathartic release from what was commonly perceived to be the stifling oppression of their religious upbringing. In both instances, the film's 'blasphemous' content provided a means to confront and work through the negative feelings these fans clearly harboured in relation to their own Christian upbringing. But even here contradictions and tensions abound. For example, whilst Felicity's account is suggestive of a cathartic dimension it is nonetheless shot through with a concomitant sense of ambivalence, as is clear in her expression: 'devastatingly fulfilling'. Note the sense of upheaval in her use of language: devastating, pulled apart, ripped apart, and 'in tatters'. These are all suggestive of an underlying destabilisation which she expressly links to her own prior investment in these beliefs. Like Howie, she feels her own beliefs have been tested.

Feelings of displacement were present in many other accounts, within which it was common for fans to suggest a sense of having been deceived by religious ideologies internalised in childhood. Again, these sentiments are underpinned by a profound ambivalence, as the following comments show:

It's a shocking revelation. Everything you're told in your youth turns out to be a big lie. Christianity is shown to be ridiculous

(Chris, questionnaire 2, 1999).

The film shows you that the white hats do not always win and there are other ways of life. As children we are told the law and

Christianity are good and right and when we become older we are forced to see the bigger picture

(Tom, questionnaire 2, 1999).

As is clear from these statements, the tension emerges out of the gap produced between childhood beliefs and the encroaching realities of adulthood. In the first example, the impact of this gap is conveyed through the choice of language, suggesting as it does the opening of a deep, experiential gulf. But this gap is also articulated in terms of one that emerges from the loss of certainties afforded by generic conventions. As is evident in the second example, it is the film's direct challenge to the moral associations of the 'white hats' that 'forces' the viewer to confront 'the bigger picture'. It is significant that in both cases, the film's subversive elements produce a rupturing experience within which the certainties of youth are destabilised. To suggest that the transgression of generic conventions may contribute to an implicitly destabilising effect nuances the more typical view in cult film scholarship that such transgressions necessarily enable forms of ideological resistance.

That which is significant about each of the examples so far discussed is that the film's demystification of Christianity appears to register in terms of a complete revelation. It is as if the film discloses for the first time something which these fans have not previously reflected on. The irony is that all of the fans in my study claimed to have rejected their Christian upbringing in adolescence. Whilst I have no doubt that this is true, the tensions and contradictions registered here cannot be overlooked. As I discussed in Chapter 1, the implicit nature of the personal myth means that the beliefs it comprises can often be in conflict with those which are consciously held. What I am suggesting here is that the film encourages in these fans the resurfacing of implicit beliefs which are at odds with the conscious beliefs they hold to be true about themselves, and it is this dynamic which generates dissonance.

This precise tension was dramatically revealed in a moment of emotional openness displayed by Kevin during a telephone interview conducted in 2003, and where the significance of generic conventions is again notably foregrounded. Discussing his

memories of horror films he had watched in childhood and adolescence, and thus reflecting on their relative moral simplicity, he divulged the following:

You know where you are with Hammer [Horror]: there are two orders - good and evil. Then along comes *The Wicker Man* and says, hang on a minute, things aren't so simple [...] I went to a Catholic school and had all that rubbish forced down my throat [...] I rejected it all long ago [...] I'm well on my way to becoming forty and all that stuff's still there, bubbling away [...] *The Wicker Man* let's you know *it knows* it's still there, bubbling away. It says, come on, this stuff's all rubbish, there are, there is no God, or sun gods for that matter. It makes atheists of us all

(Kevin, telephone interview, 2003).

Many of the elements previously observed in the above examples are again present here: the explicit rejection of formative beliefs notwithstanding, the enduring effect of religious indoctrination is patently clear. As Kevin states: despite having rejected religion in his youth, 'all that religious stuff's still there, bubbling away'. Here again, it is clear that the inversion of generic tropes effects a powerful means of generating emotional conflict in the respondent, as is subtly conveyed in the opening two sentences. Whilst the film might be admired for its generic innovation, it is clear that the comparatively simplistic moral logic of its contemporaries provides an anchor which *The Wicker Man* does not. As Kevin states, 'you know where you are with Hammer'.

As well as working to dislocate the respondent from the security of implicit beliefs, it is also clear that the film's subversive treatment of conventional morality nonetheless lends itself as a tool for smoothing over the very cracks it initially creates. Like Sadara's comment (above) with regards to 'shaking off Catholic guilt', it is here inferred that the film was at this time providing a psychological crutch for Kevin, helping him to come to terms with a belief which, ironically, he had consciously relinquished a long time before. The idea that the text 'knows', and empathises with, the viewer is also worth noting here since it is reflective of the

broader sentiment in cult fandom within which fans feel personally addressed by the text. As Bruce Kawin observes, cult fandom involves a 'direct address', within which the fan experiences 'a sense of being somehow validated by the film, as if it acknowledged their values, knew they were out there watching and listening, and had somehow especially invited them to its party' (Kawin, 1991: 20).

As is evident in many of the examples discussed here, Kevin's account implies a motive for continuing to engage with the text, and one which clearly sees the role of the text becoming a tool for personal myth-work. An important process, captured in Kevin's statement but observable more generally in other accounts, is the role of the film in aiding the transition from a dysfunctional myth to an emerging one. In Kevin's case, this process is allegedly directed towards atheism – 'it makes atheists of us all'. Significantly though, for the majority of fans it is the film's Pagan elements which form the basis of the new myth. In the following section I examine the construction of this myth, initially in terms of the practices involved and the social and psychological purposes the pro-Pagan interpretation fulfils. Observing discrete moments of tension in fan testimonies, I will then go on to highlight the potential pitfalls of this reading, and the strategies fans mobilise in order to contain contradictions. Ultimately, I will be concerned to demonstrate how the dialectic of myth renders this mythic transition as anything but smooth.

The Pagan turn

With the exception of Kevin, all of the participants in the focal study embraced the film's Pagan mythos in ways which significantly informed their practices beyond the viewing context. From my data it was possible to identify three distinct practices. The first takes the form of what might be described as a 'spiritual quest'. In this instance, fans use the film as a continued frame of reference in their own spiritual development. Typically, this 'quest' is centred on a curiosity about alternative religious practices inspired by the film, and initially involves tracing the film's mythic and folkloric references. *The Golden Bough* is central here, enabling fans to locate the meaning of the customs the film dramatises in what is accepted by fans to be an authentic historical source.³ The film's depiction of an alternative British national identity is central to this process of discovery, prompting, in the first

instance, visits to the locations, but eventually developing into practices which sees fans visiting 'sacred' sites, such as stone circles. ⁴ Gemma, Jen and Tim each described their involvement in the activities outlined here.

A consistent feature of the spiritual quest, and one which marks it out as different from related practices, is that it is linked to a preoccupation with discovering one's own cultural roots. Moreover, this would seem to be linked to a process of 'becoming one's true self'. What I mean by this is that it appears to be related to a profound sense of reconnecting with an element of a past self which has been denied expression. Such sentiments were implied by respondents in the longitudinal study. Tim, for example, suggested that his fan practices were not only helping him to discover his 'spiritual side,' but that it was on his trail for *The Wicker Man* that he was able to 'find' himself – his 'real self'. One of the clearest accounts of this process was articulated by a fan I interviewed in 2000, but who did not go on to participate in the focal study:

It [the film] made me remember I *did* have Pagan green tendencies as a child. I was involved in save the whale campaigns: I was always green minded, and I found it distressing to see people cutting down the trees. So what the film did, I think, was take that green consciousness into a spiritual dimension [...]
The film brought something out in me that I didn't know was still there

(David, personal comment, 2000).

It is worth reflecting momentarily on the findings of Chapter 3 and, more specifically, the process of the mythic awakening. The above statement is again highly suggestive in this respect: the respondent's cultic embrace of the text is determined by an experience involving the re-activation of a former aspect of personal identity.

The second, and most common, practice is that which I will refer to as the '*Wicker* gathering'. This involves getting together with mutually appreciative friends of the film for an evening of what many fans describe as 'all things *Wicker*'. Typically,

these gatherings involve watching and discussing the film, and in this respect they are not so different from the filmic practices of non-cult audiences. Yet these events exceed the normative social practices of film, not least because they involve a concerted effort on the part of fans to generate an experiential space separate from one's daily existence. The film's soundtrack plays a central role here. In an unsolicited letter I received from Sadara in 2002, he described how he would band together with some 'musical friends for an evening of song, merriment and above all, an experience which feels more real'. Similarly, Chris, an accomplished musician who had taught himself to play most of the songs on his guitar, told me that for 'the past three years' he had marked May Day by 'getting together with friends' in order to 'generate energy and atmosphere', and to experience 'a way of getting away from the monotony of life' (Chris, interview, 2003).

The third practice involves the burning of self-made wicker man effigies. Whilst by no means a commonly occurring aspect of *Wicker* fandom, this practice has to my knowledge steadily increased since the late 1990s. These events typically take place at locations around the UK, in secluded areas, although some fans do purposefully travel to the filming locations to host their events.⁵ Paradoxically, this activity appears to be restricted to non-Pagan fans, or at most those that would concede to harbouring Pagan leanings or sympathies, rather than self-identifying as Pagan. Whilst it is typical for the latter to incorporate elements of the film into their spiritual practices, most notably the songs (see Willin, 2006), the former appear to take their inspiration directly from the film.

Two of my respondents (Adrian and Felicity) described to me their involvement in such events. In Adrian's case, the event takes place each Beltane in the early evening, with a group of up to ten friends (professional men and women, mostly in their thirties), and involves the construction and burning of a ten foot wicker effigy. Once the structure collapses, the friends 'cook food over the flames' and the site is revisited the following morning in order to 'douse the area with water and plant an ash sapling on the spot'. Felicity's event is a much smaller affair, consisting of her and two other friends. Again, the centrepiece is a much more modest effigy of 'about five feet in height and strewn with wild flowers'.

Listening to fans recounting their involvement in each of these activities is revealing in terms of the social and psychological needs these practices, and thus the ongoing engagement with the film, may fulfil. With regard to the practice of wicker burnings, for example, when asked to describe the meaning of these events, the participants emphasised the importance of fostering values such as community, tradition, and meaningful interaction:

It's an unusual night because everyone is involved in building, and for once everyone is aiming for a common goal. It brings people together well

(Adrian, email correspondence, 2004).

It's about having a tradition of our own, something that's meaningful to us

(Felicity, telephone interview, 2003).

What concerned these fans was that whilst these precise values were all foregrounded in the film, they had been lost from contemporary modern life. The following example is typical in this respect:

The fact that the community are so close in *The Wicker Man* impressed me as to the value of living in smaller numbers. Because people knew each other on the island, they seemed to be more tolerant of each other's quirks

(Adrian, 2004 email correspondence).

A pro-Pagan reading of *The Wicker Man* thus satisfies utopian longings in these fans, and at the same time offers an antidote to the alienating conditions of modern life.

In all cases of the Pagan-inspired practice, there was a strong emphasis on the experiential - fans consistently suggested that engaging in these practices enabled them to transcend the more mundane modes of existence. When asked about the pleasures afforded by the *Wicker* gathering, for example, Chris suggested that 'it's

all about experiencing something beyond the everyday' and 'geared at creating a mood'. Similarly, Felicity described the purpose of the *Wicker* burning event thus:

It's about wanting to slow down time and take stock of the important things in life [...] it's about leaving behind the blur of our separate lives and experiencing things in the present, together

(Felicity, telephone interview, 2003).

Fans often explicitly linked this ability to transcend the mundane to the spiritual. In fact, it was in describing sensations of experiencing themselves and the passage of time more acutely that the term 'spiritual' was most often used directly. But the spiritual dimension was an underlying factor of all three practices more generally. For one thing, they typically take place on May Day (the day of Howie's sacrifice and, of course, the Pagan celebration of Beltane). Now, although these fans did not typically identify themselves as Pagan, and their choice of May Day was more likely to be dictated by the film's diegetic temporality, the desire to mark the date as a way of temporarily accessing something meaningful beyond the ordinary, is itself testament to a profound longing to cultivate a form of spirituality.

In addition to invoking the alienating conditions of modernity to express the need for the spiritual, such sentiments were often mobilised in opposition to the perceived danger and/or detriment of conventional religions, as the following examples demonstrate:

Religions like Christianity are all about wrong-doing and repentance, and there's nothing particularly spiritual about that. But the Paganism on the island is. I mean, the islanders are more in-touch with their spiritual side

(Gemma, telephone interview, 2003).

Religion is a dangerous, irrational force that people latch onto out of fear and trauma[...] In my view, a rational, thinking person cannot be religious [...] The islanders could be forgiven for their beliefs as they are no more unreasonable than conventional religions. In fact, because they

are based on the natural cycles of the seasons and the physical reality of the sun [...] they are more justifiable

(Adrian, 2004, email correspondence).

These comments highlight the extent to which the continued engagement with the film is aimed at negotiating a new - perhaps even a substitute - religious identity. For despite their hostilities towards conventional religion, and in Adrian's case religion per se, it is clear that the film's Pagan elements offer these fans a spiritual alternative. The fact that fans so often invoked the perceived faults of Christianity in justifying their pro-Pagan readings and practices is itself evidence of the way in which the latter are constructed in direct opposition to the former. Moreover, I often sensed that the respondents were seeking to assuage the feelings of loss generated by their confronting deep-rooted feelings towards the religion they were formally socialised into. Ironically, the very values fans' sought to foster - community, tradition, spiritual transcendence - have traditionally been provided by conventional religions.

What we are witnessing in the collective embrace of the film's Pagan elements is a concerted effort to construct a new, revitalising myth based on values which are often felt to be lacking from modernity and from conventional religions in particular. But in light of the dialectical treatment of religious myth in the film, the pro-Pagan interpretation is difficult to sustain. Moreover, this factor is not lost on fans, as the following examples suggest:

The film is spiritual if you don't count the ending

(Gemma, 2005, telephone interview).

Despite the barbarity of the sacrifice, the community is much more coherent and happier than most communities in our society

(Adrian, 2004 email correspondence).

Clearly, the pro-Pagan reading of the film is constructed by way of assimilating only those aspects of the text which support it; practices informed by the film's Pagan mythos are thus tailored to the particular needs and desires of the fan. At the same

time, fans seek to marginalise or else justify those elements which would threaten its logic and coherency. Thus, fans reluctantly concede the difficulties involved in these appropriations but manage to find ways to offset the film's anti-mythic vein. What is more, the kind of strategic assimilation evident in the above examples is highly typical of the way in which the vast majority of fans make their case for a positive interpretation of the Pagan mythos in the film.

At stake, then, is the need to foster a meaningful identity within which fans' spiritual longings can be accommodated. Although fans manage to distance themselves from the more contradictory elements of the text by way of justifying and/or smoothing over the cracks in its mythos, the precariousness of these interpretations alone is itself an indication of their fragility. Thus, an important point to consider in charting the development of these ongoing attachments is whether these interpretations stand the test of time.

***Ringing the changes:
Reversals and revisions in fan readings and practices***

One of the main aims of the longitudinal study was to track possible changes occurring in the fan-text relationship over time, both in the way fans interpret the film and in terms of degrees of commitment. Crucially, seven of the eight respondents who participated in the longitudinal survey reported significant changes in their relationship with the film.⁶ These changes were recorded in the follow up interviews I conducted between 2005 and 2006, the first of which was with Sadara. In preparation for the interview I had devised a set of questions based on the letters and emails I had received from him only three years previously. The relevant part of the interview commenced thus:

Gail: In earlier correspondence you said that watching the islanders “dismissing” Howie’s Christian beliefs was helping you to “shake off [your] Catholic guilt”.

Sadara: Yeah, it did, absolutely - at *that* time [pause] It’s interesting how each time I watch the film, how that changes, so

that recently I've been a bit more [pause] I think the film helped me get where I am now with my thinking about Christianity. I'm a lot more tolerant of it [...] I was still quite antagonistic towards Christianity back then [...] Before, it was refreshing to see the dogmatic Howie put in his place, but now I'm more inclined to feel moved that he's a man willing to die for his beliefs

(extract from interview 2005).

I encountered similar scenarios upon re-establishing contact with Felicity, Gemma, Jen, Kevin, Tim and Chris. When asked if there had been any changes in the way they interpret the film, in all cases, the respondents revealed that their previous interpretations had become deactivated. There is no easy way to quantify the findings, but there were certain consistent trends. The first set of responses share with the above example that which can only be described in terms of a new sympathy for Howie, as is evident in the following selection of quotes:

Howie's total conviction in the beliefs he holds to be true is heartbreaking

(Gemma, telephone interview, 2005).

I find the ending a lot more disturbing than I used to [...] At least Howie was true to his beliefs, no matter how dubious they might be to the filmmakers

(Chris, telephone interview 2005).

I'm not as convinced as I was by the islanders' beliefs [...] they lack the conviction of Howie's

(Felicity, telephone interview, 2006).

And the portrayal of Howie as a god-fearing virgin is wearing a bit thin. Well, it's a bit of a cliché, isn't it?

(Kevin, telephone interview, 2006).

These statements suggest that it is the integrity surrounding Howie's religious speculation which has come to preoccupy these fans over time and, ironically, it is the strength of his religious convictions in the face of ridicule that now gains the fans' sympathies. In other words, these readings appear to have undergone a complete reversal in a relatively short period of time. What accounts for this?

To some extent, it would appear that an increasing familiarity with the novelisation of the film bore an influence on the way in which some fans reconfigured Howie's character, as is evident in the following examples:

Howie is a lot more human in the novel and so it's easier to identify with him. He's not as narrow-minded [...] and he's actually quite in awe of nature really

(Chris, telephone interview, 2005).

The book's full of poignant moments which show Howie in a new light [...] we learn more about his past, and get to see what makes him tick... He's not as dull [as he is in the film] and he looks at things with an almost childhood sense of wonder, which I really like...and he seems capable of spiritually connecting with the natural world [...] All this helps to flesh out my understanding of his character when I'm watching the film now

(Gemma, telephone interview, 2005).

There is ample evidence in the novel which would support these readings. Howie's powerful imagination is foregrounded, and is obviously a source of revelation for the *Wicker* fan coming from the film to the novel, as is his unexpected capacity to derive spiritual sensations from nature. Again, the novel does portray Howie in an altogether more compassionate way, thus contributing to this new perception of him as 'more human'. It is clear, then, that the novel serves to amplify Howie's character in a way which influences subsequent viewings of the film and may well lead to a more sympathetic response.

Having said that, however, one cannot help but sense in this emergent sympathetic response to, or dissatisfaction with the portrayal of, Howie's character something of a collective resistance against the film's treatment of religion. Kevin's reference to the film's trading in stereotypes as much as Chris's contention that 'at least Howie was true to his beliefs' are charged with an underlying dissatisfaction, and even umbrage. Notably, in both instances, these criticisms are directly levelled at the filmmakers. Moreover, this was a feature of other accounts:

I want to tell the filmmakers that they're wrong; that they're too cynical
(Jen, telephone interview 2006)

I want to suggest that the revised basis upon which these new interpretations are cultivated emerged as part of an increasing sensitivity to the film's processes of demythologisation, and the determined efforts to resist this process. It is significant, for example, that many of the participants described a sense of gradually arriving at an impasse in their ongoing engagement with the film. This process is captured in the following examples:

I used to think the film was spiritual. But I actually think more and more that it's a very nihilistic film [...] it kind of mocks all religions. And I'm not religious, but I do have some kind of spiritual outlook, definitely

(Chris, telephone interview, 2005).

It stirs up contradictory feelings: it's a spiritual film, but then again it's quite condescending, you know, it's as if the filmmakers are suggesting that having a faith of any kind is a weakness, rather than something positive

(Felicity, telephone interview, 2005).

Each of these accounts implicitly refers to the dialectic of myth. In all examples, the emergent sentiment pivots around a central irony whereby the film is now felt to mock and contradict the very spiritual consciousness it had at an earlier time induced. This recognition generates a distinct feeling of unease and dissatisfaction,

and, again a concern to challenge the filmmakers' apparent cynicism. Ironically, then, part of the fan's determined efforts to challenge the authorial intent involves, by default, a justification of Christianity.

I say by default because I actually think there is a more fundamental issue at stake, namely, the need to bridge the gap produced by feelings of uncertainty. As is evident in Chris's comment (above), confronting the dialectic of myth head on produces feelings of existential angst and incoherency. These sentiments were expressed elsewhere in the follow-up interviews, as the examples below demonstrate:

It [the effects of prolonged engagement with the film] goes really, really deep. You know, it's this feeling of the rug being pulled out from underneath you, like religious beliefs and Howie as an authority as well. Having those certainties removed can be frightening - it's about having to be responsible for your own actions

(Sadara, interview, 2005).

It [the film] dances a bit too close to the edge of the abyss

(Kevin, telephone interview, 2006).

I'm not as enthusiastic about the Pagan aspect [of the film] as I used to be [...] It's the religious plight that's really taken over for me, and like, how do you go on if (0.4). Well, that's what I mean about Howie - is he so wrong or so misguided in his beliefs if that's all he has? I mean if it's those beliefs which make living at all meaningful, should he be condemned?

(Tim, interview, 2005).

These comments forcefully underscore the long-term effects of the film's anti-mythic vein which not only gradually works to destabilise a previously coherent reading of the film, but more fundamentally serves to shatter the ontological security afforded by having a coherent myth to live by.

Curiously though, the difficulty these fans experienced in maintaining a coherent reading of the film did not lead to a decline in their commitments to it. Paradoxically, these increasingly contradictory experiences with the film seem to have ushered in a new phase of intense, active engagement, as the following examples illustrate:

For a time I became obsessed [...] with scrutinising it [the film], and the novel especially. You see, I was looking for signs of any cracks in its facade, I mean the kind of hard-line agnosticism that runs throughout it [...] And I think you can find them [cracks] more so in the novel than the film

(Kevin, telephone interview, 2006).

I think it [the film] has become even more important to me recently. It's made me think hard about my own mortality

(Gemma, telephone interview, 2005).

I'd say I watch it more often now than ever, and I think that's because I'm starting to see things a bit differently. Losing mum made me think about death and, you know, if there really is anything after this life [...] and the film, and OK, in a negative way, seems to be delving into the same concerns

(Jen, telephone interview, 2006).

These statements are inherently complex. On the one hand, they suggest that going back to the text involves new attempts to make it comply with one's changing priorities. Kevin's 'obsession' with scouring the novel and film for signs of a latent spiritual sentiment on the part of the filmmakers, for example, seems to be driven by his own increasing concern to avoid the 'abyss'. But there is also evidence that respondents are becoming more engaged with the film so as to work through substantial questions about what it means to be human. Gemma and Jen's increasing concerns with their own mortality are clear examples in this respect. In other words, there is a sense in which continued engagement with the film involves a greater willingness to open oneself up to the complexities of life.

So far, then, my discussion of the longitudinal response to religion has been largely concerned to explicate the broader trajectory along which it is mobilised. To recapitulate, the response to religion was largely characterised by a movement from revolt to revision. Initially, most fans discovered revolutionary potential in constructing an anti-Christian/pro-Pagan interpretation of the film. However, in most cases, this reading fragmented over the course of time, giving rise to conflictual feelings and an increasing dissatisfaction with the film's perceived nihilism. Moreover, the response was to revise their earlier readings to suit their needs and desires.

Returning to the central concern of my study, these findings have much to tell us about the relationship between personal mythopoesis and, in this instance, enduring cult fandom. For at the most fundamental level, and as discussed in Chapter 1, they clearly show the ways in which these fans continued to engage with the film as a means of maintaining a coherent sense of self in the face of contradiction and/or the threat of the meaningless of life. Although these fans demonstrated different strategies and differing degrees of self-consciousness, the value placed on the necessity of myth in these accounts demonstrates the strong sense of self it affords. For example, those respondents who later revised their viewpoint of Howie's beliefs as derisory, thus displaying towards him a new sympathy, were attempting to retain some sense of meaning and purpose in their own lives.

These fans negotiated the dialectic of myth in ways which mirrored their own mythic concerns at a given point in time, thus highlighting the processes of assimilation and accommodation which are necessary to the ongoing project of personal mythmaking. But why did this process centre on religion? Why was *The Wicker Man's* treatment of religion especially pertinent for these fans and what accounts for the similar ways in which they embraced it? In order to shed light on these questions, it is instructive to situate the findings of the foregoing discussion within a relevant socio-historical, cultural and developmental context.

Myths in context

It is often observed (and not without condescension) that the cultish devotion for *The Wicker Man* is especially ironic given the film's fundamental scepticism towards the cult mindset. Allan Brown, for example, points to the paradox whereby 'a film with uncomfortable things to say about the cult mentality should find itself landed with a cult of its own' (2000: xxv). Anthony Shaffer echoes a similar patronising incredulity towards the film's fans: 'I wonder if these fans are bright enough to realise they're doing to the movie what the islanders did to the Old Religion' (quoted in Brown, 2000: 166).

These statements are reflective of the cynicism often levelled at cult fandom, and perform the kind of value judgements and 'moral dualisms' discussed by Jensen (1992) and Hills (2002) respectively. Brown's analysis of fans rests on invoking derogatory stereotypes: fandom signals 'a reluctance to engage with the messy world outside [...] and a retreat into the fixed and known' (Brown 2000: 172). In this respect, the battle to alter the popular perception of fans as overly emotional, awkward misfits begun by Henry Jenkins in the early 1990s is far from over, thus indicating the need to continually challenge negative fan stereotypes. But the answer does not lie in elevating fans to the status of ideological critics, or else perceiving them as cultural rebels. As I have suggested, the tendency in much scholarship to sanitise cult fandom of its acutely emotional dimension is not conducive to arriving at any pertinent understanding of that which is involved, for it not only runs counter to empirical fact, it also fails to address the extent of which individuals are invested in the very cultural myths which may be problematised by the fan text. It is my contention that an investigation of the specific factors which would render certain individuals more sensitive to a particular text's ambiguous treatment of cultural myths provides a more apposite route to understanding.

