

FUTURE FOLK HORROR

Contemporary Anxieties and Possible Futures

EDITED BY SIMON BACON

FOREWORD BY DAWN KEETLEY

Future Folk Horror

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Foreword

Dawn Keetley

Folk horror is rooted in place. Indeed, that is often both its chief attraction and its chief source of horror. Place is often so central to folk horror that the plot can *only* unfold, the characters only develop, in that place—that necessary place. In Andy Collier and Tor Mian's 2020 film, *Sacrifice*, for instance, Isaac (Ludovic Hughes) and Emma Pickman (Sophie Stevens) travel to an isolated Norwegian island to claim a house Isaac has inherited. He is returning to the place he was born, the place his mother fled when he was very small. As Isaac gets pulled back into the island's "antiquated community customs," as local Renate Nygard (Barbara Crampton) puts it, he and Emma learn that the islanders worship their own particular sea deity, "The Slumbering One." This god rules only on this island; as Renate tells Isaac and Emma, "The rest of Norway has its trolls—and we have this lovely fellow." The plot is determined by the island and the waters that surround it—and by the lore and the rituals that are inherent to its land and sea. Isaac was born there, is drawn back there, and is fated to remain there, his body and blood enmeshed with the island. "This was always your destiny," Renate tells him at the end. What transpires in the film—Isaac's "destiny"—could not happen anywhere else.

Folk horror is just as centrally, however, about something that could be seen as the opposite or undoing of place: the unsettling or wrenching of people *from* place. In his essay in this collection, Kingsley Marshall writes about the coerced displacements that mark the history of Cabrini-Green in Nia DaCosta's *Candyman* (2021). He quotes Kier-La Janisse from her documentary, *Woodlands Dark and Days Bewitched: A History of Folk Horror* (2021): folk horror is found anywhere people "displace other people or other cultures, or where older traditions are being transported to new environments." Even folk horror narratives that seem expressly about rootedness in place, like *Sacrifice*, in fact involve displacement, migration. The events of

Sacrifice, after all, are also driven by journeys across water—Isaac's flight with his mother at the beginning of the film and his return with his wife. So many folk horror films in which place is determinative also involve travel: Sergeant Howie's (Edward Woodward) flight to the outer Scottish islands in *The Wicker Man* (Robin Hardy, 1973); Norah Palmer's journey from London to a rural English village in *Robin Redbreast* (James MacTaggart, 1970), a journey uncannily repeated by Harper Marlowe (Jessie Buckley) in Alex Garland's *Men* (2022); and the perilous sea voyage of Bol (Sope Dirisu) and Rial (Wunmi Mosaku) as they flee war-torn South Sudan in Remi Weekes' *His House* (2020). Folk horror tells us, over and over, that being rooted in place, bound up with tradition and ritual, can only become meaningful in the presence of displacement.

Many of the essays in this collection (either on their own or when read together) demonstrate how crucial the dynamic of place *and* displacement is to folk horror, revealing the ways that histories of rootedness in place and displacement can't be untangled from each other. Jimmy Packham's reading of Ben Wheatley's *A Field in England* (2013) argues that the location of the titular field—the fact that it lies in a "contested space" in Monmouthshire—is critical to the film's meaning: the English and the Welsh have each moved across, fought over, and claimed it. Multiple essays show, moreover, that the displacements that characterize folk horror are by no means always voluntary; far from it, in fact. Folk horror is infused with the forcible displacements of war, coerced removals, colonialism, and enslavement that constitute the history of nations: the United States—Brandon Grafius on Emma Tammi's *The Wind* (2018), Connor McAleese on *Wrong Turn* (2003), Kingsley Marshall on Nia DaCosta's *Candyman*, and Danielle Garcia-Karr on Cherríe Moraga's play, *The Hungry Woman* (1995); Canada—Lauryn E. Collins on Waubgeshig Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow* (2018); Ireland—Kit Hawkins on *The Hallow* (Corin Hardy, 2015); and Australia—Phil Fitzsimmons on Kate Whitbread's *Witches of Blackwood* (2020). To read the essays in this collection is to become convinced that this is perhaps folk horror's central dynamic: stasis and movement, rootedness and migration—each inextricably intertwined with the global histories of oppression, war, colonialism, and slavery.

Future Folk Horror also limns a kind of rootedness within the folk horror tradition itself—as well as an uprooting. Some essays lay the foundations of folk horror, map its contours, explore critical texts in the tradition. You'll find yourself making lists of things to watch and read—and considering folk horror's central themes—as you read essays by Howard David Ingham, James Rose, and Stephanie Ellis. These essays move folk horror from its established places and into new spaces, such as, in Ellis's essay, the unexplored

role women have played in folk horror. Essays also radiate outward from the established generic place of folk horror, exploring its generative overlaps with adjacent literary genres or literary and cinematic forms—the gothic (Hawkins, Collins), ecohorror and speculative fiction (Vicky Brewster), fairytales (Sandra Garcia Gutiérrez), science fiction and the "weird" (M. Keith Booker), "future shock" fiction (Garrett Castleberry), live performance (David Norris), and fantasy and video games (Stephen Butler). As folk horror's shapes shift, its narrative and formal places becoming unsettled, it accrues still more and different meanings.

Mapping the varied displacements and uprootings of the folk horror tradition, this collection offers, as the title promises, a future folk horror. It is clear, from the final set of essays, that one future of folk horror is inevitably mapped onto the future of the planet and of humanity itself, as folk horror's explorations and investments in environmental criticism are explored. M. Keith Booker reads Alex Garland's *Annihilation* (2018) as a kind of future folk horror—specifically, "a revenge-of-nature version of folk horror with an environmentalist twist, pointing toward important new directions for folk horror as our global climate change crisis becomes ever more acute." And while Reece Goodall's concluding essay harkens back to folk horror's roots, as he explores how the "Mr. King" episode of *Inside No. 9* (2022) serves as a gloss on *The Wicker Man*, he claims that the episode also reveals folk horror's ability to encompass the complicated politics of the contemporary environmental movements. The episode's culminating sacrifice of a teacher in a small village school (presumably for compost) by his young students raises all kinds of questions about generational conflict, radical green movements, and humanity's precarious path into the future. Simon Bacon's *Future Folk Horror* makes it clear that folk horror is uniquely able to map that path from past to future.

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Introduction

SIMON BACON

"Folk horror" is a relatively recent term, which has been retroactively applied to many narratives that share a host of similar features often identifying a monstrous past trying to consume the present. Its recent popularity as seen in a host of examples from *The Witch* (Eggars 2015) to *Candyman* (DaCosta 2021) posit it as a subgenre that uniquely captures the anxieties of the twenty-first century and a world gripped in an ongoing pandemic and the divisive politics that have arisen around it. However, as will be argued in *Future Folk*, folk horror is not only goes back further than is often thought, but it also provides a unique vision of the political and cultural state of the present as well as a portent of what is to come and how the future of humanity might be a reenvisioning of a time when we had a more symbiotic relationship to the ecosystem around us.

THE LAY OF THE LAND

Folk horror can be very similar to some peoples' definition of good art, "I know it when I see it." And indeed, it can be a lot easier pointing to certain kinds of films and texts and calling them "folk horror" than it is explaining why it qualifies as such. More often than not this comes down to a set of visual or descriptive cues that resonate with the idea of "folk horror" that many of us carry in our heads—a kind of popular or cultural imaginary; there is a forest or woodlands involved; a rural community or cult, and beliefs or behaviors that seem odd; and a protagonist—who represents the modern [our] world (reasonable/logical)—who gets caught up in this seemingly irrational environment they have entered, often with deadly results. But what informed that idea, where did it come from, and—as important—why does there seem to be a lot of recent narratives that can be placed under that heading?

The term "folk horror" is relatively recent. It has been cited as being used by the director of *Blood on Satans Claw* (1971) in relation to his film in an

interview he gave in 2003. It was then used again in the miniseries, *A History of Horror with Mark Gatiss* (2010), where, in the episode on "Home Counties Horror," Gatiss interviewed the writer Jonathan Rigby and they settled on the three seminal folk horror films—sometimes called the "unholy trinity"; *Witchfinder General* (Reeves 1968), the aforementioned *Blood on Satan's Claw*, and *The Wicker Man* (Hardy 1973). The deal was sealed in 2017 when Adam Scovell published *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange,* which attempted the difficult task of defining exactly what folk horror is—though one could almost say was as he linked it back to the unholy trinity from Gatiss's show. As significant, he also gave what he thought were the main defining features of folk horror—the "folk horror chain"—that are interlinked and causational and which are loosely location (landscape), which is, or causes, isolation, which also produces a skewed moral or religious perspective, and which ultimately leads to a summoning or happening (2017, 17–8). Scovell's book gave theoretical form to a previously, largely affective category and has justifiably been influential in defining if and how a work can be viewed as being "folk horror." However, as with all influential ideas they can be as limiting as they are helpful, even if it is more in how they are applied than in the original text.

The most obvious example of this is in the retrospective application of the term to earlier films and texts. Of course, this is unavoidable, as even if we go from the earliest instance of the term it was already after the fact as it were, but where it starts to cause something of an issue is that both Gatiss and Scovell point to Britain of the 1970s, and of course Haggard—the possible originator of the term—is director of one of the films they both mention forming a cycle of affirmation that this period is seminal to the subgenre. This is not to say that Britain of the late 1960s into the 1970s was not awash with a lot of texts that can be read as being folk horror, as it certainly was, however, it has led to the idea that it was something or an origin point for the subgenre and that anything previous to it or from a different country is not as important or even "real" folk horror. This rather colonial view of folk horror is problematic both in looking backward and also going forward and, indeed, tends to go against the more instinctual feeling of what constitutes folk horror. In fact, in many ways, it goes against Scovell's folk horror chain that is far more about underlaying themes and tropes than specific locations and allows for broad and/or relative readings of what constitutes an "isolated location" and what can be seen as being "morally skewed." Indeed, if we separate Scovell's chain from the films it is primarily linked to the subgenre can be seen to be far older and more culturally diverse than often thought to be. This can be as strongly seen if we start to more exactly what we mean by "folk" in the folk horror rubric.

From the unholy trinity we tend to be given the impression that "folk" is set up as something specifically oppositional to Christianity—*Witchfinder General* posits it as equally about witchcraft, satanism, and the manipulation of Christian values for his own ends of the historical Matthew Hopkins from the English Civil War; *Blood on Satan's Claw* sees it as rural satanism in the same period; and *The Wicker Man* shifts it slightly to paganism in the face of 1970s Protestantism. In all cases, it's very much an English, Protestant vision of Christianity that sees all other beliefs as "satanic" in some way—unsurprisingly then in these films and even in later films such as *A Field in England* (2013) and *The Witch* (2015) that the "Devil" is seen as a royalist Catholic. However, if we view "folk" as a far wider term outside of the preview of the unholy trinity, then what we might term as "folk horror" will also become much more diverse. Mikel J. Koven has commented on the difficulty of defining exactly what is meant by the word "folk" (2007), and that it can include any popular belief of any group of folk, or "the people" which can be anything from a recognized religion through to creepypasta. Consequently, we can see folk as a group, within the context of the narrative they appear in, that is part of any kind of minority religion or belief system. In general, this tends to be something more Pagan—nonmain three world religions—and held by those living outside the mainstream of society or the dominant group/location in whatever narrative is under discussion. In light of that, if we see the unholy trinity of *Witchfinder General*, *Blood on Satan's Claw*, and *The Wicker Man* as just examples from a much longer tradition, and one's with a particularly British flavor, and then apply the four interlinked characteristics of folk horror—landscape, isolation, skewed moral/religious systems, and a summoning/happening—to earlier narratives then a very different view of folk horror emerges, and subsequently how it might develop in the future.

Focusing mainly on film, two early examples that fit into Scovall's schema and also show very different cultural inflexions are *Vampyr* (1932) by Carl Dreyer and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) by Jacques Tournier. In *Vampyr,* set in France, we follow Allan Grey (Julian West), who, although being a bit of a dreamer and interested in the occult, is an outsider who arrives at an inn near the village of Courtempierre. The landscape he enters is oddly dreamy and surreal with the inhabitants talking in riddles and warning of age-old terrors such as vampires. The narrative becomes increasingly surreal as it heads toward its denouement as the isolated Gray dreams of his own living-death and consequent burial. But, just as all seems lost, the vampyr is staked and Gray rescues and escapes with the girl, Gisèle (Rena Mandel). *Vampyr* talks to the rural and the existence of the "old ways" in the modern world of the 1930s. Gray, for all his interest in the occult, is unprepared for what he found in the isolated, shadowy dreamscape of the little French village, and barely escapes with his life.

I Walked with a Zombie is a very different film, though still fulfils the criteria of the folk horror chain. Here we have a nurse, Betsy Connell (Francis Dee), who leaves the modern world of North America, and more particularly the science-based environment of a hospital, who travels to the Caribbean island of San Sebastián to care for the wife of a plantation owner. Once there, she realizes she is in a completely different environment, not only the lush growth and sweltering heat of a tropical plantation but a religion that is dark, mysterious, and savage; it is literally the heart of darkness in comparison to her own whiteness in the film. Her isolation is only alleviated by Paul Holland (Tom Conway), with whom she enters into a psychologically abusive relationship as his wife, Jessica (Christine Gordon), has been turned into one of the undead (a zombie) by the leader of the local, skewed, religion (voodoo). As the narrative gathers pace toward its end, Christine is risen from the "dead" by the voodoo leader but is killed by her former lover who carries her out to sea. Their deaths leave Betsy and Paul free to have a new life together. The film differs from *Vampyr* in being a more obvious colonial vilification of another country as justification for its continued aggressive actions toward it. The United States had invaded Haiti in 1915 and had continued to impose itself upon the island nation, largely for financial reasons, up until the late 1940s. Accordingly, in films and popular press from *White Zombie* (1932) forward, it had portrayed the region as backward, dangerous, and ruled by a cultish religion known as voodoo, and consequently in need of guidance and control. Folk horror here provides the vehicle for reinforcing that idea.

Another film that could be added here, and which, in some way links *Vampyr* and *I Walked with a Zombie*, is *Isle of the Dead* (1945) by Mark Robson. Here the action moves to war-torn Greece, though in its war for independence in 1912 rather than World War II. Plucky American reporter Oliver Davis (Marc Cramer) has befriended General Nikolas Pherides (Boris Karloff), so that he can report on the ongoing conflict. In a lull after a particularly bloody battle, the general takes Davis with him to a small island where his wife was entombed. However, plague is also engulfing the region and it's not long before the island is cut off from the mainland and the "old ways" and beliefs of Madame Kyra (Helene Thimig) are starting to hold sway veer the hearts and minds of the survivors on the island. For Kyra, the plague is not carried on the winds but by an ancient and deadly creature called the vorvolaka—a vampiric entity that feeds on the living—who Kyra believes inhabits the body of the young Greek woman, Thea (Ellen Drew). Davis tries to bring American civilization and reason to the situation, while saving the attractive Thea, but he becomes increasingly isolated until the growing hysteria on the island brings things to a dramatic conclusion. Someone thought dead and, consequently, entombed, rises from their cataleptic sleep

as a believed manifestation of the vorvolaka, kills Madame Kyra, stabs the general, and then dives from a cliff edge, killing themselves leaving Davis to take Thea away with him. Here, as in many vampire-related movies of the time—and indeed many more recent horror and folk horror films—Europe is seen as the Old World, which teems with places that practice the "old ways" and which are just waiting to entrap unwary Americans. In terms of 1945, it posits the need of the plucky American everyman to save the youth (future) of Europe from its old superstitious past (Madame Kyra).[1] Of note here is the connection between Greece and the vorvolaka (vampire), which also informed John Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819). In that story, a young man, Aubrey, is taken on a trip round Europe (the grand tour) by Lord Ruthven that ends in Greece—just had Lord Byron himself had done who was inspiration for the story and it's assumed writer when it was first released. However, as the pair got further from London, Aubrey became increasingly isolated from his traveling companion until they reached the alien and savage environment of Greece. There events come to a head where Aubrey's new love interest is killed by a vampire, Lord Ruthven, who is himself mortally wounded. Unaware he is helping Ruthven enact an ancient ceremony of resurrection, Aubrey carries him to the top of a hill and leaves his body in the moonlight. Not realizing the "summoning" he has performed, Aubrey returns to London only to find Ruthven alive and betrothed to the young man's sister, but it is too late to save her from the vampire. Not unlike the later *Dracula* (1897), this sees the film horror of the rural "land beyond the forest" brought back into the midst of civilization.

In light of these examples, we could possibly sketch out some slightly different, if equivalent, points that typify folk horror that is not rooted in 1970s Britain and that might better serve slightly different traditions or cultural viewpoints. To begin with, there is always a protagonist, a figure that we the intended audience tend to identify with. The landscape that they go to is then the first link on our "chain." This doesn't need to be rural Britain but can be any environment that is different to the one our protagonist came from. In general, though, at least in the mind of the protagonist, the world they came from is the "civilized" one and the one they have gone to is not. The next link is then the tension that is inherent between that first world, which the protagonist came from, and the second world within which they find themselves. This can be a temporal or geological dislocation, such as urban versus rural, modern world versus old world.[2] The tension produced then leads into the third link, which is anxiety over a loss of identity—which replaces isolation. This can be the protagonist having their world view seriously challenged or the fear that the identity they had in their first world will be replaced by that which they have taken on or had imposed upon them in the second world. Within this can be the reenactment of personal or cultural trauma, which can

be the internal loss of one's current identity to a previous one, or the environment itself reenacts a historical trauma that occurred upon it (to it), which then subsumed the identity of those who get caught up in it. Finally, the last link is someone dies, sometimes more than one person. Here, the tensions created in the previous links, which can result in a summoning, an event, or a ceremony, need to be released or counterbalanced by a death so that some kind of order can be restored. The death doesn't need to be the protagonist; it can even be the god or ancient one who has been conjured into being, but not everyone can leave the narrative alive.

These are not necessarily discrete categories and often reinforce or swap place with others—there has been a tendency in some recent folk horror texts for the denouement to intimate some kind of significant or irreparable change either in the protagonist—this can be psychological or physical/biological. Of importance here, in the slight shifts in the description of the "links" in the chain, is that it opens up the definition of folk horror beyond the 1970s "home counties," as previously identified by Gatiss, and allows for the inclusion of other traditions and stories, and, more important for folk horror going forward, it encourages the intersection with different genres such as science fiction, ecocriticism, the weird, and even posthumanism. Obviously, it is worth laying out a couple of examples to see how this plays out in practice and maybe choosing ones that are very different just to show how wide the idea of folk horror can go. Consequently, we can look at an obvious like *The Witch* (2015) by Robert Eggars and a film that's very different, *No One Gets Out Alive* (2021), by Santiago Menghini.

The Witch is set in 1630s New England and works as something of a prequel to the later, real-world, Salem witch trials that took place sixty years after the events in the film. The film itself very much follows the mold set down by *Witchfinder General* and *Blood on Satan's Claw,* in that is set around the outside threat to Protestant, Puritan beliefs, though in the New World rather than the Old. Like it's two "unholy" predecessors it creates its own version of folklore around witchcraft and satanism to make in convincingly folkloresque if not historically accurate. The story sees the teenage Tomasin and her family who have recently arrived from England in the New World, being banished from a Puritan settlement because of her fathers' unorthodox beliefs. Somewhat curiously, exile from the camp does not seem to bring imminent danger from any of the indigenous population—indeed they are rarely mentioned if at all—but from witches that live in the nearby forest. The suggestion being then that the "evil" that is of most danger to them is the one they have brought with them—something that is proved comprehensively when their own black ram turns out to be Satan incarnate. The chain here sees Tomasin and her family move from the safety of the civilized compound—one could actually point to leaving Britain as the starting point

of their troubles—to the dangers of the forest that is beyond the protection of their religion. What it more clearly shows though is a colonial family that might have adequately survived in rural Britain but who are completely out of their depth in this new land which they neither understand or know how to survive in. As with many colonials they try to recreate Britain in the new land they find themselves in—their cottage would look completely at home if placed in the set of *Blood on Satan's Claw*—yet only seem to be able to replicate the same anti-Christian and devilish beliefs that they thought they had left behind when leaving Britain. The tension then rises from their inability to replicate their old home in the New World so that the witches and devils they brought with them start to consume their lives—this can equally be seen to be due to ingesting the hallucinogenic fungus growing on their corn and which also points to a landscape that is actively trying to eject them. As more of the family disappear, go mad, or are killed, Tomasin (Anya Taylor-Joy), who never wanted to leave Britain, fully embraces the anti-Christian beliefs of her homeland—the folk horror she brought with her—signs a deal with Satan and becomes a witch; a final act that removes both herself and her colonial family from the land they had wished to colonize.

No One Gets Out Alive moves us to modern-day America and an undocumented immigrant from Mexico, Amber (Cristina Rodlo), trying to find work and accommodation in Ohio. Not unlike Tomasin, she seems to suffer from a series of setbacks that seem to be telling her to go home, but she finds a room in a house owned by Red (Marc Menchaca) and his brother Becker (David Figlioli). Nothing so far suggests anything particularly folk horror about the story, except the slow revelation throughout the narrative regarding Red and Beckert father, Professor Arthur Welles, who had travelled to Mexico with his wife on an archeological or anthropological exploration of some kind. It transpires that on this trip into the jungles of Mexico he had discovered all manner of relics and writings on pagan rituals and human sacrifice and had gotten so embroiled with their ancient religion that he brought a relic back with him,which now resides in the basement of the lodging house where Amber is staying. This relic, a stone box, contains an ancient entity of some kind, that has brought the landscape of ancient Mexico to the basement of the house in the middle of a city in Ohio. Amber, who during the course of the narrative has become increasingly isolated, becomes even more so as the creature in the box begins to invade her dreams and Red and Becker get increasingly violent to her and the other lodgers in the house as they look for new sacrifices for the entity. At the denouement, Amber is chained in the room containing the box, where the creature begins to envelope her in its environment, but she manages to resist, subsequently offering Red in her place. The creature accepts the sacrifice of Red and, thinking she can now leave, the battered and bloodied Amber makes to leave the house. However, as she tries to go out the door her

wounds heal and she is forever trapped in the environment of the entity and herself forced to find new sacrifices to remain alive. Amber's story is oddly similar to Tomasin's, even though she is an illegal immigrant, not a colonizer. Both girls have now become bonded to the landscape around them, and both are expected to make blood sacrifices to the "gods" that have ensured their ongoing existence. Yet, while Tomasin seems empowered by her return to the old ways, Amber seems trapped destined to find and sacrifice people just like herself who will not be missed or looked for. In this sense, the folk horror here is that now Amber is the same monstrosity as her colonial masters who exist on the labour and blood of those that will come to her for help and shelter.

Before moving on, it is important to show one more example that speaks to the kind of genre intersection mentioned earlier, where folk horror can be seen to inform and influence the reading of environments that are not just on earth but in outer space. The Netflix series *The Silent Sea* (2021–present) by Choi Hang-Yong from South Korea, is set in the near future where the earth is running out of water. The government has sent a mission to the moon to see if there are any hidden deposits there. After a serious, but unexplained incident the Balhae Lunar Research Station is abandoned, but five years later a team is put together to go back up there to collect any samples they can find. However, once they reach the alien terrain of the moon things quickly start to go wrong, with their craft crashing and have to make it to the base on foot. Now, effectively isolated in the base—it will take months for a rescue craft to come and get them—the environment around them begins to become increasingly strange and threatening. While the series is obviously science fiction, it increasingly strays into folk horror tropes; first, in the nature of the landscape they enter, as it is, literally, alien, threatening, and speaks to a time before both civilization and even human life itself; and then they begin to realize that all is not as they have been lead to believe, or that everyone on the mission is who they say they are which increasingly isolates the various members of the team and even cause some of them to question their own sense of self. It then becomes apparent that the original research team discovered a new element that, when it comes into contact with living matter (i.e., human tissue), it explodes into a large amount of water. As a consequence, the environment becomes inherently antagonistic to the outsiders that are trying to colonize or exploit it. More so, it also seems that there might be other inhabitants of the base or even the moon itself, which more closely moves into areas of eco-revenge or the kinds of folk horror where representatives of the modern—often Western—world stumble into unpopulated, ancient, or sacred terrain (as seen in films like *The Ruins* [2008], *Primal* [2010], and *The Hallow* [2015]). Within this is a rising clash of ideologies within the narrative; the consumerist colonialism of the world the team came from; the anticolonialism of the possibly ancient, indigenous population; and the members of the

team who are caught is various positions between the two. The series ends on something of a summoning point, but already people have died, and one suspects more will as the folk horror elements of the environment increasingly take hold. Of note in this narrative is how folk horror no longer requires the earth or a recognizable landscape for its tropes and "chain" to be invoked and enacted suggesting that it is an implicit part of human social hierarchies and where the powerful or dominant will try to "colonize" the weak.

THE PAST, THE PRESENT, AND THE FOLK HORROR FUTURE

Given what has been said above, it would seem to make sense to divide what follows into two sections, one that focuses on where folk horror has come from—capturing something of the retroactive nature of much folk horror—and one that doesn't look backwards but more obviously assess where folk horror is now and how it might look toward a future. Consequently, this collection begins with "Section I: Framing the Past to Make the Present," which itself starts with chapter 1, "'Buried': Folk Horror as Retrieval" by acclaimed author/academic Tracy Fahey, which acts as a framing both of one of her own short stories and for folk horror itself as a means of destabilizing the present through uncovering the undead and undying past that is so often buried just beneath our feet. This is followed by "Visual Intervention I," "The Old Ways," by Gemma Files, which is the first of three such intrusions into the collection that utilizes symbolism that is both evocative and representative of folk horror and aims to visually manifest the ideas at play as well as open them up in ways that writing often cannot. From here the section divides into two, with "Part I: The Folklore of British Folk Horror" looking at the view of folk horror that sees it as centered on the unholy trinity and the British tradition. This begins with "Secret Powers of Attraction: Folk Horror in Its Cultural Context," by Howard David Ingham, which looks at the establishment of *Witchfinder General*, *Blood on Satan's Claw*, and *The Wicker Man* as seminal texts within the subgenre and the folk horror inflected environment that they emerged from. After this is Jimmy Packham's chapter, "A Battlefield in England: Folk Horror and War," which considers the more nationalistic side of folk horror, and British folk horror in particular, and how that has informed discussion around what constitutes folk horror. Next is "Live Horror Theater, Nostalgia, and Folklore," by David Norris that looks at the wider influence and tradition of (British) folk horror in media other than film to show how pervasive it has become as a subgenre and led not just by film. The section ends with stirrings of a reaction against British colonialism both as continuing real-world presence but also in the nature of the "traditional" reading of folk

horror in "Frayed Strands Entwined: Considering Twenty-First-Century Folk Horror," by James Rose. Here, the author focuses more on the literary history of folk horror, and although beginning with the British tradition begins to show how in the twenty-first century, it has become a transcultural subgenre.

"Part II: America, Settlers, and Belonging," then moves the focus to non-British examples and a more transcultural view of the heritage of folk horror. This begins with, "Palimpsests and Other Texts: Christianity and Premodern Religions in Folk Horror," by Brandon R. Grafius, which examines the alternate view of the folk horror nature of the American landscape which produces its own kinds of pre-Christian gods or "ancient ones." The next chapter, "'There's Some Weird Shit Going on in the Woods'": Landscape, Cults, and Folklore in the Films of Chad Crawford Kinkle and Andy Mitton," by Paul A. J. Lewis, looks at a different kind of American landscape that necessarily produces different kinds of pagan entities and cults. This part closes with the "Fae Fight Back: Monstrous Mycelium and Postclonial Gothic in *The Hallow*," by Kit Hawkins, which keeps the same kind of woodland landscape but shifts it to Ireland to example both the importance of location and cultural identity are in relation to landscape and the differing, yet similar, responses to colonial encroachment and exploitation.

Next is "Section II: Facing Backward While Looking Forward," that more explicitly focuses on other traditions and uses of folk horror as well as suggesting possible future directions for the subgenre through crossgenre intersections. It opens with "Visual Intervention II." "It's in the Trees," by Gemma Files acts as an opening statement as a representation of how the landscape produces its own people and its own kind of folk horror. After this the section is divided into three parts beginning with the first "Part III: Cultural Positionings," which focuses on specifically cultural expressions of folk horror that further infer particular cultural identities. The first essay is "Early American Colonial Violence and Folk Horror *Wrong Turn*, a Twenty-First-Century Interpretation," by Connor McAleese that discusses the problems of colonialism and how the question of belonging can be performative as much as it is geographical. The North American landscape features again in Lauryn E. Collins' chapter, "Wendigo Tales: Climate Gothic and Indigenous Resistance in Waubgeshig Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow,*" which examines indigenous lore and its uses in resisting the dominant culture around it. Following this is "A Locus of the Old and New in Australian Folk Horror Cinema: The Transnational, Transcultural, and Transtextual Narratives in *The Witches of Blackwood*," by Phil Fitzsimmons, which shifts the location to Australia and the intersection of colonial and national versions of folk horror. "A Multi-contextual Analysis of the Future of Folk Horror in Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth*," by Jon R. Meyers further considers the transnational influences, or the global Folk Horror imaginary, on specific

national contexts as seen in the case of del Toro's Mexican influenced fairy tale of fascist ruled Spain in 1944.The last chapter in this part is "Who Makes the Hood? The City, Community, and Contemporary Folk Horror in Nia DaCosta's *Candyman*," by Kingsley Marshall, which considers another kind of American landscape, that of the inner city, and how black identity informs its own folk horror.

This takes us to "Part IV: Identity and Gender," which as the title suggests looks at the role of gender in different folk horror narratives. "Non-normativity in Female Centered Folk Horror Literature" by Stephanie Ellis looks at the centrality of women in recent folk horror literature and how it affects their respective stories. Sandra Garcia Gutiérrez in "(In)Visible Women: Folk Horror in the Spanish Anthology of Fairy Tales *Ni Aqui ni en Ningún Otro Lugar* (2021) by Patricia Esteban Erlés," considers the work of a Spanish author and the ways in which folk horror and associated themes informs their work. Next in "Speculative Folk Horror and Reclaiming Monsters in Cherríe Moraga's *The Hungry Woman*," Danielle Garcia-Karr examines the play *The Hungry Woman* by Moraga to see how she uses the folkloric figure of la Llorona to reclaim Latinx female identity. The final chapter, "I Wish, Please, to Live" Religion and Rewilding in Michel Faber's Ecohorror," by Vicky Brewster, not only discusses the "rewilding" of female identity but also how this is achieved in folk horror through an intersection with ecocriticism and science fiction.

"Part V: Intersections and Futures" completes this collection and carries on from the last chapter in part IV in showing how new kinds of folk horror and possible new interpretations are created through its intersection with other genres. The first essay "Nigh Is the Time of Madness and Disdain": Folk Horror in *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt*," by Stephen Butler examines how the popular fantasy franchise utilizes folk horror tropes and themes as part of its ongoing narrative. M. Keith Booker, in "A Horror Film for Our Times: Annihilation as Weird Folk Eco-Horror," discusses how the film *Annihilation* (2018) mixes folk horror, science fiction, and the weird together to produce new perspectives on possible ecological futures. Following this is "Future Shock Folk Horror in Terry Gilliam's *The Zero Theorem*," by Garrett Castleberry, which focuses on how futuristic and dystopian texts utilizes aspects of the folk horror chain to illustrate the dangers of nonnatural, nonhumane landscapes. The collection closes with "Folk Horror in *Inside No. 9*: 'Mr. King' and Contending Eco-narratives," by Reece Goodall, which both brings us full circle in returning us to the unholy trinity, but in a way that points to a revising and renewing of "traditional" folk horror that moves the power structures within the subgenre to the young and formerly disenfranchised. *Future Folk Horror* ends with "Visual Intervention III," "New Beginnings" by Gemma Files, which

presents an encapsulating picture of the increasingly rhizomic nature of folk horror, both in narrative and genre interactions, and how through folk horror new stories and new visions can emerge. More so, it suggests ways of imagining a present where we can become our true selves and embrace our deep connection to the environment around us into a future of new possibilities.

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NOTES

1. Krya's link to the general, as leader of the army makes a twenty-first-century reader think of Hitler's supposed preoccupation with the occult, though it was unlikely to have been popularly known at the time.

2. We could include things like ideology, religion, or morality, but they can as equally be seen to be part of the tensions in "modern versuss old" or "city (manmade) versus rural (nature)."

SECTION I

Framing the Past to Make the Present



Figure 0.1 Visual Intervention I: "The Old Ways." By Gemma Files. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

Chapter 1

"Buried"

Folk Horror as Retrieval

Tracy Fahey

> Through the act of burying and retrieving (often malignant) objects from the ground, Folk Horror presents a causational act, whereby evil is implied to be something that always has the ability to return and never quite goes away: we repress our past acts into the very the soil itself. (Scovell 2016, n.p.)

My short story "Buried" (Fahey 2018, 37–44) is, on the surface, a simple short story of the discovery of a bog body on a remote farm. It is also a story that hinges around a pivotal act in the folk horror genre, that of *object retrieval,* penetrating below the surface to resurrect the past in the present.

In "Buried," the bog itself plays a central role. It acts as both geographical location and, with its layered strata of history, a metaphorical reminder of the past. Landscape lies at the heart of folk horror; a reservoir of myth, memory, and the eerie. The rural landscape in folk horror is always more than just setting. It is often a character, imbued with a peculiar history and collective memory, as in the film, *A Field In England* (Wheatley 2013). Folk horror landscapes present a tension between past and present, rural and urban, the old and the new. As Scovell writes of folk horror, it is "work that presents a clash between such arcania and its presence within close proximity to some form of modernity, often within social parameters" (2016, n.p.).

In "Buried," the bog acts as a reservoir of history and story. The story opens with the description of the surface level, the attractiveness of the setting, but moves quickly to the retrieval of a goat bone in the wet soil, a foreshadowing of what is to come. The protagonist's father pockets the bone with an ominous remark. "'Lots of poor beasts end up in the bog,' he said. 'That's

bad old ground out there, it'll suck you down before you can bless yourself'" (Fahey 2018, 37).

The peatland also becomes a repository of lore, the story of the will o' the wisp:

> You can see them at night, if you know where to look—out deep in the bog, beyond the willow trees. Like little fairy lights, they flare up, only to flicker and sputter out into the still dark. My grandad used to tell me they were Willy-the-Wisps, and that they'll lead you astray at night if you go wandering. The old boys down in the village say the same. Sometimes I'll sit out on the roof on fine nights and watch them. It's a fine, lonesome feeling on a dark night to see them spark off and drift into darkness. (Fahey 2018, 40)

However, it is the act of disturbance that is the pivot of the story, the eruption of the past forcefully in the present. Since the canonical films of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the "unholy trinity of folk horror," *Witchfinder General* (Reeves 1968), *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (Haggard 1971) and *The Wicker Man* (Hardy 1973), folk horror has been viewed as inextricably tied to the past; a horror that emanates from remote rural communities with a dark underbelly of ancient cult rituals stemming from old beliefs and practices aimed at appeasing the landscape and gods. Two of these three films are set in historical periods, underpinning the sense of folk horror as embedded firmly in the past, yet, it is *The Wicker Man*, with its contemporary setting, that most unsettles the viewer. Hardy shows us the implacability of the ritual, reinvented in the present, as a direct response to a contemporary anxiety. In this movie, folk horror is horror that is never really over, just dormant in the culture. And as Haggard shows in *The Blood On Satan's Claw*, this horror lies just below the surface, always in danger of disruption.

The finding of the bog body in "Buried" is a metaphor for the story's excavation of the protagonist's past; the loss of his mother, his grandfather, and the lore of the marsh land. The location of the grave in the bog is significant. Peat bogs are liminal spaces, some of the many thin places in Ireland—passage graves, ring forts, islands, caves—places that are connectors to the Otherworld of Celtic mythology. The preserved body that rests within this bog is one of many such cadavers discovered throughout northwest Europe, the majority dating back to the Celtic civilizations of the Iron Age. A popular anthropological theory is that these bodies are the remains of human sacrifices; people who were killed and deposited in bogs at a safe distance from human habitation. The disturbance of these spaces in the present causes the past to recur. As Scovell puts it, "The very earth provides a temporal as well as physical barrier within Folk Horror, allowing objects from these darker

periods to effectively travel in the sense of a time-capsule back to the present" (Scovell 2016, n.p.).

Usually, folk horror is narrated from the point of view of the outsider who enters the sealed community—"the arrival of an innocent outsider drawn into this hinterland" (Gent 2017, n.p.). In this story, I made a conscious choice to replace the traditional incomer with an insular member of the community; so, the traditional hidden horror is not a dreadful surprise but creates a more uncanny effect where something familiar, long-forgotten, arises. In "Buried," therefore, the folk horror is gothic; the uneasy sense of recognition of older, native civilizations with older, darker rituals. Within this story, folk horror becomes a quiet process of uncovering. There are no terrible consequences to the excavation in this story; just an implacable decision to cover it up, to ignore it.

Today in Ireland, the boglands are a center of controversy, where climate change imperatives wrestle with the old tradition of cutting and harvesting peat. They have become a place impossible to ignore, a place whose rich eco-diversity is being reclaimed. In *Murrain*, (Cooper 1975), incomer Alan Crich says to Beesley the farmer, "We don't go back!" But folk horror's strength lies in the fact that we *can* go back, through the process of excavation, back beyond our human span, to confront and reinterpret the arcane rituals and strange traditions of the past. The Celtic bog body may be covered up at the end of "Buried," but such attempts to reinter folk horror are ultimately doomed. As Scovell says,

> The burying and unearthing of such objects plays a key role in Folk Horror but, essentially, the very act that defines so many of its narratives mimics its current, thriving revival. So much of its film and television seems to quietly rise up, thanks in part to digital technology and social media, to be rediscovered and eventually to become popular again. Unlike a Jamesian demon or the devil's skull, however, Folk Horror's rising can be seen as a far more positive unearthing; where its demons and ghosts finally come to be appreciated after years spent buried in obscurity under the cultural soil of analogue times, now unearthed and with little chance of being put back. (Scovell 2016, n.p.)

BURIED

We've always lived here, on the bog. It can be beautiful on a sunny day. Like today, watching the shimmer of pale willow leaves in the breeze; the puffs of heather blooming, the bulrushes lined up smartly with their beefeater hats, the fragile white butterflies, the sun glinting on the pools of water between the tussocks. It's so quiet now, just the *wish-wish-wish* of the rushes rustling



Figure 1.1
"Buried." Photograph taken by the author and reproduced with permission.

and the low, constant hum of tiny insects living, flying, and dying among the long grasses over the wet ground.

It's not a working bog, just a few useless, pretty acres that are just . . . there. There's a little turf there, only a small part of it suitable for cutting. It's just a bog. It's been there for thousands of years. In comparison, we're blow-ins; we've only been here for the last two hundred and fifty years. Our house stands on its own in the landscape, white and defiant in the green lumpy expanse of marsh. There's no one else around and that's the way we like it. Nice and peaceful, my father says.

Once evening I found a lump of bone when poking round aimlessly with a stick. It was too small to be a cow, too large to be a fox. I turned it round in my hand; a lumpy, discolored fragment, a nodule on one end, and a groove where it had fit in neatly, ball into socket.

"What is it?" I asked my father. He turned it round in a large, dirty hand.

"Ah, a goat, I'd say. Medium sized bone." My father was a man of few words.

"How did it turn up here?"

"Lots of poor beasts end up in the bog," he said. "That's bad old ground out there, it'll suck you down before you can bless yourself." We stand quietly for a moment, looking out over the trees, moving in the wind. He slips the bone in his pocket.

"Come on, now," he says, jerking his head towards the house.

We're not big talkers in the family. We say what needs to be said and not a lot more. My mother's father, my grandad was a talker. He used to tell me stories, ignoring my granny's sulky silence and her face, lined and puckered sour as crab apples. But, mind you, he wasn't from around here. The rest of us are quiet. We leave school when we can and work on the farm. It's hard work, with the cows and the milking, but it keeps us busy. At night we watch TV; soaps and news and late night chat shows. I like the detective dramas best, but I'm the youngest so I don't get much of a say-so. We live too far from the town to be on the water scheme, so we have our own well and sewage system. No bin service either, so what the animals don't eat, we burn at the corner of the lane. Not legal, I know, but it's what we've always done. It's a hardworking life, but a good one. That's what we agree on.

And it's beautiful here. In the early spring and summer.

It's just that sometimes, just sometimes, when the moon is out and the birds are crying out over the bog, long and lonesome, I feel an odd sort of yearning. And the next day, the yard looks sadder and muddier, with the black plastic of the silage bales weeping puddles of rain, and the sound of the cows lowing their always-surprised *mrrrrrrrrrrrrhhhhhh*. On those days the dirtiness and endlessness of the work pulls me down. It gives me a queer ache in my chest that makes it hard to catch a proper breath.

And then, just like that, it fades, and I'm back to normal again.

Coming in to winter it's different here. Then the winds pull and tug the trees like washing on the line. The rain falls, heavy as stones, on the roof. And the bog creeps. In the wet, dark months of January and February, that dreary time when the clock ticks slower through the long nights there's the underlying slithering feel of water slowly, ever so slowly, creeping up toward the house. The ground underfoot is wet and treacherous, the little pools of brown water bleeding together into one amorphous marsh. The dampness sinks into our bones; we come home from the fields and sit, rubbing numbed feet briskly by the fire. Our wellingtons turn cold in the swampy water, the chill held deep in the rubber, penetrating layers of socks.

I do like the bog though. Unlike my brothers, who ignore it as a piece of useless farmland, a wet nuisance, I spend a lot of my free time there. In summer especially, when the days are long and there's plenty of light in the evenings, I like to explore it, winding my careful way from humpy tussock to tussock. When I was younger, I used to draw maps of it in my notebook, careful, badly drawn zig zag paths through the bog, with all the trees and clumps of rushes marked in, as well as the "islands" as I called them, those isolated hillocks in the swamp water further out, further than I was supposed to go. My mother used to worry about us out there when we were children.

I'll never forget one day when I lost track of time out there, reading a book, curled up on hard marsh grass dried brittle in the sun.

From a distance I could hear her calling, but by the time I got back she was fired up, face red and angry. She hit me on the legs, over and over until they were striped red and painful to touch.

"You had me so worried!" She was almost crying, her breath heaving. I was crying by then, big, broken sobs. I knew she was just frightened but I was too, scared of her red rage and the violence. Later I wrote, "I HATE HER" in my notebook, still raw from the slaps and the injustice of it.

It's one of my most vivid memories of her, and I'm sorry about that.

It's been a few years now since she left. From then the house has never been the same. It's coarse and manly, full of old boots and coats that smell like wet dog and the fields. No matter what we do, it always looks a bit grimy, the windows cobwebbed, the skirting-boards mouse-grey with furred dust, the presses stained under the pots. Sometimes I try. Once I spent ages polishing up the kitchen. I even broke off branches of white heather from the bog and put them in a jam-jar. The flower garden she'd tended had died off, overpowered by thick, crawling weeds. The rich, heady scent of the heather filled the room like an exotic perfume, and for a second, I almost believed she was back. But then everyone came back in and the floor was tracked with mud, the smell of wet tweed overpowering everything. My father threw out the white heather. He said it was because it shed, but I know he thought it was somehow unmanly to care about flowers.

The only time I don't like exploring the bog is in late autumn. Then the nights get longer, the waters rise, and the light fails so quickly you can be left out there as it greys out, the ground dissolving underfoot, and the firm green earth of the field suddenly a long way away. At this time of year, you get the marsh gas rising. The wetlands, baked in the summer sun and cooled in the autumn winds, start to ferment. Sometimes during the day you can see bubbles rising, brown and slow, to pop audibly on the surface. Bog farts we used to call them as kids because they smelled dankly of rot and buried things. And then there's the marsh lights. You can see them at night, if you know where to look—out deep in the bog, beyond the willow trees. Like little fairy lights, they flare up, only to flicker and sputter out into the still dark. My grandad used to tell me they were Willy-the-Wisps, and that they'll lead you astray at night if you go wandering. The old boys down in the village say the same. Sometimes I'll sit out on the roof on fine nights and watch them. It's a fine, lonesome feeling on a dark night to see them spark off and drift into darkness.

It was a night like that, in dark October, that it happened. The night they found it.

It's dark when I wake, and for one confused moment I'm not sure what time it is—I think it's morning, but there's no light outside. And then suddenly there is; the long, unsteady light of a torch. I lie in bed, confused. There's a flurry of heavy boots under my window, and huddled shadows flit by my curtains. If I strain my ears I can hear low voices, hushed against the night. The luminous dial of my clock shows 3 a.m. I pull the old floral curtains to one side and then I see it. Or rather, not it, but where it is. Out in the bog, I see lights darting round. For a second, I think it's the marsh lights, then blink strongly and realize it's just more torches, dipping and wavering out in the bog.

This is too strange. I need to go and look.

I'm outside, jumper pulled on over my old pajamas, feet shoved into shoes, no time to find wellingtons. Only the chill in the night air convinces me this is not a dream. I follow the sound of voices, hands extended in front of me to grope my way. Now is not the time to end up in a boghole. The ground sucks loudly at my shoes, making me stumble, but my knowledge of the bog carries me through, sure-footed, tussock after tussock, through the willows and beyond. Now that I'm nearer I can see they're grouped in a circle. My father and my brothers stand, silhouetted against the yellow light of their torches. There's a spade and a tarpaulin at their feet.

With one last suck and stumble, I'm with them.

"What's going on?"

My father clears his throat. "Dan came across this," he says. "Burying the calf that died." That's the sad little mound under the tarpaulin. He plays the light of the torch down into a rough pit dug into the dark brown earth. At the bottom of it I can see—something big curled up in a lopsided S-curve. I step closer, mesmerized. It is tea-brown leather like my shoes, but you could see the bones and sinews, and even hair, thick and perfect, springing coarse and orangey-brown from the shrunken head.

"I know what it is," I say. "It's a bog body."

I'd seen bog bodies before, up in Dublin, in the museum. Before I left school we went on a trip. A long trip to the city with a bus full of kids, fizzing over with sweets, fighting and shouting all the way. We did the educational stuff first, that was the deal, then went straight to the amusements in Skerries. And that's how we ended up in the National Museum that morning. There was lots of stuff there, interesting stuff, like a big boat made out of a tree-trunk, and the girls liked all the gold collars, but there was only one thing that held me; the bog body, a small, stringy mummy of a man preserved in the cold, acidic waters of a Midlands bog. While the others boiled around the shop and poked at the cases with the guns and swords, I just stood there looking at it. It was

a dusty brown, with stringy muscles like dried banana-skin peeling from the dry bones. It wasn't the prettiest thing in the exhibition, but it was the realest; a real person who'd just lain in the bog for all that time.

Later at home I drew it in my notebook, a brown, twisted, broken mass.

I climb down awkwardly into the pit. There's a rich, overpowering smell of turf. It's lying below in a little pool of water, still partly covered with soggy earth. Close up it's even more amazing. There's nothing scary about it, it's too perfect to look like a corpse. I can even see the little teeth. The droplets of water on its face and skin make it look lushly alive, nothing like that dried-up, sinewy body I remember from the museum. Its hands are clasped in front of it; I can see the tiny creases of the fingers, even the fingernails. One is badly cracked. I squat on my hunkers and look for a long time at that small imperfection, wondering if it was broken before or after death. The face is lovely, peaceful, eyes closed against the water that puddles against it. It looks like a man, but I'm not sure. I have the eeriest feeling he's just sleeping there, resting in the bog like some marshy Rip Van Winkle. A light plays down, and for a second, as it glitters on his face, I imagine I see the eyelids flutter. I jump up.

"I'm coming out." I scramble out, filthy and wet.

"Your good shoes!" says Sean, scandalized. He sounds so like our mother everyone laughs, weak, shaky laughs.

"It's a bog body alright," I say, shivering. "Been there thousands of years. We need to call the museum in Dublin. They'll know what to do with it."

There's a beat of silence that tells me this is an unpopular idea. Dan cups his hands and lights a cigarette. The match flares bright-hard for a moment, and then it's gone.

"Thousands of years, you say?" My father's voice is meditative. "Sure, then we don't need to call the guards or anything."

"Definitely not." I know this from reading about archaeology.

"Sure why can't we just . . . ?" My father gestures towards the spade. Dan is murmuring in Sean's ear.

"We could, right enough," says Sean. "But, you know, maybe people would want to see it."

Dan can't wait for him to come to the point. "Maybe people'd pay to see it!"

My father straightens up. His face is still in shadow but his voice is strong and steady. "I'll not have people traipsing all over my land. Looking and digging and interfering with us. That's not the way we live." He moves to go. "Cover it up."

"We can't cover it up," I say, stunned. "This is important."

"There could be money in it." Dan's eyes are hard, glittering in the light of his cigarette end.

"You'll get small good from that money," says my father. "Do as I say." Dan doesn't move, but Sean puts down his torch on the ground and picks up the spade with a shrug.

"Is anyone listening to me? We need to let people know about this?"

But everyone continues to ignore me. My father and Dan walk off, still arguing, while Sean stolidly heaves the tarp into the hole with a thump and splatter, and then starts to shovel the dark earth back in. I stand watching him. The earth spatters down in a series of thuds. For a second, I am reminded of my grandfather's funeral, the smack of dirt on coffin. I look down but it's already disappeared from view. That beautiful, intricate body is hidden again.

I go back to the house, but I don't sleep. Before dawn I get up and go to the open window. The breeze ruffles my hair as I stand and look over the bog. A bird cries out forlornly, a low, keening wail that echoes across the sill night air. I think about him, that strange man, lying out there, eyes closed, sleeping silent in the dark bog.

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PART I

The Folklore of British Folk Horror

Chapter 2

Secret Powers of Attraction

Folk Horror in Its Cultural Context

Howard David Ingham

In roughly the last decade, the definition of "folk horror" has developed and grown enough that what was once a roughly defined niche based upon three British horror films and a handful of TV plays from the 1960s and 1970s has become a fairly well-trodden and codified subgenre, with its own rules and expectations.[1]

WE DON'T GO BACK

The first important definitive body of critical work on folk horror as a concept was produced by Adam Scovell, who in his book, *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange* (2017) defines the subgenre in the context of a folk horror chain. Folk horror, Scovell says, has a sense of place, and the story is influenced heavily by its location; and this place, which is evocative in its own right, is isolated; the isolation leads to a skewed moral compass, or unusual beliefs, and the combination of all three of these leads to a summoning, or a happening (Scovell 2017, 17–8).

The idea of folk horror as a discrete genre was popularized in 2010 by an episode of Mark Gatiss's BBC series, *History of Horror* (2010), where Gatiss, in conversation with writer Jonathan Rigby, more or less settled the three central films of the genre. In the first, Michael Reeve's *Witchfinder General* (1968), Vincent Price plays Matthew Hopkins, taking advantage of the witch hysteria in the wake of the chaos of the English Civil War. The second was Piers Haggard's messy but delirious and beautifully framed *Blood on Satan's Claw,* where seventeenth-century rural teenagers work to remake

the incarnation of the Devil on Earth, piece by bloody piece. Piers Haggard said in a 2003 interview with *Fangoria* that in making *Blood on Satan's Claw,* he intended to make a "folk horror" film (Simpson 2008), and while the term "folk horror" had been used before, going back to the 1920s, *Blood on Satan's Claw* is really the touchstone by which we understand the cinematic genre of "folk horror." And, perhaps most important for our purposes, we have Robin Hardy's 1973 masterpiece *The Wicker Man*.

Before 2010, the term was not commonly applied to cinema and it is probably fair to say that before this point folk horror is an *accidental* genre, named in retrospect, which is why fans can be so prone to heated discussion about what counts and what does not. It is only in recent years that a body of films has been made that has intentionally adopted the mantle of folk horror. Yet, while there is a definite commonality in what is called folk horror its specifics are hard to define. Even Scovell admits that the folk horror chain, as he terms it, is not the whole story, and that folk horror is more a *feeling*. In many ways then, to quote the American judge Potter Stewart when asked to define pornography, it's often a case of "I know it when I see it" (Gewirtz 1996, 1023). Having said that, all of the films and TV programs mentioned in this article have a feeling of that curious juxtaposition of the prosaic and the uncanny that is so representative of the 1970s.

FROM THE FOREST, FROM THE FURROWS, FROM THE FIELDS: THE 1970S ENVIRONMENT

There is something oddly matter of fact about the way that the occult was presented in the 1970s, which always made it seem *close*, part of the public realm, and crucially not the preserve of the privileged classes. The occult stories of the 1970s have a very working class ambience, such as in the case of the controversy surrounding Gordon Higginson (1918–1993), the prominent medium and president of the Spiritualists' National Union who was repeatedly accused of faking, a story which featured in several national newspapers in the years 1976 through 1978.[2] We could also cite Doris Stokes (1920–1987), who shot to fame in the 1970s and who published books such as *Voices in my Ear* (1980)*, Innocent Voices in My Ear* (1983), *Joyful Voices* (1987)*, A Host of Voices* (1984)*, Whispering Voices* (1985)*,* and *More Voices in My Ear* (1981). Stokes is more or less the stereotype par excellence of the working-class old lady who offers you a cup of tea and a psychic reading. As late as 1991, the comedian Lisa Maxwell would lampoon her as "Doris Potty, the medium" in her BBC sketch show. This sense of proximity seems inherent to folk horror, even when it's set in a past age. The villains (and the heroes) of

folk horror stories, no matter the period, are often very ordinary people, and frequently it's the ability of ordinary people that supplies the horror. In this way folk horror is can also be seen to be born of a *horror of folk.*

A master of that juxtaposition was the late writer Nigel Kneale (1922–2006). While Kneale's most famous works are the *Quatermass* serials (beginning in 1953 with *The Quatermass Experiment*, filmed by Hammer in 1956) more immediately relevant is Kneale's 1976 ITV series *Beasts*. In episode 4, *Baby,* a mummified creature found in a remote cottage brings about a pregnant woman's psychological disintegration through a dreadful haunting. In the previous year, ITV broadcast Kneale's play *Murrain,* part of the *Against the Crowd* stream. Here, Alan Crich (David Simeon), is called in to investigate an illness of livestock, given the archaic term "murrain" by the locals. He discovers that the local farmer, Beeley (Bernard Lee) and his men are convinced that it is down to the evil ministrations of one Mrs. Clemson, a witch.

> Beeley: All this talk! You're tryin' to prove there's no such thing. Well, you won't prove it to us. We know there is.
>
> Crich: You're sick.
>
> Beeley: They got you trained to thinkin' nothin's true if you can't find it in books or shove it in a bottle and analyze it!
>
> Crich: That's called—
>
> Beeley: You work out the rules! And what the rule don't fit, don't 'appen!
> Crich: The purpose of science—
>
> Beeley: Then you find you got the rules wrong!
>
> Crich: Then we change the rules!
>
> Beeley: Ohh! That's handy!
>
> Crich: For better rules! But we don't go back! We don't go back. (Emphasis in original.)

This one phrase, *we don't go back*, encapsulates so many of the tensions underlying folk horror. Because it's a sensible statement. It's progressive. It's reasonable. And of course, it's wrong. The vet tries to help, tries to show the people of the village the light of reason, and attempts to save Mrs. Clemson from what he recognizes correctly as an act of systemic violence. But in his arrogance, he does not understand that it's not as simple as that. Kneale's relationship with this is complex. On the one hand, he clearly does not think much of folklore—in Kneale's writing, to give yourself up to magical thinking is madness. But at the same time, fighting it is very often madness too. We don't go back. Except of course if we don't, it's an act of hubris. And if

we do, it's madness. We don't go back out of fear and a misplaced faith in our own certainties. And it is because it is such a wrong-headed statement that it becomes such a central truth.[3]

That tension between the urban and the modernist opposed to the pagan and rural—the pagan village conspiracy, if you will, is a common theme. Take for example John Bowen's 1970 *Play for Today, Robin Redbreast*. Although broadcast in color, it only exists now as a black-and-white film copy that was sold to overseas markets. In that respect, watching it now, one can't help feeling that it a ghost of television, an echo that haunts us from the past. This makes it all the stranger.

In the play, Nora (Anna Cropper), an independent and professional woman, recently single and wanting to get away from her life in London, moves to a village in the country. There the locals manipulate her into taking part in a complex pagan rite of renewal and murder. The conflict between the sophisticated modern and sexually liberated Londoner and the canny but very ordinary villagers goes beyond the gradual revelation of a pagan village conspiracy, and this is a conflict that crosses many very 1970s social fault lines—the urban versus the rural, working-class superstition versus middle class reason, and most of all, the issue of woman's bodily autonomy.

No discussion of pagan village conspiracies can of course omit *The Wicker Man* (1973). Edward Woodward's devout evangelical police sergeant, Neil Howie, is tipped off by a report of a missing girl to come to the remote island off the coast of Scotland, Summerisle, where he finds that the islanders have abandoned Scottish Protestantism for a sort of strange paganism. The islanders come from a film tradition of jolly working-class Scots who could just as easily come from *Brigadoon* (1954)—they even have a tendency to break into song, as if they're in a musical—and it's this cutesy coziness, this friendliness that makes the magnitude of the conspiracy so disturbing. Much is made of Christopher Lee's career-best performance as Lord Summerisle, a man whose both manipulates the people of the island and believes in the Summerisle religion himself. But for our purposes, it's more useful to look at the contrast between Sergeant Howie and the locals.

One of the most common and orthodox takes on *The Wicker Man* these days is to side with the fun, sex-positive locals against the humorless Christian policeman. Yet this misses the fact that in the moral universe presented by this film, Howie is basically right. Howie is right because a missing child is a serious police matter, and you don't take that lightly. Howie is right because these people are engaging in a conspiracy to murder, because they didn't grow enough apples this year. Howie is right because, regardless of what his religious views are, underage girls being taught to dance naked and jump through a fire in a fertility rite is what we now would describe as a safeguarding issue. These fears—the fears that something weird, pagan, and

dangerous might be crouching, toad-like in the midst of the mundane and affecting our children are perennially present in our culture. They did not go away even up to today.

The public perception, and consumption, of the occult at this time in the UK can be measured by various series of publications produced in the 1970s by popular mainstream presses such as MacDonald, who published a set of "guidelines" for topics such as *Having a Baby*, *Growing Flowers*, and *ESP: The Sixth Sense*. Likewise, Hamlyn's series of factual books on subjects like *Aircraft*, *Chemistry*, *Pets for Children*, also included one on *Witchcraft and Black Magic.* Unsurprisingly*,* the more sensational newspapers were more concerned by this, both for their readers, and to increase sales, and stories involving the occult became almost regular headline fodder. This can be seen just by looking at the *Daily Mirror*. In November 1970, the *Mirror* reported how the wife of self-style occult leader David Farrant, who was currently in custody for trespassing in Highgate Cemetery while looking for the Highgate vampire, was apparently threatened over the phone with terrible magical revenge by his archrival "bishop" Sean Manchester in an attempt to get her not to post bail. In June 1974, the *Mirror* would report on how Farrant had been accused of ritually sacrificing Long John Baldry's cat. In July 1971, the *Mirror* gave readers pointers on practical witchcraft they could try at home, and in 1972, the *Mirror* ran a profile of Maxine and Alex Sanders, as part of a longer series about the rise of the occult in Britain.

This cultural saturation of all things occult and folk horror found its way onto children's television. *Children of the Stones* (1977) was a truly eerie piece of TV made for children, but perhaps a better example is the 1971 *Doctor Who* serial *The Dæmons,* which comes from the Jon Pertwee era of *Doctor Who,* a period when the show was explicitly pitched for children rather than more adult fans. Here, Jo Grant (Katy Manning)'s declaration out of nowhere that it is the Age of Aquarius begins a journey to the village of Devil's End, where the Doctor's archenemy the Master (Roger Delgado) is presiding over black masses and uncanny magic, leading to the resurrection of Azal, the Dæmon from Dæmos. What's particularly interesting about this serial is that the folk horror turns out to be down to the *other* big early 1970s occult enthusiasm, namely Erich von Däniken's Ancient Astronauts theory, best known from *Chariots of the Gods?* (1968). *The Daemons* tells us that Azal is exactly an ancient visitor who is the inspiration of an earthly mythology. We have here a substitution of substitutes Ancient Astronauts for folk horror. In the end, it does not matter if the monster in *The Dæmons* an alien or a devil, it's still a monster of mystery, and still spooky. And its magical powers still work.

Part of this spookiness is down to the character of Olive Hawthorne (Damaris Hayman), who is as far as I know one of the first explicitly

sympathetic Wiccan characters in British TV drama. She is portrayed in *The Dæmons* as being able to deliver the magical goods, at one point, here in fact, counteracting a supernatural gale with magic. Everything about Miss Hawthorne is suggestive of a portrayal of Britain's most well-known Wiccan of the time, Doreen Valiente (1922–1999). Valiente would by the end of 1971 appear on BBC TV performing a magical ritual in the documentary *The Power of the Witch*. *Doctor Who*'s Miss Hawthorne dresses, speaks and behaves exactly like her.

Of course, part of the fascination with all things occult around this time was built around its opposite construction as something evil and dangerous. Arguably, the most well-known proponent of Christian, almost puritanical views on the spread and dangers of ungodly material in popular culture in general, and television in the UK in particular, was Mary Whitehouse (1910–2001). Her spirit can be seen to cast its spectre over much 1970s folk horror, with possibly the best example being in David Rudkin's 1974 *Play for Today* episode, *Penda's Fen*. It is a play that deals heavily with the religious battlegrounds of the 1970s, and the sexual, political, and spiritual awakening of its teenage protagonist Stephen Franklin (Spencer Banks). On the one hand, we meet Stephen's father, played by John Atkinson, who is a parson, with progressive views of the land, and on the other, we see a pair of figures (Joan Scott and Ray Gatenby) who are clearly framed as morality campaigners along Whitehouse's lines. This pair appear in visions where they preside over smiling children getting their hands sliced off, and then, at the climax, they take Stephen to a high place overlooking the fens and offer him all the authority of the world, if he will bow down and worship him [God], an inversion of the temptation of Christ.[4] Here, the religion of Mary Whitehouse is portrayed as nothing more than Manichaean witchcraft, and the progressive Christianity of Stephen's father is seen as a healthy relative of an older paganism.

IF GOD STILL SEES US, HE SEES US WITH DESPAIR: THE 1970S CLASS DIVIDE

The UK in the 1970s saw a nation in a state of uncertainty. A few years before, we'd "never had it so good," but now, economically, Britain had begun to lag, and workers' rights began to butt hard against the needs of industry. This was the Britain of the three-day week, possibly the most infamous energy-saving measure of the times. Austerity, and the growing divide between rich and poor was on people's minds.

In few situations was this as stark as the fate of Capel Celyn, in the Tryweryn Valley, a village in North Wales flooded to create a reservoir to supply water for Liverpool. Even now, near the site, there is a stone regularly graffitied with the legend "COFIWCH DRYWERYN" ("Remember Tryweryn"), a reminder of an injustice that perhaps symbolizes the oppression of the poor and disenfranchised. Wales has always been one of the poorest parts of Britain, and it gets its definitive and preemptive folk horror entry in the 1968 ITV adaptation of Alan Garner's *The Owl Service*. Here, the gentrification of Wales revives and twists an ancient Welsh myth. The mundane inequities of class and capital stretch back and conquer the spirit of the land, even while England continues to conquer the land itself.

Something of this feeling is seen in the first episode of the 1972 supernatural series *Dead of Night*, titled *The Exorcism*, writer-director Don Taylor tells the story of four wealthy Londoners (Anna Cropper, Sylvia Kay, Edward Petherbridge and Clive Swift) who come together to share a lavish Christmas dinner in a reconditioned country cottage. "Why can't we just be socialist, and rich?" asks Swift's character. These are not bad people, they're just a bit self-satisfied. The cottage is haunted. A succession of uncanny events happens, and then the hostess Rachel (Cropper) becomes possessed by the spirit of the house, a woman whose husband was driven by desperation to poaching, and then sentenced to death for it, which became a death sentence for his family, who starved. In *The Exorcism,* the protagonists face a terrible fate due to their complacency. The most common take on the play is that there is not an exorcism in it, but the whole play is the exorcism. It's an exorcism in the sense that it is an airing of views, an act of self-accusation, because of course the people who meet with the ghost are the same sort of people who made this play and who are watching it. History, in its most literal sense, does not look kindly on these four very middle-class people, and *The Exorcism* is frightening, or should be, because it should make us ask ourselves the question, if we were in the position where we would be judged by history like these people are, would we do any better? The exorcism deals with the unforgiving, unresolved past that waits in the fabric of the landscape. Their sin is the sin of capitalism. Their sin is to feast while people nearby are starving. There is no justice ("If God still sees us, He sees us with despair," says the ghost), only the anger of history. China Miéville described a haunting as a "radicalized uncanny" (2011), and *The Exorcism* is a prime example of that: it is a political ghost, a specter radicalized to perform a terrorist assault on the present.

The unresolved past strikes out again at a modern-day intruder with a desire for capitalist exploitation in Nigel Kneale's play *The Stone Tape* (1972). Here, a group of British engineers are looking for a new recording solution that will compete with the growing technological supremacy of Japan. When they find out that the building their department has moved to

is haunted, they immediately begin to work out how they can monetize this. "Stone Tape theory,"[5] the idea that events can imprint on the landscape, is just one of several pseudosciences that were so popular in the 1970s (this was also the heyday of Paul Devereux and Lyall Watson), but also, the desperation of the various engineers and researchers taps into Britain's economic uncertainty. At one point, Peter Brock (Michael Bryant) harangues a colleague who is creating a fancy electronic washing machine. He declares that the new piece of kit will cost "nine hundred nicker" a unit, which was of course an immense amount of money at the time. There is a sense that their enterprise is going to fail because they have a cavalier attitude to history. History is here and it is watching, and it does not look kindly on anyone that invades its space, even the innocent.

The Stone Tape and many of the other examples from the 1970s show a nation in crisis, a battle between its past and its present. What empire there was left was slipping away and Britain was in a position where it had to face up to a long history, and the unfinished business of that history. This collective identity crisis turned to a revisiting of homegrown history, but that was equally traumatic and dangerous, a confrontation with a mythology and a folklore that further questioned our place in the present.

INTERLUDE AND RENAISSANCE

After the 1970s, the urgency of folk horror themes seemed to fade, not dying, so much as changing focus and in many places moving to more the user-friendly of comedy and television for children. In *Robin of Sherwood* (1984–1986), Robin Hood was framed as a mystical defender of the Spirit of Britain; his opponents, meanwhile, were almost entirely posh, incompetent, and entirely tangled up with the establishment, and the subtext was that class war was an objective cosmic good. *Moondial* (1988–1988) saw a young girl, holidaying in the countryside, transported back in time trying to help the "ghosts" from the past she meets there. *Century Falls* (1993–1993) was an operatic folk horror serial about a village where everyone is psychic and no children are born. As good as these serials are, there is however a sense that they're somehow weightless, that they have less to say both about the world they are from and *to* the world they are from. Arguably, the only really culturally important manifestation of the prosaic/uncanny intersection in adult-directed drama of this period was Stephen Volk's controversial Halloween 1992 play, *Ghostwatch,* which spectacularly brought the supernatural into the everyday. It simulated a BBC live broadcast from a haunted house with technical hitches, weird live callers and crucially well-known BBC personalities like Michael Parkinson and Sarah Greene playing the versions of themselves

that we all believed they really were, except haunted by a malevolent spirit named Pipes. A mild, press-fueled panic ensured that *Ghostwatch* would gain notoriety as the nearest the BBC ever got to repeating Orson Welles' infamous *War of the Worlds* broadcast in its public impact.

By the turn of the century, folk horror started very slowly to come back, in the guise of artifacts made by people who were children in the 1970s and early 1980s and who were now old enough to make TV themselves. *Look Around You* (2002–2004) channeled memories of strange, creaky, low-budget programs for schools and colleges. It has a sense of being haunted, especially in the episode where it looks at the science of ghosts. According to co-creator Robert Popper, "*Look Around You* is spooky."[6] And it is spooky, for it plays over and over on a sense of an unresolved past reaching forward into the future.

The turning point for the recent and ongoing relevance of folk horror on the screen is *The League of Gentlemen* (1999–2017). It should be stressed that *The League of Gentlemen* is not a parody. There is homage, and there are many references if you know where to look—there is an entire scene in the local shop in the very first episode that riffs repeatedly off *The Wicker Man*, for example—but getting these references is not essential to understanding and enjoying the comedy, which is the key to the *The League of Gentlemen*'s widespread, enduring popularity—by making a comedy that was both referential and yet worked on its own merits, it created some of the conditions that would enable folk horror to return as a genre. *The League of Gentlemen* was not an immediate opening of the floodgates. But a shift in cultural perspectives began. On the political scene, government corruption, an increase of wealth inequality, austerity, a resurgence of the far right and international instability all became part of our conversation again in the twenty-first century after the celebratory lull of the 1990s, and that sense of unresolved history returned to us. The cultural conversation was ready.

In 2018, the #witchesofinstagram tag on Instagram had 1,041,663 specific instances, and by May 2022, this had grown to nearly 8.7 million and social platform TikTok logged nearly 27 billion views for the hashtag #witchtok. VICE Media has reported several times about the paraphernalia and culture of witchcraft in the last few years (Kibberd 2014), and on January 16, 2018, the *Guardian* published an article about the best mail-order witchcraft services (Schopen 2018), and within an hour of that article, *yet another* article about folk horror (Harrison 2018), this time inspired by the Sky series *Britannia*, which appeared in full on Sky Atlantic on January 18, 2018. These things are not unrelated, and begin to describe a cultural moment, to tipping point in the popular imagination where a revival in folk horror was not just possible, but already happening.

The years between 2000 and 2021 saw a multitude of important folk horror films and television series appear. Perhaps the first noticeably intentional folk horror was *Wake Wood* (2009), one of a handful of films made under the revived Hammer brand. It concerns a bereaved couple who move to a village in rural Ireland where the locals practice a pagan ritual that allows them to be reunited loved ones for a brief time. But the couple (Eva Birthistle and Aiden Gillen)—he is a vet, a classic folk horror occupation—take advantage of the villagers and break the rules of the rite, and blood and death result; *Kill List* (2012), directed by Ben Wheatley and written by Amy Jump, begins with an excruciating dinner party, where we learn that Jay (Neil Maskell) and Gal (Michael Smiley) are in fact professional killers. Jay has made a terrible mistake some time ago, and has been unable to work since then, but Gal convinces him it's time to get back on the horse and do some more jobs. He suggests a short list of three targets. But Jay is being manipulated by uncanny forces—Fiona, played by Emma Fryer, for example, carves an occult symbol on the back of the family bathroom mirror with a knife while supposedly on a trip to the bathroom. The sense of dreadful banality that fills the film is accompanied by the knowledge that every figure of establishment power in the film—including the client, and also Fiona—is an agent of cultic evil, and that they are manipulating Jay, the everyman, into becoming their creature, and using him to create chaos and death; *Sightseers* (2013), also by Wheatley and Jump, follow the blackly comic tale of Chris and Tina, a couple of nerdy outsiders who go on a caravan holiday taking in landmarks north of Derby. "Show me the world, Chris" says Tina. "I thought we'd start with Crich Tram Museum," he says. Everything about their world is small, mundane, home-made, and just a little bit rubbish. Soon, though they embark on a campaign of spree killings; The third of the Wheatley/Jump folk horrors is *A Field in England* (2013). Reese Shearsmith stars as Whitehead in a tale set in the English Civil War that is, reduced to its absolute most basic, five men losing their minds in a field. Of course, it's more than that: the cosmic struggle between warring mystics that the film portrays makes the field into a weird sort of purgatory, where time and even death become fractured, uncertain things. All of Wheatley and Jump's folk horror films have a sort of nostalgia to them. They're full of the signifier's of 1970s folk horror culture, from the brown kitchen-sink dreariness of *Kill List*, and the band of jumper-wearing evangelicals we meet, to the prosaic landmarks in beautiful locations that litter *Sightseers* and the Civil War setting of *A Field in England.* All the films have a sense that things would be better if they were more like they used to be, but show that as a sort of false nostalgia, since it rarely has much to do with how things actually were then or even as they are now.

