

EVENT REVIEWS

Folk Horror in the Twenty-First Century (Falmouth University, 4-6 September 2019)

The *Folk Horror in the Twenty-First Century* conference at Falmouth University was a two-day multidisciplinary exploration and interconnected discussion of this new and vibrant facet of Horror Studies. As Dawn Keetley remarked in her opening address, the term ‘folk horror’ is a rather new one in academic discourse, but the self-conscious use of the term dates back almost fifty years, to director Piers Haggard’s description of his own *The Blood on Satan’s Claw* (1971). Keetley’s address correctly anticipated much of the primary discussions for the two days, including the use of Adam Scovell’s concept of ‘the folk-horror chain’, a list of tropes and conventions typical of folk horror that was widely cited, developed upon, and challenged throughout the conference.

Within Scovell’s conception of folk horror, the landscape, and in particular the rural, is depicted as having an adverse effect on the social and moral identity of its inhabitants, coinciding with a social, political, and infrastructural isolation that chokes the social progress of the rural community within the diegesis of the narrative. The final link in the chain is a ‘summoning’ or ‘happening’ – a cultural or supernatural ritual or practice that threatens normality or the normative protagonists.¹ Some of the conference papers, as well as Keetley’s address, utilised but also problematised some of these defining characteristics. There was particular interest in discussing the nuances of representation of the ‘folk’ in folk horror, the unfortunate potential for othering and essentialising communities, and also the politically progressive potential for destabilising hegemony. As Keetley pointed out, in both *The Wicker Man* (dir. by Robin Hardy, 1973) in the first wave, and *Midsommar* (dir. by Ari Aster, 2019) in the contemporary cycle, we have no real ‘monstrous’ Other. Instead, we have a conflation of monstrosity and normality in dramas that merely represent two deeply conflicting communities and sets of values, with our sympathies often lying more comfortably with the isolated fictional community. However, it is worth noting that the ‘folk’ community remains the more ‘obviously’ horrific group in such depictions, and genre expectations and marketing cue them as such. Although the violence of the trespassing, hegemonically dominant group is

¹ Adam Scovell, *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange* (Leighton Buzzard: Auteur, 2017) pp. 17-18.

clear, they are aligned with the audience's everyday experiences and are therefore the initial point of audience identification and reference.

These issues of normalcy and Otherness, the re-examination and re-evaluation of national identity, and humanity's relationship with the environment, were common threads throughout the two-day conference. The call for papers had an abundant and enthusiastic response from international scholars and creative practitioners, and was divided into parallel panels packed with diverse content. This conference report therefore reflects only the portion of panels and papers that this reviewer opted to attend.

The first panel was on 'Witchcraft, Feminism, and Folk Horror', with Sarah Cave, who is writing a practice-based thesis on poetry and prayer. Her fascinating paper, 'Divine Heresy: Revelation, Sexuality and Dissent', described the lives of holy women or lay preachers who started their own religions, and were stigmatised as heretics and witches. Cave noted how the symptoms of divine revelation and rapture can resemble demonic possession. This was used to other the esoteric practices of these notably feminine outsiders. Margery Kemp, for example, survived a large rock dropping on her during Mass, resulting in two contradictory narratives: was her survival the result of a divine miracle or the Devil looking out for his own? Cave illustrated how contemporary poets such as Rebecca Támas, in her collection *WITCH* (2019), reclaim and reappropriate the witch as a potentially holy figure. Rather than being seen as a relic of the past, Cave argued that heresy haunts us in everyday politics, and is employed as a tool to splinter, consolidate, and excommunicate voices of dissent. Next, Deborah Bridle presented a close reading of 'Säcken' (2015), a short story by the New-Weird writer China Miéville. The story is about a lesbian couple on holiday in Germany by a lake, where one of the women experiences a supernatural event and the other does not. Bridle described the investigating young woman as a combination of Final Girl and a detective, who researches the supernatural monster but also uses her embodied knowledge and perception to discover that the ghost is that of a young woman who was subjected to the ritual execution of *poena culli*, where the person found guilty of a transgression is forced into a sack with various animals and then thrown into a body of water. According to Bridle's reading, the story questions where we acquire knowledge, and what types of knowledge are privileged and believed.

