

Why Wyrd? Why folklore? Why now?

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Diane A. Rodgers: Why Wyrd? Why folklore? Why now?

Why Wyrd?

Whilst the term 'folk horror' tends to refer to texts employing folklore and legend in some way and, most often, to "British movies of the late 1960s and '70s that have a rural, earthy association to ancient European pagan and witchcraft traditions", this loose-knit genre is not always filmic and not necessarily horrifying (Paciorek 2015, 9). The eerie dissonance of folk horror can be observed extending beyond boundaries of genre and medium to include science fiction, fantasy, television plays, television series and even public information films. These works also share much in common with modern folk-horror television as well as other media texts including Richard Littler's *Scarfolk* blog and music released by Ghost Box Records, which incorporate a "sense of nostalgia for yesterday's vision of the future" (ibid., 13).

In writing continuing to emerge on the subject, there are recurring references to nostalgia, and to indefinable qualities of 'eeriness' and unsettled, fragmented memories conjured up by such programmes. 'Hauntology' is a term regularly appearing alongside folk horror to describe media texts evoking a sense of troubled nostalgic reverberation which, in most cases, stems from 1970s Britain. Folk horror was so pervasive in British television of the 1970s that it accounts for many hundreds of hours of programming, with folkloric themes ranging widely from witchcraft and covens (*Beasts*, 1976, *The Changes*, 1975), pagan ritual (*Robin Redbreast*, 1970) and hauntings (*The Stone Tape*, 1972, *A Ghost Story for Christmas*, 1971-78) to stone circles and sinister villages (*Sky*, 1975, *Children of the Stones*, 1977). Many of these programmes' themes also cross over with the Gothic Horror genre, a term used most synonymously with period ghost stories adapted from literary sources. Helen Wheatley's book *Gothic Television* examines this carefully, and looks at the effectiveness of the medium of television itself within a domestic setting as a conveyance for horror and having an impact upon its audience.

All of these disparate threads have narratives based on some form of category of folk belief at their core tying them together. Here I propose the application of 'wyrd' as an umbrella term to encompass this variety of related media sharing folkloric elements beyond the edges of folk-horror; encompassing folk horror, hauntology, gothic and science fiction sub-genres of media that have folkloric content and an eerie effect. 'Wyrd' is the oldest spelling of the Anglo-Saxon spelling of 'weird', in Old English - recorded instances dating back to c.888, including instances in *Beowulf* c.1000. Wyrd describes that which is strange, mysterious, or even frightening, and connects the common eerie element across the aforementioned genres (thus more elegantly avoiding frequent repetition of 'folk horror, hauntology and gothic horror') whilst suggesting a sense of the ancient, the folkloric and the unexplained. The earliest uses of 'wyrd' in Old English describe agencies of fate and destiny (relating to the consequences of one's actions) or powers of foresight with magical or legendary elements. Later definitions I like from the 1800s suggest "a supernatural or marvellous occurrence or tale" (OED online, 2017). Wyrd, therefore, appropriately links storytelling and folk belief (and its perpetuation) with more intangibly dark, alien and hauntological notions of 'eeriness' and horror.

Why television? Why folklore?

Although film has gained the most attention, it is more often than not the impactfulness of *television* of the 1970s that is cited as a central influence upon 'folk-horror revivalists' who are producing folk horror, gothic horror and hauntological media texts today (Gallix, 2011). These post-2000 'folk-horror revivalists' who regularly use 'wyrd' themes in their work include, amongst others: Mark Gatiss (*The League of Gentlemen*, 1999-2002, *The Tractate Middoth*, 2013); Jeremy Dyson (*The League of Gentlemen*, *Ghost Stories*, 2018); Reece Shearsmith (*The League of Gentlemen*, *Inside No. 9*, 2014-); Ben Wheatley (*Kill List*, 2011, *A Field in England*, 2013), Richard Littler (*Scarfolk*, 2014) and Jim Jupp (Ghost Box Records). My own PhD, in part, examines why *wyrd* British 1970s *television* is so often by these people as a central influence upon their lives and work. *Children of the Stones*, *The*

Owl Service (1969) and *Penda's Fen* (1974) are some examples film director Ben Wheatley cites as those most affective on him: "Seventies shows...were really impactful in a way that drama doesn't seem to be any more. You felt your mind being scarred and you were never the same again afterwards." (in Bonner, 2013). I've been interviewing a number of these people and, in a recent talk with Jeremy Dyson I asked him if *wyrd* TV was influential upon his current career: "Yes. **Absolutely**. One hundred percent. It showed me the way... No question, no question."

