Sheffield Hallam University

Fact, Fiction and Folklore in Film

RODGERS, Diane <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3117-4308>

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

https://shura.shu.ac.uk/30395/

This document is the Presentation

Citation:

RODGERS, Diane (2022). Fact, Fiction and Folklore in Film. In: Fact, Fiction and Folklore in Film, Glasgow, Scotland, 06 Mar 2022. Glasgow Film Festival. (Unpublished) [Conference or Workshop Item]

Copyright and re-use policy

See http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html

Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive
http://shura.shu.ac.uk

Glasgow Film Festival – Fact, Fiction & Folklore in Film

1

Welcome and thanks so much for having me...My name is Diane Rodgers, I'm a Senior Lecturer at Sheffield Hallam University and a co-founder of the Centre for Contemporary Legend Research group who are a group of academics interested in folklore and legend studies which is anything but dusty ancient history – it includes contemporary customs, traditions and rituals, UFOlogy, urban legends, conspiracy theories, moral panics, supernatural and extraordinary experiences and – my own personal area of interest, the representation of folklore in the media, primarily film and television - my PhD study is on 1970s TV folk horror and how it continues to influence film and TV today. I teach Storytelling and Alternative Media on the BA Media degree at SHU –and today I'll be talking a bit about folklore in film and TV (particularly British media, because that's my area of expertise) why folklore was so prevalent in 1960s and 70s film/TV, how any why it emerged then and why it's resurfaced again in more recent years particularly in folk horror and how it is represented on screen.

2

What is folklore? 'Folklore' broadly encompasses different types of tales, legends and belief. It's usually best defined as 'the unrecorded traditions of a people' including 'both the form and content of these traditions and their manner of communication' (Brunvand, 1998, n.p.). The shape they take and the way they are passed on. So folklore includes traditional beliefs, customs, and most importantly here STORIES that are passed on through generations via word of mouthbut are also often translated into print and various forms of media. So film and TV are significant ways in which folklore is communicated.

Why is folklore important, what does it give us? It's where so many of our stories come from, of witches, ghosts and ghouls, myths and legends – stories like these are how we make sense of the world around us, they shape our common perceptions. How these are communicated, whether in film or TV or online, can influence us in terms of our beliefs, actions and understanding of the world. We've been brought up with stories and how they work and often take as received knowledge things from media which we absorb from a young age, but it doesn't mean they are literally true. Not everyone gets married and lives happy ever after, myth and legend that we take for granted - King Arthur, Robin Hood - there was no actual Robin Hood, he's an invented archetypal

hero. King Arthur wasn't really a king, if he did exist, he was actually more of a bandit. Beliefs can be influenced by the media we watch - stories have POWER. A pioneering TV producer and president of NBC TV network (Reuven Frank) had a favourite phrase "the four most important words in history are ONCE UPON A TIME".

3

Think about - what are the first stories you can remember? Who told them to you? Where did they come from? Book? TV? What were they based on? What are the oldest stories you know of? What are the oldest stories there are - where do they come from? How are they retold? How do they shape our beliefs and opinions? Where do your ideas of villains and heroes come from? Did you ever read fairy tales or watch Scooby Doo? Did they shape your ideas about witches, princesses, ghosts and ghouls?

4

The oldest story thought ever to be told (recorded) The Epic of Gilgamesh thought to be somewhere around 3-4000 years old, although the oral version is likely even older. Epic poem centred on Gilgamesh's quest to find and slay a monstrous ogre - overcoming a monster, one of the oldest stories known to humankind - it also remains of the most popular, recurs in varying forms throughout history and across the cultures of the world. From *Beowulf* and the Minotaur, through *Little Red Riding Hood* and George and the Dragon, can even be traced through to *Star Wars,* Harry Potter and many, many more, there is something about this story shape that we seem to find endlessly compelling.

