

Folklore in Film, Television and Museum Exhibits

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Folklore in Film, Television and Museum Exhibits

Folklore is a living, evolving part of our everyday lives and is present in the cultural artefacts that surround us. Significant elements of this cultural fabric are film and television, streamed into homes via a number of devices and from across many different countries and decades. My research interest lies in how folklore is communicated onscreen in this way, not only by *what* is represented on screen, but *how* and in what contexts. Examination of such texts can suggest to us how customs and rituals change over time and evolutions of belief and attitude, which directly affect how people may experience relevant archive material.

For example, consider the representation of Voodoo in *Dr. Terror's House of Horrors* (1965) or shrunken heads in numerous cinematic examples, including Tim Burton's *Beetlejuice* (1994). Texts like these may be the very first experience many people have with concepts about such physical artefacts, before having come into close contact with them in a museum and, perhaps, even before questions about racism or colonialism are raised for them (the Pitt Rivers museum in Oxford recently removed its famous collection of shrunken heads as part of a decolonisation process).

Dried cats such as those exhibited at the Museum of Witchcraft and magic in Boscastle, traditionally placed in buildings for luck or to ward off evil spirits, can be given a more sinister dimension of magic by film and television. For example, 'Baby' an episode of Nigel Kneale's 1976 television series *Beasts*, features a couple finding a dried creature in an urn, bricked up in a wall. In this case, however, rather than bringing any kind of luck with it at all as an apotropaic device, this dried curiosity has in fact been imbued with an extremely unpleasant curse.

People's encounter with such exhibits are likely already coloured in some way by (potentially problematic) onscreen representations and it is vital to study the way folklore is presented in popular media because of this. Museum exhibits can educate and reshape common understanding, providing unique and additional contexts to such material as an experience in themselves. I am a fan of both Powell and Pressburger's classic wartime film *A Canterbury Tale* (1942), in which characters stay in the Hand of Glory Inn and *The Wicker Man* (1953) in which Edward Woodward wakes up to a hand of glory burning by his bedside. Imagine my delight, then, when I happened across a 'real' hand of glory at the Whitby town museum collection some years ago. I look forward to more such future encounters, magical or otherwise!

Diane A. Rodgers

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