The success of these films and others, have lead commentators such as Bob Fischer, to label the directors/creators behind them as *The Haunted*

Generation, something he explained in more depth in the lead article of July 2017's *Fortean Times.* He writes about the spookiness that pervaded the childhoods of those growing up in the 1970s, observing that while for many this was the time of the Bay City Rollers, *The Generation Game,* and sweets like Black Jacks and Fruit Salads, others were being "freaked" out by *Bagpuss, Watership Down,* and *The Spirit of Dark and Lonely Water,* a short public information advert/film. What is perhaps most surprising though is how the current generation engages with that material and seemingly shares similar experiences that makes the new material transcend nostalgia and be so very contemporary.

A good example of this idea of the 1970s in the 2000s is the *Doctor Who* episode "Hide" (2013), which references both Nigel Kneale and the period of *Doctor Who* that gave us *The Dæmons.* The colors are 1970s colors, and the design is beautifully evocative of that time. The episode fetishizes oscilloscopes and RF cables. Matt Smith's Doctor at no other point mucks about with "reversing the polarity of the neutron flow," but here he offers a full homage to Pertwee-era technobabble, creating a "psychochronoscope" powered by a blue crystal from Metebelis III.[7] Despite the loving homage it in no way looks like anything made in the 1970s. Everything—editing, music, performances, the positions of the cameras, is absolutely a product of now. And the story itself is an explicit rejection of the ethos of 1970s folk horror, even while it closely references it. Rather than a horror of folk, "Hide" presents a phantom, and the monster that pursues her, as benevolent figures both, equally in need of rescue. Consequently, "Hide" is not folk horror; it is *about* folk horror.

A similar effect using different means is seen in Carol Morley's *The Falling,* where, while the mood is wistful and the late sixties setting rings true, the overall sense is of something very contemporary. The sudden death of Abi (Florence Pugh), a charismatic teenager with a secret causes her closest friend Lydia (Maisie Williams) half-consciously to initiate an epidemic of fainting in her school. No one quite knows what to make of it all, Lydia is in some way possessed by her friend, and in some way she is now able to do sympathetic magic. Her older brother reads Crowley, but it's Lydia who actually knows how to do Crowleyan sympathetic magic, because it's a moment in time for her, the precise moment in her life when it works. *The Falling* pays forward to any number of ideas of the magical powers of young women, of possession, of the idea of "mass hysteria," and speaks more to now than it ever could to the time in which it is set.

Robert Eggers' *The Witch* (2015) deserves a mention here. Although an American film made by an American director, *The Witch* is nonetheless part of this conversation, not least because it has encouraged us to look back and

forward through the cinematic catalogue at examples of American folk horror idioms: you might consider *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *Martha Marcy May Marlene* (2013), and *Wisconsin Death Trip* (1999), for example. Much is made of *The Witch's* attempts at authenticity. It is subtitled *A New England Folk Tale*; its script is written in a sort-of-but-not-really historic argot patched-together from letters and witch trials; it replicates witch beliefs of the time—Eggers would repeat the trick with *The Lighthouse* (2019). However, *The Witch* is also powerfully contemporary. It is a story about how a family is lost in the wilderness of seventeenth-century New England, picked off one by one by witches who then recruit the daughter, Thomasin (Anya Taylor-Joy). But also, it is another parable of radicalization, where a young girl sees her family die one by one and she decides to rebel against the forces that caused it. The witch of then does not exist; it is the witch of now, and the witch of now is a militant. One could equally point to American director Ari Aster's films *Hereditary* (2018) and *Midsommar* (2019), which both use folk horror themes in non-British settings to explore the radicalizing power of the past in ways that are dangerous to the present.

POSTSCRIPT

When a previous version of this chapter was presented as a talk at the Miskatonic Institute of Horror Studies, London, on January 18, 2018, my expectation was that the folk horror boom would subside. At the time of this publication, this has not yet happened. Kier-La Janisse's documentary *Woodlands Dark and Days Bewitched,* although largely filmed in 2018—my own segments were filmed on June 17 of that year in fact—still hit a nerve and achieved great success nearly four years later. The twists and tropes of the classic folk horror films are now as strongly a part of the horror film toolbox as the vampire or the zombie. Netflix's series *Midnight Mass* (2021) and *Archive 81* (2022) both heavily feature folk horror tropes; in fact, the latter reasonably could be said to include a twist directly stolen from *The Wicker Man*. The same goes for Nia DaCosta's rebooted *Candyman* (2021), which, although is in no way a folk horror film on its own, admits the structures and plot elements of folk horror in a way that its predecessors do not. A cursory glance at the listings of Shudder reveals that it's actually difficult to find a low budget straight to streaming horror that *is not* in some way folk horror.

The recent pandemic seems only to have intensified the social currents that feed folk horror narratives—we are more haunted and fragmented than we have been for a very long time, and as a result, we continue to haunt ourselves. As long as we haunt ourselves, there is a place for this. As long as

we haunt ourselves, even when folk horror recedes into the collective unconscious again, as it surely will at some point, it will be back.

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NOTES

1. This is an edited and updated version of a paper first given at the Miskatonic Institute of Horror Studies at the Horse Hospital, London, on January 18, 2018.

2. For example, an article in the *Daily Express*, 24 January 1978, page 3, entitled "Are you with us, Mr. Higginson?" which describes England's most prominent medium as a "Stoke-on-Trent greengrocer" and reports details such as the flowered aprons of the ladies handling the catering, and the 50p entry price for Higginson's psychic demonstrations.

3. Hence the title of my 2018 book, *We Don't Go Back: A Watcher's Guide to Folk Horror.*

4. Matthew 4: 8–10.

5. At the time the play was shown on television the most advanced, and monetized, technology for storing information was magnetic tape which was most popularly seen in music tapes and later video tapes for television.

6. BBC DVD commentary for "Ghosts."

7. Last seen in the serial *Planet of the Spiders* (1974).

Chapter 3

A Battlefield in England

Folk Horror and War

Jimmy Packham

> "In 1346, a French man-of-war appeared off Stepper Point. The women of Padstow, dressed in red cloaks, marched out along the cliffs to the beating of drums, with a great horse at their head. The sailors, seeing what appeared to be an army headed by the devil—the snapping, biting beast of Padstow—upped anchor and sailed away."
>
> —Arcadia 2017

Arcadia (2017), an experimental documentary film by Paul Wright, offers a collage of footage, pulled from the archives of the British Film Institute, depicting the folk, landscapes, and rituals of twentieth-century Britain.[1] It is, in spirit, something like a folk horror film. The film is fascinated with "the old ways"—a turn of phrase that recurs in critical efforts to define folk horror (Scovell 2017, 5; Luckhurst 2020, 9)—and with the darkness and horror that might be glimpsed beneath otherwise quaint and rosy conceptions of British, and particularly English, gentility and eccentricity.

At the beginning of part 2 of *Arcadia*—aptly, for our current purposes, entitled "folk"—a voiceover narration describes the fending off, during the siege of Calais in the fourteenth century, of a French naval vessel by Cornish women led by an apparently monstrous "great horse"—in fact, the 'Obby 'Oss (or hobby horse) of Padstow. This event has been cited as the origin of Padstow's May Day 'Obby 'Oss festival ("E.T." 1923, 145). Such festivities also occupy a conspicuous place in the folk horror tradition: a May Day parade, complete with hobby horse, is the prelude to the final horrors of Robin Hardy's *The Wicker Man* (1973), for example. But I begin this chapter

with this anecdote less for the ways in which folk horror continues to draw on regional rituals and localized mythmaking, and more for the contexts in which such rituals and myths are embedded.

This procession along the cliffs of the Cornish coast, however apocryphal it may be, is set against the backdrop of the first phase (roughly 1337–1360) of the Hundred Years' War, a war fought, at least initially, between England and France for control of the French throne. This folk custom may then be seen as another, localized, arena of the conflict, and for the outsiders—the French sailors—the assertion of national strength and defiance is aligned with something (or misread as) satanic. Indeed, if this origin story is entirely fictional, we might be all the more attuned to the significance of choosing to imagine that the folk custom has its genesis in part of England's war effort. The annual celebrations in Padstow become, as a result, not (just) an example of May Day fertility ceremonies but are (also) the commemoration of a wartime victory. When a description of this event is transposed by Wright into *Arcadia*, it is made to signify more explicitly within the contours of the folk horror genre. That is, in Wright's unconventional and dreamlike folk horror narrative, the defense of Stepper Point is used as the means introduce the "folk" of folk horror and it segues into a photomontage of strange ceremonies and rituals that—stripped of any other context—might well come from films like *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971) or *The Wicker Man*.

For the remainder of this chapter, I want to explore further the longstanding relationship folk horror has with wars and wartime, exploring the ways folk horror media have situated their unsettling narratives against backdrops of war. Folk horror is usually preoccupied with rural, or at least regional, culture and identity—setting these strange, out-of-the-way communities off against the more "civilized" (and more condescending, more doomed) emissaries of the metropole. Situating the genre in relation to its enduring fascination with war, however, allows us to see how the genre has a more expansive vision than the dialectic between regions and centers might initially imply. Folk horror finds in war a fertile environment to explore difficult questions of national identity and belonging, and of the meaning, make-up, and history of the nation. War furnishes rich opportunity for the invention and regeneration of national narratives; this, in turn, speaks enticingly to folk horror and its persistent interest in the histories and rituals through which community comes into being. Intercommunal violence and rupture (and, occasionally, healing) afford the groundwork for folk horror to quite overtly explore the ways in which the ties that bind us have been knotted together.

In what follows, I will sketch a brief account of folk horror's relationship with war, before turning in more detail to a particular case study: the British Civil Wars as represented in *A Field in England* (2013). The Civil Wars have served folk horror well by its provision of a turbulent political landscape that

drew the nation's regions into conflict with one another over questions of national sovereignty. Moreover, as I will argue, folk horror itself provides a dynamic framework for exploring the ongoing contestation of the ideological significance of a conflict that Britain has never been able fully to resolve.

POSTWAR FOLK HORROR

In his review of Wright's film, Peter Bradshaw (2018) notes that *Arcadia* "starts with classic black-and-white postcard shots of postwar English villages . . . It is the 'Merrie England' idea that is ripe for a debunking, a sudden descent into the brutal reality of hardship, discord, class division and racism." The postwar idyll gives way to horrors that lurk not so far beneath the surface—horrors that are ideological and systemic. This is a useful point at which to address what exactly constitutes folk horror. While I don't wish to rehearse the numerous ways this slippery genre has been defined in the existing scholarship—other essays in this current volume elaborate on this more effectively—I do wish to draw attention to the significance in Bradshaw's review of the term "postwar." This is a word that recurs with strange insistency in accounts of folk horror and its emergence. Adam Scovell (2017), for example, in the first book-length study of the genre, argues that folk horror's "genealogy is less important than its stark ability to draw links between oddities and idiosyncrasies, especially within post-war British culture" (6). More recently, Roger Luckhurst has contended that folk horror "is a specific form of the Gothic that is rooted in a British post-war sensibility" (2020, 8).

Perhaps the term "postwar" is not so strange: it is a fairly straightforward descriptor, clarifying that this genre has its roots in the landscape and cultural climate of Britain following the Second World War. On the one hand, then, it is a useful shorthand for describing the latter half of the twentieth century. On the other hand, however, it begins to suggest an important connection between the genre and a context of production that arises specifically out of war, where "postwar English villages" are indelibly marked by the war in ways both tangible and spectral. There is another way to imagine this term's strangeness, too: if folk horror is a peculiarly postwar product, which war do we mean exactly? In colloquial British usage in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, "postwar" is generally understood to refer specifically to the Second World War. But if, as I am suggesting, war is significant both for producing the contexts of production and as a key backdrop within folk horror narratives, we might want to prise this term away from its conventional usage and think about the broader thematic pertinence of the term. By so doing, we can begin to think of folk horror as a mode especially invested in

exploring the legacies of war(s) and of imagining the postwar conditions of the nation and its communities and citizens.

It is not simply the case that war—and the terror and trauma of it—are suited to the thematic preoccupations of genres like horror and the Gothic, as real-life horrors are transmuted into supernatural ones. As Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet and Steffen Hantke (2016) have noted, war fundamentally underpins this literature: "The Gothic was born, and it thrived in its infancy, in times of war. From the atrocities of the French Revolution to the ravages of the Seven Years War . . . and the Napoleonic Wars, the battles of civil and national wars provided a steady background noise to the development of the genre" (xi). There is a growing body of scholarship working to further illuminate such claims; for our purposes a short folk horror genealogy will suffice to bring war more completely into the foreground.[2]

The ghost stories of M. R. James are frequently cited as foundational texts to the development of folk horror. In "uneasy rural tales" such as "Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad" (1904) and "A Warning to the Curious" (1925), James depicts "the revenge of ancient buried artefacts" against those overly inquisitive souls who would have the temerity to unearth them (Luckhurst 2020, 12). What is especially significant here, I think, is that in both of these tales these artefacts have a direct connection to international conflict and invasion. Professor Parkins uncovers his haunted whistle on the site of a ruined Templars' preceptory—a monastery belonging to the militant Knights Templar, whose abiding legacy in the popular imagination is their connection with the Crusades and religious warfare. The Anglo-Saxon crown in "A Warning to the Curious" offers a more transparent connection with war: it is one of three holy crowns "buried in different places near the coast to keep off the Danes or the French or the Germans" (James 2011, 346)—buried, then, in an effort to defend the borders of the nation against hostile forces. The tale, written in the wake of the First World War, has also been read, in an excellent analysis by Patrick J. Murphy (2017), as "a bereaved mentor's rumination on war and its memory, both collective and personal, commemorative and corrosive" (173). Medieval ritual practice offers a lens through which the impact and significance of the more contemporary war might be considered.

From here, we might trace a genealogy of folk horror that grapples with war and its specters in works by Arthur Machen, such as his unnerving allegory of the violence of World War I, "Out of the Earth" (1923), and the understudied Civil War novel, *The Hole of the Pit* (1914) by Adrian Ross. In the midcentury, beside the major example of *Witchfinder General* (1968), there is the folk horror science fiction of Nigel Kneale, Alan Clarke, and Alan Garner; Dawn Keetley (2021) also highlights the often submerged significance of the Vietnam War to Stephen King's "Children of the Corn"

(1977) and its various adaptations.[3] Following the folk horror revival of the early twenty-first century, we see this aspect of the genre developed most substantially in the work of Ben Wheatley and Amy Jump—especially *Kill List* (2011) and *A Field in England*. World War I and World War II and their legacies frame in significant ways the narratives of James Brogden's *Bone Harvest* (2020) and Andrew Michael Hurley's *The Loney* (2014) respectively. Beyond the British examples, American folk horror finds inspiration in the sustained warfare and skirmishes between indigenous and colonial powers, including the French and Indian War: for example, in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Roger Malvin's Burial" (1832) and the film *Eyes of Fire* (1983). The Spanish Civil War shapes the violence of Guillermo del Toro's richly folkloric *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006). Military presences play important roles in the Polish film *Wilczyca* (1983) and the Icelandic *Tilbury* (1987), in which it is the British military occupiers in World War II–era Reykjavík who are collated with the folkloric creatures, the tilberi. As the example of *Tilbury* begins to suggest, wartime provides folk horror with an evocative setting in which to examine two things: the mythification of military endeavor and questions around territorial sovereignty; how, in short, to account for the significance of blood spilt upon, and on the behalf of, the soil of the nation.

In the twenty-first century, Britain has seen a frenzied political deployment of the imagery and rhetoric of the Second World War. Most distinctly, it has inflected the fractious debate on the question of Britain's membership of the European Union—the "Brexit" debates—which have touched repeatedly on sovereignty and on "taking back control." It has manifested, too, in blustering discussion on the management of the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic. As Matthew Leggat (2020) has suggested, the appeal of such rhetoric is that it "hark[s] back to a near mythical moment in the collective memory when Britain stood alone"—in the national imagination, if not in fact—against aggressive foreign powers (15). As a consequence of the prominent role World War II continues to play in the British imaginary, wartime expressions are a staple of "everyday speech in the UK" (20). The Second World War provides Britain with a relatively stable framework by which the morally upstanding self is set off against a morally corrupt Other—whether tangibly human, in the case of EU bureaucrats, or insidiously invisible, in the case of the Covid virus.

Recent folk horror finds inspiration in puncturing the grandiloquence of such myth-making rhetoric by aligning it with what Dawn Keetley (2020) identifies as a defining feature of the genre: its examination of monstrous tribalism (10–15). *The Loney*, for instance, destabilises British conceptions of mid-century heroism by imagining a short path indeed from military valor and derring-do to xenophobic nationalism.[4] The novel's young protagonists, suburban Londoners, spend much time playing imaginative wargames in an

abandoned Second World War pillbox—steadfastly, but pointlessly, enduring on an English beach, like the relics of a Jamesian ghost story. These games deliberately echo the text's more stereotypical source of folk horror unease: the strange rituals, such as a Mummers play, performed by the rural coastal community. In this way, *The Loney* turns repeatedly to meditate on international violence and conflict in order to explore how such things develop a ritualistic afterlife that preserves community (and, indeed, performs a gatekeeping function) at both a local and national level. Such work warns that as we are tempted towards attractive national narratives we may stray quickly into the troubling terrain of folk horror, with its fascination with forms of insularity and exclusion. The self, in such instances, comes to exhibit those qualities it claims to deplore in the Other. *The Loney*'s attention is focused on the limit-points of the nation or community—fragile points of access like its border, the coast, and isolated rural or island populations, where insiders come into uneasy contact with outsiders or intruders.

What happens, however, when, in periods of internecine violence and conflict, everybody is in some manner an "insider"? How is "insider-ness" constructed in this respect, and what sorts of national narratives might emerge as a consequence? If the Second World War occupies a relatively straightforward position in the national imaginary, the British Civil Wars, by contrast, occupy far murkier terrain.

THE CIVIL WARS AND A FIELD IN—

The Civil Wars clearly matter to folk horror. If *Witchfinder General* ushers in the first flourishing of folk horror—it is the earliest of the so-called original "unholy trinity"[5]—it does so with the Civil Wars in tow. What I want to do in this final section is explore how the presentation of the Civil Wars has evolved in twenty-first century folk horror, what this tells us about the genre's current concerns as they pertain to war and national identity, and what this might tell us about the complex place of the Civil Wars in the ongoing construction of Britain's own national narratives.

Witchfinder General emerges in the late 1960s into several intersecting cultural movements. In the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, proponents of left-wing and socialist politics sought to recuperate and embrace "the forms of rural resistance to early industrialisation" by Civil War-era movements such as the Ranters, Diggers, and Levellers (Luckhurst 2020, 9). The late 1960s and early 1970s also saw the culmination of scholarly investment in the radical potential of the Civil Wars. Marxist historians such as Christopher Hill "presented the world of Civil-War sectarian Puritanism as a revolutionary counter-culture, created by the marginal people of early modern society,

and aimed at transforming the existing social order"; these forward-thinkers were figured as "ideological spokespersons of an emerging working-class consciousness" (Como 2008, 241). Folk horror comes to fruition, then, not just in a climate of antiestablishment counterculture with a sustained interest in folk traditions and beliefs. But in a climate where the British Civil Wars play a significant role in the articulation of this very radicalism and counterculture. By turning to a twenty-first-century folk horror film, we see a quite different form of Civil War politics in play.

A Field in England follows a raggedy group of Civil War waifs and strays: a cowardly alchemist's assistant named Whitehead (Reece Shearsmith), who we first meet escaping from the clutches of Commander Trower (Julian Barratt); several military deserters of dubious allegiance, like Jacob (Peter Ferdinando) and Cutler (Ryan Pope); and Friend (Richard Glover), a nonpartisan cooper, who seemingly spontaneously comes back from the dead early on in the narrative (and again several times later). The film's elusive and fragmented narrative runs as follows: the group join Whitehead in his search for O'Neill (Michael Smiley), an Irish alchemist who had worked with Whitehead's master but has now absconded with several of this man's occult papers. Whitehead has been sent by his master to find O'Neill and return with him and the papers. Having found O'Neill, however, the group is set to work—largely against their will—to help O'Neill find treasure buried somewhere in the field in which the entirety of the film takes place. This treasure turns out to be nothing more than a buried human skull: England's field is a grave. By the end of the film, and following a haunting hallucinatory sequence, all the characters have been killed, except for Whitehead. In Whitehead's final effort to escape the field, he seems only to return into it, confronted either by a ghostly vision or by the genuinely resurrected bodies of Jacob and Friend.

For several readers, *A Field in England* offers a notably different vision of the Civil Wars from that which has dominant popular culture since the 1970s, and as a result the film may be understood as negotiating a new way to understand and account for the wars. For Jerome de Groot (2017), "Wheatley demonstrates renewed interest in Cavalier, rather than the radical, dissident, transgressive 'Roundhead' tropes that have proven the main interest for popular cultural versions of the wars for the past 20 years," offering instead "a 'new' way of remembering" (507). Michael Durrant (2019), too, argues that the film is invested in the dialectic "of forgetting and/through remembering": in the form of a ghost story, the film proffers "a form of historical rendering that establishes and then negates the Civil War's presence." (251, 252) Not only, for Durrant, are the audience "kept at a distance from the history in which the film's characters are confined" in such a way that conjures the era "as an unknowable, rather than a recognizable past, one that slips out of

focus even as it is summoned." More than this: "The film's dialogue . . . might even emphasise a deep sense of disappointment with, or even a casual dismissal of, the politico-religious partisanship embedded in the Royalist versus Parliamentarian binary" (254). Chelsea Birks (2021) takes such readings a step further, arguing that *A Field in England* posits as its "central opposition" the disjunction "between humans and their landscape" (48). With its central conceit of humans "trapped within an inescapable space and beholden to forces beyond what [they] can understand," the film seeks to move beyond, and undermine, the human—especially violent masculinity—and grapple with "the problem of anthropocentrism" (51).

These compelling critical accounts of the film share a number of overlapping concerns. First, they recognize the importance to the film's narrative of the landscape, of the soil of a field that seems unwilling to let its human interlopers go. Second, they take note of the film's exploration or deconstruction of notions of mastery and manhood. Finally, even as historicist readings bring to the fore the film's wrangling with the political and cultural afterlife of the Civil Wars, the readings emphasize the peripheral nature of the war to the actual goings-on of *A Field in England*'s plot—understandably echoing the fact that the characters themselves are seeking to put some distance between themselves and the conflict. I, too, am interested in these elements of the film, but wish to bring them more particularly under the auspices of the critical frameworks associated with folk horror. By so doing, I want to offer a way of reframing critical approaches to this supposed "field in England," attending much more to the field's specificity than existing studies do. This, in turn, will give us an opportunity to examine how the film provides further development of folk horror's Civil War thematics and the place, within this, of mastery and manhood.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of the topographical dimension of folk horror. Folk horror is especially concerned with specificity of place, with exploring the (weird and unsettling) qualities of a very particular region or landscape (Scovall 2017, 17). Discussions of Jump's and Wheatley's field, however, have emphasized its placelessness: it is "a non-place" (de Groot 2017, 507), "on the edge of a battlefield" (Durrant 2019, 252), "a liminal space . . . beyond law and order" (Birks 2021, 49). The symbolic transitional movement at the opening and closing of the film helps imply this, as Whitehead moves through a hedgerow from some unseen space—presumably a battlefield—into the surreal place of the field. One might see here, as well, the deliberate penetration through a symbol of enclosure and effort to occupy land that is implied, by the make-up of the film's cast of characters, to be every man's (and everyman's) land; in this respect, *A Field in England* gestures obliquely toward the political occupation of once-common, now enclosed lands by groups such as the Diggers. The film's deliberately vague

title, too, suggests the field is akin to England's ur-field and a topography in which we might find the life and politics of England or Englishness in microcosm.

A Field in England concerns both the political histories of fields (in England) and England (as field). Except, the field is not English, but Welsh. Early in the narrative, Friend asks, "Where am I?" "Monmouthshire," replies Whitehead: "That near Essex, is it?" "No." Even as Jump and Wheatley invite us to read the film as a meditation on Englishness and English rural space, they situate the narrative in a location that has a contested national history: Monmouthshire was only confirmed to be a Welsh county by an Act of Parliament in 1972. Prior to this, and since at least the sixteenth century, Monmouthshire was administratively distinct from the rest of Wales (even as Wales as a whole fell under English rule) and may have been considered part of England or part of Wales. This ambiguity works for *A Field in England* in a couple of significant ways.

By situating the action in a border county, the film does indeed seek to evoke liminality and placelessness in its setting—a topographical counterpart to the liminality and placelessness of its characters. It is also through this setting, however, that *A Field in England* taps evocatively into folk horror's enduring preoccupation with questions of national and regional identity and belonging. Friend cannot place Monmouthshire: it is not near Essex, his home county. The film purposefully frames Englishness—or an English perspective—as the default lens for engaging with the territories that now comprise the British Isles. Indeed, the film itself seeks to render the viewers themselves as folk horror's ubiquitous outsider, urging us to find our sense of place and orientation destabilized. Horror and the Gothic are both modes that thrive on dramatizing the "troubled coexistence of the regional and the metropolitan" and on unsettling the ideological constructs underpinning notions of regionality, something that exists "through perception rather than location" (Hughes 2018, 15, 6). When *A Field in England* prompts us to limn its landscape as being somehow outside of time and place, only to then quite deliberately evoke a specificity of setting, we might be led to reflect on what that means for the assumed English viewer, as Wales slips out of sight as a point of reference, as it is once more conflated with England. If, as I have outlined above, questions of national and local sovereignty are key to folk horror narratives, then by following Birks in foregrounding landscape above human character, this is a film about the cultural place of Wales in a British imaginary. The political identity of Wales once again hoves into view if we also return to this chapter's central concern with folk horror and war.

"Any detailed study of Wales's role in the Civil War," notes Mark Stoyle (2005), "must begin by confronting one remarkable fact: in 1642 virtually the entire country came out in support of the king" (12). Welsh participation in

the wars "served to re-awaken long-dormant English anxieties about treachery on the 'Celtic fringe,'" while propagandizing from both royalists and parliamentarians "persuaded many thousands of people to believe that they were engaged in a quasi-national conflict with those whom they had until recently regarded as their fellow countrymen" (18, 31). *A Field in England* engineers a further turn to this screw: the film has no Welsh characters in its otherwise disparate mix. Whitehead seems to hail from Norwich, Friend is from Essex, Cutler wants to "get back to fucking London," O'Neill is Irish, and Jacob's origins remain obscure but implicitly English. Indeed, if a struggle over national identity is underway in this emptied-out field in territory that is notionally (if not straightforwardly) Welsh, it is most readily to be seen in the contest between the English and the Irish: as Henry K. Miller (2016) argues, O'Neill's violent death at the hands of Whitehead looks forwards to the violent conquest of Ireland by Cromwell's army between 1649–53 (43–44).

The Welsh exist here only spectrally, as it were, on the "fringe" of the plot: "News is Cromwell's men marched north to meet the engagers. I heard he exacted terrible revenge on the Welsh bastards at Pembroke, sir," says Cutler to O'Neill as he relays news of the war effort. One reference here is likely to be the 1648 siege of Pembroke, when a royalist rebellion led by John Poyer was defeated by Cromwell's forces (Bowen 2020). The other allusion—to the "engagers"—evokes the film's other notably absent Civil War participants: the Scottish, particularly those who made "The Engagement" with Charles I in 1647. Even here, however, *A Field in England* makes precise details difficult to pin down: Cutler's hedged expression—"News is . . . ," "I heard . . . "—reiterates our distance from the war's international violence, from whatever historical reality there might be, and recalls Durrant's claim that this war is ultimately "unknowable" and "out of focus." From this perspective, *A Field in England* dramatizes its action on the fringes of the Civil Wars, on the fringes of two different nations, locating, within this, the populations of two nations at a further fringe. This kaleidoscopic *mise en abyme*—fringe within fringe within fringe—is a rendition of folk horror's concern with marginal regional spaces, heightened almost to the point of absurdity.

Moreover, figuring such kaleidoscopic marginality in Wales—or the western limits of England—enables *A Field in England* to rewrite a pervasive trope of Civil War–era folk horror. Diegetically, Whitehead is on a quest from his master, "a gentleman at Norwich." Nondiegetically, the film is a symbolic reworking of the East Anglia—set *Witchfinder General*, a twenty-first-century reimagining of the archetypal Civil War folk horror film. The parliamentarian heartland of East Anglia is also the setting for Ross' *The Hole of the Pit* and for the recent surge in fiction that has continued to explore the long shadow cast by the witchfinder Matthew Hopkins, whose witch-hunting took place principally across this region.[6] Diegetically and

nondiegetically *A Field in England* is on the run from East Anglia. In repositioning where folk horror might most suggestively engage with this conflict, *A Field in England* does not just bring folk horror's Civil Wars out from the troubling legacy of Hopkins. By so doing, it also recasts folk horror's Civil Wars within a royalist, rather than parliamentarian, domain. The further significance of this is more apparent if we begin to shift our focus from the field to the people within it.

COMPOSITE SOVEREIGNTY

For de Groot (2017), the interpersonal conflict of *A Field in England* uses its muddy, earthy landscape to explore "the democracy inherent in the land." This field is somewhere "for a new type of identity to be debated, developed, attacked, fought over" and the film uses its flattened landscape in order to imagine forms of relation that are "not hierarchical but levelled" (508). In this respect, the fights underway in the field recapitulate in miniature the wider internecine conflict, which in turn indicates that the Civil Wars are not really peripheral or marginal events for the film at all. For Birks (2021), too, the field is a site where "petty battles" between humans fall away in the confrontation with "an indifferent landscape," (50) though here the landscape sits at the top of a hierarchy with humanity beneath it. As Birks shows, the film literalizes this notion when an inverted shot presents an image of the landscape in the upper half of the image and the sky in the lower half—one of the film's numerous ways of engaging with Christopher Hill's famous account of the Civil Wars, *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972), itself a reference to a royalist pamphlet.

It is, in the end, Whitehead who most fully embraces the revolutionary potential of the soil. "You cannot escape the field, Whitehead!" cries O'Neill in the climactic contest between the two men. "Then I shall become it!" Whitehead shrieks:

> I shall consume all the ill fortune which you are set to unleash! I shall chew up all the selfish scheming and ill intentions that men like you force upon men like me and bury it in the stomach of this place!

The land is a vehicle for retribution: Whitehead will "become" the field in order to exact revenge on O'Neill and, by implication, on a broader swathe of humanity as well. If the film imagines the potential of a more level distribution of power between human players, the characters themselves seem disinclined to explore this opportunity. The field provides a means to reverse, not rethink, power relations. One has the chance to "bury" one's enemies "in

the stomach of this place"—and as the presence of the human skull at the bottom of the pit may imply, Whitehead surely won't be the first to have done so.

Amid the wind-swept chaos Whitehead may or may not have unleashed following this exchange with O'Neill, Whitehead expresses a desire for a more-than-human perception of the field:

> I shall pray for more legs and arms, to greater appreciate the many natural intrigues and wonders that play out below us . . . Maybe I shall pen a book on the subject . . . What say you to this for a title: *A Field in England; or, The Myriad Particulars of the Common Weevil*.

What comes to the fore is the way in which *A Field in England* resolves the power struggles of its warring factions within a composite figure, a singular site of myriad forms of power and identity. Whitehead does not seek to negate his humanity, but merely wishes "for more legs and arms." This is a suggestive evocation, perhaps, of the monstrous hybrid form—especially the part-human, or more-than-human, beings—that populate folk horror narratives: Whitehead gestures towards an image of himself as a beast of the field.

More to the point, by the film's end, Whitehead has indeed become composite, a hotchpotch of his companions. The characters in the field are a volatile brew of different kinds of national, social, and political identity, and their lines of relation cut many different ways. These men evoke the international nature of the Civil Wars, staging a contest between the English and Irish. They also cross the social spectrum: from the working-class cooper to the more affluent and powerful alchemist, whose appearance superficially resembles Charles I—a connection Jacob makes when he remarks pejoratively on O'Neill "standing there like the King himself." The men are united by being, in various ways, deserters, though they are deserting different causes and they betray a mixture of royalist and republican sympathies. Some are soldiers, others seek to insist on their role as non-combatants and civilians: "I am not a solider," stresses Whitehead. As Imogen Peck has shown, however, there is an extremely "blurry line between participant and non-combatant" in the matter of the Civil Wars (26). Whitehead himself betrays this self-conception when, at the film's end, he walks off wielding his companions' musket, pistols, knives, and sword (their "arms"). When Whitehead finally kills his adversary and assumes the clothes and accoutrements of the various dead men, he symbolically takes on all of these markers of identity and the forms of power they convey.

So, what is the ideological upshot of this reconciliation of different selves and different tribal affiliations, to recall Keetley's terminology? And what might we say of this final example of the (quite literal) fertile ground furnished by war for folk horror?

The recursive structure of the film suggests a failure of resolution, the difficulty of finding a fixed meaning for an especially turbulent moment in a nation's past. Whitehead's transformation may be a vision of postwar reconciliation and of sovereign power emerging from chaos. But his is a flattening and silencing of difference. Indeed, as he assumes territorial sovereignty over the field (for his proposed book is entitled "A Field in *England*") and violently dispatches his Irish counterpart, his transformation takes on decidedly colonial dimensions, an embodiment of its horrors. Where Sergeant Howie resolutely failed to assert metropolitan control over the disorderly provinces and where Lavenham's populace eventually revolt against the government-sanctioned barbarism of Matthew Hopkins, Whitehead, the Englishman and metropolitan ambassador, triumphs. If one of the aims of this current volume is to explore the evolution of folk horror between its emergence in the 1970s and the present day, then this film suggests one quality of twenty-first-century folk horror is a cynical postcolonial consciousness.

Whitehead's incorporation of other selves, other "tribal" affiliations, signifies in another way, too: as ideological fragmentation. That is, out of that field, no ideological stance emerges above any other. Released in 2013, *A Field in England* came out the same year David Cameron promised a referendum on EU membership should the Conservative Party win the 2015 general election (they did; there was one; and Cameron skulked off into his own field). In some respects, the film anticipates the fraught public dialogue—divided along all possible conceivable lines of nationality, class, politics—that has characterized the "Brexit" debates since 2015. Numerous cultural commentators have already sought to emphasize the connection between the folk horror revival and the grimy liturgy of the referendum discourse (Smith 2016; Newton 2017). Folk horror returns to one "culture war" at a time when another was looming into view.

In a more pointed way, however, it reflects the political climate that precedes—and shares a burden of responsibility for—this fractious discourse and the vehement and ideologically-laden entrenchment of political differences. In 2013, the UK was in the midst of a coalition government formed by the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats. The coalition was the culmination of a period in which the major political parties "converged ideologically" and became "dominated by identity liberal politicians," to which voters responded with "growing dissatisfaction and disinterest" and "a steady decline in partisan attachments" (Sobolewska & Ford 2020, 9). In contrast to the 1970s' vision of the Civil Wars' potential for valuable radical political upheaval, *A Field in England* reflects its era's disenchantment with a political landscape in which parties sought to find a workable, but ultimately murky and unfulfilling, middle ground. The film's final shot implicates Whitehead in a kind of living death: he strides across the field, in the garb of power and

authority, attributes he has assumed from his defeated enemies and torn from the ground itself, only to cross back into the field to meet the ghosts of Jacob and Friend. This spectral sovereignty is going nowhere.

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NOTES

1. I owe a debt of gratitude to Imogen Peck for her generous discussions of the history of the Civil Wars during the drafting of this chapter.

2. For further discussion of war and the gothic and horror in recent scholarship, see Wasson (2010), Bulfin (2018), Poole (2018), and Smith (2022).

3. See Nigel Kneale's *The Road* (1963) and *Quatermass and the Pit* (1967), Alan Clarke's *Penda's Fen* (1974), and Alan Garner's *Red Shift* (1973).

4. For further discussion of this quality of Hurley's novel, see Packham (2019).

5. The term "unholy trinity" refers to *Witchfinder General*, *The Blood on Satan's Claw*, and *The Wicker Man*, and finds its fullest exploration in Scovall (2017).

6. Recent novels to explore Civil War–era East Anglia and the witchhunts include Beth Underdown's *The Witchfinder's Sister* (2017), A. K. Blakemore's *The Manningtree Witches* (2021), and Rosie Andrews' *The Leviathan* (2022).

Chapter 4

Live Horror Theater, Nostalgia, and Folklore

David Norris

This chapter addresses folk horror in live performance and the distinct qualities that the shared space between the story and the audience add to the dynamics of folk horror. I argue that central to the manifestation of live folk horror is the performance's relationship with affect, specifically how the blend of fear and nostalgia is manipulated within the performance. Fear is commonly associated with the horror genre, while the response of nostalgia is the primary form of affect associated with senses of belonging and cultural identity. This paper advances the claim that live folk horror, more so than its counterparts in other media, makes an inherent statement about the nature of cultural belonging and identity. As a consequence, live folk horror is either actively or passively political, making a statement about how communities are defined and how their stories from the past are told.

Live horror is most frequently staged and encountered seasonally. The most common period of the year in which horror is performed is Halloween (Hoedt 2009). This increasingly includes celebratory events that take place at rural locations; for instance, *Tully's Shocktoberfest* and *Farmageddon,* two of the most popular horror events in south and north England, respectively, both take place on farms. Commentators have also observed an established tie between British Christmas and the ghost story (Johnston 2015). Both Halloween and Christmas have strong traditional ties in the British calendar relating to seasonality. Christmas is a Christian celebration occurring around the Winter Solstice, and Halloween aligns All Souls with the pagan Samhain. These events are simultaneously Christian and rooted in rural and pagan traditions with the implication of a natural progression and a symbiosis a part

of some cultural commentary from at least the beginning of the twentieth century (Miles 1913).

Many of the character types that recur throughout horror and commonly appear in live horror performance—the werewolf, zombie, vampire, witch, scarecrow—are associated with cultural folklore (Trubshaw 2002). In other cases, horror performances employ the "folkloresque." The folkloresque is a term used by Michael Dylan Foster to describe work that is intended to feel like a piece of folklore but is instead "popular culture's own (emic) perception and performance of folklore . . . consciously cobbled together from a range of folkloric elements, often mixed with newly created elements, to appear as if it emerged organically" (Foster and Tolbert 2016, 5). The predominance of popular folkloric tropes, mean that horror is a particularly fertile genre in which the folkloresque may be merged.

Live horror events and performances, therefore, often incorporate elements of folklore and heritage. They take place at seasonally relevant moments in the calendar—something often reserved for culturally distinct performance formats. In the UK these performance formats would include traditional pantomime, Winter Wonderlands and Santa's Grottos. Seasonal performances such as pantomime come with their own culturally coded expectations and mutually understood rituals, passed down from generation to generation, just as they exist in wider culture (Taylor 2007). Horror events fit into these dynamics also. All of these seasonal events involve the curation and communal experience of a shared space, and this differentiates live experiential formats from their screen and literary equivalents. The co-presence of the audience and performers sharing a space creates an inherently statement-based and political dynamic based on the topology of the space and how it is related to by those present (Fishcer-Lichte and Wihstutz 2013, 3). For a piece of folk performance there is an opportunity to not just highlight the landscape, but to feel it as a shared communal space that belongs to both storytellers and attendants as a community. The geography of the space, the relationship of the storytellers to that geography and the relationship of the community/audience to that geography becomes a core part of the performance. Unlike in screen and literary productions, this means that there can be an inherent spiritual/totemic attachment to that shared space: a quasi-community is naturally in assembly: an in-group that has gathered to share in the folklore.

This paper will propose a definition for folk horror performance, which appropriates Scovell (2017). The definition for this is "a performance which is occupied with the folklore and superstitions of a shared people and landscape, to which the audience is implicated; and which offers in its transmission affective sensations that combine fear or fear-aligned sensations with a felt sense of cultural authenticity." In most cases it is likely that these

performances will, to some degree, draw upon traditional heritage performance forms.

The presence of a shared geographic space in a folkloric work would indicate the audience are implicitly led into strong sensations of cultural identity and sense of place. Zygmunt Bauman observes that nostalgia is a complex emotion that allows for an "affectionate relationship with an 'elsewhere,'" (2017, 3) and the live performance environment allows for that "elsewhere" to be artificially constructed around the audience and experienced as themselves, rather than observed in screen or book or experienced only via identification with a character. This relationship with the "elsewheres" of the folkloric and nostalgic space may become manifest in one of two ways based on the awareness and intentions of the artist. First, the work may seek to confirm the senses of nostalgia and cultural-identity that are instigated by the folklore, in a dynamic I will refer to as nostalgia-affirming. Alternatively, the work may be nostalgia-challenging in that it creates a distance or framing to the nostalgic affect, with the audience invited to question their own tendencies toward experiencing bodily responses to cultural and folkloric provocations. This is true of all folkloric performance, however distinct to folk horror performance is a different and notably strong piece of affect, that of fear, which will have already been instigated by the horror component. Thus, the performance is already inherently situated in the bodies of the audience, who have been invited to be physically open and exposed to affective responses by that dynamic.

To demonstrate folk horror performance with respect to nostalgia and the community, I will introduce two case studies: *Soulstice: A Twisted Tale of Two Seasons* (hereafter Soulstice) and *Story Beast: This Is Bardcore* (hereafter *Bardcore*). *Soulstice* was produced by AtmosFEAR! Scare Entertainment and was written and directed by Jason Karl. The version that will be discussed in this chapter is the one in which the author performed, which was presented at Smithills Hall, Bolton in December 2014. *Bardcore* was written and performed by John Henry Falle and was attended by the author at Udderbelly during the 2018 Edinburgh Festival.

These two performances have a significant amount in common; They both fit into the category of folk horror performance that I set above; they both invite the audience into a sense of affect within their performances of both fear and nostalgia; and both employ a distinct folkloric blend of relative historic accuracy. This blend includes some objectively truthful historic accuracy, including some historic facts, evidence-based cultural references and artefacts from the past and legitimate folkloric performance. The blend also includes some contestable interpretations of historic performance and stretched artistic license; finally, they include some outright fictive elements intended to appear folkloric—the folkloresque—but which are not.

Both performances directly appeal to British heritage, make fundamental statements about British heritage, explore matters of their definition of "Britishness," and employ heritage performance forms to do so.

I argue that the directions of these two performances demonstrate two diametrically opposed formats of folk horror. The rationales of the works are oppositional due to the way they approach their corporeal assaults with horror-based and nostalgic affect. *Soulstice* is affirmative in its presentation of nostalgia, horror, tradition, heritage, and community while *Bardcore* is cynical. They also curate different degrees of social cohesion within the audience, splintering the boundaries of audience in different locations: one around the audience, one within. By the management of these dynamics the two pieces communicate functionally different relationships to the nation and provide oppositional respective relationships of the creative artists to twenty-first-century Britain.

FOLK HORROR

Sigurdssen (2008, 27) considers live performance and storytelling to be a fundamental element of culture, one that draws on the oral heritage of the folk tale. He considers the "fluid and constantly changing" entity that exists partially in the moment, in the relationship between teller and listener and which cannot exist as a fully fixed vision that traps a piece of folk text and finally pins it down to "the way things ought to be." Storytelling and folklore are rooted in this oral tradition, sharing a degree of this fluidity and lack of fixedness. There can be no definitive version of this story that passes directly and with some objective truthfulness from one teller to the next, one generation to the next, backward and forward through time. This is the sense and continuity that oral storytelling contrives in its listeners, but under Sigurdssen's argument can never exist as an absolute truth.

Sigurdssen's argument features two relevant aspects: the first is the fluidity and constantly changing aspect of folklore and heritage. The second is the inherent notion that, captured in the folk tale, is an intimate relationship between the teller and the listener(s) that comments, or takes a position, on how things "ought to be." Presumably, given the relationship of folklore to the land, the way things "ought to be" are those that occur in that location. In the instance of a book or film this location may be anywhere that is the subject of the narrative, however in the instance of performance, the location becomes that which is shared between the teller and the listener(s). Indeed, the teller and the listener(s) become the community about which the folklore becomes subject, making those present subjects themselves of the folklore. In the moment of storytelling the location is shared between teller and listener

and at that moment the boundaries are established surrounding the community to which the folklore is relevant. Boundaries can be placed to embrace the entire group, implying that the audience and teller make up a shared community. Alternatively, boundaries can be split among the audience to imply a shared cultural in-group, who are of the landscape and are implicated in the folklore, and the out-group(s), who do not share in the folklore. Therefore, they do not partake in the landscape and are not part of the community.

Oral tradition creates both the stories and the means/rituals in which those stories are told generating "intangible heritage." Intangible heritage is the term used by UNESCO to refer to cultural value (2019). The inability of the oral tradition to remain fixed makes intangibility a definitive property of oral storytelling and, therefore, folkloric performance. The fragmentary nature of the oral folk tale and the relationship between teller and listener will be perennially negotiated in the invisible space between them. This negotiated space provides the shared sense of whatever, at that moment, becomes defined as "the community" and "its culture." Tradition is predicated on the idea that these momentary senses of community and culture can be replicated in the future, and have been passed down, creating shared moments. This tradition allows the culture and community to spiritually connect between generations in a way that feels real/authentic.

Bauman acknowledges, "there is no single idea more central to conceptions of folklore than tradition" (Bauman 2017, 30). He defines tradition as "both the process of transmission of an isolable cultural element through time and also the elements themselves that are transmitted in the process." On one hand, this definition of Bauman's follows a more accepting, positive view of the ability to isolate cultural attributes from the past and replicate them in the future than does Sigurdssen. But this ignores the nuance that Bauman introduces when using the term "the process of transmission."

In cinematic and literary form, the process of transmission is relatively fixed. Nothing will be shaped or changed between the curation of the element and its reception by the spectator. It will still be subject to the nuances of reception in the spectator and the environmental and cultural context in which they consume it, however there is no change in the artefact itself. What the consumer consumes is the text of the artefact that came from the past, providing at least a significant amount of legitimacy. However, in live performance this transmission requires more sequences. The coming-together of a community into a shared space; the rituals this coming-together involves; the acknowledgement of the shared landscape, and then the oral storytelling in whichever form it may take. Only from then onward come the various forms of reception that are partially common to those of film and literature. Similarly to the arrival, the end of the performance also comes with a need

to affectively conclude the business of the shared community and ritual(s) associated with departure.

In Daniel Schultze's *Authenticity in Contemporary Performance* (2017), he highlights both the contestability of the idea of authenticity and its perceived high value in modern popular reception. The past is a paradigm that can be presented as rooted in objective truth. History is sometimes portrayed in public sentiment as a fact-based subject. This positions the past ideally as a means of communicating supposed authenticity. In looking at the transmission phase of the Bauman model, it seems as though tradition is the means by which "transmission" of isolable cultural elements being brought from the past indicate that the purpose of "tradition" and, in the case of performance, "tradition"-al performance formats, is to give the impression of elusive authenticity. This authenticity, Schulze claims, is central to modern performance reception. It is also what metamodern theorists Vermeulen and Van Den Akker have centralized as part of the post-postmodern experience in which they argue that the contemporary condition rests on creating the sensation of a kind of sentimental authenticity, a romanticized idyll and the modern sensibility to seek a, "deliberate being out of time, an intentional being out of place, and the pretense that that desired atemporality and displacement are actually possible even though they are not" (2010, 12). Folklore and especially the space constructed in live folk performance is an exceptionally fertile space for such sensations. By combining Bauman and Sigurdssen's definitions, we can see a model whereby tradition and traditional performance formats will often be experienced by the spectators as continuous and authentic despite such a thing being impossible. No cultural element from the past can ever be fully replicated. Time passing makes that impossible, but conditions can be created to induce an optimum number of consumers to experience such traditional events as supposedly authentic.

Horror, especially with regards to the representations of the supernatural, implicitly promises the idea that the past can be replicated in the present. The supernatural, in most representations, indicates *things that go on after they have ended.* However, there are few things that provide a greater sense of continuity than physical landscape. Compared to the other elements of fluidity, it is easiest to see the landscape as being, at least within human experience, permanent and fixed. It is perhaps this reason why folklore emphasizes traits of the landscape to such an extent. References to the land help make customs and folklore appear inherently "natural" and "authentic." That this authenticity of the landscape "going on" can be slipped into stories alongside other forms of sensed "going on" provides a possible explanation as to why folklore and horror sit so well together—horror providing parallels of continuity, and revival after ending, to stories of the land; emphases on the land provide seemingly robust credibility to the supernatural narrative elements.

In his discussion of folk drama, Steve Tillis (1999) argues that rather than considering folklore on stage as a piece of history that has "more or less died out . . . a part of the appeal of heritage theater, or at least theater that appeals to a heritage nature is that it does indeed appeal to something that is perceived as having ended, something that has been lost never to truly be refound even if this is strictly inaccurate" (Tillis 1999, 13). Tillis implies that there is a sense of conclusion inherent to the history of a folk drama, and thus any attempt to stage it in the modern day represents an ongoing form of "revival" regardless of similar performances. It provides a conflict, the impression that there are forces of modernity that represent obstacles to the continuation of tradition, possibly even the same forces that were responsible for the first "conclusion."

NOSTALGIA: AN AFFECTIVE STIMULANT

Both Reyes (2017) and Wilson (2018) have emphasized the affective nature of horror spectatorship and the degree to which the responses associated with the genre: fear (Renda 2019), the uncanny response (Wiseman and Pena 2021), disgust Brinkema (2014), and shock are all corporeal responses, experienced first in the body and subsequently interpreted cognitively. This two-phase process that attacks the body subconsciously and then becomes consciously interpreted is augmented in the live environment in which the body is physically present. Live horror becomes even more body and location-focused when compared to literary and screen horror. Once again, the shared space and communal presence emphasizes the location and the shared attachment to that location.

Affect is a shared attribute of both horror and nostalgia. Jarratt and Gammon (2016, 42) highlight the affective nature of the nostalgia response, and Sather-Wagstaff has noted the degree to which affect as a response has the "potential to elicit embodied, physiological responses with very powerful effects" (2016, 12) and can be powerful enough for both the construction of memory and the access of embodied memories.

Nostalgia generates a sense of social cohesion and identity. These traits, as part of the nostalgic emotion, produce strongly positive sensations in the consumer/spectator. Jarratt and Gammon found that "Nostalgia increases current levels of positive affect, self-esteem and social connectedness—a sense of acceptance, inclusion, belonging" (2016, 43), indicating that it is an extremely desirable sensation that can have lasting impact on self-actualization and sense of community. To set this very positive cathartic response against its near opposite—that of fear and the uncanny and the alienation and isolation these sensations bring—is exceptionally powerful.

It is extremely satisfying to appeal to nostalgia—for politicians, journalists, and commentators generating a sense of lost past provides very easy wins with a general public that live in an era of affect and ongoing suspicion of "fake news" and media—a fetishization of the real (Barekat 2018). What "feels real" is as or more important than objectivity. This has veered into sociological scholarship as a competition for "realness" with paradigms such as Joe Kennedy's "authentocracy," which argues that "we must now fall back on some notion of tradition" via a "spurious concern for 'real people'" (2018). This can be observed in performance as well, as manifest by the *Soulstice* performance I will explore. To condition nostalgia and to both point out that continuation is not really possible, that folklore is constructed and not enduring, and that the past cannot be replicated in the present may be more accurate but represents a much harder argument, that feels dissonant, and requires a level of distancing from the affective catharsis of nostalgia. This will be manifest in the *This Is Bardcore* performance. When producing live folk horror, it is impossible to remain neutral in one's presentation on nostalgia and thus on the commentary the piece makes about heritage, tradition and the relationship between community and individual identity.

TWO CASE STUDIES

Soulstice was a site-adaptable piece of theater inspired by mumming plays.[1] Mumming plays are one of many heritage forms of British performance and are, as with the styles named above, seasonal in nature being performed primarily at midsummer, Christmas and Easter. Mumming has multiple formats (Hannant 2011; 15, 130, 151) varying across Britain and has sundry regional names such as "guising" and "pace-egging" (Brody 1970, 3). The plays feature folkloric characters such as Robin Hood and Father Christmas and have been argued to sometimes deliberately incorporate aspects of paganism. The variation among mumming plays leads to a difficulty in developing a precise definition. However, in Brody's seminal text, *The English Mummers and Their Plays,* he argues that two elements remain common to all mumming plays in that "we can safely say all the hundreds of texts and fragments collected so far have in common, They are all seasonal and they all contain a death and resurrection somewhere in the course of their action" (Brody 1970, 3). Death and resurrection make for a notable concoction, since they are common themes of both the spiritual traditions that have marked Britishness as indicated above, namely Christianity and paganism.

One form described by Brody is the hero-combat mumming play, in which a heroic figure—often St. George or a white knight—is challenged to combat by an antagonistic figure—often a black or "Turkish" knight. The two

play out their combat and one of the pair falls slain only to be revived by a third-party doctor (Brody 1970, 5). The revival can be seen as a parallel of the Christ resurrection mythology, but some scholars such as Brody claim these can be traced to paganism and contain pagan symbolism. *Soulstice* takes these traces and symbols and enhances them so that the notional pagan origins of mumming are fully affirmed. Karl, the producer of the play, does this not just by more prominently featuring pagan symbolism, but by making the central conflict directly reference pagan mythology yet maintaining the British landscape focus and the use of characters from seasonal, Christian and British historical folklore. The overarching narrative of *Sousltice* is a variant of the story of the holly king and the oak king, written about extensively by Robert Graves (*The White Goddess* 1978) and John Williamson (1986), that has been adopted by various contemporary neopagan and wiccan traditions as symbolizing the cyclical nature of life and the seasons.

In *Soulstice,* audiences are subject to uncanny music and darkness before being engaged by Beelzebub, the Christian devil, who functions as the mumming narrator, or "guiser" in this story. His first line to the audience is,

> In Times Long Gone and Christmas Past
> The Mummers' Magic Spell Was Cast

These lines demonstrate several dynamics already addressed. First, there is the connection to the past and sense of something that has been complete, or in this case, "long gone." Second, through the direct appeal to seasonality, the audience is being presented with a Christianity-evoking figure referring to a Christian seasonal festival, yet simultaneously is pointing to the idea of "magic" in a way seemingly distanced from the Christian.

The principal characters are Dame Seasons, Robin Goodfellow, and Jack Frost. Robin and Jack are folkloresque, pop culture–savvy alternatives to the oak and holly kings of the usual narrative. Dame Seasons' name and function is an unambiguous reference to "Mother Earth," and her characterization (larger than life, confident, and flirtatious) evokes that of a pantomime dame—a British seasonal tradition with which the audience is likely to be more familiar than mumming (Taylor 2007). Robin is the protagonist of the hero combat. He is the son of Dame Seasons and reigns over a kingdom of greenery and bounty. Robin Goodfellow is a name most likely to be familiar to audiences as the character Puck, a sprite, from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The makeup of Robin Goodfellow also evokes other British figures of summer: The Green Man, Jack Barleycorn, or Jack-of-the-Green. This Robin Goodfellow, then, creates an amalgam of British-seeming, summer-related folkloric figures into one anthropomorphic character. Various forms of the Green Man are associated with pagan imagery surrounding the

summer months (Hannant 2011, 19). Jack Frost takes the equivalent function of the Turkish knight. Jack Frost is introduced with a dance, a figure of snow and cold. He is Dame Seasons' wayward son and the two fight. Jack Frost replaces the holly king of the common version of this story, perhaps as he is a more familiar character to western audiences as the secular personification of winter. Most audiences would likely know the name and the characterization from "A Christmas Song" by Wells and Tormé from 1945 or from his portrayal in the popular film *Santa Clause 3* (Lembeck 2006) In *Soulstice,* Jack Frost is the victor in the fight between himself and Robin and takes over the land.

Dame Seasons' laments over her slain son are answered by a questionable doctor in plague mask: Doctor Dee. The Doctor brings Robin back to life via ambiguous magic. The drama is concluded by the arrival of Old Father Nick, costumed in his more familiar form of Father Christmas, who is Dame Seasons' lover and the assumed father to both Robin and Jack. He agrees that the two warring figures, the personification of Summer and Winter, should reign for half the year each.

By incorporating a combat play featuring a resurrection narrative, set in rhyme, with the inclusion of figures from British folklore, *Soulstice* can legitimately claim to follow the form of a mumming play. However, the incorporation of pagan mythology in which one cycle of life is destroyed in order to facilitate regeneration is taken much more literally in *Soulstice* than any known version of mumming plays. *Soulstice* is using the narrative form and pop culture sensibilities in order to enact an affirmative piece of pagan mythology that feels legitimate, specifically tied to the land that the audience are in (in this instance both "British" and "Boltonian").

The narrative of the affect in *Soulstice* augments the rationale of the performance. The description of the show above might not appear to be folk horror in the reading owing to a relative lack of a horror component, but the production company AtmosFEAR! Are an outfit who specialize in commercial horror. The affect instigated at the start of the show: a grotesquely adorned Satan emerging from the darkness to the refrain of ethereal music was intended to create an uncanny affective response and the costume, lighting, music, masks, and appeals to a greater magic all have shared origins in horror and employed the grammar of horror. However, the invitations for affect that develop in the progression of *Soulstice's* narrative indicate a marked shift away from horror and toward the affective sensations associated with nostalgia. As Tolia-Kelly has demonstrated, (2016, 213) individuals have differing tendencies toward varied forms of affect and so have varied degrees of affective capacities. Subsequently, affective works will all have heterogenous spectatorship and, subsequently, heterogenous reception that is difficult to control. I propose that the and embodiment generated by the use of techniques of horror theater are

employed in *Soulstice* to exert greater control and garner a more homogenous audience response in the later stages of the play. In other words, the horror elements create a sense of corporeal vulnerability that can be filled with the positive corporeal sensations associated with the nostalgic affect response. The show creates an impression of identity with heritage and the past that is experienced on an affective level (Sather-Wagstaff, 2016, 18). *Soulstice* may aim to generate the positive affective attributes associated with heritage and embodied tendencies of the nostalgic response by first exposing the bodies of the spectators to the forms of affect associated with horror. Instead of fear, however, this embodiment is then subject to the states of belonging, warmth, and vitality (May 2017, 404) associated with nostalgia.

In the case of *Soulstice,* the purpose of this association is to make the show's overtly pagan presentation and argument be palatable to as wide an audience as possible. This is done by making pagan mythology, via the use of the popular and folk theater forms, come across as a sincere and, most importantly, authentic representation of British heritage. It is intended to connect the audience with a felt sense of a "Britain's pagan history" of which they are part of the community and legacy in the present. The use of heritage, site-specific venues also emphasizes this dynamic as the "historical" appeals of the production are sensed as legitimate by the environment of the shared space.

In contrast to this stands *Bardcore*. Falle's presentation is a combination of stand up and variety and is self-described as "folk horror comedy." *Bardcore*'s eponymous Story Beast is described in marketing materials as a "trans-dimensional bard" who travels between different versions of Britain from plane to plane using a portal—a tree. One such tree is the primary piece of set on stage and is adorned with white lights which illuminate to speak and interact with the Beast to comic effect, making direct reference to a human speaking, quite literally, to the land: whilst simultaneously making such an idea seem ludicrous. The show is made up of loosely connected songs, stand up sets, poems, and audience interactive segments. The version attended by the author was in a late-night slot of the Edinburgh Fringe and was positioned by the venue as part of program seemingly expected to have an audience primarily looking for pure entertainment. The feel of the event was informal, with many of those in attendance consuming alcohol.

Some scholars have emphasized a difference between personal and collective nostalgia, with a good summary of the current arguments of nostalgic ontology being provided in Sedikides and Wildschut (2019). The variation of nostalgia between individual, collective and permeable memory is explored in *Bardcore*. When confronted with nostalgia for events and exposures that have been experienced in childhood there can be a corporeal transformation

into those moments of childhood and personal experience (Sedikides et al. 2016) Embedded into the variety of *Bardcore's* many songs and poems there are various references to British paraphernalia from the previous century that audience members may have encountered at fixed moments in time. Some of the references refer to pop or niche culture of the past and will stand out to a small proportion of those in attendance. I will attempt via a numerical device to list each of these "mini-experiences" below.

The *Bardcore* performance was a one-man cabaret, with vignettes pulled together by a loose narrative. Comedic songs performed in *Bardcore* include *I am a Horse (And I'm in Your House)*, sung by the Story Beast wearing a large rubber horse mask [Referent 1: A reference to the various regional horse performance traditions across Britain such as Welsh Mari Lywd and Cornish 'Obby 'Oss Penglaz (Hannant 2010)]; *Jam*, a song about a man covered in strawberry jam being attacked by wasps [Referent 2: The commonly shared British experience of going for a picnic on a rare sunny day and having it ruined by flying creatures]; *Halloween,* a version of the song *Monster Mash* in which the audience are supposedly cursed by performing ritualistic dance moves [Referent 3: The song itself, recorded by Bobby Pickett in 1962 and Referent 4: Being awkwardly asked to dance in a children's party environment]; and *Cone Dog*, about a frustrated dog forced to wear a protective cone following a trip to the vets [Referent 5: Experiencing this event with one's own pet].

Poems and stories from the show include *Bertie the Bus,* a grotesque rendition of a story about an anthropomorphic bus made of human flesh [Referent 6: this is a thinly disguised satire of Wilbert Awbry's *Railway Series*]; *Gruber,* a rendition of the plot of the film *Die Hard* told in rhyming iambic pentameter [Referent 7: the popular move *Die Hard* (McTiernan: 1988) and Referent 8: Shakespearean verse]; and *Little Whingeing* a poem set in the world of *Harry Potter* [Referent 9: The Harry Potter Books and Movies].

Interactive segments include a *Blue Peter* sequence [Referent 10 The long running British children's television series *Blue Peter* (1958–present)] in which the audience are taught how to use various objects such as pasta shapes, glitter, and a cornflake box [Referent 11: School experiences of making these types of art works, typical of primary schools in the 1970s to 1990s; also Referent 12: A more specific reference to the "Tracy Island" construction on *Blue Peter,* a Christmas phenomenon in Britain in 1992]; to construct an archeological dig site [this included Referent 13: Direct calls to the 1971 *Doctor Who* serial *The Daemons* (Season 8, Episodes 21–5), and Referent 14: neolithic findings on British soil of a similar nature, most specifically the Le Houge Bie remains site in Jersey] and a game of audience pass-the-parcel [Referent 15: the experience of playing the game as a child] to determine a

designated "king" who, it is implied, will likely be sacrificed at the end of the performance [Referent 16: *The Wicker Man* (Hardy: 1973)].

The referents above are significantly more heterogenous than those contained within *Soulstice.* Some of the referents are based on "collective" knowledge but will be beyond the knowledge of some audience members; others address popular culture, however audience members experience of and context of consumption of that popular culture will be multifaceted; finally, some referents refer to more general common life experiences that many in the audience will have had but represent different individual past memories. These appeals to personal memories lead to a performance where nostalgia, or at least corporeal attachment to past times, is taking place in the shared space. However, these corporeal abductions are occurring individually, not as a community. Individual journeys and histories are being emphasized, and as such the individual differing relationships of the people collected together in Britain. It is clear here that the ideas and symbols that represent Britain are of differing levels of importance and attachment to different people.

The loosely connected narrative concludes with Story Beast asking the evening's selected monarch, by this time adorned with leaves, a garland, and a branch-staff (*Bardcore's* version of the Green Man image) to come on a journey across dimensions:

> For I know there are many Britains out there among the neverending forking paths of what is and what could be. And among those, I think there must be a Perfect Britain.

Story Beast then deviates into an extended monologue describing this "perfect Britain," a rural idyll in which everything is the ideal version imagined by the spectator:

> In this Perfect Britain everyone is happy! Everyone is healthy! Everyone is loved and respected*!* . . . Everyone that is except . . .

He describes the exception: a carriage containing David Attenborough:

> who sits shackled hobbled within. His mouth stopped with wax lest he narrate the Natural History of even a single sparrow. Everybody knows that only suffering of one so pure as David Attenborough can pay the price for their unending happiness.

The finale of the show presents and ridicules the idea of a "perfect" Britain. This is a direct adaption of Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* (1973) about a utopia maintained by the suffering of a single child. Falle replaces the suffering of an innocent child in Le Guin's original

with that of David Attenborough, presented as a pinnacle of Britishness, a secular British Christ. These different experiences are paralleled by the in-show references to there being an infinite number of Britains across the different realities that Story Beast traverses: which become the infinite Britains of the audience's individual journeys: no one Britain the same and the idea of a perfect Britain presented as monstrous. Falle aligns with Sigurdssen's argument that indeed momentary representations of history are fluid, and impossible to trap. This evokes the sense that there can be no one true perfect Britain; no strictly accurate Britain.

CONCLUSION

Soulstice employs an historical theater form, appeals to two different forms of affect, and manipulates the sense of shared space surrounding its audience, to create a nostalgia-affirming experience. Perhaps describable as "heritage propaganda": it invites the audience to recognize its pagan themes, implicitly tying them to a shared sense of Britishness using the characters of Robin Goodfellow and Father Christmas and the use of a recognizable pantomime style and invites the audience to experience themselves as taking part in a piece of intangible cultural heritage using direct appeals to the body to do so. It uses affect to bypass potential cognitive cynicism, appealing to the audience's likely sense of preexisting relationship to their own landscape and encouraging the sense of shared communality. *Bardcore* contrasts this journey The management of affect in that case being dissonant, jarring, and prone to jerk the individual on their own personal journey, countering any sense of collectivism and affirmation.

Appealing to affect is usually more persuasive than appealing to objectivity (Kim, Ratneshawar, and Thorson 2017) and presenting a nostalgic view of the past as an objective tradition is a highly effective means of appealing to the former while appearing to appeal to the latter. The increasing predominance of folkloric texts in contemporary pop culture indicates increased awareness of folklore as valuable and viable in a neoliberal environment. (Foster and Tolbert 2016) As we witness our news becoming taken over with political figures increasingly keen to generate collective senses of a shared objective nationhood and emotionally appealing to the nostalgia for a part-true, part-fictive, often folkloresque history, the management of affect within folkloric and horror artworks—and especially in those that combine the two—will likely provide a fascinating window into artists' representation of these national sentiments.

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NOTE

1. Scripts for both *Soulstice: A Twisted Tale of Two Seasons* and *Story Beast: This is Bardcore* were kindly provided and are replicated with permission from the artists.

Chapter 5

Frayed Strands Entwined

Considering Twenty-First-Century Folk Horror

James Rose

To try and undertake a survey of twenty-first century folk horror is a significant and difficult undertaking. The scale of works produced in this genre across various media platforms has become increasingly vast, even when considering works within the parameters of a strict definition. As a result, a coherent and unified academic survey warrants a book-length study as opposed to a chapter in an edited collection. But, despite the scale of recent folk horror production, this chapter seeks to provide a consideration of the progressively amorphous body of work identified as "folk horror" produced during the early twenty-first century in order to identify common strands and directions the genre has so far taken.

The key aim of this chapter then is to reflect upon selected works within twenty-first-century folk horror in an effort to identify if there are any dominate or recurrent themes and aspects that could constitute a potential shift in direction for the genre. This is not to suggest that folk horror *has* made a clear directional change as result of its recent popularity and the sudden influx of productions that are deemed "folk horror"; it is more a considered application of Stephen Neale's approach to genre: in his seminal book *Genre* (1980), Neale identifies a number of aspects that help to formulate and therefore give structure to any genre. A key element of this is the dual need of the audience: they want to experience *something* new each time they engage with a production within a certain a genre but, in sharp contrast to this, they also desire to see what they have already seen before within this genre. Neale defines this audience need as "difference in repetition" (1980, 50). Herein then lies

a potential area of growth or shift in folk horror: by the incremental addition of *difference*, folk horror can potentially evolve because that which was once *different* is now itself repeated in subsequent productions and so not only becomes an implicit part of the genre framework but also shifts the direction of the genre itself. It is anticipated that by looking across a range of productions from an equally broad range of media, that both the *difference* and the *repetition* can be observed and, from there, the identification of dominate or recurrent themes.

In order to do this, folk horror, as a genre needs to be defined. Some of the key work undertaken in this area has been by Adam Scovell in his book *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange* (2017). In the opening chapters, Scovell identifies that to endeavor to construct parameters for folk horror is "conceivably impossible" (5) and that perhaps it "is best seen, not simply as a set of criteria to be read with hindsight into all sorts of media, but as a way of opening up discussions on subtly interconnected work and how we interact with such work" (6). To begin this discussion, Scovell works to establish a set of ideas which folk horror channels: the use of folklore and the arcane to stimulate the eerie, the uncanny or the horrific; the conflict between arcania and modernity; a work that seeks to create its own folklore through the application of popular conscious memory (7). Scovell develops these ideas further into what he terms the folk horror chain, a structure which he identifies as "a template with which a basic form of narrative Folk Horror can manifest" (8). This chain is comprised of three interlinked elements, the most important of which is the "landscape" for it stimulates the subsequent links—the "isolation" such landscapes induce upon the characters resulting in a skewed belief systems and equally skewered morality which, in turn, generates the final link, that of the "happening" or "summoning" (18). This final link is often made manifest through ritualistic sacrifice and, as Scovell states, brings the folk horror narrative to a close with death in its slowest, most primal, and most ritualistic of ways (18).

To return to Neale, Scovell's text effectively defines the parameters of repetition across folk horror productions for the audience and this is easily demonstratable as numerous folk horror texts, regardless of platform, conform to not only Scovell's chain but also his ideas that surround the genre. To apply this defining framework to film has already been undertaken by Scovell himself in his book but, looking across a range of comics and novels, Scovell's ideas and chain are also in place. T. C. Eglington and Simon Davis comic *Thistlebone* (2019) is a prime example of a text where folklore has been created to stimulate the eerie as the power and influence of the titular ancient deity is felt by the contemporary characters of the story and so neatly places the arcane against the modern. Alongside the flashbacks experienced by *Thistlebone's* protagonist and sacrifice survivor, Avril, there are also the

rumors that surround the woodland location that dominates the narrative, the mutilated wild birds arranged into a cryptic glyph, the discovery of an altar of bones, skulls, earth, and moss, all steadily generating the atmosphere of unease that permeates the narrative. Landscape is important in this narrative too, with its first panels depicting a gentle song and dance that celebrates the bounty of the British pastoral only for the song to take a dark turn when the lyrics state, "For what we've taken we now give back to Old Thistlebone of the Oak" (2019, 1). What is being given back is, of course, Scovell's final link in the chain, the human sacrifice. A similar quality dominates Scott Snyder's and Jock's graphic novel *Wytches* (2017), where the landscape is one that exists of the periphery of the modern and remains firmly entrenched in its own folklore. Here, the hollow trees are home to the Wytches who, if pledged a human sacrifice, will make true any request. Like *Thistlebone*, *Wytches* has its own internal folklore that allows Scovell's chain to be put into place; the isolating landscape, the skewered belief system that has sustained itself into the Present and the pre-requisite sacrifice.

As indicated, Scovell's ideas and chain are also evident in contemporary folk horror Literature. Typifying this is Andrew Michael Hurley's *Starve Acre* (2019): here the isolating landscape takes the form of Starve Arce house which stands alone amongst the Yorkshire Dales. This house is home to the Willoughby family whose young son, Ewan, soon discovers the horror of the landscape in the form of local folklore legend Jack Grey. As the narrative progresses, the eerie and the uncanny occur, most notably in the inexplicable reanimation of a Hare's skeleton. Here what was once dead comes back to life and, with it, comes the specter of Jack Grey and his sacrificial intentions. In contrast, Daisy Johnson's collection of short stories, *Fen* (2016), is a brooding meditation on a specific landscape, the East Anglian fenlands. The narratives that unfold in this space seem to either emerge from, or merge into, it as its internal folklore works its way into the contemporary. A schoolgirl, for example, turns into an eel and is set loose into the streams and ditches of the fenlands by her sister; another girl sneaks a fox into her home where she feeds and looks after it as she believes it to be a reincarnation of her brother; the landscape not only isolates and stimulates the eerie and uncanny but takes a further step from the chain by entering into the modern and affecting it with its ancient ways.

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY FOLK HORROR: A (VERY) BRIEF OVERVIEW

As demonstrated in Scovell's book, folk horror, as a genre, has grown considerably during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, a quality typified

in the closing chapter of *Hours Dreadful and Things Strange,* which provides a focused overview of recent (to 2017) folk horror cinema. But alongside film, numerous television programs, limited series, books, and comics have all emerged that have been explicitly associated with this cinematic renaissance. As stated at the start of this chapter, to provide a detailed survey of just over twenty years of production is a significant task, even with Scovell's chain in place, the multitude of works produced internationally across a range of platforms is too vast a project for just one chapter. Instead, what follows is a brief summary of some of the works to demonstrate the range of folk horror content produced since the start of the twenty-first century.