Where scholars have paid attention to *wyrd* film and television, focus tends to remain on the realm of screen studies, examining generic form, style and, particularly, onscreen use of landscape. Adam Scovell argues that folk horror "is never all that fussed with a genuine, accurate recreation of folklore" and that "anything could effectively be put into the mix of practices and customs, and still come out looking relatively authentic." (Scovell, 2017: 29). The latter is, though, precisely why I think it *does* matter; what and why beliefs persist and develop is absolutely integral to modern folkloristics. Scovell does however acknowledge that links between folklore and folk horror have been somewhat overlooked, and folklorist Gillian Bennett recognises that popular media can directly influence the shaping of public conceptions about folklore and the supernatural (1987, 44) whilst Macey, Ryan and Springer also note that television's varied "narratives, and cultural forms are not simply entertainment, but powerful socializing agents" (2014, 6).

It is of vital importance to clarify and contextualise folklore and folk history as presented by popular film and television texts *because* of their ability to affect and perpetuate folkloric belief. A useful example Jacqueline Simpson gives is the fabricated legend of the three crowns of East Anglia, as used by M. R. James in *A Warning to the Curious* (adapted for television in 1972). The tale is given such "plausible details, many readers now assume that this antiquarian 'legend' which James wove into his fictional tale is authentic folklore." (Simpson, 2011, 286). To transpose this to *wyrd* TV, Stewart Lee (writer, comedian and *Children of the Stones* fan) asks Matthew Holbrook, a Druid: "It's reasonable to assume that your life would have been very different, then, had you not seen *Children of the Stones* as a child?" Holbrook replies: "It had a dramatic effect on me... very much so, because I wouldn't have... [otherwise] been introduced to stone circles and paganism" (*Happy Days*, 2012).

In my own research, conducting interviews with makers of *wyrd* film and television, there is a sincere desire to express a sense of 'authentic' folklore in their work.

Jeremy Dyson: I think feeling authentic is good... I'm particularly interested in the ghost story as a form... location and place are central ... you can't really have a ghost story without a haunted place, it's sort of one is bound up with the other... traditionally our understanding of ghosts, ... is in part about place. And there's a sensitivity to it ... we've got lots of very old buildings and, ...a lot of that romantic gothic stuff grew out of ruined buildings and there's something about a ruin, because it speaks of antiquity, ... things of ages past, that allows a certain kind of story to come out. [mention ghosts not always traditionally tied so much to place - purpose>purposeless - Bennett]

Piers Haggard saw the use of folklore in his own work as an attempt at verisimilitude, to "tap into the things which I thought were moving and interesting and which had emotional, historical cultural depth and resonance" (interview, Rodgers 2017), stating (about *BLOOD ON SATAN'S CLAW*) "I was trying all the time to make it more credible, more authentic... touching on folk customs at every point... "

Patrick Dromgoole - writer, producer, director of countless folkloric TV fare including: *Arthur of the Britons* (*Arthurian myth and Legend*), *Sky* (*UFOs and stone circles*), *King of the Castle* (*urban hauntology*) and folk-horror cornerstone for many, *Children of the Stones* (*village ritual, aliens, stone circles*). "I was a great believer in *The Golden Bough*,...Frazer was a hugely authoritative man to me... So insofar as I have any source for things like *Children of the Stones*, that's probably it." Frazer's work is cited as influential by a number of creatives I've interviewed, even contemporaries of today (Ben Wheatley said Amy Jump used the text as part inspiration for *A Field in England*) but, to folklorists, Frazer's work has been hugely discredited for decades, and is seen as a bit of a magpie compilation of disparate myths rather than an accurate collection (insofar as this is possible) of

'actual' folk customs. Mikel Koven's excellent chapter on *The Wicker Man* in *Film, Folklore and Urban Legends* explains the unfounded basis of many beliefs portrayed in the film, which relied heavily on Frazer's work.

Children of the Stones, is seen by a number of folk-horror fans and revivalists as their touchstone, as peculiarly British, drawing on ancient customs and beliefs. But beyond Frazer's influence, CoS writer Jeremy Burnham cited Thomas Tryon's 1973 novel *Harvest Home* as inspiration for the story also - because it "had the sort of creepiness we were looking for". *Harvest Home* is at best considered a piece of low brow kitschy Americana (which even Stephen King reviewed it as not "a great book, not a great horror novel, not even a great suspense novel" but noted that there is a sense of authenticity in it that helps account for what he predicts will be an ongoing popularity: "it is a true book; it is an honest book... there will still be a routine rebinding once a year for the library copies of "Harvest Home,". This juxtaposition of folkloric sources for these programmes, considered by many to be drawing on uniquely ancient British beliefs and customs, is comparable again with M. R. James. James is considered by many to be the master of the *English* ghost story and ghost traditions, of which he was certainly well aware, but in fact drew more heavily upon folklore from Scandinavia and their tropes of hauntings than from the English counterparts (Simpson).

Therefore, acknowledging the derivation of folklore employed in television is, an integral furrow to plough in developing an understanding of the creation and perpetuation of folk belief, whilst also explaining the enduring influence and often-acclaimed eeriness of that which is *wyrd* - whether the influence comes from other versions of on-screen folklore, or from more historical or antiquarian sources.