Socio-cultural factors

Thus, in addressing the question of why religion was central to these fans' ongoing commitments to the film it is relevant to consider first the changing socio-cultural backdrop against which these fans cultivated and developed their personal myths. It is of immense significance, for example, that the fans in my focal study belong to the

first generation to grow up in an emergent post-Christian society. Although the decline of Christianity as the state religion of the modern Western world dates back to the nineteenth century (Bederida, 1996), there is a general consensus amongst scholars that this process accelerated considerably during the 1960s, particularly in Britain and America (Bederida, 1996; Roof, 1991). The decade was characterised not only by a steep decline in church attendance,⁷ but also a yearning for alternative spiritual belief systems. It was a time in which the myths that had sustained a previous generation were being called into question. The so-called 'Baby boomers' (i.e. the generation born between 1943 and 1960) challenged the cultural myths and ideologies which had sustained the previous generation. The countercultural dissatisfaction with prevailing institutions, which were felt to be racist, sexist and devoid of spiritual community, fostered a search for personal freedom which drew on unorthodox faiths such as Paganism and Buddhism. It was, of course, this cultural climate - its iconoclasm and eclecticism, as much as its inherent idealism - which gave *The Wicker Man* its shape and content.

There is a substantial body of work documenting how these changes shaped the characteristics of the emerging generation's religious outlook (see for example Beaudoin, 2000; Flory and Miller *et al.*, 2000, Lynch, 2002). In their book *Gen X' Religion* (Generation X being the term used to identify those born between 1961 and 1981), Flory and Miller (2000) suggest three central features of this generation's relationship to religion: the prioritisation of spiritual experience over religious dogma, a suspicion and inherent dislike of institutionalised forms of religion, and a tendency to seek moral guidance and spiritual transcendence in popular culture.

The fan testimonies discussed in this chapter bear the traces of this shift in religious speculation, and reflect the characteristics of Generation X outlined above. This is evident not only in the respondents' mistrust of Christian dogma but also in their readiness to embrace a mediated form of Paganism as a viable alternative.

Having said that, however, the fan responses discussed in this chapter cannot be so neatly contained within this discourse. Whilst the respondents demonstrated a dislike of Christian dogma, and claimed to have rejected it in adolescence, they nonetheless revealed in other ways the extent to which they remained implicitly invested. This

investment might be better characterised as a lingering sense of confusion and ambivalence. These fans exhibited in their narratives a strong sense in which their religious upbringings had fostered feelings of guilt, and it is clear that the film spoke powerfully to these unresolved tensions. But there was also a feeling of anger and betrayal, as well as a sense of loss, as was evident in those examples which conveyed a sense of bitter lamentation in having been fed a 'big lie'. Moreover, their accounts were littered with suggestions that are indicative of the ontological ruptures incurred by the expose of this myth. It is precisely these anomalies in fan narratives which stand in sharp contradiction to the common wisdom of Generation X discourse. Flory and Miller, for example, judge a scenario in which the parent generation's demystification of traditional religion in the 1960s left the emerging generation with nothing to believe in or else to rebel against:

Parents hesitated to stuff religion down their kids' throats. They wanted their children to choose for themselves [...] active churchgoing was not on the Sunday agenda, as it had been in the past. Consequently, many children had nothing to rebel against as they moved into their teenage years and simultaneously no set path to follow

(Flory and Miller, 2000: 4).

But religion was a part of this generation's story; institutionalised forms of religion did not simply disappear from the social and cultural agenda. Even if religion was not reinforced in the familial context, it was (and still is) a powerful socialising tool in the context of education in schools. Even so, the processes of religious transmission and internalisation are more complex and diffuse. As McAdams asserts, in a culture dominated by the image, religious socialisation is now far more likely to take place through the media as opposed to the more traditional contexts. (McAdams, 1993: 64). This was evident in those examples suggesting the moral lessons acquired from horror films consumed in childhood. Thus religion continued to form a significant dimension of this generation's experiences regardless of whether or not it was practised within the family.

The unique circumstances surrounding this generation's relationship to religion, I would argue, involved not so much a search for a spiritual identity in a society where religion no longer figured, but instead created a condition whereby the formative beliefs which were part of their religious socialization were publicly exploding. By the time these fans reached adolescence and young adulthood elements of their formative myths were already in dispute, and this was nowhere more evident than in the media. The relaxation in censorship laws at the end of the 1960s meant that the challenge to traditional religion was played out in films and television programmes, most notably the biting religious satire we find in Monty Python's *The Life of Brian* (1978). No previous generation had witnessed the beliefs they had been exposed to in childhood so publicly and utterly renounced. In short these were times which fostered contradictory attitudes towards traditional religion.

Taking into consideration the contradictions surrounding religion during this period helps to explain the marked ambivalence in fan testimonies. Thus the centrality of religion in the enduring fandoms discussed herein is not merely a reflection of contemporary postmodern forms of religiosity. More specifically, it is linked to a fundamental experience of displacement, the roots of which can be traced back to these fans' formative years - the particular contradictions around religion at this time, and the confusion implicitly registered by these changes.

Thus, it can be argued that the specific socio-historical and cultural changes occurring at this time converged so as to render the fans in my study as being uniquely positioned in relation to the film's dialectical treatment of religion, addressing those contradictions unique to their own moment and at the same time offering a countermyth which was culturally sanctioned. To this end, the film affords these fans an important and ongoing means of confronting, expressing and working through these deeply-felt contradictions whilst at the same time providing the seeds of a substitute myth upon which to develop their spiritual identities.

Developmental factors

The centrality of religion in the respondents' ongoing relationship with the film can also be illuminated from within a developmental context, within which the specific age of the participants becomes a major factor in accounting for the nature of the

trajectory discussed in this chapter – from revolt to revision - as well as its cultural timing. The longitudinal study conducted herein covered a period during which most of the participants made the transition from their thirties to their forties. As Table 5.1 (below) indicates, in 2006 most had entered, or were close to entering, mid-life. ⁸

Table 5.1:
Ages of participants in the longitudinal study in 2006

Respondent	Age in 2006	Respondent	Age in 2006
Tim	44	Jen	40
Kevin	42	Chris	39
Felicity	41	Adrian	37
Gemma	41	Sadara	36

The transition from the thirties to the forties (midlife transition) is commonly characterised in developmental studies as a period involving significant changes in the motivation and concerns of the individual (Levinson et al., 1978; McAdams, 1993). The thirties have been seen as a time in which the individual becomes increasingly more concerned with fashioning a sense of one’s own roots (Levinson, 1978). Following Levinson, Leonie Sugarman summarises the thirties as a period ‘heralded by the sensation that life is losing its provisional quality and is becoming more serious. There is a feeling of time pressure – that if we want to change our life we must do so now, for soon it will be too late [...] It entails a deepening of roots’ (2001: 117). Conversely, the forties is characterised by an increasing concern with mortality. Indeed, for Levinson *et al.*, the midlife transition above all else involves relinquishing the myth of immortality: ‘one of the strongest and least malleable of human myths’ (1978: 215).

The findings of this chapter can be mapped onto the above developmental model. As we saw, at an earlier time in their respective fandoms, and whilst these fans were still in their thirties, the film’s Pagan elements provided a significant resource for constructing a myth within which a concern with cultural roots was indeed

foregrounded. But eventually, fans grew increasingly disillusioned with the film's existential ethic, which in many cases was perceived as nihilistic, thus leading to practices which witnessed these fans struggling to preserve its spiritual integrity. Again, in most cases, respondents expressed an increasing concern with their own mortality. Thus, while the film initially offered fans an appealing countermyth at a time in life when one's roots was a developmental concern, it later conflicted with a new concerns to foster a spiritual framework. A clear admission of this was reflected in the following example within which Kevin admitted to having revised his earlier atheistic position. When asked about atheism, he stated:

I've revised that thinking over time. Well, it always was a bit of an exaggeration. Perhaps it's because I'm not getting any younger, I dunno, but I do feel it's important to have a faith of some sort; it might be a comfort thing even. I know I'm not exactly old old...but I think about my own mortality much more than I used to. It doesn't bode well to grow too cynical

(Kevin, telephone interview, 2006).

The emergent need to preserve a sense of the film's spiritual quality, to off-set its nihilism, is also significant in light of research which has argued for a link between midlife and spirituality. Jung (1933, 1964), who is often credited with first observing this link, suggested that the increasing concern with mortality during midlife is that which facilitates a greater search for spirituality. Moreover, there is a wealth of supporting research (see for instance Campbell, 1988; Sinnott, 1994; McFadden, 1996). Thus, the dissatisfaction many of the respondents came to feel in relation to the film's nihilism may well be reflective of age-related concerns to foster a sense of spirituality.

Another notable feature of the responses in the longitudinal study was that by 2006, the respondents demonstrated a marked sensitivity towards the film's dialectic, whereas earlier they had selectively interpreted it to satisfy their own desires. Thus, no longer concerned to make excuses for those elements of the film which threatened to destabilise their preferred readings, many fans instead describe in their accounts coming up against the contradictions inherent in the film. Notably, it was at this

stage that the fan accounts took on a difference in tone. Unlike the inherent idealism which earlier characterised the respondents' quest to experience sensations beyond the mundane, and to foster ideals based on authentic truths, later accounts incorporate elements which are of a decidedly more sombre nature, and which seem concerned to address the contradictions in experience. Sadara's recognition of the uncertainties brought about by facing up to one's responsibilities in a world in which the certainties of youth no longer hold true is a case in point.

Notably, Dan McAdams has suggested that midlife signals an important shift in the mode of personal mythmaking, characterised by a period 'of reassessment and revision of the life story' (1993: 198). 'Youthful idealism gives way to a more contemplative pessimism', and at the same time the 'the personal myth often adopts a narrative tone that incorporates more tragic and ironic elements' (1993: 200). Midlife involves the surfacing of feelings of uncertainty about the world, but gradually leads to a greater 'acceptance of inherent contradictions or paradoxes [...] even though they cannot be fully understood or logically reconciled' (1993: 201). In short, as 'adults move forwards in their forties' they are more able to identify and begin the process of reconciling the fundamental conflicts in their myths (1993: 202). Thus, the shift from idealism to pessimism, revolt to revision, which was characteristic of the longitudinal response to the film's dialectical treatment of religion, can also be explained in terms of a developmental readiness to engage with the complexities and contradictions of life.

Conclusion: When the myths no longer fit

A central aim of this chapter has been to explore the cult formation's evolution over time so as to ascertain how and why the fan-text relationship endures. Although the concept of longevity is recognised as a defining characteristic of cult film fandom, I have suggested that work in this area is particularly under-explored. Even so, this has not precluded scholarly speculation. As discussed earlier, cult film scholarship often foregrounds an assumed link between the durability of cultism and a commitment based on the politics of oppositional/subcultural tastes and values.

In an attempt to challenge this assumption, as well as to redress the extant gap in research, I have sought to trace the ongoing attachments of seven dedicated *Wicker* fans over a period of seven years. The longitudinal component of my study has facilitated three central concerns here. Firstly, I wanted to establish that which is involved in specific instances of enduring fandom. Secondly, it seemed important to track the changes occurring in the fan-text relationship, and particularly, the emergence of conflictual feelings which I was able to observe over time. Finally, the longitudinal sample has provided a means of investigating the relationship between mythwork and enduring cult fandom, and specifically, my concern to ask how far mythwork can be seen as an important mainstay of enduring cult fandom.

In cultivating an approach equipped to address these concerns, I have proposed the concept of the 'dialectic of myth' - a structural ambiguity which is operant in the myths mobilised by the text, and a mechanism intended to nuance the more typical tendency to perceive the cult text in terms of a tool of cultural demystification and transgression. The dialectic of myth, in other words, enables us to map the fan-text relationship onto the dynamic interface between cultural and personal myths. Moreover, as I have insisted throughout, precisely how this dialectic is negotiated depends at the very least on how fans are invested in the myths which become mobilised and destabilised by the text. For the purposes of this chapter, I have limited my focus to the dialectical treatment of religious myths in the film, and have sought to trace fan responses to this particular dynamic accordingly.

The findings show a similar pattern in the way fans negotiated the dialectic. Initially, all of the respondents interpreted the film as a critique of Christianity, and it is clear that such readings enabled certain psychological needs to be fulfilled, as was evident in the cathartic function of the film's blasphemous content. Fans found in the film a valuable means by which to articulate frustrations stemming from their own religious upbringings. The film enabled them to reaffirm an earlier adolescent rejection of Christianity; and yet ironically, the emergent sentiment in fan testimonies at this stage pointed to ways in which they were implicitly invested in these formative beliefs. Why else would their accounts consistently hinge upon feelings of deception, abandonment and dislocation? More accurately then, the film brought to the fore unacknowledged tensions surrounding religion, enabling fans at an earlier stage in

their fandom a means to work through negative feelings and contradictions, to reconcile a myth that had long grown dysfunctional. Paradoxically, the film to an extent generated the very tensions the fans supposed they arrive at independently. The fact that the film seemed perfectly pitched to address these tensions thus contributes to the feelings of personal resonance and direct address.

Perhaps these fandoms would have ended there had it not been for the fact that the film also offered them an appealing countermyth. Whilst I do not want to suggest too rigid a scenario in which the film destroys the last remains of one myth only to hand fans a spiritual substitute, it seems clear that the Pagan-informed practices these fans became engaged in served to assuage the feelings of dislocation, as well as replace certain social and spiritual functions traditionally provided by conventional religions. But the transition between these myths was more complex, subtle, gradual and organically occurring; and it is important not to overlook the significance of the film's original role in raising a spiritual consciousness in these fans.

However, the use of the film in cultivating spiritual practices was complicated by the fact that the film came to undermine the spiritual longings it had at an earlier time induced. In order for fans to continue to accommodate the film they needed to find ways to make it relevant within the terms of their own developing personal myths, and they did this largely by discovering new ways to preserve the film's spiritual quality. Thus, in seeking to justify Howie's beliefs these fans were also seeking to secure a sense of coherency in their own personal narratives. Thus, fans' continued engagement with the text oscillated between the spiritual and the secular, the sacred and the profane, producing a personal dialectic which quickened the mythmaking process.

I have argued that these findings need to be understood in light of certain conditions which coincided so as to render these fans especially sensitive to the film's dialectic of religious myth. In socio-cultural terms, this can be characterised as a conflict emerging from the fact that these fans were formally (and also informally) socialised into a religious ideology which underwent significant changes in this period, the full effect of which coincided with these fans reaching adolescence, and thereby a time in which personal ideology is crucially worked out. The film thus spoke to this

generation in a particular way about the contradictions they had experienced as a result of growing up in an emergent post-Christian context. It forced fans to confront some of their innermost personal fictions, to address unacknowledged tensions, some of which occupy a privileged place in personal imagination and implicitly self-defining. Significantly, the results produced here show a rather more complex picture of so-called 'Generation X' attitudes towards religion than is suggested in some of the available literature.

In addition, I have argued for the significance of the specific age-range of my respondents in understanding the centrality of religion in their responses and the trajectory these responses were to develop along. The fact that the participants were at a transitional stage in their lives explains why they were similarly sensitive to the tensions in the film. My discussion of certain age-related concerns also helps to explain why this group similarly came up against the dialectic when they did, thus demonstrating again the significance of generational factors to the cultural timing of this particular cult formation.

Taking all this into account, it is clear that the film became pivotal to the task of myth-work for these fans precisely because it tapped into and challenged simultaneously the very foundations upon which they had built their mythic identities and concerns. Some of the later comments in their testimonies bear the traces of a process of reconciliation occurring. Felicity's suggestion that you 'grow with the film emotionally and spiritually' is a good example, and reflects sentiments in the wider sample. The following examples are from the third questionnaire and are responses to my question: How, if at all, has your understanding of the film changed?

The Wicker Man taught me that there are things I cannot change -
sometimes good just doesn't triumph

(Male, 36, questionnaire 3, 2006).

I think the best time to watch the film is in your formative years. But it
grows even richer in meaning as we get that bit older

(Male 44, questionnaire 3, 2006).

These statements reflect the cult text's didactic function - they suggest a widening of moral and philosophical vision from which we gain a sense of how the text provided these fans with an invaluable means of negotiating a more advanced understanding and acceptance of their experiences, but also the means by which to push the myth forward.

Thus, the dialectic of myth served to move these fans beyond mere rebellion towards a process of personal mythwork, which required fans to confront, but also to bridge, the gaps in their myths generated by ongoing conflict. They came to realise that elements of their supporting myths were not only thwarted by the text but also rendered defunct. The result was a turning inwards to focus on the very contradictions. As Jerome Bruner asserts: '[w]hen the myths no longer fit the internal plights of those who require them, the transition to newly created myths may take the form of a chaotic voyage into the interior' (Bruner, quoted in Feinstein, 1977: 210).

Cult film fans are often perceived as sophisticated and/or radical cultural decoders, capable of consciously responding to the text's ambiguities in ways reflective of their commitment to rebellious, demanding and challenging texts, as well as their oppositional taste preferences. Even though the respondents displayed these competencies, my research has demonstrated that beyond this level of engagement a much more complex process is occurring. Whilst the film's transgressive qualities enabled fans to articulate alternative and/or oppositional views, continued observation has revealed that enduring cult fandom is linked to the ways in which the fan-text relation is involved in the ongoing dynamic interplay between cultural and personal modes of mythmaking. Moreover, the determining features of this process were embedded in a complex web of socio-cultural, historical and personal factors.

Whilst the findings presented in this chapter cannot be taken as representative of all cult fandoms, nor can they speak for all *Wicker* fans, what they do show is that rebellion and opposition can be a stage or even an effect, rather than a condition, of cult fandom. This in itself suggests a need to explore issues of endurance from the perspective of specific instances of cultism. In this precise instance, then, the cult formation lives on partly because of the text's incisive, critical and ambiguous

intervention into a period of heady cultural mythmaking, and partly due to the contradictory conditions created in the aftermath of this cultural epoch for the subsequent generation. The fans studied here were precariously poised in relation to these changes, and conditions emerged rendering them susceptible to the full, delayed cultural impact of these changes.

Thus 'when the myths no longer fit,' the cult film may continually suggest itself to the fan in ways which facilitate the 'voyage' towards mythic integration, within which the coherency and integrity of the self is fundamentally at stake. It is a voyage which enables the individual to negotiate the transition between a dysfunctional myth and an emerging one, and whereby the text aids the fan to continually revise his or her own story. And it is a voyage which in the contemporary modern world is not only increasingly aided by cultural texts, but is also occurring in the most unexpected of places, and in response to the unlikeliest of texts:

For me, as an unmethodological (if not very inspired) fan, *Showgirls* has been an invaluable cultural resource. As I thought, talked and wrote about it I *worked through* whatever obsessed me at the time: the double life of the academic fan; the sexual thrills of consumer culture; the inevitable triumph of capitalism; the agreeable way that irony legitimizes an addiction to trash culture; and so on. It was a means of revising what Rorty [1989: 72] calls one's 'final vocabulary': '*the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively, sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives*'

(I.Q. Hunter, 2000: 201, my emphasis).

¹ It should be noted that could apply to other factors, most notably gender. For a discussion of anti-myth and gender in *The Wicker Man*, see Ashurst (2005).

² The extract recited by Lord Summerisle is taken from Walt Whitman's, 'Song of Myself', a poem featured in his collection, *Leaves of Grass* (1855).

³ There has been significant controversy over the validity of Frazer's study. For an insightful discussion in this respect see Koven (2006).

⁴ These practices seem to support Tanya Krzywinska's proposition that the film by participating in an imagined topography enable viewers to construct an alternative cultural identity, unpublished paper

⁵ For instance, at the *Wicker* convention in 2000, I met a group of ten men, mostly from Manchester, who were staying in a nearby rented cottage and planning their own May Day Wicker burning, a tradition they had observed for the past three years.

⁶ At the time of follow-up interviews Adrian was unavailable due to work commitments.

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- ⁷ For example, social historian, Bryan Wilson, notes that in 1968 fewer than 25 percent of the adult population in England and Wales attended an orthodox church. (see Bederida, 1996: 267).
- ⁸ The period designated as 'midlife' varies slightly in the available literature. Here I am following Levinson *et al.*, (1978) in highlighting the significance of the age forty transition as the onset of midlife.

Conclusion

The overall aim of this thesis has been to explicate and explore the generative mechanisms and sustaining factors of that which I have referred to as the 'relatively spontaneous cult formation'. To this end, I began by delimiting a particular faction of *Wicker* fandom and went on to outline three specific concerns related to this particular formation. Firstly, in all cases, the attachment grew out of an essentially affective experience with the text itself, within which there were a number of consistent features, most notably a strong sense of personal resonance and feelings of inexplicable familiarity. Secondly, fan accounts of the initial encounter with the film consistently pointed towards an aesthetic experience which generated magical and transcendent feelings. Finally, I observed that over time the initial sense of awe and fascination gave way to conflictual feelings. During the initial phase of my research, it also emerged that my participants tended to fall into the generation which grew up in the 1970s and 1980s. Moreover, these fans were further linked by their investment in British horror in childhood and adolescence. It was these early findings which shaped the central concerns of this study and subsequently developed into the following questions: what are the processes which link these fans to this text? And what factors underpin the cultural timing of this formation?

My approach to these questions has centred upon an investigation of three specific trajectories, each of which reflected my theoretical concern to explore the role of personal mythology as a decisive factor of the spontaneous cult formation. The theoretical framework I have developed herein was not artificially imposed on the study from the outset, but instead emerged as part of an inductive progression determined by several years of empirical research into *Wicker* fandom. The first trajectory took us some way back into the personal history of the fan in an attempt to shed light on the affective bond which was in evidence from the fan's initial discovery of the text. I wanted to ascertain whether or not it was possible that these fans were preconsciously disposed to the film and, if so, through what mechanisms? Taking the theme of topophilia as our focal point, I sought to trace the articulation of affect expressed in fan accounts back to a collective source and, since it was shown

to have provided an early site of personal mythmaking for these fans, the British horror factor provided us with a compelling context here.

The second trajectory focused on the relationship between the initial aesthetic experience with the text and subsequent forms of extra-textual fan practices, and was primarily aimed at discovering more about the essentially magical and transcendent feelings the film aroused in these fans. Basing my account on fan descriptions of the initial textual encounter, I proceeded to chart the ways in which the cult aesthetic encouraged a visceral and multi-sensorial viewing experience for these fans. In addition, I sought to ascertain how these experiences were subsequently assimilated into fans' existing personal myths. Here I concentrated on manifest fan practices, with a view to observing a link to the aesthetic import. Finally, I observed the significance of the film's widespread cultural mythos, seeking to ascertain how it serves to aid the process of mythic assimilation.

The third trajectory explored the fan-text relationship as it develops over time as a means of addressing questions related to the emerging dissonance which characterised the ongoing relationships under focus here. My focus was with fan responses to the film's religious theme, and the longitudinal component of this study was thus employed in this instance in order to pinpoint decisive moments of tension. Longitudinal analyses of cult fandom have not been forthcoming in cult film scholarship and indicate a significant gap in existing research, and so I was concerned to provide an account of the longevity of cult fandom more generally. My strategy was two-fold: firstly, I introduced the notion of the 'dialectic of myth'; a theoretical formula designed to preserve the film's ambiguous representation of cultural myths. Whilst the film could be read as a critique of religion, it simultaneously presented alternative religious practices in an appealing and persuasive way. One aim then was to observe the ways in which these fans negotiated this dialectic in their ongoing attachments. Secondly, I considered a number of historically and culturally specific factors which would help to explain why the film's treatment of religion was particularly resonant for these fans.

A central theoretical concern underlying this study, in relation to my contention that cult fandom is operationalised through a process of personal mythmaking, has been to ascertain where the mythopoeic potential of cultism lies. The findings show that

its mythopoeic potential can be generated in three ways. Firstly, it can emerge from a text's capacity to awaken associative networks of affect accumulated in the cultural experiences of a specific faction of individuals who have similarly invested in a shared imaginary. The text taps into this shared imaginary, inducing an 'experiential identification' which in turn acts as a catalyst for the mythmaking process. Secondly, it can be activated at the sensory-aesthetic interface; in instances where individuals are attuned to the 'primitive' aesthetics of the cult text. The result is a powerful, embodied event; arousing transcendent feelings and enlarging the mythic quality and 'aura' of the fan object. Finally, it can emerge in relation to a text which addresses contradictions which speak directly to a group's particular experiences, thus signalling the historical and cultural specificity of the cult formation.

Reflecting on the trajectories explored herein, it is clear that there are certain networks which link this fan faction to the text in complex ways and help to explain the generative mechanisms and sustainable factors involved in the spontaneous cult formation. The cult formation, in this precise instance, emerges from a network of interconnections in terms of belonging to the same cultural moment and similarities occurring in relation to how these fans drew on that moment in cultivating their own personal identities. My original supposition of a cult predisposition thus seems to have been confirmed. What this study has revealed is that the mechanisms involved are related to complex processes which take place in the fans' affective-associative networks. This provides an alternative to the more commonplace conception that cult texts appeal to viewers' knowledge of media intertexts on a strictly conscious level, leading me to conclude that fans that forge intense and affectively-charged attachments to a specific cultural text are preconsciously disposed to doing so in ways determined first and foremost by their personal myths. The preconscious dimension of experience (and indeed spectatorship) is therefore central to the processes of cult fandom, and provides a welcome corrective to the rather limiting tendency of many cult scholars to focus exclusively on either unconscious processes or modes of conscious cognition.

In all of this, it seems that there needs to be a substantial temporal gap for the cult proper to emerge. What I mean by this is that the cultic force of the film for these fans was in many ways the result of a delayed cultural impact. The film's emotional charge derived from its ability to tap into elements of a deeply embedded cultural

myth accumulated and sedimented over time, and thereby inducing a powerful experiential identification upon recall. The cult attachment was forged for these fans on account of the way in which it brought to the surface elements of a past self, whether that be in the shape of innermost fantasies or unresolved tensions. It is precisely because the personal and cultural roots tapped by the film run so deep that its impact was powerful enough to trigger the mythmaking process.

The unavailability of the text until relatively recently contributed to this process; fans first discovered the film well into adulthood, and at a time in their lives when they were developmentally more open to specific age-related concerns. The growing sense of urgency with which many fans used the film to develop the spiritual dimensions of their identities was a case in point, and reflected broader observations in developmental studies. Many cult formations accrue around films which have lay culturally dormant until they are discovered by a new generation. From the perspective of personal mythopoesis, it therefore becomes possible to understand the psycho-cultural mechanisms which underpin this process.

Two further considerations follow, both of which are related to the status of the mythmaking processes of cult. The first raises the question of the extent to which it might be characterised in terms of a religious process. The quasi-religious dimension of cult fandom has formed an underlying concern throughout my study, and has been on display in fan accounts across each of the empirical chapters. As I noted in the introduction, the religious dimension is often invoked in existing definitions of cult, but has remained a marginal theoretical concern therein. Moreover, it is hardly likely to be accommodated within prevailing cult concepts, within which the focus is very much on rebellion and resistance. More work on the connections between fandom and religion has been conducted on television fans. Even so, work in this area has posited broadly sociological explanations, which sees the object of fandom serving to replace the traditional social functions of religion in an increasingly secularised society, or else it has been restricted to attempts to locate 'sacred' themes and symbols in specific fan texts. Elsewhere, the religious element of fandom has been seen as an effect of discursive and performative iterations of the self.

