Introduction:

Defining Folk Horror

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Fans and critics alike have expended considerable energy defining 'folk horror', a form of cultural production that first emerged in the late 1960s and that has enjoyed a resurgence in the 2010s. In seeking to understand a term, grappling with its history is crucial. A landmark in the history of naming folk horror is Mark Gatiss's influential three-part BBC documentary, *A History of Horror*, broadcast in 2010. Near the end of part two, 'Home Counties Horrors', Gatiss shifts from discussing the dominant Hammer films of the 1960s to articulating a 'new' kind of horror film that avoids what he calls 'the gothic clichés'. 'Amongst these', he claims, 'are a loose collection of films that we might call folk horror'. Gatiss interviews Piers Haggard, the director of the 1971 cult classic, *The Blood on Satan's Claw*, who says, 'I suppose I was trying to make a folk horror film' (*History* 2010). This moment in 2010 is often cited as the origin of the term, although it is not; indeed, Haggard himself had called his film a 'folk horror' in an interview seven years earlier with *Fangoria* (Simpson 2003).[1] But the term 'folk horror', with its connection to *The Blood on Satan's Claw*, actually appeared much earlier than the 2003 interview. In a 1970 piece in the British trade publication, *Kine Weekly*, writer Rod Cooper called Haggard's film a 'study in folk horror' (12). The self-conscious use of the term to refer to a subgenre of film goes back almost fifty years, then.[2]

These two central designations of folk horror—in 1970 in *Kine Weekly* and in 2010 in Gatiss's documentary—helpfully mark what can be seen as the two waves of folk horror, each with their own representative texts. And looking at its definitive examples is another way to

understand a term's meaning. The first wave of folk horror extended from roughly 1968 to 1979 and includes the films *Witchfinder General* (Michael Reeves, 1968), *The Devil Rides Out* (Terence Fisher, 1968), *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (Piers Haggard, 1971), and *The Wicker Man* (Robert Hardy, 1973); the TV productions, *Whistle and I'll Come to You* (1968), *The Owl Service* (1969-70), *Robin Redbreast* (1970), BBC's *Ghost Stories for Christmas* (1971-78), *The Stone Tape* (1972), *Penda's Fen* (1974), *Against the Crowd: Murrain* (1975), *Children of the Stones* (1977), *Red Shift* (1978), and *Casting the Runes* (1979); as well as fiction by Alan Garner and Dennis Wheatley. The second wave began in roughly 2008 and includes the films *Eden Lake* (James Watkins, 2008), *Wake Wood* (David Keating, 2009), Ben Wheatley's folk horror trilogy, *Kill List* (2011), *Sightseers* (2012), and *A Field in England* (2013), *The Woman in Black* (James Watkins, 2012), *The Borderlands / Final Prayer* (Elliot Goldner, 2013), *White Settlers / The Blood Lands* (Simeon Halligan, 2014), *The Hallow* (Corin Hardy, 2015), *A Dark Song* (Liam Gavin, 2016), *Dogged* (Richard Rowntree, 2017), and *Apostle* (Gareth Evans, 2018); as well as, in fiction, S. J. Bolton's *Sacrifice* (2008, and Peter A. Dowling's 2016 film adaptation), *Blood Harvest* (2010), and *The Craftsman* (2018), Adam Nevill's *The Ritual* (2011, and David Bruckner's 2017 film adaptation) and *The Reddening* (2019), Andrew Michael Hurley's *The Loney* (2014), *Devil's Day* (2017), and *Starve Acre* (2019), Max Porter's *Lanny* (2019), and Michelle Paver's *Wakenhyrst* (2019). This second wave has moved in two directions— forward, shaping new incarnations, as well as backward, revisiting and reworking the defining folk horror texts from the late 1960s and 1970s.

This brief history is a British one. Indeed, since the preponderance of folk horror scholarship takes up British texts, current definitions are necessarily predicated on this particular national tradition. As critics begin addressing the folk horror productions of other nations,

different chronologies and definitions will undoubtedly emerge. US folk horror has been something of an afterthought in the extant scholarship on folk horror, but it is already clear that its timeline looks different. Some of the clearest examples of folk horror in the US stand outside the two-wave paradigm of British folk horror: for instance, Washington Irving's 'Rip Van Winkle' (1819) and 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow' (1820), Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'Young Goodman Brown' (1835), Shirley Jackson's 'The Lottery' (1948), Stephen King's 1977 story 'Children of the Corn' and its 1984 film adaptation (directed by Fritz Kiersch), King's *Pet Sematary* (1983) along with Mary Lambert's 1989 adaptation, and *The Blair Witch Project* (Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick, 1999). The meanings these folk horror texts accrue in their particular historical moments is certainly worthy of further exploration. US cultural texts have also, though, been part of the two major folk horror waves: Thomas Tryon's *Harvest Home* (1973) is an important novel from the first wave, its connection to the concurrent British folk horror tradition heightened by the fact that the small Connecticut town in which it takes place, Cornwall Coombe, is named after the English village to which its residents trace their roots. And recent US productions are integral to folk horror's second wave—not least, Robert Eggers' *The Witch* (2015), Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2018) and *Midsommar* (2019), and Oz Perkins' *Gretel and Hansel* (2020). Because of the prominence of British and US folk horror, this issue centers on those texts, while recognizing that much work needs to be done to unearth other national traditions of folk horror.

