Identity and Folk Horror in Julian Richards' *Darklands*

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Julian Richards' *Darklands* (1996) occupies an important place in British cinema history as the first home-grown Welsh horror film. Despite this, and some awards success (including a Méliès d'argent[1]), critical response in the UK was largely negative. Much of this response focussed on the film's surface similarities to *The Wicker Man* (Robin Hardy, 1973) and its low production values (it was shot on Super 16mm for £500,000). Claire Monk's *Sight and Sound* review sums up the overall reaction of the press, making positive remarks about the film's engagement with socio-political issues and themes of 'urban renewal' but criticising Richards for a superficial 'interest in his story's Celtic / pagan elements' and for 'offering little insight into Celtic, pagan or even Welsh nationalist beliefs' (1997: 37). Subsequently the film has remained largely ignored, a status not helped by the lack of a US release due to issues concerning distribution rights ('Darklands' 2012). Despite growing interest in British horror, particularly folk horror, *Darklands* merits little more than one-line mentions in most histories of the subgenre, if it features at all. The most significant discussion of the film has come from writer / director Richard Stanley, who, in an essay decrying the state of British horror in the 1990s, described it as a 'staggeringly inept' attempt 'to transplant the all too familiar plotline of *The Wicker Man* to Wales' (2002: 193).

These criticisms seem harsh when revisiting the film now. Although it does indeed suffer from low production value, as well as inconsistent performances, *Darklands* merits consideration partly as an important Welsh text but also as a folk horror film produced during a period of stagnation in that subgenre's production and popularity. And in drawing on the intertwined identities of Welsh, pagan and Celtic, it also points to wider issues with the conceptions of such identities and their use, particularly in how they are constructed from

colonial discourses of otherness. *Darklands,* I argue here, presents a folk horror that challenges conceptions of the intersecting identities of Welsh, Celtic and pagan while simultaneously disrupting the basis of those identities. It also, in its subversion of Welsh stereotypes, creates an Industrial 'Wyrd' that suggests how folk horror can interact with urban landscapes.

Wales, Identity and Horror

A country of roughly 3 million people, dwarfed by England's 55 million but comparable to Scotland's 5 million, Wales became allied to its neighbours through annexation in the fifteenth century. It shares much in terms of culture and history with the other Celtic nations, Ireland and Scotland, but has generally lacked their cultural impact or global recognition. Independence is not as dominant a political issue in Wales as in Scotland (Wales's 1997 referendum for devolved political powers was won by 50.3% to 49.7%), although calls for independence are growing, in large part through the political party Plaid Cymru, which expressly advocates for independence. Culturally, geographically and economically Wales is split between North and South; featuring the capital Cardiff, the South enjoyed great economic prosperity during the Industrial Revolution and the first half of the twentieth century when heavy industry was predominant (Vinen 2009: 210). Nowhere is this more evident than in Port Talbot, the setting for *Darklands* and birthplace of its director*,* where the community is dominated, both visually and in terms of employment, by the extensive steel works.

Typically, the South has been more Anglicised than the North, where the Welsh language is much more common as a first language and Plaid Cymru is more popular (Morris 2005:13). The language itself was generally in decline until various interventions lead to a Welsh language television channel, S4C, in 1982, which helped it recover and laid the base