Unsurprisingly, film has been at the forefront of folk horror production, with a number of key works being produced to both critical and academic acclaim. Amongst these are Robert Eggars' *The Witch* (2015) and *The Lighthouse* (2019), and Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2018) and *Midsommar* (2019). While *The Lighthouse* continued Egger's preoccupation with historic timeframes and the internal conflicts of close-knit communities, Aster's two films are bound by individuals in mourning and, as such, become accounts of grief in terms of its experience and the subsequent processes individuals undertake in order to enable them to cope. While these four films are ostensibly North American productions, global folk horror has also burgeoned with works such as *Pyewacket* (MacDonald: 2017), *November* (Sarnet: 2017), *Hagazussa* (Feigelfeld: 2018), *The Old Ways* (Alender: 2020), *The Other Lamb* (Szumowska: 2020) and *Lamb* (Jóhannsson: 2021) amongst others. Perhaps as a sign of both the current growth and popularity of folk horror cinema, contemporary streaming services have either funded the production of these film or created a genre category to allocate their existing content within—a quick search on providers such as Shudder and MUBI reveals lists of films they deem to be "folk horror" and, as such, offer a broad and interesting spectrum of film, particularly when considering approaches to genre definition and the work undertaken by Scovell. Of all the streaming services, Netflix has made firm connections with folk horror through the production of at least four genre films: *The Ritual* (Bruckner: 2017), *The Apostle* (Evans: 2018), *In the Tall Grass* (Natali: 2019) and *In the Earth* (Wheatley: 2021) as well as the Limited Series *Equinox* (Balle and Matthiesen: 2020) and *Midnight Mass* (Flanagan: 2021) which can, despite its use of the vampire, be considered folk horror when Scovell's chain is applied.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the term folk horror is implicitly connected with Britain—as noted by Howard David Ingham in this collection—and, by extension, British Film, the genre continues to flourish in UK film and literature. Most "home-grown" film production has been undertaken by independent filmmakers working with small to medium budgets that is not to the

detriment of the quality of their productions. Of these *Black Death* (Smith: 2010), *The Borderlands* (Goldner: 2013), *The Isle* (by husband-and-wife partnership Matthew and Tori Butler-Hart) (2018), *Gwen* (McGregor: 2018), and Russell Owen's *Shepard* (2021) all stand out as embodying not only Scovell's chain but also those ideas that surround and contextualize folk horror. *The Isle* and *Shepard* both use their respective isolated island settings to great effect, imbuing the landscape with the eerie and the uncanny, presenting a landscape that is both beautiful and hostile, an English pastoral that harbors the bucolic and the horrific. Of particular note in relation to British folk horror film production is writer/director Ben Wheatley. A number of his works—*Kill List* (2011), *Sightseers* (2012), *A Field in England* (2013), and the previously mentioned *In the Earth*—are all not only explicitly folk horror (particularly the urban-set *Kill List*) but have their narratives imbued with a social/political consciousness that critiques the state of Britain at the time of their making.[1]

Just as Wheatley is emerging to become a distinctive voice in contemporary folk horror cinema, so too are two British writers, Adam Nevill and Andrew Michael Hurley. Both have, to date, worked consistently within the genre, each producing three novels that are clearly part of this tradition: Nevill has authored *The Ritual* (2011), *The Reddening* (2019), and *Cunning Folk* (2021), while Hurley has written *The Loney* (2014), *Devil's Day* (2017), and the previously discussed *Starve Acre* (2019). Nevill's *The Ritual*—which was adapted for the Netflix series of the same name mentioned above—is interesting in that the novel steadily and subtly slips from a survival thriller to folk horror as a group of university friends decide to reunite through a hiking trip in the Swedish mountains. The ill-prepared urban males and the differences that have grown between the men quickly manifests and are then amplified when a shortcut is taken due to one of the group being injured. Soon the men are lost, and the tropes of the thriller give way to the emergence of folk horror elements—the incremental discovery of arcane practices through butchered animals, a shack filled with animal skulls as well as hand-crafted ritualistic artifacts, all culminating in the stumbling upon a desecrated church. The men are then steadily attacked, one by one, by an unseen animalistic assailant and dragged into the dense forest only to be later discovered, strung up and disemboweled until only one survives. But he too is soon attacked and, instead of being killed, he is held captive, ready to be sacrificed to an ancient god. Nevill's clean and precise narrative clearly operates upon Scovell's chain, with the writing placing emphasis on the Swedish landscape in order to create and then amplifying the sense of isolation the urban males soon feel as they are dwarfed by the countless trees and lost amongst the seemingly endless limits of the forest. And, just as the dense forest isolates, so too does it shape those who have chosen to live amongst the pines.

Hurley's novels are, like Nevill's, connected not just by genre but also through a specific focus on the landscape. Such is the extent of this that, arguably, the landscape functions as a silent character throughout all three novels. As deemed by Scovell's chain, the landscapes of Hurley's texts are isolating (such as the Loney on the bleak Lancashire coast, or the aforementioned Starve Acre house standing alone amongst the fields of the Yorkshire Dales) and forge the values of those who either inhabit those spaces or, as in *Starve Acre,* come from outside and move into those spaces. In *The Loney* for example, Smith and his mute brother, Hanny, follow a church group on their pilgrimage to a small area of Lancashire coast where they encounter the locals who, in some way, have had their morals and values shaped by their exposure to the sea and the many myths it has generated. This contrasts to *Starve Acre,* where the land is so tainted by past violence and myth, that it rises to the surface and influences the present, leading to injury, animal mutilation and eventually death. Collectively, Hurley's three novels suggest that the landscape of England is still lost to its past and that the arcane myths that haunted those landscape still do, reaching out and influencing those that are susceptible.

Alongside Nevill and Hurley, further distinctive voices in British folk horror literature have emerged with writers such as Sarah Moss with *Ghost Wall* (2018), Lucie McKnight Hardy with *Water Shall Refuse Them* (2019), Michelle Paver with *Wakenhyrst* (2019), *Witch Bottle* by Tom Fletcher (2020), and Francine Toon with *Pine* (2020) as well as short story collections from Daisy Johnson's *Fen* (2016), Tom Cox's *Help the Witch* (2018), and Zoe Gilbert's *Folk* (2018). Folk horror anthologies have also emerged with *The Fiends in the Furrows* (edited by Neal and Scott, 2018), *A Walk in a Darker Wood* (edited by Pesice, Walker, and White, 2020), *The Mammoth Book of Folk Horror* (edited by Jones, 2021), and *Damnable Tales: A Folk Horror Anthology* (selected by Wells, 2021) all offering diverse collections that include works from established authors in the field such as M. R. James, Shirley Jackson, and Robert Aickman, as well as original stories from new and emerging writers.

Alongside this not inconsiderable amount of folk horror fiction so too has a number of nonfiction work also emerged: *A Treasury of British Folklore: Maypoles, Mandrakes and Mistletoe* by Dee Dee Chainey (2018), *Ghostland: In Search of a Haunted Country* by Edward Parnell (2019), *The Weird Old Albion* by Justin Hopper (2019), *The English Heretic Collection: Ritual Histories, Magickal Geography* by Andy Sharp (2020) and the folded map *Woodlands Dark and Day Bewitched: A Topographical Guide to Folk Horror* by Kier-La Janisse (2021) all draw folk horror ever closer to the borders of psychogeography and hauntology as they offer accounts of folklore both

historic and contemporary and how it impacts and encroaches upon current society.

Alongside this, folk horror has also found its place in the field of comics. Numerous serialised narratives and graphic novels have been published internationally including the previously mentioned *Thistlebone* (Eglington and Davis, 2019) and *Wytches* (Snyder and Jock, 2014), *Harrow County* (Bunn and Cook, 2015), *Wendigo Woods* (Oliveira and Ivkovic, 2020), *Nicnevin And The Bloody Queen* (Mullane and Jock, 2020), *Hallows Fell* (Burgess and Stanic, 2021), *Two Moons* (Arcudi and Giangiordano, 2021) and *Double Walker* (Conrad and Bailey, 2021). Again, across the range Scovell's chain is in place and bought vividly (and sometimes luridly) to life in the still panels of the comic format. There is also, of course, a range of narratives and while some creatively rework existing folk horror tropes, works such as *Thistlebone* and *Harrow County* seek to create their own mythologies. In *Thistlebone* for example, Eglington—consciously or not—actively seeks to embody Scovell's ideas in that he has created his own folklore for the narrative and placed its antiquated origins in contrast to modernity, as embodied by both protagonists Avril and Seema, as well as the relatively contemporary geographical location of the Thistlebone Cult. With these ideas in operation, Eglington's Thistlebone Lore and its juxtaposition against the modern naturally stimulates the eerie, the uncanny and, in the stark moments of graphic violence that occurs in both the first series and its sequel. In contrast, the first series of *Two Moons* is set during the American Civil War and joins a young Pawnee man, Virgil Morris, as he slowly discovers his shamanic origins and who he really is as he confronts not only the horrors of war but also the monstrous manifestations from his culture's heritage. While ostensibly a folk horror narrative, *Two Moons* is as equally concerned with Virgil's position as an assimilated American and the struggle to find an identity and a place between what he has become—a foster child, a Christian, and now a Union solider—and what his birth origins are. As he encounters explicit and dreadful human violence, hallucinatory visions from his ancestors and very real monsters, Virgil begins the steady journey toward an understanding and embracement of his heritage to conclude the narrative both bloodied and scarred but also as Two Moons as he reclaims his identity and heritage through a brutal battle with ancient deities.

DIFFERENCE IN REPETITION

Looking across the range of narratives outlined in the previous overview, there is, it seems in these contemporary works, less a leaning on existing and established folk horror myths, lore and literature and more a willingness to

create original and unique works: when considering contemporary productions across the spectrum of literature and media with texts such as *A Field in England, Midsommar, Starve Arce* and *Thistlebone*, it can be seen that the heritage the genre has been respected but its core elements have been creatively reworked. Herein lies one aspect of Neale's difference in repetition, with perhaps the clearest example of this being *Thistlebone* where writer Eglington begins his narrative where many folk horror productions end, with the sacrifice and so asks what happens if the climatic sacrifice of folk horror (and, by implication, Scovell's chain) does not happen? What stories can be told if the sacrifice escapes, and what are the ramifications of the escape for that person? For *Thistlebone*, the trauma of the cult, the ceremonies and sacrifice linger and reverberate into the present, creating a twilight world where all is real and seemingly unreal, where stories are told as truth but dissolve into fragments of fiction, all resulting into an uneasy, shifting ground where ambiguity only adds to the eerie and the uncanny of the text.

This sense of originality extends into *how* folk horror is used by creatives. For many it functions beyond is terrifying capabilities and extends into metaphor: as outlined earlier, *Two Moons* charts the journey of discovery of the spiritual self and, by doing so, reconnecting and embracing with one's cultural heritage. *The Old Ways* works in a similar manner where protagonist Cristina's (Brigitte Kali Canales) substance abuse is explored and exorcised along with the demon within her. Here, the title takes on a dual meaning where *the Old Ways* are the witchcraft practices Cristina must experience (and, just like Virgil, ultimately embrace) if she is to be exorcised, but it also refers to Cristina actively losing her *old ways* of drug use. The "old ways," it seems in contemporary folk horror, continue to linger, to persist and shift from one generation to the next. It is also worth noting that, in a further instance of difference in repetition, the narratives of *Two Moons* and *The Old Ways* suggest the ancient ways still hold sway but not in the ritualistic, dangerous, and violent manner of many folk horror productions. Instead, these products suggest that the old ways can be synthesized into the contemporary of their respective timeframes for both have shamanistic figures from the past returning to the young ancestral people of the present and setting them off on a journey of (self) discovery through the language of ritual experience.

Further metaphoric potential of folk horror lies in the experience and, in some cases, the trauma of grief. Looking across the range of texts identified and discussed in this chapter's brief overview, a good number explore and discuss this aspect, suggesting a clear direction the genre has taken in exploring this issue: the narrative of Aster's *Midsommar* is solely driven by grief as protagonist Danni seeks emotional support from her partner, Christian, following the death of her sister and parents, but instead she finds it in the strange rituals and celebrations of the Haga; *Starve Acre* focusses on the

two very different coping mechanisms a mother and father privately put into action for themselves after the death of their five-year-old son, while in *Shepard*, having been rejected by his mother following the death of his young and pregnant wife, Eric (Tom Hughes) retreats into his grief by taking on employment as a lone Shepard on an equally lone Scottish island. In contrast, the film adaptation of Nevill's *The Ritual* reworked the rationale for the hiking trip: in the novel the four men undertake the trip to reconnect as a group of friends while, in the film, the hike was to be undertaken by five friends, but one is murdered soon after they agree on undertaking the trip and so the journey functions in honor and memory of their lost friend.

Within each of the aforementioned characters, grief takes a strangle hold and, in many ways, controls the function of the folk horror chain. Richard in *Starve Acre* for example tries to bury his grief in work which, ironically, involves him digging deep into the earth in order to discover that which he seeks to find—Old Justice, the Stythwaite oak tree at Starve Acre. His long hours and days spent digging into the mud of the field are rewarded twice over, for not only does he discover what he believes to be the ancient roots of this tree but also the eerie buried remains of a hare. By undertaking such long hours and metaphorically *burying* himself in this work, Richard openly acknowledges to himself that the painful memory of his son "never bothered him out here in the field" (Hurley 2019, 15). To be alone, to dig into the earth, to attempt to discover something acts as a process of healing for Richard, the field becoming a space in which emotions can be managed and reconciled. And as winter steadily begins to loosen its frozen grip on the land of Starve Acre, so to it seems that Richard can come to positive terms with his loss.

This response operates in tandem with his wife Juliette's understanding of her own grief. The trigger for her own emotional shift lies not in coming to terms with the senselessness of what has happened to them, but as a result of the experiences she encounters as part of a séance at the family home. Unable to verbally express what she saw during this experience but convinced that she now has a new understanding of death, she clears her deceased son's bedroom of bedding, clothing, and toys, concluding with the removal of the wooden letters that spell out his name on the door, each letter carefully prised off with a screwdriver. In this moment of Juliette's transition, Richard allows himself to imagine the possibility of there being other children in their life and ancestral house:

> [He] imagined her pregnant again, all breasts and belly. Carrying a girl this time. The seed of the family proper. Ewan would still be here with them, of course. There would be photographs to show and stories to tell their Linda, Jason, Bobby, and Jo as soon as they were old enough to understand that death had been to Starve Acre and that was the way of things sometimes. (140–41)

Positive progression beyond death, it seems, is possible, but the folk horror elements that linger at the backdrop of this narrative slowly and steadily bring themselves to the fore and Richard's hopes for the future of his family are bought to ruin by the very the creature he unearthed—the hare. Inexplicably, the hare's bones are uncannily reanimated and grow tendon and sinew, muscle and skin, a pelt of soft, warm fur. In both horror and awe, Richard releases the creature back into the fields of Starve Acre, but it soon returns, attaching itself to Juliette, who perceives the reanimated creature to be the spirit of their deceased son. Keeping the hare warm, feeding it, swaddling it, and taking out for a walk in their son's pram are all instances that occur in rapid succession and spiral beyond Richard's control. As the novel reaches its end, Richard is confronted with the full horror of the unity between Juliette and her "child":

> Sitting in the rocking chair, Juliette set it going with her foot and stroked the animal's ears. When it was settled, she undid the belt of her dressing gown, working her shoulder free and cupping her breast, which had grown engorged and milky white. She offered the nipple to the hare and, with a paw resting on her sternum, it latched tight and drank. (241)

In the end, Juliette's grief is not resolved and her concluding fate mirrors that of Danni's in *Midsommar*: both women accept and ultimately embrace the folk horror that their respective narratives offer. Just like Thomasin sheds her clothes and joins the coven in *The Witch*, so do Juliette and Danni; Juliette literally nurses the hare as if it were her child while Danni ambiguously smiles in either pure terror or pure happiness as she watches her boyfriend be sacrificially burned alive.

Reflecting upon folk horror texts across the range of platforms mentioned, it is interesting to note that there is a preoccupation with setting the narrative within a contemporary timeframe: *The Ritual, Starve Acre,* the short stories that comprise *Fen*, *Thistlebone, Kill List, Lamb,* and *Midsommar* are all set in a recognizable and modern timeframe, a quality which contrasts with earlier key works such as *The Witchfinder General* and *Blood on Satan's Claw,* as well as a handful of more contemporary products such as *The Witch, The Isle,* and *Two Moons,* where the story is framed within a specific historic time period. By placing folk horror in the *today,* a very obvious juxtaposition is made evident: the past and the old ways against the present and the modern world. While this may seem obvious, the contrast within the opposition suggests a gothic linage within folk horror.

GOTHIC RESONANCES

In her book, *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic*, Anne Williams (2009) comments that "All these tales [are] about the power of the past (especially the deeds of one's ancestors) to affect the present" (90). In many folk horror narratives, an element from the past is in some way invoked and drawn into the present. As Williams indicates, this manifestation of the past into the present is an indicative element of the gothic, if, indeed, one of its defining factors. In the gothic, the manifesting past often takes the form of a ghost but can also take the form of other variations upon the frightening or horrific. This appearance of the past often brings with it some sort of demand, be that the righting of a wrong or the undoing of a curse. In playing out these behaviors, this element of the past directly unbalances the present and calls into question the protagonist's understanding of their own sense of the world. The appearance of the past in folk horror functions in a similar manner, with the manifestation of the past being focused on antiquated practices which bring forth ancient deities or gods. Upon seeing these practices and beings, the narrative world of the folk horror protagonist is unbalanced and called into question: we see this when Danni, from *Midsommar*, witnesses the community elders sacrifice themselves by stepping off a cliff, and when she deliriously dances around the may pole; this also happens when Avril confronts her past experiences with Thistlebone, the return of the hare and the discovery of the Stythwaite Oak in *Stave Acre* are just some of the moments when the past makes itself evident in contemporary folk horror and, by doing so, takes hold of the protagonist's reality and leads them inexorably to the necessary sacrifice. And, as they do so there is a sense of Scovell's idea of the uncanny, for what is being experienced is both frightening and unfamiliar but, in its own way, strangely familiar, recalling Sigmund Freud's own description of that experience "that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar" (Freud 2003, 124).

Considering the range of folk horror productions produced over the last two decades, a further difference in repetition becomes apparent in that the many of the productions have a clear and sustained preoccupation with presenting its varied ritualistic horrors in broad daylight. The uniqueness of this quality lies in its direct opposition to the horror genre where the traditional trope is one of presenting that which terrifies in the shadows, with countless horror texts positioning their fearful moments in the dwindling light of dusk, in the deep shadows of the wild woods or those cast by flickering candlelight. Such a sustained convention suggests that terrible events only occur in the half-light or the dense dark, that the terrible creatures beyond our imagining only come out to haunt or hunt in the midnight hours. Darkness, therefore,

is not safe, for it can (and does) conceal and disorientate, it can hide, and it can absorb. In contrast, the soft warmth of daylight must function in opposition to this, acting as a safe haven from all that seeks to harm us. Numerous horror narratives support this opposition where the various characters make clear in their dialogue that they only need to make it to daylight in order to survive their current ordeal. Light then brings safety, it pushes back the shadows, and makes what was once dark and ominous now clear and mundane. Yet contemporary folk horror often takes this opposition and reverses it, and, by doing so, openly displays its horrors with a specific clarity. Herein lies the key element to this quality; by presenting its horror in broad daylight, folk horror hides nothing and, instead, seeks to expose everything. As threats reveal themselves or as bodies are assaulted, damaged, or ritually penetrated, all can be seen unhindered, clearly and with detail: the razor edge of knife, the knuckle bone necklace, disfigurements, blood, and torn flesh are all laid bare, crisp and sharp and slick with glossy blood. The horror, the revulsion felt, comes from this very exposure, the almost clinical detail in which daylight *frames* the content.

The most obvious—and perhaps most explicit—example of this "daylight horror" is Aster's *Midsommar,* as it actively seeks to place its characters and the increasingly disturbing events they experience in clear and vivid, if not blinding, daylight. The film begins in a murky darkness, a world in which a daughter not only takes her own life but suffocates those of her parents too. The quiet imagery of these events is smothered in the murk, just as those who have died have asphyxiated from the car fumes. In amongst the shadows and shade, tightly wound gaffer tape can be seen, the sharp edges of crumpled bed sheets, the bodies in rictus. Aster lingers and arguably wallows in all this darkness, an action taken not just to heighten the horror of what has happened but to make vividly clear that protagonist Danni will make, by the narrative's end, a seismic shift from this dark to the dazzling daylight of the Haga.

Like *Midsommar, Shepard* also takes place in broad daylight: all that protagonist Eric experiences is bathed in the soft, flat light of the Scottish Isle or seen through the haze of fine rain. In such light, Eric clearly sees that which is leading him to revelatory confession: the figure cloaked in swirling swathes of black cannot be a hallucination, for they stand before him amongst the pasture nor can the many flayed sheep that are crucified and arranged around his cottage for the light is too bright and too clear. The horror of Eric's isolation and his suppressed guilt are amplified by this light, they are drawn out by it and laid bear with no shadow or pool of darkness to hide within. In contrast, the bloody and graphic conclusion of *Thistlebone: Poison Roots* takes places in broad daylight. Seema, rock and knife in hand, crushes the skull of one of the cultists and slits open the throat of another. The blood and brain matter appears as a thick and sticky red that sprays and leaks across the brilliant

white pages, appearing as deep red cuts in all that brilliant sunlight. Folk horror then suggests that when in the light, protagonists can not only see with clarity but also cannot escape and must, therefore, confront that which they are becoming—Danni's final moments are bathed in the glorious sunshine as she watches the immolation of her boyfriend; Eric cannot suppress his guilt any longer and seeks confession; Seema, maddened by what she experienced, becomes that which she fears the most. In many ways, folk horror has always been daylight horror: returning to two of the holy trinity of the genre, this element is there in the climatic sacrifice of *The Wicker Man,* which takes place in the midafternoon sun, while *Blood on Satan's Claw* opens midmorning, with a farmer ploughing his field to reveal ancient bones, a skull, and a glistening eye. While there is difference, repetition, just like the old ways, lingers and remains.

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NOTE

1. See Scovell's *Hours Dreadful and Things Strange* (pp.174–80), Aaron Jolly's *Kill Lists: The Occult, Paganism and Sacrifice in Cinema as an Analogy for Political Upheaval in the 1970s and the 2010s* (in Folk Horror Revival: Field Studies, 2015) and Andy Paciorek's *An Arthurian Antichrist: Alternative Readings of Kill List* (also in Folk Horror Revival: Field Studies, 2015) for discussions on the sociopolitical dimensions of Wheatley's folk horror productions.

PART II

America, Settlers, and Belonging

Chapter 6

Palimpsests and Other Texts

Christianity and Premodern Religions in Folk Horror

Brandon R. Grafius

In his influential study of folk horror, Adam Scovell identified "skewed belief systems and morality" as part of the "Folk Horror Chain" (Scovell 2017, 17–8). This chain—landscape, isolation, skewed belief systems, and the summoning—are what, for Scovell, constitute the key elements of a folk horror narrative. Scovell argues that these skewed belief systems frequently arise from a community's isolation, and much of the horror emerges from the conflict between these belief systems and those of mainstream society. Of course, this conflict frequently reveals that contemporary society's morality system is more skewed itself than is comfortable.

This chapter will first explore Scovell's conception of skewed morality within the so-called "unholy trinity" of folk horror: *Witchfinder General*, *Blood on Satan's Claw*, and *The Wicker Man*. Secondly, the chapter will argue that this "skewed morality" frequently reveals itself through a clash of religious worldviews, with contemporary Christianity being in conflict with an older spiritual reality (either pagan or demonic), and demonstrate how this is evident in a handful of folk horror films. In a common motif, these two religions exist as a palimpsest, with Christianity serving as a modern veneer over its counterpart. Finally, the chapter will offer a close reading of *The Wind* (2018) to argue that religion is portrayed in the film as a function of texts, and that the film's use of overlapping and interrelated texts serve as a development of the folk horror idea of the palimpsest. Through this discussion, I suggest that Scovell's "Folk Horror Chain," while a useful heuristic

device, should be understood flexibly to be able to incorporate conflicting worldviews within its understanding of "skewed morality."

THE ELEMENTS OF FOLK HORROR

Scovell has argued that the main elements of folk horror include an emphasis on the landscape; the isolation of the main characters; a sense of skewed morality, frequently embodied as a conflict between modern and premodern systems of morality; and an inevitable "summoning," in which the latent evil that has been present throughout the narrative is made manifest. While Scovell's category of "skewed morality" is my primary interest in this chapter, the landscape frequently plays an integral part in establishing this morality.

As the first element in his chain, Scovell notes how frequently the landscape is emphasized in folk horror, whether it be through the pastoral travels of *Witchfinder General* (1968), the initial discovery of a skull found buried within a field during ploughing in *Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971), or the intense focus on the island landscape of *The Wicker Man* (1973). This emphasis on the landscape is not incidental but serves as a primary means of connecting the various plot threads through the isolation of the main characters. Commenting on *Witchfinder General*, Ian Cooper remarks that "[Director Michael] Reeves intentionally set out to produce a home-grown variant of the B-Movie Westerns," which Cooper suggests is one of the few genres that "presents the landscape as a character" (Cooper 2011, 57). This characterization of the landscape runs through the sun-drenched island of *The Wicker Man* up to more modern incarnations of folk horror, such as Ben Wheatley's *A Field in England* (2013) or the menacing forest of Robert Eggers' *The Witch* (2015).

This landscape serves as a thread that runs through all these films, inducing the isolation that so frequently drives the plot and also serving as a means of creating or emphasizing the conflict regarding morality. As will be argued throughout this chapter, this moral conflict is frequently religious in nature. Often, the indifference or even hostility of the landscape to the film's protagonists serves as a framework through which the conflict of worldviews plays out. (See, for example, Connor McAleese's chapter later in this volume.) In *Witchfinder General*, the English landscape becomes the backdrop against which the witch-hunting depravity plays out; here, the skewed morality does not emerge from a premodern worldview, but from a horrifying version of Christianity itself. This conflict between the modern and the premodern is more clearly played out in *Blood on Satan's Claw*, in which the discovery of an inhuman skeleton drives the village to ritual sacrifice. And in *The Wicker Man*, the isolated island of Summerisle has allowed the residents to continue

practicing their centuries-old religion of nature worship, undisturbed by the advances of modernity. The horror of the film emerges at the climax, when this idyllic pagan utopia is revealed to rest upon a backbone of human sacrifice. In both of these films, the dark underbelly of premodernity emerges and is clothed in religious practices that predate Christianity. Of course, in *The Wicker Man,* Sergeant Howie's Christianity does not come off looking too good either—he's judgmental, obviously struggling with his self-imposed repression, and more than a little boring. The "skewed morality," here as in other folk horror examples, belongs just as much to the modern worldview as to its predecessor.

It is worth noting that Scovell's analysis of the folk horror chain emerges from his study of British folk horror. I have argued elsewhere (Grafius 2020) that the American strand of cinematic folk horror, with *The Devil and Daniel Webster* (1941) as one of the earliest examples, shares many characteristics with its British counterparts; however, American folk horror seems to place an increased emphasis on the act of storytelling, whether it be by announcing the film as being based on oral tradition (*The Devil and Daniel Webster*; *The Witch* [2015]), foregrounding the folk tale that exists within the diegetic world of the film as something that is shared orally (*The Fog*, 1980), or by otherwise emphasizing the "told" nature of the film. (For example, in the way that *The Blair Witch Project* [1999] uses the "found footage" format as a means of presenting the film as a story that is being told to the audience.) In subsequent analysis of *The Wind*, we will see how this element of storytelling becomes refracted through the film's emphasis on texts, which are intricately related to the religious worldview that finds itself in conflict with the demonic presences of the plains.

THE PALIMPSEST

In *The Wicker Man*, the conflict between modern religion (as represented by Sergeant Howie's Christianity) and the premodern paganism of the villagers of Summerisle is right on the surface. The villagers' pagan rituals are openly discussed almost from the moment Sergeant Howie sets foot upon the island; it is only their penchant for human sacrifice that is a (barely) disguised secret. But frequently, folk horror films present the conflict between these worldviews as a palimpsest. Christianity is a modern veneer, laid over the underlying, older religion. Peel back the skin of Christianity, and an older religion (or at least a prereligious world) reveals itself—one which Christianity is frequently ill-prepared to encounter.

This idea is hinted at in the famous opening scene of *Blood on Satan's Claw*, when farmer Ralph Gower unearths a distinctly nonhuman skull while

plowing his field. Through the course of the film, the village falls under the influence of this demonic relic and becomes consumed with violent ritualistic practices. Here, it is modernity itself (albeit of the seventeenth-century variety) that has been gently laid over the premodern world; it only takes a bit of farm work to uncover this ancient world and bring it back to life.

In some ways, this theme is an example of the overlap between folk horror and hauntology, as the mythic past intrudes on the present (Scovell 2017, 10). The monstrous skull seems reminiscent of one of M. R. James' "found objects" which "carry a powerfully weird charge," in the wording of Merlin Coverly (2020, 90). In the schematics of hauntology, "the time is out of joint," in the epigraph from *Hamlet* that Derrida uses to being his work *The Specters of Marx*, and explore the ways in which the present is haunted by both the past and the future. In hauntological thought, time is not linear, but is experienced as a series of loops, whorls, and eternal returns that we are caught in the midst of (Fisher 2012). We exist as part of a larger, mythological time, which conflicts with the chronological time our limited human experience is able to comprehend.

This theme of the barely concealed religious past that continually intrudes upon the present is made even more explicit in the lesser-known film *Blood Tide* (Jeffries 1982), a coproduction of the UK and Greece. The film is folk horror through and through, though the landscape has been shifted from the British countryside to the remote Greek island of Synoron (which seems to be fictional, as far as I can tell—the film lists the small island of Serifos as the filming location). The village is filled with crumbling stone houses, seemingly arising from the hillside. The film's main character emphasizes the profound sense of the premodern, by remarking that the village looks like the "remains of Sodom and Gomorrah." It's a perfect spot for isolation, and for watching the clash of old and new worldviews. While the landscape may be different, the themes (and even some of the plot points) remain the same.

The conflict between ancient and modern religions is established in the prologue, where we learn of the region's past practices of human sacrifice. "Before the dawn of civilization, in the early light of man's existence," incants the voiceover to establish the mythic time against which this story will unfold. "The ancients knew the way to placate the beast that lurked beneath the eternal sea, and within the consciousness of man," he continues. The answer: "Sacrifice. Virgin sacrifice." The narration continues to emphasize the disconnect between this prehistoric past and contemporary times. "The practices of that bygone age died with the coming of civilization. But deep in the heart of man, the primeval urge to give new life to an ancient ritual lingers on." These few sentences offer an encapsulation of the folk horror aspect of the conflict between the premodern and the modern; as the narrator tells us, we might think that we have left the days of human sacrifice

behind, but a vestige of this desire still remains within us. The voiceover is accompanied by the image of a young woman being placed onto a raft and sent into a sea cave, with a coin on her tongue as payment for Charon. After this prologue, clearly establishing the themes that will be developed, the film jumps to a contemporary setting.

While this prologue might already bring to mind *The Wicker Man*, with its conflict between the pagan religion of Summerisle and Christianity, the outline of *Blood Tide*'s story seems even more reminiscent: Neil's sister Madeline has gone missing, and he has traveled to Synoron in hopes of finding her. In the isolated community (connecting with Scovell's second link of the folk horror chain), complete with a band of seemingly feral children (borrowing from *Blood on Satan's Claw*), Neil finds Madeline pursuing her dreams of becoming an archaeologist by researching the local abbey. She began by trying to restore a painting, covered over with centuries of smoke from nearby candles, but realizes that this traditional Christian painting has been painted over an older image. The underlying image is of a knight doing battle with what seems to be a sea creature of some kind; as the wizened nun Sister Elena observes, it's not clear who's winning.

But there is yet a third layer underneath these. Madeline notes that the locals have told her it's painted on a type of wood that went extinct after a blight in 1521 BCE. (Apparently, the locals are able to have a high degree of specificity regarding ancient dates.) Sister Elena reminds Madeline (and the viewers), this is well before the time of Christ, indicating that the monastery was originally built as a pre-Christian sanctuary of some type, and repurposed after many centuries. But the content of the final painting is what is truly horrifying: it depicts what seems to be the same sea creature from the middle layer, this time with a pronounced phallus, and a nude woman prostrating before him. What in the middle layer seemed to be a depiction of the struggle between humanity and this sea creature has been revealed as a relationship in which this creature is an object of worship. The layers of Christianity have been painted over this archaic religious tradition. The conflict between Christianity and the ancient religion that lies underneath its surface is here presented as a literal palimpsest.

But as we learn, this older tradition has not been completely painted over. As the result of a rather silly subplot involving James Earl Jones and some undersea explosives, this ancient sea creature is released, and commences to maul two of the villagers. At the double funeral, a procession of nuns from the local monastery carries the two coffins to the graveside, accompanying the burial procedures with a liturgical chant. But this chant is interrupted after they lay the coffins on the ground, and the village mayor bursts through them to pry the coffins open. He places a coin on the mouth of each victim, connecting with the sacrificial ritual of the film's prologue. By transforming these

deaths into a ritual, the mayor is hoping the sea monster will be assuaged, and further bloodshed avoided. (At least until the next sacrifice.) It's an extraordinary scene, with the competing rituals of these different worldviews struggling against each other in real time.

It is a great example of how religion in folk horror is frequently treated as a palimpsest: a premodern religion, associated with either paganism (as in *The Wicker Man*) or the demonic (as in *Blood on Satan's Claw*). In *Blood Tide*, this palimpsest is presented literally through the artwork of the abbey; Christianity attempted to erase the previous local cult and their patron sea monster. But as is always the case in folk horror, this erasure is only partially successful. And it's not an erasure that can endure for long.

THE INHABITANTS OF THE LAND IN *THE WIND* (2018)

While *The Wind* is in some ways a perfect example of folk horror, it departs from the standard expectations in being told severely out of sequence. This has the effect of disrupting Scovell's folk horror chain; it's only at the film's conclusion that the inevitable sequence of events becomes apparent. The connection between the landscape and isolation is present throughout, but the film's structure makes the manner in which these elements lead towards the summoning only evident in hindsight. Personally, it took me three viewings before piecing the timeline together, and I'm still not sure I have all of the details right. In particular, the struggle between contemporary Christianity and the premodern demonic that is at the heart of the film is only gradually uncovered, with the final piece of the puzzle not coming until the final few minutes of the film. As will be explored below, it also slightly adapts the motif of the palimpsest that was discussed above. In *The Wind*, Christianity comes into contact with the older spirituality of the plains and is subsumed by it. In several key images, Christianity itself is subverted and folded into the demonic. But, like the abbey imagery of *Blood Tide*, this is represented through texts—sometimes, even texts that conceal other texts within.

The film is set in the nineteenth-century American plains, on a remote settlement inhabited by only a few homesteaders. At first, Lizzy (Caitlin Gerard) and Isaac Macklin (Ashley Zuckerman) are the only farmers in sight. They are eventually joined by Emma (Julia Goldani Telles) and Gideon Harper (Dylan McTee), young emigrants who establish their cottage close enough that the Macklin's can see their light across the barren fields at night. This only serves to emphasize how lonely this landscape is: there's nothing between the Macklins and this distant light, several miles across the plains. When the two families share a neighborly dinner, the women wash dishes together afterwards; Emma asks whether there is a church nearby, to which

Lizzy responds, "Not enough people for that yet." Subtly, the presence of Christianity is linked with civilization, and the lack of a nearby church implies that we are living in a premodern landscape. Once more settlers arrive, the church will follow, Lizzy implies. As we'll soon see, this landscape isn't just too empty for a church—it's even too empty for God.

As Lizzy and Isaac first roll into their new land in a rickety, horse drawn wagon, they pass by a cluster of gravestones. It seems like things did not go well for the previous residents. The cause of this soon becomes apparent; the windswept land is haunted by a demonic force, one that possesses people and causes them to inflict harm on themselves and others—one of the film's strengths lies in its refusal to go too deeply into precisely what these demonic forces can do, or give us more than a few hints about what they are. It is an unsafe space for humans, dominated by the presence of these older demonic powers. The conflict between the demonic and Christianity is expressed through the recurring use of texts: most notably a Bible and a handmade pamphlet called "Demons of the Plains." These two texts are intertwined throughout the film.

A third text, a copy of Horace Walpole's eighteenth-century Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, is associated with Emma, and representative of how completely unprepared she is to face the plains demons: it does not offer her the (supposed) protection of Lizzy's Bible, but also does not take the demonic seriously. As Lizzy reads the novel aloud to Emma and begins to become unnerved by it, Emma tells her not to worry: it's only humans who are the enemies in this novel. The supernatural is dismissed as a trick, something not worthy of serious consideration. However, as the women will soon learn, there is much more to be afraid of in their new environment than humans. There is also a fourth text associated with Emma: her diary, through which Lizzy learns that Emma has been taken over by an otherworldly power. While the diary was originally Emma's attempt to chronicle her own emotions, as Lizzy reads through it, she learns that Emma has been possessed by the demonic forces of the plains. These forces have even forced their way into Emma's diary. But perhaps more central to the film are the texts owned by Lizzy.

When Lizzy and her husband are first entering the land that will become their homestead, they encounter a traveling preacher who offers Lizzy a Bible. She responds, "I came prepared," showing him her own. In this scene, and throughout, the Bible is treated in the manner that Steve Wiggins has described as a "talisman," an icon that in and of itself can offer protection against evil (2018, 40–61). Elsewhere, we see Lizzy use it for the liturgical effect of its contents, hoping that the words contained within are what will offer her a defense. In one of the film's many timelines, when Lizzy has been left alone one night while Isaac heads to town for supplies, she takes up her Bible to read by the fireplace. A knock on the door distracts her just as she has

opened the book, and she rushes to answer, carrying the book with her. But there is no one at the door, and a rush of wind extinguishes the fire. She slams the door shut, then attempts to light two candles, which are immediately extinguished. Realizing she is under attack from an unseen force, she drops to her knees in front of the fireplace, attempting to reignite it, and begins frantically praying. Her text of choice is Psalm 121 (the translation she is using seems to be either the King James, or, if the film is being more faithful to the historical context, the Geneva Bible): "My help cometh from the Lord, which made Heaven and earth. He will not suffer they foot to be moved." Then she skips a few verses, and resumes: "The Lord is thy keeper; the Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand." As she grows more frantic, she continues reciting verses from this psalm, but she begins repeating and mixing up their order. It seems this text is not powerful enough to fight against the demons of the plains, as the cabin's door blows open again. The film cuts to another scene, but in reconstructing the timeline it seems clear that this is the point at which Lizzy fell under the sway of this being.

There are other key ways in which we see the Bible as a compromised text, less powerful than the demonic forces of the plain. We learn that, soon after arriving at their homestead, Lizzy gave birth to a stillborn child. As she and her husband bury their infant, she places her Bible next to his grave, burying it as well. "He'll use it more than I will," Lizzy says as she covers the book with dirt. But the Bible returns—later, as she is under attack from the plain's unseen forces, she finds the Bible lain on her doorstep, still covered with dirt from its grave. And just in case we are unsure as to whether it's the same book, we see her name inscribed on the cover. This is Lizzy's Bible, brought back to her. It is not the first time we have seen something brought back by the plain's demons. Earlier in the film, the family's goat had been killed by a pack of wolves; shortly afterwards, Lizzy steps out of her house to find the goat looking at her. She remembers her husband's advice: "If you see a demon, shoot it," and retrieves her shotgun to kill the goat a second time. (No *Pet Sematary*–style hesitation here—Lizzy knows this goat is bad news immediately.) After it has been brought back, the goat is associated with the demonic. It seems as if the same is true of Lizzy's Bible. It came back after it should have been buried.

But in a further association with the demonic, there is yet another text associated with Lizzy's Bible. Kept in its pages is the handmade "Demons of the Plains" pamphlet, containing a list of demonic names and their functions. When he first finds it, Isaac throws it into the fireplace; yet it, too, comes back. While it seems possible that Lizzy had another copy, the surprised reaction of both her and Isaac implies that this pamphlet returned, somehow, from the fire. At the film's climax, we learn that this pamphlet was given to Lizzy by the itinerant preacher. After she turned down his offer of a Bible,

he responds by telling her, "You can never be too prepared," and hands her a copy of the pamphlet. The implication seems to be that it is his hand that lies behind the creation of this makeshift grimoire; however, it seems to offer no one any measure of protection. Understanding the demons' names and functions does little to protect either Lizzy or the pastor. But having this pamphlet hidden within the pages of Lizzy's Bible offers another example of how Christianity is overpowered and, eventually, co-opted by the demonic forces of the plains.

In the Islamic tradition, Christianity (along with Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and Sabianism) are considered fellow "religions of the book," due to their devotion to particular texts as the ground of their traditions (Eickelman 2001, 241–311). Knowledge of God is mediated through these texts, which are in some way related to the divine. In *The Wind*, texts serve to establish the contours of the conflict between Christianity and the demonic: Christianity may be a "religion of the book," but the demonic presence of the plains is older than writing. The sacred text of Christianity is subject to being co-opted by the demonic presence, just as the family goat—in the same way, the demonic is able to insinuate itself into the deeply personal text of Emma's diary. And creating new texts that attempt to offer knowledge and power over the demonic forces of the plains is ineffectual. In the end, Christianity finds itself subsumed within, and captive to, the powers that have lived in the plains far before humanity arrived. Christianity in *The Wind* is an ineffectual palimpsest, one that cannot fully erase the image that lies underneath.

TEXTS AND PRETEXTS IN FOLK HORROR

In the diagetic world of *The Wind*, the modern world attempts to capture and tame everything within a text. This includes our religious life (as represented by the Bible), our fears of the supernatural (as represented by the gothic novel), our emotional life (as represented by Emma's diary), and the supernatural beings of the plains themselves (as represented by the handmade pamphlet). These efforts fail on multiple levels, and the film frequently demonstrates how the demonic forces themselves are able to enter into these texts and co-opt them for their own purposes. Modernity's attempts to capture premodern realities within a system of texts is a system that has failed. That which is prior to texts—the pretextual, if you will—proves itself to be far more powerful and enduring. The underlying painting continues to reveal itself, in spite of the efforts of the overlain image.

This marks a slight shift from previous folk horror films, as described by Scovell; it will be interesting to see if this thematic trend continues, or if *The Wind* will be proven to be a strange outlier. In *The Wind*, the conflict

between premodern and modern ways of understanding the world is revealed through our relationship to texts. Lizzy and Emma both demonstrate (as does the wandering preacher) that they mediate their relationship with the world through this series of interlocking texts. But the demons of the plains exist in an unmediated world, able to circumvent and, eventually, subordinate the texts that attempt to track them.

This is where the conflict between different worldviews that Scovell discusses shows itself most clearly in *The Wind*. But for this film, Scovell's idea of "skewed morality" needs a slight update, or at least an expansive interpretation. It's really a conflict between different worldviews, broadly described as the modern and the premodern. In *The Wind*, these worldviews are represented by textuality: the world that understands knowledge and power as being contained within texts, and the world that believes texts can be co-opted and subordinated to other purposes. Scovell hints at this in his discussion: he comments that the frightening morality of the inhabitants of Summerisle in *The Wicker Man*, or of the villagers under the sway of the monstrous relic in *Blood on Satan's Claw*, is "skewed within the context of the general social status quo of the era in which the films are made coupled with the diegesis of the cinema itself" (Scovell 2017, 18). When we understand this link of Scovell's chain in this manner—worldviews in conflict which represent different systems of morality—then *The Wind* fits squarely within this definition. It helps to understand how a film like *The Wind* can exist within the same generic space as *The Wicker Man, Blood on Satan's Claw*, and *Blood Tide* (as well as more contemporary iterations of folk horror such as *The Witch* and *Midsommar*). Throughout the folk horror genre, this "skewed morality" is often reflected in the conflicting values held by two worldviews.

The emphasis on texts in *The Wind* also serve to connect it to the American strand of folk horror, which frequently emphasizes texts and the process of the tale being told. Whether it's the barnacled old sea dog who opens John Carpenter's *The Fog* with a tale of the fishing village's haunted past, or the simple intertitle that proclaims *The Witch* to be "A New England Fable," or the ways in which the cameras of *The Blair Witch Project* are foregrounded as creating the text that is unspooling on the screen, texts and stories play a large role in American folk horror. And while *The Wind* does not present itself directly as a story being told to the audience, this emphasis on the overlapping texts within the film serves as a closely related, and important, thematic element.

The genre of folk horror has long been plagued with hazy boundaries; we know folk horror when we see it, but it can be difficult to articulate precisely what makes a piece folk horror. As Scovell has documented so well, for decades many viewers and critics had a sense that the three films of the folk horror triumvirate were somehow related but figuring out how to tie them

together generically is a difficult task. Scovell does an admirable job in his monograph, although the folk horror chain that he outlines should be seen as flexible guideposts rather than hard and fast rules. Allowing ourselves to understand Scovell's link of "skewed morality" as consisting of a conflict between two different worldviews—with the winner frequently being the side that we as viewers struggle to identify with—takes us one step further towards identifying what, precisely, marks a film as a piece of folk horror.

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Chapter 7

"There's Some Weird Shit Going on in the Woods"

Landscape, Cults, and Folklore in the Films of Chad Crawford Kinkle and Andy Mitton

Paul A. J. Lewis

"Folk horror" is generally taken to be a retrospective label, originally applied to a narrow group of British horror films of the 1960s/1970s, following its use by Jonathan Rigby and Mark Gatiss in the 2010 BBC documentary *A History of Horror*. Since then, the boundaries of what constitutes folk horror have evolved, and the manner in which examples of the folk horror overlap with other designators has become increasingly apparent. However, a constant theme in films that attract the label "folk horror" is the juxtaposition of belief and its Other—whether belief is represented in the form of pagan cults or adherence to folklore.

This essay will discuss how this theme is explored in contemporary folk horror cinema through consideration of the work of two current US filmmakers: Chad Crawford Kinkle, writer-director of *Jug Face* (aka *The Pit*, 2013) and *Dementer* (2019); and Andy Mitton, co-writer/co-director of *YellowBrickRoad* (2011, with Jesse Holland) and writer-director of *The Witch in the Window* (2018). Both Kinkle and Mitton's work may be discussed within another paradigm, that of independent "regional" horror films, and this essay will consider the areas of overlap between folk horror and regional horror.

In discussing Kinkle and Mitton's work, the essay will draw on comments made by these two filmmakers in communication with the writer. Where

Kinkle's work focuses on the impact of isolated cults and the individuals affected by them, Mitton's films examine folkloric beliefs. However, both filmmakers have produced work that adheres to Adam Scovell's "Folk Horror Chain," particularly in their focus on beliefs that run counter to the norm, either in terms of the hierarchical thinking of a cult (as in the work of Kinkle), or their emphasis on rural folklore (as in Mitton's films).

FOLK AND REGIONAL HORROR

The "folk horror" paradigm is generally accepted as originating with Piers Haggard, director of *Blood on Satan's Claw* (1972). In an interview published by Fangoria in 2003, Haggard used the term to describe *Blood* as aiming to capture the "dark poetry" associated with rural folklore and superstitions (Simpson 2018, 165). In 2010, the term was further popularized by Jonathan Rigby and Mark Gatiss, in their BBC documentary *A History of Horror*. Gatiss and Rigby identified the three British horror films most commonly associated with folk horror: *Witchfinder General* (Reeves, 1968), *Blood on Satan's Claw*, and *The Wicker Man* (Hardy, 1973). Gatiss, in *A History of Horror*, suggests that these films "shared a common obsession with the British landscape, its folklore, and superstitions." Subsequently, Adam Scovell identified a Folk Horror Chain: four essential ingredients of folk horror (2017, 31). These are: the *landscape*, and its "effects on the social and moral identity of its inhabitants"; *isolation*, engendered by the landscape, and experienced by "just a handful of individuals or a small-scale community"; *skewed belief systems/morality*, facilitated by the isolation of the community; and a *happening/summoning*, in which "such beliefs . . . will manifest through the most violent and supernatural of methods." (2017, 30–1)

The borders of folk horror overlap with other designators, particularly when discussing American examples: these include the labels Southern Gothic and regional horror. In the context of US cinema, "regional horror" denotes independently produced horror pictures made away from "the general professional and geographic confines of Hollywood," and "with a cast and crew made up primarily of residents of the state in which the film was shot." (Albright 2012, 2) In communication with this writer, Chad Crawford Kinkle offered an understanding of regional horror that chimed strongly with Haggard's original definition of folk horror, and Scovell's analysis of the importance of landscape in folk horror: "Regional horror is about people from a specific place in time. That's the first step into folk horror. For me, I've always been fascinated with locations first because I think they shape the people who live there."[1]

Both Kinkle and Andy Mitton's work is identifiably "regional": Kinkle's *Jug Face* and *Dementer* were produced in Tennessee; Mitton's *YellowBrickRoad* and *Witch* were filmed in New England (New Hampshire and Vermont, respectively). Kinkle and Mitton both suggest that their understanding of the tenets of folk horror was acquired through exposure in youth to films such as *The Wicker Man*; these early viewing experiences filtered into their own work. When writing and filming *Jug Face*, Kinkle was:

> not sure if I even knew the term "folk horror." I was clearly aware of *The Wicker Man* and other films that felt like it . . . But, I do take a certain amount of pride that *Jug Face* is considered folk horror . . . To me folk horror are stories about groups of people who reject the notion of the modern, and . . . fall back on something old and generally supernatural to guide them. In those terms, both *Jug Face* and *Dementer* fall under the umbrella of folk horror.[2]

Similarly, Mitton told this writer that "I feel like the term has been floating around in my head to some degree since I've been aware of horror . . . It makes me think of *The Wicker Man* (1973) first and foremost."[3] For Mitton, folk horror is defined by "stories that stem from the warping of cultural and religious practices. I think about the woods and rural spaces, and the feeling of a protagonist often new to a foreign set of rules, and having to learn it along with us, often on a track that moves from fascination to unravelling horror." When Mitton and co-director Jesse Holland made *YellowBrickRoad* (2010), "[t]he [folk horror] tradition was on our minds . . . for sure. I remember watching *Picnic at Hanging Rock* while writing and being inspired by its vibe. Especially since it combines a sense of folk horror with a Lovecraftian sensibility."

THE CULTIST'S POINT-OF-VIEW: *JUG FACE* AND *DEMENTER*

Douglas Cowan has argued that secularization has led to "the belief . . . that technologized societies are becoming less religious." (Cowen 2008, 50) Within this framework, popular entertainment has articulated a generalized anxiety surrounding "religious fanaticism and the power of the dangerous religious Other." (208) Films such as *The Wicker Man* underscore this via narratives that focus on "the power of religion to motivate participants in ways that those of us not privy to their secrets are often at a loss to understand." (Ibid) Cowan has claimed that films about cults tend to foreground themes of:

> control and violence. The former is lodged in concerns about "brainwashing" and "cult mind control," while the latter lives in recurring fears over the possibility of religiously motivated mass suicides, ritual murder, violent confrontation with civil authority, or even the potential of attacks on civilian populations. (Ibid)

According to Howard David Ingham, cults have a particular fascination for US filmmakers precisely because of the landscape and the possibility of isolation within it: the US "has space for these groups to grow; anyone with the right resources can . . . build a place where they can practice their religion in isolation." (Ingham 2018, 207) Cultists can, in America, "very much go their own way without interference, and don't receive half as much suspicion as independent religious groups in the U.K. do.": where the notion of a *Wicker Man*-esque "pagan village conspiracy" is very identifiably British, "cult leaders and their followers are the rural pagans of the American psychogeographical imagination . . . and they carry an extra degree of threat, since they are, in the American imagination, very real." (Ingham 2018b, 512)

Where some folk horror narratives focus on individuals who encounter cults after trespassing into their environment, other films "bridge the gap between the dangerous religious Other and the people next door." (Cowen 2008, 209) Kinkle's *Dementer* focuses on a former cult member, Katie (Katie Groshong). Having broken away from a cult led by the enigmatic Larry (Larry Fessenden), Katie takes employment at a care center for special needs adults. However, though Katie has left the cult, she has not purged herself of its beliefs: to protect Stephanie (Stephanie Kinkle, the director's sister), one of the clients in her care, from "demons" she believes are circling her, Katie enacts various rituals taught to her by Larry. These include placing a bovine heart under Stephanie's bed and burning a domestic cat before placing its charred remains at the entrance to Stephanie's home. The film's final sequence subverts audience expectations by revealing that Katie has been programmed by Larry to commit ritualistic sacrifice: Katie believes she is protecting Stephanie, but subconsciously she has been preparing to murder her after displacing Stephanie to the isolated, derelict house where the cult was based.

As with *Dementer*, Kinkle's *Jug Face* looks at a cult from within. *Jug Face* focuses on Ada (Lauren Ashley Carter), who has been raised within a rural cult that commits human sacrifices to "The Pit," a mysterious hole in the ground. Sacrificial victims are selected by Dawai (Sean Bridgers), a mentally challenged man who has an innate skill as a potter: whilst in a fugue state, Dawai crafts jugs bearing the faces of those to be sacrificed. Ada discovers she is pregnant and desperately tries to conceal this from her family: mother Loriss (Sean Young) and father Sustin (Larry Fessenden), the leader of the

community. Ada discovers that Dawai has made a jug bearing her face; fearing for her life and the life of her unborn child, she hides this in the woods. The required sacrifice not having been met, a mysterious force emerges from The Pit and brutally kills various members of the cult. Ada and Dawai make an attempt to escape; tragically, they are caught when they attempt to sell moonshine to a store owner who knows Sustin and are returned to the cult for punishment.

Jug Face's focus on an isolated backwoods community, in a forbidding landscape

(the forests of North Georgia), and its emphasis on the skewed beliefs of the cult with a build-up to a happening/summoning (The Pit's murderous rage when these sacrifices are not enacted), ensure that the film meets all four elements of Scovell's Folk Horror Chain. The Pit is believed to possess will and agency—"We understand that The Pit wants what it wants," Loriss asserts. The cult also believes The Pit to have powers to heal the sick, as long as the community continues to practice human sacrifice: "We give a life when it wants it, and it heals us when we need it," Sustin says. The narrative is focalized through Ada, who has been raised into this cult, and the film's audience experiences the cult's beliefs from within. When the sacrifices are halted following Ada's hiding of the jug bearing her likeness, The Pit's supernatural nature is validated by point-of-view shots presented from the perspective of the murderous force that emerges from it.

Jug Face and *Dementer* depict the supernatural elements of their plots ambiguously, refusing to deny the beliefs of their protagonists. Kinkle has said that "Ambiguity is around us in everyday life and so I tend to find those types of stories interesting [. . .] It's not surprising that all of my films handle the supernatural in similar ways."[4] Though no outsiders invade *Jug Face*'s cult, Ada and Sustin come in direct contact with folk from the secular outside world when they journey into town to sell moonshine to a store. There, the cult members are regarded with uneasy tolerance by the store owner. "You can't get in the middle of these people," the store owner tells his daughter after handing Ada and Dawai over to Sustin. "There's some weird shit going on in the woods there, and we don't want any part of it."

It is difficult not to see the isolated cult in *Jug Face* as symbolic of a broader repressive mindset: Howard David Ingham has written that

> the brilliant thing about *Jug Face* . . . is that it encourages you to identify with people who are condemned to live in a world with small horizons, and . . . it has something much deeper and trenchantly political to say about how communities of good people who believe evil things can choke the horizons out of their children. (2018a, 331–32)

For Ingham, *Jug Face*'s horror lies not in the fact that The Pit "does hideous, violent things for inscrutable reasons," but rather in the realization that nobody within the cult "recognizes it as evil": The Pit's authority is not questioned, "and no one can see the foundational beliefs of the community are toxic and destructive" (Ingrham 2018, 331–32). Asked about both *Jug Face* and *Dementer*'s theme of individuals' behavior being conditioned, Kinkle connected this to folk horror's focus on landscape and its effect on people: Kinkle said, "This goes back to the setting or environment that the story takes place in. It is for me, the environment that enforces the rules that the people find themselves under."[5]

Dementer and *Jug Face* use their focus on cults to examine issues of female agency and the manner in which women's behavior is policed within male-dominated societies. Both films' cults are orchestrated by men, with womenfolk positioned as subservient. In *Jug Face*, Ada's marriage to another member of the cult, Bodey, has been arranged for her: Ada has no say in whether she wishes to participate in this "joining." When Ada asks Sustin if anyone has said "no" to a joining, Sustin responds, firmly, "It's a woman's job to have babies. You gotta be joined to do that." Likewise, *Dementer* depicts Katie's behavior as being unconsciously influenced by Larry, even after she successfully escapes the cult. Larry's influence over Katie is represented in short flashbacks to Katie's time with the cult; these bubble up within the diegesis, suggesting that Katie is haunted by her past. These intrusive analepses offer ambiguous fragments of scenes, hinting at past traumas, and are bridged into the present via the use on the soundtrack of Larry's voice: hushed, intimate, and intense. The film opens with one such flashback, showing Katie naked and in front of a bonfire, then chased through a field lit by the headlights of a pursuing vehicle. Later flashbacks show Katie's relationships with other cult members: these hint at a traumatic moment in Katie's past, the loss of a child, perhaps in sacrifice to the cult. (This is represented highly ambiguously, via analepses that show Katie interacting with a doll, and Larry's repeated assertion that "For a life is given, and the devil is born.") The fragmented, expressionistic depiction of these flashbacks contrasts sharply with the semidocumentary style associated with the diegetic present.

Katie tells her colleagues that she has been living in "a place in the country. It needs a little work, but I'm hoping to stay there for a while." However, in reality she is sleeping in her car. She struggles to function in regular society, and Larry's ongoing influence over her—via the conditioning she was exposed to during her time with the cult—is represented physically via a sigil that has been branded onto her back. Though Katie manages to conceal her cultist's beliefs for much of the narrative, Brandy becomes suspicious after surreptitiously thumbing through the journal Katie consults throughout the

narrative. The journal contains an assembly of scribbled notes, combined with sketches of sigils. Scenes in which Katie is shown consulting the journal are accompanied on the audio track by the disembodied voice of Larry, anchoring the relationship between the journal and the cult. The journal symbolizes Katie's enduring connection to the beliefs of the cult, which drive her to commit the film's final act of sacrifice (the climactic happening/summoning from Scovell's Folk Horror Chain). When Stephanie falls ill with a respiratory infection, Katie becomes obsessed with using the knowledge she gained from the cult to protect Katie from "the devils" she believes to be responsible: she offers a cow's heart and a cat as sacrifices. However, Larry's influence is driving Katie subconsciously to prepare Stephanie for sacrifice. In the final scene we once again we hear Larry's voice intoning, "For a life is given, and a devil is born," though this time it ends with "But you will not remember this." Katie leaves the site, presumably destined to select another sacrificial victim.

Discussing why he chose to tell these stories from the cultists' point-of-view, Kinkle said this:

> It's about perspective. An outsider's prospective is always going to be limited and judgmental within the story and they will have to rely on being told by other characters who are in the know to understand things. To me, it's far more interesting to be a "fly on the wall" as an audience member. But this makes the audience do more mental work throughout the film to sort out the logic.

In particular, Kinkle chose to focus the narratives of both *Jug Face* and *Dementer* on women who struggle to assert themselves within the framework of a "skewed belief system" that undermines their will and agency because "I generally focus on the most interesting character that goes through the worst turmoil in the story."

ENTERING THE FOLKLORIC ZONE: *YELLOWBRICKROAD* AND *THE WITCH IN THE WINDOW*

The conflict between a belief system and its Other does not solely manifest itself in stories about cults: it can be found in narratives in which outsiders butt against local folklore. Douglas Cowan has used the term "folkloric zone" in discussion of *The Blair Witch Project* and its narrative's focus on a trio of filmmaking students who investigate regional folklore surrounding the Blair Witch. The folkloric zone, Cowan says, may be penetrated by "travelers lost

on a road in the dark . . . or students who seek out the source of folk tales and folk warnings" (2008, 118).

Two films by Andy Mitton adopt a similar structure to the "pagan village conspiracy" trope; their narratives focus on outsiders—representatives of an urban, secular culture—who penetrate the folkloric zone. *YellowBrickRoad* centers on a group of academics who, led by Teddy (Michael Laurino), travel to the town of Friar, New Hampshire, with the intention of investigating the mysterious disappearance in 1940 of 300 of the town's inhabitants. The researchers follow in the footsteps of the people who left the town; over time they become lost and disoriented in the wilderness. Their GPS navigation systems fail, and they experience strange sounds and visions. Mitton's more recent film, *The Witch in the Window,* focuses on Simon (Alex Draper) who, after separating from his wife, takes his twelve-year-old son, Finn (Charlie Tacker), out of New York City to rural Vermont with the intention of renovating a house. Simon hopes that after the renovation, he and his wife, Beverly (Arija Bareikis), will be able to reconcile and live as a family. Amidst a series of strange occurrences, Simon is informed by a neighbor, Louis (Greg Naughton), of the local folklore surrounding the house, which is claimed to be haunted by Lydia (Carol Stanzione), a former occupant whom locals believe to be a witch.

Scovell's Folk Horror Chain is present in both films: an isolated community, in a forbidding landscape, is associated with a "skewed belief system" in narratives that culminate in a "happening/summoning." However, instead of focusing on outsiders who intrude on a pagan cult, *YellowBrickRoad* and *Witch* are concerned with folklore: the protagonists of both pictures unwittingly find themselves in the folkloric zone. As the narrative progresses and the researchers find themselves in an increasingly precarious situation owing to the psychological effects of isolation and strange occurrences, Teddy persists in driving the expedition forward. "I just think we should go home with answers," Teddy tells the others, "These questions will kill us." Another member of the group, Cy (Sam Elmore), responds, "These questions never needed to be asked. What does it matter, anyway?" Ultimately, Teddy's desire to uncover the story of the disappearances leads to the deaths of the team, whose members are driven variously to either attack one another or commit suicide.

In *YellowBrickRoad*, the researchers suggest a connection between the mysterious disappearance of Friar's population and America's then-impending involvement in the Second World War, and also with the film *The Wizard of Oz* (Fleming, 1939): a print of the film was found in the projector in the town's deserted cinema, and at the head of the trail used by the townsfolk is a stone bearing the inscription "Yellow Brick Road." Cultural trauma, popular culture, and folklore thus become intertwined. *YellowBrickRoad* features a

similar narrative paradigm to *Blair Witch*, inasmuch as both films focus on groups of students who set out to investigate regional folklore and become subjected to supernatural happenings. While Mitton and co-director Jesse Holland were preparing *YellowBrickRoad*, they found themselves involved in a heavily "research-oriented writing process," drawing on actual folklore of "several real stories of disappeared villages," including Roanoke, Virginia, and Ukivok, Alaska.

Mitton has said that the process of writing *Witch* was much less "research-oriented": "Haunted house movies are in my bones," Mitton has stated.[6] However, while preparing *Witch,* Mitton intentionally avoided rewatching his favorite haunted house films in order to ensure the story felt "uniquely itself, and not an amalgam of things we've all seen." Perhaps just as important, Mitton was motivated by a desire to make a film that was "purposefully shape[d] in the *opposite direction*" of pictures "of *The Conjuring* sensibility" that "had programmed the mainstream to expect certain things visually, and sonically. Cold, haunting sets. Night scares. Sudden jumps in an effective—but over time, predictable—rhythm." Mitton spent time with *Witch*'s cinematographer, Justin Kane, in "turning those expectations on their heads with *Witch*. We wanted a movie that was foundationally warm instead of cool—so the dread would feel more invasive and wrong when it arrived. And our scares would be in daylight and would play the off-rhythm to what we've been programmed to expect." Mitton further told this writer:

> I like ambiguous evil in horror movies. I want clues about the humanity that may or may not be within them, I want teases and enough detail to make a story rich . . . but I also want things veiled and mysterious, the way the scariest things feel to me in life. I know there are those who wish there was more about Lydia in the story, more blanks filled in—but for me what was important is that we know just enough about her to satisfy the arcs of my main characters, and the completion of the themes I was exploring. The rest should be that beautiful gray area.

In the film, when Simon approaches Louis and tells him of some of the strange occurrences he and Finn have experienced, a reticent Louis articulates the local folklore about Lydia: "I don't know what they told you already . . . They didn't tell you about *her* . . . Lady that lived here when I was a kid. She was the kind of lady that kids would call a 'witch.' . . . I guess it was a good house once, back before I was born. But for me, it was always *her* house." Lydia was rumored to have caused the deaths of her husband and son, and stories about Lydia's temperament led to the development of folklore about Lydia and, following her death, the house in which she had lived. "Most people, I think, genuinely try to do good, but this woman was the other way . . . She liked that people were scared. She liked being in your head," Louis says,

adding that Lydia used to sit in an armchair facing the window on the upper floor of the house, "just watching." One summer, she did not move from the armchair for several weeks, and eventually it was discovered that Lydia had passed away. However, her ghost has been seen by some—including Louis—seated in the armchair, in the same spot in which she died.

Just as the disappearance of the townsfolk in *YellowBrickRoad* is associated with anxieties surrounding the onset of the Second World War, the folklore within *Witch*, and the use of a rural space as the "folkloric zone," was motivated by the horrors of contemporary technology-rich urban environments. In the film's narrative, Finn is sent to help his father, Simon, renovate the house in Vermont because Simon's estranged wife, Beverly, worries about Finn's experiences in the city: "I'm just trying to keep him safe," she tells Simon at the start of the film, adding that she is "up against the internet, random shootings." Finn has also been in trouble because he has seen something "forbidden" on the internet. For much of the film, Simon (and the audience) assumes that Finn has seen a pornographic video, and that Finn's experiences on the internet are those of a sexually curious adolescent. However, Simon eventually discovers that Finn has in fact accidentally viewed an online video of a beheading. Both Simon and Finn are haunted by this revelation: "Look, Finn. The world's kind of a sick place, I guess," is the only advice Simon can muster for his son.

Connecting this revelation within the narrative to the folklore surrounding Lydia's enduring presence in the house, Mitton says that "When I imagine my child stumbling onto the internet and seeing a video of a beheading or torture or something like that, the feeling that happens inside of me—a *low* drone of revulsion, horror, and helplessness—is Lydia."

Where the "folkloric zone" in *YellowBrickRoad* is laden with the trauma of the Second World War, *Witch*'s depiction of folklore was rooted in more personal anxieties about parenthood. *Witch* "came directly from the experience of having kids and buying a house, all during a time when tensions both in America and in the world at large were rising," Mitton says. "The world seemed to be getting darker, and I was bringing these innocents forward into the face of it. [His children] were both really young when I wrote it . . . but I was already imagining what it would be like to watch them discover the world for what it really was. How sad and difficult it would be."[7]

YellowBrickRoad was made with a conscious effort to examine the parameters of what was beginning to be defined as "folk horror"; with *Witch:*

> the only thing I really had in mind was to make a haunted house movie that explored my fears of parenting in the face of the unknowable and unstoppable bad forces of the world. But in hindsight, it's easy to see how it fits into the

> [folk horror] tradition. The folklore is there, certainly the rural environment, the locals who know more than our heroes, the slowly unspooling dread.

The internal folklore within *YellowBrickRoad* was based on research into actual folklore surrounding mysterious large-scale disappearances. By contrast, the key folkloric element in *Witch* was devised directly in response to Mitton's experience of viewing the house used as the film's key location. Mitton had asked friend and lead actor Alex Draper to help him find a location for a horror film; Draper showed Mitton a house that had recently been bought by Middlebury College, where Draper taught theater. The house "already had a reputation; the previous owners had supposedly died there and it was full of atmosphere and strange quirks." Mitton "got to walk around and figure out the character of each room. I saw that spot in the hallway where the chair looked out the front window and flagged it as the power point of the whole house. I pictured a woman there—who would look perfectly human and alive—but would not be. Just dead but impossibly there."[8]

The idea that Lydia was considered a "witch" is anchored in the film's title. However, Mitton's original intention was for the film to have a different title: *The Vermont House*. This was changed at the behest of the film's distributor, who felt that "no one on the other side of the world had the faintest idea where Vermont was."[9] Mitton eventually settled on a new title, *The Witch in the Window*: "It has a lyrical feeling that suits the style of the film," Mitton says.[10] Initially, Mitton had some reticence about the new title, feeling that "I hadn't made a 'witch' movie" and had "written the word ['witch'] in the script to describe how the neighborhood kids thought of Lydia when she was alive."[11] As the film nears its conclusion, Simon is forced to submit to the will of Lydia, who after snaring him in a supernatural trap, confronts him directly. She tells him that if he will die in the house and replace her as its ghost, she will finally be freed, and Beverly and Finn will be able to live there contentedly. Otherwise, Lydia threatens, "your family stays in their hellhole" in the city. Simon submits; he dies in the house, and remains there as a ghost, watching over his wife and son: as the film draws to its conclusion, Finn reads a note from his father which declares, "It's a good house again, if you want it. I haven't left; I never will." The "summoning" of Lydia results in the sacrifice of Simon, in the hope that his wife and son will, by living in the Vermont house, be able to escape the chaos of the urban environment.

Like Kinkle, Mitton highlights the importance of landscape in both *YellowBrickRoad* and *Witch*; landscape, he suggests, is a thread that connects their exploration of the folkloric zone:

> [W]hat's in common between the two films more than anything . . . is how nature plays a role. Even in the screenplay for [*Witch*], Louis' story of how the

> Lydia legend came to be was always set as voiceover against nature, and to natural sunlight moving through the empty rooms of the old house. Just like in *YellowBrickRoad*, how we weave the lore with the trees swaying, the strange music. To be removed visually from these stories within stories, and instead listen to them as we look at nature, with no human beings in the frame—for me it helps to feel what's underpinning these stories: something older than us, bigger than us, something eternal and (perhaps mercifully) just out of reach.

Echoing Scovell's comments about the significance of rural locations for folk horror narratives, Mitton reinforces the importance of rural spaces for horror stories:

> Urban spaces will always be defined by humanity. Almost everything in sight is made by man. Everything plays by the rules of man . . . But when we leave the buildings and lights and sounds of people for the wide open spaces, those things are taken over by the natural world—animals we don't feed and trees we didn't plant and *true* darkness—and we lose our footing. Our rules don't matter so much. And there might be whole other sets of rules we couldn't even imagine. Ones which aren't built aren't our own survival—and might possibly be *opposed* to it.[12]

CONCLUSION

Where the folk horror label was initially employed retrospectively, in reference to specific, historical examples of British horror cinema, it clearly intersects with the type of US regional horror cinema associated with filmmakers such as Kinkle and Mitton. Both filmmakers made their directorial debuts at a time when the term "folk horror" was being popularized within critical discourse, and its parameters being examined by writers such as Scovell. Though Kinkle and Mitton's early films were not consciously devised as examples of folk horror, both filmmakers conceded that the parallels between their work and the folk horror paradigm are evident. Part of this is perhaps owing to both filmmakers' shared use of *The Wicker Man* as a point of reference.

Articulating one of the key elements of Scovell's Folk Horror Chain, Kinkle and Mitton's films are also both fascinated with the rural landscape. In Kinkle's case, landscape and environment are integral to the stories he wishes to tell: environments "shape the people who live there," and for Kinkle, this is the lynchpin of the intersection between folk horror and regional horror.[13] For Mitton, the rural landscape represents an escape from the anxieties of the urban environment, both within the narratives of his films, and in his own practice: Mitton has said that the production of *Witch* was partially motivated

by a desire to "play to my strengths" after making *We Go On* (2016) in Los Angeles, and a desire to get "back into nature on location."[14]

The isolated rural space is also an environment that facilitates the growth of cults and folklore and is laden with its own superstitions and "skewed beliefs." What connects Kinkle's focus on cults and Mitton's examination of folklore are not only the four key elements of Scovell's Folk Horror Chain, but also the films' shared examination of a loss of control in the face of either a cult's beliefs or folklore. In Kinkle's films, the protagonists lose their agency to the will of a cult leader. Mitton's protagonists lose their agency when they enter the folkloric zone and are faced with the forces of folkloric belief: the research team in *YellowBrickRoad* become lost and ridden with violence directed both toward each other and themselves, while Simon submits to the will of Lydia and allows himself to be sacrificed in order to provide his wife and son with a means of escape from the toxic urban environment. Fundamentally, there is little difference between Simon's sacrifice and the ritual sacrifices that are conducted by the cult in *Jug Face*: in both instances, the sacrificial victims willingly submit to their fate for the greater good of their community/families.