My study, by contrast, has demonstrated that the religious dimension of fandom emerges out of a number of interrelated psycho-cultural processes, and can occur in a

number of different fan contexts, thus suggesting that this too is subject to the processes of cult. This study indicates that there are multiple sites of cult religiosity: firstly, the religious attitude can emerge out of the processes of a mythic awakening, within which elements of the individual's personal myth are brought forth, and producing powerful feelings of personal resonance and inexplicable familiarity. Fans consistently used the term 'spiritual' to describe these experiences. Secondly, it emerged from an aesthetic encounter with the text, an experience which, in turn, influenced the ways in which fans interpreted the film's continued cultural presence and their own ongoing attachments to it. This process was itself linked to the mythic assimilation, and significant here was the potential to observe and subsequently safeguard a network of magical connections and meaningful synchronicities. Finally, religiosity emerged out of the process of psychological moratorium, and the feelings of loss the transition from a previously sustainable myth involves. In Chapter 5, I discussed the changing relationship to the fan object and drew attention to the ways in which the ongoing engagement forced fans to confront and work through innermost conflicts, and thereby reconcile dissonance in their lives. Clearly, that which links these processes is that they are each bound up with the ongoing quest to integrate the sources of identity into a personally meaningful whole. Where, then, does the significance of religion figure in this?

In fact, a number of theorists have linked the ongoing task of identity formation to a religious process. Most prominent, perhaps, is Jung's explanation of religion in terms of an effect of the processes of individuation (1990, 1993). That is, the individual's potential for full psychological development. Jung even goes as far as to suggest that religions such as Christianity have always traditionally functioned as a means of aiding the process of individuation - its teachings helping the individual to successfully negotiate (psychologically) the transitions of the self across the stages of life. It is this perspective which typically informs personal myth theorists' characterisation of the sacredness of the self narrative. Whilst I find this notion to be of some relevance here, I am generally resolved to thinking that the Jungian emphasis on the transpersonal realm of the 'collective unconscious' is too limiting a basis on which to theorise the self.

Based on my findings, it seems reasonable to conclude that cult fandom resembles the religious process insofar as it involves the integration of fragments of experience

into a coherent whole. But I would argue that those fragments, and their symbolic value have an experiential basis, the collective significance of which can be explained via recourse to that which I have referred to as the 'collective cognitive unconscious'. This retains my emphasis on the preconscious dimensions of identity formation, and provides a model which can accommodate an appreciation of the way in which the link between identity and religion is subject to historical and cultural processes.

What is needed therefore is a psycho-social model of the relationship between religion and identity. Hans Mol (1982), who also links religion to identity, provides some useful concepts in this respect. For Mol, religion is a process which involves the sacralisation of identity, and thereby fulfils the human tendency towards wholeness and coherency. From this perspective, religion enables and supports the production of a coherent sense of self by way of strengthening the personal and social forces which tend towards the imposition of order on the chaos of experience. Like religion, then, cult fandom enables the imperceptible strands of identity to come to the fore and temporarily fix. But it also engages fans in the processes of revising outmoded parts of their story, built on myths which can no longer support the changing needs and aspirations of the individual. Encounters with objects in the environment which participate in this process - either by affirming or challenging that cohesion - are therefore likely to become sacralised. This helps to explain a number of cult-related behaviours such as exclusivity and feelings of ownership.

This brings us to my second consideration and to the question: what is the temporal orientation of the mythopoeic process of cult? Is it, for example, an essentially progressive development, as the transition from a dysfunctional to a new myth might imply? In what circumstances and under what conditions might this transition be more difficult? Given the neglect of fan audiences in much cult film scholarship such questions have yet to be sufficiently explored, and it is again necessary to reflect on work related to cult television fans as a means of deriving some sort of comparative context. Both Henry Jenkins and Matt Hills have broached questions related to the status of enduring fandom. For Jenkins, who starts from the position that fan texts are ideologically dubious, the processes of fandom which sees the fan actively reworking the text to suit his/her own needs and desires, implies a progressive trajectory, characterised by an increasingly opposed stance towards the dominant

ideology at work in popular texts. It involves, in other words, the gradual politicisation of the fan. For Hills, by contrast, cult fandom is prone to becoming 'stuck', and is thereby a question of whether or not individual fandoms provide a 'good enough third space for affective play' (2002: 112).

The fact that these studies consider the status of enduring fandom at all is a step in the right direction, but there are limitations in both propositions which are again reflective of the underlying assumptions about the self upon which they depend. As I discussed in Chapter 1, for Jenkins, fan subjectivity is inherently rational. Fans consciously choose texts which reflect their ideological commitments or else expend a great deal of time and energy transforming ideologically deficient texts to meet their specific needs. From this perspective, fandom is geared towards a self-conscious search for meaningful stories and the creation of a cultural utopian. But as I have said, this argument marginalises crucial elements of the fan experience such as the initial resonance and emotional encounter, as well as moments of resistance to corporate changes to their favoured texts. In other words, Jenkins' perception of fans as inherently rational agents leads him to construct a rational set of explanations for these behaviours.

Hills' conceptualisation of the fan-text relationship as 'stuck' is more pertinent, at least in its willingness to concede that cult interest can be characterised by a fixation on a particular text. I would suggest, however, that this description of the cult attachment is symptomatic of conceptualising fandom in Winnicottian terms of the transitional object, rather than reflective of actual fandoms. Conceiving of fandom as a third space between fantasy and reality brings its own limitations; there is little room in this formulation for a sense of movement beyond the rather stilted back and forth motion apparently involved in negotiating this boundary. It is little wonder, then, that Hills is forced to describe the cult attachment as fundamentally 'stuck'. But as I hope to have demonstrated herein, cult objects are not merely transitional objects enabling fans to play across the boundaries of fantasy and reality. Much more than this, they are objects which aid the transition between dysfunctional and emergent personal myths. This sufficiently nuances the idea of fandom as a transitional realm and in a way which accommodates a greater sense of movement and development.

In contrast to both Jenkins and Hills, I would suggest that fandom is neither inherently progressive nor 'stuck' per se, but is instead prone to oscillating between these two positions. As this study has hopefully demonstrated, cult fandom operates along a push-pull dynamic. What is needed, therefore, is an understanding of its specific sticking points. I would argue that these emerge in moments when elements of a myth which remain functional for the fan are in some way directly challenged by their involvement in fandom. A brief example drawn from my wider research on *Wicker* fandom is useful here. In 2007, I wrote a research paper examining the significance of the overwhelmingly negative fan response to the recent American remake of *The Wicker Man* directed by Neil LaBute (2006). Specifically, I wanted to understand why fans sought to protect the original. A major characteristic of this response, and one which saw fans attempting to draw rigid boundaries around the original film, was an insistence on its quintessential 'Britishness'. Indeed, for a time, many fans including those who participated in my study became fixated on finding ways to mount a case for the story's British national credentials, arguing that it made little sense in its American context.

On the surface, these sentiments, charged as they were with anti-mainstream hostility, resembled the prevailing wisdom to be found in academic work on the cultural politics of cultism. But at the heart of this collective protest was an objection to the supplanting of a very British rural imaginary to an American setting. The remake posed a challenge to the coherency of a much cherished British mythology which, as I demonstrated in Chapter 3, provides a powerful sense of self for these fans. In other words, the shipping of the story to an American context signalled for these fans a loss of identification and generated strategies intended to safeguard and protect this myth.

Throughout my research, similar instances of mythic preservation have been highlighted, and although there has not been space enough to explore these, it would seem that gender is a major factor. In fact, my argument in Chapter 5 could have easily been mapped onto gender. The film's representation of gender, like its treatment of religion, is ambiguous; presenting females as strong and iconoclastic, but simultaneously playing on stereotypes, particularly those found in the horror genre. Elsewhere I have written on this dynamic of the film, suggesting its potential to produce a critical distance in viewers (see Ashurst 2005). But in observing actual

fan responses to the film's portrayal of gender, I discovered a much more complex set of results. Although these fans consciously suggested the film's treatment of gender was progressive and subversive, elements within their accounts told a different story. It would seem that fans prioritise gender formations in personal fantasy over and above any sense of commitment to notions of political correctness. That is to say, these fans, and female just as much as male, displayed a preference for reading the film's treatment of gender in terms of fantasy. In their articulations and artwork, these fans sought to flatten the ironic address and this was sometimes consciously acknowledged through confessions of 'guilty pleasures'. This is an area requiring further investigation, particularly since theories of the intersection of gender and fandom have so far been seen as a performative site of resistance. There are clear similarities here to those elements of Jenkins findings which he contrives to play down, probably out of a felt need to protect fandom from the taint of harbouring seemingly 'regressive' ideologies.

Taking all of this into consideration, I am lead to conclude that the temporal orientation of cult mythmaking is inherently complex; it is both forward-facing and at other times concerned to protect formative elements of identity. But I would advocate an approach to the contentious issues which is committed to ascertaining how they might serve the individual fan, particularly on the imaginary level, rather than castigating fans as infantile or regressive. It is the ebbs and flows of fandom specifically as they relate to the mythmaking process that needs to be considered, and is thus an area for further work.

In the introduction to my study I suggested (following Hills) suspending distinctions between fans and cultists; the semantic uncertainty surrounding these terms independently, as well as the less than convincing attempts at separating them, signalled for me a caution. Whilst at the end of my study I am no closer to fixing a definitive distinction, I am all the more certain that these identities cannot be distinguished along the lines heretofore supposed. Indeed, one of the implications of this study's findings is that the line between fan and cult identities remains uncertain. If traditional fandom is typically defined by its deference to the fan object, whilst cultism is thought to exhibit a rebellious disregard for the text, then it is significant that the findings herein show a movement in and out of these supposedly distinct positions.

This throws into question the validity (and integrity) of scholarly attempts to construct cultism as something wholly distinct from fandom. Even now, when empirical audience research is still largely absent from the cult agenda, scholars continue to make unfounded judgements of cultists as more rebellious, more ironic, more savvy. In so doing, they ignore elements of the cult response which do not fit this criterion. An example drawn from the most recent publication on cult film scholarship is particularly telling in this respect. In *The Cult Film Reader*, editors Mathijs and Mendik (2008) include a chapter from Henry Jenkins' *Textual Poachers*. In the accompanying editorial note, the authors suggest their rationale for its inclusion on the basis that the extract selected 'stresses those elements of Jenkins' exploration of fandom which come closest to 'cult viewing' instances, like 'ironic' viewing, 'nomadism', or 'textual poaching' (2008: 429). Curiously, it is precisely those elements of Jenkins' work which I have found to be most telling of the cult response – the emotional resonance, in particular – that are excluded from the above summary of what the cult viewing entails. Does this mean I am obliged to divide my findings up between the cult and fan camp according to the specifications of prevailing wisdom?

The fact is much of what currently passes for cult film scholarship reflects the biased proclivities of academics who have rather fixed ideas about what cult is or should be, and nowhere is this clearer than in the above example. Yet such practices seem particularly misguided in the case of cult which is, after all, still very much in the process of seeking to establish itself as an area of Film Studies worthy of serious academic study. Cult film scholarship should therefore refrain from operating within these limiting and elitist systems of inclusion and exclusion and instead cultivate an approach which is first and foremost committed to embracing cult fandom in all of its complexity. This does not mean that the concepts which typically inform cultism warrant being jettisoned from the research agenda. But academics do need to concede the extent to which the dominant concepts of cult are more reflective of their own stories than those of the fans. Irony, for instance, is surely a sensibility emerging from the academic's liminal positioning in the cultural hierarchy, often serving as a justification for the study of texts which have been culturally devalued, and dependent on a media proficiency only a film scholar could possess.

What I am specifically objecting to here, then, is the way in which the concerns of academics are projected onto subjects who do not necessarily experience these texts in the same way. The cult attachment for most non-academic fans is hardly likely to be founded on the anarchistic assertion of the right to champion texts which have been culturally devalued. Nor do fans generally see themselves as rebelliously defying protocols of proper taste. Rather, these texts often mean something which often cannot be put into words, precisely because they connect so deeply with their personal histories.

Establishing the applicability of these concepts in certain instances is also a basic requirement of the cult scholar embarking on research. The idea of nomadism, for instance, should not be seen as a condition of cult *per se*, but instead treated as a concept which can be usefully brought to bear on those manifestations which display a tendency to draw widely and indiscriminately on a range of fan texts. It is not, in other words, applicable to cult formations centred around a particular text, as I have focused on herein. But nor should concepts be used to create a 'good' impression of cult fandom, as I suspect is true of the concept of nomadism, suggesting as it does the diversity of fandom, as well as enabling theorists to avoid the more thorny implications of the relationship between fandom and fixation. It is hoped that my own account of the one-text cult has dispelled this fallacy, and has in fact pointed to the gains to be made by re-drawing our focus at the more local level.

Cult scholarship therefore needs to cultivate concepts which relate specifically to fan experiences. For example, if textual poaching occurs, it is necessary to ask deeper, probing questions about the personal stake underpinning these actions. I would suggest that the need to preserve elements of the personal myths which are still functional to the fan's sense of self is an important factor to consider when assessing the significance of both textual poaching and anti-mainstream fan discourse, since both engage fans in the processes of assimilation and accommodation which are central to maintaining coherency and order.

This study represents a call to put audiences squarely back on the cult agenda, where they belong. Despite the problems incurred by conducting this type of research – issues of reliability, time, and complexity, to name but a few - I remain certain of its value. Without the audience study the complexities I have uncovered herein would

have remained hidden, and it has at the very least shown that conceiving cult as a site of cultural resistance and rebellion is not wholly appropriate, nor is it the only way to conceptualise modes of cult consumption. Moreover, that which I have hopefully demonstrated is that the affective and experiential, as well as the religious, dimensions of cult fandom are not hopelessly beyond the reach of ethnographic inquiry.

But there is another positive reason for undertaking empirical research: studying fan responses forces us to consider concepts which might initially present difficulties to the researcher on account of their own 'prejudices' (Thomas, 2002). In my own experience, I was often made to confront my own prejudices - the idea of the film as 'spiritual experience' is a case in point. It was a term which bothered me for a long time and was an aspect of this formation that I did not particularly want to investigate. So too the idea of a personal myth initially made me recoil - the term seemed slightly fey, and New-Age, and I wrestled with the fact that if I found it difficult to get past its decidedly whimsical connotations then how could I expect to convince others of its relevance? But, in dialogue with fans, I have found it to be a valuable and accommodating concept for cult studies and it is my hope that the concept will be extended in future research.

One area of research in particular need of further work is the sensorial dimensions of the cult experience. I have made a start in this enterprise, and have found existing work on the subject extremely productive, particularly in opening up ways to grapple with the thornier issue of transcendence, as well as magical and 'primitive' modes of perception. The range of experiences potentiated by the ramshackle quality of many cult texts has remained an under-explored possibility for too long, with most scholars instead preferring to produce accounts of its deconstructive and transgressive potential. And yet, when put under the lens of sensory film theory it becomes clear that the cult text's 'transgressions' are ripe for inducing the kinds of intense responses which so often characterise the cult experience: cult is nothing if not an intense experiential encounter with a text. But taking this dimension of cult seriously requires an appreciation of film in terms of a multi-sensory experience involving embodied viewing subjects. It demands a change of perspective, within which the association between the cultist and cultural mastery needs to be tempered, enabling a greater appreciation of its affective experiences to come to the fore. As I have said,

this does not mean that the exploration of the conscious mechanisms of cult fandom should be secondary to the study of the preconscious processes involved. But listening more closely to fans describing their initial encounters indicates that elements of that experience register at levels beyond that which is processed consciously. This in itself is reason enough to generate models which can better accommodate its experiential dimensions.

It is important to remember that the aesthetic encounter is merely an aspect of a much broader process, in this instance characterised by mythmaking. For me, one of the advantages of thinking of cult in terms of a mythopoeic process is that it demands an inclusive and thoroughgoing methodology which aims to accommodate aspects of the cult experience which have remained under-explored. It demands closer attention to the contingent factors upon which cults are created and sustained, and thereby precludes the temptation to produce partial accounts. Cult is, after all, produced at the interface between text, viewer and context, and I suggest that the combination of methods employed in this study offers a particularly inclusive way of conducting research in this area. This is perhaps best illustrated in Chapter 3, within which I traced the articulation of affect back to a veritable source via the textual history of the fans. This involved attending to salient film and TV memories which have sedimented in personal imagery, and I would suggest that such textual histories are traces of emotional memories, and provide a useful means of gaining access to the experiential and personal dimensions of fandom. But my method here also enabled a consideration of the specific channels through which the cult text was connected to this broader network. In other words, cult concepts need to reflect the intricacy of the processes involved and theorists must work more diligently to create concrete substitutes for the currently vague ideas intended to capture the special resonance of cult texts. The rather simplistic metaphor of the mirror is a case in point here.

Above all, the value of treating cult in terms of a mythopoeic process lies in its capacity to open up a dimension of experience previously overlooked in cult studies; the preconscious mechanisms of cult not only take us closer to that which is so inexplicably compelling about cult films, but also serve as a cautionary reminder that our cult attachments, as well as those of subjects we study, are never as wholly

rational, 'self-conscious', 'anarchistic', 'hip', 'subversive', 'transgressive' or 'rebellious' as many cult film scholars imagine them to be.

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Select Filmography

<i>American Werewolf in London</i>	(US, 1981, dir. John Landis)
<i>A Space Odyssey 2001</i>	(US, 1968, dir. Stanley Kubrick)
<i>Beauty and the Beast</i>	(France, 1946, dir. Jean Cocteau)
<i>Black Narcissus</i>	(UK, 1947, dir. Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger)
<i>Blade Runner</i>	(US, 1982, dir. Ridley Scott)
<i>Blair Witch Project, The</i>	(US, 1999, dir. Daniel Myrick & Eduardo Sanchez)
<i>Blood on Satan's Claw</i>	(UK, 1970, dir. Piers Haggard)
<i>Blood Simple</i>	(US, 1984, dir. Joel Coen)
<i>Blue Velvet</i>	(US, 1986, dir. David Lynch)
<i>Canterbury Tale, A</i>	(UK, 1949, dir. Michael Powell & Emeric Pressburger)
<i>Casablanca</i>	(US, 1942, dir. Michael Curtiz)
<i>Children of the Stones</i>	(UK, 1977, dir. Peter Graham Scott)
<i>A Clockwork Orange</i>	(UK, 1972, dir. Stanley Kubrick)
<i>Countess Dracula</i>	(UK, 1971, dir. Peter Sasdy)
<i>Crow, The</i>	(US, 1994, dir. Alex Proyas)
<i>Dark Star</i>	(US, 1974, dir. John Carpenter)
<i>Day the Earth Stood Still, The</i>	(US, 1951, dir. Robert Wise)
<i>Devil Rides Out, The</i>	(UK, 1968, dir. Terence Fisher)
<i>Don't Look Now</i>	(UK, 1973, dir. Nicolas Roeg)
<i>Dracula</i>	(UK, 1958, dir. Terence Fisher)
<i>Eye of the Devil</i>	(UK, 1966, dir. J. Lee Thompson)
<i>Eyes Without a Face</i>	(France, 1959, dir. Georges Franju)
<i>Fitzcarraldo</i>	(US, 1982, dir. Werner Herzog)
<i>Garden, The</i>	(UK, 1991, dir. Derek Jarman)
<i>Halloween</i>	(US, 1978, dir. John Carpenter)
<i>Harold and Maude</i>	(US, 1971, dir. Hal Ashby)
<i>If</i>	(UK, 1969, dir. Lindsay Anderson)
<i>Last of England, The</i>	(Sweden, 1989, dir. Derek Jarman)

<i>Logan's Run</i>	(UK, 1976, Michael Anderson)
<i>Mars Attacks!</i>	(US, 1986, dir. Tim Burton)
<i>Night of the Demon</i>	(US, 1958, dir. Jacques Tourneur)
<i>Night of the Eagle</i>	(US, 1962, dir. Sidney Hayers)
<i>Night of the Living Dead</i>	(US, 1968, dir. George A. Romero)
<i>Nosferatu: Phantom der Nacht</i>	(France, 1979, dir. Werner Herzog)
<i>Nuts in May</i>	(UK, 1976, dir. Mike Leigh)
<i>Oh Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Laddie</i>	(UK, 1968, dir. Jonathan Miller)
<i>Omega Man, The</i>	(UK, 1972, dir. Boris Sagal)
<i>Owl Service, The</i>	(UK, 1969-1970, dir. Peter Plummer)
<i>Performance</i>	(UK, 1970, dir. Donald Cammell & Nicolas Roeg)
<i>Piano, The</i>	(UK, 1983, dir. Jane Campion)
<i>Picnic at Hanging Rock</i>	(UK, 1976, dir. Peter Weir)
<i>Pink Flamingos</i>	(US, 1972, dir. John Waters)
<i>Planet of the Apes</i>	(US, 1968, dir. Franklin J. Schaffner)
<i>Quadruphenia</i>	(UK, 1979, dir. Franc Roddam)
<i>Quatermass and the Pit</i>	(UK, 1967, dir. Roy Ward Baker)
<i>Robin Redbreast</i>	(UK, 1970, dir. James MacTaggart)
<i>Rosemary's Baby</i>	(US, 1968, dir. Roman Polanski)
<i>Scars of Dracula</i>	(UK, 1970, dir. Roy Ward Baker)
<i>Showgirls</i>	(US 1995, dir. Paul Verhoeven)
<i>Stone Tape, The</i>	(UK, 1972, dir. Peter Sasdy)
<i>Taste the Blood of Dracula</i>	(UK, 1970, dir. Peter Sasdy)
<i>Texas Chainsaw Massacre, The</i>	(US, 1974, dir. Tobe Hooper)
<i>Thing, The</i>	(UK, 1982, dir. John Carpenter)
<i>Thundercrack</i>	(US, 1975, dir. Curt McDowell)
<i>Time Machine, The</i>	(US, 1960, dir. George Pal)
<i>Tin Drum, The</i>	(West Germany, 1979, dir. Volker Schlöndorff)
<i>Tomb of Ligeia, The</i>	(US, 1965, dir. Roger Corman)
<i>Vampyres, Daughters of Darkness</i>	(US, 1975, dir. José Ramón Larraz)
<i>Virgin Witch</i>	(UK, 1971, dir. Norman J. Warren)
<i>Warning to the Curious, A</i>	(UK, 1972, dir. Lawrence Gordon Clark)

Westworld (US, 1973, dir. Michael Crichton)
Wicker Man, The (UK, 1973, dir. Robin Hardy)
Witches, The (UK, 1966, dir. Cyril Frankel)
Witchfinder General (UK, 1968, dir. Michael Reeves)
(The Conqueror Worm)
Withnail and I (UK, 1987, dir. Bruce Robinson)

Appendix 1

Letter published in the *Galloway Gazette* and the accompanying editorial column

'Wicker Man'

I HAVE recently visited Newton Stewart in the hope of finding out information regarding the film 'The Wicker Man' which was based there twenty six years ago. The reason being that I am currently in the process of producing 'The Wicker Man Fanzine', with co-producer, Stuart Belton.

Although our visit proved 'fruitful' in that was discovered some of the filming locations such as Anwoth, Kirkcudbright and Stranraer, we are absolutely mystified as to the whereabouts of 'The Green Man' and the 'Harbour Master's house'.

Therefore, we would be very grateful to anyone who may be able to recall the setting for these scenes. Additionally, we would love to hear from anyone who starred as an extra (especially ex-Douglas Ewart pupils who danced the 'Maypole scene').

Maybe some of you would be willing to share with us your own memories and anecdotes of the big event.

If you can help in any way please contact me on 0161 998 2421 or write to me:

Gail Ashurst, 15 Moor Road,
Northern Moor, Manchester
M23 9BO

On the Wicker Man trail

THIS coming January is the 25th anniversary of the premiere of one of the world's great cult movies: *The Wicker Man*.

Filmed entirely on location in Wigtownshire and the Stewartry in late 1972 and early 1973, the film received its world premiere at Newton Stewart Cinema on 13th January 1974.

During the intervening years, this celtic-gothic thriller has acquired world-wide cult interest second only to *The Prisoner*.

Dubbed by Cinefantastique in 1977 as "The Citizen Kane of British Horror", *Wicker Man* buffs have regularly made pilgrimages to Galloway to seek out the film locations - including the final burning scene at Burrowhead.

And with the 25th anniversary fast approaching, this year has seen something of a *Wicker Man* revival.

This has included circulation of the director's original 110 minute cut - some 24 minutes longer than the screen and video version; and release last month of a full CD soundtrack to the film (Trunk Records: BARKED 4CD).

Now Manchester-based Gail Ashurst has formed a *Wicker Man* Fanzine.

Gail and the *Galloway Gazette* are anxious to trace the many locals who played extras in the film, and tie-down one or two seemingly spurious film locations.

We are also attempting to tie-down interviews with the film's principal stars: Edward Woodward, Christopher Lee, Britt Ekland and Ingrid Pitt.

If you can help our quest to celebrate Galloway's finest moments in movie-world please write to: Nic Outterside, the Editor, the *Galloway Gazette*, Victoria Lane, Newton Stewart, DO8 6PS.

Appendix 2

Questionnaire 1

THE WICKER MAN QUESTIONNAIRE 1998

I am an undergraduate at Manchester Metropolitan University and as part of my course I am carrying out research on cult films, using *The Wicker Man* as my case study. It would therefore be much appreciated if you could spend a short time completing the questions below.

Gender:

Age: 18-25 26-35 36-45 55+

Occupation:

1. How would you define a 'cult' movie?
2. What do you find most appealing about *The Wicker Man*?
3. Is this your first viewing? If not, how many times have you watched it previously?
4. Are you more likely to watch the film with others or alone? Please give reasons for your answer.
5. Do you have a favourite scene in *The Wicker Man*? Please provide details.
6. Do you have a preference for cult films and/or television series? Please give details and titles.
7. Do you plan to watch any of the other films listed in the cult movie season? Please provide specific titles.
8. Please list your interests

If you would like to make additional comments please use the space overleaf. Additionally, if you would like to be contacted at a later date for further discussion in relation to *The Wicker Man* or cult films more generally, please provide your full name and contact details in the space provided.

