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Folk Horror Film in the United States: Sources and Development

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1. Introduction

The main aim of this essay on contemporary US Folk Horror is to contribute to the burgeoning field of its studies, as well as to gather and condense the several and often conflicting scholarly definitions and studies of the texts analysed. Folk Horror is a horror subgenre first popularised in Britain during the 1970s which has experienced a new renaissance in the last 15 years, but which is still in the process of a formal categorisation and taxonomy, having only been defined within the academia in recent years.

Academic resources and methods acquired throughout the degree in English Studies have been taken into account in order to conceptualise this phenomenon, drawing tools and ideas from the entire assortment of cultural and literary courses, from US, British Isles and Postcolonial cultures, to their respective literatures, as well as literature into film studies. All of these disciplines are combined to provide an approach more specifically based on film and cultural studies, perhaps better seen in the second year module Las literaturas en lengua inglesa y el cine. Thus, this essay will not only be concerned with film analysis, but also with attempting to understand cultural and folkloric background, and the anxieties which drive the horror in the selected texts.

The relevance of this work lies not only in its relative newness to academia, and thus, in its need for scholarly research, but also in its potential within it, as it provides ties between film, culture and anxiety in a particular manner within horror cinema.

The main aims of this essay are:

- The selection of material that can contribute to a formal categorisation of the genre.
- The analysis of this corpus of texts.
- The synthetisation of a definition of Folk Horror.
- The selection of contemporary Folk Horror texts produced and set in the United States, and their analysis using the definition elaborated.
- A better understanding of the cultural background of these texts' cultural background and the explanation of their relevance today.

The two main compilatory critical works on Folk Horror published to date will be used as a theoretical basis: Adam Scovell's 2017 book *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange*, which provides the first taxonomical formalisation of the genre in its narrative; and Kier La Janisse's documentary *Woodlands Dark and Days Bewitched: A History of Folk Horror* (2021), which provides an extensive corpus of Folk Horror texts from around the world. Other works, such as Mark Fisher's many publications on Hauntology, or Carol J. Clover's seminal 1993 book *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, will also be used, as they can be especially fruitful in the analysis of relevant texts. Taking this into account, a methodology of analysis will be proposed.

A brief contextualisation on Folk Horror's history follows, in order to give the key information regarding the subgenre, and the cultural setting in which it occurs. Finally, this, along with the methodology, will serve as a basis for the analysis of Chad Crawford Kinkle's *Jug Face* (2013) and Robert Eggers' *The Witch* (2015), aiming to dissect their narrative similarities and their relation with the subgenre, as well as explaining the cultural background against which this newer group of texts has been produced after.

2. Theoretical Background and Methodology.

Screenwriting teacher and author John Truby, in his book *The Anatomy of Genres*, poses that the fundamental concern of Horror cinema is to "confront death and face your ghosts from the past" (2022: 16). Two of Truby's main arguments in his theory of horror are, first, that this concern may be achieved by "creating a character out of the most dangerous of all opponents: death itself" (26). Secondly, Truby goes on to say that one of the main strategies for the effectiveness of horror may be to "begin the story in a foreign, mysterious, or 'Old World' location. The horror is then transported to the new, modern world, like the plague from which no one is immune" (33).

Bulgarian philosopher Tzvetan Todorov's concepts in his 1975 book *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* are also crucial in the construction of the horror narrative. He articulates that the Fantastic exists between the Uncanny and the Marvellous. The Uncanny occurs when the events that are happening, and are perceived as dangerous or disquieting, appear to go beyond the realm of possibility or realism, only to be eventually proved unusual rather than supernatural. In contrast, the Marvellous occurs when supernatural elements are directly brought into play, transcending the standard physical laws. The Fantastic resides in the plausibility of the supernatural, existing in a realm in which characters and the public must question whether the circumstances are merely uncanny or have strayed into the domain of the Marvellous.

A lot of horror subgenres can be treated as different iterations of Truby's ideas – the threat of death may come from a monster from outer space such as in *Alien* (1979), or a seemingly unstoppable hooded killer such as in *Halloween* (1978), or from the characters' own minds, such as in *The Lighthouse* (2020), also keeping the audience at play with Todorov's concepts. Folk Horror would then take these ideas and materialise them in specific ways, to which the next section will be devoted.

Despite its modern resurgence, the subgenre of Folk Horror has remained largely under-theorised, as noted in studies made by scholar Albert Andrés Calvo (2021) or Andy Paciorek (2015). However, several authors and academics such as Adam Scovell, Matilda

Groves or Dawn Keeteley have recently released theorisations and studies on the matter. The first step in this theoretical review will be to analyse their definitions of the genre and arrive to a general conclusion to go on with the analysis.

2.1. Defining Folk Horror

Andy Paciorek, editor of independent magazine *Folk Horror Revival: Field Studies*, and one of the leading advocates for the study of the genre, stated the following in the publication's introductory essay: "So in bid to answer 'What is Folk Horror?' one may well attempt to build a box the exact shape of mist; for like mist, Folk Horror is atmospheric and sinuous" (2015). It is not hard to see how the question lingers as a lot of other writers come to similar conclusions.

Writer Adam Scovell, in his seminal 2017 book *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange* (*Hours Dreadful* from now on), also refuses to provide a concrete answer to the question, and offers many instead. In one of his most simple yet effective definitions, Scovell poses that Folk Horror should not be seen as a "set of criteria to be read into media, but as a way of opening up discussions on subtly interconnected work and how we now interact with such work" (2017: 6).

In her 2017 essay 'Past Anxieties: Defining the Folk Horror Narrative', folklorist Matilda Groves begins her conceptualisation of the genre by pointing to the two words that conform its name. She defines 'folklore' as "the wisdom of the common people; wisdom handed down by the common people throughout history" (2017). She develops her definition from this point of view, arguing that "folk wisdom" is the key to Folk Horror, and not rural landscapes and iconography, which, from her point of view, can be argued to be just "a simple signifier for bygone times". For Groves, then, "[Folk Horror] is horror of the people, stemming from folklore. It is old wisdom seen with modern eyes as archaic" (2017). Groves also highlights the importance of belief as a key factor, as the way in which the power of different worldviews does not necessarily imply a supernatural or occult element to be real. Groves explains this, stating that "a film about witch hunts, regardless of plot and

setting, does not need witchcraft to tell a story. The most important element is that the story concerns a society that believes in witchcraft" (2017).

