

Happy Halloween: Five Folk Horror Films

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Folk horror is a sub-genre that has come to be associated with onscreen use of haunting landscapes and sinister isolated communities. However, it is often the use of folklore itself, with writers and directors drawing on myth and contemporary legend that helps to create an eerie atmosphere in films and television programmes we love to spook ourselves with. In no particular order, here is a selection of some favourites of Diane A. Rodgers (Senior Lecturer in Media and one of the co-founders of Sheffield Hallam University's Centre for Contemporary Legend Research Group), as ones to watch out for this Halloween.

1. *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971), directed by Piers Haggard.

An obvious choice to those familiar with folk horror, but for those new to the genre, an absolute must-see. Frequently cited as one of the 'unholy trinity' of folk horror films (along with *Witchfinder General*, 1968 and *The Wicker Man*, 1973), *Blood on Satan's Claw* is my favourite of the trio. A cult favourite of the League of Gentlemen gang also (some of whom recorded an audio version this year), set in early 18th-century England, the film tells the tale of demonic possession taking over a village. From the start when a deformed skull with bits of fur and an uncanny eye still intact are unearthed, strange events start to occur, including the village children forming a Satanic cult overseen by a cruel teenage girl named Angel. Superb Satanic ritual, murder and mayhem ensue!

2. *Curse of the Crimson Altar* (1968), directed by Vernon Sewell.

Starring horror stalwarts Boris Karloff, Christopher Lee and Barbara Steele, this lesser-known cult movie features black magic against the backdrop of swinging 1960s hedonism. An evil sorcerer invites a young couple to his spooky mansion, with the lure of a hip party masking the black magician's plans to sacrifice the young man to atone for the evil misdeeds of his ancestors. Loosely based on a story by H. P. Lovecraft, the film features bizarre and erotic Black Mass ceremonies, spooky ritual masks, groovy 1960s outfits and possibly the best folk horror headdress worn by an evil black magic priestess ever!

3. *Dr Terrors House of Horrors* (1965), directed by Freddie Francis

One of my all-time favourite films, this portmanteau classic has everything: Peter Cushing, Christopher Lee, Michael Gough, Donald Sutherland, 60s DJ Alan Freeman and even national treasures Roy Castle and Kenny Lynch. Folkloric stories of werewolves, killer plants, vengeful disembodied hands, vampires and fateful tarot cards abound. My own favourite, however, is where we get to witness Roy Castle performing swinging 60s beatnik jazz numbers on his trumpet, embroiled in a tale of stolen Voodoo music! What more could you possibly need?

4. *Borderlands* (2013), directed by Elliot Goldner

This is one of the final two films in my list that the less you know about in advance, the better. Presented as found footage, it stars the wonderful Gordon Kennedy as a craggy religious brother sent by the Vatican to investigate supernatural goings-on in a remote West Country church. Pagan sacrifice and violent exorcism become entangled in the unfolding tale where events steadily escalate. The atmosphere is palpably thick and creepy throughout, haunting and with a huge twist in the tale - avoid spoilers before watching!

5. *Antrum: The Deadliest Film Ever Made* (2019), directed by David Amito and Michael Laicini

Recently screened at Sheffield's Celluloid Screams horror film festival, *Antrum* is a film presented in the spirit of mischievous movie genius William Castle, complete with warnings that, by watching this film, the audience accepts responsibility for any event occurring to them during or after the screening including "illness, injury, mortal danger or death". The mini-documentary preceding the film explains that screenings of *Antrum* have their very own folklore and legend, being surrounded by bizarre incidents including the last cinema that showed the film subsequently burning to the ground. The cursed feature, in which a young girl and her brother attempt to dig a hole to hell, shot in 1979, reputedly vanished without a trace, and Else films have located the only known copy in existence. This is that film. I absolutely HAD to see this film. And I haven't died... yet.

Happy Halloween!