Mode Of Submission: Extended Essay

"Illuminating an Audiences terror based on Aesthetic Impact."

Exploring the use of contrast lighting in the genre of 'Day Light Horror' through a

comparative analysis of "The Wicker Man"(1971) and "The Witch"(2015)

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<u>Synopsis</u>

This essay examines the pivotal role of lighting in horror films, specifically focusing on the sub-genre of daylight horror and how darkness and light influence audience perception and emotional engagement through a comparative analysis of The Wicker Man(1971) and The Witch (2015). In this essay, I examine how harsh naturalistic lighting can confront audiences with horror in its unfiltered form as opposed to concealing fear in the dark, hence heightening emotional engagement and creating an unsettling atmosphere.

By analyzing the intentional use of lighting techniques in both films, the essay reveals how daylight, typically associated with safety, is manipulated to evoke discomfort and challenge viewer expectations; as well as looking the thematic depth of each film, illustrating how lighting serves not only as a technical element but also as a narrative force that magnifies the psychological impact of the stories. Ultimately, the essay posits that the lighting strategies employed in these films create a haunting experience that lingers with audiences long after the credits roll, leaving them with a lingering sense of unease.

Introduction

Lighting is one of the most powerful elements within visual storytelling, from ethereal moonlit landscapes to pitch-black silhouettes, lighting is one of the most potent storytelling devices a filmmaker has in conveying mood and feeling and shaping how we interpret what we see on screen. Over the last century, countless films from a wide range of genres, countries, and budgets have entered the cinematic world. According to cinematographer Eric Koretz, " Lighting is everything really. With lighting, you're creating the look of the movie" Kortez. E (2023). Lightness, darkness, hue, and saturation work together and may turn a passing series of frames into something unique and meaningful to its target audience, however no genre of cinema exploits these effects more directly than horror; "Horror presupposes a *threat*, building tension with its promise that something hideous will occur, and there is no escape." Sipos. T.M (2010)

Traditionally, horror works in darkness to elicit terror;"Fear of the dark is a nearly universal neurosis — it's why small children plead for a nightlight at bedtime, and why even level-headed grownups might hesitate to descend an unlit staircase."Pizello, S. (2023). Daylight horror, however, instils a different kind of fear. By using this bright, natural light, there is an implied sense that something nefarious or untoward exists under the surface, this sub-genre has one common theme: daylight is only sometimes safe. By examining these aspects, we can understand how visual component manipulation in daylight horror generates terror, revealing a memorable form of fear that persists within plain sight.

This exploration identifies two Folk horror films from different decades and directors dealing with the concept of "daylight" to draw attention to how opposing visual aesthetics can 'trip' or enhance each title's narrative. Folk horror is renowned for its ability to evoke unease through idyllic yet unsettling rural settings; as Mofardin (2024) states,"This genre (*Folk Horror)* is particularly interesting because of its depiction of contrasting themes, such as the tension between the old and the new, the urban and rural spaces, and the contrast between nature's beauty and human corruption."

Both *The Wicker Man* (1971) and *The Witch* (2015) effectively illustrate the power of daylight to heighten terror and discomfort, securing them a place in daylight horror royalty. This paper attempts to reveal how lighting enhances narrative, character, and audience engagement by analysing intentional stylistic decisions made by the filmmakers with different forms of lighting that keep viewers at the edge of their seats or cowering behind their hands in fear of what is lurking behind them.

