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**20701637**

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**Sous la direction de M. Mellet Laurent**

**The Impact of Paganism on the Anglo-Saxon  
Cultural Identity  
Through Popular Culture**



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# Contents

## - Introduction

## - I. The Philo-Political Impact of Paganism

### A) A matter of Cultural Identity

### B) Challenging the established order of things

#### 1) Balance of Powers

#### 2) Questioning the relationship between the human and the non human

#### 3) Issues surrounding gender equality, gender identification and sexual orientation

### C) An alternative cultural identity?

## - II Paganism in Popular Culture: Implicit and Explicit Forms

### A. Implicit Paganism

#### 1 ) Fantasy

#### 2 ) Science-Fiction in Movies

#### 3 ) Super-Hero Movies

### B .Explicit Paganism

#### 1 ) Horror and Folk Horror

#### 2 ) Science Fiction in TV shows

#### 3 ) Peplum

### C. An Evolving Representation

### D. A representation which depends on the cultural context

### **- III. Pagan stereotypes in Popular Culture**

#### **A) Paganism and Nature:**

- 1) Nature as a nurturing place, a haven**
- 2) Nature as a Threat to Humankind and Civilization**

#### **B) Paganism and Feminism**

- 1) An Ambivalent portrayal**
- 2) Witches and Witchcraft in Popular Culture**

#### **C) The Character of Wonder Woman:**

- 1) A Summary of the character's origin stories**
- 2) The motivations of the creator**
- 3) Importance of the character in contemporary time in relation to the general political and sociological context**
- 4) A critical and Commercial success**

#### **D) Paganism and Music**

### **- IV. Paganism: Syncretism and Confusing Amalgam**

#### **A) Language as an incarnation of syncretism and amalgam**

- 1) The word demon**
- 2) The figure of the elf**

#### **B) Paganism, Syncretism and Confusing amalgam in Popular Culture**

- 1) Judeo-Christian overtones: A syncretic portrayal**
- 2) Confusing amalgam**

### **Conclusion**

### **Bibliography**

## Introduction:

Exposing an overview of the representation of paganism in my first-year Master research project paved the way towards a deeper study of the characteristics. What are they? And above all, what do they reveal about the culture(s) which spawned them? Paganism is a very rich belief system indeed and it has participated in shaping our modern societies. It has undoubtedly inspired artists for centuries and centuries. In a world in constant move and evolution, pagan religions have been gaining more and more followers but the modern version of Paganism is slightly different from the Paganism practiced back in the pre-conversion era. One of the reasons is that the paganism practiced today is a legacy from centuries of evolution under the dominion of the Judeo-Christian traditions, with reconstructed knowledge gathered from antiquarians and archaeological research. Furthermore, the objectivity and reliability of some of the sources of knowledge can be questioned because of the partisanship behind them.

For example, in the Anglo-Saxon cultural context, the idea that the truth about Paganism has been altered on purpose is defended by S.D Church<sup>1</sup> as he considers that most of our knowledge about the non-Christian English religions is contained in two letters of Pope Gregory the Great, which were transcribed by Bede into his *Ecclesiastic History*. This is shared by other scholars such as Marion Gibson who wrote<sup>2</sup> that whatever was to be said in the first indigenous writings about Britain's tribal history would be framed by Christian notions about a chosen people to whom this god had eventually revealed himself. Working on the Anglo-Saxon Paganism, Philip J.Rackl<sup>3</sup> wrote about the difficulty to approach it due to the limitations in terms of data and the questionable reliability of the evidence we were able to gather. Interestingly, S.D. Church seems to take an explicitly strong stance in favor of Paganism in his article when he writes that the current understanding of English paganism relies too much on the belief that both Pope Gregory and the Northumbrian monk Bede were describing the pre-conversion. English religion the way it really was, pointing out the fact that neither of them were passive observers of the conversion process and they actively participated in vilifying paganism overall.

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<sup>1</sup> S.D Church, "Paganism in Conversion-Age Anglo-Saxon England: The Evidence of Bede's Ecclesiastical History Reconsidered" The Historical Association and Blackwell Publishing, 2008

<sup>2</sup> Marion Gibson, *Imagining the Pagan Past*, London and New York, Routledge, 2013 p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Philip J. Rackl, "Anglo-Saxon Paganism", *Introduction to Old English*, Department für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 2014

Thus we really are bound to question the very reliability of the knowledge we have about the pre-Christian religions, especially if the information we have tends to depict it in a negative way. It consequently has a certain importance in our study of the stereotypes which participate in defining paganism nowadays. It directly affects indeed the reception of its representation and to a certain extent, the very essence of cultural identity.

It is undeniable that Paganism has lost to Judeo-Christianity but what is interesting is that awareness about Paganism is getting stronger in a world which is heavily dominated by it and its religions are often implicitly or explicitly the established ones. Nevertheless, it is a belief system which consists of principles which seems not to be appealing anymore as it is met with a growing rejection from a part of the individuals. Among these individuals, we can find a large portion of atheists or at least people who militate for secularity but there are also these people who chose to embrace the pre-Conversion era religions and maybe to a certain extent, embrace the pre-Conversion cultural identity. We are witnessing a sort of rupture in the vision of the world between the "powers that be" and the "governed" and this will to adopt pre-Christian religions and spiritualities might be one of the manifestations of this rupture. One of the aims of this paper is to show how this is dealt with in popular culture, because popular culture not only reflects reality but it also affects it by getting the audience to learn and question their certitudes and knowledge about any sorts of issues.

We could argue that Paganism has helped shape a sort of counter-culture, especially when it comes to various issues such as sexuality, environmental matters or the status of women in the society and all the issues surrounding gender equality. We can find many examples of that aspect in popular culture, which reveals a lot about societal issues for instance. Acknowledging the fact that Paganism back then did have a real impact in art and still does today, subsequently also has an impact in the way that the British for example, identify themselves on a cultural level and so we are left to wonder to what extent Paganism affects the very notion of the Anglo-Saxon cultural identity.

It is important to note here a distinction between the way the Britons would take into account paganism in the way they identify themselves culturally speaking and the way the North Americans would because of the geographical, historical and cultural context. Indeed, through extensive readings, it became soon quite obvious that paganism really has a special place in the British culture, and the aim here is to know to what extent and how it shows in popular

culture. We can find more and more pagan features in the most recent movies and TV shows which means that there are elements in it which seem to fascinate both the filmmakers and the audience. These elements are symptomatic of issues which are timely for the contemporary audience and in response to a certain cultural and political context.

To what extent does paganism impact the way societies work, more particularly in the Anglo-Saxon culture? Would it be safe to say that it even goes as far as impacting the cultural identity itself?

#### The Philo-political impact of Paganism:

The study of the philosophical and political influences of Paganism might help us see to what extent it does impact cultural identity itself. Paganism indeed in a way challenges the established order of principles up to what constitutes the very essence of cultural identity. It consequently raises some questions on the Philo-political level as it manifests in the tension between the individual and the collective. Paganism is not just a belief system and it cannot either be reduced to being only a philosophy because there is also a political dimension to its influence on the society. It is another perspective on the world and provides other ways of reflecting upon it and it can eventually help bring some answers and solutions to societal issues surrounding gender equality, ecology and so on.

Based upon research led by S D Church, Marion Gibson and Michael Strmiska, we shall start with a look at the past as it will help give a pertinent explanation to understand the current status of paganism in the Anglo-Saxon cultural identity. Then we shall tackle the major themes which are impactful and we shall see to what extent they may impact the culture as a whole. This will subsequently lead us to deal with the study of the characteristics of Paganism as represented in popular culture and it will hopefully prove that the Anglo-Saxon cultural identity is indeed partially influenced by paganism.

#### Paganism in Popular Culture:

A study of the characteristics of Paganism in popular culture, through the various recurring stereotypes that we can find in some of the most popular movies and Tv shows will obviously testify to the current status of paganism in the real world. As shown in the most recent sociological studies, there is a growing interest in this belief system on a worldwide scale, to a point where it becomes an important aspect of both the plots and the characterization of the characters.

Paganism is mentioned either in an implicit or in an explicit way and it clearly makes a difference in the way it is represented and how it can be received by the audience. Minorities in the cinema for example have indeed suffered from many negative and reductive stereotypes for a long time. It used to be the case for black people, whose roles were only limited to certain types of individuals, always lower in class than the white people and serving them.

When they were not passive and submissive, they were often depicted as being violent and they were forbidden to be mated with a white person. This of course reflected some of the politics of the time with segregation and anti-miscegenation laws for example. This reveals the implication of political ideals which were little by little influenced by the militancy of the oppressed portion of the population and those who defended them. Stereotypes are not bad in themselves because not all stereotypes are negative but when used as a political tool and broadcast widely, they can become a pretty efficient weapon against the targeted group of individuals, especially when the focus is on negative, made up stereotypes, and as a result the people targeted are denied an accurate onscreen representation.

Thus, it is a duty to question the very sources of these stereotypes in order to understand why the most popular ones have survived and have affected the individuals or cultural aspect the way they do. Nevertheless, in regards to paganism, even if there are arguably lots of negative stereotypes, it still raises interest in a growing number of people, which eventually seems to have influenced the way it is used in the narrative of films and TV series. Furthermore, we can notice an evolution in the representation which tends to be more and more positive.

#### Reflected in popular culture through various aspects:

Paganism fascinates as there is some veil of mystery which surrounds it, especially when one is not particularly familiar with it. Some scholars<sup>4</sup> think that paganism is for the elites, because only well educated people would know about it and understand what it really is, as opposed to the common people who generally does not have or only has little clues about what it is. He defends his position by arguing that even though paganism is used in the most popular movies, it has lost bits of its essence, because of many shortcuts in terms of representation, the use of overrated negative stereotypes and exaggerated syncretism. Nevertheless, the very use of paganism in those popular movies is a proof that there is something about paganism which still fascinates both the filmmakers and the audience of today.

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<sup>4</sup> Nicolas Bonnal. *Le Paganisme au Cinéma*. Paris, Dualpha, 2015.



There is a somewhat consistent pattern centered around specific themes when it comes to the representation of Paganism in cinematic and TV shows, regardless of the positive or negative aspect of that representation:

*Timelessness:*

Pagan cultures are often untouched by the changes which occur in the outside world as they are mostly unaltered by time. There is a sense of authenticity, a return to the roots which mirrors that of the real world contemporary pagan people. Nevertheless, this leads us to wonder to what extent it is authentic. Because our current knowledge of the pagan past is based on reconstructed data with sources the objectivity of which could be questioned (cf Christian writings, not pagan-friendly). This timelessness is all the more obvious since to the general audience, paganism belongs to another age. An age before modern civilization which is mostly based upon Judeo-Christian foundations since Paganism has been reduced to myths.

Interestingly, there is this underlying fascination towards Paganism which leads the authors to combine the essence of the pagan religions with modern story-telling in a world which is heavily dominated by Judeo-Christianity and its various branches.

*Remoteness:*

The Pagan world is often geographically isolated from the outside world. It is shielded from the outside world's negative influences but this remoteness also shields the outside world from its pagan influence, whether it is good or bad.

It is a reflection of one of the most famous parts of pagan rituals: the forming of a circle, which symbolically displaces those inside out of reach from the outside world, in which they can spiritually elevate themselves. Nevertheless, in popular culture, it is showcased in several ways. The remoteness of the pagan world can indeed be vital for the survival of the individuals who sometimes benefit from local miracles which transcend the natural laws the conditions of which can be horrific in the case of *The Wicker Man* for example with the use of human sacrifice for Nature to thrive in the most negative portrayals. Nevertheless we can also find positive depiction of paganism in which the remoteness of the pagan world ensures the viability of the local magic, on the sole condition that the individual must abide by the locals' rules, like in *Wake Wood*, where a ritual allows the temporary resurrection of a loved one for three days under certain conditions. The demise of the protagonists does not come from the pagan individuals but from the protagonists' failure in respecting the conditions of the ritual.

In the *Wonder Woman* comic book mythology for example, Themyscira is the home of the mythical Amazons who are a creation of the Olympian gods. It is an island which is mystically shielded from the outside world by pagan gods where the female individuals can excel in various domains such as arts, science, philosophy, etc...This will be developed in the part about paganism and feminism since the very character of Wonder Woman combines many aspects of paganism and it is a character who has been popular for a long time and who challenges the notion of heroism and who brings lots of exposure to paganism in a rather positive way.

#### *Otherness/Otherworldliness:*

The remoteness of the Pagan cultures consequently comes hand in hand with the notions of otherness and otherworldliness. Although Paganism is supposed to stand at the roots of civilizations, when used in shows whether it be in cinemas or TV, it is mostly not allowed to blend in with the modern civilizations. Most of the time, when there are alien characters, they reportedly have a pagan background which mostly consists of a polytheistic belief system, such as the Daxamites, the Kryptonians or the White and Green Martians in the *Supergirl* CW TV series. For instance, while on a specific mission working undercover as humans, Mon-El the Daxamite and Kara Zor-El the Kryptonian would mistakenly say "gods" while talking to a religious character only to correct themselves right after, emphasizing on "God". The audience is then reminded of the cultural distance between the protagonist and themselves.

When applied to regular earthlings, the pagans are most of the time shown as marginals since they do not blend in with the general population or at least when they do, they do not blend in explicitly as pagans. The audience is often reminded of the otherness of the characters by pointing out the queerness of their practice and beliefs, in the shape of a cultural clash. We can find many examples of this in movies such as *The Wicker Man*, *Wonder Woman*, or TV shows such as *Orange is the New Black*, *Grace and Frankie*, *Supernatural* and so on. These features and some others will be reflected upon in our study.

#### *Implicit/Explicit paganism:*

The way paganism is treated overall also needs to be analyzed from several perspectives which directly influence the way the audience will react to it. Most of the times, paganism is alluded to in an implicit way. The audience is expected to recognize them and accept these elements as pagan. That representation is mostly positive as we can see in recent and

successful movies such as James Cameron's *Avatar*, *Mad Max The Fury Road*, *Wonder Woman*, *The Lord of the Rings Franchise* and spin offs among others. On the contrary, when paganism is explicitly featured, there is a tendency to confront it to Judeo-Christianity and it mostly has a negative representation composed of recurring stereotypes which find their sources in the early encounter between Pagans and Christians. Among the movies and Tv Series which portray explicitly paganism in a negative way, we can find the likes of *The Wicker Man*, *Sinister*, *Supernatural* and so on...Nevertheless, although the frontier between explicit and implicit paganism can sometimes be blurry as it depends on the general context of the narrative, we can notice an evolution in the way paganism is represented. This will be developed in detail in a specific part.

#### Paganism, Syncretism and Confusing Amalgam:

Since the notions of syncretism and amalgam partially define how paganism is perceived and what modern paganism is, an in-depth study of these notions will eventually show how influential paganism is to the point that it might even affect the very essence of the Anglo-Saxon cultural identity.

Through various examples deeply analyzed, it will be demonstrated how we live in a society which is set in a syncretic world but which is also plagued with confusing amalgam. This will be tackled through a pagan perspective and illustrated in popular culture but also with a little reflection on some aspects of language itself.

## **I. The Philo-Political Impact of Paganism**

From our study, we can see that Paganism is more and more featured in popular culture and the evolution of its representation shows that it is somewhat influential. Paganism offers a way to envision the world from another perspective and thus also offers other ways to build and organize societies differently. We saw that it is inclusive in ways that Judeo-Christianity cannot be in essence. Would the world be different if Paganism were to be the dominant belief system? We might never know but it would be interesting to understand why Paganism never really disappeared even after centuries of aggressive anti-pagan raids from the victorious new Judeo-Christian traditions, even when nowadays societies are pushing for more secularity and yet, Paganism is on the rise where Judeo-Christianity loses some ground.

We could argue that the rebirth of modern Paganism did not really *start* but was rather *stimulated* from around "the early medieval period to the Renaissance and beyond"<sup>5</sup> with the rediscovery and popularization of Roman texts. Thus, pre-Christian ideas have inspired and influenced many an artist with poems, novels and paintings which popularized and vulgarized knowledge about paganism. Some of those works of art carry in them a panoramic testimony as to how the representation (and perception) of Paganism has evolved, through various figures such as the Druid, the Morrigan or especially the Green Man whose origins have been widely debated. Some argued that it is a pure pagan figure while others counter-argued that this Middle-Ages figure has no pertinent link to pagan lore. This issue will be dealt in detail in the part about Syncretism, Amalgam and Paganism. There is also an important piece of information from Marion Gibson's *Imagining the Pagan Past* where she argues that British imperialism from the sixteenth century onward has greatly participated in the revival of paganism thanks to the discovery and the engagement with non-Christian cultures all around the world.

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<sup>5</sup> M. Gibson, *Imagining the Pagan Past*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

### **A) A matter of Cultural Identity:**

When we tackle the subject of Paganism, we should pay attention to the matter of cultural identity. The way Paganism is received is symptomatic indeed of the social and political context which are eventually reflected in popular culture.

To some, Paganism could and should be considered as the original cultural self. They find a sense of authenticity in the pre-Conversion era, even though we do know that our knowledge of it is fragmented and not totally reliable.

Taking the example of the Anglo-Saxon culture, Philip J.Rackl<sup>6</sup> notes that the English language began to develop its own identity while the Anglo-Saxon paganism was said to be the chief religion. This is an important piece of information given the oral aspect of the pagan traditions, which means that the language itself is tinted with pagan notions, to the point where for example the days, up to now, are mostly named after Anglo-Saxon deities. If the development of the English language identity started in a Pagan context, then the cultural identity as such is obviously tinted with Paganism. When we see how the British media coverage of Paganism compares to the French one for example, we can notice a serious gap between the two. It seems like Paganism is part of the media landscape in Great Britain whereas in France it has a more anecdotal aspect. The only noticeable French pagan site would be the mythical Brocéliande forest, with its ties to the Arthurian legend and the alleged tomb of Merlin. The Arthurian legend itself has elements of Paganism.

Ronald Hutton wrote a book where he gives a panoramic history of paganism<sup>7</sup>. What is interesting for us here is the importance of Paganism in that history but he is quick to point out the interpretive aspect of the early stages of the history of Britain, bringing us back to the fact that a good amount of the knowledge we have is speculative, regardless of the positivity or negativity in the portrayal of Paganism. Nevertheless there are certainties which can be backed up by historic records and comparative data, for example about the large number of deities and their powers and functions but also about the festivities or what is in the afterlife.

Hutton also provides us with some interesting information about the cohabitation of the Britons with the Romans, how they dealt with their respective gods, of which we have

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<sup>6</sup> Philipp J.Rackl. "Anglo-Saxon Paganism", *op. cit.* p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Ronald Hutton. *Pagan Britain*, Yale, Yale University Press, 2014.Hutton, 2014

records. About the conversion to Christianity, we learn that it was not as well documented as we thought and he gives three main reasons why the English converted to Christianity.

