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“Isn’t folk horror *all* horror?”: A Wyrd Genre

Diane A. Rodgers

The notion of folk horror as a distinct sub-genre has developed in leaps and bounds in the post-2000 period, with the most oft-cited paradigm examples being distinctly from British 1970s cinema. A revival of interest in films from this era occurred alongside the release of a number of titles post-2000 which echo qualities of those from this earlier period. In 2017 Ben Wheatley, director of *Kill List* (2011), *A Field in England* (2013) and *In the Earth* (2021) (films considered seminal in the modern folk horror canon) wondered in my 2018 interview with him: “Isn’t folk horror *all* horror?” He goes on to muse upon folkloric tales of vampires and (quite rightly) wonders “isn’t the werewolf’s tale a folk horror tale... usually a village dealing with someone who transforms? That’s all folk tale stuff. So, in a way, most horror is folk” (pers. comm. 25 May 2018). The roots of horror are indeed often firmly based in folk tales, myth and legend: unofficially recorded histories, campfire tales and urban legend. However, although I and others have argued elsewhere (Rodgers, 2019, Cowdell, 2019) that the use of folklore is absolutely integral to many horror narratives, conversely, not all horror is folk horror in terms of the genre we know it as today. Folk horror, in fact, can be viewed as quite separate from and atypical of more conventional examples of cinema horror to the extent which I suggest that rather than being a sub-genre of horror, folk horror is a truly ‘wyrd’ genre in its own right. It is useful, therefore to firstly establish what typically conventional horror *is*, in order to outline more clearly what folk horror *is not*.

Classic horror

There are records of folk tales and legends about undead beings consuming the blood or flesh of the living dating back to ancient civilisations, with depictions of vampires “found on ancient Babylonian and Assyrian pottery going back thousands of years before Christ” (McNally & Florescu, 1994, p. 117). Similarly, werewolf legends or tales of lycanthropy (the mythological ability of a human to undergo transformation into an animal, or animal-like state) date at least as far back as the “Romans and Greeks [who] were cursed by the man-wolf, Vikings revered him, medieval peasants feared him and witches tried to control him” (Beresford, 2013, p. 7). Contemporary perceptions of such folkloric creatures, however, tend to be shaped by the media, predominantly those representations in film and television. Although there were earlier significant onscreen incarnations (such as Murnau’s *Nosferatu*, 1922, for example), it was arguably the classic horror films of Universal Studios in the 1930s which established what became the most enduring iconography associated with these legendary monsters. *Dracula*, in 1931, became synonymous with Bela Lugosi’s becaped aristocrat with a hypnotic close-up stare whilst *The Wolf Man* (1941) was embodied by Lon Chaney Jr. whose memorable onscreen transformation helped firmly establish him in the classic title role. 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 iconic characters.

It was not simply the characters that were made iconic, though, during this period, as these films also marked what is referred to as the classical or traditional period for the horror genre (with earlier films like *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari*, 1920 and *Nosferatu* being part of what is known as the genre’s ‘primitive’ stage of growth). The 1930s films, therefore, clearly established a number of onscreen characteristics which helped to cement a number of distinct conventions for the horror genre. Some of the most instantly-recognisable rules or generic conventions in relation to classic horror tend to relate to stylistic choices in terms of lighting (such as low key lighting or back-lit characters to create distinct and frightening shadows), the use of dramatic music to underline impending disaster or sound to elicit physical ‘jumpscare’ reactions from an audience. Even the visual presentation of ‘monsters’ themselves became a type of recognisable uniform convention

from Universal's iconic monsters through to slasher villains like Freddy Krueger in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), made distinct by his striped jumper, worn fedora and razor-claw glove, and *Candyman* (1992, remade in 2021), with sinister pirate-like hook replacing a hand. Though these more recent examples have clear origins in folk myths, satanic panics and urban legend; Krueger as a modern take on the manifestation of nightmares and sleep paralysis (an area written extensively upon by folklorist David Hufford, 1982, 1995) and 'the hookman' urban legend (which began circulation in 1950s America) about a killer with one hand replaced with a hook (Brunvand, 2003), the films in which such characters appear are not seen as *folk horror*.