Douglas Cowan has suggested that in horror films focusing on belief systems:

> the issue is not one of *secularization* . . . but an overwhelming *ambivalence* toward the religious traditions, beliefs, practices and mythistories [sic] by which we are confronted, in which we are often still deeply invested, which we are distinctly unwilling to relinquish, and which we just as often only minimally understand. (2008, 51)

Whether represented by cultist beliefs or a journey into the folkloric zone, in Kinkle and Mitton's films a movement from one landscape/environment to another necessitates a negotiation with a different belief system and articulates fundamental cultural anxieties.

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NOTES

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Chapter 8

Fae Fight Back

Monstrous Mycelium and Postcolonial Gothic in The Hallow

Kit Hawkins

Corin Hardy's 2015 film, *The Hallow,* is relatively unremarkable in its execution of folk horror tropes. However, his culturally displaced and nondescript depiction of Irish folklore within a horror setting replicates Gothic anxieties that have historically constructed the Irish landscape through a colonial lens of alterity. These anxieties provoke a curious cognitive dissonance that pervades the plot of the film, which oscillates between juxtaposing moments of awkward English acknowledgment and a growing dread of monstrous reprisal. Consequently, this chapter offers a transdisciplinary approach to explore Hardy's film, combining Adam Scovell's "Folk Horror Chain" with postcolonial critiques of Irish gothic conventions. The film's visceral scenes of body horror also provoke discussions of bodily invasion and somatic "Otherness" as vulnerable becomings that undermine the paranoid ontological dominance of the singular, enlightened "self." These transformations provide the impetus for an analysis of the broader interpretations of parasitism, the countercolonial potential of folk horror topographies and mycelial monsters.

The Hallow begins with the Hitchens family, Adam (Jason Mawle), Claire (Bojana Novakovic), and their infant son, Finn, arriving in Ireland. Adam has been hired to be a scientific advisor to a British deforestation project. The staticky exposition from the car radio suggests that the sale of public forests is an act of economic desperation, and one that will not benefit the Irish people. As the family car drives through miles of ruined woodland, a voice carries over the radio chatter, "Those parasites can show up and try, but I'll tell you what over our dead bodies will they take our trees from us!" The speaker has

a broad Irish brogue; a sharp contrast to the clipped syllables of the newly arrived English protagonists. Predictably, the Hitchens do not receive a warm welcome from the locals, being warned by their taciturn neighbor Colm that they will be at risk if Adam continues trespassing in the forest. Undeterred, Adam begins work examining the trees in the surrounding woods, discovering that many of them are infected with an invasive yet unidentifiable fungus. On his way back to their cottage, he comes across the corpse of a deer that has been grotesquely transformed by the fungi. Upon his return home, he declares it to be a variant of the *Cordyceps* fungus: a parasitic species that reproduces by taking over the bodies of ants.

Adam and Claire suspect that the strange occurrences at their ancient farmhouse are an intimidation tactic, until Colm begrudgingly leaves them a book that reveals the horrific nature of the entity living in the woods: "Faeries, little people, good folk'—better known as the Hallow."[1] What had been mistaken for black mold infiltrating the house is revealed to be the same parasitic fungus that Adam had identified in the forest. Through this growth, the woods themselves take on a supernatural, networked sentience that is both aggressive and deeply territorial, manifesting as triffid-like tendrils and bark-covered goblins. Reading through the book, it is revealed that the Hallow's parasitism does more than simply transform its victims into mindless puppets: it steals children and replaces them with identical changelings. It is evident that the Hallow is not simply defensive; it is also vengeful. As the inevitable terrors of the plot unfold, Adam becomes infected and baby Finn is taken and replaced with a changeling. These two events shift the tension of the final third of the film away from the external violence of the Hallow itself toward Adam's rapidly deteriorating humanity as the Fae-parasite gains greater and greater influence over him. The film culminates with a predictably noble sacrifice, as Adam is able to use his last moments of lucidity to rescue his family. The penultimate scene shows Claire running through the forest with Finn before collapsing in relieved, traumatized sobs on the floor of their ruined house. The sun rises and the changeling Finn returns to blackened tendrils as the Hallow retreats (Hardy 2015).

In *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange,* Adam Scovell (2017, 17–8) identifies four broad, interconnected features of the folk horror genre that he refers to as the "Folk Horror Chain": landscape, isolation, skewed belief systems and morality and a "summoning/happening" event. These linkages represent a broad set of attributes that manifest in myriad ways throughout the genre. However, what is most significant to this discussion is Scovell's emphasis on the how the peculiar topographies of rural environments are positioned as the progenitors of moral or existential unravelling (Scovell 2017, 17).

The unease provoked by folk horror ruralities overlaps with similar narratives of "Othered" locations within Gothic texts; particularly those that are situated within environments marked by colonial violence. In their chapter *Imperial Gothic,* David Punter and Glennis Byron note that colonized lands—particularly those within the historical realm of the British Empire—constitute liminal and dangerous spaces, where the "normal boundaries of the civilised world slip away, or are constantly under siege" (2004, 49). The colonial anxieties and paranoia provoked by this aspect of the Gothic are described through Eóin Flannery's postcolonial analysis of Irish Gothic narratives, wherein he asserts that that unlike the varied and romantic English traditions, the Irish Gothic originates within its traumatic history of colonial conflict and division. Consequently, he describes both the physical and cultural landscape of Ireland as haunted by the revenants and ruins of colonialism (Flannery 2013, 92).

This association of the contested, haunted "Otherness" of Ireland is exemplified in the very first seconds of *The Hallow*. Prior to the introduction of the Hitchens family, the film opens with a quote from the *Lebor Gabála Érenn*: "Hallow be their name, and blest be their claim. If you who trespass put down roots, then Hallow be your name." The *Lebor Gabála Érenn* is a semi-mythologized account of Ireland's ancient history dated to the eleventh century. In modern English, the title translates to *The Book of The Taking of Ireland*, or *The Book of Invasions*. While the text is now largely viewed by historians and archaeologists as being a series of mythologized reimaginings of Irish history (Carey 2010, 320–22), Hardy's use of the text in the opening shot of the film establishes the Irish landscape itself as a site defined through many centuries of colonial violence, but moreover as a place occupied by strange and sinister otherworldly beings.

This Gothic fear of colonized land and its inhabitants intersects with Scovell's aforementioned first tenet of the folk horror chain, albeit in a manner that his work does not wholly account for. While the examples of folk horror settings that Scovell explores are certainly varied, they are only ever instances of landscapes as "Other": unsettling at best, outright deadly at worst. There is little to no accounting for the role of folkloric topographies as sites of belonging or resistance, or of its supernatural inhabitants as ally rather than antagonist. Conversely, the novels of activist and author Dorothy Macardle demonstrates a use of the Gothicized Irish landscape as a source of solace and solidarity. While imprisoned for her Republican activities, Macardle wrote a collection of short stories entitled *Earthbound*, six of which feature encounters between Irish nationalists and the friendly ghosts of their compatriots (Malone 2011, 97).

Malone (2011, 98) notes that Macardle's stories marked a deliberate departure from previously established traditions within Irish Gothic, not

only through the benevolence of her ghosts but also through her portrayal of the Irish landscape as the site of said spectral encounters. Hitherto, the Gothic work of nineteenth-century Protestant authors such as Oscar Wilde, Bram Stoker, and Sheridan Le Fanu had presented the Catholic population of Ireland as backward and irrational, and thus the contested land they inhabited and inherited became sites of malevolent, supernatural terror. The civil-division inherent within these texts gives credence to Flannery's (2013, 93) assertion that the Irish Gothic tradition is primarily a *Protestant* tradition, belying what he refers to as a "confessional allegiance" with its English counterpart. In fact, in his analysis of the history of Irish Gothic, Jarlath Killeen (2014, 146) explains in quite exhaustive detail how the fears of the Protestant ruling class in Ireland were projected onto the Catholic majority to the extent that they themselves became "monstrous." Given that the Protestant reformation was premised upon the refusal of the supposedly regressive idolatry and indulgence of the Catholic church, Catholics came to embody a uniquely Gothic position within the colonial zeitgeist.

Relatedly, Luke Gibbons' (1991, 109) analysis of Irish literary history adds an extra layer of significance to Scovell's descriptions of folk horror locations, wherein manmade buildings, as well as the land upon which they are located, are imbued with histories of colonial violence. While the trope of the haunted house or gothic mansion is an obvious mainstay of the Gothic more generally, Gibbons asserts that the decline of Irish ruins were not, "the result of a clash between nature and culture, but between several opposing cultures, the debris of a history of invasions." This Gothic representation of both natural and man-made locations is depicted in particularly unsubtle fashion in *The Hallow*. From the beginning of the film, Claire expresses clear unease at the state of the ancient cottage that the family is renting; immediately setting about attempting to make repairs by removing the iron bars from the windows, ironically facilitating the future bombardment by the iron-averse Fae creatures. Shortly after Adam discovers the black mould in the forest, it is revealed to have spread to the cottage where it seeps through the ceiling into the nursery. "Five hundred years of ancient Irish sludge are dripping all over Finn's bed," Claire announces in disgusted annoyance, one line of dialogue encapsulating a paranoid terror of contamination through contact with the very land that she occupies. Claire's anxieties about the state of their house reflect Flannery's (2013, 94) observations of the role of "Big House" novels within the Irish Gothic; wherein the crumbling buildings and geographical isolation are deployed to provoke feelings of anxiety, paranoia, and insecurity. These anxieties come to terrible fruition as the supernatural attacks by the Hallow escalate, the dilapidated house offering scant protection to the besieged family.

Gibbons (1991, 96–7) notes that this locational dis-ease extends to the Irish people, as well as the landscape, describing how their resistance of, and resentment toward, their colonizers has been interpreted by the English as a deliberately inhospitable and isolationist trait. This is replicated in *The Hallow* in an almost predictable fashion; wherein Adam explains to Claire that, despite his best efforts at diplomacy with Colm, they are "still not mates." This predictability certainly owes much to the well-established horror trope that portrays rural communities as insular, inbred, or ignorant, however, Scovell (2017, 21) does note that folk horror narratives are, "simply the hyper-extension of localism down a dark, parallel footpath." Hence, the isolated woodlands that mark *The Hallow* as a folk horror text also function as a means of identifying the Irish locals as similarly antagonistic. Throughout the film, Colm is only ever portrayed as terse and unrelenting, even callously turning Claire away at gunpoint when she seeks refuge from the Hallow, aligning neatly with Scovell's (2017, 18) observation that folk horror imposes a skewed system of morality onto its rural antagonists. However, he also notes that this morality is skewed within the context of the general status quo of the era in which a text was produced, which—given Gibbons' previous description of the colonial characterization of the "inhospitable" Irish—does raise pertinent questions as to the cultural heuristics present within *The Hallow*.

While it is not appropriate to speculate on Corin Hardy's personal motivations, it is not unreasonable to suggest that he likely did not consciously intend for *The Hallow* to be a pro-colonial film. However, what is evident is that the combined tropes and narrative devices that are utilized within the text are the product of a long history of colonially informed, etic storytelling that relies upon an uncovering of a materially grounded and scientific explanation for "regressive" or superstitious folklore. This tension between the modern/scientific and the rational/superstitious is a common trope within folk horror. However, its erasure of identifiably Irish folklore provokes a specifically colonial reading of the film, wherein the supernatural nature of the Hallow functions as a flattened, oppositional "Other" to the more developed English protagonists. Mikel Koven (2006) explains that the generalized depiction of Celtic mythologies and traditions by British filmmakers serves to maintain a clear distinction between "us" and "them," wherein the latter typically denotes a conveniently broad representation of barbaric, pre-Christian societies that are regressively at odds with scientific modernity; subtly implying the necessity of colonial/scientific intervention.

This tension is less apparent in *The Hallow*. With the exception of the film's use of changelings, the Fae antagonists of this film bare little—if any—resemblance to any entity found within Irish mythology. While a certain degree of artistic license is to be expected in any mainstream depiction of traditional folklore, the denizens of *The Hallow* are more akin to

the subterranean monsters in *The Descent* than any recognizable *Aos si*. Consequently, while the film retains its "dark fairy tale" aesthetic and location, it is nonetheless one that is entirely stripped of its cultural specificity in favor of a more malleable pop-cultural rendering. This "flattening" of Irish mythology recalls Mikel Koven's (2006, 93) observation that Celtic cultures are often presented within folk horror as a hybridized, generic whole, using genre staple *The Wicker Man* to illustrate the "folkloric amusement park" that this erasure of regional-specificity entails. Accordingly, Corin Hardy himself has stated that his intent was less about cultural accuracy than a desire to explore a potential scientific "truth" behind the fairy-tale, stating, "We've read fairy tales all our lives, but what truth might they be based on in a modern, grounded, non-gothic reality?" (Narasaki 2015).

This desire to portray a "non-gothic reality" ironically demonstrates what Flannery (2013, 92–4) identifies as hallmark of Irish Gothic conventions; wherein the project of imperial modernity imposes its logics onto the Irish people and their invaded lands, reducing both to homogenous, threatening "Others." This "enlightened erasure" of the supernatural is evident in both the visual design as well as the narrative of *The Hallow,* wherein the woodland creatures are revealed to the audience through the gaze of the foreign scientist sent to oversee their removal. Throughout the film the Hallow manifests in a variety of forms, but it is initially portrayed as a pervasive, fungal growth that Adam collects in the woods before examining it beneath a microscope. The scene depicts Adam's simultaneous fascination and bemusement at the strange specimen he has found, as well as his self-assured confidence in assigning the Hallow to the familiar confines of comparable taxonomy.

Indeed, Adam's role as a scientist is particularly prescient within a purview of colonialism and folk horror, as it grants him both diegetic and nondiegetic authority. The former refers to his capacity to access the contested woodlands as an employee of the logging company, and the latter reflects the fact that he is positioned to garner audience sympathy by virtue of his status as a lone man of science amid the superstitious hostility of the Irish locals. Early on, the audience is positioned to share Adam's frustration as he attempts to justify his presence in the woods as an ethically neutral scientist, rather than the vanguard of yet another profit-driven incursion into Irish lands. Initially, Adam's discovery of the fungus provokes fascination rather than fear, languidly explaining the parasitism of the *Cordyceps* fungus to Claire as she prepares dinner. The tone of the scene is oddly sexual; the couple pass a joint back and forth, before Adam embraces Claire from behind and caresses the side of her head:

> "It's a real beauty. Its spores can penetrate the skull of an ant to control its mind."
> "That's disgusting."

> "It's amazing. Gets inside the nest, drops its spores over the entire colony, creating thousands of little fungus-controlled automatons."

While one can certainly appreciate the peculiarities that often accompany academic expertise, Adam's enthusiasm for the invasive *Cordyceps* is apt. Not only in terms of the obvious metaphorical links between himself and the fungus as agents of invasion, but also because this scene functions to establish a subject position that the abject alterity of the Hallow will inevitably subvert. It is here that the specific nature of the Hallow as a fungal species raises significant themes of somatic autonomy and subjectivity within the film's context of colonisation and land.

According to mycologist Paul Stamets (2005, 4–7), "The mycelium is an exposed and sentient membrane" that can sometimes cover thousands of acres, and yet remain in constant molecular contact and communication with their environments. Some fungi also develop symbiotic relationships with other species in order to feed or reproduce. In *Mycelium Running*, he describes mycelium networks as more akin to neurological structures than singular and self-contained entities, dubbing them "nature's internet" by virtue of their capacity to collectively respond to stimuli (Stamets 2005, 3). This description thus positions mycelia as an ultimate "Other." This is true for both biological and metaphysical taxonomies, given that fungi cannot be categorized as either animal or plant. They exist within their own category, the boundaries of which appear to be consistently shifting as most species have not yet been identified. This categoric nonconformity contradicts the clear delineation between individuals that has come to define the "Self" within normative Western discourse; as Stamets (2005, 4–5) asserts, they are not limited to a singular and distinct corporeality. Indeed, according to Ben Woodard (2012, 4), fungi are often depicted in weird fiction as possessing their own sentience and agency that is wholly antithetical to that of humans. The notion of a form of intelligence that rivals our own, and yet remains unanswerable to any recognizable symbolic order undermines the supposition of human supremacy.

Put simply, mycelia and other fungal bodies exist across multiple genres of fiction as ideal embodiments of "Otherness," precisely because their inherent "weirdness" contradicts a human desire for conformity within material and discursive categories. This elusiveness provokes what Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (1996, 6) refers to as a "harbinger of category crisis," the monstrous liminality of mycelia signaling a weakness within conventional systems of naming, knowing and being that are premised upon the invulnerability and singularity of the sovereign "Self." Furthermore, Jack[2] Halberstam examines the relationship between the Gothic monster and parasitism, noting that the primary association of the Monstrous and parasitism is not quite as literal as

that shown in *The Hallow*. Instead, he stipulates that parasitism in these texts functions as a racist metaphor for invasion, wherein foreigners such as Jews or the Irish "became ever more closely associated with a kind of parasitical monstrosity, a non-reproductive sexuality, and an anti-English character" (Halberstam 1995, 16). Consequently, it is through this supernatural parasitism that *The Hallow* presents a subtle yet significant reversal of the film's establishing expositions, wherein it is the land that invades the Englishman. Consequently, if the Hallow is to be understood as a manifestation of the colonized Irish landscape, then its parasitic invasion of Adam's body can be understood as a visceral subversion of the binary system that Flannery (2013, 95) identifies within the Gothic: an incursion of "unruly nature" into a hitherto rational agent of "tamed culture."

Shildrick (2002, 50) describes how the normative "tamed" ideal of the Self is constructed against the "unruliness" of nature, which must be controlled and managed at all times, lest it become disruptive. This paranoia speaks to the Cartesian dualism that characterised the so-called Age of Enlightenment, wherein the body and mind exist as separate and dichotomous entities; the latter being detached from the baser elements of materiality and nature. She maintains that the "sovereign Self" is premised upon the fastidious exclusion of contaminating "Others": that is, those that do not fit within patriarchal, ableist or colonial standards of purity and rationality (2002, 54). Consequently, the fungal parasitism that infects Adam represents more than a mere injury; it is an existential undoing facilitated through the Monstrous technologies of the Hallowed land.

Shildrick's description of the singular and exclusive subject is supported by Claire Quigley's observation that, " through contamination by fungus or slime, the human body can no longer provide a clear barrier between the human and nonhuman, nor between the self and other" (2002). A ghoulishly literal bit of wordplay transformation fulfils the ominous warning given by the *Lebor Gabála Érenn*: "If you who trespass put down roots, then Hallow be your name." Once infected, Adam is no longer a singular or independent being, but rather is slowly overtaken by the Fae-parasite. Although he previously likened the Hallow to the *Cordyceps* fungus, it becomes evident that this entity is sentient and alive in ways that cannot be accounted for within rationalistic, colonial symbolic orders; being massively multiple in its materiality and connected to its environment through the "unhinged spatiality of life" that characterizes the fungoid as fundamentally Monstrous (Woodard 2012, 31).

Indeed, as Kearney (2003, 3–4) asserts, the threat of the Monstrous lies less in any threat of violence that they may impose, but rather in their refusal of the taxonomic categorizations that are the hallmarks of enlightened

rationality. It follows then, that for a trained scientist and "rational" protagonist like Adam, the existential threat of the Hallow becomes all the more real when it ceases to be an object that can be studied, named and pathologized by him, echoing Noel Carroll's assertion that a monster is, "anything not believed to exist now according to contemporary science" (cited in Killeen 2014, 147). His pain and fear upon seeing his injured reflection is a stark contrast to the calm, rational scientist that had been so confidently studying the fungal-Hallow beneath a microscope. Indeed, Adam's expertise as a mycologist adds to the tragic irony of his transformation, wherein the knowledge that had once granted him privilege and status leads to him witnessing his own subjective undoing.[3]

This "witnessing" is significant, as it represents a breach of a normative symbolic order that is premised upon the arbitrary lines of distinction between Self/Other; Human/Nature; Rational/Superstitious; Single/Multiple. However, while these breaches are hallmarks of Monstrosity within the Gothic, Halberstam (1995, 21–3) is careful to add that the conventions of the genre (particularly nineteenth-century Gothic) are reliant upon and preoccupied with the very categories of race, class, gender and embodiment that produce the Monsters that disrupt them. This is especially true in the case of Irish Gothic. As Gibbons (2004, 16) maintains, although Gothic invocations of the supernatural facilitate such hierarchical breaches, the genre is nonetheless characterized by these structures of domination and violence. He asserts that " The true violation of nature involves attempts to press society itself and hierarchies of power into a biological mold. It is through the Gothic that race is connected to the paranoid imagination." Following this logic, *The Hallow* would indeed appear to reinforce these conventions—quite literally—through a monstrous, violating mold.

However, this Gothicized paranoia lends itself to the next stage of the discussion: the threat of Monstrous reprisal, and the projection of colonial anxieties within Gothic narratives. The final panning shot of the film shows the aftermath of the planned deforestation. The once dense and impenetrable forest now stands pillaged and bare, with the Hallow presumably destroyed. A truck pulls into frame, and the camera focusses on the felled trees it is carrying; a black, mold-like substance is oozing out of the rough-hewn wood. The Hallow is still alive. The truck pulls away for one final jump-scare as a Hallow-creature leaps, snarling toward the camera. What is interesting about this ending is that amid the threat of future horrors, it also suggests the possibility of catharsis. The film opens with a militant promise to defend Irish forests from "parasitic" invaders, and it ends with a subtle implication that their subsequent destruction will have future, horrific consequences now that the Fae-parasite has been uprooted. Here arises an opportunity to return to Scovell's discussion of the eerie alterity of folk horror locations, albeit with

a mind to explore the postcolonial possibilities that arise in light of Dorothy Macardle's spectral topographies.

Macardle's themes of Republican liberation demonstrate an important distinction between predominant folk horror tropes that establish the interloping, urbanized/British outsider as the clear victim of the folk horror that is enacted upon them—as is the case in *The Hallow.* However, both Malone's (2011, 99) analysis of Macardle's sympathetic spectrality and Flannery's aforementioned description of the paranoid, Protestant Gothic suggest that the fear that maintains these narratives is primarily a colonial fear of reprisal. Accordingly, a similar logic may be applied to the way that *The Hallow* constructs the land itself as Monstrous, wherein the principal horror is provoked in response to invasion. Indeed, despite its chthonic threat of violence, the violence of Hallow is born of a territorial defensiveness that had hitherto been both feared and respected by the locals (give or take a changeling child every few decades). Had Adam heeded their warnings and gone against the invasive agenda of his employers, the forest would remain standing with the Hallow contained within.

However, unlike Macardle's Gothic tales of ghostly solidarity, Hardy's depiction of Irish otherworldliness cannot be read exclusively as either a pro-or anti-colonial text. Indeed, despite the unambiguous references to English colonialism during the first third of the film, Hardy appears to drop the subject entirely by the time the Hallow actually appears onscreen, whereupon the focus is solely upon the tragedy and violence that is wrought up on the Hitchens family. With this said, any sense of loss provoked by the final scenes of environmental devastation should not be uncritically interpreted as an intentionally anti-colonial sign of solidarity or conservationist grief—especially considering the implied terror that the Hallow's survival implies. Rather, it is arguable that *The Hallow's* consistent foregrounding of Ireland's history of subjugation by the English can be understood as a projection of misplaced colonial guilt. Indeed, Hardy's positioning of the landscape as both vengeful and Monstrous aligns more with Flannery's (2013, 93–4) assertion that such constructions reproduce and reveal Anglo/Protestant fears of counter-colonial retribution. Rather, the Monsters of *The Hallow* can be understood more through what Punter and Byron (2013) describe as the misplaced and repressed anxieties of the "supposedly superior human." (264) More simply put, the Gothic's emphasis upon repression reveals the ways in which the paranoia of the powerful is projected back onto marginal bodies and subjectivities. This projection constitutes what Julia Kristeva (1982, 2–3) would refer to as a failed abjection; an attempt to jettison the abject "Other" (or the "not-I") from the "Self" ("I") that ultimately reveals the familiar and self-same origins of said abjection: the "Other" cannot ever be wholly xteriorized, because it originates within the Self (Shildrick 2002, 81). Simply put,

the abjection of the vengeful Hallow is an "Otherness" that does not originate from the Irish landscape, but rather is produced by the colonial-Anglo psyche.

In the instance of the Irish Gothic and *The Hallow*, that abjection culminates in a narrative that similarly projects its own colonial anxieties onto the Irish landscape. Fear of postcolonial reprisal suggests not only a threat of violence, but also—as Adam's transformation reveals—a loss of oneself, and therefore the potential unmaking of a colonial subjectivity. Consequently, *The Hallow* emerges as an awkwardly self-aware film that dithers at the margins of colonial guilt before descending into obfuscating, genre-typical schlock. In particular, the film provokes a sustained (yet unspoken) awareness of the cultural and historical context into which its protagonists arrive, demonstrated primarily through their characteristically English awkwardness within the colonial setting. This is demonstrated in one particularly on-the-nose scene, where a local police officer tries to explain the local mythology to the Hitchens:

> Officer: You're not au-fait with your Irish folklore are you, Mr. Hitchens? A conquered people, forever in hiding, driven from their sacred lands by man with iron and fire.
>
> Adam: Beautifully told. So, you're a believer?
>
> Officer: Nah. Not me. I'm from Belfast. Different sort of bogeyman up there.

The officer's last line speaks to the ambiguous self-awareness of the text as a whole. Afterall, it is not clear what "side" of the Troubles he may have aligned with, nor whom he is referring to as a "bogeyman." The awkward silence that follows is telling; Claire and Adam know that they are unwelcome, and yet they remain the sympathetic "Selves" against which the Monstrous "Other" is constructed. As such, *The Hallow* may be read as a typically Gothic text in the manner described by both Gibbons and Flannery: an abject spectacle that simultaneously provokes and soothes the anxieties of its (presumedly) colonial audience. Indeed, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (1996, 17) insists, the thrill of horror is an understanding that the nightmare on the screen is temporary, the terror of the monstrous is fleeting, and that when the film stops the world will be as it "should be," "When contained by geographic, generic or epistemic marginalization, the Monster can function as an alter ego, as an alluring projection of (an Other) self" (ibid).

However, Cohen (1996, 19–20) also notes that Monsters are rarely so easily contained within such projections—cinematic or otherwise. While *The Hallow* in and of itself may be read as a colonially self-soothing text, Flannery notes that postcolonial readings of Gothic texts function to identify how colonialism constructs dualistic notions of the "Self" and "Other," while

simultaneously, " indicating the presence of the inherently unstable version of the subject on which such a politics rests" (2013, 95). This instability is important, as it represents a potential for a reconfigured politics of the self as a part of a landscape, rather than a possessor of it. Furthermore, the work of Dorothy Macardle already demonstrates the possibility of a Gothicized subjectivity that is informed—even strengthened by—one's proximity to and identification with their homeland. While it is granted that her stories and nationalist zeal may not be wholly applicable to contemporary settings, what remains relevant in this instance is that Macardle's spectral encounters represent a subversion of the Protestant Gothic, wherein the "haunting" of Ireland's history is commandeered as a resistance tactic: "When the rebels fall, they join the army of the dead" (Malone 2011, 98–9). The revenant ghosts of *Earthbound* are harrowing, but only to those that seek to uphold the oppressive status-quo. It is here that the Scovell (2017, 37) offers an intriguing observation about folk horror topographies that offer new possibilities for such transformative heuristics. He asserts that folk horror's use of "Monstrous" landscapes may evoke a Gothic sense of repressed dread and awe, but in so doing it also "suggests that that such terror be derived from a more primitive set of ideas; the sort that Romanticism seemed to equally embrace, but at a comfortable, lofty distance."

Scovell does not offer a clear explanation for what he deems to be "lofty," however, his observation of the limits of Romanticism aligns with prior critiques of nineteenth-century Gothic texts that invoke themes of transgression while simultaneously reproducing hegemonic categories of the self-same (Halberstam 1995, 12–3). Through this interpretation, "loftiness" can be understood as a hesitancy (or outright refusal) to fully embrace the awesome terror and liminality that counter-Enlightenment heuristics can offer. Scovell (2017, 37–8) continues, "Folk horror often denies reason and embraces new forms of, often theological, moral authority; it just so happens that this is linked almost consistently with the topographical location of its societies." If the moral authority and discursive impetus of a text derive from the land itself, then there is much that can be gleaned from folk horror in the configuration of postcolonial Gothic narratives. Here arises an opportunity for the "lofty" anxieties of the Gothic to plummet gleefully back into the burial ground, and see what monsters emerge from its fertile soil.

Accordingly, it is here that we may take a cue from *The Hallow* and consider what lessons can be appropriated from its monstrous mycelium. Stamets (2006, 157) not only describes mushrooms as sentient, but also possessing a sense of humor, stating, "They like to make fun of humans—especially humans who are uncomfortable with their properties." This characterization is commensurate with the subjective unmaking described above and speaks to the value of Monsters (fungal or otherwise) to expose and disrupt arbitrary

categories of "Self" and "Other." Stamets continues, "Humans have this pompous, biologically provincial attitude that we are intelligent, and nature is not. But nature gave us our intelligence, so why wouldn't the mother be as intelligent as the children?" (2006, 157). Stamets' ecological decentring of Enlightenment rationality offers a glimpse of the future potential for postcolonial heuristics of horror, wherein connection to and alliance with the land challenges, rather than reinforces the logics of oppression. As Kearney (2003, 67) maintains, "An openness to the 'Other' beyond the same is called justice."

As stated, *The Hallow* is not a film that ought to be read as a wholly anti- or procolonial text, as this would arbitrarily ascribe a motivation to its creators that may not be warranted. However, as the prior discussion has established, the abject construction of its mycelial Monsters reflects the ways in which colonial anxieties are projected onto contested and stolen lands. The work of Eóin Flannery and Luke Gibson further discusses how these projections manifest in a specifically Anglo-Protestant terror of the Irish landscape, wherein the traumas of conflict and dispossession are sublimated into chthonic, revenant terror. However, while the liminality of Monsters always presents a degree of risk, their alterity functions to expose and transgress the boundaries that underpin the supremacy of the singular and transcendent human. Following the logic of Shildrick (2002) and Kearney (2003), it becomes possible to connect the radical vulnerability of the Monstrous to Scovell's (2017, 81) assertion that the "Otherness" of folk-horror geographies function to warp the reality of its narrative worlds; thereby undermining its promise of ontological stability. More simply put, when the land itself becomes an "Other," it is germane to ask, "To whom?"

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NOTES

1. For the purpose of clarity, in this paper when the phrase "the Hallow" is used, it will refer to the Fae antagonists of the film. When the italicized *The Hallow* is used, it refers to the film itself.

2. For the sake of clarity, Halberstam is cited under his name at the time of publication in the bibliography, however out of respect for the author, he/him pronouns will be used throughout this chapter.

3. A similar theme is present in *Cargo,* (dir. Ben Howling and Yolanda Ramke). Like *The Hallow*, the protagonist of *Cargo* is also a colonial outsider (an Englishman in rural Australia) who has been similarly infected by a parasitic fungus and must now find safety for his infant child before his transformation into a zombie-automaton robs him of his agency and identity completely.

SECTION II

Facing Backward While Looking Forward



Figure 0.2 Visual Intervention II. "It's in the Trees." By Gemma Files. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

PART III

Cultural Positionings

Chapter 9

Early American Colonial Violence and Folk Horror

Wrong Turn*, a Twenty-First-Century Interpretation*

Conner McAleese

Why are we scared of the woods? Folk horror relies on this fear in the same way that haunted house stories rely on the architecture of and attachment to the home for their framework. However, the house is generally only home to a human past, while the woods, or the forest, can contain things much older and not human at all. Folk horror settles between the two, in the intersection of the old and the new, the human and the non-human, though, as a category, like the anxiety it inspires it often refuses to come into sharp focus. Adam Scovell describes the difficulty in defining folk horror best when he says "Folk Horror is a prism of a term. Its light disperses into a spectrum of colors that range in shade and contrast" (Scovell 2021, 6). The "shade and contrast" is especially relevant when looking at the differences in American and British folk horror. While British folk horror has free range of the English countryside to relay its tales of terror, American folk horror is, arguably, a lot more contained in the motifs it can employ within its folk horror tradition (the irony here being that the American wilderness, even just that of the East Coast and Deep South that this chapter shall look at, dwarfs any landscape England has to offer). For American folk horror in particular, the wilderness—often epitomized by expansive forests—is a distinct and fully definable area of land that isseparate from the civilized and "decent" areas of settlement (Murphy 2013, 6). One of the key definitions of what may be considered the "wilderness" is that from the 1964 Wilderness Act of the United States (as cited by Murphy

in *The Rural Gothic*). The most important line from this act, for this chapter at least, is that the wilderness is conceived as an area in which "man himself is a visitor who does not remain" (Murphy 2013, 6).

This chapter will argue that the mutant, cannibalistic clan of *Wrong Turn* (Rob Schmidt 2003) represent neither the impoverished, rural community of West Virginia, nor the traditional violent retribution of Mother Nature seen in other horror films that deal with mankind and their impact on the planet. Instead, Saw-Tooth (Garry Robbins), One-Eye (Ted Clark), and the de facto leader of the clan, Three Finger (Julian Richings) are instead representations of early colonial settlers, forcing the role of "Native American" on the white characters in the film—or those who accept the role as shall be discussed later. Within this framework Three Finger, Saw-Tooth, and One-Eye represent a defilement of the natural landscape and it is the film's protagonists who more closely resemble the transient nature and adaptability of the Native Americans as the earliest settlers understood them to be. While the first half of *Wrong Turn* may be interpreted as a tale of the stereotypical Northern Yankee trespassing on the traditions, culture, and land of the Southern way of life, its second half becomes a turbulent narrative of survival, with the forest remaining neutral yet malleable. This chapter will show a reversal in roles via visual and spoken clues that highlight a greater synergy between the white characters and their environment, while also showing how the same clues work to distance the cannibal clan from the natural landscape and hint at their desecration of the environment. The argument put forward here will then show how *Wrong Turn* is a piece of the larger discourse around how "settler communities . . . have dealt psychologically with the fact that they have dispossessed others of their land and resources" (Porter 2018, 45). The innovation here being that it is the white characters that now experience the horror of earlier colonial prejudice against the Native Americans who "owned" the land before them, and therefore threatened their fledgling colonies. It is specifically this idea of "fledgling" that shall apply to Three Finger and his cannibalistic clan, as this chapter seeks to illustrate them as very early colonials, devoid of the strength offered by their home nation and relying solely on their own brutality to sustain their new lives.

One of the key assertions that this chapter will challenge is the agency afforded the forest in horror cinema and literature. The confluence between evil, the unholy, and the forest can often obscure the other sources of fear that are at the heart of early American writings—a habit that can be seen to have been passed along to early settlers in America through their European heritage. Something of this can be seen in *The Willows* by Algernon Blackwood, where he writes of two friends that take a canoe trip down the river Danube and choose to settle overnight on an island that is covered in "acres and acres

of willows, crowding, so thickly growing there, swarming everywhere the eye could reach" (Blackwood 2004 [1907]). From this description, the imagery of the words "crowding" and "swarming" conjures images of pre-Christian demonic chaos masked under the guise of simple willow trees—indeed it is no coincidence that one of the men on this trip is referred to as a "Swede" invoking the Scandinavian belief that Lucifer landed in a forest when he was cast from heaven and "made it his home."

The Willows continues and reaffirms a standard of contempt/respect for the forest that can be traced through European fairy tale imagery and early American literature. Several scholars comment that "the forest is commonly read as a binary space: either as "good" or "bad" (Parker 2018, 275). In relation to this, the chief rebuttal of this chapter comes from the implied racism of the forest itself. Murphy writes that "the wilderness is depicted as hostile and even actively malevolent space that poses a threat to the safety of the white settler and his/her descendants" (2013, 7). This posits the forest as almost inherently anti-white, and while there certainly are narratives which utilize the rage of the forest to bring a reckoning upon the "white settler" and their "descendants" it is valuable to shine light on those works that espouse the opposite. One of the chief reasons for personifying traits onto the wilderness (especially in the American context that serves as the basis for this chapter) comes from the colonial period as "this era saw early settlers thoroughly dwarfed by the expansive wilderness of America" (Parker 2018, 279). Within woods and expanses of the sizes dealt with in early North America, God—or, perhaps more accurately, Satan—was not easily discernible amongst the elms and oaks of the American East Coast. This fear of the woods has then evolved into a conflict between civility and modernity and the natural landscape of the wilderness. And, as a result, "the forest remains a margin of exteriority to civilisation" and underlines the foundational assumption that the forest is something *other* than civilization—the two are at odds (Harrison 1992, 201).

Elizabeth Parker does much to categorize the fears that underpin our wariness of the forest in her "Seven Theses" (an homage to Jeffrey Cohen's "Monster Culture [Seven Theses]") (Parker 2018, 277). Of these "Seven Theses" the one that most closely epitomizes the fear experienced by Jessie (Eliza Dushku) and Chris (Desmond Harrington) from *Wrong Turn* is her fifth—"the forest . . . is a setting in which we fear we will be eaten" (Parker 2018, 282). Parker takes this idea of consumption and, rightly, highlights the hypocrisy of human deforestation being ignored while "humans are cast as the 'endangered species'" (Parker 2018, 282). Where *Wrong Turn* becomes suggestive within the paradigm offered by Parker is that the creatures hunting Jessie and Chris are not *of* the forest in the way that wolves and bears are (her chief offerings for that which might eat humans), although their humanity remains very much up for debate in the early stages of the film.

While searching for a phone to use to contact his interviewer (and to get the cars involved in the initial crash that started their descent into horror, towed) Chris, Jessie, and her friends come across the typical "cabin in the woods." The group then choose to go inside in search of the phone, even though no one's home (with only Scott [Jeremy Sisto] mentioning West Virginian trespass laws in passing). This "violation of the domestic space" (Murphy 2013, 162) leads the group to discover that there is a threat lurking in the woods; one that is capable of defilement and monstrosity through cannibalism. This incites the beginning of the true horror of the film, or, at least, the murdering of its main characters.

Up until this point, the dialogue within the film had done much to establish this film as a typical Northern disdain of, and intrusion upon, the Southern way of life. At several points throughout the film, Carly and Jessie call the "people" who they perceive to live in the woods, and who they believe set up the barbed wire trap that halted their weeklong hike through the wilderness, "Redneck assholes." However, within the shack that the mutants presumably dwell, we uncover along with the protagonists that these people are more than just uncultured, Southern "rednecks" but are active criminals and cannibals. It is at this moment that the break between considering Three Finger and his kin as people who inhabit an "economically deprived area," as Scott calls the rural setting, and recontextualize them as something far more evil, and, importantly, nonhuman.

If we consider Three Finger, One-Eye, and Saw-Tooth as distinctly unhuman, or having been mutated *beyond* human, then their presence in the woods becomes unnatural—again, a similar parallel emerges here between *Wrong Turn* and the Scandinavian belief that Satan fell into a forest and inhabited it thereafter. The emphasis then falls on the idea that the mutants that serve as antagonists within the film are the colonizers of the forest. There is no connection between landscape and mutant other than that of ownership staked out by the mutants. Instead, the forest appears to be entirely neutral in the conflict between human and mutant, if not favoring the humans themselves. The best example of this is seen in the Canopy Sequence.

THE CANOPY SEQUENCE

There are two reasons that this sequence is of particular importance. The first is that it serves as the tonal and narrative shift from typical backwoods horror film to the subversion of the folk horror genre that my argument posits this film to be. The second reason for its in-depth analysis is that it is the most ubiquitous sequence in the film that shows the disconnect between mutant and their environment, while affirming the connection (or synergy) between

Jessie and Chris and the woods around them. This second point will, in turn, support the former argument.

While running from Three Finger and his kin, Jessie, Chris, and Carly (the rest of their party by this point having been murdered) find themselves at the foot of a watchtower. It is after their ascension into the watchtower that the beginnings of the film's most significant tonal shift occurs. With an empowering score, and the beauty of a cascading sunset out the watchtower's windows, the vast and uncompromising scale of how deep in the wilderness they are is hammered home. It is at this point that we as the audience are also reminded of this fact, as, for most of the film, it has been easy to believe that the highway is not too far off screen, since the original incident that occurred at the start of the film happened not too far from it. We, at the same time as Jessie, Chris, and Carly, now understand that help will not be forthcoming in anytime soon. It is from this point that the settler/nature motif is introduced to both characters and audience. Jessie, Chris, and Carly are no longer looking for a road (representing safety) and the police (representing justice). Instead, survival becomes their primary objective. The caveat of this change is that they now understand they must rely on themselves to achieve this. This is despite the OB radio within the watchtower because as the mutants pass beneath the watchtower, a man's voice booms across the forest and asks them, "What's your position?" It is with this question that we understand the futility of the radio and its link to the outside world. Jessie, Chris, and Carly have no idea where they are or how to direct help to them. In a similar way to the early European colonists and their rudimentary cartography, the vastness of the landscape around renders them both everywhere and nowhere at once. And what is worse, this voice alerted their hunters to their position.

The seminal shift in the narrative occurs after this moment. As Three Finger sets alight the foundations of the watchtower, Jessie and her companions are now torn between being burned alive or taking a leap of faith into the waiting arms of the forest—the tall branches that surround (yet do not eclipse) the watchtower. As each elect to make the leap, their faith is rewarded and their relationship with the environment around them is altered. It moves from a green sea isolating them from the outside world (and the aid it could offer) to a mode of outmaneuvering the mutants. It is this understanding, and subsequent use of the forest that consolidates the argument of this chapter. While Saw-Tooth, One-Eye, and Three Finger hunt Jessie, Chris, and Carly, they are forced to deal with the same fear that many Europeans had when they colonized most of the known world—that they do not know what to expect from those they are up against.

The second reason for the Canopy Sequence's deeper investigation is a result of the visual clues that the narrative offers to substantiate my argument above. As Jessie and Chris navigate the thick branches of the trees (a

navigation which highlights the "labyrinthine" quality of nature that is typical of "fictionalised American landscapes" (Downey 2018, 78)), Carly is killed by Saw-Tooth, who has climbed the tree to hunt them in the canopy while his kin stalk them from below. Upon seeing Carly's death, Jessie's determination to survive coalesces with her earlier need for justice. She and Chris, in another of the film's cinematographic parallels, set a trap for Saw-Tooth. As Jessie calls for his attention, she ducks as Chris lets loose a branch he had been holding back. The branch hits Saw-Tooth square in the chest and sends him tumbling to the ground below. This is vital to this chapter's interpretation of the environment for two reasons. The first is that, where the mutants use bear traps, and coils of barb wire (read: manmade elements) in their traps, Jessie and Chris are forced to be more adaptive and receptive to the forest around them. Their lack of mechanized resources (the mutants also carry guns) evokes a sense of atavistic urgency that distinguishes Jessie and Chris from being perceived as colonizers of the forest, despite their heritage.

The second visual clue that further supports the argument that the mutants are at odds with their surroundings is their use of torches. While Three Finger and One-Eye go to their fallen kin, Chris and Jessie are able to break off from being hunted and take shelter behind the noise of a waterfall. As the plot is now set at night, the use of torches by the mutants appears to make sense, until you consider Chris and Jessie's escape. Where most folk horror narratives espouse some kinship between the rural community at the heart of their narrative and the landscape they inhabit (Murphy 2013, 146), *Wrong Turn* actively distances itself from this rhetoric, and instead weakens its antagonists with the same visual motifs we are familiar seeing our protagonists utilize—in this case, the limited light of a flaming torch.

Each of these points are integral to the audience viewing Jessie and Chris (the only two to survive the film) as being Other from the mutants. This Otherness is a deliberate attempt to recontextualize the settler/native dynamic we are used to seeing on screen with the settler being in most ways innocent and the Native being an epitome or embodiment of evil. Jessie and Chris threaten the cannibalistic clan's way of life, and letting the "outsiders" survive means retribution, investigation, and a fundamental change to the comfortable life the clan have established for themselves. While they initially seek to simply consume the travelers for their enjoyment/gratification, the outsider's adaptiveness to the surrounding forest and their resilience in the face of the clan's brutal hunt begins to threaten their way of life. The parallel here is that Jessie and Chris can escape into the forest and back to their way of life and leave behind Three-Finger and his ilk, and while scarred, their life will continue on as normal. But this is not an option for the mutants, Jessie and Chris' escape means their claim on the land, their continued terror of the Appalachian Mountains, will come to an end. In many ways, this is symbolic

of the mindset of those early colonial settlers. Not only did the existence of Native Americans challenge the teachings of Christianity, but their continued presence challenges any claim made by the settlers on ownership of the land. The two cannot coexist.

THREE FINGERS, ONE-EYE, AND SAW-TOOTH AS EARLY SETTLERS

Defining the members of the clan as early settlers relies on the interpretation of the visual clues offered to us within the film. The first that we shall consider is the actual settlement (homestead) of the mutants within the film. This is of vital importance as it is an indicator of the static nature of the clan and the approach this then brings to how they view themselves in relation to the woods and those that pass through it. Murphy writes that "those who reside in settled, apparently, secure communities are menaced by outsiders characterized by their freedom of movement and dangerous unpredictability" when defining the "central conflict in the way Indians and colonists interacted with their environment" (2013, 10). In the movie, the mutants are presented as "settled." From the indoor plumbing facilities of their cabin to the three fridges holding various body parts, to the beds and sofas strewn throughout the cabins main front room, these mutants are presented as—though horrifying and devoid of basic hygiene—partly domesticated. The house itself sits at the end of a dirt road, easily traversable by their truck. While primitive, these are bulwark signs of domesticity. If we consider the film from the point of view of Three Fingers, this group of outsiders are similar to passing deer or an infestation of rats (a "menace") that he and his family have every right to challenge. The film makes this clear with the aforementioned violation of the clan's domestic space. This home is what allows the mutants to stake claim on the territory around them, which in turn includes them in the wider discussion of American sovereignty of the land. "The battle for the spiritual as well as territorial control over American soil has never ended" (Porter 2018, 45), and through *Wrong Turn* we can begin to understand the legacy of this conflict. America, while now settled, must reckon with its own colonial violence.

However, this is not the only way the film juxtaposes the role of the white characters and the mutants. Specifically, with the "freedom of movement and dangerous unpredictability" portion of Murphy's quotation. Chris, at the film's beginning, says that he is on his way to Raleigh. A doctor, he is interviewing for a position at a hospital. While seemingly innocuous, this is an example of economic migration and representative of a Native American view of settlement. "They [Native Americans] have adapted to the seasonal diversity of their environment by moving their settlements in accordance

with the changing of seasons" (Murphy 2013, 10). While not dictated by the seasons, and instead motivated by economics and employment opportunities, even before Chris steps into the Appalachian wilderness, he is being shown as an intuitive and adaptable figure that is able to migrate in order to survive. It is, however, his desperation to at least notify his potential employer of his tardiness that is offered as the reason for the group entering the mutant's home without consent.

Second, there is a distinctly urban approach to how the mutants choose to hunt their prey. One of the first kills in the film is that of Evan (Kevin Zegers) and Francine (Lindy Booth). While we do not see Evan being killed Francine's happens on screen. The most significant aspect of this murder is that it does not come from the woods, but from the road. As Francine peers into the underbrush of the forest that lines the road, she sees a remnant of Evan's ear (the piercings confirming that it is his ear). As she backs away, one of the mutants' attacks Francine from the road behind her. This is indicative of the way that the mutants hunt *en general*. They are tied to the dirt roads by their truck, and because of this, it is the rural roads that they know best of all—not the complicated networks of the forest itself. We see this again, after our protagonists escape the mutant's cabin after trespassing. While Jessie and her friends clamber up the rock-face that looms behind their cabin, Three Finger, Saw-Tooth, and One-Eye do not give chase via foot. They immediately go to their truck and head for the road. Our protagonists end up in what can only be described as a car graveyard and the legacy of these mutants' killings are revealed. These cars become a de facto urban area within the forest, one that the mutants are only able to sustain through their violence. While in this space, Three Finger chooses to hunt the intruders with a gun. While several of the kills within the film do happen with a bow and arrow, the *initial* attack on the group *en masse* occurs with a rudimentary gun. The implication of this is that Three Finger only uses a bow and arrow (exampling a much more primitive weapon) when he is out of ammunition.

Just as the first examples above have shown how unconnected the clan are to the natural environment around them, they can also be seen, as in these most recent cases to have a very limited version of what constitutes the urban. From their comforts of domesticity; to their reliance on mechanics (both guns and vehicles); to their knowledge of their land stemming from dirt roads, the mutants continually show their proclivity for the technological and manmade. This is yet another instance where the narrative seeks to distance the mutants from the natural environment they inhabit and a corner stone of this chapter's argument that the mutants are more representative of early colonists rather than as indigenous Americans as the genre would usually imply. The "fixity" of their environment not only underpins their claim over the land, but also their assuredness of this claim. While the car graveyard to

the protagonists shows the scale and historicity of the mutants' crimes, for the mutants, it highlights an assuredness (or arrogance) that their position is rightful and permanent. Beyond this it illustrates a *desire* to remain static. It is a reversal of the fear that "when you leave 'civilisation' you will inevitably become less civilised, often as a result of adaptation and transformation that turns you into something partially or wholly monstrous" (Murphy 2013, 11). While Jessie and Chris do participate in the "adaptation" mentioned above, their violence is ephemeral and reactionary. Instead, it appears that the mutants themselves are *entering* civilization and, though not becoming more civilized (though violence and civility are interesting areas of investigation within the American context), they do become less adaptable (clinging to the dirt roads, fire-lit torches) and resistant to transformation (picking off their prey one by one).

This then forces us to reconsider how we view what is "partially or wholly monstrous" as it appears that the familiar comforts of civilization appear to promote a degree of monstrosity. And with this we must reckon with *why* they are so entrenched in their way of life. While it is revealed in its sequel that the mutations caused are a result of inbreeding (which was only hinted at in the first film as there appears to be no female mutants) and the effluence of a paper mill polluting the environment; if we are to consider the first film alone, then we must do as we have throughout the length of this chapter and reverse the roles presented to us. Were Three Finger, One-Eye, and Saw-Tooth to consider ending the violence and turning themselves in, the only result we can envision is that same violence being meted out on them (either through death penalty or abuse). Their disfigurements bely a greater intelligence (Murphy 2022, 143) that is only hinted at in the first film, and that intelligence has a greater understanding of the results their appearance would cause them: violence. While not justified, it is an interesting position to evaluate; understanding why these "mountain men" choose to cling to the mountain and hide in the wilderness, yet hunger for the convenience of modernity.

While *Wrong Turn* was certainly not written or produced to be a metaphor for early colonial violence and its legacy on modern American culture, Alexandra Heller-Nicholas says it best in *Woodlands Dark and Days Bewitched* (2021) when she connects horror to its uncanny ability to "articulate something they don't even know they're articulating." *Wrong Turn* epitomizes this articulation, with its relatively low-budget, "predictable" premise, and twist ending, it would be easy to miscategorized this film. Yet, when connected with the amorphous definition of folk horror that comes in a "spectrum of colours that range in shade and contrast" (Scovell 2021, 6) discussed in the introduction to this chapter, we can critically engage with the visual and narrative context offered by the movie and mete out an understanding of it that has larger repercussions on horror debates than the sum of its gory parts.

While its connection to folk horror is based on the rurality of its locale and the innate misunderstanding between Jessie, and her friends, and the cannibal clan, what lies beneath the surface is an indictment of early colonial violence. While America does not have the remnants of feudalist practices and Gothic architecture on which to anchor its folk horror tradition, it is littered with the conflict between pre-Christian, un-Christian, and Christian peoples that are evidenced in much of British and European folk horror. While *Wrong Turn* does more than pay lip service to this Americanized version of the genre, it builds upon it. In subverting the roles of Jessie, Chris, and the cannibals, so that the audience's perception of each is reversed, *Wrong Turn* participates in America's discussion around its beginnings and the cost of its hegemony over the North American continent, while simultaneously bringing a reckoning upon the audience that forces a reflection inward in their participation within a culture borne of violence. It, too, renegotiates the nebulous boundaries of what constitutes as American folk horror and cements itself as a twenty-first-century consideration of the genre.

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Chapter 10

Wendigo Tales

Folkloric Monsters and Indigenous Resistance in Waubgeshig Rice's Moon of the Crusted Snow

Lauryn E. Collins

Canada's literary tradition is inseparable from the country's existence as a colonial power. With the overwhelming majority of Canadian climate fiction focusing on the settler-colonial subject's relationship to land and location, the scholarly shift to centering Indigenous authors and subjects raises unique perspectives and prompts challenging questions on how experiences of the Canadian landscape are filtered through positionality as settler-colonial, immigrant, or Indigenous subjects. One result of this recentering of Indigenous subjects is the emergence of differing perspectives on apocalypse culture in Anthropocene fiction, with Indigenous Canadian authors producing counternarratives to the dystopian perspectives typical of Margaret Atwood's sci-fi oeuvre through a triumphant return to non-European narrative traditions and figures. With apocalypse narratives becoming a common way of coping with the existential threat of climate change (LeMenager, 2017), the Gothic provides a useful lens for analyzing and understanding the particularities of apocalypse narratives in the current literary landscape. Using a contemporary understanding of the Gothic as an "emphasis on the returning past, its dual interest in transgression and decay, its commitment to exploring the aesthetics of fear and its cross-contamination of reality and fantasy" (Spooner and McEvoy, 2007, 1), as opposed a rigid set of tropes and features indicative of an eighteenth-century European aesthetic, the emergence of a horror tradition grounded in the oral histories and folklores of Anishinaabe culture utilizes the Gothic's potential for horror through illumination as a subverting force.

Incorporating the Gothic's history as a subversive genre that foregrounds the experiences of the social "Other" through metaphors of the supernatural and the haunting past, I use recent scholarship on Indigenous Gothic and Apocalypse Gothic in tandem with Stephanie LeMenager's scholarship on morbidity in "cli-fi"[1] to argue for an increasing scholarly tradition of Indigenous horror in Waubgeshig Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow*. Acknowledging the problems that arise when applying a European literary tradition to contemporary Indigenous literature, this chapter aims to provide an overview of current approaches to Indigenous literatures through a Gothic lens by bridging the two epistemological frameworks through scholarship on Indigenous science fiction and literary representations of climate change. Waubgeshig Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow* demonstrates LeMenager's conceptualization of "learning to die" (227) in the Anthropocene through a subversion of Eurocentric Gothic traditions by the recentering of Anishinaabe folklore within which to situate contemporary understandings of the Wendigo figure in the context of ongoing colonial violence and climate catastrophe.

CLIMATE HORROR: HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO GOTHIC FOLKLORE

It is imperative to ground this analysis in a thorough understanding of the history and evolution of Canadian Gothic literature and its origins in eurocentrism. Early Canadian literature is deeply grounded in the Sublime (Burke, 2014, 507–8), with settler colonial subjects repeatedly finding themselves thrust into crisis as they are met with the unfamiliarity of the Canadian wilderness. As such, the Canadian Gothic is a tradition that is—even in its settler-colonial iterations—a Gothic grounded in the Anthropocene through its connection to the sublimity of nature. Construing nature as an antagonist: cold, unyielding, and deeply threatening to the humanity of the settlers that encountered it, Carol Ann Howells argues that "the first Canadian Gothic was [a] wilderness Gothic, emphasizing not only location but also dislocation, refiguring the classic tropes of European Gothic in a New World context" (2007, 106). The rhetoric used in scholarship on the early Canadian Gothic is problematic, to say the least. Using a traditional Gothic lens through a specifically settler-colonial perspective, Howells constructs this wilderness Gothic as a "hybrid" Gothic, "existing 'at the imaginative frontier where the imported European imagination meets and crosses with the Native indigenous one'" (Ibid). The frontier rhetoric fronted by Atwood and, subsequently, Howells masterfully dodges the violence that operates through Canadian colonialism. The use of pioneer language in constructing Canadian Gothic

as a hybrid discourse of European and Indigenous narrative traditions makes it seem as if it was an equal or dualistic phenomenon. This glosses over the silencing of Indigenous voices by Canadian settlers through decades of genocidal imperialism and, doing so, rejects the established ability of the Gothic to evolve and adapt—or, rather, graft (Sanders, 2016)—itself into myriad literary scenes, whether or not those scenes concern themselves with a settler-colonial or Eurocentric viewpoint. As such, this begs the question: how can one ethically apply a Eurocentric epistemological tradition to Indigenous literature that foregrounds, in part, the monstrosity of colonial hegemony? How does the re-centering of folkloric horror serve as a subverting agent in a literary landscape that by-and-large views the settler-colonial subject as the "natural" victim in a hostile and foreign landscape?

Analyzing anti-colonial literature through a theoretical tradition that originates from the colonizer is an uncomfortable juxtaposition. It is this very juxtaposition, however, that allows the friction necessary for subversion and therefore resistance in a literary landscape that cannot ever fully distance itself from its colonial origins. Cari Carpenter writes:

> The critique of attaching Indigenous literature to Eurocentric literary genres is perhaps best articulated by Jodi Byrd "Genre, in other words, colonizes texts; it collects, categorizes, and arrays textual productions into shelved units for instant marketability and digestibility, and, in the process, produces its own others." In place of genre, Byrd suggests one think of the "transgeneric aesthetics." (2017, 48)

I echo Carpenter's arguments on the concept of an Indigenous Gothic, as "rather than arguing for a neat fit of these texts within the Gothic genre, I look to ways that they in fact refigure that category in an anti-colonialist project. The Gothic, in other words, has other uses than what one might imagine; like the monsters it imagines, it rapidly changes form" (48). The Gothic's history as a subversive discourse has always made way for marginalized voices to stand against the social hegemonies. As such, an Indigenous Gothic is not outside the realm of possibility—particularly when noted that pre-contact Indigenous folkloric traditions are able to use the Gothic as an adaptational "graft" (Sanders, 2016) on which to anchor Indigenous voices into a genre that the dominant discourse is able to transmit.

Carpenter further states that:

> Cynthia Sugars and Gerry Turcotte make a case for the Canadian Gothic, calling its national project "inherently haunted," with a "haunting effect that can be unsettling and enabling at the same time." Such haunting is particularly relevant to those of the First Nations, who have had to endure atrocities such as genocide, boarding schools, and—perhaps most crucially—the various iterations of

> the Indian Act, which has sought to determine who has (and who lacks) Indian status. (2017, 50)

By approaching the possibility of an Indigenous Gothic through a "Gothic . . . [that is] described as more a strategy of reading (or viewing) [rather] than a text alone" (49) offers a vehicle for subversion—an opportunity for Indigenous voices to "cast colonialism as the true horror" (50) and appropriate a Eurocentric epistemological tradition for the purposes of resisting Eurocentric literary hegemonies.

INDIGENOUS GOTHIC: AN ETHICAL GRAFTING

Integral to the possibility of an Indigenous Gothic is the current body of literature that exists on the concept of the Wendigo figure. The Wendigo is a monster from Anishinaabe folklore, described as "[a] figure [that] resembles a giant ice skeleton, typically described as superhumanly tall and yet impossibly thin, who has been driven to an insatiable and irreversible cannibalism by starvation, usually brought on by harsh winter conditions and the absence of any game or food sources in the unforgiving far northern landscape of the North American continent" (Burnham, 2014, 231). The Wendigo figure exists in the realm of the supernatural and the uncanny, which allows it to act as a scion on which to graft Indigenous folklore onto the Gothic tradition. Adaptation theorist Julie Sanders describes grafting theory as a form of adaptation that, instead of creating an updated or modified form of an original source material, is adapted "as if a grafting has taken place of a segment, or rootstock, of the original text. The rootstock is conjoined to a new textual form, or scion, to create an entirely new literary artefact" (2017, 69). This image of a graft is useful, as it prevents the concept of the Wendigo figure from being absorbed into the European Gothic discourse, and instead allows the Indigenous origins of the Wendigo to exist in a Gothic space without becoming homogenized as a "Gothic monster." This allows the Wendigo to act as a subversive keystone, as it is "an especially useful trope for a potential Indigenous Gothic; it is often used to invoke (and critique) the selfishness and destruction of capitalism and colonialism" (Carpenter, 2017, 49). The Wendigo figure appears in Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow* in ways that foreground colonialism as the all-consuming monster that hunts and harms the Indigenous subject. The Wendigo figure is a monster fit for the Anthropocene: it is the result of human beings so desperately affected by the sublime wilderness that they resort to cannibalism to survive (DiMarco, 2011, 134), and in doing so are fundamentally transformed into a posthuman

monster that consumes others in the name of self-preservation. The Wendigo figure as the result of refusing to "learn to die" (LeMenager, 2017) in an Anthropocene that has resulted in disaster, apocalypse, and displacement reminiscent of colonization itself (Whyte, 2018). As such, as Rice's text is an apocalypse narrative that foregrounds colonialism and climate change, the Indigenous Gothic graft must include a thorough understanding of how "apocalypse" is understood by both settler-colonial and Indigenous subjects through a folkloric tradition that predates and presupposes European narrative assumptions.

Kyle Whyte's article "Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral Dystopias and Fantasies of Climate Change Crises" takes issue with the way apocalypse is portrayed by contemporary science fiction written by settler-colonial subjects. Whyte states, "Some Indigenous peoples, then, offer the idea that we confront climate change having already passed through environmental and climate crises arising from the impacts of colonialism" (2018, 226). Citing residential schools, displacement, and the destruction of Indigenous ecosystems through settler-colonial capitalism, Whyte argues that some Indigenous peoples already exist in the dystopian future that white subjects dread as a direct result of the actions of colonialism (228), implying that "apocalypse" is a state of existence understood differently by Indigenous and settler-colonial subjects. "Apocalypse" narratives tend to be associated with science-fiction, and indeed *Moon of the Crusted Snow* can be interpreted as a science fiction (or climate fiction) text, however, the boundaries between Gothic and science fiction are more fluid than they appear. From its very beginnings, the Gothic has made room for science fiction narratives and vice-versa, as both genres concern themselves with social anxieties, fears, and taboos. As noted by Arthur Redding:

> The Gothic delights in excess, grotesquerie, scorns of the moral, and the energizing tension between rationalist impulses and the indulgence of morbidity, of perversion, marks the admixture of Gothic and apocalyptic science fiction. Mary Shelley's 1826 fantasy of a world depopulated, *The Last Man*, is an important link between the great age of British Gothic fiction in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and the emergence of Victorian science fiction, and such subsequent horror classics as Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) betray the fraternity of science fiction and horror genres. (2014, 445–49)

I do not wish to turn this into an argument on genre and codification; however, it is useful to note that science fiction often overlaps with the Gothic—either in aesthetic, mode, or structure—and a text may occur as both a piece of science fiction *and* a piece of Gothic fiction. Taking this into account,

the notion of the Wendigo figure again serves as a useful narrative bridge: grafting European onto Indigenous, Gothic onto science fiction, folklore onto novel, and disaster onto mundanity. The "disaster narrative" is one that occurs in both Gothic and science fiction alike, with folklore reminding us that narratives of disaster and haunting are cyclical and ever-changing, providing a fluid framework that serves as both reminder and warning.

FOLKLORIC GOTHIC: APOCALYPSE, WENDIGOS, AND THE ANTHROPOCENE

Writing on narrative manifestations of climate anxiety, LeMenager's conceptualization of "learning to die in the Anthropocene" offers the grounding theory that brings together the previous contextualization on Indigenous voice, Gothic traditions, science fiction narratives, and apocalyptic thinking. LeMenager argues that cli-fi offers readers narrative exercise to help practice learning to die—to accept climate change not as a quick, painful, and dehumanizing end but as a series of slow transformations that must be addressed by recognizing oneself as ecologically enmeshed (2017, 230). She observes that learning to die in the Anthropocene is understood differently based on an individual's relationship to settler-colonial versus Indigenous ideas of death and disaster. LeMenager writes this:

> For cli-fi writers in the Euro-American tradition, learning to die implies letting go of some cherished tenant of humanism. Sometimes this letting go proves productive of new aspirations of humanity and human sociality. In other instances, learning to die means recognizing oneself as a biological entity, challenging traditional humanist ideas of the sovereign self. (2017, 229)

This loss of humanity and the self is reflected in settler-colonial understandings of the Wendigo figure in Apocalypse-Gothic narratives, which is juxtaposed by Kyle Whyte's scholarship on spiraling time (2018, 229) and the idea of how these scholarly "concepts and narratives of crises, dystopia, and apocalypse obscure and erase ongoing oppression against Indigenous peoples and other groups" (234). Whyte argues that many Indigenous peoples have already experienced apocalypse (an irreversible end to a fundamental way of life) by nature of colonial violence and displacement (226–27). As such, the concept of an "apocalypse" as an event of a threatening future erases the experiences of Indigenous peoples who have already experienced an apocalypse in the recent past, raising questions of disaster narratives and how they are contrasted by Indigenous and settler-colonial authors.

The use of the Wendigo as a demonstrative figure of the ecological apocalypse or disaster narrative is a narrative tool that has been in some ways appropriated by settler scholarship. There is a tendency to analyze the Wendigo figure as a metonymic mirror for settler subjects to view the monstrosity of colonialism within themselves. Danette DiMarco—addressing Atwood's scholarship on the Wendigo figure in settler-colonial science fiction narratives—writes this:

> Goldman identifies Wendigo stories as "disaster narratives" that emerge "in social systems in crisis." Goldman understands Atwood's narrative adaptations of the Wendigo in Wilderness Tips as vehicles for exposing "western culture's very own disaster narratives . . . " and for "register[ing] the ongoing impact of imperialism." For Goldman, the power of Atwood's adaptive practice, and I would argue of many of her other works, is her reflexivity. Atwood does not represent Wendigo tales as manifestations of "native" culture. Rather, she turns to them to reveal western culture's unhealthy and systemic commitment to over-consumption. The belief that Wendigo stories, as disaster narratives, can be used to critique Euro-western materialism is a common thread which this essay shares with Goldman's, as it extends this approach from literature to film. (2011, 135)

I take issue with Atwood's tendency to dislocate the Wendigo from its origins as a pre-contact Indigenous monster. The Wendigo figure is an Anishinaabe figure, and this is especially important to keep in mind when analyzing scholarship by Indigenous subjects. Although I agree that the Wendigo figure can be used to subvert Eurocentric epistemological traditions in the Gothic mode, I caution against dislocation. Instead, I aim to foreground the Wendigo as a supernatural figure that has existed pre-colonization and now acts as a grafting point through which Indigenous literatures can express the effects of colonialism as they relate to climate destruction, historical brutality, and ongoing harm by subverting the question of who is the "Other" in Gothic narratives.

Grounding its critique of settler-colonial movements in the Anthropocene, *Moon of the Crusted Snow* bridges narrative traditions to foreground a series of truths, "demonstrating the value of playing with opposites, the Indigenous uncanny maintains a constant state of flux in order to disrupt and destabilise knowledge and power from settling into hardened and irrefutable regimes of truth" (Emberly, 2014, x). Although media coverage of the "climate apocalypse" is primarily geared toward white citizens of the Global North, citizens of the Global South, communities of color, and Indigenous populations bear the brunt of climate apocalypse—feeling the effects of it earlier and with more intensity than the communities who write and consume climate apocalypse media. Returning the Wendigo figure to Indigenous authorship (and not removing it from its folkloric home, as Atwood's scholarship does),

allows that disruptive potential to flourish, as the horror that is created from the literary use of the Wendigo is at once effective and affective to a multitude of readers. Humanizing the Wendigo—instilling the Wendigo with real-world behaviors (violence, greed, and hubris) in addition to its operation in the uncanny—renders it a contemporary folkloric tradition that serves the twenty-first century in its herculean task of grappling with decolonization in the Anthropocene.

MOON OF THE CRUSTED SNOW: WENDIGO AS COLONIAL THREAT

Waubgeshig Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow* centers on Evan Whitesky—a young Anishinaabe man in his mid-twenties who serves as a maintenance worker on his Northern Ontario reserve. The narrative begins with a disconnection of the reserve from power or contact with other communities, immediately situating the narrative as one that takes place in a disaster scenario—at least according to a settler-colonial narrative. A particularly harsh and brutal winter sets in, and the now-isolated community begins returning to traditional practices to withstand the weather, a reality that settler-colonial climate fiction portrays as "disastrous" but is treated with a clear, unencumbered sense of reality by the novel. As people begin to succumb to the cold, a group of white settlers (led by an aggressive, bullish man named Scott) arrive at the reserve and demand to be included in the community's survival efforts—a demand that soon turns into a colonization effort as members of the Anishinaabe community begin to succumb to the cold and the settler group attempts to claim leadership. This revisitation of colonization creates a distinct social framework for a nexus point of horror: by laying bare the realities of settler contact in a cli-fi setting, folkloric elements from pre-contact legend have the ability and the opportunity to flourish as a form of resistance. Rice's use of the Wendigo—in addition to representations of oral histories of displacement and replacement—merge the horrific realities of colonialism with the existential horror of climate destruction, using the Wendigo as a metaphoric bridge that foregrounds the viscerality of the consumption and destruction of Indigenous lives.

The sublime horror of the Wendigo is based in its personification of deadly hunger. The corporeal threat of starvation and its consequences is one that lends intuitively to the looming effects of climate instability and its potential consequences. Rice introduces the literary landscape for the Wendigo figure subtly, focusing at first on the apprehension of isolation and then on the concerns of food stability and access to warmth and shelter—both elements of life that, when disrupted, allow the Wendigo to flourish and to feed.

> "We all know there wasn't enough food at the trading post to last us for the rest of the winter. And all that food is gone now anyway. So we have to use our emergency supply . . . We're going to assess each home's need, and set rations according to that. That means we'll be visiting your homes over the next few days to see what you have." (Rice, 2018, 113)

This is the first instance of subversion in the narrative, as instead of the cut off from urbanity sparking panic or fear in the community, the response is one of calm resignation amidst a history of displacement and adaptability.

> Despite the hardship and tragedy that made up a significant part of this First Nation's legacy, the Anishinaabe spirit of community generally prevailed. There was no panic on the night of this first blizzard, although there had been confusion in the days leading up to it. Survival had always been an integral part of their culture. It was their history. The skills they needed to persevere in this northern terrain, far from their original homeland farther south, were proud knowledge held close through the decades of imposed adversity. (Rice, 2018, 48)

This indicates the presence of Whyte's claim that "the hardships many non-Indigenous people dread most of the climate crisis are ones that Indigenous peoples have endured already due to different forms of colonialism: ecosystem collapse, species loss, economic crash, drastic relocation, and cultural disintegration" (226). This acknowledgement of displacement and perseverance also demonstrates LeMenager's claim that "the prescription [for learning to die] involve[s] learning to lose one's 'civilization,'" (231) and Evan's Anishinaabe community has learned to die many times through the repeated effects of colonialism in the Anthropocene. This message is foregrounded in a narrative parallelism in the denouement of the novel, when the community is once again displaced from their current living space due to the extreme conditions brought on by the inclement weather.

> "The world isn't ending," she went on. "Our world isn't ending. It already ended. It ended when the Zhaagnaash [2] came into our original home down south on that bay and took it from us. That was our world. When the Zhaagnaash cut down all the trees and fished all the fish and forced us out of there, that's when our world ended. They made us come all the way up here. This is not our homeland! But we had to adapt and luckily we already knew how to hunt and live on the land. We learned to live here . . . But then they followed us up here and started taking our children away from us! That's when our world ended again. And that wasn't the last time . . . Yes, apocalypse. We've had that over and over. But we have always survived." (Rice, 2018, 149–50)

Rice's framing of a climate disaster as another small apocalypse for this indigenous community not only grounds the narrative as climate fiction but

also creates a setting of isolation through which a Gothic mode can flourish. This climate-centric isolation not only lends itself well to Burke's sublime, but it also reveals the winter as a site of the *uncanny*—that strange and mysterious feeling that leads to an unsettling of the mind that allows the Wendigo figure to appear as Gothic subversion of colonial understandings of climate "apocalypse."

The volatility of the climate paints an apocalyptic Gothic scene, with the eeriness of the landscape and the cloying isolation of winter painting a background for the Wendigo figure to operate as grafted Gothic monster.

