

***Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange* by Adam Scovell**

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***Folk Horror Revival: Field Studies* (Second Edition) edited by Andy Paciorek, Grey Malkin, Richard Hing and Katherine Peach**

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Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange

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How do we define Folk Horror? These two books, in very different ways, explore what is meant by the term. For Adam Scovell, arguably the genre's foremost theorist, Folk Horror is

a prism of a term. Its light disperses into a spectrum of colours that range in shade and contrast. Contrary to the handful of images that the term now invokes, arguing for it to represent a single body of artistic work with strict parameters and definitions is ... impossible. (5)

Andy Paciorek, in *Folk Horror Revival: Field Studies*, acknowledges this difficulty, likening the process of definition to 'attempt[ing] to build a box in the exact shape of mist; for like the mist, Folk Horror is atmospheric and sinuous. It can creep from and into different territories, yet leave no universally defining mark of its exact form' (12). Both works illustrate the convenience of, and the problems with, such fluid genre boundaries.

Hours Dreadful and Things Strange is Scovell's first full-length work and builds upon his *Celluloid Wicker Man* blog. Not only is the book satisfyingly generous in scope, Scovell's prodigious knowledge of film and television gives the reader confidence in his conclusions.

In his introduction, Scovell recounts a brief meeting with *The Wicker Man* (1973) director Robin Hardy in which, full of fanboy enthusiasm, he is eager to share his nascent theories about that film's connections to the works of M. R. James, to the haunting Public Information Films of the 1970s, to 'Vincent Price in [English] Civil War garb, and unearthed Martians under a tube station' (Scovell 5). Since then, acknowledging that TV and film as diverse as *Kill List* (2011) and *The Owl Service* (1969-70) sit comfortably within its borders, Scovell has developed a framework he calls the Folk Horror Chain. This can be used as a template to identify – or produce – a work of Folk Horror.

The chain, Scovell says, was created to account for the connections between the 'Unholy Trinity' of the genre (*The Wicker Man*, *Witchfinder General* (1968) and *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971)), but also to allow a degree of flexibility in accounting for their differences. There are four links in the chain.

1. *Landscape*: categorised as 'where elements in the topography have adverse effects on the social and moral identity of the inhabitants' (17).
2. *Isolation*: these works are not necessarily rural, but typically feature a community cut off from society: a village, small town, moor or island. Isolation is also highlighted by the appearance of outsiders (who are themselves now isolated).
3. *Skewed belief system*: as demonstrated by the pagans of Summerisle, or the 'happy' villagers of *Children of the Stones* (1977).
4. *Summoning/happening*: which Scovell admits is the weakest link, covering as it must any type of climactic incident.

If we assume that the presence of these links makes a work 'folk horror' (and arguments could be made to the contrary), are we closer to that elusive definition? It helps if we define our terms. For Scovell, 'folk' can refer to:

the practise of a people or community; the elements of ethnographic tradition ...
the aesthetics of such practices and the natural ancestry of the visual and
thematic elements that accompanied them ... or ... a connected link between

certain forms that emerged in the popular culture of the 1960s ... In one sense, it is all of these. (Scovell 6)

As for ‘horror’, ‘it is not necessarily always “horror” within any straightforward guise of the term, but simply a mutation of its affect ... the inherent feeling is broad across other forms such as science-fiction and fantasy’ (6). Scovell unites these to arrive at a threefold definition:

A work that uses folklore ... to imbue itself with a sense of the arcane for eerie, uncanny or horrific purposes. [A work that] presents a clash between such arcania and its presence within close proximity to some form of modernity [and] A work which creates its own folklore through various forms of popular conscious memory. (7)

If Scovell’s approach is to examine the ‘folk-ness’ of horror, Paciorek’s, on the other hand, is to demonstrate the ‘horror-ness’ of folk. To this end *Folk Horror Revival: Field Studies* includes a number of articles investigating genuine folklore and interviews with artists or academics in the realm of contemporary paganism. Although categorically ‘folk’ and to an extent ‘horrific’, for some readers the presence of these articles and interviews may seem incongruous (additionally, the pathological misanthropy of Thomas Ligotti, while making for fascinating reading, seems particularly out of place).

The most obvious feature of *Folk Horror Revival: Field Studies* – other than the size of the book – is the sheer breadth. As mentioned above, this does mean covering areas that may not be to every reader’s taste, but if one article fails to please, the next may. This rattle-bag nature thus makes for a constantly surprising read. Some analyses (including several by Scovell) mine depths that *Hours Dreadful* does not. Others focus on areas that Scovell does not, including the comic side of Folk Horror, and film soundtrack reviews. There are also some nuggets such as interviews with directors Piers Haggard and Robin Hardy. The book could therefore be used as a companion piece to *Hours Dreadful*, or as a source of raw material (which the *Field Studies* of the title implies).

