

Folklore: the eerie underbelly of British 1970s folk-horror television?

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Published version

RODGERS, Diane (2017). Folklore: the eerie underbelly of British 1970s folk-horror television? In: At Home With Horror? Terror on the Small Screen, University of Kent, Canterbury, 27 October 2017-29 October 2017. (Unpublished)

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Intro

In emerging writing on 1970s folk horror television (considering narratives informed by pastoral settings and folkloric legends, ranging from witches and covens, pagan ritual and hauntings, to stone circles and sinister English villages), there is discussion of an indefinable quality of 'eeriness', as Andy Paciorek puts it: "a 'Folk' ambiance and aesthetic that can more often be felt intuitively rather than defined logically"; a notion which seems to fuel folk-horror today. This paper will examine the 1970 BBC Play for Today *Robin Redbreast*; to what extent it employed the use of folklore and what it lends to 'eeriness'.

Why so many folkloric themes on 1970s TV?

The 1960s and '70s are described by Ronald Hutton (1999) as the "second great wave of interest in folklore ... of the modern period"; an occult revival within youth counterculture helped popularise folkloric texts from the 1920s such as these. In fact, much of *The Wicker Man* (1973) was based on Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890/1922) and, although made 3 years later than *Robin Redbreast*, is a useful comparison to which I'll return.

The '70s was an era of societal discomfort; generations no longer understood one another; the explosion of drug, hippy and then punk culture instilled fears of youth culture in the bourgeoisie (in Paciorek, 2015: 271). Seismic shifts in gender perception took place with the women's liberation movement, and children were taught to be afraid of adults in numerous public information films (such as *Charley Says*, 1973). Robin Wood (2003) describes the 1970s as a period of "cultural crisis and disintegration of society" - a situation in which perhaps we can find parallels with today. Stories of predatory celebrities emerged to prove that children were in fact quite right to be afraid of adults of the 1970s. Within the current 'fake news' political landscape, no-one knows what is real, who is lying, what politicians might do next.

Fear of other people

In 2016 a *New Statesman* article titled 'The Fear of Other People' (Smith, 2016) stated folk-horror ghost stories were "perfect for a Brexit Christmas" and even described Michael Gove as a "classic Folk Horror figure"- once again everybody is afraid of everybody else.

Scarfolk

Richard Littler's ongoing blog *Scarfolk* (2013) brings these two decades together, drawing heavily from '70s folk-horror aesthetics in a darkly comedic way to comment on the 2010s (using an image of young Donald Trump), with the same sense of suspicion and fear of others. This corresponds directly with the atmosphere of creeping horror conjured up in so many 1970s TV programmes which Newton states "... [evoked] the barely suppressed fears of childhood." (2015: 15). The use of folklore and legend in this context brings with it elements of historical truth, evidence that spooky things may be lurking just under the surface of society. Legends are defined by Tosenberger as stories with "claim to real-world or historical truth" (2010: 1.6); belief in such legends *as possible truth* is a significant factor which therefore allows audiences to buy into a degree of plausibility of such folkloric, folk-horror content.

1970s TV as influential

Ben Wheatley, along with a growing number of British writers and directors, cites 1970s television as tremendously influential upon his current work: Wheatley states: "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). This visceral reaction resonates with other writer-directors, like Ashley Pharoah (*Life on Mars*, *The Living and the Dead*, 2016,) cites many of the same 1970s influences, noting that "the BBC Christmas stories " particularly left strong impressions upon him (Mellor, 2016). The *Inside Number 9* series has made a number of folk-horror offerings; recently *The Devil of Christmas* (2016) which is set in 1977, is about the making of a tv drama in that period, is based upon a folk-horror tale, and even employs "vintage tube-based studio broadcast cameras and period lamps to give the studio an authentic 70s atmosphere" (BBCStudioworks, 2016).

Robin Redbreast

I intend to draw out folkloric elements used in *Robin Redbreast*, and suggest how these may become rooted into the fabric of British folk horror. *Robin Redbreast* was first broadcast on the 10th Dec 1970 as a BBC 1 Play for Today, preceding the first BBC *Ghost Story for Christmas* in 1971, (1968's *Whistle And I'll Come to You* was part of the *Omnibus* series and broadcast in May); RR helped solidify what arguably became a ritual of a spooky tale on Christmas TV; a tradition embedded into British culture and a staple of 70s TV schedules, that Mark Gatiss states was "as necessary to the festive season as mince pies" (in Earnshaw, 2014).

A context of Folklore theory

Modern folklore theory argues that contemporary and non-oral forms of folklore are worthy of serious academic consideration; Alan Dundes's expansion of the definition of "folk" and folklore, beyond traditional rural storytelling, to include "the cultural texts of groups of all socio-economic backgrounds" (Gurel, 2005: 4) was liberating - if we are all folk and if folklore is, in part, "man's attempt to bring enjoyment to his leisure through the art of storytelling" (Thompson, 1977: vii), then those who create television are certainly worthy of study in this respect - recent interviews I conducted with directors like Piers Haggard and Lawrence Gordon Clark show that they indeed consider themselves storytellers, first and foremost.