> A blizzard howled as he opened the high garage door, the whiteout obscuring his line of sight. He looked up to see a crimson sun pulsing through the winter storm, washing the snow around him in a bright red glow like the flashing lights of an ambulance. It seemed to flash in sync with the beat of his heart, which sped up as he stepped into the building to escape the storm. He pulled back the hood of his parka and his eyes struggled to adjust to the darkness. The pulsating flares from the sun outside did nothing to illuminate the interior of the morgue. (Rice, 2018, 186)

The representations of Rice's landscape are reminiscent not of a traditional Gothic aesthetic, but a disaster Gothic: isolation, degradation, and the dissolution of comfort and community are hallmarks of the Apocalyptic Gothic (Redding, 2014), and Rice's invocation of that aesthetic here grounds the appearance of the Wendigo figure as that dystopian figure wandering the plains after disaster—looking (or hunting) for victims.

Scott—the white man who appears just as disaster begins to strike the community—is a figure who attempts to *re-colonize* the Anishinaabe community just as the community is attempting to *decolonize* itself. The outsider's introduction reeks of colonial entitlement, emerging from the forest surrounding the reserve and demanding authority and attention. "Well, my Ojibwe friends," Scott says in his first meeting with Evan. "I'm here for the same reason everyone else is: to breathe the fresh northern air . . . and I hear the hospitality of the Ojibwe is unrivalled" (Rice, 2018, 102). After the community reluctantly accepts Scott into their land as an antagonistic outsider, Scott is implicated in the deaths of multiple members of the community (138) and shows a blatant disregard for Indigenous sovereignty in the face of climate crisis (180). This construction of Scott as human colonial threat is transmuted into supernatural threat by the Gothic mode, which allows his monstrosity to be foregrounded as supernatural horror.

> A tall, gaunt silhouette stood in the doorway, outlined by the scarlet blizzard behind it. The smell made him gag. The creature hunched forward. The hair on its broad shoulders and long arms blurred the lines of its figure. Its legs appeared

> disfigured, almost backwards. But its large, round head scared him the most . . . Evan slowly raised the flashlight, illuminating the figure's pale, heaving emaciated torso under sparse brown body hair. He brought the beam up to its face. It was disfigured yet oddly familiar. Scott. His cheeks and lips were pulled tight against his skull. He breathed heavily through his mouth, with long incisors jutting upward and downward from rows of brown teeth. His eyes were blacked out. If it weren't for the large, bald scalp and the long, pointy nose, this monster would have been largely unrecognizable. The beast Scott had become lunged forward. (Rice, 2018, 187)

Scott's presentation as Wendigo *subverts* discourses of the Indigenous Other to foreground the monstrosity of colonial thought. Scott's revelation as the monster that hunts and consumes the Indigenous subject is a contemporary presentation of the hallmark of the Gothic plot: that horrific twist that foregrounds all the anxieties that have been lurking in the subtext like ghosts in the shadows. Scott not only attempts to re-colonize the community through recurrent racist remarks and attempts to insert himself into positions of authority (201), but he also actively hunts and attempts to consume the Indigenous community when they refuse to concede to him. This echoes the notion that the Wendigo figure is a useful tool in resistance as it "recasts colonialism as the true horror" (Carpenter, 2017, 50) through an established Indigenous folkloric figure that embodies the ethos of the settler-colonial in the Anthropocene: entitled, insatiable, and violent.

The Wendigo figure, in its post-humanity, reminds us not only of our mortality but also our immortality as perpetrators of a legacy of harm. If "'letting go' is losing any trappings of social transcendence-whether these are understood as whiteness, wealth, heteronormativity, or national belonging" (LeMenager, 2017, 229), then the Wendigo figure hangs on, desperately clinging to shadow of a life it could have had if it had not strayed so far from its own humanity. The Wendigo provides a catharsis through horror in its reflection of the darker potentials of the human psyche. In refusing to let go of its human shell despite its abject monstrosity it serves as warning to those refusing to die in the Anthropocene (LeMenager, 2017), by demonstrating to reluctant figures the consequences of a colonial mindset in the ongoing climate crisis, the Wendigo aids in purging the fear of climate disaster through a recentering of resilience, subversion, and community.

FOLKLORIC RETURNS: TOWARD A GOTHIC OF THE ANTHROPOCENE

Speaking of Wendigo as an adaptational graft, Dimarco writes: "Hutcheon's explanation of the adaptive process, which is an appropriative one, serves in reading the Wendigo as a symbol of individual and cultural crisis because it allows writers'—and by extension readers'—involvement in the processes of social critique and ethical change" (DiMarco, 2011, 137). It is in this adaptive process that both texts foreground differences in Indigenous and settler-colonial attitudes toward learning to die. As "the theme of learning to die as played out in novelistic practice also tends to mask the contention built into the proposition that there is a 'we,' a broad if not universal social category, who must learn to die. I argue that a historical argument would be different: there are people in this world who already have learned to die, and there are people who, faced with anthropogenic climate change, are only now learning to die" (LeMenager, 2017, 229). Rice's use of Wendigo folklore to center Indigenous voices in the climate crisis disrupts the colonial narrative that climate change is *the* apocalypse, and in so doing draws attention to the historical (and yet ongoing) tendency to exploit Indigenous communities and their resources in attempts to escape the consequences of climate mismanagement. By subverting the Eurocentric elements of the traditional Gothic to create a contemporary, intersectional, Indigenous Gothic mode, Rice's novel adds to an important and growing canon of Indigenous Canadian literature that uses folkloric horror to disrupt settler-colonial narratives of a white-centered apocalypse.

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NOTES

1. LeMenager. 2017. "Cli-fi" is short for "climate fiction": a callback to "sci-fi" that refers to speculative and science fiction narratives that concern themselves primarily with ecology and the Anthropocene.

2. Zhaagnaash is Ojibwe for "White People" according to The Ojibwe People's Dictionary and @Hayden_King's 2013 Tweet.

Chapter 11

A Locus of the Old and New in Australian Folk Horror Cinema

The Transnational, Transcultural, and Transtextual Narratives in The Witches of Blackwood

Phil Fitzsimmons

SOCIAL IMAGINARIES, SYNOPSIS, AND SEMIOTICS

This chapter explores the transtextual blending of two different "social imaginaries" embedded in the 2021 Australian folk horror movie *The Witches of Blackwood.* Horror cinema is the prime modality that engenders a social imaginary or cultural memory awareness, as it magnifies and "refines and re-defines the collective space where cultural motivations and orientations are collectively developed" (Boucher 2021, 211). Core components of understanding this culturally constructed process is appreciating and incorporating where the narrative "took root in order to see the significance and relative value to it" (Sokolowska-Parry and Loascnigg 2014, 3). Hence, the ensuing discussion at times follows a non-linear pathway, incorporating key cultural memory touch points and "empathetic connections to the past, endowing them with a significance for the present" (Sokolowska-Parry and Loascnigg 2014, 3).

The social imaginary as analytic lens was not chosen casually or as an *a priori* methodological focus, rather *Blackwood* was advertised as being set in Australia and a "folk horror" movie. Notwithstanding the linguistic liberty of advertising, on the surface this transtextual linkage appeared to be somewhat contradictory. Although Gothic horror underpins much of Australian cinema,

it is very different to other socio-cultural sites. Given the transnational nature of the times we live in the concept of Australian "folk horror" appears to be a recent narrative import of British or European psycho-cultural supernatural.

Indeed, another critical issue is how the concept and representations of the supernatural and witchcraft have been wiped from the collective Australian memory bank because of the sheer brutality of its colonial beginning. Horror and supernatural narratives come to the surface to explain social trauma, but when all existential reasoning and sense of place has been expunged then the reset button is socio-culturally pressed, and a new narrative must be pieced together. There was no imaginary in the new colony after the first hours of the first landing, and all that remains to this day is a cultural amnesia, a fragile container of lingering excessive trauma. Excess in any culture produces Gothic narratives, but where a metanarrative has been completely airbrushed out another voice will always arise, but in the case of Australia it is generally one of popular falsehoods. The actual narrative landscape has been lost in the past, but it is "haunting us, becoming intangible, lost in collective memory and overblown legends that have whitewashed brutal colonizing experiences" (Hassall 2021, 12). To draw from the work of Arthur Frank, what is needed is an embodied voice of the "wounded storyteller . . . a body made strange" (1997, 21). In describing the Australian wound, author and playwright Linda Hassall acknowledges, that all that remains is a sense of barely acknowledged trauma and a false sense of national identity: "At the back of me is always the memory of the land breathing the distant, dry smell of the bones of those who have come before me" (Hassell 2021, x). It should be noted that this chapter is a "white narrative," as the indigenous narrative has yet to be given permission to begin the process of fully surfacing.

Cultural healing does occur, but over time and primarily through narrative, of which supernatural cinematic narratology is one of the key emancipating modalities. This allows viewers to incorporate unsighted horrific scenes into memory, "to 'behead' or distort the horror it mirrors, and to influence the discourse about violent events in real life" (Köhne, Elm and Kabalek 2014, 2).

BLENDING, BENDING, AND BLURRING IN *BLACKWOOD*

The Witches of Blackwood draws on the landscape based "dry smell of bones" of Australian Gothic and transmutes the European understanding folk horror into an overlay of a sense of desolation, silence, and loneliness. Every trope has an original source, and according to Stephanie Trigg, a false sense of *Terra Australis Incognito* was ingrained in the British psyche two hundred years prior to the landing of the First Fleet. In her seminal research Trigg

demonstrated that those living in eighteenth-century England perceived the Antipodes to be an unholy, haunted, and unearthly "region of otherness," as far as one could travel "from the heart of Christian truth and from the centre of theological and ethical understanding" (Trigg 2005, 1). Thus, the 1788 "transported" thought they were entering the place of the Biblical abyss, fearing a total loss of existential and transcendent foundations. "There is no deity at this point, it is dark chaos, a gaping void" (Bronfen 2008, 30). This is still an ingrained component in the Australia metanarrative and cinema because of the deep-seated "trauma associated with colonization" (Hassall 2021, 2).

The *Blackwood* narrative commences with a bifurcated paratext of disturbance and woundedness. In keeping with what little there is of Australian supernatural cinema, it relies on dark subtlety. The first short section touches on the ordinary with a car driving along a lonely dirt road through thick bushland. The stillness in Australian cinema belies a depth of anger and death. These paratextual elements are, of course, deep-veined indicators of the colonial in Australian everyday. The woman driving stops the car while talking to an unknown person and tells them she has pullover to urinate. Obviously heavily pregnant, she enters the bush, and blood is then seen splattering across her phone's screen. Drawing on the axiom that one can read a culture through the loss of blood, this brief opening reveals multiple layers of meaning, which include the shedding of innocent blood, the bond between child and mother, and sacrifice. It is this threaded voice that speaks throughout *Blackwood.*

While all these trauma possibilities are enmeshed throughout *Blackwood*, the clearest metonymic starting point suggests that an intratextual filament in this movie is that the key foci of urine, the maternal and blood signal a continual representation of the feminine as pure, "abject . . . fears of impurity that need to be controlled and repressed" (Stephanou 2014, 23). These initial scenes also reenact a very different underpinning to the usual Australian mythscape. In Gothic-mythic literature the dominant relationship is often the patriarchal father-son connection. In this schema, the son "is a metonymic extension of the father, he shares his father's blood, and the father's sacrifice makes visible that relationship and the institutions and hierarchies that it grounds" (McCracken 2003, 68). In *Blackwood*, this is reversed, and the dominant heritage frame is matriarchal, taking in the female elements of blood and sacrifice.

Blackwood's initial paratext of death then visually and silently telescopes out into the second broader perspective set of the Australian bushland, habitats that Spicer has called a "wilderness of ruins" (2020, 128). These visual vectors represent the colonial echo or preconceived colonial reflection of the Antipodes as *terra nullius,* a Biblical Otherness or a "nothingness." Through a silent panorama using a wide angle, this cinematic paratext pans along a

heavily forested shoreline of an isthmus, which is reflected in a dark lake. As a double "signifying duplicity and evil nature" (Botting 1995, 68), this brief beginning carries all the brooding nature of the Australian bush, as well as the transtextual and intertextual narratives of British Gothic, "which denies the bush and reinscribes it as an empty space" (Simpson 2009, 39). This interval also represents the fears related to the convergent entity of the liminal witch-space: "the marshland and marginal tide banks, . . . the margin of transitional state" (Larrington 2015, i, 93). However, this is also representative of the interstitial spectrum of the witch in all her forms, representing either "divine females, . . . or savage crones" (Hutton 2017,189). As such, the *Blackwood* site and narrative elements have been marked as either tidal shifts of the "cursed" or as a site of "transformation that takes place at a moment of absolute vulnerability and helplessness" (Labudova 2017, 84). It is in this symbolic physical area that the entire narrative of *Blackwood* takes place, narratively shifting back and forth representing the semiotic possibilities of the nature of the witch, the meaning ascribed to the historical foundations of *Terra Australis Incognito* and the evolutionary possibility of the Australian story.

The labile elements of witchcraft blending put forward in the previous paragraph are a component of the folk horror lore of Europe and were not extended as a representation to any form of the feminine or to the females on the First Fleet. Instead, this group was defined in the witchcraft concepts of "depravity and abandonment" (Damousi 1997, 64). To add further weight to the key narrative thrust of this chapter and the film it explores, the latter points offered by Damousi were the key facets that defined early settlement, and which also define contemporary Australia. Not only were they the root cause of this largest transportation to an unknown continent but also demonstrated colonial power to displace and exterminate whole groups of people that the British deemed were irrelevant to their higher sense of being or represented any narrative that contradicted their supposed sovereignty.

In particular, the fears arising from their prior wide ranging settler colonization and slavery invasions were bought to bare in the Australian experience in which woman were equated with extreme sexual deviance and witchcraft. Hence, there was a constant patriarchal push to suppress and eliminate "the witch as a troubling gendered category, a woman (but not quite), and the need to dispose of this category" (Sempruch 2008, 22). Attempting to not only exile but exterminate all the "filthy and unnameable criminal class" (Hughes 1988, 1) through transportation, oppression, and degradation of woman was enacted even before the First Fleet left British shores. Concubinage and sexual attack was either ignored or sanctioned on board before departure, with the colony like all its precursors ultimately "secured though forms of sexual control" (Stoler 2002, 635). This was not just an isolated force in the

Australian context, but as Schields and Herzog have demonstrated that colonial sexual domination at all levels of society and the family were "central matters of colonial preoccupation." Furthermore, this sexual abuse shaped "the modern world and the constitution of modernity itself" (Schields and Herzog 2021, 1).

The previous descriptors of the feminine still comprise much of Australian cinema, and underpin, the "mythic space" of *Terra Australis* that has been "perpetuated to the rest of the world since colonization" (Hassall 2021, 2). Thus, the dark and ethereal divides of the landscape in the initial frames of *Blackwood* reflect more than simple projected transference of abyssal fears, they also contain something of an even deeper internalization of the repressed British anxieties that informed folk horror, before it was even designated as such. The new alien landscape-based reality was far beyond British anticipatory mind frames, becoming an actual horror of lived experience and an all-enveloping new supernatural force generated within the psyche of the convicts, sailors, and soldiers on the First Fleet as they sailed into Botany Bay in January 1788. Numerous historians further contend that this already heightened sense of the British Gothic immediately "mutated on arrival and adapted to local conditions (Stadler, Mitchell, and Carleton 2016, 88).

Such was the power of this overwhelming psychological shift that it seems to have induced "cultural amnesiac memory" (Hedges 2015, 31). This socio-emotional reaction initially occurs as repression, which pushes cultural memory into long-term hiatus. This collective memory "is not capturable through representation or, indeed, recollection" and "disrupts all efforts at narrative reconstruction" (Butler 2004, 153). Only over a long period of time and repetition of the trauma narrative through the interface between deeply personal forms of narrative and historical frameworks can fractured remembrances begin to emerge and be pieced together so that cultural healing can commence.

As a possible component of this re-storying process and possible healing, *Blackwood* appears to be the first time in Australian film that a representation of the witch and associated elements has explicitly surfaced. Beyond the initial silent frames of paratext, the narrative of Blackwood then shifts into a cyclical diegetic that is an externalized form of the initial landscape paratext: a storied form of feminine transition, marginality, and abandonment.

With the actual arrival shock too horrific to be named, it can be seen to have been passed into the feminine. This transference is narratively realized primarily through the personal identity crisis experienced by Claire Nash (Cassandra Magrath), a young woman in contemporary Australia, conflicted by emerging memories of a witchcraft habitus and the death of her witch mother. This non-linear narrative then continues in the development of an alternative Australian social imaginary through the ever-increasing focus

and consolidation of Claire's "memory dispositives" (Basu 2013, 3). Basu contends that this cinematic process is how multiple elements of trauma memories in particular tend to become focused into "portable, topographical, monumental" and "public and private sites of memory" (2013, 3). The *Blackwood* movie as a whole and Claire in particular, increasingly become an even more intensely focused "vortex of symbolic investment, . . . a common framework of appropriating the past" (Rigney 2005, 18).

The village of Blackwood is a social dispositive in itself with a mixed supernatural and witch heritage, filled with "dark secrets, buried corpses, dim recesses, corners of the mind you didn't even know exist till you got there" (*Blackwood* 2020). Following on from the initial landscape framing, there are scenes of roads leading into this village setting. Similar to the village often seen in English Gothic, it is the center of the surrounding countryside and is also the site of murder, mysterious secret meetings, and supernatural horror. As a small community it should represent overall safety, security, and stability as provided by "good mother figures" (Astrom 2017, 14). On the other hand, more often than not it is the "dark mother" (Astrom 2017, 86) of the village community that becomes the center of the Gothic or supernatural storyline. Claire is the one who exists on the margins of the village, who casts spells, destroys the status quo and is a dark malevolence. *Blackwood* is a shifting spectrum between these two extremes.

With its focus on children and Claire's storied history, this movie conjoins the distant past with the here and now. Acknowledging that most people could not read in the 18th century, nonetheless researchers have argued that the oral narrative experience related to the supernatural would have been prevalent for children and is akin to "colonization by adults" (Doughty and Thompson 2011, 1). Hence, given the social conditions of the time those on lower echelons of British society would have had a none too subtle reinforcement of their sense of place and identity, with transportation to the colonies simply confirming their place as societal outliers. To paraphrase Dijana Jelaca, the colonial implants would have perhaps bought with them an already complete dislodgement of their "identifiable categories and sense of borders, unfamiliar territories that blur the line between past present and future" (2016, 241).

In the trauma of the migratory path through colonial transportation and settlement the notion of the village in the Australian setting also became infused with a sense of existential uncertainty. While the original government plan was to set up a framework of "small strings of village-style communities across the settled district," (2012, 96) to mirror the supposed "blissfully domesticated and hierarchical social order" (Reid 2012, 209) of the mother country, this ideal rapidly collapsed. Instead, a raft of issues that included a hundred-years war with the indigenous tribes and a famine that arose because of poor planning, the first settlement slowly morphed into

larger scale freehold land division and isolated small towns. This produced an enduring socially fractured and divided land-based narrative of disruption and dislocation. These bush-based colonial settlements became welded into the same ilk as the convict mindset, a "recurring figure of the outsider, immigrant, convict, or traveller who is alienated, exiled, or stranded in an alien landscape" (Stadler, Michell, and Carleton 2016, 17). In the absence of any form of Christian symbology as seen everywhere in the homeland, this previous scant but ancient buttress between a semblance of Christian belief and sheer survival, a new imaginary of fear became the dominant force. The Gothic imagination arose supplanting the sense of loss and transition. Thus, the physical environment evolved into its own sense of identity with images of the monstrous, the supernatural, and darkness. This idea comes to the fore when Claire questions her mother:

> Claire: Why do you go into the forest mumma?
>
> Mother: There's something there, something that mummy needs very much

Within the film, Claire Nash is an embodiment of physical and psycho-matriarchal blending. This is clearly exemplified when Claire has a heated discussion with Blackwood village's only male police officer. It becomes clear that she is perceived as a supernatural infusion and the evolutionary focus of the much older transnational "dark mother" memory. Indeed, she represents a concentrated mirror of a lineage of dark mothers that have rippled out of the dark recesses of the supernatural English boundary markers of ruined abbeys, rundown houses, and boiling cauldrons filled with the unclean into a new representative setting of dark forested vaults and isolated bush land houses of the Australian setting.

> This town is in your blood isn't it, I remember you. Strange little girl. Little girl Nash from a strange family, lunatic family on the fringe of town, lunatic mum, lunatic dad, there's something in the forest and I'm going to find out what it wants, and you and your freaky fucking family wants.

The pain of ongoing dislocation, the notion of witchcraft, the underpinning trope of the feminine and the imprint of systemic colonial trauma are further threaded within and holistically overlaid through Claire as scar tissue memories and experiences. In this narrative flow, drawing from the initial broader narrative elements that foreshadow a wider cultural pain, a clearer revelation that that Claire is a police officer emerges. She has been suspended as well as demoted from the rank of detective as she was unable to dissuade a young boy from ending his life. With both characters introduced in developing flashback sequences, both are eventually separately outlined against the ocean while

standing at the end the long pier where their encounter took place and the boy shot himself. This end point in the ocean is also the place where Claire receives a note from her uncle that her father is dead and where she drops the note into the sea. Intratextually, drawing another thread down through the *Blackwood* narrative from the paratext, this ocean setting connects the ancient oppositional binary between life and death.

This binary is also present in the circuitous interactions with her uncle, who at one point, as they stand at the front of building where her mother died, tells her, "I'll wait here, this is your journey" (Blackwood 2020). While clearly these binary points connect Claire with the entire journey of the Australian narrative, it is also an element of psycho-social scar tissue grounded in the long-held web of religious juris prudence beliefs related to both Britain and Australia. As focused on in the pier scene, the colonial belief was that any death resulting from suicide or by the accidental death at the hand of another represented the crime of murder. Stemming from the mythology of the Biblical Eve, Claire is cast as being in the lineage of the cause of sin as found in the narrative of Genesis. Claire's experience with the young boy's suicide not only mirrors this archetypal narrative, as well as fitting into the viewpoint that current detective narratives still carry on this existential and transcendent path as they are really focused on "life which must be solved . . . a search for meaning, turning it into a parable for life" (Ascari 2007, 12).

In her search for an existential meaning to her journey, another form of death is also introduced in Claire's circular encounters in Blackwood. While staying at her father's broken-down shack, she hears strange noises and, running into the night, she finds a goat tied up in a shed. The next morning, she returns to find the goat has been killed and its blood splattered on the ground. Reminiscent of the blood spatter in the paratext, this scenario has all the hallmarks of the scapegoat sacrifice, a substitutionary punishment in which the sins and errors of a whole group are transferred to a goat, who is killed and removed. As Dawson (2013, 13) notes, the entire ritual can be summed-up as "rites of riddance and substitution. While the metaphor is clear in this movie, to whom it applies is unclear until the final scenes.

The experience of suicide, Claire's position as a former detective and the "scapegoat" are pivotal turning points in Claire's cinematic narrative, these also point to an immediate colonial connection as well. Claire's demotion forces her to realize she has been scapegoated and while she has the superficial appearance of agency and white privilege, she is still trapped in the straitjacket of a gendered workplace. More importantly she is encased in an enduring cultural memory that still defines Australia as "a white masculine, nation-building enterprise" (Collins, Landman and Bye 2019, 9). It should be noted that in both British and Australian settings, the female detective in fictional narratives has often been overlaid with suspicion and often linked

with the supernatural or "assumed to be a female witch" (Evans, Moore, and Johnstone 2019, 49).

With time on her hands, the narrative circles again and she decides to take leave and travel back to her hometown of Blackwood. This journey westwards also shifts her away from the affluence of the east coast cities and towns, which have become the focus of the narrative drift in much of Australian literature. However, despite the national meta-shift in narrative and the associated belief that the east coast seascape represents "a thirst quenching antidote, . . . a refreshing, coastal sight for sore eyes" (Stadler, Mitchell, and Carleton 2016, 87), Claire Nash's directional move as the daughter of witchcraft represents the opposite. Gothic shifts in direction, particularly a return to the site of childhood, signify on an individual level an attempt at release from some form of prior imprisonment. More important, constant shifts into and out of early memories, such as Claire's, that then become backfilled over the duration of the narrative represent a cultural need for the "reinstatement of depth in a superficial culture" (Spooner 2007, 58).

In one sense, Claire's physical movements and return to dream memories reflects a process akin to peeling back layers of scar tissue to reveal the site of the actual wound. However, this fluctuating process represents how "a rearticulated representational locus of colonialism can be broken, by coming up against difference and disavowal" (Low 2005, 194).

In *Blackwood,* resistance against colonialism is also prefigured through a variation of a much-used cinematic representation of shape shifting. Rather than taking on a completely different being or animal, Claire has internal shifts into an external focused state in which her eyes appear as white-hot globes. This is a similar narrative-visual concentration to that of the witchcraft of the Caribbean "jablesse" (Otto 2020, 97), which appears to have evolved from the ancient British "maiden-mother-crone mythology" (Conway 1994, 48). While Astrom contends both archetypes are representative of the witch, she asserts that the "jablesse" specifically also mirrors counter "patriarchal imperatives" (Astrom 2017, 36). In particular she emphasizes that this visual is representative of a rebellion to counter any form of colonial oppression and repression.

Across the research spectrum it would appear that this glowing eye form is also "a powerful metaphor for a girl's coming of age, of a young girl's psycho-social-wellbeing mind-frame that is holistically "shifting into the shape of a young woman" (Otto 2020, 97). Also denoting the internal power of the witch or culturally specific magic practices, it focuses the possibility that socio-cultural groups possessing this gift are on the verge of shifting into maturity. With the insight of genuine connection to the broader elements of the universe, these young women are capable of understanding when to protect authentic life or eliminate that which stands in the way of spiritual growth.

While this represents a penetration into the patriarchal underpinning of the Blackwood village, it is also a vision of a new imaginary. Her personal growth is essentially commencing along the path of "unwriting" Australia's dark history, especially as it relates to the perception of young women. Through these ever-evolving collective supernatural visions and dreams, numerous arcs of the witch are revealed as a fluid signage of Claire having had to continually traverse "trauerarbeit or the work of mourning; exploring trauma by remembering it and repeating it in the form of diagetically mediated symbolisations of loss" (Blake 2008, 2). Very early on in the cinematic cycle, this journey toward a new vision is physically inscribed on an amulet given to her by her mother. This acts as a corporeal and psychical aide-de-memoire of her long-term heritage and accompanying trauma. Inscribed on this circular bracelet are multiple double arrows known as the "starry host." Although this supernatural symbol is often conflated to a pentagram, which is also embedded in Claire's dream memories, this is a multifaceted feminine symbol of having to constantly evolve by shifting recursively through space and time—from its association with the trajectory of the planet Venus in the night sky. More important, it represents those recruited from the earth "to fight everlastingly in their courses against the forces of darkness, and to be perpetually dispelling and out maneuvering the spirits of Evil" (Bayley 1993, 110). While Claire is constantly reminded by those around her of her familial and satanic anchor points, her mother's *momento mori* gift is also a reminder that she is part of a feminine network that in the distant past was emblematic of political and social supernatural resistance to the power wielded by patriarchy. This symbol is also emblematic of universal suffering, as the witch figure throughout history has always been killed or banished because of the charge of possessing the "evil eye." As Hutton (2017, 62) notes, this has occurred throughout history because patriarchal dominance simply "planted the idea in soil made fertile for it."

More important, in the scene of her return to Blackwood it is mooted that Claire is pregnant and presumably the father is her boyfriend who is virtually an absent character. With Claire's witch connectivity, this discovery also conjures up the two hundred and fifty years of trauma resulting from the continuation of embedded colonial power structures that were based on sexual abuse, suppression, and eradication of woman and witchcraft. *Blackwood* uses the Gothic process of inversion, in that first, all the men in Blackwood have left because of their oppression by the forest demon and apparently Claire's mother. Also, the only two men remaining alive on Claire's arrival end up dead or, in the case of her uncle, commit suicide. Thus, a symbolic inverted narrative mirror, of colonial oppression is revealed as being perversely egotistical and self-destructive. While the departure of the males in Blackwood clearly echoes the suppression of woman in the Australian setting, the death

of Claire's mother in a symbolically colonial sanatorium fits the often-used male-related horror trope of distaste for all "sexually mature woman" (Astrom 2017, 13), and the need for their eradication.

Claire's mother equally acts as an inverted mirror, but in her case her narrative acts as a double. While she had a clear long-term linkage to the demon-witch in the Blackwood Forest, the two-hundred-year silence related to the supernatural in Australian history and narrative is paralleled in the silence related to why she has left the fold. Several clues are left to fill in this gap, including Claire's interaction with her uncle Cliff. In a very British accent, he states that "Things have changed. Things are just different" (*Blackwood* 2020). Linking back to the paratext and the "starry host" bracelet, Claire's mother was reverting to the ancient witchcraft practices in which the natural world was protected and sustained by witches of a different ilk to the one in Blackwood Forest. Also, as a component of the reflective cycles Claire was embarking on, her mother has actively sought to provide a counterbalance to Claire's focus on her clan as being demonic related and pushed her to consider questions related to her identity. Claire looks through an old photograph album and images of her as a little girl

> Mother: What do you think about in the dark?
>
> Claire: The sunrise
>
> Mother: Are you afraid of the dark?
>
> Claire: No. (*Blackwood* 2020)

While the witch eradication linkage is developed through a demonic assault, another component of the "double" is seen through a process instituted again through Claire's mother. Having gone insane and presumably died in Blackwood's Saint Margret's sanatorium, her mother is cast as an "absent mother" (Astrom 2017, 21). While the "missing mother" in a child's relationship may produce a lack of emotional stability, in narrative theory as a whole, and in British folklore narratives in particular, the missing mother character is both a reflection and a result of "the child's need for individuation" (Conway 2017, 6). However, *Blackwood* reframes this trope into a combination of Australian Gothic and British folklore, as in these narrative forms when this absent parent is also a witch and the child a daughter of necessity who must develop much more independently and "shape her own destiny" (Astrom 2017, 21).

As becomes manifest in *Blackwood,* only a specific witch is powerful enough to evoke the need to reverse the symbolic death of all that is feminine and allow a reverse shift to "emerge from beneath the surface of culture, beneath the territory of its laws and prohibitions, from the semiotic

possibility of a language and its unwritten track of history" (Sempruch 2008, 108). In a dark nightmare-like vision of a woman having been hung by the neck on a tree branch, Claire interacts with her, and it becomes clear it is her witch mother:

> Mother: I can't! It's too late for me
>
> Claire: It's a difficult choice. I can't!
>
> Mother: You can do it

This scenario becomes fully fleshed out toward the end of the movie as Claire thinks she hears her mother's voice. Wandering into the bush she finds her mother on a funeral pyre. In their brief interaction, her mother states, "It has to end." Touching Claire's abdomen, she adds, "You have a choice to make. Yes, it's true, he's going to be so beautiful. I'm so proud of you. There is something in those woods and it's waiting for you and your child. There is a way and only you can do it, that's why I called you. By doing this you can break the line. The flame can do it. Now do it!"

In setting fire to the pyre, Claire fully reverses the earlier elements that reflected a matriarchal chain. Thus, her mother's self immolation brings the scapegoat motif in line with the colonial and male-bloodline version of the Biblical Abrahamic sacrifice. In the Christian myth, the father sacrifices the son as a means of atonement for sin, but Claire's action offers her mother as both the scapegoat, as well as the sacrificial intercessor between the bondage of the old ways of knowing and a new way of being.

This death also melds Claire and her mother with the Australian narrative regarding the concept of a daughter, who in Australian literature and cinema has been a long-standing representation of an overall disruptive force. Often portrayed as being caught in between landscapes and sites of "entrapment and disempowerment" (Collins, Landman, and Bye 2019, 18), in the final scene, Claire leaves her mother's grave with her eyes glowing and with her own daughter who is wearing the "starry host" as a necklace.

Rather than closure of the wound left by colonialism, the signage at the end is one of possible erasure of that wound.

CONCLUSION

To paraphrase Botting, Gothic texts are often difficult to analyse in that "the line between transgression and a restitution of acceptable limits remains a difficult one to discern" (Botting 1995, 13). This is not the case with *Blackwood,* as it reveals one of the key purposes of all witch narratives, which is to hold

up an ideological mirror "to see a version of ourselves" (Hollinger 1997, 201). The questions remain, can Australia recognize what it has become, and is it willing to change?

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Chapter 12

A Multi-contextual Analysis of the Future of Folk Horror in Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth*

Jon R. Meyers

This study will conduct a multi-contextual analysis of the folk horror elements found within Guillermo Del Toro's, *Pan's Labyrinth,* both the dark fantasy film he directed in 2006 as well as the later book he co-authored with Cornelia Funke, *Pan's Labyrinth: The Labyrinth of the Faun* (2019)*,* that was based on the movie. To be clear, and for the sake of this chapter here, when referring to *Pan's Labyrinth*, it is meant to be in direct reference to the story found in that of both the film and print formats unless explicitly mentioned otherwise. This study will then examine the explicit connections the body of work has to not only the sub-genre of folk horror in a traditional or critical sense, but also the origins of folk horror in a historical sense, so that we are able to more clearly understand the associations that del Toro's work has with pre-Christian Pagan festivals, religious movements, Greek and Roman mythos, and deeper occult and esoteric messages interwoven throughout the entirety of both narratives. Further, it will also note the intersection of these previously mentioned elements with magical realism and the fantastical, which are also found throughout the respective stories. In this same fashion, in which the direct and indirect associations to the actual lore and darker mythology pay homage to the great god Pan as well as an overall direct physical, spiritual, and emotional association to the direct involvement with humanity, society, nature, nature spirits, concepts of both good and evil, as well as the absolute physical, spiritual, and fantastical messages thereof that is in direct involvement with this very imagery and occult symbolism

including but certainly not limited to that of folk horror, and, it is within this very fact that we are personally able to see the direct impact on humans living on this earth today and their direct and/or indirect intentions of nature, society, and overall humanity, to which not only resembles that of the past but can also further be perceived to imply a direct involvement with that of the future, and, it is within this direct involvement that it is important to note that we as humans are able to see that there is an ever-changing relationship between that of humanity and nature, thus revealing a call to change rather than a return to the physical past.

For one to be able to make sufficient correlations specific to the body of work in relevance to the subject matter documented in this study, we must first make the adequate correlations of its own personal connection with the genre and/or term, *folk horror*. We can achieve this status in a few different ways, first by studying the conceptualization of previous scholars in the field to whom have spent countless hours of their own regard. This specific type of research and development is within itself to reach and to achieve such a position, and, by those to which whom have already deemed such common recurring characteristics of theme, imagery, concept, origin, and meaning as well as reciprocally decided upon three main definitive sources based upon these specific studies to which the creation and origins of the genre and term of folk horror accredited in film sources dating back to the early 1920s, and well before that when taking a look at and examining closer much earlier works in literature with these very same characteristics of the genre.[1] According to an introductory essay written and published in *Folk Horror Revival: Field Studies (Second Edition)* by Andy Paciorek entitled, "Folk Horror: From the Forest, Fields, and Furrows: An Introduction," Paciorek states, "its first use in its current guise appears to have been referenced by Piers Haggard in a 2003 interview with *Fangoria* magazine in reference to his own 1971 movie *The Blood on Satan's Claw*" (Paciorek 2018, 12).[2] Before going on to further state that, "The term was later popularized in the 'Home Counties Horror' episode of the 2010 documentary series *A History of Horror.* In it three movies are mentioned in relation to 'Folk Horror' and as such have become the unholy trinity of Folk Horror Cinema, namely, *Witchfinder General* (1968), *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971), and *The Wicker Man* (1973)" (Paciorek 2018, 12) Before later pointing out and referring to a paper published by Adam Scovell,[3] who is by no means a stranger to the subject. In this paper Scovell points out a list of elements that "put forward an intriguing chain of elements that comprise a Folk Horror film: Landscape, Isolation, Skewed Moral Beliefs, Happening/Summoning" (Paciorek 2018, 13). Paciorek then further continues to make his own personal affirmations about the prior, but what I'd like to point out, document, and examine here is that it is here that we are able to see that these very same explicit elements of folk horror, in

which not only, strengthen, point out, develop, and more importantly define the more technical aspects examined here that are prevalent throughout the entire body of work in del Toro's, *Pan's Labyrinth*. The eerie, nightmarish, dark and surreal *landscape* of the fairy tale world, as well as the violent and brutal *landscape* and imagery suggestive of battle and war, as well as how these very same depictions of the dark and dreary imagery more specifically associated with the *landscape* in an absolute physical sense but, also, as well as spiritually and emotionally. For the sake of this chapter, the term "spiritual" here is meant to be in direct reference to the occult/esoteric aspects of the body of work. It is within these very same attributes that the physicality of the decayed labyrinth, the landscape of nature, and the specific elements articulated throughout the majority of the body of work with these very specifically intended elements of physical, spiritual, and emotional impact, to the point where the recurring concepts of authority and (dis)obedience can be expressed to the viewer in a physical sense with something as simple as the concept of rain, as it is prevalent in the film when showing the fascist regime, and, yet again, with the rebels of the authoritative figure, who are hiding from this very same regime in the nearby woods, is expressed in a much more calm manner, as the environment is used not only in the physical sense but, also, in an effectively unique and genuinely emotional and spiritual manner symbolic of the direct association with the *landscape* in nature. Ofelia's severe *isolation* begins to unfold at the beginning of the story when, being physically withdrawn from her previous home, in which the observer understands implies brute force—a forced move—or another element of the fascist regime and takeover as she herself begins hearing more and more of Mr. Vidal, this increasingly adds to her delusions of the on-screen fantastical elements and world upon the backdrop of the film,[4] which leads her further in seeking out more and more from what she is reading in books as her *isolation* from diminishing normalcy begins to gain fear as the story begins to unfold. The previous *landscape* of nature is also used to shadow this very same concept of *isolation*, as Ofelia and her mother continue to embark on this emotional journey to somewhere that is both foreign and distant to them, only to be greeted by these very same harsh living conditions that are far from normal than that of their previous life and *landscape,* indicative of a past location, points, and time in their past lives, and, although, it is currently at times seemingly normal to those that are already there living under this fascist regime, this again, is another recurring element found time and time again and is certainly by no means a stranger to the folk horror tradition. It is this very same sort of *isolation* that is one of the contributing factors in the *skewed moral beliefs* of not only the rebels seeking refuge in and amongst nature and hiding from the fascist regime, but also of the fascist regime in and amongst itself, as well as both Ofelia and her mother's previous direct

and indirect involvements with it, until they personally begin to take some sort of action to the events before them as the story continues to unfold. This is when the viewer can more clearly see beyond the physical elements of the happening/summoning in not only the imagery but, in the physical sense of the deeper subject matter that can be found here as well, whether looking at elements of the story that take place indoors or outdoors, within nature or not, and the direct correlations that these specific involvements of place and time (past or present) have on each other is more direct than indirect throughout the entirety of the film.[5] The viewer is also able to physically see the happening/summoning in a more traditional folk horror fashion when Ofelia begins to take part in physical happening/summoning within the fantastical world amongst the backdrop of the real world setting in the film,[6] a moment in which the viewer is then introduced to an entirely different angle, element, and characteristic of the story that is indicative of deeper occult and esoteric messages interwoven throughout the majority of the body of work. Although the book[7] tends to lean closer to the lore of the fairy tale world, these very same correlations can be accurately made throughout the entirety of the body of work in both formats, as well as this very specific recurring imagery being indicative of the happening/summoning throughout a majority of folk horror in the status quo that we are able to then connect the key elements to the supernatural elements of, *Pan's Labyrinth* to folk horror, thus we can now take a closer look at and examine these quintessential elements of folk horror. To be able to better pinpoint more exactly the specific origins of the genre through the aspects given though, one must look beyond these very elements of film, and more into the pre-existing literature that came before it in a historical sense. However, according to The Eldritch Archives, a popular podcast and YouTube mini-series entitled *The True History That Created Folk Horror,* the creator states:

> I discovered that a book by the anthropologist Margaret Murray in 1921 popularized the idea that there are secret pagan cults conducting clandestine rituals in remote rural areas. The book was called, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*[8] and in this book, Murray claimed that there was evidence that an ancient cult of witches had survived in various areas around Europe, even up until the present day. This book captured the public's imagination and since then Folk Horror stories about secret pagan cults in rural areas have been a fan favourite, especially in films. (The Eldritch Archives 2021, 0:31–1:11)[9]

After making such a claim, as well as the extremely proactive fan engagements and comments the creator received after the creation of the video, this led to the creator taking a more specific look at the real-life murders, historical sources, and eventually, a deeper look at paganism itself and how it was

incorporated into Christianity. The creator then states,[10] "and therein would lie the true twisted roots of the Folk Horror genre" (The Eldritch Archives 2021, 1:47), in which the creator then later goes on to document and explain his response to the origins of folk horror lying within the existence of the creation of the films making up the trinity of folk horror. The creator states:

> In my opinion these films[11] are not the start of folk horror as a genre at all, but I do think it's fair to say that these films sort of crystallized the idea of the genre in the general public's mind. To put a cap on the discussion, folk horror encompasses a wide variety of stories. The setting for these stories can be either historical or modern. Sometimes the story is realistic and sometimes fantastical. Folk horror stories tend to have several common features which set them apart from a normal horror story. First, the stories generally concern folklore, pagan religions, or folk traditions. Second, the setting is generally rural, or even remote. Third, the story is often but not always told from the perspective of an outsider coming into this remote setting, and—fourth, nature; the natural world or agriculture tends to play an important role in the story. (The Eldritch Archives 2021, 5:55–7:00)

The creator of The Eldritch Archives then proceeds to accurately describe a number of real-life events, literature, and possible correlations to the origins and connections of pagan religious movements to pre-Christian festivals used in specific works of folk horror, but, it's important to note that this status was achieved in both fiction, as well as first-hand accounts of non-fiction in which the creator then introduces a genuinely remarkable discovery of exact place and time in real-life relevant to the specific origins of folk horror, by also managing to further pinpoint an exact correlation to the elements of folk horror in a real-life setting[12] and states in relevance to that factual reality of the book above by stating that:

> Margret Murray's main hypothesis was that witchcraft and witches were actually the survival of a more ancient religion. Evidence to support Murray's theory is really quite slim but I think that the belief in which is by medieval society probably is related to the remnants of paganism even if it's only tangentially. Now, this point requires a bit of clarification, Murray is arguing that there was a genuine organized society of witches with a defined religion. This idea has been quite thoroughly discredited. It does seem that the concept of a witch and the devil as conceived of during the medieval period does seem to be created from the remnants of pagan religion. During the medieval period gods from other religions did become associated and incorporated with the Christian conception of the devil, most notably Pan, the Greek god of the wild, who is depicted as a man with the legs and horns of a goat became associated with the Christian devil. This image of the devil still persists to this day. This association according

> to some theories was a conscious effort by Christian leaders to demonize paganism and previous religions. (The Eldritch Archives 2021, 15:51–17:16)

This point not only explicitly defines, connects, and correlates that of witches and practitioners of pagan religions and religious movements in a number of different ways, including, but not limited to the connection of the great god, Pan, to that of the Christian devil by demonizing pagans and pre-Christian religious movements, but to that of the connection of witches to the devil by means of that very same Christian belief of taking over these very core concepts of paganism by default and then converting them unto their beliefs of their own design,[13] "witches were of course people who worshipped the devil and by associating pagan gods with the devil, it meant that anybody who worshipped those gods would be considered a witch" (The Eldritch Archives 2021, 17:21–17:32),[14] to which the creator points out and speculates that "the fear of witches who were in league with the devil is also a fear of pagans who maybe still worshipped their old gods. All of this is still happening in medieval history though. Folk horror takes these ideas and moves them from the past into the present day" (The Eldritch Archives 2021, 17:40–17:59).[15] It is important to also note that it is these very same concepts that are the exact bridge and connection to the origins of the recurring supernatural elements still present in Folk Horror today in both fact and/or fiction. *Pan's Labyrinth* is so undeniably unique in its creation for many different reasons, down to the very way in which the story was unfolded and introduced to viewers, to as so far as the actual physical format of the media in which the story was documented and presented to its audience (i.e., film before literature) but this is certainly not the only way in which the story is explicitly unique and detailed to viewers.

> the power of cinema lies in its ability to make the everyday fantastic, *Pan's Labyrinth* accesses both sides of the film-as-art, film-as-reality option and thus manifests some of the most persuasive and engaging attributes of film expression. With its paralleling of real and fantastical worlds using neomagical realism, *Pan's Labyrinth* represents a powerful and innovative new genre. (Lukasiewicz 2010, 77–78)[16]

There's no denying the masterful skill and technique intended with the overall construction of the body of work. To what varying level of importance the storyline delivers between the two separate narratives in the body of work is hard to say but, with the given methodology of what has been left behind as fact, we are able to connect the dots and make educated assumptions and assertions to what was intended, even if by process of elimination of fact and fiction. This sort of debate and study has been around and prevalent in the

endless study of the fairy tale itself and as far as fantasy elements in genre fiction,[17] and it is with good reason for doing so. It establishes factual motive as the intended art form, delivery, and within itself presents a message for the audience to dissect. In a chapter entitled, "The Parallelism of the Fantastic and the Real: Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth/El Laberinto del fauno* and Neomagical Realism*"* by Tracie D. Lukasiewicz published in *Fairy Tale Films: Visions of Ambiguity*,[18] Lukasiewicz's states:

> Conflicts between scholars and filmmakers about whether cinema is a representation of reality or an art form have resulted in "two opposing tendencies: one towards the recording or documenting of external 'reality,' the other towards the imaginative use of cinematic illusion" (Ibid., 2). It seems appropriate, then, that this divergence is often placed side by side in a single film, perhaps reaching a culmination in neomagical realism. Although the historicized story of Pan's Labyrinth cannot be described as an exact representation or direct recording of reality—the film is by no means a documentary—it is nonetheless based within a specific, historical time period. (Lukasiewicz 2010, 77)

Pan's Labyrinth is by no means a stranger within itself to its own personal delivery of the fantastical and elements of magical realism throughout the entire body of work. It is also safe to say that the story's messages were constructed with a purposeful, composite duality, that is purposefully intended to reference more than just the two narratives presented to us, which is to say more than just the plot and subplot within the story as a physical viewer deciphering the magic as it unfolds or unravels, perhaps makes its own physical way through its own decaying labyrinth depending on how you take a look at it as far as physical media is concerned, whether viewing on the screen, or reading the words in a book, you are uncovering the messages, peeling the layers back to figure out an absolute truth. In the same chapter,[19] Lukasiewicz states:

> In making *Pan's Labyrinth*, del Toro drew upon events he witnessed while growing up in Mexico, as well as on his own imagination, to create a story that is in itself a labyrinth; "a maze is a place where you get lost, but a labyrinth is essentially a place of transit: an ethical moral transit to one inevitable center" (del Toro, quoted in Arroyo 2006). Thus, his film fluidly intertwines characters and events to bring them to its concluding cohesion—fundamentally its centralized meeting point. Like its labyrinth del Toro's film leads the viewer to its moral center with the ultimate death of the corrupt and evil villain. The physical maze on screen interlaces with stories in the film but also with the combination of realism Grimm brutality, and fairy tale expectations that the narrative weaves together. (Lukasiewicz 2010, 61)

It's within this very same ideology that we're able to clearly see the two different narratives in the body of work that many scholars in the status quo have previously examined, observed, and/or documented to great lengths before but, there's more to it than that by using this very same sort of methodology that seems to be consistently overlooked here. It's more than obvious to anyone that there are in fact these two interwoven narratives inevitably in place here: a realistically abhorrent story creatively paired alongside an equally dark and grim fairy tale[20] that is controversially said to "never" cross paths with each other even though in all instances of reality they actually do more than a handful of times. It is, however, in my opinion, that these two distinct narratives are part of a much bigger narrative that is left to decipher, thus to uncover the true meaning to the overall brilliance of del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth,* in a more literal sense, because there is in fact a third narrative in place that directly ties the two narratives together in the body of work in the form of hidden occult and esoteric messages and symbology that go far beyond the body of work to add another layer and concept to the already masterful labyrinth yet again, leaving behind these very specific messages to also be intertwined and uncovered in very much the same sort of light as they're intended for Ofelia throughout the majority of the body of work. In an interview hosted by The Academy Museum in the David Geffen Theatre on February 9, 2022, after a viewing of the 2006 film, *Pan's Labyrinth*, was preceded by a Q&A[21] with director Guillermo del Toro, Guillermo Navarro, and Doug Jones. When asked by the interviewer regarding the potential correlation between the motif of eyes throughout the majority of the film, del Toro states:

> Most of my movies there is a motif of great importance and admiralty, is a motive of great importance is the theme, or one of the themes of *Shape of Water*, which is how we look, gaze of each other. We had a company for a while that was called Mirada, you know, and I think the idea for me is only those that know how to look will find magic in this world because there is none if you don't know where to look. And that's the idea at the end with the little flower. If you know where to look, there's magic, and this came from what made me make this movie, was I felt that I was making movies, that I didn't feel that they were going to leave anything behind. And it's not about posterity because what have you done for me lately? Right. What it is about, it's about, I thought of the movies that made me survive this life when I was a kid, because movies saved my life and my sanity a few times, and I thought, can I make one of those for anyone that needs it? (The Academy Museum 2022, 11:17–12:27)[22]

Interestingly enough, and important to note here after these very same points in regard to the motif of eyes, prior themes and imagery have previously been similarly evaluated for years prior and for the most part in many cases

chocked up to be creative metaphors of (dis)obedience and authority between the two narratives, including but certainly not limited to violence, trauma, fascism, masculinity, femininity, the motif of eyes, symbolism of hands, the meaning of the Pale Man. But it was, in fact, however, quite recently that the mention of any use of occult and esoteric magic, symbology, and/or agenda throughout the complexity of the concepts interwoven in the body of work are first introduced here in real-life beyond the reality of fables almost fifteen years later, which again adds another layer of depth to the already multitudes of masterfully skilled construction and physicality the body of work has left behind to decipher here. Shortly after, in the same interview with The Academy Museum, the interviewer goes on to ask about the specific usage of film, in which, del Toro states:

> We decided on 1:85 for many reasons, including that scope was invented by producers and not directors. You know, it was to get people to leave TV and then it became an affectation a little bit and then it found its true purpose. But I'm not prone to that, except if I shoot a Western, I'll go scope. But 1:85 is very close to the golden measure that the Greeks enunciated for all artistic endeavors and closer to the perfect measure on nature. And it allows me to do arches, which are vertical in formation and so forth. (The Academy Museum 2022, 13:41–14:18)[23]

The body of work is by no means a stranger to the occult and esoteric in a number of different ways, in my opinion, no matter how you look at it the imagery and symbolism is prevalent but to point out and make mention the use of doorways and numerology in this regard to the specificity in which the subject of which a lens is meant to be viewed through is being discussed is by no means a coincidence here, especially when taking into consideration the intricately designed narratives so flawlessly intertwined and interwoven with each other throughout the remainder of the story, and I wholeheartedly believe these messages are meant to be sought out and discovered to add another level of mastery to the already masterful body of work abound. Doorways are a direct path between two places, two worlds in magic, a steppingstone from one place to another, and in this very same regard, the story is no stranger by any means no matter how you look at it. It could be said that Ofelia makes use of such doorways to travel between both real life and fantasy worlds in and amongst the body of work, in so far as much a direct metaphor to the occult and esoteric symbology and messages hidden within the two narratives of the story respectively. In response to the more technical aspects and specific use of 1:85 ratio on film, Navarro states:

> We are really engaged with the film language. We believe that the images are part of the storytelling. It's not only what you say, what you, but it's, the camera takes you there. The story can be told with the camera and this camera that it's

> always in search of. It's always finding connecting dots. And in this movie particular, particularly, the need to go from one reality to a parallel reality, we had to create like artificial bridges to suddenly be in that world. It coming back. We did a whole thing with a color about that. Well, the human world was the warm world, and then the cold was a military strict, etc. So, we even did things that in another movie would have been called out like a brutal mistake. Like when we are, when they have the guy that they captured, that they're going to torture in this room, that it's like, well, they're outside, it's cold and raining and they go in and it's warm. So, it makes no sense in terms of the natural world that we're living. But we are announcing that this is parallel realities and we're going in and out just like the girl. The girl goes in and out. (The Academy Museum 2022, 14:47–16:00)

Again, this very same topic of conversation is brought back to the point of occult symbology and esoteric meaning and inference here by making mention of the concepts of artificial bridges, parallel reality, and even the inclusion of the topic of color, to which is yet another term and reference point associated with deeper occult and esoteric meaning to coincide and go along with the already aforementioned concept of numerology already present here when discussing and making mention of the lens. These are all relevant aspects when viewing such works of classic fairy tales based on such folklore, as well as not to mention a deeper connection to those purposefully deeper roots of folk horror and folk tradition, in both specifications, fact and/or fiction, as well as yet again brought to fruition in an accurate historical sense as far as time and place is concerned. Perhaps, this again is meant to be a purposeful homage to the occult and esoteric messages meant to be concealed and thus revealed the deeper you dig into the body of work. Dissecting and taking into consideration the physical, spiritual, emotional, as well as historically accurate aspects of such scenes as Ofelia's personal interactions and activities with the faun. From the ritual with the mandrake root under her mother's inevitable death bed, to the arches of the labyrinth, and doorways drawn upon the walls to transcend physical space and time, ideology of good and evil, high priest and priestess imagery at the end of the story, to the quintessential elements of factual connection to witches and witchcraft to pre-Christian pagan religions, to that specific correlation of supernatural inferences in both physical reality, magical realism, and the fantastical elements, the many metaphors and direct correlations to the left and right hand paths hidden in a real world occult and esoteric sense, to the extent where these specific events are accurately portraying relevant uses of occult and esoteric practices, studies, as well as different forms of magic, as far as the many other inferences of occult symbology and esoteric messages seemingly hidden and interwoven throughout the entirety of the body of work, it is important to note that this is genuine to not only that of folk horror

but to also that of, *Pan's Labyrinth*, and perhaps, these deeper messages and symbology indicative of the occult and esoteric are hidden there in plain sight for those *wanting* or *needing* to look further into or to dig deeper into the actual lore to decipher the messages therein, in which, this is explicitly brilliant and unique body of work is not only relevant to reveal such hidden messages within the physicality of the body of work in reference to the two separate narratives, but, also to that of these very same relevant instances of the occult and esoteric themes that could be equally said to be true in real life. This brings us to the fact that we're then able to accurately connect modern day practices of occult and esoterism, as well as the many variations of modern pagan practices respectively (i.e., wicca, Norse paganism) not to mention the many different variations of such belief systems attributed to different variations of folk magic, and how this point alone can be said to be indicative of a call to change that of the future and not a return to the physical past, a forward progression through a fantastical world by means of altering and changing one's very own perception of their current reality whilst looking for a better solution for one's own future and humanity, just like Ofelia's personal fantastical voyage throughout the majority of del Toro's powerfully masterful body of work, *Pan's Labyrinth*.

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1. "The True History That Created Folk Horror (Part 1)," The Eldritch Archives, October 2, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oxDfium5HNA

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Chapter 13

Who Makes the Hood?

The City, Community, and Contemporary Folk Horror in Nia DaCosta's Candyman

Kingsley Marshall

FROM BRITAIN TO THE UNITED STATES

Folk horror is traditionally located in the rural landscape or pastoral settings, where the power of nature creates a sense of isolation compounded by an individual's exclusion from communities, initially defined by a triumvirate of British films—the "unholy trinity" of *Witchfinder General* (1968), *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971), and *The Wicker Man* (1973) and continued in a second wave of British stories typified by the woodland trilogy of Ben Wheatley's *Kill List* (2011), *A Field in England* (2013), and *In the Earth* (2021), in addition to *The Isle* (2019) and, more recently, the village and woodland settings of Alex Garland's *Men* (2022) and Ben Steiner's *Matriarch* (2022). In folk horror, as Adam Scovell defines it, the "folk" of the definition is the ethnographic practices of a people or community, its folklore and superstitions, where the "horror" through which these practices are depicted is "open to fluctuating meaning" (2017, 6).

In North America, folk horror shares many of the themes with its European counterparts in that stories are often focused on a clash between the modern and the arcane, the ordinary and the uncanny, or "wyrd"—a term Diane A. Rodgers has proposed as a way of describing post-2000 folk horror revival as "eerie, hauntological media with folkloric themes" (2019). The genre is typified by the enemy within and situated in place and the hierarchies of power that govern communities. The genre is commonly located in rural

environs—evident in the TV movie *Crowhaven Farm* (1970) and superlative cinematic releases *Children of the Corn* (1984) and *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). The religious fervor of British films, whether pagan or puritanical, often shifts focus in North American folk horror to stories that reflect the impact of slavery or colonialism. This is evident in the country's own latest wave of films in the genre, from the early New England puritans of Robert Eggers' *The Witch* (2015), the contemporary settings of upstate New York in Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017) and coastal small town location of *Us* (2019), to the struggling Oregon town that features in *Antlers* (2021). All in this group of US folk horror films are connected by roots that sit in the black American experience or Native American folklore, rather than calling back to European traditions.

As Dawn Keetley notes, the most important conflict in the genre involves humans and their relationship to their environment. "In folk horror, things don't just happen *in* a (passive) landscape; things happen *because* of the landscape. The landscape does things; it has efficacy" (2015). This convention of folk horror is certainly true of the *Candyman* franchise (1992–) where the central story of each film is evoked by its location and a connection to slavery and contemporary racism. A twist is presented in the way with which the origins of this action are drawn from a *built* rather than *natural* environment, and in an urban, rather than rural, locale. The Candyman character at the center of the story is connected to a past that haunts both the real-life Chicago Cabrini-Green neighborhood in which the legend is born in the film and is recounted by its occupants or those that have fled or been displaced. These themes are common across the original *Candyman* (1992) and, to a lesser extent, in its sequels *Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh* (1995) and *Candyman 3: Day of the Dead* (1999), though DaCosta's is the first film of the franchise to return to the location of the original—Cabrini-Green, and the urban housing projects of Chicago. This connection to a city, rather than a rural location, echoes the franchise's source material—Clive Barker's short story *The Forbidden* (1985)—where graffiti in the Spector Street Estate, a public housing project situated in Liverpool in the UK, is the subject of a study by an academic researcher. In the original story, the action is contemporary to the book's publication, as the occupants of Spector Street—subjects of institutionalized poverty, a working class consigned to concrete tower blocks—recount to a visiting sociologist the story of the Candyman and how they are haunted by him. The impact on communities in folk horror's more traditional rural settings is often shaped by the impact of humans on their environment and the anxiety or tension this predicates. In *Candyman* this tension centers on how the built environment is a force that impacts, restricts, and imposes malevolent power upon its resident communities. In DaCosta's

iteration of *Candyman,* the change that disrupts the landscape's equilibrium is *rebuilding*. Here, redevelopment is the catalyst for anxiety, a residual dread that haunts both landscape and its people.

Each of the stories of the *Candyman* franchise center around a legend of a hook-handed spirit summoned by saying his name five times in front of a mirror, with these summoners then stalked and murdered by him. Each component of the character is born from longstanding legends. The Hookman is a familiar urban legend originating in the United States of the 1950s, of an escaped serial killer with a hook for a hand who preyed upon courting couples (Brunvard, 2003). Similarly, the notion of summoning a spirit through an incantation made in a mirror is well-established, though originates in a much older tradition: the summoning of Bloody Mary or its Japanese equivalent of Hanako-San (de Vos, 2012). The franchise trades on other contemporary urban legends, which are recounted through the narrative, most notably where razor blades are secreted in Halloween candy.

One of *Candyman*'s many strengths is the relocation of the supernatural into this more familiar world—the contemporary situation lessening the distance between the dread of the characters who occupy the film and an audience familiar with stories of city decay, and fearful of crime, poor social housing, oppressive policing, and a neglectful central society. In addition to the mythos, part of the storyline has its origins in the true story of Ruth McCoy, a resident of the Grace Abbot Homes, a Chicago housing authority project, who had called 911 in 1985 reporting that someone had attacked her, having climbed through the bathroom cabinet of her apartment. This home invasion technique had been widely reported in the city before McCoy's experience, facilitated by intruders entering homes by way of the pipe chase that separated each apartment of the block. Although police responded to the call and knocked on McCoy's door, they left when they received no answer. McCoy was found two days later, having been shot and killed in her own home (Bogira, 2014). This device, of the Candyman occupying and emerging from the walls of apartment buildings is repeated in DaCosta's film, as is the victim's surname recounted through the central protagonist's nomenclature Anthony McCoy (Yahya Abdul-Mateen II).

SPECTRAL CITIES: FOLK HORROR, URBAN LEGEND, AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Director Nia DaCosta's *Candyman* embodies the fluidity of the folk horror genre—taking the conventions common to both British and US films defined

as the "folk horror chain" by Scovell—combining the rural environment, a sense of isolation, skewed belief systems or morality with a happening or summoning (2017). In this film, all of these elements of the chain are present, with an individual's isolation and brooding fear of others combined with a sense of the past imposed upon the present yet the urban setting breaks the chain and presents a question as to the significance of the rural to folk horror as a genre. A key difference between this latest film and the original *Candyman* is that these themes are resituated to a spectral city. DaCosta's story is almost entirely situated in the Cabrini-Green public housing development that featured in the first film of the franchise, with the larger Chicago cityscape serving only as a backdrop to the events that occur in the neighborhood. The neighborhood of 2021 is much diminished, and far from the wealthy areas of the city and subsequently from the reach of authority, or society. Much of the 1957 Cabrini Homes Extension of fifteen red-brick, mid- and high-rise buildings were demolished by 2011, together with the William Green Homes. Only the Francis Cabrini Homes, the two-story rowhouses, remain and the principal location for DaCosta's film (Ihejirika, 2010). Kier-La Janisse has observed that folk horror can be found "anywhere people . . . displace other people or other cultures, or where older traditions are being transported to new environments" (2021). As Summerisle is to *The Wicker Man*, so DaCosta presents Cabrini-Green as an island, albeit one in which glass and steel tower blocks and creeping gentrification have displaced its occupants and their understanding of themselves rather than water and religion.

What we see of the city is accentuated through how DaCosta chooses to present the city from unusual points of view. These are consistent throughout; they begin with the mirror-imaged Universal logo that opens the film and are carried through to the inversion of the camera that views the city upside down in the title sequence. This point-of-view presents a disconcerting viewing position for the audience as the camera floats through the city looking up at skyscrapers disappearing into fog rather than down on rooftops and teeming streets from the more traditional helicopter shot. This choice conjures unusual lines and shapes of buildings free of the typical markers of the city—vehicles, pedestrians, and street signage. The effect evokes notions of the satanic witch with the ability to fly or levitate, and the position is disconcerting—in that the camera appears both of the air, in that we cannot see its anchoring in its tilt towards the sky and tower blocks that occupy it, but also strangely grounded in reality in that it doesn't rise or fall but merely floats. In the context of the wider film, this can be read as an othering of the city by way of an *almost* human point-of-view, but one which takes an unusual, and newly seeing, perspective of the familiar.

In DaCosta's articulation of the *Candyman* mythos, the stark neighborhoods of Barker's 1980s Gothic and Bernard Rose's original film are

reimagined in what is now left of the original Cabrini-Green projects following the redevelopment of the district that began in the 1990s (Guzzardi, 2011). The housing project was one of a number built or expanded in the 1950s and 1960s in Chicago, populated largely with African American residents and poorly funded and maintained by the city authorities (Bogira, 2014). Robert Macfarlane describes in an essay on the eeriness of the English countryside that "landscape . . . is never a smooth surface or simple stage-set, there to offer picturesque consolations. Rather it is a realm that snags, bites and troubles" (2015), and this is evident here, recounted in the narrative as to how the area has been policed, and how the nature of the contemporary place is intrinsically linked to its past. This is recounted through a flashback to 1977, when white police officers beat to death a homeless resident suspected of secreting razor blades in candy. This is also made evident in the present day through Anthony's fear of the police—demonstrated through his hiding from patrolling police cruisers as he explores the two-story rowhouses, all that remains of the original housing development. In folk horror, the landscape is often a contested, liminal, space of the uncanny—situated beyond the ordinary and mundane, but one marked by what has gone before a palimpsest or a shared remembrance of the collective past—buried secrets forming ley lines that connect the present to distant history. *Candyman* occupies a liminal space of a *remembered* real constructed of the mythological and the historical where the original population and their children remain haunted by the mythologies of the place; candy spiked with razor blades, homeless men who live in walls, child abduction, and a suicide.

In *Candyman*, the old ways are never framed as having been right. The ghetto that occupies the geography of Cabrini-Green is now only evident in the empty rowhouses and abandoned church featured in the film—all that remains of the old neighborhood—with principal photography occurring entirely on location in the area (Holmes and Austen-Smith, 2021). In DaCosta's film, Cabrini-Green has become a location manifest only through the mind, where a fractured sense of the past has taken its place rather than through its actualization through buildings and community—indeed even the name of the neighborhood itself finds itself distended, referred to only as "Cabrini" in several scenes.

The processes of gentrification have purified the location to some extent but is unable to erase its memory so easily—the ground on which the housing project stood carrying a "hauntology" of a cultural past that can never be scrubbed away, and a persistent stain on the lives of those who live there. In a scene that takes place early in the film, contemporary artist Anthony and his gallerist partner Brianna (Teyonah Parris) are questioned by Brianna's brother, Troy (Nathan Stewart-Jarrett), as to why they had purchased their new apartment in a neighborhood troubled by its long history. Troy informs

the couple that the area had been known historically as "Smokey Hollow, Little Hell, Combat Alley" before recounting the story of Helen Lyle, a woman accused of kidnapping a child in the 1990s. "The neighborhood is haunted," says Troy. "Everywhere is haunted" responds Anthony. As Brianna articulates how the original housing projects and their communities have been destroyed through redevelopment, acknowledging Cabrini-Green's part-replacement by their own shining steel and glass apartment block. Troy's partner, Grady (Kyle Kaminsky), observes that Anthony and Brianna are complicit in this destruction, having played their part as enablers of the actions of real estate developers. This is made particularly pointed in that Grady is the only white character amongst the otherwise black group in the scene. There is no response to this from the characters in the scene, DaCosta holding the action as each understands the observation to be broadly true. This collective responsibility of the group in the erasure of Cabrini-Green as a place is buried within each individual—Troy in his role as a real estate agent, Brianna and Troy as the new-money millennials purchasing apartments within the redevelopment, and Grady as a representative of a white professional class. Each are limited in their responsibility of their accountability in the destruction of the old neighborhood, but the scene serves to remind one another of this shared responsibility in this cleansing.

The moment is akin to those accused of witchcraft by their neighbors in *Witchfinder General*, complicit but choosing individual fear of others—of witchcraft in place of *Candyman*'s crime narrative—over the communal sense of shared social cohesion. Anthony is accused in a similar way later in the film at an exhibition of his artwork. In the scene, the art critic Finley Stephens (Rebecca Spence), suggests that artists—and indirectly Anthony and Brianna—are predators upon, rather than saviors of, working-class communities, presenting the argument that artists' work capitalizes upon the representation of poverty for material gain. Finley makes a further accusation that, through the actions of the occupation and subsequent gentrification of communities previously occupied by the working class, these artists are active through their lived behavior as part of the gentrification process in addition to their artistic practice.

Prompted by Troy's story, Anthony explores what remains of the original Cabrini-Green projects meeting laundromat owner William Burke (Colman Domingo), who recounts to him the origination of the Candyman myth; a hook-handed homeless man named Sherman Fields (Michael Hargrove) who had been unlawfully beaten to death twenty-five years earlier by police. Later, the film presents the resolution to a pre-title sequence where William, as a child, had encountered Sherman. In the later sequence, William is revealed to have witnessed Sherman's man's murder at the hands of the police officers. This recounting of the story prompts Anthony to begin painting a series

of work around the hook-handed figure. Though a playful exchange with Brianna, he conducts the summoning ritual himself as part of a conversation with her—an act that is revealed to have successfully opened the portal for Candyman to haunt Anthony, by way of a brief shot of the city from the point-of-view of the inverted camera that follows the scene. The theme of personal reflection and of having one's true self and intent revealed to oneself is represented literally through the many mirrors within the film used to summon the Candyman, but also in other reflective surfaces—elevators, windows, and vehicles all revealing his presence. These mirroring spaces form a significant part of the Candyman mythos. Anthony first sees Candyman as he listens to recordings Helen Lyle had made of her studies, with Candyman inverted as a mirror image of Anthony in the ceiling of an elevator. The figure is seen by Anthony a second time almost immediately afterward when he visits Finley Stephens' apartment, prompting Finley to summon Candyman in her bathroom mirror. Anthony is taken by surprise by the spirit, who again mimics his physical actions in a hallway mirror before Anthony leaves and the Candyman kills Finley. This notion is echoed in how characters navigate the filmic world and not just *what* we see of the city but, more important, *how* it is revealed to us as an audience. The many interstitial images that break up the story show rail and road intersections, tunnels and subways, bridges, walkways, corridors, and rivers—these liminal, *connective*, spaces are portrayed as malevolent—shown in darkness, absent of people and accompanied by a disconcerting score. They serve a similar purpose to the mirrors and walls that serve as portals connecting the real world of Anthony to its "wyrd" (Rodgers, 2019) counterpart, occupied by Candyman. Marcus K. Harmes has noted that lingering shots of landscape help to craft the elevated world required by rural horror (2013). These shots both call back to the strange viewing position of the opening titles, in addition, prompting the audience to consider the landscape as one of menace - accentuated by the cyclical score from Robert Aiki Aubrey Lowe, itself drawn in part from the landscape—Lowe making use of field recordings made in Cabrini-Green during the shoot (Brown, 2021).

SAY HIS NAME

Writing about the original *Candyman* film, Mikel J. Koven notes that the very method of summoning the Candyman—repeating his name five times in a mirror—serves as an act of folkloric ostension. The summoning ritual itself is familiar to traditional horror, conducted by characters who face the consequences in each edition of the franchise, but in *Candyman* it is the recounting of the legend to other characters that presents the film as occupying a folk

horror tradition—a passing on of knowledge (1999, 168). The significance of this recounting of the legend is important in understanding the wider connotation of the *Candyman* narrative, where the ritual of telling is more important than the ritualistic summoning—in that the telling of the story—rather than the act of the monster himself—that serves as a mechanism that speaks to lived experience. The significance of the myth is not that of a serial killer with a hook for a hand, but the origins of the myth itself as Anthony comes to discover—initially born of slavery and the practice of lynching, and latterly from the impact on a series of black men of poor social housing projects, the aggressive policing of these neighborhoods, and the fear of predators within the community—whether made manifest through a serial killer or a fear of one's own mental wellbeing. This mechanism meets Simon J. Bronner's description of the "folk" of "folk horror" as one of a recounted tradition, bound up in people and carried between groups through both intergroup, and intergenerational, storytelling (2017). Anthony inherits the story from William, before recounting it through his art and exhibitions and effectively prompting the initial summoning and subsequent murders. In the latest film, this retelling of the Candyman narrative shifts in this form of ostension—it is recounted as a story told between characters as in the previous editions of the franchise, but also moves from the physically represented to depicting back story using shadow puppetry deployed both as inserts within the film and in its credit sequences. DaCosta cites artist Kara Walker, whose work recounts black trauma through the medium, as an influence (2021). In the film, these sequences are used in a similar manner to Walker's work in that the device allows the evocation of historical violence without having to directly depict events. A secondary purpose is the device saves DaCosta of the need to call-back to flashbacks to footage from the previous films.

This technique of utilizing shadow puppets as ostension is seeded in the film initially as a profilmic event where William Burke is shown as a child enacting a story of police brutality using shadow puppets within the film itself. Once introduced however it shifts to a non-diegetic device and illustration of voiceover—first used when Troy recounts to Anthony and Brianna the story of Helen Lyle's suicide, then as William elaborates on the Candyman legend for Anthony—connecting the ghost to a lineage of murdered black men leading back to 1890s and the lynching of artist Daniel Robitaille. It is women who predominantly suffer following the summoning of this murderous supernatural spirit. It is Brianna's colleague's assistant Jerrica (Miriam Moss) who is the first to die, followed by Stephens, and a group of young women who conduct the ritual led by their friend who had visited the exhibition of Anthony's work. Their suffering is born of male trauma as William explains—the original spirit Robitaille, and subsequent victims of brutality William Bell—who William explains was "lynched in the twenties," Samuel

Evans, who he explains was killed "during the white housing riots of the fifties" and, most recently, Sherman Fields' murder at the hands of the police. As William explains to Anthony—"a story like that, a pain like that . . . lasts forever," suggesting that legends such as Candyman are the manner with which society handles its traumatic history.

