

Something Wyrd: Folk Horror, Folklore and British Television

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Something Wyrd: Folk Horror, Folklore and British Television

The phrase 'folk horror' was coined in 2003 by director Piers Haggard to describe his film *Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971), now canonised as one of the 'holy triumvirate' of folk-horror films alongside *Witchfinder General* (1968) and *The Wicker Man* (1973). A revival of interest in them and other, related media texts has gained 'folk horror' status as a sub-genre and increasing attention from both cult and academic audiences with folk-horror festivals and panels at academic conferences becoming regular occurrences.

Television narratives involving folklore were so pervasive in British television of the 1970s that they account for many hundreds of hours of programming, and are now beginning to be widely referred to as 'folk horror' with folkloric themes ranging widely from witchcraft and covens, paganism and hauntings to stone circles and sinister villages.

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. All of these disparate threads have narratives based on some form of category of folk belief at their core tying them together. These loose-knit texts are more often 'eerie' than *necessarily* horrifying. Because of this, I think the term 'folk horror' does not adequately describe all relevant texts with folklore at the centre.

To explain my terminology, 'Wyrd', (the Anglo-Saxon spelling of 'weird') describes that which is strange, mysterious, or even frightening, and connects the common eerie element across genres whilst suggesting a sense of the ancient, folkloric and unexplained (Rodgers, 2018). Therefore (and I'm not claiming coinage of it), I use 'wyrd' here as an umbrella term to encompass media texts that have folkloric content and an eerie effect.

Mark Fisher's *Ghosts of My Life* (2014) builds an impressionistic picture of the hauntological effect of British media from the 1970s to now, drawing upon personal responses to texts throughout the decades. The films, television programmes, musicians and journalism to which he refers (including *Sapphire and Steel*, Joy Division, the Jimmy Savile scandal and Ghost Box Records) may seem incongruent but convincingly share this sense of the 'wyrd'. A recent article by Bob Fischer draws upon these concepts in which his media-creative interviewees highlight British *television* of the 1970s as a central influence upon their work: "There was something in the *look* of television from that era... that's just not *right*." (Jim Jupp in Fischer, 2017: 30-31). Many of these programmes' themes and 'hauntological' media 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 carefully both American and British Gothic television and, though she doesn't explicitly discuss 'folk horror' by name, she considers many texts that could be considered folk horror, drawing attention to the uniquely restrained eeriness of British horror (Wheatley, 2006: 55) - whilst also looking at the effectiveness of the domestic medium of television itself as a conveyance for horror and having an impact upon its audience. Part of this impact included having lasting effects on audiences who became film and programme makers of today. It's important to note that Helen Wheatley's work seeks to broaden the perspective of television studies, which she has developed further to highlight the lack of serious attention given to children's television, "often disregarded by those scholars seeking to write a history of 'serious' or 'important' television drama" (2012: 383). I think that 'Wyrd' quite elegantly connects these different aspects and sub-genres under discussion.

So, two elements have yet to gain much serious academic attention to date: the importance of *television* folk horror (including childrens' TV) and, more significantly here, the *folklore* of folk horror. My research examines how folklore is communicated in British television during the 1970s and with what lasting impact. We can look at television as a form of mass-mediated folklore: *what* folkloric tropes and legends were propagated by British 1970s television, *how* they were portrayed and *why* they have had significant impact and influence on future generations of media creators: important to look at how "mass media contributes to the maintenance and creation of folklore" (Schenda, 1992: 29). Combining folkloristics with screen studies, we can examine the unique context 1970s British television to highlight the significance of television in the communication of folklore and how this continues to affect the cultural development and communication of folklore.

Linda Dégh explores "mass-mediated folklore" (1992:10), which refers to the use of popular media to communicate folklore, a still relatively new area in folklore studies. Studying how British television does this can help to understand not only what folkloric tropes (and beliefs) are communicated and how these are represented and reinterpreted, but also why they are passed on so effectively and with what legendary or historical basis.

Adam Scovell's *Folk Horror* (2017) (largely concentrating on cinema), expresses a somewhat dismissive attitude to folklore studies. Scovell argues that the genre "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 precisely why it *does* matter; what and why beliefs persist, develop, are acted upon or reproduced in culture is absolutely integral to modern folklore study.

As an example, Stewart Lee (writer, comedian and *Children of the Stones* fan) asks a modern-day Druid: "your life would have been very different, then, had you not seen *Children of the Stones* as a child?", who 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).

Acknowledging *folklore* (and traditional belief) as central to folk horror is something that not many folklorists or screen studies scholars are yet exploring in any depth.

As part of my data collection, I have also begun noting programmes which explicitly discuss folklore or folkloric belief, particularly dialogue with reference to specific legends or folkloric texts.

Here are three brief examples of dialogue from: *Robin Redbreast*, *Doctor Who and the Stones of Blood* and *A Warning to the Curious*. The first two refer to actual texts and folklorists whilst the latter is entirely fabricated (by M.R. James, and embellished upon in the teleplay by LG Clark):

Robin Redbreast (1970):

Mr. Fisher: He would pass away, yes. Assisted to it, one might say. And from his blood, you see, the crops would spring...you must read a book by Sir James Fraser - *The Golden Bough* in seven volumes."

Doctor Who and the Stones of Blood (1978):

Leonard De Vries: "I am a humble scholar of Druidic lore"

Doctor Who: "...there's so little of it that's historically reliable, is there? The odd mention in Julius Caesar, Tacitus. No great detail. I always thought that Druidism was founded by John Aubrey in the 17th century as a joke."

