

The Folk of Folk Horror

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‘Folk horror’ has often been considered, following Mark Gatiss’ description of the genre, as centrally focused on a particular ‘obsession with the British landscape, its folklore, and superstitions’. While these elements are clearly significant, they become more problematic when opening up the genre to include texts from beyond Britain. Not only that, but they broaden the genre to include a wide range of rural-set horror texts, while also being not entirely descriptive of the ‘unholy trinity’ of *Blood on Satan’s Claw*, *Witchfinder General* and *The Wicker Man*.

While accepting the importance of these elements, and the problems around claiming specific defining characteristics for any particular genre beyond the way that the genre label is popularly used, this paper suggests that a central element to be considered in folk horror is ‘the folk’, in the sense of the community of ordinary people. The community in folk horror is typically responsible for preserving the beliefs and rituals that separate them from the outside world. These beliefs and rituals give them cohesion and identity, but often present horror to outsiders underlying their initial appeal. More than that, the fact that these beliefs and rituals are perceived to work suggests that these communities of ordinary people know more about the actual working of the world and nature than all the politicians, academics and experts who promote a mainstream way of life. This presents a challenge to dominant power structures and ways of understanding how the universe works. It also suggests one of the reasons for the contemporary resonance of folk horror in a time when issues of national or community identity, populism and the desirability of isolation dominate the news.

In 2014, I was one of the keynote speakers at what I think was the first academic conference on folk horror, and I observed that folk horror could not simply refer to narratives which had a basis in folk tales, because then all vampire and werewolf, and zombie, stories would be folk horror. Since, then, many people have made a similar observation, but then it is a fairly obvious point. Instead, I suggested that it is more helpful to think about folk horror in terms of horror that is related to “the folk”, that is to the people of the, typically rural, community that it features. More particularly, we can think about folk horror as related to the usage of the idea of “the folk” in the notions of collectors of folk song, story and practice, who imagined a particularly rural community that were tight-knit, and who had inhabited a specific place since time immemorial, and who somehow preserved the old songs and stories and ways in a largely unchanged form. Of course, to do so meant being lacking in outside influences, including formal education.

This paper, then, explores this concept, picking at its implications. This will primarily focus on issues of identity and power, which seem to me to be central to folk horror. I argue that the uncomfortable disruptions caused by folk horror are in the way that it can be seen to challenge power relationships, shifting knowledge and understanding of the real workings of the universe from the cities and the educated classes to the rural, working class. That even when a folk horror film like *The Wicker Man* shows an aristocrat using ideas of folk beliefs in an attempt to control the people, the people are ultimately the ones who gain power from those beliefs. This power is based in tradition, whether real or fake, and connection to place, and so assumed connection to the deeper origins of a local identity. This connection in turn gives power to the local community by giving and enhancing a sense of shared identity, which can readily be linked to wider ideas of national identity. Folk horror can thus easily be understood as a conservative horror genre, in that the horror is the horror of ordinary people, people who are rural and perhaps uneducated, lacking

in metropolitan graces. But it is also a horror of a conservative community, one that is unchanging, and in which everyone knows their place. So I return to another idea that I first raised over seven years ago: folk horror is a horror of ambiguity, one that tempts from multiple angles and appeals in different ways to different tastes.

I do want to emphasise that I am not proposing this as the sole definition of folk horror. I tend to follow Jason Mittell's idea of genres as cultural categories, where what is interesting and important is not claiming the authority to set *the* definition that everyone should abide by, but rather exploring how people and groups use genre labels. What I am doing here is picking at part of the term used to describe a genre, and some of the ideas that are associated with it, in order to consider what they might mean for the genre, and for how people engage with it, and the meaning they can derive from it. I am certainly not claiming that this consideration of "the folk" *must* be a defining feature of all folk horror products, but that it is a way of thinking about at least some.