First, all the surrounding countries had converted to Christianity, then the rise of Kings made the work of missionaries easier because when Kings converted, the population would subsequently convert too. Finally, the native English religions were not missionary in nature and the more aggressive and determinate rivals won because they "cared more about winning and demanded absolute victory".

Nevertheless these traditions were mostly written down by the early Christians. This raises questions concerning certain aspects which were seen through the Christians' point of view, some of whom were not particularly friendly towards paganism and which might have distorted the reality of the facts. This goes to the point where there are some statements which do not seem to be confirmed by archaeological or antiquarian findings. There is a lack of empirical evidence to support some of the writings which are mostly unfriendly towards paganism.

Gregory the Great and Bede both derived their understanding of paganism from the Bible and the ancient world in which there were temples and there were idols. Anglo-Saxon non-Christian religion(s), on the other hand, had a different appearance which Gregory was not able to tell us about and which Bede was disinclined to reveal to his audience. In fact, given what is known of these two great Fathers of the Church, it would be surprising if their words were designed to inform their readers of the religion(s) they were certain were in error and which they were determined to destroy<sup>8</sup>.

This means that today we have managed to collect evidence about the pagan past which is fragmented, incomplete and reconstructed. Yet, there is a tendency to look at the Pagan past to try and find something which seems to be missing for our contemporary fellows.

This search for authenticity in the cultural identity seems to be a recurring issue for modern pagan followers, as illustrated with the case of modern Greek pagan worshippers who have congregated in multiple organizations such as the Supreme Council of Ethnic Hellenes. Some of them, such as Angelo Nassios as he wrote in a column for *Patheos*<sup>9</sup> argue that it is a matter of restoration of a lost cultural identity and the aim is to remind the Greeks of what their authentic self is.

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<sup>8</sup> S.D. Church, "Paganism in Conversion-Age Anglo-Saxon England: The Evidence of Bede's Ecclesiastical History Reconsidered", *op. cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> Angelo Nassios, "The Hearth Of Hellenism." *Agora*, Accessed 31. Aug. 2017, [url: http://www.patheos.com/blogs/agora/2017/07/the-hearth-of-hellenism/](http://www.patheos.com/blogs/agora/2017/07/the-hearth-of-hellenism/).

Could this be applied to the contemporary Anglo-Saxon pagans? We shall try and answer this question throughout this paper by studying how the reality of paganism translates in popular culture.

## **B) Challenging the established order of things:**

Paganism represents a particular vision of the world and how it is supposed to work. The rejection of the Judeo-Christian system is often motivated by a disillusion in the modern world, which is heavily dominated by the different branches of that monotheistic belief system. Just like in the late 60's, people tend to turn towards other kinds of religions, but instead of looking for religions from abroad, the consensus is to turn towards the past and embrace the pre-Conversion religions.

### **1) Balance of Powers:**

In terms of power hierarchy, monotheism is supposed to centralize the powers into one single male divine figure whereas in paganism, the existence of a multitude of divine figures is acknowledged, and the powers are more or less equally distributed. The notion of freedom of choice is also more present in Paganism since the individual has the possibility to worship any deities according to their affinity. That notion of freedom is indeed present in Judeo-Christianity with "Free Will", but it can seem to be easily left to interpretation since it is a conditional freedom. Indeed, the individual is free to do whatever they want in their time on earth, but they will eventually have to face the consequences in the after-life, with pre-requisite in values and dogmas, among which we can find the complete rejection of idolatry and same sex relationships among other things.

The establishment of monotheism in the British Isles, for example, is very important on the political level, since with the Monarchy we have the anointed Kings and Queens who are supposed to be the mortal representations of the Divine, which consequently influences the lower spheres of the society with a very pyramidal power hierarchy in which, religion, the Christian religion has all its importance. For example, in S.D Church's article we can find that pagans could accept foreign gods without any problems, but Christians could not do the same since it is in the very definition of monotheism to deny the existence of other deities:

It has been traditional amongst scholars to argue that Rædwald's actions represent 'a brave attempt by a defeated Christian king at a form of religious syncretism, and that Rædwald, as a polytheist, would have had little difficulty in finding a space in his temple for another god to fit within his existing pantheon of gods. The

Christian God was constructed by those who worshipped Him at this time as a jealous God who would suffer no rival; the pagan gods coexisted in the minds of those who worshipped them and so, the argument goes, the prospect of welcoming another amongst their number should not have caused great difficulty.

On another note, on the political matter, accepting Christianity at the time had direct impact on the political relationship between Kings, as pointed out in the same article:

Rædwald had rejected Christianity as he had begun to throw off Æthelberht's overlordship. It has long been known that conversion to Christianity was intimately linked to overlordship, and it might equally be possible to suppose that, in the early stages of the conversion, when adherence to Christianity was optional, the rejection of Christianity was a sign of a king's rejection of another king's claim to overlordship.

We are centuries and centuries away from the conversion era now, but if back then the coming of Christianity challenged a vision of the world and the functionality of societies, we could consider that if it happens today, there might be chances that the mentalities would eventually be impacted.

## **2 ) Questioning the relationship between the human and the non human**

The importance of nature is also pointed out and it questions the very place of mankind in the scale of existence. Paganism opposes anthropocentrism which has a negative impact on the natural order and will eventually negatively impact the life of humans on the long term as we can already see with global warming. The developed societies of the world give a great importance to mass production, mass exploitation of natural resources with a non negligible negative impact on the planet. It is because humankind places itself above all the other species and considers nature to be tamed and to be exploited for its resources. Pagans believe that nature should be revered and that we should show gratitude for the resources we depend on. Nature is also the dwelling of a large number of divine beings, which makes it all the more necessary to preserve it.

The human cannot be dissociated from the non-human through a pagan's point of view, there is an awareness which is influenced by the pagan theology which differs from that of the Judeo-Christian one. The monotheist's god is out of the world and everything beneath him is his creation. In paganism, there are gods everywhere. Nature itself is either a deity or the dwelling of a large number of deities and other supernatural creatures with divine essence. The animals themselves have a special place as they often are the animal totems of deities. There is a symbiotic process with the non-human in paganism which triggers a particular



awareness which makes the pagans very close to nature and tend to try and apply this in their own way in the mainstream society.

This awareness is all the more important as we can already witness the direct impact of global warming on our societies. Could it be one of the reasons why a growing number of people are turning towards ethnic religions that are very close to nature? A hint of answer can be found in the way paganism is portrayed in popular culture in relation to the relationship with nature, something which will be dealt with below.

### **3 ) Issues surrounding gender equality, gender identification and sexual orientation**

The patriarchal aspect of the Judeo-Christian traditions is also what sets Paganism apart from it, because in most of the pagan traditions, the feminine aspect of the divine has a huge importance, which in turn has a direct influence on the matter of gender equality and everything LGBTQ+.

The earth is often personified as a nurturing mother goddess, who is equally as powerful and as important as the male leading deity. Gods are often paired in a yin-yang way with a consort, without whom the harmony of things would be questioned. Interestingly, there are traces of an old female deity which was the consort of the Judeo-Christian and Islamic god, but she was slowly erased from the divine equation by the Patriarchal founding fathers to the point where she is no longer acknowledged as such, except by historians. It is of course far stretched to say that if Paganism were to be the dominant belief system, the order of things would be different, but it is important to note those differences as to understand why there are people, now in this era, who abandoned Christianity to adopt a pre-Christian set of beliefs and practice, and how this eventually got translated in arts and especially in cinema, which in turn spread the knowledge to the audience.

As we will see in more detail in a specific chapter, Paganism in popular culture is often associated with feminism and also non-hetero normativity. This can be found in a large number of TV shows but it is not as obvious on the silver screen.

### **C) An alternative cultural identity?**

In Britain, the practice of witchcraft was illegal up until 1951. From the moment the Fraudulent Mediums Act was enacted, elements of witchcraft started gaining more and more focus in the mainstream narrative, partaking in the occult explosion of the 70's. This ensured much more visibility for Paganism and it translated onscreen with a certain interest in pre-Christian traditions. Even though the portrayal of the pagan world might not have been very positive, from our perspective we can see that neo-paganism became a viable alternative for those who were disillusioned back then. It seems to be a viable alternative for the disillusioned of today as we will see. Nevertheless, that interest was somewhat short-lived maybe because the hippies' vision of a world where the humans would live in total harmony with nature did not really come to be. We could argue that the mostly negative portrayal of Paganism onscreen is an expression of that failure. The solution to the issues in society was not to be found in the old ways.

In a way, we can say that those who adhere to pre-Christian religions are somehow marginalized on a national level, since being English or British is mostly associated with any of the Judeo-Christian religions, followed by oriental religions such as Hinduism due to colonial reasons. Hinduism in itself is as a pagan religion, but it is not an English native religion as such. Thus we can consider the Pagan identity as an alternate identity. Nevertheless paganism is also called an "ethnic faith", which brings not only the individual back to their cultural roots but the identity of the nation as whole and in a way it gives them some legitimacy in regards to historical evidence. Yet, as said earlier, this legitimacy could be questioned due to the reconstructed nature of the knowledge which has been gathered and finally tend to direct the nature of the pagan identity to that of an alternative cultural identity. But we also know that the very book upon which all the Jude-Christian religions are based, the Bible, is a collection of stories which were carefully chosen by the religious leader of the different eras during specific councils and so, the reliability of some knowledge is also to be questioned. For example, the very figure of Jesus Christ might have never been an historical one since none of his contemporary scholars seem to have ever heard about him or met him in any fashion.

Among many of the aspects of paganism, some say and defend the idea that it is not so much a religion as it does not really link people together. Indeed, many modern pagans have a solitary practice. It is due to many factors among which we can take into account the disparate

numbers of traditions and practitioners. Nevertheless, this individuality anchors itself in a will to better the current state of the world. It is an individuality which aims at improving the way the individuals are supposed to deal with their surroundings, especially the environment which plays an important part in a vast majority of the pagan religions/spiritualities which are often called "nature religion".

There is also a particularity with Paganism in its relation to the issue of national and cultural identity, because to some, it can be considered as an anchor to a sort of nationalism, something which can be found in other parts of Europe, in the Slavic countries or even in Russia itself. In its most extreme form, Paganism serves as a justification for nationalism, white supremacy and the creation of a unique identity which is supposed to set it apart from the rest of the world, a sense of national pride which rejects the outsiders. Indeed, there lie the xenophobes who are affiliated to far right or new far right movements, like in Russia<sup>10</sup>.

In short, just like the Judeo-Christian religions, Paganism reflects both a progressist and a conservative vision of the world, one that is open to diversity and another one which is in search of a purified identity according to the criteria of the individuals who adhere to it. Nevertheless, there are radical differences which set one apart from the other which are more appealing to a portion of the population because of certain issues. Paganism is in essence much more accepting of the human diversity than Judeo-Christian monotheism.

We can for sure stress the paradoxical status of Paganism when it comes to dealing with the notion of cultural identity. While it is indeed part of the cultural identity, it has not yet made it to the mainstream part of that identity. Interestingly, there is a certain pattern in the way Paganism draws attention upon itself and it certainly has its importance when we come to issues which are timely for the individuals. It came back in the late 60's for certain reasons influenced by the political and social context, with a need to build a counterculture motivated by a distrust of authority, sexual liberation and a need to get closer to nature among other things. This led some people to look for alternative religious beliefs, in search for a new kind of authenticity, new answers or solutions for the issues they faced. That interest soon faded away before another come-back in full strength in the past decades, especially in Europe where a strong movement of reclaiming the Pagan identity coincided again with timely issues.

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<sup>10</sup> Marlène Laruelle. "Alternative identity, alternative religion? Neo-paganism and the Aryan myth in contemporary Russia". ASEN/Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2008

It can be argued that it is an alternative identity based on the very roots of the mainstream cultural identity which had been dormant but towards which some people turn to in order to find solutions that the modern world does not seem to have. There are environmental issues, societal issues surrounding gender equality, races issues, sexual orientation and gender identification issues and all of these issues partake in defining the cultural identity of a country.

These issues are obviously dealt with in many areas of life, but there is one area which has a wide range of influence and it is popular culture through various media. Popular culture reflects what happens around the lives of the individuals and it also reacts to those happenings. When it comes to paganism as developed earlier, our knowledge about it has to be questioned since the various definitions of what constitutes a cultural identity depends on it. The many issues that paganism raises are reflected in popular culture through various aspects which reveal how the general audience feels about it. The filmmakers are not spared by this, because they too are influenced by the reigning stereotypes of paganism which have lived through the centuries.

## **II. Paganism In Popular Culture: Implicit and Explicit Paganism**

Paganism has been heavily featured throughout the history of cinema and TV shows. Just as there is a cyclical pattern in the revival of paganism, there also seems to be a cyclical pattern in the way it is depicted in movies and TV shows, which seems to go hand in hand with the actual evolution of real world pagan religions and real life issues. For example, there is a growing concern for environmental issues with global warming having a negative impact throughout the world. As a result, it is an issue which is echoed in movies and TV shows and it often takes the shape of a clash between Humankind and Nature, with hints of paganism.

Just like Stuart Pigott<sup>11</sup> characterised the representation of the druid as Posidonian for the negative portrayal and Alexandrian for the positive one, we shall apply it too in the way we will tackle the representation of paganism in popular culture. The Posidonian tradition, based on recollections in book 23 of Posidonius the motivations of which are to be questioned, depicted the druids (and by extension Paganism) as savage and bloodthirsty while the Alexandrian tradition based on more speculative yet more dignifying process and depicted the druids as a sage and erudite pagan (and ultimately gave a positive depiction of paganism).

The representation of Paganism has been mostly negative up to a certain time when the fantasy genre became more and more adapted to the Silver Screen, thus popularizing and vulgarizing all things pagan to the general audience. The idea that Paganism could be an alternative to the dominating monotheistic belief systems is more and more used, often coupled with timely issues such as environmental concerns, equality regardless of sexual identity, genre, orientation, race and so on.

This representation obviously led to specific stereotypes which seem to have evolved thanks to the general social and cultural context in which the shows were made. But before going into the specifics of these stereotypes, we shall flesh out the distinction between implicit and explicit Paganism and how the different genres tackle the disparity in that representation.

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<sup>11</sup> Sam Smiles, "The image of the druid in British Art", Pré-actes, colloque du Collège de France, Juillet 2006

It seems that the reception of the representation of paganism in popular culture mostly depends on the genres in which it is featured, especially in movies and TV shows which are medias with the widest range of audience. Explicit paganism cannot be found in just any genres and it is first important to note a distinction between what we recognize as pure paganism featured as such and pagan themes or aspects of it used in shows which might not be named as such. Many pagan elements can be found in contemporary shows, revolving mainly around the following genres: Fantasy, Sci-fi, Horror and Super-hero movies. But to a much lesser extent and in some of the most recent shows which do not belong in the previously mentioned genres, mentions of paganism as a genuine and accepted practice can be found too. This obviously is a manifestation of how Paganism is received in the real world.

In the following, we shall have an in-depth look at the genres in which Paganism is implicitly used

## **A. Implicit Paganism**

### **1 ) Fantasy :**

Let us, for example, take a look at how the Fantasy genre deals with Paganism, since in terms of box office and TV ratings, a vast majority of the movies and TV series of that genre have performed quite well, thus guaranteeing a wide range of audience. To illustrate this, let us take a very well known example, the whole *Lord of the Rings* franchise and its spin-offs with the *Hobbit* franchise. Tolkien's universe is already a syncretism of various mythologies, with a pagano-christian cosmogony. The syncretism of paganism and monotheism will be dealt with further down. Among the fantasy creatures we can find in those movies, the Elves are one of the most pagan of them all. Originally, elves are lesser gods of nature and fertility of the Celtic and Norse mythologies, nevertheless they have been reduced to being just another race of being, and even though they are superior to humans in terms of longevity and abilities, they no longer have the godly essence they used to have in the pagan lore. We could see the original elves as the Norse and Celtic version of the Greek Nymphs who are also lesser deities of Nature and Fertility. Dwarves are also another type of pagan creatures taken from Norse mythologies, heavily featured in the franchise and they are also very popular in other fantasy movies and TV series ( *Once Upon a Time, Snow White and the Huntsman, Charmed*)... and also in video games such as *World of Warcraft* being one of the most popular.

There is another franchise which uses a lot of pagan elements without naming them as such, it is the *Harry Potter* saga, without diving too much into details, we could say that this franchise participates heavily in perpetuating two of the most popular stereotypes about paganism, magic and witchcraft. There are also lots of creatures taken from the pagan lore as well with the Phoenix, Pegasus-like creatures, sirens, etc... What is interesting about the *Harry Potter* case, is that it has raised some concerns from some Christian groups who believed it was the work of the Devil since it features magic and witchcraft. It is important to keep in mind that the *Harry Potter* movie franchise is adapted from a series of books written by a British woman, J.K Rowling, and in Great Britain, pagan religions such as Wicca and Celtic reconstructionism are common practices recognized by the state as official religions. I will come back to this further down in the point about the cultural context and the status of pagan religions in both the British Isles and the United States.

While being extremely popular, we could argue that the fantasy genre, even though featuring paganism in a neutral and sometimes even a rather positive way, does not really do justice to it in the sense that it limits paganism in its representation. The fantasy genre indeed can feature paganism to some extent but it is reduced to its supernatural aspect and thus it is not really shown as a genuine thing in the movie's actual world, even though fictional and can even misrepresent some of the pagan elements for the sake of story-telling. Paganism in the fantasy genre thus has a limited positive influence in its representation.

## **2 ) Science-Fiction in Movies:**

In some sci-fi movies, we can also find traces of pagan elements. Let us take a look at James Cameron's *Avatar* movie featuring an extra-terrestrial race, the Na'avi. In that movie, which also has elements of fantasy, the Gaia theory served as the basis for the environment and the general mechanism which allows the planet to work as it does. Indeed, the Na'avi people worship a being they call Eiwa, who is the planet in itself with whom they can commune by plugging themselves into a specific tree of which roots connect to the planet. The general consensus in the movie is that all lives are linked and depend upon one another and that all living creatures and plants are children of Eiwa, who is just an analogy of Gaia, the primordial Earth Mother from Greek mythology. It's a pantheistic view of the world but in the shape of a female deity, a deity which is embodied physically in a planet. It is not a deity out

of the world, the way the Judeo-Christian god is but a deity which is the planet itself, inside the world.

