Time and Identity in Folk Horror
A Fiend in the Furrows, Queen's University Belfast, 19 September 2014

Firstly, I would like to thank the organisers of this conference for inviting me to speak on such an interesting subject as folk horror. Although the honour of being the first speaker brings with it its own sense of dread, a feeling of responsibility to set the whole thing running well, to establish some initial definitions, and to sound like you know what you are talking about. Which is particularly a challenge with such a nebulous field as folk horror, where there is a strongly defined core of what falls into the genre - *The Wicker Man*, *Blood on Satan's Claw*, *Witchfinder General* - but where there has been less attention paid to other texts, and where attempts to define just what it is that connects those three films to establish the genre of 'folk horror' have been few, and as vague as attempts to define a genre usually are. Possibly Adam Scovell and George Cromack will address some of those challenges in the next session on defining folk horror.

Anyway, what I want to talk about today is a subject that arose from discussions with Craig, so I hope that I don't tread on his toes too much. This is about time and identity in folk horror, which I consider to be central ingredients to the genre, and that it is the treatment of these ingredients that I would suggest helps to set folk horror apart from other subgenres of horror. There are particularly points where the folk horror genre is close to and arguably overlaps with rural horror, eco-horror and the Lovecraftian weird tale, but I believe that there are some differences which can be argued that make folk horror so distinct. I'm going to be talking quite generally here, rather than focusing on a particular case study or set of case studies, so that should mean that there are plenty of points for people to challenge later...

The title of this conference draws on *Blood on Satan's Claw*, the opening of which memorably features [SLIDE] the discovery of a monstrous head in the furrows of an English field. This calls to mind a comparison made by oral historian George Ewart Evans in describing the work of the folklorist as being like discerning [SLIDE] 'the pattern under the plough':

> the crop marks seen in the aerial photographs of some of our fields. Just as the pattern of the ancient settlements is still to be seen in spite of years of repeated ploughings, so the beliefs and customs linked with the old rural way of life in Britain have survived the pressures and changes of many centuries. They are so old that they cannot be dated; and on this count alone they are historical evidence; as valuable as the archaeological remains that are dug from those sites so dramatically revealed since the development of the aeroplane.¹

This description connects to a number of the ideas that I am going to examine in this paper, and ideas that seem to me to be central to folk horror. Firstly, [SLIDE] there is the general association with agriculture and a rural way of life. Secondly, [SLIDE] there is the idea that the patterns of old ways of living have somehow managed to survive, albeit in a somewhat blurred form, into the present or near-present day. Thirdly, [SLIDE] there is the notion that these ideas are not only old, but that they are *ancient*, 'so old that they cannot be dated', with the sense that folklorists are thus somehow uncovering something innate in the country with their explorations. Significantly, and as suggested by Evans in his comment relating this purely to Britain, there is the particular idea that these surviving practices and traditions thus point to something particular to the nation.

But we should remember that these folk horror texts are not just their content, but they are also cultural products and so *of their own time*, even as we revisit, or are introduced to them, now. So I want to suggest

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Derek Johnston (derek.johnston@qub.ac.uk) 19 September 2014
that there are essentially three main aspects of time that we could use to focus this examination of time and identity in folk horror. The first [SLIDE] is the relationships to the past depicted within the texts. Secondly, [SLIDE] there is the historical context of the texts, including the amount of actual then-current historical knowledge used within them. Thirdly, [SLIDE] there is the significance of nostalgia, which can be found both within the texts, but more particularly within the audience relationships with those texts, and also in their presentation in marketing, academic texts, etc.. And all of these relationships with time feed in to notions of communities and identities.

I don't think that I will have much time to deal with the second issue, mainly because looking at historical context requires focusing on particular texts and / or periods. Some of the comments that I make here may be period specific, but I think that Darryl Jones will be focussing more on this issue in his plenary session this afternoon.

To think about the audience for a moment, obviously we are all here because of an engagement with folk horror, whether that is connected to personal nostalgia or not. So we share an aspect of our identities, and demonstrate shared values and community, and so far, so basic audience studies.