Paul Cowdell has similarly drawn a contrast between folk horror and the previously dominant Gothic paradigm, to argue that:

The superstitious peasantry, in all their muddy reality, move from background to centerstage in folk horror. They become less plot adjuncts than the defining milieu. Folk horror films are predicated on more complete visions of socio-economic worlds within a time and space [than Gothic horror]. Farming is an actual practice in folk horror, rather than a pretextual backdrop. (301)

This picks up on the way that Piers Haggard described his film *The Blood on Satan's Claw* as "folk horror" in 2003, emphasising its focus on the community as a way of differentiating the film particularly from the Gothic. And what Cowdell's point about farming being "an actual practice in folk horror" emphasises is the connection of the community in folk horror to the land.

And it is community which is central to this idea of the "folk", and so of "folk horror". This stems from the concerns about the loss of community with the development of modernity and the disruption of traditional life brought on by the scattering of communities in the wake of industrialisation. It is, of course, a highly romanticised vision of a rural idyll in which everyone knew their place, in which everyone had a place, and they were all tied together in service of the community, which in turn was connected to a particular location that had been occupied since time immemorial. This romantic idea would have the local community developing in harmony with the land, something that is both practical, such as in selecting which crops suit the soil and what kind of building materials are available, and also could be seen in a more spiritual or supernatural way. There is, of course, some truth to this, and Nicholas Crane's book *The Making of the British Landscape* provides ample examples of how local landscape is shaped by human activity, while human activity is also shaped by the specifics of the local landscape.

However, the idea that these relationships are unchanging is clearly not true, just as the idea of communities being unchanging and preserving beliefs without alteration through centuries or even longer does not make sense. As Georgina Boyes put it in her study of the British Folk Revivals, this idea that folk song and dance were actual unchanged survivals of earlier, long-standing traditions was necessarily based on "a definition of the Folk as manifesting a comprehensive absence of creativity" (12). Unless, that is, the lack of change is exactly the point, because that is the form that has power, which is where our folk horror narratives come in, because they tend to show that these old forms and beliefs do have power, whether supernatural or as organising society.

What is important about this power is that it is essentially outside the dominant power structures of society. Yes, there is often a leader who is of higher social status and probably formal education, such as Lord Summerisle in *The Wicker Man*, Fisher in "Robin Redbreast", Stephanie Bax in *The Witches*, Matthew Hopkins in *Witchfinder General*. Bax and Hopkins both come from outside the communities but find ways to tap into beliefs and desires through superstition and ritual to take over those communities. Indeed, in classic folk horror, it seems that there is little place for the power to originate from within the community itself, except potentially for in *Blood on Satan's Claw*, where the power of the demon is channeled through the community's youth which is positioned against the formal authority of the Judge, Reverend and Doctor. This is where the incomers are important: in representing not just a different world view but different social and power structures which are challenged by this community and its views.

This is probably most obvious in *The Wicker Man*, with Howie as the servant of the crown and official representative of centralised authority.

Boyes has pointed out that “A revival is inherently both revolutionary and conservative. It simultaneously comprehends a demand for a change in an existing situation and a requirement of reversion to an older form” (3). Through returning to the practices of the past it is supposed to bring about a return to the past, not in terms of book knowledge but in embodied experience and practice. To a certain extent, while these revivals in folk horror productions are often based on the re-creation of practices based on the synthesis of book learning and research (particularly in *The Wicker Man*, “Robin Redbreast”, and *The Witches*), what is significant is that they receive embodiment. And in that embodiment the people of the community find a connection, and so reconstruct the structures of feeling around the rituals and practices, and in doing so remake their meaning. The “old ways”, whether real or imagined, may not have the same meaning for the new community, but the community does imbue them with meaning and significance, and so power of the non-supernatural kind.