These powerful aesthetic choices further accentuate the power of the ostension or, in DaCosta's own words, to demonstrate how the "telling of the story, is as important as the story itself" (2021). Matilda Groves defines folklore "as the wisdom of the common people," noting that it is not just the people encountering the uncanny that is important, but that these people are those who "tell the story. They are the story" (2017). In Grove's reading of the folk horror genre, she notes that this retelling through ostension serves to draw an audience further into the story through the purposes of a restricted narrative, where both protagonist and audience gain story information in the same moment. In *Candyman* there is no omniscient narrative—the audience learns of Sherman Fields' murder and the connection of this event to a Candyman mythos that leads back much further into the past at the same time that the information is revealed to Anthony in its retelling by William. Groves suggests that this device—of ostension within restricted narrative storytelling—can serve to prevent the othering of the characters within a wider narrative; by being told these stories in the same moment as Anthony the audience joins him to become the folk of this "folklore" (2017).

This notion is consistent with how we experience the film through Anthony as a protagonist. When Anthony is alone, he is commonly in the center of the frame, as are William Burke and Sherman Fields when they are first depicted. Anthony occupies this framing position throughout his two solitary explorations to the rowhouses, in his studio and gallery exhibition sequence, and when he initially hears through a news report of the gallery murders. The framing position is repeated when we see him visit Stephens' apartment, in a visit to a hospital, and a subsequent visit to his mother. In each example he is commonly in the center of the frame—the camera either following him, presenting his point of view or, in an echo of how he experiences the mirrored Candyman, in a reverse shot, where we see Anthony facing us as an audience, again in the center of the frame. When Anthony first comes to paint his images of Sherman Fields, the camera again centers him in the frame but, unusually, this time from above his body—an inversion of the opening city sequence, and as though presenting a thought. Throughout, the camera accentuates the audience's restricted narrative position and serves as a mirror of Anthony's experience. We see what he sees, or observe him looking at it, often taking the same position occupied by the Candyman in the elevator and hallway mirror sequences. Similarly, the point-of-audition or position from which we hear also often mirrors Anthony's experience, most notably

controlled through the use of headphones in the elevator sequence where Anthony first experiences a manifestation of Candyman.

As Anthony slowly loses his mind, William shifts position in the frame and in the narrative to become the center and principal focus of DaCosta's film. In the closing sequence, William is revealed to have first seen Candyman as a child, having witnessed his sister's murder after she had conducted the summoning ritual. By way of revenge, William discloses his plan to unleash the spirit as a force to reverse the oppression of the community. Following his revelation, Brianna kills William in her attempt to rescue Anthony, but is subsequently shot dead by attending police officers. As the police officers attempt to coerce Brianna into agreeing that the homicide was justified, she conducts the summoning ritual in their cruiser's rearview mirror—the Candyman appearing with Anthony's face.

Adam Scovell describes one of the key criticisms of his "Folk Horror Chain" as the emphasis on rural landscape, presenting in a later essay a number of films situated in the urban environment which may otherwise satisfy the criteria—citing the London Underground setting of *Death Line* (1972) as a specific example of what he defines as "Urban Wyrd" (2015). He suggests that one of the key differences between the urban and rural landscape is how the former retracts to create its sense of isolation, while the latter expands. Nia DaCosta's *Candyman* avoids this problem by the manner with which it frames its city. This urban landscape is not viewed horizontally or from above, but from below, looking up to the sky through its floating camera. The manner with which the skyscrapers of the wider Chicago tower over the two-story rowhouses that embody the continued haunted landscape of Cabrini-Green provides a further twist; a distinctly urban alternative to the more traditional presentation of woodland that contains the threat to the ordered world in Robert Egger's *The Witch*, so beautifully captured in the title of Kier-La Janisse's superlative folk horror documentary *Woodlands Dark and Days Bewitched*. DaCosta' elegant aesthetic choices provide the necessary expanse within the city blocks, the impact accentuated through a film that expands the liminal spaces so central to its narrative—mirrored surfaces—to the connective tissue of the city; the transport network of roads, railroads, subways, and bridges. Folk horror reflects a lived experience and to exclude urban characters is to deny the understanding of the city as a landscape like any other, one that is capable of presenting a veritable palimpsest of meanings, or memory, of hauntology and is perhaps one more powerful to the contemporary audiences that live within them.

I challenge you. Look in a mirror. Say his name five times. "Candyman, Candyman, Candyman, Candyman . . ."

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PART IV

Identity

Chapter 14

Non-normativity in Female-Centered Folk Horror Literature

Stephanie Ellis

Folk horror subverts. It places communities or individuals in isolation and takes them on a journey where traditional values—in the normal sense of wider society—are challenged or discarded, often in favor of beliefs which root them deeper in the land, conferring prosperity and fertility. The clue as to how women are presented in this subgenre is very often linked to the latter. Rarely is the female in folk horror seen in complete isolation in the wilderness. Her treatment, and any subsequent isolation, tends to be presented as a response to the community or people around her. She is measured according to the mores of this environment, how she conforms to the edicts dictated by the body that governs that community. Becoming "other" by stepping outside of these restrictions, whether deliberately or by virtue of circumstance, is something which drives the horrors visited upon them.

Key to the female experience is the qualification of their "value" defined by their stage of life: maiden, mother, crone. The maiden—the daughter—can be married off to bring wealth or status to a family. The wife becomes the mother, breeding the desired children enabling the family and community to thrive. The crone, the older woman, expected to accept their place in the shadows having fulfilled their "duty" to become a quiet support while continuing in obedience to the rules of their society. With the vanishing of fertility, their status diminishes in the often-patriarchal society they are part of.

These values have been reflected in the earliest literature; stories from the Bible, the fairy tales, the myths, and legends imparted to educate and inform. They reinforced expectations, attempted to ensure everyone conformed to the

"appropriate" behavioral code, especially that of the female. Read these stories and you will find the dutiful daughter, the biddable wife, the deferential mother. Should the reader or listener not follow this guidance there would be dire consequences; denied Heaven, eaten by a wolf, outcast from the community, a woman was left in little doubt as to what would happen should she diverge from the norm.

Before examining the representation of the female in modern—mainly Western—folk horror literature, it is worthwhile taking a brief look back to pre-Christian beliefs to highlight one element, that of the primacy of Mother Nature. Much is made of a woman's fertility or their status as "mother" in folk horror and because of this they are always perceived as tied to the rites of the land, to Mother Nature. They have a unique bond by virtue of being the creators of life. How this came about can be seen by examining two strands of development: the archaeological and the creative.

As a consequence of academic deification and subsequent personification by creatives, Mother Nature—or the goddesses synonymous with her—has become a figure consistently found within the pages of folk horror narratives; actually, becoming more so in recent years as ecological issues take precedence in modern society's thoughts and worries. For some time, it was assumed that some early cultures were matriarchal as opposed to patriarchal. This belief came about as scholars considered evidence for a "single goddess, representing the sustaining and regenerating powers of the earth, who presided over the religion of the tomb-shrines" (Hutton 2014, 70). This reinforced the idea of a great matriarch, which in turn was adapted by scholars who used it to reflect on the structure of early society. For example, Jane Ellen Harrison who "posited . . . a peaceful and intensely creative woman-centred Greek Civilisation in prehistory" (Hutton 2014, 71). In recent years however, such ideas have not been dismissed entirely but have been downgraded to one of a number of possibilities due to a lack of evidence. While the matriarchal society tends to be elusive in folk horror, the primacy of the Goddess, can often be seen—their worship under the control of the male. A source referenced by Robert Graves and many other writers, including Robin Hardy, co-author of *The Wicker Man*, is *The Golden Bough* by Sir James George Frazer. In his anthropological work, he indicates that it "appears that originally the goddess was a more powerful and important personage than the god . . . it is always the god rather than the goddess who comes to a sad end" (Frazer 2009, 390).

In addition, the European Romantic movement of the early 1800s, developed as a response to the industrialization and urbanization of modern society, where writers and poets "personified the divine feminine increasingly in terms of the natural world . . . as 'Mother Nature' and 'Mother Earth'" (Hutton 2014, 70). In *The White Goddess*, Robert Graves explores the classical mythology and religion of many cultures, showing how the different

kings and gods of these were actually subservient or dependent on their queen or goddess. Each time, he promotes the triple nature of the Goddess: "as Goddess of the Earth she was concerned with the three seasons of Spring, Summer and Winter"; "As Goddess of the Sky she was in the Moon . . . As the New Moon or Spring she was girl; as the Full Moon or Summer she was woman; as the Old Moon or Winter she was hag" (Graves 1999, 377–78) These triple aspects are important to remember when considering the representation of women in folk horror for they often determine the treatment meted out to those who step beyond accepted norms.

Do women who refuse to conform to societal norms or who have erred in some way have any protection because of their sex, or is their punishment greater because of it? How does folk horror treat its female outsiders and miscreants? Are there any trends to be noted?

First, it is necessary to examine some works by earlier authors in the field to see whether treatments of nonnormative women have changed over time or the stereotype is reinforced in more recent publications. The qualification must be repeated here that much of this essay focuses on Western, particularly British, examples. Folk horror is often thought of in this manner and demonstrates the need for other authors to show us the genre as it is in their cultures. This chapter does not deny their existence; simply that it is beyond the scope of this author's own research and current experience.

Regarded as a classic of folk horror literature, *The Great God Pan* (1894) by Arthur Machen is a novella in which a character, Dr. Raymond, believes the real world is hidden, beyond "this glamour and this vision." He intends to lift this veil, and calls this "seeing the God Pan" (Machen 2018 [1894], 10). A person can achieve this view of the other side by undergoing surgery on a specific part of the brain. In this instance, his guinea pig is a girl, he had rescued "from the gutter, and from almost certain starvation, when she [Mary] was a child; I think her life is mine, to use as I see fit" (100). The operation leaves her a "hopeless idiot," (15) but Raymond is dismissive. Mary in this tale is a mere vessel, taken from the lowest social strata where her life is regarded as inconsequential. In her comatose condition she gives birth to a child whom Raymond eventually sends away because of her demonic nature. That she was pregnant and there is no obvious love for her, hints that he extended his "rights" in more forceful ways. Mary is controlled, the conduit for a horror visited on her by Raymond.

Machen's short story, *The White People* (1904), another work frequently referenced in the relation to folk horror and which has influenced many others, including *The Ceremonies* (1984) by T. E. D. Klein, centers on a written account by a young girl who, as a child, understood her difference, that she behaved in an abnormal manner, "was queer . . . talking all to myself, and I was saying words that nobody could understand," and she recalls "the little

white faces that used to look at me when I was lying in my cradle" (Machen 2018 [1904], 269). She then relates how, when in her early teens, she goes for a walk one afternoon and finds herself in a landscape she has never seen before. Her subsequent journey to the land of the white people she had seen as a child is very dreamlike and, in reality, feels little more than a vehicle to describe this other, occult world. Again, the female appears very much as a passive character. It is as if the writer is using the vulnerability of the female to emphasize the horror of her surroundings and as a contrast to its inhabitants but by exaggerating her difference early on, the reader does not engage sympathetically with her.

In contrast, *Lolly Willowes* (1926) by Sylvia Townsend Warner is a black comedy rooted in folk horror. The main character, Lolly, is an unmarried woman in a very traditional family where "canons of behaviour imposed upon them by the example of their ancestors" (Warner 1926, n.p.), fuel their belief that for Lolly to have any kind of life, she must have a husband—and if not, to remain with the family who will look after her. She rebels at forty-seven, when she succumbs to an autumnal longing for the countryside, "a something that was shadowy and menacing," deciding to move to Great Mop and become the "village witch" (Warner 1926, n.p.). Here, she allows herself to be absorbed by nature and reestablish her connection with rural life. When attacked by a kitten, she believes she has made a blood pact with the "Prince of Darkness" (Warner 1926, n.p.) and seeks him out. A conversation with her perceived Satan is not frightening or horrific, but benevolent. Despite the subtle humor in this tale, it is very much a casting-off of the chains wrapped around a woman by the prevailing view of society and a claiming of independence, even from the Devil. Written by a woman about a woman, this story brings in the priority of the female experience rather than the assumed values represented by the characters of Machen; behaviors which she also mirrors in her own her male characters who continue to reflect the air of superiority and natural ownership. Yet there remains an element of passivity in Lolly. She allows much of her life to pass before she acts, and even when she moves, she tends to drift through her days.

Such passivity is much less likely in more modern works, perhaps because women have moved beyond the bonds of home and have carved lives for themselves through work and independence. Such freedoms are by no means worldwide, even today. There are cultures and religions where the prime directive for woman is to be a mother and homemaker before everything else. Such clashes of old-world values and the new, are often part of folk horror narratives, as is evident in a cinematic classic of the genre, *The Wicker Man* (Hardy: 1973) which sets a puritanical Sergeant Howie against a sexually free society on the island of Summerisle—the film reverses the usual order in seeing the past as a place of freedom and the present as repressive. Summerisle,

is a place where women's expression of sexuality and freedom to choose how they use their body is venerated and applauded, but it is not normal to Howie. This conflict is representative of a time of change in society and the progression toward acceptance of women whose behavior would once have marked them out as different. It swaps the abnormal for the normal. The novel, written as a tie-in to the movie, centers on the apparent disappearance of a child against a backdrop of pagan practices, which have been adopted to ensure the fertility of the land. Sexual freedom is personified in the form of Willow, the landlord's daughter. The author has mirrored the *Golden Bough* in his inclusion of a sacred grove to Diana as well as other ritual elements from Frazer's anthropological study. To Lord Summerisle, Willow is Aphrodite, Goddess of Love. To Sergeant Howie, she is a "pagan slut" (Hardy and Shaffer 2014, 182), a "Jezebel . . . whore" (177) The locals in the pub even sing her praise and do not condemn her freedom with her body: "You can have all you like/ If you swear not to waste/The Landlord's Daughter!" (53) In this aspect, she challenges Howie's strict religious conditioning which prizes chastity and virginity. Another role of woman, that of the mother, is also subverted on the island. In his search for the missing girl, whom he believes is to be sacrificed as part of a May Day ritual, he addresses a group of older women, appealing to them as "decent women and mothers" (220), but when they fail to respond he wonders, "Did not the word 'mother,' connoting tenderness, compassion and gentleness, mean the same thing to them as it did to him?" (221).

None of the women are behaving as expected, they are all, to Howie, non-normative. The schoolteacher, Miss Rose is unlike other teachers and schools the young girls in occult and ritualistic practices which he regards as "filth" (85) Schools are guardians of the young mind and should protect their innocence while delivering an education which will allow them to take part in society in the expected manner. To him, "Sex seemed the ruling passion of this strangely fecund island" (64). Every aspect of island life offends his sense of propriety. He is amongst heathens and when stood on the outcrop before his imprisonment in the Wicker Man, he realizes he is "all alone, standing right on top of their White Goddess's limestone womb" (267). Ultimately, Howie is the virgin, manipulated and sacrificed, a contrast to the expected sacrifice of the female. *The Wicker Man* inverts societal expectations to create "a totally alien society" (121) and offers women a platform of freedom unavailable elsewhere. The threat implied to the female, is one that is served on the male.

The primacy of the Goddess in her own right can be found in *Harvest Home* (1973) by Thomas Tryon—a novel written five years earlier than *The Wicker Man*, although of a time concurrent with the film. In the book the women are again linked to cult aspects of fertility and worship, but unlike *The Wicker Man*, they appear appropriately respectable in public. The book

takes us back to that direct link with Mother Nature mentioned earlier and the representation of the three ages of woman. In the apparently idyllic village of Cornwall Combe "tradition . . . was the important thing here: tradition and custom, customs that had been preserved through the villagers' lineage since olden times" (Tryon 1973, 26). As new arrival, Theodore Constantine, discovers the nature of the traditions behind the corn farmers lives, he finds that it is the women who carry the primary role in their society by virtue of their control of the ritual of Harvest Home, "what no man may know nor woman tell" (322). The corn dolls represent "the Mother. The Mother was the goddess. The goddess provided fertility. . . . Doll; Mother; fertility. Hope; belief" (331); a belief held by the whole village. The Mother, the Goddess, is in the earth, Demeter. She was first in creation, *before* Adam and Eve. Fertility of the land is ensured through the sexual act, the Corn Lord and Corn Maiden, and the subsequent death of the male. Another male sacrifice to the land, as with Sergeant Howie. Here, difference is hidden behind a mask of apparent old-fashioned simplicity. Perhaps the isolation of Summerisle allowed its inhabitants to behave more openly, allowed the women a greater freedom without bringing down condemnation on their heads. Or, sometimes what is secret gives greater power to those who hold it close. In this case, the women.

The Ceremonies by T. E. D Klein came out several years later in 1984, a period when feminism had made its mark and women were making inroads in many walks of life. Yet this story too, chooses to clash tradition with the modern, the rural fundamentalist nature of the village of Gilead and its Amish-like people with progressive New York. Two characters carry the story: Jeremy Freirs, who takes up residence on a farm to complete his thesis, and Carol, in New York, traditional in her own Catholic way. As the summer wears on, we see Rosie, "The Old One," preparing for the return of the Master, an ancient power. Through Jeremy's efforts, things start to go wrong in Gilead and an elder, muses, "Perhaps, though, as with the first Fall, a woman was to blame" (Klein 2017, 495). Carol, the intended sacrifice, is a young virgin "that traditional, much-derided qualification" (51), a girl, unwittingly aiding Rosie by being an obedient and biddable assistant. The wife of Freirs' landlord, Deborah, is feisty but "of their faith . . . Her morals were . . . beyond reproach," (136). She still demonstrates the obedience of the wife in the community. The one woman who displays difference, Mrs. Poroth, mother-in-law to Deborah, is regarded as an oddity. She has "the sight." The sacrifice here is one of virginity: the attempted rape of Carol, as she is to be the vessel to return the Master to life as the son to be born. Pivotal to the outcome of the ritual and manipulated throughout, she is never allowed the opportunity or requisite knowledge to consent to what happens to her. None of the women hold any power in this story. Even Mrs. Poroth only has her strength because of her occult powers: "The Brethren felt uneasy in her presence, though they

were loud in praise of her piety" (137). She is the one woman who could derail the Old One's plans through her intention to kill Carol and prevent the son, the Master, being born. Women are not their own agents; they are again shown under the control of others—husbands, elders, supernatural—for if they show independence, like Mrs. Poroth, they are removed.

Her control of occult powers gave Mrs. Poroth some agency, but it was ultimately not enough to protect her. Yet the occult is a theme which has been increasingly employed in recent works of folk horror literature. As society has become more secular, there has been a growing interest in Wicca and the occult, and this has inevitably fed into recent storylines. While once such associations would have seen women ostracized, condemned, and even executed, it has become a trope to highlight the difference of the main female character or as a justification for the way in which she lives her life. Despite the growing acceptance of Wicca, and what might be termed "earth-magics," it still appears to promote the alienation from the norm. *The Water Shall Refuse Them* (2019) by Lucie McKnight Hardy is an interesting example where female agency seems to suggest inherent unlikability.

In this story, Nif, a sixteen-year-old, has developed a creed following the death of her little sister, Petra. She was looking for "something to take control of my life" (Hardy 2019, 39) as her life and family fell apart around her. The Creed demands that if a "bad thing happens, I have to cancel out the negative energy by repeating it. It's about finding balance, equilibrium." This means that if Lorry, Petra's surviving twin, grazes a knee, she has to graze Lorry's other one, and she does carry out some appallingly cruel actions. She explains her creed to Mally, the boy next door, who asks, "So does that mean you are no longer responsible for your own actions?" (163). They are kindred spirits, Mally declaring, "You're different. You're like me. We don't belong. We're outsiders" (64). As their relationship develops, she loses her virginity to him but is subsequently betrayed as he sees her as just another conquest. With the Creed giving her the control, she needs to cope she continues to behave in destructive manner. She harms small creatures, she is violent with other girls from the village, and when she fights one in a stream, the memory of her sister's death comes back, and she realizes she was the one to blame. At this point, with the need for balance in her life, she heads back to Mally's house, the implication clear as having killed once, she needs to do so again. Nif is an outsider and does not conform although much is because of being in thrall to a supposedly occult force and the psychological trauma of her sister's death. Her actions, with regard to Lorry, a child with difficulties and ignored by their mother since birth, are hard to take as she has adopted a generally maternal role and really does love him, but her actions portray her ultimately as disturbed and unlikeable. The female in this story does not behave according to expectations, undermining her nurturing role with unforgivable cruelty.

This correlation between female agency, the supernatural, and inherent unlikability as seen in folk horror narratives continues in works such as *Swansong* (2018) by Kerry Andrew, and to a lesser extent, *Pine* (2020) by Francine Toon. Both, like *The Wicker Man*, use the liminality of the "wilds" of Scotland and Wales as a shorthand for "returning to nature" and the "old ways."

Here we see young women who "please themselves" largely portrayed as uncontrollable and, therefore, unlikeable. The other direction often offered in folk horror narratives is that female agency occurs because the main character is not even human but some kind of pagan or pre-Christian entity. This is seen in the short story, "The First Order of Whaleyville's Divine Basilisk Handlers" (2018) by Eric J. Guignard, where the young female protagonist, Rosalie Jacobs, turns out to be a basilisk. Similarly, in Andy Davidson's *The Boatman's Daughter* (2020), Miranda, has "had to cut things out of herself to survive on the river" (Davidson 2020, 27), and is possessed of dark forces. Although, more centered on the role of women within a cult, *Lure* (2022) by Tim McGregor, also shows that feminine power is only achievable for women if they're not human; in this case in the body of the luremaid [mermaid].

However, a different, in not unproblematic approach to the role of women in folk horror related narratives is shown in the short story, "The Fruit" (2018), by Lindsay King-Miller. A same-sex couple, Evelyn and Ada, live in a traditional town which they feel they can never leave because of the hold of the annual harvest. The orchard is located on Genesis Farms and in a way mirrors the story of the Garden of Eden and the eating of forbidden fruit. Evelyn has a burning desire to be a mother. She tries "not to imagine what their lives would be if they had been born somewhere else, if they were just two ordinary women in their ordinary home" (King-Miller 2018, 64). Evelyn's yearning is felt by the orchard which treats her purely as a woman and offers her the chance she craves, although ultimately absorbing her into the orchard as with the others. Here is a couple who feel "other" in their society but are accepted by the force that controls the community. The non-normative female is treated sympathetically but, again, this is a story which links horror to motherhood and reproduction; normative characteristics that are encouraged even in non-normative couples.

Older women in contemporary folk horror, although often portrayed as knowing their own mind about the world, also seem as equally tied to earlier, patriarchal conceptions of their symbolic role as a crone in such narratives. A brief but illuminating instance of this is in Adam Nevill's *The Ritual* (2011), where it is only toward the end of the tale when the main character is to be sacrificed to an ancient being, Moder (mother). In this instance it is the old woman who will perform the summoning and who "Kept alive a bond with dreadful things of another time . . . It was despicable" (Nevill 2011, 334).

When she is killed, she is revealed to have goat legs, conjuring visions of ancient gods and the demonic. A similar example is Thomas Olde Heuvelt's *Hex* (2021), where the ghost of the witch Katherine van Wyler haunts the town of Black Springs, with her eyes and mouth sewn shut, she crops up anywhere but is regarded as harmless—until her mouth is unstitched and people start to listen to her whisperings. In life, it seems she was abandoned by her husband leaving her with two children to care for. But the gossip of the townspeople accused her of dark deeds, which combined with her own personal tragedy, literally made her a witch.

A more positive role of the ageing woman in folk horror is seen in *The Man in the Field* (2022) by James Cooper, where the main protagonist, Mother Tanner, who is part of a cult, begins to suspect all is not what it appears begins to unravel the truth behind the council's leader, Father Lynch. Within the cult she is treated with disapproval and suspicion, a reaction which is reinforced by her position as a widow who is no longer a (reproductively) useful member of the community. Mother Tanner then subverts the usual narrative role of elder women in folk horror by becoming a strong, independent female who is determined to search for the truth.

FINAL THOUGHTS

As seen in the examples mentioned, late-nineteenth-century Gothic tales that could be seen to be precursors of modern folk horror, largely utilized female figure as "tools" of horror and the wider patriarchal society for which such stories were written. Any woman that strayed from the "traditional" roles of "virgin," "mother," or "crone" would be viewed as monstrous or, literally, demonic. Given the conservative nature of Victorian society, this could easily be seen as an argument against the rise of the New Woman and a reinforcement of normative values.

Fast forward to the 1970s and the establishment—if retroactively from the early twenty-first century—of folk horror as a subgenre and one might expect these values to have changed, particularly given the proximity to the "free love" and sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. And indeed, something of this is seen in *The Wicker Man* with the pagan "hippy" community of Summerisle, in contrast to the deals of the mainland, promoting women to express themselves sexually and redefining the roles expected of motherhood and elder women. However, moving forward again into the twenty-first century, folk horror appears to have resorted to older tropes, so that their visions of a pre-Christian, more nature-based past reinforces Christian, patriarchal ideologies. As shown above, many examples from recent folk horror short stories and novels, while creating strong female characters, almost inevitably

resort to reinforcing older tropes of the necessary silencing of women and dangers presented by allowing them to speak for themselves.

This is no more clearly seen in the trope of woman as mother, of their reproductive capacity and its link with the cult of Mother Nature, is still one regularly used in the genre. Their biology defines their purpose in the story. It is time for women to redefine themselves and claim their own authority, to cast off the chains of maiden, mother, crone to which the patriarchy has kept women bound. Folk horror has too often treated the nonnormative female as the vessel for the horrors to come, their supposed vulnerability and weakness making them an easy victim, while using the idea of difference to justify their treatment. Where they are shown as characters of strength, they are regarded as monstrous in some way, far removed from their role as creator and nurturer. The way in which women have been defined and accepted—in society and therefore reflected in literature—has long been a male prerogative and it is time for that to change. The last word should go to Emily Banting, anthropologist, and feminist witch of Hookland, who called for female agency and self determinism, "No longer defined by the names of men . . . we seek new descriptors" (Banting 2021, 71).

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Chapter 15

(In)Visible Women

Folk Horror in the Spanish Anthology of Fairy Tales Ni aquí ni en ningún otro lugar *(2021) by Patricia Esteban Erlés*

Sandra García Gutiérrez

Folk horror, the Gothic, and fairy tales share a common place in Western cultures, including by extension Spain and Latin America. While fairy tales have had a pedagogical and moral function in society, Gothic narratives approach moral burdens by channeling the fears and anxieties of the reader. Women have been both the main characters and the primary readers of these narratives. In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, female writers including Amparo Dávila (Mexico, 1928–2020), Cristina Fernández Cubas (Spain, 1945–present), Cristina Peri Rossi (Uruguay, 1941–present), Mariana Enríquez (Argentina, 1973–present), and Patricia Esteban Erlés (Spain, 1972–present), among others, have reappropriated horror to subvert the plots of fairy tales under a Gothic aesthetic from a feminist approach in Spain and Latin America. The folklorist, Matilda Groves (2017), states that tragedy and horror combined is "like belief in magic, religion, and science—a trinity begetting itself—is to inspire cathartic awe. It invokes the need to learn better who we are, and recognize how we might change our life and our world for the better" (n.p.). Horror, as Simon Bacon (2019) points out, reveals "our darkest fears and anxieties whilst trying to restore a sense of order to a world that seems to be imminently on the verge of destruction and spinning out of control" (6). The concept of folk horror was coined in the 1970s within the field of horror cinema. Since then, studies have focused primarily on the

experimentation of extreme feelings such as fear, revulsion, sadness, or anger through the interrogation of traditional beliefs held by the audience. Eamon Byers (2014), a scholar of medievalism, folklore, and music, proposed the following definition of the term:

> Whatever its provenance, the term "Folk Horror" did not invent the object of its reference, but, like any good neologism, filled a semantic void by providing the vocabulary to discuss something that had already, however hazily, been identified. In essence, Folk Horror might be defined as a genre that encompasses a variety of media, including film, television, literature, music and art, but with an unifying thematic focus on the propensity for traditional culture and its practitioners to be the object of unease and dead. (6)

The field of folk horror has been expanding and contracting in recent years, from an original emphasis on film to new types of narrative and media. Fear and horror are universal trends that focus on the local, with varying representations in function of space and time. As Rachel Pain (2009) notes: "fear moves from international political events and processes down into people's minds, bodies and everyday lives" (472). The correlation between Gothic and folk horror is linked to the experimentation of fear. If Gothic started as an artistic style in medieval times and was transfigured to literature in the seventeenth century, and was later adapted to film and digital media, the patterns in folk horror have gone in a divergent direction: from film and digital media in the 1970s to an expansion into literature in the present. Very few researchers have studied the relationship between women and folk horror, with the exception of Catherine Spooner, who has analyzed novels aimed at young female audiences 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" (Casey 2020, 281). Spanish folk horror narratives constructed by women predominantly focus on transgressing traditional ideas of gender. They empower women to trespass a common and unquestioned space in which folk, fairy tales and myths cohabit and continue to promote the ideal of beauty and perfection, while warning female characters of the presence of monstrous dangers.

In this chapter, I explore the idea of women's folk horror and assert that Spanish-speaking writers are reappropriating myths and tales traditionally assigned to a female audience to push and define the limits of horror. Specifically, I contemplate both the content and the reception of *Ni aquí ni en ningún otro lugar* (2021)[1] by Patricia Esteban Erlés (1972). The writer is also a columnist of the newspaper *Heraldo de Aragón*, and a language and literature teacher. Her published works include *Abierto para fantoches* (2008), *Manderley en venta* (2008), *Azul ruso* (2010), and *Casa de muñecas* (2012),

among others. Her first novel, *Las madres negras* (2018), a recuperation of the nineteenth-century Gothic scene, won the Dos Passos prize.

Currently, Esteban Erlés is a producer on the second season of *El sillón de terciopelo verde* on Aragón Radio, a podcast that functions as a creative writing workshop that centers on the Gothic, the dark, and the fantastic. She is also producing the first season of *Erlés in noir*, another podcast that produces monthly episodes exploring true crime stories. The podcast is described on the official website as "[a]n open door to the darkest room of the human soul."

As an avid social media user, Patricia Esteban Erlés has a supportive community of followers where she posts constantly, and she uses her own invented adjectives to describe how she perceives colors and fashion through the gothic lens. For example, the disused Spanish term '"fetén" has been popularized by the writer to designate something that is excellent and fabulous, and the adjective "verdelés" combines the color green, "verde" in Spanish, with her last name Erlés to refer to something mysterious and dark. She proposes the term "goticuqui"[2] to refer to clothes associated traditionally to naivete, but their meaning has been subverted under an aesthetic of fear. Her supporter and friend, Ana Segura Anaya, has even popularized a t-shirt design with the countenance of the writer and the sentence: "Soy erlesiana"[3] to express admiration for the writer's worldview. Her performance always combines attraction to the dark, the subversion of folklore and traditional tales, the influence of British and American culture, and the use of irony and humor.

The anthology *Ni aquí ni en ningún otro lugar* (2021) was published on July 27 and arrived to bookstores on September 8. Esteban Erlés considers this book is not just a book but, rather, an artifact: the reader can touch and experiment with the emerald green of the cover. On September 3, the writer organized a contest on Facebook to promote her new work. The rules of the contest "Ojo al concurso" were posted on her social media account as well as in the official website of the editorial Páginas de Espuma as follows: readers were asked to find a representation of an eye, which in the work symbolizes both the monster's sight and visual appearance of said monster. They were then asked to take a picture with both the eye and the book, adding a word or phrase that incorporated the book title. The writer goes further asking the future reader to not even read it yet but just to share the sensation of touching and seeing the book for first time. Therefore, she encouraged her readers to photograph the book alongside eyes of different shapes and sizes. These eyes symbolize the gaze directed at the other, at the monster, and at the desperate woman. They seek to question the normativity of social discourse. This contest was a success, and readers participated, sending their pictures and texts incorporating elements like sewers, trees, black cats, and mirrors that still can

be found on her social media. *Ni aquí ni en ningún otro lugar* (2021) is written to connect with the emotions of the reader purposely using content that is familiar as it is based on traditional short stories. However, it also immerses readers in a world of shadows and light in which main characters are not guaranteed a happy ending.

Esteban Erlés can be seen to base her work on the concept of "negative nostalgia," which Carolina Hart (2020) describes as the dynamic between Gothic, folklore, and fairy tales:

> The traditional narratives of folklore and fairy tale offer to the Gothic the possibility of a social and moral order, and a happy ending; an important dynamic within the Gothic is its oscillation between subverting the fixed structures of folklore and fairy tale for more progressive (or disruptive) ends, and nostalgically preserving the conservatism of such structures. (3)

Horror's representation through the physical presence of eyesight, as Esteban Erlés employs, is a medium for exploration of abjection, because, as Cecilia Sjöholm (2005) points out, according to Julia Kristeva's theories, "[t]he abject is not simply something that is outside of us, and that we are disgusted by. In being neither 'subject nor object,' it seems, first of all, to threaten the borders of the self" (79). Gothic and folk horror interact in Erlés' collection in its very form, which the author describes as an "emerald artifact" because she picked this type of green as the official color of the book that resembles the forest and mystery but is also a reference to the traditional covers of books in Spain in the nineteenth century.

Julia Kristeva (2012) asserts that "The power of horror is contagious. It figures but it disfigures as well: the source of a resurgence in our representations that cut through the forms, volumes, contours to expose the pulsing flesh" (103). In similar fashion Esteban Erlés' works reflect the tensions, or "pulsing flesh" in Spanish society but contextualized in the global sphere, especially attuned to cultural trends in the United States, Latin America and the rest of Europe. She was born in the 1970s, which was primarily characterized by the end of Franco's dictatorship (1939–1975) and the beginning of the democracy in Spain. The following decades brought light to the cases of the stolen children during the Franquismo, the shaven rituals of the republican women who lost the Civil War (1936–1939), and an explosion of feminism in Spain in the years after the rape of a young woman (2016) by La Manada—a group of men who depicted themselves as a pack of wolves on social media. As Abrisketa and Abrisketa explain regarding to this case, "[R]ejection of sexual violence is one of the main incentives for joining and supporting the public expressions of feminism in Spain" (931).

Disfiguring traditional representations of fear and anxiety shows how we, as human beings, experience the blurred border between the distinction of the monster and the non-monster, the human and the non-human, the fear of the fictional and the threats that currently exist in contemporary societies: the breach of basic human rights, misogyny, poverty, and drug addiction, among others. Her book also explores the contagion of horror and revolves around eyesight as the key to solving mysteries: eyesight can deceive but eyes will always reveal the truth. More so, Esteban Erlés raises a plea in favor of love in all its forms and the recognition of human differences through her subversion of fairy tales and traditional oral folklore stories.

APPROACHING SPANISH HORROR FOLKLORE THROUGH *NI AQUÍ NI EN NINGÚN OTRO LUGAR* (2021)

Both the cover and illustrations of the collection were done by Alejandra Acosta, a Chilean artist also responsible for a special edition of *The Bloody Chamber* by Angela Carter for the Spanish publisher Sexto Piso in 2014. Her work is characterized by experimentation and her continuous research of different artistic techniques and materials. The front cover of *Ni aquí ni en ningún otro lugar* depicts fairy tales and monsters alongside a key and an eye that allow the reader to open the door to this enchanted world. All of the illustrations are collages of different eighteenth- and nineteenth-century prints. Inside the book-artifact, through a total of sixteen short stories, Esteban Erlés subverts traditional fairy tales under the influence of the Gothic mode with the aim of exploring the limits of horror. As Fred Botting and Catherine Spooner (2015) state, "Monsters are unacknowledged, wretched creatures, objects of exclusion and thence figures of fear and threat" (2). In this game between fairy tales and horror, Esteban Erlés places most of the stories in distant times and blurred spaces. However, three of the stories are focused on contemporary environments: "El ogro," "Neverland," and "Madre."[4] In an interview I conducted with the writer,[5] she revealed that the short-story, "El ogro" is based on a newspaper story she read in the 1990s about a Ukrainian jailer who committed several crimes in the Soviet Union and had fled to the United States under a new identity. This ogre is a helpful and kind neighbor in Esteban Erlés' fairy tale until a child sees his true face. In "Neverland," Esteban Erlés reflects on another true story, the case of Susan Smith, a mother who killed her two children and disposed of their bodies in a lake in South Carolina. The short story "Madre" focuses on young women struggling with drug-addition and is located in an unidentified city in the UK. In the fairy tale story, a character based on the tragic life of Amy Winehouse must reckon

with the death of her unborn child. Folklore is the thread that connects all of the stories and their use of traditional and familiar tropes such as: princesses, ogres, fairies, giants, and dwarfs.

FOLK-HORROR TROPES: FROM THE CRAZY CAT LADY TO THE FIGURE OF THE MOTHER

Patricia Esteban Erlés was inspired by Angela Carter's feminist rewriting of fairy tales and especially by her work *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979), and believes that Carter is holding out a phantasmal hand to women storytellers from the past. The opening of *Ni aquí ni en ningún otro lugar* is the short story "La vieja,"[6] about an old lady whose clothes and appearance raise suspicion in the reader who begins to question if she could be a witch surrounded by cats. In my interview with Esteban Erlés, she explained that the old woman is a feminist-inspired figure meant to vindicate female story tellers in medieval times that did not know how to write but whose roles were to share culture orally across generations. Another female force in Esteban Erlés' writing is the figure of the mother. In her short story "La madre," a young woman loses her baby during childbirth. She runs away with a green coat, a symbol of mystery and dark fascination, to the neighborhood where she used to do drugs when she was a teenager with hopes that her baby could still be alive.

Botting and Spooner (2015) have noted how, "Monstrosity is an effect of systems of power, and, at the same time, an unreal, constructed figure; it manifests movements or forces within and beyond all the relations, exceeding both objectification and domination," (2) and accordingly, Esteban Erlés weaponizes her plots of traditional tales, the use of Gothic aesthetics, horror movies, and folklore against such "systems of power" to produce a feminist and anti-patriarchal discourse. Inherently part of this is the systemic violence that Spain experienced during the dictatorship of Francisco Franco (1939–1975) and the posterior years of a young democracy. Theorists, such as Nicholas G. Schlegel (2015), have asked, in relation to Spanish horror "why 'a ghost' or an 'old dark house' would somehow be more threatening or disturbing than the inhuman carnage of war or the blood orgies of a bullfight" (26). Esteban Erlés provides the answer.

"LA VIEJA": AN INTERSECTION BETWEEN THE WITCH AND THE CRAZY CAT LADY

Drawing from works as diverse as Hans Christian Andersen's short stories in the beginning of the nineteenth century to the TV show *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), the writer channels all of her personal fears and anxieties in the construction of her anthology. The first story, "La vieja," delves into the daily life of an old woman who spends the majority of her time in the kitchen cooking, accompanied by her black cat. She licks her lips repeatedly because she knows the best fairy tale in history, while recognizing that it is the only one, she knows, "solo se sabe un cuento, pero es el ajor de todos"[7] (13). The old woman has memory loss, but she stills remembers all the words and letters of the fairy tale. The plot describes a blond girl lost in a forest trapped by an ogre who seeks to devour her.

Esteban Erlés draws on food symbolism to explain how the ogre decides not to devour her but to save her, allowing her to grow up after he falls in love. Within this story is a critique about how the rest of the old women are praying in the church, while she proudly narrates the story time and again. The tale highlights the lack of female solidarity revealing how the patriarchal system in Spain has isolated women to prevent their friendship. Silvia Federici (2018) has identified the processes put in place to cause this and notes it came into place as Europe transitioned into an industrial and capitalist economy which encouraged a "new model of femininity to which women had to conform to be socially accepted in the developing capitalist society: sexless, obedient, submissive" (32).

In the story's conclusion, an attractive, gallant knight rescues the young girl by shooting a poison arrow toward the monster's eye: "Ella y solo ella puede hablar del enorme ojo ensangrentado del monstruo, perplejo, muy abierto, partido en dos por una flecha envenenada"[8] (14). The bloody eye is a reference to the myth of Polifemo and Galatea, the romantic love story of the Cyclops in Homer's *The Odyssey.* Esteban Erlés' obsession with the fuzzy balance between beauty and monstrosity is well represented here. She connects this being with the figure of a monster, even though in *the Odyssey*, as Baena (2014) points out, Galatea was the only one identified as a monster. In this vein, Baena also claims that "If Polyphemus is a monster of castration, Galatea is the monster who opposes such castration. She is the pulsion-machine of desire, in flux, in maritime, liquid, flux" (35).

Esteban Erlés then uses the story to show the danger of taking sides in favor of the beauty and the false privilege given as a result of that assumption. At the end of the story the old woman is shown swinging in her chair ready to tell the story to her cats one more time as she dies peacefully. This

same dilemma of trusting in either the beauty or the beast also appears in the short story "El monstruo," in which the figure of the ogre is manifested in the form of a male beast that it is offered to young ladies as an accompanist. The young princess is not as beautiful as her father had hoped and the kingdom risks losing power. The king has a two-fold goal of fulfilling his duties as a king and as a father. Horror appears when the daughter screams at the loss of her sanity when the male beast becomes an attractive man.

"MADRE": EXPLORING FOLK HORROR THROUGH MOTHERHOOD, DRUGS, AND DEATH

"Madre" is a re-appropriation of Andersen's tale "The Story of a Mother" (1848), where death is linked to water. The continuing popularity of the Danish fairy tale author and poet, Hans Christian Andersen (1805–1875), is due in no small measure to the translations of stories such as "The Little Mermaid" and "The Princess and the Pea." However, not all his stories are as sentimental as his most well-known ones, as noted by Jack Zipes (2006):

> His stories are weird and unsettling, and they are weird and unsettling because Andersen wrote a few radical fairy tales, legends, and anecdotes with a ferocious tone and spirit along with many saccharine religious tales that drip with sentimentality and banality—and he wrote these types of tales and other strange and mundane narratives at the same time. (233)

"The Story of a Mother" (1848) is one of the strange ones beginning with the lines, "A mother sat by her little child. She was so sad, so afraid he would die" (329). The plot centers on a young mother's fear of the loss of her child shortly after his birth due to sickness and adverse weather conditions. She has a first visitor, Death, with whom she shares her worries about the health of her child. After three nights taking care of him, she closes her eyes for a few seconds and, immediately after, discovers Death has abandoned the house with her baby. The mother begins the search for her child, wondering if God has made the right decision. The main character finds different figures who guide her to Death and the baby in exchange for different items or favors. The mother sings all the songs she knows to Night; she warmed up the blackthorn bush; she gives her eyes as pearls to the lake; she trades her black hair to an old woman. In her second encounter with Death, he asks, surprised, "How did you find your way here?" (333) to which she answers that she is a mother. The end of the tale depicts Death as the gardener of God, and the flowers

represent human lives. Accepting her child's fate, the mother resigns herself to God's will and allows Death to carry her baby into the unknown.

Two centuries later, Esteban Erlés offers a new version of this tale questioning the ideal of perfect motherhood and entangles it with the idea of drug addiction and how together they impact one's own notion of identity. In "La madre," a woman loses her baby in childbirth and refuses to accept the loss: "Nadie puede nacer muerto. Nadie puede no vivir sin nacer y llegar a este mundo como un ahogado que el mar arroja hasta la playa"[9] (183). Contextualized in an urban space, the mother runs away in the middle of the night to the same neighborhood she frequented to use drugs in her teenage years. A memory of her youth resurfaces, and she recalls being saved from death by a young policeman. She has a flashback of an anonymous voice whispering that she owes a debt of life. She begins wandering the streets in her hospital robe and a green coat, on a mission to find her baby. As in Andersen's short story, the main character encounters three individuals identified as Dolor (Pain), Noche (Night), and Muerte (Death). Each of them asks the young woman, respectively, for her hair, her eyes and finally her voice in exchange for information on how to rescue her son. The woman ends up dead in the polluted river of the city, thinking she will find her baby in its deep waters.

The fairy tale is disfigured by a Gothic aesthetic, and folk tropes represent the female desperation of rejecting the loss of the baby and blaming herself for her past drug addiction. As Padilla (2013) points out, the female monster is linked with the idea of infertility, and impurity. In this story the writer presents a sinner, a woman who is not perfect and pure, and who seeks to find her baby at the cost of losing her own life. Horror abounds in the entirety of the story, as her family and doctors: "Le rogaron que pensara en ella misma, que recordara milagrosamente que estaba bien, que no guardaba secuelas de aquel parto fallido"[10] (183). She refuses to go to the funeral and to see the baby's corpse because her son was not a blue-skin wax doll (184). As the young woman is convinced her baby is still alive, and lost somewhere, she devotes herself entirely to finding him and to convincing her family that he is still alive. Once she leaves the hospital, she decides to tell no one of her resolution to find her baby. She withdraws from her family and sleeps in the guest room in order to avoid the empty cradle in her own room.

During the story the main character refers to herself as a silent ghost. As a child, she used to hide in the closet or escape from the window to hide from the adults. When she becomes a teenager, she starts to explore the city at dawn. In those getaways, she encounters like-minded adolescents who use substances to escape their realities. One night, a drug overdose triggers a change in her perspective of life: "Los demás se asustaron al mirar sus

ojos vacíos y echaron a correr. Estuvo muerta, eso le dijeron, más de un minuto."[11] (187).

In our interview, Esteban Erlés had said how moved she had been by the reports of substance abuse and subsequent death of the singer Amy Winehouse (1983–2011) and of women like her. This concern would appear to have a direct correlation to "Madre." Even though the main character of the story was rescued by a policeman, she recalls how this hero pulled her of from the arms of the death, and Muerte declared herself an enemy: "Me debes una vida, pudo oír que le decía ella, masticando las palabras en su nuca"[12] (187). This episode returns to her when she leaves the house at dawn while her family sleeps, dressed in a light gown, a green coat and no shoes. The avenue that she walks down and which connects the residential area to an abandoned neighborhood is compared to an artery that carries the living to the world of the dead.

The neighborhood is full of empty houses with covered windows and abandoned buildings. Through her memories she recounts the stories of addicts searching to buy more drugs in those forsaken places. It is in that desperate place that she recognizes the cry of her baby and runs to find a shadow in the corner of a street, shrouded in black clothes, who holds a shape covered in a blanket. At first sight, the woman thinks that shape is her baby, but the blanket falls revealing a doll. The shadow who is portrayed as a woman with a man's voice, confesses to the main character that it was waiting for her. This character is called Noche and offers her an exchange: her hair for information about the baby's location. The woman accepts it, and Noche cuts her hair with rusted scissors.

After following a marked path to an attic, she finds Dolor waiting on the doorstep. This figure represents an addict, and Esteban Erlés uses expressions such as "nieve quemada" [burnt snow] to refer to the use of cocaine and crack. Soon Dolor welcomes her into the room:

> Se quedó de pie, en medio de la habitación. Olía a nieve quemada, reconoció aquel aroma que la llevaba a huir cada noche, en ese otro tiempo tan lejano, el tiempo en que contrajo la deuda. Él paso a su lado, le sonrió con dulzura y ocupó el desvencijado sillón de Skay, en realidad el único mueble de aquel cuarto minúsculo, desplegando al sentarse un par de alas, magnificas y muy negras.[13] (192)

This figure resembles a dark angel with two different colored eyes: one pale blue iris and the other black.[14] Dolor also offers her an exchange for information about her son: her voice. The dark angel does not try to convince her to accept this exchange, but rather warns her that she will never be able to talk or even cry again and that permanent silence will become part of her life.

After accepting the deal, the mother runs to a polluted river called Hilo de Sangre to find the only person who knows where the baby is located. This river represents death, and the author explains that it is the location of frequent suicides of addicts unable to procure more drugs. The deep waters keep the bodies of all of those who remain unknown to the rest of society.

Muerte's character is waiting for the young woman in the river. The mother has difficulty recognizing the gender of this supernatural being that is described as having dark skin, deer-like eyes, and with a scepter in hand. In exchange for her eyes, Muerte reveals to the woman that the baby is sleeping in the middle of the river. This episode of horror is particularly visual as the narrator describes how the corneas abandon the eyes and roll over her face (195). As the mother has now lost her sight, Muerte decides to wake up the baby provoking his cry and letting the woman follow his voice. She removes her green coat and begins swimming to find her son. She jumps into the river from which no one returns, and she begins swimming unceasingly toward her death.

Mothers are central figures in the narratives of Esteban Erlés. In *Casa de muñecas* (2012), she reflects on the role of the mother as the perpetuator of the tradition in both buying dolls for their daughters and dressing their own daughters as dolls. In the novel *Las madres negras* (2018), Esteban Erlés writes of "holy mothers" in her appraisal of both convents and the lives of orphaned children. There is an implicit critique of the Magdalene Laundries in Ireland that abused women and children and forced them into a life of hard labor (Verano and De La Varga, 2021). In "La madre," as seen above, folk horror infects Andersen's original, deforming the story and distorting the classic characters that the mother finds on her journey to "rescue" the baby. Dolor, Noche, and Muerte are highly distinct from Andersen's characters. They represent the decay of human lives and the horror of someone who observes this as their condition.

CONCLUSIONS

The emerald book-artifact, *Ni aquí ni en ningún otro lugar*, shapes the intersection between Spanish feminism and folk horror. Short stories such as "La vieja" and "La madre" delve into the deception and truth of "seeing" and recognizing the horror of monsters and addictive behaviors. Folk horror, through fairytales and folk stories, creates a palpable tension between characters and the reader, looking for a monster that speaks to our daily worries and insecurities. Spain has traditionally been part of the European cultural flux of translations and adaptations that arrived from France and Germany. If nostalgia has persuaded folk and fairy tales to stay in the Western collective

imaginary, feminist writers have reappropriated them through the exploration of fear and horror. The complexity of Spain's contemporary history has found expression and been "seen" through Gothic and folk horror narratives, such as those created by Esteban Erlés. The *#MeToo* movement has also brought forth a renewed call and impetuous for understanding and assuring social rights for those traditionally ignored or vilified by patriarchal society, and folk horror has provided the perfect vehicle with which to explore the fears and anxieties that women simultaneously face and embody in the twenty-first century.

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NOTES

1. *Ni aquí ni en ningún otro lugar* can be translated to English as *Not here nor any other place*. All the translations from Spanish to English in this paper from the anthology have followed my personal criteria.

2. The term "goticuqui" has been studied in the article: "Vestir al sujeto femenino: la moda goticuqui en *Casa de Muñecas* (2012) de Patricia Esteban Erlés" by Sandra García Gutiérrez.

3. T-Shirt's logo "Soy erlesiana" ("I am Erles") is available to download in the personal writer's Facebook account.

4. Translated as "The Ogre," "Neverland," and "The Mother." The English title "Neverland" is a choice of the writer indicating that it is an adaptation of the story "Peter Pan" (1911) by J. M. Barrie.

5. I interviewed Patricia Esteban Erlés regarding *Ni aquí ni en ningún otro lugar* (2021) on April 2022.

6. Translated as "An Old Woman."

7. Translated as: "She only knows one story, but it is the best of them all."

8. Translated as: "She and only she can speak about the big bloody ogre's eye, perplexed, opened, split in two by a poisonous arrow."

9. Translated as: "No one can be born dead. No one can live without being born and no one can come into this world washed up onto the shore."

10. Translated as: "They asked her to think of herself, to remember that her health condition was miraculously good, and she did not suffer any after-effects of that cursed birth."

11. Translated as: "The rest of them were scared to look at her empty eyes, and they started running away. She was dead, they told her, for more than a minute."

12. Translated as: "You owe me a life, she heard, chewing those words in her nape."

13. Translated as: "She remained standing, in the middle of the room. It smelled of burnt snow, and she recognized that smell which always pushed her to flee each night, that time long ago when she'd incurred her debt. He came around her, smiled at her sweetly, and sat down on an old and rickety Skay chair; the only furniture in that small room, and he showed his wings, magnificent and dark."

14. This is an allusion to the Heterochromia suffered by David Bowie as the author herself has remarked on her private Facebook account, and that has also appeared in the character of Mida in Esteban Erlés' gothic novel *Las madres negras* (2018).

Chapter 16

Speculative Folk Horror and Reclaiming Monsters in Cherríe Moraga's *The Hungry Woman*

Danielle Garcia-Karr

US public discourse and popular media are rife with monstrous metaphors of Latinxs. This essay argues that these gothic monstrous metaphors construct an affective economy of fear, which results in material violence and the devastation of Latinx lives. I further argue that to intervene within this affective economy, Latinx authors write speculative fiction, filled with familiar figures of folk horror, dismembering and redeploying the monster. In other words, speculative Latinx authors disidentify with monsters and enact epistemic disobedience, problematizing the known and naturalized and delinking Latinx people from monstrous metaphors to interrupt cycles of fear and violence. This essay examines the reclamation of the familiar Latinx ghost la Llorona in Cherrie Moraga's *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* to further establish an epistemology of Latinx monstrosity and understand how popular mediums operate as tools of the oppressed.

"Pórtate bien or la Llorona will come for you." La Llorona, El Cucuy, visiting spirits, floating lights, magic trees, egg cures: these folkloric figures and magical objects animated my abuela's stories along with tales of her own misdeeds and supernatural experiences. She used her stories, always flavored with resistance and resilience, as a tool to convey cultural memory and history. I, like many Mexican and Chicanx[1] children, grew up on folktales and horror, with caregivers frightening me into good behavior. Family members illustrated folklore as a teaching tool, historical record, cultural validation, and even "social protest" (Castro 2001, xiv). For many Latinx[2] people, no distinct line exists between folklore and horror, the ghostly and

ghastly continually crossing genres' borders. To that end, folk horror can be understood as people's stories and beliefs which engage with the horrific and terrible. For Chicanx authors, folk horror bleeds into speculative fiction, which is "grounded in the Southwest and draws upon familiar folkloric figures" (Merla-Watson and Olguín 2017, 11). Further, contemporary queer Chicanx cultural producers unframe—defined by Gaspar de Alba as undoing harmful framing, bordering, and blaming—folkloric figures from Eurocentric epistemologies and patriarchal gender scripts as a method of social critique. In other words, marginalized authors engage with the folk, the public, through stories with which they are familiar in order to alter how marginalized people are depicted and thereby understood and treated. Chicanx speculative authors transform the public's preconceived notions by engaging directly with the colonial imaginary through their creative works. Latinxs are constructed as metaphorically monstrous in the US imaginary through many modes including popular media, public discourse, and political rhetoric. Monster as metaphor is "employed as a rhetoric of rebuke" to create exploitable fear and justify violence (Ingebretsen 2003, 2). These metaphors "shap[e] public opinion about Latinos" and lead to devastating material consequences. Luckily, public opinion and policy can be altered by "Renegade metaphors," which "replace ones that produce intolerant attitudes" (Santa Ana 2002, 11). Latinx speculative authors reclaim and redeploy monstrous figures, subverting dominant ideological narratives, and asserting our fundamental human and citizenship rights because fiction bypasses audience logic to "spea[k] directly to the limbic . . . system—bypassing the discursive (syllogistic) rationality" (Asma 2014, 955). Further, William Calvo-Quirós posits, "Monsters and the phantasmagoric have long been central to the Chicanx experience as reminders of our unresolved haunted histories of violence and oppression" (Merla-Watson et al. 2017, 39). Additionally, "haunting, unlike trauma, is distinctive for producing a something-to-be-done" (Gordon 2008, xvi). In other words, by deconstructing and unframing the ghosts that haunt folk horror, queer Chicanxs make oppressive systems visible so that they might be changed.

This chapter specifically examines metaphors of monstrosity in Cherríe Moraga's *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea.* In this play, the traditional Greek myth blends with the tale of la Llorona. Medea and all of the jotería have been cast out of Aztlán, recaptured homeland of Chicanx people, to the ghetto borderland of Phoenix. Medea is betrayed by her husband, Jasón, and kills their son, Chac-Mool before dying herself. Additional characters include Medea's lover, Luna, and her grandmother Mama Sal. The traditional chorus is replaced by "four warrior women who, according to Aztec myth, have died in childbirth" and represent the four cardinal directions (Moraga 2001, 294). These women also double as the minor characters in the play and often their words overlap with other characters, illustrating the shared nature of these

violent and oppressive experiences. All characters are defined by their relationship to Medea. In this chapter, I perform a close reading of key scenes to demonstrate how monstrosity is either cast off or reclaimed by Moraga through the character of Medea, the archetypal bad mother, representative of la Llorona, and stand in for all disenfranchised Chicanas. This analysis reveals the need to reimagine the monster because metaphors matter.

HEMISPHERIC HEURISTIC OF MONSTROSITY

The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea adapts the traditional Greek tragedy to a third space dystopia filled with queer Chicanas. According to Emma Peréz, third space is an "interstitial space that third world women occupy," "where agency is enacted through third space feminism," and the "decolonial imaginary" is possible. Anzaldúa calls this in-between space the nepantla, where things are "br[oken] down" and "tak[en] apart" (Peréz 1999, xvi). By creating a space between temporalities and realities, Moraga reconstructs this play into a liminal third space of nepantla, where transformation is possible. Occupying liminal space between semantic categories, Medea is not just a victim or a villain: she is a chingona. A chingona "fucks gender, fucks with gender, fucks things up" (Cuevas 2018, 30). Chingonas, like Medea, fuck with the norms of white heteropatriarchy, making them monstrous from the dominant ideological standpoint. However, to Moraga, a queer Chicana, her power is evident. She calls the audience to consider exactly what makes a monster, nuancing the audience's understanding and disrupting binary systems like citizen/monster or virgin/whore. Moraga unpins Medea from the gendered, colonial, religious scripts of marianismo to tie her more closely to the folk horror figure of la Llorona. For Latinas and la jotería, Moraga reclaims the monstrosity, its power, and its agency by making Medea a chingona.

The Hungry Woman references major political violence, in addition to the everyday oppression of Latinxs, queers, and women, which inform Moraga's use of gothic monstrosity. Written in 1995, following the pivotal 1994 elections, which gained the Republican majority in the Senate and elected Newt Gingrich, this work speaks back to the Chicano Movement, The English Only Movement, and North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), in addition to more general violence against Chicanxs, women, and queers. Though produced various times over the years but not widespread,[3] it has been influential in laying the foundation for other feminist, Latinx gothic works. Scholars who studied this work include Patricia Ybarra and Barbara Smith from a feminist and LGBTQIA+ perspective, and Michelle R. Martin-Baron and Juan Ráez Padilla from the angle of myth and folklore. Tonya Gonzalez's "The (Gothic) Gift of Death in Cherríe Moraga's '*The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea*'"

informs this project, for she is the first to explore this play through the lens of the gothic. Gonzalez's focuses on death, not as a curse or punishment, but a gift of freedom from heteropatriarchal oppression. I add that the control over life and death is emblematic of power, specifically Medea's, a queer Latina's, power. While Gonzalez concentrates on the genre's features, I focus on the figure of the monster through Medea.

Metaphoric monstrosity has been deployed against Latinx people from the conquest onwards. Foundational monster theorist Jeffery Jerome Cohen argues, "Representing an anterior culture as monstrous justifies its displacement or extermination by rendering the act heroic" (2020, 65). Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, Persephone Braham, Patricia Saldarriaga, and others[4] document the historic mapping of monstrosity onto indigenous and then Latinx bodies. Braham posits, "Embodying exoticism, hybridity, and sexual and other excesses, monsters sustained the ongoing conceptualization of the unknown that was a prerequisite to conquest" (2015, 2). This metaphoric monster-making continued to the present to allow for construction and constitution of citizenship, explored by Josue David Cisneros, Karma Chávez, Natalia Molina, and more.[5] Karma Chávez details the alienating logic used to construct a person or group as outsiders to be "separated or excluded" and "which is opposed, repugnant, or unaccustomed" specifically in relation to the citizen (2021, 6). These scholars answer the question of why the construction of the metaphoric monster in relation to BIPOC populations exists.

Scholars including Otto Santa Ana, William Nericcio, and Edward Ingebretsen detail the consequences of such rhetorical monster making. Building from George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, and cognitive metaphor theory, Santa Ana contends that "Humans build their concepts of the word in terms of images . . . by means of metaphor," which leads to devastating material consequences for Latinxs, including linguistic terrorism, workplace and housing discrimination, and outright violence (2002*,* 8). Exploring this rhetoric of fear, Ingebretson argues metaphoric monster-making is "language designed to hide the violence they enact" where "Monster-talk . . . is narrative and metanarrative . . . it tells a story, explains the story, and draws moral conclusions, simultaneously" (2003*,* 43). Monstrous metaphors deny citizenship and belonging, but also condemn and condone violence.

Using a framework for understanding monstrosity, that included scholars such as Cristina Santos, John Block Friedman, and Jeffery Jerome Cohen,[6] along with the works of Gloria Anzaldúa, a methodology can be established to understand the major markers of monstrosity: appearance, diet, residence, weaponry, culture, language, references, and affect, which will be addressed here. Cohen posits, "The monster is difference made flesh" (2020, 65). Friedman contends monsters make "the observer's culture, language, and physical appearance the norm by which to evaluate all other people" (2020,

32). Clearly, monsters represent difference from the perspective of the dominant culture. Additionally, Anzaldúa argues, "woman is carnal, animal, and closer to the undivine, she must be protected. Protected from herself. Woman is the stranger, the other. She is man's recognized nightmarish pieces, his Shadow-Beast. The sight of her sends him into a frenzy of anger and fear" (2021, 74). Conjoining these perspectives allows us to see the intersectional impact of metaphorical monster making because those marginalized groups have monsters of their own. As scholars like William Calvo-Quirós, María Herrera-Sobek, José Limón, and more illustrate, Latinx monsters are "more than just superstitious or naive figments of the 'primitive' imagination: they are sophisticated articulations" of interpersonal violence, systems of oppression, and discriminatory laws and policies (Merla-Watson and Olguín 2017, 16). Additionally, as I argue, Latinx cultural producers can dismember and redeploy monsters, negotiating the perception and treatment of marginalized groups.

La Llorona is the most well studied Latinx monster, ghost, and folkloric figure. In *Altermundos*, Merla-Watson and Olguín trace the genealogy of scholars, which include "Norma Alarcón, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cordelia Candelaria, Ana Castillo, Rosa Linda Fregoso, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Cherríe Moraga, Domino Renée Pérez, Emma Pérez, Tey Diana Rebolledo, and Sonia Saldívar-Hull, among many more" (Merla-Watson and Olguín 2017, 16). Domino Pérez posits that la Llorona is "alternately, and sometimes simultaneously, a person, legend, ghost, goddess, metaphor, story, and/or symbol," often conflated with la Malinche/la Chingada, Malinalli Tenepal, Doña Maria, Coatlicue, and Cihuacoatl (Pérez 2008, 2). La Llorona stands "as a cultural counterpoint to La Virgen de Guadalupe's maternal goodness" (30). According to Alicia Arrizón, good women like La Virgen embody the qualities of "goodness, humbleness, dedication to family, and virginity" as opposed to "the undesirable traits . . . treachery, lying, deceitfulness, and sexual promiscuity" (2020, 154). These folkloric figures are often employed as behavioral guides and delimit socially acceptable behaviors for women. To that end, La Llorona has historically been understood from a folkloric perspective. Domino Pérez illustrates how traditional perspectives on La Llorona are "conservative or static," preserving historic versions of her tale (2008, 16). However, to fully understand la Llorona, she must also be understood also in terms of horror and the gothic, of representing, haunting, and making visible the lingering harm which must be accounted for and rectified.

ARCHETYPAL BAD MOTHER

Cherríe Moraga mobilizes the seemingly monstrous figure of la Llorona to not only excavate specters of heteropatriarchal Chicano nationalism, but also begin to imagine a more liberatory future. I trace how Moraga dismembers the monster to further develop a Latinx epistemology of monstrosity. In a close reading of *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea*, I examine how Moraga disidentifies with both dominant and Chicanx gender scripts by dismembering the monster and unframing folkloric figures. I conclude that Latinx speculative authors engage in rhetorical acts of epistemic disobedience through art to alter the perception and treatment of Latinx people in the United States.

The opening scene of Act I introduces Medea, sitting in a mental hospital:

> Medea: Cover the mirrors, Nurse. I don't want my son to see me like this, red-eyed, crow's-feet drooping. I am a motherless sight . . . Bring out the purple cloths. We'll pretend it is Lent and we await the resurrection of my son, my holy son. I'll sleep until then, until he returns to me . . . The mirror is cold, impenetrable. You can never get inside it, unless you are a child or un muerto. I am neither, no longer, not yet . . . Tiny ghosts live inside me. The ghost of my own pathetic girlhood. (Moraga 2001, 298)

The chorus of Aztec warrior women, Cihuatateo, have framed the play in the Aztec myth of Coatlicue becoming pregnant with Huitzilopochtli. They tie the traditional Greek myth to the Aztec and even Christian saying "So, too begins and ends this story. The birth of a male child from the dark sea of Medea" (297). By tying together these disparate mythologies, Moraga alludes to Medea's archetypal nature. She is the ubiquitous and quintessential evil woman and monster.

This passage begins with Medea wanting to "Cover the mirrors" because she literally and metaphorically does not want to see herself. Anzaldúa understands the mirror as a symbol connected to Coatlicue. Throughout the play, Medea is repeatedly connected to Coatlicue, who is a "creator goddess" of Aztec mythology, the quintessential mother (2021, 86). Coatlicue, sometimes known as Coatlalopeuh, Tonantsi, Tlazolteotl, and Cihuacoatl according to Anzaldúa, underwent a transformation following Catholic colonization. Her positive aspects were attributed to Tonantzin, who became la Virgen de Guadalupe, the good mother. Her "darker guises," which went on to include la Chingada and la Llorona were made into "putas," cementing the virgin/whore dichotomy (2021, 87). This connection to Coatlicue sets up the expectation that Medea represents the archetypal bad mother. Through the mirror, we see and understand ourselves fully, including the shadow beasts we have

striven to hide through desconocimiento. Therefore, Medea begins the play refusing to acknowledge or integrate the monstrous parts of herself, remaining trapped in the metaphorical Coatlicue State. Regardless of whether she can see the monster, the audience has her put on display.

Infidelity and infanticide mark the pinnacle of monstrous motherhood/womanhood. This passage transgresses temporality, remembering the past and foreshadowing the future, revealing Medea will commit both. Infanticide is referenced here as Medea is a "motherless sight." Later in the play, the audience learns that Medea's husband, Jasón, caught her and Luna in bed together, which led to Medea's exile from Aztlán. Medea fled with her young son, Chac-Mool, representative of hope and the future. When Jasón tries to take their son back for the purpose of legitimizing his hold of Medea's land, Medea kills Chac-Mool to release him from the cycle of violence of toxic masculinity. Rather than condemning her as an evil woman like her namesake or la Llorona, Moraga associates her with Christian mythology. This is done by constructing Chac-Mool as Christ, "the holy son" whose "resurrection" is anticipated during "Lent" with the "purple cloths." The familiar folkloric figure of Jesus Christ is evoked in Aztec indigenous Chac-Mool, who is equally worthy of worship, will release Medea from torment, and will be resurrected in a better future. Throughout the play, the line between human and monster is queered and blurred. Monstrosity is juxtaposed with holy. In this way, Medea holds the power of the monster, but is released from its violent cycle of oppression.

Additionally, past, present, and future blend together. Here, Medea is neither "child" nor "muerto," "no longer, not yet," however, all of these instances of Medea live inside her as "Tiny ghosts" in addition to the ghosts which are the monsters, cultural foremothers, folkloric figures, and generational traumas. Referencing other ghosts as inside of Medea marks her as monstrous. From the outset of the play, Medea is entangled with the stories of women who have come before her, but in the end, she is released from the never-ending pain, in a "gothic gift of death" where we can imagine a future of freedom (González, 2007). Unlike typical monsters, Medea's character does not engage the audience in the affective dimension of monstrosity with fear, horror, revulsion, disgust, terror, etc. Instead, when the audience sees how Chac-Mool and Luna view her, we bear witness to Medea's pain and pity her. Medea nuances our understanding of la Llorona, not simply a woman scorned who takes her wrath out on an innocent, but instead a trapped mother, desiring better for her child, who achieves freedom in the only way she can.

In addition to these temporal changes, the setting oscillates between the mental hospital and her home in Phoenix, "now a city-in-ruin, the dumping site of every kind of poison and person unwanted by its neighbors," which is "Located in the border region between Gringolandia (white Amerika) and

Aztlán (Chicano country)" (Moraga 2001, 295). Sometimes, different locals occupy the same physical space on the stage. Residence also marks a monster, according to Friedman, with those outside of the boundaries and borders of the civilized world are barbarous, monstrous. Medea resides between two civilized countries and can belong to neither, to both she is an outsider, monster. This liminal border space is where monsters live. It is the nepantla. The changes in time and space further illustrate that Medea's story is not solely her own, but that of many other women in different times and places.

In this passage, as throughout the play, Medea reflects internalized heteropatriarchy and colonialism. She laments her "red-eyed, crow's-feet drooping," complaining about her appearance, a common marker of monstrosity. For women, monstrous appearance is anything that displeases the male gaze with either too much or too little sexual appeal. As evidenced by the virgin/whore dichotomy, women's place in society is dictated by her sexual availability and service to men. Cristina Santos defines how appearance and sexual availability define monstrosity through these four archetypes: the "ugly, old, overly intelligent woman" become "the crone, the witch, the hag," the "beautiful, young, expressive woman" become "the sirens, mermaids," the "sexually powerful, promiscuous" become "the vampires, succubi, whore, prostitute," and the "monstrous mother/Stepmother" become "La Llorona, fairy tale witch" (2017, xvii). As an amalgamation of these, Medea is monstrous. Further, when Medea's appearance is judged by the representative of the patriarchy, her husband Jasón, she is lacking, monstrous. When he talks of her beauty, it is always in the past tense. Medea uses this heteropatriarchal gaze to devalue and condemn herself. However, when Luna, Medea's lover, representative of the queer gaze, speaks of Medea's looks, she appreciates the current beauty. Moraga illustrates how attractive or not, Medea is undeniably human.

FEMININE MONSTROSITY

Moraga uses Medea to critique the view of women within the Chicano Movement. According to Arrizón, this nationalist movement was "saturated with sexism, homophobia, and internal oppression" and women "were expected to perform the 'three fs': to feed, fight, and fuck their men" (2020, 163). Acting outside of these gendered expectations made a woman monstrous. In act 1, scene 2, Medea has received the letter from Jasón demanding the return of his son. Reading aloud to Luna, Medea picks the letter apart:

> Medea/Jasón: "She reminds me of you, Medea. Your once-innocence. Your wide-eyed eagerness. She is the Medea you were before the war, before 'politics changed you . . . changed us . . . She bled for me, just as you did once."
>
> Medea: *Politics*. Men think women have no love of country, that the desire for nation is a male prerogative. So, like gods, they pick and choose who is to be born and live and die in a land I bled for equal to any man. Aztlán, how you betrayed me! Y aquí me encuentro in this wasteland where yerbas grow bitter for lack of water, my face pressed to the glass of my own revolution like some húerfana abandonada. (Moraga 2001, 301)

In this letter, sixty-year-old Jasón tells Medea of the nineteen-year-old girl he will marry. Through his direct their direct comparison, his complaints reveal the aspects of Medea which he sees as monstrous, the shadow beast, that which displeases and frightens his male gaze. To be a good woman, Medea should be young, innocent, subservient, ever suffering, virginial, like la Virgen de Guadalupe, the only true virtuous woman. When viewed through the heteropatriarchal virgin/whore dichotomy, the only alternative for fallible, human women is to be monstrous like la Malinche or la Llorona. Further, a common marker for female monstrosity is treachery. Tricking men makes you a monster, and Medea has tricked Jasón. Later, the audience discovers that Medea was not a virgin. As a child, she was raped by her brother. To convince Jasón of her virginity, she bit her tongue, literally, and spat the blood onto the covers. The version of Medea that Jasón remembers and compares to his child-bride never existed except in his mind.