Scholar Alberto Andrés Calvo, writing about Michael Reeves' *Witchfinder General* (1968)*,* Piers Haggard's *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971) and Robin Hardy's *The Wicker Man* (1973), known as the Unholy Trinity of Folk Horror, in his article "Ghosts of Great Britain: A Hauntological Approach to the 21-st Century Folk Horror Revival", wrote: "rurality, anachronistic ways of living centred around tigh tknit societies, sexual liberation, cults: these are all thematic points of suture among the Unholy Trinity" (2021: 82). He also points that "the delayed emergence of Folk Horror as a critical category owes as much to the cult status of many of its main examples as it does to the inconsistent nature of the texts we are working with" (2021: 82). However, he goes on to provide a lengthy explanation, elaborating on his conclusions about the genre's qualities.

> Part of the horrific aspects of these films is that the events usually take place in the outside and in broad daylight, thus subverting horror's predominant setting. The dark and closed spaces favoured by horror take the backseat; horrific events happen not only outside and during the day but also in communal settings. This is particularly true of these films' climaxes, which, as in most horror, pivot around death. The individualistic murder is here often replaced by human sacrifice. […] Folk horror adds another layer by which we are also horrified by the reaction (or lack thereof) of an audience that is more often than not complicit in this human sacrifice. The powerful last acts of *The Wicker Man* and *Midsommar* serve as perfect examples for this point, as it might be argued that both films force their viewers to be complicit with the diegetic audience by presenting the sacrificed outsiders in opposition to the more enticing and adventurous natives (2021: 82-83).

Calvo also remarks on another central theme of Folk Horror, which is widely acknowledged by all academics approaching the field. He approaches it on the most basic of levels, stating that "Folk Horror works by contrasting the dominant cultural practices of Westerners with those of the Other" (83). University of California Professor Carol J. Clover already referred to this in her seminal 1993 book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Albeit not explicitly addressing Folk Horror, as the category had not been yet pinned down at the time, she remarked on how one of the modern horror film tendencies is "the split between two competing systems of explanation– White Science and Black Magic, to use the terminology in *The Serpent and the Rainbow*". Clover's address of

American horror in general directly points to how connected the genre is to folkloric roots in the United States. She further elaborates that “White Science refers to Western rational tradition. Its representatives are nearly always white males […] and its tools are surgery, drugs, psychotherapy, and other forms of hegemonic science” (1993: 66). In contrast to Clover’s exposition, nevertheless, Folk Horror deviates from traditional horror in its typical conclusion. Clover writes that a film’s final “state of calm is not, however, the same as the opening state of calm, which is now designated as a state of ignorance. It is a new, enlightened state in which White Science, humbled in its failure, works not arrogantly *against* but respectfully *with* Black Magic” (1993: 98).

This system of White Science and Black Magic as ontological tools is challenged in most Folk Horror films, and put in the spotlight as an opposition. When a representative of White Science sets foot on the turf of Black Magic, they are usually consumed by it, or escape horrified, not enlightened. Many protagonists die by Black Magic, the Old Ways or the occult in general. Again, as it is a rule of the genre, this is not a static aspect of Folk Horror, but rather a common occurrence. Easily, one may point at *Witchfinder General* and *The Wicker Man*, two of the most historically relevant Folk Horror films, clearly depict the protagonist’s end by the opposing system of belief, while *The Blood on Satan’s Claw* sticks more closely to Clover’s theories, having evil be defeated through ‘Christian’ methods, but thanks to the study of the occult.

Thus, a keystone feature of Folk Horror that is entirely acknowledged throughout all sources sampled is that: there is a clash between the modern, capitalist and Western ways of life and philosophies, which we shall call the ‘New Ways’, against the archaic traditions from what was before, be it different civilisations and their religion, or different systems and ontologies of the world, often barbaric, pagan, or having been subject to colonisation. These, we shall call the ‘Old Ways’. Kier La Janisse elaborates on this on her 2021 documentary *Woodlands Dark and Days Bewitched: A History of Folk Horror* (*Woodlands* from now on). One of its opening statements concerning the circumstance where “ancient wisdoms that have been long repressed and forgotten rise up again, very often to the

consternation of the complacent, modern man" and referring to it as "that old Freudian chestnut: the return of the repressed" (2021).

Folk Horror often works within this juxtaposition, and the dread conveyed often comes from the question, as put, again, by La Janisse: "What if the Old Ways were right?" (2021). Folk Horror protagonists tend to reject standard archetypes. In contrast to Clover's theorisations on horror cinema, the first wave of films, dating from the 1960s until the late 1970s, are overwhelmingly led by white males, representatives of the White Science, or, at the very least, the New Ways, coming into contact with the Old Ways. The Folk Horror Revival has seen a shift in having a bigger number of female protagonists, although not necessarily embodying the *final girl*, as it can be seen in films such as Chad Crawford Kinkle's *Jug Face* (2013), which will be analysed later.

Therefore, it may be concluded that Folk Horror films, in their majority, are concerned with some common thematic threads:

First, a clash of belief systems, in which usually protagonists coming from the 'mainstream', usually white and Christian world are caught in a setting which is held upon contrary, backwards, archaic or occult Old Ways, which may or may not be Marvellous in Todorov's terms (1975).

Second, the horror usually comes from a community which sustains itself by these Old Ways, therefore creating a sense of isolation, not only found being the cause of their 'twisted ways' but also being caused in the protagonists' point of view. This allows horrific events to take place on a communal setting.