5

So folklore and storytelling are fundamentally linked. Famous folklorists have described folklore as “man's attempt to bring enjoyment to his leisure through the art of storytelling” Thompson, S. (1977) and storytelling as *“*an important skill for all layers of society seeking amusement, relief from boredom, and escape from everyday drudgery into the world of illusion.” (Dégh, 1994: 15)

We can look at stories in TV and film as a form of folklore; folklore is not simply an ancient thing or just traditional rural storytelling, we are all folk, the stories we tell and share, the rituals we do in our everyday life are folklore. And people who create film and TV are worthy of study in this respect, as storytellers - not just from a screen studies point of view, but a social and cultural one also.

6

Directors of film and TV, such as these examples onscreen made by Piers Haggard and Lawrence Gordon Clark, indeed consider themselves storytellers, first and foremost ["film is like telling a story... the most important thing is the story " - Haggard] – many of which use folklore – so as students of any type of storytelling in the media, folklore, myth and legend, it is important to think about how film and television communicate folklore. In turn, this can help us understand the impact and effect of past media and past storytellers on the present; and how this might affect the storytellers, folklore, film and TV of today.

7

Modern film and TV is bursting with folklore and folkloric themes, aimed at both adults and children – just a small selection of examples here from Worzel Gummidge (legends about the green man, seasonal rituals), Ghosts – playing with notions of spirits and hauntings, the brand new forthcoming comedy The Witchfinder (set in 1600s when fear about witchcraft and superstitious beliefs and Puritanical Christianity were deep-seated) and even the gentle comedy *Detectorists* has eerie folkloric overtones, using folk music, notions about magpies, and the idea of legends, ghosts and stories of the past as something just beneath the surface of the land - CLIP

8

CLIP – 3 mins

Now I think you can see there's a certain sense of eeriness here, that type of eeriness often goes hand in hand with film and TV using folklore prominently as part of the story or central to a narrative, and this idea of something sinister just beneath the surface or just out of sight - which is often described today as folk horror, which is a genre enjoying a revival in recent years in popularity, including the film being screened tonight (ZALAVA). So I'm going to talk a bit now about folk horror and how this genre has come about in the way it is most often described today.

9

What is folk horror? What people think of as 'classic folk horror' tends to be categorised by a set of films including The Wicker Man from 1973 often referred to as a cornerstone of the genre. Even though there are plenty of examples of folk horror from many eras and many different nations, the roots of folk horror as it's discussed today are still distinctly often drawn back to

examples like this from British 1960s & 70s cinema. This period has come to be accepted as the classic first wave folk horror.

The Wicker Man has been a hugely influential film, described as the greatest British horror thriller of all time. The soundtrack alone has been influential, in 2018 a rollercoaster called The Wicker Man opened at Alton Towers. It was reportedly one of the films Christopher Lee was most proud of over his entire career, yes even more so than Count Dooku in Star Wars. It's a film that draws heavily on folklore and beliefs, there are elements of what many people accept as 'ancient paganism' in the film, and has affected people's beliefs perceptions about folklore and history. The Wicker Man has become almost ubiquitous as an example of strange villages, isolated unwelcoming communities with sinister undertones posing lurking threat for outsiders.

10

A more recent folk horror revival, sometimes called the second wave of folk horror has seen a raft of titles released in the post-2000 period, films which continue to draw upon and echo qualities from these earlier 1970s counterparts - some similar themes of isolated villages and traditional beliefs surfacing in Zalava, the film you'll be watching tonight – which puts all these types of films very much in the same category or sub-genre - it is all these types of films to which I will refer as classic folk horror.

11

Before becoming a widely popular term, the phrase 'folk horror' was used in 2003 by director Piers Haggard to describe his work from the 1970s – it has been used on other occasions, but Piers Haggard's use of the term was to distinguish his work from what he saw as the more formulaic clichés employed by mainstream horror. Horror films had fallen out of favour with critics, who tended to look upon what they saw as visual extremes of special effects, bloody deaths, and gory cartoonish violence – so it was precisely this perception that Piers Haggard was trying to move away from when he used the phrase 'folk horror', as a way to separate his work from more typical and classic horror.