Thank you,

Gail Ashurst
September 1998

Appendix 2
Results from Questionnaire 1:
Cult Movie Season at Manchester Cornerhouse (1998)
(28 out of 50 returns)

Table 2.1: Gender

MALE	20
FEMALE	8
Total	28

Table 2.2: Age

Under 25	7
26-35	13
36-45	6
46-49	1
50+	1

Table 2.3: Occupation

Skilled non-manual	10
Mature student	5
Student	4
Manage/tech	3
Self-employed	3
Professional	2
No answer	1
Househusband	
Housewife	
Retired	
Semi-skilled	
Skilled manual	
Unemployed	
Unskilled	

Table 2.4: Favourite cult films and programmes mentioned by participants

(Titles)	(Frequency)
<i>Blade Runner</i>	3
<i>Hammer Horror (unspecified)</i>	3
<i>The Prisoner</i>	3
<i>Other 'British horror' (unspecified)</i>	3
<i>A Space Odyssey 2001</i>	2
<i>The Devil Rides Out</i>	2
<i>Fitzcarraldo</i>	2
<i>Full Metal Jacket</i>	2
<i>Star Trek</i>	2
<i>Thundercrack</i>	2
<i>The Tin Drum</i>	2
<i>Witchfinder General</i>	2
<i>Babylon 5</i>	1
<i>Bionic woman</i>	1
<i>Blake 7</i>	1
<i>Blood on Satan's Claw</i>	1
<i>Blood Simple</i>	1
<i>Blue Velvet</i>	1
<i>Casablanca</i>	1
<i>The Crow</i>	1
<i>Dark star</i>	1
<i>Don't Look Now</i>	1
<i>Harold and Maude</i>	1
<i>Logan's Run</i>	1
<i>The Magic Roundabout</i>	1
<i>Mars Attacks</i>	1
<i>Night of the Living Dead</i>	1
<i>Performance</i>	1
<i>The Piano</i>	1
<i>Pink Flamingos</i>	1
<i>Planet of the Apes</i>	1
<i>South Park</i>	1
<i>Texas Chainsaw Massacre</i>	1
<i>Twin Peaks</i>	1
<i>Westworld</i>	1
<i>Withnail and I</i>	1

2.5: Other Interests

Ancient sites/paganism	5
Gothic literature/film	4
The occult	4
Reading	4
Drama/theatre	2
Rural (esp. Scotland)	2
Astrology	1
Sciences	1

2.6: Favourite scenes

Climactic	7
Schoolroom	3
Gently Johnny	2
Procession	2
Willow's seduction	2
Copulating couples	2
Maypole	1
Green beans	1
Harbour scene	1
Howie's prayer	1
Landlord's daughter	1
Summerisle/Howie's first meeting	1

2.7: Personal appeal

Religious conflict/morality (blurred)	6
Atmosphere/tension/suspense	5
Location/scenery	5
Music	5
Visuals/cinematography	5
Camp aesthetic	4
Script/credible/plausibility	4
Paganism	3
Sexuality/sexual tension	3
British	2
Christopher Lee	2
Occult/mystical/esoteric	2
Community/utopia	1

Gender portrayal	1
Overacting	1
Thought-provoking/generates discussion	1

2.8: Number of repeated viewings

1	2
5-10	5
10	1
20+	2
50+	2
Under 5	13
No answer	3

Appendix 3
Questionnaire 2 (1999)
Nuada Readership

THE WICKER MAN QUESTIONNAIRE 1999

Over recent months I have been researching the growing popularity of *The Wicker Man* as part of a dissertation I am working on at university. I am particularly concerned to explore the concept of 'cult movies' and the film's status as a cult text. Therefore, I would be very grateful if you could complete the following questionnaire.

Gender:

Age: 18-25 26-35 36-45 46-55 55+

Occupation:

1. Why did you decide to order *Nuada*?
2. Please describe in as much detail as possible your initial response to the film (e.g. How did it impact on you?)
3. How many times have you watched the film?
4. Do you have a favourite scene? (Please provide details)
5. What do you find most appealing about the film?
6. Has your reading of the film changed since you first watched it?
7. How would you define a cult film?
8. What factors would you say have contributed to *The Wicker Man*'s cult status?
9. Do you consider yourself to be a 'fan' of the film? If so, what specific practices/activities does this involve and what are the rewards?
10. Please list your favourite film and television programmes.
11. What are your interests?

Please provide your contact details if you would be willing to be contacted to discuss the film in more detail.

Thank you for your time

Gail Ashurst

Appendix 3
Results from Questionnaire 2:
Nuada Readership (1999)
 (34 out of 50)

Table 3.1: Gender

MALE	30
FEMALE	4
Total	34

Table 3.2: Age

Under 25	-
26-35	19
36-45	10
46-54	4
55+	1
Total	34

Table 3.3: Occupation

Skilled non-manual	12
Manage/tech	5
Semi-skilled	5
Professional	4
Skilled manual	2
Unemployed	2
Mature student	1
No answer	1
Retired	1
Unskilled	1

Househusband
 Housewife
 Self-employed
 Student

Total 34

3.4: Number of times viewed

Under 5	7
6-10	9
11-15	2
20+	7
30+	1
50+	1
60+	1
80+	1

3.5 Personal Appeal

The following tables show examples of the participants' responses to the question relating to personal appeal. A selection of examples representing the main categories is provided in the subsequent ten tables. The numerical value in each table represents the frequency of examples in each category.

Religion

19

- "The White Hats do not always win, and there are other ways of life. As children we are told the law and Christianity are good and right and when we become older we see the bigger picture. The law is only as good as the humans representing it" (Male, 26-35)
- "we perceive Christianity as ridiculous yet we are afraid of the alternative" (Male 26-35)
- "I like the fact that the Christian gets it!" (Male 26-35)

Music**16**

- “seamless integration of music and image” (Male, 26-35)
 - “the music plays a very important part in binding and enhancing the film’s main themes” (Male, 46)
 - “the music fits the scenes to a tee” (Male, 36-45)
 - “the music is haunting” (Female, 36-45)
 - “evocative folk music” (Male, 36-45)
-

Pagan Britain**14**

- “the portrayal of a working modern-day pagan community” (Male, 36-45)
 - “rooted in our Pagan past” (Male, 26-35)
 - “the film helps us to discover our true identity and British roots” (Male, 36-45)
-

Affects/moods/tones/colours**11**

- “joyfulness” (Female, 61)
- “intensity of feelings in Summerisle community” “awe and wonder” (Male, 32)
- “Its strangeness” / “and colours - white, greens, gold” (Male, 26-35)
- “the film awakens the dormant child within us all” (Male, 36-45)
- “it’s easy to become drawn into its secret” (Male, 36-45)
- “dripping in high level weirdness and oodles of symbolism (Male, 25)
- “eerily comic effect” (male 26-35)

Scenery/location**11**

- “unique rural British horror” (Male, 26-35)
- “the location is familiar to us” (Female, 36-45)

Visuals/ cinematography/photography**7**

- “beautifully filmed” (Male, 46)
- “wonderful photography, draws you in” (Male, 26-35)
- “surreal imagery” (Male, 26-35)
- “the ‘look’” (Male, 36-45)
- “imagery of setting is something out of the ordinary” (Male, 26-35)
- “stunning visuals” (Female, 39)

Originality/Cultural distinctions**6**

- “far more horrific than any Hollywood effects team could realise. Authentic, real horror (Male, 26-35)
- “doesn’t opt for easy conventional resolution” (Male, 26-35)
- “like the first time I saw *Eraserhead*, you just know you’ve seen something special” (Male, 36)
- original/unique/different/like no other film (Female, 36-45)
- “The era of truly weird/disturbing films has, I think, died; it’s all special FX produced by unimaginative drones now. I think the ‘70s were signalling an end to an era” (Male, 36-45)

Sexuality**4**

- “treats sex in adult fashion” (Male, 26-35)
- “Willow’s dance (sorry!)” (Male, 26-35)
- “the dynamic between sexuality and chastity” (Male, 26-35)

- “fear of unbridled sexuality” (Male, 26-35)

Community

3

-
- “more authentic and cohesive than today” (Male, 32)
 - “the film marks ‘a return to the essential spirit of community and earthiness, the harmony of gods and goddesses” (Male, 36-45)

‘Cultlore’: Cursed Movies

1

- *The Owl Service*, *The Wicker Man*’s TV equal - a hell of a lot of ‘bad luck’ followed the cast years later. One actress, Gillian Hills (*Blow Up*) simply vanished and stopped acting completely. Another actor died in a brawl” (Male, 36-45)

**3.6: Favourite films and television programmes
mentioned by the participants**

Films	Frequency
<i>The Wicker Man</i>	4
<i>Witchfinder General</i>	2
<i>Alice in Wonderland</i>	1
<i>Some episodes of the Avengers</i>	1
<i>Brazil</i>	1
<i>Children of the Stones</i>	1
<i>A Chinese Ghost story</i>	1
<i>Dr Strangelove</i>	1
<i>Eraserhead</i>	1
<i>Gone With The Wind</i>	1
<i>The Man in the White Suit (Ealing)</i>	1
<i>The Mummy</i>	1
<i>Naked</i>	1
<i>The Omega Man</i>	1
<i>The Omen</i>	1
<i>'The Owl Service'</i>	1
<i>The Prisoner</i>	1
<i>Rocky Horror Picture Show</i>	1
<i>Sir Henry At Rawlinson End</i>	1
<i>Some Like It Hot</i>	1
<i>Space Odyssey 2001</i>	1
<i>The Stone Tape</i>	1
<i>Tales of Mystery and Imagination</i>	1

Appendix 4 Questionnaire 3 (2006)

4.1 The questionnaire

The third questionnaire was devised and circulated in September 2006 to a total of 100 people in my mailing list for the fanzine. The criterion for the selection process in this instance was two-fold. First I sought to contact people I had been in touch with from the beginning of the venture, as this seemed conducive to questions relating to longevity. Secondly, I limited my search to predominantly British fans born between 1960-1980, since both variables had by this time become increasingly more central in my research.

THE WICKER MAN QUESTIONNAIRE 2006

This questionnaire has been sent to you because you have at some point over the past eight years contacted me with regard to *Nuada, The Wicker Man fanzine*. I would be very grateful if you could spend a short time filling it in.

Information received from this questionnaire will form the final phase of research for my PhD thesis. Participants will be notified at a later date of details about how to obtain access to the finished thesis, should you wish to read it.

Your replies will be treated with the utmost confidentiality, and real names will not be used in the completed research.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Best wishes,
Gail Ashurst

NAME:

AGE:

Please indicate the word which best describes where you spent your childhood years:

City / town / suburb / village / countryside (please state actual location).....

Please indicate the word which best describes where you live now:

City / town / suburb / village / countryside (please state actual location).....

Male / Female.....

Occupation.....

(If you are retired, please give your occupation prior to retirement).

How would you describe your ethnic origin?

Section One:

1. How old were you when you first saw *The Wicker Man*?
 2. How did it impact upon you?
 3. How many times have you seen the film?
 4. Which did you encounter first: the film or the film's legend? (e.g., the stories surrounding its circumstances of production, post-production).
 5. What aspects of the film stood out the first time you watched it?
 6. Which aspects have grown in significance for you with repeated viewings?
 7. Have you read up on *The Wicker Man*? If so, what have you read? (please include websites, articles in books, etc)
-

Section two:

1. What is your religious background?
 2. Do you hold any strong religious/spiritual beliefs/views?
 3. Do you hold any strong political beliefs/views?
 4. Please write down the first three words which come to mind when you think of each of the following:
 - 1) the city
 - 2) England
 - 3) the countryside
 - 4) Scotland
 - 5) nature
 6. Which era would you most like to have lived in and why?
 7. What are your main interests? Can you pinpoint any themes which are always likely to appeal to you?
-

Section three:

Although many *Wicker Man* enthusiasts (myself included) have at some point disputed the film's status as a 'horror film' I am interested to learn of your views about films which generally come under this category. Please feel free to make your answers as long and detailed as you wish. I am very interested to read everything you have to say and value your insight.

1. Would you say you have or have had in the past a definite preference for horror/gothic films/literature and if so, why? (If your answer is "no" please go on to question 5).
2. At what age did you first begin watching horror? What do you remember most about your earliest experiences?
3. Please list your favourite films/novels (horror or otherwise) in ranking order (the first being your absolute favourite) NB: Please include *The Wicker Man* in the appropriate place. Feel free to add a few comments regarding the appeal

of any of these texts.

4. Do you have a particular preference for British horror films and/or related television programmes?
5. Do you find the landscape of *The Wicker Man* appealing and if so, why?
6. To what extent does the scenery in the film play a part in your admiration of it? (Please highlight in bold)

- a) highly significant
- b) part of the appeal
- c) not very significant
- d) other

7. Which phrase best describes the landscape in *The Wicker Man*?

- a) Scottish
 - b) English
 - c) Primeval and timeless
 - d) Other
-

Section four:

1. Have you visited any of the filming locations in Scotland?
 2. If your answer is no, do you intend to visit the locations.
 3. If you answered "yes" to question 1) please feel free to share your thoughts and feelings about your trip.
 4. Have you been along to the annual *Wicker Man* festival in Scotland? Please feel free to share your thoughts and feelings about the experience if applicable.
 5. Has your appreciation of the film changed over time? For instance, do you like it less now than you used to? Alternatively, has it grown more significant for you in recent years? Can you account for any reasons which you think may explain this?
 6. Are you aware of the forthcoming American remake starring Nicholas Cage? What are your thoughts on this?
-

Section five:

Please rank the list of statements below in order of relevancy to your own relationship with the film. Feel free to elaborate on any of the statements which seem to strike you as being particularly important. Use extra paper if need be. *(Please answer these questions as honestly as possible. Remember, your answers are completely confidential).*

- a) The film stirs a feeling within me which I cannot fully explain
- b) The film is a flawed masterpiece
- c) The film is spiritual
- d) The film is so "cheesy". I like its camp humour.

- e) I've grown with this film (literally, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually). It's a part of my life.
- f) The Wicker Man awakens the innocent child within.
- g) The film makes me more aware of nature.
- h) Much of the film's emotion comes from the music
- i) The film is intellectually stimulating.
- j) The Wicker Man transgresses the codes and conventions of the classical form of filmmaking. It draws attention to its own constructedness.
- k) The film's quirkiness and/or strangeness arise from its detailed representation of pagan ritual and earth mysteries.
- l) The film's quirkiness and/or strangeness arise from its incoherency of plot and its self-conscious playfulness.
- m) The film is very ambiguous and my response is often highly contradictory.
- n) The film has made me question aspects of my beliefs and values.
- o) The film is just one more in a long line of films which I like.
- p) I don't consider myself to be a film fan. There is just something different about this film which makes it stand out.

* Please feel free to offer some alternative statements.

Please return your completed questionnaire to myself at:
gail@nuada98.fsnet.co.uk

Thank you so much for your time,
Gail Ashurst

Appendix 4
Results from Questionnaire 3:
Nuada Readership (2006)
 (32 returns out of 100)

The tables in this section chart the results of the third questionnaire and are intended to provide a demographic profile of the survey, as well as an indication of the taste patterns of respondents. Of particular concern here, are those results which can be usefully compared with the findings of the focal study (see tables 5, 6 and 7). A total of 32 returns out of a possible 100 were received.

Table 4.1: Gender

MALE	22
FEMALE	10
 Total	 32

Table 4.2: Age

Under 25	2
26-35	5
36-45	18
46-54	4
55+	3
 Total	 32

Table 4.3: Occupation

Curator	2
Engineer	2
Student	2
Teacher	2
Corporate manager	

Electronics engineer
 Financial advisor
 Gatekeeper
 IT
 Joiner
 Mature student
 Media librarian
 Photographer/youth worker
 Public safety director
 Retired school librarian
 Sales assistant
 Solicitor
 Staff Nurse
 Storekeeper
 Student (mature)
 Teacher/writer
 Unemployed carer
 Unemployed
 Writer
 Yoga Teacher

Table 4.4: Ethnic origin/Nationality

White British	5
White British (English)	4
White British/English	2
White European/Scottish	2
Anglo-Celtic/USA	
Black Caribbean	
English/Polish/living in USA	
Scottish American	
White/American	
White British/English	
White British (Scottish)	
White Caucasian (German)	
White Caucasian (Scottish)	
White/English	
White English	
White Irish	
White/Scottish	
White Scottish	

Table 4.5
 Favourite/most memorable films and television
 texts named by participants in Questionnaire 3

(Title)	(Frequency)
<i>Blood on Satan's Claw</i>	7
<i>Witchfinder General</i>	7
<i>Dracula (Hammer)</i>	5
<i>Children of the Stones</i>	4
<i>Frankenstein (Hammer)</i>	4
<i>MR James/English ghost stories</i>	4
<i>Withnail and I</i>	4
<i>Night of the Demon</i>	3
<i>The Tomb of Ligeia</i>	3
<i>The Witches (1966)</i>	3
<i>American Werewolf in London</i>	2
<i>Beasts</i>	2
<i>Black Narcissus</i>	2
<i>A Canterbury Tale (Powell and Pressburger)</i>	2
<i>Night of the Eagle</i>	2
<i>Nosferatu (Werner Herzog)</i>	2
<i>Nuts in May (Mike Leigh)</i>	2
<i>Picnic at Hanging Rock</i>	2
<i>Quadruphenia</i>	2
<i>Quatermass and the Pitt</i>	2
<i>The Stone Tape</i>	2
<i>Walkabout</i>	2
<i>Beauty and the Beast (J. Cocteau)</i>	1
<i>Blade Runner</i>	1
<i>A Clockwork Orange</i>	1
<i>The Day the Earth Stood Still</i>	1
<i>The Garden (Derek Jarman)</i>	1
<i>Halloween</i>	1
<i>If (Lindsay Anderson)</i>	1
<i>The Omega Man</i>	1
<i>The Owl Service</i>	1
<i>Rosemary's Baby</i>	1
<i>The Thing</i>	1
<i>The Time Machine</i>	1

Table 4.6:

A sample of extracts from Questionnaire 3 demonstrating a positive correlation between an investment in British horror and *Wicker* fandom. Notably, most of the participants also fall into the same age range as the core participants in my study.

- "I've always been drawn to the mysterious setting of the occult based horror (Female, 36)
- All Hammer because they're British and were made at a time which interests me" (Male, 38)
- "Loved the Hammer feel to the movies. Tigon were good too" (Female, 39)
- "all the Hammers and Tigon" (Female, 44)
- "I prefer them [British horror films] to American films because I can relate to them more" (Male, 44)
- "Most of the Hammer films, they were the films I grew up with" (Male, 39)
- Hammer films starring Lee, Cushing and all the Oliver Reed horrors (Male, 41)
- "Gothic/horror films – Hammer" (Male, 46)
- "quite liked Hammer, though *Wicker Man* is real horror" (Male, 53)

Table 4.7: Responses to statements in the longitudinal study

This exercise was intended to compare the results from the survey with sentiments which emerged in the focal study. Although the results are inconclusive, some significant correlations can be drawn. The six most popular answers can be interpreted as supporting the characteristic responses in the focal study.

The film stirs a feeling in me which I cannot fully explain

Significantly, 38 percent (12 out of 32) ranked this statement in first place, whilst a further 28 percent (9 out of 32) ranked it in their top five most relevant sentiments. This suggests that a high proportion of the sample (66 percent)

experience the film in ways which they struggle to articulate. Whilst these results alone are not enough to draw any definite conclusions, I would suggest that there does seem to be a significant trend amongst fans of the film.

I don't consider myself to be a film fan. There is just something different about this film which makes it stand out

(44 percent or 14 out of 32)

Much of the film's emotion comes from the music

(31 percent or 10 out of 32)

The film is spiritual

(12 percent or 4 out of 32)

The film makes me more aware of nature

(12 percent or 4 out of 32)

The film is intellectually stimulating

(28 percent or 9 out of 32)

Appendix 5

The focal/longitudinal study

Table 5.1:
Biographical details of the main participants
In order of age starting with the oldest

Name	Gender	Age in 2006	Occupation	Ethnic Origin	Country of Residence
Tim	Male	44	Freelance writer	White British	England
Kevin	Male	42	Telecommunications	White British	England
Felicity	Female	41	Human Resources manager	White Scottish	Scotland
Gemma	Female	41	Teacher/freelance writer	White British	England
Jen	Female	40	Banqueting manager	White British	England
CHRIS	Male	39	Music teacher/musician	White British	England
Adrian	Male	37	Air scientist	White British	England
Sadara	Male	36	Buddhist retreat organiser	White Australian	England

Table 5.2:
Research contexts and modes of contact

	1998	1999	2000	2003	2004	2005	2006
Convention/filming locations	Chris	Kevin Gemma	Felicity Jen				
Questionnaires 1 (1998) 2 (1999) 3 (2006)		All participants completed questionnaire 2					
Face-to-face interview						Sadara Tim	
Email correspondence		Tim Jen	Adrian Sadara Tim	Jen Tim	All		
Telephone interviews				Gemma Kevin Chris Felicity		Chris Gemma Felicity Jen	Kevin

5.2 Additional details of research contexts and modes of contact with the main participants

Adrian: Adrian first contacted me via email in 2000 requesting details about *Nuada*. As well as completing the second questionnaire, Adrian continued to participate in the longitudinal study by email correspondence. Unfortunately, Adrian was unavailable for an interview in the final phase of the research (2005-6).

Tim: Tim first contacted me in 1999 in order to obtain a copy of *Nuada*. He agreed to be interviewed via email in 2003, and was interviewed again in person in 2005. As well as completing the second questionnaire, I have corresponded quite regularly with Tim via email. In addition, Tim sent several images, *Wicker Man*-related artwork and essays for inclusion in the fanzine.

Kevin: I first met Kevin during a research trip to Scotland in 1999. He was staying with a friend at the Ellangowan Hotel and his purpose for the trip was to photograph the locations for a photo essay he was planning. Kevin completed the second questionnaire and was interviewed by telephone in 2003 and again in 2006. In addition, I received several emails and letters from Kevin.

Chris: I met Chris at the first convention at the Ellangowan Hotel in 1998. The interview took place on location and back at the hotel. Chris completed the second questionnaire in 2000, and his answers formed the basis of two telephone interviews I conducted with him in 2003 and 2005.

Gemma: Gemma also attended the second *Wicker Man* convention in 1999, although she was not staying at the convention venue but a nearby hotel. The interview was informal and took place during a trip to the filming locations in Dumfries & Galloway. During the interview, it transpired that Gemma had ordered the first issue of *Nuada* in 1998, and had sent two images. I conducted two further telephone interviews with Gemma in January 2003 and July 2005. Gemma also completed the second questionnaire.

Felicity: I met Felicity whilst on location during the third convention in 2000 and conducted an informal interview. Two further interviews took place by telephone in 2003 and 2006. Felicity also completed the second questionnaire and regularly communicated with me via email.

Jen: I met and interviewed Jen at the third *Wicker* convention in 2000. The interview took place at the Ellangowan Hotel, where the event was being hosted. My main mode of correspondence with Jen after that time was via email, although I did conduct a very brief telephone interview with her in 2005.

Sadara: I met and interviewed Sadara in his own home in 2005 following three years of communicating by email and letters. Sadara is a practising Buddhist and lives in an all-male Buddhist commune in South East England, where he is responsible for arranging retreats at the centre. Sadara is originally from Australia but moved to the UK in the 1990s.

Table 5.3:
Educational background of the main participants

Name	(highest qualification)
Adrian	Higher degree
Chris	First degree
Felicity	First degree
Gemma	Higher degree
Jen	Diploma
Kevin	A Level
Sadara	Secondary education
Tim	Higher degree

Table 5.4: Religious background

Catholic	7
Protestant	1
Total:	8

Table 5.5:
Favourite/most memorable films and television
programmes mentioned by the main participants

(Title)	(Country, Year, director)
<i>Blair Witch Project, The</i>	(US, 1999, dir. Daniel Myrick & Eduardo Sanchez)
<i>Blood on Satan's Claw</i>	(UK, 1970, dir. Piers Haggard)
<i>Canterbury Tale, A</i>	(UK, 1949, dir. Michael Powell & Emeric Pressburger)
<i>Children of the Stones</i>	(UK, 1977, dir. Peter Graham Scott)
<i>Countess Dracula</i>	(UK, 1971, dir. Peter Sasdy)
<i>The Devil Rides Out</i>	(UK, 1968, dir. Terence Fisher)
<i>Eye of the Devil</i>	(UK, 1966, dir. J. Lee Thompson)
<i>Eyes Without a Face</i>	(France, 1959, dir. Georges Franju)
<i>Last of England, The</i>	(Sweden, 1989, dir. Derek Jarman)
<i>Oh Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Laddie</i>	(UK, 1968, dir. Jonathan Miller)
<i>Robin Redbreast</i>	(UK, 1970, dir. James MacTaggart)
<i>Scars of Dracula</i>	(UK, 1970, dir. Roy Ward Baker)
<i>Taste the Blood of Dracula</i>	(UK, 1970, dir. Peter Sasdy)

<i>Texas Chainsaw Massacre, The</i>	(US, 1974, dir. Tobe Hooper)
<i>Tomb of Ligeia, The</i>	(US, 1965, dir. Roger Corman)
<i>Vampyres, Daughters of Darkness</i>	(US, 1975, dir. José Ramón Larraz)
<i>Virgin Witch</i>	(UK, 1971, dir. Norman J. Warren)
<i>Warning to the Curious, A</i>	(UK, 1972, dir. Lawrence Gordon Clark)
<i>Wicker Man, The</i>	(UK, 1973, dir. Robin Hardy)
<i>Witches, The</i>	(UK, 1966, dir. Cyril Frankel)
<i>Witchfinder General</i>	(UK, 1968, dir. Michael Reeves)
<i>(The Conqueror Worm)</i>	
<i>Withnail and I</i>	(UK, 1987, dir. Bruce Robinson)

Appendix 6

A Sample of Extracts from the Telephone Interviews

Many of these interviews were up to 40 minutes long and thus generated masses of data, aspects of which are either irrelevant or else touch on subjects I have not had space to incorporate in the main body of the thesis. In order to avoid duplicating excessive material which has no direct relevance for the written thesis, and in wanting to preserve for future research those elements of the data not explored herein, I have sought, in the main, to reproduce only that which shows how statements used in the main thesis were introduced into the conversation. Interviews were recorded using a dictafone, but I also took notes with the intention of duplicating these accounts verbatim. My objectives were not always realised, mainly due to moments of inaudibility which, on occasions, I was unable to clarify with my notes. In such instances, I have used ellipses.

