

## **A Fear of the Folk: On *topophobia* and the Horror of Rural Landscapes**

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The so-called ‘unholy trinity’ (Scovell 2017: 8) designates a collection of horror films produced between 1968 and 1973--*Witchfinder General* (1968), *The Blood on Satan’s Claw* (1971), and *The Wicker Man* (1973). These films are described by Mark Gatiss in his *A History of Horror* series for the BBC (2010) as sharing ‘a common obsession with the British landscape, its folklore and superstitions’, and are generally regarded as the starting point for the folk horror subgenre. As central examples of folk horror cinema, these films approach the rural (British) landscape as a commonly understood and singular entity, a process mirrored in their portrayal of the folk who inhabit it; these ‘folk’ are unmodern, superstitious and, above all, capable of enacting extreme violence in order to conserve the rural idyll. Naturally, such framings are erroneous; pastoral landscapes exist as multiplicities, with widely varying assemblages of human and non-human actants performing diverse functions within their respective (regional) environments: ‘rurality is not homogeneous – different “countrysides” are different’ (Clope 2003: 2). In fact, the landscapes that emerge from the ‘unholy trinity’ demonstrate an explicit diversity in the settings used for the films as well as in characters’ understandings of the rural spaces in which they dwell: village, field, and island.

Whilst it has been noted that pastoral landscapes are integral to producing the unsettling aesthetic of folk horror (Barnett 2018; MacFarlane 2015; Packham 2018; Paciorek 2015; Scovell 2017), there remains no comprehensive treatment of the subject within commentary on the subgenre. The positioning of folk horror as an inherently rural rendering of the eerie (Newland 2016: 175) is not pure happenstance; rather, it derives from a deliberate attempt to exploit the *othering* process manifest in the presentation of pastoral communities as something outside of the normative. To this end, folk horror presents us with a spatial

politics that works to further alienate rural communities from the contemporary ‘mainstream’, placing the pastoral within a context of both spiritual and physical threat.

The hostile rural geographies of folk horror engender *topophobia*, offering ‘experiences of spaces, places and landscapes which are in some way distasteful or induce anxiety and depression’ (Relph 1976: 27). Existing writing on folk horror has presented the *topophobia* of rural landscapes as *a priori*, suggesting that pastoral spaces are conceived of in the popular geographic imagination as inherently threatening. This suggests that, at their core, ‘countryside’ geographies are read as problematic spaces due to their perceived isolation and *backwardness*, supporting the idea that modernization is both oppositional to the identity of rural communities and rejected by them. In this context, folk horror demonstrates a co-opting of the (largely) metropolitan understanding of rurality as a homogenous spatiality. Observed through the lens of the ‘urban gaze’, the nuance of pastoral landscapes is lost in reductive articulations of rurality as singular and static. The embodied horror of the rural has thus not been accurately captured by either folk horror or its commentators—a result of the negligence with which non-rural bodies treat rural landscapes, imagining them as enclaves of ignorance and social, cultural and political stagnation. In reality, the lived or embodied horror of such landscapes emanates not from the social inadequacies or archaic customs of rural populations but lies rather in a lack of investment in and an estrangement from central governance and metropolitan hubs. The true horror of rural landscapes thus exists as a composite of lived experiences of social and political marginalization and the proximity of human bodies to the less savory aspects of rural existence. The horror exists, in other words, in shrinking rural economies; the closure of primary resources such as hospitals, doctors’ surgeries, libraries and schools; restricted communications, such as diminished public transport services as well as internet and cellular ‘blackspots’; the brutality of livestock farming and its subsequent body count (2,277,000 cattle, pigs and sheep were slaughtered in December 2019 in the UK

alone ['United Kingdom' 2020]); the proliferation of poorly planned housing developments accompanied by increased privatization of space and restriction of land access; and the elemental effects of the weather and contingent erasure of the land (flooding, soil erosion, deforestation).