My own paper explored the American horror film *Starry Eyes* (dir. by Dennis Widmyer and Kevin Kolsch, 2014) as a post-feminist folk-horror text. This demonic-possession film is about an aspiring actress who inadvertently contracts her physical body to

become a vessel for a demonic entity that works on behalf of a Hollywood cult/production company. Tanya Krzywinska contends that pre-existing landscapes, ruins, and the iconography of the past are used in British cinema to create alternative histories, and to rethink national and cultural identity.² Building on this, I argued that some recent urban occult films use the pre-existing legacy of classic Hollywood to a similar end. I discussed how the main character's possession dramatises the effects of exploitative emotional labour on the individual, but that the film itself perpetuates a devaluation of that feminised labour. The papers on the panel complemented each other nicely, with topics ranging across the media of poetry, short story, and film, each picking up themes of community and exclusion, trauma and isolation, and the systemic devaluation of female labour.

In the next panel, 'Encountering Nature in Folk Horror', Katy Soar talked about stone circles in the UK as a nexus for storytelling. She discussed a range of folkloric origin stories, including those that posited stone circles as the homes of supernatural beings or the petrified remains of unfaithful husbands turned to stone. However, she noted that the folklore changed with the onset of archaeological excavations in the nineteenth century, which provided evidence of the longevity of the earth and of human habitation. These newly discovered ancient ancestors were enfolded into national narratives of colonialism and social Darwinism, and folkloric figures such as fairies and goblins were subsequently reimagined as resembling the indigenous people colonised by the British Empire. Continuing the exploration of British national identity, David Sweeny presented a paper on 'The Spirit of the Green' in Marvel UK's *The Knights of Pendragon*, a 'quasi-mythic Arthurian comic' that dealt with the consequences of Empire and globalisation. First appearing in 1990, *The Knights of Pendragon* imagines a post-human world involving both the natural and supernatural. Sweeny described how the spirit of nature presented itself in the comic as having to become human-like in its violence in order to combat humanity's brutality against the environment. The comic experienced a short run, ending in 1993 but, like folk-horror films, *The Knights of Pendragon* is enjoying a contemporary second wave, as in 2014 the Knights were reactivated through fracking. Sweeny's paper led to an interesting question regarding the use of animism to resist eco-fascism, given fascism's fascination with national mysticism and the occult. The texts that Sweeny described seem wilfully to ignore the prevalence of such readings of myth and mythicism, and reimagine them for anti-colonial, anti-racist purposes.

² See Tanya Krzywinska, 'Lurking Beneath the Skin: British Pagan Landscapes in Popular Cinema', in *Cinematic Countrysides*, ed. by Robert Fish (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 75-90.

The third panel I attended was titled ‘Folk Horror’s Eerie Geographies’, in which James Thurgill’s paper ‘Locating the Eerie’ expanded on Mark Fisher’s variation of ‘the uncanny’, by locating ‘the eerie’ in the spatial relations and rurality of folk horror. Fisher described ‘the eerie’ as an experience of presence where there should be absence, as with the presence of the malicious consciousness and intent of the birds in Daphne Du Maurier’s ‘The Birds’ (1952), and Alfred Hitchcock’s 1963 film version of the same name.³ Thurgill contended that the eerie is about more than a projection of malice onto the rural geography. Instead, he argued, the folk-horror eerie offers an embodied feeling of ‘out of placeness’. Complementing this was Kerry Dodd’s paper ‘Zones of Alienation’, which opened by discussing the current popularity of Chernobyl as a tourist destination for people who like the aesthetics of dereliction and wish to encounter a non-human environmental experience. Dodd provided an analysis of Andrei Tarkovsky’s 1979 *Stalker*, a film that predates the Chernobyl disaster by seven years but has an eerily prescient aesthetic. The ‘Zone’ in the film is an evacuated area much like the ‘Exclusion Zone’ of Chernobyl, and it was filmed primarily in and near abandoned hydro-electric plants. In *Stalker*’s three-hour running time, three men go on a quest to find a room that is fabled to grant visitors their deepest desires. Dodd noted the alienation and ennui felt by both the viewer and the characters as, while they do indeed find a magical room, it is uncertain if this is *the* room or just *a* room, leading the viewer to question if they would even recognise if their deepest desires were fulfilled. This thematic uncertainty and the film’s decentralising of the human is supported by an object-oriented *mise-en-scène*, where human characters walk into pre-existing frames as figures that are part of the rural landscape but far from its central or meaning-making component.