As I discussed in Chapter 2, some of the richness of actual interviews is inevitably lost in the transcribing process. But I have attempted to preserve something of the sheer dynamism of these interactions by including original pauses, moments of laughter and original emphases where possible.

Extracts from telephone interviews 2003

In 2003, I interviewed four of the main participants by telephone. My specific purpose was to follow up the British Horror lead. Each of the respondents demonstrated a particular liking for horror films in their responses in the second questionnaire (1999). In response to my question asking them to list their favourite films, in all cases the respondents listed horror films and related programmes (notably mainly British). Moreover, some respondents indicated in their answers that these texts formed strong investments in childhood and/or adolescence, typically by way of stating that these films were something they 'grew up with'. The interviews therefore provided an opportunity to explore this lead in more detail. Specifically, I wanted to ascertain how they remembered horror and the ways in which it may still figure in their lives. My second objective was to elicit more detailed accounts of how *The Wicker Man* first impacted upon the respondents. Again, my question: 'Please describe in as much detail as possible your initial response to the film (e.g. How did it impact on you?)' produced some very interesting results in relation to issues of personal resonance and inexplicable familiarity, as well as the quasi-religious dimension, all of which are of concern herein. Beyond these questions, I had no set agenda for the interviews, but issues related to the question of religion did occasionally emerge.

(CHRIS 2003 telephone interview)

[...]

GAIL: Can I ask you about the first time you saw the film [*The Wicker Man*]. You mention in the questionnaire that it 'haunted' you 'for many years after'.

CHRIS: Yeah, it did! Oh god, I was totally blown away by it - you know, there's nothing quite like it.

GAIL: Yeah.

CHRIS: And you know that's why I get a bit narked by all this jumping on the *Wicker* bandwagon that's going on at the moment, you know, everyone's coming out and waxing lyrical about it all of a sudden. But you know, real appreciation involves a journey of discovery, cos you know, you grow emotionally with the film. You don't just read about it and decide, OK, yeah, I'll back this film. That's not the way it happens. I mean, like I say, the film's meant something to me for more than fifteen years now and a number of strange events have happened along the way - really weird actually.

GAIL: Yeah? Like what?

CHRIS: Well just little things really, but when you add 'em all up it's like, wow! - that's spooky. I mean take a time back in the late 1990s. I was browsing through some material at a film festival and there it was - a copy of the rare *Cinefantastique Wicker* edition! I couldn't believe it! Call it luck or fate - I knew I was going to find something important that day. Now you know how hard that mag is to get hold of: it's like gold dust [laughs]. But yeah, I mean it, since day one, my relationship with the film's always panned out in the spookiest of coincidences.

GAIL: Yeah, that's interesting. I actually hear that a lot from other fans I've spoken with.

CHRIS: Oh right, I thought it was just me [laughs]

[...]

GAIL: So what did you experience the first time you saw the film? I mean how did it make an impression on you?

CHRIS: It was so atmospheric for a start, and seductive in a way - not just seductive in the obvious way. The Seduction Scene is utterly haunting, and yeah, Britt Ekland is undoubtedly gorgeous. But to be honest - and I'm not just saying this - but the first time I saw it I don't think I even noticed she was naked [laughs]

GAIL: Really? [laughs]

CHRIS [laughs] No, really! I mean it. No, honestly, I was enchanted, moved, knocked sideways by that scene, but not because of Britt. No. The magic of that scene lies elsewhere. It's not a sexual fantasy thing. I mean the music is beautiful: Willow's song is probably my favourite. But then it's a whole other combination of things, you know, the various levels on which the scene works – visually it's striking, and intensely provocative through the sound. And it's suggestive, rather than overstated. It's almost as if it's, you know, organically introduced into the narrative, so that doesn't intrude on your enjoyment too much, you know, but draws you in all the more. It's all in the finer details and the way they come together. The truth is I'm still trying to work out what it is about that film [PAUSE]

GAIL: Are you any closer to finding out?

CHRIS: No! And I've given it some thought over the years, too [laughs]. I don't know, perhaps it's a subliminal thing. I guess it has to be really otherwise I'd be able to say, yeah, it's this that I like or, yeah, I can see why that bit stands out for me. But the truth is I really can't say.

GAIL: Is there anything in the film which you do consciously identify with?

CHRIS: Yeah, I mean I like folk music, I play the guitar, you see. I find its religious themes interesting. I was raised a Catholic so it's pretty pertinent in some ways and, yeah, like most people, I guess, I rebelled in my teens, so yeah. I don't really have a religion to speak of now - except my music, of course [laughs]. But it's true, you know, my music is like a religion for me.

GAIL: Yeah, I was thinking about a comment you made earlier [referring to comment in the questionnaire] about your fandom being expressed through music.

CHRIS: Oh, you mean with the guys?

GAIL: Yeah, you said you often get together with friends and play songs from the film.

CHRIS: Yeah, although I wouldn't say "often"- probably once a year - on May Day usually, you know, as a mark of respect for Howie [laughs]. No, just seems fitting to be honest, you know, with the islanders celebrating Beltane.

GAIL: So can you tell me a little bit about what these get-togethers involve?

CHRIS: Yeah. It started about three years ago when I was really getting into the film in a big way. I've liked the film for the best part of 15 years, like I say, but a few years back I guess you could say I took it to a different level. And so I taught myself how to play the songs. And, you know, the *emotion* in those songs is incredible. I actually think that much of the emotion comes from the music. Some might say it's a real mixture of genres and styles rather than pure – a friend of mine - a real purist, a bit older than me [laughs]; well he thinks the music's a bit of a travesty. But for me, it was really quite evocative of, well, an older time somehow. I know what I like, I guess, and I found the music eerie and sometimes quite moving. But I also think the

music gives the film much of its magic. It's great that all that singing and dancing goes on in the outdoors, as well. You know, I mean the use of location in the film is superb and the music lends magic and mystery to the magic rites and things. You know, it's like Summerisle says, you know, about capturing the music of nature but also its mythic drama, or something like that. For me, personally, the countryside is the best stage there is for showcasing myth and magic ritual. The two surely belong together, don't they?

GAIL: You mean the British countryside?

CHRIS: Well, yeah. The British countryside – I mean, it's always been there - if you read about folklore and customs you can see how closely related the countryside is to ritual and magic. And we know Shaffer and Hardy got a lot of their ideas from *The Golden Bough*. So, you know, you're talking about rural kinds of customs the further back you go. *The Wicker Man* of course really plays that link to perfection. And then you've got countryside link with witchcraft and English country estate and the type you get in Hammers back in the day - when horror was good! [laughs] You know, through music it can suggest the magic and life of the countryside and bring all that history of folklore alive again.

GAIL: Ah, I was coming to that. Can I ask you about your interest in horror films? I'm just looking at the list of films and programmes you mentioned as personal favourites in your youth [referring to previous questionnaire].

CHRIS: Sure

GAIL: You stated in the questionnaire that you really liked horror films as a kid and watched them all.

CHRIS: Yeah. I guess it's what a lot of kids did in the 1970s, wasn't it?

GAIL: [laughs]

CHRIS; Yeah: I think back to my childhood and it's one big mish-mash of horror

[...]

GAIL: In the questionnaire, you mention *Children of the Stones* as a text which reminded you of *The Wicker Man*.

CHRIS: Yeah, that's right; I think they're easily comparable. Although, to be honest, I don't recall much about the story itself, I was very young at the time. But it was the groaning stones that stood out for me. My god, they were terrifying! But I'm not a big fan of horror now. I mean, I spend most of my time at gigs and so don't get much free time to watch films and when I do, *Wicker* takes preference. I usually stick it on when I'm with friends.

But in saying that, you know, the thing with horror is that once you've been bitten I don't think it ever leaves you. And it's quite funny really I guess my old love of horror has influenced my music in some ways. I mean, I've been writing songs since

I was a child and erm, 'Willow Tree', one of my earliest, you know like, as in M. R. James' *The Ash Tree*. A bit of an homage, I guess. Do you know it? *The Ash Tree* I mean, not my song [laughs]

GAIL: [laughs] Yeah, I've heard of it, but haven't read it.

CHRIS: Oh you should. The film adaptation's quite good. Very *Wicker* – like, you know.

GAIL: Really? I'll look it up. So, how old were you when you wrote the Willow song?

CHRIS: Willow Tree? Oh, late teens. But it's one of my better one's [laughs]

GAIL: [laughs] Was it an intentional homage to M. R. James?

CHRIS: Er, I guess not, no. Hmm, no, I didn't exactly sit there and think OK, I'll write a song based on *The Ash Tree*. But looking back now, yeah, I guess that influenced me. Musical influences work that way. I mean it's only with the passing of time that you can look back and say, yeah, I can see where that idea comes from. And the horror influence is a big part of my music

[...]

GAIL: What's your earliest memory of watching horror?

[...]

CHRIS: Oh, and I have a very clear memory of watching *A Warning to the Curious* with my brother one Christmas. I'm not sure it's my earliest, but it's one of them, and it's probably the most vivid.

GAIL: How old were you?

CHRIS: Oh, I guess I must have been about eight or nine.

GAIL: So what do you remember about it?

CHRIS: Well, watching ghost stories at Christmas-time was a bit of a family tradition back then. And it's a tradition that I've kept up - if I've not got my head in a book of ghost stories I'm watching them on DVD. But yeah, it's a Christmas thing, like I say; I'm not big into it anymore. What else? Erm, I remember it was raining and windy outside and I mean the wind was *really* howling, and it was all very atmospheric and we made a big deal of it, my brother and me, and so we had a few candles lit, and there were smells of Christmas filling the air. And I can still remember it all. Er, mince pies, and erm, the scent of the zest of oranges - that kind of thing. And well, also that Christmas Eve hush you can only really appreciate when you're eight! Erm, and then the scenery [in the text] was striking, and the colour – I mean it's actually the contrasting colours I remember most [...] Gosh that sounds – well, you can appreciate I was young at the time. Well, the room was still quite dark,

and I remember how vivid the colours looked on the television screen. That's something I've noticed as I've got older as well, colours always seem more vivid when you're a kid. Or maybe it's a memory thing? So anyway, I've got this lasting impression of being sat in the blackness of the living room with this green world opening up in front of my eyes. And just this feeling of being totally mesmerised. That's it! I'm sorry, that's not giving you much to go on, is it?

GAIL: No, that's incredibly insightful actually. It's really interesting that you recall the memory in terms of a contrast of colours. So when you say you opened up to a green world, are you're talking about the greenness of the countryside?

CHRIS: Yeah, the film is shot on location. Like wicker there's a lot of detailed attention to the natural landscape. So yeah,

[...]

Extract from telephone interview with Gemma (2003)

[...]

GAIL: Going back to the questionnaire I sent to you in 1999 -

GEMMA: Oh my god! [laughs]

GAIL: [laughs] I was particularly interested in one of your answers: specifically where you listed your favourite films – all notably horrors – and add that you had 'a fascination with horror and gothic films in childhood' -

GEMMA: Oh yes, I was *always* fascinated by horror as a young child; well yes, gothic films really [...] It's my mum's fault [laughs].

GAIL: [laughs] Why do you say that?

GEMMA: Oh, she would watch them on the telly all the time and, well, I guess it was because she was probably a bit windy of them that she allowed me to stay up and watch them too. [laughs]

GAIL: [laughs] So you weren't frightened, then?

GEMMA: Sometimes. Yeah, perhaps they frightened me more than I remember. I know they fascinated me more than anything.

GAIL: So what was it that fascinated you about gothic films?

GEMMA: Oh, the atmosphere. Yeah, I mean they have a real atmosphere, which can sometimes seem silly now. But back then, well, I thought they were enchanting. Ideas and visuals. Gothic has an atmosphere. Dracula films of course. I grew up watching these films and so they become part of your childhood.

GAIL: Would you say your fascination has persisted?

GEMMA: Yes, to an extent. [pause] Well, I'd say horror has left its mark on me more than anything else. Not in a sinister way. I mean in an imaginative way really. I write short stories and often centre on gothic tropes. But every now and again [...] I can be anywhere – I don't know - in the middle of somewhere as uninspiring as Birmingham town centre, and then I hear something which transports me back to the world of Hammer. You only have to hear the sound of hooves on concrete and you're right back there with the galloping horses pulling Dracula's stagecoach'. [laughs]

GAIL: That's really interesting. Can you say a bit more?

GEMMA: Well, that's it really...

GAIL: So it was Hammer horror you watched as a child? I noticed that in your list of favourite films -

GEMMA: Oh you noticed that! [laughs] Yes, I guess so - although I tend to think of all British horror films from my childhood as Hammer, so I couldn't be too sure. You'd have to go back to my list and double-check.

[...]

GAIL: So, you think your experience of watching these films at an early age has had an influence on your life now?

GEMMA: Oh absolutely, yes.

GAIL: You say that like you've thought it before.

GEMMA: Well, I have. I guess.

[...]

GAIL: By the way how old were you when you started watching horror?

GEMMA: Probably as young as seven or eight, I think. My god, that's terrible isn't it Can I have a copy of this interview to show my mother how irresponsible she was? [laughs]

[...]

GAIL: So what do you remember about watching horror films as a child? I mean, do any scenes stand out in your memory?

GEMMA: Yeah. Er, that's difficult

GAIL: OK

[...]

GEMMA: I must admit to recently buying Nigel Kneale's *Beasts*. Do you know it? I bought it mainly because I never did get to see how the episode 'Baby' ends. Although I confess, it's still in the wrapper. But I'll get round to seeing it at some point. But yes, Now, I have a very vivid memory of watching that episode as a kid. But it frightened me so much I couldn't watch the end.

There's this one scene in the woods. A woman is searching for a cat or something, and the trees; I remember the trees - saturated in a vivid green moss. And then it all starts to go very dark and the trees close in on her and begin making these terrible growling noises. It terrified me! To this day I don't know what happened after that, I couldn't watch after that [laughs]

GAIL: That's interesting. I mean the way you remember the colour and trees

GEMMA: Yeah and I guess it may [inaudible]

[...]

GAIL: So how does *The Wicker Man* compare to the gothic horrors you liked in childhood?

GEMMA: Ah well, *The Wicker Man* is for me a beautiful collage of everything I've ever liked. All those enchanting landscapes I've seen in films like *Blood on Satan's Claw* and *Witchfinder General*. *The Wicker Man* has all of that and more; the atmosphere, the music, the scenery... It's incredibly atmospheric [...] Living here in Shropshire I'm able to get out quite a bit for walks in the countryside and my imagination runs riot on those walks! I'm always half expecting to bump into Mathew Hopkins on horseback. Sad, I know, but I've always been like that. It keeps me young! (Gemma, 32, British)

GAIL: What do you mean by enchanting landscapes?

GEMMA: Oh it's their otherworldliness I like [pause] It's the atmosphere of the countryside in those films...that's what I mean by enchanting.

GAIL: Would you say *The Wicker Man* has a similar atmosphere?

GEMMA: Yes, in some ways. It certainly feels like a British horror, if you know what I mean. It's this whole idea that every British country village hasn't quite severed its ties with the primitive past. I particularly like that feature of the film; the every country village has its very own resident witch or witch-doctor kind of thing [laughs] Obviously, it's a parody in many ways. But yes, it's got that magical quality, although it's much more eerie and surreal. That's what drew me to it in the first place – the look of it.

GAIL: You mean you were drawn to the images of the landscape?

GEMMA: Yeah, the images are striking, and some of the little details [pause] and the colours are striking too.

[...]

GAIL: Do you sense a magical quality from the images?

GEMMA: Oh yes.

GAIL: Can you think of any images specifically?

GEMMA: I love the scene in May's sweetshop. Yes, it has a certain magical charm about it.

GAIL: Really?

GEMMA: It's not just the look of the landscape which moves me. (0.3) It's lots of things really. Like I say, all the detail. It's difficult to explain, and a little embarrassing [laughs]

GAIL: No, it's really interesting and I can really identify with what you're saying.

GEMMA: There are other things about the film I admire though. It's very provocative and stimulating. I find it's take on religion and belief very interesting.

GAIL: I was going to ask you about the religious dimension a bit later. Would you mind if we stay with the initial viewing for now? It's just that I found the comments on your questionnaire interesting.

GEMMA: No, that's fine. [pause] It's not only that the film shows images I find appealing; it touches on something which moves me deeply. It's the way it's filmed, perhaps? No, maybe not. I don't know [pause] It awakens in me a feeling which I cannot explain

[...]

GEMMA: There's this one scene in the woods. [...] a woman is searching for a cat or something, and the trees; I remember the trees - drenched in this really vivid green moss. And then it all starts to go very dark and the trees close in on her and begin making these eerie noises.

[...]

GAIL:

GEMMA: I knew absolutely nothing about the film prior to seeing it [...] Anyway, it was just another ordinary weekend for me; I had a heap of marking to do followed by

a bit of respite. Usually I get on with writing but I noticed the title listed in the TV guide and thought it sounded interesting. [...] It engaged my imagination in a way that (pause), how can I put this? I felt as though I'd acquired a new set of eyes. I felt so alert, sharp and crisp but in a very odd way. As if a button had been switched, and I had this profound sense of moving in and out of different levels of consciousness; when I think back to the first time I saw it that's what I think of, this sense of feeling every now and then like I'd come back from somewhere. But at the same time I remember every detail so vividly caught my eye. And I didn't just see all the little details I felt them; the textures and moods of each and every object. It was like, or I felt myself opening up to an undiscovered dimension [...] It engaged my imagination in a way that [pause], how can I put this? I felt as though I'd acquired a new set of eyes. I felt so alert, sharp and crisp but in a very odd way. As if a button had been switched, and I had this profound sense of moving in and out of consciousness. It was like, or I felt myself opening up to an undiscovered dimension. I remember every detail so vividly caught my eye. And I didn't just see all the little details, I felt them; I mean I felt the textures and moods of each and every object.

I think there's a rawness about the look of the film [...] I love the scene with the harbour master and fishermen - you know, when they're looking at Rowan's photograph and passing it around and denying all knowledge of her existence [...] You feel so totally drawn in, it really pulls you in that scene. You can smell the sea air - honestly, and I could actually taste the salt on my lips [...] I actually got a sense of the 'Fisherman'; of who he is, and what his life is like: I'm aware of his rugged, wrinkled features, battered from years of being at sea in all kinds of weather. It's amazing, you don't think about these things like normally, but with the film you've got all these little added impressions coming over you in a wave; all the time you're made to notice the little details. It's so clever like that.

Kevin (2003)

[...]

GAIL: In the questionnaire you completed in 1999 you mentioned a number of films and television programmes that you say you 'grew up with'

KEVIN: Yes

GAIL: In particular, you refer to a number of horror texts.

KEVIN: Yes, I can see why you'd say that.

GAIL: Sorry, I'm not sure what you mean.

KEVIN: I mean horror – you call them horror

GAIL: Wouldn't you categorise them as horror?

KEVIN: Some yes, but not all. I mean some are better described as terror, or gothic, but not horror. Are you going to ask me to think of *The Wicker Man* as a horror film?

GAIL: No, not at all. You wouldn't describe *Wicker* as a horror then?

KEVIN: No, not really. Yes it has obvious horrifying elements, of course it does. But it's not horror in the true sense. The thing is. You know where you are with Hammer [Horror]: there are two orders - good and evil. Then along comes *The Wicker Man* and says, hang on a minute things aren't so simple. You know, you can't divide things up so neatly as that. So it lets the audience, or should I say it muddies the waters for the audience. And I mean it creates a situation where you're not seeing things in quite so black and white terms, but you might actually have a dilemma on your hands. You might even find yourself siding with Summerisle, even when he orders Howie's sacrifice. But then it deals with the issue of religion in an intelligent way, I think. I mean, it's not just a clever tactic, you know, not just a case of toppling the moral order of things. It actually makes a statement, and in fact it makes a number of statements about religion which I think are valid. You know, Summerisle might be a heathen but he's not as unenlightened as Howie. He's not restricted to live his life by codes and beliefs. He sees Howie coming a mile off, with, you know, his bible bashing speeches and he [Howie] doesn't stand a chance. Not with Summerisle and not with the viewer, because what Summerisle basically infers about Howie's beliefs in sin and abstinence [...] what are going to ring true. It's all about the oppression of someone else's beliefs and if you don't accept them you're somehow in the wrong. But Howie fears his God and believes sinners are hell-bound. But all that stuff about the Devil – how perverse is that. You know Howie can't believe that they teach the children about reincarnation. But what about teaching children to fear the Devil? I mean, how perverse is that? And I know, I went to a Catholic school and had all that rubbish forced down my throat. And I was such a young kid at the time. And even now, you know, I'm well on my way to becoming forty and all that stuff's still there, bubbling away. And that's the thing, *The Wicker Man* let's you know it knows it's still there, bubbling away. It says, come on, this stuff's all rubbish: there are, there is no God, or sun gods for that matter. You know I just think it makes atheists of us all.

GAIL: You have strong feelings about your religious upbringing then?

KEVIN: No. I don't have strong feelings. Strong views, yes.

GAIL So you are an atheist?

KEVIN: Yes, I think I must be. I don't hold to any religion. Not anymore, and I really think it [religion] can be damaging. You know, more harm than good.

[...]

GAIL: So what do you like about *The Wicker Man*? How would you categorise it?

KEVIN: The film is set in my kind of landscape – it's bright, it's beautiful, it's lush. But it's [...] I've always thought of the countryside as being ever so slightly macabre; a place where anything might happen, and where anything might be creeping around in the trees...I've felt that way for as long as I can remember [...] And, you know, it

[the film] suggests that there are remote pockets within the British Isles where anything might happen. I like that, because the idea of a remote island untouched by the modern world is also appealing. It puts me in mind of quite a few films, but none are as distinctive as *The Wicker Man*

[...]

GAIL: You mentioned having grown up watching *Children of the Stones*.

KEVIN: Ah yes, fantastic. But of course, that was hardly horror. It was a children's programme for a start.

GAIL: Yes, that's right. How old were you when you first saw it?

KEVIN: I don't know exactly how old I was, probably eleven or twelve. Come to think of it, I was probably a bit older as I remember talking about it with kids in my school, high school that is. Yeah, certainly twelve but maybe even thirteen. Something like that.

GAIL: Right. So, what do you remember about it?

KEVIN: I remember that it was set in Avebury. Well, actually, I don't know if I knew that at the time. I do now, of course [...] *Children of the Stones* had a massive impact on me as a kid, more so than anything else I can think of that I saw at the time. And I found it very eerie, and even a bit frightening. I mean, the title credits alone were scary. In fact, it's the credit sequence I remember most – those god-awful stones coming out of the screen at you, all contorted and moaning like a banshee.

[...]

GAIL: And you mentioned the landscape in *Blood on Satan's Claw*.

KEVIN: Ah well, there was something quite magical about the landscape in *Blood on Satan's Claw*: It oozes a life-force of its own, a strong presence of something very unsavoury. It's the feeling I always get from it [...] it looks beautiful but there's a feeling that. Much of the emotion comes from the landscape' this is not the green and pleasant but something far more real.

[...]

GAIL: Can I ask you about your initial viewing of *The Wicker Man*. I'm just looking at the questionnaire you filled in and in response to the question about the initial impact, you say it left you 'speechless' and you also say you 'felt that time stood still'

KEVIN: Yes. Yes, it did. It made a huge impression on me the first time around. I can't explain it really, but it was as if time stood still, or as if I'd entered a different level of consciousness – a time shift, if you like. I had the sense of really experiencing something all the way through it, in fact. You know, you really feel you're witnessing something very, very special. And it's difficult to pinpoint why.

I've often tried to rationalise it but then I think it might be something too special to reason it away. But it was incredibly absorbing. It captured me from start to finish. And I do remember I became very aware of the tiniest shifts in mood. Erm, the scene where Howie is being 'anointed' on the cliff tops, and he's being prepared for his sacrifice, and it's all very provocative in this respect. (pause) I don't, you know, want to come over all mystical now, but it borders on the spiritual – whatever that means [laughs] I'm not big into spiritual things as you've probably guessed. But I'm thinking, you've got the golden jug of water, shimmering in the sunlight, and then the vivid blue sky, and the crashing waves against the rocks; and it's the way these sounds and images are interspersed with an intermittent and uncanny silence. Then we get the harp, and the islanders begin to hum. This is what I mean by mood shifting.

GAIL: Shifts in the mood of the film, you mean?

KEVIN: Yes, like very subtle changes in the way it's been edited together and the affect is amazing. I'm sorry, I'm not making myself very clear.

GAIL: Yes, you are. I understand what you mean. I'm just remembering the scene as you're describing it and, yeah, I can see what you mean about the editing. So those mood shifts affect your own mood? Can you say a bit more about what you mean by a 'time shift'?

KEVIN: Yeah, it sounds a bit sci-fi, doesn't it?

GAIL: No. I was thinking it's an interesting way of putting it. But I just want a clearer picture of what you mean.

KEVIN: I guess I mean it has something to do with the editing which as I've said I'm not entirely sure about.

GAIL: But whatever it is the affect for you was, well it involved experiencing a different level of consciousness.

KEVIN: Yeah. I don't mean anything too heavy by that. Just a different state of mind

GAIL: ...and sensitive to feelings...?

KEVIN: Absolutely more sensitive to feelings (pause)

GAIL: Such as?

KEVIN: [PAUSE] Like I say, it's not something I can pin down in words.

GAIL: OK. And you say all this was quite spontaneous; you had no knowledge of the film beforehand. You say here [in the questionnaire] that you knew nothing about the film when you first saw it.

KEVIN: Yes, that's right. I knew nothing about the film's legends and stories the first time I saw the film, or for a long time after, for that matter. There's been so much written about it over the years that I think we all know about it now. Actually, I can recall first reading about an appreciation society in America in the late 80s or something, I thought it a bit bizarre, but I wasn't at all surprised. It obviously affects lots of people in similar ways. As I've said I sensed from the first time I experienced the film that it had a power of some sort, you know some way of communicating with people. It has a power. And you know, it seems more than a little coincidental that such a dreadful calamity should occur on the very same day the film was shown on television. Don't you think? And you know, I still don't think they know what caused the Solway Harvester to sink to this day. And if you think about it, that's now been proven in the way it has literally risen from the dead. Well, it has, hasn't it. If you look at how close it came to becoming lost.

[...]

CHRIS (2005)

[...]

GAIL: I wondered if you still like the film as much as you used to.

CHRIS: It goes through stages. I don't watch it nearly as often as I used to but that's because of work commitments more than anything else. I mean, I still really like it.

GAIL: when did you last watch it?

CHRIS: A few months back, though not all the way through. I caught the last 40 minutes or so on TV. I'll always try to see it if it comes on the telly.