But I don't want to get caught up in audience studies or fan studies, largely because they take a lot of time and statistics and transcriptions to do properly. Instead, I will merely note that many of us have a sense of nostalgia for these texts because of their associations with when we first encountered them or texts like them, particularly if they were seen as part of an introduction to more adult fare, as a rite of passage. We may also have a sense of nostalgia generated by material within the texts; whether it is memories of a 70s childhood spurred by seeing the fashions and largely empty streets of Children of the Stones, the appearance of particular actors, the sounds of particular music. And this need not be nostalgia generated by memories of actual experience, but can be related to Alison Landsberg's concept of 'prosthetic memory', the memory of events and periods that is created by media texts rather than by direct experience. The prosthetic memory is a particular type of mediated memory, in that [SLIDE] 'In the process the person does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live. The resulting prosthetic memory has the ability to shape the person's subjectivity and politics.' So prosthetic memories are empathic, about feeling the representation of the past, not just taking on a 'factual' account of it.

And here it is worth reminding ourselves of Svetlana Boym's definition of nostalgia [SLIDE]: 'Nostalgia (from nostos - return home, and algia - longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy.' We often think of nostalgia as being comfortable, warming, cosy, and that is the element of the 'romance with one's own fantasy', where we take the past and create our own conception of it, a conception that is connected to but not an accurate reflection of the reality of that past. As Boym reminds us, nostalgia is also about a sense of loss, it is about pain at the absence of the past, even if that is a past which never strictly existed.

So how does this idea of pain at the loss of the past fit with the representations of the past and our or characters' relationships with it in folk horror? After all, it is typically the connection with the past which brings about the 'horror' element. Yet this idea of nostalgia for the past as a part of horror is a strangely persistent one in criticism. Maggie Kilgour, writing in relation to Gothic fiction, stated that [SLIDE]:

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The gothic is symptomatic of a nostalgia for the past which idealises the medieval world as one of wholeness ... This retrospective view of the past serves to contrast it with a modern bourgeois society, made up of atomistic possessive individuals, who have no essential relation to each other.4

There are obviously significant issues to be taken with this stance in relation to the Gothic, and Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall do so very neatly in their chapter on 'Gothic Criticism'. But in terms of folk horror, Kilgour's ideas seem rather more relevant, particularly as she goes on to claim that [SLIDE] 'the gothic looks backwards to a kinder simpler paradise lost of harmonious relations that existed before the nasty modern world of irreconcilable opposition and conflict5 and that [SLIDE] 'Like Romanticism, the gothic is especially a revolt against a mechanistic or atomistic view of the world and relations, in favour of recovering an earlier, organic model.6 That concept of the 'organic' is particularly relevant to the pre-industrial appeal of many of folk horror's rural communities.

Folk horror is based strongly around the appeal of the past, and the idea that past ways of living and behaving were not only more 'authentic', whatever that means, than modern ways, but that they provided something additional which had been lost. Frequently, this appeal is based around two key pleasures of community and sexual freedom, [SLIDE] pleasures which were central also to the ideals of many alternative communities not only of the 1960s and 1970s, but throughout history. However, folk horror is also conservative in pointing out that these appeals and pleasures come at a price. But where folk horror tends to differ from other types of horror is that it does not say that this renders the dominant society as the one that is more 'correct'; indeed, the appeal of the traditional community is often much clearer than the appeal of the alternative. What it tends to suggest is that both traditional and modern ways of living have their benefits, and their costs, and that neither is inherently superior. Rather, it is a question of considering just what costs one is prepared to pay for the way of life that you desire.

But this is not just a question for the individual. As I pointed out with regard to Evans' ideas about oral history and the survival of ancient practices, this is about cultural and national identity. This is about the idea that cultural identity stems from place, and that this association is something magical or spiritual, although some folk horror texts undermine this concept as much as they support it.