1.Conceptual Framework

The purpose of a horror movie is to evoke fear and uneasiness in its audience. It often mirrors fundamental human anxieties by exploring dark themes of the supernatural, the monstrous, or the unknown. Horror films use a number of different techniques, including structure, sound, and visual elements like lighting and frame, to create suspense and force powerful emotions on it's audience that stay with us even once the film has finished. The genre has continuously changed from the first gothic horror to the most recent psychological thrillers to reflect societal changes and technological advances. However, because the horror genre sometimes combines science fiction, fantasy, and thriller elements, it is famously hard to define. "Horror cinema is a hugely successful, but at the same time culturally illicit genre that spans the history of cinema. It continues to flourish with recent cycles of supernatural horror and torture porn that span the full range of horror styles and aesthetics. It is enjoyed by audiences everywhere, but also seen as a malign influence by others."Cherry, B., 2009

The emergence of postmodern horror, which purposefully blurs the lines between conventional genres, makes this problem even more difficult to understand. As film scholar Isabel Cristina Pinedo notes, "The boundaries of any genre are slippery, but those of the postmodern horror film are particularly treacherous to negotiate since one of the defining features of postmodernism is the aggressive blurring of boundaries."Characteristics of postmodern horror include self-referentiality, irony, and the subversion of conventions that make it problematic to classify within expectations of what a horror film can theoretically entail.

The many shades of horror are only a testament to the malleability and timelessness of the genre, ever ready to constantly reinvent itself to deal with new fears in new societies.

Lighting has always played an essential role in shaping the aesthetics and emotions of not only horror cinema, but every motion picture genre, with a variety of different techniques being developed and favoured over the past century. As Swarnakar, M.S observes,"The lighting used in films and TV shows may significantly affect how a story is portrayed. Utilising a mix of vintage and contemporary lighting techniques to create distinctive visual effects is another emerging trend in cinema lighting techniques."This highlights the evolving nature of cinematic lighting, blending traditional methods with modern innovations to craft unique atmospheres that shape audience perception and emotional engagement.

 Low-key lighting, generally in high contrast with dark shadows and little light, has traditionally been used in horror films. It highlights the unknown, covering large chunks of the frame and using primal fear, making us, as viewers, terrified of what lurks in the shadows. This technique is heavily focused in classic horror films such as; *Nosferatu* (1922) and; *Psycho* (1960). Raymond Durgnat's essay, "A Long Hard Look at 'Psycho," Durgnat. R (2002) is an extensive analysis of Alfred Hitchcock's landmark film with particular attention to the contrasts in lighting. Originally published in Film Quarterly1962, this essay explores how different lighting styles help to create psychological intensity and depth of meaning within the

film. Durgnat begins his analysis by discussing Hitchcock's adept manipulation of light to create a deep sense of fear and discomfort. He explores the interplay of light and dark, singling out vital sequential moments like the iconic yet shocking murder of Marion Crane in the shower. According to Durgnat, the high-contrast lighting in scenes such as this is purposefully used by Hitchcock to heighten to temporarily transfer the character's psychological conflict onto the audience themselves.

Fig. 1. *Psycho (1960)* Dir. Alfred Hitchcock

In contrast to the darker tones of low-key lighting which create tension for veiwers, daylight has traditionally been associated with safety and comfort in visual storytelling as noted by Ammer, S.M.E.I, (2020); "High key Lighting may seem unreliable in horror movies as a result of its bright nature that expresses security, happiness and childhood as a result for excluding dark shadows and colours in the image but there are some cinematographers who use it in a different way that unite with the rest of the elements of the image to express emptiness, loss and feelings of coldness, death and mortality." This twist of traditional associations allows filmmakers to challenge audience expectations, transforming light into a tool for creating unsetling emotions for audiences.

Bright, natural light is often perceived as a domain of clarity and normalcy, where danger recedes and evil is banished, the expectation is embedded in our cinema language, where daytime tends to offer an intermission from the tense narrative of making it through the night. In the case of traditional horror, scenes during daylight are often used to reset the mood — allowing for a brief respite from danger for both character and audience. However, daylight horror flips this regular relationship on its head and removes all protective ambiguity,

leaving us as the veiwers to be confronted with alarming imagery in stark full clarity. This harsh switch is jarring to its audience, and could be argued, to be an even more profound discomfort that what the film is portraying, due to leaving us with the question; can terror dwell not only in the dark but also invade where we perceive is safe?