for a revitalisation which continues (Morris 2005: 12-13). This resurgence correlated to an increased sense of Welsh identity driven in part by the economic policies of Margaret Thatcher's government, which laid waste to many communities that relied on heavy industry. These policies had a radical impact on the Port Talbot steel works, which fell from a 1960s high point of 18,000 employees to its current total of 4,000, who are regularly under threat (Duffy 2016). When Thatcher rose to power in 1979, the 'proportion of people in Wales who defined themselves as "Welsh", rather than "British", had dropped to 57 per cent'. However, 'Two years into the Thatcher government, this proportion had risen to 69 per cent' (Vinen 2009: 211). Welsh identity, of course, has a much longer history than this. One prominent example is the Eisteddfod, a festival of music and performance presided over by ceremonial leaders known as Druids. Eisteddfods trace their roots back to the twelfth century, although their present form comes from the 1800s during a period where figures such as Iolo Morganwg and Edward Lhuyd sought to revive a Romantic version of a culture that had been in various ways abandoned and repressed for centuries. Key to this revival was the figure of the Druid, a Celtic / pagan religious leader conceptualised as 'at the heart of British resistance to the Romans' (Richards 1997: 213). For Wales, the Druid has become a potent symbol of a distinct Welsh identity with origins in pre-Anglo-Saxon and Christian cultures. Such was the impact of Lhuyd that it became widely accepted that 'the Welsh were the ancient Britons and the ancient Britons were the Celts, a race of rulers, warriors, artists and poets' (Richards 1997: 213). From here the conception of Wales as a 'land of song' took hold. *Darklands* engages with these ideas, especially the Romantic vision of a pre-Anglo-Saxon, pre-Christian culture, as well as with the economic decline of the 1980s, which scarred the landscape of much of South Wales and broke many of the communities that relied on heavy industry. It also draws from another historical conception of Welsh identity. Colin McArthur has discussed how Celts have been constructed through discourse as a 'monstrous other' in

opposition to the urban, civilised, bourgeois English, and this is seen in various depictions that reinforce ideas of the Welsh as infantile, emotional and violent (quoted in Morris 2005: 10).

Cinematically, Wales has had less exposure on screen than other parts of Britain and lacks the better-known cinematic identities of Scotland and Ireland. Despite the success of various Welsh actors in Hollywood, the predominant film depiction remains John Ford's *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), filmed in Hollywood with a mostly Irish cast. Although *Darklands* was produced during a resurgence in British filmmaking, led by commercial and critical hits such as *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Mike Newell, 1994) and *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996), Welsh cinema lacked a comparable hit. Despite a mid-to-late 1990s flurry of film-making that produced films including *Twin Town* (Kevin Allen, 1997) and Oscar nominated Welsh language films *Hedd Wyn* (Paul Turner, 1992) and *Solomon & Gaenor* (Paul Morrison, 1999), there has been no establishment of a long-term Welsh film industry. Morris highlights how early cinematic depictions of Wales, from the 1910s and 1920s, cemented the English colonial view of a nation of 'poor but honest farmers, singing shepherdesses, gypsy magic and mountain pastures', ignoring the industrial landscape that was pivotal to the economy (2005: 10). *Twin Town*, produced eighty years after such depictions first took hold, acknowledged the stereotypes that had become dominant in the intervening years in its subversive poster tagline:

Rugby. Tom Jones. Male Voice Choirs. Shirley Bassey.

Llanfairpwllgwyngllgogerychwyrndrobwyllllantisiliogogogch.

Snowdonia. Prince of Wales. Anthony Hopkins. Daffodils. Sheep. Sheep

Lovers. Coal. Slate Quarries. The Blaenau Ffestiniog Dinkey-Doo

Railway. Now if that's Your Idea of Thousands of Years of Welsh

Culture, You Can't Blame Us For Trying to Liven the Place Us A Little

Can You?

Running parallel to this brief boom in Welsh filmmaking, and the success of the wider British film industry, was a continuing decline in British horror. As described by Johnny Walker, the state of British horror was 'dire' in the 1990s, a decade that 'did not proffer the most encouraging environment for indigenous horror production' (2016: 2). British horror's revival would come later, in part thanks to *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2002), leaving *Darklands* as an isolated example from the period.

Making it stand out in this otherwise desultory period is its status as the first horror film set and shot in Wales with a mostly Welsh cast (although the main characters are played by English actors). Before *Darklands*, Wales appears to have been almost non-existent in the genre, the most conspicuous appearances coming in two Universal horrors, *The Old Dark House* (James Whale, 1932) and *The Wolf Man* (George Waggoner, 1941). Although both are set in Wales, neither engages with the country's culture or language; instead they use the landscape as an evocative backdrop (and are filmed in California, of course). In the former the only character identified as Welsh, by his name, is Morgan a mute and violent man-servant played by Boris Karloff. In the latter, the town is given a Welsh name, Llanwelly, but lacks other distinctive elements. Both present a rough and forbidding landscape, dangerous to outsiders and well away from the industrial areas of the South. Perhaps the most significant contribution of the country to the genre was as a location during the opening scenes of *American Werewolf in London* (John Landis, 1981), filmed around the Black Mountains but set on the Yorkshire moors.