Only those who are familiar with the Gaia hypothesis could recognize it but it is not something the general audience might know out of the blue if they are not interested in the matter. The Gaia Theory is a hypothesis formulated by the chemist James Lovelock and co-developed by the microbiologist Lyn Margulis in the 1970's. They defend the idea that "living organisms and their inorganic surroundings have evolved together as a single living system that greatly affects the chemistry and conditions of Earth's surface. Some scientists believe that this Gaian system self-regulates global temperature, atmospheric content, ocean salinity, and other factors in an automatic manner. Earth's living system appears to keep conditions on our planet just right for life to persist"<sup>12</sup>. In short, the planet would be a giant self-regulating organism. Of course, after being ignored, this theory has met some huge resistance and even mockery in the scientific world, but it is not the topic here. However, what concerns our topic is that this still limits the representation of this aspect of paganism, since only a portion of the viewers can recognize it.

Nicolas Bonnal has a very harsh position when it comes to post-modern paganism in the media, and he especially took the example of the movie *Avatar* to show the limits of such a representation. He says that:

Avatar n'a rien à voir avec ni avec le cinéma ni avec le paganisme, c'est un fourre-tout où tout le monde reconnaît quelque chose: la forêt d'émeraude, la Bible, l'Yggdrasil de nos pauvres germains, les dieux hindous sans oublier le message écolo antiraciste et anti-blanc, saupoudré de sauce anti-impérialiste (comme on sait, rien n'a changé depuis!)<sup>13</sup>.

On the one hand this movie could indeed be seen as a "junk room" where anyone can find things which are relatable for them, but on the other as a media, vulgarizing paganism might be a good way for the general audience to accept it as a genuine and common thing. It is also the role of art to make some issues accessible to the common people. Art can be used to teach, but only as long as its teachings remain accurate and that they do not betray the essence for the sake of story-telling, which, in the case of paganism, can distort its very essence. He also

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<sup>12</sup> "Overview Gaia Theory." *Gaiatheory.Org*, Accessed 31.Aug. 2017, url: <http://www.gaiatheory.org/overview/>.

<sup>13</sup> N. Bonnal. *Le Paganisme au Cinéma, op. cit.* p. 142-143.



says something which is quite useful for this point, it is that even though pagan elements are used, it is "no longer named as such"<sup>14</sup>.

This is quite problematic for the representation of paganism, because naming things gives them reality and so not naming them tends to keep them in the dark, as a thing which is almost impossible to understand and hardly recognizable as such.

### **3 ) Super-Hero Movies:**

There is also a particular genre which features some pagan elements and it also a very popular genre at the moment, with billions of dollars at the box office: it is the super-hero genre. This genre adapts indeed stories from comic books in which the majority of super-heroes could be seen as reinterpretations of the ancient gods and heroes who happened to be demi-gods for the most part, and there are two main companies which rival one another, Marvel and DC Comics. There are also major differences in the way they handle the supernatural and mythological aspects. For example, Thor in the comics is shown as an actual god whereas in the movie adaptation, his divinity is downplayed and so is that of his whole race. As a result the Asgardians are just a superior and more technological advanced race, and all the magical aspect is downplayed in favor of the technological aspect. Even the character of Thor is somehow reduced to being just an almost stereotypical super powered viking and his godliness is being mocked by the very American and Christian Captain America<sup>15</sup>. Furthermore Loki, the trickster god, is being humbled by the mortal Hulk who effortlessly defeats him and we have an obvious quote from Odin himself who says that the Asgardians are not gods.

In this case, the pagan elements are reduced and deprived of their essence for the sake of story-telling and in order to make the characters more "grounded".

Things are a bit different with DC Comics, since they tend to stay closer to the source material, and sometimes go further, with for example in the movie *Catwoman*, the protagonist gets her powers from the goddess Bastet, through a gathering of cats which channel her powers into the character of Patience Philips, played by Halle Berry, who then has abilities beyond that of humans, but she also somehow loses part of her humanity. In this case, pagan elements are used, but reduced to the occult aspect and deprive the protagonist of a part of her

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<sup>14</sup> N. Bonnal. *Le Paganisme au Cinéma, op. cit.*, p. 143.

<sup>15</sup> In the Avengers movie (2012), Captain America replies to Black Widow who warns him that Loki and Thor are basically gods by saying that "*There is only one god man, and I'm pretty sure he doesn't dress like that*"

human essence in favor of a more animalistic aspect. Nevertheless, there is also a very well known character, Wonder Woman, who is heavily inspired by Greek Mythology, and is even herself an offspring of a god, Zeus, and the Queen of the Amazons, Hyppolita. She has made her first cinematic entrance in the *Batman V Superman* movie, in which she has a mystery role.

Before the solo *Wonder Woman* movie was released, she was thought to be a demi-goddess and during a press interview, the producer Charles Roven confirmed they would go for the daughter of Zeus origin. Her race, the Amazons, is indeed a creation of the Olympian gods. With Wonder Woman being half an Olympian goddess, it can only bring more awareness to an aspect of paganism with such an iconic and popular character. Her popularity even increased after her solo movie was released in June 2017 in which her back story revealed that Humankind is a creation of the chief Pagan god Zeus and that the Amazons were created to quell their corruption instilled by the god of war Ares. The cultural impact of the movie *Wonder Woman* will be developed in a specific point about Paganism and Feminism.

The movie *Hancock* also features super-heroes heavily inspired by deities, in the sense that Hancock, played by Will Smith is hinted to be Zeus and his ex-wife Mary played by Charlize Theron, is hinted to be Hera. The hints come in the shape not only of an eagle accompanying Hancock (The eagle is one of Zeus' totem animal) but in the back story told by Mary who reminds him of their misadventures thousands of years ago when they were physically close, which would nullify their powers and make them vulnerable to harm.

In *The Guardian of the Galaxy* sequel, it was revealed that the character of Peter Quill was of divine origin, as his father Ego is a god-like being called a "celestial" who can manipulate matter and sought to create a perfect offspring with whom he would conquer the universe. Eventually the evil agenda is disclosed and Peter Quill found out he had to dispose of his father, thus losing his divinity in the process.

The super-hero genre can be tricky in terms of representation of minorities, since there need be a detailed analysis of how these minorities are being portrayed before making any judgments, which is not the topic of this paper, but it is interesting in our reflection about the representation of paganism. Indeed it is a very popular genre which performs successfully in the box office, and thus it participates in the spreading of stereotypes. This also naturally influences people's view about any kind of issues those movies deal with. Nevertheless, there can be some hope regarding the representation of paganism (along with other minorities),

especially with the DC Comics company and the Warner Bros. studio which owns it which, because of the fact that the filmmakers and especially Zack Snyder has expressed his will to stay really close to the source material out of respect for the fans and the essence of the characters, and thus this will ensure a better and maybe more accurate representation of paganism, with at least the character of Wonder Woman, who is extremely popular due to everything she represents, but she is not the topic here.

As a conclusion, we could wonder if implicit paganism is a good or a bad thing in terms of representation. On the one hand, not necessarily naming it as such would make it appear as something which existence is granted and commonly accepted, but it can also limit its representation as a portion of the audience might not recognize what elements are taken from paganism and they might stick to the already existing and mostly negative stereotypes about it which are commonly attributed to paganism. On the other hand, as Jacques Lacan wrote "C'est par la nomination que l'homme fait subsister les objets dans une certaine consistance<sup>16</sup>", and thus not naming paganism as such might deny it from its existence over the long term as the general audience would not be able to link certain elements, which are mostly positive, to paganism. It is important to note since most of the explicit use of paganism tends to portray it in a negative way, especially when confronted with Judeo-Christian mythology and at best the pagan aspect is downplayed because it is fused with Judeo-Christian overtones.

Let us see now how the implicit use of paganism compares to the genres, and to some extent, the types of media in which paganism is explicitly featured.

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<sup>16</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire Livre II, Le moi dans la théorie de Freud et dans la technique de la psychanalyse*, Paris, Seuil, p. 202

## **B.Explicit Paganism**

### **1) Horror and Folk Horror:**

The revitalized presence of Paganism in society often finds its echoes in a rather dark manner when it is depicted explicitly onscreen. It is especially the case in the horror genre and more precisely in the folk horror subgenre. Even though this subgenre is not yet well defined and studied, it is, according to a website dedicated to it<sup>17</sup>, a subgenre of horror/occult fiction characterized by references to European pagan traditions with stories involving diverse rituals, nature deities and earthworks among other things. Although there does not seem to be much concern for Christian traditions other than the use of notions such as "demon" and "devils", some stories will first imply that the evil forces at hand are from Satanic sources but eventually, the audience will learn that these forces predate Judeo-Christianity and they will associate this dark past to Paganism. Thus, the audience is misled to believe that it is an accurate representation of Paganism while it is most of the time completely discordant with what Paganism as a whole actually is. The supernatural forces at work are rarely benevolent and the price to pay for their favor is often really high.

In Mark Gatiss's documentary on the history of horror movie<sup>18</sup> we learn that the horror genre, greatly stimulated by British filmmakers saw a decline in the late 60's which seemed to be pretty irreversible, as it seemed like horror movies were no longer appealing to the audience. Nevertheless, a new kind of horror movie flourished with the coming of a new creative flow from filmmakers who decided to avoid the gothic clichés by taking inspiration in the British landscape and its folklore and superstitions. From this collection of folk horror movies a first wave of trinity of films stood out above the others.

Among these, we can find *The Wicker Man* in which the pagans need to sacrifice a human for their civilization to thrive, thus giving a very negative portrayal of paganism. It has been theorized that this boom was a manifestation of the failure of the hippie philosophy which could never be realized and thus bringing down all the hopes for the harmony between mankind and nature which is manifested in a dystopian pagan world. Nevertheless another wave emerged in the last decade in which the movie *Wake Wood* completed that new trinity of folk horror creations next to Ben Wheatley's *Kill List* and *The Loney*, the dark work of art

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<sup>17</sup> "Folk Horror." *Folkhorror.Com*, Accessed 31. Aug. 2017, url: <http://www.folkhorror.com/>

<sup>18</sup> A History of Horror with Mark Gatiss (Part 2 of 3) Home Counties Horror, Youtube. Accessed 31. Aug. 2017, url: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gaFNgHuYdPA&t=3136s>

of Andrew Michael Hurley. Interestingly, the portrayal of Paganism in *Wake Wood* differs from that in *The Wicker Man* because the pagans are not evil, quite the contrary as the pagan rituals is supposed to bring a second chance to those who need it, without resorting to any human sacrifice but only under certain conditions. but the general atmosphere of these movies is not really flattering for paganism.

What does it reveal about the relationship between the audience and paganism? And ultimately their sense of cultural identity? According to Michael Newton<sup>19</sup>, this genre presents "the dark dreams Britain has of itself" with how the movies pick up on the audience's association with the tribal and the rooted with an attention to the old ways being untouched by modernity and how the rituals are hardly as remembered as they used to be. The pagan past is thus shown as a threatening era with Britain being haunted by it. But is a statement which reminds us about the limited knowledge of that pagan past, with a good amount of information the liability of which is to be questioned because of the nature of the sources we have, as developed earlier.

It is safe to say that the folk horror movie subgenre tends to lean towards the Posidonian tradition by depicting the pagan world as threatening and dark and in opposition to modernity.

Nevertheless, paganism is featured in the horror genre as a whole as testified with movies and movie franchises such as *The Exorcist* in which paganism is shown in bad way in comparison to Christianity. Indeed, it is an Assyrian-Babylonian god, Pazuzu, who is portrayed as an evil demon possessing a child. In *Exorcist: The beginning* and its alternate version *Dominion: a prequel to the Exorcist*, there is a mention of a pagan temple dedicated to Pazuzu upon which a Christian church was built in order to seal the Evil away. In the pagan temple, there is a statue of Pazuzu and clues that human sacrifices were made to honor him

This sense of horror can also be found in some long lasting TV series, especially in *Supernatural* which is already at its 11th season. It has featured pagan gods and creatures regularly, but most of the time, these pagan gods have something monstrous about them, they need to kill and consume human flesh in order to sustain their powers. A pagan god has also appeared in the *American Horror Story* show, in the character of "Papa Legba" from the Voodoo tradition, he made the character Marie Laveau immortal but the price is terrible. She

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<sup>19</sup> Michael Newton. "Cults, Human Sacrifice And Pagan Sex: How Folk Horror Is Flowering Again In Brexit Britain." *The Guardian*, 2017,  
[url: https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/apr/30/folk-horror-cults-sacrifice-pagan-sex-kill-list](https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/apr/30/folk-horror-cults-sacrifice-pagan-sex-kill-list).

had to give up her first born to the voodoo god. Voodoo in itself is a religion which is already surrounded by lots of stereotypes and shows like this one, which are very popular, really help in perpetuating those stereotypes which again, are most of the time quite negative.

## **2 ) Science Fiction in TV SHOWS:**

There seems to be a difference in the way Science-fiction depicts paganism in the cinema as opposed to the way it is depicted in TV-Series. For example, let us take *Stargate SG-1* (granted, it was originally a movie, *Stargate*, which spawned the TV series) and *BattleStar Galactica*, which feature it in a different way. In the *Stargate* universe, the gods are revealed to be aliens inhabiting human bodies, granting them exceptional abilities, but they are mostly evil and it falls in line of the "ancient aliens" theory, which defends the idea that all the gods that humanity ever worshiped are just aliens visiting us, to make us evolve into something better. And in that case, the alien-gods just want to subjugate the humans for their needs.

So, this takes away all the seriousness and spirituality of the actual pagan religions, something which can be found in *Battle Star Galactica*, where the humans are all polytheists, divided in twelve colonies worshipping Greek Gods. What is interesting is that the humans have created a race of cyborgs called the Cylons, who rebelled against their creators and who are monotheists, something which starts spreading even to the humans. The representation of paganism in sci-fi is ambivalent since it proposes a futuristic world which could be, so the establishment of paganism as a viable belief system is a good thing in itself. Nevertheless, it can be argued that, indeed, paganism is allowed to be shown as an actual and respectable practice, but only within the boundaries of the genre and it can also be argued that paganism is just only a tool to tell a story and that at the end of the day, it is the judeo-Christian overtones which prevail since the twelve colonies simply represent the twelve apostles of the Mormon Church and the cradle of humanity, Kobol, is just an anagram of Kolob which is the closest star to God in the Mormon writings of the book of Abraham.

## **3 ) Peplum:**

One cannot reflect on paganism in the movies and TV series without talking a little bit about the peplum genre, especially when there are remakes, with for example the very successful British-American movie *Clash Of the Titans* directed by Desmond Davis and produced by Ray Harryhausen and Charles H.Schneer. Indeed this movie features the Greek gods as quite benevolent beings, which is not really the case in the all American remake directed by Louis

Deterrier in 2010 where the gods are essentially shown as petty creatures and with a very American authority-defiant hero.

These gods are also very Christianized in the sense that there is a real dichotomy between Olympus and the Underworld, with Hades shown as a Satan-like being, which is not the case in the mythology and not even in the ancient Greek religion itself. The problem with peplum and the representation of paganism is that it stages a world in which paganism exists but it is a world which temporally is far away from us, it is an era which no longer exists and the audience cannot really relate to it.

It is a desynchronized representation of paganism and the remakes sometimes denature it for the sake of story-telling and audience identification. For instance, in the Deterrier remake, the themes and plot are mostly centered around the male characters, almost entirely downplaying the female ones. Indeed, the female deities have no more than one line and they do not bring much to the plot. This loss in the essence of paganism in some of the modern day peplums such as *Clash of the Titans* or even *Troy* has also been noticed by Nicolas Bonnal who talks of an "*American falsification*" when it comes to paganism in the American Cinema<sup>20</sup>. Even though we may not completely agree with all of his statements regarding post-modern paganism in popular culture, we could share his harsh position about what he calls "*American falsification*" when it comes to paganism.

### **C. An Evolving Representation**

Nicolas Bonnal makes a distinction between cinema with "*pagan connotations*" which can be applied to the Western cultures as opposed to cinema with "*pagan intentions*" which would be applied to cultures like Japan or Russia<sup>21</sup>. So, the movies and TV series produced in our Western cultures have pagan connotations to them, meaning that there are supposedly no real intentions of portraying paganism for what it is since it is mostly only a narrative tool. We could agree with many of his statements in his book, *Le Paganisme au Cinéma*, but he has quite an elitist view on paganism which somehow can, in a way, contradict the essence of paganism which needs to be accessible to be understood. It seems to choose to dwell only on some aspects of it, completely ignoring the cultural context which might have a huge influence on the representation of paganism in popular culture. It is what I am trying to do in my humble endeavor, attempting to understand why paganism is represented the way it is and

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<sup>20</sup> N. Bonnal, *Le Paganisme au Cinéma. op. cit.* p. 53.

<sup>21</sup> N. Bonnal, *Le Paganisme au Cinéma. op. cit.* p. 13.

trying to link the said representation to the actual status of the pagan religions in the real world.

It is safe to say that there really are some limitations to how paganism is represented on many levels, with for example the fact that it is not dealt the same way regarding the cinematic genres, where it is prominently featured as such in horror movies where as only parts of it are featured in other genres but without mentions of it as "pagan".

Nevertheless, there seems to be a tendency for improvement, as in some series, there are mentions of pagan religions, with for example in *Orange is the new black*, in season 1 episode 5 "*The Chickening*", the character of Pennsatucky, a Christian believer, complains to Chaplain Royce because she is not allowed to put a huge cross she made herself on the wall of the chapel saying:

*"- Pennsatucky : You know what? You're treating everybody here better than me. Even those witch ladies.*

*- Chaplain Royce: Also not true.*

*Pennsatucky: Not, it is true. You let...You take them for walks and you...*

*- Chaplain Royce: As I would take you if your faith required communion with nature."*

Also, in season 3 episode 1 "*Mother's day*", the character of Gina Murphy is shown leading a group of Wiccan worshippers performing a ceremony under the full moon. They are not explicitly named as Wiccan, but as witches, which is not a derogatory term since it is an aspect of the Wiccan religion. Indeed there are enough hints to ensure that the audience would recognize this practice as being Wiccan. There is the mention of communion with nature and the gathering of worshippers in circle under a full moon. The fact that it is shown as a genuine and normal practice, on the same level as any other religions, is a positive representation of paganism and there is no sign of vilifying it or the practitioners. Even the character of Gina Murphy is not shown as being any worse than the other inmates, which strengthens the positive or at least neutral representation of paganism.

