

Adam Scovell, *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange*
(Leighton Buzzard: Auteur, 2017)

Folk horror has been enjoying a renaissance since at least 2010, the year Mark Gatiss's influential three-part BBC documentary, *A History of Horror*, was released. Gatiss interviewed Piers Haggard, the director of the early 1970s cult classic, *The Blood on Satan's Claw*, who had claimed in a 2003 interview that his film had been an effort to create 'folk horror'. Haggard thus coined the term, although it didn't attract much attention until Gatiss used it in his documentary to denote a distinctive subgenre. Since then, the folk-horror renaissance has moved in two directions — backward, revisiting the defining folk-horror texts from the late 1960s and 1970s, including the central triumvirate of *Witchfinder General* (1968), *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971), and *The Wicker Man* (1973), and forward to new incarnations of the subgenre, both in films — *Eden Lake* (2008), *Wake Wood* (2009), *Kill List* (2011), *A Field in England* (2013), *The Hallow* (2015), and *Without Name* (2016) — and fiction — Adam Nevill's *The Ritual* (2011; made into a 2017 film), Andrew Michael Hurley's *The Loney* (2014), Thomas Olde Heuvelt's *Hex* (2016), and John Langan's *The Fisherman* (2016). This resurgence of the folk-horror subgenre has been met by a growing critical response. Adam Scovell has been at the forefront of this critical movement, through his website, *Celluloid Wicker Man*, and now his book, *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange*.

As folk horror has continued to flower, it has inevitably provoked the definitional question: what is folk horror, anyway? One of Scovell's most important interventions is that (first on his website and now in his book) he has offered a useful answer to that question through his articulation of the 'folk-horror chain', a series of interlinked motifs that can be found in most if not all folk-horror texts. The first link in the chain is *landscape*, which, as Scovell points out, is never mere 'scene-setting' in folk horror but instead a topography that ushers in 'adverse effects on the social and moral identity of its inhabitants' (p. 17). The second link is *isolation*; the characters of folk horror, Scovell argues, are confined within a profoundly 'inhospitable place' that is cut off from 'some established social progress of the diegetic world' (pp. 17-18). The landscape and its isolating effects produce '*skewed belief systems and morality*'; those who inhabit folk horror's lonely landscapes, in other words, acquire a set of convictions and values that are outside the mainstream rational, modern world (p. 18, emphasis added). The inhabitants on Summerisle in Robin Hardy's *The Wicker Man*, for instance, believe that sacrificing a virgin can restore their crops. Finally, the folk-

horror narrative typically culminates in what Scovell calls the ‘*happening/summoning*’, the ‘horrific fallout’ of everything that came before (p. 18, emphasis added), perhaps best exemplified by the sacrificial burning of Sergeant Howie — avatar of the Christian and ‘modern’ — as a pagan offering in the climactic scene of *The Wicker Man*.

The idea of the ‘folk-horror chain’ is an incredibly productive lens through which to read most folk-horror texts, as Scovell does in Chapter Two, which examines the ‘unholy trinity’ of late 60s and early 70s films (*Witchfinder General*, *The Blood on Satan’s Claw*, and *The Wicker Man*). His book does argue, though, that the sheer diversity of folk-horror texts typically surpasses the bounds of the motifs that he identifies as making up the folk-horror chain. Indeed, Scovell’s introduction lays out a more capacious conception of folk horror, as consisting of any work that uses folklore ‘for eerie, uncanny or horrific purposes’; that dramatises the clash between such ‘arcana’ and modernity; or that ‘creates its own folklore’ (p. 7). Scovell’s introduction, then, offers expansive definitions of folk horror that serve to balance the more constraining ‘folk-horror chain’.