Third, it is usually rooted in Folkloric imagery. This must be read in the broadest sense, that is, in any way that it signifies the wisdom of the people, be it referring to rural, archaic environments or even built-up, urban ones.

In conclusion, Folk Horror is a subgenre of horror fiction concerned with the otherness in people and their ways of living. John Truby's elaborations on an Old World being the origin of the horror, which transcends into the protagonists' world, is turned on

its head, with the protagonists' either stepping into that Old World, or it permeating the modern one.

Adam Scovell further developed traits to be read into Folk Horror, creating a clear, distinctive methodology in its narrative function that can be traced back in texts and arguing that it serves as its core aspect: the *Folk Horror Chain*.

2.2. The Folk Horror Chain and other modes.

Scovell poses in *Hours Dreadful* a theory that serves as a method of analysis for Folk Horror: the "Folk Horror Chain: a linking set of narrative traits that have causational and interlinking consequences" (2017: 14). The Chain is composed of links, which are placeholders for the narrative traits that commonly appear on Folk Horror texts, one directly tying with the next. However, these links can certainly be broad, and their rather vague nature could allow for this theory to be read into a vast array of texts, rendering it useless.

However, he successfully proves his theory by providing a formal framework shared by the Unholy Trinity of Folk Horror, which had not been scholarly articulated before. His theory proposes four elements or "links" to the Chain:

The first and most important element is the landscape. The landscape for Scovell speaks not of the mere scenery that fills the screen, but of "elements within its topography [that] have adverse effects on the social and moral identity of its inhabitants" (2017: 17). The landscape is an essential part of the Folk Horror narrative, being a character in itself, punishing as well as augmenting or defining other characters.

The second element is directly tied off it, being the isolation effected by said landscape. The landscape may isolate key characters or small communities. This isolation in the landscape may be "because of natural enforcement through circumstance, situation and the landscape itself" (2017:18). While it is often the case, this isolation does not necessarily entail any semblance of rurality, as stated by Paciorek in his introductory essay, remarking upon how "The tradition of the horror may indeed have rustic roots and pastoral locations may provide the setting for many of the stronger examples, but people carry their lore and fears with them on their travels and sometimes into a built-up environment. Also,

below the foundations of every town is earth with a more ancient past" (2015). Isolation as formulated by Scovell is simply a means to halt social progress, effectively establishing the setting as an Old World.

This halt on social progress blooms into the third link: skewed belief systems and morality. Scovell writes about a double skewing of morality. "This is skewed within the context of the general social status quo of the era in which the films are made coupled with the diegesis of the cinema itself" (2017: 18). The landscapes and its inhabitants existing outside of progress allows for the horror that is experienced by the outsider protagonists and the audience to be socially acceptable within the specific, isolated place, as Alberto Andrés Calvo also elaborated on his 2021 article.

The final link in the chain is that of the happening or summoning. Scovell defines it as "the resulting action from this skewed social consciousness with all of its horrific fallout. (2017: 18). He is referring to the unleashing of the most violent or supernatural methods that are realised with that skewed morality. Scovell elaborates:

> Folk Horror is often about death in the slowest, most ritualistic of ways, occasionally encompassing supernatural elements, where the group belief systems summon up something demonic or generally supernatural. There's a sense that, in many Folk Horror examples, this chain has already established itself by the time of the film's narrative, the protagonists uncovering the results of this summoning on some isolated plain without the need to go through the motions of the chain itself (2017: 18-19).

This last link is arguably the weakest of the chain, as its description is very broad and could be read into virtually any third act in a horror film, as events tend to escalate to provide a dramatic high-point. However, the vagueness of the concept does not disqualify a film from falling into the Folk Horror category, as it may be argued that it is pointless to attempt to analyse a film into a 'pure' standard of genre, as John Truby noted in his introduction to *The Anatomy of Genres* (2022: 13) but a certain formal categorization into the Chain must be fulfilled in order for a film to be considered in this essay. Importantly, for the purposes of this essay, a certain formal categorization into the Chain must be fulfilled in order for a film to be considered as an instance of the Folk Horror subgenre.

During the last section of *Woodlands*, in which a lot of the speakers give closing remarks on the topic, their understanding of it, and how it has affected them, Scovell recalls *Hours Dreadful* in a final reappraisal of his work:

> One of the big mistakes I think I made. And is still continually being made about [Folk Horror] is that it is and functions like a genre. So, I think the best way to see it is as a mode, in the sort of musical sense, where there is a set of key notes, but they are providing a different context because they are played in a different order. And so, Folk Horror works like this along with other modes. Things like Psychogeography, Hauntology, Urban Wyrd or the English Eerie, all of these different modes that are interlinked, but they do not quite function as one cohesive genre. They're all more interrelated in a more complex way (2021).

As Scovell notes, other 'modes' may be relevant for the analysis of these films. Here are two which are perhaps the most widely used by scholars in the study of Folk Horror:

Hauntology, a theory developed by French philosopher Jacques Derrida in his 1993 book *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of the Mourning and the New International*, takes its name from a pun between 'to haunt' and 'ontology', the philosophical concept of what can be said to exist. While Derrida used the term to refer to the ghosts of Marxism haunting the world after the fall of the Soviet Union, British scholar Mark Fisher revised the term in his 2014 collection of essays *Ghosts Of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*. Fisher gave new life to the concept, repurposing to talk about media. He originally grouped together a number of musicians under the genre of Hauntology, such as Burial, The Caretaker or Boards of Canada, which shared a sense of nostalgia and eroded the borders between the analogic and the digital in their music, mainly by the inclusion of vinyl crackle or tapes disintegrating within their fully-digitally released music (2014: 13-14).