Unlike the Universal films, *Darklands* directly engages with Welsh culture and identity. In discussing the film, Steven Blandford notes its engagement with 'the "orientalised" vision of Welshness' but also its 'subversive and irreverent' elements (2007:

94). The film's protagonist Frazer Truick is the vehicle through which the film engages with Welsh stereotypes. Played by East End actor Craig Fairbrass,[2] Truick is a London-based journalist who returns to the town of his birth, Port Talbot, after his career in England stalls. Despite being Welsh by birth, Truick is a monoglot who speaks with a cockney accent, is unaware of local customs, and is alarmed at the nationalist sentiments expressed by local politician David Keller (John Finch). After prompting from a journalism student, Rachel (Rowena King), Truick starts to connect the desecration of a local church to Keller's Regeneration movement, a campaign that asks the local community to 'rediscover our true identity'. Truick then starts to investigate the death of a steel worker, Rachel's brother, who may have been used as a sacrifice in a ritual designed to bring prosperity back to the area. As the main point of identification for the audience, Truick's experiences of Welsh culture are featured prominently, and mostly he encounters hostility. All this would be simple enough, and would align with historical colonialist views, if Truick was a sympathetic protagonist. Throughout the film, however, both Truick and the Welsh community are represented ambivalently, complicating issues of identity and allowing criticism of both sides to emerge.

Although mostly performed in English, the Welsh language, both spoken and written, punctuates the film, providing a narrative obstacle for Truick but also insinuating a sense of a hostility. Here the representation feeds on historical tensions concerning the Welsh language, such as attempts in the past by English governments to eradicate it completely and director Richards' own experience of exclusion from the Welsh media industry as a non-Welsh speaker (Blandford 1996: 94). Not only is Truick alienated from the local community by the use of Welsh, but he is actively hostile to the language, describing it as 'gobbledygook', recycling colonial attitudes that are exacerbated by his lack of sensitivity to local communities, such as when he trespasses into a Gypsy camp, which, in a subversive act of casting, has Ray Gravell as the Bearded Gypsy. Gravell was a well-loved rugby player for

both Llanelli and Wales and a notable advocate for the Welsh language. That the communities he finds are hostile to him comes as a shock to Truick, but any sympathy we might develop for him is complicated by his insensitivities. At various stages of the narrative, he is shown to be ignorant and impotent, qualities implicitly linked to his rejection of his birth culture.

The film is not uncritical of the Welsh community, however: it is often depicted as inward, violent and exclusionary. This is most evident in the Gypsy camp, the locus for the conspiracy that Truick uncovers. The Gypsies are thuggish, speak Welsh throughout, and provide both the animal sacrifices and the muscle behind Keller's pagan revival, rehashing colonial representations of Wales and the Celts.[3] Ironically, Keller himself displays a markedly bourgeois lifestyle, living in a country house while running his political campaign. An overt nationalist, Keller evokes Wales's industrial and colonial past when railing against the Anglicised nature of South Wales, which he describes as 'a culture born from the rape of this fair country. It's a culture left to rot on the scrap heap like a knackered pit pony'. However, his own house is decorated with artefacts from other indigenous cultures that have been colonised by European powers, items perhaps plundered from their owners. So strong are Keller's views in favour of national autonomy,[4] he is willing to include 'cannibalism and human sacrifice' as side-effects of independence. Keller's political campaign is overtly linked to fascism throughout, most obviously in the costume of his enforcer Carver whose black costume makes an explicit link to the ideology, as well as Keller's own rhetoric, which focuses on racial purity.