The Wicker Man (1971) follows the journey of Sergeant Neil Howie, a devout Christian police officer, who travels to a remote Scottish island to investigate the disappearance of a girl, his search leads him to a seemingly idyllic pagan community. Yet instead of finding the missing child, he encounters a society deeply rooted in ancient rituals and beliefs and the story goes on to reveal a disturbing twist about Howie's fate and the islanders' true intentions. Robin Hardy's Highland-based film offers a unique viewing for audiences that divides opinion yet contributes significantly to its notorious status within its genre; "The wicker man is quite the novel experience; one that does not appeal to some viewers but for many others does not detract from the film's dark underbelly and adds to its cult status reputation."Paciorek, A., 2018.

Fig.2. *The Wicker Man (1973)* Dir. Robin Hardy

The pensive mood, sombre tone and almost lyrical narrative of *The Wicker Man* (1973) have been the subject of many critical examinations, which have identified the film as a milestone in its use of light to achieve these effects. Robin Hardy chose to film the vibrant Scottish countryside in spring and summer, using light as not just an afterthought in the production, but a key narrative element. "The location filming of *The Wicker Man* (1973) used a number of places to invent the Pagan Scottish island of Summerisle. In the film, Summerisle feels like

a timeless place in the Inner or Outer Hebrides." Spracklen, K., 2023. There is a visual distance between the way that the film is dripping with brightness, while sordid things happen within its frame; the light, rather than highlight the horror in its mundane setting, instead becomes the real oppression as the audience is blinded by the vibrant tones of the villages celebrations while ironically keeping us in the dark from what is conspiring beneath the surface. This naturalistic use of light serves to amplify the film's exploration of cultural alienation and existential dread, there is no dark where either the character or viewer can retreat. The raw, constant light, strips away the shadows that are a hallmark of horror and makes the sacrifice scene far more disturbing when it unfolds starkly in bright daylight. The film, even decades after its release, has had an immense cultural impact; "In 202 Scotland's *The Sunday Mail* placed it as one of the top ten films with a Scottish theme and in 2003 the film was included in the top half of Channel 4's *100 Greatest Scary Moments."* Franks, B., Murray, J., Harper, S. and Stevenson, L., 2020.

Fig.3. *The Wicker Man (1973)* Dir. Robin Hardy

Robert Eggers' 2015 film *The Witch* on the other hand, centers on a Puritan family in 1630s New England, who are exiled from their settlement to a secluded farm near a menacing forest, but as the family struggles to maintain their livelihood within the harsh conditions of the isolated forest and dwindling resources, internal tensions and supernatural occurrences unravel their unity. The eldest daughter, Thomasin, becomes the focal point of suspicion and paranoia as the family grapples with unexplained events, culminating in a harrowing descent into madness and despair - "this dark fairy tale uncovers fears and anxieties regarding intersecting hierarchies of gender and religion and its implications for the current sociocultural landscape in the United States."Casado Presa, C., 2024. This quote highlights

the thematic depth of *The Witch* (2015), framing it as more than a straightforward horror film, through acknowledgement of how by blending historical allegory with universal themes, *The Witch* invites viewers to confront how the unresolved conflicts of the past continue to inform present-day narratives of oppression and rebellion.

Fig.4. *The Witch (2015)* Dir. Robert Eggers

Eggers uses naturalistic lighting — often muted and cold — to maintain the sense of isolation and loneliness in the barren land, it's dependence on mundane cloudiness and dark, cascaded daylight provides a dull bleakness that embodies the family's mental and arid collapses; "Lighting, with the exception of night scenes, was primarily natural or candlelit, creating chiaroscuro effects reminiscent of Dutch painting" Briefel, A, 2019. It can be noted that this lighting choice creates a balance between the realism and the supernatural horror present in the narrative, providing a historical basis while presenting the dull everyday events in an odd, ghostly manner. In scenes such as the family working outside or the looming woods, their shadowy portrayals create a tension where light becomes inescapable and uncomfortable; there is no relief from the penetrating brightness of this world, only exposing vulnerability.