Folk Horror's Folklore

Along with exploring the history of a term and its exemplary texts, the task of definition involves identifying that term's constituent parts. Certainly, one central characteristic of folk horror is the

presence of 'folklore' within the film's diegesis.[3] Michael Chaves's *The Curse of La Llorona* (2019), for example, features the titular La Llorona, an apparently real Mexican woman who drowned her two children in 1673 and who now roams the world seeking surrogates. Hearing the story of this liminal figure, the protagonist of the film says, 'So it's a folk tale', pushing the film from horror toward *folk* horror. At the most basic level, then, folk horror is rooted in the dark 'folk tale', in communal stories of monsters, ghosts, violence, and sacrifice that occupy the threshold between history and fiction. The function of folklore in folk horror texts is complex, but it is nonetheless critical to the task of defining folk horror. Simon J. Bronner has argued that while 'folk' on the one hand designates a group or community of people, it can 'also be construed as an adjective meaning "traditional",' bound up in the processes of 'intergenerational transmission and localized culture' (2017: 1). Indeed, folk horror is distinctive in rooting its horror in the local community bound together by inherited tales.

One must not, however, take the 'traditions' of folk horror at face value. They are typically not 'authentic' traditions, although they may well be represented as such within the text. Instead, they are highly mediated and often expressly fabricated. As Adam Scovell puts it, folk horror often 'creates its own folklore' (2017: 7). These diegetic folk customs and beliefs are frequently crafted, moreover, with the specific purpose of forging exactly the kind of local, 'primitive' community that used to be—*but is no longer*—the repository of folklore. Bronner describes the critical intellectual shift within twentieth-century folklore studies: 'The evolutionary association of folk to peasants or "primitives" was altered to a relativistic conceptualization of everyone possessing folklore' (2017: 12). Against the entire trajectory of folklore studies, then, which has recognized the global dissemination and mutation of traditions within mass-mediated modernity, folk horror reanimates the notion of the 'peasant' or

'primitive', the local and isolated community, as the repository of (often orally-transmitted) folk traditions and rituals. Folk horror actively works *against* the critical arc of folklore studies, forging a divide between tradition and modernity that has otherwise been all but eroded when it comes to the propagation of folk tales in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In opposition to the processes of modernity, then, which see 'folklore' widely dispersed, including, for example, across transnational social media platforms, folk horror seeks to re-enchant the traditional, oral, and rural as storehouses of folk tales and rituals.

In evoking folklore in order to (re)-attach it to the local, the provincial, and the rural, folk horror participates in what Guntis Šmidchens describes as 'folklorism', which names a self-conscious use of folklore for particular ends: 'Folklorism is the conscious recognition and repetition of folk tradition as a symbol of ethnic, regional, or national culture'. Folklorism represents 'folklore self-consciously', Šmidchens continues, 'accepting it as a carrier of the past and the premodern world, and bringing an impression of unchanging, stable tradition into the present' (1999: 56). Folk horror does not just 'accept' folklore as a 'carrier of the past', however, but actively *creates* it as such. Indeed, some folk horror texts not only themselves serve as folkloristic practice but also represent an ongoing practice of 'folklorism' within the diegesis. In *The Wicker Man*, for instance, the current Lord Summerisle perpetuates folk traditions while being quite aware that his grandfather invented them expressly in order to control the islanders; while the islanders appear to believe in the status of their rituals as 'real', Summerisle knows they are not, although he governs as if they were.

In self-consciously representing its rituals as invented, *The Wicker Man* is somewhat of an outlier. But even in this case, *The Wicker Man*'s writer (Anthony Shaffer) and director (Robin Hardy) report studying James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890) as a source of what they took

as the *authentic* Celtic traditions they depicted in their film. As Mikel Koven writes, 'both men, well read and erudite, appear to believe in the literal truth of Frazer's depiction' (2007: 271). As Koven goes on to point out, however, Frazer's work is not in any sense a 'historical' compilation of folklore but a 'folkloristic description', specifically a 'Victorian reconstruction' of a supposedly Celtic pagan past, 'complete with the ideology of Empire' (2007: 270, 273). While Shaffer and Hardy's folk traditions, then, are actually 'invented' in multiple ways, both inside and outside the diegesis of *The Wicker Man*, the creators' belief in the 'authenticity' of the rituals they discover in Frazer seems to support Bronner's point that, as much as 'folklorism' may actually be invented, it is in no way a frivolous or campy articulation of folklore.[4] Folklorism 'is organized', Bronner writes, 'with the idea of presenting traditions on stage as authentic or at least rhetorically invoking them as significant to the larger society' (2017: 155).[5] Folklorism is often shaped by its creators' quite sincere conviction of its authenticity; it is shaped, in other words, whether consciously or unconsciously, in order to create 'an impression of unchanging, stable tradition in the present' (Šmidchens 1999: 56).

Folk Horror's Landscape

Deeply committed to a 'folkloristic' project of representing an 'authentic' folklore that self-consciously animates a 'primitive' culture opposed to modernity, folk horror often follows a set of narrative conventions and thematic concerns ancillary to that project. On his website (*Celluloid Wicker Man*) and in his 2017 book (*Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange*), Adam Scovell incisively articulates these conventions as the 'folk horror chain'. Drawing on what he calls the 'unholy trinity' (8) of late 1960s and early 70s British folk horror films, *Witchfinder General*, *The Blood on Satan's Claw*, and *The Wicker Man*, Scovell describes

what continues to be a useful paradigm: Ari Aster's 2019 film *Midsommar*, for instance,

illustrates it perfectly. The first link in the folk horror chain is landscape—specifically a

'topography', often but not always rural, that has 'adverse effects on the social and moral

identity of its inhabitants'. These 'adverse effects' are crucial to the second link in the chain,

'isolation': the landscape must, Scovell writes, 'isolate a key body of characters', who become

'cut off from some established social progress of the diegetic world'. The pressure of the

landscape, and the isolation it enforces for its central characters, leads to their 'skewed belief

systems and morality', which then impels the conclusion of the plot and the final link in the

chain, the 'happening/summoning', often a violent event such as a sacrifice (2017: 17-18).

