

Stones on Screen: Folklore & folk- horror soundtracks

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

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

<https://shura.shu.ac.uk/38003/>

This document is the Presentation

Citation:

RODGERS, Diane (2026). Stones on Screen: Folklore & folk- horror soundtracks. In: Old Ways, New Sounds: Folklore, Hauntology and Identity in British Music, London, UK, 17 Sep 2026. Guildhall School of Music & Drama, London. (Unpublished)
[Conference or Workshop Item]

Copyright and re-use policy

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

Stones on Screen: Folklore & folk- horror soundtracks

1

Thanks so much for having me...

2

Here I am interested in HOW folklore and contemporary legends about British megalithic monuments, stone circles and monoliths are presented onscreen in film and TV , some examples onscreen here, WHAT kinds of ideas about them persist in popular culture and if there are any implications we might draw from this. When folklore, and indeed folk music, is used Film and TV, it's often employed in a spooky way - here is an eerie moment from what is otherwise a gentle comedy sitcom– the BBC's Detectorists:

3

[explain clip] the combination of music and visuals lends itself to a recurring idea in British folk horror of something sinister just beneath the surface or just out of sight – something lurking in the landscape, which brings us to stones on screen!

4

This is Spinal Tap, famously features a song called 'Stonehenge' which has lyrics that conflate: Druids, demons, banshees, magic, dragons, the 'Pipes of Pan', notions about 'living rock', sacrifice and fairies with the stone circle. Though the song's performance is made ridiculous, within the world 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. 5 – SKIP

6

Megaliths provide an enduring source of fascination not just for audiences, but also writers and directors. Piers Haggard, director of folk horror classic *Blood on Satan's Claw* and 1979's *Quatermass* describes stone circles as "history with an added mystery factor... they *work* on your imagination about ...sacrifice, moonrise, sunrise, festivals... that's amazing!".

7

Contemporary film and TV directors share this fascination: Ben Wheatley, said about *A Field in England* "There was something in the landscape that plainly terrified me" and spoke 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".

8

Robert Wynne-Simmons, writer of *Blood on Satan's Claw* says that using ancient sites onscreen "actually *gives you* part of the story" – they already have their own stories, legends, folklore so just the act of putting this type of landscape on screen, brings those stories with them, Part of the enduring appeal of stone circles is, no doubt, the abundance of folkloric tales and lack of definitive answers about their existence which really acts as fuel for the imagination.

9

In 1979's *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 Quatermass (John Mills) searches for his missing granddaughter who has become a member of a youth cult, the Planet People, who believe they will be beamed to their salvation in space – but are actually being lured to their own annihilation at the stone circles.

10

Kneale's original intention was to use Stonehenge as a real-world Neolithic monument, and blends history and folklore about stone circles with his fictional plot. Stonehenge has a wealth of mystical theories about it: including that the wizard Merlin brought 'the great megaliths of Stonehenge ...to Salisbury Plain' by magic from Ireland. In the 1960s, Erich von Däniken suggested it functioned as a landing pad for alien terrestrial craft, fuelling a revival of new-age theories about 'ancient alien astronauts', reflected in Kneale's Planet People cult. Stonehenge *wasn't* used for *Quatermass* but inspired Kneale to invent his own megalithic circle Ringstone Round, and accompanying nursery rhyme that features in the series with its own tune [sing!]. (plausibly authentic, reminiscent of Ring A Ring A Roses)

11

Commonly associated with stone circles, are petrification legends (people being turned to stone), woven into the plot of *Children of the Stones* which has been described as "the scariest programme ever made for children". The story follows Professor Adam Brake and his son visiting the fictional village of Milbury to conduct scientific research on neolithic stones, filmed within the real stone circle at Avebury, the 'largest prehistoric stone circle in the world'. One of the reasons it's been called scary is the fear inducing opening title sequence: "the most inappropriate theme music ever used for a children's series..."