Another film to become a landmark amongst it genre, *The Witch* had lasting effects on the way audiences perceived what we know to be an inherrently scary film vs those which have us questioning what 'saftey' in setting really is; "at the time of its release in 2016, the most financially successful film the independent studio A24 had distributed, and the film has subsequently been embraced by horror cinema fans. The film also inadvertently helped popularize "elevated horror," a cycle of horror which began in the independent sector during

the mid-2010s" Brannan, A. 2023, this success highlights *The Witch* as not just a horror film but a cultural touchstone that redefined the genre.

Fig.5. *The Witch (2015)* Dir. Robert Eggers

Chapter 2: Contrast Lighting as a Key Aesthetic in Daylight Horror

Contrast lighting is an important aspect of tone, tension and emotion in horror cinema as light and shadow don't just affect the overall look of films, but they also guide viewers in experiencing fear and suspense; "Images and sounds of characters spark various processes of mimicry, while the "direct effects" of movements, sounds, colors, spaces, and textures have important affective and physiological effects." Plantinga, C. and Shimamura (ed.), A.P. (2013). High-key and low-key lighting are two methods in which filmmakers can convey opposite tones and psychological effects.

Conventional horror frequently uses low-key lighting to emphasises strong contrast and deep shadows. In addition to lowering the amount of natural light, this technique leaves the majority of the frame dark, adding to the mystery and unease, take how *Halloween* (1978) employs low-key lighting to elevate Michael Myers as a creeping, near unparalleled shadow. This intentional vagueness plays into a collective fear of the unknown, which horror returns to time and again. Although high-key lighting is often used in genres that value clarity and emotional warmth, it can also be deployed to disturbing effect in horror. It saturates the scene

in stark bright uniform light, revealing all but nothing, often associated with utter blandness and banal exuberance, in horror instead will shine a searchlight into the darkest corners of criminality that might otherwise go dark. *In The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), this approach is particularly effective in sequences where the light removes any semblance of safety and creates an unrelenting sense of discomfort, such as when the character of Sally Hardesty finally escapes Leatherface after an intense chase in broad daylight.
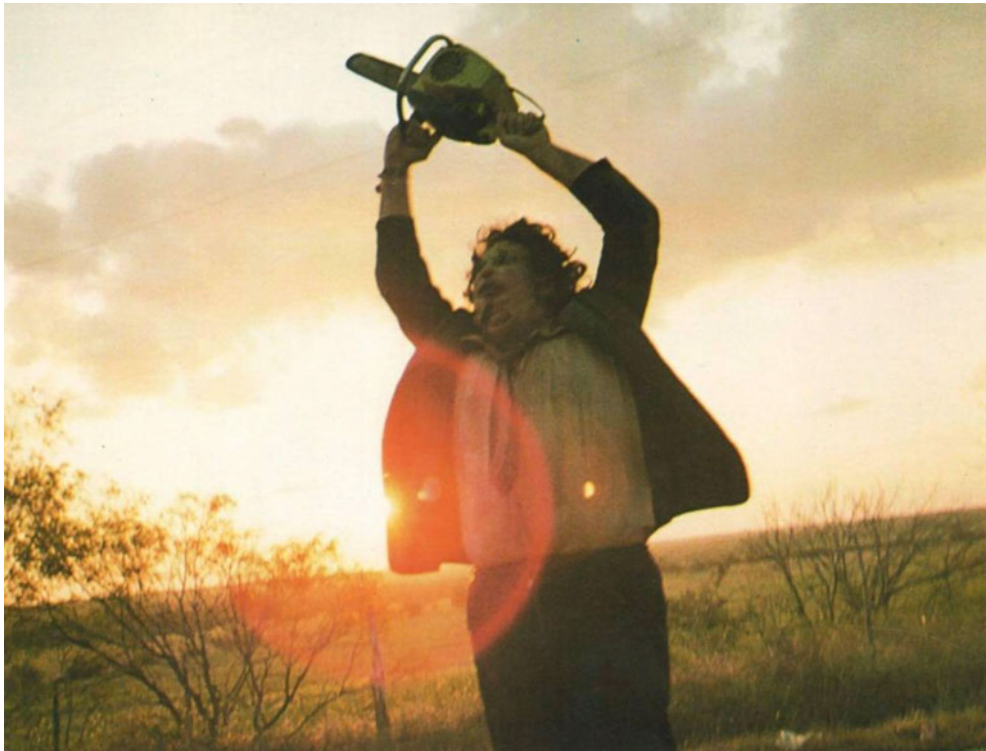

