Abstract: A central element of the core folk horror texts (The Wicker Man (1973), Blood on Satan’s Claw (1971), Witchfinder General (1968)) is the idea of rural communities as retaining pre-Christian practices and beliefs. When uncovered by a modern outsider who is returning to the countryside, these revelations disrupt their world view. Folk horror texts do not resolve this tension between worldviews, present any ‘victory’ as bittersweet and neither side is shown to hold all the answers. The sustaining of this tension beyond the end of the narrative suggests that folk horror speaks particularly to our contemporary uncertainty, where organised religion and political organisations no longer hold all the answers, but retreat to the past also does not appear to present a sustainable alternative. This paper will show the importance of the rural return as a movement in time as well as space, one which invokes a strong sense of cyclical in the rural space-time in tension with the linear industrial time of modern urban living. Examples will be drawn from the ‘Unholy Trinity’ of folk horror films, as well as related texts such as the Robin Redbreast and the BBC series The Living and the Dead.

The recent revival of interest in folk horror is one that I argue can be associated with key aspects of the genre that help make it particularly relevant to contemporary concerns. While the Gothic can be interpreted as relating to fears of the powerful elite, folk horror deals with fears of the people. Where rural horror can be interpreted as dealing with an urban fear of the countryside, folk horror shows the appeal of the rural as an escape. Where ecohorror can be interpreted as the revenge of a nature that has been mistreated, folk horror tends to represent the environment as significant but significant in relationship with the people that inhabit and manage it, rather than a force in its own right. And folk horror does this through its engagement with the idea of being able to return to a simpler past by returning to the rural, a past where the horrors of the present can be rectified or avoided. But what folk horror also does is show that such a return to the past and the pagan itself comes at a cost, and one that we may not want to pay.

This means that folk horror is a genre particularly suited to dealing with concerns around ecological collapse, because it is about the human relationship with and management of natural resources rather than presenting an opposition between human activity and nature. It is also a genre particularly suited to considering issues of national identity, with its sense of a return to an older and more true identity connected to the land, but one which is dependent on horrors which we moderns would like to forget or hide. It is also a genre that is centrally, to my mind, concerned with the idea of the people, the folk, and so the combined appeals of and fears of the popular and populist, particularly as activated by nostalgic appeals to mythical national identity. These concerns were active in the late-1960s and early-1970s, at the early flourishing of folk horror in Britain, when the UK turned to Europe for economic support at a time of industrial strife and ecological concern. They are active now, in the time of Brexit and ecological collapse.

This recurrence is not only appropriate because of the apparent recurrence of related external factors. It is also appropriate because folk horror is a genre which frequently makes reference to the recursive, to cyclical narratives which suggest an inescapable overarching narrative, often dependent upon the relationships within a community which enforces particular behaviours and attitudes, and so that the actions of individuals are largely irrelevant in the grand scheme, doing little more than providing slight variations while the end result remains the same. In turn, this inescapability connects to the idea of rural time as cyclical time governed by the cycles of nature,
where events recur at regular intervals with slight variation but little change to the overall result: planting, tending, harvesting, clearing to plant again, and so on. This is contrasted to the idea of linear time, time which indicates machine-governed modernity prioritising industry and profit over community and connection to nature. As Richard Morris so succinctly put it, 'Time in an economy based on land is cyclical, whereas in a world of coin and markets time is money.'

All of this preamble should have made clear one of the key aspects of folk horror as I see it: it is a genre of ambiguity. The rural, pagan community is appealing, but it relies on horrors for its survival. If it is a representation of a ‘true’ national identity, then that identity is based on practices and beliefs that are partially appealing and partially horrific, often at the expense of the individual over the community. It is up to the viewer or reader to decide if they believe it is better to be a sacrifice for the good of the community or a sacrifice to the good of capitalism, or whatever other horror people can be sacrificed to. Every benefit has a cost; the disturbing power of folk horror is that it does not decide for you whether or not that cost is worth paying.

A central concept useful to interpreting folk horror is Svetlana Boym’s distinction between two different types of nostalgia: the reflective, which ‘explores ways of inhabiting many places at once and imagining different time zones’, and the restorative, which ‘does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition’. As Boym goes on to note, ‘This typology of nostalgia allows us to distinguish between national memory that is based on a single plot of national identity, and social memory, which consists of collective frameworks that mark but do not define the individual memory.’ In other words, the typology allows us to separate those concepts of memory which are narrowly nationalistic, looking to the past as one true golden age to be returned to, and those concepts of memory which engage with the complexities of experience of the past and the different experiences of the past shared by different groups to inform the present. I argue that folk horror is accessible to both, that it draws particularly on ideas of a true national narrative that can return or which has survived in a hidden way, but that it also makes complexity part of its narrative, raising the question of whether this national identity is worth its cost. The relevance of this to current issues is clear from Boym’s statement that ‘Modern nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values’.

This raises one of the key issues in folk horror: the idea of insularity. This is literal in the case of The Wicker Man, as we are dealing with the isolated community of the island of Summerisle. But more broadly in folk horror we are dealing with communities that are to a large extent separated from the rest of the modern world. They appear to offer the opportunity to physically travel back to a past not just ‘as it used to be’, but as it still is in this particular place. The return to the rural is thus a return to a desired past, just one that turns out to have a potentially undesirable cost.