12

To think about the difference between classic/mainstream horror and folk horror for a moment, Classic horror is that established by Universal in the 1930s and their enduring iconography of legendary monsters and the stars that embodied them. *Dracula*, in 1931, became synonymous with Bela Lugosi whilst

Frankenstein (1931) was associated with Boris Karloff, both actors reprising these roles in a number of successful sequels. Classic horror tends to offer an abundance of theatrical visual drama, using low key lighting to create large areas of shadow onscreen from which a monster may emerge at any moment, or underlighting to distort a character's features to make them appear more sinister. Therefore a significant proportion of horror films take place in a dark setting or at night. The music of classic horror is similarly dramatic, with sweeping orchestral grandiosity underlining impending disaster or, common in recent decades, high octane heavy metal or punk bands often featuring on soundtracks.

13

With many mainstream horror films from the 1970, '80s and 90s onward, stories were often built around clearly defined character-monsters drawing this time not from gothic literature but from other areas of folklore and urban legend. Films like I Know what You Did Last summer (1997) right up to 2021's Candyman draw upon myths like the 'escaped psycho' and 'the hookman' urban legend, a famously enduring folkloric trope which began circulation amongst teenagers in 1950s America.

14

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?"

15

My short answer "no". And I'll go on to explain why...

16

Folklore is absolutely integral to folk horror narratives, the roots of **horror in general** are firmly based in some sort of folklore. Horror and fantasy genres routinely borrow folkloric elements like 'werewolves, vampires, fairies, trolls, witches'. Horror is the stuff of folklore: unofficially recorded stories & histories, campfire tales, myth and urban legend. But whilst the gory murder-spree antics of slasher films and monstrous villains like Candyman may have clear origins in folk myths, satanic panics and urban legends, the films in which such iconic monsters appear are not what we now think of as *folk horror*. So although all horror might use folklore, not all horror is folk horror, at least as the term is generically applied today. Before I talk more about the characteristics of the genre itself, I'm going to look at how folk horror came about esp. in the 1970s.

17

WHY was there an explosion of folk horror in the 1970s? The 1960s and '70s saw a huge wave of revived interest in folklore when fascination with alternative ways of being, alternative religion and the occult as part of this within youth counterculture helped popularise folkloric texts from the 1920s such as Margaret Murray's *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* (1921) and Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1922, originally published 1890). In fact, much of *The Wicker Man* (1973) was based on Frazer's work and because of this many people over the years have bought into the folkloric ideas in the film as some kind of ancient truth, even though it is far from factual, and Frazer's conclusions have been widely discredited since the late 60s onward. Ideas drawn from books such as these persist in popular culture today. Because of this general sense of revived interest in the otherworldly and occult in this period, there is a general folkloric eeriness that can be seen beyond just the folk horror film genre to include science fiction, fantasy, television programmes, public information films, documentaries and even news reports. In all types of 1970s media, we don't have to look far to find narratives based on supernatural folklore and contemporary legend.

18

For example, The Enfield Poltergeist, a story in 1977 about a haunting in a London home, was broadcast widely and regularly in British news (including programmes like Nationwide and across print media). During this period reported hauntings would be treated as semi-serious news, witchcraft and the occult were taken seriously to an extent in mainstream media. There were sincere television documentaries on ghosts, witch cults, the loch ness monster etc. to the extent which…

19

…Spooky stuff was everywhere not least for children – Usbourne book of Ghosts, UFOs, monsters (and these have been reissued due to popular demand in the past few years because of revival of interest in folklore, myth and legend). There was so much of this kind of stuff in the 60s and 70s that people grew up around and plenty aimed at children, these kinds of things are now widely parodied in recent years with images and memes knocking around the internet like…

20

this by (artist Steven Rhodes) – and this might seem comically far-fetched, but compare it to …

21

this very real Children's book from 1974 *How To Make Magic*! (WHSmith!) – suggests “Has your teacher or a friend made you a little angry lately?” – here are some “less nasty black magic spells you can try”!