Yet, with its concentration on clichéd representations of archaic rural geographies and people, folk horror has been conditioned by abstraction; this lack of nuance in the conceptualizing of folk horror landscapes has spilled out into the growing commentary on the topic. This is not to say that folk horror's landscapes cannot be considered complex, but that to date both their presentation and consideration by critics as simply 'rural' has failed to posit them as such. Adam Scovell, for example, refers to landscape as a constituent part of his 'folk horror chain', a shared expression of landscape, isolation, 'skewed belief systems and morality', and 'happening / summoning' (2017: 15-19). However, Scovell's 'chain' proves problematic when rurality is understood as synonymous with landscape. A similarly harmful conflation can be found in the use of hauntology, Jacques Derrida's conceptual pun on the nature of temporal experience after the end of history, which becomes confused with the aesthetics of nostalgia. The conflation and manipulation of these terms in Scovell's 'folk horror chain', and elsewhere, occludes the dynamic agency of landscape and the production of *topophobia* on which the subgenre is built. Whilst the 'chain' is useful in thinking through the aesthetic components of folk horror that draw its texts together, Scovell's unpacking of these terms is inadequate and, at times, their usage contradictory.

This essay addresses the role and diversity of landscape within folk horror, broadening understanding of the spaces and the 'folk' who inhabit the landscapes of the subgenre and problematizing the homogenous rurality that it has been considered to present. By focusing on how landscapes function within folk horror, we can move closer toward understanding the subgenre's *topophobia*. The sections that follow provide an explication of

landscape, working through the fundamentals on which what I call ‘folk horrific’ rurality is formed: folklore, exchange and time.

### **Defining landscape**

In the context of geography, understanding what we mean when we talk about landscape matters. It is not an exercise in terminological point scoring; rather, thinking about the complexity, context and nuance of landscape brings us closer to an understanding of the rural agency that folk horror aims to reflect and comment upon. Landscapes are social constructions; they are products of specific framings of the assemblage of relational agents that converge to form regional and local geographic identities. Whilst it is, of course, important to recognize the shared elements of rurality and folklore within folk horror texts (naturally there are features that gather together to allow for the subgenre’s identification), this should not play out at the expense of acknowledging diversity in the organization of the rural and its people (both within and beyond folk horror texts). Nor should landscapes themselves be considered as mute components in the production of folk horror; they perform active and collaborative roles in the generation of fear that folk horror engenders.

In his examination of landscape, cultural geographer John Wylie suggests that ‘[l]andscape is tension’ (2007: 1). Tension is an appropriate place to start when discussing landscape in folk horror. The subgenre commonly exploits the pressures that exist in the production of (rural) landscapes, although it recognizes these pressures as a result *of* rather than resulting *in* landscape. Folk horror acts as an expression of tension, articulating the pressures of multiple binaries: local and not-local, ‘them’ and ‘us’, modernity and antiquity, progress and regression, urban and rural, nature and culture, civilization and wilderness, religion and enlightenment. Such tensions are clearly depicted, for instance, in the caricaturization of rural inhabitants in the BBC’s *The League of Gentlemen*’s (1999-2002)

fictional village of ‘Royston Vasey’. Here, the monstrous duo of Edward (Reece Shearsmith) and Tubbs Tattsyrup (Steve Pemberton) are depicted as incestuous, uneducated and violent, and they not only decry the actions of developers building a road through their village but commit all manner of heinous acts in order to stop them, frequently asking unaware visitors who happen upon their village shop, ‘Are you local?’ The series makes ongoing use of the tension that exists between rural and city folk, with the couple despairing at the evils of modernity and the constant threat that new and non-local ways of life pose. Further depictions of horrific folk can be found elsewhere in the series; indeed, the show is saturated with dark and sinister ‘countryside’ characters.

