

Conference Report, 'Folk Horror in the 21st Century',

Falmouth University, 4-5 September 2019

Dorka Tamás, University of Exeter

The organisers, Dawn Keetley, Ruth Heholt, Joanne Parsons and David Devanny, could not have chosen a better location for the 'Folk Horror in the 21st Century' conference in September 2019 than Falmouth University. Walking in the early morning through the woods to reach the campus felt like first-hand experience of the powerful 'landscape' from Adam Scovell's folk horror chain. The next step was not isolation, however, but rich intellectual discussion for two days on various subjects connected to folk horror. Dawn Keetley's welcome speech set the tone for the conference: as well as offering preliminary definitions of folk horror, she said she hoped that participants would debate new meanings for the subgenre in the twenty-first century.

As the title of the conference implied, folk horror is not limited to one medium: it is present in film, TV, literary studies, archaeology, the history of folklore, video games, and comic books. This was definitely a strength of the conference, to bring together people from such varied disciplines. The morning panels of the first day started with an exploration of folklore and of witchcraft and feminism in folk horror. The latter panel included Sarah Cave's paper on divine heresy, which explored the blurred boundaries between the female religious figure and the mythic and heretical witch. Máiréad Casey and Deborah Bridle revisited women's place in the genre of horror from a feminist perspective and looked at the different forms of women's exploitation. The panel ended with a provocative thought on the cultural fear of what women's communities do together, and how often an anxiety is present in the genre of folk horror, as it positions folk communities, particularly groups of women, as 'other'.

The next panels were titled ‘New Ways of Seeing 1970s Folk Horror’ and ‘Encountering Nature in Folk Horror’. David Sweeney’s presentation studied the short-lived Marvel UK’s comic book, *The Knights of Pendragon*, which was influenced by British folklore and Arthurian legend. The embodiment of environment was an important aspect of the comic book series, according to Sweeney, which both incorporated elements from folk horror and raised awareness of environmental issues. All three speakers talked about environment as a living organism: landscape represents the relationship between the non-human and the supernatural, a theme found extensively in the genre of folk horror.

After the soothing music during the lunch break by the duo We Are Muffy, participants could choose between panels on eerie geographies or the creative practices of folk horror. The fourth session consisted of three panels: ‘Folk Horror in the US’, ‘Expanding the Genres of Folk Horror’, and ‘The Political Uses of Folk Horror’. The latter included a fascinating presentation by Yasin Yesilyurt from Istanbul on Turkish horror cinema and its political function in the recent decade with the rising power of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Simon Aepli and Brendan Byrne both explored the right-wing exploitation of folk horror, which has perpetuated a politics of fear.

The first day of conference closed with the keynote speech by Tanya Krzywinska from Falmouth University. Entitled “‘Everybody’s Gone to the Rapture’: Folk Horror in Videogame Art”, Krzywinska’s paper appealed to people who are not at all familiar with gaming. She said her interest lies in exploring the ‘occult order of games’ and the specificity of folk horror used in the dynamics of video games. Krzywinska continued that most of these games are built from British folklore and fantasy, such as Tolkien’s works. Games like ‘Dear Esther’ and ‘Everybody’s Gone to the Rapture’ incorporate Scovell’s folk horror chain in which the landscape is embodied, exerting its own agency. Walking simulator games like ‘Rapture’, Krzywinska noted, deploy the landscape as something ‘beyond us’: it is not for the

gamer's pleasure but to remind the player of loss. According to Krzywinska, folk horror creates myth building and constructs otherness and the poetic of absence. Will we see more folk horror in video games with the development of VR? Krzywinska thinks it is a definite possibility; however, she said she find augmented reality more interesting and poetic, able to transform even your own house into a spooky environment.

Day two began with the second keynote speaker, Catherine Spooner from Lancaster University, whose paper was titled 'Whose Folk? Locating the Lancashire Witches in Twenty-first-century Culture'. The famous Pendle witch trial of 1612 celebrated its 400th anniversary just seven years ago, and, as Spooner noted, the community of Lancashire is still very divided on its history of witchcraft. Spooner began her presentation by reflecting on the rising interest in folklore during the nineteenth century, which was followed by the fictionalisation of the Pendle trials by many writers. In the twenty-first century, the Lancashire witches appear in historical novels, literary fiction, children's books and documentaries. According to Spooner, the trial of the Pendle witches is unique in the sense that it is both history and folklore: the landscape and Thomas Potts's account of the witch trial materialise the history, while the oral tradition also 'folklorised' the witches of Pendle. Spooner also highlighted Lancashire's walking tourism, which constructs the accused witches and the landscape as a romantic tourist attraction. According to her, the title question, 'Whose Folk?' reflects on the contemporary concerns of folk knowledge and folk history through which communities perceive their own past in often contradictory ways. During the question and answer period, Spooner also suggested that we must resist the political exploitation of folklore and the pagan past by ideologies that want to appropriate the 'folk' for their own agenda.

The first panel of the day was titled 'Magic and the Occult in Folk Horror'. The session included Timothy Jones's presentation on the black mass or sabbath in folk horror.