This was once again repurposed by Scovell and other scholars such as Calvo in the analysis of Folk Horror texts, especially regarding nostalgia for the Old Ways, and, implicit within it, the idea of the portrayal of the past as a more desirable time; as well as the conversation between the past and the present, both within the film's narrative or themes, as well as its formal aspects. Calvo explained an example of Hauntological tropes, stating

how "dis-synchronicity and anachronisms are brought about by formal devices concerned with the materiality of the music (or image), mirroring Katy Shaw's argument on spectrality and temporality (in *The Presence of the Past in 21st Century English Literature*, 2018): "the encounter with the spectre marks the point at which multiple temporalities meet and cross" (2021: 15). Fisher's ideas on music may be translated to the screen by the use of analogic film or VHS tape in modern media, often for its nostalgic feel, and thus establishing a direct conversation with the past, or haunting.

Fisher posed to "think of hauntology as the agency of the virtual, with the spectre understood not as anything supernatural, but as that which acts without (physically) existing" (2014: 14). Folk Horror films usually portray these spectres of the past exerting agency in the diegetic present as well as the non-diegetic one, as can be seen in texts such as Walter Grauman's *Crowhaven Farm* (1970) or Peter Sasdy's *The Stone Tape* (1972), in which a group of technological researchers find themselves dealing with an ancient monolith which projects ghostly recordings of brutal events in the past. Scovell poses in *Hours Dreadful* that British culture during the 1970s has "in itself become a form of Folk Horror through the mechanisms of Hauntology, whereby the traumas seen and unseen within the period are now repeating through our constant rediscovery of such culture, thanks largely to the internet" (2017: 124).

For the purposes of this essay, Hauntology may be understood diegetically and non-diegetically with the reference to the "time-wound". Calvo summarizes how "by venturing beyond self-awareness and meta discourse, Hauntology thematises the dialogue between past and present through formal techniques that highlight the temporal incongruities that Fisher, taking up Derrida's conception of time as "out of joint" (1994: 34) aptly names the "time-wound" in his short essay "No Future 2012" (2020: 716). Diegetically, the trauma and isolation tied to landscape can also be seen through the scope of Hauntology, allowing for them to be resolved by addressing nostalgia and separating positive aspects that need to be mourned, and the negative ones that societal progress has left behind.

Psychogeography, a term coined by French philosopher Guy Debord in his 1955 essay 'Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography', describes the effect of a geographical location on individuals' emotions and behaviour. Despite being a concept conceived to reclaim and understand urban spaces on a particular light, its connection to Folk Horror is not hard to see, and was introduced to formal study of the genre by speakers in *The Alchemical Landscape*, a symposium held in Corpus Christi College of Cambridge University in March of 2015. Psychogeography can be a relevant tool for analysis because of the first link in the Chain. The effect of the landscape on people in Folk Horror is ever-present, but an especially clear instance may come from *The Wicker Man*. The specific situation of the people of Summerisle, in lonesome Scottish Island during the early 1970s, is a perfect brewing ground for their mentality, as it is this geographical isolation which has allowed for Lord Summerisle's religious and political power to seep into the population, having no other moral input not to become the secretive, human-sacrificing people Sgt, Howie encounters upon his arrival.

3. Overview – A History of Folk Horror

In its origins, Folk Horror has been considered a quintessentially British genre, a title earned by the UK's abundant production of media texts in this style. Dawn Keeteley, professor at Lehigh University, writes that "this brief history is a British one. Indeed, since the preponderance of folk horror scholarship takes up British texts, current definitions are necessarily predicated on this particular national tradition" (2020: 2). When one thinks of Folk Horror, the Scottish crags of *The Wicker Man* or the winding East Anglian prairies in *Witchfinder General* automatically come to mind. However, relatively recent additions such as Robert Eggers' *The Witch* (2015) having broken into its corpus.

The first mention of term, superficial in nature, dates back to a journal article published in a 1936 edition of *The English Journal* and written by American academic and Shakespeare scholar Oscar James Campbell, who, in analysing William Wordsworth, remarked on how 18th Century German writer Gottfried August Bürger's ballads, "with [their] freightage of superstition and folk horror" (1936: 205), influenced the British poet, thus not only introducing the theme into the literature of the British Isles, but also putting it in relation with the origins of Gothic literature.

The same year as Campbell's article was published also marks the passing of another one of the biggest predecessors of the genre. Writer and medievalist M. R. James is one of the most relevant figures to British ghost stories, and is extensively mentioned and revered in Kier La Janisse's *Woodlands* as well as in Adam Scovell's *Hours Dreadful*. Scovell touches on him again in a *Literary Hub* post, in which he states that

> James's stories of antiquarians unearthing forgotten horrors [are] natural maps and can be walked. Even the act of reading them simulates a traversing of sorts, such is their detail. They are filled with askance for journey. James was a landscape artist who, more often than not, subverted such journeys into the pastoral (2020).

These scholars remark on the importance of James' figure in being the first to consistently embed into British horror some of the most central aspects of Folk Horror. As Scovell notes, "though his stories do not all fit into the category and characteristics of Folk

Horror as a whole, almost all their subsequent adaptations do; programmes and stories which loom large over all other Folk Horror in some guise, especially upon British television" (2021).

Moving onto the screens, there are several crucial British films that must be acknowledged before being able to cross the Atlantic. Jonathan Miller's 1968 TV film *Whistle and I'll Come to You* adapted James' 1904 story "Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad", following the arrogant and muttering Professor Parkins (Michael Hordern), a stern, obsessively pragmatic academic who constantly remarks about his convictions against the existence of the supernatural, as he finds a strange whistle in an eroded Knights Templar graveyard during his holidays. Parkins blows the whistle and unleashes some kind of unseen power which begins to haunt him, slowly leading him to madness and ending with him being completely taken into an oblivious, baby-like state due to sheer terror. The success of this adaptation inspired the development of annual British television short film series *A Ghost Story for Christmas* (1971-1978), directed except in one instance by Lawrence Gordon Clark, which adapted a strand of James' stories.