Whilst not itself explicitly folk horror, *The League of Gentlemen* treats landscape in ways that mirror the hostility of the rural utilized in folk horror. Exemplary films of the subgenre, such as *Robin Redbreast* (1970), *A Warning to the Curious* (1972), *The Wicker Man*, *Kill List* (2011), and *The Hallow* (2015), all exploit those binaries that form the misinterpretation of rurality as a homogenized and oppositional landscape. This exploitation works to establish a collectively (re)imagined rural landscape in which uncanny encounters with the pastoral can take place; nonetheless, reducing both the rural and landscape to a singular understanding of ‘oppositional’ takes us further away from understanding what landscape is and how it functions to produce specific renderings of horror as *folkish*. To this end, it is worth considering that landscape is not only representative of and produced by tension(s), but that it also articulates a particular way of framing spaces and spatial experiences.

Landscapes do not merely exist; rather they are shaped and defined by social processes (Mitchell 2005; Wylie 2007). Where construction, industry and development define the flux and velocity of urban landscapes, we might look to agriculture, conservation and land management as the social processes that produce rurality. It is human intervention

that forms and shapes the texture(s) of the land around us. Denis Cosgrove posits landscape as a specific product of culture, noting that the term is not merely synonymous with 'area', as was historically the case, but that it describes particular aesthetic and artistic representations of the world. For Cosgrove, landscape marks 'a way of seeing, a composition and structuring of the world so that it may be appropriated by a detached, individual spectator' (1985: 55).

Whilst such an understanding of landscape as 'a way of seeing' implies distance between the viewer and the viewed, 'landscape' has been used elsewhere to describe a more collaborative spatial experience. In his *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot*, nature writer Robert Macfarlane posits landscape as an embodied practice of both seeing and being in the world:

[L]andscape is not something to be viewed and appraised from a distance, as if it were a panel in a frieze or a canvas in a frame. It is not the passive object of our gaze, but rather a volatile participant - a fellow subject which arches and bristles at us, bristles into us...it is dynamic and commotion causing, it sculpts and shapes us not only over the courses of our lives but also instant by instant, incident by incident. I prefer to take 'landscape' as a collective term for the temperature and pressure of the air, the fall of light and its rebounds, the textures and surfaces of rock, soil and building, the sounds, the scents and uncountable other transitory phenomena and atmospheres that together comprise the *bristling* presence of a particular place at a particular moment. (2012: 254-55)

Macfarlane's depiction of landscape is imbued with agency, bringing us closer to the type of rural environments utilized within folk horror: landscapes act upon their inhabitants, shape their spatial experiences and co-produce the narrative's horror. In viewing landscape through such a lens, we may begin to examine the true extent to which landscape rather than rurality is performative within folk horror texts.

Macfarlane's phenomenological response to landscape is closely aligned with the so-called non-human turn of the humanities and social sciences, a proliferation of 'attempts to depict a world populated not by active subjects and passive objects but by lively and essentially interactive materials, by bodies human and nonhuman' (Bennett 2015: 224). As with Macfarlane's suggestion that landscape is formed through physical and material encounters with our surroundings, the vital materiality of the non-human provides an experiential space 'where fleshy, vegetal, mineral materials are encountered not as passive stuff awaiting animation by human or divine power, but as lively forces at work around and within us' (Bennett 2015: 223). Perhaps a central aspect to the landscapes offered by folk horror, then, is their embracing of the 'fleshy, vegetal, mineral materials' in order to expose the affectual valency between people and places, human and non-human. From the malevolent nature at work in M. R. James's 'The Ash Tree' (1904) and 'A View from a Hill' (1925) to the malignly coercive cereal crops in Fritz Kiersch's adaptation of Stephen King's *Children of the Corn* (1984) and the macabre animism of Gareth Evans' *Apostle* (2018), individualized landscapes emerge from an amalgamation of specific social processes and idiosyncratic material interactions. Such examples demonstrate that folk horror's landscapes are anything but muted, singular backdrops of occulted interaction; instead they reflect the same processes that contribute to the formation of our lived surroundings. Landscapes in folk horror are contrived, produced and manipulated in the very same ways that produce those of the actual-world environment. It is not folk horror's capacity to engender alienation from the landscape that produces horror, rather it is the apparent sameness between these fictional milieus and our own that resonates so disturbingly in our minds.

