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Published version

RODGERS, Diane (2024). Monstrous Megaliths: Spooky Stones of Folk Horror. Contemporary Legend, 2 (4), 1-7.

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Monstrous Megaliths: Spooky Stones of Folk Horror

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In this paper, I am interested in how folklore and contemporary legends about British megalithic monuments, stone circles, and monoliths have been presented onscreen in film and television (especially in folk horror), what kinds of ideas about them persist in popular culture, and if there are any implications we might draw from this.

This is Spinal Tap, comedic mockumentary from 1984 features a song called "Stonehenge." This parodic prog rock song has lyrics which conflate Druids, demons, banshees, magic, dragons, the "Pipes of Pan" and notions about "living rock," sacrifice, and fairies with the stone circle. Though the song's performance is made ridiculous due to a mistake in scale of the props, within the diegesis of the film, the band's intention was clearly to create a sense of awe and mystery which suggests a broad sense of popular fascination with mystical notions about ancient stones.

Standing stones clearly provide an enduring source of fascination not only for audiences, but also writers and directors. Piers Haggard, director of British classic folk horror film *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971) and 1979's television series *Quatermass* describes stone circles as "history with an added mystery factor…stone circles are wonderfully interesting, because they *work* on your imagination about...sacrifice, moonrise, sunrise, festivals…how the f**k did they get those stones [there]… that's amazing!' (pers. comm. 17 June 2017).

Contemporary film and television directors share this fascination. Ben Wheatley, speaking about his film *A Field in England* (2013) said "there was something in the landscape that plainly terrified me." He also spoke to me about feeling surrounded by history in the UK and that "you can walk ten miles from wherever you are and find an ancient monument…where I live, we walk the dog round a Saxon hill fort" (pers. comm. 25 May 2018).

Work by directors like these evokes a tangible sense of ancient, perhaps sinister, history present in the physical landscape which megalithic stones are often used to suggest or overtly represent. Robert Wynne-Simmons, writer of *The Blood on Satan's Claw* says that using ancient sites onscreen "actually *gives you* part of the story" (pers. comm. 22 May 2017). Such stones already have their own associated stories, legends, and folklore, so the act of putting this type of landscape on screen

brings those stories with them, presented as a kind of palimpsest to the fictional narrative. Ancient stones in folk horror especially are often central to the narrative and can combine several ideas from folklore and contemporary legend in one visual image.

Part of the enduring appeal of stone circles is, no doubt, the abundance of folkloric tales and lack of definitive answers about many aspects of their existence which acts as fuel for the imagination. Even in the well-documented case of Stonehenge, scholars like Ronald Hutton can only use educated guesswork about its origins, noting that "literary sources do not tell us anything conclusive about the midwinter practices of the ancient British Isles" (1996: 5).

Quatermass

In 1979 British television series *Quatermass*, a fictional stone circle called Ringstone Round is central to the narrative. Professor Bernard Quatermass was a fictional heroic scientist who appeared in various television, film, and radio productions written by Nigel Kneale across many decades. In this version, the now older Professor Quatermass (played by John Mills) searches for his missing granddaughter who has become a member of a quasi-religious youth cult, the Planet People, who believe they will be beamed to their salvation in space. They are, however, actually being conditioned to gather at stone circles to be 'harvested' as a food source by a mysterious extraterrestrial energy.

Kneale's original intention was to use Stonehenge (in name as well as location) as a real-world Neolithic monument and to weave in a blend of recorded history and folklore about stone circles with his fictional plot. Stonehenge has unique status as the best-known prehistoric monument in Europe, thanks in particular to a wealth of mystical theories accumulating since the Middle Ages about its construction and purpose. In the twelfth century, Geoffrey of Monmouth described how it was "through the ingenuity of Merlin," the wizard of Arthurian legend, that "the great megaliths of Stonehenge were brought…to Salisbury Plain" by magic from Ireland (Tolstoy 2016). In the 1960s, Erich von Däniken (1968) suggested the site functioned as a landing pad for alien terrestrial craft, which fuelled a revival of theories about "ancient alien astronauts" in new-age culture, reflected in Kneale's Planet People cult. Stonehenge *wasn't* used for *Quatermass* due to budgetary restrictions, but this inspired Kneale to invent his own megalithic circle which he wanted to give 'some resonant name." Thus was born Ringstone Round, which lends itself well to Kneale's invented nursery rhyme that features in the series "Huffity Puffity Ringstone Round" (reminiscent of "Ring a Ring o' Roses") adding another dimension of plausible history and legend to his creation.