Returning to the original image from Blood on Satan's Claw, Leon Hunt has pointed out that the appearance of the parts of the demon from the very soil in the film shows that [SLIDE] 'This Green and Pleasant Land forever resists the onset of an Age of Reason'.7 In other words, there is something essentially non-rational in the very landscape, in the very character of the land itself, and so at the heart of the nation. I would suggest that it is this anti-rationalism that is a key part of folk horror, but more importantly it is the idea that we cannot escape the anti-rationalism of the past, that it is not only a key part of our heritage, but that it is, to a large extent, a more accurate and appropriate understanding of the universe and ourselves than materialistic rationalism could be. Maybe it would be more accurate to say that it is not an anti-rationalism, but an alternative rationalism, one based around the power of magical thinking, and supported by an alternative moral structure.

It could be said, then, that folk horror thus presents a rather bleak view of belief, of people, and of our cultural and national identities. Pre-Christian faiths, or their reconstructions, are shown to be either

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Derek Johnston (derek.johnston@qub.ac.uk) 19 September 2014
equally or more 'true' than Christianity or post-Enlightenment material rationalism, so there is no real sign of advance and frequently a sense of loss of knowledge and understanding in the face of codified book-learning. Communities that abide by those old values and beliefs are often shown to be happier than those that follow mainstream society. The landscape and nature are either unconcerned with human activity or require placating to allow it to thrive. And, frequently, there are no supernatural powers involved in the narrative at all, which exposes that everything is equal because all of the horror and evil comes only from human activity.

By turning to pre-Christian beliefs and activities as part of their community identity, communities are rejecting the beliefs and practices of invaders and outsiders. They are trying to recreate a more insular, specific culture than one that has been influenced by internationalisation, globalisation, immigration. So this is in many ways a traditionally conservative route, with each person knowing their place, although the sexual liberation and focus on community rather than commerce may appeal less to the politically capital-C Conservative. But the appeal of the past in this sense is a mixture of the safely conservative and the liberating, by moving the practitioners out of the mainstream of society and allowing them to express their difference. It is also notable that these communities tend to be secretive rather than proselytisers, rarely attempting to spread the word of their more 'authentic' culture or their better way of living.

And this connection of representations of paganism and a return to rural community as conservative is not really that different from actual cultural movements. While modern paganism has certainly attracted those who could be considered to the left of the political spectrum, with its associations with 'hippy' ideas of reverence of nature, sexual openness, rejection of the military-industrial complex and its influence on society, it developed from very conservative roots. Indeed, the very rejection of modernity was also a rejection of the ideals of modern socialism, to employ technological and industrial processes to free the individual and to level society. As Ronald Hutton puts it, [SLIDE] for many people in the early and mid-twentieth century, industrialization, urbanization, and high technology all formed parts of a package with socialism. Their [meaning modern pagans'] spiritual interests marched closely with three different emotional aspects of right-wing ideology: nostalgia for a better past, elitism and suspicion of the masses, and a desire for a free market, in magic and sex as in economics. At the same time, paganism could be, and has been and is, treated as celebrating feminine power, through the significance of the Goddess, and communal power, through its emphasis on co-operation, or for radical action and a rejection of the status quo. In other words, the politics of modern paganism, like the politics of folk horror, are as complex as the individuals involved and cannot be readily simplified down to a definitive statement. Instead, each text has to be considered individually.

Returning to the concept of the community, we find that it is tied very deeply to ideas of place, but particularly to the ideas of a place occupied for a long period of time by the same community, with a strong sense of continuity. There are differences here to the idea of deep time as encountered in, say, The Stone Tape, where the connection of the ancient horror to people relates to whoever encounters it, and the horror is ultimately that of a possibly pre-human existence, something so ancient that the contemplation of how long ago it took place is a terrifyingly vertiginous experience. Yet one of the most significant ways that folk horror engages with time is in the way that it presents a place where time collapses in on itself, where different times touch each other and a sense of the present is frequently lost. This is perhaps clearest in narratives such as Red Shift, The Children of the Stones or the Ghost Story for Christmas 'Stigma', each of which features connections across time, even cyclical narratives.