GAIL: Do you still find it as haunting as you used to?

CHRIS: Yes and no. Or rather, yeah I do still find it haunting but not in the same way. I mean, it affects me differently now, I find the ending a lot more disturbing than I used to.

GAIL: Yeah?

CHRIS: Yeah, definitely.

GAIL: Why's that?

CHRIS: It's difficult to say really. Well, there's the obvious [laughs]. But, I guess I feel for Howie at the end now whereas I never used to. I mean, I used to think the ending was really avant-garde, do you know what I mean?

GAIL: Yeah

CHRIS: Cutting-edge stuff having the Christian copper killed off. But, yeah, I've mellowed a bit, I think. Well, I must have done because I'm more sympathetic to Howie now. You know, as I see it: he [Howie] had his beliefs and the islanders had theirs, and never the twain shall meet. But when you think about it, the islanders were no less ignorant than Howie because, I mean they go about stamping on Howie's beliefs every bit as – and they are intolerant of his beliefs to the point that they wipe him out. And I know the idea is that Howie's sacrifice is necessary for the crops, but in a less literal way it's about religious beliefs coming into conflict, and you know it's a kind of putdown of Christianity. But Howie's plight is more convincing to me now than the filmmakers' agnosticism; you know, at least Howie was true to his beliefs, no matter how dubious they might be. You know Howie has conviction in what he believes in and that's got to count for something.

GAIL: But in the film he's not shown to be particularly tolerant of the islanders' beliefs, and that's before he has reason to suspect them of anything untoward.

CHRIS: Yeah, that's true. But at the same time, he's not a bad person – old school, yeah.

GAIL: Yeah

[...]

CHRIS: You've read the novel, right?

GAIL: Yeah.

CHRIS: Don't you think Howie's character is better developed? I mean, it's possible to sympathise with him.

GAIL: Yeah, I agree with you there.

CHRIS: And, in fact, the book makes the islanders look like a bunch of villains.

GAIL: You think so?

CHRIS: Yeah, because you get a better insight into the extent of the islanders' plotting and scheming. They hunt him down and then of course, Lord Summerisle spies on him when he's desperately trying not to give in to his fiancé, Mary. And so you know, Howie is a lot more human in the novel and so it's easier to identify with him. He's not as narrow-minded and his quirks are developed to the point he becomes likeable. And he's actually quite in awe of nature really

[...]

GAIL: Do you still find the film spiritual? [Reference to Chris's previous comment in the second questionnaire, 1999].

CHRIS: I used to think it was spiritual. Or at least, I found the music and other things about it spiritually uplifting and, well, I thought of it as having a certain power

and a force that's rare to find in most films. But I actually think more and more that it's a very nihilistic film and, you know, it's like a massive turnaround

GAIL: You mean its message is increasingly nihilistic?

CHRIS: I think it is, yeah, because it kind of mocks all religions. And I'm not religious, but I do have some kind of spiritual outlook, definitely

GAIL: Do you still have your musical gatherings on May Day?

CHRIS: [laughs] Didn't this year, no.

GAIL: How come?

CHRIS: I guess the novelty's wore off a bit, I dunno.

GAIL: So would you say you no longer experience the music and other elements in the film in a spiritual way?

CHRIS: I can still get very caught up in the film. I mean it still has the power to move me but not in the same way as it did before, or not for the same reasons it did before

[...]

(Kevin 2006 INTERVIEW)

GAIL: I was wondering if you still like the film.

Kevin I still admire the film, you know I still really rate it. But I'm more inclined to challenge it nowadays. There are quite a few flaws for a start. Why would Howie be flying solo? And how can Summerisle be so sure that 'there will be no traces'. And the portrayal of Howie as a god-fearing virgin is wearing a bit thin. Well, it's a bit of a cliché, isn't it?

GAIL: You're not convinced then?

KEVIN: No, I don't suppose I am. It's quite overstated, you know, Howie dripping in sweat, terrified that he may give in to sexual temptation at any minute. It's hardly subtle.

GAIL: So, it's a bit camp, then?

KEVIN: No, I wouldn't say that.

GAIL: So, it's the gaps in the logic of the film you find yourself challenging?

KEVIN: Well not just that, I mean I've always thought it had its flaws.

GAIL: Yeah, I was going to say. You once described it as a 'flawed masterpiece', so I was -

KEVIN: Yes, and I still believe that. Very much so.

GAIL: So -

KEVIN: So. Well, I think there's an arrogance running through it to be honest, and it's not something I've not noticed all that much in the past [pause].

GAIL: What about your saying it makes us all atheists – do you still think that?

KEVIN: You see, I. Hmm [pause]. I've revised that thinking over time.... Well, it always was a bit of an exaggeration. Perhaps it's because I'm not getting any younger, I don't, but I do feel it's important to have a faith of some sort, it might be a comfort thing even. I know I'm not exactly *old*, old [...] but I find myself thinking about my own mortality much more than I used to. It doesn't bode well to grow too cynical.

[...]

Appendix 7

Adrian June 2004 - email

For the past few years I've organised a one-day trip at Beltane to different sites around the UK with friends to have our own Wicker Man burnings. The idea came partly from the film and partly from a Beltane celebration I went to a couple of times at Grantchester Meadows in Cambridge. We've been lucky to find some great sites by pure chance and everyone who has been along has wanted to go the next year. It's an unusual night because everyone is involved in building, and for once everyone is aiming for a common goal. It brings people together well. We construct a simple wooden frame at home and take it with us, then there's a mad 2 hours of stuffing it with twigs, bracken and the like until we have a 10ft yeti-like effigy. By this stage the beer's flowing well and there's an air of expectation building, so as soon as it's dark enough we burn him from the feet up. Some years we've had a real blaze going – 15ft or more in height. Photos are an important aspect and we have a photo each year – much like the Harvest Festival pictures in the film! When he burns and falls we cook food over the fire – that's about the last thing our Wicker Man provides before we toast the end of Spring and the coming of Summer. The next morning we douse the area with water and plant an Ash sapling on the spot.

[...]

Adrian November 2004

It reaffirms my belief that if we look closely enough, Nature is more awe-inspiring, creative and ingenious than man and that conventional religious practices are pretty arbitrary. The islanders could be forgiven for their beliefs as they are no more unreasonable than many other religions. In fact, because they are based on the natural cycles of the seasons and the physical reality of the sun and what grows from the earth, they are perhaps more justifiable than other more prevalent religious beliefs based on the supernatural. As Lord Summerisle nicely points out when talking to the investigating policeman about the islanders' beliefs.

It also twice reaffirms my beliefs that religion is a dangerous, irrational force that people latch onto out of fear or trauma, i.e. when they are at their weakest. In my view, a rational thinking person cannot be religious, but along comes some event which makes them think irrationally. This is often enough because once this step is taken anything can be justified and it becomes difficult to break out of that cycle of attributing events to the will of some higher being. This can be seen through many of the actions of the good Christian copper and the islanders. For example, when he pleads in the wicker man at the end or when he uses his religion to reject the landlord's daughter or when the islanders are afraid of losing their crops.

Finally, the fact that the community are so close in TWM impressed me as to the value of living in small numbers. Because people knew each other on the island they seemed tolerant. Somehow, despite the constraining factor of their beliefs and practices, they seemed more free. I like this aspect of the film.

This is a tough question.

- 1) Microcosms are a nice example of how even the smallest of creatures have a daily routine and so are not so very distinct from ourselves.
- 2) The servant is a good example of how rotten many people are.
- 3) The story of the WW11 code breakers at Bletchley is a superb example of how the power of natural rules (in this case mathematics) far exceeds mans' desires
- 4) *Dark City* and *The Matrix* both show how life could easily be a game, and the secret is to play it well and to look for the fundamental truth rather than getting wrapped up in the latest sociological phenomena like soap operas or *Big Brother*.

7 July 2003- Felicity (email)

A long time ago (can't remember when – sometime around the late 80's, very early 90s) I spotted this film called the Wicker Man in the paper, and, on reading that it was some sort of pagan fit-up, thought I'd set the timer for it, because it was screened late at night (I now know it's the medium length BBC version!). I'd not heard of it previously – I just decided to see if it was any good. Because I was not in at home for a few days afterwards, it was a little while before I got round to watching it.

Bearing in mind I'm a folk guitarist, I was instantly interested because of (what I thought were) the uilleann pipes and the acoustic guitar playing as the film starts. Plus, I've always had a bit of a soft spot for Ewan Woowar, as the old joke goes. Also, I think Chris Lee is just brilliant and have seen (and re-seen!) lots of his stuff too.

The way the islanders are sinisterly obstructive had me hooked within minutes and I couldn't let it go. Call me gullible, call me naïve, but I just didn't see what was coming, not for a minute. I thought, right up to the end, that the police would arrive on their white chargers and rescue him, and to say I was horrified and dumb struck at the end would be a huge understatement. The whole film had a profound effect on me – particularly Chris Lee's speeches, firstly about nature and wildlife, then about heathenism -v- Christianity.

I still remember how I felt: how devastated that good had not triumphed! And yet, it was strangely fulfilling, because I really wanted their crops to grow, and ended up seeing through their eyes how this was an obvious remedy for the failure of their crops.

Even now, fifteen-odd years hence, I still tell people about it and try to persuade them to watch it, but until recently, I thought I was fighting a losing battle – until I realised just what a huge amount of people out there seem to feel similarly to me.

One thing I particularly admired, and still do, about WM is the fact that it cannot be pigeon-holed. It's a horror film. It's a supernatural film. It's a detective movie. It's a religious one. One about nature; and one about man's inhumanity to man. It's still incredible to me just how clever the film is.

Each year two of my friends and I have our own Wicker man burning. Oh he's a little fellow of about five feet in height and we like to add our own little touches, like flowers. It makes you feel alive. I'm a fairly spiritual person. It's not something you can put a name to. I wouldn't say I have a religion, I guess it's leaning towards paganism but I'm not a pagan. I don't attend groups or subscribe to pagan groups but I suppose it comes close to something like a form of paganism. But it's also exciting. It's a striking image and symbolic for us. It's about wanting to slow down time and take stock of the important things in life...everything is so rushed, commute into the city for work and hustle and bustle of everyday life takes over. We don't get to see each other much. So for us it's about leaving behind the blur of our separate lives and experiencing things in the present, together in the present. It helps to ground you - just chatting over a drink but it was whilst chatting that we and you know, Community here in certain areas is a bit close-knit. It feels great because we just do our own thing, you know, we do what feels right. There were no rules, we didn't sit down and plan it. In fact all spontaneous over a drink and we were chatting about the film, and just about how great it would be to live on Summerisle, it was all a bit of a banter really. But then we started comparing it to our own lives and you know, however misguided paganism on the island is its still belief in something. And makes you want something to believe in curious about all old rituals and we read up on. It's actually quite exciting to go back to The Golden Bough and find all those references in the film. It's about having a tradition of our own, something that's meaningful to us.

I also went to a Wicker Man weekend in Hay-on-Wye in Wales (around 1995). The Saturday consisted of a torch-lit procession around the centre of Hay-on-Wye, accompanied by people dressed in black-and-white skeleton type outfits and all beating drums (and various other percussion instruments), then they led us all out onto the hillside, where there was a huge Wicker Man waiting to be burnt, plus a wicker maze and a wicker house. The "music" continued into the wee small hours, and a great time was had by all except for one apparently slightly mad woman, who was some kind of Christian, and who was screaming at everyone and berating them for conjuring up the Devil and such like. It was quite entertaining actually! (probably not for her, but certainly for the rest of us!!)

I hope I haven't gone on too much, but I don't often get the chance to go on and on about how I feel about WM ...

Letter From Sadara
14 August 2002

In 2001, Sadara wrote to me requesting details about Nuada. He mentioned his participation in 'Wicker evenings' and suggested that he would be willing to share his experiences with me. The following letter was sent in response to an email I sent Sadara requesting more details:

Dear Gail,

I hope you are well.

Things are going well here but I've been burning the candle at both ends having a full on social life outside the community playing capoeira – a Brazilian martial 'game'. Its summer after all and after a deep Winter I feel up for the crack.

Well, I'll try to describe for you what goes on during our 'wicker evenings' but as we've not had one for a while I have to cast my mind back a bit to catch the spirit of what was alive for me then. I do continue though to have a fascination for cult films and have had a David Lynch phase of late, as well as a bit of Kenneth Anger.

To begin with a bit of history I saw The Wicker Man first in Melbourne – where I come from – in 1994, and I remember it having an impact on me. Some of my friends liked it at the time. They were quite a pagan bunch: we were living in a mud brick house surrounded by beautiful bush and rolling hills, a river over the back and the whole area teeming with wildlife. Now I mention this time as it was very important for me as a young man exploring my spirituality and to have come across these people who to me exemplified freedom of expression and a connectedness to nature. I was yearning for a simpler life and the monk in the Buddhist tradition appealed to me at that time. I had also taken up Reiki healing as a result of dabbling in witchcraft, and because I'd not successfully integrated myself - through drinking and drugs in my early teens. So this pagan household was very appealing: happy healthy and human!

So The Wicker Man was one of the first real cult films I think I watched (I saw Pink Floyd - The Wall at eleven I don't know if that counts). Ever since I was a kid I've had an interest in the occult so my decision to come to England was an important step spiritually: to tap into my roots and follow up my hunches on the spiritual traditions that 'called me'. At 17 I had the desire to join a coven in the UK. I left Laughing Waters (which was the name of the street the mud brick house was on) and headed off the UK. As I see it now I've found my coven in the Buddhist Order I'm ordained into.

The men and women Ordained in [NAME OF BUDDHIST CENTRE] have trained between 3 – 20 years until accepted and feel themselves that they're ready to join. We draw from the whole of the Buddhist tradition and also from sources outside of Buddhism like important texts on spiritual friendship in 'The Duties of Brotherhood' in Islam by Al Ghazzali and similar inspiring texts from the Christian monastic tradition on that same theme. I've continued to follow up my pagan/wiccan interests here but would say that there's not a whole lot that I've read that inspires clarity for me but the emphasis on bodily awareness and awareness of nature and others (including other realms of existence) are essential and an important basis for any 'religion'.

Back to TWM! So to see a pagan society portrayed in TWM based on the kind of awareness and ritual recognition of life has been quite refreshing-the connection with Buddhism in this area is quite interesting which I'll say more about later. There was the thrill of a certain therapeutic blasphemy played out for me in the straightforward pooh-poohing of Sergeant Howie's beliefs that was helpful, and I continue to shake free of what Catholic guilt I still have. As I'm beginning to become more aware of what is and what isn't helpful to a spiritual path it's clearer that there's no room for guilt in the spiritual life, a healthy conscience yes but not a guilty one.

That was the first thing that stood out for me in TWM (but the comparison breaks down cos the community had no qualms burning alive a human being!)

So hiring TWM and hanging out with a couple of friends that night gave rise to quite a lot of mirth and interest, it was about getting together with musical friends for an evening of song, merriment and above all, an experience which feels more real. In part from the response from my friends and also I'd more interest in paganism than I used to. The folk soundtrack was also explicitly pagan and enjoyable adding to the 'life affirming' spirit. We'd walk around the retreat centre singing bits from the film and seeing a couple of us play the guitar we thought for one of our 'community do's' we'd play 'corn rings' etc. I think there's quite a pagan spirit in Buddhism and there are elements akin to the 'earth religions' which I mentioned earlier. One element being the fundamental Buddhist practice of mindfulness/awareness which covers moment to moment awareness of body, feelings, emotions, thoughts, others and reality.

[...]

I think TWM (leaving out human sacrifice) portrays where some people in an overly scientific age and where God is dead would 'like to be at', in terms of healthy human and social functioning. To shake off their Christian conditioning and reinstate the old gods after rejecting God having replaced him with science and hedonism! When I watch the film, I feel it's helping me to shake off my Catholic guilt and it really helps, I tell myself it's a kind of therapeutic blasphemy.

[...]

I remember reading somewhere that when TWM was show to a group of Christians - far from being shocked or outraged they were pleased to have had a clear representation of their faith portrayed - the martyr's death! I

The darker side to the film I've not thought too much about is how everything happy and pagan has led to the ritual burning of Howie. I suppose you can only romanticise a 'traditional society' to a certain extent! I think underneath 'traditional societies' can be quite oppressive even though a group of people base themselves on traditional principles which in this scientific age could be seen as desirable. The individual isn't valued for a start as he or she would naturally try and break out of certain ways of doing things that wouldn't be conducive to their 'development', therefore going against the grain. You can see the trend throughout history.

On a more symbolic level I'm sure you can read loads into TWM. I leave that alone for now. A friend who's actually written a paper on TWM & Buddhism may have more to say about that side of things so I'll give your email address to him as he'd be interested in you contributing.

I hope all that makes sense and please don't hesitate to ask for any clarification! I'm more than happy to try and answer any questions leading from this letter too and if I have missed answering any of your original questions let me know.

Appendix 8

This section includes two extended face-to-face interviews I conducted with Tim and Sadara in 2005. The structure of the interviews was loosely based on Dan McAdams' (1993) life story interview protocol. This involves asking the interviewee questions which encourage him/her to reflect on their lives in terms of chapters, enduring themes and on salient memories. I incorporated these methods in all aspects of my research with the focal study, as I found them conducive to soliciting open and honest responses, therefore minimising the tendency to produce 'discursive mantras' (Hills, 2002) in questions directed more explicitly towards their relationships to *The Wicker Man*. Both of these interviews, and especially Tim's, highlight the contradictions inherent in the fan responses more generally. As discussed in Chapter 2, the respondents clearly experience difficulties in articulating how and why they became fans of the film. At the same time, they produce discursive accounts, not unlike the justifications discussed by Hills (2002). Having said that, the particular protocol adopted encourages, not only the production of insightful responses, but highlights active instances of the mythmaking process. Tim's interview, in particular, demonstrates the interplay between the implicit and explicit modes of response I have highlighted throughout. Both interviews were recorded, and I have sought to retain, where possible, the original nuances – pauses, laughter and interruptions.

(Interview with Tim, 30th May 2005).

GAIL: IF YOU HAD TO PUT YOUR LIFE INTO CHAPTERS, HOW WOULD YOU DRAW THEM UP AND WHAT WOULD BE THE CHAPTER HEADINGS?

TIM: That's interesting (pause) erm...the first set of chapter headings that spring to mind would be the education structure: pre-school, infant school, junior school, secondary school, post-secondary school, university, and I suppose first job. After that, I suppose it'd come in terms of age: 30's, 40's. Erm (pause) funnily enough, I do tend to sectionalize my life like that. Some people seem to be able to look back on their life in a very linear sort of way, whereas I tend to break it up into different headings and, I think (pause) there's a book by Margaret Atwood called *Cat's Eye* which...and there's a section in that which really caught my attention. And I'd be thinking yeah...where she's describing memories... as looking through a set of different coloured filters, and each filter represents, I suppose, the closure of a chapter of a life. And of course, the more filters you look through the more distorted the memories become. And I think there's a lot of truth in that. I'm pretty aware that a lot of my memories are distorted, and I think we do reshape them, reselect them and change them (...)

[...]

GAIL: CAN YOU THINK OF FOUR PEOPLE WHO HAVE HAD A BIG INFLUENCE ON YOUR LIFE.

TIM: [requests a break in the interview to think this question through](...) I'll mention David Bowie...of course, he was a great influence on me, especially in my adolescent years, not he himself but the lyrics he was producing. Erm. I got very interested in nihilism when I was in my teens and (.2) there's a song he wrote called Quicksand, I think. The chorus to which says "don't believe in yourself; don't deceive with belief...which was a line I used to quote a lot when I was about 17, 18 or 19. Yeah, so I think that shaped a lot of my perspective of the world. So I'd say he was an influence. Erm(.8) I'm trying to think of teachers and I can't come up with a particular one because there's been so many teachers(...) who have been a great influence on me, in terms of encouraging me to write...an seeing early signs that I was showing this, not talent , but interest in creative writing. And who did a lot more to push me more in that direction (...)

GAIL: WHAT WOULD YOU SAY ARE YOUR SPIRITUAL BELIEFS?

TIM: Yeah, that is a difficult one! [laughs] I do have a spiritual side to me – that I do believe in. I was brought up a catholic - I'm a lapsed catholic now. I suppose some of those old catholic vows and beliefs have hung over but you know in a different sort of way. Erm (.2) I believe there's a spiritual side I do believe there's an afterlife. But what format afterlife takes I've absolutely no idea. We can only speculate on that one. I believe in the spirit of nature. You know the changing seasons and the positions of the sun and the moon. You know we consider the physical world isn't effected by the moon but you know even the tides are affected by the moon. We're what? 97 percent water? So that must have an influence on us. So I'm spiritual in that sense. I always used to say, when I stopped going to church, and my mum and dad would ask, you know, why have you stopped? And I'd say well it does absolutely nothing for me. I walk in, recite the same prayers; walk out (.) cold! But, if I go down to Blackpool promenade on a lovely summer's evening and watch a really good, red sunset. That used to fill me with a sense of spirituality. And I used to think, god, isn't the world fascinating, isn't the world brilliant. There must be something more to it. So, I'm somebody who[overlap]I mentioned the bad adult memory about when I was at that job I didn't like that was pivotal to me spiritually because I think that was about the moment when I rejected materialism. Not completely, I mean I didn't become a drop out or anything like that but when I realised that the yuppie-sort of Thatcherite dream we were being sold in the 80s which, for a while, I was a willing participant in, I realised was a big lie. Or rather, what's the use of having money and a flash car if you're just not happy? If you're not happy in yourself and you're working long hours. Not being able to spend time with family and friends. What does it all mean? Absolutely fuck all. So I kissed that goodbye. You know, sod going out and earning big bucks. Family and friends... that's all I need. So that's my spiritual belief, if you like.

GAIL: AND HOW OLD WERE YOU AT THAT TIME?

TIM: 30, I'd just turned 30.

GAIL: WOULD YOU SAY YOUR OWN INTEREST IN MUSIC AND ART CHANGED AT THAT TIME ALSO?

TIM: Erm...I don't think they changed profoundly, I think interests do change as you go along in life, I think you go through phases. Erm, I was no longer listening to chart music by then. But I don't think that had any change on me. I think by the late 80's the charts had gone crap anyway. But I bet every generation says that[laughs]. I think I developed a greater interest in art around that time. I wasn't really one for going to galleries I did do it. But not in as big a way as I did when I got into my 30's. I became far more interested in the artwork of other people. I'd been interested in artists such as Edvard Munch and the Expressionist movement. I got more interested in, in classical music – certainly. Now again, I don't know if this was a reaction against me not liking the music at that date that was being produced; the Stock/Aitken/Waterman and all the rest of that pre-packaged nonsense. Erm... but I was certainly discovering classical music in a much bigger way than I had done. So I'd say...there wasn't a profound change in my taste in arts or music, I think it was still the start of this steady progression.

GAIL: HOW HAVE YOUR POLITICAL BELIEFS CHANGED?

TIM: [laughs] I've been through so many political phases. Erm, I mean I grew up in a family where you know one parent was a labour supporter and the other was a staunch Tory supporter; which was an interesting combination, I always thought [laughs]. But I didn't vote in the 1979 election because I was still too young but I did support the Blessed Margaret, I suppose because we were all a bit dissatisfied with the government of the day, I mean the government was stale. So although I didn't vote, I supported the Tories, perhaps for the wrong reasons. And with not really getting to know what they were about(...) A year or two later I changed and went really very Socialist In the late 80's I started changing again and when back[laughs] – not right wing. But I suppose I thought, yeah, maybe you socialist labour have got it a bit wrong. I mean they seemed a bit naïve. [laughs] Then again, post-thirty I started finding my socialist heart again and then putting people first and...and until the point where I'm actually now totally rejected all the political parties. I didn't vote in the last election which, I know is a shameful admission. But when you look and you think back and can't agree with any of them, what do you do? I'm not apolitical. I mean I don't believe people when they say they're apolitical. That means you have *no* politics [laughs] well that's nonsense, everybody has politics it may not be a party political. But I'm very mix and match. In terms of social welfare I do have a socialist heart and I believe in looking after those who need looking after (...) I do have a republican heart. I don't support the royal family (...) I don't mind them being there just don't ask me to buy a coronation mug; I just don't wanna know. In terms of law and order, that's where I get a bit 'red-necked' [laughs] I'm not a member of the hang 'em and flog 'em brigade, let's get that very, very clear. But I do tend to be a bit - the law and order in this country could be better. Probably 'cos I'm a copper's son and I've seen it from his side of things. And it does open your eyes when you've seen it from their side (...) So those are my politics. I suppose if you wanted me to sum them up in a sentence...I support...I would support a government which, you know, look after health look after education, and give everybody in society an equal chance to make the absolute best of themselves in whatever field they choose (...)

GAIL: IF YOU COULD CHOOSE A THEME WHICH WOULD BE APT LOOKING BACK OVER YOUR LIFE, WHAT WOULD THAT THEME BE?

TIM: Quest! It is a quest thing. I'm still trying to find who I am. What I am. If I'm gonna draw a literary comparison I gonna sum up my life by using a work of literature... I mean there's probably a number of novels I could choose but the one which springs to mind immediately which would probably seem a very odd choice, is Jane Eyre. Now the first obvious difference is Jane Eyre was a woman I'm not[laughs] but, she was a character I always identified with..erm, and I first read the book...I knew the story cos I'd seen it done on tv. But I first read the book properly, cos one, I was doing a course, and two, again – and it's all tying in – again I was about thirty and it was that time when I was doing a job I didn't like. I think where Jane Eyre struck a chord with me was that she struck me as somebody who was trying to find the existence which was just right for her in a society which couldn't really offer her that existence. I mean I know she finds happiness at the end with Rochester but she has to go through so much to get there. And yet she makes bad mistakes along the way. You know she's not a fully wise woman, which I liked. And I've made bad mistakes along the way. Course you do. You look back and say "why did I do that?" [laughs] she was a very self-willed woman from being a child and sometimes maybe a bit impulsive. But at the same time, intelligent. Perhaps didn't have a clear view of what she wanted but sort of had some idea of where she wanted to be. Erm., and the bit which sticks out most for me in the book is where, in the argument with Rochester...and it's the famous quote... you know, you and I should be called before god as we are, which she does get in the end but she only gets it by the fact that Rochester sort of becomes physically impaired through the accident. So in a way they become equals because then he becomes reliant on her. Rather than the other way round. Which I thought was a nice, interesting twist. I mean I hope nothing drastic happens to anyone else in order for me to get what I want [laughs]. But, yeah, that is a book that I would colour my life with (...)