22

So the 1970s was an era in which folklore was treated with some gravity in mainstream media and it’s often *television* of the 1970s at least as much as film if not more so is cited as a central influence upon ‘folk-horror revivalists’ or the second wave of folk horror and hauntological media today. Just a few examples of folkloric programmes made for children and young audiences here – one influential example:

23

Children of the Stones was a British children's drama series broadcast in 1977 on ITV. Set in the village of Milbury (real village Avebury, largest stone circle in Europe) where a father and son arrive there for research, where most of the villagers seem to be acting strangely. Many modern programme makers say they have been influenced by the series (it was most recently adapted into a podcast for BBC in 2020). Not only is it genuinely creepy, but - IMPORTANTLY - the script is unpatronisingly complex, treats the young audience with intelligence. Topics covered include psychic ability, the power of ley lines, the energy of standing stones, black holes, medieval history, supernovas, psychokinesis and atomic clocks. Director Peter Graham Scott remarked on seeing the script of Episode One, "this is for children?" It has been described as "the scariest programme ever made for children", and as having "the most inappropriate theme music ever used for a children's series.“ *CLIP*

24

CLIP

25

, while contemporary musician Jim Jupp explains: 'There was something in the *look* of television from that era . . . there's something in the television images of that period that's just not *right*.' – These are genuine images from 70s and 80s children's TV, on the left from the original incarnation of Worzel Gummidge – the thing is they weren't intended as creepy at the time, its something only really noticed in retrospect in recent years when people who grew up with it are now looking back at this stuff.

26

These people are the children of Gen X (anyone born roughly between mid 60s to early 1980s), grew up surrounded with all of this, myself included and it is these people who are now come of age to be the film and tv makers of today : people like Ben Wheatley, Alice Lowe, Jeremy Dyson, so this somewhat accounts for the folk horror revival, dark nostalgia for wyrd and spooky past

27

Mark Gatiss is one of this generation also, who made a BBC Four series, *A History of Horror* in 2010, and it is him who put films I mentioned earlier like *The Wicker Man* (1973) as prime examples of folk horror, and this film is consistently used as a benchmark for FH as we understand it as a genre today. Gatiss describes films like this as sharing "a common obsession with the British landscape, its folklore and superstitions'. Now I'm going to talk about some things that are common to folk horror on screen in general.

28

In most typical examples of classic folk horror whether old or new, in contrast to classic horror I talked about earlier, there are rarely any monsters – in folk horror there is rather a tendency towards eeriness and fear shaped by other factors- a general sense of brooding disquiet, and rarely a string of spectacular onscreen deaths. When sinister things do occur, it is most likely to happen offscreen. For example, in the 1976 TV series *Beasts* written by Nigel Kneale*,* in an episode called *Baby (*Mark Gatiss describes as *"*the most disgusting piece of television I've ever seen!"), main character Jo is frightened throughout by an unseen presence and strange sounds which seem to come from distant woods for which the audience is never made aware of the source, in the BBC's *Whistle and I'll come to you* there's something terrifying that ***might*** be a ghost or a wispy sheet or and in Ben Wheatley's film *A Field In England*, whatever mysterious thing happens to Reece Shearsmith's character to cause prolonged

shrieking, happens entirely out of sight in a tent before he emerges with one of the most unsettling grimaces in cinema history. There are of course exceptions to the rule, but often even when there **is** a visual reveal or spectacle in folk horror, the horror tends to come from understanding the psychological impact of the moment (in the atmosphere or context) which can be disturbing in a different way than entertaining splashes of gore or fast paced violent action. Monsters in mainstream horror are most likely knowable, they are easily defined and recognisable, which means they also killable (even if it comes back), BUT if there is nothing there like in FH – how do we vanquish the threat? There's a different type of discomfort or unsettled fear there.

I mentioned music in classic horror, metal and punk - where folk horror soundtracks use music, it tends to be in the form of traditional folk songs – or music to evoke bygone eras or an otherworldly atmosphere. In 'Baby' I just mentioned, there is no music whatsoever. With little or no high-octane music, leaves audience response undirected, we're not sure how to feel or even if or when something might happen, which allows for sinister interpretation of even the most gentle onscreen moments.