Scovell's first link—landscape—has received a lot of attention from other critics, both

before and after Scovell's mapping of the folk horror chain.[6] The folk horror of England in

particular is repeatedly described as purveying what Robert Macfarlane has called the 'eeriness

of the English countryside' (2015). In his 2003 *Fangoria* interview, Haggard linked *Blood on

Satan's Claw*'s status as folk horror with the importance of the countryside to him, personally

(Simpson 2003). He did the same in his interview with Mark Gatiss in *A History of Horror*,

claiming that the 'appeal of the 'rural setting. The nooks and crannies of woodland, the edges of

fields . . . The sense of soil . . . was something that I tried to bring into the picture' (*History*

2010). It is not only the immediately visually apparent eeriness of the English countryside that

infuses folk horror but also what is deposited in its soil—not only unspoiled 'nature' (if there is

such a thing), but also the ancient artifacts of humans, often crafted from and deposited in nature.

Critics of folk horror, including Scovell himself, have consistently described the rural British

landscape as a palimpsest, shaped by a long history whose vestiges are, literally, layered in the

earth—replete with 'potential pasts under the surface top-layer of the landscape', as Scovell puts

it (2017: 46). Rob Young invokes folklorist George Ewart Evans' phrase, 'the pattern under the plough' to describe what he calls the 'sense of the past lying just behind the present' (2010: 18). In M. R. James's 1925 story, 'A Warning to the Curious', for example, an archaeologist digs up one of the three legendary crowns of Anglia, summoning also its sinister protective spirit; in *Blood on Satan's Claw*, a plough turns up a Satanic skull that propels the village's teens into violent pagan rituals; and in Adam Nevill's 2019 novel, *The Reddening*, a storm opens a cave on Devon's coastline and unleashes a primitive cult. Folk horror is frequently propelled, then, by the uncovering of ancient artifacts, along with their often malevolent spirits, which serves to demonstrate that the past was never actually 'past' at all. The dead and buried live—they have always lived—in folk horror.

The landscapes of folk horror have often been read to political ends. Those readings can be progressive. Paul Newland, for instance, claims that the 'rural "anti-modern", "natural" and/or pagan' landscapes of folk horror are often pitted against the 'technocracy of modernity', thus offering a 'critique' of modernity—an attempt 'to re-engage with aspects of British culture that are not governed and controlled by an increasingly global, glossy, homogenous, superficial culture industry' (2016: 163, 176). Against this reading of folk horror's potential critique, others note the regressive nostalgic impulses of folk horror's landscapes, suggesting they mirror (and even perpetuate) tendencies toward an insular nationalism.[7] This latter reading has been particularly pronounced since Britain voted in 2016 to leave the European Union (Brexit), and numerous writers have described folk horror as the incarnation of its particular political alignments. As Scovell puts it, 'Folk Horror unusually and accurately maps the nationalistic elements of post-Brexit Britain' ('Brexit' 2017). Writers who describe folk horror's alignment with Brexit typically focus on the landscape and its rural communities, on their rootedness in the

soil, and on their 'fear of other people' (Smith 2016).[8] In the end, though, one cannot reduce folk horror to a representation (either before or after the fact) of Brexit discourse (which itself gets reductively labeled in such comparisons). Part of folk horror's richness is precisely the way it is open to multiple kinds of readings: folk horror's landscapes, and their ideological implications, can serve both politically progressive and conservative ends, along with everything in between.[9]

Despite the fact that the characters of folk horror aim to make their mark on the villages, lands, and histories of the narratives they inhabit, readings that dwell only on the political readings of folk horror may, in the end, give too much power to its human actors. One of the most important characteristics of folk horror is the awful agency of the land—awful not only because the land becomes implicated in characters' deaths but also because human actors, accustomed to considering themselves the sole motivators of history, are often profoundly dispossessed of agency. Although not expressly writing about folk horror, Peter Hutchings has brilliantly described what he calls the 'British anti-landscape', a landscape that 'throws into question the very idea of the human/national subject as the owner of landscape'. An 'emphasis on the alterity of the landscape itself', he continues, 'effectively displaces individual and social agency—with the human either completely disappearing or becoming subject to uncontrollable impulses or compulsions, or regressing to something other than human' (2004: 29). To say this is to articulate the fact that folk horror embodies an explicitly ecological worldview in which human and nature, human and nonhuman, are thoroughly imbricated. There is not society *and* nature, which signifies separation, but what Jason W. Moore calls a 'messy bundle of relations', with emphasis on the singular 'bundle'. Ecology, Moore writes, 'signifies the relations of the whole . . . the matrix of human and extra-human natures' (2011: 5). Acknowledged as inextricable from the human, the land, in folk horror, takes its place, in its own right, in narrative

and history, evicting human characters and sending them to the margins, showing how their stories have been fundamentally interwoven with *and driven* by the land they have inhabited.