After examining the subgenre’s ‘unholy trinity’ through the lens of the folk-horror chain in Chapter Two, Scovell turns, in Chapter Three, to the importance of landscape in British television of the 1960s and ’70s, beginning with the BBC’s Ghost Stories for Christmas (including several fine M. R. James adaptations) and moving through *The Owl Service* (1969), *Robin Redbreast* (1970), *Penda’s Fen* (1974), and *Children of the Stones* (1977). Pursuing the idea of the centrality of landscape to folk horror, in Chapter Four, Scovell examines what he calls ‘rurality’ in a wide range of films, from the very earliest example — Benjamin Christensen’s *Häxan: Witchcraft through the Ages* (1922) — through *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), offering examples not only from the UK but from Europe, the US, Australia, and Japan. Scovell defines ‘rurality’ as much more than just a countryside setting; instead, he sees it as ‘the sideways tipping of the diegetic reality of a narrative world through an ironic emphasis on the recognizably numinous rural’ (p. 8) and, later, as perceptible in a text’s use of the ‘otherness that can be attributed to rural life’ in order to ‘warp the very reality of its narrative worlds’. ‘Reality’ and the ‘rural’ are mixed in such texts, in other words, to form ‘a symbiotic effect of eeriness’ (p. 81). These definitions of ‘rurality’ make it clear how representations of rural landscapes in folk horror slide into the terrain of the strange and the unfamiliar rather than partaking strictly of realism. The rural

landscapes of folk horror are always uncanny, always harbouring the past just beneath the surface, and always possessing a powerful agency.¹

In Chapter Five, Scovell shifts away (mostly) from landscape to focus on ‘the occult flavoured esoteric content’ (p. 9) within the genre — whether it be pagan ritual, magic, the supernatural, or witchcraft. He also extends his discussion to folk-horror texts set in urban locations (notably taking up the work of television and film writer Nigel Kneale, perhaps best known for 1967’s *Quatermass and the Pit*). Scovell reads the folk-horror texts discussed in this chapter through the concept of ‘hauntology’, a term he defines several times (see, for example, pp. 122, 125, 135-36, 158, and 162) and that seems to signal the way in which the 1970s are both haunted by a deep (often occult) past and also (themselves) haunt later folk-horror productions. As Scovell uses it, hauntology involves not a nostalgic looking back to the past but a critical questioning of both past and present: ‘nostalgia of the hauntological variety’ involves a ‘questioning of the past through its lost futures rather than a reductive form of looking back’ (p. 158).

Scovell discusses Gordon Hessler’s *Cry of the Banshee* (1970), for instance, a film that takes up the persecution of witches in the 1700s while exposing the ‘ubiquitous abuse against women of all classes’ that occurred in both the eighteenth century and the 1970s. Finally, in his last chapter, Scovell examines the burgeoning of folk horror in the twenty-first century — notably the work of Ben Wheatley (*Kill List*, *Sightseers* (2012), and *A Field in England*) — and what it might tell us about the current political climate. He ends with the provocative claim that the real world seems increasingly to resemble the diegetic folk-horror world, especially since the 2016 British referendum that may soon result in the UK’s exit from the European Union. ‘We have burnt our Sgt Howie in the wicker man’, he writes, ‘and now wait naively for our apples to grow once more, confident that we have “taken back control”’ (p. 184). While this specific analogy for Brexit may be something of a stretch, it provocatively links the resurgence of folk horror with the nostalgia for a ‘lost Britain’ (one with more secure borders) that in part at least fuelled the vote to leave the EU.

¹ An important early essay in the folk-horror critical canon, although it does not use the term, identifies how the past haunts the present in folk-horror texts. See Rob Young, ‘The Pattern under the Plough’, *Sight and Sound*, 20.8 (August 2010), 16-22 <<https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.lehigh.edu/docview/734695556?accountid=12043>> [accessed 15 September 2017]. Looking at depictions of rural life in British period drama of the 1960s and 1970s, Young notes ‘a desire to focus on the historical essence of place, and screen out modernist intrusions; or to envision buried spirits of a place bursting into the present’ (pp. 17-18). I have argued that perhaps the dominant trait of folk horror is the agency of the landscape: ‘In folk horror, things don’t just happen in a (passive) landscape; things happen because of the landscape. The landscape does things; it has efficacy.’ See Dawn Keetley, ‘The Resurgence of Folk Horror’, *HorrorHomeroom*, 6 November 2015 <<http://www.horrorhomeroom.com/the-resurgence-of-folk-horror/>> [accessed 15 September 2017].