Fig.6. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre(1974)* Dir. Tobe Hooper

In 2015, Cleveland State University 'examined the impact of three film lighting styles on participants' emotional responses', in which they found that; "Participants who viewed the film in Low-Key lighting reported significantly more feelings of mystery, suspense, malice, intrigue, and other uneasy feelings associated with Low Key lighting. Surprisingly, Low Key lighting also elicited higher levels of emotional response in more happy and positive emotions."Poland, J.L. (2002) This further suggests that although Horror as a genre, generally has a more obvious play of the relationship between darkness and danger, Daylight horror disturbs audiences in an even more unsettling way because it shows everything a veiwer is afraid to see in a harshly lit portrayl.

By aligning film lighting with the narrative, filmmakers can influence emotions and foster a deeper connection between the audience and the story;"Viewers tend to empathize more with the film characters when the contrast between light and shadow is lower. Film lighting techniques should be closely connected to the story in order to create an effect on emotions

and empathy." Huang, Y (2018). Daylight horror uses light to control tone, so a sunny park location can radically turn at any moment into an inhospitable scene. Such juxtapositions heighten the horror effect as everyday scenes take grotesque forms, and this transparency becomes a deliberate provocation for the audience to rethink their notions of the sites and what they may consider a threat. Hence, the importance of contrast lighting is no longer purely aesthetic but narrative as well. Light and dark are not just contrasting colors on the horror film palette, but a psychological balancing act that serves as an instrument in eliciting audience emotion; whether it be suspense in shadows or dread in brightness, contrast lighting techniques are some of the most powerful tools we have for creating that distinctive emotional depth to the horror genre.

Chapter 3: Comparative Analysis of Lighting Techniques

Through lighting, Robin Hardy takes the rural, open space of the Scottish countryside and uses bright, natural light to create a contradicting environment that heightens the unsettling nature of *The Wicker Man* (1973), the pastoral landscapes basking in sunlight make the setting feel safe and mirror the protagonist's initial view of their community as a perfect and harmless enclave. The film creates an illusion of comfort for its lead (Sergeant Neil Howie, played by Edward Woodward) and viewers alike with free usage of natural light in outdoor scenes, only to dismantle it layer by layer as the plot unfolds. Using heavy contrasts in lighting, Hardy continues to illustrate the conflict between culture and ideology, for example, making the bright images of communal rituals unnaturally unsettling rather than joyous. As on the island, in daylight, we see these villagers live true to their beliefs, and indeed make Howie (and with him the audience) see how uncomfortably normal their practices seem. The colours and shadows of the film provide an extra layer to the psychological effects this film has; most of the film is awash in warm, earthy hues that capture the island's natural splendour, but it uses these to create a chilling effect when needed. The interaction of light and detachment comes to a head at the end of the film when the sacrificial ceremony takes place under great light in the sun going down; the golden skies and the stunning beauty of a sunset contrast with the horrific silhouette of the burning Wicker Man. The viewer is suffocated rather than reassured in this final scene of sacrifice, as all chance for rescue is drowned by the slaughter ritual's unnatural brilliance;

"The autumnal shoot for a tale set in spring definitely contributes to the peculiar atmosphere. Unusually for a horror film, much of the action takes place in bright Sunshine as the island prepare for their Mayday celebrations. Everything looks in order at first glance but, on closer inspection, there is something off about the light and shadows, captured as each day was dwindling towards winter rather than lengthening towards summer." Adams, L. (2023)

Fig.7. *The Wicker Man (1973)* Dir. Robin Hardy

The Wicker Man utilizes lighting, colour, and shadow to redirect a quaint rural landscape into a realm of tension-building terror and exploit the safe illusions of daylight to reveal that which dwells in shadow; Hardy tells a tale where sight becomes no less frightening than blindness.