The power of landscape is one of the essential characteristics of folk horror, then. Unfortunately, critics have tended to take up 'landscape' as an abstraction rather than particular landscapes. Writing of 'landscape' (rather than landscapes) serves, again, to give too much agency to humans, who are the creators of 'landscape' as abstract concept. Hutchings' essay, for instance, dwells on the power of prehistoric stones in the aggregate; he takes up, equally, both real and fictional stone circles and the ways they drive an uncanny repetition. This kind of reading supports the 'magical' power of stones that folk horror plots themselves purvey. His reading supports, in other words, the power of 'magic' rather than the power of the specific 'bundle' of human and nonhuman that constitutes each environment as distinctive. Folk horror demands a critical methodology that pays attention to its actual locations—to the ways particular stone structures, rivers, valley, mountains, and border regions have dictated their own stories.[10] Andrew Michael Hurley's novel *Devil's Day* (2017), for instance, is fundamentally about the way landscape shapes the histories of individuals in a specific community; it is not about landscape in general but about the particular interwoven people, land, animals, agriculture, and industry of the Langden Valley, Oakenclough, and Calder Vale in Lancashire.[11]

Folk Horror's Monstrous Tribes

As important as landscape is to folk horror, and as central as it has been to almost all critical writing on the subgenre, it is significant that the other three of Scovell's links—isolation, 'skewed' belief system, and the 'happening/summoning'—presume a 'community' that is equally constitutive of folk horror (2017: 17-18). Indeed, I would argue that the monstrous 'tribe'

is one of the most definitive characteristics of folk horror. In an insightful article on *Folklore Thursday*'s website, Matilda Groves (2017) has argued against the grain of those who insist that its *rural* setting is the preeminent defining trait of folk horror. Asserting that the countryside is by no means the sole locale of folklore—after all, cities in Britain are 'brimming with folk tales'—Groves instead positions the 'folk' as central.[12] 'Folk', however, is too broad a term to bear the defining weight of a subgenre, especially with the decades-old turn in folklore studies that insists everyone is a purveyor of folklore. What is crucial to folk horror, rather than 'folk' more broadly, is a community bound together by shared (folkloristic) beliefs, traditions, and practices—a community bound so tightly, in fact, that it constitutes a 'tribe'. As Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart define it, a 'tribe' is an 'imaginary community demarcated by signifiers of us versus them—our people versus the others'. It coheres around characteristics of social identity such as 'economic, religious, or blood ties, with a common culture and dialect' and typically forms under a 'recognized leader'. Tribes, Norris and Inglehart continue, 'involve loyalty, stickiness, boundaries, and shared cultural meanings and feelings of belonging' (2019: 7). In the context of folk *horror*, not merely folk film, this 'tribe' is—or is perceived to be—monstrous, although its 'monstrousness' only emerges through its volatile relationship with the 'normal'.

To say the 'monster' of folk horror is a 'tribe' is to say that it is neither a lone individual nor a family. In many ways, for instance, Tobe Hooper's 1974 film *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* could be construed as folk horror: the vast landscape of rural Texas forms an overwhelming presence in this narrative about a group of young people who stumble into a family of ex-slaughterhouse workers who continue their work of slaughtering with human victims. These antagonists are isolated; their beliefs are certainly 'skewed'; and they do the work of killing in a 'traditional', even ritualistic, fashion. However, they are one family—idiosyncratic,

pathological—and not a community; their values are not shared beyond the bonds forged by immediate kinship. *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* is more accurately seen as 'backwoods horror', helpfully marking the boundary between this proximate subgenre and folk horror; as Tzvetan Todorov asserts, 'a genre is always defined in relation to the genres adjacent to it' (1975: 27). In her definitive analysis of backwoods horror, Bernice M. Murphy argues that its 'monsters' are 'degenerate, savage, and often cannibalistic *family* groups', and she goes on to articulate the traits of the '"bad" backwoods *family*' (2013: 148-49; emphasis added). Indeed, part of the very point of backwoods horror is that the taint of savagery is frequently derived from inbreeding; it is about blood and reproductive degeneracy in a closed community. While this idea is very close to the narrative dynamic of folk horror, and produces some intriguing intersections—in, for instance, the 1972 folk horror film, *Doomwatch*, which plays on the notion of inbreeding and monstrosity in a small isolated community (Keetley 2019)—it is worth separating the two: while backwoods horror typically centers on the *family* joined *only* by blood, folk horror is about a tribe joined by tradition, ritual, folklore, and multiple forms of social identity as well as some portion of blood kinship.

What is at stake in this distinction between family and tribe is folk horror's role in debates over nation and national identity. With its insular emphasis on the degenerate family, backwoods horror films like *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* do not pretend to offer a vision of 'America' *in toto*; their representations are inevitably partial, particular. Folk horror, however, with its focus on tribe rather than family, often does speak to ideas of nation. In writing about the roots of nation in 'imagined communities', Benedict Anderson claims that these communities are 'conceived in language, not in blood' (1983: 133), and he explicates the role of print culture in the spread of nationalism. Folk horror, however, centers other more embodied practices that

constitute nation *through tribe* and that incorporate rather than oppose 'blood'. Folk tales, albeit

transmitted orally rather than in print, are important, but, even more critical are *embodied*

traditions and rituals that bind the tribe around lived experience rooted in the past.