In the same panel, David Evans-Powell’s paper illustrated how folk horror can be disconnected from the rural, in his exploration of folk horror set in the London Underground, and specifically in *Death Line* (dir. by Gary Sherman, 1972). He historicised the London Underground as a system and an infrastructure that initially and continually triggered a sense of class consciousness and class unease. Evans-Powell explained that, before the line was electrified, the Victorians experienced it as unpleasant, crowded, and smelling of sulphur, with commuters fearing exposure to contagions such as tuberculosis, and to diseases borne by rats. In this setting, the ‘folk’ threat in *Death Line* comes in the form of the descendants of

³ For example ‘[a] bird’s cry is eerie if there is a feeling that there is something more in (or behind) the cry than a mere animal reflex or biological mechanism – that there is some kind of intent at work, a form of intent that we do not usually associate with a bird’ (Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 3rd edn (London: Repeater Books, 2016), p. 62).

railway labourers who survived a cave-in, but were left trapped under the rubble and had to resort to cannibalism to remain alive. The landscape of the cannibals' underground lair is shown in a seven-minute-long take in the film, with the camera panning over material waste, debris, and mutilated human bodies – the collateral of London's progress. Evans-Powell's paper shared a common thread with other papers of the day, arguing that those used and discarded by capitalism's urbanisation and globalisation return to haunt and harm the blissfully ignorant subjects of postmodernity.

The final panel I attended on Day One was on 'Folk Horror in the US'. Folklorist Ian Brodie gave an engaging paper on *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You!* (1969-70) and its relation to folk horror. Widely understood to be most American children's introduction to the supernatural in fictional television content at the time, the adventures of Daphne, Velma, Fred, Shaggy, and their loyal canine companion, Brodie argued, dramatise the American young-adult hobby of 'legend-tripping' – the intentional attempt to encounter a legend directly. Brodie described the youths as typical of white, suburban, heteronormative hegemony. They pay aesthetic lip service to the counterculture through fashion, facial hair, and slang, while their faith in institutions such as the police remains intact. He also posited a potential queer reading of the cartoon. Brodie's queer reading did not present the cartoon as a challenge to heteronormativity but to rationalism and the presumed status quo. Brodie argued that, even though a rational explanation resolves the narrative by each episode's end and the threat turns out to be real-estate scammers in disguise as monsters and ghosts, the supernatural is not excluded as a realm of possibility. Moreover, the quest itself, and its concomitant depiction of the car as a personal, mobile territory where the gang are free to make their own rules, is situated as an anticipated part of adolescent culture for the presumably pre-adolescent audience. In this way, the collective pursuit of the supernatural and the gentle troubling of the rational works as a means by which young people can navigate their identities and develop values independent of their communities of origin.

This panel also featured three timely papers on contemporary American horror. Linda Sheppard discussed the clash between arcana and modernity in the most recent adaptation of *Pet Sematary* (dir. by Kevin Kölsch and Dennis Widmyer, 2019); this was followed by Alexandra Hauke's analysis of Jordan Peele's *Us* (2019) and its engagement with race in a post-Obama, neoliberal 'post-racial' age. Hauke made the interesting point that American folk horror could be traced back to the captivity narratives of American slaves, and that the narrative of *Us* is a repetition and reversal of the coloniser/colonised narrative. The final

paper on the panel was Frances Auld's examination of *Hold the Dark* (dir. by Jeremy Saulnier, 2018), which connected American folk horror to psychogeography and ecocriticism. The wolves within the film, and the novel upon which it is based, resort to hunting humans and eating their own pups because their natural prey has become scarce. The consequences of human consumption and expansion lead to dark, unsustainable appetites and, as Auld eloquently described it, the prospect of our own extinction can be seen on the horizon.