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Supernatural tales in general are also tied up with conceptions of the national and identity in their frequent positioning of the foreign as the threatening 'other'. Whether it is an ominous foreign count, a mystical object from overseas or foreign magical knowledge, foreignness is dangerous. This extends to people's appearance, particularly in the Victorian era, where appearing somehow foreign was often a sign of being suspect, as in the case of Helen Vaughn in Machen's 'The Great God Pan', who is described as [SLIDE] 'of a very different type from the inhabitants of the village; her skin was a pale, clear olive, and her features were strongly marked, and of a somewhat foreign character.' Such figures were seen as dangerous invaders, psychically or magically polluting the natural magics of the English mystical landscape and in need of expulsion. Indeed, the whole of the narrative of M.R.James' 'A Warning to the Curious' comes from the disruption of England's mystical Saxon defences for the purposes of personal gain.

And here we can touch upon concepts of the mystical landscape, bound together no doubt by ley lines, those ancient lines of mystical force connecting prehistoric points of power, invented by Alfred Watkins in 1921 as nothing more than ancient pathways from geographical point to geographical point, and given their magical inflection by John Mitchell in 1969. But this mystical version of ley lines adds to the sense of the landscape as something living, with energy pulsing around it like blood, in a conception influenced by feng shui, connecting the energy of the landscape with the energy of the people. And we can also connect the particular conceptions of a mystical landscape with the increased interest in Asian mysticism which arose in the 60s and 70s.

But back in Victorian and Edwardian supernatural fiction, foreignness also presented a method by which the unusual, the irrational could be introduced into a rational, ordinary British society in which such things just could not happen in the normal run of events. The expansion of the British Empire and its trade through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries also meant that it was an easy narrative solution to introduce strangeness as something brought back by a traveller, or introduced through trade. In this way, these fears also represented the trepidation associated with these regular introductions of novelty, of foreign strangeness into British life. The supernatural tales also provided a way of working through some of the fears about British engagement with foreignness, whether from the position of a powerful overlord fearful of revenge through means not completely understood, or from a more liberal position concerned with the effects of British rule on other societies and cultures, as well as with the potential for justified attacks on Britishness and British power as a response.

For folk horror, though, the horror is native, not foreign. In some cases, it is clear that we are the ones who should be considered other, whether because we are outsiders to the place where the horror dwells, as with many of Algernon Blackwood’s tales, or because we are newcomers as a species.

However, it can be that the supernatural power is one that is known by people but is not necessarily tied to folk practices that are still active. There, the horror can be with encountering an ancient power, realising that the culture used to know how to deal with it, and the protagonists then have to find a way to uncover that lost knowledge in order to survive. If they can. Again, the recovery of cultural practices that have been lost, and the reinterpretation of these practices for modern use, are central to the genre. For example, the Torchwood episode 'Small Worlds' deals with fairies who are associated with an ancient woodland area, Roundstone Wood, that has remained untouched while all was developed around it. The fairies are beings who exist outside time, and the only way that they can be dealt with is to allow them to occasionally take away a child to join them. It is only the timeless Captain Jack, his historical encounter

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Derek Johnston (derek.johnston@qub.ac.uk) 19 September 2014
with the fairies, and the clues left through folklore, that allows the team to realise that this is the only solution: let the fairies take the child they want, or the whole world will burn. Another example might be *Rare Exports* [SLIDE], the 2010 Finnish film which presents the horrifying 'true' origins of Santa Claus, and shows how folk tales have to be mined for information to successfully deal with the supernatural source.

And *Rare Exports* brings me to a number of considerations about folk horror, which I suspect I will not have the time to cover in detail, so hopefully others will pick them up.