If the 'monster' of folk horror is neither a lone individual nor a family, it is also not a

supernatural entity, say a ghost or a witch, although it can be a community that collectively

believes in a ghost or a witch. As Groves writes, the most important element in a folk horror

narrative is not the witch in itself but '*a society that believes in witchcraft*' (2017). Indeed, I

would argue that folk horror tends to lean away from the supernatural. Even while the

supernatural may emerge as a presence, often at the end (as in, for instance, Eggers' *The Witch* or

Aster's *Hereditary*), the focus within the narrative is on the community that believes in the

supernatural. Whether the supernatural exists at all, in many texts, is typically represented as

contingent on the characters' belief, which itself (as is arguably the case in *The Witch*) has the

power to conjure up that in which it believes. Andrew Michael Hurley's novel *Starve Acre*

(2019), for example, depicts a spiritualist group seemingly able to communicate with the dead

and a hare that comes back to life; it also presents both, however, as possibly the effects of

bereaved parents' profound grief.[13] Even in 2009's *Wake Wood*, which definitely incorporates

supernatural elements and marks one end of the realistic-supernatural spectrum of folk horror,

the ability of the isolated rural community to bring the dead back is represented as imbricated

within the mundane routines of rural life.[14]

The importance of collective belief to folk horror can be illustrated by comparing two

films about witchcraft—suggesting that not all narratives about witches can be considered folk

horror. Both 2016's *Friend Request* and the *Paranormal Activity* franchise (2007 – 2015)

concern witches, even cults (often considered a *prima facie* trait of folk horror). In *Friend*

Request, however, the film features only one witch who haunts contemporary Facebook users one at a time through the social media platform. Even though the film creates a backstory about an allegedly historical 'Black Mirror Cult', thus engaging in what Jeffrey Tolbert calls the 'folkloresque', or 'invented folklore' (2015: 126), there is no actual cult or coven in the diegesis of the film, just a single malign presence and a few fleeting images from an old book. *Friend Request* is horror, but not really folk horror. In the *Paranormal Activity* franchise, on the other hand, the horrifying ending of *Paranormal Activity 3* (2011) discloses a coven of witches devoted to the demonic Toby.

Figure 1. The 'coven' at the end of *Paranormal Activity 3* (2011)

The shocking revelation of the presence of a monstrous 'cult', and the fact that the protagonists have been entangled in its machinations from the beginning (as in the similar ending of Ari Aster's *Hereditary*), signals folk horror.

Rituals to Re-Enchant or Disenchant

The centrality of the 'monstrous community' in folk horror typically comes hand in hand with another of the subgenre's defining characteristics: the ritual or sacrifice, what Scovell calls 'the happening/summoning'—the final link in the folk horror chain (2017: 18). The rituals that often conclude folk horror narratives not only serve to bond the communities that are their central antagonists but also usher in the pagan or occult beliefs that have become identified with the subgenre. Folk horror films in the first wave, in particular, were generally permeated with a collective belief in the supernatural, even the Satanic. Even if some characters in these films (e.g., Lord Summerisle in *The Wicker Man*, Matthew Hopkins in *Witchfinder General*) believed in nothing but their own power, they were able to wield that power because other characters believed in the efficacy of supernatural forces. Films in the second wave are more ambivalent, however, and while some (e.g., *Wake Wood*, *Hereditary*, *The Witch*, *Apostle*) do indeed suggest the influence of the supernatural in human lives, others (e.g., *Eden Lake*, *Kill List*, *Midsommar*) do not. Cynthia Freeland has argued that the 'existential dread' of horror can come from two quite different sources: the 'fear of malign agents' but also 'of precisely the reverse—that the world has no ruling agents and that we humans are alone in a world that fails to satisfy our expectations for purpose, meaning, and justice' (2004: 192). In its representations of ritual and sacrifice, folk horror taps into both of these terrifying possibilities—that the world is ruled by 'malign agents' who ensnare humans in their dark design or, in evoking only the trappings of

ritual and sacrifice, that there are 'no ruling agents'. If folk horror often serves to 're-enchant' the

world with belief in the supernatural, its evocation of a prior and now vanished enchanted world

can also serve to emphasize exactly how profoundly *disenchanted* the contemporary world is.

Secular rituals, parodic of lost belief, are more frequent in the second wave of folk horror.

Eden Lake, for instance, which I argue began the second wave of folk horror, mimics the rituals

of earlier folk horror films but stripped of the spiritual. The title of the film encapsulates the

film's central notion of a paradise lost. For its main characters, as Steve Gerrard has written, 'the

lake turns from a veritable Eden into Hell', and he calls Jenny and Steve a 'yuppie Adam and

Eve' (2018: 56). The notion of a paradise lost is what brings Steve and Jenny to Eden Lake in the

first place, as Steve wants to show his fiancée the idyllic abandoned quarry of his childhood

before it is turned into an upscale housing development. Steve's attempt to return to an idealized

past is violently preempted, however, by a gang of delinquent youths (establishing *Eden Lake* as

paradigmatic 'hoodie horror'[15]). The local boys (and one girl) initially seem only annoying

(playing loud music, allowing their aggressive dog to roam free), but then they steal the couple's

car and, finally, capture, torture, and kill Steve and try to do the same to Jenny.