This is interesting, because it reflects a reality in which this pagan branch really is considered as an actual religion. For instance, in keeping with the prison context, this phenomenon has made its way up to the Supreme Court when five inmates fought in order to have the right to practice minority religions. Among these inmates, two of were Asatru practitioners, one was Wiccan, one Satanist and another one was a minister of the White Supremacist of Jesus Christ-Christian. It is the *Cutter v Wilkinson* case, in 2005, which guaranteed that freedom for



the inmates since the Supreme Court held that "under the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA), facilities that accept federal funds cannot deny prisoners accommodations that are necessary to engage in activities for the practice of their own religious beliefs".

Michael F. Strmiska wrote<sup>22</sup> that according to the American Religious Identity Survey (ARIS) carried out by sociologists at the City University of New York in 2001, an estimated 307,000 Americans identify their religious affiliation as "Wicca, Pagan, or Druid," making this one of the twenty largest religious categories in the United States, anticipated at the time of the survey to grow to some 433,000 by 2004. A similar survey carried out in 1990 did not even mention Wiccans, Pagans, or Druids, which underlines how fast modern Paganism, in its different forms, has been growing in recent years. Even though the number is quite small in comparison to the whole population of the USA, the rise is not negligible and it is a testament to the way the cultural landscape is altered and thus, this naturally influences the representation of paganism in popular culture. Nevertheless, in the US it is a belief system which is quite marginal, since the very first pioneers were Christians and so to some, the historical religion of the Americans is supposed to be Christianity, and the rise of other faiths such as Islam or Paganism is not welcomed by a significant portion of the population.

In another recent TV series, *Grace and Frankie*, the character of Frankie, a hippy, is also shown to be a pagan-friendly woman, since she mentions praying to several deities and especially Frigg, a Norse goddess, and every now and then she calls upon "Goddess" instead of "God". Nevertheless, there is actually no focus on a particular pagan religion, but the mentions of pagan gods on an everyday moment makes it powerful in the sense that it is not shown as being an issue, especially in an exchange where Frankie offers her roommate, Grace, a Christian, to introduce her to Frigg, should she ever need to commune with the divine, without Grace having an anti-pagan reaction.

These two examples of TV series cannot really be taken as real beacon of hope regarding a general positive and genuine representation of paganism because they belong to a network which does not have the same wide range of audience as the mainstream networks. Indeed, both *Orange is the new black* and *Grace and Frankie* can only be (legally) watched on Netflix

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<sup>22</sup> Michael F. Strmiska. *Modern paganism in world cultures: comparative perspectives*. Santa Barbara. ABC-CLIO, 2005.

which requires a subscription, and even though it is a popular network, not everyone has access to it.

#### **D. A representation which depends on the cultural context:**

Interestingly, there seems to be some difference in the way paganism is shown from a British and American perspective, as shown in the difference of treatment of the pagan elements in for example the original *Clash of the Titans* and its remake. Could it be that the cultural context influences the way the filmmakers use paganism? It is no wonder that the British would feature it in a more positive way than the Americans, since there is an obvious rise or return to the old religions in an official way in the UK. In the United States, there clearly is a dichotomy between the conservatives and the progressives and it is especially the case in the religion domain, since the Constitution is supposed to ensure freedom of religion to all citizens and thus it is clearly reflected in the medias, with the examples of the series *Orange is the new black* and *Grace and Frankie*, which mention paganism as a genuine and positive thing whereas in the *Supernatural* show, it has a more negative representation.

Nevertheless, the representation of paganism suffers from some mostly negative clichés and stereotypes ,especially through the popularity of TV shows and movies which take lots of liberties for the sake of story-telling. These creative choices can sometimes falsify the essence of paganism since it can either be reduced to its folkloric aspect, with all the supernatural elements or it can be reduced to only some of the negative aspects mixed with cheap syncretism with Christian lore which end up in some misunderstanding about this particular system of belief. Paganism is not something to be taken lightly and it indeed has a very important place in the popular culture, and not only movies and TV series, since it is the source for many modern stories, with myths being retold over and over again. Nicolas Bonnal defends the idea that everything originated from paganism with the heroes, the myths, the initiatory trip, the link to the cosmos, and beauty being an important concept.

He also fervently defends the idea that these elements can only serve the purpose of cinema, since paganism is also the source of the popular literature of adventures and thus, cinema too<sup>23</sup>. Nevertheless, in his book, he mainly focuses on movies that "*those under 20 might have never heard about*", pointing out the fact that the movies featured heavily pagan themes up to

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<sup>23</sup> In an interview with Breizh, Nicolas Bonnal explained some of his creative process:  
[url: http://www.breizh-info.com/2015/08/22/30040/le-paganisme-au-cinema-de-nicolas-bonnal](http://www.breizh-info.com/2015/08/22/30040/le-paganisme-au-cinema-de-nicolas-bonnal)

the seventies, and that in the modern and contemporary movies, paganism cannot really be found as such.

Even though we could agree with him on the idea that paganism is a great creative source and a spiritual adventure, we might want to distance ourselves from his view on paganism as being something for elitists, because it would mean that only a handful of people can really grasp its essence, and I think it is not the purpose of art to only serve a handful of people. He also bashes on the contemporary Hollywoodian take on paganism, which we could agree with in a way, because of the many liberties filmmakers have taken when using pagan elements in their movies which betrays the very essence of paganism in a way.

Nevertheless, on the other hand, modern movie-goers who do not only passively watch a movie or a TV series, could notice some evolution and improvement in the way paganism is represented (along with other minorities), and we could argue that it is greatly influenced by the way paganism, as a belief system, is starting to gain a wider official recognition, and thus also starting to be equally reflected in the medias.

We shall now have a look particular recurring stereotypes of paganism in popular culture as the themes and subjects they represent have a certain importance in regards to societal issues.

### **III Pagan Stereotypes In Popular Culture**

#### **A) Paganism and Nature:**

One of the most recurrent elements that are associated with Paganism in popular culture is the use of Nature. Indeed, in the belief system itself, Nature plays an important part. But the symbolism of Nature in popular culture and especially cinema has various meanings. It can either have a positive connotation or a negative one, and it would be interesting to develop what kind of significance Nature has in relation to Paganism. In my first-year master project, I have briefly mentioned Nature used as a barrier which would isolate the Pagan world from the outside world. To protect itself from the outside world? Or the other way around? The answer is both, depending on the authors' choice and intentions, but no matter what the answer is, what is relevant is that the existence of Paganism is acknowledged.

Andy Lecher<sup>24</sup> wrote that according to Eco-pagans nature is not disenchanting, it's worth to be valued accordingly to its utility to humanity, but is rather sacred, sentient and crying out for protection from human amelioration. He added that an idea of nature once established can have important consequences for society, from establishment of alternative religious identities to expressions of political dissent.

Nature in paganism is indeed considered to have a possible impactful influence on the society, and this is a common issue in a large number of pagan religions which, in some fashion or the other puts Nature front and center to the point that most paganisms could be designated as a nature religion and "generally, the identification of Paganism as nature religion points to the Pagan recognition of the sacredness of nature, both the earth and the human body" Chris Klassen writes<sup>25</sup>. The importance of Nature is part of the stereotypes which set Paganism apart from the Monotheistic-based religions. It was observed that the multiplicity of Pagan traditions leads to a multiplicity of understandings of nature. There is a tendency for Pagans to pride themselves with a friendly attitude towards nature unlike other religions, especially those that belongs to the Judeo-Christian traditions.

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<sup>24</sup> Andy Letcher. "Gaia Told Me To Do It': Resistance And The Idea Of Nature Within Contemporary British Eco-Paganism." *Journal For The Study Of Religion, Nature And Culture*, vol 8, no. 1, 2007, *Equinox Publishing*, doi:10.1558/ecotheology.v8i1.1645.

<sup>25</sup> Chris Klassen. "The Role Of Nature In The Construction Of Ethics: A Study Among Contemporary Pagans In Ontario, Canada." *Journal For The Study Of Religion, Nature And Culture*, vol 7, no. 1, 2013, *Equinox Publishing*, doi:10.1558/jsrnc.v7i1.49.

### 1) Nature as a nurturing place, a haven:

In the most positive depictions of paganism, Nature has a nourishing aspect, it represents the world untouched and unsoiled by the world of Men. It is associated with harmony and elevation, it has mystical qualities. It is the home of benevolent supernatural beings. But those mystical qualities often do not work outside its boundaries and so the Pagan world sometimes evolves differently from the outside world. There are lots of examples in contemporary popular culture, especially in the most recent blockbuster movies. It is important to emphasize these types of movies, because of the exposition they provide about paganism.

#### ***Maleficent*, Robert Stromberg, 2014:**

Among these movies, we can find the cinematic adaptation of *Maleficent*, in which the protagonist who is traditionally a villain is shown from another perspective. The character portrayed by Angelina Jolie is a fairy (which could be considered as a type of deity in the Celtic religions, akin to deities like the nymphs of ancient Greek religions or the Elves) and she protects a mystical land called *The Moors* which provide protection for the supernatural being. What is interesting here is that the filmmakers decided to give an explanation to how Maleficent became a "villain" by retelling her origin and it is because of the greed of mankind which is incarnated in the love interest of the protagonist, King Stefan, who betrayed her for power.

This betrayal triggers the dark aspect of Maleficent which directly impacts The Moors which as a result become a dark and desolated place. It is not the luxuriant, green and shiny place it was before the betrayal. It is also important to note that the context, although implicit, shows a cultural clash between Christianity, incarnated in King Stefan and Paganism, incarnated in Maleficent who was originally a pure force of evil but was transformed into this Earth Goddess-like character for the movie version. Greg Burk from LA Times writes in his article<sup>26</sup> "Op-ed Disney's Maleficent': Romancing the Devil" that the rebranding of Maleficent is perhaps another sign that Americans have grown uncomfortable with their traditional role as idealistic world-savers.

And it is indeed a pattern which is more and more recurrent in modern movies as we will see in future chapters and the fact that the filmmakers would turn to paganism to illustrate this

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<sup>26</sup> Burk, Greg. "Disney's 'Maleficent': Romancing The Devil." *Latimes.Com*, Accessed 31. Aug. 2017  
Url: <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-burk-maleficent-disney-20140613-story.html>.

shows how relevant paganism is today. To add some weight to this statement, Evgenia Fotiou wrote that:

The revitalization or rediscovery of indigenous religious traditions is a global phenomenon. It takes on multiple manifestations, but its roots lie in what is perceived as a global ecological, political, and spiritual crisis. These revitalization movements (...) make claims about what is wrong with the world and offer suggestions for how the world should be. In Europe, this manifests as the revitalization of pre-Christian traditions which both challenge the long history of western culture and Christianity and propose solutions rooted in ancestral worldview<sup>27</sup>.

Thus, there really is a global momentum in the revitalization of ethnic religions triggered by a global crisis that is not only a local particularity in Northern Europe for example. The search for authenticity in the cultural identity is a global phenomenon and paganism is a part of that identity to a non negligible portion of the population, as it is acknowledged by many scholars.

The use of Paganism in movies and TV shows as a political statement and a commentary on our contemporary world seems to be a trend as it seems to coincide with the real life issues and concerns about the fate of our planet. There is one very successful and popular movie *Avatar* directed by James Cameron which combines many criticisms about our behaviour towards one another as a species with our behaviour towards the environment overall, with a very pagan-friendly stance using many aspects of the pagan belief system backed up by science.

### ***Avatar*, James Cameron, 2009: Eywa and Pagan aliens**

The movie *Avatar* could very much be considered as a postmodern pagan myth centered around nature worship. The Na'vi people is an alien race living on the planet Pandora where all the beings and plants live harmoniously. They worship a Mother Goddess type of figure they call Eywa who is very much inspired by the Greek's Mother Goddess Gaia. The Gaia Hypothesis which is a controversial scientific theory which defends the idea that the earth is a living organism, is very much applied to the movie's universe. It is translated in the movie as being a "biological global network" and an "electro-communication between the trees" thus giving a scientific explanation and justification to the Na'Vi's pagan religion. The planet was able to defend itself, through the union of all of its inhabitants with it, against the Human

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<sup>27</sup> Evgenia Fotiou. "We Are The Indians Of Greece"." *Crosscurrents*, vol 64, no. 2, 2014, pp. 219-235. Wiley-Blackwell, doi:10.1111/cros.12074.

invaders representing Western Civilization and Christianity while Pandora and its inhabitants represent the Undiscovered Pagan world.

It is a shout out to our own history, inspired by the story of Pocahontas where colonialism and imperialism might have brought more damage than good to the indigenous cultures with the sole difference that in the movie, the indigenous culture were able to defend and protect themselves through the union of all beings. The message of the movie might be cheesy in a way, but it only reveals that there is an awareness to all of these issues and the explicitly positive use of pagan elements to tell the story is another indication of an awareness about the nature of Paganism and the importance of the role of Nature in a world which suffers from climate change negatively impacting the lives of billions due to global warming.

If Nature ever was to be worshiped as a deity in our real world, would we behave differently? Would we have the means to fix the things we have done wrong?

This is a topic which is covered in the following movie set in a world where Nature has lost to nuclear war and where the very last remains of fertile seeds are in the hands of an Amazon-like tribe who are waiting to find a place where they could bring nature back to life again.

***Mad Max the Fury Road, George Miller, 2015: "The Green place with Many Mothers":***

The dystopian post-apocalyptic world of this movie is a warning of what could become of ours should we go on treating our planet and one another the way we do. Nature is a rarity and it is closely associated with Womanhood and Matriarchy as opposed to the warmongering Patriarchal dominant tribes thriving on gas.

Emperor Furiosa is from an Amazon-like tribe, the Vuvalini of Many Mothers but was kidnapped from an early age. She was supposed to become a breeder but could not and was discarded but she did not die. She finally blended with the locals in the Citadel until they almost forgot that she was a woman. Later on, she helped the Five Wives of Immortam Joe (used as breeders) escape and promised to get them to the Green place with Many Mothers, her birthplace. Her hopes and dreams were destroyed when she met her people and learned that the legendary place is no more and has become a toxic no man's land. Her people are survivors of mostly old women who have kept the last fertile seeds safe in case they would stumble upon a place where they could bring Nature back to life again.

The last bits of Nature could be found atop a rocky hill, jealously guarded by Immortam Joe and by the end of the movie, Furiosa was able to overthrow the patriarchal hierarchy and brought in the Vuvalini to rule by her side, with the fertile seeds to be used to bring the Green Place back to life. The very importance of Nature is not so much in its onscreen nigh absence, but it is more in the narrative, especially when Furiosa finally gets to meet the remaining women of her tribe. While full of hope after having gone through a lot of trouble to bring her comrades to her home, she finally confronts the truth and realizes that her home is lost forever. The audience is invited into Furiosa's point of view with the chattering of the other people slowly fading away as the extra diegetic music replaces any of the other human voices. In realizing she lost her home, her Green Place of Many Mothers, she takes off her prosthetic arm as if to reunite with herself, only to kneel in the desert, as the camera takes us further and further away from her character who appears overwhelmed by the desertic landscape. Nature here is very much associated with hope, renewal and civilization, as her people, through her perspective, is shown to be quite a harmonious one.

This is very much a story about a paradise lost which is reclaimed by a group of women who were the keeper of the last fertile seeds and who may be on the verge of overthrowing the patriarchal system perpetuated by Immortam Joe and his peers to maybe establish a matriarchal society which would be more just and nurturing than the previous one.

We shall now have a look at an explicitly pagan culture which shows a possible reality where the individuals would be in perfect harmony with nature, where the nurturing aspects of a matriarchal system guarantee the lasting quality of their culture.

### ***Wonder Woman*, Patty Jenkins, 2017: The Amazons and the Island of Themyscira:**

Although only a portion of the island is shown in the movie, the aesthetic choices of the creative team again shows how important nature is for the pagan culture of the Amazons. The buildings on the Island were conceived to be nature friendly, in the sense that the Amazons worked so that they would adapt to the environment rather than impose themselves against it. They live in total harmony with nature as attested by the presence of animals roaming freely, unafraid of the Amazons. The abundance of the vegetation shows how the Amazon culture is respectful of their surroundings and they completely blend it with the landscape. It also shows in the colour palette and tones, it is vibrant on Themyscira, but much more desaturated in the outside world, with a grey-ish, dark tone which contrasts a lot with the idyllic and paradise-like god-made island.



The importance of the non-human or we should say the non-amazon world here is all the more obvious as there is a large number of animals in the background, which were specifically chosen for their oddity. They are not front and center but their presence in the background makes their presence genuine, they are not attached to a leash of any kind, they roam freely. For example, as young Diana, the Wonder-Woman-to-be amazon, is sneaking through the island, she passes white peacocks which can be seen again in the background when she and her mother are facing the sea on a large balcony and years later when she and her aunt Antiope are training. The animals were definitely a purposeful part of the Themyscira design. We can also see an armadillo, goats with four horns and a bull. Onset pictures even shown mountain lions that apparently did not make the cut. This shows that the natural connections are not just about the vegetation and the mountains and the sea, but also about the animals.

Speaking about the design of the double spiral artifice in the art and the making of the film book which houses the *godkiller sword*, Aline Bonetta said that she played with the spiral which is a motif found in nature but it is also a symbol of progression, of movement, a link from one world to another. She was inspired by the recurring shell pattern, especially because the Amazons emerged from the sea at their creation and are a very naturalistic culture. The shell motif also connects with the birth of Venus in Botticelli's painting, Venus/Aphrodite being one of the most important deity in the Wonder Woman lore.

With these three examples, Nature is shown as a benevolent, nurturing place. It is the source of life, wonders and magic which needs to be preserved from the bad influences the urban world can bring. The survival of the individuals can only be guaranteed by the harmony between all beings and utter most respect towards Nature, failing that, we end up in a dystopian world as shown in *Mad Max, The Fury Road*, where Nature is defeated.

In these cases, Nature is heavily associated with Paganism and femininity and in conflict with Civilization and masculinity. The ecological message in these movies, coupled with pagan elements do echo and reflect aspects of Paganism as it is practiced by the contemporary individuals. It also shows that the salvation of humankind is no longer to be found in the traditional patriarchal and mostly Judeo-Christian values but in Paganism which offers an alternative way of redemption for humankind.

## 2) Nature as a Threat to Humankind and Civilization:

Nevertheless, the reception of paganism is not only positive and this also is reflected in the media, and Nature has its role in it too in the way it is portrayed. In the most negative depictions of paganism indeed, Nature has a very ominous presence, it is inhospitable to humans. It is the home of dark creatures, a place where the humans can lose their minds and their lives. It sometimes has to be counter-attacked by tools from the "civilized world" thus showing a rupture from that civilized world. Ultimately we could argue that it also shows a rupture of mankind from a part of its identity in relation to his environment. This gives the impression that Nature has to be tamed by the civilized world and puts Paganism in a submissive position and in a more negative light.