In defining genre, we tend to look for recurring patterns, whether these be in terms of themes, styles, paradigms or motifs. Steve Neale describes genre as a process that, though "dominated by repetition" (such as in the conventions outlined above) is also "marked fundamentally by difference, variation, and change", suggesting elements of a genre "are always *in play* rather than being simply *replayed*" (2000, p. 165). This approach is echoed by my own application of the term 'wyrd' to expand our understanding of folk horror which encompasses:

folk horror, hauntology, and gothic sub-genres of media texts that have folkloric content and an eerie effect... Wyrd (the Anglo-Saxon original of 'weird') describes that which is strange, mysterious, or even frightening, and connects the common eerie element across the aforementioned genres... while suggesting a sense of the ancient, the folkloric, and the unexplained... [linking] with more intangible hauntological notions of eeriness and horror (Rodgers, 2019, p.135)

Folk Horror

The term, though having been traced back at least as far as 1936ⁱ, is popularly attributed to director Piers Haggard who, in 2003, described his film *Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971) as 'folk horror', which is now canonised as one of the 'Unholy Trinity' of folk horror films alongside *Witchfinder General* (1968) and *The Wicker Man* (1973). Haggard's use of the phrase was less about naming and defining a particular folk horror sub-genre than distinguishing his work from what he saw as more typically conventional, clichéd or exploitative horror:

the definition was initially defensive... when I made [*The Blood on Satan's Claw*] the dominant mode of horror was absolutely the...Hammer tradition...[but *Satan's Claw*] didn't...tick the obvious boxes... I just said in conversation "well of course this isn't really sort of a *horror* horror film, this is... sort of a *folk* horror really" trying to tap into the things which I thought were moving and interesting and which had emotional, historical cultural depth and resonance (pers. comm., 5 June 2017).

Adam Scovell (2017) has sketched useful thematic outlines for folk horror as a genre, proposing that folk horror can be considered as a mode which utilises "forms of popular conscious memory", channelling aesthetic or thematic folklore "for eerie, uncanny or horrific purposes" (2017, p. 7). However, as *Hookland* author David Southwell remarks, folklore in folk horror is not "mere tinsel for a story" but instead functions "as integral infrastructure" (Southwell, 2019): folklore is clearly a thread woven throughout horror in the broadest context. I have made a case elsewhere about bringing folklore to the fore of folk horror, so here I wish to take up the notion of folk horror as a *mode* (in the sense of a manner or style in which something is expressed) and apply it to onscreen aesthetics and generic convention. Where folk horror has been explored to date, it is not generally in direct comparison with more broadly typical examples of what Piers Haggard refers to as '*horror horror*' and generic conventions such as those discussed above. Andy Paciorek has been

instrumental in defining the folk horror genre as specifically centred around “British movies of the late 1960s and '70s that have a rural, earthy association to ancient European pagan and witchcraft traditions or folklore...as well as some creepy British children's television shows of the era” (2015, p. 9). Additionally, “this loose-knit genre is not always filmic and not *necessarily* horrifying... The eerie dissonance of folk horror can be observed extending beyond boundaries of genre and medium... to include science fiction, fantasy, television plays, television series, and even public information films” (Rodgers, 2019, p. 134). Therefore, it is useful to consider a variety of examples from both film and television (particularly from this ‘classic’ period of 1970s folk horror) through this lens of generic convention, to help bring what folk horror *is* more sharply into focus but also what it is *not*, in terms of that which separates it from horror in general.

Folk Horror vs “Horror Horror”

The examples of classic mainstream and slasher horror (what Piers Haggard describes above as ‘horror horror’) discussed above have central monstrous figures who, in some cases, lead the story as well as posing the main threat within the narrative. Though they may lurk in the shadows at times, they are nonetheless recognisably iconic and easily defined in distinctly physical terms (for example, sporting a hockey mask, striped jumper or hook-hand). 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. For example, in the Iranian folk horror film *Zalava* (2021), we witness fear, torment and physical affliction suffered by a community on screen, all attributed to the presence of a demon in the village. An exorcist carries out complex rituals using a glass jar to carefully trap the demon inside and later, at various points, we see the jar treated irresponsibly, dropped accidentally and even opened disrespectfully. The actual existence of any demonic presence is never confirmed nor denied for the audience beyond unfortunate events and mysterious coincidences (to the extent to which we are encouraged to wonder if there was anything present at all). In *Zalava*, eerie phenomena are *suggested* on screen in a manner that Robert Macfarlane has described elsewhere as “glimpsed but never confronted” (2015, 10 April, n.p.): as variously unsettling, in a context that could plausibly be no threat at all, or simply a figment of the villagers’ collective imagination. The possibility that there was never a physical threat present at all is left open.