Eden Lake's narrative arc of outsiders stumbling into an insular community with

unambiguously 'skewed' values marks the film, generally, as folk horror. There are two scenes

that are especially important, though, in that they mimic the rituals of folk horror. The first is

when the group ties Steve to a stake, and the leader, Brett, makes each of them (except the girl)

stab Steve as a kind of ritual that bonds them around a shared culpability. When Jenny gives

away her hiding place in horror at what they are doing to Steve, the boys capture her too and plan

to burn both of them. The fire consumes Steve, who is already dead, and when it spreads to

Jenny, Brett declares, 'Burn, you little witch'. Jenny manages to escape, however. In frustration,

Brett and his gang instead burn the lone non-white member of their gang (though his inclusion was questionable at best). The Indian boy who serves as the necessary sacrifice when Jenny eludes the group is, ironically, wearing an England Football Club shirt. His execution makes it clear, though, that his membership in the gang—as well as the village and the nation—is perennially precarious and subject to violent revocation. Brett's explicit evocation of witchcraft here—and the burning of a 'witch'—echoes the classic first-wave film, *Witchfinder General*, in which a woman is notoriously burned as a witch in front of an entire village. The gang's multiple stabbings of Steve, moreover, evoke the repeated scenes in *Witchfinder General* when Hopkins and his assistant jab needles into their victims in an effort to 'prove' they are witches. *Eden Lake* thus layers its violence—its stabbing and burning—onto older rituals that once expressed communities' belief in the presence of the Satanic among them. In this film, though, these rituals are utterly devoid of a belief in the efficacy of the supernatural, and community is grounded only in an intermingled class- and race-based resentment and rage.

The second scene in *Eden Lake* that maps onto the rituals of folk horror, albeit thoroughly bereft of any shadow of the supernatural, is the final horrific scene. Having found her way out of the woods of Eden Lake and driven herself to what appears to be 'civilisation', Jenny stumbles into a backyard party. It turns out, though, to be a gathering of the village folks who have, until this point, been nothing but hostile whenever Steve and Jenny encountered them.

Figure 2. Jenny stumbles into the party/'ritual' gathering at the conclusion of *Eden Lake* (2008)

There are also the parents of the boys who killed Steve and attempted to burn Jenny, one of whom Jenny killed in her escape. The film ends with Jenny trapped in the bathroom by several of the village men, her screams echoing through the house, similar to the way in which the tortured Sara's screams fill the castle at the end of *Witchfinder General*. The seemingly banal neighborhood party turns out to be a ritual gathering of sorts that will end in Jenny's sacrifice.

The culminating sacrifice of *Eden Lake* is resonant of Scovell's 'happening/summoning', which, as Andy Paciorek argues, can involve a supernatural element or be an 'entirely earthly (though no less horrific) event such as an act of violence' (2015: 11). In her essay for this issue, Beth Kattelman proposes a similar 'entirely earthly event' in her discussion of Ree Dolly's beating in Debra Granik's *Winter's Bone*; while the 'happening' is transformative for Ree, in *Eden Lake* (as in *Witchfinder General*), it is a starkly non-redemptive annihilation. The dark, nihilistic irony that sees Jenny seek salvation from the same people who have threatened her and Steve throughout the film also reinforces a typical folk horror trope (as in *The Wicker Man*, *Kill List*, *Hereditary*, and *Midsommar*) in which the protagonist is, from the beginning, trapped in a

'plan' of which they are completely unaware—their fate written from the opening. That the 'plan' in *Eden Lake* does not seem to have been the result of forethought—and certainly not one animated by any belief in a higher force—only makes it all the more horrific; the culminating 'sacrifice' of Jenny will no doubt further cement the community, but it will in no way sanctify it.

Folk Horror's Particular 'Horror'

Folk horror's rituals articulate a world in which, as Freeland puts it, either 'malign agents' rule and human fates are already decided or in which there is no order or purpose at all, just random human depravity. These particular traits obviously develop the 'horror' of 'folk horror, which has received less attention than the 'folk'. It is worth exploring further where the particular *horror* of folk horror lies: how is *folk horror* different from horror more generally? One of the most compelling definitions of horror is Robin Wood's 'normality is threatened by the Monster' (1986: 78). Wood argues that the 'monster' is everything that our society represses or oppresses; the monster is society's 'other'. Through the monster, the horror film stages 'the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses' (1986: 75). In Wood's formulation, 'normality' is clearly demarcated from the repressed or oppressed other—indeed, that is the very function of repression or oppression. The monster is thus on the other side of a boundary delimiting it from 'normality'. That boundary is, of course, transgressed as the monster is unleashed, but the boundary is only able to be transgressed, only able to generate horror, precisely because it exists.

The folk horror plot, however, is driven by a much more permeable boundary between 'normality' and the 'monster'—is driven, in fact, by a kind of doubled 'othering' and thus a doubled 'normality'. The seeming protagonists, avatars of 'normality', are never completely 'normal', and the apparently monstrous antagonists that threaten them are never completely

'monstrous'. In other words, both the protagonists and the antagonists –typically the 'outsiders' and the community they stumble into—are each simultaneously 'normal' and 'other'. The extent of the ambiguity pervading this central divide of horror, the extent of the ambiguity surrounding 'normality' and the 'monster', is one of the most distinctive traits of folk horror.

The Wicker Man is a perfect example of the mutual entanglement of 'normality' and 'monster': there is arguably no real 'monster' in the film, just deeply opposed communities and values. By virtue of the narrative conventions of folk horror, the community of Summerisle is structurally positioned to be 'monstrous': its values diverge dramatically from those of the modern Christian mainstream, embodied by Howie, and the townspeople's agenda in luring Howie to the island under false pretenses is to burn him alive in the large wicker man, a sacrifice offered to their ancient gods in hopes of restoring their failed apple crops. As Benjamin Franks has pointed out, the central conflict between Howie and the islanders, as in much folk horror, is *apparently* between 'liberalism, modernity and democracy' (represented by the mainlander Howie) and the 'tradition, pre-modernity and authoritarianism' of Lord Summerisle and the islanders. According to both the film's writer and director, Franks points out, the brutal concluding attack on Howie was supposed 'to savagely indict the [island's] form of social organization and the practices that underpin it' (2005: 65). The problem is, as the body of criticism on The Wicker Man evinces, most viewers of the film—both the general public and film critics—have aligned themselves *with* the islanders and *against* Howie. The film's lines of identification are persistently troubled not only by the ways in which Howie and the Summerislanders change through the course of the film but also by the pre-existing values of those who are watching the film.