One is the question of folk horror and nation. When Craig and I first talked about this conference, we were slightly stuck when trying to think of non-British examples of folk horror, although a number of possible candidates have since been identified and one of them, *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders*, is showing tonight. I learned at a conference in Sweden last week that there are many Scandinavian novels and films which present a harsh, supernaturally antagonistic environment which threatens and ultimately destroys modern, educated, frequently university-affiliated, urbanites who decide to journey into the country. This connects to the concerns over the disruption of the environment, and many of these narratives sounded to me that they are more strictly eco- or environmental horror than folk horror. However, they are also about the concern of the modern Scandinavian that they have, in the short time since the Second World War, largely lost touch with their ancient connections to the land, by becoming a primarily urban society.

This is also a concern that is found in British folk horror, as our communities became fragmented and scattered in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in order to move to the cities to benefit from the developments of industry, commerce and globalisation. In this process of scattering, it was believed that rituals, practices, narratives, songs and rhymes could be retained, but would lose their connection to the original place they developed in, and so lose their specificity. Antiquarians and folklorists were thus needed to rediscover these original meanings. According to Ronald Hutton, Mary Beard's study of Frazer's *The Golden Bough* suggests that for Frazer the book had represented a journey through an underworld of belief, in which the familiar rituals of the British countryside were integrally linked with savage and foreign rites in an exciting and unsettling way. So these familiar songs, dances, etc. were revealed to be excitingly unfamiliar. And note that use of the word 'savage', which suggests so much: otherness, unleashed passions, freedom from civilisation's constraints, as well as danger, violence, animality, primitiveness. As I have already mentioned, Leon Hunt has pointed out that the appearance of the parts of the demon from the very soil in *Blood on Satan's Claw* shows that [SLIDE] 'This Green and Pleasant Land forever resists the onset of an Age of Reason' (Hunt, 2002: 87), suggesting that an appeal of this supposedly uncovered mystical and savage past within our nursery rhymes and folk songs and dances is the recovery of a freedom of emotional expression, freedom from the constraints of so-called civilisation. And the appeal of recovery suggests that this freedom is something that is perceived to be lost. In Scandinavia the loss is a more recent one, and one that has occurred largely alongside growing concerns over the need to conserve nature against damage from human activity. So this suggests that, while folk horror is possible in various national contexts, and will have similar concerns, it is also something that is going to be differently inflected in different nations.

Another issue is that of the memorialisation of the ancient within culture, and particularly with forgotten folklore. What is important here is the idea that much of this folklore, being pre-Christian, is also from before the dominance of literacy, and so it very much has to be pieced back together from remnants and

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shadows. These are traced, or so the folklorists would have us believe, through memories of songs and rhymes, and through folktales. Indeed, the scholar leader of the communities that are central to folk horror has often pieced together the rites and rituals of that community through their recording in and interpretation from books; think about the Victorian Lord Summerisle, or Fisher in Robin Redbreast.

And the mention of folktales leads us to the third question or idea. The narrative typically goes that folktales were for children and adults, but that they are preserved largely through versions which have been reinterpreted for children. Indeed, the notion that the 'true' or 'original' version of a fairy story is something that is much more vicious, violent and scary than the more familiar, 'Disneyfied' version is something that has become strongly embedded. So there is the idea that there are remnants of truth to be found in children's stories, but that they have to be traced back to a truth that is horrifying, and certainly not for children. The idea of folk stories as being appropriate for children seems to have developed from the idea that these stories were themselves as 'simple' as narratives from 'primitive' cultures, and so not appropriate for adults, even if collectors and adapters like Perrault or the Grimms were originally writing for a largely adult audience.

Mention of the Grimms reminds us that, like their collections of the stories of the German Volk, folk horror is partially concerned with the legitimacy of national identity. If the past in folk horror depicted is real, it is often horrific. Any right of domain, any claim to the land, is typically by bloodshed and horrific pacts. And there is frequently a sense of a prior claim from someone or something else, be they fairy folk or demons. Other pasts, as in The Wicker Man, are shown to be creations, of romanticised pasts, but ultimately illegitimate in terms of demonstrating a long-standing connection to the place.

