"Isn't Folk Horror All Horror?"

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Fear 2000 presentation (2021) – Diane A. Rodgers: "Isn't folk horror *all* horror?"

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The notion of folk horror as a distinct sub-genre has developed in leaps and bounds since its post-2000 revival, with the most oft-cited examples considered 'classic folk horror' still distinctly from British 1970s cinema.

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More recent folk horror titles released continue to echo qualities from this earlier period, putting them very much in the same generic category – it is these types of films to which I will refer as classic folk horror.

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In 2017 Ben Wheatley (director of films considered seminal in the modern folk horror canon) wondered in my interview with him: "Isn't folk horror *all* horror?"

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"no". However, I will of course show my workings - in my discussion with Ben Wheatley, we went on to talk about folkloric tales of vampires and other monsters and he (quite rightly) wondered:

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"isn't the werewolf's tale a folk horror tale… That's all folk tale stuff. So, in a way, most horror is folk". I am taking as a given, that folklore is absolutely integral to folk horror narratives, I and others have already argued this elsewhere (Rodgers, 2019, Cowdell, 2019) and I won't really being going into that further here. I also want to acknowledge that the roots of horror **in general** are firmly based in some sort of folk tales, horror is the stuff of folklore unofficially recorded stories & histories, campfire tales, myth and urban legend. So although all horror might have folklore, not all horror is folk horror, at least as the term is generically applied today.

So much of what has already been written about folk horror focuses on trying to define its nuances, looking at abstract representations, complex thematic patterns, the onscreen use of liminal spaces, notions of fuzzy memory, and immersive unsettling atmospheres – very much from the inside looking out. Therefore – this paper is really thinking aloud about folk horror from a different perspective, I want to take a step back and examine it from the outside looking in – to look at it broadly, to see if it helps pull some ideas into focus.

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ACADEMIC TRIGGER WARNING - to do this, I will be: make sweeping generalisations, contradicting myself. HOEWEVER sometimes it is useful to take a step back and make broad comparisons to gain a different degree of clarity, and even play Devil's Advocate to an extent to gain a wider view about the aesthetics of folk horror: to establish what something *IS*, it is useful to show what it *ISN'T*

If you find these kind of generalisations awkward at any point, for your own comfort and safety, please feel free to mentally add the #notallhorror to any statements you may find upsetting - With that out of the way, I will state that –

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Folk horror is NOT classic horror – I am using 'classic horror' in the broadest sense as arguably established by classic Universal horror in the 1930s and their enduring iconography associated with legendary monsters. (Nosferatu) *Dracula*, in 1931, became synonymous with Bela Lugosi whilst *Frankenstein* (1931) was embodied by Boris Karloff. Both actors would reprise these roles in a number of sequels in the successful Universal Monsters series, helping reinforce the public perception of, and familiarity with, these iconographic characters helping to cement distinct conventions for the horror genre. Some of the most instantly-recognisable relate to stylistic choices in terms of lighting, music and sound to create atmosphere and the visual presentation of the 'monsters' themselves.

Across these elements, classic horror offers an abundance of visual drama, using low key lighting effects to create large areas of shadow onscreen from which a monster may emerge at any moment, or underlighting distorting a character's features to appear more intense or sinister. In every case, these commonly used lighting effects are dramatic and theatrical, and thus a significant proportion of horror films take place in a dark setting or at night.

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The music of classic horror is similarly dramatic, with orchestral grandiosity giving weight to the narrative or sweeping, symphonic strings underlining impending disaster or a perilous encounter e.g. Max Steiner's thematic score for *King Kong* (1933). A specific narrative use of music in classic horror is to employ musical 'stabs' which build or create tension and often accompany scary moments or attacks: eliciting a physical 'jumpscare' reaction from an audience. such as the screech of violins used by Bernard Hermann in Hitchcock's infamous *Psycho* shower scene in (1960). Dramatic, high-tension music on horror scores persists today, with recurring motifs such as the pounding heartbeat of Carpenter's *Halloween* theme, and high octane heavy metal or punk bands often featuring on soundtracks (e.g. recent *Fear Street* trilogy).