### *Supernatural* (2005-ongoing)

The Tv series *Supernatural* provides many examples of that dark aspect. Paganism generally is mistreated in its representation, and when it is involved, it is mostly directly linked to natural phenomena. A great number of pagan gods featured in the show have elemental powers and some control over nature as common abilities. For example, a Vanir can provide great weather conditions for the crops and for the individuals to thrive as long as human sacrifices are made. He was finally defeated when the tree that was inhabited by the god's essence, imported by pagan pioneers, was burned.

Hold Nickar pagan gods, from Germanic paganism, also need to feed on human flesh in order to provide good weather conditions to the town in which they live because they gradually lost their power once a "*Hippie from the middle east*" came and "*stole the spotlight*". These gods were finally killed after being stabbed with a stake made from an evergreen tree. The goddess Calliope is also featured and her involvement is first suggested by a certain type of flower, the borage, that is supposedly her symbol before she ends up being killed by the hunters, with a wooden stake, because once again, she is a human eating deity. A Slavic god, Leshi, was forced to wander the earth, hungry for human flesh once his forest was cut down and was eventually killed beheaded. The gods Zeus, Kali and Vesta are shown mastering their respective elemental powers, electricity and fire.

The *Supernatural* TV show relies heavily on a Posidonian reading of paganism. It perpetuates and popularizes even more the folk horror subgenre which flourished in the 70's and its depiction of paganism is very much reminiscent of movies like *The Blood of Satan's Claw* and

*The Wicker Man* in which nature is an integral part of paganism but portrayed in a very negative way. Therefore, it only perpetuates even more the misconceptions about paganism.

Could this negative association of paganism with nature be a manifestation of the paradoxical relationship humankind has with the environment? As we have seen earlier, the folk horror subgenre very much relies on the fact that the old religions are a threat for our modern societies. Nature is the place where dark rituals are performed, blood spilled and otherworldly creatures are summoned and will eventually claim the minds or the lives of those who are unfortunate enough to wander in it. This very much contrasts with the positive portrayal of paganism in which Nature is the place where humankind can find a sort of redemption through the harmony with the environment and all living things.

As a consequence, we could argue that the impact of paganism on cultural identity can be spotted in the treatment of nature in relation to paganism itself, as paganism calls back to the roots of that identity and this quite telling of the ambivalent appreciation humankind has of both its natural surroundings and pagan past.

Having developed the many aspects of the representation of Paganism and Nature, it is now time to further our reflection of the Humans vs. the Non-humans on a pagan context with Paganism and animals, which will obviously raise some questions about the human condition and eventually help see the extent of the impact of Paganism on the Anglo-Saxon cultural identity.

## **B ) Paganism and Feminism**

We could wonder if there is a correlation between the revival or at least the rise of paganism and the momentum which drives feminism. If that is the case, it may be due to the very nature of paganism which is in essence women-friendly. It could appear stereotypical to associate Paganism with feminism, but it is only accurate since the pagan belief system is not patriarcho-centric. The feminine principle is way more present than in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Paganism indeed can bring all the material needed for female empowerment thanks to the many pagan female figures that have undoubtedly served as inspiration for modern day female heroes.

We can take the example of ancient Greece where the goddess Hecate was considered an equal and sometimes a superior to the king of the gods, Zeus, who was said to be very respectful to her. In Hesiod's *Theogony* she is a goddess who is said to have been greatly honoured by Zeus who gave her splendid gifts and a share of dominion over earth, heaven and sea. Although she was given a great importance in Hesiod's point of view, she is not necessarily the most obvious female deity that comes to mind as she is only one example among many other female deities, who are more popular than he is, for that specific matter, to the modern individuals. Names such as Athena or Artemis come to mind when we think of the strong independent female deities and these female deities have often served as basis for not only modern female hero figures but also allegories for countries. The Statue of Liberty is very much modelled after the roman goddess Libertas and symbols such as Britannia, Columbia and Marianne, respectively representing the United Kingdom, the United States and France, are also very much modelled after female classical deities, among which we can easily recognize the goddess Athena in the imagery used.

Without saying that the nations cited earlier are pagan nations, because there is absolutely no truth to that, it is nevertheless interesting to note that the source for inspiration to create those symbols is not in any of the Judeo-Christian monotheistic religions, but in the pagan pre-conversion religions and especially, the female pagan deities.

The existence of female deities who are on the same level of power and importance as the male deities is the first aspect which seems to be appealing to a lot of people. Indeed, gender equality directly impacts other issues such as equal rights to LGBTQ people who have suffered -and still suffer in some parts of the world- from the dark aspects of Patriarchy which has a huge presence in Judeo-Christian cultures and religions.

There is a tendency to make strong female characters -not straight- or at least, bisexual. Hence, hetero-normativity is sometimes an issue which has to be dealt with in a particular way. The fluidity in sexual preference and gender identification could be understood as a form of empowerment and a direct influence from paganism as those issues find lots of rejection from the patriarchal Judeo-Christian traditions, even though there are progressive movements which militate for acceptance. For example in the *Xena Warrior Princess* show, Xena and her sidekick Gabrielle are explicitly bisexual and it has been praised by Lgbt groups for the positive and daring portrayal of non-heterosexual relationships onscreen.

In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Willow the powerful witch has been shown to have dated men, but she ended up only dating women as she comes to terms with her sexuality, sharing a strong bond with her lover Tara before the show killed her. Willow is an LGBTQ+ character who was allowed to be powerful, have a positive portrayal and be pagan and not end up being killed as it usually is the case for queer characters.

*Lost Girl*, a Canadian TV show features a pagan-heavy world, where the supernatural race of *Faes*, live in parallel to the humans. The lead role, Bo, is a bisexual succubus who feeds off the life force and sexual energy of people and happens to be the child of Hades, who in the show, is part of a family of the most powerful *Faes* which were seen as gods by the ordinary people. A great number of *faes* in that show are portrayed as having a fluid sexual orientation and gender identity thus, perpetuating the stereotypical association of paganism with non-hetero normativity. For instance the fae-god Zeus possesses the body of a mortal woman while Hera possesses that of a mortal man.

In the *Witches of East End* TV adaptation, Joanna Beaucamp is the matriarch of her family of witches. But we soon learn that they come from Asgard and might even be godly in their nature. She is a very powerful witch and she also happens to have had a same-sex relationship with another witch, Alex.

A specific chapter will be dedicated to the character of Wonder Woman, but just a brief mention of her sexuality as it has been greatly speculated for quite some time that she might be at least bisexual. Wonder Woman is the perfect example which illustrates the link between Paganism and Feminism because of the very nature of the character. Her bisexuality is to be

considered officially canon since one of the most well known writer, Greg Rucka has stated that<sup>28</sup> :

It's supposed to be paradise (... )You're supposed to be able — in a context where one can live happily, and part of what an individual needs for that happiness is to have a partner — to have a fulfilling, romantic and sexual relationship. And the only options are women. But an Amazon doesn't look at another Amazon and say, 'You're gay.' They don't. The concept doesn't exist. Now, are we saying Diana has been in love and had relationships with other women? As Nicola [Scott, Rucka's artist and collaborator on the "Wonder Woman: Year One" storyline currently running in the series] and I approach it, the answer is obviously yes.

This is particularly important since the comic book world has a wide range of audience, especially when comic book characters are adapted to the silver screen. It's all the more interesting that according to Rucka, no one at DC Comics has stated that "she's gotta be straight. Nobody. Ever. They've never blinked at this." Gal Gadot herself agreed with Rucka, saying that even though the topic is not covered in the cinematic adaptation, she is potentially bisexual as she is "a woman who loves people for who they are. She can be bisexual. She loves people for their hearts."<sup>29</sup> We shall cover more grounds on that particular character further down.

Of course, not all the female pagan characters show fluidity in their sexual orientation, there is nonetheless a pretty obvious recurring pattern which is accurate when it comes to dealing with paganism, especially on the small screen. It is also interesting to note that it seems to be easier to portray female characters as having more fluid sexuality than the male ones. The material for female empowerment seems to find its sources in the pagan world as it brings more raw power and freedom as opposed to the Christian dominated mainstream world.

As reflected in the examples we have just dealt with, it is in the fundamental nature of paganism to embrace and accept the many aspects of human nature. Gender identity and sexual orientation are non-issues. The vast majority of modern pagan branches give equal importance to both men and women, all justified by the very nature of paganism. At least, it is promoted that way by a very large number of pagans, even though there is a minor fraction

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<sup>28</sup> "Exclusive Interview: Greg Rucka On Queer Narrative And WONDER WOMAN." *Comicosity*, Accessed 31. Aug. 2017, [Url: http://www.comicosity.com/exclusive-interview-greg-rucka-on-queer-narrative-and-wonder-woman/](http://www.comicosity.com/exclusive-interview-greg-rucka-on-queer-narrative-and-wonder-woman/).

<sup>29</sup> Brent Lang. "Gal Gadot Dishes On The New 'Wonder Woman' Film." *Variety*, Accessed 31. aug. 2017, [Url: http://variety.com/2016/film/news/gal-gadot-wonder-woman-dc-patty-jenkins-1201884362/](http://variety.com/2016/film/news/gal-gadot-wonder-woman-dc-patty-jenkins-1201884362/).

comprised of mostly right wing to alt-right wing oriented pagans who are very much like the Judeo-Christian radicals, they thrive on the rejection of progressive ideals, thus not very lgbtq-friendly and adhere to a very patriarchal system.

This is an example of how paganism can be considered as a counter-culture to the established Judeo-Christian order of things where for example, the religious officials have hard times accepting to share power with women.

### **1) An Ambivalent portrayal**

Nevertheless, in popular culture, the portrayal of feminism in a pagan context is quite ambivalent. Even though the portrayal is quite positive on the small screen, there is a tendency to portray matriarchal systems as broken on the silver screen, in opposition of course to the mainstream patriarchal system. It gives the impression that the female power has to be kept in check, otherwise if let loose, it could only bring chaos and desolation to the world. Interestingly, there is also an opposite tendency to portray matriarchal systems as a good alternative, by focusing on the nurturing aspects, a sisterhood which galvanizes the individuals and allows the culture to thrive. It is a trend we can witness in some of the most recent movies. In the following, we shall have a look at the ambivalence of the portrayal of Feminism with a pagan background with particular examples in movies and we shall try and demonstrate what it could eventually reveal about the state of our world.

#### ***Mad Max: Fury Road, Roger Miller, 2015:***

The whole movie itself is heavily pagan-friendly with the mention of Valhalla and the cult centered around the Wheel. Emperor Furiosa is from the Vuvalini, an all-female tribe who lost their home which used to be green and luxuriant because the soil became contaminated after a nuclear cataclysm and could not support harvest. Their tribe is very reminiscent of the Amazons in Greek mythology. These women are the last of their kind and possibly on the verge of extinction as they are mostly old women with the exception of a character called *The Valkyrie* played by Megan Gale. Nevertheless, they have kept the last remnants of their lost Paradise in the form of fertile seeds entrusted to the Keeper of the Seeds should they ever find a suitable place to bring Nature back to life.

They are not explicitly pagan women as such, but the imagery calls back to pagan female figures from pre-Christian cultures such as the Amazons, the Valkyries and the archetypal Earth goddess type of figures. Their Matriarchal system is also a shout out to Paganism which feature numerous female deities with equal power and importance to their male counterpart. The onscreen depiction of the Vuvalini might have been quite positive but according to production designer Colin Gibson, it was a broken Matriarchal system which banished all the boys outside of their Green Place, only using them for reproduction. They are pretty much akin to the classical Amazons of ancient Greece who, in some versions of the myth, would use men only for reproduction, keeping the female babies and banishing the male ones. This is a continuation of a series of depiction of a broken matriarchal pagan system which can be found in the remake of the *Wicker man* and its spiritual sequel, *The Wicker Tree*.

### **The *Wicker Man* film Series 1973 -2011:**

In the original version, the chief of Summerisle is a man, Lord Summerisle portrayed by Christopher Lee, but in the 2006 remake version directed by Neil Labute, the character was gender-bent into a woman, Sister Summerisle thus establishing a matriarchal society centered around the worship of a Mother Goddess of which she is supposed to be the human incarnation and their cult requires a human sacrifice in order to guarantee the survival of her people.

In the back story told by Sister Summerisle, we learn that her ancestors had left England in order to avoid persecution only to face it again during the Salem Witch trials before finding refuge on the island. She finally explains that their population is mostly comprised of women as they are considered to be stronger, leaving the fate of the male unwanted babies unsure.

In the spiritual sequel also directed by Hardy, the *Wicker Tree*, the broken matriarchal system is not as obvious as in the *Wicker Man* but their religion is also mostly centered around the worship of a Celtic female deity, Sulis, a solar deity that has been syncretized with the Roman goddess Minerva with whom she shares a certain number of common attributes. Two born again evangelical missionaries, Steve Thomson and Beth Boothby, arrive in a village called Tressock where the inhabitants have become infertile because of a nuclear power plant.

They are eventually lured into performing a pagan cult which results in Steve getting chased and torn apart as part of the ritual and Beth ending up being a May Queen with her body exposed next to the previous ones. Steve had previously slept with one of the locals who



ended up pregnant, thus suggesting that the ritual has been accepted by their gods and bringing a new generation of individuals to their land.

**- *Pay the Ghost*, Uli Edel, 2015:**

In that movie which stars Nicolas Cage as Mike Lawford whose son has disappeared, the villain is the spirit turned evil of a young pagan widow whose family was part of the first New York settlement. On Halloween Night of 1679, she was burned alive with her three children by an angry mob of settlers. Because of her Celtic worship, they accused her to be a witch responsible for the flu that decimated their people. Since then, she takes revenge every year on Halloween, when the border between the spiritual world and the physical world weakens for a brief time and kidnaps children. Upon learning of the story and of a group of people who still practice the ancient Celtic cult, Lawford goes with his wife to investigate and meet with them. They are greeted by the chief of the group whose individuals are dressed in black, cloaked and with animal masks, performing a ritual. The chief happens to be a woman, dressed in white but with an uncovered face who supposedly is the priestess of the cult.

She explains the significance being the symbol of the Celtic goddess, saying that the growing moon is the maid and the decreasing moon represents the old lady, warning that it is the most devastating pagan symbols, as her hatred blinds her to the point of forgetting about her motherly nature.

Here, paganism is associated with the female figure but the portrayal is negative. The ghost of the widow was initially a victim, a scapegoat who had been deprived of her family and her life but the movie treats her as the ultimate evil without giving any chance at redemption. Her presence is hinted by the gathering of vultures and manifests in violence. Even the symbol of the "Celtic goddess" is not really positive, as it appears on Lawford's arm after she cuts herself, possessed by the spirit of their son who is begging them to rescue him.

The portrayal of paganism is thoroughly negative as well as its association with the female figure, which brings a sense of anti-feminism and this trend seems to follow the spirit of previous folk horror movie such as *The Wicker Man* and its companion movies. Is female empowerment that much of a threat for our society that it has to be associated with a Posidonian interpretation of the pagan past? We shall take a look at the figure of the Witch, as it is a recurring figure when paganism is dealt with in Popular culture.

## 2 ) Witches and Witchcraft in Popular Culture:

One could argue that associating Paganism with the Occult can be seen as a voluntary attempt to cut Paganism from the regular world, thus distancing it from the grittiness and the seriousness of the real world. The Occult indeed doesn't abide by the scientific rules that are transgressed by magic. It is also rejected by the dominant monotheistic religions which consider the Occult as a transgression of the rules laid by their deity. In popular culture, there is a great tendency to couple the Occult and Paganism as opposed to Judeo-Christianity in a way that is detrimental to Paganism.

T.M Luhrmann<sup>30</sup> speaks about "*magical realism*", a term which came to be to describe a literary style where the magical and the mundane blend naturally. In Paganism, the supernatural is treated as mundanely present thus leaving the relationship between the "*merely asserted*" and the "*really real*" quite ambiguous.

Generally, the portrayals of Witches and Pagans in movies and TV are hardly accurate and are quite ambivalent and the (over)-use of the Occult as a threat to the common earthlings partakes in perpetuating their negative representations. It is especially the case when it comes to Witchcraft as a whole, as it is mostly associated with Devil worship and the individual practicing it are generally evil, selfish, ignorant and cruel to others. This association with a Judeo-Christian figure participates in emptying Witchcraft of its original pagan essence, which is essentially a set of skills to play *with* (and not against) the natural laws, with the blessings of the higher spiritual or godly beings through the means of rituals and the gathering of specific ingredients and sometimes under specific natural conditions.

The portrayal of the witch is most of the time manichean in popular culture and we could draw two main categories out of its representation. There is witchcraft which entirely depends on the Christian mythology and there is witchcraft which is more associated with paganism and the natural world. Nevertheless, the onscreen depiction can be sometimes confusing, because of the aesthetic and creative choices. For example, pagan rituals and symbols could be used while the plot only deals with Judeo-Christian mythology thus participating in the confusing amalgamation between paganism and devil worship like in *The Blood on Satan's Claw*.

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<sup>30</sup> T. M LUHRMANN, *Touching the Divine: Recent Research on Neo-Paganism and Neo-Shamanism*, London and New York, Routledge, 2012

Let us first start with the explicitly positive representation of witches, by taking examples from the small screen. The *Charmed* TV show features a trio of sisters, the Halliwells, who practice white magic and although it also features Christian inspired creatures such as demons and angel-like beings, the pagan elements are easily recognizable in the presence of a great number of pagan symbols and supernatural beings such as mermaids, dwarfs, deities and so on. For instance the Halliwell's symbol, the triquetra, is considered by modern pagans as a symbol for the triple goddess while for the Christians, it is a symbol which represents the Holy Trinity. We get the same pattern in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* where the main witch, Willow, although she had a dark moment after the loss of her lover Tara, is mostly portrayed as a powerful and benevolent witch, whose pagan background is pretty obvious in her proximity to nature and her summoning the powers of several pagan deities.

The *Charmed*-like *Witches of East End* TV adaptation also features a bunch of witches who are in fact of Asgardian origin, thus tying it to North pagan mythology and religion. And although paganism is not necessarily explicitly mentioned, we can easily recognize some elements as pagans in the ritual used and the symbols just like in the shows mentioned above.

We can notice a tendency to associate Witchcraft with femininity and by extension feminism and anti-feminism as the practitioners of witchcraft are most of the time women. It is a sign of empowerment through mystical means which can be double edged as we will see in the following. But it also shows how society considers femininity among all the societal issues.

