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(September 5-6, 2019)

Conference Report by Miranda Corcoran

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## FOLK HORROR IN THE 21ST CENTURY (SEPTEMBER 5-6, 2019)

Conference Report by Miranda Corcoran

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***Folk Horror in the 21st Century*. Falmouth University, Penryn, UK, 4-6 September 2019.**

The landscape of Cornwall is weird and wild. Farmland is etched onto the façade of a vast countryside that seems older and stranger than its expanses of pastoral silence at first suggest. The coastline is a jagged outcropping where stark, premonitory cliffs tumble down to a roaring sea. The fields and furrows of the Cornish countryside are vital with a lingering, ancient magic. In essence, this remote corner of England's south west peninsula is the most fitting location for a conference dedicated to the eerie power of the rural, the folkish, the rustic. Taking place over three days, from September 4<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> 2019, *Folk Horror in the 21st Century* set out to interrogate the role of Folk Horror as a transmedial genre. The conference was hosted by Falmouth University's Penryn campus, a remote location conducive to the study of how the countryside lends itself to a horror born of isolation, the arcane, and the uncanny.

Folk Horror is simultaneously very old and intriguingly modern. The term owes its origins to a 2010 interview with the director Piers Haggard, who claimed that in making his Horror classic *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971) he was "trying to make a folk horror film..." (Scovell 7). The term was later redeployed by Mark Gatiss in his BBC 4 documentary series *A History of Horror* (2010). In the second episode, "Home Counties Horror," Gatiss utilises the term to knit together three films from the late 1960s and early 1970s that place the uncanniness of the English countryside at the centre of their horrific visions. These three films – *Witchfinder General* (1968), *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971), and *The Wicker Man* (1973) – codified a subset of Horror cinema rooted in the perceived eeriness of the rural landscape, its people, and its traditions (Scovell 7). A testament to the power of spectral returns, the genre re-emerged after decades of dormancy in the early twenty-first century with texts such as *Kill List* (2011), *A Field in England* (2013), *The Loney* (2014), *The Witch* (2015), *Devil's Day* (2017), and *Midsommar* (2019). Perhaps even more intriguingly, the re-emergence of Folk Horror has spurred critics and fans to search for the genre's origins, tracing its roots not only to nineteenth and early twentieth-century writers like Nathaniel Hawthorne, Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, and M. R. James, but all the way back to Anglo Saxon and Middle English texts like *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

*Folk Horror in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* was an ambitious conference that sought to interrogate this expansive history and understand the role of Folk Horror in contemporary culture. Panelists and keynote speakers, in formal sessions and in casual conversation, undertook to define the genre, probe its limits, and analyse its key concerns. Although commencing on September 4<sup>th</sup> with a series

of film screenings that included Mark Jenkin's and Denzil Monk's *The New Weird: invoking horror through formal limitation* and *Making Strange: Adapting H. P. Lovecraft for the Screen* by Neil Fox, Ryan Mackfall, and Angela Annesley, the conference proper began on the morning of the 5<sup>th</sup> with an introductory session by co-organiser Dawn Keetley (Lehigh University, USA). In welcoming the assembled delegates, Keetley outlined existing constructions of Folk Horror, alluding both to academic definitions of the genre and those developed by fans. In particular, Keetley emphasised the important critical work undertaken by Adam Scovell in his book *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange* (2017) and suggested some ways in which existing theories of the genre could be challenged and expanded on over the coming days.

The first panel I attended was entitled "Witchcraft, Feminism, and Folk Horror." The papers in this panel clearly established the ability of Folk Horror to engage with theoretical paradigms and social movements like feminism. The speakers explored a diverse range of topics: Sarah Cave's (University of London, Royal Holloway, UK) fascinating paper discussed mystics like Marjory Kempe and Mother Anne Lee; Deborah Bridle (Université Côte d'Azur, France) spoke about execution in the era of fourth-wave feminism via a stunning analysis of China Miéville's short story "Säcken" (2015); and Máiréad Casey (NUI Galway, Ireland) brilliantly connected body horror and precarious labour in her study of the film *Starry Eyes* (2014). The second session I listened to was focused on the theme of "Encountering Nature in Folk Horror," and it featured some brilliant analyses of the relationship between Folk Horror and the natural landscape by Katy Soar (University of Winchester, UK), David Sweeny (Glasgow School of Art, Scotland), and Andrea Kalthoff (University of Münster, Germany). Lunch featured musical accompaniment by the band We Are Muffy, a group whose songs harken back to both imagined and remembered pasts, and whose work demonstrates the dynamic manner in which Folk Horror motifs have migrated across media to inflect music and performance.

