

## **Folklore On Screen**

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# DIANE A. RODGERS RESEARCHER BLOG: FOLKLORE ON SCREEN

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The Centre for Contemporary Legend (CCL) research group team (David Clarke, Andrew Robinson and myself, Diane Rodgers) were keen to build on our successful inaugural 2018 symposium and considered a larger event with a clear focus that could have more of an academic and public impact. Wanting to be ultra-contemporary and more firmly establish our own mark in the field of folklore studies, we decided that 'Folklore on Screen' would be an ideal conference theme. This captures a wave of studies surfacing in recent years examining folklore, film, television whilst also celebrating the multidisciplinary nature of folklore studies, which has long connected a number of disciplines (our own areas of teaching and research alone cover journalism, UFOlogy, photography, calendar customs, television and film). The theme also lends itself to the popular rise in interest in folk horror and hauntology across a variety of media so, for the department of Media, Arts and Communications to host an event at the forefront of communication of folklore in the media seemed a natural fit.

Folklore on screen investigates folklore study and popular culture, looking at not just what folklore is represented on screen but *how* folklore is communicated by media, how is it framed and in what contexts. This stems not just from interest in folk horror and its various monsters, devils, demons and pagan rituals, but also we see folklore on screen relating to UFOlogy, hauntology, wyrdness and wider folkloric traditions, and extending beyond film and television to include videogames, photography and the internet. We were delighted to be awarded funding from the Creating Knowledge Implementation Plan project (assisting research groups such to seize opportunities to be leading in our area and have real social, economic and cultural impact). The support of the C3Ri team has also been invaluable in encouraging and guiding our aims.

Overwhelmed by submissions for papers, we found ourselves in the lucky position of designing an extremely rich conference and, after spending many days sifting grouping papers, we found wonderful themes emerging that allowed us to have fun with panel titles. We enjoyed coming up with, for example; 'The Monster Mash' (featuring papers on vampires, werewolves and ghosts); 'Ghosts in the Machine' (digital urban legends and the hauntological internet); 'The Devil Rides Out' (Satanic narratives, folk horror, occulture and fairy-lore) and 'The Village of the Damned' (folkloric rituals in onscreen narratives about remote communities). These titles also lent themselves well to conference visuals: zombie hands plunging from the earth, haunted television sets, flying saucers and screaming 1950s horror comic-style damsels all featured in posters, slides and, most strikingly, adorning the entrance staircase of Cantor building (which fills me with joy to see arriving to work each day!). Myself and Andrew Robinson enjoyed designing the materials ourselves, including stickers (snapped up by delegates in no time) and a folk horror showreel (edited by Andrew) on the giant video-wall. The attention to detail was appreciated by delegates: "Excellent design of booklet and signage... the posters, film clips etc really enhanced the conference experience."

My own personal experience of organising the event highlighted how wonderful my colleagues are to work with, each of us passionate about our interests and sharing the workload fairly and evenly: this may sound minor but makes every difference in organising such a large event. We started planning a year ahead of the event, and worked hard on making it our own. We cannot thank Kathy Doherty and Amy Lander enough for their support with encouragement, time and administrative help, vital to our success. It's fantastic that each of the three founders of the CCL delivered their own papers as part of the conference, showcasing our own research as diverse and vital to the centre with inter-disciplinary synthesis at the heart of the study of folklore studies and contemporary legend. It was also a great opportunity to welcome the newest member of our team, PhD student Sophie Parkes-Nield, instrumental in helping the event run smoothly.

I was proud to be able to speak at the event opening, and delighted that both our first choice keynote speakers were in attendance. Mikel Koven gave a fascinating opening keynote contextualising the film *Get Out* (2017) as a zombie film, with fascinating detailed research on Haitian folklore. Helen Wheatley's closing keynote on Haunted Landscapes drew together a number of conference strands, including contemporary British television drama and ghostly folkloric themes on television. I am thrilled that both keynotes received extremely high praise in delegate feedback across the board. The other outstanding highlight for, it seems, *everyone* in attendance, was The Haunted Generation panel, featuring industry creatives David Southwell, Andy Paciorek and Bob Fischer. Their papers connected well on themes of 1970s childhood, nostalgia and unsettling fears fed by news and television dramas from the period. Though not all used to an academic audience, the presenters remained unphased and were all extremely well-versed in their areas and entertaining in their presentation styles. The inclusion of this panel is reflective of a wider necessary shift in academia to acknowledge public engagement with research: including the 'outside world' in academic reflection can only work to improve partnerships, and reflects my own strong belief in closely connecting teaching and research, sharing and developing knowledge as widely as possible.

In a similar spirit, it was marvellous to be able to offer an evening event mid-conference for our delegates to attend at The Hubs (SHU student union, with thanks to Rob Lee): an evening of hauntological music from contemporary folk musicians Sharron Kraus, Phil Tyler and Hawthonn. The evening set the scene perfectly for 'The Haunted Generation' the following morning. We even had our own branded 'Wyrd Folk' beer for the event; there's something very special about drinking a bottle of ale with a label you've designed yourself! Luckily, I consumed only a sensible amount and was fresh enough to enjoy the remainder of the conference and deliver my own paper (on Nigel Kneale's television series *Beasts*) the following afternoon. As a team we are excited by the success of the event and embrace the varied disciplines that folklore studies crosses and unites in our mutual fascination with folklore and contemporary legend.