In *The Witch* (2015) by Robert Eggers, the use of gloomy, overcast light underlines the stark contrast between the family's struggle to survive and the harsh, isolated environment they find themselves in, this aesthetic choice evokes a general feeling of loneliness and unease and accentuates the family's isolation from society and in turn the result is a chilly, uncaring mood where the audience struggle to find little to any relief from the dreary surroundings and ominous tone.

"To understand why the witch archetype was important and interesting and powerful... we had to go back in time to the early modern period when the witch was a reality. And the only way I was going to do that, I decided, was by having it be insanely accurate."Eggers, R. (2016)

Eggers skillfully hints at the shift from everyday life to creeping supernatural horror through gradual contrasts in lighting, for instance; interior spaces, softly lit by filtered daylight, slowly become more stifling as the narrative unfolds, reflecting the family's growing paranoia and internal conflicts. Meanwhile, in outdoor scenes, the uneven lighting in the woods (where patches of light break through the dense canopy) builds a tense atmosphere, suggesting a hidden presence and this gradual approach allows the supernatural to seep into the film's visual language without overtly signalling its arrival, creating even more dread for veiwers (not that they need any) as well as adding to the visual artistry of the film.

Eggers' approach to lighting in *The Witch* draws viewers into a harsh, unyielding world where light blurs the boundaries between reality and the supernatural while achieved through the use of muted tones, delicate contrasts, and an intricate balance between natural and firelight. The haunting atmosphere of this film is created through this careful use of lighting, which not only intensifies the emotional weight of the story but also plays a crucial role in shaping the visual experience; "(*The Witch*) is filled with meticulously accurate seventeenth-century period detail; it presents us with a grim, pre-modern world in which the supernatural is a real and palpable presence" Booker, M.K. and Lopes, E (2023).

Fig.8. *The Witch (2015)* Dir. Robert Eggers

Both *The Wicker Man* (1973) and *The Witch* (2015) harness the power of their natural settings to create a chilling effect, with nature playing a pivotal role in both films' horror, this intense use of nature challenges the expectation that the brightness or openness of a film's frames provide security, with each film tailoring its lighting to fit its historical and cultural context, thereby enhancing the specific atmosphere of dread that defines its story.

Chapter 4: Aesthetic Impact on Audience Perception and Emotion

Through out planning, production and editing, lighting has a dramatic way of informing the audience and establishing emotional stakes; the visual language it creates directs the viewers' eyes, establishes mood, and supports narrative ideas, the right amount of light and shadow can help shape atmospheres that appeal to viewers' emotions: warmth, intimacy, suspense,

and even fright. The lighting selection itself can set a film's aesthetic and offer psychological information to learners, guiding them toward making sense of the expression and subtext in a scene; "As with other cinematic tools, lighting comments on events in a film and conveys an emotional impact. Lighting can support characters, story, all themes, in which case the lighting 'works' aesthetically." Sipos, T.M (2014).