GAIL: CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT THE FIRST TIME YOU WATCHED *THE WICKER MAN*?

TIM: I first saw the film properly in the late '70s on TV. I guess when it was being shown on TV for the first time. I think it was on ITV prime time. I had been aware of the film when it came out at the cinema. Obviously I didn't go and see it because I was only 11 years old. And it was an X-rated movie [laughs]. They showed a clip on TV, on a kid's TV programme called Clapperboard, which was like a film magazine programme for kids, and I think they were doing a feature on Christopher Lee, and they showed the clip of him at the piano singing, so it was quite a safe clip to show (...) So I was aware of it as a film but I didn't know what The Wicker Man referred to. I had in my head that it referred to the Chris Lee's character and, of course, in the mid-late '70s it started to get picked up on, and I started reading that it developed this following in America. And there was actually a Wicker Man appreciation society in America, and I thought how strange, you know, one film, having its own appreciation society. I can imagine a TV programme show one. But a film! And

what I found even more remarkable was the fact that the film hadn't really had a wide release in the States at this time, and a lot of people in the society had probably never even seen it! But they were campaigning for it to get shown. And then I was aware that it got released in America (...) and I finally saw it in the late 70's and erm...erm (overlap) I wasn't expecting that ending. And when they put him in the wicker man I expected him to be rescued in the last moment or fall out and when it didn't happen, I was like argh [laughs] So, yes, it was like nothing I'd ever seen before.

GAIL: AND DID IT MAKE AN IMMEDIATE IMPACT ON YOU?

TIM: Yes, it did! I thought it was a film that was very different, original and strangely absorbing. It captured me immediately! But, I didn't actually see it again for about another 15 years. I saw it a second time, I bought it on video in HMV and it was like one of these budget video [...] I got to know Ingrid Pitt and have got involved with her as one of her researchers [...] So I picked up the wicker man, obviously watched it, and I think the second time I watched it – because you know the story and you're not being surprised or confounded by its story, you start to pick up on the other elements and, and I was particularly picking up on the language that was being used and...and the dialogue; the different sorts of dialogue and the way it defined the three main protagonists . So yeah, Howie's talk – he was a straightforward, no-nonsense copper, talking in a very clipped, direct way [pause] erm, you had Miss Rose, who is an elusive, slippery character, who talks in a very elusive slippery way and a very pedantic way: "well, you know the body is buried in what was once a graveyard "whether it's still a churchyard or not, all this, you know [...]. Which kind of defined her character, you know, a very evasive trickster. And of course, Summerisle himself, whose language is interesting cos it sort of - he sort of leads from the...the...the...pretentious to the – not profound – no, that's not the right word. I mean, his sudden usage of slang, the way he slips slang in, he goes. He's eloquent and slangful. And again, it's like there's something quite phony about him. And, of course, we learn in the film that the actual whole Summerisle thing was somewhat phony, it'd been a title bought by his great-grandfather. But again, I like the way in the scenes, especially in the scene where he and Howie meet face-to-face for the first time. And he's explaining the island. He's very eloquent in his use of language; you know, I mean, a man born of a virgin I believe impregnated by a ghost. And then he'll slip into slang again; [mimicking Christopher Lee's character] it's been a great pleasure meeting a "Christian copper!" [laughs] And this...that stood out to me. And I found that quite interesting And I like the texture of the film and I like the costumes, the animal masks, but I thought they were very, very sinister. Er, the scene where you know, Howie's obviously going out to his plane with the intention of going back to the mainland and he's being watched by all these characters in masks; it's like they've become something inhuman, which I suppose, in many ways they have. But we don't know that yet. and even things like the scene in, Er, the Green Man where they sing the Landlord's Daughter, which is this jolly sort of saucy ditty, I think when I first saw the film I took it as being humorous when I saw it for the second time and each time I rewound that scene, I'd find it very threatening. And I mean very threatening. There's something going on under that. Erm, cos obviously on the surface, they're mocking his authority, you know, this priggish copper erm, but again, why are they mocking his authority? You know, why do they feel confident in doing so? And I found it a very, very threatening scene.

GAIL: SO WOULD YOU SAY THAT IT WAS THROUGH WATCHING IT AGAIN AT A LATER STAGE IN YOUR LIFE AND BECOMING FASCINATED WITH ITS USE OF LANGUAGE. IS THAT WHERE YOUR INTEREST WITH THE FILM BEGAN

TIM: Yes, I would say so. Yes. Although, I would say there are elements I can't explain. I can't explain why I'm fascinated with the film, I can only give [pause] you know, I was fascinated by the use of language, I was fascinated by the use of texture, textures, of course, the costumes; the dramatic structuring obviously I think it's very well structured, even in the edited version which obviously butchered a lot of things out I thought,..I think the structuring, that was quite good in it [...] but why it works as a whole – I don't know. Erm maybe it's because it's the sum of such good parts. You know, maybe there's no reason why it works as a whole, it's just the parts that make it work. I can't explain why I'm still fascinated with it; why I keep going back to it. You think after a while you'd get tired of it...I've been a...if we're gonna use the word 'fan', I have been a fan of other things but it's never lasted. It's lasted for a time - 'til a time when I've sort of...moved on. But *The Wicker Man*, at least for the past 10 years, has remained a constant source of interest to me. More so than other horror films I've watched, and I've always liked horror – British horror I mean, especially so – since I was a young kid. You know, I like Gothic film and novels and always have done.

GAIL: CAN YOU TELL ME WHAT IT IS YOU LIKE ABOUT BRITISH HORROR IN PARTICULAR?

TIM: Well, it's part of my past – I grew up with these texts, and I mean Hammer and *Witchfinder General*, you know, all the classics really.

GAIL: YEAH, YOU MENTION THE LANDSCAPE AS BEING ESPECIALLY APPEALING IN THESE TEXTS [REFERENCE TO PREVIOUS COMMENT IN QUESTIONNAIRE 2, 1999]

TIM: Yeah, the countryside always figured predominantly in them [in many British horror texts of the period] so that you almost felt enveloped by it somehow; it was like watching them allowed you to peer into some ancient England. And so it's a world which looks familiar, but you're uncovering a dark past. And you've got all these sunny green spaces filled with lurking, creeping terrors. And as a kid I often felt very drawn to this combination of horror and the countryside. And it's the same with some of the good little British adaptations of M. R. James' ghost stories. I've probably seen all of the BBC ghost stories for Christmas. It was the highlight of the festive season back then. Forget Santa [laughs] Christmas was always about ghost stories around the hearth. So, yeah, you got this really atmospheric use of the landscape and I'm thinking of things like *Oh whistle and I'll come to you, my Laddie* and *A Warning to the Curious*. And that other one – not M. R. James, but on similar lines – *Robin Redbreast*.

[...]

GAIL: HOW DOES THE PROSPECT OF THE FORTHCOMING REMAKE OF THE FILM MAKE YOU FEEL?

TIM: [laughs] I'm against the idea. I don't think it needs to be remade full stop. I think it works perfectly on its own terms. I think it's a very timeless movie, by the way. I mean I know it was made in 1973, and certain fashions do give it away a little bit but on the whole it's very, very timeless, I suppose because it's set in a very timeless environment, it's set in this other world, it's not mainland Scotland or wherever...It's set in this timeless community. Er, so I think that endows it with a timelessness which means, does it need to be remade? I mean, they could release it tomorrow and it could be a big hit all over again, erm, because the ending I think is still very, very powerful. I mean even thirty years later it's still very upsetting and more disturbing than anything Hollywood's ever come out with. So I think remake full stop I'm against it.

I'm against the idea of it being an Americanised remake, because I think [pause] I'm not being patriotic, but, I think it's a very British, or very English subject. And connects to the British landscape, and you know, as I've said. I'm assuming the Americans are gonna Americanise it in some way. I know they're going to set it in America but I assume they're gonna do more than just move the location. I'm presuming that it's going to be a different kind of society they're going to portray. Erm, [pause] I suppose cultural theft springs to mind. Obviously, we've seen a lot of British classics being remade, especially recently like *The Italian Job*, *The Ladykillers*, and it's almost a case of: why can't you make your own stuff? Why you taking(overlap) it's not so much they wanna take, it's the fact that they wanna move it to America...it's like they're claiming it as their own, which I find a bit distasteful. Cultural theft springs to mind. I mean, I [pause] it's not something I get angry about; I don't think the issues that important. But I'd rather they weren't doing it. And I'd rather they'd leave *The Wicker Man* alone. Its fine as it is.

GAIL: YOU USE THE EXPRESSION "CULTURAL THEFT" THERE; WOULD YOU SAY THAT, EVEN IF YOU CANNOT FULLY EXPLAIN IT, THAT IT IS ALSO IN SOME WAY A PERSONAL THEFT?

TIM: I imagine some fans would erm [pause] I've not met many *The Wicker Man* fans, I've got to admit - not what I'd really call fans. I've met many people who've seen the film and like it. But from what I've read from cuttings, I can imagine some who perhaps see the film as perhaps being theirs in a way [pause] I think that's a bad way of putting it really. They take something personal in this idea of [pause] something that they feel belongs to them being taken and revamped by a different culture and revamped for that different culture. Erm [pause] whether that's true of certain fans or not I don't know. I can imagine it might be.

GAIL: BUT FOR YOU IT'S NOT A PERSONAL THEFT?

TIM: It's not a personal theft for me in that sense, erm, it's a film that interests me, it's a film I'm fond of. And I think it's a tremendously well made film. And a good little thriller. I mean, I love thrillers anyway. Erm, the idea of something that's a

classic of ours [pause] again, I'm trying to avoid sounding patriotic. It's not as simple as that. Erm, the idea of something that came from our culture being taken and revamped by this other culture which we perceive as being very materialistic and very empty in many ways, this multi-national culture – and turned into a product I think that's what's bothering me more than anything else: product. It's almost like the buying, the brand. Erm, when I saw the remake of *The Italian Job*, for example, I thought, why did you call it *The Italian Job*? Cos it's not set in Italy: It's set in Los Angeles. Why didn't they call it summat else then they could have claimed it as their own film with great justification. Erm, but it's obvious they wanted the name; cos they knew they were remaking a classic. I don't know anything about this remake. I don't know if the *Wicker Man* is even gonna be in it. But I know they're hanging on to that title desperately. And I think it is for that reason and I suppose I find that annoying.

GAIL: SO DO YOU THINK BECAUSE THAT FILM'S COME OUT OF A CULTURE THAT YOU SEE YOURSELF AS BELONGING TO THAT THE ORIGINAL IS IN SOME WAY MORE AUTHENTIC?

TIM: I think so, yes. I'd say that a very fair comment. The other thing about *The Wicker Man* is that it's a film that wasn't just made, it evolved. Er, I mean we all know the stories behind the making of it and the difficulties they had. And the happy accidents that went on along the way. And [pause] you know, the fact they had incredibly good luck when they were making it, with the weather, when they shot that final scene. It could all have gone so bloody wrong and a very different film could have emerged at the end. The fact it was butchered at first, and then it was restored, erm, and we've now got these two cuts available, the fact it was buried, and then re-emerged and became this cult, and became a stronger film and I think there's a lot of truth in the idea that had it been given a full release in its day, it probably wouldn't be as big as it is now. But part of that film's story is part of its success and part of its culture. So yeah, I would say it's more authentic in that it has evolved...it has grown like the crops in the film itself, it's *somehow* grown and the more they tried to cut it back the more it's grown back. Whereas all the Hollywood version's gonna do is take the template of this film and its title and just turn it into a Hollywood product.

GAIL: SO, AS IT STANDS IN BRITISH CULTURE, YOU DON'T SEE IT AS A PRODUCT?

TIM: Oh [pause] that's a difficult question [laughs] it depends what you mean by product. It's been produced by our culture; obviously, we've got the history of paganism in this country and indeed Europe, which is part of it. We've got Tony Shaffer, who was of course a British playwright; got all the talent invested in it. Yes, it's very British...English...Scottish; whatever you wanna say. I don't think of it as a product in the sense that it's a brand put on the supermarket shelf. It wasn't produced for that purpose; it was produced to be (.) a film that told a good story that would go on to entertaining audiences in the cinema. One of the problems I have with Hollywood these days is that they don't just look at that when making a film they're looking beyond to a DVD release. OK we'll have to cut some scenes out; they can go on the DVD – and all this sort of thing; they're thinking very much in terms of

package. I mean, they've already released the film poster or the "pre-teaser" poster as they call it; this intriguing image of a young girl with a candle, looking back at *The Wicker Man*. And I thought, god, they've not even shot one scene and they're packaging it already. Erm. So I think of it as a product of British culture in the way that it's been produced by British culture, and the way that a crop is produced by an agrarian culture; I do not think of it as being a *manufactured* product in the way that I see a lot of Hollywood movies manufactured, if you can understand the distinction I'm trying to get at [albeit] very badly [laughs].

GAIL: HOW ELSE HAVE YOU INTERPRETED THE FILM?

TIM: I see it as a clash of cultures; I see it as a film which doesn't take one side or another. You've got your...obviously the clash between paganism and Christianity as represented by Howie. On the surface, its two very disparate cultures, but really they're the same. And one of the key scenes for me is one where (...) he [Howie] meets Summerisle for the first time; and you've got the girls dancing naked over the bonfire. And, Summerisle's explaining it parthenogenesis; they're hoping they're gonna be impregnated by a god; to have the child of a god, and Howie's scornful at that - oh what nonsense is this, have these girls not heard of Christianity? Now, have these girls never heard of Christ? Which he turns round and says, Er himself the son of a virgin produced I believe by a ghost. And I thought that was a pivotal scene because he was basically saying you know, you may think your religion's so much better than ours but in fact, they're the same. They are the same. We've just got two different slants on it; you've got a Christian slant, we've got a pagan slant. But we're celebrating the same things: death, reproduction, life, fire, blood, sacrifice. They're all there in both religions.

GAIL: Would you say then that there are times when you can watch it and one reading of it will play a bigger part in that particular viewing of it?

TIM: Yeah, I think that is possible; I think that may have happened during at least one viewing where [pause] I started to see Howie as being a bit of a Christ figure himself, which I don't think I had before and I don't think I have done since really. Erm, because of course, at the end of the film he gets sacrificed. As indeed Christ got nailed up at the cross. He's not gonna get physical resurrection but Summerisle tells him you will have life eternal; you'll sit among the Saints, so you'll be resurrected in a sense...in the sense that he believes his religion believes. And I think when I got that idea was when I first time I saw the director's cut; well they call it the director's cut - which had the scene where he's tempted in the cut version it's portrayed as taking place on his first night on the island. Whereas in the actual, real cut its portrayed as being on his last night on the island. And I thought ah! The last temptation of Christ!

GAIL: DO YOU, OR HAVE YOU, IDENTIFIED WITH ANY PARTICULAR CHARACTER IN THE FILM?

TIM: I don't think I have to be honest. Erm, [pause] in terms of degrees of identification I suppose you identify with Howie more than anything because your that outsider coming in to this other world which is very strange. I mean, I can imagine his sort of being taken aback in the scene where you've got this post office ,

those candy babies and there's something very bizarre about them and I didn't like them the first time I saw them [laughs] and I still don't ..you look at them and you think urgh, I dunno [laughs] there's something very strange so I suppose you identify with Howie as being more one of us ; he's come from the world that we know. Having said that it's a bit difficult to identify with him as a person because he's just so pious, so priggish and so wrapped up in his own religion which, you know, I'm not. Erm, and it's hard to imagine being like him in that sense. As for the other characters, I can't really...I'm not sure you could identify with any of them at all because again I can see them as being the Other. As belonging to this other world, with their own values, some of which of course would be very, very alien to me and their attitudes towards sex and of course their attitude towards death and reproduction erm(.) so, yeah, I don't identify with the Summer islanders; Howie to an extent; as the outsider coming in .

GAIL: SO, GOING BACK TO THIS IDEA OF ENGLISHNESS THEN, WHAT DO YOU THINK STRIKES YOU IN THAT FILM AS BEING ENGLISH AS SUCH?

TIM: I think it - it's a very pastoral-looking film, cos of course it's set in this agrarian community. Erm, and I suppose when you think of a pastoral community you think of the Englishness, the green and pleasant land, you know, the cricket match on the green, the village pub, Er, and of course,. But the landscape is of course not quite the rural idyll it first purports itself to be. And so a lot of the English rural turned bad, Er, a lot of those elements are in *The Wicker Man*, I know it's supposed to be an island off the coast of Scotland, and so I suppose British should be the word but, yeah, there's an English quality about it; a look to it and Er... and of course, Paganism is a part of English history and the maypole is still a part of English pastoral culture. So you have the whole maypole bit; the hobbyhorse bit; I know that still goes on in places like Padstow. So I suppose that's where I'm coming from on that take. It's the texture of the film I think is very, very English; very pastoral or maybe I should be saying – very Scottishly pastoral.

GAIL: SO, PICKING UP ON WHAT YOU SAID EARLIER ABOUT *JANE EYRE*. DOES THAT FEEL LIKE A MORE PERSONAL PIECE OF WORK TO YOU?

TIM: Yeah [pause] Yes, it does. Erm, I suppose for the reason I explained before that I can identify with the character Jane Eyre very closely in the sense that I can't identify with Sgt. Howie or any other character in *The Wicker Man*. It is very personal because her journey resonates with my life's journey, so yes I do identify very, very closely even though she's female [laughs]. Which some people would find strange. I don't find it strange; that's immaterial to me, it's the person, not who they are.

SO IS *JANE EYRE* A BOOK THAT YOU GO BACK TO AS OFTEN AS *THE WICKER MAN*?

TIM: Not as often as *The Wicker Man*...Er I suppose for the practical reason that *The Wicker Man*'s a film; I find it easier to go back to a film. I think purely for that reason more than anything else. It's a book I keep on my shelf; it's a book I keep

dipping in to - maybe go back and read certain favourite chapters, or re-read certain favourite pieces of dialogue. I've not sat down and re-read it as a novel again since I did it as part of my degree course and then I did read it only a few times. Erm, shortly after re-reading it again cos I was breaking it down to make chapter by chapter notes which I later published. But, yeah, it's a novel I'd probably go back to and read again soon...as a novel again.

GAIL: WOULD YOU SAY YOUR FASCINATION FOR THE WICKER MAN IS STRONGER THAN FOR JANE EYRE?

TIM: Yes, that's a good way of putting it. But you see I can explain Jane Eyre, but not *The Wicker Man*. I don't quite know why I go back to it so often.

GAIL: WHEN YOU TALK ABOUT GOING BACK TO *THE WICKER MAN* DOES THAT JUST ENTAIL WATCHING THE FILM OR IS IT SOMETHING THAT PLAYS MORE OF A PART IN YOUR LIFE WHERE YOU CAN JUST DRAW ON IT IN YOUR THOUGHTS...OR...

TIM: Oh, yeah, I can draw on it in my thoughts; it's not just about watching the film.

GAIL: Can you give me an example?

TIM: It's erm, I mean this may be a flippant example [pause] several months ago I was in work and I was working in this department and I'd been told my job was going [pause] and I was doing my usual stuff and then my head of department walked up to me and said oh Tim, can you just step in my office. Lesley from personnel's in there as well and I knew what was coming and my colleague looked at me cos he knew what was coming as well. And I thought this is it. I turned round and I said it's time to keep my appointment with the wicker man [laughs] meaning this is it, I'm for the chop; which I was. [laughs]. But , yeah, I draw on it and I mean yeah, I quote from it and things like that and also the sense that you know, you watch a thing on TV set in a remote village where people are a bit strange and you say things like oh it's very *Wicker Man*-ish , and I don't think it's just me I think it's become part of our popular language, even down to, you know, I watched a review of a popular children's TV show called *Balamory* or something, which is aimed at tots set in a Scottish moor, and I read somewhere it described as *The Wicker Man* without the sex and violence. [laughs]. So, yeah, I think you draw on it. You draw on it as a reference.

GAIL: AND ARE THERE ANY OTHER BOOKS OR FILMS THAT YOU WOULD SAY HAVE PLAYED A PART IN YOUR LIFE, OR IN YOUR IMAGINATION?

TIM: Erm, *The Prisoner* was a big influence in my life; a hell of a big influence. I watched that properly when I was in my teens; I had seen it as a youngster but I was too young to remember it or appreciate it. And I was drawn into this series, firstly cos it's a strange looking series anyway and I think anyone who's 14 would be attracted to something that's different. Having said that most of my peers didn't understand it, I do remember talking about it at school and those who had seen it seemed frustrated by it because it, probably because it wasn't the dumbed-down

fodder they were used to. It was the same when I saw *Space Odyssey 2001*, you know I really understood it and my brother was amazed at how I could come off with this complex interpretation.

But, yeah, going back to *The Prisoner*, I got drawn into its ideas and it was the first TV series I'd seen where it wasn't talking to the audience, and instead it was expecting its audience to keep up and not leaving you with answers; satisfactory answers, but questions. And it was a series about identity, about being an individual in a huge collective society and about authority. These are the kind of questions that played on your mind when you're an adolescent anyway so, and I identified very much with No. 6; I saw myself as being very much against the system; erm, so that had a huge influence on my life. Erm in terms of books, texts; erm I read in my late teens some Paul John Sartre which I thought was articulating a lot of my concerns; it probably was at that time about nihilism. Erm, I wouldn't say now, cos I think that's something I've evolved and gone on; I'm more altruistic these days than I was back then. [pause] *Jane Eyre* I've mentioned, erm, Thomas Hardy; the works...some of his books I'd say influenced a lot of my thinking about the countryside versus the city and the difference between the two and the concerns about the two, about the dehumanisation of the city on its populous. Cos they're not natural environments really are they? Erm, and I think that's a theme I still read into a lot of texts, I remember going to see *Invasion of The Bodysnatchers*, the 1979 version, and talking with my mates about it and wondering why was it set in the city cos the original had been set in suburbia, and a lot of people took that as the '50s version of being a paranoid parable about communism whereas in actual fact I read it and I believed the director later said it was more about middle-class conformity as later explored by films like *The Stepford Wives*. And when I saw the Philip Kauffman version, cos he moves the city, it was a film about the alienating effects of the city; that you become less than human, you become a component of the city. And I think that's the thing that occurred in my life, or occurred in the back of my brain all the time.

GAIL: SO THAT'S NEVER CHANGED; IT'S NEVER SORT OF.

TIM: It's never really changed, no. I still think there's something alienating about cities. I do like cities; I like visiting them, I wouldn't like to live in one.

GAIL: OK THEN, SO IF YOU COULD PICK ONE WORD TO DESCRIBE THE CITY AND THE COUNTRYSIDE WHAT WORDS WOULD YOU CHOOSE?

TIM: What words would they be? One each?

GAIL: YES.

TIM: (.) The countryside I'd describe as bliss. The city - noisy.

GAIL: AND TALKING ABOUT THAT THEME, HOW DOES THAT MAP ONTO A FILM LIKE *THE WICKER MAN* FOR YOU?

TIM: I suppose because in *The Wicker Man* which portrays a society which is blissful.

[...]

(Interview with Sadara, 15th May 2005).

[...]

GAIL: YOU MENTIONED HAVING A FASCINATION WITH CULT FILMS. WHAT IS YOUR DEFINITION OF A CULT FILM? [Reference to previous correspondence]

SADARA: A film that is Er (.4) out of the ordinary, erm (.) and different to a mainstream film, obviously and what makes it different is (.2) it's something that would make you think outside of the box.

GAIL: SO IS IT TO DO WITH IDEAS AND CONCEPTS. OR IS IT SOMETHING ABOUT THE STYLE AS WELL?

SADARA. *Definitely about the style.* Imagery, archetypes.

GAIL: WHAT DO YOU THINK IS DIFFERENT ABOUT THE IMAGERY?

SADARA: I'm not sure (.) I suppose I'm thinking in a mythic context.

GAIL: YES, I KNOW WHAT YOU MEAN, THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT THE STYLE.

SADARA: Yeah.

GAIL: SO, YOUR FASCINATION WITH LYNCH AND ANGER - IS THAT ON A PAR WITH THE WICKER MAN?

SADARA: Er, I've gone back to Anger [pause] I'd have to think about that a bit more. I'd say it's certainly on a par [pause]. There is a difference with the wicker man, and it maybe it's related to the visual style, the colours are absorbing, the blue sky and then the rich green colours of the land, green is a central colour in the film but the blueness of the sky is also striking. [Erm, it's a difference of a life to it than Lynch; Lynch is very dark. I mean he uses light a lot which I like, you know, it's kinda weird. There is the light and a sense of moving towards that [pause] And it's the same thing, if not more with *Wicker Man*. Yeah I was affected quite a lot, it was an emotional thing with me.

GAIL: CAN YOU DESCRIBE WHAT YOU MEAN BY EMOTIONAL?

SADARA: Well I mean it's working on a level, like a deeply emotional level. Impressing on me images but I can't really put it into words what I feel, and I can't explain fully why the film impacts on me the way it does. It just feels close to me, part of who I am but I don't know how else to describe it. But some films get me thinking, they engage me on an intellectual level. And the wicker man does too. But

more than this it engages me on a emotional level and it's that level that even I find difficult to explain. I'd say it was spiritual, but I don't like the word, I don't think it has a clear meaning.

GAIL: YOU MENTION THAT IT [*THE WICKER MAN*] WAS AN IMPORTANT THING IN YOUR LIFE BECAUSE YOU WERE EXPLORING YOUR OWN SPIRITUALITY AT THE TIME

SADARA: Yeah, that's right.

GAIL: SO DO YOU THINK THAT'S SIGNIFICANT?

SADARA: Yeah but also I can't remember exactly my responses at the time. Erm, which is a shame because it was an important time in my life; living in a mud-brick house with very healthy, happy people, erm, into their magic as well: witchcraft, Paganism. So, and yeah, I was exploring my spirituality and it was a bit of rehab; just getting back to feeling normal, human again. So maybe I did get into it then although I was still probably quite cynical really, and didn't get into it then really...it didn't do it for me at that time, I didn't know what all the fuss was about. And, yet the second time I watched it, it was different.

GAIL: SO, IF YOU WERE TO WATCH IT NOW, OR WHEN YOU'VE WATCHED IT SINCE, DO YOU THINK YOUR RESPONSES TO IT HAVE CHANGED?

SADARA: Hmm, yeah.

GAIL: SO, WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO YOU NOW? I MEAN DO YOU STILL LIKE THE FILM A LOT?