By contrast *Hours Dreadful* is structured, not by the links in the Folk Horror Chain, but in the underlying themes of the genre. First, Scovell looks at ‘Topographies’, by which he means ‘landscape as a temporal and sentient being’. This use of landscape is similar to what China Miéville calls the ‘pictureskew’: the ‘bad conscience’ (Miéville) of the picturesque, where ‘the forms of the picturesque have been repurposed to provoke unease’. Miéville’s

definition is therefore broad enough to cover the (Romantic) idea of the ‘sublime’, as something in the landscape provoking an awe that borders on terror, as well as Folk Horror examples like Alan Garner’s *The Owl Service* in which a myth is reactivated by the coming together of that myth’s component parts within its original setting.

Scovell then moves on to ‘Rurality’, which he uses to cover films in which the gap between the urban and the rural creates a weird space, which allows works to enter into the Folk Horror discourse that do not necessarily feature all the links of the Folk Horror Chain. Scovell discusses *Straw Dogs* (1971), *Psychomania* (1973), *An American Werewolf in London* (1981), and many of the late 60s and early 70s works of Hammer and Tigon studios.

Third, Scovell addresses ‘Hauntology’, a term seemingly as fluid as ‘Folk Horror’, and ‘now commonly used to account for our own ... relationships with British artefacts from the 1970s as well as ... the concept of lost futures’ (122), and which the late Mark Fisher examined in depth in *Ghosts of my Life* (2014). In this chapter, Scovell also looks at the big-city cousin of Folk Horror: the ‘Urban Wyrld’. In doing so, he identifies Hammer’s film version of Nigel Kneale’s *Quatermass and the Pit* (1967) as a key work. This is a film which, in unearthing ancient evil, not only ties it to *The Blood on Satan’s Claw* but more pertinently for Scovell, to the very real horrors of the 1970s.

The 1970s - the era in which most of the works under discussion were created - was a time when the optimistic mood of the 1960s had turned sour, interest in the occult had bled into the mainstream, but the post-war economic settlement in the UK had not yet been killed off by the election of Margaret Thatcher. Consequently, it is a period viewed with a degree of nostalgia by those whose recollection of it is nebulous. Hauntology, though, is not a reflection of our nostalgia but a prism through which we can examine it, positing as it does a past that does not quite tally with either recorded history or popular memory. After all, the 1970s was the era of the likes of Jimmy Savile. For Scovell this makes the decade ‘not just the place where Folk Horror was produced most abundantly but [is] itself the most terrifying form of Folk Horror conceivable’ (162).

Following on from his discussion of the 1970s, Scovell looks at modern Folk Horror: recent film and television that share links of the chain,¹ and the resurgence of interest in the genre, of which Scovell’s book is itself a product. The obvious question about the return of Folk Horror is ‘why now?’ Scovell is forthright in his analysis. He identifies the near-

collapse of the global banking system in the late 2000s, and the subsequent election of an austerity government in the UK, as catalysts.

A key to understanding why a genre dormant for almost forty years should suddenly become relevant, can be found in Ben Wheatley and Amy Jump's *Kill List*, which

isn't as literally isolated as other Folk Horror films, but it is so in terms of morality and emotion; this is a world where power has been taken away from working-class people who, even when armed with weapons, are still ultimately mere tools in an upper elite's social game. (177)

Scovell wrote the book during the 2016 EU referendum campaign, of which he says 'there have been few political events in recent years that have resembled the genre in such startling detail' with its 'local jobs for local people' ethos (184).

He finds hope, however, in the workings of Folk Horror. Although it is a genre that can draw 'blood and soil' nationalists (attracted by what they perceive as an evocation of a lost, golden-age England), on the contrary, Folk Horror:

provides two essential bulwarks against such nostalgia-tinted ideologies: it blasts apart the romantic visions of an England gone by through unflinchingly depicting how violent and brutal the past really was. The second is that it portrays villains who harness similar techniques of indoctrination that contemporary far-right groups and figures use ... such figures appropriate the same aesthetics and social narratives to control communities. (184)

In conclusion, returning to his initial question of "what is Folk Horror?" Scovell observes – and has gone some way to proving – 'that the genre resists such a direct question' (183). It is:

a social map that tracks the unconscious ley lines between a huge range of different types of media ... that connects the past and the present to create a clash of belief systems and people, modernity and enlightenment against superstition and faith ... it is the evil under the soil, the terror in the backwoods ... the loneliness of a brutalist tower block. (183)

As a source of critical analysis and academic rigour, filled with pathways that will send the curious off to unearth forgotten film and TV, *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things*

Strange is a landmark work which deserves to be read by anyone with an interest in contemporary horror.

Notes

¹ Howard James Ingham, in his *Room 207 Press* blog, argues that the original works from the 60s and 70s were ‘accidental’ folk horror: ‘people making films and TV didn’t set out specifically to make “folk horror”, they set out to make compelling dramas that chimed with the cultural preoccupations of their day’. Since the term became common currency, any contemporary work which is ‘deliberately packaged’ as ‘Folk Horror’ ‘must live up to [the] label, and beg to be judged by how it lives up to that label.’ As such, it runs the risk of what Ingham calls ‘Folk Horror Bingo’, in which the viewer can tick off all of the tropes associated with the genre (or the links in Scovell’s Chain).

References

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