### **Landscape and Folklore**

There are many cultural traditions that seemingly connect people with places, yet it is perhaps folklore that serves to illustrate the deepest (and darkest) ties between communities and the landscapes they form. While the disciplines of geography and folklore have traditionally diverged, the former focusing on place(s) whilst the latter attended to people, analysis of the relationship between folklore and geography has not been altogether absent. In an early think piece for the journal *Folklore*, Karl Sinnhuber rejects the then oppositional trajectories of folklore and geography by ‘attempting to look more closely at folklore with the eyes of a geographer’ (1957: 385). In stating his case, Sinnhuber claims, ‘True as it is that "geography is the study of places" there are, however, few places on earth which do not owe their present and past appearance and character to the interaction of nature and man’ (386). Sinnhuber suggests that ‘folklore studies must see its objects against the natural basis, and the cultural landscape’ (386). He thus simultaneously widens and narrows the foci of each discipline by pushing towards a unification of folklore and cultural and historical geography.

The closure of the gap between folklore and geography also makes sense when considering the performativity of landscape in folk horror: after all, the subgenre provides a platform on which people and places are intrinsically linked. Prior to Sinnhuber’s paper, anthropologists, historians and regional geographers had already made mention of the relationship between folk customs and their specific cultural landscapes (see Knight 1845; Riehl 1854; Frazer 1890; Glyde 1872; Johnson 1908; James 1930). The significance of Sinnhuber’s exhortation to form a ‘folk geography’, as well as the writings of those scholars who understood the connections between folklore and landscape early on, is crystallized in the ‘folk archeology’ of the early twentieth-century. The development of leyline theory by Alfred Watkins that emerged from his navigations of ancient trackways and monuments in the west of England gave rise to notions of folklore being quite literally embedded in landscape. In particular, Watkins’ assertion that strange cartographic alignments could be



traced by observing the connections between ancient burial mounds, monuments, barrows, ditches, castles, ponds and trackways formed the central argument of his ‘ley line’ theory and was explicated across a series of archeological writings: *Early British Trackways, Moats, Mounds, Camps and Sites* (1922), *The Old Straight Track* (1925) and *The Ley Hunter’s Manual* (1927).

Within the discipline of geography, too, scholars have investigated the relationship between folk belief and landscape. The so-called ‘spectral turn’ in the humanities over the last two decades (Luckhurst 2002) has resulted in geographers becoming ever more involved with studies of folklore (Laviolette 2003; Dixon 2007, 2013); magical affect (Matless 1991; Holloway 2003a, 2003b, 2018; Thurgill 2015a); haunting (Pile 2005; Matless 2008; Holloway 2006, 2010, 2016; Thurgill 2018a, 2018b); and landscape mysticism (Holloway 2000; Matless 1998; Thurgill 2015b). The emergence of folklore-themed geographic studies is unsurprising given that place and landscape are commonly considered to be socially constructed (Relph 1976; Tuan 1976, 1977; Mitchell 2005; Cresswell 2006). In folk horror, folklore is not used merely to generate theme; the people involved in its rituals and practices are imperative to a nascent threat, often committing the atrocities themselves in order to satisfy the lore that protects the land (for example, *The Wicker Man*, *Kill List*, and *Apostle*). It is the folk themselves who, more often than not, serve to undertake the most chilling actions in folk horror and whose role as violent warrants further analysis here. After all, it is the interplay between the folk and rural landscapes that is most obviously caricatured and exploited in the production of folk horror.