The Wicker Man has gained an almost cult-like following among various segments of the counter-culture. While the writer of the film, Anthony Shaffer, has referred to 'those interested in paganism and witchcraft as "lunatics"', Franks points out that 'audiences have continually sided with the populace of Summerisle rather than with the virtues represented by Howie' (2005: 65). Franks goes on to discuss how 'contemporary class-struggle anarchists', in particular, have embraced the community of Summerisle (2005: 65-67). Similarly, Tanya Krzywinska has noted that while director Robin Hardy wanted to communicate the dangers of paganism, it is Howie (not the pagans) who has been 'pointedly directed to the libertarian counter-culture as a figure of ridicule and contempt' (2007: 83). Krzywinska has also argued that while Howie's shocking sacrifice 'is meant to make viewers reassess their identification with Summerisle's anarchic paganism', the 'images of life' that have pervaded the film—for example, 'a woman breast-feeds her baby in the ruins of the church'—are 'too powerful, and they accord with the hippy-based criticism that Christian and judicial law stifles what is "natural"' (2000: 83). The paganism of the film, she continues, 'may (for some viewers) offer possible alternatives to Christianity' (2000: 87). Judith Higginbottom confirms Krzywinska's suggestions, describing the popularity of *The Wicker Man* with Pagans, who say it is 'the only film they know of in which the action takes place in a Pagan context, where Paganism is the norm rather than a transgressive, exotic practice, and where the validity of Pagan belief is accepted' (2006: 130-31). Assertions abound, then, that while structurally positioned as 'monstrous'—and, indeed, intended by both director and writer to be horrific—the community of Summerisle has been a profound source of identification and validation for an assortment of counter-cultural groups, including hippies, anarchists, and contemporary Pagans. This deep investment by many viewers functions to turn Howie and the

mainstream values he represents, perceived as repressive and intolerant, into what is 'monstrous' in the film—and even his violent death at the very end is unable to shift this perception.

For other viewers, though, Howie is not such a monster, marking the ambivalent identifications elicited by *The Wicker Man*. He is undoubtedly something of an unsympathetic character throughout much of the film: he is authoritarian, sexually repressed, and closed-minded—intolerant of the islanders and their beliefs even when Lord Summerisle makes the convincing argument that Paganism and Christianity are not that far apart (both systems believe in virgin birth, for instance). As William Hughes points out, though, the ending of the film, when Howie is sacrificed, when he becomes a martyr, 'ethically problematizes all that has been represented before' (2013: 59). Howie goes to his death unwavering in his faith, and it is certainly very possible to see his death as heroic. Indeed, Howie also turns the tables on Lord Summerisle, who, in the end, appears as blind and irrational as Howie did earlier (in their conversation about Paganism and Christianity). Summerisle dismisses Howie's insistence that his sacrifice will not work and that, next summer, the villagers will demand *Summerisle's* death. Viewers, however, cannot help but sense the truth in Howie's claim.

There is certainly much more that can be said about *The Wicker Man*, but it should be clear from this brief discussion that while the source of horror in folk horror is some sort of 'monstrous tribe', the exact identity of that tribe can be slippery, troublesome, and dependent not only on the text's narrative ambiguity but also on the viewers' values and beliefs. What further characterizes folk horror, moreover, is that each group, both the protagonists and the antagonists, presumes that *it* represents normality and the *other* is the monstrous, although the film typically puts this very certainty fundamentally in doubt. Folk horror offers a narrative structure that is predicated on a clash of cultures—on characters representing a version of 'normality' stumbling

into a 'monstrous' tribe. As the narrative unfolds, however, both terms—'normality' and 'monstrous'—are challenged. The horror of folk horror lies in both the (seeming) absoluteness of the divide between groups *and* in its dissolution.

This special issue offers essays, reviews, creative work, and interviews that all seek to explore further the varied meanings of the folk horror subgenre that I have begun to map out here. The emphasis of the critical essays is on British and US folk horror productions from the late 1960s to the present, and we hope this starts a conversation that only broadens in scope. James Thurgill's opening theoretical essay explores the fundamental role of landscape in folk horror, and, specifically, how it articulates a *topophobic* vision, a landscape of fear, through its intertwined representations of landscape and rural 'folk'. While Thurgill interrogates the elements of 'landscape' and 'folk' integral to folk horror, Diane Rodgers takes up the equally important role of folklore. Using the 1970 teleplay, *Robin Redbreast* as a case study, she argues that folk horror has consistently staged television as *mass-mediated ostension*—that is, television itself comes to be an important source of folklore. Cary Edwards explores a film from a decade, the 1990s, that has not been deemed particularly important in folk horror chronologies. He argues, however, that Julian Richards' *Darklands* (1996) is a critical Welsh folk horror text, exploring both 'Celtic' and 'pagan' as well as 'Welsh' identities. Edwards argues that the film also shapes an 'Industrial Wyrd' through setting its cult, its rituals, and its sacrifice within an explicitly industrial landscape. In the final essay on British folk horror, David Sweeney takes up two Internet projects that are central to the recent resurgence of folk horror: Scarfolk and Hookland. Sweeney interrogates how memory is intertwined with technology and how Scarfolk

and Hookland deploy both in order to offer forms of 'reflective nostalgia', looking back while at the same time acknowledging what was troubling about that past.