12 – CLIP

13

In the opening sequence of every episode, the stones are a nightmarish collage of looming, threatening presences whilst also appearing to be screaming out themselves in pain as we hear a cacophony of voices, howl, chant and wail – evoking the idea that the stones contain trapped people or souls, frozen in time. Director Peter Graham Scott consciously wanted to create a theme for voices without words to suggest a type of Neolithic language: 'we didn't know what Neolithic language was, but they must have communicated or else how could they have put up the stones? I wanted to create a sound almost like a work song, where they're heaving away' (in Richardson 1995: 44).

14

Folk horror is really distinctive from other forms of horror in how it uses music – often using music to evoke bygone eras or an otherworldly atmosphere. Mainstream horror (eg slasher) often uses high octane rock, metal, punk – folk horror tends to be in the form of traditional folk songs – TWM is perhaps as famous for its soundtrack as the film itself, and FH Elements of the soundtrack of *Blood on Satan's Claw*, Piers Haggard told me, were crafted to suggest a kind of medieval plainsong.

15

Sense of authenticity is vital to these storytellers: *Children of the Stones* weaves Avebury's real history into its narrative, for example incorporating the tale of a real medieval skull and skeleton discovered crushed underneath a stone. In *Children of the Stones*, this story is recounted onscreen, linking real elements of history with sacrificial notions from traditional custom and belief.

16

Several elements in *Children of the Stones* imply that events in the circle are related to extra-terrestrial involvement: each day when aligned with the stars, the circle channels a beam es that somehow sends villagers' personality out into space – turns them pod people, traps them within the circle – as in Quatermass, people are being lured there, the stones themselves can pose a threat.

17

In contemporary examples of British folk horror, similar sinister notions about stones prevail. In *In The Earth*, a scientist encounters strange occurrences linked to an ancient force within a large monolith. There are suggestions that the stone is sentient "If it wants to talk, we have to listen". One character worships, offers sacrifice to it, telling a story of a "practising necromancer and alchemist" who is trapped in the stone. There are overt ecological themes, with mention of asking the stone being about "how we can all live together without destroying each other" using the notion of the it somehow having ancient wisdom to impart, functioning as a watcher or a guardian. Sonically important, characters use elaborate synthesizer rigs, loudspeakers, and flashing lights to **communicate with this being, mirroring** real-life musical movement where artists use biodata/ to turn nature into music, plant-music technology, a concept that unfolds in the film.

18

Enys Men (Cornish for stone island) is set on an uninhabited island where the landscape is dominated by one ancient stone, a real one called Boswens Menhir (about which myth tells that animals fear approaching the stone), it acts very much as a character in the film watching over the island as a forbidding presence on screen. 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 from 1932 states "long ago, stones were alive. They spoke and delivered judgments" like a guardian of the past.

19

Beyond folklore and legends about **stones**, an obvious aesthetic influence for monoliths is *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Are these monoliths a marker 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...

20

... then all across the globe – including my hometown of Sheffield. Most likely pieces of situationist art, but the nature of their appearance, particularly in the heightened Covid-era, seemed to capture people's imaginations. The monoliths appeared in mainstream news across the globe, including headlines asking 'Artist or aliens', and direct comparisons with *2001*. People seemed keen to speculate about some kind of meaning, or warning?

21

These images from a 1990s U.S. Dept of Energy project exploring proposed designs for warning people away from radioactive waste storage facilities look, to me, *not unlike* standing stones – the literal purpose of structures like these is intended to tell future humans to KEEP AWAY. 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 exactly this type of message:

22

‘Preserved as a memory, transmitted through the centuries of infants’ singing. **Like nuclear waste set harmlessly in blocks of glass**’ (Kneale, 1979b, pp. 60-61). 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.”

23

Megalithic stones are most often used onscreen in an unsettling way: whether a threat coming from the stones themselves, from the earth beneath or the sign of alien peril. Rather than these sites as spiritual places or sites of worship – folk horror resolutely presents stones as places where BAD or DANGEROUS THINGS can happen. Perhaps we should be *keeping away* from megalithic sites will humans in 10,000 years (if the Earth is still here) be visiting nuclear warning sites, wondering what we were trying to communicate, or worship? Perhaps, as Nigel Kneale’s Quatermass wonders, ancient stones were indeed a way of our ancestors trying to warn us against ourselves – maybe our music and songs now will tell our stories to future generations?