Little has been said about the folk of folklore in analyses of folk horror and there is insufficient room to expand fully upon the subject here; still, it is useful to introduce the topic so as to further ascertain the relationship between folklore and landscape. As with the ontological flattening of rural space that is effected in folk horror, so too can we find the

homogenization of its 'folk'. The folk of folklore share a similar history of reduction, a concern expressed by nineteenth-century folklorist Joseph Jacobs in his criticism that 'in dealing with Folk-lore, much was said of the Lore, almost nothing was said of the Folk'. (1893: 233). In *Interpreting Folklore*, Alan Dundes notes that initial understandings of folklore were premised upon a perceived division in social classes, specifically between the burgeoning 'mainstream' of the middle classes and working rural communities—the 'folk'. The study of folklore was predicated upon a two-tier system whereby folklore and folk communities were seen as the subjugated element of a classist society. The belief that the 'folk' represented the 'uncivilized element of a civilized society' (Dundes 1980: 2) is expressed in folk horror's apparent presupposing and fetishizing of the horrors of rural life; its usage of folk communities as oppositional to modernity, the mainstream and the middle classes. The horror of folk horror is rarely *folkloric* and rather more commonly *folkish*. In this sense, we might better turn to 'horrorism' to conceptualize the horror at work in folk horror—that is, the committing of acts that cause us to 'suffer offence at the ontological level' (Cavarero 2009: 32). The type of horrorism that unfolds from folk horror is almost exclusively orchestrated and actioned by humans: *auto-da-fé*, beheading, bloodletting, cannibalism, drowning, hanging, dismembering. The *topophobia* evoked by the spatial dynamics of 'folk horrorism' is, then, one that extends to a fear of real places and real people.

The bleak bucolic landscapes characteristic of folk horror thus assert an irrevocable division between urban and rural communities, a split through which the former inevitably comes to suffer under the untamed savagery of the latter. Through folk horror, the 'folk' come to enact their bloody revenge. The threat posed by folk horror's rural communities often extends beyond the natural world. Characters such as M. R. James's famed Professor Parkin ('Oh Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad' [1904]) and the young antiquarian Paxton ('A Warning to the Curious' [1925]), for example, work to demonstrate the malign

supernatural forces that await the drifting urbanite middle classes in a landscape perceived to exist exterior to the ordered social relations of the town and city. Nonetheless, the landscapes that folk horror texts depict do more than simply critique a (recognizable) socio-cultural divide. Folk horror conveys a strange ecology positioned outside of capitalist operations, one that unnervingly amplifies the more macabre aspects of capital itself, produces weird iterations of the dangers posed by the 'city', and creates spaces where blood and sacrifice form the basis of ritual exchange.

### **Landscape and Exchange**

One of the key ways in which geography functions within folk horror is to reflect landscape(s) as the site(s) of exchange. Robin Hardy's *The Wicker Man* provides a ready example of folk horror's positioning of landscape as a platform for exchange, with the ritual sacrifice of Sergeant Howie performed to rectify the failing crop harvest on Summerisle. Here, death provides the ultimate sacrifice. Exchange is performed as an embodied spatial process throughout the subgenre: Shirley Jackson's 'The Lottery' (1948) tells of a sacrificial ritual performed annually in a rural American town to ensure a good corn harvest; David Pinner's *Ritual* (1967) – the inspiration for Hardy's *The Wicker Man* – depicts a similar scenario, with the success of vegetal growth dependent on an exchange for human life. Elsewhere, *Robin Redbreast*, *Children of the Corn* (1984) and *Apostle* all make use of the same sacrificial scenario. In Michael Reeves' *Witchfinder General*, human bodies undergo (involuntary) commodification and exchange through sexual exploitation, ritual torture and death as a means to secure familial safety and deliverance from damnation. The exploitation of bodies for material gain in *Witchfinder General* is confirmed when Matthew Hopkins, self-appointed 'Witchfinder General', proclaims: 'It's the Lord's work. A noble thing', to which

his paid accomplice John Stearne responds, ‘And a profitable one! The good Lord paying in silver for every hanging!’