Why now?

Due to a general public resurgence of interest in 'folk horror' gaining new audiences, and the keen growing interest of the academic community with panels (such as this!), my director of studies Dr. David Clarke (who is a leading folklorist, written lots on UFOs, pagan rituals) and I hope to launch a Centre for Contemporary Legend at Sheffield Hallam University.

Now is the perfect time to capitalise on the rising interest in this subject matter from both public and academia alike: in the last 2 years there is a (non academic) Folk Horror Revival group which hosts regular film screenings, poetry, art, mummies plays and live music events and has begun to publish collections of informal folkloric essays, stories and poetry. There has been one dedicated academic publication on folk horror to my knowledge (Adam Scovell, published in 2017), although there are book dedicated to horror (such as 'Yuletide Terror') which are including chapters dedicated to *wyrd* film and television.

Cambridge University set up a folk horror research group in 2017 called Alchemical Landscape, holding talks in conjunction with Folk Horror Revival; there was an academic symposium at the BFI last year (2017) entirely dedicated to 1974 folk horror television play *Penda's Fen*. At two recent conferences I attended; one on horror film and the other (a first) on horror television, there were small but very notable folk-horror contingents present. And, as I've mentioned, although interest is growing, there is still very little academic attention to the *folklore* of folk horror. It is usually examined from a screen studies perspective or events are from a more public-facing fan-based perspective. This is where we in Sheffield provide a unique point of focus.

The National Centre for English Cultural Tradition (NATCECT), founded in the 1960s at the University of Sheffield, established Sheffield as the only city in England with a dedicated folklore centre that combined teaching, research and archives. In the early 1980s, the university hosted a series of Contemporary Legend conferences that helped confirm Sheffield as a centre for the study of what are now popularly referred to as "urban" or "modern" legends. Sadly, that centre closed in

2008, and we feel that the time is right for Sheffield Hallam (SHU) to launch a new 'Centre' for legend studies, building upon the established reputation of Sheffield as a centre for scholarship in this area.

With our Centre for Contemporary Legend, we think there is a fantastic opportunity to connect with the wider public outside academia – to engage with the proposed new Research Centre at SHU, via talks and events etc. A recent public talk on witchcraft in Sheffield was so popular with the public that it was booked up weeks in advance so the public interest is clearly there. We hope to launch the Centre for Contemporary Legend (CCL) by hosting a small symposium later this year, and by funding a photographic exhibition and book project on English customs by our colleague Andrew Robinson. This project, entitled 'Another England', is in a similar vein to well known folklorists and photographers Homer Sykes and Doc Rowe, and will continue this documentary tradition of customs still being practiced in the present day. We hope that the success of these smaller projects will then lead to a larger academic conference devoted to folklore on screen, incorporating all things folkloric, wyrd and wonderful .

Our larger conference would cover a number of areas related to folklore and folk-horror on screen, with an emphasis on 'folk', and British folkloric aspects – to include not only academic discussion of films and television with folkloric content, but also discussion of folklore itself (local history and legends, myths, calendar customs and so on) as a significant driving factor in the wider context of the public sphere. We are all folk, folklore takes many forms beyond traditional storytelling; contemporary and urban legends are propagated by popular culture and media, often affecting popular belief, therefore it is important to encourage public discourse about the foundations of tales, legends and belief.

We aim to bring attention to the phenomenon and significance of 'wyrd' media to the public and academia, not only of film and television but also to connect folklore in music, art, photography, local history and heritage and thus highlight links between a wide range of disciplines.

We imagine academic conference panels, with keynotes led by scholars of folklore, television and film but would aim to also include talks aimed at the general public, such as 'Children's TV of the 1970s', or, 'An introduction to folk horror', 'Local folklore of Yorkshire and Derbyshire' and so on. Additional film and television screenings along with Q&A sessions with the writers or directors with whom we have made connections through our research, would have broad appeal. An evening event with popular bands that have folkloric connections makes perfect sense as we have the facilities available. This could include bands like the Eccentric Research Council (from Sheffield, who made an album with Maxine Peake based on the Pendle witch trials), Sharon Krauss (successful folk artist), even artists like Matt Berry (who you may also recognise from TV such as *Toast of London*, *Darkplace*).

At our events, we would like to (with appropriate consent), create short films of talks and Q&As, conduct interviews with visitors, and have a 'wyrd tales' booths to record our visitors' own folkloric tales, memories or strange experiences (whether written, audio, video or upload using social media). In doing this we aim to harness new technology to make folklore relevant to contemporary audiences whilst also archiving new material for future research.

There is huge potential for regional, national and even international media interest. Positive PR of the launch of the centre and the conference would mean a wide reaching impact.

We believe that building on Sheffield's reputation as a scholarly centre for folklore, a strong research culture in folklore at Sheffield Hallam University can be built with the university as a leading proponent of this.

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