SADARA: Erm, do I like it? I do like it. I prefer not to watch it that often. I showed it to Neil the other night , about a week ago, erm and you know, a different response erm, I think..erm.. partly to do with my views on Christianity, you know, as well. And the character of Howie (.2) I'd say I still like it cos it's engaging - the music, and you know, looking at the subtleties of the characters and (.) yeah, it's quite fun and quirky still.

(...)

GAIL: OK, LIFE CHAPTERS

SADARA: well, there's loads but I thought of starting in New Zealand, I suppose this is quite life-story-ish for me. (...) New Zealand. Experience. Turbulence. Adoption. Friends. [childhood] Australia. Adventure continues. Reflection. Security . school, friends, puberty loss of innocence, After school – rebellion: sex, drugs, rock and roll. Pressure of world. Magic, religion , music, teenage years. Erm {someone's? book} reiki, rehab, travel, the Buddha (...)

Interest in paganism continues...social life (.10) maturing process, responsibility(.).

[...]

SADARA: Peak experience: most wonderful moment. There were two [pause] falling in love when I was nine or ten was like...quite exquisite. And an out of the body experience with reiki, where my experience was; it may be difficult to explain this for you. But there was a boat on a golden lake and, and the waves lapping against the...the...dinghy, the boat, the wooden boat and the intense heat and the sun that was like myself, that moment. Again, exquisitely beautiful (...)

GAIL: WHAT ABOUT THE WORST MOMENT?

SADARA: Acid trip; going to hell on an acid trip. Erm, which was total alienation from my friends and an ability to communicate anything, erm which was cyclical and at the darkest end of that cycle was a pit and erm it was hellish, very negative voices which seemed to come from a very deep pit in my, in some way, in my being.

GAIL: WERE YOU RAISED A CATHOLIC?

SADARA: Yeah. Erm, until I was 12. I'd progressively got more and more paranoid on marijuana and (...) smoking was almost blissful when I first started but it's almost as if I began to run out of merit with it. It was a bank account of happiness that kind of diminished. Cracking it open with pot or dropping a tab, I erm , it was like ten-fold. It was just an inability to get myself through my teens and the turbulence of teenage years. A feeling that sort of no-one would understand you got in to .

GAIL: DO YOU THINK YOUR EXPERIENCE OF HELL WAS IN ANY WAY INFLUENCED BY YOUR CATHOLIC UPBRINGING? DID IT FEEL AND LOOK LIKE ...

SADARA: No, it wasn't a visual thing it was an(.) er (.) it was more like I could hear things(...)

SADARA: From childhood I've had a fascination with the word 'consequences'

GAIL: WITH THE *WORD* CONSEQUENCES?

SADARA: Yeah. Erm, and the word 'monotonous'. Those were the two words that I came away with after primary school still ringing in my head. I also remember being attracted to a priest at our parish, a young man: a very attractive. I was attracted to his friendliness, I don't know, perhaps I thought he was spiritual. And I remember thinking does that mean I'm going to be a priest. And I remember thinking I'm going to become a priest. The other important memory was refusing to go to church when I was about 12. On that Sunday morning just not getting out of bed and my mum just trying to wake me up - to get going. And I thought I'm not

waking, I'm not going to show signs of life. I'm gonna sit this through cos I just don't wanna go (...)

(...)

GAIL: WHO HAS BEEN MOST INFLUENTIAL ON YOUR LIFE?

SADARA: Erm in my life, I suppose erm, myself, my mum and dad and the founder of the western Buddhist Order (...) I've got loads of friends and they're all very important. The most significant is the people who brought me up and the guy who taught me the Dharma [pause]. They're all blokes [laughs] and in no particular order, Buddha, Crowley, Bono, John Lydon, Ned Kelly, Charlie Chaplin,

GAIL: CAN YOU FIND A LINK BETWEEN ALL OF THEM?

SADARA: Yeah, individuals. Definitely individuals. Definitely strong characters forging ahead and stepping outside of the group and ...er...maybe a bit less Bono

GAIL: WHAT ARE YOUR HOPES AND DREAMS FOR THE FUTURE?

SADARA: It's pretty cosmic. Does that matter?

GAIL: NO.

SADARA: To become acutely interconnected with life, and intensely in love with it so that's like the vision and the practical application of that is to help set up a retreat centre like this, in Australia and to keep my connections with the Pagan festival scene; and to keep my connections with the more earthy kinda people. The issue of having a lover and not being able to have one on the conditions, the way I live my life at the moment. And conflict of or with, communication and erm, communicating honestly, in a nutshell. To communicate honestly and straight-forwardly. So tying in with a fear of not being myself open and honestly. I know that's very general.

GAIL: CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT YOUR RELIGIOUS BELIEFS?

SADARA: What are my religious beliefs? All life is interconnected and all things have consequences. Therefore, love is a powerful , transformative influence and , and erm, it's gonna sound a bit textbook but it's hard to articulate but mind and consciousness, mind, not as in mind as opposed to matter but as opposed to consciousness is erm, is also part of phenomena. It's through seeing that all things are really interconnected, seeing things as they really are, seeing through things. erm, seeing mind. So that's my religious beliefs, I suppose.

GAIL: WHAT ABOUT POLITICAL BELIEFS

SADARA: I was quite antagonistic towards anything political. I think I just picked up this notion of the non-conformist. But I could say erm...like recently I voted, and I voted for labour cos, erm, to me they've been relatively professional in running the country [...]

My religious beliefs have changed through personal experience as opposed to some written that I've been forced to digest. Not that it was necessarily pushed on me. Jesus and all that was quite healthy as a boy, all part of the divine; obviously perspectives change with reading and again personal experience and organised religion. Particular material which I made fit with myself. (.)

GAIL: SO WHAT ABOUT A LIFE THEME?

SADARA: Freedom, freedom from social binds, from and therefore from that opportunity to offer that to others (...) you can say freedom overall. And I think just looking over all that there's a sense that I needed to be free from constraints, and those individuals I mentioned, they're all individuals, all their own men. You know being individual and not necessarily lose that, also be free but not separate, not alienated from others.

[...]

GAIL: CAN I REFER YOU BACK TO SOMETHING YOU STATED IN A LETTER THREE YEARS AGO -

SADARA: YEAH

GAIL: YOU SAID THAT THE FILM ALLOWED YOU TO EXPERIENCE A CERTAIN KIND OF "THERAPEUTIC BLASPHEMY".

SADARA: Oh, yes.

GAIL: AND YOU SAID HOW WATCHING THE ISLANDERS DISMISSING HOWIE'S BELIEFS HELPED YOU "SHAKE OFF GUILT"...

SADARA: Yeah, it did, at that time. It's interesting how each time I watch the film, how that changes, so that recently I've been a bit more I think that film helped me come to where I am now with my thinking about Christianity; I'm a lot more tolerant of it erm. I don't know how many years ago it was, I've been here four years now [in England] and I'm not sure how far it was into my stay here that I first watched it. But I was still quite antagonistic towards Christianity, certainly Howie being [PAUSE] there's a lot in there. It was refreshing to see the dogmatic Howie put in his place but at the same time he took it, he took it quite well, I thought [...] I suppose it does go really, really deep; you know, it's about having the rug pulled out from under you...religious beliefs, god and Howie as an authority as well – having that authority removed can be frightening, having to be responsible for your own actions. Erm, in relation to this I watched 'the Crucible' just recently. Seeing the portrayal of someone put to death – holding fast to what they believe in – moved me to tears. So there's something interesting in there for me regarding deep belief or reverence or something you base your life around or in.

[...]

Appendix 9

Fan-generated definitions of cult

This section provides a sample of fan-generated definitions of cult. As I discussed in Chapter 2, a consistent feature of responses obtained in the initial phase of my research highlighted significant discrepancies between popular definitions of cult and the fan's own. This precise exercise was divided into two parts. The first (question 1) asked respondents to state what they understood by the term 'cult', and whether or not they self-identified as a 'cultist'. The second part of the exercise incorporated sentiments which had emerged from the focal study. My logic here was to observe again similar discrepancies, should they emerge. The samples herein were solicited via email.

QUESTION 1: What do you understand by the term: cult film? Do you consider yourself a 'cultist' or 'cult fan'? (Please answer in as much detail as you would like).

TIM (2004, Email Response)

My definition of a cult film/TV series is one that does not have mass appeal, but establishes a strong following from those to who the film/TV series does appeal, and who engage more pro actively with the subject of their fan following rather than just passively enjoy it.

The Prisoner is a good example. The series had largely flopped when first screened in 1968, mainly because most viewers found it too much of a conundrum, particularly the final episode. It was not screened again until around 1976 when it was released for late night syndication around the country's ITV stations. When I saw it advertised on Granada, I had this fleeting memory of a man being chased along a beach by what appeared to be a giant ping pong ball. The image was strong enough to encourage me to watch the series again, this time as a 14 year old rather than a six year old.

I was instantly hooked on the series. Very few at school caught onto it, but I then read that a group of enthusiasts were forming an appreciation society. I got the address and joined, being among the first members of 'Six of One'. What I liked about it was that it was not a fan club. It was about critical evaluation rather than blind praise. The journal, Alert, analysed each episode in turn and we were all encouraged to submit ideas. It did have a great influence on my own ideas about life, politics, personal identity, but then I was at an impressionable age.

I find it strange when shows like Dr Who and Star Trek are referred to as cult when they are really popular with the general public. But I suppose both shows do have a hardcore fan following that is cultist. The film Casablanca was popular in its day, but

further down the line it has been reclaimed by a new generation of enthusiasts. Bogart films had a strong student following during the 1970s, so this is where its transformation to cult status began.

In general, my model of a cult film is one that was not a success in its day, possibly because it was ahead of its time, but gains a following as time passes on. A film that is quirky in some way. A film whose major components take on iconic status. *The Italian Job* is a good example of this. Though a reasonable success in its day, a major re release 30 years later confirmed the film as iconic of British 1960s cinema.. It is also a difficult film to put a handle on; is it a thriller with comedy, or a comedy with thrills? (It descends into pure farce at some points) Also the cast collection is eccentric. A film that features Michael Cain, Noel Coward or Benny Hill

I think some cult fans are protective of their subject and like the idea of it being non popular. Like they are in an exclusive club. As a teenager, my mates and I spurned Top of the Pops and listened to John Peel to get into the up and coming acts like Altered Images. As soon as they became popular, we abandoned them. In the Gary Numan v. John Foxx debate, I always rooted for Foxx. Not because I thought he was better, but because he was less well known.

QUESTION 2: Please choose one of the statements below and describe how it is fitting with your own appreciation of *The Wicker Man*. Please make a quick note at the end of your reply with regards to where you would rank the remaining statements in terms of their personal relevance. Feel free to write about these too, if you have time:

- a) The film is unique, a “flawed masterpiece”.
- b) *The Wicker Man* awakens something within me I cannot explain.
- c) I find the film spiritual
- d) I choose to be a fan of this film so that I can meet like-minded people
- e) I’ve grow up with it (literally, emotionally, or intellectually). It’s a story to live by – a part of my life, who I am.

(B) is top of my list. I don’t know why the film appeals to me. It is not the greatest movie ever made, but somehow its components fall into place. I cannot explain it. I don’t know why it works for me. Maybe it is reliving the experience of the detection, even though I know the ending. It could be the same instinct that drives women addicted to Mills and Boon to consume book after book even though they always end happily. They enjoy the experience of reading the romance again and again. Rather like sex itself. Could the wicker man’s appeal be sexually related? I don’t know.

(A) I agree with this statement but it’s not so much flawed as I think all of the elements do come together in the film.

(F) In a way I have grown up with it. I was aware of the film when it was first released back in 1973 when a clip was shown on the children’s film program, Clapperboard. They showed the scene with Summerisle and Miss Rowe singing and Howie arriving. The bit with the dead hare was clipped, presumably as not to upset the ankle nippers watching. I have always been interested in horror and gothic films

and television, from a very young age I collected related memorabilia and so this statement does definitely apply to me.

(D) There is definitely a hardcore cult among the Wicker fans which borders on worship. The missing footage appears to have become the new lost Ark of the Covenant. That's not me. I like to visit the locations and things but I'm not obsessive about the film. I don't choose to be a fan of the film in order to meet like-minded people. My relationship with the film is more personal than that. But I do like to discuss the film with people.

Jen 5th August 2004

QUESTION 1: What do you understand by the term: cult film? Do you consider yourself a 'cultist' or 'cult fan'? (Please answer in as much detail as you would like).

I didn't realise that I liked things that were termed as having a "cult" following until a few years ago. Since I've had cable TV (about 10 years) it's been so much easier to watch things I love – I'm into Dr Who, Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy, British 60's/70's films, and lots of other stuff, which now, I suppose, would be called "cult viewing". I can only guess at what makes something a "cult", and three things spring to mind: the age of the programme (therefore giving it a feeling of nostalgia); the fact that it might be perceived as being intellectual, and therefore only "intelligent" people might like it; and the fact that the programme/film may be somewhat offbeat, or of limited appeal. And yes, a lot of things I like do seem to have this "cult" following, e.g. The Wicker Man, Local Hero, The Rocky Horror Show, Bagpuss, Withnail and I, Plan 9 from Outer Space, and as previously mentioned, Dr Who, hg2. Yes I can't get away from it, I'm a cult fan!

2. Please choose one of the statements below and describe how it is fitting with your own appreciation of The Wicker Man. Please make a quick note at the end of your reply with regards to where you would rank the remaining statements in terms of their personal relevance. Feel free to write about these too, if you have time.

I have rearranged your points below in order of their importance to me, and added my comments under each.

c) I can't explain why I'm so drawn to the film.

This is true for me. I haven't a clue why I like WM so much, although it does have a few elements which would always interest/attract me. I love the countryside and it is filmed in green places. I am interested in paganism, so of course I would be intrigued by a film which revolves around paganism/heathenism. It's old(ish!) Also, I like Scottish people and their accent and that attracts me too. However, the film

has that certain “je ne sais quoi” so I’m not going to even continue to try and put my finger on it!

a) The film is unique, a “flawed masterpiece”.

It’s only flawed in as much as there are bits still missing from it which we will probably never see. Also, it irritates me that there is no love lost between certain members of the cast/crew, but that’s people for you. It certainly is unique – I can think of no other film quite like it (apart from an American film – don’t know when it was made – probably in the 90’s – or what it was called!! But it was certainly a rip off of WM).

b) The Wicker Man awakens something within me.

It makes me feel more aware of Nature and the Earth. I love Christopher Lee’s speech during whasisname’s awakening with Britt Ekland.

d) I find the film spiritual

Only in as much as I worship the Earth and everything it gives us.

f) I’ve grow up with it (literally, emotionally, or intellectually). It’s a story to live by – a part of my life, who I am.

I first saw it when I was about 20 – so that’s about 20 years ago now. It made a massive impact on me – I am very drawn into films when I watch them, and really didn’t see the end coming. Every time I watch it, even now, I still think, “the police MUST come! He MUST escape! He can’t POSSIBLY die!” Once every now and then (not very often, I have to say) I meet people who really love it like I do. It definitely is a part of my life now.

e) I choose to be a fan of this film so that I can meet like-minded people

Didn’t even know people were fans of this film until about 10 years ago, so definitely not.

Thanks!

Adrian (Email)

(5 August 2004)

1. We all have some idea of what it is that makes a text ‘cult’. But what does the term mean to YOU? Does the film/TV series you admire have, in YOUR opinion, a definite ‘cult’ following? And, if so, would you consider yourself a ‘cultist’ or ‘cult fan’? (Please answer in as much detail as you would like).

For me, a cult film or text is something that strikes a deep chord in people that is different to our usual simpler feelings like fear, anger or happiness. I think that if you're really alive then you should get this feeling from something, whatever it is.

The film certainly has a growing cult following.

Most of my top few films are probably classed as cult films. So by definition I imagine I am a cult film fan. I like things that make you think and have twisting and interesting plots. A good indicator is also whether something stands the test of time and is still interesting.

2. Please choose one of the statements below and describe how it is fitting with your own appreciation of *The Wicker Man*. Please make a quick note at the end of your reply with regards to where you would rank the remaining statements in terms of their personal relevance. Feel free to write about these too, if you have time.

a) The film is unique, a "flawed masterpiece".

b) *The Wicker Man* awakens something within me.

c) I can't explain why I'm so drawn to the film.

d) I find the film spiritual

e) I choose to be a fan of this film so that I can meet like-minded people

f) I've grown up with it (literally, emotionally, or intellectually). It's a story to live by – a part of my life, who I am.

d) and a), I also identify slightly with f).

The reason I say d) is that we should all be in awe of the things that go on in nature around us rather than just being interested in people. I also object to the large, artificial distinction people make between ourselves and the rest of the animals on the planet. I think that viewpoint is arrogant, misguided and self-centred. *The Wicker Man* brings this point out nicely (in the way that animals and people were sacrificed together for example).

Appendix 10

The 'Image-Bank'

This section comprises a selection of images and artwork sent by the main participants and fans more generally. Figures A to C - the 'mood-shots' – were taken by fans whilst visiting the filming locations. They are included here as a means of further underscoring my arguments in the concluding section of Chapter 3. As I suggested there, these images appear to reflect elements of the Paganistic address I have explored in relation to the British horror mythology.

The remaining images are highly typical of those I have received from fans over the years. I have sought here to provide a selection which, I think, demonstrates the connections between *Wicker* fandom, the British rural imaginary, and an investment in British horror/gothic more generally.

Figure A. 'Mood shot': Chris's photograph taken on location at the filming locations

Figure B: 'Mood shot': Image sent in by Chris in 2000



Figure C: 'Mood Shot'

Figure B: 'Mood shot': Image sent in by Chris in 2000

Tim's photograph depicting a *Celtis occidentalis*



Figure C: 'Mood Shot'

Figure D: 'Tree cosies: The Garden Party, Ferringbury, Essex'

Tim's photograph depicting a Celtic cross

A postcard sent in by a male fan



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Figure D: 'Tree cosies: The Garden Party, Feeringbury, Essex'

A postcard sent in by a male fan



© Boomerang

Figure E 'The Lunar Stone'

MEN-AN-TOL - CORNWALL

Postcard sent in by Tim



© Bob Croxford

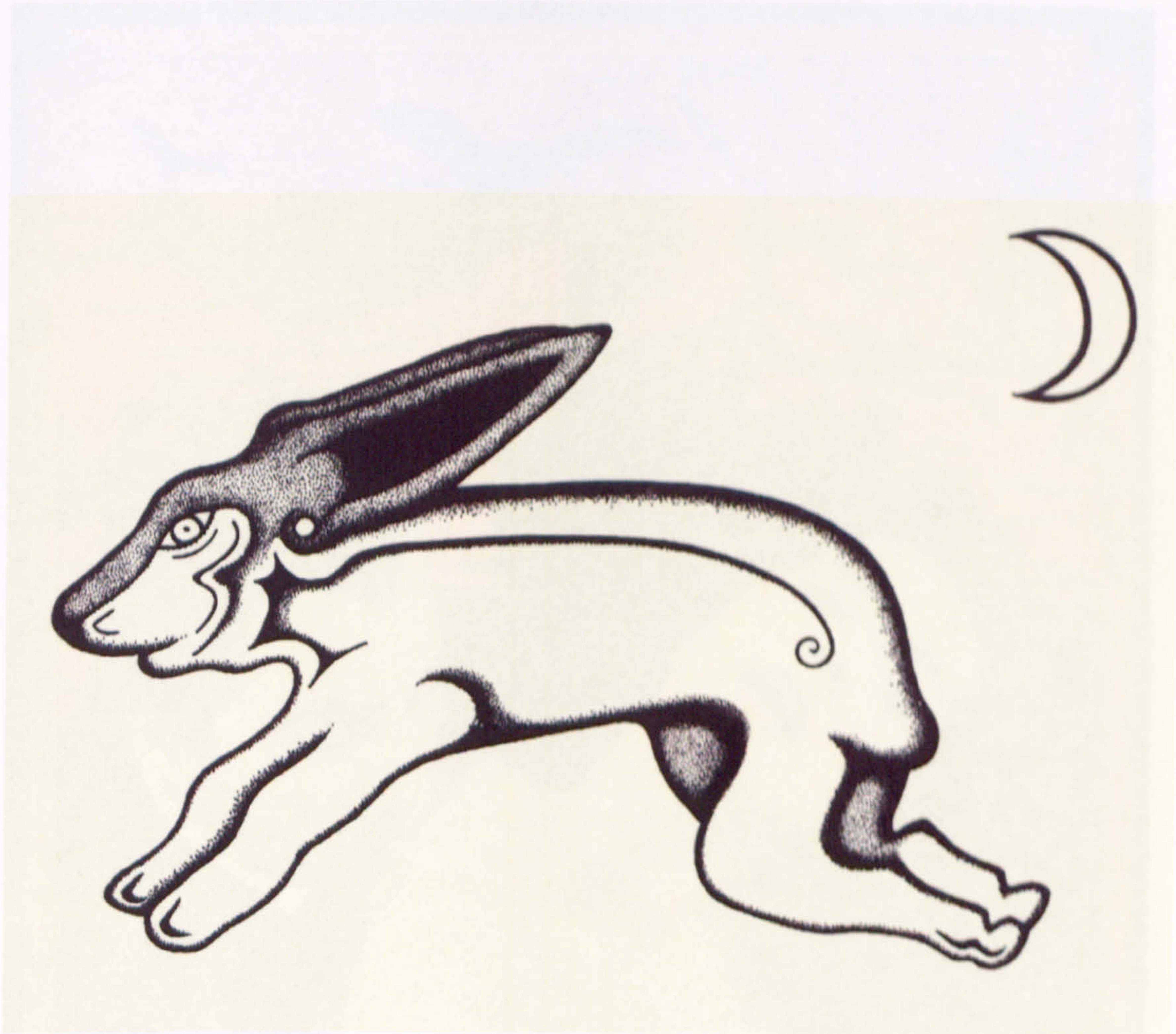
Clan Berman

Figure F 'The Lunar Hare'

Self-produced image sent in by Nuada subscriber in 2000

Figure G

'Dracula 1958' - Self-produced postcard sent in by Nuada subscriber, Claudia Andrei



©Ian Brennan

© 1997 Claudia Andrei

Figure G

'Dracula 1958': Self-produced postcard sent in by *Nuada* subscriber, Claudia Andrei



© 1999 Claudia Andrei

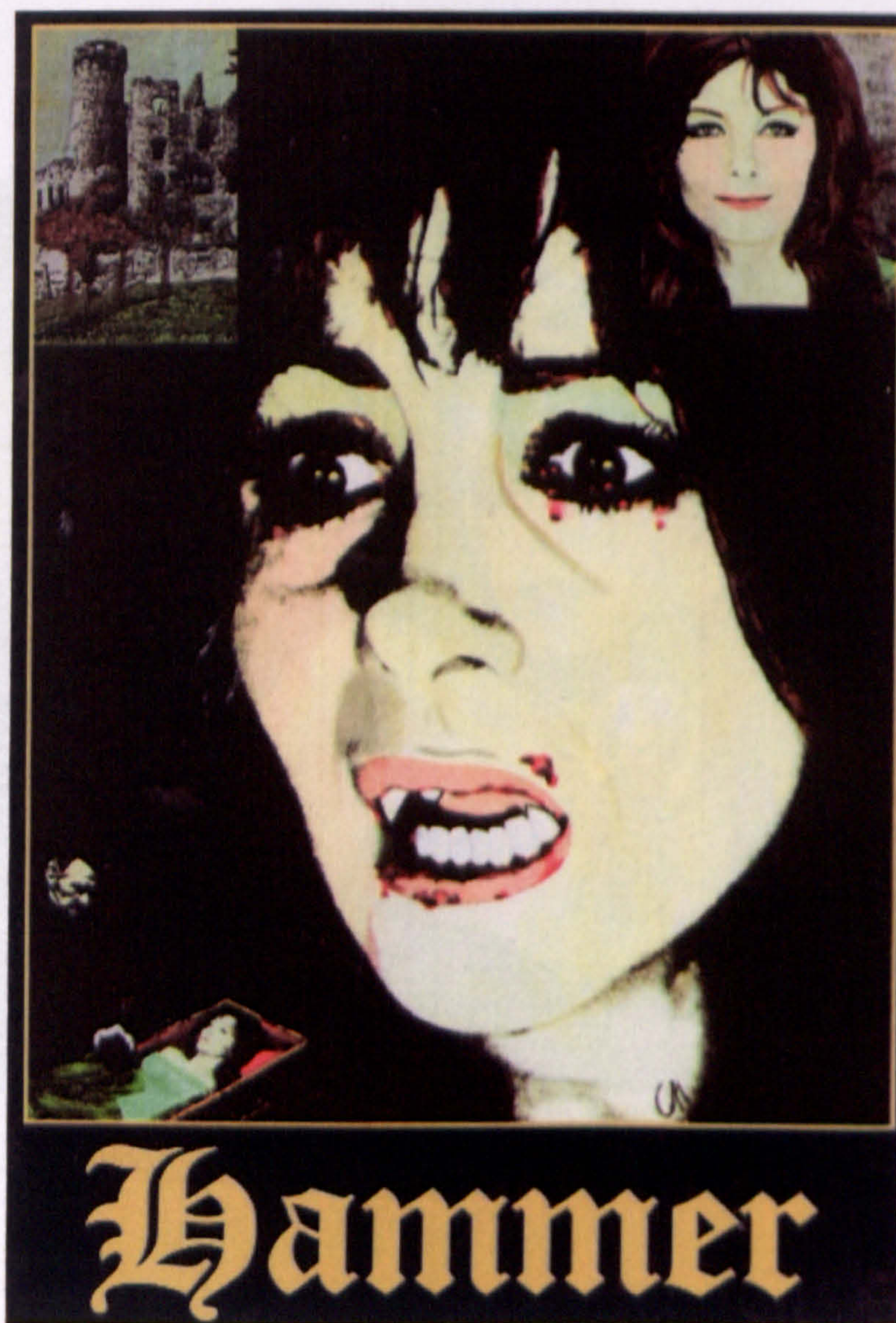
Figure H

'Countess Dracula, 1971'

Self-produced postcard submitted by Nuada subscriber, Claudia Andrei

'Black Tears'

A postcard sent in by Tim in 2001



© 1999 Claudia Andrei

Figure 1
Figure 1: Painted artwork sent in by Tim, 2002

'Black Tears'
A postcard sent in by Tim in 2001



© 2002 Chris Achilleos

Figure J
Self-produced artwork sent in by Tim , 2002



Figure K
Countess Dracula
Artwork by Tim 2002



Figure L
Brides of Dracula
Artwork by Tim