Many of these dramatic conventions, and iconic monsters embodied by a star, carried on throughout horror cinema history, for example, the Hammer horrors from the late 1950s onward, spawning further rafts of sequels and made horror stars out of actors like Peter Cushing and Christopher Lee, the latter who, like Lugosi before him, became synonymous with the Transylvanian count.

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Once again, with the slasher films of the 1970s and '80s, narratives were built around clearly defined character-monsters drawing this time not from gothic literature but from other areas of folklore and urban legend. Wes Craven's iconic dream-stalker Freddy Krueger for example, was a modern take on the manifestation of nightmares and sleep paralysis (an area written extensively upon by folklorist David Hufford). Similarly, *Halloween* / *Friday 13th* drew upon myths like the 'escaped psycho' and 'the hookman' urban legend (later used by *Candyman* (1992) (recently remade), and *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997), an enduring folkloric trope which began circulation amongst teenagers in '50s America. A vast proportion of these classic horror films rely upon a central, specific, 'monstrous' figure who, though lurking in the onscreen shadows, are also distinctly iconic: the striped jumper, worn fedora and razor-claw glove immediately identify Freddy Kruger in the same way that a cape and fangs identify Dracula. They tend to be easily defined in physical terms (sporting a hockey mask, striped jumper or hook-hand).

The visual extremes of special effects, memorably bloody deaths, lurid lighting and gory cartoonish violence meant that horror films became less favourably looked upon by critics and it was precisely this perception that director Piers Haggard was trying to move away from when he first used the phrase 'folk horror' in 2003, as a way to separate his work from more typical horror. Whilst the murder-spree schlock and gore antics of villains like Freddy, Jason and Michael Myers may have clear origins in folk myths, satanic panics and urban legends, the films in which such iconic monsters appear are not what we think of as *folk horror*. In many examples of folk horror, it is rare that a monster or threat is so distinctly knowable, if there is even a well-defined threat at all.

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For example, in 'The Treasure of Abbot Thomas' (1974), an episode of the BBC's classic FH *Ghost Story for Christmas* series, a curious scholar is seemingly tormented by a mysterious supernatural presence. The actual existence of any presence is never confirmed nor denied for the audience beyond abstract shapes and shadows which fleetingly pass in front of the camera (to the extent to which we are left to wonder if there was anything present at all).

The threats here are created by suggestion and inference, less distinct and 'knowable' than in classic horror: We are not afraid, in these cases, of Freddy or Jason jumping out from the shadows and thus there is a different kind of tension or anticipation for the audience… The FH atmosphere created is less about waiting for an expected jumpscare and more of a general unsettling eeriness - the fear in folk horror comes from absence rather than presence which Mark Fisher, in his writing on hauntology, states "occurs either when there is something present where there should be nothing, or there is nothing present when there should be something".

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In most typical examples of classic folk horror like this, THERE ARE RARELY ANY MONSTERS AT ALL – merely a general sense of brooding fear, and rarely a string of spectacular onscreen deaths. When something sinister does occur in the genre, it is often likely to happen offscreen. For example, in an episode of Nigel Kneale's *Beasts* series, Jo is frightened throughout by an unseen presence and strange sounds which seem to emanate from distant woods and trees for which the audience is never made aware of the source, in *Whistle and I'll come to you* there's something terrifying that might be a ghost or a wispy sheet or and in *A Field In England*, whatever mysterious thing happens to Reece Shearsmith to cause prolonged shrieking, it happens entirely out of sight in a tent before he emerges with one of the most unsettling grimaces in cinema history. Though there are of course exceptions, when there is a visual reveal or spectacle in folk horror (#notallfolkhorror), such as the infamous ending of *The Wicker Man*, but the horror tends to come from understanding the psychological impact of the moment (in the context) which can be more disturbing for an audience than entertaining splashes of gore. If the monster is knowable, it is also killable (even if it comes back), if there is nothing there – how do we vanquish the threat? We are often left with a loosely open ending, aligning FH with arthouse cinema.