If these elements fail to create a coherent sense of 'Welshness', the effect is to continually ask questions of the identities that are represented: we have Truick, the Anglicised Welshman, the Gypsies as the violent, Welsh-speaking colonial cliché, and Keller, a fascist who espouses independence while surrounding himself with the spoils of

empire. Love interest Rachel furthers the diversity of representation. Played by an actress born in London with Liberian heritage, her English accent and her race put her at odds with the nationalists she seems to support. Throughout the first half of the film, Rachel acts as a sounding board for Truick, albeit one that expands the confusion over the various identities in play. Her description of a book in Welsh as 'in Celtic' points to an elision of identities that *Darklands* engages in and fails to resolve. Throughout the film, Welsh, Celtic and pagan are used almost as synonyms, without any clarity as to what these ideas mean, or how they coalesce. This points to a wider question pervading folk horror, generally, in terms of how concepts of pagan and Celtic are portrayed. In its attempts to reconcile narratives of otherness and nation, *Darklands* points to the complexity of representing these identities, especially when attempting to engage with pre-existing colonial attitudes.

Darklands and Folk Horror

Darklands contains overt references to several significant horror films. Most obvious is the influence of *The Wicker Man*, but elements of *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968) are seen in the forced conception of a child; desecrated churches recall *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1974); and Port Talbot's industrial landscapes owe much to *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982). The line, 'Long live the new flesh', from *Darklands*' climactic ritual borrows from David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983). To write the film off simply as 'genre homage at its most vacant' (Monk 1997: 37), however, ignores how the film works to create variations within the existing narrative codes of folk horror.

Critical appreciation of folk horror has developed more in the last ten years than in the previous thirty. Much of this attention has focused on its most famous film texts *Witchfinder General* (Michael Reeves, 1968), *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (Piers Haggard, 1971) and *The Wicker Man.* Mark Gatiss helped popularise the term folk horror in the BBC documentary *A*

History of Horror (2010), in which he referred to these three films as sharing a 'common obsession with the British landscape, its folklore and superstitions'. While on the surface *Darklands* has a strong resemblance to the most well-known of these, *The Wicker Man*, the differences between the films are telling, particularly in the viewer's relationship to the protagonist and his fate. In *The Wicker Man*, the spectator largely shares Sergeant Howie's experience of Summerisle, suspecting but not knowing the fate of the missing Rowan. It is only at the dénouement of the film that both Howie and the audience come to understand that he has been brought to the island as part of an elaborate plan to use him (not Rowan) as a virgin sacrifice in a fertility ritual. *Darklands* eliminates this narrative enigma, however, by opening with an animal sacrifice, making it plain from the beginning that a cult exists. The audience is thus placed in a position of superior knowledge to Truick, which is reinforced several times (for example the audience learns of Rachel's murder by Carver well ahead of Truick). Rather than offering a restricted narrative in which the spectator knows as much, or as little, as the protagonist, *Darklands* continually places the spectator in a position of greater knowledge, emphasising Truick's impotence and his manipulation by the community. Indeed, familiarity of *The Wicker Man'*s plot helps the audience stay ahead of Truick throughout, exacerbating the difficulties of identification already created through his negative relationship to the setting. By removing the mystery, the film shows Truick's fate to be inevitable, lending a grim humour to his various attempts to understand and discover the conspiracy that surrounds him.

The sacrifice itself forms an intertextual variation on that in *The Wicker Man:* unlike Howie's sacrifice (because he is a virgin), Truick has to have sex before his sacrifice, to conceive his successor. This is used throughout *Darklands* to link ideas of emasculation and nation as the Anglicised Truick, in three separate scenes, fails to orgasm while having sex with Rachel, is drugged and forced to have sex to conceive his heir and, at the film's climax,

shoots blanks from his gun at the gathering cult members. As the narrative unfolds, we find that Truick has been targeted for this fate from birth, as had his father before him, as will his son. It lends a bleak inevitability to the film and seals his status as passive victim rather than active protagonist. Whereas Howie can be read heroically, as Christian martyr, Truick is afforded no such status – he is simply part of a larger cycle which he cannot change. This bleakness offers a statement on the situation not only of the characters but also of Wales itself in relation to hundreds of years of English governance—manipulation by forces seen and unseen that render attempts to resist null and void. The pagan cult in *Darklands* has access to the state apparatus, including the Police, National Health Service, the Steelworks, press and rail system in an ironic reversal of many people's experience of the political reality in Wales through the Thatcher years.