So in our response to folkloric tales on TV or in film; we may have pulled the duvet tight or slept with the lights on because of stories of witchcraft or ghosts: in such cases we are acting on some level of belief, which folklorists refer to as ostensive action. Ostension is a term used by folklorists to suggest a perpetuation of belief; ostensive action is to behave in a certain way or alter ones actions as a consequence of belief in folk myth or legend (an example Bill Ellis, 1989, gives is not allowing your child to trick or treat in case they receive an apple filled with razor blades). There are several permutations of ostension, but the one I am drawing from, coined by Mikel Koven (2008) is 'mass-mediated ostension'. Briefly, this describes when media texts present legend materials, and thereby encourage debate about a legend's veracity; whether the stories are believed or not, is secondary to the discussion of *possibility*, which is an essential aspect of legend. Koven proposes this as a framework within which to study film, television and folklore, and is what I will use to develop the notion of television as an important form of folklore in itself; able to significantly affect belief, or to affect action in some way.

I propose that television effects two strands of mass-mediated ostension; firstly as a medium within which elements of folk legends are retold and which, thereby, perpetuates the possibility of belief in such legends. Secondly, that within the creation of television itself, when specific *ways* of retelling these stories or legends are repeated; and where the same techniques may be employed, this therefore becomes another form of ostensive action (Ellis, 1989 discusses ostension in terms of a guide or map for future behaviours). Therefore, television not only perpetuates folk legends but also specific *ways* of telling those legends within the television medium. So, to *Robin Redbreast*:

Fisher, Norah, Rob [SPOILERS]

Whereas the BBC's *A Ghost Story for Christmas* series relied on period piece tales by M. R. James or Charles Dickens, *Robin Redbreast*, written by John Bowen, was closer to the pioneering contemporary realism of *The Wicker Man* (1973). It follows the character of Norah Palmer, a TV script editor who, following the break-up of a long-term relationship, escapes to a rural farmhouse complete with a creaky wooden staircase and cavernous hearth. But this is no cozy retreat; the local villagers are highly manipulative and disapproving of Norah's modern independence and cosmopolitan ways.

The enigmatic Mr. Fisher is a fount of local knowledge who appears with a peculiar request to "hunt for sherds" in her garden (from the old English "potsherd," - fragments of prehistoric pottery). Fisher is a parochial equivalent to Christopher Lee's Lord Summerisle in *The Wicker Man*, described as a "learned fellow" with "the instinct", he knows the "Old Tongue" (Anglo-Saxon) and his pursuit of "sherds" suggests Fisher is, (as Vic Pratt describes) "like a fragment of an elusive rural English past."

Fisher introduces Norah to young gamekeeper Rob (or Robin - not his real name but a nickname given him by the villagers) to whom she is attracted even though he is an odd character, and there are suggestions that he is something of an outsider to the other villagers. After an evening of awkward flirtation between Rob and Norah, interrupted by unromantic events like a bird falling violently down the chimney, the situation is manipulated to allow the unlikely pair to end up in bed together, after which Norah soon finds she is pregnant.

A series of other mysterious occurrences add a sense of creeping threat to the play - tangible events not horrific in themselves but together build up a sense of eeriness, particularly on the soundtrack. Mice scratch in Norah's cottage walls, voices and cries are heard on the wind; 1971's *BBC Radio Times* notes that *Robin Redbreast* is suffused "with such elements as dead chickens, all-knowing village sages, murderous axes, birds in the chimney and fertility symbols," all weighty with ominous ritual suggestion.

Mrs Vigo

Norah, however, is not quite the target she suspects—Fisher quotes explicitly from *The Golden Bough* : "the goddess of fertility in the old religions [...] would couple with the young king [...] and from his blood the crops would spring,". A horrified Norah realizes Robin is the sacrificial virgin; needed only to sow his seed and be ritually murdered as per local tradition to bring fertility to the land. Sinister housekeeper Mrs. Vigo explains: "there's always one young man answers to 'Robin' in these parts—has to be."

Just as Fisher quotes *The Golden Bough*, *The Wicker Man* director Robin Hardy, screenwriter Anthony Shaffer also used this book as key source material. Although Frazer's text is considered problematic by contemporary folklorists, for various reasons, it is interesting to compare the two onscreen realisations drawn from the same text:

The Lords

Lord Summerisle's vigorously enthusiastic paganism and flamboyant ritual contrasts the understated, coolly dispassionate behaviour of Fisher in *Robin Redbreast*. The villagers' belief in ancient pagan rites to sustain fertility of the land is clear, but is treated as everyday pure matter-of fact. In contrast to *The Wicker Man*'s shocking revelation and climax, Rob's sacrificial fate is never explicitly detailed, again, we are left to imagine this as we only hear an offscreen scream.