This fits, of course, with the idea that national identity is largely a development of the late eighteenth century and the spread of rapid communication technologies and trade. This is perhaps most famously summed up in Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities, and I find myself driven to quote probably the most commonly quoted part of this book. Anderson describes the nation as [SLIDE] 'imagined' because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. This fits with the idea of the community in folk horror more in the way that these communities are imagined across time, and that they appear familiar, yet unfamiliar, to us as part of our national identity. Perhaps a more useful concept to take is Georgina Boyes adaptation of Anderson's ideas, as 'the imagined village'. This focuses on the rural, communal nature of folk material, but also points to the way in which this material has been shaped historically by those who use it as part of their lives, and those who have collected, codified and interpreted it.

Boyces was writing in relation to the English folk music and dance revival, and the connections between folk horror and folk music are going to be considered by Clare Button and Eamon Byers tomorrow, and we will be able to experience some of our own musical folk horror with Sharron Kraus and Clare Button that evening. Even in texts which do not utilise folk music in the same way that The Wicker Man does, Boyes' assessment of the frameworks in which folk revivalists operated is of relevance to the use of folk material in horror films, and particularly in relation to ideas of time and identity.

It is one of those things that only needs pointing our because it is so obvious that it is easy to overlook, but the word 'folk' refers to the people, to the ordinary person, rather than to the laird in his castle. It particularly has associations with the rural, and with the pre-industrial. The antiquarians and collectors

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Derek Johnston (derek.johnston@qub.ac.uk) 19 September 2014
who gathered songs and stories concentrated on the rural communities, the more the remote the better, in their search for the purest expressions of the 'natural' culture of the country. These collectors often saw these songs and stories as the remnants and survivals of ancient narratives and traditions. Of course, both songs and tales have been modified, retold, resung, forgotten and remembered and misremembered, edited, bowdlerised, recreated and evolved. So what is left of any original core is rather questionable. But what uses those songs and stories are put to, now those are interesting.

Michael Brocken, like Boyes, has argued that the folk revival has often had a nationalist element to it, typically one originating from middle classes fearful of the encroachment of American popular culture. Note here the differentiation between popular and folk, a distinction that is still made, and which is reinforced in cultural studies with the differentiation made by the Frankfurt School between the mass-produced popular outputs of the culture industry and authentic folk creativity. And that might encourage us to consider how folk horrors can be seen as showing an 'authentic' community fighting back against the forces of consumerism. Or are they a demonstration of how the fight against the forces of consumerism can only cause disruption and terror for nice, middle-class consumers who take a wrong turning somewhere?

In any case, folk implies a group, the people, a community, and this is particularly evident in the centrality of community to The Wicker Man, Robin Redbreast, Wake Wood and John Buchan's Witch Wood. The idea that these communities are continuing ancient practices, and that those practices have power, implies a concomitant lack of power in the mainstream society. It may be that the power of these practices is on a purely human level, binding the community together and providing them with communitas, as in The Wicker Man. Or it may be that it relates to an actual supernatural power, as in Wake Wood, in which case there is a definite sense that this is a community with access to superior knowledge or at least awareness of the true nature of things.

This aspect of a group having secret knowledge also appeals to our ideas of the occult, of secret societies and hidden knowledge. However, unlike stories of surviving Knights Templar and the secrets of the Holy Grail, or of Freemasonry, or many other narratives of secret societies, the folk horror model is not about the privileged elite keeping secrets from the rest of us, but is about the ordinary people holding the power of true knowledge. The horror of folk horror, then, is that it tells us, the formally educated, the urban and urbane, that we do not know the truth, that we do not understand, and its empowering appeal lies in its placing true understanding in the hands of the ordinary people, the folk.