Because definitions of folk horror have emerged almost exclusively in the context of British folk horror, folk horror in other national traditions almost by necessity will not quite 'fit'. As a result, those essays in this special issue that take up folk horror from the US all describe distinctive traits, troubling the terrain mapped by scholars of British texts. In her essay on Debra Granik's *Winter's Bone* (2010), Beth Kattelman explicitly identifies the film as a hybrid genre, a film adjacent to 'backwoods horror' yet still embodying, albeit with intriguing differences, the folk horror traits of landscape (the film is both rooted in, and filmed in, the Arkansas Ozarks), cults, and interlopers. Peter Turner explores how found-footage folk horror films, *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999) and *Blair Witch* (Adam Wingard, 2016), not only, like most folk horror, incorporate folklore into their diegesis—the mythology of a witch who has long haunted the woods of Burkittsville, Maryland—but also explore the technological means of proving the 'authentic' source of those local folk tales. What happens, he asks, when characters try to capture the terrifying and archaic sources of rural folktales with modern digital technology? Brendan C. Walsh explores the historical sources of Robert Eggers' 2015 film *The VVitch*, arguing that Eggers draws from a diverse array of Old World and New World sources on witchcraft and demonology in order to convey a Puritan world that is unremittingly the 'Devil's Territory'. The success of *The VVitch*, Walsh argues, is due to the way in which it offers an historical 'authenticity' that is paradoxically (for the contemporary viewer, at least) mediated through the textual remainders of a 'realistic' worldview rooted in the supernatural. And finally, Alexandra Hauke offers a rich theoretical framework for understanding US folk horror, one inextricable from the nation's history of racism and

colonialism. Her exemplary text, John Langan's 2016 novel *The Fisherman*, is profoundly

rooted, Hauke argues, in a disturbing history that evinces that the real 'monster' of folk horror is

'us.'

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Notes

[1] Jonathan Rigby also used the term 'folk horror' earlier than Gatiss—in his 2007 book *American Gothic*, to refer to the (now lost) 1923 American film *Puritan Passions* (37). Rigby was a consultant for Gatiss on *A History of Horror*.

[2] While several online pieces trace a lengthier history of 'folk horror', earlier instances of the term carry a broad and rather random swathe of meanings. For those discussions of the origin of the term 'folk horror', see 'Roots of Folk Horror' (2017) and a discussion thread, 'Earliest Mention of "Folk Horror".' In an interview with *Folk Horror Revival*, Sarah K. Marr (2018) says that she traced the term 'folk horror' to a 1936 instance in *The English Journal*. And, indeed, Oscar James Campbell uses the term to describe how the ballad form, 'with its freightage of superstition and folk horror', influenced William Wordsworth (Campbell 1936: 305).

[3] Adam Sovell begins with the centrality of folklore to folk horror, citing Gatiss's claim, in his documentary, *History of Horror*, that folk horror films of the late 1960s and 1970s 'shared a common obsession with the British landscape, its folklore and superstitions' (2017: 7)

[4] In this way, I think folk horror's 'folkloristics' differs from what Michael Dylan Foster and Jeffrey Tolbert have called the 'folkloresque'—that is, the 'sense of folklore' or 'invented folklore' embedded in popular culture (2015: 4, 126). The 'folkloresque' implies, as Bronner notes, a more 'frivolous, even meaningless' use of folklore (2017: 155).

[5] See Cary Edwards' essay in this issue for a discussion of the invented and variously 'Celtic' and 'pagan' Welsh traditions of Julian Richards' film *Darklands* (1996).

[6] James Thurgill's essay in this issue interrogates the 'landscape' of folk horror in relation to the 'folk'.

[7] See David Sweeney's essay in this special issue, in which he discusses different forms of nostalgia in folk horror.

[8] For discussions of folk horror and Brexit, see Waites, 'So What', Newton, 'Cults', Smith, 'Fear,' and Scovell, 'Brexit-Is-Iccumen-In'.

[9] David Sweeney's essay in this issue discusses the starkly divergent political readings evinced by the varied interpretations of the 1974 TV film, *Penda's Fen*.

[10] Beth Kattelman in this special issue points out how important it was to Debra Granik that *Winter's Bone* be filmed in the Ozarks and include the local community.

[11] From a personal communication on 12 March, 2019 with Andrew Michael Hurley. Reading *Devil's Day* in relation to its particular locations is the subject of my chapter on the novel in my forthcoming monograph on folk horror.

[12] Adam Scovell includes a chapter on the 'urban wyrd' in folk horror (2017: 143-64).

[13] See my review of Hurley's *Starve Acre* in this issue.

[14] Films like *Wake Wood* and *Apostle*, which do have unambiguously supernatural elements, force me to disagree with Michael Newton's claim that 'it is almost a rule in folk horror that the supernatural is banned' (2017). As my argument makes clear, though, I also disagree with those who say that folk horror must include the supernatural. For me, the presence of the supernatural itself is secondary to communal beliefs and rituals, one of the traits that distinguishes folk horror from horror.

[15] In *Chavs*, Owen Jones discusses *Eden Lake* as 'hoodie horror' (2011: 130-32).

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