The threat here is created by suggestion and inference, less distinct and ‘knowable’ than in classic horror: the fear in folk horror comes from absence rather than presence. We are not afraid, in these cases, of a Freddy or Jason-like character jumping out from the shadows and thus there is a different kind of tension or anticipation for the audience. The atmosphere created is less about waiting for an expected jumpscare and more of a general unsettling eeriness which Mark Fisher, in his writing on hauntology, suggests is created by this notion of absence, discussed this in relation to the terms ‘weird’ and ‘eerie’ (2016). He notes that both terms relate to that which is strange and frightening, but argues that “it would be wrong to say that the weird and the eerie are necessarily terrifying” (ibid., p. 8). ‘Eeriness’, in Fisher’s terms, is a sensation which “occurs either when there is something present where there should be nothing, or there is nothing present when there should be something” (ibid., p. 61). In classic examples of folk horror, there is usually a general sense of brooding fear throughout a text, and rarely a string of spectacular onscreen deaths. When something sinister does occur in the genre, it is more likely to happen offscreen. For example, when a ritual sacrifice murder takes place near the conclusion of *Robin Redbreast* (1970), it is merely suggested offscreen by a brief scream, and in *A Field In England*, whatever mysterious thing happens to Whitehead (Reece Shearsmith) to cause prolonged shrieking and one of the most unsettling grimaces in cinema history, it happens entirely out of sight in a tent. Though there are of course exceptions, when there is a visual reveal or spectacle in folk horror, such as the infamous ending of *The Wicker Man*, but here the horror comes from understanding the psychological impact of the moment (in the context of the story or for a particular character) which can be more disturbing on a fundamental level for an audience than entertaining splashes of gore.

The other major type of threat in folk horror comes in the shape of "skewed belief systems and morality" of a local populace sometimes due to its isolation, which may culminate in unpleasant events "resulting action from this skewed social consciousness" (Scovell, 2017, pp. 17-18). That is, 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. This is most overt in *The Wicker Man* (1973) (a film covered at great length elsewhere, most effectively by Mikel Koven in his book *Film, Folklore and Urban Legends*, 2008) when the residents of Summerisle require a sacrifice to supposedly restore fertility to the land. This narrative trope is used by so many texts considered to be (either classic or revival) folk horror (including television play *Robin Redbreast*; US series *The Dark Secret of Harvest Home*, 1978; *Wake Wood*, 2009; *Kill List*, 2011; *The Ritual*, 2017; *Apostle*, 2018 and *Midsommar*, 2019) that it is safe to denote this as typically conventional of the genre.

In opposition to the settings and cinematography of mainstream classic horror, the mise-en-scène of folk horror is most associated with the onscreen use of landscape. As Mark Gatiss has noted (in Jardine and Das, 2010), in classic folk horror this is most often manifested as "a common obsession with the British landscape" and I would extend this to not only the British Countryside, but also its weather. For example, consider the bleak grey skies and hills of *The Wicker Man*, the autumnal trees and fields of *Witchfinder General* (1968) and the soft monochrome cinematography of *A Field in England*. Similarly evocative is Lawrence Gordon Clark's description of his experience filming elements of the *Ghost Story for Christmas* series (1971-1978):

there was a thick mist so we got the more dramatic effect of the... lamps burning through Autumn is a great time for filming in the English countryside. You get early sunsets, lovely mists and abundant cobwebs in the dew (pers. comm. 11 June 2017).