"His ghosts are more earthly and physical, he describes their texture and their smell. They're deeply connected to their physical surroundings, in a lot of ways, and to this idea of a bloody history that is buried beneath the façade of civility", Janisse states in *Woodlands* (2021). Seconds later, Lawrence Gordon Clark himself is featured as he comments on how in *The Stalls of Barchester*, in which the titular stalls of the Barchester Cathedral were carved out of a cursed hanging tree, James "interwove historical evil, violence and sacrifice with so-called rational Christian beliefs" (2021). Clark's adaptation of James' stories solidified the first link in Scovell's Chain, setting up the country landscape as an all-engulfing and isolating element, as we can see with Parkins' long stride in the establishing shot of the grand, static beach, and portraying the evil as having its source on the ground itself, or being set loose via unearthing.

3.1. The Unholy Trinity

Almost in a parallel to *Ghost Stories*, three films were released which would be the definitive expression of the genre. Michael Reeves' *Witchfinder General* (1968), Piers Haggard's *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971), and Robin Hardy's *The Wicker Man* (1973) are three seemingly very different horror films which, through their cult status, have come to be considered Folk Horror's Unholy Trinity. Concise narrative breakdowns of the three follow:

Witchfinder General: Set in 17th Century East Anglia amid the English Civil War, the film follows the exploits of Sir Matthew Hopkins (Vincent Price), a psychopathic, misogynist lawyer who, accompanied by his assistant Stearne (Robert Russell), takes advantage of the war-torn mentality of the people to enact barbaric tests of incredible violence on women who are accused of witchcraft, executing them in the name of God.

The Blood on Satan's Claw: Local youngsters living on an farming village in early 18th Century England, led Angel Blake (Linda Hayden) later find a claw while playing in the ploughing fields. This finding results in a Satanist outbreak spreading among the village's youth, who begin conducting rituals in a derelict church in the woods, in which they attract other children with games that turn into grizzly sacrifices to reconstruct the devil's body.

The Wicker Man: The film takes a great leap into the future, as it takes place on the (then) current day. Police Sergeant Howie (Edward Woodward), a deeply puritanical Christian, is sent to the isolated Scottish island of Summerisle after receiving an anonymous letter. A local girl, Rowan (Gerry Cowper) has gone missing. As Howie begins his investigation, he is shocked both by the lush and bountiful farmland environment of what should be a craggy, inhospitable island, as well as the pagan ways and customs of the townsfolk. The islanders have forsaken Christianity for a sexually liberated kind of paganism, led by their guru –and local nobleman- Lord Summerisle (Christopher Lee).

Film historian and actor Mark Gatiss, in the second episode of his 2010 BBC Documentary *A History of Horror*, titled 'Home Counties Horror', was the first person to group the three films as the Unholy Trinity. He presented them as a 'last hurrah' of the

Golden Age of British horror, which, “having squeezed every last drop out of 19th Century Gothic”, and before returning the ball across the pond, delivered these three films as he ‘last gems of an era’ (2010).

The status these three films have come to hold may seem shocking due to how starkly different they are on a surface level. As Alberto Andrés Calvo mentioned, “it would be easy to cite irreconcilable differences and altogether renounce studying Folk Horror film as its own phenomenon” (2021: 82). *Witchfinder General* may seem more a “nihilistic Western” (Scovell, 2017: 21), with its many scenes of characters riding on horseback across the green vastness of East Anglia, accompanied by duels and chases. *The Blood on Satan’s Claw* is the most stereotypically horror film of the three, heavily leaning into exploitation cinema, as well as being the only one of the three to portray explicitly supernatural elements. Finally, *The Wicker Man* can seem more like a twisted, musical police procedural than any kind of horror at all. However, a number of things link them together.

For Scovell, Folk Horror was “summoned into existence during what can be called the British counter-culture movement”, as he states in *Woodlands* (2021) and acted as a high point of its artistic expression. Counter-culture manifest as hippie communes and free love, as well as anti-establishment feelings can certainly be felt throughout these three landmark texts. In writing about *Witchfinder* for magazine *Folk Horror Revival*, Aaron Jolly commented on how “the initial seeds for representing the bourgeois as morally bankrupt were planted early in the Folk Horror genre” (2015: 275). In an interview for *Woodlands*, Sam Deigahn, associate editor for *Diabolique Magazine*, describes how “Lord Summerisle, is trying to go back to what he describes as the Old Ways, and that is something that turns up in British Folk Horror in particular, where you have these ‘old money’ aristocratic figures who are really struggling in the modern era, and they are trying to preserve this ‘Old’ way of life” (2021). For its own part, *Blood* also represented this movement in Angel Blake’s Satanic flowerchildren, which the film depicts in a time of massive privatisation of lands.

Furthermore, the Trilogy is used by Adam Scovell to comprehensively exemplify his Folk Horror Chain, it being what binds them together even beyond their loosely (given the

importance he gives them in his work) common context. He remarks: "The Folk Horror Chain can be seen as the hyphen between these depicted, horrific events; its descriptor as a chain being more than simply an evocation but specifically to highlight connections and strong ties between cause and effect, idea and action, the summoning and the summoned. It is within these conditions that Folk Horror as a form can begin to be conjured from the framework or perhaps even as a narrative template" (2017: 15).

3.2. Folk Horror in the United States

Before the screens, the US did have a, if not extensively rich, certainly emblematic corpus of proto-Folk Horror literature dating from the Gothic halcyon days, with Washington Irving's stories "Rip Van Winkle" (1819), "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (1820), as well as Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" (1835) serving as excellent examples. All of these texts have received cinematic adaptations, dating as far back as 1896, but none are especially relevant to this essay.

In his book's brief foray into foreign ruralities and their forms of horror, Scovell writes:

> American rurality is often as pure as its Anglo-Saxon cousin when in the cinematic form. Rurality has played such a huge role in the country's horror cinema that separating the examples relevant to Folk Horror from its general horror cinema is a difficult task. This is a horror cinema that is already fragmented by endless sub-genre identification, and many films have used elements of rurality to induce a heady and sometimes extreme form of the horrific while not being even vaguely related to Folk Horror (2017: 114).