What becomes interesting from this point of view is how frequently the leader of the community is presented as an educated man, that book learning and the associated understanding of history is needed to maintain these folk practices. Of course, The Wicker Man shows us folk practices which are imposed inventions, or re-inventions, used by an Anglicised Victorian lord to control his Scottish tenants with a recreation, ultimately, of a ritual derived from Julius Caesar's propaganda against the Gauls. However, as Sergeant Howie points out, as the rituals have taken hold in the community, who will they turn to as a more powerful sacrifice when the crops fail again but their leader. Frazer's Golden Bough, itself responsible for much interest in folk practice as true practice, would suggest that it is the king who must die to return the summer. Creating, or re-creating, the community into the form that one desires would, it is suggested, therefore be a choice that would ultimately lead to one's own doom, although that act of sacrifice would also be a demonstration that the imposition of this culture had worked and that it had been fully adopted by the community.

So the figure of the community leader is often of someone who is at least slightly outside the community, in terms of class and education, and whose education is significant in the creation or revival of rituals. This can be seen not only in The Wicker Man, but also in Robin Redbreast, where the most sinister figure is the nearest the village has to an intellectual, or in Wake Wood, or Children of the Stones, where the
cyclical repetition of events within the village is exploited by an astronomer from outside the village. However, these leaders can be understood as not just outsiders exploiting ignorant country folk with their superior, albeit unconventional, knowledge. The concept of the cyclicality of time and the recurrence of events also suggests that they can be seen as contemporary embodiments of community leaders, of sages, druids and kings. Indeed, this is pointed to directly in both Robin Redbreast and Children of the Stones, which emphasise narratives of return, for these figures in particular.

The communities are also significant in that they represent one potential difference between folk horror and rural horror, if we want to find such boundaries. So rural horror uses the sense of isolation of the individual or small group within the countryside, and it is either the countryside itself or something supernatural that exploits that situation to create a present danger. Something like Dog Soldiers is an obvious example, or The Long Weekend.

Folk horror, on the other hand, is still about people, about folk, not about monsters or forces of nature. If there is a supernatural power involved, as with The Owl Service, Wake Wood or Children of the Stones, what is important to the narrative will be how that power is interacted with and used by the people of the community. Thus, I would also argue that narratives structured around a lone survival of something from folk belief, such as the presence of a witch in Nigel Kneale's Murrain, moves a text out of the folk horror category, where the presence of a coven which effectively runs a village in Hammer's The Witches does move that film into the category. But I'm willing to discuss that point, possibly in the next panel.

I expect that some of you have already spotted a significant issue with this emphasis on community in folk horror: it displaces one of the central texts of the genre to the periphery, or even removes it from the genre entirely. Witchfinder General is the problem text, as it does not really focus on a community preserving ancient, or allegedly ancient, beliefs and practices which go against the cultural norm. Instead, it is a rather more straightforward narrative of a person of power using superstitions to fulfil their desires, putting them up against our hero in the process, against a backdrop of civil disruption in the form of the English Civil War. There is no real collision of belief systems, or of societies, and the conflict between Royalist and Parliamentarian really takes place in the background, to serve primarily as an indicator that society in general is in turmoil, and that at such times unscrupulous people will take advantage of this to serve their own aims.

But we are moving away here from the idea of time and its relevance to folk horror. And we are also running short of time.

I have thrown out a number of ideas here about folk horror, time and identity. I do not think that there is any one approach that is applicable across all of folk horror, but I do think that folk horror draws upon the ideas of the survival of ancient practices amongst remote communities that particularly drove the folk revival of the early twentieth century. These conceptions have passed into common thought, despite the many problems that become apparent on close inspection; as Boyes points out, the survival hypothesis rather depends on the individuals making up rural communities having a complete lack of creativity and excellent recall for hundreds, if not thousands of years. But, accurate or not, we are fascinated with the idea that there can be ancient knowledge that survives, and that, if it does survive, it is because it is something that is useful to us, either because of a present or recurring threat, or in forming a community that can better survive the future. We also connect the idea of these survivals to notions of identity, specifically local identity, but with the implication that this local identity is part of a wider, national identity which has become lost, overwritten over the centuries. Folk horror thus raises the question of who we are, not just as individuals, but as community. And, for me, one of the strengths of the genre is that it very rarely offers us any answers.

Thank you.

Derek Johnston (derek.johnston@qub.ac.uk) 19 September 2014
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