The use of landscape and outdoor (often rural) settings in this way 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 the music of his "children of the night" or Freddy Krueger lurking in teenage dreamscapes. Rural folk horror settings also arguably provide a sense of realism, using naturalistic lighting, something Piers Haggard was conscious of using in opposition to what he saw as the stylisation of stifling sets and interiors favoured by Hammer (pers. comm., 5 June 2017). Grey, overcast weather and Eastman Colour film stock "pervasive in the 1960s and 1970s" with a "reputation as cheap and easy replacement" for Technicolor (Heckman, 2015, p. 46) meant that much folk horror of the 1970s had a low contrast, desaturated look. Achieving this 1970s style is essential to some creators of the folk horror revival period with films like *Antrum* (2018), framed as a 'rediscovered' film from the 1970s, emulating a scratched print complete with bleached-out colour and an abundance of lens flare. Similarly, in television, the creators of the *Inside No.9* episode 'The Devil of Christmas' (2016) used vintage 1970s cameras in order to achieve an "authentic re-creation" of the atmosphere and the look of 1970s television (writer-actor Steve Pemberton in Oglethorpe, 2016). This further concretises the 1970s as the definitive classic period for folk horror, whose lighting conventions differ greatly from the primary colours and high contrast lighting conditions of the wider horror genre.

Classic horror soundtracks have a tendency to direct the audience's emotive response with the swelling of sad strings or a high-octane beat accompanying a frenzied chase sequence. In opposition to this, scores for folk-horror films tend to be relatively minimal, or focus more on creating mood or atmosphere, such as the score for the Estonian film *November* (2017) which simply 'oozes dread at times' (Havlin, 2019). Leaving audience response less obviously directed in this way allows for sinister interpretation of even the most benign onscreen moments, and for inexplicable events to seem all the more chilling, replicating a stunned silence and bleak outlook. Where folk horror soundtracks more pointedly use music, it often tends to be either in the form of traditional

folk songs and music to evoke bygone eras or, particularly in post-2000 folk horror revival texts, as music that falls into the category of hauntology (discussed in more depth elsewhere in this volume). The former is prevalent in the classic era of folk horror when the countercultural revolution of the late 1960s and early 1970s saw a modern reinvention and popularisation of folk music (Young, 2000). The soundtrack of *The Wicker Man*, for example, famously incorporates a mixture of traditional songs (such as arrangements of traditional Scottish, Irish, and English tunes) and songs that are reminiscent of ancient folk songs (such as the song the island children sing around the maypole). The use of folk song in such examples of folk horror is often to give the suggestion of a pre-Christian pagan culture and hint at earlier, ancient times. Although *The Blood on Satan's Claw* has an orchestral score fairly typical for horror films of this period (composed by Marc Wilkinson whose credits also include scores for the 1968 film *If* and 1979's *The Quatermass Conclusion*), elements of the soundtrack were specifically crafted by director Piers Haggard "to suggest a kind of coarse, degraded, bit of derivative, pseudo-plainsong" (Haggard, pers. comm., 5 June 2017). Similarly, an opening track near the start of *A Field In England* is percussion alone, emulating the beating of drums evocative of the period of the English civil war.

Hauntological soundtracks, though retrospectively common in the classic 1970s period of folk horror, are most knowingly used in the post-2000 folk horror revival period which foreground "technologies and explicit references to media texts...from post-war Britain, particularly the 1960s and 1970s". This type of output is most commonly typified by the Ghost Box record label, discussed in detail by Jamie Sexton who states it is most specifically "horror films and television which permeate the allusions made by the label", observing that their own website "signals its main threads of inspiration" as coming from "folklore, vintage electronics, library music, and haunted television soundtracks" (2012, pp. 562-3, 566). The purpose of some of this music aims to recall the spooky nature of earlier media: most often cited are the title themes of 1970s and 1980s children's television programmes like *The Owl Service* (1969-70) and *Children of the Stones* (1977) which are seen as definitively creepy examples. Ben Wheatley posits the work of composer and sound designer Martin Pavey as integral to the hauntological effect of films in the modern film folk horror canon. Pavey's work is to be found not only in Wheatley's own films (such as *Kill List* and *A Field in England*) but also in several other paradigm examples of the folk horror revival including *The Borderlands* (2013), *Prevenge* (2016), and *Borley Rectory* (2017). Wheatley confidently states that if a film is

scary...you'll find Martin Pavey did the sound design on it...Pavey did all the sound design for my stuff as well...he's behind *lots* of stuff ...he's like the Conny Plank [innovative avant-garde West German sound engineer] of horror sound design (pers. comm, 25 May 2018).