According to Jones, many anthropological texts produced in the beginning of the twentieth century, such as Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and Murray's *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*, influenced folk horror films and books produced during the 1960s-70s. Dennis Wheatley's black magic thrillers were at the centre of this production, but they are highly problematic, popularising certain conservative views about Satanists and the black mass. Angeline Morrison highlighted the absence of black characters in folk horror, and her presentation explored the episode 'Charlie Boy' from the 1980s popular TV horror series, *Hammer House of Horror*. Morrison argued that the lead character, Sarah, a young black woman, has similar features to the rural landscape in the genre of folk horror. In the episode, white colonial logic is opposed the 'primitive', exotic and sexual black woman which runs in parallel with the urban/rural binary in which 'magic does not travel', said Morrison. The third speaker of the panel, Barbara Chamberlin gave a fascinating presentation on her current PhD topic about the construction of the witch in contemporary comics. Her work, she highlighted, is based in creative practice, which includes a collaborative illustrative work and walking as a method of exploring space. The 'Domestic Folk Horror' panel, which ran parallel, included Sian Macfarlane's presentation on women and the domestic occult in 1960s cinema and Jen Baker's paper on 'The Dead-Child Folkloric Tradition in the late 20th Century and 21st Century'.

The panels of the sixth session included a second panel exploring folklore in folk horror and 'The Long Reach of the Past', which included a paper on Merlin and male witches in *A Canterbury Tale* and *A Field in England* by Lawrence Jackson—whose imitation of film voices was brilliantly funny—as well as my own presentation, 'The Appearance of *Macbeth*'s Weird Sisters in Contemporary Literature and Culture'. The folklore panel contained Joan Passey's 'Folklore Collecting and the Cornish Gothic', Katarzyna Logozna Wypych's paper

on ‘Stephen King’s Cats in Folk Horror’, and ‘The Dark Lakes: Social Death and the Screaming Skulls of Calgarth’ by Chelsea Eddy.

After the second lunch break, with everyone well-fed, the final keynote speaker, Bernice M. Murphy from Trinity College in Dublin gave an amazing (and often funny) speech on American folk horror traditions. Her presentation started with Shirley Jackson’s ‘The Lottery’ (1948), which Murphy named as the key text in American folk horror, inspiring many stories and films with its symbolism of the ‘black box’. Thomas Tryon’s *Harvest Home* (1973) is another defining text, incorporating elements from the old-world harvest rituals and reimagining them in a contemporary US setting. According to Murphy, the sacrificial worship of Demeter, the goddess of harvest, shows similarities to the Christianised harvest rituals and, in many American folk horror texts, the two coexist within the same community. Corn, and harvest and harvest rituals generally, are defining elements of American folk horror, all stemming from the importance of crops in the beginning of European colonisation of the continent. Murphy also highlighted the importance to folk horror narratives of Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, in which harvest sacrificial rituals often appear. The keynote speech ended with an analysis of several contemporary American horror films in which, as Murphy concluded, the symbolism of the black box appears: it is a symbolic reservoir of beliefs which justifies the sacrifices enacted by the community, who attribute supernatural powers to the object—or, in the case of *Jug Face* (2013), to the pit.

The first afternoon session included a panel on Robert Eggers’ *The Witch* and two interesting papers on ‘Rituals and Sacrifice in Folk Horror’. Adam Whybray talked about the video games, *Pathologic* and *Pathologic 2*, in which the heterotopic town turns out to be a sacrificial dark space which symbolises that ‘the earth is fallen ill’. Marco Malvestio’s presentation was an exploration of folk horror using René Girard’s theories of the origin of sacrificial rituals. In the question time, the two speakers shared their own views on sacrifice,

ecology, and capitalism which led to a deeply thoughtful conversation on what we see as sacrifice.

The last sessions of the conference had three thought-provoking panels: ‘Rethinking Folk Horror through Contemporary Films and TV’, ‘Global Folk Horror’, and the second part of ‘Creative Folk Horror Practices’. The panels included speakers on ‘Greek Folk Horror Stories and Revenant Heroines in the Early 20th Century’ by Maria Vara, Muhamet Alijaj’s paper on ‘The Role of the Rural Supernatural in *Requiem* and *True Detective*’, and ‘Shamanism through the Conflicted Lens of South Korean Horrors *Whispering Corridors* and *The Wailing*’ by Frazer Lee. Daniela Kato spoke about the Malaysian-based artist’s, Yee I-Lann’s performative photo collages which reimages and reclaims notions about femininity, fertility, and female monstrosity from South-East Asian folk horror narratives. Sherezade Garcia Rangel and Amy Lilwall presented their collaborative research and creative work about the Falmouth cemetery, including their new podcast, ‘On the Hill’, which retells stories of the people buried in the cemetery. This fascinating creative practice was a great way to end the conference sessions.

The final event of the conference was a lovely and eerie wine reception in the Photography Gallery, where the exhibition ‘Strange Folk’ curated by Tanya Krzywinska took place. This event embodied the atmosphere of the conference and culminated the enormous work of the organisers, who created an open and exciting event to explore folk horror in all forms.

The programme for the conference is still available on the website, and, if you would like to know more about the work of any of the presenters, please feel free to contact them: <https://wordpress.lehigh.edu/folkhorror2019/program/>.