

Review: *Folk Horror on Film: Return of the British Repressed*

edited by Louis Bayman and K. J Donnelly

Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023

ISBN: 9781526164926 (Hardback)

£90.00 (£16.99, Paperback & eBook). 264pp.

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Folk Horror on Film: Return of the British Repressed, newly released in paperback, has continued both the popular and academic revival of interest in folk horror since its initial publication in 2023. This volume joins the likes of Adam Scovell's *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange* (2017); *Revenant*'s own 2020 special issue devoted entirely to the subject, edited by Dawn Keetley; Kier-La Janisse's exhaustive documentary *Woodlands Dark and Days Bewitched: A History of Folk Horror* (2021) and several individual chapters in edited collections (Murphy, 2022; Malvestio, 2023) in an exploration of this singularly wyrd subgenre. What continues to mark this volume's unique contribution to the academic study of folk horror is its sole focus on British works. Britain provides a distinct contextual, historical and cultural backdrop for a genre that 'on some level [...] is always about history, or rather about the present's relationship to the past' (p. 19). From the Roman invasion and the suppression of pagan cultures to the Anglicisation of the Celts, British history offers multiple points of conflict that are ripe for folk horror's unique form of cultural archaeology, one that evokes horror from 'a history from the unconscious, not necessarily in the strict

Freudian sense common to accounts of horror films, but more in the sense of a forgotten – and happily forgotten – heritage’ (p. 117). The relationship between national heritage and folk horror is a consistent touchpoint throughout this book; indicating that the traditions, cultural myths, and collective histories that comprise British heritage garner rich interest from both creatives and audiences alike. Furthermore, the volume’s focus on British works is also significant in terms of the genre’s development, since the ‘Unholy Trinity’ of *Witchfinder General* (1968), *Blood on Satan’s Claw* (1971) and *The Wicker Man* (1973), a uniquely British vein of horror films, ‘[provided] a template of a peculiar community of agricultural folk hostile to the ways of outsiders.’ (p. 1).

Louis Bayman and K. J. Donnelly’s introduction makes an admirable attempt to situate the reader, provide an overview of existing scholarship on folk horror and interrogate differing perspectives on the genre’s parameters. Such an introduction serves an accessible point of entry to readers of differing levels. The volume’s scope is, understandably, quite broad. It aims to encompass a variety of critical perspectives on folk horror: from an exploration of changes in the English landscape and the loss of rural spaces to make way for suburban development in *Requiem for a Village* (1975), to the intersection of Cornish folklore and environmentalist concerns in *Doomwatch* (1972). This volume contains an eclectic array of theoretical frameworks – including gender, genre studies and historicism – widening its appeal to scholars whose disciplines who may seldom engage with folk horror directly.

Perhaps this volume’s most compelling quality is its representation of underdiscussed works, the likes of which rarely receive academic attention. For example, Amy Harris discusses both *Following the Wicca Man* (2013) and *Maya* (2021); the former, a low-budget crowdfunded affair and the latter, a short made on a shoestring budget. Harris advocates convincingly for both films by suggesting that they ‘demonstrate, in one way or another, that

women's creative autonomy invites new and exciting possibilities' (p. 157) for British folk horror. Likewise, Mark Goodall reflects on his own filmmaking practice and the process of adapting Arthur Machen's short stories. Goodall, the co-director of *Holy Terrors: Six Weird Tales by Arthur Machen* (2017), outlines the theoretical underpinning of his adaptation, citing the likes of Antonin Artaud and his notion of cinema's capacity for 'endow[ing] [objects] with a second life' (p. 200), and the psychogeographer Ivan Chtcheglov's perception that 'certain *shifting* angles, certain *receding* perspectives, allow us to glimpse original conceptions of space' (p. 203), as points of inspiration for his filmic response to Machen's work. Here, Goodall provides a unique, first-hand account of the adaptation process and successfully positions his discussion within this volume's interrogation of British folk horror. Together, Harris and Goodall present an enthusiastic appraisal of works that, without this volume, likely would not have garnered academic consideration.

There are, however, some concerns regarding the volume's balance. Of course, discussion of the 'Unholy Trinity' occurs frequently throughout the contributions. The most successful discussions of these films are the ones that offer a novel perspective. Some notable examples are Lyndsay Townsend's comparison of, among other films, *The Wicker Man* and *Kill List* (2011) and their use of percussive drumbeats as a means of articulating 'the mortality and emotions of characters onscreen' (p. 175); and Mikel J. Coven use of *The Wicker Man* as a point of comparison for Neil Jordan's *The Company of Wolves* (1984) to 'reflect on the range of possible discourse(s) in folk horror' (p.57). There are several discussions of character, landscape and thematic concerns in the 'Unholy Trinity' that arguably retread similar grounds. While undoubtedly significant and worthy of study, such an intense focus on these three texts arguably results in some notable British folk horror films – such as Alan Clark's *Penda's Fen* (1974) and James McTaggart's *Robin Redbreast* (1970) – only being mentioned in passing. This volume's strengths lie in its engagement with a broad

range of underdiscussed films, and the contributions that embrace this eclectic approach are the most successful.

Folk Horror on Film: Return of the British Repressed will, hopefully, set a precedent for future studies of the subgenre. Its focus on a singular national context allows for a thorough investigation of how Britain's sociocultural history shaped filmmakers' approaches to folk horror. Such a framework could be easily transposed to other nations to investigate how their unique histories and folk cultures shaped their folk horror output. For a subgenre that is so deeply interconnected with specific landscapes, traditions and culture, folk horror is best understood through a national lens; therefore, the study presented in this volume results in an impressive level of nuance. Genre scholars will, of course, be attuned to this volume's approach; however, both cultural and historical scholars will also find much to admire. Furthermore, the contributions are consistently accessible to readers of varying levels and familiarity with the subject; plots to underseen films are succinctly described to orient the reader and theoretical concepts are discussed deftly, forgoing excessive technical jargon. More broadly, this volume attests to a prevailing curiosity towards folk horror and its specific national contexts. *Folk Horror on Film: Return of the British Repressed* evidences why the subgenre continues to appeal to us as a nation and as consumers, insofar as the volume illustrates how the subgenre mobilises cultural myths and histories in a fashion that is both insightful and entertaining. Folk horror as a subgenre provides an avenue for social archeology, to interrogate and unpack the customs and beliefs of a nation's past to garner a fresh insight on the present. Ultimately, this volume provides an invaluable resource and, with luck, will precipitate further study of the rich and continually evolving folk horror subgenre.

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