Anna Cafolla quoting Gary Parsons<sup>31</sup>, wrote that Wicca rode on the countercultural sentiment of the late 60s onward, with a great coverage on the media. For example there was a popular show for children based on pagan folklore, *Children of the Stones*, and there was also a children encyclopaedia magazine, *Man, Myth and Magic* where the topics were envisaged in an academic perspective and there would be things about witchcraft and by extension paganism. This association with the social context is especially pointed out when there was a mass panic in the 90s where thousands of people were investigated because of unfounded cases of child abuse linked to witchcraft and devil worship and the popularity of witchcraft finally dwindled as the era of revolution and sexual liberation came to an end.

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<sup>31</sup> Anna Cafolla. "How The Power Of Witchcraft Gripped 70S Britain." *Dazed*, Accessed 31. Aug. 2017  
[url: http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/32864/1/how-the-power-of-witchcraft-gripped-70s-britain](http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/32864/1/how-the-power-of-witchcraft-gripped-70s-britain).

It seems like one of the reasons why the Posidonian representation of paganism (through witchcraft) has lived on in popular culture can be explained with the clash between the conservative part of the society and the hippies of the era, who were progressive, militating for sexual liberation, spirituality and authority defiant. Those are qualities which can be found in paganism due to its nature, it provides material to create a counterculture for the disillusioned portion of the population. As a result, 'witchsploitation films' flourished and peaked in the 70s. They were filled though with historical inaccuracies and misconceptions about paganism and witchcraft who were then associated with sex, violence and gory scenes while on some other portrayals, they would be associated with a more quiet, rural and remote practices.

There seems to be a difference of treatment in the way witches are portrayed in the small screen in comparison to how they are portrayed in the silver screen. As mentioned earlier, there is a large number of TV shows which are witch-friendly, but the most negative portrayal of witches are to be found in the cinematic universe. We shall have a look at a couple of these movies from different eras in order to see the evolution in the representation and how the female figures evolved too.

*The Blood on Satan's Claw* is a 1971 folk horror movie which is set in a village taken over by an evil demonic possession. It was directed by Piers Haggard based upon a story written by Robert Wynne-Simmons who was motivated by the theme of eradicating the old religions through an atheistic belief, incarnated in the character of the Judge with a determined agenda of imposing enlightenment not through Christianity, but through atheist reason. Nevertheless, he represents the male power over the female dominated cult and his atheistic stance betrays a Judeo-Christian filtered vision of the world with a Posidonian reading of the old religions as he says:

(0:29:18)

- "Doctor, witchcraft is dead and discredited, are you bent on reviving forgotten horrors?"

Nevertheless, although he stands for reason, he does take a look at the book of witches, so he does not completely reject the possibility of the existence of the old religions and as pointed out by the doctor, he does come from the city and "cannot know the ways of the country". The sense of remoteness from the civilized world associated with paganism is indeed a recurring motif that can be found in many movies featuring paganism in some fashion.

The supposedly corrupting influence of the old religions is represented during a procession sequence where the majority of the individuals are young people, led by a girl, Angel Blake. The pagan portion of the movie is concentrated in that particular scene as the followers have crowns made of branches in blossom, chanting while they are processing, which ties this to the pagan rites. The presence of an old couple is a reminder of the corrupting old religion which has claimed the souls of the young people of the village. The pagan elements are quickly disposed of as a Christian beast name is dropped, Behemoth, we are then brought back to the Judeo-Christian context but in a confusing way as the pagan elements are used to give shape to the cult's practices. This movie can be understood as a conservative's perspective on the pre-Christian religions, adhering to a Posidonian point of view by attributing to pagan followers savage deviant and savage behaviour, as attested by the rape of one of the young girls in order to summon their evil master.

That corrupting aspect is incarnated in Angel Blake as she is a pretty young girl, far from the cliché of the ugly old witch and it gives a sense of warning that, from a conservative point of view, is needed in order to denounce the evil influence of the past on the young generation. It may also be a reminder of the failure of the vision the hippies had of a perfect world, by promoting qualities that are close to paganism.

Let us now make a jump in time and have a look at certain modern movies featuring witches. They still do not have a very positive portrayal as they often end up being the main antagonist and villains even when their presence is only suggested and not shown. The *Blair Witch* movie series (1999-2016) does perpetuate the idea that witchcraft is evil and the association with the woods ties it to paganism, especially when one of the pagan religions, Wicca, is name-dropped explicitly in the movie. The *Paranormal Activity* (2007-2015) franchise also features evil witches but in a more Judeo-Christian context, which does not explicitly give paganism a bad name, but the association of witchcraft with devil worship does partake in the long tradition of misrepresenting paganism, as a result of many confusing amalgams in popular culture which find their sources in the 70s and are just modern manifestations of the distinction between the Posidonian and Alexandrian traditions.

Those are examples of treatment in the horror genre, although we also find witches in other genres, we shall only cover a couple of them just to show the recurring pattern associated with that figure, paganism and femininity.

Both *The Last Witch Hunter* (2015) and *Suicide Squad* (2016) feature a witch as a main villain. Both villains are powerful and share the same weakness, they can only be killed if their heart is destroyed. In spite of those similarities, *Suicide Squad's* villain, Enchantress, is more tied to Paganism than the Witch Queen whose background is not clearly defined. The movie seems to be set in a Judeo-Christian world where the priests are pitted against the magic users who are not all evil, but there are no clear mention of pagan deities and the origin of their magic is left vague. In *Suicide Squad*, Enchantress is the spirit of an old entity in the body of June Moon, a young archaeologist. She and her brother have been imprisoned in an artefact after having been worshipped for thousands of years as gods.

The pagan aspect of that character is in the aesthetic of Enchantress in her true form. Many females deities can be recognized in her appearance, which is mainly South American inspired, but one can easily recognize the crescent moon on her forehead which is an attribute shared by a number of Egyptian deities such as Isis and the runes on her body is also heavily pagan inspired and can be found in many pagan cultures. Given that it is a movie which is set in a shared universe, the DC Extended Universe, where Greek gods exist and where Humankind is a creation of their chief god Zeus, it is possible that Enchantress and her Brother Incubus are part of another group of deities.

We can notice a certain trend of owning the pagan essence of certain figures such as the witch or at least, the pagan origin and themes are more and more used, which might be another indication that Paganism indeed has a certain impact in the cultural identity.

A study has shown that Wicca, a form of paganism, is the fastest growing religion in America. The American Religious Identification Survey has indeed shown that Wicca had an average annual growth of 143% from 1990 to 2001 and a press release from Witch School has also claimed that Wicca is the fastest growing religion in America and would soon grow to become the third largest religion in the US, right behind Christianity and Islam<sup>32</sup>.

So why are we now seeing one of the biggest modern resurgences in witchcraft since the 70s? Maybe counterculture and mass disillusionment is at its strongest once more, spurred on in post-Brexit times.

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<sup>32</sup> Michael Snyder. "The Fastest Growing Religion In America Is Witchcraft – The Truth." *Thetruthwins.Com*, Accessed 31. Aug. 2017, [url: http://thetruthwins.com/archives/the-fastest-growing-religion-in-america-is-witchcraft.>](http://thetruthwins.com/archives/the-fastest-growing-religion-in-america-is-witchcraft.>)

## **C. The Character of Wonder Woman:**

### **1) A Summary of the character's origin stories:**

Wonder Woman's character has had various origin stories but the background has nonetheless remained consistent. The character is deeply rooted in Greek Mythology. She is Diana of Themyscira from an all-female culture, the Amazons, and she is also one of a kind among her own people. In her first appearance, she was sculpted from clay by her mother, Queen Hyppolita and brought to life by the goddess Aphrodite. In the 80's reboot by George Perez, her Greek mythology background was enhanced and the female Olympian deities were given far more importance to the origin story.

The Amazons were from then on reincarnated women who were abused by men in their past lives. Their souls were kept safe in a mystical cave until a delegate of Olympian deities went and gave them a new life. Among these souls was that of a mother with an unborn child who was killed before she could give birth. She was to become Hyppolita and the baby was to become Diana. The baby's soul was kept for another purpose. It would later be infused in a clay baby sculpted by Hyppolita and five Olympian goddesses and one Olympian god would give a portion of their powers to animate it. The female deities were Demeter, Hestia, Aphrodite, Athena and Artemis and the only male deity was Hermes.

In another soft reboot by DC Comics made in 2011 with the creative team comprised of Brian Azzarello and Cliff Chiang, Diana was no longer a clay baby brought to life by the previous deities mentioned, but she actually was the daughter of Zeus and Hyppolita, making her an actual demi-god and she also later would become a full god of war. The story of the baby clay was then used as a cover up story to protect Diana from the wrath of Hera. Brian Azzarello meant for the character to have a special place among the "trinity" of DC Comics, next to Batman the "Human", Superman the "Alien" and Wonder Woman would be the "God". Some people were taken aback by this decision, arguing that giving Wonder Woman a father was anti-feminist.

This version of the origin story is to be considered canon since in the 2017 movie directed by Patty Jenkins, it is heavily implied that she actually was never made of clay as her mother told her, but is in fact the daughter of Zeus and meant to be a weapon powerful enough to kill a god, and in this case the only god to remain alive after a huge war, Ares. The lie was meant to

protect Diana from Ares, should she ever tap into her full divine self and attract the renegade war-god.

But concerning the Amazons in the movie, there are no many details. We can see them emerge from the water, which connects to the shell-inspired motif we see everywhere on their island. We also know about their attributes and their mission which consisted of inspiring the good in humans before they had to be isolated from the outside world for their own protection against the god Ares. One main difference from the comics is that the role of the female deities is almost non-existent as the focus is on Zeus and Ares and even the other male gods are not even named, although we can see a number of the Olympians during the moving painting sequence. One could consider this as a step back in terms of female empowerment, because Athena, Artemis and Aphrodite played a huge role in the comics but it also makes the Amazons as the female counterpart to the male deities, Zeus and Ares. In that way, the Amazons are elevated as the primary immortal female beings, rather than being subjects to the goddesses of Olympus. Nevertheless, the creation of mankind might have been attributed to Zeus alone in the movie, but the creation of the Amazons could be attributed to the female deities, as there is a subtle hint for any of the Olympian goddesses implication in their creation, as Hyppolita tells Diana that "the gods" created the Amazons and not Zeus alone.

This created some controversy among the fans, as they felt betrayed by the riddance of the Olympian goddesses in favor of the male ones, stating that it reduces the female power in the Wonder Woman mythology. Although we could be sympathetic to their complaints, the plot relies heavily on female empowerment, as all the gods are supposedly dead, except Ares, but Diana was surrounded only by women, in a culture which has evolved without any influence from the outside world and from men.

Some of the reactions to Wonder Woman and her background very much reflects misconceptions about feminism. Some define feminism as a complete rejection of any male influence, while others simply militate for equal representation, equal rights and consideration. The latter is the main reason this movie was made. It is undeniable that Wonder Woman is a feminist icon, but does feminism have to entirely exclude the role of male characters in the evolution of the main female protagonist?



## 2) The motivations of the creator :

William Moulton Marston was an American psychologist and inventor and a comic book creator. He thought that comic books had a "great educational potential" as he told his former student Olive Byrne, under the pseudonym "Olive Richard" in an interview published in *The Family Circle*. This caught the attention of Max Gaines, who was a comics publisher and he would hire Marston as an educational consultant for two companies who would merge to form DC Comics. Back then, in the 1940s, comics were dominated by super powered male characters and there were accusations that comics would make boys aggressive.

Marston then recommended a new type of hero who would not conquer with brute force but with love. It was revealed in the Fall 2001 issue of the Boston University alumni magazine that it was Marston's wife, Elizabeth Holloway Marston, who suggested to make that new type of character a woman.

Marston wrote that "Not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength, and power. Not wanting to be girls, they don't want to be tender, submissive, peace-loving as good women are. Women's strong qualities have become despised because of their weakness. The obvious remedy is to create a feminine character with all the strength of Superman plus all the allure of a good and beautiful woman."<sup>33</sup>

What is important here is that the Wonder Woman character, even though her creation was a response to existing male super heroes, is not a spin-off of any male characters. Unlike Supergirl, Batgirl or Catwoman, she is not defined by a male character and stands on her own, which is an aspect that seems to be very appealing for feminists. It is a character which stands for acceptance, compassion and understanding without negating any of her powers and whose message is to use violence as a last resort only. There is a focus on the diplomatic aspect, favoring peaceful means over radical violent behaviors, as it can be the case with male super-heroes. The longevity of the character in comics and in pop culture is a testament of her importance which has been confirmed after the first solo movie was released in June 2017.

We shall now have a look at the importance of this character in regards to the general political and sociological context to understand why this character is so appealing and what role paganism plays in this, since her character is deeply rooted in pagan religions.

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<sup>33</sup> *The American Scholar*, 1943

### **3 ) Importance of the character in contemporary time in relation to the general political and sociological context:**

The cinematic iteration of the character is very much a commentary on our real world societies and how timely the issues surrounding gender are. The character of Diana is depicted as overly naive as she has never been in the outside world before. She was overprotected by her mother who never wanted her to know about her true origins and purpose, but was nevertheless secretly trained by her aunt, the general of the Amazonian army, Antiope. She arrives in the world of Humankind as an optimistic, idealistic and naive person. She might have been surrounded only by women but she genuinely sees men and women as equals.

Through her point of view, we have a reflection of contemporary issue which are very timely even though they are set in the first World War context. We have showings of the bad sides of humanity (and not only from the German side) greatly enhanced by the contrast with Diana's naiveté. For instance, she witnesses people beating a horse to make it move, much to her shock and offering to give an alternative way of doing it only to be stopped dead by her comrades. Right after, she sees a young boy crying out for his mother and then a soldier with a broken leg crying out of pain, to whom she also offers to help only to be told that "there is nothing they can do". The last event which proved too much for her was when a woman with her child in her arms told her that the survivors of her village were enslaved, and that they were lacking food and water. She suggested to her comrades to go and help them only to be told that they cannot save everyone in the war and that it was not "what they came to do" and that they cannot save everyone. This triggered her heroism and against all odds, undressed herself, climbed up the ladder and revealed her Amazonian garb with all her weaponry.

At that point, Diana is still unaware of her full potential but out of compassion, she goes to test her mettle against modern weaponry composed of machine guns and mortars while she's only wielding a shield, a sword, a lasso and a greco-roman inspired leather and metal armor. Her decision to go and interfere in the war is also a call back to the history of the Amazons where her mother, Queen Hyppolita, led the charge to free her people from enslavement.

Gal Gadot, during a promotional interview, described her character as someone who has the "powers of a goddess" but with the "heart of a human", something which is emphasized by Patty Jenkins who says of the character that she is a "god who comes to the world of man" and whose ideals are challenged by the very nature of humankind, their war-torn societies and many societal issues.

What is interesting here, is that we have a heroic character who happens to be female and whose background heavily is tinted with Paganism associated with Feminism and Nature. For instance, on the island of Themyscira, there are hardly any presence of phallic symbols. The inhabited parts of the main city were designed to adapt to the natural environment and the only real phallic building is the tower in which all the "gifts from the gods", mostly special weapons, are kept. It is a building which reminds of war, while wars happened at the time when the Amazons were still in the outside world to bring peace to a corrupted humankind, only to be enslaved later on. The feminism in the design can also be found in the spiral pattern we can find in the throne room which is supposed to remind of the origins of the Amazons, who according to the Wonder Woman mythology, rose out of the water, which is very much a call back to the birth of the goddess Aphrodite who is not explicitly involved in their creation.

While in the outside world, Diana on several occasions destroys phallic symbols. She breaks a gun in her back and shatters a column with her sword. She also parries many bullets and a mortar fired from an armored car which she utterly destroys. It is also important to note that the ultimate phallic weapon that is supposed to be able to kill a god, her godkiller sword, is actually ineffective against Ares as it is completely reduced to ashes at the contact of the god's hand. The extreme feminist message might not have been that explicit but we can easily pinpoint the little details which makes it all the more powerful.

There is a particular sequence which stands out symbolically, it is when she also obliterates a church bell tower only to rise from the debris. There is a very strong symbolism in that particular sequence, because, she is propelled in the air by her male comrades who apply an Amazonian fighting strategy that sends Diana towards a sniper hidden in that church bell tower. For one, it is a very positive depiction of what feminism is supposed to be: Men and Women coming together for the greater good. Finally, Diana rises from the debris, victorious, on the top of a church, which is a christian temple while she is a pagan goddess. She is cheered by the crowd who looks up to her and we have an over the shoulder shot in high angle which gives a godlike perspective as she physically looks down on the people she just saved. From the way the sequence is shot, it almost feels like she symbolically cut down the head of Judeo-Christian patriarchy only to offer an alternative way through her Amazonian teachings and her Olympian parentage (which she is still unaware of at that time).

Interestingly, the godlike perspective from Diana, which hints at her true nature, is shown as soon as the movie starts. The audience is greeted with a voice over from Gadot's character as

we have an establishment shot of a stylized Earth from space before being zoomed in at her in her civilian identity - she has adopted in order to blend in with the humans - at the Louvre, Paris.

The movie *Wonder Woman* might have been made by an American studio, but the saving of the world does not happen from the hands of an American character, not to mention, a male White American character. Wonder Woman is an immigrant from a mystical pagan all female culture. The character of Steve Trevor, even though American, is working for the British intelligence and has Etta Candy as a secretary who is given important tasks and who happens to be a "kick ass" character too. Their comrades are comprised of Sameer, an Arab character who was forced to become a soldier because he was of the wrong colour to be an actor, Charlie, a Scottish sniper who has PTSD and The Chief, a Native American character who is shown as being loved and respected by the soldiers in the trenches who even befriended an American, Steve Trevor, who belongs to the very people who took everything from the Natives, forcing the Chief to become a smuggler.

Thus we have a diverse cast in a movie directed by a woman, Patty Jenkins, starring a female lead actress, Gal Gadot and the screenplay of which was written by an openly gay man, Allan Heinberg who also participated in the writing of the story alongside Zack Snyder and Jason Fuchs.

#### **4 ) A critical and Commercial success:**

The non-American savior in the character of Wonder Woman echoes a quote by Greg Burk from LA Times who writes about the movie *Maleficent* that "The rebranding of Maleficent is perhaps another sign that Americans have grown uncomfortable with their traditional role as idealistic world-savers". Can this really be applied to the movie *Wonder Woman*?. According to the box office results, the movie is very much a success worldwide, but especially domestically speaking. At the time these lines are written, the movie sits at \$ 800,618,061 worldwide, with \$ 404,618,061 domestic in 84 days.<sup>34</sup> As a comparison, the very first *DC Extended Universe* movie, *Man of Steel* made \$ 291,045, 518 domestically at the end of a 14 weeks theatrical run. The follow-up, *Batman V Superman* made \$330,360,194 after 12 weeks and finally *Suicide Squad* made \$325,100,054 at the end of its 14 weeks theatrical run. If we

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<sup>34</sup> "Wonder Woman (2017) - Box Office Mojo." *Boxofficemojo.Com*, Accessed 31. Aug. 2017:

url: <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=wonderwoman.htm>.

are to take these numbers as an indication to the general audience's taste, we can say for sure that the view might no longer be Americano-centric when it comes to saving the world and it also undermines the general consensus in the world of movie making that a female lead movie does not sell.