Landscapes in folk horror might well be seen to echo the horrors of capitalism, offering a decidedly gothic Marxist breed of social commentary on the ills of labour and exchange. The rural communities of folk horror both alienate and are alienated by their constituent landscapes in the process of exchange, reflecting the very real pressures that exist for rural communities. Don Mitchell understands landscape as a term that, from its very conception, expresses the exploitative relationship between people and capitalism. The landscape of capitalism is all-encompassing, produced from and representative of the inequality of those who build it (workers) and those who own it (capitalists):

[W]hile *grounded in* and *deriving from* work, landscape in the contemporary world functions as a source of alienation. Landscape both establishes the geography of production and works to naturalise that geography, to make it seem inevitable that those who build the landscape are not the same as those who own the landscape. This is a crucial move, because landscapes are necessary not only as the site of production (work) but also reproduction (leisure, rest, entertainment and the attendance of bodily needs). (2005: 51)

In the Mitchell-esque settings of folk horror, landscapes of bloody and sacrificial exchange emulate those produced by workers in their generation of capital for industry owners, farmers, and various consumers in actual-world spaces. In folk horror these landscapes are equally cultivated, produced, maintained, guarded and surveilled, demonstrating an oscillation of power relations and veneration of landscape that echoes the horror of actual-world capitalist exploitation. Scovell refers to the spatial politics of the subgenre when he comments on the uncanny way that its texts revel in an ironic pageantry of empire and compound representations of ‘Britishness’ that mirror the UK’s decision to leave the

European Union, a retro-gazing act of defiance: ‘We have burnt our Sgt Howie in the wicker man’, he writes (2017: 184). Whilst Scovell’s conclusion lacks the necessary critique of race, class and gender stereotyping that imperialist ideology purported and that saturates the folk horror subgenre, it nonetheless articulates a clear discomfort with the apparent resonance of folk horrific fiction with the real and the ostensible repetition of history’s skewed nationalism and identity politics. Thus, at the heart of folk horror we find the unnerving fear that history might repeat itself, that past horrors remain or might be repeated.

### **Landscape and time**

Time and history are integral components of folk horror, emerging as either a survival of the past, a returning of the past, or a returning to the past. The tripartite organization of time in folk horror, while often displaying overlap, offers a useful way of thinking about how spatial experience is inflected and unsettled by the passing of time. It is unsurprising, then, that analyses of folk horror have turned to ideas of spectrality and hauntology (Derrida 1994) through which to understand the geographies of its texts (Fisher 2012; Paciorek 2015; Scovell 2017). Initiated by philosopher Jacques Derrida to describe the haunted political situation at the end of the twentieth-century, and specifically the haunting of and by Marxist political thought, hauntology shares its lineage with a number of ‘endist’ writings that emerged between the late 1970s and early 1990s (see: Fukuyama 1989; Jameson, 1991; Kojève 1980; Lyotard 1984).

Whilst a reconceptualization of the term was already well underway in the first decade of the new millennium, the appropriation of hauntology for the analysis of folk horror texts stems from Mark Fisher’s use of the term in analysing the adapted works of M. R. James and Nigel Kneale in his ‘What is Hauntology?’ for *Film Quarterly*. Fisher claims: ‘Haunting can be seen as intrinsically resistant to the contraction and homogenization of time and space. It happens when a place is stained by time, or when a particular place becomes the site for an encounter with broken time’ (2012: 19).

Whilst Fisher is not wrong to posit a correlation between the aesthetics of time and haunting in these cinematic representations of folk horror, the inclusion of the term in the analysis of folk horror has become somewhat axiomatic. Both overuse and misuse in the application of hauntology to folk horror has rendered the term impotent, acting as mere substitution for the existing and apt terminology of nostalgia and haunting. Often the places that are presented in folk horror have been affected by time, and it is the articulation of loss or nostalgia for what has gone that is being presented. As Edyta Lorek-Jezińska and Katarzyna Więckowska suggest, hauntology has become ‘preoccupied with the consequences of memory and incomplete or failed mourning processes’ (2017: 18). Whilst there is undoubtedly a Shelleyan *Ozymandias melancholia* at work in folk horror – a lamenting of the passing of time and the ruination it necessitates – it is not so much that an ontological haunting occurs, rather that folk horror shares an obsession with the past, particularly the not-quite-lost past of landscapes.