Day One ended with the first keynote speaker, Tanya Krzywinska, who presented a survey of folk horror as it appears in computer games. At first glance, she argued, the mechanics of games would seem to be antithetical to the experience of folk horror, as the ludic medium tends to be about mastery and agency, whereas folk horror tries to evoke feelings of disorientation, loss of agency, aphasia, and inertia. Krzywinska proposed the walking simulation game as a subgenre suited to folk horror, because these games are slow paced and melancholic in nature, and gave the examples of *Dear Esther* by The Chinese Room (2008) and its spiritual successor, *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* (2012). These games provide non-linear storytelling and no agency to the player whatsoever, as the player is only a witness. Instead, they evoke a sense of elegiac nostalgia for a landscape and a pastoral ideal that will one day be lost. Similarly, she cited games such as *YEAR WALK* (Simogo, 2013) that are readerly in their execution, challenging the player to engage in their own imaginative engagement with the landscape; Krzywinska described this as 'serious fiction in game form'. Conference attendees could also avail of the free art exhibition titled 'Strange Folk' connected with the conference and curated by Krzywinska. The experience of walking through the exhibition space and interpreting the multimedia pieces provided attendees with a similar role to the players outlined in her talk.

Day Two began with the second keynote address, 'Whose Folk? Locating the Lancashire Witches in Twenty-First Century Culture' by Catherine Spooner, who asked 'who does folklore belong to?' Spooner anecdotally mentioned how nearly everyone from Lancashire claims to be descended from the famous Pendle witches who were tried in 1612. The Pendle witches occupy polarising positions, depicted either as folk devils or folk heroes in popular culture. Spooner drew attention to popular historical novels directed at female audiences and young adults, such as *The Malkin Child* by Livi Michael (2012), which are often excluded from popular recognition as folk horror, and asked what this implies about the gendering of the genre. These novels tend to hold back from the final link in Scovell's

aforementioned ‘folk-horror chain’. Instead of Scovell’s ‘summoning’ or ‘happening’ (which seems to mean a supernatural or horrific fallout for unfortunate characters), popular historical folk horror aimed at female readers tends to convey social messages relating to powerlessness and scapegoating. As Spooner demonstrated, the question of folk horror and folk histories is not a concern belonging to the past, but part of the construction of the present and the imaginary of national identity. She argued for a redefinition of folk horror to accommodate similar contributions from a feminine perspective.

‘Magic and the Occult in Folk Horror’ was one of the panels I was looking most forward to and it did not disappoint. Timothy Jones’ paper “‘Just Like Witches at Black Masses’: Occulture, Black Magic Stories, and the Idea of Folk Horror’ talked about how folk horror is used wilfully to re-enchant national perceptions of place. He made the point that, just because esoteric knowledge was discredited, that does not mean it was not engaged with and believed in. He noted that books such as Alfred Watkins’s 1925 book on ley lines enjoyed popular success in paperback reprints, alongside Gerald Gardner’s non-fiction book *Witchcraft Today* (1954). However, Jones perceived, within horror fiction and film influenced by these studies of esoteric beliefs, a disillusionment with academic accounts of magic, evident in texts that pre-date what is generally understood to be the first cycle of folk horror in the 1970s. These horror reimaginings therefore had cultural stock in heritage and locality, and presented a paranoid view of ‘the crowd’ that is classist, racist, misogynist, and homophobic. For this paper, Jones presented Denis Wheatley’s *To the Devil a Daughter* (1953) as a case study. In the novel, a group of teens band together to organise a gang rape and murder in the woods to open a gateway to hell. Like most narratives featuring sexual violence, rape is used as means of othering one generation or demographic of men; the book is therefore more of a nationalist statement on ‘who belongs in Britain’ than a serious exploration of the violated subject’s trauma. As such, Jones pointed out that sexual violence in folk horror has yet to be discussed at length and is a gap in existing knowledge in horror studies.