It is also worth noting that the domestic box office is higher than the international one, which is atypical for a blockbuster, which might be explained by the political context as Donald Trump was elected President, much to the disappointment of those who thought Hillary Clinton would easily win. All the misogynic, racist and homophobic statements he and his fellows have expressed built a certain tense atmosphere, doubled with the resentment that came out of his winning the presidency. Maybe having a female superhero finally make it to the silver screen as a lead and whose portrayal is on the same level as the male superheroes made it particularly successful in the United States. Variety reports that the average superhero movie draws a 62% male audience, and by the third week, *Wonder Woman's* female audience nearly reached parity with the male one. As of July 31st, USA today reported that according to Jeff Block who is a senior box-office analyst, talking about women, *Wonder Woman* proved that 50% to 55% of the marketplace is underserved, and that it was an indication as to what is happening in the political environment.

Where is the place of paganism in this? And how is it impactful in regards to cultural identity?

We could argue that both Paganism and Feminism do benefit from the success of a fictional yet very iconic character since everyone involved in the movie aimed at making the character of *Wonder Woman* universal, thus relatable for everyone. The pagan dimension might be more subtle as it is both implicit and explicit and it is greatly syncretized with Judeo-Christian overtones and themes which will be developed in detail in the part about Syncretism and confusing Amalgam. This movie will also participate in perpetuating the accurate association of Paganism with Feminism, because it is an essential aspect of this belief system and what sets it apart from the Judeo-Christian monotheism.

The stereotypes which accompany paganism in its representation in popular culture are sometimes accurate, sometimes not but they reveal a state of our contemporary world concerning many timely and immediate issues. There is a sense of cultural clash, both geographically and in terms of era which directly impacts the individuals. It also reminds us that the established order of things greatly influenced by Judeo-Christian principles is questioned and Paganism offers itself as a solution which seems to appeal to more and more

people. The impact of Paganism might not be that obvious, but the very fact that a character greatly influenced by figures from one of the most popular classical pagan culture is very telling of the role of paganism as a source for questioning the actual order of things and bringing plausible alternatives in order to better society.

The global reception of the movie has surprised a lot of professionals who did not think that the movie would be so successful and yet it has broken many records and outperformed a huge number of male-led superhero movies. Furthermore, this actually brought more issues surrounding gender equality in the cinematic industry, especially with the emphasis on the fact that it was a movie directed by a woman, Patty Jenkins. The movie also brought more attention on the issue of diversity with its cast. One could argue that this movie is a turning point for the actual status of women in the cinematic industry.

It would be far-fetched to say that paganism has a vital role in this, but its impact is not to be ignored because, although there are Judeo-Christian overtones in the movie, they do evenly match the global pagan imagery and symbolism and the character of Wonder Woman itself cannot be set apart from her pagan origins, as it is an integral part of the character which has made her so impactful and iconic. And this movie is also a continuation of a recent trend to show paganism in a positive way and associated with feminism as we have seen with the couple of previous examples.

Could that switch in the representation be a sign that cultural identity is slowly being redefined?

In the following chapter, we shall have a brief look at paganism and music, as music itself is a good indication of the social and political atmosphere in which it is expressed, but we shall focus on the possible impact on the cultural identity by studying some specific examples which show a certain pattern.

## D) Paganism and Music:

### **How relevant is music in the representation of Paganism?**

As developed earlier on, in popular culture as a whole, Paganism is often associated with mystery with followers living in remote places, very close to Nature. There is also a sense of timelessness or out-of-timeness because the followers have not forsaken the pre-Christian beliefs. This aspect is greatly illustrated by the use of acoustic music and folkloric songs. We will see how this has evolved with a couple of examples taken from several era, from the 70's to our contemporary time.

*The Wicker Man*, Robin Hardy, 1973.

A very good example which shows this parallel between the representation of paganism and how it is illustrated in the soundtrack can be found in the *Wicker Man* movie from 1973. The soundtrack was specifically composed and arranged in order to hint at pre-Christian European pagan culture, with lots of tracks inspired by traditional Scottish, Irish and English folk music characterized by the abundant presence of drones, specific rhythms and instruments such as the tin whistle, acoustic instruments and beautiful yet haunting vocal harmonies. That hint is not so much in the lyrics as there is nothing explicitly pagan in the content except maybe with the *Fire leap* song. It is in the musicality where the pagan hints reside, as intended by the composer. The lyrics were written by Paul Giovanni who also took inspiration in poems by Robert Burns. Let us have a look at a couple of those songs:

"*Gently Johnny*": (0:18:57) The song illustrates a scene in which the character of Ash Buchanan is introduced to the avatar of Aphrodite, Willow McGregor, so that his boyhood can be sacrificed to the deity. The song is played during an acoustic gig by the villagers in the tavern right below Willow's dwelling and as a diegetic sound, it is shown as a moment of communion through music as if it had a particular power to help through the mating of the two characters as the villagers look up towards them while playing the song. The musical ambiance is quiet, slow-tempoed with a ternary rhythmic pattern which suggests sensuality.

We could argue that this aspect is a call-back to the sexual liberation that characterized the 60's and the 70's and associated with paganism, which are here portrayed as deviant things by Neil Howie, the Christian policeman from the outside world. The relationship between paganism and music is centered around the authenticity of the human nature as seen from the pagan perspective with sex not being a taboo and with a different sense of intimacy.

"The Wicker Man ost-gently Johnny", Youtube:

url:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iUjKm\\_nuZQ8&index=3&list=PL7FB01CC5E1DE4358](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iUjKm_nuZQ8&index=3&list=PL7FB01CC5E1DE4358)

"*Fire leap*": (0:38:17) The scene in the movie depicts a very clichéd pagan fertility ritual where naked girls are gathered around a fire, dancing and chanting. The juxtaposition with shots of pregnant women in an orchard in blossom further reinforces the notion of fertility ritual and the association of acoustic music with nature. They are led by a priestess and all of them are surrounded by a circle of monoliths. The melody of the tune is haunting, mysterious although harmoniously arranged with the voices and the flutes.

"The Wicker Man ost-fire leap", Youtube:

url:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=glgIXsjBntM&index=5&list=PL7FB01CC5E1DE4358>

"Chop Chop": (1:13:49) That scene is also a supposedly pagan ritual where people are symbolically beheaded. The tune is very Scottish as the pipe is the main instrument, easily recognizable with its particular sound and the drone.

"The Wicker Man ost-chop chop", Youtube:

url:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T5h-AkIFyAQ&index=9&list=PL7FB01CC5E1DE4358>

In the following example taken from the movie *Pay the Ghost* released in 2015 we have dealt with earlier on, we can notice that it is indeed a recurring and consistent pattern to associate paganism with that type of music:

"The Portal Song - Pay The Ghost Soundtrack Preview (Official Video)", Youtube:

url: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hHV9CfaeygU>

"The Portal Song" which is sung in Gaelic by a children's chorus is played during a scene in the third act where the protagonists go to a pagan celebration for some information about a mystical symbol. The composer Joseph LoDuca explained that the film needed a song that felt pagan, yet plausible for the setting of a neighborhood park in New York City on Halloween<sup>35</sup>. Thus we

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<sup>35</sup> "Joseph Loduca's 'Pay The Ghost' Score To Be Released." *Bloody Disgusting!*, Accessed 31. Aug. 2017,



notice this explicit intention to reference paganism with the use of music, in a movie which is not particularly friendly towards paganism and not really accurate either in its portrayal.

From these examples, we can see that there is a tendency to associate and reduce paganism to a folklore, both in the stereotypes in terms of supposedly pagan rituals but also in the exclusive use of acoustic folk songs. This could be interpreted in many ways among which we can argue that paganism is an integral aspect of the cultural identity which is more or less accepted and recognized as such. But when one listens to Irish, Scottish or English folk songs, it is not the Judeo-Christian imagery which necessarily comes to mind, but it is the landscape, the folklore, the myths and legends which have been greatly popularized by many successful movies and TV series which in turn have altered the perception on paganism.

Let us now focus on a very iconic character who made her first cinematic debut in March 2016, in a super-hero movie based on characters from DC comics, Wonder Woman, which embodies many aspects we have studied in regards to Paganism.

As we have mentioned earlier, Wonder Woman has had her first live appearance in *Batman V Superman* released in March 2016 before the solo *Wonder Woman* movie was released a year later. Even though she only had an extended cameo in her first cinematic entrance, she made a huge impact especially in terms of female representation. It is not only her character as such which had a big impact, but her entrance was accompanied by a musical theme which is very popular now, composed by Hans Zimmer entitled "Is She With you":

"OFFICIAL - Is She With You? - Batman v Superman Soundtrack - Hans Zimmer & Junkie XL", Youtube:

url: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S176AKQhcCk>

The main riff, often mistaken for an electric guitar, is played on an electric cello by artist Tina Guo. The theme is characterized by a sense of tribal flavour with the heavy beats on various drums which brings the audience onto a battlefield while the electric cello riffs could remind of a banshee cry as intended by Hans Zimmer<sup>36</sup>. What is interesting here is that the modern Wonder Woman musical theme is far from the one most people know about which originated from the 70's TV show. The 70's musical them was drastically different and much more in tune with the taste of the time: disco music. In the modern theme, there is a blend of

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Url: <http://bloody-disgusting.com/news/3358372/joseph-loducas-pay-ghost-score-released-september/>.

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iuc7zVsy5N4&t=85s>, around 4:46

modernity as illustrated with the heavy beats and saturated guitars but there is also some folklorish hints with the presence of the electric cello and the melody which has some oriental tints to it. It can easily be perceived on the slowed version of the theme we can hear at around 1:40' on this following link:

"Batman v Superman - Meta Human Scene | Wonder Women / The Flash / AquaMan / Cyborg", Youtube:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ItMcSNYWFu8>

We have seen earlier on with the example of the *Wicker Man* that when music is associated with paganism, it tends to be acoustic and very folkloric. But in that case, the pagans are really cut off from the outside world whereas in this case, Wonder Woman is a pagan character that comes indeed from a remote island, but who has been living among humankind. In the movie's universe, she is an immortal Amazon who has been in the world of humankind for a century, since 1918. It does make sense indeed that her theme would illustrate this blend of folk and contemporary and heavily orchestrated soundtrack.

We also mentioned that Hans Zimmer wanted to find a way to reproduce musically the cry of a banshee, who is a female spirit in Irish mythology. Interestingly in some tales, the battle goddess Morrigan is considered to be the first banshee. Thus, we find ourselves with a melting pot of several pagan mythologies applied to a fictional character, both in her imagery and her musical theme.

It is also worth noting that folk music is closely tied to paganism firstly in the sense that it brings music to its original, authentic roots, with the use of acoustic instruments and emphasis on the rhythmic beats and focus on the vocal harmonies, far from the computer-generated sounds from today. Gary Parsons seems to imply that there is a correlation between the peak of popularity of paganism and the rise of popularity of folk music as it was coming back again with bands like The Incredible String Band who were forming communes, getting people back into nature<sup>37</sup>, reminding that Witchcraft (and by extension, Paganism) is intrinsically linked with nature.

Is it the case for the current revitalization of paganism?

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<sup>37</sup> Anna Caffola

Taking the example of Joseph LoDuca's "The Portal Song", it seems like the pattern is still relevant today but we can notice a sort of musical syncretism with the example of the modern Wonder Woman theme where the modernity in the sound is mixed with a flavor of the old times, even if it is only in a hint. But it was indeed in the intention of the Zimmer's to associate the Wonder Woman theme to a pagan supernatural being, the Banshee, who was indeed closely tied to the goddess Morrigan.

Music is indicative of the social and political context overall as we have seen with the advent of many "alternative" musical genres in response to particular historical, social and political events. It would require a much more ambitious work to give a definitive answer, but in the case of Paganism, we may also say that it is indicative of the nature of modern paganism. It calls back to the roots. There is a sense of authenticity with acoustic instrument, because they do not depend on electricity to work. It is that sense of authenticity which is said to be found in ethnic religions, but are the foundations of that authenticity really solid when we do know that most of our knowledge of the pagan past is reconstructed and based on pieces of information which are in part of speculative origins?

It seems like it is not such an issue for modern pagans as the reconstructed aspect is acknowledged, and there is a will to make something new out of something old, thus resulting in another layer of blending which somehow betrays the search for authenticity. We could argue that this blending in regards to paganism can be categorized in two particular notions, syncretism and confusing amalgam, which are commonly used in popular culture.

#### **IV. Syncretism and Confusing Amalgam**

Pagan religions are already syncretic in themselves because of the cultural exchanges between peoples. We can find many similarities between the many branches of paganism, mainly due to the Indo-European nature of these cultures. Nevertheless, with the coming of Judeo-Christian monotheism, paganism lost ground yet many elements have been adapted to the victorious monotheist faiths. As a result, most of Judeo-Christian rituals or festivities are syncretic in nature, having absorbed aspects of pagan festivities.

Some of the pagan gods themselves have been assimilated with Judeo-Christian figures. Jesus himself has many traits of previous deities such as Mithras, Dionysus or Horus for example and his mythology has many similarities with previous ones. Tom Harpur in "The Pagan Christ" indeed states that many pagan cultures from different places and in different eras shared some symbolic themes like virgin births, divine parentage, resurrection, descent into the underworld and so on. He also claims that almost everything attributed to Jesus in the Bible actually originated thousands of years before.

Furthermore, most of the pagan gods, when they were not vilified as evil spirits, lost their godhood and became saints, as it was the case for the goddess Brigid who became Saint Brigid. She kept most of her attributes, but was Christianized. On the other hand, when they ended up vilified, some other gods were assimilated demons in the Christian meaning of the word. It was a way to conquer and defeat the old religions by either downgrading the deities into saints or actually perverting the nature of those old gods by saying that they exist indeed, but they are nothing but (bad) demons in disguise. Language is maybe one of the best examples of syncretism and amalgam when dealing with paganism.

We shall make a clear distinction between syncretism and amalgam, these words might share the same meaning but connotation is what sets them apart.

On the Oxford online dictionary, *syncretism* is defined as "the amalgamation or attempted amalgamation of different religions, cultures, or schools of thought" while *amalgam* simply means "a mixture or blend". Nevertheless in French, when used in a figurative way, amalgam has a negative connotation. It consists of an abusive association of people or ideas. For example, when there are terrorist attacks initiated by Islamic extremists, the population is urged not to associate all Muslims with them. When it comes to Paganism and its representation, we can notice a trend of negative association of Paganism with Devil worship,

which is a remnant of the time when it lost ground and was subject to vilification from some of the harshest Christian leaders, whose goal was to impose the new faith and eradicate all things pagan.

Before going into the specifics, we shall take some time to reflect upon the phenomenon when it happens in language with two examples, the word *demon* and the figure of the *elf*.

### **A. Language as an incarnation of syncretism and amalgam:**

#### **1) The word demon:**

Syncretism and amalgam are the direct results of different cultures colliding. We can take relevant examples in language with for example a word which is directly taken from the pagan world and the meaning of which has evolved with the decline of paganism and the rise of the Judeo-Christian traditions. It is the word "demon" the meaning of which has evolved from designating beings from the divine sphere down to designating evil spirits in the Judeo-Christian traditions. Nowadays, both definitions still apply but with a different spelling, *daemon* for the "pagan" notion and "demon" for the Judeo-Christian one. Yet, there is no difference when the word is uttered and for the common people, a demon is just an evil spirit and it is greatly spread by the popular culture in the horror genre.

The word *demon* is one among many examples of how cultural mix can alter the definition of a word and the essence of notions especially when it comes to important cultural phenomena such as religions. In this case, the meaning of words does reflect the current cultural state and which culture has the upper hand over the other.

According to the *Oxford dictionaries website*, a *demon* is first described as "an evil spirit or devil, especially one thought to possess a person or act as a tormentor in hell" then as "a cruel, evil, or unmanageable person" ; "a powerful, often destructive compulsion or obsession" and finally "something very insidious and harmful". These definitions have very negative connotations, nevertheless it is mentioned that the spelling "demon" is the modern form of the archaic "*daemon*" which was in use up to the 16th century. The notion of "*daemon*" designates a being which is, in ancient Greek belief, a "divinity or supernatural being of a nature between gods and humans or an inner or attendant spirit or inspiring force".

The history of the notion of *daemon* is quite complex but to summarize a section of the *Dictionary of The History of Ideas* from the *University of Virginia Library* online website, *Demonology*, written by Helen P. Trimpi, it was a word which was first more or less an

equivalent to the notion of deity in ancient Greece. Then this notion gradually lost its meaning as an equivalent to deity but more as an equivalent to the notion of "angels" before finally being reduced to designate only evil beings with the Judeo-Christian influence. Indeed, in Alexandria, a translation of the Old Testament was made to the Greek-speaking Jews, and the word *angeloi* (messengers) was used to translate the word "ma'lak" which designates beings we call nowadays "angels" while the word "daimon" was used to designate the equivalent of the Hebrew word for idols, foreign gods, certain beasts and natural evils. Later, the use of "daimon" in the New Testament's Greek text caused the Greek word to be applied to the Judeo-Christian concept of evil spirit and this meaning has lived up to our contemporary time. These changes also impacted the ancient gods, some of whom were gradually downgraded to the state of "demons" in its Judeo-Christian meaning while others just became saints. This reinforced the domination of the "new belief system" whose influence was felt down to the very essence and meaning of a simple word which participated in helping the establishment of the new faith on every cultural level from then on.

Thus, in the case of the notion of "demon", even though the original meaning is still acknowledged, it is the Judeo-Christian one which has lived on. The same reflection could be made on many other pagan notions and symbols, such as the Swastika which is originally a holy symbol used in Buddhism and Hinduism for example, but it is widely known and accepted as a taboo symbol of the Nazis.

## **2) The figure of the elf:**

The figure of the elf is also one of those perfect examples that show how some of the pagan elements have lost more and more of their essence through linguistic evolution but also through the various representations in popular culture.