29

If there *are* what we could describe as a type of monsters in folk horror they are almost always people, and their actions based on their beliefs about religion, customs and rituals. The threat comes from the folk themselves (rather than an external or necessarily supernatural force), and their commitment to their traditional beliefs or customs, rituals and actions based upon these. Interestingly, these characters are often either oppressed or represented by community leaders, (usually) men in positions of authority– which perhaps reveals some kind of rumbling real world concern or fear – in some cases suggests fear of CLASS, patriarchy…

30

….politicians, illuminati, masonic orders –and can have real world comparisons and consequences – this is the very kind of thing from whence conspiracy theories and social fears arise whether QAnon or anti-vaxxers or even broader dangerous actions taken based on such beliefs as we can see in all kinds of social and political crises of today

31

CLIP

One of the most unexpectedly unsettling folk horror things from the real world that isn't necessarily intended as folk horror!

32

The countryside and landscape is another key factor in creating eerie folk horror atmospheres onscreen. The mise-en-scène (the overall look) of folk horror is most associated with the onscreen use of landscape and outdoor filming, which necessitates a tendency toward daytime filming. This contrasts the cover of night more often used as backdrop for mainstream horror such as *Dracula'*s "children of the night". 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. The British Countryside, does of course have a very distinct look and feel to it, as does the weather - bleak grey skies in *episodes of the BBC Ghost STory for Christmas*), and the soft monochrome setting of *A Field in England.*

33

Screenwriter Robert Wynne Simmons has talked about "a sense of place being very important to folk horror" that there is such a sense of history and legend all around us in Britain, wherever a film happens to be set "actually *gives you* part of the story", In 2015, *Author* Robert Macfarlane wrote an article "The eeriness of the English countryside" discusses the idea of an English eeriness as "the skull beneath the skin of the countryside".

34

Director Ben Wheatley speaking about *A Field in England*, "There was something in the landscape that plainly terrified me" – and he spoke of being surroundedby history in the UK "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". These filmmakers and their work seems to describe a tangible sense of ancient times in the land, brings us back to that sense of darkness always present just under the surface.

35

Of course FH exists far beyond Britain and outside of film, but many modern FH films and TV share many qualities in terms of look and style of earlier 1970s

fh film fare, such as the woodland settings, grey skies of The Blair Witch Project and Calibre, remote and rural communities of The Witch and Zalava – otherwise they are comparable in terms of story, theme and plot. Folklore, ritual and belief are at the fore in their narratives, with other modern folk horror revival examples returning to narratives about witches and covens, pagan ritual and hauntings, to stone circles and sinister remote villages. **Zalava is importantly set before the Iranian revolution in 1979 when clerics came to power and certain laws based upon religion were put in place, and Iranian cinema still today operates within very strict restrictions of censorship, not allowed to show certain things like a man and woman kissing for example, and so there are other kinds of complex belief systems at play behind the scenes as well as onscreen.**

36

To summarise: Even though the folk horror revival seems to have been borne out of the nostalgia of a generation to an extent, Folk horror and wyrd seems to more than just a passing trend but a sub genre and distinct style that keeps on finding new audiences and keeps evolving with the times. Traditional folklore and contemporary legend are used consciously across a huge variety of media today which in turn create their own, new versions of folklore: whether in art like Richard Littler's Scarfolk project which began as an online blog, The Witcher video game series based on series of books by Polish writer uses Polish folklore, radio series and spooky podcasts like the BBC's The Whisperer in Darkness uses folklore and creepiness inspired by strange tales by HP Lovecraft through to

Online memes, creepypastas and internet projects are rich in folklore and contemporary legend. For example The SCP foundation a fictional secret organization, started as a web-based collaborative fiction project – to which anyone could contribute, an invented archive of objects, creatures, lore and legend. Thus we can see folklore evolving and adapting beyond filmand TV genres as a mode and style across a multitude of media from a variety of time periods By placing examples of classic folk horror alongside those more typical of classic mainstream, horror, we can see that folk horror has it own set of characteristics – rather than necessarily being horrific, it has a tendency to be weird, unsettling or vaguely eerie. 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.

37 Thank you for listening!