Such approaches to score composition and the resulting hauntological soundtracks can themselves influence the reading of films as being at least folk-horror adjacent in terms of the style and atmosphere they create, even when folk-horror themes might be less obviously present in the narrative. Peter Strickland's *In Fabric* (2018), for example, about a haunted red dress, features a soundtrack by Cavern of Anti-Matter, a group comprised of members of Stereolab, a band known for drawing upon nostalgic influences to create playful electronic mood pieces. The score of *In Fabric*'s "unpredictable melodic patterns [which] suggest the creepy elegance of a Victorian music box" (Cardew, 2020) combined with Martin Pavey's unsettling sound design has played a significant role in allowing audiences to understand the film "as a mannered BBC folk horror plucked from pastoral countrysides and placed in cramped apartments and sinister department stores" (Sugar, 2020). This mode, or haunted atmosphere common throughout folk horror and *wyrd* media is similarly evoked in the soundtrack of Strickland's *Berberian Sound Studio* (2012) composed by the band Broadcast whose work brings to the film a "sense of nostalgia and weirdness" (Daniels, n.d.). Broadcast's music is often cited as a hauntological exemplar, drawing from 1970s influences with distinct folk-horror flavours, combining "the primitive electronics of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop, 1970s public

information films, Czech surrealism, Moog organ, forgotten film soundtracks and kitsch ephemera” (Long, 2011). *Berberian Sound Studio*’s psychological horror narrative revolves around the creation of a soundtrack for a 1970s Italian giallo, reminiscent of films like *Suspiria* (1977), redolent with witchcraft, rituals and other forms of supernatural folklore. The hauntological, avant-garde nature of soundtracks such as these (along with other arthouse aspects of the work), particularly in their stylistic references to British folk horror film and television of the 1960s and 1970s, allows such films to be placed apart from typically conventional examples of mainstream horror, aligning them more closely with a folk-horror mode.

Conclusions

‘Folk horror’ was used by Piers Haggard as a term to purposefully set a certain strand of cinema apart from the broader brush strokes of Hammer and classic horror traditions which, retrospectively, helps us align the genre more with an intellectual, arthouse style of cinema. Folk horror has come to be associated especially with a milieu of the 1970s and the British landscape (but is not restricted to Britain or rural areas) which coincided with the development of technology allowing outdoor filming more easily. Thus, folk horror is a mode linked with the style of European new wave cinema, with distinctive aspects including the use of folklore, landscape and folk beliefs in remote communities, which suggests that films like *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) can be aligned with folk horror whilst *Gremlins* (1984) far less so. Wyrld films and television programmes are often presented with an arthouse sensibility in that the audience must work at creating the meaning and emotional direction for themselves. Avant-garde approaches and more abstract narratives mean that at times folk horror has more in common with the work of David Lynch than John Carpenter: it is uncomfortable, troubling and unsettling rather than full on visceral horror.

By placing paradigm examples of folk horror alongside those typical of mainstream, classic horror, it is clear that folk horror in onscreen convention alone is not typical of the broader horror genre and, in fact, has many generic conventions that are uniquely distinct. As it is not always ‘horrifying’, there is further case for ‘wyrld’ as a genre, rather than folk horror merely being a sub genre. A comparable case might be that of romantic comedy, firmly established as a genre in its own right, to the extent which its staid conventions are examined in the documentary *Romantic Comedy* (Sankey, 2019) and parodies like *They Came Together* (2014) and *Isn’t It Romantic* (2019) and spoof age-old genre tropes. Romantic comedy is thus not merely a hybrid or subgenre of comedy, but has entirely its own specific set of conventions as, it can be argued, does folk horror as separate from classic horror. Folk horror is, in fact, unconventional alongside ‘horror horror’ as rather than horrific, it has a tendency to be rather more weird, unsettling or vaguely eerie. There may be a scream or a cry heard, but it is unlikely these sounds will punctuate the entire texts and the audience may never find out where the cry came from. The killer or threat is unlikely to be vanquished or escape in a folk horror narrative, if we even know who or what the threat is: it might be an entire community or it might even be ourselves.

Biographical note

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i By author Sarah K. Marr who, using Twitter, found an entry in *The English Journal* and “managed to trace its use back to 1936” (Skaldsummerisle, 2018, n.p.).

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