Folklore - robins

The eponymous "Robin Redbreast," is, of course, significant; Robins were famously appropriated in the Victorian era as cheery messengers on Christmas cards (when postmen were nicknamed "redbreast" or "robin" due to their red tunics). However, folkloric tales associated with the robin have darker origins; many British folk beliefs cast them as bad omens or messengers of death. For example, there is a long-held belief in British folklore that it is extremely unlucky to take a Robin's eggs or damage a nest; an interesting parallel to the villagers' careful concern for Rob and Norah's unborn child. It was also believed that an ill fate would find anyone who killed a robin; one writer explains in 1868 (*Notes and Queries*), "if a robin dies in your hand, it [the hand] will always shake." Another English folk rhyme suggests "The blood on the breast of a robin that's caught; Brings death to the snarer by whom it is caught."

Robins also have a history of religious reverence, which comes from the way it is said to have received its red breast. One Welsh folk tale tells that the robin scorched its breast in the fire of purgatory, when it took pity on sinners and carried water in its beak to tormented souls. Some legends tell that the robin was stained with the blood of Christ as the bird tried to pluck away his crown of thorns. In all the tales, the bird is closely linked with death and blood, and the *Robin Redbreast* title is used here by Bowen for ominous associations.

Faith and folk belief

Like *The Wicker Man*, *Robin Redbreast* echoes conflicts of Christian faith and superstition, here seen with images suggesting sacrificial offering rather than a Christian harvest festival sermon, which accompanies them on the soundtrack (in fact, the dialogue fades with mention of God).

Final shot

In a final chilling shot at the end of *Robin Redbreast*, Norah sees the villagers changed: Fisher sports antlers and ancient garb and Mrs. Vigo's hair streams from a black hooded robe. Bowen's teleplay (in Muller, 1973) notes that here Fisher is Herne the Hunter, a pagan spirit or God associated with woods and oak trees, while housekeeper Mrs. Vigo is described as the Crone, Hecate, a pagan goddess often described as "Queen of the Witches." Whether the villagers are revealed as their true selves, or this is Norah's perception of them, Bowen explicitly employs legend; and believes that folkloric myth is entirely relevant to contemporary audiences, as "applicable to modern life as well as to the time when the myth first appeared." The history, faith and legend here lend levels of plausibility to the story: as folklorist George Ewart Evans put it; *The Pattern Under The Plough* (in Young, 2010)- the sense of the past lying just behind the present.

Realism

This plausibility of folk belief is enhanced by elements of realism which struck a chord with audiences and reviewers, *Radio Times* reviewers describing the play as "beautifully creepy" and "convincingly terrifying." *Robin Redbreast* was in fact based in reality in a number of ways: most grimly on the real-life still-unsolved killing of Charles Walton, a man who could "reputedly charm animals with his voice and knew many old rural ways" (Fowler) who was found dead on Valentines' Day, 1945. Walton's brutally beaten body was discovered in what he describes wonderfully as the "depths of the smiling countryside" where he was "slashed and punctured by a billhook [...] with a pitchfork pinning him through the neck." This sinister and notorious case features so many peculiar folkloric aspects and coincidences that Newman notes it "make[s] one think this is surely the plot of an imaginative novelist."

In fact, throughout British media in the 60s and 70s, reality and fiction blurred as folk belief was considered seriously, in a "cultural moment when witchcraft and the occult were no longer ludicrous." (Pratt). The play highlights contemporaneous news stories, as Norah grimly observes, "Every now and again there's a song and dance about it in the Sunday papers. Devil worship. Graves dug up... stories of blood..." In turn, audience members wondered about this play to the BBC "If this could really happen" or confirming, for instance, that "after living in a small village in the South-West we can well believe this play". (BBC WAC,R9/7/109).

"JUST NOT RIGHT"

A widening resurgence in folk horror suggests that the creeping fear instilled by *Robin Redbreast*, *Ghost Stories for Christmas* and other sinister 70s TV fare has had huge influence across all forms of media. Jim Jupp from Ghost Box records explains: "There was something in the *look* of television ...images of that period that's just not *right*." (in Fischer, 2017: 31)

In Summary

In summary, an image used by Ghost Box Records, is not that far-fetched as it is comparable with images from the very real 1970s Children's book *How To Make Magic!*. Mark Gatiss also directed his own BBC Ghost Story in 2013 and states "Something I always loved about the seventies... [Ghost Stories] is that they're ... very impressionistic and I wanted to achieve something like that." (BFIEvents, 2014). Therefore, television of the 1970s does effect a kind of mass-mediated ostension; the use of recurrent folk narratives continues to extend into current media with artists explicitly aiming to capture nostalgia in employing similar aesthetic techniques. *Robin Redbreast* helped instigate a festive folk-horror tradition that showed us we need only begin to look at our own folk history; myth and legend to scare ourselves silly.

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