Angeline Morrison’s paper was a personal highlight; the paper drew parallels between the rural in folk horror and the representation of the Black female lead, and specifically the character Sarah (played by Angela Bruce) in ‘Charlie Boy’, an episode of the anthology series *Hammer House of Horror* (1980). Where the urban is associated with the civilised and safe, Morrison argued, the rural is met with a complex longing for an imagined ‘simpler’ past, but also feelings of fear and repulsion directed at the ‘primitive’, which is associated

with sparsely populated and silent spaces. Morrison asked whether the Black body is similarly presented as a space and place of magic, liminality, and the primitive. The protagonist, Sarah, acquires an African fetish carving from her boyfriend's white colonialist uncle and names him 'Charlie Boy'. Her role is described as complex and multiple; she is glamorous, witty, and in love with her job but it is her sexuality that activates Charlie Boy's curse, and murders occur nearby as a result. The effects of her sexuality are represented by an interracial sex scene, cross-cut with a victim being stabbed. Morrison noted that, despite the complexity of her character, the fear of Black female sexuality remains tacit. Morrison concluded that, in this narrative, the Black female body possesses the same function as 'the land' as the site of magic in this urban-set folk horror; it is simultaneously desired and feared, simplified and reduced for the sake of articulating white anxiety. As she described it, Black bodies are conspicuous in horror by their absence; her approach critiqued this conspicuous absence with innovation, rigour, and nuance. In the same panel, Barbara Chamberlain's practice-based PhD, on which her paper was based, showed how the witch herself acts as a haunted space in comic books; moving from the role of maiden, through mother, to that of crone, the witch expresses multiplicity in a single space. Chamberlain concluded by discussing the life and afterlife of a local Cornish witch, Joan Wytte (aka The Fighting Fairy Woman of Bodmin), whose skeleton was on display in The Witchcraft Museum, until she was buried in 1998, and who has inspired Chamberlain's collaborative-practice comic, 'Joan's Bones'.

The final keynote of the conference was Bernice M. Murphy's 'Black Boxes: Backwoods Horror and Human Sacrifice in American Folk Horror'. Murphy examined class and regionality, and how a personal relationship with the land, often in the form of manual farm work, is important in folk horror. Murphy referred to a number of texts such as *Harvest Home* by Thomas Tryon (1973), Joyce Carol Oates's ecogothic novella, *The Corn Maiden* (2012), and of course Stephen King's 'The Children of the Corn' (1977), all of which feature America's versatile and over-used crop. Murphy also analysed the 2013 film *Jug Face* (dir. by Chad Crawford Kinkle) as a text that she described as a fascinating meditation on the suffocating grip of tradition. In the film, an evil psychic pit demands that a backwoods community sacrifice one of their own even as their population dwindles. Human sacrifice in folk horror, Murphy argued, demonstrates how insiders in communities can suddenly become outsiders and are therefore ripe for scapegoating, and stressed that these insider-outsiders very often happen to be women. She looked in particular at the human sacrifice in Shirley

Jackson's most famous and anthologised short story, 'The Lottery' (1948), and how this and other folk-horror texts dramatise a slavish adherence to tradition. 'The Lottery' is set in an notably undefined time period; it could be the recent past, the present, or a dystopian future, yet the villagers refer to scarcity, and the need for a good harvest seems anachronistic and vestigial. The initial ritual was obviously first practiced in an earlier time with different circumstances. Murphy therefore highlighted the pessimism and fatalism that lies at the heart of much folk horror; the human sacrifices in these texts are ultimately meaningless and indefensible, but continue almost automatically and inevitably. In the question-and-answer session, Murphy expanded upon the tendency of folk horror to essentialise rural communities in a way that is dangerously close to eugenics. While people of colour are excluded from most of these narratives completely, backwoods horror is, she noted, sometimes used as a way for articulating or mapping unacceptable forms of whiteness.