Additionally, Medea is compared to Circe, witch and monster of Greek lore, famous for entrapping a man through deceit. Jasón tells Medea that he "torment[s]" him and therefore she "should live on an island" (Moraga 2001, 326–27). She responds that she needs someone to notice and "accuse [her] of tormenting them with [her] beauty" (327). Just like the aforementioned witch from Greek mythology, Medea ensnares and entraps men with her beauty. In the same way as Circe, Medea is victim to a man who takes what he wants and then leaves. While Medea thinks that she is securing a place for herself and her son in Aztlán by seducing Jasón, he later says that she can come live as his "ward" in his "second bed" and she is in no "position to negotiate" (338–39). She refuses to be his "Juárez whore," which alludes to the femicides in Mexico and the heteropatriarchal understanding of women as objects to be used and discarded as a man sees fit (338). Rosa Linda Fregoso elucidates, "What is now understood as various forms of 'feminicide' started in 1993, a year after the signing of NAFTA, and continued on through the tenure of three Mexican heads of state" (2003, 1). Elsewhere in the play, Mama Sal, representative of the past, cultural memory, and history, discusses

the harms of NAFTA with Chac-Mool, ensuring that he, representative of the future and hope, remembers. *The Hungry Woman* is about both preserving history and ensuring change for the future. In many ways, Medea relives the stories of her folkloric namesakes, Circe, la Llorona, la Chingada, Coatlicue, and many other women. In the end however, Medea holds the power and is freed from this cycle.

Medea's response to Jasón's letter speaks back to misogyny within the Chicano Nationalist Movement. Women, like Medea, were castigated for fighting for equality. They were left out of the revolution and faced violent consequences for participating. Medea is monstrous for her participation and for subverting the ideology in which men are "gods," choosing who will "live and die," when she takes power into her own hands and kills Chac-Mool (Moraga 2001, 301). Destruction of male property and progeny is the ultimate act of betrayal of her husband and assertion of her own power.

During Medea's speech, she code-switches between English and Spanish. Language is a major marker for monstrosity. Anzaldúa enlightens that Chicanxs "are your linguistic nightmare, your linguistic aberration" because we mix languages and are therefore subject to "Linguistic Terrorism" (2021, 124). Civilized language is unambiguously the language of the powerful and remains within bounds. Lack of the dominant language or hybridity of languages is monstrous. Within the last sentence, as with much of the play, Medea repeatedly switches back and forth, mixing and blending languages, making her monstrous. Queering English and Spanish, Medea makes the boundaries between the two ambiguous, disidentifying with language as a marker for monstrosity. Combining lores and languages allows the audience to see la Llorona as representative of the suffering of women the world over.

GOTHIC MONSTROSITY

From the queer of color standpoint, Medea is not monstrous for the ways in which she fails to live up to white, heteropatriarchal expectations and gender scripts. Her monstrosity instead stems from the pain and violence she experiences and in turn inflicts upon others. The audience is called to enact the Coyolxauhqui Imperative and bear witness to this suffering. Medea is unlikable for the ways in which she hurts others, including her partner, Luna, representative of the queer of color gaze and Coyolxauhqui, Aztec goddess of the moon and Chicana feminist icon. Characterized by kindness, Luna cooks, cleans, creates, builds, plants, and tries to make things work. However, as Medea gets more and more stressed about Jason, she takes it out on Luna. Their relationship is fraught because of the world in which they

are forced to live. In Act 1, Scene 8, Medea and Luna have been fighting and Medea laments:

> Medea: You once thought me beautiful, Lunita. My hair the silky darkness of a raven's, the cruelty of Edgar Allan Poe's own, I know. I know you think me cruel . . . I'm not cruel, I'm dying. Dying to make sense of it . . . How is it you used to drink from me as if you yourself didn't taste the same coppered richness when you brought your own bloody fingers to your mouth . . . At night, I would lay awake and wonder, how is it she could worship me so . . . It doesn't matter now. I am the last one to make this journey. My tragedy will be an example to all women like me. Vain women who only know to be the beloved. Such an example I shall be that no woman will dare to transgress those boundaries again. (Moraga 2001, 318–22)

Importantly, again in this section, Medea aligns with divinity, worshiped by Luna. Additionally, Medea blends the lines between beauty and monstrosity. The juxtaposition of beauty with the gothic suggests that the lines between human and monster, between desirable and detestable, are unclear and permeable. Medea is as beautiful as a fairytale princess like Snow White, with raven black hair, but also cruel, deadly, and even vampiric, drinking of "coppered richness." Moraga ties Medea to figures across folklores to gesture toward the widespread nature of this monstrous treatment of women. Moraga disidentifies with monstrosity by deconstructing beauty standards and appearance as a marker of monstrosity.

Weaponry also traditionally marks monstrosity with sophisticated and modern weapons denoting civility. Medea's weapons are her beauty, words, and poison, all divergent from these norms. Female monsters are often defined by the sexual attraction they hold for men and the ability of that beauty to disarm and control men. Medea has used it this way, but through aging lost her desirability to the male gaze. However, she still "possesses a dark and brooding allure, akin to obsidian: a razor-sharp edge with a deep and lustrous sheen" (Moraga 2001, 329). Throughout the play, Medea is angry and mean. She pushes people away and hurts them. Her grandmother warns that "You're gonna push [Luna] so far away from you, she won't be able to find her way back" (302). Medea says "she doesn't give a damn if [Luna] feel[s] exploited" (313). Medea is "cruel," "pissed off," and "not fair" (308). She uses her words to hurt others. In the end, Medea uses herbs as poison to kill first her son and then herself. Medea's weapons of choice are not modern or masculine, guns or knives, but still effective. By giving these feminine tools power, Moraga disidentifies and delinks with heteropatriarchal thought, indicating the intrinsic power of women.

While not monstrous as a warning sign, Medea is still monstrous. Jeffery Jerome Cohen contents that "The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible" and "prevents mobility (intellectual, geographic, or sexual), delimiting the social spaces through which private bodies may move" (2020, 69). Additionally, "The Monster is the Harbinger of Category Crisis" and "refuses easy categorization" and "The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference" where "monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual" (Cohen, 2020, 64–65). Medea represents racial difference from white US society and gender difference from the Chicano movement. In between, she represents category crisis. More than anything, she herself states she stands to warn off all other women from following her path; her suffering will deter them. All of these monstrous standards, Medea meets. Moraga makes no attempt to throw off monstrosity entirely, instead she reclaims and redeploys it. The monster is scary, maybe if Medea is a monster, we can be scared into treating people like her, like la Llorona, better.

RECLAIMING LA LLORONA Y MADRE COATLICUE

Throughout the story, allusions connect Medea and la Llorona. These references begin small with "I feel my hands as liquid as the river" (Moraga 2001, 303). Then, "Medea lets out a deep wail" (332). Also, she asks "Do you smell my baby's death" (334). The Cihuatateo earlier retold a folktale of the hungry woman, connecting la Llorona and Medea to hunger. Historically, food has been one of the biggest markers for monstrosity. As Zimmerman argues, any hunger at all on the part of a woman is monstrous. However, the hunger represented in this story focuses not so much on the hunger for food, but for the desire for justice, recognition, equity, home, and more. Anzaldúa contends that "Like la Llorona, Cihuacoatle howls and weeps in the night, screams as if demented" because sometimes this is the only form of resistance afforded to BIPOC women (2021, 93). This is a cry of desperation for the injustice and oppression to be addressed, for all that has been kept from the lives of queer BIPOC women to be redressed. This is the Coyolxauhqui imperative: the call to bear witness to pain and put the pieces back together to enact change. This is the work that takes place in the nepantla, as Anzaldúa suggests, to transform both the past and the present and produce a better future. With food, Moraga breaks down Eurocentric epistemologies and narratives. She delinks food from monstrosity and redeploys la Llorona as a powerful figure calling for social change. In act 2, scene 2 Medea literally transforms into and embodies La Llorona:

> Cihuatateo [*Chanting*]: All, viene La Llorona. Rivers rising. Cold-blooded babies at her breast . . . *They encircle Medea with the ghostly white veil of La Llorona. It is a river in the silver light. Medea and the sound of the children's cries drown beneath it.* (Moraga 2001, 335)

The play begins with Coatlicue and ends with rewriting the ending of La Llorona's story. Moraga reintegrates the tales which colonization has separated, reclaiming the monstrous aspects of ourselves and accepting the duality and ambiguity inherent to life.

In addition to this culmination of La Llorona references, this story is told in a non-linear fashion and Medea both haunts and is haunted by her past while she resides in a mental hospital. Unlike in the original Greek tale or in the Llorona folktale, Medea's child returns and releases her pain. Moraga has Chac-Mool, the child, the representation of the future, voice "La Llorona never scared me like she's supposed to . . . I felt sorry for her, not scared" (Moraga 2001, 316). The audience is called to witness Medea's pain, la Llorona's pain, again enacting the Coyolxauhqui Imperative. We as the audience and readers are called to heal generational and cultural traumas to reimagine what it means to be female or monstrous or both. Moraga blends Greek myth with the Mexican folklore and disidentifies with patriarchal Chicano ideology, which paints women as monstrous. This epistemic disobedience creates the imaginative possibility of a future where la Llorona, Latinxs, and especially queer Latinas are seen and treated differently.

CONCLUSION

There are material consequences of metaphorical monster making. On August 2, 2019, Texas Governor Greg Abbott sent out "an anti-immigrant fundraising letter calling on Republicans to "DEFEND TEXAS NOW," which "echoed the xenophobic rhetoric of Donald Trump, who as spoke of an 'invasion' of migrants."[7] The very next day, a gunman cited Abbott's words in his manifesto before driving 600 miles from Dallas to El Paso and killing twenty-two people. Like other proponents of the dominant white heteropatriarchy in the United States, Governor Abbot's language, narratives, and metaphors aim to contain, control, condemn, and even extinguish Latinxs. When Latinxs are portrayed solely as problems, "figured as monstrous, threatening, or beastly through stereotypes of the bandido, drug dealer, or gang member, and as actual monsters," violence ensues, both short and long term, from the personal to policy level (Merla-Watson and Olguín 2017, 14). The violences of the past are remembered through stories of folk horror, the Gothic, and the

ghostly, which haunt our present, reminding us there is still much to be done to rectify the situation.

Reclaiming these ghosts, unframing them from their gendered and racial scripts, releasing them from their torment allows us to imagine the same might be possible for other Latinx women. Latinx speculative authors "engage crises in representation and create speculative historiographies" (Merla-Watson and Olguín 2017, 11) and thereby "the politics of the possible" (Saldívar 2011, 534). William Calvo-Quirós articulates that Latinx Speculative Productions "propos[e] (and produc[e]) a new world . . . constructed in the imagination but never completely disassociated from the 'real.' Here, the real is perceived as temporal, as a stage toward a world that is based on the premise of equality and social justice" (2017, 39). Here, chronology is queered, past bleeding into present and future. Moraga reclaims monstrosity in *The Hungry Woman* with the figure of Medea, tying her to the ghost/monster la Llorona, and liberating her from the pain and [folk] horror of the past and present to the hope of the future.

The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea is a nepantla. It is in-between Classic Greek and contemporary Chicanx traditions, between folklore and reality, between theory and embodiment, between past and future. It calls us to watch as things are broken down and put back together, to acknowledge our own roles in the pain experienced by the characters, to accept our own monstrous sides, and emerge monstrous ourselves. Through the lens of folk horror, this analysis shows Moraga redeploys monstrous metaphors in a discursive act of disidentification and delinking as epistemic disobedience. In this speculative work, Moraga subverts the dominant white heteropatriarchal ideology, makes visible the material harm caused to Chicanx people as the direct result of gothic, monstrous rhetoric used against them, and directly comments on the destruction caused by US policy and practice. In negotiating the monstrous metaphor, Moraga engages the public's imaginary to intervene in affective economy and alter the treatment of Latinx people in the United States.

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NOTES

1. Mexican-American, gender neutral, and inclusive.

2. Latin-American, gender neutral and inclusive.

3. Commissioned 1995; staged readings 1995, 1997, 1999, and two in 2000; produced 2002 Celebration Theatre, 2005, The Pigott Theatre, 2006 The Leeds Theatre.

4. Paul Ortiz, Emy Manini, Robert C. Schwaller, Jessica Oxendine, Elena Daniele, and Jana Byars.

5. Lisa A. Flores, Leo R. Chavez, Lawrence Davidson, Laila Lalami.

6. Lisa A. Flores, Leo R. Chavez, Lawrence Davidson, Laila Lalami.

7. www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/aug/22/texas-governor-anti-immigrant-letter-el-paso.

Chapter 17

Religion and Rewilding in Michel Faber's Ecohorror

"I Wish, Please, to Live"

Vicky Brewster

Michel Faber's speculative novels, *Under the Skin* (2000) and *The Book of Strange New Things* (2014), may fall comfortably into the categorization of science fiction, but they also express many of the concerns and ideology of ecohorror. Although *Under the Skin* fits unquestionably into the genre of horror, among others—Faber being known as an author who "defies genre"[1]—*The Book of Strange New Things* is less obviously a horror novel. However, it has undeniable moments of visceral horror, such as Bea's description of the torture of her pet cat, the description of the vermin attack, or the return of the Oasans' body to the planet by covering them in insects and other carrion. Stephen Rust (2014) defines ecohorror as "when nature strikes back against humans as punishment for environmental disruption" or when "horrific texts and tropes are used to promote ecological awareness, represent ecological crises, or blur human/nonhuman distinctions more broadly" (Rust 509–10). While only specific scenes in *The Book of Strange New Things* might be termed horror, these play heavily upon the ecology of Oasis and Earth, the fall of Earth into ecological crisis, and nature's backlash on Oasis at the beginnings of large-scale agriculturalization. The book is also entirely concerned with the blurring of human and non-human boundaries. It is these scenes which are the focus of this essay, along with the various ecohorror concerns of *Under the Skin*.

In both books, Faber presents the reader with intelligent alien lifeforms. His stories invite the reader to question the humanity of these aliens using religious frameworks and bodily comparisons. In *The Book of Strange New*

Things, he presents aliens who are Christian but with a literal understanding of the Bible, utilizing language barriers to question whether religious ethical frameworks can apply when their metaphors and concepts are rooted in a frame of reference that cannot be fully understood by a non-Earthbound humanoid. *Under the Skin* features an alien "human" race considered superior to the animal-humans or "vodsels" of Earth as they are higher up the food chain. It presents the problem of physicality as a human characteristic and questions whether embodiment is integral to the experience of humanity.

Both these novels highlight the importance of interaction with nature to the "human" experience. Both include worlds that have been eaten and destroyed by industrialization, and an Eden-like savior planet as a haven for those worthy to live on it. But nature in these Edens is not always idyllic, providing dangers that occur whether an individual is moral or not. Nature is a reclaiming force that both gives and takes life, and emphasis is placed on the importance of returning to nature after death. This essay argues that what Faber presents as outside or in opposition to humanity is not so much post-humanity as inhumanity. The inhuman can be an evil, destructive force, as in industrialization that is a product of but also destroys humanity—but it can also exist in nature itself, sometimes described as a life-bringer, sometimes presented as a harbinger of death. Faber's emphasis on religion as a lens for assessing and understanding humanity stands in opposition to his human and non-human characters' need to be part of nature, which knows no dogma and needs no language to be understood. Ecohorror here is seen as adjacent to folk horror, often borrowing its key tropes and utilizing the folkloresque (Foster and Tolbert 2016, 5)—the creation of its own diegetic folklore—to produce its horror.

DEFINITIONS OF HUMANITY

James McGrath (2012) writes that defining humanity produces "insurmountable difficulties" because "defining what it means to be a person, and thus deserving of 'human rights,' is incredibly difficult and complex . . . it is incredibly hard to *define*, at least in a way that is philosophically and existentially satisfying, not to mention ethically useful" (120, emphasis original). McGrath here states not only that discerning humanity or personhood is in itself difficult but raises one of the reasons personhood might need to be defined: entitlement to *human* rights. In his fiction, Faber is concerned with the human as opposed or related to the animal, and the differing rights to which humans and animals are entitled. In the Biblical sense, who has dominion over whom. However, Faber's fiction is also interested in ecology

and, like so much ecohorror, the reclamation of the world by nature. Christy Tidwell (2014) defines ecohorror as "something that humans act upon and that also acts upon humans" (538), emphasizing the balance, the dichotomy, that acts as a binary with nature on one side and humans on the other. It is humans who report the first-hand experience of ecohorror. It is then important to assess who, in Faber's estimation, is human, and whether those human characters are already a part of, or apart from, the natural worlds they inhabit.

Isserley, the alien-human hybrid protagonist of *Under The Skin*, suffers a life of pain and humiliation. She has been surgically altered to appear human in an effort to help her hunt humans or "vodsels"[2] for meat to ship back to her home planet as a delicacy. Following a sexual assault, Isserley comes to know she cannot live the life of either one or the other, human or alien. She is pressured into picking up a hitchhiker returning home to his wife, who is in labor. They are involved in a car accident, and Isserley cannot let herself be found by the police. Although Isserley spends much of the novel believing humans to be equivalent to cattle and has worked to process them for meat on her home world, she makes an effort to see that the hitchhiker is saved or at least remembered before destroying herself.

If the aliens are not human, the obvious alternative is that they be considered animal. However, "'human' [has become] a category which is more than just biological taxonomy" (Vint 2014, 27). This could be said to have first become a consideration following Jacques Derrida's lecture, "The Animal That Therefore I Am" (2002), in which he discusses human responses to animal observation being more than anthropomorphisation, and further considering the responses of animals to humans. He describes the "*unprecedented* proportions of . . . subjection of the animal" (Derrida 25, emphasis original), demonstrating a change in human interactions with and understanding of the animal. This becomes particularly salient in works of science fiction and fantasy, where intelligent alien races or even animal races feature. The question of human and animal in such works becomes increasingly blurred, leading the reader to question where the bounds of humanity lie and to think of humanity as a quality not necessarily encapsulated in the physical body. In *Animal Alterity*, Sherryl Vint (2014) writes:

> [Science fiction] has a long history of thinking about alterity, subjectivity and the limits of the human which is precisely the terrain explored by much of HAS [Human-Animal Studies], while HAS offers new and innovative ways to think about [science fiction's] own engagement with such issues, situating it within a material history in which we have always-already been living with "alien" beings. (2)

Isserley has been surgically altered from her alien form to appear more human, and experiences a great deal of physical pain as a result. Among her catalogue of alterations, "her sixth finger had been removed" (Faber 2000, 115), "half [her] backbone amputated and metal pins inserted into what was left" (127), and "her real teats, budding naturally from her abdomen, had been surgically removed in a separate operation from the one that had grafted these puffy artificial ones onto her chest" (178). Much is made of her human/vodsel breasts, as they appear to be the main tool of trapping human men. For example, "Isserley smiled and drove off with [a hitchhiker], lifting her arms high on the steering wheel to show him her breasts" (28). This is a motion that is repeated throughout the book, as though practicing some sort of animal mating ritual. McGrath writes that personhood is assessed "by analogy to ourselves" (McGrath 2012, 127), by discerning similarities between species. However, Isserley's physical analogies to the human self are an abomination that make her feel like a "freak," a hybrid. They bring her closer to a kind of humanity, but remove her from her own alien idea of humanity.

Donna Haraway (1991) defines a cyborg as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of science fiction" (149). Although Isserley's extreme surgical alterations are not mechanical, they do make her a cyborg-like hybrid—a hybridized body, with non-human parts to make her more human. As Sarah Dillon (2011) puts it, *Under the Skin's* "altered bodies shift backwards and forwards across the boundary between human and nonhuman animal" (Dillon 134). Haraway views the hybrid as a means of transgressing or transcending the divide between one thing and another—in this case, between human and animal—in order to make comment on that divide. Isserley's status as a hybrid allows her to question the boundaries between human and animal, and slip between them. Her body is neither alien nor human, but in many ways, it is also both. Through the hybridity of the cyborg, "the boundary between human and animal is thoroughly breached" (Haraway 1991, 151). Isserley's physicality transcends her former alien body to become (an approximation of) human. Isserley's hybridity is emphasized when she prepares herself to look like a vodsel by shaving off her fur and considering herself in a mirror. Vint states that, "Recognising oneself in the mirror suggests some sort of conception of self in a world of other beings" (Vint 2014, 45). When Isserley looks in the mirror she "trie[s] to see herself as a vodsel might" (Faber 2000, 150), again blurring the distinction between human and alien; human and animal.

In *The Book of Strange New Things,* a new planet has been discovered which supports human life. Its alien inhabitants, the Oasans, request that their human colonizers provide a Christian minister after being given a copy of the Bible by one of colonizing company USIC's employees. Peter leaves behind his wife Bea in order to travel to Oasis to be the Oasans' minister, finding

an idyllic planet and an enthusiastic "Jesus Loving" congregation. He lives with the Oasans as much as he can, slowly neglecting his correspondence with Bea back home, who describes an Earth that is rapidly descending into apocalypse. After discovering the Oasans' belief in the Bible is rooted in a desire to be healed of their naturally very fragile bodies and to "live forever," Peter decides to return home to Bea so they can face whatever is happening on Earth together.

When he first arrives on Oasis, Peter is determined to think of the alien Oasans as human, and to persuade the others living on the USIC base not to think of them as animals or subhuman. When asked why he does not use the word "alien" to describe the Oasans, Peter says, "Because *we're* the aliens here" (Faber 2014, 108, emphasis original). Here, Peter vocalizes Faber's agenda, conflating the idea of humanity and alienness. Both are a matter of perspective and can be decided using a number of factors, rather than being binary positions. When trying to humanize the Oasans in his own mind, Peter concerns himself with questions such as, "Do they have genders?" (108). When he first meets an Oasan, Peter initially catalogues the things that make the Oasan seem more human to him: that they "stood upright, but not tall," and that their hands have "five digits" (120). However, he "flinche[s]" (121) when faced with their inhuman faces:

> Here was a face that was nothing like a face. Instead, it was a massive whitish-pink kernel. Or no: even more, it resembled a placenta with two foetuses—maybe three-month-old twins, hairless and blind—nestled head-to-head, knee-to-knee . . . try as he might, Peter couldn't decode it on his own terms. (121)

Despite his claims that the Oasans must have souls and, therefore, humanity, he still struggles with the alienness of their physicality.

However, the Oasans' claim to humanity (made by Peter rather than by the Oasans themselves) comes from a stance of the Oasans being capable of religious belief. It is the Oasans who initiate the request for a Christian pastor as a condition of their allowing establishment of a human colony. The Oasans stick closely to the Bible as a religious document—calling it the Book of Strange New Things—preferring the original text to the pamphlets which paraphrase the original which Peter produces in an attempt to remove sounds from the language that the Oasans find difficult to speak. However, they express themselves through their religious practice, producing murals for the church that they build with Peter:

> [Jesus Lover Five's] mourners . . . clad in hooded robes like herself, confronted a scarecrow-thin figure wearing a loincloth. This Jesus stood erect with arms spread wide, an eye-shaped hole in each palm of His starfish-shaped hands.

> Above His neck, where His head should be, Lover Five had left a blank space surrounded by a porcupine profusion of lines, to indicate radiance from an incandescent light source. (323–24)

Despite this piece of creative workmanship, undoubtedly different to what Peter would have experienced from Biblical illustrations on Earth, he uses descriptions from his own earthly experiences (scarecrow, starfish, porcupine) to narrate the image, when these are items that Five couldn't possibly have seen before or intentionally referenced. Five is then drawing on concepts from her own world, from beyond Peter's imagination or comprehension, in order to interpret creatively a scene from the Earth-based Bible. This and the other murals demonstrate that the Oasans have the capacity to understand the Bible through their own analytical lenses, taking a "human" experience and, rather than making the text alien, making themselves human.

While Faber's work at times focuses on to what extent aliens can be considered human, he also explores the extent to which humans can be inhuman. The clearest example of this is Isserley's attacker in *Under the Skin*. Each time Isserley picks up a hitchhiker, the narrative switches to give some description from the hitcher's point of view. This is usually their opinion of Isserley, or their motivation for hitchhiking in the first place. These descriptions typically last from one to three pages. When Isserley picks up her attacker, his only narration is, "He was thinking, My lucky day" (Faber 2000, 177). Compared to the thoughts of other hitchers, this initial description is very basic. For example, others have begun, "Observing his rescuer, the hitcher was not impressed" (134) or "It was a pity, Dave reflected" (121). Compared to these beginnings, the attacker's narration is blunt and to the point. His narration, "He was thinking," expresses no emotion or opinion, but bluntly states his only thought. This thought is then repeated as the first thing the attacker says to Isserley is, "My lucky day" (177). This marks the attacker out as an unknown quantity and someone who is hiding something. The capitalization on "My" might suggest the self-importance of the character or that his motivations are selfish. However, the phrasing itself also suggests a basic creature. This is not a person or vodsel who thinks with emotion or with intelligent or complex turns of phrase. The simplicity of the language, and the egocentric angle of the narrative, suggests something base, even animalistic.

The attacker's status as inhuman is further demonstrated when he fails to be affected by the icpathua chemical Isserley uses to drug her hitchhikers: "The trousers of the baldhead's overalls, she realized now, were as thick as cowhide and covered in an extra yellow layer of something resembling tarpaulin" (182–83). His skin is not human skin, but something leathery, animal, and other. At the crux of his assault, when the attacker tries to force Isserley to perform oral sex on him, his genitals are described as "grossly distended,

fatter and paler than a human's, with a purplish asymmetrical head. At its tip was a small hole like the imperfectly-closed eye of a dead cat" (185). Although in this context we know that, by "human" the narrator means a member of Isserley's alien race, the phrasing still separates the attacker from humanity, along with the imagery of animals and death.

There are further descriptions of humans doing inhuman things in *The Book of Strange New Things*, when life on Earth seems to devolve into a living hell. Bea describes walking home via the park to try and find her missing cat, Joshua. She finds him being tortured by a group of children:

> He's strung up by the tail from a tree. Alive. Two kids of maybe twelve are hoisting him up and down on a rope, making him spin, jerking him so he twitches . . . Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know—underprivileged kids, rotten upbringing, in dire need of love and forbearance, why not come to our outreach programme blah blah blah—THESE EVIL SCUMBAGS WERE TORTURING JOSHUA! (Faber 2014, 476)

Given the way the Oasans are throughout the novel described with a kind of child-like innocence, it is interesting that the greatest example of inhumanity in *The Book of Strange New Things* is enacted by children. This is the moment that truly pushes Bea to lose her faith and heavily contributes to the book's imagery of Earth as a place rapidly becoming hellish.

These descriptions of hellish, inhuman characters suggest that humanity is not just a matter of biological species or sentient intelligence, but can also be considered as an ethical or moral spectrum. Throughout Faber's work, the moral spectrum most commonly used is religion. It is not so great a leap, then, to suggest that Faber uses religion as a paradigm to determine humanity in his fiction. After all, religion, as far as we know, is a singularly human experience, celebrated throughout the world in many different creeds and cultures, but in Faber's works it is an experience not limited to human life forms.

NATURE AS A RECLAIMING AND OPPOSING FORCE

In *The Book of Strange New Things*, as Peter becomes acclimatized to Oasis and begins to feel more distantly about Earth, the alien planet becomes a metaphor for the Garden of Eden. Descriptions of Oasis as a land that provides for its inhabitants without waste or excess abound in the latter half of the book. For example, there is no need to store water as Peter and the Oasans drink and wash in the rain: "the rain was cool and clean and luxurious. He opened his mouth and let it pour in. He felt as though he was diving and swimming—and surfacing, always surfacing—without having to move a muscle" (Faber

2014, 446). This echoes the description of watering the Garden of Eden in Genesis: "There went up a mist from the earth, and watered the whole face of the ground" (Genesis 2:6). The Oasans farm white flower, an indigenous plant that can be turned into almost any food: "Chicken. Fudge. Beefsteak. Banana. Sweetcorn. Mushroom. Add water and it's soup. Boil it down and it's jelly. Grind and bake it and it's bread. The universal food" (136). Similarly, in Eden, God provides "every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food" (Genesis 2:9). In addition to this, Peter starts to feel a total affinity for Oasis itself: "His body felt free and unencumbered, almost a part of the atmosphere, with no division between his skin and the surrounding sky" (Faber 2014, 433). This, again, reflects the Biblical description of life in Eden, "And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed" (Genesis 2:25).

However, the apparent Eden of Oasis is subject to harsh living conditions: nature on Oasis can be a debilitating force of destruction. This is seen in how some native creatures of Oasis which Peter had previously admired as "adorable critters" (Faber 2014, 449) come en masse to decimate the Oasans' crop of white flower, becoming "rapacious vermin," which are "Mindless as maggots" (449). The description of their attack is like a Biblical plague, a "horde [that] consume the fruits of his people's labour" (450). Trying to fight off the vermin, Peters is bitten on the hand, to which the Oasans moan, "You will die, you will die!" (451) as a similar superficial injury would prove eventually fatal to an Oasan, their biology not having the same regenerative powers as a human body. Jesus Lover Five suffers a less severe injury, a bruise to the hand, which results in a "hand [that] was no longer a hand. The fingers had fused into a blueish-grey clump of rot" (517). While examining her injury, it becomes apparent that the Oasans have chosen to embrace Christianity as a means of bypassing the cruelties of nature, hoping that the "everlasting life" promised by Christian doctrine will somehow save them from their own fragile bodies. As Five says, "I need healing . . . Or I die . . . I wish, please, to live"[3] (518). This demonstrates how Peter's idea of Oasis as "heavenly" is based entirely on his own human makeup. The Oasans, native to this "heaven" are also savaged by its nature. They are unable to escape the dangerous wildness of the landscape, or their own bodies, no matter how much faith they place in a religion which claims to provide everlasting life.

The idea of Eden appears also in *Under the Skin*, although in less specifically Biblical imagery. Isserley's home planet has become an industrial wasteland, a dystopic place in which oxygen and water are currency, and the poorer of her kind are driven to live underground in the New Estates. Isserley views Earth as a kind of Eden, unappreciated by the "vodsels" who inhabit it. Even the idea of precipitous water is alien to Isserley: "Just the idea of all the water vapour solidifying by the cloudful and fluttering to earth was miraculous.

She couldn't quite believe it, even after all these years. It was a phenomenon of stupendous and unjustifiably useless extravagance" (Faber 2000, 56). "Miraculous" is a term commonly used in Christian religious parlance and, for Isserley, communing with nature, being alone with it and amongst it, is a borderline spiritual experience. She does not seem to conform to a specific religious dogma—no kind of religion is mentioned—but she seems capable of "religious sentiments," a "capacity for symbolic as opposed to merely literalistic thinking [that] might prove to be indispensable" (McGrath 2012, 144) to categorizing Isserley as human. However, her description of the snow clouds is also dominated by Isserley's perception that this beauty is wasted on Earth, in the idea of "extravagance." This suggests that while Isserley enjoys this perceived luxury, it borders on overwhelming by comparison to her home world. Similarly, "The indiscriminate, eternal devotion of nature to its numberless particles had an emotional importance for Isserley; it put the unfairness of human life into perspective" (Faber 2000, 61). With the term "unfair," Isserley perceives the arbitrary allocation of who gets to enjoy this planet as an achievement that cannot be earned. There is a suggestion of predestination here, of allocation by a cold, uncontactable deity. The difference between the two is so marked, it again casts Earth as Eden-esque.

The Eden of Earth is drawn in comparison to the apocalyptic dystopia of Isserley's home planet and the New Estates in which she previously lived. Though not described in detail, glimpses are shown of a world in which people never see the sky. In her descriptions of the Biblical apocalypse as presented in science fiction, Tina Pippin (1997) writes that "Present fears and oppressions are visible in the vivid descriptions of the monstrous and its destruction . . . Everything that is *alien* is invited to this horror show" (199, emphasis mine). Pippin draws a direct comparison between the apocalyptic and the alien, and Faber utilizes these ideas of apocalypse to describe Isserley's home planet. However, Pippin also allows that "The prophetic vision of horror also has an aspect of hope" (199). This is not the case in Faber, where the reader knows that Earth is not actually Eden—it is a planet itself dying from pollution, drought, and industrialization.

As they enjoy a nearby loch together, fellow alien-"human" Amlis Vess places a kind of ownership over this new world on to Isserley: "Amlis seemed to regard her as the custodian of an entire world, as if it belonged to her. Which, perhaps, it did" (Faber 2000, 239). The language used when God creates humanity and states their purpose on Earth is focused on dominion. Adam and Eve should "fill the Earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Genesis 1:28). To subdue, to rule, are more controlling terms than to take custody. In this respect, the position Amlis Vess places on Isserley is at odds with her position as a honey trap for the meat industry. *The Oxford*

English Dictionary provides "guardian" as a direct synonym in its definition of "custodian" (OED Online), suggesting a role of caretaking and responsibility. This reflects more closely on the position Isserley takes at the end of the novel, when she attempts to save a "vodsel" after their car crash, finally feeling some empathy and humanity toward Earth's original custodians.

Toward the end of *The Book of Strange New Things*, the Earth that Peter has left behind becomes more and more apocalyptic. Bea describes her world to Peter as, "It was hell. Don't say anything, it was hell" (Faber 2014, 476). His colleagues on the USIC Base eventually reveal to Peter that Oasis's future is to be a colony when Earth finally becomes uninhabitable. Although "apocalyptic" has Biblical origins, more recently it tends to express "the recurring expectation of an imminent end of history or of the world itself" (Collins 2014, 9). However, given the overt Christian aspects of *The Book of Strange New Things*, it seems appropriate to apply both views on the apocalypse here. The world that Bea describes does seem to be descending into a hellish dimension, while those who have been "saved" by USIC are kept safely on Oasis, the planet of escape from the apocalypse for those who can afford it. Bea herself seems to ascribe to the second definition of the end of the world, as the happenings on Earth, her isolation and the many natural disasters lead her to believe there is no God. Given that Bea possesses a strong Christian faith at the start of the book, this could be described as the end of the world as she knows it. Walter Lowe (2001) states that, "For better and for worse, gospel and apocalyptic bleed into one another—in Christianity and in the culture at large" (499). In this way, Faber mixes the Christian and secular ideas of apocalypse, opening the potential for Peter to lead a new flock in a new world.

Bea and Peter write to each other across the galaxy throughout the novel, but their correspondence degenerates until, eventually, Bea sends Peter a message which simply says, "There is no God" (Faber 2014, 454). David Lyon (2000) theorizes that "Facing life's issues without the benefit of religious interpretations, people turn instead to other sources of explanation, justification or hope" (31). Yet, Bea is intrinsically tied to placing her hellish experiences inside the framework of religion by stating that there is no God, and leaving no further message. Without God to create or define her framework, she has no other words.

Faber began writing *The Book of Strange New Things* before his wife, Eva, was diagnosed with cancer. He continued to write through her illness, and the book was published after her death. Faber has spoken about the book's central separation of a couple initially as a metaphor for their relationship, as Eva "lived on Planet Earth, and dealt with all the messy shit of daily life, and I [Faber] was on Planet Art, creating my books in my sanctum sanctorum"

(Jordan 2016). It is not unreasonable, then, to suggest that, as Eva's illness progressed, the novel's metaphor could also have developed to describe the separation of death and the afterlife. Faber admits that "when your partner is dying of a disease that you don't have and you know that you are going to outlive her, they are on a different planet. They've already gone somewhere where you can't follow" (Kidd 2014). Peter's journey to Oasis could be described as a death for him, resulting in his transferal to Oasis as his heaven. It is a place where he is able to minister, to build his own church and fulfil many of his personal ambitions, but also feels a detachment from time and place that might signify the metaphysical aspects of life after death.

REWILDING

A theme present in ecohorror and folk horror is a, sometimes aggressive return to nature. In *Under the Skin*, the return to nature is cast not as horrific but as welcome. Isserley's surgical transformation into a "vodsel" is the horror—in some cases, graphic body horror—while her return to her natural state, such as letting her fur regrow, or becoming closer to the natural world she finds on Earth, are cast as non-horrific. The return is a relief: "The relief she felt in allowing her long toes to splay over the rocky shore, curling round the stones, was inexpressible" (Faber 2000, 61). Similarly, Amlis Vess describes rain "As if nature were actually trying to nurture me" (Faber 2014, 224). The horror in *Under the Skin* lies in the fact that this is not, in fact, Isserley's world, and she cannot live in it while in her natural state. There is a dissonance between her desire to be herself, a "human being," and the freakish hybridity of her appearance. If Earth is Eden, she may only be a part of it while pretending to be Eve. However, Isserley instead seems to more closely embody the serpent, tempting young, male, heterosexual hitchhikers with an appearance influenced by pornography, to ultimate knowledge: the knowledge that there is intelligent alien life in the universe, and those aliens are distinctly hostile. There is also a symbolism of transformation to the serpent that Isserley embodies, literally, in her hybrid form.

Still, Isserley's body, as Dillon notes, is one of the few bodies described in naturalistic terms in the novel (Dillon 2011, 144). "Rewilding" describes a return to a "wilder, more natural state," usually referring to the reintroduction of animal species to habitats where they have been "exterminated locally at some earlier period" (OED Online). However, the term has also been adapted to "human rewilding," describing a process of "trying to re-engage people with the natural world" (Monbiot 2013). Certain spiritual and other communities have taken this further, describing "an increased sense of wonder and curiosity, a desire to understand natural processes and to figure out how

we as humans fit into the natural order" (Roos 2022). Taking a cross-section of these terms—rewilding and human rewilding—what Faber presents in Isserley's transformation is a rewilding; a reclamation of her body by the wild, and an absorption of that same body into the landscape Isserley loves so much. Following her sexual assault, the moment that provokes Isserley's rewilding, Isserley is described in terms that associate her with the ocean she loves so much. As she has a bath, Faber describes "the waving seaweed of her hair" and how "her heavy little skull sank like a stone" (Faber 2000, 248), while her breasts and toes "reminded her of rocks in the ocean, revealed by the tide" (249). This is contrasted with the evidence of her rewilding, the return of her physical self to her natural form, literally growing over her hybridity: "her fur was growing back everywhere except in the places that were so severely scarred or artificial that nothing could grow there. She looked almost human" (250–51).

While couched heavily in the language of rewilding, Isserley's death also holds a religious significance that might be considered Buddhist or Pagan. As Isserley prepares to kill herself using an explosive, she imagines that:

> The atoms that had been herself would mingle with the oxygen and nitrogen in the air. Instead of ending up buried in the ground, she would become part of the sky . . . Her invisible remains would combine, over time, with all the wonders under the sun. When it snowed, she would be part of it, falling softly to earth, rising up again with the snow's evaporation. (296)

In this way, Isserley's body becomes one with the landscape. This could be compared to Hindu funeral rites, during which it is common for the body to be allowed to be eaten by animals or cremated and the ashes added to the soil, to show that the body continues to be a part of nature and the cycle of life. In Hindu cremation the ashes are often scattered among sacred bodies of water. Similarly, for Isserley, all clean water is sacred, and it is to that water that she is returned. This further recalls the beliefs of some Buddhists, that the essence of a person returns to the whole before reincarnation. As it is taught in the Upanishads, "If water is poured into water, it becomes one and the same thing in it" (Rajagopalachari [4]-14–5).

There is a similar returning to nature in *The Book of Strange New Things* when Jesus Lover One's mother dies. Jesus Lover One takes Peter to see the corpse which, in the tradition of the Oasans, has been laid in a garden for insects and carrion to feed on:

> these bugs were every bit as beautiful as flowers: they had iridescent wings, glossy carapaces of lavender and yellow. Their buzz was musical. They covered

> almost every inch of flesh, giving the corpse the appearance of a twitching, breathing effigy. (Faber 2014, 304)

These insects will be harvested and used for food. The body is on full public display during this time, and the majority of Oasans ignore it, a part of daily life. This recalls the Buddhist practice of meditating on death in order to accept it as a part of life. Larry Rosenberg (1994) recalls his own experience meditating on a corpse:

> The two of us sat all night with this bloated, blue and festering corpse with a really bad smell. I went through the phases of fear, nausea, resistance, and tremendous doubt . . . [The teacher] watched me very carefully and whenever he saw a strong reaction, he'd say, "What are you experiencing right now?" I would tell him my experience and he'd say, "O. K. Sit with it." . . . Be with your breath and sit with it. (Rosenberg 1994)

While the majority of Oasans are content to carry on their lives around the corpse, Jesus Lover One and Peter discuss the food that will be made from the insects that fed from her body. Peter confesses, "I'm not used to it. It upset me," and Jesus Lover One agrees, "I also" (Faber 2013, 309). In this respect, their reaction is quite Western and, indeed, Christian. Jesus Lover One has started to take on a Westernized view of death learned from his Christian teachings.

In describing ecohorror, Tidwell refers to "a nature that is exterior to humanity" (Tidwell 2014, 539), and in much of ecohorror there is a clear divide between human and nature as opposing forces. However, Faber presents a worshipping and appreciation of nature, that is more in tune with folk horror narratives, that raises nature as interior to humanity. Faber's fiction still presents ecohorror's rewilding of the landscape as a force that can be destructive, but by couching this ecohorror in language that is both Biblical, spiritual, and naturalistic, Faber also rewilds his human or human-hybrid characters. As the natural landscape is overtaken by nature, a force that is expansive and everlasting, so his characters are overtaken by the nature within themselves, whether that be human or alien.

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NOTES

1. The first symposium dedicated to Faber's work held in 2016 at University of the Highlands and Islands, Inverness, was titled "Defying Genre," and discussions of categorizing (or being unable to categorize) Faber's work were a theme of several papers.

2. In the narrative of *Under the Skin*, Isserley's alien race are referred to as "human beings" throughout, while the humans or Earth are called "vodsels."

3. In the original text, the "s" and "d" letters are replaced with special characters to represent that the Oasans cannot pronounce this phonemes.

PART V

Intersections and Futures

Chapter 18

"Nigh Is the Time of Madness and Disdain"

Folk Horror in The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt

Stephen Butler

The globally renowned video game, *Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt* (2015), by Polish gaming studio CD Projekt Red, might not seem an obvious choice for a study on folk horror, but this essay will argue that it is perfectly suited for it. The game is primarily a fantasy RPG set in the fantastic world of the novels of Polish author Andrzej Sapkowski. It shares many of the obvious traits of the genre: a medieval setting, a predominant quest structure both in its main quest and its various (obligatory by modern day gaming standards) side missions, magical abilities (with requisite opportunities at levelling them up), luscious scenery that draws attention to the landscape and detailed interactions with minor and non-playable characters. Yet, as will be shown, some of these features are themselves key criteria of the folk horror genre as much as they are staples of the fantasy genre, virtual or otherwise. Various theorists and commentators, such as Mark Fisher, have drawn attention to the porous boundaries that exist when trying to define either the horror or fantasy genres: "The fantastic is a rather capacious category, which can include much of science fiction and horror" (Fisher 2016, 161).

In describing the prominent role of monsters in the horror genre Noel Carroll describes the figure as possessing a similarly "porous" nature that Fisher applied to the genre overall. For Caroll, the nature of monstrosity is to expose or "violate our categorical norms" as to what constitutes normalcy and monstrosity (Carroll 1990, 5). As will be discussed later in this chapter,

Geralt's role as a Witcher (or monster hunter), may seem to preclude this violation but his own process of being othered will complicate this. Another aspect of the game that may seem to preclude its inclusion in the horror category is its open-world nature. In an open-world fantasy game, there are two main drives to the gaming experience: completing quests and exploring the open world. The player in this game is prompted to explore by having a large world map with unsurveyed areas signaled with a question mark sign. Part of the experience of the game is to go to such places and reveal the mystery or question as to what is there, thus removing the question mark and arguably removing the mystery element necessary for horror to flourish. I would argue, though, that the game environment is set up in such a way as to foster some of the basics of the horror genre, and folk horror in particular. We are advised during loading screens in the game that it is better to stick to the beaten paths as the landscape is dangerous and full of monsters. Once you stray from the path and plunge into the wild landscape that is literally marked as unknown territory it can very much feel as eerie as any horror scenario that involves a lone figure isolated against a backdrop that seems to threaten their very existence (Scovell 2017, 17–18). Landscape is a key element in folk horror whether as a rebuke to pastoral platitudes or as a suggestion that the land itself is a "home" to horrors as are the people who serve whatever entity resides within it. The latter is memorably the case with several game areas of the Wild Hunt; the "unholy trinity" of the Crones of Crookback Bog as the exemplar: they are referred to as "old as the forest itself [and] they care for this land and its folk in their own way." But they also happen to weave hair and twist lives" as they gain their strength by ingesting "a broth of human flesh" (Tomaszkiewicz 2015). We are told by the Whispering Hillock, a literal spirit of the place, that the Crones have invaded and usurped the land and are responsible for its monstrosity.

While the Crones are horrors strongly associated with the land, the titular antagonists of the Wild Hunt are almost Lovecraftian in their cosmic dimension. We discover in the last book of Sapkowski's series that the Wild Hunt are interdimensional beings (or "space elves") who plan to teleport to the Northern Kingdoms of this fantasy world for colonization purposes. This can come as a shock to the reader who finds themselves suddenly in the realm of science fiction after many books of arguably standard medieval fantasy fare. Part of that fare is discovering what is so special about the blood of main character Cirilla Fiona Elen Riannon, other than the political ramifications of its royal lineage which is a main plot of the books (and an optional ending in the game if you choose to pursue it) in a manner similar to George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996-present). While it leads to the obvious trope of royal blood containing magical abilities, the abilities themselves are more science-fiction based—we learn that Ciri is the Lady of Space and Time

and can teleport herself to any time, place, or dimension of her choosing. Yennefer, one of the main characters describes her in the game thus: "She travels between places. Here and other worlds. Space is no obstacle for her" (Tomaszkiewicz 2015). This ability becomes the main plot point of the game as the Hunt are tracking Cirilla across many worlds so they can harness her abilities for themselves to use in their bid for intergalactic and interdimensional subjugation and domination.

Both book and game leave this revelation of the nature of the Wild Hunt until late in their respective narratives. The Hunt only features sporadically throughout the books, which for this slightly pusillanimous reader was a relief as the passages are always horror-infused and literally nightmare-inducing for many of the main characters, as this memorable passage from *The Tower of the Swallow* can attest to:

> The nightjars sang their death knell in clamorous voices while the horizon became shrouded in clouds, quenching the remains of the moonlight. At that moment sounded the howl of the fell beann'shie, the harbinger of imminent and violent death, and across the black sky galloped the Wild Hunt—a procession of fiery-eyed phantoms on skeleton horses, their tattered cloaks and standards fluttering behind them. So it was every few years. (Sapkowski 2014, 6)

The horrific atmosphere of this spectral aerial procession is heightened by the ghastly chorus of "goatsucker nightjars," birds that "according to folk tales," (Ibid.) gather to sing around dying people. Here we have a narrative situation that perfectly conforms to one of the tenets of folk horror as observed by Adam Scovell as being, "a work that uses folklore, either aesthetically or thematically, to imbue itself with a sense of the arcane for eerie, uncanny or horrific purposes" (2017, 7). By choosing to make this spectral version of the Wild Hunt the main antagonist, the game had already signaled its intent to lean more heavily into the horror elements of its source material. Subsequently, the game not only embraces the folklore-instilled terrors of folk horror, but it also entertains a strong sense, through its main quest and antagonists, of the arcane, the eerie, and at times, the downright terrifying. Arguably, nothing in the game reaches the sheer horror of fellow gaming titles such as the *Silent Hill* (1999–2014), or *Resident Evil* (1996–present) series, and your abilities as a Witcher ensures that slasher horror such as *Until Dawn* (2015) is nigh on impossible as a game mechanic, but while all these examples are stronger on the horror element, the *Wild Hunt* is more in keeping with the weird or the eerie, as defined by Mark Fisher. He provides a number of characteristics of the eerie that pertain to the game: landscapes bereft of human presence, or populated with ruins that give an apocalyptic feel to some of the game areas, as well as an obsession with fate and time loops that we will see are

key factors in Ciri's story and of which we are constantly reminded on the game's loading screen with its icon of the ourouboros, the snake eating its own tale which features prominently in the books as a symbol of "the loop of fate" that binds the characters together. And whilst you eventually defeat the interdimensional threat of the Wild Hunt, the overall feeling of the game is that this indeed a universe in which the gamer is "caught up in the rhythms, pulsions, and patternings of non-human forces" (2016, 5).

It is noticeable in the above passage concerning the Wild Hunt and their avian accomplices that they are accompanied by another spectral figure, the "beann'shie," described technically as "A female wraith of Irish and Scottish Gaelic tradition thought to be able to foretell but not necessarily cause death in a household" (MacKillop 1998, 30). This highlights an important feature of the folk horror within *The Witcher*, which unlike Scovell's reading that centers it on the UK, is its transcultural nature. And so, although the books seem uniquely Polish and/or Slavic with references to monsters and folk traditions as well as real-life history, they also contained many "ancestral voices" from Gaelic, Celtic, and Norse folklore. This saturation in the books of these different folk tales and myths is carried over successfully to the *Wild Hunt* game. As it should, for as MacFarlane explains, the titular myth is a "North European" one but also an "ur-myth" that is both a reaction to the global migratory patterns of wild geese (rather than nightjars) as well as a reflection on the "wider webs of wild places" that show up in cultural stories the world over (MacFarlane 2017, 291–92).

Such comparative mythologies and folk tales are standard features of the fantasy genre (Sullivan 2001, 1), but they also example Scovell's idea of "global ruralities" and more so the "folkoresque," as described by Michael Dylan Foster where a narrative creates its own, seemingly authentic, folklore (Foster and Tolbert 2016, 5). While, as we will see, discussion on the concept of "folk" will entail engaging with the currently thorny issue of national identity, and the global success of the *Wild Hunt* has certainly been promoted by the Polish government as an example of national pride, the game itself both looks to its own folk traditions but also to similar ones "on a wider global scale" (Scovell 2017, 101). The Wild Hunt legend is particularly prevalent in Norse mythology, as MacFarlane elucidates when referring to the leader of the Hunt often being Woden, the Norse All-Father (Ibid.). While Odin is replaced by main antagonist Eredin in the game, himself based on the Slavic folk figure of Koschie the Deathless, this does not mean that the Norse elements of the tale are forgotten. The final battle in the game takes place on Skellige, which is a game area heavily influenced by Celtic and Norse iconography, culture, and storytelling, and so it is fitting that when the Wild Hunt land here they do so aboard the Naglfar—a ship forged from the hair and fingernails of the dead, which is from Norse mythology as the vessel that

carries monsters to do battle with the gods during Ragnarök. It is introduced via a cinematic cut-scene in a glacial deluge of ice and fog that is a particular highlight of the game and fully horrific in atmosphere.

The ship's arrival leads to one character's fearful rumination that the end of days has come: "Ragh nar Roog . . . the world's end." The reference to Ragnarök, the Norse apocalypse, confirms the source of inspiration for the Wild Hunt as antagonist, but it is also a foreshadowing of the game's end when Ciri uses her abilities to stop an apocalyptic cataclysm known in both books and game as the "White Frost," which we are informed is the fate of not just the world in the game but all worlds across space and time. The game in a sense ties up a loose thread on this prophecy that is left dangling in the book series, which it is bound to do due to the quest structure of the game that demands a resolution one way or the other. Books can leave room for ambiguity or interpretations of events in the narrative, it can leave certain plot elements unresolved if it so chooses, but the quest or mission structure precludes this happening in RPG games. So, Ciri proves she's the main protagonist of the game rather than the titular Witcher, Geralt, when she informs him that "The White Frost is inevitable, it will come to freeze the worlds one after the other, eradicating all life. Only I can stop the destruction" (Tomaszkiewicz 2015). This conversation is part of the final cut scene, so there is no gaming element involved, but at certain times you get to play as Ciri rather than Geralt to confirm that she is actually the more important character in the game. Having said that, the majority of the gaming experience is with the player assuming the role of Geralt, a Witcher, aka "monster hunter." As such the most common side quest structure in the game is "find out who or what the monster is, where it lives, find it and (usually) kill it, get paid, indulge in bread and vodka." It is in the bestiary of monsters you hunt in the game that the horror elements of the game shine the brightest and while the bestiary is also of a global nature it is also very specifically tied to its Polish and Slavic roots.

L'ÂME SLAVE (THE "SLAVIC SOUL")

One of the more horrific side quests in the game is entitled "Tower of Mice" and is heavily inspired by a ninth-century Polish folk tale that is itself informed by a historical event. You are told by a group of local village people that there is a cursed local lord's tower, and they want you to lift the curse and kill whatever monsters it created. Your sorceress companion, Keira Metz gives you a magic lamp that allows you to see the ghosts that haunt the tower to help lift the curse. You eventually meet the source of the curse who is a young woman confined as a wraith to the tower's location. We discover she

was given a potion to make it look like she was dead to avoid the angry mob justice of the local starving populace who have discovered that the local lord is hoarding food at their expense. While said lord meets his arguably justified end, the woman is the only survivor of this retribution due to a potion her mage lover gives her that makes it seem as if she is dead. She awakes as the only survivor but is paralyzed due to the effects of the potion, so she has to lie, conscious but immobile, while she is slowly eaten to death by the rats that now inhabit the abandoned tower. The horror in the scene is in the dead victim's narration, and it is a chilling adaptation of a Polish folk tale concerning a real-life Mysia Wieża (Mice Tower) in Kruszwica, Poland, and its ninth-century ruler, Prince Popiel. A more direct allusion to the tale is given by another character who is a key one for a discussion of folk horror elements in the game, a local shaman known as the Pellar: "a great hunger descended on us all. While the lord in abundance wallowed, there in the Tower of Mice. But the old gods in their ire upon him visited a punishment. A plague of rodents swarmed the isle. At first, they ate all from the feast tables. Then, the lord and all his court they devoured" (Tomaszkiewicz 2015).

The Pellar is also involved in the side quest that draws heavily on both Polish folk traditions but also the literature around it. After successfully completing the "Tower of Mice" quest, the player is invited by the Pellar to help him with a related matter at a site adjacent to the tower. This quest, "Forefather's Eve," involves attending a local stone circle complex and summoning the spirits of the dead in an annual ritual that Geralt thought had died out. The Pellar though, as we've seen, is a staunch follower of the "old gods" who are the ones to be placated during this ritual, that is essentially the Slavic version of Halloween. In Poland, it is known as "Dziady," and was immortalized in a poem by the same name by Poland's national poet, Adam Miczkiewicz; it is commonly translated into English as the title of the quest, "Forefather's Eve." This is an example of a theme that appears throughout The Witcher games and books where, following one of Scovell's dictates for a narrative to be classed as folk horror, pagan or older beliefs are pitted against an official or contemporary religion. What is interesting within the world of The Witcher is that it creates an environment that is full of such clashes, containing multiple references to both real folklore from various cultures and others from recent pop culture so that they constantly oppose contemporary "beliefs" that are predominantly manifested in Geralt's view of the world. This creates a "folkloresque" landscape that is a patchwork of "folk horror" motifs. An instance of this is seen in the case of "noonwraiths," who are the daytime twins of the "nightwraiths." They are taken from the Slavic figure of the "południca," who has a commendable managerial work ethic: "Although she was a patron deity of agriculture, the poludnitsa was also a mischievous spirit who would punish those who worked in the fields at midday, an

hour sacred to her, for she had decreed it a time of rest" (Dixon-Kennedy 1998, 217). The noon wraith, though, is both deeply local but also global in character, as Russian author Eketerina Sedia explains of Slavic myths and tales: "I hadn't realized Russian fairytales were related to other religions . . . Most of Russia's pagan gods were borrowed from elsewhere—Scandinavia, Phoenicia, Greece, Egypt, you name it" (Sedia 2007, loc. 2335).

This borrowing from Scandinavian sources can also be seen in the creature of the leshy, who had first appeared in the Scandinavian fantasy game *Skyrim* before returning a few years later in the *Wild Hunt*. In both games it can be found in forests, usually protecting the woods and creatures who live there. There are a few quest-related interactions with the leshy in the latter game with one entitled "The Woodland Spirit" which is exactly what the creature is in the stories of both countries: "the spirit of the forest from which it takes its name" (Dixon-Kennedy 1998, 166). In order to summon the creature, it is required to burn its totem effigy, and what is striking about the game is that once you see one totem you start to see them interspersed throughout the game's entire visual environment. There are countless wayside shrines and village totem poles that dot the landscape in the game in the same way they still do in Poland. This points to another aspect of the transcultural folk horror aspect of the game in its use of structures that are simultaneously real and imaginary, place specific but part of a larger cultural imaginary.

The village totems, just mentioned, while appearing in the game have nothing to do with the game's narrative but are very much a part of the visual texture of the game that draws heavily on Polish physical geography, ethnography, and cultural iconography. A Polish travel blog identified some of these specifics in relation to the designs of some of the buildings in the game. One of the first inns you visit in the White Orchard game area (and by far the last if you're fond of vodka and card games) is interiorly decorated with pająki, paper ornaments as unique to rural settings in Poland as the various statues of the old gods. This is mirrored by the exterior floral patterns on buildings in the game village of Lindenvale that correspond to those found at the Zalipie museum in southern Poland (Widomska 2021). What is so interesting about these buildings is that while they clearly have specific local roots in Polish geography and architecture, they are also part of a larger visual iconography of the folk horror genre. For example, Robert Eggers' *The Witch* was released in the same year as the *Wild Hunt,* and the cottage in that film could easily be situated in the game, and in both the game and film such buildings tend to be framed by or situated in dark and ominous woods that always seem to threaten the security of the human dwellings. The brief reveal of the witch in that film as a beautiful woman with goat feet is a shock in the film, but in a fantasy game, it's a very common trope.

WITCHERFINDER GERALT

The fantasy world of Sapkowski, both in the books and games, is one in which magic is common enough that, as discovered early when meeting both Keira Metz and the Pellar, people turn to it and its practitioners when they need help. Yet, there is a short story of Sapkowski's set in this universe, "Eternal Fire," in which he introduces a religion known as the "Church of Eternal Fire" established in the city of Novigrad. They are fond of burning people at the stake, and their criteria for selection is primarily magic users and nonhuman species such as halflings, elves, and dwarves. Novigrad is a main gaming area in the Wild Hunt (and based visually on the Polish city of Gdańsk), and when you first arrive, there is a particularly gruesome cut scene in which we see three people being burned in a public execution in the main square, all for the crime of having used magic. Every time you enter the city, subsequently, there are corpses hanging at the various gates to remind you of how magic users and other species are treated in the city. This is not just for scenery purposes—numerous side quests in the game involve Geralt thwarting the machinations of the church and helping various mages and witches flee the city. The main antagonist in these missions is their primary enforcer, Caleb Menge, who is as sadistic and misogynistic as Matthew Hopkins, the *Witchfinder General* (Reeve 1968) of the classic folk horror trilogy of films along with *Blood on Satan's Claw* (Haggard 1971), and *The Wicker Man* (Hardy 1973). In the case of both Britain and Poland, this supplanting of pagan religions by Christianity is itself a theme in their folk horror traditions with the "religious tensions" of Michael Reeve's film also on full display in the Wild Hunt (Janisse 2021). While neither film nor game explicitly state it, it can easily be read in both narratives that of the two worldviews one is much more appealing than the other. There is no gameplay choice, for example, that allows you to side with Menge or his church. You either help eliminate him or you opt out of the quest entirely.

FEARS OF THE FOLK AND FEAR OF THE FOLK

Depending on your game choices you can take a definitive side and help eliminate the witch hunters for good from the Northern Kingdoms and dispel one of the more horrific aspects of the game. The various choices you make throughout the game are reflected in the end cut-scenes, which differ depending on said choices (these can range from the death of Ciri to her crowning as empress of the Northern Kingdoms). If you rid the world of the stain of the religious witch hunters, an interesting piece of reflection by Geralt

occurs, which reintroduces the horror element thought banished with the elimination of the hunters: "Hatred and prejudice will never be eradicated. And witch hunts will never be about witches. To have a scapegoat—that's the key. Humans always fear the alien, the odd. Once the mages had left Novigrad, folk turned their anger against the other races . . . and, as they had for ages, branded their neighbors their greatest foes" (Tomaszkiewicz 2015). This is very much in keeping with the themes of both books and games and shows how they carry the spirit of folk horror at their respective cores. The vilification and abhorrent treatment of nonhuman species is a direct correlation to racism in the narrative world and is a staple of every iteration of The Witcher story—in the books these racial tensions often ignite into massacres and genocides, or "pogroms," as Sapkowski describes them, referring to the historical persecution of Jewish people in the Poland/Lithuania region, and indeed across Europe. The totems of the old gods that are so frequent in the *Wild Hunt* involve a side quest, "Defender of the Faith," that entails restoring damaged totems that have been vandalized by the proponents of the Church of Eternal Fire. In 2020, a commune in northern Poland attempted to erect similar totems designed by a local folk artist in their area and met active resistance from the Catholic church and Polish government. It is no coincidence, however, that the group being discriminated against are Kashubians, an ethnic minority group in Poland who have historically faced such persecutions (Wilczek 2020). Sapkowski is from Łódź, a city that infamously had a Jewish ghetto during the second world war, and whose awful history is part of its psychogeography and informs the racial and ethnic politics of the entire Witcher series.

The discrimination at work in The Witcher universe is most noticeable regarding its main POV game character—Geralt. When the company announced the first game and that it would take place after the book series had ended, it caused a stir, not least because to all intents and purposes both Geralt and Yennefer had been killed in a pogrom of their own. The ending is ambiguous, though, as Ciri arrives with her newfound spatiotemporal powers and whisks the two dying protagonists off to a mystical place called Avalon. Geralt's ignominious end at the prongs of a pitchfork by an enraged peasant during a mass riot points to a final revealing of the folk horror that runs below the surface in The Witcher and exposing the horrors of the "monstrous communities" as its gruesome coda (Scovell 2017, 30). The game does not ret-con this; rather it takes advantage of the ambiguous ending to bring both Geralt and Yennefer back, but the lingering wound of how Geralt met his end informs the atmosphere of the game throughout. There is a prologue that sets the scene for the game where the player is introduced to the world and the nature of its main character, The Witcher. They are, however, described in heavily loaded language: "Stray children taught the ways of foul sorcery,

their bodies mutated through blasphemous ritual. Sent to fight monsters though they could not distinguish good from evil. The flicker of humanity long extinguished within them" (Tomaszkiewicz 2015). Here, there is a clear dichotomy made between monster and human, but the immense appeal of The Witcher universe, in whatever medium, is that it involves a critical deconstruction of this dichotomy. Geralt is constantly treated with fear and hatred in his interactions with people due to this monstrous "othering." A common contention throughout this chapter has been that having a monster hunter as the main character and a quest structure that often revolves around identifying a monster and killing it often reduces the horror impact of the game. But this is an open world game that involves resolving the quests in several different ways depending on the choices of the player. If you don't feel like heading into the wilds and hunting giant spiders or griffins or wraiths, then you can strategically avoid them. And there are numerous quests in which having determined the nature of the monster you decide the best course of action. This could involve handing people over to the monsters as deserving victims or freeing the monster from their situation in a non-violent manner. The "Woodland Spirit" quest is such an example. You can either burn the spirit's totem and then kill the spirit in combat or you can listen to the local shaman in Skellige who offers you an expiatory ritual that will placate the spirit. If you pay attention to the "old ways" of the shaman, both Woodland Spirit and Mutated Monster Hunter get to live in a world that is as openly hostile to them as they are to it. If you so choose, you can play the entire game in a manner that would make Lord Summerisle, from *The Wicker Man*, proud.

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Chapter 19

A Horror Film for Our Times

Annihilation as Weird Folk Eco-Horror

M. Keith Booker

The two films to date that have been directed by Alex Garland, *Ex Machina* (2014) and *Annihilation* (2018), can both be described as science fiction films with strong components of horror, with suggestions that the technologies that have helped to build modern civilization might also contribute to taking it down. However, *Annihilation* tilts much more strongly toward horror than does its predecessor, especially in its visual imagery. Generically, *Annihilation* might be described as a revenge-of-nature version of folk horror with an environmentalist twist, pointing toward important new directions for folk horror as our global climate change crisis becomes ever more acute.[1] *Annihilation* can be read in various ways, but one of the most useful readings is to see it as a climate fiction cautionary tale about our natural environment turning on us in retribution for centuries of abuse. The film's combination of horror with another genre, as well as its inclusion of environmentalist warnings, point toward two of the most important directions for horror film in the coming decades. Moreover, that this other genre is science fiction in this case is highly appropriate, given that destructive climate change has been largely caused by science-driven technologies, while technology must also be central to the fight against climate change. Finally, the particular defamiliarizing way in which *Annihilation* combines science fiction and horror is typical of the multigeneric character of what we have come to know as "weird" fiction, which might just be the most appropriate mode in which to deliver the film's environmentalist message.

In *Annihilation*, an adaptation of Jeff VanderMeer's 2014 novel of the same title,[2] a special team of government operatives is sent to investigate the area that lies beyond the "Shimmer," a glistening, undulating rainbow curtain

that has appeared, seemingly out of nowhere. The Shimmer itself is easily penetrable, but several previous missions (mostly military) sent to investigate the phenomenon, have disappeared without a trace, having lost the ability to communicate with the outside world once they passed through the curtain, never to return. The rest of the film details the efforts of the exploratory team to try to understand the strange area beyond the Shimmer (known as "Area X"), an area in which the laws of physics and biology seem to operate completely differently than they do in the rest of the world.[3]

The all-female exploratory team[4] featured in *Annihilation* is led by psychologist Dr. Ventress (Jennifer Jason Leigh), though the central character and the one whose point of view is followed most closely in the film is Lena (Natalie Portman), a professor of cellular biology and a veteran of seven years in the military. It is also crucial to the plot that Lena's husband, Sergeant Kane (Oscar Isaac) is, as the present action of the film begins, the only member of any of the previous expeditions to have seemingly returned from Area X (though he seems oddly distracted and confused, and then nearly dies).[5] Moreover, we will eventually learn that this "Kane" is apparently not really Lena's husband but is some sort of clone of the original, created by whatever phenomenon that has created Area X. Other members of the main expedition in the film include physicist Josie Radek (Tessa Thompson), former Chicago paramedic Anya Thorensen (Gina Rodriguez), and geomorphologist Cass Sheppard (Tuva Novotny). The team, thus, consists mostly of scientists, but all are armed with military weaponry and have clearly been given the training to use them, on the suspicion that they are likely to encounter something dangerous.

Annihilation is constructed in a complex nonlinear narrative form in which flashbacks (consisting of Lena's memories or dreams of the time before Kane went into Area X) and flashforwards (mostly consisting of the interrogation of Lena after she returns from Area X) are interwoven with the present action in a way that helps to give viewers some sense of the temporal confusion experienced by the characters while inside Area X. For example, we can piece together from the Lena's memory flashbacks that Lena and Kane had apparently once had a healthy relationship, but that (by the time of his mission into Area X) it was already beginning to grow stale. Kane, often away on missions, seemed to be growing more and more distant, while Lena had been involved in an affair with Daniel (David Gyasi), a colleague at Johns Hopkins. We learn from one of the flashbacks that Kane had found out about the affair, suggesting that he might have gone on the suicide mission into Area X in response to that discovery, thus explaining Lena's sense of obligation to go into the area herself in an effort to find out something that will help him recover. The flashforwards construct a sort of frame narrative involving the efforts of the Southern Reach, the top-secret government agency operating

from a facility designed to investigate the Shimmer and Area X. In fact, the film actually begins with one of these flashforwards, in which the returned Lena is being interrogated by Lomax (Benedict Wong), an agent of the Southern Reach, who are obviously taking extreme precautions for fear that Lena might be carrying some sort of contamination. Meanwhile, one thing that adds to Lena's confusion in the film is that she herself does not fully understand the nature of the Southern Reach, nor do we. They do, however, seem vaguely sinister in their own right, somewhat in the mold of the government agents who swoop down on the unfortunate alien in Steven Spielberg's *ET the Extraterrestrial* (1972). This motif adds an extra dystopian dimension of complexity to this already complex film. The potentially dystopian orientation of the powers that be in this film is clearly indicated early on as Lena rides in an ambulance rushing the newly returned "Kane" to the hospital, only to have the ambulance intercepted by a paramilitary force that spirits Kane away to a secret facility, while Lena is drugged and taken to the facility as well. When she awakens in the facility (now dressed in a prison-like jumpsuit), she is immediately interrogated by Ventress. Alarmed by the situation, Lena demands to see a lawyer. "You're not going to be able to see a lawyer," Ventress states flatly, then refuses to divulge any further information about what is going on. Eventually, Ventress is able to recruit Lena to join her on the next mission into Area X, but the "Southern Reach" maintains a mysterious, dystopian air throughout the film.[6]

In addition to these dystopian resonances, *Annihilation* sometimes has the feel of a post-apocalyptic narrative. After all, the transformations inside Area X are apocalyptic in scale, including the fact that the expedition encounters several ruined and abandoned structures, such as an entire abandoned village, evacuated two years earlier by the Southern Reach. They also discover the former headquarters of the Southern Reach, now engulfed by Area X, indicating that the organization has been studying Area X for a long period, given that they have already had time to drop back and build a replacement headquarters farther away from the lighthouse—which is itself perhaps the most important abandoned structure that the expedition encounters.

As these added dystopian and post-apocalyptic components illustrate, one of the things that complicates the viewer's understanding of *Annihilation* is that it participates in several different genres at once, making it a bit difficult to understand just what kind of film we are viewing. Much of this multigeneric character comes from the source material: VanderMeer is generally described as a leading practitioner of "weird fiction," a kind of postmodern amalgamation of science fiction, fantasy, and horror.[7] The multigeneric character of the film does make it harder for viewers to contextualize the film, but the action is not really especially hard to follow, in the sense that it is fairly easy to know what Lena is experiencing at any given moment and reasonably

easy to grasp the relationship between the flashbacks and the main narrative. Any difficulty in the film comes from the fact that Lena herself does not understand much of what she experiences, while we have no more information than she does, given that essentially everything in the film is related to us through her perception of it. It is helpful, though, to get one's bearings by locating the film generically, which can best be done by considering its relationship with the two genres in which it participates most extensively: the alien invasion genre of science fiction and the genre of folk horror with a strong psychological twist, suggesting a new form of weird folk horror designed to shake us out of our complacency with regard to the environment.

ANNIHILATION AS ALIEN INVASION NARRATIVE

When Lena wanders to the edge of Area X, she first observes the almost indescribable Shimmer. Ventress follows her and afterward offers an explanation that is no explanation: "A religious event? An extraterrestrial event? A higher dimension? We have many theories. Few facts." This uncertainty will remain in place at the end of the film, though there are many indications in the movie that the extraterrestrial theory is probably the most accurate one. In addition to the vaguely dystopian intonations of the activities at Area X, *Annihilation* contains a number of science fiction motifs, including (most obviously) its status as a sort of alien invasion narrative. Near the beginning of the film, we see an object (apparently a meteor) streaking across the sky and crashing into the earth at the base of a lighthouse. The film implies (though it does not explicitly state) that this meteor is the seed that sets in motion the transformation of the surrounding landscape, a transformation that is gradually advancing, ultimately threatening to engulf the entire world. Ventress does go on to explain, however, that the lighthouse is in "Blackwater National Park" and that the "event" started around three years before the present action of the film when it was reported that the lighthouse had suddenly become surrounded by a "shimmer," which has gradually expanded outward ever since. So far it has encompassed barely populated swamps (which have, in any case, been evacuated on the pretext of a chemical spill), but it threatens soon to start moving into more heavily populated areas. All drones, animals, and people sent in to try to determine the nature of the event have disappeared without a trace, until the apparent return of Kane. To the extent that this event can be attributed to the impact of that meteor, *Annihilation* is clearly an example of the science fiction subgenre of the alien invasion narrative, even though we never see any actual aliens (unless we consider the replicated Kane to be an alien). After all, alien invasions have been coming to earth aboard apparent meteors ever since H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* (1898). Here, though,

instead of actual aliens, what we see is a "refraction" (by some unstated and perhaps unknowable process) of the laws of nature, so that everything, including human beings, touched by this process is fundamentally altered. In particular, the physicist Josie (best equipped by her training to understand such things) hypothesizes that the zone somehow distorts everything by refraction, including biological information (such as DNA) and physical information (such as the laws of space and time). The changes wrought by this refraction of information are especially noticeable at the biological level, lending themselves to the creation of striking surreal visual imagery in the film. Animal species can be genetically modified through changes to their DNA; they can also be combined with other animal species (and even with plant species), creating strange hybrids that would be impossible according to any terrestrial understanding of the laws of biology. Plants, for example, can include human genetic material that allows them to grow in the shape of human beings. Moreover, this strange process of hybridization extends even farther, so that living species can be combined with inanimate materials to create even more bizarre hybrids—as in the crystalline trees that we see near the end of the film.