This was further reinforced by University of Passau professor Alexandra Hauke, in her essay "Dreaming of Leviathan: John Langan's *The Fisherman* and American Folk Horror". She stated that "any theory of American history speaks to the history of American folklore, and vice versa, as two inseparable sides of the same coin", arguing how "if American folk literature and history are shaped by the monsters of enslavement, savagery, human trade, war and the repercussions of the idealism of imperialism, so are its horror texts" (2020: 170-171).

Thus, instances of American Folk Horror films can date even earlier than the string of British texts which began to come out during the 1960s. However, their sporadic nature and lesser cohesiveness when grouped together in comparison with their counterparts on the other side of the Atlantic has not given them the status that led to the academic study of British Folk Horror.

One of the greatest departures between British and American iterations of the genre may be religion. As Witchcraft was "the only religion the British Isles ever gave to the world" (2021), it was often the ideas around which it revolves that came around when people portrayed the Old Ways in Folk Horror, as is the case in *The Blood on Satan's Claw* or *The Wicker Man*. In comparison, a lot of the isolated communities and backwards beliefs portrayed in American Folk Horror often are offshoots of Christianism or directly tied to it, as it can be seen in *Eyes of Fire* (1983) or *Wisconsin Death Trip* (1999).

Janisse also contrasts between American Westerns and British Folk Horror in the key role of landscape in their effectiveness, stating that while the former heavily showcased amplitude of the terrain, the latter went "deep into the earth" (2021). While the width of America versus the depth of Britain is an effective figure to use, American Folk Horror has widely dismissed this. The combination of both elements exists, playing into the archaic and forgotten beneath its landscape while inevitably playing into its expansiveness. For Folk Horror, the American grandeur becomes a contributing factor to the greater variety for the sources of horror, being now much bigger than the British repertoire.

Charles Laughton's *The Night of the Hunter* (1955) is credited by both Scovell and La Janisse as one of the first iterations of Folk Horror in the United States. It is also the first of a lengthy slew of films who may also be considered to fall within the subgenre of Southern Gothic, which scholar Nick Pinkerton describes for the magazine *Sight & Sound* as "set amid the decaying grandeur and crumbling mansions of the ante-bellum South, these films are haunted by the ghosts of slavery, lost loves and dark family secrets, and feature exiles and eccentrics in a world characterised by macabre violence" (2015: 44). Both subgenres have

been widely diluted and muddled together, but Southern Gothic can be best read as another 'mode' through which the text may be appreciated in a certain light.

The psychogeographic aspect is clear within Southern Gothic, which explicitly deals with the darkness brought upon people by the impoverished, isolated communities in the Southern States dating from as far back as the Antebellum. Its nihilistic tone, especially palpable in other examples such as Toobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), is akin to that of *Witchfinder General*. However, other examples of the Folk Horror and Southern Gothic interjection can be more reliant on the former's themes of belief, such as Fritz Kierch's 1984 adaptation of Stephen King's novel *The Children of the Corn*. The film portrays isolation in an especially explicit way seen in its first act, with unending, labyrinthine roads and seas of corn fields allowing for extreme violence to take root in a small community.

Witchcraft is still an essential part of American Folk Horror. Beginning with the experience of the British colonisers bringing their culture with them, and informed by the Puritans' extensive record keeping, American Folk Horror is still heavily scarred by the country's history with the Salem Witch Trials that took place between 1692 and 1693, in which 19 people accused of witchcraft were executed. Witchcraft holds a leading part in American Folk Horror, from early examples such as Walter Grauman's film *Crowhaven Farm* (1970).

Its protagonist, Maggie (Hope Lange) inherits a farmhouse in New England, in which she decides to get away from the stress of city life along with her husband Ben (Paul Burke). Their idyllic new life is extremely short, as Maggie soon finds herself plagued by visions of witch trials taking place there 300 years before. Through their also menacing and close-knit neighbours, almost anticipating the intimidation of the peoples of Summerisle during their introductory scene, and a mysterious young girl (Cindy Eilbacher), Maggie discovers that she is the reincarnation of one of the witches executed at Salem, and must honour her deal with the Devil to seek revenge on the prosecutors who killed her.

Crowhaven Farm (1970) is not the first American venture into Folk Horror, but it may well be the oldest one to completely fulfil its formal aspects dealt with in this essay. The Massachusetts rural landscape is present in the film, providing much more than a backdrop of forests and rolling hills. It also goes beyond emphasizing the couple's isolation from their previous life while fuelling Maggie's paranoia, but also justifies the isolation of their neighbours, who are revealed to be part of a coven with intentions to trick Maggie into fulfilling the witch's pact. The rurality of the setting both contributes to their portrayal as both pastiche of rural New England as well as to the mystery of the film. Their introduction as typical quirky neighbours in a classic Americana fashion is quickly imbued with the same sense of eeriness invoked by the farm itself.

Fisher's time-wound is opened both diegetically as well as non-diegetically in the film. The film's physical conditions are hauntological as it exists through a series of filters of nostalgia, with its original film having only persisted onto our current era by being uploaded to the internet in low-quality, un-remastered VHS tape recordings. *Crowhaven Farm* sets an example of how the time-wound works in Folk Horror, as Maggie's visions tie the landscape and the horrific events that took place during the Salem Witch Trials to the land, demonstrated through the camera work and points of view of being buried alive, as well as the backdrop's stillness in time as the visions of the past and the present shift. The past is literally bleeding and 'haunting' the present in the film, with the spirits of the witches – and the trauma they hold – influencing the present. The film ends on an ambiguous note about whether the haunting has been broken, leading the watcher to believe that it may still go on. The trauma of the past is, as of now, diegetic and non-diegetic in Folk Horror, persisting in the film's story as well as having yet come back today in a new wave of films, therefore point to unresolved issues.