Elves are originally a type of deity just like the demons or should we write "daemons". In Old Norse mythology, they were counted among the pagan gods as minor fertility gods. The divine nature of the elves is linguistically justified, as demonstrated by scholars<sup>38</sup> who found that elves are frequently mentioned in the alliterating formulaic collocation *Æsir ok Álfar* ('Æsir and elves') thus suggesting a strong tradition of associating elves with the *Æsir*, who is the principal type of deity in Norse paganism. We even get to learn that sometimes

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<sup>38</sup> Alaric Timothy Peter Hall,. "The Meanings Of Elf And Elves In Medieval England." Department Of English Language, University Of Glasgow, 2004.

there is no clear distinction between the two groups, which shows that at least on a linguistic level, the Elves were just considered as a certain type of deity.

Nevertheless, these types of supernatural beings gradually lost their divine attributes and were finally downgraded to just a superior race of immortal beings, greatly popularized by folklore stories and most recent movies with the Lord of the Rings franchise or even popular video games. A fantasy race of beings who almost completely lost their original status as deities of nature.

We shall have a look at a particularly successful movie franchise inspired by the works of Tolkien's, *Lord of the Rings* and the spin-offs with the *Hobbit*.

In the *Lord of the Rings* lore, the Elves are a creation of Eru, the supreme deity. They are presented as a race of virtually immortal beings with unusual beautiful physical features, almost androgynous in appearance and the only thing which is supposed to tell a male Elf from a female one is the reproductive apparel. They are closely associated with the Ainur, which is a race of godly beings second only the Eru, as they possess various supernatural abilities and are able to create mystical weapons.

They might be considered as superior beings, but we are far from their original godly status as Tolkien's theology is mostly based upon Judeo-Christian mythology even though it is somehow left for interpretation as the word "god" or "deity" could be understood as generic terms to designate beings with a certain amount of power of creation. For instance, the Ainur are considered as "angelic beings", but they do hold godlike attributes in the fact that they hold power over specific domains, just like the pagan gods are traditionally depicted.

As we have just demonstrated, the evolution of the meaning of the notions of d(a)emons and elves is not only shown on a linguistic level but it is also shown in the way the beings designated by these notions have been portrayed throughout time, especially in popular culture. This evolution shows a process of symbiosis which is triggered by cultural blending, resulting in syncretic figures, just like it was the case for some deities in antiquity, like the greco-roman gods who have been assimilated with gods from other cultures like the Celts or the Egyptians. Interestingly, they have also been assimilated with Judeo-Christian figures, mostly in the way the saints hold power over specific domains like the pagan gods. Nevertheless, it is mostly detrimental to paganism as we have seen with the examples of the

demons and elves, with an important portion of the pagan theology having been diminished through vilification, and vulgarization of some elements.

We can witness that process of syncretism and confusing amalgam in popular culture, as it is a very impactful medium due to its very nature.

### **B) Syncretism and Confusing Amalgam in popular culture:**

We can see indeed the remnant of this long tradition of syncretism and amalgam in popular culture and it is especially the case when pagan deities are used. As we will see in detail further down, there is a tendency to apply Judeo-Christian characteristics to pagan gods. It is quite obvious in some of the most recent blockbuster movies such as the remake of *The Clash of the Titans* and its sequel, where the god Hades is presented to be a Lucifer-like figure, just like in the Disney movie *Hercules*.

We can also find that gods are assimilated with bad demons, in the Judeo-Christian sense, like the Babylonian deity Pazuzu, heavily featured as the main antagonist in the *Exorcist* franchise. Another creature is said to be a Babylonian god in the *Sinister* franchise, Bughuul, but it is a god which acts like a regular Judeo-Christian demon and it is a god which does not exist in the real world Babylonian mythology. Furthermore, the gods can also be portrayed as having a sort of vampiric behaviour since they are often shown as needing the energy produced by their worshippers through their prayers or rituals. And some other times, the monstrous aspect is even more stretched as they need to feed off the flesh of their worshippers or any specific parts of their worshippers' body which symbolize qualities dear to the deities.

Studying the concepts of syncretism and confusing amalgam applied to the representation of paganism in popular culture will eventually point out the problems in the search for authenticity which motivate a large number of pagans. It is of some importance especially if we are to deal with the impact of Paganism on the cultural identity. As we have seen earlier indeed, paganism is syncretic in nature as there is a long tradition of assimilating alien deities with the local pantheon. In the British Isles for example, many Roman gods have been assimilated with local deities thus resulting in syncretic deities who are tinted with both cultures. The very fact that the days of the week are named after pagan gods, and that pagan gods serve as models for allegories of nations and that most of the Christian celebrations have



replaced the pagan ones and yet still bear some pagan elements shows that there is still some interest in the pagan past and that it has its importance in the cultural identity.

We very much live in a syncretic world which can be tricky when we have to deal with the notion of cultural identity especially when we look at the pagan aspect.

### **1) Judeo-Christian Overtones: A Syncretic portrayal**

It is no secret that much liberty is taken when ancient myths are used in popular culture. The early movies which adapted myths to the silver screen were somewhat respectful of the material, even when mythologies were mixed like in the original *Clash of the Titans* where the big monster is called a Kraken, which comes from the Nordic traditions, while in the Greek myths, the monster was Cetus. Nevertheless, the gods were still Greek gods and there was not any apparent Judeo-Christian overtones unlike in some modern adaptations of those myths.

When the gods are used indeed, there is a particular focus on the male ones, often Zeus and Hades when it is about Greek myths. In the Disney movie *Hercules*, Hades is a villain and is shown as a devil-like character while Zeus is the good great all father. It mostly is a Christian interpretation of pagan deities. Hades was never a villain in the Greek myths. He was not necessarily all benevolent and just like any other gods, he is multi-faceted but he was never the Devil he is portrayed to be in most cinematic adaptations.

It is all the more obvious in the remake of *Clash of the Titans* by Louis Deterrier. While all the Olympian gods appear onscreen indeed, only the male ones have the most lines and then again, Hades is portrayed as a villainous god gone rogue who has been tricked into ruling the Underworld and who seeks to overthrow his celestial brother. The fallen angel concept is also applied to another god in the sequel *Wrath of the Titans* when Hephaestus is thrown out of Olympus for defending Hades, thus stripping him of his godly powers.

In *The Chronicles of Narnia* franchise, we can see another case of pagano-Christian syncretism in which there are various creatures from Greek myths, with Fauns, nymphs, sirens, etc... but they all seem to be the subjects of the lion Aslan that most of the critics found to be a representation for Jesus. In this case, the pagan creatures are subordinate to a Christian allegory in the character of Aslan, the lion, thus diminishing the importance of these pagan elements but without necessarily vilifying paganism. This statement can be backed by

C.S. Lewis<sup>39</sup> who himself "believed that pagan mythology could act as a preparation for Christianity, both in history and in the imaginative life of an individual, and even suggested that modern man was in such a lamentable state that perhaps it was necessary "first to make people good pagans, and after that to make them Christian."

Nevertheless, it is not so much about the rejection of paganism, but it is more about paganism being a gateway to adopting Christianity, and thus, paganism is not shown as a bad belief system although it is seen as something inferior. In the movie adaptation of the books, there is not any mention of "paganism" as such, as the supernatural creatures' existence, some of which are heavily inspired by Greek and Celtic Mythologies, are taken for granted and there are no theological debate. We could argue that once again, pagan elements are used in order to serve a narrative agenda and thus, it somehow undermines the essence of what paganism really is.

The most recent Judeo-Christian overtones applied to a pagan myth can be found in the very first Wonder Woman cinematic adaptation. Although the history of her people is based upon an interpretation of the Greek mythology and its gods there are Judeo-Christian overtones in the narration. The origin story of the Amazons is told by both the Queen Hippolyta and her sister, Antiope, and it is illustrated by a very stylized visual which consists of moving paintings in an Italian Renaissance style. This can easily be recognized by the Western audience who is reminded of the many religious imagery which spawned from paintings such as *The Fall of Phaeton* by Peter Raul Rubens, *The Triumph of Neptune* by Nicolas Poussin or Luca Giordano's *Fall of the Rebel Angels*.

These Judeo-Christian overtones are not so subtle as for example Hippolyta tells Diana that Zeus created man "in his image" and that "at first, things were good", which is reminiscent of the book of Genesis. During the animated paintings, there is a shot of Zeus who is generating light from his hands as he creates human kind, which is an imagery popularized by Michaelangelo. The corruption of mankind at the hand of Ares is reminiscent to the fall of Man, initiated in the Christian tradition by Satan, who lured Adam and Eve into eating the forbidden fruit.

Although we have a connection between the pagan Greek gods and the Judeo-Christian mythology, we end up seeing Ares which confirms the creation story told by Hyppolita in the

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<sup>39</sup> Moynihan, Martin. *The Latin Letters Of C.S. Lewis To Don Giovanni Calabria Of Verona And To Members Of His Congregation, 1947 To 1961*. Longmont, Colo., Bookmakers Guild, 1987

DC cinematic universe. A cinematic universe in which other characters like Superman, Batman, the Flash and Aquaman exist.

The story of the gods is very much similar to that of the *Wrath of the Titans* in the sense that in both movies, all the other gods are killed by Ares and both have Judeo-Christian overtones in the narration and style. Nevertheless, in the DC cinematic universe, Christianity does exist and it could be understood as the Christian interpretation of the creation story where Zeus becomes the Christian god under the name God or Yahweh, Ares becomes the Devil and the home of the gods becomes Heaven.

One could also argue that the very message of Love Wonder Woman spreads and defends can be interpreted as a Christian principle, but it has more to do with the actual origin of the character who was closely tied to the goddess of Love Aphrodite, of whom she could be seen as the modern incarnation or maybe the successor since her full powers were activated upon realizing the potential for good humanity has, thus rendering her immune to the powers of Ares.

We could wonder why the filmmakers would find it necessary to apply Judeo-Christian overtones to pagan myths, maybe it is a matter of identification for the common audience, but at the end, it could be seen as Paganism getting back what was stolen from it by claiming back some spotlight, especially with an icon such as Wonder Woman, whose cultural impact is not to be ignored. We thus end up with a syncretic world, taking the best of both mythologies to create a modern myth which can be relatable for the modern audience.

## **2) Confusing amalgam**

As we briefly mentioned earlier, there is also a confusing amalgam when it comes to the representation of paganism, especially when used in horror movies. A confusing amalgam which perpetuates the misconceptions about paganism. These misconceptions have been quite popular in the late 60's and 70's with the folk horror movement which were only a reflection of the social and political context of the time where a vision of the world failed to be realized and crumbled down, losing to a conservative perspective on society. The confusing amalgam of Paganism with devil worship endured for quite a long time before a period of Pagan Renaissance in some of the most recent movies and Tv shows where we can notice a shift.

It could be seen as a continuation of the Posidonian tradition which depicted paganism as a religion of blood-thirsty savages. In popular culture, it mostly translates in the association of

paganism with blood related rituals, dark and violent symbolism. When it comes to the pagan theology itself, most of the time the gods and any other supernatural creatures akin to pagan gods are associated with devil worship. The Exorcist movie franchise has greatly participated in perpetuating this aspect by using an originally Sumerian pagan deity as the villain, Pazuzu but vilifying him as a demon from Judeo-Christian mythology. Paganism is explicitly mentioned as being of evil nature, as a church was purposely built upon a pagan temple honoring Pazuzu in order to seal the evil away. That deity is indeed ambivalent in nature because although he can be considered as an evil deity -he was said to bring famine during dry times and locust during rainy seasons- he was also summoned for protection as he was believed to protect the humans from misfortunes and plagues by scaring away evil spirits. It is only partially accurate to portray that deity as evil, but the explicit choice of portraying Pazuzu as only evil is a testament to the loss in regards to the culture in which he belongs, to finally be absorbed into Christian mythology.

At best, the gods need the energy created by the power of prayer from the mortals, like in the *Clash of the Titans* remake. In a deleted scene, during the council of the gods, Aphrodite tells the other gods that the love of the mortals feeds them and Athena informs the gods that the mortals have found a way to hurt them by cutting off the sources of their powers: their worship. The lack of "mortal love" for the gods would eventually render them powerless and mortal. The only god left alive in the franchise is Hades, but with all his power spent when he participated in defeating Cronos who eventually killed Zeus.

At worst, the gods need to feed off the energy produced by human sacrifice or just to feed off human flesh itself like it is the case in the *Supernatural* TV show. For instance, the pagan god Vesta is shown as having to eat liver, because it is supposedly the healthiest part of humans and as she is no longer revered as a goddess of chastity, she takes matter in her own hands by joining a church of born again people who are purified by their vow of chastity. The goddess Veritas would appear to people who summon her, asking for truth to be revealed, then she would curse them to hear unsettling truths and they would eventually die as if they were sacrificed. Finally she would feast on their remains. As mentioned earlier, the character of Bo in *Lost Girl* is the daughter of a god-like fae, Hades, who needs to feed on life energy to survive and be strong.

As such, the pagan gods are akin to vampire, which have been a very popular type of supernatural beings with the difference that vampire first were mortal humans before being cursed in some way into having to feed off human blood in order to live. In both cases, it is the life force of humans which is at the center of attention, whether it be from psychic origin through prayers or from an organic source, like human flesh or blood.

What it reveals is that both the figures of the pagan gods and that of the vampire have joined courses in popular culture, thus enforcing the idea that the Posidonian version of paganism still holds some water incarnated in the cinematic and TV media and could be seen as one of the fictional manifestations of the conservative perspective on the society as paganism is greatly associated with progressive principles. Furthermore, reducing paganism to its folkloric aspect cuts it from the mainstream culture as the awareness of its existence is acknowledged but it is set as an example not to follow. We could argue that it is a manifestation of the tension between the collective and the individual as visions of the world are colliding and the recurring pattern of the revitalization of paganism is indeed closely tied to societal issues.

The confusing amalgam which surrounds the representation of paganism somehow shows the downside of cultural blending as it comes with a sense of loss as illustrated with the pagan gods and the assimilation with lower supernatural beings. As we have seen, this resulted in the paganism being assimilated with devil worship and types of deities losing their godly status overtime, up to being almost completely absorbed in popular supernatural evil figures like the vampire or underwent a process of humanization.

But on the other hand, when Judeo-Christian overtones are interwoven in pagan-themed story, it could either be seen as a way of diminishing paganism or a way to elevate it at the same level. Thus, we end up with a syncretic approach to paganism and it could be seen as a continuation of Pagano-Christianity which acknowledges the pagan roots of Christianity. This particular approach seems to have lived on up until now, if we are to take into account how Judeo-Christian overtones are used with paganism in popular culture. This is an important matter when we have to deal with the sense of authenticity which seems so dear to a great number of pagan followers who want to embrace the pre-Christian cultures and religion.

To what extent can the cultural identity be authentic by embracing paganism, as paganism itself is already syncretic in nature? We also need to take into account the fact that the vast majority of modern paganisms are mostly reconstructed paganisms and thus the authenticity cannot be found in the modern form. Some would argue that it is a made-up kind of

authenticity of a dignified past based on speculations, but the very same thing could be said about the Posidonian approach to paganism because of the reliability of the first Christians whose role was to spread the new faith by all means necessary.

This part is particular to Anglo-Saxon paganism mostly because of the oral tradition, unlike ancient Greek paganism the records of which are way more explicit. But archaeological and historical research tend to prove the very syncretic nature of Greek paganism itself in the study of the gods, which would for example explain the many wives of Zeus or the many epithets these gods have, which could be a remnant of other deities who have been assimilated with the gods' conquerors.

## **Conclusion:**

Studies have shown that our knowledge of pre-Christian religions was mostly based on recollection from the early Christian founding fathers whose agenda was to spread Christianity. This caught the attention of some scholars who were quick to question the very accuracy and reliability of some of the negative depictions of paganism by pointing out the weaknesses in the empirical processes used by these Christian founding fathers. This reassessment was triggered by some scholars who have analyzed and compared information in order to have a more objective perspective on the matter. Some of those data, the most negative ones, have lived on through the centuries and have participated in perpetuating the negative representations of paganism as featured in popular culture that we categorized as a Posidonian tradition in opposite to the Alexandrian one.

Nevertheless, the revitalization of pre-Christian spiritualities and religions as a global phenomenon has been noticed and it seems to go hand in hand with issues concerning women's rights, LGBTQ rights and environmental concerns. This was greatly reflected in popular culture with some successful movies and Tv Series which offer a huge exposure to the audience which in turn raised awareness, explicitly or implicitly, in paganism.

We have also demonstrated how paganism could be seen as a counter-culture to the established Judeo-Christian world by pointing out these issues which marginalized a portion of the population, and thus, impacting the very definition of the cultural identity through the pagan perspective.

As shown by the peak of interest in paganism from the 60s onward, motivated by a certain defiance in the established order of things, the liberation of sexuality, the awareness of environmental issues and the need for new kinds of spiritualities, the representation of paganism in popular culture always reflected the political and social context whether it be in the rejection by the conservative part of the society or the honest interest in aspects of ethnic religions which gave alternative ways of seeing the world which appealed in a way their disillusion. As demonstrated all along, the revitalization of paganism often coincided with fights for equality, whether it be gender equality, LGBTQ+ recognition or environmental issues.

As paganism gained more and more popularity and media coverage, with a great number of countries recognizing their ethnic religions as official religions, it also started to be reflected

in popular culture with a growing number of movies and TV shows which mention and feature aspects of paganism, even though not all portrayals are positive. It shows that the cultural landscape has evolved and that the audience accepts the existence of paganism as a possible alternative to the dominating monotheistic religions which face resistance and rejection from a growing number of people.

This does not mean that the general audience has adopted and fully accepted paganism but it shows that paganism has participated in the awareness of these issues and also has eventually contributed to making them a part of the culture as a whole, as attested by the success of some of the most recent movies and TV shows which feature heavily paganism.

Nevertheless in regards to the cultural identity it has also been pointed out that there is a problem with the definition of authenticity which is dear to a huge portion of modern pagans, because of the very nature of paganism. Syncretism and confusing amalgam have shown that our societies have evolved embracing the many influences which helped shape it, with syncretism allowing for a more progressive outbreak while confusing amalgam tends to nurture the conservative perspective on the society. But there was eventually some loss on both sides when it comes to paganism. Thus, the use of paganism is indeed testament to the evolution of society and the ambivalent relationship with the past.

The impact of paganism on the Anglo-Saxon cultural identity is undeniable because of the very history of its evolution. The media coverage grows wider as the recognition on a national level strengthens and in return, it brings more awareness when adapted to the screens and appears as an alternative to people who do not find their answers in the mainstream culture. Nevertheless, the role of paganism is ambivalent as it is considered as an alternative, a counter-culture, somewhat marginalized, but it is more and more featured in the mainstream culture, just as societal issues we have previously mentioned are getting more and more awareness and have started to reshape the cultural landscape starting with the cinematic universe and the push from studios to make female centered movies, especially in super-hero movies as we have seen with the example of *Wonder Woman* from DC Comics and WarnerBros.



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