Beyond its relationship to the *The Wicker Man*, *Darklands* is connected to folk horror more generally. Adam Scovell describes folk horror texts as having three key aspects; they are works that 'use folklore' to achieve a 'sense of the arcane for eerie, uncanny or horrific purposes', dramatized in a clash with the modern world which then creates 'its own folklore through various forms of popular conscious memory' (2017: 7). As such the subgenre can embrace texts as diverse as the BBC's M. R. James adaptation, *Whistle and I'll Come to You* (Jonathan Miller, 1968), various episodes of *Dr Who*, and even Public Information Films such as *Lonely Water* (Jeff Grant, 1973) in which the voice of Donald Pleasence warns British children away from dangerous lakes and rivers. Scovell also defines a 'folk horror chain', a narrative template that begins with the importance of landscape: 'the landscape is essentially the first link, where elements within its topography have adverse effects on the social and moral identity of its inhabitants'. This is key to the second element, isolation, in which 'people are cut off from some established social progress of the diegetic world'. Within this isolation there will have developed 'skewed belief systems and morality', in

which a society has deviated from the norm, from 'the general social status quo of the era in which the films are made coupled with the diegesis of the cinema itself'. Finally, these elements lead to the 'happening / summoning', what Scovell calls 'the resulting action from this skewed social consciousness', a violent and supernatural conclusion in which the 'the group belief systems summon up something demonic or generally supernatural' (2017: 17-18)

Darklands certainly conforms to these elements. The film features a reconstruction of pre-Christian traditions, including human sacrifice, rubbing shoulders with heavy industry and regional politics and includes 'its own folklore' in the use of Druidic imagery with ideas drawn from other pagan traditions, such as the May Queen and the Green Man. The economic decline of the area has effectively cut much of it off from the progress seen in the rest of the UK, and Keller is pushing his own 'skewed belief systems and morality'. The resulting action, or 'Happening', is, of course, Truick's sacrifice—part of what Keller calls the 'Regeneration'.

Pagan and Celtic Identities in Folk Horror

In depicting the Regeneration cult Richards draws from a wide range of ideas that are broadly captured by the concepts of pagan and Celtic. Central to this cult is the festival of Beltane, or May Day, celebrated by the lighting of fires. Richards gives a central place in his visualisation of pagan / Celtic rituals to the May Queen (seen also in *The Wicker Man*), a figure of Cornish origin (Cornwall is considered Celtic, rather than English by many) with a Green Man in attendance. Dancers are covered in circular designs reminiscent of Celtic art. Some of his inspiration comes from the Beltane Fire Festival, a 'dynamic reinterpretation and modernisation of an ancient Iron Age Celtic ritual' (Beltane Fire Society) that occurs annually in Edinburgh. As high priest during the film's climax, Keller dresses in Druidic

robes similar to those worn at Eisteddfods. This suggests a more specifically Welsh identity

than the more generically Celtic identity associated with Beltane, but it also highlights a pick-

and-mix approach, particularly as Calan Mai, a parallel Welsh festival, is never referenced.[5]

This mixing of different traditions recalls *The Wicker Man*, which has largely defined the

cinematic codes for Celtic / pagan traditions in folk horror.