SLIDE 13 – this is where I will CONTRADICT MYSELF

When there *are* monsters in folk horror, they are almost always people, (their actions based on some folkloric belief) what Adam Scovell calls "skewed belief systems and morality". The threat comes from the folk themselves (rather than an external or necessarily supernatural force) and their actions based on their beliefs about religion, customs and rituals. The narrative trope of villagers requiring a sacrifice to supposedly restore fertility to the land is used by so many 'classic' FH texts that it is safe to denote this as typically conventional of the genre. Interestingly, these characters are

often community leaders, positions of authority– suggests fear of CLASS, politicians, illuminati, masonic orders – in folklore studies, the literal existence or not of these things is not the focus, but the fact that this representation recurs reveals some kind of rumbling genuine concern or fear– and is the kind of thing from whence conspiracy theories arise.

SLIDE 14 – in fact here's one of the scariest folk horror examples of this I've seen (2020)
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The mise-en-scène of folk horror is most associated with the onscreen use of landscape and outdoor filming, consider the bleak grey skies and autumnal fields of *Witchfinder General* (1968) and the soft monochrome of *A Field in England,* the bleached dreamlike lens flare of *Midsommar* and *Antrum*. This necessitates a tendency toward daytime filming which contrasts the cover of night more often used as backdrop for classic horror such as *Dracula* (1931) and his "children of the night" or Freddy Krueger lurking in teenage dreamscapes. Rural folk horror settings also arguably provide a sense of realism, which with naturalistic lighting was something Piers Haggard was conscious of using in opposition to what he saw as stifling interiors favoured by mainstream horror (again, aligning with arthouse cinema).

Where folk horror soundtracks use music, it tends to be in the form of traditional folk songs and music to evoke bygone eras or an otherwordly atmosphere. Particularly in post-2000 folk horror, music often falls into the category of hauntology – perhaps simplistic electronic drones, or is folkloresque, suggestive of ancient times or a pre-Christian pagan culture. Elements of the soundtrack of *Blood on Satan's Claw* were crafted to suggest a kind of mediveal plainsong and in the 'Baby' episode of *Beasts* there is no music whatsoever. Leaving audience response undirected in this way, with no swelling of sad strings or a high-octane beat accompanying a frenzied chase, allows for sinister interpretation of even the most benign onscreen moments, and for inexplicable events to seem all the more chilling.

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To go transmedia here, hauntological soundtracks heavily influenced music in the folk horror revival most commonly typified by the output from the Ghost Box record label: described as "A world of TV soundtracks, vintage electronics, folk song, psychedelia, ghostly pop, supernatural stories and folklore" (Ghost Box, n.d.). The purpose of some of this music aims to recall the spooky nature of classic folk horror: not so much film but most often creepy 1970s and '80s children's television programmes like *The Owl Service* (1969-70) and *Children of the Stones* (1977).

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A distinctive sense of the folk horror wyrd (as established in classic period 1970s) is used consciously across a huge variety of media: in art like Richard Littler's Scarfolk, Sharron Krauss' Chanctonbury Rings music & spoken word, literature like Elisabeth Hand's Wylding Hall novel, radio series and podcasts like The Whisperer in Darkness and a 2020 BBC radio remake of Children of the Stones.

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Online memes, creepypastas and internet projects like The SCP foundation (a community made invented archive of objects, creatures, lore and legend, a bit like an online X-Files) are rich in folk horror – SCP049 is a creepy kind of plague doctor, 323- is a wendio skull with antlers, resembling a mythical creature, and a hole from another place', is a Lovecraft-esque portal.

Thus we can see that folk horror is more of a mode, style and atmosphere that can be applied across a multitude of media from a variety of time periods and is not strictly limited to the generic conventions of film or even television.

SLIDE 19 – IN SUMMARY

By placing paradigm examples of folk horror alongside those typical of mainstream, classic horror, we can see that folk horror is not typical of the broader horror genre and has it own set of characteristics – folk horror is, in fact, unconventional in this context - rather than being horrific, it has a tendency to be weird, unsettling or vaguely eerie, suggesting that films like *Picnic at hanging Rock* (1975) can be aligned with folk horror whilst *Gremlins* (1984) not so much. The folk horror threat is unlikely to be either easily defined or vanquished, if there was one on the first place: it might simply be a community or even ourselves.

NOTES:

Comedy elements to horror, camp villany of Dracula ("I never drink…wine") – nods to audience, rare in FH e.g. compare with Baby, heavily pregnant woman around mentions of brucella abortus – nasty and unsettling