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Et in Arcadia Ego: The Very British Landscape of Folk Horror

by Diane A. Rodgers

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Folk horror is a relatively newly defined and unsettling genre of British film and television - acknowledging *folklore* as central to this and how it is perpetuated through mass media - is something that folklorists and screen studies scholars are only really just beginning to explore. Much focus is on folk horror of the 1970s, but the use of folklore continues to be recurrent in onscreen narratives - as RWS, writer of folk horror classic *Blood on Satan's Claw* notes, "The folk tale will never die and horror is an element of the folk tale". Folk horror is often associated especially with landscape and themes of 'unearthing' which help to characterise British folk horror with its own peculiarly national sense of eeriness.

Adam Scovell's book on folk horror expresses a somewhat dismissive attitude to folklore studies, arguing 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). But 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. It is of vital importance to clarify and contextualise history and folklore as presented by popular film and television texts *because* of their ability to affect and perpetuate contemporary folkloric belief. My own research interviews with writers and directors of relevant work suggests they were indeed concerned with a degree of authenticity and plausibility.

Although folk horror and 'wyrd' media are still relatively new categories, the British landscape is invariably noted as a key factor in creating eerie atmospheres onscreen. Mark Gatiss remarks that a key element of folk horror is "a common obsession with the British landscape, its folklore and superstitions" - and it is not only the British Countryside, but also its weather which has a very distinct look and feel.

Think of bleak grey skies and hills of *The Wicker Man*, or the autumnal trees and fields of *Witchfinder General*. LGC: speaking about filming BBC *Ghost Stories for Christmas* remarked that at times "there was a thick mist so we got the more dramatic effect of the sound of the horses trotting then the side lamps burning through and finally the coach emerging... Autumn is a great time for filming in the English countryside. You get early sunsets, lovely mists and abundant cobwebs in the dew" - all of which are evocative images. Robert Macfarlane's article "The eeriness of the English countryside" describes the eeriness as "the skull beneath the skin of the countryside", the sense in British culture that a kind of darkness is always present, something sinister just beneath the surface- and something that defines this type of eerie horror as peculiarly British.

Macfarlane makes reference to MR James' ghost stories, which have been adapted for film and television on numerous occasions, (most famously in the 1970s BBC *Ghost Story for Christmas* series, revived in the 2000s). James is generally considered to be the master of the English ghost story and was of course a folklorist himself. Macfarlane: "I find the eerie far more alarming than the horrific: James is one of only two writers...who has caused me to wake myself with my own screaming." (2015). LGC also notes that James' "renowned English settings had none of the sentimental heritage qualities given to so many 'classic' tv adaptations of Jane Austen ... His towns are habitually lonely, run down places and his country sides are bleak and resolutely unpicturesque".

A reason Macfarlane gives for James' affectiveness is his understanding of landscape "especially the English landscape - as constituted by uncanny forces, part-buried sufferings ...is never a smooth surface... Rather it is a realm that snags, bites and troubles...". To relate this to more recent folk horror media, Macfarlane describes Ben Wheatley's *A Field in England* as a "brilliant" film, "in which

an alchemist's assistant joins a group of civil war deserters, high on psychedelic mushrooms, on a hunt for treasure supposedly buried in a field. The film is shot in black and white, which invests the grass, trees, clouds and gun smoke with a strangely luminous intensity of greyscale". The treasure hunt is, as film critic Jonathan Romney describes, "*Apocalypse Now* among the hedgerows" . The field itself is the focus of the title - the landscape is the setting, the trap, and the folklore of which characters get pulled into literally - including the notion that it takes four men and a rope to pull someone out of a fairy ring. When I spoke with Ben Wheatley: "There was something in the landscape that plainly terrified" - him, he spoke of being surrounded by history and folklore in the UK and trying to explain the concept to American producers that " the idea of that history is around you in the UK, ... you can walk-- ten miles from wherever you are and find an ancient monument, I mean, where I live, we walk the dog round a Saxon hill fort".

Macfarlane also discusses "digging down to reveal the hidden content of the under-earth [as] another trope of the eerie". In *Blood on Satan's Claw*, the catalyst to the narrative is a **literal unearthing** during the ploughing of a field, supposedly of the Devil. Writer RWS describes his idea of folk horror as a result of a repressed pagan past and certain types of folkloric belief, out of which comes "the idea of something erupting...that eeriness that you get in some of the English things.." So many things feel embedded in British history and culture that are taken for granted - to return to MR James, there is much literal digging for treasure, such as in *A Warning to the Curious* (directed by LGC for the BBC in 1972). The story and TV episode discuss the legend of the three crowns of East Anglia. Not only is this legend entirely fabricated by M. R. James , Jacqueline Simpson describes how the tale is given such "plausible details, many ...now assume that this antiquarian 'legend' which James wove into his fictional tale is authentic folklore." (2011, 286). Not only that, but James in fact drew heavily upon Scandinavian folklore, not just British folk legend and customs. It is interesting, then, that the combination of influences, including and extended by director LG Clarke's TV adaptations; results in not only eerily authentic and effective stories (Simpson 1997, 16) but ones which are often regarded as typically British.