The last remaining panels of the day included one focusing exclusively on Robert Eggers's 2015 film *The Witch*. Miranda Corcoran and Andrea di Carlo looked at Eggers's *mise en scène* as an expression of the sublime American landscape, and the contradictory awe and terror it struck into the hearts of early American settlers. Against the vastness and (projected) emptiness of the New-England landscape, the family of exiles are tiny vulnerable figures dwarfed by the twilight forest. By contrast, the assembled witches do not fear nature because they are part it. In the next paper, musicologist Shauna Louise Caffrey explored Mark Korven's soundtrack to the film, and described how music is used in the film to embody the character of the witch, even as her physical form remains elusive and ephemeral. Caffrey described how Korven's use of drones and unresolved dissonances induce a sense of claustrophobia. The description of asynchrony in sound and image complemented Corcoran and di Carlo's paper, and their emphasis on how, even though we see a vast expanse of landscape, this settler family are trapped. The panel concluded with Amelia Crowther's paper, which looked at *The Witch* in terms of the construction of the reproductive body. Historically, women whose bodies defy the capitalist function of reproducing a labour force (such as infertile and post-menopausal women, as well as lesbian, trans, and asexual women) have been attacked as witches. In Eggers's film, we see a similar and connected anxiety about spaces that are 'barren' and 'unruly'. Crowther explored the subversive potential of the figure of the witch, citing the WITCH (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell) protest in the 1969, and Bakhtin's conception of the pregnant hag, but expressed scepticism that the witch can ever be fully recuperated from her patriarchal constructions. The panel

offered rich arguments and avenues for thought, and raised the question of whether the ending of *The Witch* presents a solution to living outside the system, or merely another failure. Although Thomasin, the film's protagonist, does get to levitate with the assembled band of women in the woods, materially, this is far from the Devil's promise that she will 'live deliciously'.

The final panel, 'Global Folk Horror', featured Greek folk horror in a paper by Maria Vara, who told us about vampires in the Epirus region of Greece and how their cultural residue can be seen in vernacular speech, particularly the phrase 'may the ground not reject thee'; and explained how this folkloric history is erased in the 'classicising' of Greece. Frazer Lee then discussed shamanism in horror films from South Korea. Lee argued that, unlike Catholic and Christian possession and haunting, shamanism does not stigmatise intuition and embodied trauma. Valeria Villegas Lindvall's paper conceptualised folk horror as a vehicle to work through colonial trauma, in Mexican cinematic iterations of the figure of La Llorona. With the release of the new film *The Curse of La Llorona* (dir. by Michael Chaves, 2019) by Blumhouse, as Villegas Lindvall argued, this is an ideal moment to call for a critical re-evaluation of this mythic figure from a de-colonialising perspective. The latest film (much like *The Conjuring* franchise (2013-present) that it is associated with in viral marketing campaigns) reinforces the status and power of the Christian patriarchal order. Marketing for the Blumhouse film claimed that this was La Llorona's first incarnation onscreen; Villegas Lindvall challenged this with evidence of La Llorona's rich history in Mexican film since 1933 and her recent revival by female directors, in films such as *Las Lloronas* (dir. by Lorena Villarreal, 2004), *Madre de Dios* (dir. by Gigi Saul Guerrero, 2015), and *Tigers Are Not Afraid* (dir. by Issa Lopez, 2018). Working against a North-American gaze that denies the racialised body its humanity and sensitivity, Villegas Lindvall argued, La Llorona's cry is recuperative, a political expression of grief and resistance.

In conclusion, *Folk Horror in the Twenty-First Century* proved to be a timely and invigorating exploration of horror's representation (and anticipation) of contemporary social fears. Just as the original 1970s cycle expressed growing concerns with environmental issues and the tensions between the counterculture and authoritarianism, this second wave appears to connect with renewed ecological concern and grassroots demonstration. With escalating natural disasters, the mass extinctions reported by the WWF in 2018, and the demoralising visual images of beached whales with stomachs full of plastic, the perceivable impact of climate change might find its natural narrative home in horror. One of the noted common

features of folk horror throughout the two days were the markedly pessimistic and ambivalent endings found in the respective texts. Even when the landscape is not openly hostile to its human inhabitants, even when it could be described as a beautiful pastoral idyll, the tone to the text is mournful and elegiac. These texts could be said to depict tentative if fearful imaginings of counter-hegemony, of a future beyond the horizon of globalisation and capitalism, one that valorises the collectivised experiences of small, self-sustaining communities, while still registering traumatic encounters with the effects of what we have inherited.

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