[*A Warning to the Curious*](#) (1972):

Vicar: "Cooper, R.L. *Romances and Roles of East Anglia*. Fine publication, sadly out of print these many years. You were looking at the coat of arms?"

Paxton: "Yes, there's a legend attached to it, isn't there?"

Vicar: "The buried crowns that guard the realm. That's in Cooper. It's still current folklore around here."

Jacqueline Simpson writes about M. R. James' fabricated legend of the three crowns of East Anglia, stating that 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). Presenting this on TV alongside other folklore texts means that it is equally as capable of affecting popular belief.

I refer back to Adam Scovell's remark that "anything could effectively be put into the mix...and still come out looking relatively authentic" to underline the importance of examining the presentation of such material. 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 popular folkloric belief.

To the medium itself- above any other medium it is the impactfulness of *wyrd television* of the 1970s that is cited as a central influence upon 'folk-horror revivalists' who are producing *wyrd* media texts today (Gallix, 2011).

Post-2000 'folk-horror revivalists' who regularly use 'wyrd' themes include all members of *The League of Gentlemen*; and their subsequent careers Mark Gatiss (*The Tractate Middoth*, 2013); Jeremy Dyson (*Ghost Stories*, 2018); Reece Shearsmith (*Inside No. 9*, 2014-); but also Ben Wheatley (*Kill List*, 2011, *A Field in England*, 2013), Ashley Pharoah (*The Living and the Dead*, 2016), and Jim Jupp (Ghost Box Records). Film director Ben Wheatley cites *wyrd* TV shows and plays like *Children of the Stones* as an example 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." *Wyrd* TV has been hugely impactful in an important way.

In conducting interviews with makers of *wyrd* film and television across the decades, there is a sincere desire to express a sense of 'authentic' folklore in their work and to use it to accentuate authenticity:

Piers Haggard saw the use of folklore in his own work as an attempt at verisimilitude, 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... " to "tap into the things which I thought were moving and interesting and which had emotional, historical cultural depth and resonance" (interview, Rodgers 2017),

Patrick Dromgoole - writer, producer, director of countless folkloric TV fare including: *Arthur of the Britons*, *Sky*, *King of the Castle* and folk-horror cornerstone for many, *Children of the Stones*. "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."

From the 19th century, Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and Margaret Murray's *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* reinforced the dominant theory among folklorists that some British local customs and folklore were 'survivals' from a primordial pagan past, with a traditional concentration on rural customs and beliefs. Though these ideas are no longer taken seriously by folklorists, notions of 'ancient' Druidism and so on are actually much more recent inventions, BUT such texts remained popularly influential until as late as the 1980s; Frazer's work is still cited as influential by a number of creatives I've interviewed, even those working today (Ben Wheatley said Amy Jump used the text as

part inspiration for *A Field in England*, 2013) but, of course to folklorists, Frazer's work has been discredited for decades.

Bob Trubshaw (2002) states that although these popular perceptions persist, are misguided or simply incorrect, that the folklore student observes this is nonetheless important as part of how folklore is created, evolves and adapts; and is even fabricated - this is how folklore is reinterpreted and reproduced: media plays a role in this. But only in recent decades has the study of popular culture and communication of contemporary and urban legends gained much ground; Linda Dégh acknowledges that media has the power and influence to bring about its own form of populist folklore. Gillian Bennett, too, remarks that popular media can directly influence the shaping of public conceptions about folklore (Bennett 1987, 44). However, these are still burgeoning ideas in folklore study: "No one thought much of mass mediated folklore ...many colleagues told me that folklore was contaminated and destroyed by the mass media." (Dégh, 1994: 10)

I argue popular culture, and the development of television as a significant component of this, is socially and culturally important to popular belief; mass media (television) reinterprets and creates its own variants of folklore - i.e. *Scooby Doo* - destroying or reinterpreting folklore?

Ostension is a term appropriated from linguistics by Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi (1983) to suggest a perpetuation of belief. Ostensive action is to behave in a certain way or alter one's actions as a consequence of folklore. In an inspiring text for my study, *Film, Folklore and Urban Legends* (2008), Mikel Koven develops Dégh's work on mass mediated folklore and the existing concept of folkloric ostension to introduce the notion of 'mass-mediated ostension':

This describes when media texts present legendary materials through onscreen action; the ostension here is in the legend or belief being presented to us in an *acting-out* of the tale. The notion of ostension, which is entirely about the communication of folklore, the action of its presentation is quite unique to folklore study and Koven's work allows an explanatory context for how folkloric themes are reproduced in popular culture via film and television. Koven's chapter on *The Wicker Man* explains the unfounded basis of many beliefs portrayed in the film, which relied heavily on Frazer's work. Applying the concept of mass-mediated ostension to television as a theoretical approach, could perhaps be a unique and robust way to study the communication of folklore and contemporary legend.

Returning to *Children of the Stones* as a TV example, it is seen by a number of folk-horror fans and revivalists as their touchstone, as peculiarly British, drawing on ancient customs and beliefs (and as I mentioned earlier, affected beliefs of at least one modern day druid). But beyond Frazer's influence used for the programme, 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 Stephen King reviewed as "not a great book" but noted that there is a sense of authenticity in it. 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 what Trubshaw says about how folklore is created, evolves and adapts; and is even fabricated, it's perhaps less about verisimilitude, more about the *process*.

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. In summary, because there is little academic attention to date of the *folklore* of folk horror this is one of the ways in which I hope my own PhD research, and we here in Sheffield at the CCL can provide a unique point of focus for future folklore study.

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