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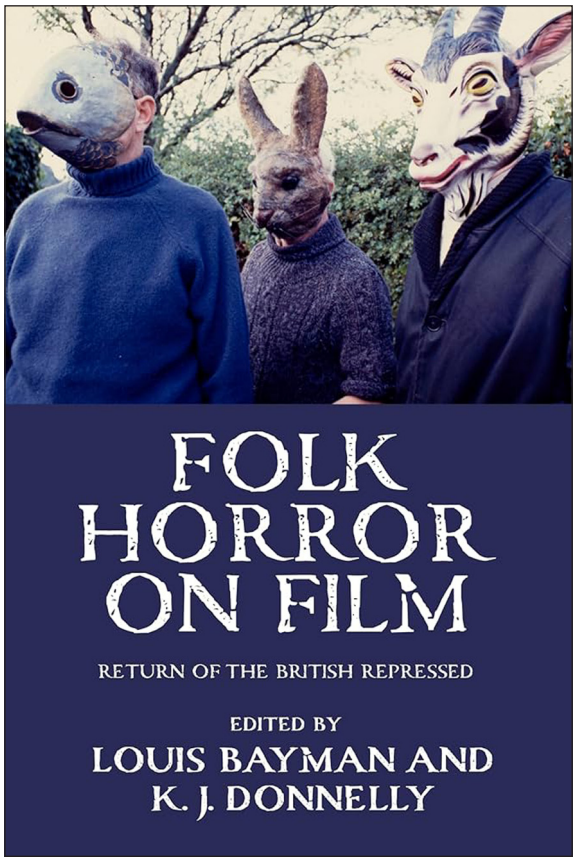

Folk horror is a genre on the rise. There has been a noticeable upswing in eerie forests, wicker masks, and strange rituals on screen – something is in the air, or rather *In The Earth* (2021), as a recent genre entry by director Ben Wheatley is titled. Looking at lists of folk horror films on popular film blogs and websites, however, one is soon struck by the apparent fuzziness of the ascendant genre. While almost every list-maker seems to include the so-called 'Unholy Trinity' of *Witchfinder General* (1968), *Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971) and *The Wicker Man* (1973), many other proposed entries seem less certain: what about the forest-set US splatter classic *The Evil Dead* (1981), for example, or the modern fairy tale *Border* (2018) from Denmark? Considering the obvious popularity of the genre, concrete definitions are scarce thus far, as is critical writing on the topic in general.

The collection *Folk Horror on Film – Return of the British Repressed* seeks to change this 'relative paucity of writings' on the topic, as the editors Louis Bayman and K.J. Donnelly state in their introduction to the volume. They have compiled 14 chapters which provide a large variety of perspectives on folk horror – however, as the volume's subtitle already suggests, they are largely limited to British cinema. This is, as Bayman and Donnelly clarify, "not because British cinema offers a universal standard, but to seek a focus that too much discussion of folk horror lacks" (ibid.). Considering the central importance of British cinema in the context of the genre, this is a convincingly argued decision, especially since Bayman and Donnelly explicitly invite future research and discussion on the applicability of the collection's definitions for other national cinemas.

The editors' insightful introductory chapter, titled "What makes the folk horrific?", will certainly be an indispensable source for many such future studies. It provides important demarcations from other, related forms such as gothic and rural horror and suggests a productive and lucid definition: "folk horror is the horror of the folk

themselves, and of the wider conditions that sustain their existence." (5) Following the logic that any subsection of the horror genre should be defined by which common fear it taps into, the authors continue:

> It is not the horror of what threatens that existence from the outside, but of the very customs, land and lifestyle that keep the folk going. [...] Its horror is less of monstrous others to the folk than of the beliefs that produce meaning, the rituals that provide festivity, and the land that brings forth nourishment." (ibid.)

Bayman and Donnelly loosely follow these three central aspects – beliefs, rituals, land(scape) – when they discuss some of folk horror's key generic elements, its notion of community, and, finally, its political significance in relation to British history and nationalism. These are fascinating observations that effectively set up the following chapters' explorations of specific case studies.

Since Robin Hardy's *The Wicker Man* still represents a towering influence on many contemporary genre entries, it makes sense for the volume to open with a section of three chapters dedicated solely to this cinematic urtext – especially since they approach it from such diverse perspectives. In his chapter, for example, Ronald Hutton provides helpful historical context for some of the film's images and themes, particularly the iconic "wicker man" itself, the giant wooden shrine in which the film's protagonist is sacrificed by the island folk at the end of the narrative. Hutton locates the origin of the trope in a disputed passage in Julius Caesar's *De bello gallico* which contains a description of the druids of Gaul and their brutal religious practices. He then follows this trail to the year 1922 which saw the publication of *The Golden Bough*, Sir James Frazer's popular study of ancient religions. Hutton's critical reading of Frazer's speculative study is so insightful because it provides us with a convincing "origin story" of the folk horror phenomenon: "whereas he [Frazer] expected his readers to be appalled [...] by the paganism he portrayed as a religion of sex and violence, many were entertained" (30). This combination of genuine anthropological insight and shock value still seems to drive much of folk horror's popularity.

The volume then proceeds to follow a more thematic approach with the two following sections dedicated to the specific British national context and folk horror's cultural landscapes respectively. In the first section, for example, Derek Johnston provides a nuanced reading of the national politics of the above-mentioned 'Trinity' of classic films. His chapter touches on the problematic notion of 'blood and soil', the idea of 'ancient connections to a particular location' (85) which lies at the heart of folk horror, yet also forms a key tenet of Nazi ideology. Johnston argues that one of folk

horror's appeals lies in the fact that it successfully negotiates the traditionalist appeal of 'knowing one's place in the community, of being more connected to nature' (ibid.) etc. whilst at the same time recognising that these dreams of freedom and disconnection from the modern world can come at a terrible cost.

The section dedicated to landscape contains, among others, Lyndsay Townsend's phenomenological analysis of the use of drums in folk horror which makes a similar point to Johnston in relation to the genre's notion of the past and tradition. The chapter explores the affects produced by "one of the oldest instruments used by mankind" and argues that, by combining it with uncomfortable sounds like 'guttural chanting', folk horror rejects 'preconceived notions of idyllic pastoralism' (176). Both highlighted chapters will surely be invaluable for future political readings of the genre.

If this volume misses anything, however, it is one or more chapters expanding on these ideas in relation to folk horror's focus on whiteness and racial uniformity. In a recent review for *Film Quarterly*, for example, J.M Tyree discusses the folk horror adjacent *The Green Knight* (2021), specifically its casting of Dev Patel as protagonist Gawain, and argues that the film presents an 'obvious challenge to the myth of whiteness underlying the pallid Victorian English folklore tradition' (Tyree 2021). Tyree bases this convincing point partly on the film's ending, in which Gawain "rejects the role of the conquering colonizer-king after inheriting the crown from his white uncle, King Arthur". (ibid.) While this film might be too far outside the volume's focus on horror, an expanded view on more diverse contributions to the genre (what about Remi Weekes' *His House* (2020)?) and/or an in-depth investigation of the British horror traditions' whiteness would have benefitted its critical scope. Nevertheless, *Folk Horror on Film* is an outstanding contribution to genre studies; its selection of chapters makes it useful as both an introduction as well as an excellent research tool for experts in all things horror.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Reference

Tyree, J. M. 'The Green Knight: Non-Whiteness and Landscape Punk in "A24orror"', *Film Quarterly*, October 8, 2021, https://filmquarterly.org/2021/10/08/the-green-knight-non-whiteness-and-landscape-punk-in-a24orror.