This makes the appeal of the communities in folk horror one of belonging, belonging to something specific, local, not urban, national or even international. Folk horror therefore challenges the idea of the national, or wider, identity. Whether imported, invented or not, the rituals that bind together these communities carry meaning for them, suggesting that they have some connection to and present a way of communicating a sense of identity. These isolated communities can thus be understood as truer representatives of the culture of the country than anything put forward by, ahem, “metropolitan elites”. This is obviously empowering for those who would align themselves with these “common folk”, while challenging those who may have more conventional economic, political or cultural power. This idea of the folk as preserving true practices, even those as seemingly innocuous as songs and dances, also means that they stand against the homogenising influences of globalisation, and the fear of becoming “citizens of nowhere” rather than the people of a specific place and culture.

Obviously, this idea of these communities being potentially understood as representing some sort of “true” native culture opens up the possibility of reading them nationalistically or nativistically. Consider how these communities are typically depicted as homogenous. While the Hårga of *Midsommar* intentionally bring in outsiders from their community, this is with the specific goal of avoiding incest, and of the outsiders depicted in the film only one survives. As numerous commentators have noted, those selected for incorporation into the community are blonde and white, whether they are simply wanted for their genetic material or they are apparently accepted permanently into the community. The black characters do not seem to even be considered as mating material, but are to be used for sacrifices.

Of course, this is no surprise when we remember that “blood and soil” was a Nazi slogan, as well as both being common concepts in folk horror, including in their intermingling. However, we should also remember that the return to the land and to old ways of life has attracted those on the left as well as the right. This is part of the tension that I think is important to folk horror, in that the way of living presented by the alternative society has many appealing aspects, but has a horrible cost associated with it. In part, this can be interpreted as a warning about the appeal of going backward; Howard David Ingham named his collection of essays on folk horror *We Don't Go Back* from a line in Nigel Kneale's “Murrain” as representing a key principle of post-Enlightenment society that is challenged in folk horror and so defines the tensions in the genre. While science and post-Enlightenment thought tell us that we build on the past, we learn, we develop and so move forward, the past is comfortable and comforting, or at least looks it as we imagine it from the complexity of the present. There is an appeal to a society where everyone knows their place. There is an appeal to belonging to a community that works together, plays together, that seems free, and works in concert with the land.

But folk horror reminds us that this romanticised notion of the past is dangerous, that it expresses what Svetlana Boym labelled “restorative nostalgia” which claims that returning to the past can provide a cure for present ailments, but instead is only a fantasy of an unattainable and probably imagined past. Folk horror suggests that the dominant culture is rightly dominant, because alternative cultures end in death and horror, even if they are very appealing with their shared culture, their sense of community. Folk horror is a conservative genre, one that says that empowering the folk is a pathway to horror and death, but at the same time it frequently challenges conventional authority. As Sergeant Howie suggests, at the next harvest failure it will

not just be the representative of central government who will be sacrificed, it will be Lord Summerisle himself. Authority will be toppled by the power that it has given to the folk. The cult of *Blood on Satan's Claw* have to be destroyed by the Judge, but the Judge himself is a secret Jacobite, loyal to the exiled Stuarts, not the reigning monarch. Dani in *Midsommar* loses everything, has no connection or support in the outside world, and finds community in a probably white-supremacist murderous cult. And what is significant is that these narratives often present the challenge to contemporary, dominant society not as resulting in chaos, but resulting in a stable community and culture, one potentially so stable that it can persist unchanged at its heart for hundreds or thousands of years (though this may be an illusion). And these dangerous Others that challenge dominant society are not foreigners, not outsiders, but are actually representatives of a more "true" national and cultural identity than that of dominant society.

So what are we left with? Probably nothing that anyone here hasn't already thought of. Folk horror, I argue, can be profitably examined through the role of the folk, because that helps us to think about how each text relates to conceptions of ordinary people working as a community. In doing so, it relates to images and ideas of identity, particularly national and local identity. And what many of the classic folk horror texts seem to present is a tension between the appeal of community and connection, and the costs of retreating to the past. We shouldn't go back, says folk horror, because the price is too much, but isn't it awfully tempting to visit?

Thank you.

Works Cited

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