Witchcraft is also extensively portrayed in Avery Crounse's colonial horror film *Eyes of Fire* (1983). The film also presents the figure of witches in the Western tradition, while deeply intertwining them with their relationship with the landscape. *Eyes of Fire* might provide a far more interesting case for the Folk Horror Chain, as it portrays more than one of the traumas of Folk Horror at once. Much like *Crowhaven Farm*, the film presents us with

a witch named Leah (Karlene Crockett), in a European fashion, as she is an Irish immigrant. She follows a rag-tag group, led by an exiled, adulterous preacher (Dennis Lipscomb) beyond the Western frontier of their Puritan settlement after an attempted witch trial upon the two. After a run-in with the Shawnee, they flee and settle in a valley that the Native Americans will not delve into because of its spirits. The settlers become triply trapped by this events: by the Shawnee waiting for them at the valley's edge, by the preacher's increasingly mad religious experimentation and behaviour, and by the valley itself, which is home to ancient spirits of the landscape manifest as mud-people, led by a gargantuan, earthen witch. Unlike *Crowhaven Farm,* the film delves in the marvellous from the beginning, as Leah's powers are key to the party's survival from the opening of the film, and they specifically revolve around altering the landscape and natural elements, creating sparks or gusts of winds.

Leah, a European witch, represent the themes usually related to them, mainly her perception as incredible danger because of her feminine power, which was remarked upon by folklorist Gail-Nina Anderson and Mitch Horowitz in *Woodlands* (2021). The film's colonial themes of settling are also present in her confrontation with the ancient mud-witch, whose place as 'Queen of the forest' she eventually takes. The monstrous witch represents a Native spirit of the earth that keeps the valley free from humans' influence, and the settlers' presence sets off her wide array of supernatural ploys to either get them to leave or exterminating them. Her figure is directly tied to the landscape, not only in its literal physical manifestation as living mud, but also in her control of the trees and terrain, serving her and the mud-people as the medium for their life, emerging and retiring into the literal ground, and hiding themselves as well as trapping people in the bark of trees. The land "literally manifesting defenders to mimic what is being done to its own soil" (2017: 116), as Scovell explains in *Hours Dreadful*, can be seen in many American Folk Horror texts, especially those putting their focus on issues of colonisation. The quote, referring to John Boorman's *Deliverance* (1972), is equally applicable to *Eyes of Fire* despite the virtually inexistent similarity between the films.

Witchcraft, brought over to the New England colonies, may be the most historically important section of American Folk Horror, given the pervasiveness of the trauma of the witch trials and Puritan society as a whole. In Woodlands, Bernice M. Murphy, author of *The Rural Gothic in American Popular Culture*, states that "small Puritan towns hiding a terrible secret go back to the Salem Witch Trials", arguing how this specific branch of horror came from the fact that "the communities in the wilderness could turn against themselves with a very frightening speed" (2021).

American Folk Horror may perhaps be the most varied and branching of the 'global Folk Horrors', and Scovell's Chain, focused on British cinema, proves still a relevant tool to sift it from the bulk of folkloric or rural-related horror texts. These thematic and narrative beats are, in some way, inherited from the European tradition, but other sources of Folk Horror which are still relevant will not be dealt with in this essay.

The country's extensive history and deep trauma makes it a special brewing ground for a genre such as Folk Horror or theories such as Hauntology, which explore how these unresolved past issues bleed into the present and twist it against progress from a varied moral stance. A territorial and temporal divide may also be observed, as witch-related texts dating from the trauma of the trials are common in New England, along with Southern Gothic taking place in the southern states. Further West, frontier traumas are explored in films such as Antonia Bird's *Ravenous* (1999) or Emma Tammi's *The Wind* (2018), or Native American legends being more relavant in the North with films such as Larry Fessenden's *Wendigo* (2001). Its variety is captured in this quote by Alexandra Hauke:

> As such, many vampire, werewolf, and witch tales thematize New England's legacy of the Puritan battles between human good and supernatural evil; American ghost stories negotiate the gothic fear of haunted houses and unresolved generational disputes; race horrors read the non-white monster as a racialized other; zombie narratives go back to the transatlantic slave trade and enable the return of the repressed; slashers threaten the allegedly safe spaces of white suburbia; and sea as well as nature horrors examine the terrors of the open waters threatening whalers and slave ships across the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans (2020: 171).

Folk Horror had two clearly distinct waves of cultural production. The first one, beginning at the end of the 1960s and spanning during most of the 1970s, with its last relevant

features within the group being Peter Graham Scott's *Children of the Stones* (1977), or the last of the original run of Lawrence Gordon Clark's M. R. James *A Ghost Story for Christmas* adaptations, *Casting the Runes* (1979). As we have established in section 2.1. of this essay, this group of films manifested Folk Horror as a way to deal with anxieties about the British zeitgeist of the time, mainly regarding the counterculture and back-to-the-land movements, and the fear-inducing resurgence of Old Ways as a response to the 1973 oil crisis, along with the skyrocketing inflation, unemployment and the subsequent strikes and power cuts that took place in the British Isles during the decade after the post-WWII era of economic growth came to an end.

As it has been clarified, the conception Folk Horror as a British phenomenon can be contested. However, this first wave did not really establish itself beyond the British Isles. The example of the US points to a rich tradition, but the collection of films that may be addressed as "20th Century American Folk Horror cinema" is evenly spread out along 50 years, with no clear peak of activity, consistent authorial counterparts to Lawrence Gordon Clark or Nigel Kneale, and expanding over very different topics, given the folkloric and cultural differences between Great Britain and the United States.

The second wave has been dubbed by some academics as the Folk Horror Revival, often remarking on its problems with derivativeness, but, for the sake of clarity give the existence of the homonymous magazine, it will be addressed as contemporary Folk Horror, or the new wave. It got its spark in the early 2010's, according to Andy Paciorek and Adam Scovell, with Ben Weathley's works *Kill List* (2011) and *A Field in England* (2013). This contemporary wave has laid its roots in the British Isles, largely thanks to Weathley's growing body of work, which usually reflects the British countryside or folkloric tangents, such as *In the Earth* (2021). Mark Gatiss' reboot of *A Ghost Story for Christmas* is also noteworthy given the comeback of James' stories.