After lunch, I attended my third panel of the day which was centred around the eerie geographies of Folk Horror. The speakers included James Thurgill (University of Tokyo, Japan), who analysed ideas of topophobia and eeriness; Kerry Dodd (Lancaster University, UK) who uncovered traces of Folk Horror in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979); and David Evans-Powell (University of Birmingham, UK) who looked at urban Folk Horror in his discussion of the woefully overlooked British film *Death Line* (1972). The fourth session I attended was entitled "Folk Horror in the US". A delightfully eclectic panel, it featured everything from contemporary cinema to children's cartoons. In this context, Ian Brodie (Cape Breton University, Canada) gave a highly original paper on the use of folklore in the popular 1970s animated programme *Scooby Doo*. His paper was followed by Linda Shepherd's (Palomar College, USA, and University of East Anglia, UK) incisive analysis of the arcane and landscape memory in Stephen King's *Pet Sematary* (1983). Still centred on the landscape but moving further north, Frances Auld (State College of Florida, USA) excavated the layers of topographical meaning inherent in William Gibaldi's Alaskan novel *Hold the Dark* (2014). Finally, Alexandra Hauke (University of Passau, Germany) presented a highly original reading of Jordan Peele's *Us* (2019) as a folk horrific critique of the prison-industrial complex. The day closed with a fascinating keynote speech by Tanya Krzywinska (Falmouth University, UK) that centred primarily on video games and the manner in which Folk Horror in gaming is shaped by the electronic

medium itself. Krzywinska further encouraged delegates to consider Folk Horror as a transmedial phenomenon by curating an art exhibit, "Strange Folk," which displayed some astounding examples of Folk Horror in visual art.

The second day of the conference opened with a broad-ranging and innovative keynote paper by Catherine Spooner (Lancaster University, UK). Spooner discussed the myriad diverse ways in which the infamous story of the Pendle Witches – twenty individuals tried for witchcraft in 1612 – has been adapted and reinterpreted by twenty-first century culture. Spooner's talk incorporated reimaginings of the Pendle Witches in novels, folklore, film, and young adult fiction. However, the most interesting aspect of her presentation was its focus on "Dark Tourism" and the manner in which Lancashire tourist industries that centre on the trials evoke Gothic narrative tropes.

Following Spooner's keynote lecture, I attended a session themed around representations of magic and the occult in Folk Horror. The first speaker, Timothy Jones (University of Stirling, UK), spoke about occulture, an environment in which supernatural, esoteric, and conspiratorial ideas emerge. Jones provided a unique and intriguing analysis of Dennis Wheatley's (1897-1977) occult fiction and his tendency to employ Satanic themes to represent the collapse of an empiricist, classist English conservatism. Angeline Morrison (Falmouth University, UK) followed with a truly original analysis of televisual Folk Horror in her presentation on White Logic vs Black Girl Magic in *Hammer House of Horror's* "Charlie Boy" (1980). Morrison's paper contemplated how, in this episode of the popular British anthology series, the black body empowers and drives the narrative. More importantly, Morrison's presentation highlighted and challenged the troubling absence of people of colour in Folk Horror texts and criticism. The last speaker on this panel was Barbara Chamberlin (University of Brighton and Central Saint Martins, UAL, UK), a practice-based PhD student who provided a fascinating overview of Folk Horror in comics, but also gave the audience an insight into her own graphic narrative about Joan Wytte, the "Fighting Fairy Woman" of Bodmin. The papers at the sixth session I attended were linked thematically under the banner of "Folk Horror's Folklore." The first presentation, by Joan Passey (University of Bristol, UK), discussed folklore collecting and Cornish Gothic. The next paper was presented by Katarzyna Logozna Wypych (John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland) and dealt with the many supernatural cats found in the fiction of Stephen King. In particular, Logozna Wypych framed King's sinister felines as a bridge between modernity and the past. The panel concluded with Chelsea Eddy's (University of Lancaster, UK) analysis of Cumbrian Gothic and its relationship to the folklore of the English north.