Returning to Adam Scovell's remark that "anything could effectively be put into the mix [of folk horror]...and still come out looking relatively authentic" underlines the importance of examining the presentation of such material and its ability to be accepted as potentially true. Acknowledging *folklore* as central to folk horror, as communicated in mass media and use of landscape - is a key element of the eeriness of such representations, not just in the landscape itself but the stories, the history; the folklore that **comes with** the landscape; RWS "that feeling of a sense of place being very important to folk horror...of wherever it happens to be actually gives you part of the story" .

Folkloric themes persist across many types and genres of media, not always necessarily 'horrific' so the term 'wyrd' can be used in place of 'folk horror'. Wyrd media often shares a haunting, considered, atmospheric tone and includes documentaries, television plays, series' and Public Information Films. A famous one that terrified many children in 1973 - THE SPIRIT OF DARK AND LONELY WATER (clip).

Such works share much in common, in style and tone at least, with modern media that is described as hauntological such as Richard Littler's *Scarfolk* blog (based on the idea of a town in NW England that has not progressed beyond 1979) and music released by Ghost Box Records; Andy Paciorek describes hauntology as incorporating a "sense of nostalgia for yesterday's vision of the future"(2015, 9-13). Jim Jupp of Ghost Box records explains the importance of the influence of 1970s TV in particular and has released "entire albums inspired by the terrifying, authoritarian feel of vintage Public Information Films. There is something in these which draw on a very **British** past, folklore, myth and legend as well as aesthetics; media which is modern and relevant in one sense yet also feels uncannily out of time and place, with an unsettling eeriness because of this.

Even British comedy shares a sense of the English eerie, employing darker folkloric themes - most obviously *The League of Gentlemen*, or less obviously, the far gentler *Detectorists*, the most literal programme about unearthing (metal detecting, digging for gold)and the British landscape, described by writer director Mackenzie Crook as a sitcom that Thomas Hardy might have written. But it is not so far from the work of MR James - as LGC notes, some of James' strongest elements blend " landscape, history and myth and a lonely driven man seeking something that we know should be best left well alone... How would he have approached the metal detecting zealots of contemporary treasure-hunting?". The end of series 3 episode 1, set in contemporary 2017, gives us a hint of how this might have been managed, it has hauntological suggestions of connective threads through time and even recalls the tale type motif of ghosts being raised by a whistle (clip <https://youtu.be/C6gSYHJhuCw?t=55> - 2 minutes).

Terms like 'hauntology' and 'wyrd' help describe this general sense of eeriness that links all these media, with reference a sense of time being broken, haunted by or borrowing from the past to create a skewed or unsettling vision of the present or the future. Post-2000 'folk-horror revival' work which uses 'wyrd' themes include Jeremy Dyson's film *Ghost Stories*, 2018, episodes of *Inside No. 9*, 2014-, Ben Wheatley's *Kill List*, 2011 and Ashley Pharoah's *The Living and the Dead*, 2016. Interviewing Jeremy Dyson I asked him if *wyrd* TV he saw, particularly with folkloric themes in the 1970s, was influential upon his present career: "Yes. **Absolutely**. One hundred percent. It showed me the way... No question, no question."

1970s media, particularly television, *continues* to be a touchstone for many drawing upon media references especially those who were children during the era. It was a period in which folklore was treated with some gravity in mainstream media which Bob Fischer describes as "a deliciously credulous era, when reported hauntings would be treated as semi-serious news... " (2017, 33) such as with the case of the Enfield poltergeist, and Vic Pratt notes as a "cultural moment when witchcraft and the occult were no longer ludicrous...." (2013, 2). Television programmes in the 1970s were either broadcast live or were transmitted and then gone, with no possibility to rewind or 'catch up' later. Bob Fischer describes the generation of the 1970s as "amongst the last to remember their childhoods in this fractured, dreamlike fashion...the last 'analogue' generation" (2017, 36) which perhaps help suggest the impact of partial memories and strong impressions made by eerie programming of the day.

If folklore is, at least, in part: "man's attempt to bring enjoyment to his leisure through the art of storytelling" Thompson, S. (1977), and directors like Piers Haggard and Lawrence Gordon Clark indeed consider themselves storytellers, first and foremost ["film is like telling a story - it certainly is in our culture, it's about telling a story... the most important thing is the story " - Haggard] then it is important to think about how film and television communicate folklore. In turn, it is important to understand the impact and effect of past media and past storytellers on the present; the storytellers and folklore of today.

In doing so, I'd like to finish with an example of a film made in 2018 by Scottish director Paul Wright, using over 100 clips of archive footage with eerie original music by Portishead's Adrian Utley and Goldfrapp's Will Gregory. This film, *ARCADIA*, neatly draws together many threads I've touched upon: not only British myth and history, public information films of the 1970s and hauntology, playing with notions of broken time but also the legacy of things like British national WW2 cinema, and it brings its own, dark postmodern twist and undercurrent to these politically unsettled times, the past haunts the future. *Arcadia* has been described as "A fever dream of the British countryside" and by the BFI as "A folk horror fairy tale about the British people's relationship to the land." In this we can see new media directly influenced by everything that's gone before - to create a particular vision of Britain and national identity haunted by its folklore, landscape and media past. (Clip - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YfK5J3kYG9U> - 2 MINS).