

Review: *Woodlands Dark and Days Bewitched*

directed by Kier-La Janisse

United States of America
Severin Films, 2021
192 mins

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Folk Horror remains one of the most sinuous genres to define. This often centres on issues with defining the concept of 'folk', generally. According to Haase (1993), the folk are a national or ethnic group that share socio-cultural traits, lore and traditions. Historically, this has meant the working classes, however Cocchiara (1981) suggested a move away from defining folk by social class. Instead, Cocchiara (1981) posits that the folk transcends class structures, and acts as an expression of certain attitudes, visions of life, customs, culture, and civilisation. This definition includes the need for clearly delineated characteristics, a factor also present in the most contemporary, and frequently cited definition from Scovell (2017).

These definitions are useful in that they provide a framework through which academic exploration can take place. However, the focus on the 'Unholy Trinity' (*Witchfinder General*, 1968, *Blood on Satan's Claw*, 1971 and *The Wicker Man*, 1973) and even more recent offerings such as *Midsommar* (2019) and *Kill List* (2013) leads to a Western, Eurocentric approach to folk horror that perhaps unjustly boxes in (or out) contributions from other contexts that do not fit this mould.

Woodlands Dark and Days Bewitched has sought to shift away from this approach, giving space and analysis to films from across the globe. Split into six sections, this is a comprehensive body of work that provides one of the most fulsome accounts of folk horror to date. If there is one criticism to be made here, it is that it is not long enough. This fault does not lie with Janisse, as this is as comprehensive an offering as one could make in a single

documentary, but if given wider scope in a multi-episode series, much more depth could have been given, particularly to texts from other cultures.

The first section titled *Unholy Trinity* focuses, perhaps expectedly, on the 'Unholy Trinity', identifying the linking factor between these three texts and the nature of belief. The context of the production of these films is also explored, and this is something frequently returned to throughout. This reminds the viewer that the context in which these films are made, not just the context in which they are set, shapes the exploration of the horrors within. The notion of classification is something often discussed when it comes to folk horror, and this is examined further in the second section *Signposts of British Folk Horror*.

In *We Don't Go Back*, the roots of Paganism and witchcraft are explored through the lens of 1970s film makers who were starting to produce the classic examples of British Folk Horror we are all familiar with. The impact of the political and social context of the time, austerity, strikes, divisive referendums, on those filmmakers is succinctly highlighted, demonstrating how a growing interest in the occult and fears of 'free love' and the impact of increasing modernity on young people fostered an interest in the old ways, and an appropriation of belief and practice from other cultures.

Moving away from the British Isles, *Call Me From the Valley: American Folk Horror* is an interesting insight into the influence of both colonialism and migration on the American landscape. This begins with the influence of the Pilgrims, through to those who settled in the Appalachian Mountains, bringing global influences into an often-hostile environment. *The Wind* (2018) is one example of American folk horror that encapsulates the idea of a hostile new landscape that insidiously corrupts its inhabitants. Again, the link between colonisation, unfamiliar landscapes, and threats from within and without the group are prevalent in this section of *Woodlands Dark*, reminding the viewer that the land is unforgiving, particularly when it is stolen.

The dark shadow of colonialism is ever present throughout, and its influence on the development of the genre is explored in ways that are both thoughtful and thought provoking. This shadow of racism is nothing new in relation to folk tales, as Haase (1993)

concisely summarises, nationalism and indeed the othering of the non-folk, those outside the frame of reference, began with the Grimm brothers and continues to this day. *Woodlands Dark* has sought to shed light on this harmful, often violent history through giving space to a wide range of scholars, academics and filmmakers who provide a meticulous, and compassionate analysis.

All the Haunts Be Ours: Folk Horror From Around the World is a particularly fascinating section as it provides an overview of all the rich, and varied, folk horror that may be unfamiliar to many viewers. This section of the documentary highlights that folk horror contains elements that are both universal and distinct. Although we all may fear the rustling in the darkness, the shape that the emerging monster takes is different, depending on whether we are in woodland, prairie, or mountains. So much of the fears expressed in folk horror are defined by the environment, as well as the customs and beliefs of the film makers, and so we see that there is a world of folk horror waiting to be discovered. One of the most impressive, and academically useful, elements in *Woodlands Dark* is this inclusion of texts from such varied cultural contexts, providing a beneficial 'to watch' list for folk horror scholars.

The final section, *Folk Horror Revival*, demonstrates that interest in folk horror has continued apace, growing in momentum over recent years. Perhaps this has something to do with the all too familiar social, political, and economic turmoil we currently face. What is clear when watching *Woodlands Dark* is that, when it comes to folk horror, there is much more that connects us than divides us. By drawing on such a breadth of material from varied temporal and geographical contexts, Janisse has highlighted that there are thematic elements to folk horror that remain, regardless of cultural context. It is clear from watching *Woodlands Dark* that there is a certain universality in our fears. Landscapes may change, traditions may differ, but at the heart of the folk horror lies a collective truth. The past will haunt us, and the land will reclaim what has been stolen. Our push for modernity, our relentless march of progress, won't save us from the twisted roots of our communal past.

Ghosts wait, half buried in the soil, and the old ways will return to the land they once occupied, whether we are ready or not.

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