The third and final keynote speech of the conference was delivered by Bernice Murphy (Trinity College Dublin, Ireland). Centred on the theme of "Backwoods Horror and Human Sacrifice," Murphy's paper positioned Shirley Jackson's iconic 1948 short story "The Lottery" as the foundational text of US Folk Horror, arguing that its repeated refrain of "lottery in June, corn be heavy soon" signals the centrality of corn or maize to American Folk Horror traditions. From here, Murphy moved on to discuss the centrality of the harvest to a host of US Folk Horror texts, from Thomas Tryon's *Harvest Home* (1973) to the recent backwoods horror *Jug Face* (2013), as well as analysing how these texts repeatedly foreground anxieties about rurality.

My own paper featured on the penultimate panel of the day and it was co-presented with my colleague Andrea Di Carlo (University College Cork, Ireland). Our paper explored how Robert Eggers's film *The Witch* (2015) draws on Puritan conceptions of the natural Sublime while simultaneously challenging these visions of a threatening wilderness with a feminist interpretation of the sublime that views nature as a liberating force. The panel, which was entirely focused on *The Witch*, also featured a highly original reading of the film by Shauna Louise Caffrey (University College Cork, Ireland) who argued that music is a vital participant in the film, serving as an extension of the often-unseen witch and facilitating a sort of embodiment through music. The final paper on this panel was an insightful comparative study by Amelia Crowther (University of Sussex, UK) who explored *The Witch* in dialogue with the 2006 film *The Woods* and argued that these works represent anxieties about the boundless reproductive body. The conference drew to a close with a panel session that sought to test the limits of the Folk Horror genre. "Rethinking Folk Horror through Contemporary Film and TV" opened with a stunning paper by Andrew Jarvis (University of West Scotland) on the films of Ben Wheatley. The presentation revolved closely around Wheatley's 2012 film *Sightseers* and discussed how this text enacts an "enweirding" of England and Englishness. Kyna McClenaghan (Columbia University School of the Arts, USA) followed this with an insightful exploration of Christian and pagan motifs in Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2018) and the Netflix film *Apostle* (2018). The last presentation, by Muhamet Alijaj (University of Exeter, UK), constituted a thoughtful reflection on the role of ritual in *Requiem* (2018) and *True Detective* (2014).

As noted at the outset, *Folk Horror in the 21st Century* was a highly ambitious undertaking. Over a short three-day conference, more than 60 delegates – presenters and keynote speakers – addressed a wide array of ideas pertinent to the burgeoning critical canon of Folk Horror studies. The sheer volume of delegates necessitated a parallel panel format, and I immensely regret all of the incredible panels and presentations I missed. Yet, everything I saw, and the reports I heard of panels I was unable to attend, suggests that each speaker brought something new and original to the conference. Interrogating the way in which Folk Horror intersects with issues of race, gender, class, ecology, identity, architecture, history, and more, the assembled delegates laid important critical groundwork for the future study of the genre. Moreover, the breadth and scope of the papers presented indicate that while Folk Horror may be a comparatively small generic type – a single subset of Horror fiction – it is by no means limited by its specificity as a genre. The presenters who spoke at *Folk Horror in the 21st Century* not only sought to articulate the nature of this very particular mode of Horror, they also pushed the boundaries of what Folk Horror can be, searching out traces of the genre in a host of different modes and media. It is truly a credit to the conference organisers – Ruth Heholt (Falmouth University, UK), Dawn Keetley (Lehigh University, USA), Joanne Parsons (Bath Spa University, UK), and David Devanny (Falmouth University, UK) – that a conference focused on a single genre could produce so many variegated interpretations, ideas, and discourses.

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**BIONOTE**

**Miranda Corcoran** is currently a lecturer in University College Cork, Ireland. Her research focuses on Horror, Science Fiction, the Gothic and popular culture. She is the co-editor (with Steve Gronert Ellerhoff) of *Exploring the Horror of Supernatural Fiction: Ray Bradbury's Elliott Family* (Routledge in 2020). She is also working on a monograph entitled *Witchcraft and Adolescence in American Popular Culture: Teen Witches* and is a regular contributor to the online magazine *Diabolique*.