We, as viewers, never gain a full understanding of this process of transformation, nor is there any discernible reason for it. In this sense, *Annihilation* participates in a family of science fiction narratives that have been built on the fundamental notion that alien intelligences would probably be *so* alien to us that we would be entirely unable to understand their motivations or to establish meaningful communication with them. The classic text in this regard would be the 1961 novel, *Solaris*, by the great Polish science fiction writer Stanisław Lem, which still stands as one of the most successful meditations on the difficulties of encounters with aliens that are genuinely different from humans. Here, a human expedition to the planet Solaris has difficulty recognizing that the planet's vast ocean is itself a sentient being, but one so alien to humans that communication between the humans and the planet is virtually impossible. *Solaris* was successfully adapted to film under the same title in 1972 by the great Soviet science fiction master Andrei Tarkovsky (and was less successfully adapted by Steven Soderbergh in 2002). Linguistic difficulties are also central to the plot of Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1979). More recently, Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival* (2016) deals almost entirely with difficulties in communication with a group of aliens that have arrived on earth, difficulties that are made more serious by the fact that the aliens perceive time in a way entirely different from that of humans, which exerts a strong influence on their fundamental conception of language.

Of these predecessors, *Solaris* is probably the most similar to *Annihilation*, in the sense that the humans in that novel/film, like the humans in *Annihilation*, do not really understand what they are encountering. This lack

of understanding, though, is perhaps even more profound in *Annihilation* because the properties of the zone explored in this film include a warping of the perception of space and time, so that the explorers cannot really understand or trust the data that come to them via their own senses.

Meanwhile, the alien invasion motif of *Annihilation* has a number of other important predecessors in the world of science fiction. For example, that a clone of Kane that is returned from the zone inevitably recalls the alien replicants who replace humans in the classic sf film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) and its remakes. The apparent ability of the alien phenomenon to manipulate and rearrange genes recalls the "Oankali," alien genetic engineers in Octavia E. Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy (1987–1989), who merge genetically with humans on a post-apocalyptic earth devastated by nuclear war. The aliens are very much in charge of the process, however, seeking to remove humanity's natural (and highly destructive) tendency toward hierarchical behavior, which they see as the cause of the recent holocaust on earth.[8] In the process they transgress all sorts of human gender boundaries—and eventually transform the entire restored earth into a giant spaceship for use in their further travels. Meanwhile, the focus in *Annihilation* on the exploration of a strange zone where the laws of physic and biology are changed (apparently by an alien intervention) is quite reminiscent of another Tarkovsky film, *Stalker* (1979), which is itself based on the 1972 Russian novel, *Roadside Picnic*, by Boris and Arkady Strugatsky, perhaps the greatest of all Russian science fiction novelists.

Even more analogous to what is going on in *Annihilation* is the main narrative of Ian McDonald's "Chaga" saga, which includes *Chaga* (1995, US title *Evolution's Shore*) and *Kirinya* (1998). This story features an alien incursion in Africa by the Chaga, an extraterrestrial ecosystem that seeds the southern hemisphere, possibly through the use of a form of nanotechnology. The Chaga spreads dramatically and transforms the African landscape, seemingly for the better, but the United Nations responds with an intervention that is essentially a neocolonial exertion of power. Indeed, reading *Annihilation* alongside McDonald's Chaga books raises a serious question about how we should see the Southern Reach and whether the phenomenon in Area X might actually be a positive force that has come to earth to save the planet, even if that means having to rid it of the pesky humans who are destroying it.

Probably the most striking sequence in *Annihilation* occurs near the end of the film when Lena finally enters the lighthouse and is confronted by much strangeness. Among other things, she discovers a recording that suggests that the "Kane" who returned from Area X is a clone of the original Kane, who was turned to ash by a phosphorous grenade. Then comes the strangest sequence of all (critics have used terms such as "mind-bending" and "trippy"

to describe it), in which psychedelic visuals accompany what appears to be the creation and then destruction (again by phosphorous grenade) of a clone of Lena herself. The destruction of the clone appears to trigger the destruction of Area X, returning the area to normal and returning Lena to the Southern Reach. This sequence, of course, is reminiscent of nothing more than that final segment of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), in which astronaut David Bowman enters some sort of stargate, passes through a psychedelic tunnel, then emerges in a field of stars. He then moves through a series of strange, incomprehensible sights and shapes, taking him out of the solar system and into a different part of the galaxy. After more strange images, Bowman realizes that he has apparently landed in a simulated period hotel suite. Bowman, now transformed into an old man, begins to explore the suite and encounters other versions of himself. A monolith appears at the foot of the bed, and an aged Bowman lying in bed is suddenly replaced by a gestating fetus (apparently as a signal that he dies and is reborn), returning to earth as the Star Child, announcing another step in human evolution.

Annihilation resembles *2001* in a number of ways, well beyond the visual similarities between its lighthouse scene and Kubrick's finally segment. Most commentators have interpreted *2001* as a narrative about alien interventions that help along human evolution. In *Annihilation*, it is possible to see that the clone of Kane is analogous to the Star Child, while it is possible to imagine that the returned Lena will join with Kane to produce a Star Child of their own. (It is also possible that the returned Lena is a clone, as many viewers—noting as evidence the new tattoo on her arm and the strange shimmer in her eyes, which she shares with Kane's clone—have suggested.) By this reading, the phenomenon that created Area X can be seen as an alien intervention designed to set right a human race that has gone badly off course—though of course it might also be suspected of having more sinister intentions. Garland gives us even less information than Kubrick about how to interpret his ending, so there can be no definitive reading.

Much about *Annihilation* is confusing and disorienting, but that might largely be the point. In addition to the film's echoes of specific alien invasion motifs, it should also be noted that *Annihilation* largely involves the women entering a strange world that clearly operates in a manner that is far different from the world they have always known. They then spend most of the film attempting to get their bearings and to understand how and why this world differs from their own. In short, they are all performing very much the same kind of activities as those performed by science fiction readers (though in a more dangerous way, of course). After all, readers read science fiction in order to explore different worlds, and part of the task (and fun) of reading science fiction is to try to figure out the rules of these new worlds and how they differ from their own. Indeed, ever since the pioneering work of Darko Suvin

in the 1970s, there has been a strong critical consensus that this phenomenon, which Suvin terms "cognitive estrangement," is the central project of science fiction as a genre. For him, science fiction places readers in a world different from our own in ways that stimulate thought about the nature of those differences, enabling us to view our own world from a fresh perspective. Moreover, this process is invested with strong utopian energies, giving readers the ability to imagine that their own world could be otherwise and that genuine change is possible.

ANNIHILATION AS WEIRD FOLK ECO-HORROR FILM

That alien invasion narratives and climate change narratives might share a generic space is perhaps indicated by the fact that the 2008 remake of the 1951 alien invasion classic *The Day the Earth Stood Still* recast (if not terribly successfully) the original story into a climate change narrative. And that science fiction and horror can share the same space has been shown by a whole family of films, often with alien invasion narratives, including such classics as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) and (perhaps especially relevant to *Annihilation*) *The Day of the Triffids* (1962). Indeed, this generic combination has been in place since the days of silent film—and begins in sound film as early as *Frankenstein* (1931).[9] As a result, the particular combination of elements that make up *Annihilation* is perhaps not all that surprising, even if the particular way in which they are combined in this film (and its source novel) is extremely innovative.

This innovation leads to a level of strangeness that creates a level of cognitive estrangement that is typical of the best science fiction. However, one could also argue that this film not only creates cognitive estrangement in viewers but is itself also *about* cognitive estrangement, given the experiences of its characters. And the cognitive estrangement suffered by the members of the expedition in *Annihilation* reaches a level so extreme that it tilts the film into the genre of horror, so that even the most science fictional elements of the film also contribute to the horror elements, meaning that the two genres are intricately intertwined. Such generic interpenetration is, of course, a key characteristic of weird fiction and helps to identify this film as participating in that movement.

The disorienting effects of Area X are indicated very early in the film when we learn in the first flashforward at the beginning of the film that Lena (apparently the only one of the group we will be following who will survive and return from the zone) believes she was in the zone for a few days or at most a few weeks, when in fact she had been inside for nearly four months as measured in the outside world. Then, in the present-time narrative of the film,

as soon as the expedition is shown passing through the Shimmer into Area X, its members are immediately shown in their encampment, even though none of them can remember setting up camp (or anything else after passing into Area X). However, the depletion of their food supply suggests that they have already been inside Area X for three or four days. It is thus quickly established, not only that they are in a strange new environment, but that they cannot trust their perceptions of what is going on.

One of the earliest hints that we are dealing with both horror and science fiction occurs when the main characters explore the abandoned base that was formerly the headquarters of the Southern Reach. They find there a video recording left by the most recent previous expedition and play it, discovering that it contains shocking material that might be very much at home in a horror movie. On the recording, Kane is shown cutting open the abdomen of a fellow soldier, revealing that the soldier's abdominal cavity contains, not the expected intestines and other organs, but some sort of slithering, snake-like creature. Soon afterward, they discover what appears to be the body of the soldier, his abdominal cavity hollowed out and his body merged both with some sort of vine-like plant and a concrete wall, forming a grotesque display. This discovery seems like almost pure horror, though one of the closest cinematic counterparts to this sequence might be the infamous chest-burster scene from Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979), perhaps the quintessential example of a science fiction–horror hybrid in film.

Similarly, the hybrid monsters that attack the expedition inside Area X, beginning with an alligator that seems to have the teeth of a shark, would seem to be equally at home in either horror or science fiction. That they appear to have been formed by some sort of genetic modification would seem to place these creatures in the realm of science fiction, but the monstrous nature of some of the hybrids in the film definitely seems more like horror. For example, at one point, the members of the expedition are threatened by a monstrous creature with the body of a bear but with a grotesquely misshapen head, the skull exposed and with a human skull (presumably that of Sheppard, who had earlier been carried off by a bear) embedded within it (see figure 23.1). It also has a set of human teeth, in addition to bear teeth, while it emits both bear-like growls and human-like sounds. In some ways, this bear-human hybrid is visually reminiscent of the alien in *Alien*, but the monstrous possibilities offered by genetic merger of humans and animals are perhaps most reminiscent of David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986), a classic science fiction–horror hybrid that tilts toward body horror after its scientist protagonist merges with a fly, with most unfortunate results. This hybrid bear seems to be a mutated form of the one that apparently killed Sheppard earlier, and it initially draws the attention of the other women by yelling, "Help me!" in Sheppard's voice, suggesting that it has taken on some of Sheppard's

genes. Of course, this moment perhaps recalls the iconic moment at the end of the original 1958 version of *The Fly*, in which a scientist, merged with a fly to create a hybrid that is the size of a fly, gets caught in a spider web and calls out, "Help me!" in a tiny voice.

Importantly, it is not only the animals that are mutating inside Area X. The women in the expedition are also changing. Anya becomes alarmed when she looks closely at her hand and believes she can see her fingerprints moving. Lena examines a sample of her own blood under a microscope and observes abnormal cellular division. Ventress states it most plainly when she says they need to pick up speed in their progress toward the lighthouse because "We are disintegrating. Can't you feel it? It's like the onset of dementia. If I don't reach the lighthouse soon, the person that started this journey won't be the person that ends it. I want to be the one that ends it."

By the end of the film, Ventress has disintegrated altogether inside the lighthouse, perhaps merging her lifeforce with the energy of the phenomenon. That lighthouse, meanwhile, is in many ways a veritable house of horrors. Indeed, as Lena reaches the lighthouse, we see that a display of human skulls and bones has been carefully arranged on the ground outside of the structure. There are no clues concerning the meaning of this display, but it certainly seems to belong to the genre of horror. On the other hand, it is perhaps most directly reminiscent of the display of skulls that decorates Kurtz's compound when Marlow finally reaches it in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Then,



Figure 19.1 The mutant bear. *Annihilation*. Directed by Alex Garland (Paramount Pictures: 2018).

when we see the inside of the lighthouse, it seems to be overgrown with some decidedly disturbing white, vinelike plants, which also doesn't seem to bode well.

However horrifying some of the physical transformations and other images in the film might be, one of the most important ways in which *Annihilation* functions as a horror movie is its exploration of the psychological impact on the characters of their experiences in Area X. It has monsters, and it has body horror, and one might even see the lighthouse as a sort of haunted house, but one of the most horrifying aspects of Area X is the tricks it plays on people's minds. Perhaps it is significant that the expedition is led by a psychologist. Indeed, the perceptions of the film's characters are so altered that many of the events we see might simply be imagined, shown to us through the characters' points of view. Indeed, the returned Lena is questioned about this possibility but dismisses it, noting that all of the women were seeing the same things. However, if these hallucinations are caused by some sort of alien phenomenon (rather than individual pathology), there would not appear to be any reason why all the women could not have the same hallucinations.

Traveling through a strange and dangerous environment that one does not understand (while not being able to trust the evidence of one's own senses) is about as frightening a situation as one can imagine. Perhaps the only thing more frightening, at least for anyone whose identity has been formed amid the individualist ethos of the Western world, is to lose one's own identity, much as Ventress indicates. That the loss of identity is central to this film is also indicated in that final video that Lena finds of Kane, who questions the very concept of identity with his final words (spoken to his clone as the latter records him just before he sets off that phosphorous grenade): "I thought I was a man. I had a life. People called me 'Kane.' And now I'm not so sure. If I wasn't Kane, what was I? Was I you? Were you me? My flesh moves like liquid. My mind is just cut loose. I can't bear it."

ANNIHILATION AS ENVIRONMENTALIST ALLEGORY

One might see this theme of the loss of the self in *Annihilation* as related to the Buddhist notion that individual identity is a delusion and the major cause of the world's suffering. And Kane's final fate is certainly reminiscent of those famed moments of self-immolation with which Buddhist monks have sometimes protested against injustices in the world, perhaps most famously when Thích Quảng Đức burned himself to death on a busy Saigon street on June 11, 1963, to protest the persecution of Buddhists by the US-backed South Vietnamese government. Indeed, Kane positions himself in his final moments in a pose that is very reminiscent of the pose of Thích Quảng

Đức, captured in a famous photograph taken by journalist Malcolm Browne: calmly sitting cross-legged on the ground with his hands in his lap.

There certainly are many elements of *Annihilation* that seem congruent with the Buddhist worldview, and it is perfectly reasonable to connect the title of the film to what has often been (wrongly) described as the Buddhist quest for annihilation of the self. In point of fact, the ultimate goal of Buddhists is to achieve nirvana, which does not truly involve the annihilation of the self so much as a transformation of the self into a new condition that is liberated from suffering and worldly attachments, specifically greed, anger, and delusion. On the other hand, the title of the film could have many more meanings, including the most obvious one that it describes what was happening to the natural landscape in Area X. In this sense, though, we should recall the moment in the film when Lomax refers to the fact that the phenomenon was destroying everything, whereupon Lena corrects him and says, "not destroying; changing."

I think a more immediate reading of the "point" of *Annihilation* and the meaning of its title is that "annihilation" primarily refers to the potentially cataclysmic effects of climate change, making the entire film an environmentalist allegory. I will grant, however, that this reading is easier to defend in relation to the original novel, partly because VanderMeer is himself a committed environmentalist, and partly because the novel never explicitly identifies the nature and source of its central phenomenon, while the film fairly clearly identifies it as being of extraterrestrial origin, which complicates the environmentalist reading.[10]



Figure 19.2 The self-immolation of Kane as his clone stands near him. *Annihilation*. Directed by Alex Garland (Paramount Pictures: 2018).

Still, the environmentalist reading captures a great deal of what is important about the film, even though it still leaves the way open for radically different interpretations. On the one hand, one could see *Annihilation* as a sort of revenge-of-nature film in which nature is striking back against the damage done to the environment by hundreds of years of capitalist modernization. By this reading, Area X involves a sort of purification of the environment, a reading that again works better with the novel than with film, because the novel makes it clear that the environment inside Area X has been cleared of human-made pollution, while the area outside remains impure. Musing on the environment around her in Area X, the biologist notes, "The air was so clean, so fresh, while the world back beyond the border was what it had always been during the modern era: dirty, tired, imperfect, winding down, at war with itself." (VanderMeer 2014, 30)

On the other hand, in the film, the environment inside Area X seems much more threatening, almost cancerous (or at least alien), which could be seen to support an alternative view of Area X as a sort of defamiliarized re-creation of what humans have done to the environment on earth. To the extent that although we can't trust anything we see in this film, the film does seem to verify that the transformation of the environment inside Area X is of alien origin. Late in the film, for example, Lomax hears Lena's story and concludes, "So it *is* alien," which she appears to affirm. Thus, the transformation of Area X might be seen as a sort of reverse terraforming in which alien intervention radically changes the environment, just as human intervention has radically changed the environment of earth over the past few hundred years. This reading would highlight the notion that modern industrial civilization is, in a sense, an alien force that is at odds with the natural environment of earth. Of course, the film also leaves open the possibility that the aliens might be sophisticated enough to change the environment for the better.

Finally, the film also leaves open the question of just what happens next. Even if Lena has, in fact, brought an end to Area X, that does not necessarily mean that the alien intrusion has been thwarted. There is still the question of just what happens next, given that the clone of Kane (and possibly Lena herself) seems to be "infected" with alien material. In many ways, in fact, the ending of the film is less like the ending of the novel than it is like the ending of Garland's previous film, *Ex Machina*, in which an android that possibly poses a major threat to the human race, escapes confinement and issues forth to mingle, undetected, among humans. That film leaves open the question of whether the replacement of the flawed human race by posthuman androids might be a good thing, just as *Annihilation* leaves open the question of whether the replacement of humans by aliens as the rulers of earth might be an improvement. After all, the film clearly suggests that human beings are inherently flawed and even self-destructive, as when Lena notes early on

that aging occurs simply because of a genetic flaw in all animals on earth, which meshes with Ventress's later claim that almost all of us self-destruct in some way. Ventress herself makes the connection, in fact, telling Lena that, as a biologist, she can probably understand humanity's self-destructive impulses better than can a psychologist: "Isn't self-destruction coded into us, programmed into each cell?" One could see the destruction of the natural environment as a manifestation of the innate self-destructive tendencies of humans in general, and perhaps the aliens in *Annihilation* hope, not just to annihilate humans but to improve them with an better model, with no built-in drive to self-destruct.

Ultimately, *Annihilation* is clearly designed to trigger questions, rather than to provide answers, something that is typical of weird fiction. Meanwhile, the "weirdness" of the film effectively enhances its environmentalist theme by providing a critique of and warning against centuries of arrogant rationalist assumptions that human beings understand nature completely and have the right and the ability to alter their natural environment in whatever way they feel furthers their own (mostly economic) goals. The strangely altered landscape of Area X, produced by a phenomenon that can just as easily alter human beings, counsels an awareness of the complexity of nature and advises humility in the face of nature's power. Horror seems an appropriate mode in which to deliver such warnings, and a weird combination of horror with science fiction might be the most effective of all.

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NOTES

1. Not surprisingly, horror films related to climate change (sometimes known as "eco-horror" films) have received increasing critical attention in recent years. See, for example, the collection edited by Tidwell and Soles (2012).

2. The process of adaptation in this case is a fascinating topic in itself. See Kunzelman (2021) and Lutes (2017) for discussions of the adaptation.

3. Note that the film implies that the whole affected area is called "the Shimmer," while "Area X" is the headquarters of the Southern Reach. VanderMeer's use of the terminology I use here is much clearer, so I have decided to go with his version.

4. The film gives no good reason why all of the members of the team are women, other than it was always men on the previous expeditions, though somehow seems appropriate given the number of films that have featured all-male expeditionary forces without explanation of that gender choice. The novel merely stipulates that they were "chosen as part of the complex set of variables that governed sending the expeditions" (VanderMeer 2014, 3).

5. In VanderMeer's novel, none of these characters have actual names, but are simply given labels, such as "the psychologist" and "the biologist." This strategy reinforces the theme of annihilation of identity that runs through the novel. It also recalls the unnamed listeners aboard the "Nellie" in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), a book whose trip into the jungles of Africa (depicted as strange and mysterious, at least to incoming Europeans) has more than a little in common with the expedition at the center of *Annihilation*.

6. Garland reinforces the sense of uneasiness surrounding this facility with a subtle structural trick. While VanderMeer's novel makes it quite clear that "Area X" is the area within the Shimmer (though, unlike Garland, he does not actually call the boundary "the Shimmer"), Garland simply displays "Area X" in on-screen text before cutting to the first shot of the facility, leaving some uncertainty about what "Area X" refers to. While, this trick does create a sense that the facility itself is called "Area X" (perhaps in the tradition of "Area 51"), that term is never again used in the film,

leaving some uncertainty. The novel, meanwhile, makes clear that the "clandestine government agency that dealt with all matters related to Area X" is called the "Southern Reach" (8–9). Indeed, VanderMeer's *Annihilation* is the first volume of a trilogy of novels collectively known as the "Southern Reach Trilogy." The term "Southern Reach" is barely used in the film, though it is mentioned in passing, and I will use it here.

7. It should be noted that VanderMeer's novel won both the Nebula Award (primarily given for science fiction writing) and the Shirley Jackson Award (primarily given for horror writing). For a general study of weird fiction as a genre, see Cisco 2022.

8. Humans, it turns out, are especially good subjects for genetic manipulation due to the rare genetic property that enables cancer, something the Oankali have encountered nowhere else in the galaxy. There are also vague hints in *Annihilation* that cancer (which is key to Lena's own research and of which Ventress is dying) might be vaguely analogous to the process of genetic transformation in the zone. Brooks de Vita (2019) believes that Lena has cervical cancer, but I see no evidence of that in the film.

9. The confluence of horror and science fiction has probably received less critical attention than it deserves, but it does play a prominent role in histories of science fiction film. For example, a running subtheme of Vivian Sobchack's *Screening Space* (1997) is the overlap between the two genres, despite the fact that some critics have insisted on separating them.

10. The third volume of the Southern Reach Trilogy (which begins with *Annihilation*) appears to identify the phenomenon as alien in origin, but even that information is delivered in a way that makes it appear less than entirely reliable. For two helpful recent discussions of the ecological implications of the trilogy, see Dudley (2021) and Kortekallio (2020). For an excellent discussion of the entire trilogy in terms of its focus on "weird ecology," see Tompkins (2014).

Chapter 20

Future Shock Folk Horror in Terry Gilliam's *The Zero Theorem*

Garrett Castleberry

In this chapter, I discuss the third film in Terry Gilliam's dystopian trilogy, *The Zero Theorem*, making a case for its haunting existence as future shock science-fiction and a technologized entrant into consideration as folk(lore) horror for the twenty-first century. I examine the source of the phrase "future shock" as an emergent intellectual idea, coming of age amidst the late twentieth century when public intellectuals still produced bestsellers with broad audience appeal, the era before the birth of cable news, the Internet, and the oversaturation of doomsayers capitalizing on frayed mental health and distrust of public institutions. Then I examine the evolution of future shock as a sociological theory to its filmic formation as an identifiable sub-genre within science fiction but also one that overlaps betwixt and between definitions and conversations of horror. I review the role of the TV film host and its mechanical function as mass orator, a foundation through which folk tales about mass media, and film in particular, form and reform ideas that stick to the popular imaginary. Finally, I return to Gilliam's *The Zero Theorem* to more closely read this film artifact, though not only as future shock cinema, but also by means of a comparison with Adam Scovell's "Folk Horror Chain" as a modern mechanism by which the auteur continues his folkloric tales of futuristic horrors made manifest by paths taken in the present. Ultimately, this chapter makes a case for *The Zero Theorem*'s inclusion into the growing canon of folk horror in the twenty-first century.

FUTURE SHOCK AS A MODERN MEDIATION OF FOLK(LORE) HORROR

Future Shock presents a theoretical output projected by sociologists during the middle of the second half of the twentieth century. Coined by public intellectual, Alvin Toffler, future shock essentially functions as a sociological commentary on the physiological and psychological toll taken on society—collectively but also at an individual level—resulting from a period of enhanced rapid growth and technological change. Given his cultural cache as a public intellectual, male intellectuals like Toffler, or even contemporaries like Marshall McLuhan, could generate wide-audience persuasion as their popular talks were held in high regard. At a time when television supplanted film as the emergent storytelling medium of the twentieth century, the ability to enter the home, the apartment, the village, the headspace of the viewer and impact them directly elevates the power that a public intellectual possesses. We might consider this a lesser version of the "Walter Cronkite effect," where the limits of broadcast voices directly corresponded to their perceived position as "America's voice" domestically and an international influencer by extension of viewing the United States as a Cold War superpower politically, economically, and intellectually. This theorization of the power of public intellectuals is a mere rhetorical observation, not a hard scientific fact, or a demonstrable theory. In the pseudo-science tradition, and as audiences have witnessed amidst the twenty-first century collision with ideologies surrounding "fake news," information does not have to wholly align with scientific replicability to nonetheless function as both reputable and socially persuasive.

Future Shock wasn't just a bestselling book—with reports of over six million copies printed, most of which in its initial years of publication—but the book signaled an idea that was gaining momentum in dialogic circles. Fellow public intellectual and social critic Neil Postman claimed co-ownership of the phrase in his essay, "Future Shock," that was eventually woven into his own polemic *Conscientious Objections: Stirring Up Trouble About Language, Technology, and Education* (1988). In true folkloric fashion, the term future shock was passed around intellectual circles, occasionally leaking into public circulation, as a means of theorizing about rapid change and humanity's psychosocial reaction to shifts in technology, progress, and the general pace of life in developed nations. The link between this social theorization of the affective nature of future shock and its signposting of collective social anxiety places it in conversation with not only folkloric horror but a folkloric horror situated within a futurist framework.

The simple point I articulate is that folklore *as* persuasive narrative does not operate by the same logic or social conditions as scientific fact. Quite the

opposite. Folklore endures due to its propensity to unite what we suspect to what might remain unprovable. Folklore typically aligns with the subjectivity innate in oral cultures, storytelling, and the ways in which ideas are expressed again and again, in a combination of retention and invention based on the popularity or novelty. In this way, we can consider the persuasive power of folklore in line with the cultural and economic value of *genre* in a storytelling or *use value* sense of worth. Following this logical trajectory, I interpretively read the evolution of Toffler's ideas about future shock as thematically resonant enough that they evolved from sociological theory to cinematic sub-genre. The sub-genre of future shock appropriately rests within the larger blanket of science fiction, and indeed posits a slippery and, at times, even fluid identity between genres like horror and sub-genres like post-apocalyptic cinema, disaster movies, and variants that include sci-fi motifs such as time travel adventures or even contemporary offshoots like cyberpunk. If Toffler founded a broad theorization for future shock through his bestselling books and public talks—an amalgamation of which was produced into a 1973 short-form documentary hosted by none other than famed doomsayer voice Orson Welles—then the film theory invocation of Toffler's essence was translated by *Chicago Tribune* film critic, essayist, and media scholar Michael Phillips as part of cable channel Turner Classic Movies [TCM] "Spotlight" month in September 2013.

While it is likely that film critics like Phillips may have previously held university classes or private screenings that intentionally paired features that could be classified under the "future shock" banner, the TCM tribute month gave specificity to the sub-genre and broadcast its existence, even at a cult level of audience participation, in ways that can be likened to the oral tradition of folklore storytelling. The TCM brand cultivated and broadened an important tradition in the history of film presentation as redefined for televisiual audiences often via the use of a host to provide information on what was being presented. The history of the TV host exists parallel to public television. As the broadcast age evolved to incorporate B-movies into late night circulation just prior to the "end of broadcast" signal, the emergence of the TV film host took shape in interesting ways.

The TV film host functions as an emcee between the media text and the audience, arguably an integral factor in selling the need to watch repeat features that audiences have already viewed in cinemas or elsewhere. The TV film host may delight in a bit of performativity, borrowing from the likes of Vaudeville for the technological age of audience retention. TV hosts aggregated out of regional syndication and public access but grew in notoriety once television evolved to include cable and satellite access. Indeed, the TV-film emcee provided lucrative careers for kitschy personas, from Cassandra "Elvira" Peterson to folk satirist Joe Bob Briggs. Emcees then began to front

curated matter, films, and presentations that would appeal to a wider audience, and with the cultural worth of cinema steadily rising, this often centered around works by a particular actor or director, or even a certain theme. One such company that took advantage of this was TCM, which adopted the host-driven format that include curated series of films and presentations, with the *TCM Spotlight* series being of particular interest to us here.

TCM's Spotlight designation presented a narrow window by which the channel could designate a single day of the week on a given month and curate specialized programming that could emulate episodic programming that, if effective, would generate serialized return in viewership. Scheduled for the month of September 2013, TCM welcomed in guest host Michael Phillips with a unique arrangement of dark and daring cinema, tentatively assembled as the *TCM Spotlight* curating "future shock film." In his month-spanning series of feature film intros and outros each Thursday in September 2013, *TCM Spotlight* guest-host Phillips presented features spanning the 1920s through to the early 2000s, more than eighty years of loosely related science fiction tales brought together by an ominous title, "future shock." Given the brevity of the typical intro (approximately 2–3 minutes) and outro (approximately 1–2 minutes), TCM's televisual film curation tend to entice audiences with breadcrumb trivia rather than seasoned theorization. For this reason, oral performance of the intros service as a kind of folklore lecture that frames the feature for specific type of informed engagement. For the purposes of this chapter and argument, I consider the *TCM Spotlight* intros and outros as a folklore primer between aged ideas once profitable to Toffler and the avant-garde commercial expressions we can retroactively regard as future shock cinema. Of note, Terry Gilliam's entrant into future shock consideration, 1985's *Brazil*, was featured under the sub-banner of "urban landscapes" on the first night of the month-long installation. While this is not directly connected to Toffler's book it does show a certain cultural receptiveness to the internet ideas that he would be putting forward and the kind of popular "scientific" folklore that informed it.

ALVIN TOFFLER, FUTURE SHOCK, AND SOCIAL THEORY AS A FOLK GENRE

Alvin Toffler's book *Future Shock* (1970) functions as an observational vehicle for the paradigm shift that took place between what scholars consider the industrialist and post-industrialist period, accompanying changes in linear (e.g., modernist) viewpoints and positions about society at a time when rapid social, cultural, economic, and technological changes accelerated a transition into what cultural theorists consider postmodernity. Postmodern patterns

embrace fragmentation and acknowledge diversity as a core unit of being. For the generations comfortably settled into mid-century post-war stability and newfound wealth, "too much change in too short of time" manifested in the form of collective psychological despair (Grasshoff, 1972), particularly among those perceived to be in or a part of the relative control of the status quo.

There are a handful of collective signifiers that highlight Toffler's theorization of future shock. The core tenet can be understood as a negative reaction to the following forms of accelerated growth: "transience," or the increased mobility of livelihoods and lifestyles (1970, 49), which is linked response to corroding modernist notions of "permanence" (12); "novelty" in relation to rapid shifts in social practices and individualist identity (183); the reaction of novelty and the production of plural and fluid forms of "diversity" (261), the culminating thrust of accelerated cycles that challenge "the limits of adaptability" for those incapacitated by the pace and consequences of progress (323).[1] Toffler does provide remedies to this social ailment, or what he calls "strategies for survival" (369–470). Not surprising, these classical responses include "coping" groups (371) and other simpatico enclaves; updated and reformed approaches to "education" as a core principle to not being entirely left behind (402); bringing balance amidst concerns regarding "technological backlash" (430); and even a concluding call for, if not whimsically naïve suggestion of "social futurism" as a mobilized political practice of what he calls "anticipatory democracy" (470).

While very cliché in some places and problematic, by contemporary standards, in a few areas, Toffler's projections comfortably situate within the intellectual arena of futurists. Albeit the scholar does prefer to lean into immediate social anxiety, his predictions of where a rapidly accelerating society appeared headed remain profoundly resonant. Toffler would continue to build his grand narrative with *The Third Wave* in 1980 and *Powershift* in 1990. Together they comprise a trilogy of polemics designed to update his sociological assessment and theoretical explanation of phenomenon linked to this unique period of rapid acceleration in human history and the inherent anxiety it produces. In the following section, I return to the central text under examination for its future shock qualities and, by extension, its prescient function as an artifact of twenty-first century futurist folk horror.

CLOSE READING *THE ZERO THEOREM* (2013) AS FUTURE SHOCK SCIENCE FICTION

Released in 2013, Terry Gilliam's *The Zero Theorem* revisits a familiar motif of the director, opening with a point of God POV shot slowly zooming out of

a projected cosmos. The pulling out shot reveals the nude body of a middle-aged man, Qohen Leth (Christoph Waltz) staring into the digitized abyss of what appears to be the darkly unlit corridor of a cathedral. The figure's gaze is broken, and he arises. Teeth brushed with only a speckle of natural lighting; he dresses himself before opening the church's large wooden door frame allowing the outside world to immediately assault the senses, at first with noise pollution and then with unending visual excess. The pale and seemingly dissociated man reluctantly walks out into a postmodern cityscape. The world presented to the audience could quickly be interpreted as a consumerist dystopia. The city bears European resemblance (portions are shot in Romania) with a kind of chaotic LED lighting and endless info-scrollers; a hybridization of Rome or Paris if they were reconstituted as Time Square and Las Vegas. The authorial intent to visualize sensory overload is penetrating. The omnipresence of pop culture as a globalist monoculture can be immediately interpreted in a digital billboard that expresses the slogan, "The Church of Batman the Redeemer Needs You." Mary Corliss captures the scene in her *Time* review, warning, "The Zero Theorem is a spectacle that demands to be cherished—as long as the society Gilliam portrays is a satire, not a prophecy" (Corliss and Corliss, 2013).

Audiences familiar with the Gilliam's striking visual style and profane filmography will quickly identify in Qohen a kind of direct authorial response to twenty-first-century advancements in the technologized new world social order. The director visualizes a pessimistic outcome for increasingly popularized notions of the near future presented throughout the first decade of the new millennium. The 2000s were defined by techno-optimism: defined by Lawrence Lessig as *Free Culture: The Nature and Future of Creativity* (2004); framed by Frank Rose as an optimistic economy of spectacle in *The Art of Immersion* (2012); ideas building upon Toffler's foundation that Paul Virilio calls *The Futurism of the Instant* (2010). Yet Qohen abhors his surroundings, a world so busy and yet simultaneously scrambling for purpose beyond immediate personal stimulation. He rushes along and makes his way into what resembles a once classical marble palisade, now converted to serve as an arcade-like workspace. Settling into a neon-lit cubicle housing numerous digital screens, Qohen "plugs in" a controller from his briefcase and appears to practice labor in ways pleasurable to those around him but abhorrent to his personal detachment from this world. Managing his labor station includes literally pedaling in place—as opposed to historical associations of peddling salesmen but also inadvertently predicting the Peloton movement of work-as-you-exercise among quarantining enthusiasts amidst the novel coronavirus pandemic in 2020.

Qohen office is part of a multinational conglomerate overseen by a conspicuously named entity known as "Management" (a humorless Matt Damon).

Akin in size and expressionistic style to fascist propaganda posters, a hoisted exterior wall poster proselytizes the corporate message. One such billboard hangs over the entryway and promotes its CEO figurehead as dictator, further visualizing corporate surveillance. The poster reads, "Management" at the top, followed by "Everything is Under Control" as the bottom tag line. The poster features a depiction of the eponymous Management who serves as a cryptic and calculating shadow leader in the authoritarian tradition. Management is a central investor in the mission to uncover and validate the "zero theorem." These symbols conjure Orwellian systems of control by a state apparatus, a postmodern folkloric fear visited upon previous audiences in Gilliam's *Brazil*, itself an inventive reimagining of Orwell's *1984*.

A coworker and supervisor, Joby (David Thewlis), calls him away from the cubicle and across a costumed party atmosphere toward Management's personal office upstairs. Once there, Management asks him rhetorically, "What is the meaning of life?" Rather than answering, Qohen instead draws the attention of a young socialite, Bainsley (Melanie Thierry). Bainsley is a free spirit who lives vampily from one experiential moment to the next, thus meeting Toffler's definition of a *transient* being, a "fun specialist" (1970, 288) that, through her [physical] love labor, proves also to function libidinally as one of the "hippies, incorporated" (294). She draws Qohen's introverted attention initially in face-to-face contact, but steadily demonstrates the *art of immersion* by becoming his virtual paramour. Joby later calls Qohen away from his desk again with speculative interest in an unexplained "zero theorem." Qohen reconnects to a networked domain where he feverishly explores a video game space that archives vast mathematical equations in visual spaces that resemble the war-torn rubble of older Eastern European cities. These numbers—this "data,"—not only enlivens Qohen but appears to drive and awaken him from his otherwise depressed existence. He shares a digital video exchange with another employee, Dr. Shrink-Rom (Tilda Swinton). Dr. Shrink-Rom appears as an HR type at first, then clarifies her role as Management's mental health specialist—but also, possibly only exists as an AI humanoid program.

From this point forward, it is worth remembering Gilliam's propensity for blurring reality and madness in the physical and psychological world of his characters. In his TCM Spotlight film intro, Michael Phillips (2013) calls Gilliam's *Brazil*, "one of the grandest, darkest future shock movies of them all." And if Gilliam's inaugural foray into futurist dystopian film lore proves anything, it is that audio-video expressions of projected futures contain the possibility to horrify audiences just as they hold the potential to shape future imaginations of things to come. Qohen appears to awaken, eye patches concealing his temporarily scrambled vision and which links to one of the directors' earlier films, *12 Monkeys* (1995), where the premise of

memory-as-time travel is expanded upon as a looper tale of tragic madness and existential doom.

Future shock appears to haunt Qohen's relationship to the present. "You've got a case of the Zero Theorem heebee jeebies," Jody warns him. His visits serve to settle Qohen into his work tasks so that they may better serve the ominous needs of Management. But Oohen becomes unnerved by his immersive sessions, so Jody sends Qohen a nurse to see to his needs. The nurse turns out to be Bainsley, and her visit places her "title" at odds with her role. She enters Qohen's converted church sanctuary in a latex nurse's uniform and six-inch red heels. A young upstart programmer, Bob (Lucas Hedges), joins Qohen to remind him that their work for "the man upstairs" is never truly done, thus hinting at the film's larger critique of the nature of labor as both fragmented and unending because of the nature information and the internet. In support of this the hyperactive exterior world closely resembles the digitization of the world wide web at the turn of the century, where advertisements attached themselves to users via cookies with pop-ups and empty page spaces graffitied in tacky delight.

Another digital fantasy displaces Qohen to a simulacra beach, the next in a series of elusive encounters with the object of his anxious desire, Bainsley. The fantasy starts as an oasis dream until Qohen becomes consciously aware of the artificiality of this space by the Bainsley's sudden appearance. The two enact the following exchange:

> Bainsley: Like it? I made it just for you.
>
> Qohen: We're not it all sure it's quite us. We no longer drink.
>
> Bainsley: You can do anything you want here. You can drink and never get drunk. We can eat and never get fat.
>
> Qohen looks around in wonder. Where is this place? Qohen wonders out loud. All in your mind, Bainsley quirkily retorts. Or my mind.
>
> Bainsley begins to kiss his shoulder and neck. Do you feel this?
>
> Qohen remains emotionless at first. But it's not real.
>
> Bainsley: It's better than real. You're in your computer, I'm in mine. We're connected by memory chips and fiber optics. And, we're safe here. Just trust me.

The two frolic on the beach and then in the water, but unlike her assuring words, they are never truly safe (or alone), just as the work for Management never truly ends.

The collective brain trust pushes Qohen ever further to resume his research. Bob returns to drive his significance home more clearly, while clearly paraphrasing another famous future shock parable, *The Matrix*. "You're the one,

Q." But when the MacGuffin is potentially explained, it posits a future shock game-changing in relation to existential outcomes. "You're trying to prove that the universe is *all for nothing*. All matter, all energy, all life just a one-time glitch." With this exchange, the film's nefarious aim comes into central focus. Qohen functions as a genius drone capable of determining altruistically fatalistic conditions that charter humankind's role in the universe.

In his hands, Management holds the potential to condemn all hope to an endless labor loop, regardless of the temporary bliss-factor matrix that holds its subjects in work-play stasis. To this end, Qohen's nihilistic outlook might be instinctual unconscious avoidance. Qohen's entrances into his digital mainframe demonstrate an increasingly voyeuristic descent. Upon learning that Bainsley works as a "call" girl, both his portal-based fantasies and domain search missions devolve into a hedonistic hunt for personal pleasure. His body, including cognitive desires, are in denial about the truth of the mission. Bob ultimately draws him out of conscious withdrawal, which jettisons Qohen back into a colorless and sterile state. Qohen has entered a cataclysmic state of future shock. The revelation just within his reach shakes him to his core, sending him seeking immediate carnal escape.

Unlike Gilliam's other standalone dystopian futurist folk tales, it is arguable that *The Zero Theorem* does not fully exist narratively without applied allegorical translation. Whether philosophical, theological, or in this case, through close reading as futurist folklore, Terry Gilliam's capper to his dystopian future shock trilogy not only does not exist on its own—in fact, it failed spectacularly as a financial product and did not garner consistent acclaim among critics. In this interpretative condition, the film cannot exist on its own but works in paratextual partnership with the echoes of Gilliam's other films, his personal existential meta-myth developed through press interviews over decades, and in dialogic circles among audience debating the film's merits and meanings. Like the desperate fear of nothingness that haunts Qohen and others, the film struggles to hold its core together without the constellation of inferred, implied, and deduced meanings that infuse life into *The Zero Theorem*.

THE ZERO THEOREM AS FUTURIST FOLKLORE HORROR

In the final act, Bob falls ill and must be tended to within the church quarters. Qohen attempts to sooth him, drawing a bath just as he rips apart the surveillance mechanisms that have grown over the furniture like vines. Technological vegetation chokes out the lifeforce while creeping into the sanctuary in physical and psychological form. *The Zero Theorem* descends

into a psychological and spiritual form of body horror. If the metaphorical meaning were not strong enough, a life-size crucifix replaces Christ's head with a surveillance camera, the ideological beheading of organized religion—itself a sign of greater universal and cosmic purpose—with a ubiquitous symbol of secular "seeing" and being seen. "I'm afraid you won't find my son here." The ominous voice of the father bemoans. "My son's never been well," Management confesses as he supernaturally appears in Qohen's sacred space. Standing over the deteriorating ruins of Qohen's secular sanctuary, he and Management reenact what could be called the last temptation of Qohen:

> Qohen: Are you real, or are you just in my mind?
>
> Management: It doesn't matter at all. You're part of the neural net now.
>
> Qohen: So there is no answer?
>
> Management: That depends on the question.
>
> Qohen: What I'm living for
>
> . . .
>
> Management: I'm not the source of your call. I'm not God or the Devil. I'm just a man seeking truth.
>
> Qohen: What truth?
>
> Management: Turn around and look. That's it. Chaos encapsulated. That's all there is at the end. Just as there was at the beginning.
>
> . . .
>
> Qohen: Why would you want to prove that "all is for nothing?"
>
> Management: I never said, "All is for nothing," I'm a businessman, Mr. Leth. Nothing is for nothing. . . . There's money in ordering disorder. Chaos pays.

Bringing Qohen's inner fear to life, Management then merges Qohen's concerns with a simple dismissal. "I'm sorry, Mr. Leth, I no longer require your services." In firing him, Management not only relieves him of his life's work, his intellectual labor of passion, but disconnects his raison d'état. The gesture offers more than dramatic climax. It visualizes the two-dimensional conflict (internal/external; physiological/psychological) into a singular sense of ultimate loss. It is in this existential moment of crisis, ironically, that Qohen metaphorically opens his arms, smiles, and allows himself to fall into the cosmic void that he's painstakingly stared into over these long years. He "disappears" into it—not unlike Sam Lowry at the bleak conclusion to *Brazil*—and awakens reborn on that familiar false fantasy beach, naked and this time alone. He reaches out to touch the sun like a beach ball of his divine

imaginary making. Qohen then sets it down where it sets into the horizon. And with the diming of the light, the film cuts to black. And yet, just as the directorial credits fade into screen, the blissful sound of Bainsley's voice can be heard off camera. It giggles, "What are you doing here?" suggesting an open-coded descent out of the literal world, an exodus from reality into the unknown breeches of the darkest corridors—not into cosmic space, but rather, into uncharted interiority of the virtual mind.

Released in 2013, Gilliam's grim depiction of an alternative dystopia could be easily read as his own reaction against accelerated changes, not just societally or technologically, but also within the processes and practices assimilated into the entertainment industry and the cultural production of film. I've examined ways that Gilliam's narrative representative in *The Zero Theorem*, Qohen reacts fiercely against the cultural assault of relentless mass media messages integrated heavily into contemporary society. An underlying anxiety is easily identifiable in the blurred convergence between work-life as well as the social-visual collapse of the natural world with simulacra technologies. The dystopian auteur, an AV folk storyteller, projects an imposing future potentially all the bleaker upon the realization (and monetization) that there may indeed be nothing to look forward to after enduring this reality. The film employs nihilism as its MacGuffin and does not comfortably resolve the tension between how society "progresses" versus what it can never regain. Almost accidentally—though Gilliam would likely never admit it—the loss of spiritual romanticism that is tethered to religious faith haunts the film through the director's repeated visual rhetoric infused in religious symbolism. He places religious icons in direct opposition to their human value by casting them as bygone physical totems, even desecrated ones as is the case in the film's cataclysmic final act.

But what of *The Zero Theorem*'s predictive qualities? What Gilliam couldn't have predicted in 2013, but the film indeed does, is a world reshaped by a global pandemic to resemble the blurred adoption of remote work lifestyles and the tensions more closely between employers and employees over which physical (and virtual) spaces best posit the place where laborers might maximize productivity, not to mention intellectual curiosity or skillful creativity. Indeed, through *The Zero Theorem* the director exhibits future shock folk horror in how the film displays the existential crisis we face as the benefits of work-from-home labor devolve into a dystopic status quo of 24-hour, on-call labor requirements to match physical-digital demands amidst rampant technological changes in human-labor and social-leisure lifestyles. If any reader has ever had trouble simultaneously sleeping well or waking up, due to the exhaustive nightmare of incomplete duties brought on by real-world stresses compounded by overlapping deadlines and personal labor shortages, then Gilliam's film will feel like a prescient folk horror parable for

the digitized and cynically faithless twenty-first century. The folk horror here, oddly parallels that of Adam Scovell's (2017) "Folk Horror Chain" in that it is set in an uncanny landscape, that, while being intricately interconnected is isolated and isolating, and, as shown in the figure of Management it is led by an extremely skewed belief system with no real morality involved. Scovell's final requirement of "a summoning" is what truly defines this futuristic folk horror tale, in that when the "old gods" are summoned there is only darkness. The big reveal in *Zero Theorem* is the same as that in *The Wicker Man*, that for all the ritual and ceremony, there is no God. There is no greater power that that steps in only the nature of the world itself. And if you're lucky, a small voice in the darkness.

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NOTE

1. There is much here that can see more accepted interpretations of folk horror—as seen in *The Wicker Man* (1973), for instance—as a reaction against "future shock" with a "shocking" return to the past.

Chapter 21

Folk Horror in *Inside No. 9*

"Mr. King" and Contending Eco-narratives

Reece Goodall

The British anthology series *Inside No. 9* (2014–present) has often flirted with dark humor and horror tropes, something it has in common with other shows created by co-writers Steve Pemberton and Reece Shearsmith such as *Psychoville* (2009–2011) and *The League of Gentleman* (1999–2017; created with Mark Gatiss and Jeremy Dyson); indeed, the duo have come to be known for what Darryn King (2021) terms "a certain kind of dark twisted comedy." By the very nature of an anthology series, each episode is its own self-contained story, and thus the writers have the opportunity to draw on the imagery and iconography of famous sub-genres to enthrall and horrify viewers within the confines of an individual narrative. Pemberton and Shearsmith have cycled through a number of horror sub-genres throughout the series' run, such as the slasher (in "Private View"), the cursed morality tale (in "Tempting Fate"), and the dual identity of Hammer Horror and snuff film (in "The Devil of Christmas"). There are also references to the genre which have permeated narratives that cannot be easily identified as belonging to horror: one notable example is the mysterious appearance of a stranger in a young woman's flat, the only horror element in the otherwise tragic drama "The Twelve Days of Christine." Much though the show explores a variety of stories and story-telling frameworks through its eight seasons, an undercurrent of horror is always identifiably present in the duo's work, and yet it was a long time before folk horror truly made an appearance.

Inside No. 9 has played with folk horror tropes in its early seasons; Andy Paciorek cites the second season's "The Trial of Elizabeth Gadge" as

reminiscent of the canonical *Witchfinder General* (Reeves, 1968) in terms of both narrative and style, as well as the casting of David Warner evoking the Cornwall-set British horror *Straw Dogs* (Peckinpah, 1971) (see Paciorek 2018b, 540). Yet the writing duo would not fully embrace a folk horror narrative until the seventh season, revealing that the sub-genre was at the heart of the episode "Mr. King" in its final third. This delay was somewhat of a surprise given the creators' flirtations with it in their earlier work (including Shearsmith's role as an alchemist's assistant in Ben Wheatley's contemporary folk horror *A Field in England* [2013]) and the historical implicit Britishness of the sub-genre.[1] Pemberton and Shearsmith have never been shy in paying homage to classic British texts, and they have openly acknowledged the influence of folk horror in their work, yet the status of "Mr. King" as belonging to the sub-genre is cleverly disguised.[2] The episode is a fascinating example of both the subtle and explicit coding of folk horror and its associated tropes, some of which I touch on in this chapter, and particularly, through significant and heavy referentiality, to the seminal *The Wicker Man* (Hardy, 1973). However, my interest here is in the ways that Pemberton and Shearsmith carefully connect folk belief and human sacrifice to the contemporary environmental movements popularized by Greta Thunberg and Extinction Rebellion (both of whom are referenced in the episode). Rather than solely locating the horror of the episode in a regressive concept of folk horror, I argue that "Mr. King" also seems to problematize the tendencies and assumed moral superiority of the modern green movement, instead empowering the next generation to look to the future through the lens of tradition and folklore. A specific way that the episode suggests this to the audience is in two particular scenes that allude to *The Wicker Man* and environmentalism: explicitly in a private discussion with one student who has reacted badly to Alan's promotion of green activism; and then implicitly in the final sequence, which alludes to Hardy's film but subverts some of the power dynamics to reorient agency into the hands of the young.

"Mr. King" follows a teacher called Alan Curtis (Shearsmith), who has relocated to a school in an insular Welsh village on doctors' orders after an unspecified instance of mental illness (Alan attributes it to exhaustion, but the episode implies something more substantial). Alan struggles to adapt to life in the school as he tries to teach the children about environmentalism, particularly because he is overshadowed by the memory of his predecessor, the much-loved Mr. King. Alan is the subject of an indecent exposure allegation by student Ceri (Elin Owen), something the headmaster Mr. Edwards (Pemberton) disproves after taking a Polaroid picture of Alan's penis. The teacher investigates Mr. King in the headmaster's office—he learns that there is no such person, and that the personnel file on the supposed teacher is full

of photographs of men's penises. He fears that Edwards is covering up a sex abuse ring, but he learns the truth after being confronted by his class as they pretend to rehearse for an upcoming assembly. Alan is to be sacrificed as part of a ritual designed to enrich and earn the favor of the Earth, and that the "Mr. King" designation refers to the teacher's role as the corn king who will suffer a triple death (drowning, strangulation, and dismemberment) to help the growth of the village's crops.

Inside No. 9 famously relies on twists, which subvert the viewer's understanding of the narrative and can often shift the generic framework of the episode (to provide an example, the series five episode "The Stakeout" evolves from a police procedural to a vampire story). "Mr. King" only overtly embraces the framing of the folk horror story in its final scene, and it disguises the true nature of the story by using the implication that there is something wrong with Alan, followed by the abuse allegations, as narrative red herrings: as director Louise Hooper noted on a podcast about the episode, the script in this particular installment was "a treasure trove of red herrings" (Pemberton and Shearsmith 2022). However, there are frequent hints in the iconography of the episode, the dialogue, and a number of allusions to the sub-genre and its recurring tropes (and *The Wicker Man* more specifically) that imply the folk horror of "Mr. King" before the final reveal to an informed viewer. There are narrative parallels between this episode and that film—in which Police Sergeant Howie (Edward Woodward) comes to Summerisle to investigate the alleged disappearance of Rowan Morrison, a young child he suspects has been sacrificed for the pagan deities worshipped by the islanders, only to learn that he is in fact the intended victim—and I will bring out a number of these allusions, and the ways in which they are subverted, as I interrogate "Mr. King." The name of the class's former teacher, Mr. Hardy, is clearly a reference to Robin Hardy, director of the seminal film, while the headmaster's name Edwards evokes the film's lead actor. It is possible to draw a connection between Alan's first name and the English novelist Alan Garner, who is best known for retellings of British folk tales and work rooted in the landscape of his native county of Cheshire. There is reference to crop growth and fertility in a conversation that Alan shares with school cleaner, Winnie (Annette Badland), a classic trope of folk horror; given the character's use to introduce these themes, it is little surprise she eventually serves as the corn queen at the episode's close. Alan's transfer from the city to the country is a typical of folk horror narratives, with the supposedly sophisticated outsider falling victim to the wisdom and manipulation of the locals. There is also a language barrier presented earlier in the episode, in which Edwards addresses the class in Welsh—it is not subtitled for the viewer and it is clear that Alan does not understand it, this introduction to the class subtly laying the groundwork for a clash between the incomer and the locals. Isolation,

both of the community itself, and of the incomer, is one of the key themes identified by Adam Scovell in his work on the sub-genre (2017, 17–18), and this sequence subtly lays out the idea in the guise of introducing the teacher. Finally, in an act that is certainly referential, and thus a further example of foreshadowing, Alan writes on the chalkboard in the first class that the viewer witnesses. The scene suggests a similar instance in *The Wicker Man* in which Woodward's Sergeant Howie writes his name on a chalkboard as he addresses schoolchildren in his investigation, tying Alan's eventual fate to that of his predecessor. But the foreshadowing is not simply allusive: Alan is discussing environmentalism and climate change with the children, and he writes some of their answers to his questions on the board. Two of the answers, framed carefully behind the teacher, create the phrase "humans recycling," exactly the fate that is to befall Alan. That his eventual demise is spelled out through a combination of the children's knowledge (or presumed lack thereof), his own misguided belief in the superiority of his cause, and discourse about the planet and its future, leads to a striking and implicit undercurrent to "Mr. King" that I intend to bring out in this analysis.

The connection between folk horror and ecological/environmental concerns are long acknowledged by scholars, and many staple texts in the genre present narratives in which human sacrifice is enacted for the planet and its prosperity: we could cite as examples the aforementioned *The Wicker Man*, "Robin Redbreast" (MacTaggart, 1970), and the legend of John Barleycorn, the latter of which is evoked by name by the children and Edwards. In their mock assembly, the schoolchildren present a history of the connections between the Earth and sacrifice as a means of contextualizing the need to "recycle" Alan, and they draw attention to a shift in the power dynamic behind the advocacy of these movements. Whereas it was the children who were sacrificed to the gods in fifteenth-century Peru in an effort to prevent natural disasters, the class tells Alan they are challenging this paradigm by instead eliminating him as part of their fight for a future to inherit. I contend that it is this particular narrative development that differentiates "Mr. King" to other folk horror texts, and notably *The Wicker Man* to which it is highly referential: though the evocation of contemporary environmental movements (which are presented negatively through Alan) and the subversion of historical models of the folklore, the episode actually works to imply an immediacy and potential futurity to these traditions.

Although Alan is clearly intended to be the central character, Shearsmith's portrayal renders him abrasive and unsympathetic, a deliberate choice by the writers that functions as both a narrative red herring (thus encouraging the viewer to question the lack of information we learn about his past) and one that invites a reading in which we examine his stance on green issues with some degree of skepticism. He shouts at the children in an early scene about

their lack of knowledge on climate change, seriously intoning how impactful the issue will be on their futures; this is correct, but Shearsmith's unnecessarily harsh tone immediately invites the viewer to see him in a negative light. The exact cause of his move to Wales is never revealed, but it is implicitly very serious, to the extent that he would rather Edwards take a photograph of his penis unofficially during a sexual harassment complaint than face a full and public investigation. After the children laugh in class about a misshapen carrot, Alan explodes at them and openly compares the carrot to a penis, an outburst that casts further suspicion on his mental state and ambiguous backstory. Meanwhile, in a recurring joke, Edwards repeatedly misunderstands modern technology, asking whether email is "the one with the little bird," before reacting with a smile when he places that its "the one with the @ sign": he suggests that the former Mr. King's email is on a piece of paper in his office, implying an old-fashioned nature that is in direct opposition to the form of technological (modern) nous of Alan (later, when Alan breaks into the headmaster's office, we see a very old computer on his desk). Shearsmith's scornful facial expressions as Edwards speaks about technology align him with a kind of bitter progressivism (and its more extreme counterpart in doomerism), an allegation often levelled by critics at the climate movements Alan seems to promote.[3]

The very use of a classroom as the setting is itself suggestive of the future, as schools are a location centered around preparing the young for the world and later life; of course, in "Mr. King," both Alan and Edwards have radically different approaches to this, but their ultimate objective is identical. Alan's belief in the superiority of his science as a response to climate issues, as well as his surprise that the class have seemingly not been educated on the topic, calls to mind Howie's shock that the islanders have not embraced Jesus and what he believes to be the correct religion: to both Alan and Howie, their views represent salvation, and both men's beliefs will ultimately be rejected by the community. Instead, their bodies are manipulated and destroyed (in Alan's case, we do not see the death) as a means of reinforcing the theology of the local people and stimulating the ecology. Both men are celebrated for their roles in the sacrifices, with both of their deaths described as honors; it is a striking point of comparison that they are both cast as "king for a day"; in Howie's case, it is a designation explicitly provided by Lord Summerisle, while Alan's death comes as he becomes the new Mr. King.

The episode is full of comparisons to *The Wicker Man*, and these similarities are as interesting as the ways in which they are subverted through reference to modern environment movements. I want to focus on two specific sequences and pinpoint the allusive properties of the episode, exploring the climate subtext in both the form and in Pemberton and Shearsmith's dialogue. The first of these comes during an art lesson, when Ceri makes Alan

a cup of tea. He takes a sip and discovers that the young girl has boiled the class tadpoles alive in the kettle (a visual that is perhaps intended to bring to mind a sequence in *The Wicker Man* in which a frog is placed into a child's mouth to help cure a sore throat). Surprised by this, Alan asks Ceri to remain inside so he can speak to her. There is a cut to a shot of Alan and Ceri sitting at two desks, facing each other; in the shot, a tree appears to be growing out of Alan's back, a subtle foreshadowing of his eventual fate. He tells her that "those tadpoles, they're not going to turn into frogs now, are they?" in a soothing voice, and one that immediately and noticeably hardens when she asks why not. Alan's comment, although an accurate descriptor of Ceri's actions, is framed through the lens of a lack of a future, and this idea is reinforced by Ceri's downbeat comment that "I don't want the world to end." Alan asks who told her that the world will end, and Ceri tells him that she has done her homework and learned about climate change protestors. Ceri misnames the group as "Stinkin' Rebellion," a malapropism that has a comedic effect, but which also implicitly suggests a distaste for the group on the part of the young girl (and, by proxy, the village community). Alan's response to Ceri's emotion is that she should channel her fear into doing something positive, and then he attempts to comfort her with a pat on the back. Low strings indicate Ceri's distress, but the score evolves as Alan suggests she could go out and play with the other students or remain in the classroom with him; Ceri chooses the latter option, and the instrumentation becomes noticeably louder and discordant. The camera cuts away to one of the drying paintings, and we can hear Alan's stoic utterances of "good girl" in the background, generating a sense of unease for the viewer. This choice to cut away from the scene works on a first viewing to create a sense of doubt about the sexual abuse allegation made in the following scene, but on subsequent viewings, it has a different effect. Knowing that Alan is innocent of abuse, the score and the dialogue instead complicate our understanding of the teacher and his ability to present climate activism as a reassuring cause. After this scene, Ceri then vanishes from the class for the period of the investigation into Alan, and her empty desk at the center of the classroom is highly suggestive of the empty desk that would have been occupied by Rowan in Hardy's film; and just as Rowan's disappearance is the catalyst that ultimately leads Howie to his death inside the wicker man, the accusation against Alan and the need to remove Ceri to "investigate" is part of the scheme to ensure that the teacher is an appropriate sacrifice. Edwards, like the islanders, is gathering information about the sacrifice, with the accusation explained simply as a means to examine Alan's penis and ensure that he has not been circumcised; as Ceri later says, the teacher is "as nature intended," which carries a dual connotation as an expression and as a means of personifying the planet.

The second sequence comes at the episode's end and sees Alan learn the truth about the motivations of the children. Alan has broken into the headmaster's office and discovered a staff folder entitled "Mr. King" that contains only Polaroid images of men's penises. At this point, both Alan and the viewer assume that the narrative is concerned with sexual abuse, yet things will suddenly take a radically different turn. It is a twist hinted at as Alan calls the headmaster to raise his concerns about abuse, as the musical score shifts to a piano motif that is highly evocative of the opening to "Willow's Song," a piece of music performed sensually in *The Wicker Man* by the eponymous character as a means of testing Howie's faith. The cue is subtle, but it indicates a major change in the focus of the episode. Alan then returns to his classroom and finds that all the children are waiting for him. The class present their assembly to Alan and, unbeknownst to him, the children have superglued the chair to bind their teacher's arms to the leather and prevent him from escaping. The viewer does not at this point know about Alan's entrapment, but the eventual reveal adds an ironic undertone to the way the children begin their assembly. One of the students moves to the center of the frame, clutching a giant prop tube of superglue: he mimes coating his hand in glue, and then states that "we have glued ourselves to the Prime Minister's house to protest again climate change" (the way he raises his hands in the air with the glue suggests to me the iconic shot of Christopher Lee's Lord Summerisle standing in front of the wicker man in the eponymous film, which will be evoked elsewhere). Alan lets out a chuckle at the comment, and says that the observation is a good one, conforming with his belief in the cause that he has tried to promote with the children. Ultimately, the tactics that Alan supports are turned against him by the children, and his belief that they are a good way to stir action in climate issues is abused by his class to incorporate the teacher into their own approach to saving the planet. He is annoyed when the children tell him that he is part of the protest, seizing the initiative for themselves. The assembly presentation initially appears to be explicitly about climate movements and the role of the young; the casting of one of the children as the Earth, complete with a homemade costume, is a perfect indication of the clear connection between the future of the planet and the next generation. But this is not the only costume on display, as one of the children also wears a tree-like outfit that they tell Alan is a representation of the "Earth Goddess: all souls were born from her sacred womb, lived for a span upon her body, the Earth, then returned to her tomb-womb at death." This presentation of the two costumes overtly links the local traditions with the environmental movements pioneered by Alan, and both forms of eco-consciousness are depicted corporeally through the children and their use of contemporary language to describe the folk traditions of old (for example, describing John Barleycorn as the first man to "recycle himself"). The reference to wombs and lifecycles

implies a futurity that, although linked to a myth that is thousands of years old, makes the children a driving force of environmentalism, as they are the contemporary manifestation of the Earth Goddess' will. Alan's sarcastic responses to their description of the planet—that it "isn't very Key Stage 2" and that "it's not normal"—indicates a lack of comprehension of their beliefs that will ultimately lead to his death, and his return to the Earth.

Edwards enters the room and interrupts the assembly, before turning his back to the children and looking at Alan in a display of apparent concern. Ceri approaches him from behind, wielding a scythe, and Alan fears that the children are about to murder the headmaster. After Ceri tells Edwards that the class will shortly narrate the story of John Barleycorn to Alan, he turns and smiles, revealing that he is also part of the plan to sacrifice the teacher. This is suggestive of the dynamic at the end of Hardy's film, where Howie attempts to save Rowan only to learn that she is part of the conspiracy that will culminate in the police officer's sacrifice, but "Mr. King" evokes this connection in order to subvert it in such a way that it connects to the episode's shift in focus toward the agency of the young. Ceri describes Alan as "a perfect candidate for a new corn king," to which Edwards says, "Thank you, Ceri, you did it beautifully."[4] The line is a direct echo to one that Lord Summerisle says to Rowan to thank her for her part in leading Howie to the eventual site of his sacrifice, clearly intended to call Hardy's film to mind and suggest this relationship between the island's authority figure and the young woman. Yet although the relationship between Ceri and Edwards is clearly evocative of the one shared briefly by Rowan and Lord Summerisle, I suggest that it is more complex, less geared toward a submission to the kind of patriarchal authority denoted by Lee's character and his links to the past through his own ancestry. Rowan has little screentime in the film despite her importance as the driver of Howie's investigation, and after she has delivered the policeman to Lord Summerisle and received his thanks, she leaves the ceremony with her mother and pays no further part in Howie's appointment with the wicker man. It is Lord Summerisle who describes to Howie why he is to be sacrificed and what will happen to him, and who then leads the procession to the wicker structure in which the policeman will be burned.

By contrast, the roles that Rowan and Lord Summerisle play cannot be easily mapped onto Ceri and Edwards, and there is in fact a fluidity that sees their parts in the sacrifice continue to shift throughout the scene. It is Ceri who leads the assembly, and her silent lifting of the scythe behind Edwards is reminiscent of Lord Summerisle's ceremonial use of the tool during a procession, while the revelation that Edwards is playing a part and is secretly in on the scheme to sacrifice Alan initially seems to cast him in the Rowan role in this sequence. This was, however, a role apparently occupied by Ceri earlier in the episode during her disappearance, suggesting a mobile transaction of

agency between the adults and the children that, in comparison to the earlier film, empowers the young characters. Both Ceri and Edwards work together to narrate the legend of John Barleycorn to the captive Alan, making them implicit equals in the ritual. Although Edwards then directly echoes Lord Summerisle's line to praise Ceri, and then stands and raises his arms in a clear reference to the film's narrative image, the fact that the character and gesture have already been evoked by the children negates a simple one-for-one comparison on Edwards' part. Unlike the earlier film, children are not simply silent witnesses who function as props in Lord Summerisle's plan—it is notable that Rowan has few lines in the film, and much of the mystery is linked to characters on the island refusing to acknowledge her existence—but active drivers of the eventual sacrifice. The sequence, then, appears to break away from the sole authority of Lord Summerisle in *The Wicker Man*, which emerges as a result of his societal status and his historical lineage, and instead presents a scenario where the children are placed on a level playing field to Edwards (and, to a lesser extent, Winnie). This is a notable and interesting shift, because it foregrounds the status of the young, making them an equal part of the folkloric ritual; after their earlier assertion to Alan that the young are fighting back, the progression of the sequence supports my argument that the subversion of *The Wicker Man* is designed to imply a futurity to the sacrifice we witness, even as it acknowledges the legacy of the past, because the children are now active participants.

At the climax of *The Wicker Man*, in a desperate attempt to save his own life, Howie pleads the futility of the islanders' cause:

> Can you not see? There is no Sun god. There is no goddess of the fields. Your crops failed because your strains failed. Fruit is not meant to be grown on these islands. It's against nature. Well, don't you see that killing me is not going to bring back your apples?

He entreats Lord Summerisle to tell the islanders that this is true, and the laird rebukes him. In response, Howie evokes the future of the island and warns Lord Summerisle that he will be the sacrifice next year if the crops fail again, such is his personal stake in the ritual (through the reference to the theories of the laird's ancestors). Howie's rationalist beliefs, although they do not save his life, introduce an air of doubt into the ritual's optimism for the islanders: Lord Summerisle's hesitant retort that "they will not fail" is as much about nature as it is his own preservation, tying the success of the sacrifice to the history of the island and his own status. Alan, by contrast, has no chance to really register any objection after initially telling the children that their proposed assembly is inappropriate, as the children respond by super-gluing his lips together, thus making him to watch proceedings in enforced

silence. Unlike Howie, Alan is unable to cast any skepticism on whether or not the plans will work, and so the only opinion expressed regarding the ritual is the positive one articulated by the children and the school staff. It is noteworthy that the finale of Hardy's film takes place against a narrative context in which the island's crops have failed (necessitating the ritual in the first place), whereas Alan's sacrifice comes a couple of scenes after Winnie shows him how successful her harvest has been that year. Howie's is a sacrifice that is intended to spur a harvest that, as William Hughes writes, will produce "literal fruits of nature [that] are not for the children of the island" (2016, 60), drawing on a combination of a fallacious combination of science and myth to promote crops that are clearly unsustainable in the Summerisle ecosystem (2016, 64–68). Lingering over the sacrifice in *The Wicker Man* is the suggestion that it will not work, whereas "Mr. King" heavily hints that not only could it work, but that it already *has*. Indeed, Winnie's comment that Alan is "gonna do my leeks the world of good" during the ritual hints that her earlier successful harvest is directly connected to the murder of the previous Mr. King; thus, the children are promoting a form of green activism with a implicitly proven track record.

In a striking final shot, after Alan has been taken offscreen to an implicitly brutal death by Edwards, Winnie, and the children, the camera focuses on one of the class's projects: on the wall of the classroom, there is an image of a tree. Attached to the tree is a poster of Greta Thunberg, the word "HOPE" at its bottom. The camera then pans downwards to the base of the tree, where an image of a skull is half-concealed by the trunk. There is another image on the board, a painting by one of the students of a tree, with what appears to be a skull in the branches and a hand poking out of the grass. Both are surrounded by red paint, connoting blood, as is the base of the painted tree. This is most immediately a means of suggesting Alan's eventual fate—dismemberment and burial—as a means of supporting the harvest, the positioning of the skull behind the larger tree implying that human death is behind nature. But what is particularly striking in this final shot is that, after the camera has panned downwards, the word "HOPE" is the only part of the Thunberg poster that remains in the frame, visible in the top left corner. It is a carefully constructed frame that suggests a transference of the message of environmental hope for the future, away from the science-based environmental policy articulated by Thunberg and Alan to one rooted in the folk traditions of the children. This shot is proceeded by a *Wicker Man*-esque procession leaving the classroom, but whereas Lord Summerisle led the islanders in the film, "Mr. King" instead grants that privilege to the children, and the adults occupy the spaces at the back of the march. When the characters have all left the classroom and the frame, the only marker of their presence is the singing of the folk song about John Barleycorn, meaning the children's voices fill the soundscape

during this final shot. The effect of this closing image and its associated soundtrack is to prioritize the role of the children and indicate that although Alan was initially positioned as the episode's protagonist, the ultimate resolution is not truly about him: his role is necessary to spur the children into climate action, even if it takes a considerably different form to the one, he himself advocated. He, like John Barleycorn before him, is to be recycled for the good of the community, its children, and the Earth that they now take up the fight to protect.

The very nature of a folk horror narrative about ecological sacrifice is that it straddles the fine line between past, present, and future; a sacrifice enacted in the present in response to a problem in the community, drawing on the practices of the past with the intention of ameliorating the situation in future. Yet what makes "Mr. King" such an interesting case study is the way in that it explicitly foregrounds the futurity of the text, even before it reveals that it is a folk horror narrative. The subversive elements in Pemberton and Shearsmith's writing infuse the long historic traditions of both the folklore itself and the canonical texts of folk horror with new blood, through both the reference to contemporary environmental movements and the foregrounding of children and youth narratives. When they discussed the writing of the episode, Pemberton and Shearsmith expressed that the initial dynamic at the heart of "Mr. King," long before they conceived of the folk horror aspects, was that an adult was being blackmailed by a child. As Shearsmith puts it, "something to do with a child having power over an adult" (in Pemberton and Shearsmith 2022). "Mr. King" was, then, always a narrative concerned with the youthful interrogation and manipulation of narratives and figures of old, and framed through the lens of folk horror, this installment of *Inside No. 9* becomes an example of how imbuing these traditions with the agency of youth generates a terrifying form of futurity that explores, questions, and revitalizes these historic discourses. In effect, the children's desire to recycle with a view to sustaining the future is a textual example of the meta-process enacted by the episode itself, transforming eco- and folk narratives of old into new ones for future generations.

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NOTES

1. On the Britishness of folk horror, see Paciorek 2018a, 13, and Ingham this volume.

2. Specifically in the realms of folk horror, the duo cites both *Witchfinder General* and *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (Haggard, 1971), see Seale 2021.

3. The association exists in part because of a media tendency to focus on the extreme poles of the climate debate, denial and doomerism: see Borm 2019, 9.

4. The line was also used in *The League of Gentleman*, as local shopkeeper Edward (Shearsmith) praised his wife Tubbs (Pemberton) for lying to a policeman (Gatiss) about their murder of a hitchhiker. Shortly after, Tubbs reveals the truth, and she and Edward respond by implicitly murdering the policeman—the act of throwing his helmet onto a bonfire is clearly intended as a further evocation of *The Wicker Man*.



Figure 0.3 Visual Intervention III: "New Beginnings": By Gemma Files. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

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