As Mikel Koven notes, the main source for the Celtic paganism that appears in *The*

Wicker Man was not the novel it was based on, *Ritual* by David Pinner, but Sir James George

Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890),[6] an 'unselfconsciously Victorian perception of Celtic

Paganism' (2006: 83). Frazer himself drew on Roman writings to create a picture of pre-

Christian beliefs and traditions including his conception of a wicker man, which comes from

Julius Caesar's *The Gallic Wars.* In the original however, wicker men were effigies in which

criminals were sacrificed in France, notably not in Scotland. Frazer was largely uncritical of

his sources, ignoring the potential for bias as Koven explains,

> legends are, in addition to negotiations about the possible, negotiations
>
> about the Other. To see the 'wicker colossus' episode as legend, in part, is
>
> to see a negotiation of whether such 'barbarity' could have been
>
> perpetuated by non-Christians / non-Romans (depending on the source of
>
> the legend), thereby creating a visceral distinction between 'us' (Frazer's
>
> Victorian Britons or Caesar's Republican Romans) and 'them' (the ancient
>
> pre-Christian Celts or cultures deserving to be conquered or occupied).
>
> (2006: 84-5)

That *The Wicker Man's* director, Robin Hardy, and screenwriter, Anthony Shaffer, read

Frazer uncritically is evinced in various interviews promoting the film, which show how they

failed to understand Frazer's biases. Beyond the effigy signaled in the title, *The Wicker Man*

displays a hybridization of regionally diverse traditions presented together as if part of a

coherent whole (including Beltane, homeopathic medicine in the form of the Hand of Glory and various costumes such as the Hobby Horse), leading Koven to describe the film's effect as akin to a 'folkloric amusement park' (2006: 93). This issue of representation is further problematized when considering the use and meaning of Celtic within *Darklands*.

Ronald Hutton has suggested that the word Celtic has been applied to 'three different phenomena – to an ancient racial group, a set of languages, and a style of curvilinear decoration – which interlocked create the modern concept of Celticity' (2013: 167). He continues,

> Ancient Greek and Roman authors had spoken of Celts as a category of
> people, but generally used the term vaguely to indicate barbarians living
> north of the Rhine delta, Alps or Danube; none provided any criteria for it
> and they disagreed over where the people for whom they used it should be
> located. The employment of the word 'Celtic' to describe a group of
> languages has occurred only at the beginning of the eighteenth century, by
> the Welsh scholar Edward Lhuyd; and most of the languages concerned
> survived in the British Isles, where no ancient writer had placed the Celts.
> The category of 'Celtic art' was a nineteenth century one. (167-68)

Celtic identity, which embraces Welsh, Scottish, Irish, Cornish and Breton people, therefore emerges as much a construction of 'nineteenth century attitudes of racist stereotyping' (Hutton 2013: 168) as anything historically based. For some Victorian writers this was romanticised as 'magical, imaginative and egalitarian, but [. . .] accepted to be superstitious, excitable and subversive' (Gibson 2013: 142). Ironically, then, the attempt to create an identity rooted in the past actually engages closely with Victorian conceptions rather than the much longer past itself. A tension emerges between the romantic conception and the barbaric

other, paralleling the ways in which Welsh identity more generally has frequently, within modernity, been recovered partly from history and partly from romantic imaginings.

Although attacked by contemporary critics for its lack of coherence regarding Celtic, pagan and Welsh identities the confusion shown in *Darklands* is reflective of a problem inherent in those identities and in their depiction in folk horror texts. They are identities that have been constructed, or reconstructed, from Victorian attitudes and ideas and are by their nature full of contradictions and incoherence.

The Industrial 'Wyrd'

It is in the urban mise-en-scène that we see *Darklands'* main innovation—that is, the relocation to an industrial landscape scarred by modernity and decline rather than the rural environments and isolated communities common in the subgenre, suggesting how folk horror can break out from its typical rural setting. Scovell discusses the occurrence of the 'Urban Wyrd'[7] in folk horror, as seen particularly in the works of Nigel Kneale. According to Scovell, the term describes how 'urban topographies and zones' interact with the 'Folkloric realm' (2017: 144). *Darklands* creates a sense of what I call the 'Industrial Wyrd', in which folk beliefs co-exist with the furnaces and trains of Port Talbot's declining steel industry. The 'happening / summoning' elements of the film take place within the steelworks, which visually provide imagery suggestive of hell and ritual burnings. Throughout the film, circus performers, who are decorated in circular Celtic designs, marry elemental fire and industrial tools in their shows. *Darklands* juxtaposes ideas of the rural, pagan past with the industrial present, then, drawing attention to how beliefs survive beyond industrial and technological development.