The strength of Scovell's book lies first and foremost in the vast array of folk-horror texts he discusses (primarily film and television), from the 1920s to the present and across the globe, though with an emphasis on British cultural productions of the 1960s and '70s. The book is thus an invaluable resource for those who seek an introduction to both the central and more marginal entries in the folk-horror canon. Scovell's bibliography of secondary criticism is also helpful. There has been very little scholarly work on folk horror, with much of the criticism occurring in popular journals and on websites and blogs.² Scovell does an admirable job of collecting this work. There are some omissions, though, not least the important academic scholarship that has begun to emerge: Paul Newland's excellent edited collection on rural cinematic landscapes, including his chapter on folk horror in *Blood on Satan's Claw* (which extends its reach to folk horror more generally), as well as Tanya Krzywinska's important essay on pagan landscapes in popular cinema.³ Nonetheless, along with its importance as a resource, Scovell's book is invaluable for his concept of the *folk-horror chain* and for his use of *rurality* and *hauntology* as lenses through which to read folk-horror texts. These three concepts recur throughout the book, and although the latter two suffer from some fuzziness of focus, they are helpful paradigms through which to approach folk-horror texts of all kinds.

Scovell's book is not, however, particularly helpful for its actual analysis of the folk-horror texts themselves. He introduces most of the texts he discusses by offering a 'breakdown' (a plot summary) and then his subsequent analysis is often sporadic and not terribly illuminating. His writing, moreover, is often unwieldy, obscure, and even ungrammatical, making it difficult sometimes to follow his point, especially at crucial moments when he elaborates the more abstract concepts that structure the book. The obscurity of both his arguments and analysis is deepened by the book's lack of any clear organising structure. It's clear that Scovell tries to impose some order at the beginnings and endings of chapters, but the vast middles are a hodgepodge of summaries and claims that often feel random and that are not developed in any sustained way. Chapters range over the

² See, for example, Scovell's own website <<https://celluloidwickerman.com/>>, as well as <<http://www.folkhorror.com/>> and <<https://folkhorrorrevival.com/>>. Andy Paciorek, who runs the Folk Horror Revival Group on Facebook, published a collection of essays and interviews in *Folk Horror Revival: Field Studies* ([n. p.]: Wyrd Harvest Press, 2015).

³ See *British Rural Landscapes on Film*, ed. by Paul Newland (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), especially his chapter, 'Folk Horror and the Contemporary Cult of British Rural Landscape: The Case of *Blood on Satan's Claw*', pp. 162-79; and Tanya Krzywinska, 'Lurking Beneath the Skin: British Pagan Landscapes in Popular Cinema', in *Cinematic Countrysides*, ed. by Robert Fish (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 75-90. Also missing from Scovell's bibliography is the important essay by David Bell, 'Anti-Idyll: Rural Horror', in *Contested Countryside Cultures: Otherness, Marginalisation, and Rurality*, ed. by Paul Cloke and Jo Little (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 94-108.

same texts and the same ideas (rural landscapes and the occult come up throughout the book, no matter what the purported argument of the chapter) to such a degree that the substance of the individual chapters end up collapsing into each other. The long Chapter Five on ‘Occultism, Hauntology and the Urban “Wyrd”’ tries to cover far too much ground and has no centre at all; much of the chapter (despite supposedly focusing on the urban occult) goes back to rural/village settings, and then when the chapter does turn to the urban, folk horror as such seems to fade away. It’s hard to see, for example, how *Death Line* (1972) or *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) fit within even the most generous definitions of the genre.

Scovell has addressed numerous folk-horror texts on his website — and this book often feels like a translation of multiple blog entries onto the page; it is too often sporadic and sometimes superficial, not the sustained, deep, and coherent argument and analysis that a book demands. In short, my evaluation here is mixed. Despite the very real deficiencies in style, organisation, and analysis, though, you won’t find a more comprehensive introduction to folk-horror texts than Adam Scovell’s *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange*. And his conception of the ‘folk-horror chain’ offers a productive lens through which to grasp some of what folk horror is doing.

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