Lighting also has an emotional impact, and more often than not, it is all happening in the background of your subconscious reactions; warmer shades may conjure memories or comfort, while cool, blue tones can point to distant sadness and even uneasiness due to having a clinical connatation in many day to day settings;"lighting can be used to effectively alter the intensity of emotion of a character and that brighter conditions increased appeal"Wisessing, P., Zibrek, K., Cunningham, D.W., Dingliana, J. and McDonnell, R., (2020)

One example is the lighting technique; Chiaroscuro; "What is a horror film without someone using a flashlight to explore a dark room? This type of lighting gradually develops tension and guides the viewer's gaze through the horror scene."COLBOR. (2023)

The interplay of light and dark is also used by filmmakers to give three-dimensionality to both characters and environments and represent internal conflict or moral ambiguity. In the same way that using silhouettes or backlighting can explore themes of mystery or alienation; harsh and direct light might expose vulnerability and raw emotion, intensifying the depth and intensity of the narrative for the audience; "The Chiaroscuro lighting technique is used to produce a dramatic appearance that makes the audience sense a feeling of solitude, mystery and deep drama associated with the character."Tavares (2020).

Lighting, along with the direction and quality of light, is a powerful tool that helps tell the story and by using these techniques deliberately the filmmaker not only tells the story but also creates a captivating visual experience, creating an emotional connection between the narrative and the audience.

When it comes to shaping audience perception and evoking emotional responses through lighting, *The Wicker Man* (1971) and *The Witch* (2015) both defy audience expectations by crafting a visual style that underscores their profound thematic depth as both films are adept at creating a sense of perception in their projections through light, associating key moments with emotional responses. On one hand, in *The Wicker Man*; "The sense that there's something dark lurking beneath the surface of this bright, colorful, and insulated community is enough to keep you on the edge of your seat" White, C. (2024). Where as similarly for *The Witch*; "Light and darkness become quickly important in any film about perception, and "The Witch" is no different. Of course, it's a no brainer to shoot a horror film in the dark, but "The Witch" has obviously taken this tactic to another level - The film almost exclusively uses period candles to light its shots (the cinematography was by Jarin Blaschke), adding an air of

authenticity while forcing us to experience the world of "The Witch" through the same perspective as the settlers onscreen. At least until we leave the darkness of the theater and begin to see the film with new, modern eyes"Newton, C. (2016).

By rejecting the trope of concealing fear in darkness, the naturalistic lighting in these films forces audiences to confront horror in its stark, unfiltered form. This inescapability intensifies emotional engagement, as viewers are drawn into unsettling atmospheres that linger well beyond the viewing experience and ultimately, the lighting in both films transcends its technical purpose, becoming a narrative force that magnifies the emotional and psychological impact of their stories. Overall, the lighting strategies featured both films deepen emotional engagement by creating an atmosphere of inevitability as audiences are left with a lingering sense of unease, their expectations subverted and their comfort eroded and the result is a haunting, unforgettable experience.

Conclusion:

In molding audience perception and evoking emotional responses through lighting, *The Wicker Man* (1971)and *The Witch* (2015)' stand out within the sub-genre of daylight horror; both films defy audience expectations by crafting a visual style that underscores their profound thematic depth and similarily are adept at creating a sense of perception in their projections through light, associating tentpole moments with emotional responses. Both Robin Hardy (*The Wicker Man*) and Robert Eggers (*The Witch*) play with audience expectations created by light, establishing a stylistic backbone for their thematic richness with both movies using light to subvert conventional horror tropes, where darkness signals danger and the unknown. Instead, they use naturalistic lighting to optimize discomfort, portraying horror in a bright or drear ambiance that comes across as mundane and this subversion of horror tropes will intrigue and engage the audience, proving that horror does not always need to hide in the shadows and that its absence can be more unsettling—exposed, inescapable.The lighting in the films highlights their themes by contrasting human vulnerability and mortality with the surreal distortion of saftey and protection.Instead of hiding fear in the narrative dark, the naturalistic lighting of these films directly confronts their audiences with that horror, raw and unpolished. This naturalistic light makes the horror's unavoidability and emotional stakes palpable, heightening surrounding emotions and bringing viewers into painful atmospheres that pierce long through watching. In short, the light in both films goes beyond its technical use. It becomes a narrative agent, boosting the plots' emotional and psychological effects and keeping the audience engaged.

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