Referring to the works of Jacques Derrida and Mark Fisher, Scovell defines hauntology as 'our own cultural, and sometimes moral, relationships with British artefacts

from the 1970s as well as artwork that deals with the concept of lost futures' (2017: 122).

Scovell uses this concept not only to explore folk horror texts from the 1970s but also to

discuss how 'the traumas seen and unseen within the period are now repeating through our

constant rediscovery of such culture' (2017: 124). *Darklands* engages with hauntology

through its drawing from the past and expressing, through Keller's political campaign, the

desire for the lost future that might have been if only Thatcher had not been elected in 1979

and if Wales had voted for an assembly government in the same year. The use of Super

16mm, a low budget format that came into use in 1969, recreates some of the filming

conditions from the 1970s. Casting John Finch as Keller further cements this link to the past,

given his appearances in *The Vampire Lovers* (Roy Ward Baker, 1970), *The Horror of

Frankenstein* (Jimmy Sangster, 1970), *Macbeth* (Roman Polanski, 1971) and *Frenzy* (Alfred

Hitchcock, 1972). For Welsh audiences the appearance of the rugby player from the 1970s,

Ray Gravell, provides a further connection to a time when the Welsh national team was

considered pre-eminent. (By the mid-1990s the team was in the doldrums.) It is both the past

and a lost future for which the pagan cult, Keller's 'Regeneration', is yearning. To regenerate

is to grow again, with both physical and spiritual connotations.

As a film, *Darklands* is far from perfect. However, by engaging with questions of

Welsh identity, recreating and innovating around aspects of the folk horror tradition, and

drawing attention to the contradictions and problems of pagan and Celtic identities, the film

shows its value. *Darklands* may not consistently reconcile these elements into a coherent

whole, but it does create a complex dialogue with them, asking questions of their very nature,

of how these linked identities have been constructed as both romantic and monstrous. More

recently, two additional folk horror films have been set in Wales, *The Dark* (John Fawcett,

2005)[8] and *Apostle* (Gareth Evans, 2018). Whatever their relative merits as films, both

recycle the old tropes of Wales as a country of harsh, unremitting, and isolating countryside.

It is to Richards' credit that in *Darklands* he attempted to create a film that was not only engaging with Welsh identities and the legacy of colonialism but also attempting to transform its cinematic appearance.

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[1] The Méliès d'argent was awarded by the European Fantastic Film Festivals Federation in 1997.

[2] Fairbrass is a cult actor mostly known for a supporting role in the Stallone vehicle *Cliffhanger* (Reny Harlin, 1993).

[3] A gypsy camp also features prominently in *The Wolf Man* (1941). From this comes the werewolf (Bela Lugosi) who bites protagonist Lon Chaney Jr.

[4] *Darklands* was released the year before Wales marginally voted in favour of a devolved government (1997).

[5] Welsh customs for Calan Mai include the lighting of fires (with the possibility of animal sacrifice), decoration of houses with hawthorn branches and flowers (linked to fertility) and hanging a straw man (called a 'crogi gwr gwellt') as a token of love. Singing and dancing, some of an overtly sexual nature, and raising a maypole (called 'codi'r fedwen' in South Wales and 'y gangen haf' in North Wales) would also take place ('Welsh' 2012).

[6] *Darklands* features a fictional text *Arwydd Paganaidd* (Sign of the Pagan) that functions like the *Golden Bough.* Keller draws from it to create his brand of Celtic paganism.

[7] 'Wyrd' is an Anglo-Saxon word similar to fate and is the progenitor of the modern weird.

[8] *The Dark* is filmed in the Isle of Man, which makes a poor substitute for Wales.

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