Another fictional stone circle in *Quatermass* is referred to as "the stumpy men," whose name recalls petrification legends commonly

associated with stone circles (see Bord & Bord 1976; Grinsell 1976). The Merry Maidens in Cornwall, the Nine Maidens in Devon, and the Nine Ladies stone circle in Derbyshire all have traditional beliefs about the monuments depicting women who were turned into stone as a punishment for dancing on the Sabbath (English Heritage, n.d.). Folklore about the Rollright Stones (in Oxfordshire) tells that a witch turned a king, his army, and his knights to stone whilst the witch herself became an elder tree: 'if it is cut the spell is broken [and] the Stones will come back to life' (The Rollright Trust, n.d.). The 'motif of *petrification* as punishment for wrongdoing' and the notion of standing stones containing or trapping people in some way, is common in supernatural folklore (Grinsell 1979: 66, italics in original), blurring the animate with inanimate: speaking of life and movement frozen in magic and time.

Children of the Stones

This type of petrification is tightly woven into the plot of 1977 television series *Children of the Stones* which has been described as one of the "scariest children's tv series ever made" (Hinman 2020). The story follows Professor Adam Brake and his son visiting the fictional village of Milbury to conduct scientific research on neolithic stones, set and filmed within the real stone circle at Avebury, the largest prehistoric stone circle in the world. In the opening sequence of every episode, which includes what has been called "the most inappropriate theme music ever used for a children's series," the stones are depicted as looming, threatening presences whilst also appearing to be screaming out themselves in pain (Brotherstone & Lawrence 2017: 97). This nightmarish collage sees standing stones filling all sides and spaces of the screen as we hear a cacophony of voices, howl, chant and wail on the soundtrack—evoking the idea that the stones contain trapped people or souls, frozen in time.

As Kneale draws upon the real history of Stonehenge, *Children of the Stones* weaves Avebury's real history into its narrative. In real excavations in 1938, a medieval skull and partial skeleton were discovered under a fallen stone. The skeleton has been believed to be a travelling barber surgeon or tailor who was helping Avebury villagers dig out the underside of the stone when it fell, crushing him beneath it. Others suggest the man was actually buried beneath a stone. Either way, items such as scissors and thirteenth-century coins discovered with the remains allowed archaeologists to date a period when stone-burial was taking place. In *Children of the Stones*, this story is recounted by the curator of the local museum: "He was helping to bury one of the stones when it crushed him to death" and "when they re-erected the sarsen his skeleton was found underneath." When asked why the villagers were burying the stone, she explains "The villagers believed that if they buried one of the stones each

year, it would bring them luck," which her explanation links real elements of history with sacrificial notions from traditional custom and belief.

Several elements in *Children of the Stones* imply that events in the circle are related to extraterrestrial involvement and the notion of ancient aliens. In a twist on the notion of an alien force using stone circles' energy to *take something* from humans (as in *Quatermass*), in *Children of the Stones*, the beam of light in fact originates from a stone dish under the village, as Matthew realises, "the energy comes from here, it's a transmitter." This dish is collecting power carried to the stones by ley lines and, each day when aligned with the stars, channels a beam that somehow sends villagers' anxieties, individuality and personality out into space—turns them pod people, contained within the circle.

In *Quatermass*, Ringstone Round is a "marker" of alien visitation to which the Planet People are being drawn. The stone circle performs a similar narrative function to what Mark Fisher frames as a "xenolithic artefact" which he describes as "autonomous, sentient inorganic demons in specific (hauntological) landscapes." The suggestion that objects (in this case stones) themselves can be a threat, "operating as fatalistic engines, drawing characters into deadly compulsions," can be applied to megalithic structures in *Quatermass*, luring the Planet People to their own annihilation (Fisher 2012: 21, 83).