At the same time that these communities are isolated, there is a sense that they retain practices and beliefs which have been forgotten in the wider, modern world, but which are more accurate representations of how the nation was. In some cases, these are openly recreations of a past that never was: in The Wicker Man, Lord Summerisle makes it clear that it was his grandfather who turned the island to his idea of paganism as part of his attempts to regenerate its agriculture through a better engagement with nature, apparently some form of organic farming. From the

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Derek Johnston 2
practices shown, including the wicker man itself, these traditions were not actually native ones, but a mixture of Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* and Caesar’s propaganda against the Germanic tribes. However, the traditions have been taken up by the people of Summerisle to the extent that Howie is able to warn Lord Summerisle at the end that he has lost control of them, they have become true for these folk, and the logical result of this will be Summerisle’s sacrifice.

In other texts, the survival appears to be a true one, although also potentially revived. In *Robin Redbreast*, which predates *The Wicker Man* by three years, we again find an isolated community where traditions around fertility and the regeneration of the land are carried on in a regular cycle overseen by generations of wise men, executioners, corn kings and mothers. I have found Georgina’s Boyes’s work on the English Folk Revival useful in thinking about these presentations of traditions, survivals and recreations, especially as its ideas clearly fed into and continue to feed into folk horror material. She points out, for example, that folk music and dance collectors would seek out isolated rural communities as the most likely places that material would survive unchanged. But, as she goes on to explain, the underlying idea of the ‘survivals theory was, therefore, a definition of the Folk as manifesting a comprehensive absence of creativity. [...] Why whole communities would continue to perform actions which had ceased to be meaningful hundreds - perhaps thousands - of years before was simply not touched on.5 Folk horror texts like *Robin Redbreast* or *Wake Wood* suggest one reason why: these actions do not cease to meaningful, but retain their meaning because they are understood to still work. And if they do actually still work, then that suggests that these folk, these common people, actually have a better understanding of the working of the world than all of us sophisticated, educated, international urbanites.

This survival of tradition is also connected to an idea of the return to a rural past where people knew their role. In a time of increasing job insecurity, increased movement, and so detachment from place and community, and changing communities from incomers and departures, the idea of the old rural community where everyone knows their place has a very understandable appeal. The ploughman ploughs, the laird governs, the landlord provides entertainment, the scholar knows things, the sacred whore inducts men into sexual maturity, and the corn king will die, possibly after having fathered a new generation on the sacred mother. Having the comfort of a role means having a place in the community. Having that taken away from you causes pain. The realisation that your role is that of sacrifice can lead to horror.

In *The Living and the Dead*, psychologist Nathan Appleby and his society photographer wife Charlotte return to his family farm estate of Shepzoy, initially to take part in a Summer Solstice fire festival where an Appleby has ‘always’ lit the fire. On the death of Nathan’s grandmother, they decide to stay and take over the farm, and so take over responsibility for their tenants and workers, and their relationship to the land. In order to keep the farm viable, Charlotte, as farm manager, decides to buy a steam engine to improve efficiency. This is in the interests of speed rather than a response to the natural rhythms of crops and land, and it takes away the traditional role of the ploughman, changing him from someone who works with a plough team to someone who controls, or tries to control, a machine. In response, John, the ploughman, goes into the field, starts his team moving by drawing them on with an apple, and allows himself to be trampled by them and cut by the plough. We see his blood soaking into the land, the connection between flesh and soil, and touching the apple that he used to draw on the team, also making a Biblical link to the idea of

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woman as originator of sin and error through the temptation to eat of the fruit, leading to the casting out from paradise. And we are reminded of the family ties to Shepzoy and its traditions at John’s funeral, where the gathered congregation’s singing of a hymn at the graveside is overridden by Nathan loudly singing a traditional harvest song, first alone and then joined by the others. The traditional and local returns, overriding the connections to wider institutions such as the Church of England and, in doing so, suggesting that this is in some ways the ‘true’ England.

For, as Raymond Williams put it, ‘In English, “country” is both a nation and a part of a “land”’. The rural, the countryside, is seen as more representative of the nation than the urban, multicultural cities. In part, this is because of knowability; in Benedict Anderson’s famous formulation, a nation is a community that ‘is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.’ Georgina Boyes reformulated this idea of the ‘imagined community’ in the title of her study of the English Folk Revival to The Imagined Village, raising both the basis of this idealised community in imagination more than reality, but also the appeal of the village as a manageable community. In such a community, not only does everyone know their place, but everyone knows everyone and what each person’s place is, quite unlike Anderson’s imagined nation. What this also means is that these imagined villagers know who the outsiders are, those who ‘don’t belong’, who have no place there. Once again, the comfort and appeal of the isolated, rural community and its return to an imagined past has an unsettling aspect.

And so we come around again, to the end of this paper, which may well be resurrected for another conference, or a publication, in some amended form, some time in the future. Or is it the past? And there will be the same appeal of revisiting something familiar, and being horrified at some of what it shows, as found in folk horror texts.

Those folk horror texts provide us initially of an appealing fantasy of returning to the familiar, imagined village of the past, a rural retreat from the onrushing, linear, mechanically-governed time of the industrialised modern world into a more relaxed, naturally-governed, cyclical time. There, we would find a connection not just to nature, but to a more ancient and so more true sense of what the nation, usually England, should be like. It would be a connection to a happy and connected community where everyone knew and was content with their place, and so knew your place even if you did not yet know it yourself. But, beware, for it is quite possible that your place, your role as an outsider is as a sacrifice, to ensure the continuity of that community and its connection to the land, and so its identity. For, in folk horror, it is not the individual that truly matters, but their role, and the final concern is the survival of the folk, the continuation of the community and its practices, because that is where meaning is found.

Thank you.

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