In *The Weird Old Albion*, writer Justin Hopper narrates a series of encounters with the South Downs area of southern England. Starting from a point of personal enquiry – in order to examine the suicide of his grandmother – Hopper takes the reader through a series of spatially informed vignettes, each pulling the reader ever deeper into the topology and memory of the landscapes and places in which the author finds himself. The retelling of Hopper’s experiences is charged with an understanding of landscape infused with esoteric wonder; he sees memory and time as inherently connected through the form and materiality of the landscape itself, affording sentience to his surroundings: ‘This landscape remembers’, Hopper proclaims (2017: 24). Such an interpretation is common within folk horror. An overt sense of historical depth or ‘deep time’ (Holloway 2003a) is commonly attributed to the environmental settings of the subgenre’s texts. Piers Haggard’s *The Blood on Satan’s Claw*, for example, unfolds from the literal sense that dark elements are retained in and can emerge from the ancient pastoral. Haggard’s landscape demonstrates its own capacity to remember

through the uncovering of the demonic – in this case, the ploughing up of a skull retaining a single perfect eyeball, its gaze fixed on the camera as an earthworm writhes around on top of it. The discovery of the skull, itself a material artifact offered from the earth, reveals the retentive qualities of the film's landscape, an environment apparently saturated with unholy primeval threat.

A useful way of framing the correlation between landscape and time in folk horror is through the archaeological imagination: 'The archaeological imagination is rooted in a sensibility, a pervasive set of attitudes toward traces and remains, towards memory, time and temporality, the fabric of history' (Shanks 2012: 25). Such a view of folk horror's geography exposes the 'deep time' (Holloway 2003a) of its landscapes and promotes excavation of the 'biography' of its places (Thurgill 2018a). This use of 'deep time' in the initiation of spatio-temporal disturbance is ubiquitous amongst folk horror texts. M. R. James's short supernatural tales 'Oh Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad', 'A Warning to the Curious' and 'A View from a Hill' (1925), as well as their subsequent film adaptations, initiate a spectral return of the past through an eerie archaeology. 'Oh Whistle' sees Professor Parkin uncover an old whistle whilst out walking the deserted East Anglian coastline, the blowing of which mobilizes a ghostly visitor from another time; 'A Warning to the Curious' follows the young antiquarian Paxton, as he is pursued and eventually slain by a ghostly assailant after disturbing a long buried Saxon crown; and in 'A View from a Hill', Fanshawe, 'a man of academic pursuits' (James 2006: 119), gains literal views into a past landscape as he unknowingly gazes through binoculars that permit him to see through the eyes of the dead. In each of these tales a return of some *thing* from a lost time is positioned as central to the production of horror. John Bowen's film *Robin Redbreast*, a depiction of the dark pagan customs at work in a small rural village, offers a comparative treatment of the survival of the 'old ways' (the sacrificial bloodletting that takes place) and the persistence of material history through archaeological remains, or sherds. Ancient horrors are out there, hidden in rural landscapes, waiting to be unearthed.

Yet it is not always a survival of the past that is used to invoke fear in folk horror; sometimes a more literal disturbance of time, a revisiting, repetition or co-mingling of historical moments in the present takes place. Thames Television's series *Shadows* (1975-1978) offers a number of examples of folk horror where characters appear to return to the past: *The Future Ghost* (1975), *The Waiting Room* (1975), *Dark Encounter* (1976) and *The Inheritance* (1976). Each of these short films iterates a central link between landscape and time, offering its characters retro-temporal encounters through embodied experiences of history or through the replaying of historical moments in the present, the latter being demonstrated *par excellence* in Peter Sasdy's adaptation of Nigel Kneale's *The Stone Tape* (1972). John Mackenzie's 1978 revisiting of Alan Garner's *Red Shift* (1973) further distorts our perception of history in its treatment of time as near cyclical; following the encounters of three men in a shared landscape across different time periods, with the strange effect of time unfolding in and out of itself—layered, permeated and repeated. Elsewhere, folk horror evokes historical threats through a straightforward depiction of the past as present. Ben Wheatley's *A Field in England* (2013) and Robert Eggers' *The Witch* (2015) are entirely set in historical landscapes, employing a distinct strategy of dragging their viewers back into reimagined geographies of previous occult threat.