Contemporary Representations of Stones

In contemporary examples of British folk horror, sinister notions about ancient stones prevail. In Ben Wheatley's *In The Earth* (2021), a scientist ventures into a forest to find a research colleague and encounters strange occurrences linked to an ancient force within a large monolith. The film's opening is dominated by the stone, with multiple references in the dialogue suggesting that people are "drawn to it from all over" and, even though there is no stone circle there is the sense of being contained "everything seems to just keep us here." There are also suggestions that the stone is sentient: "If it wants to talk, we have to listen." One character religiously worships the stone, to the extent of offering sacrifice. He tells a story of "practising necromancer and alchemist" who was "inducted into the stone. Transferred into the ancient matter of the forest…trapped here." There are overt ecological themes, with mention of the being in the stone asking for help but also being looked to for advice about "how we can all live together without destroying each other." On this note, interestingly the film was made during the first heightened wave of COVID; masks and personal protective equipment feature in the film's mise-en-scène. Though COVID is not specifically mentioned, this is an added aesthetic warning of external environmental elements—with the notion of the stone somehow having ancient wisdom to impart, functioning as a watcher or a guardian, albeit a powerful and dangerous one.

Mark Jenkin's *Enys Men* (2022) is set on an uninhabited island where a volunteer makes daily observations of local plant life. The film has been described as *The Shining* on an island but is perhaps more comparable with Robert Eggers' *The Lighthouse* (2019), as the narrative follows the central character's loss of her grip of reality in a more arthouse, abstract way. The landscape in *Enys Men* is dominated by one ancient stone, prominent throughout the film. There are connotations that the stone acts as a waymarker or memorial for a site of a tragic Cornish mining accident, but the stone acts very much as a character in the film watching over the island. It is a forbidding presence on screen: a shocking moment in the film is when the stone suddenly, briefly, appears in a different location, acting very much like a warning, physically blocking the volunteer's way.

Enys Men is Cornish for Stone Island, and the film uses the actual Boswens Menhir (about which myths tell that animals fear approaching the stone). Traditional belief about stones in Cornwall combines the idea of stones being alive and having a kind of conscious authority: one book on the subject states "long ago, stones were alive. They spoke and delivered judgments, distinguishing the rightful king from the usurper, the honest man from the thief" (Dexter 1932). As used on screen in this case, the notion communicated about the stone is less about trapping people (or being energy conductors) and acting more as representative sitting in judgement as a guardian of the past.

Conclusions

Beyond folklore and legends about stones, an obvious aesthetic influence for the use of monoliths onscreen is *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Are the monoliths in *2001* a waymarker of human progression, a welcome sign from aliens, or a forbidding warning to proceed no further? In late 2020, a series of monoliths appeared for real around the world initially in Utah then all across the globe, including in my hometown of Sheffield, United Kingdom. These arrivals were most likely pieces of situationist art, but the nature of their appearance, particularly in the heightened COVID-era, they seemed to capture people's imaginations. The monoliths appeared in mainstream news media reports across the globe, which included several headlines asking "Artist or aliens" or making direct comparisons with *2001* (Kesslen 2020). People seemed keen to speculate about some kind of meaning or warning behind the objects.

Images from a 1990s United States Department of Energy project (see Chapman 2022) exploring proposed designs for warning people away from radioactive waste storage facilities look *not unlike* standing stones. The literal purpose of structures like these is intended to tell future humans to KEEP AWAY and there are debates about how sites like this might best communicate this to people in 10,000 years' time. In the novelisation of *Quatermass*, somewhat hauntingly, the character describes the Ringstone

Round nursery rhyme acting as this type of message: "Preserved as a memory, transmitted through the centuries of infants' singing. *Like nuclear waste set harmlessly in blocks of glass*." Quatermass further hypothesises: "men may have raised those megaliths to commemorate, to mark places that had become terrible to them, places that had been visited…and left traces behind, perhaps deep under the surface" (Kneale 1979: 60-61, italics mine).

Across examples of folk horror in particular, megalithic stones are used in an unsettling way: whether a monstrous threat coming from the stones themselves, from the earth beneath or the sign of alien peril. Moving far beyond notions about ancient stones as spiritual places or sites of worship—folk horror resolutely presents them as places where BAD or DANGEROUS THINGS can happen. Perhaps we should be *keeping away* from megalithic sites: will humans in 10,000 years (presuming we are still here) be legend-tripping nuclear warning sites, wondering what we were trying to communicate or worship? Both the 1970s and the present see heightened periods of environmental concern: ecological disaster is a recurring theme in 1970s dystopian horror, and into the 2020s we see regular news of environmental and climate disasters. Perhaps, as Nigel Kneale's *Quatermass* wonders, ancient stones were indeed a way of our ancestors trying to warn us against ourselves.

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