That landscape is central to the production of folk horror should be clear; its films and literature are representative of the remote, bucolic landscapes of rurality that exist in the popular geographic imagination. Yet, the rural landscapes encountered in folk horror often display 'a deceptive quaintness and nostalgia' (Brewster 2012: 50), erroneously posing as antiquated while '[t]he seeming timelessness of the country is belied by the changes demanded by the globalised food industry, the increasing mobility of people and production, the niched fragmentation of consumption and the commodification of place' (Cloke 2003: 2). Folk horror undoubtedly deals with the corruption of landscapes, the aberration of places and fracturing of urban and



rural communities. It does so by exploiting the tensions on which rurality is constructed: exchange, modernization and tradition.

There is a tangible anxiety or discomfort with landscape present throughout folk horror--a framing of rural landscapes as simultaneously innocuous yet malign, a sense that, underneath the superficial solitude of the pastoral, malevolent forces are working to promote acts of unspeakable violence. Folk horror's landscapes are set, I have argued, within the context of *topophobia*. *Topophobia*, as Relph suggests, can 'include all experiences of spaces, places and landscapes which are in some way distasteful or induce anxiety and depression' (1976: 27). *Topophobia* aptly describes the fear evoked in the uncanny, threatening and dreadful experiences of spaces, places and landscapes that folk horror presents us with and more accurately describes the functioning of geography in the subgenre than rurality alone.

Folk horror articulates landscapes as co-produced sites of fear, requiring specific forms of human intervention and veneration through which it manifests dread. The agency afforded to landscape within the context of folk horror is neither clearly natural nor entirely otherworldly. Whilst more recent examples portray reactionary landscapes caught in the struggle against exploitative (capitalist) human activity (for example, *The Hallow*, *Without Name* [2016]), the fear and the threat that folk horror traditionally evokes is one that derives from a deliberate manipulation of the boundaries ordinarily thought to exist between nature and culture, people and places. The landscape(s) of folk horror offer a stage on which the organisation and separation of certain people in and from certain spaces can take place—and it is in this division of people from place that horror emerges.

## Filmography

*Apostle*, Gareth Evans (Director), Netflix, 2018.

*The Blood on Satan's Claw*, Piers Haggard (Director), Tigon British Film Productions, 1971.

*Children of the Corn*, Fritz Kiersch (Director), New World Picture, 1984.

*Dark Encounter*, Leo Thau (Director), Thames Television, 18 August 1976.

*A Field in England*, Ben Wheatley (Director), Rook Films, 2013.

*The Future Ghost*, Leo Thau (Director), Thames Television, 3 September 1975.

*The Hallow*, Corin Hardy (Director), Fantastic Films, 2015.

*A History of Horror with Mark Gatiss*, ep. 2, 'Home Counties Horror', John Das (Director),  
BBC, 18 October 2010.

*The Inheritance*, Peter Webb (Director), Thames Television, 11 August 1976.

*Kill List*, Ben Wheatley (Director), Optimum Releasing and IFC Midnight, 2011.

*The League of Gentlemen*, Steve Bendelack (Director), BBC, 11 January 1999 – 31 October  
2002.

*Red Shift*, John Mackenzie (Director), BBC, 17 January 1978.

*Robin Redbreast*, John MacTaggart (Director), BBC, 1970.

*The Stone Tape*, Peter Sasdy (Director), BBC, December 25 1972.

*A View from a Hill*, Luke Watson (Director), BBC, 23 December 2005.

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