Contemporary Folk Horror has a much more global influence, having been set in motion all over the world, especially in the United States, due to the sheer size of its horror film industry. The reasons behind this global resurgence may lay in globalisation and easy

access to these older films, a great percentage of which not even qualifying for cult status, thanks to the internet and mass communication. This, intertwined with the formalisation of the genre by Gatiss in 2010, and its subsequent efforts by scholars for the genre to be formalised within academia, may be largely responsible for the burgeoning of new Folk Horror films, more global than ever, as it may be clearly exemplified by Ari Aster's *Midsommar* (2019), an American production set in Sweden.

4. Case Analysis

Having laid this groundwork, this essay will now delve into two relevant contemporary Folk Horror films: Chad Crawford Kinkle's independent picture *Jug Face* (2013), and Robert Eggers' commercial and critical success *The Witch* (2015). Both are produced and set within the United States, and attempt to analyse how they fit within the Folk Horror taxonomy provided in the Methodology section, as well as commenting on the social and political background or trauma they may be responding to. Before staring, some relevant prompts from *Hours Dreadful* may be considered, which are noted as Scovell to be contributing factors to the resurgence of all things Folk Horror:

- The new work may reflect nostalgia, "whether effectively subverting it (hauntollogically) or succumbing to past visions of Folk Horror's primary era, to produce referential work" (2017: 167)

- It may also use "certain thematic traces within the inner workings of Folk Horror to assess current political issues" (2017: 167), or simply revise those of last century.

4.1. Modern Cultism and Rurality in Chad Crawford Kinkle's Jug Face

Director Chad Crawford Kinkle has introduced this film as "Southern Gothic" (2013) and "Backwoods Horror" (2014: 156), but its strongest tie to Folk Horror may be its depiction of a cult, providing a tie to British predecessors such as *The Wicker Man* or, especially *The Blood on Satan's Claw* whose influence within the text is clearly palpable. A narrative breakdown of the film follows:

***Jug Face*:** Ada (Lauren Ashley Carter) is a teenager living in a rural isolated community in the Tennessee forests, which revolves around the cultish veneration of a mystic mud-pit which, in exchange for protecting the village folk and curing their diseases, demands human sacrifice from one of their own. The sacrifices are announced by Dawai (Sean Bridgers), a "seer" who, possessed in a state of trance by the Pit, creates clay jugs with the next victim's face on it.

Ava lives with her very controlling mother (Sean Young), her father (Larry Fendessen), who is the patriarch of the community, maintains order and enforces the

sacrifices; and her brother (Daniel Manche), with whom she has an incestuous relationship. When she finds herself pregnant outside of marriage, a practice heavily looked down upon by the community, she attempts to quickly marry a young man who is chosen for her. At the same time, Dawai moulds a jug with Ada's face on it. Upon discovering it, Ava defies the pit's demand and attempts to hide it in the woods in order to save her child's life, which unleashes the pit's spirit to go on a murderous rampage, gradually culling Ada's community. Ada also becomes possessed by the pit, experiencing first-hand the demise of several villagers at the hands of the spirit. Thus, she comes to better understand the pit, but still resolved to escape her destiny. As the tension builds within Ada and the decreasing members of her family, her secrets are eventually revealed and, after a violent confrontation, she finally comes to accept her fate and allows herself to be have her throat slit for the pit. The film ends on a dark note, strongly establishing the pit's control over the community.

Despite its mixed reception upon release and general perception as a 'B movie', *Jug Face* presents an extremely interesting commentary on the tropes of Folk Horror. Its intertextuality and revision with British classics, as mentioned before, as well American ones such as John Boorman's *Deliverance* (1972), offers perhaps the clearest proposal for a 'New Wave' of Folk Horror in the United States.

The Folk Horror Chain is completed to perfection in *Jug Face*. The landscape is present upon the first second of the film, as a seemingly naïve-styled depiction of the geography of the backwoods Tennessee village is portrayed on a map as the credits roll. This plastidecor animation presented with the opening credits provides some background on the film's world, illustrated within the explosive green of drawings of trees. The landscape, as well as the hillbilly townsfolk of the film, is entirely dominated by the Pit, clearly exemplified in its opening zooming out, in which the blood red clay water contained within it is the epicentre from which the map expands. Here, the Pit is established as its own character possessing agency, taking advantage of the villagers first outbreak of a pox-like illness takes over the settlement. The Pit takes its first possession and conspicuously drives

the chosen man to mould a jug with the face of the village priest, being the first one to be sacrificed.

After this, the landscape can be appreciated in its oppressing function. The camera very often frames the characters, especially Ada, in medium to long shots, effectively portraying its dominance over the community. The overgrown locations, backwoods as well as the inhabited spaces, also accentuate a labyrinthine quality to their existence. Though roads and ways clearly exist in this village, no clear beginning or end to them is ever showcased, and the physical connection to the rest of the world (the town in which Ada's father makes his moonshine business in, and to which she later attempts to escape along with Dawai) are left purposefully blurry.

All of this easily contributes to the isolation of the community. Chad Crawford Kinkle commented on the nature of the Pit spirit in a 2014 interview for *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, stating that "this 'deity', Kinkle suggests, predates the first Native Americans. 'For the back story', he continues, 'I had always imagined that the Indians left any settlers there alone, because they knew that the pit was in that area'" (2014: 156). The Pit, a bona-fide Jamesian ghost in its physicality and earthiness, is portrayed to hold immense power over the territory, which, it may be assumed, it exerts upon it to keep its followers trapped within its grasp. Guy Debord's ideas may be applied here to see Psychogeography in action, the functioning and beliefs (which are revealed to be entirely true shortly after the film begins, immediately resulting in the Marvellous), are entirely moulded by the landscape in which this community finds itself.

Jug Face's depiction of a skewed moral system is the film's most interesting aspect in regards to Folk Horror. The townsfolk's violent ways are fruit of the Pit. Kinkle emphasizes this more explicitly than other films regarding similar topics such as *The Wicker Man*. Much more similar to *The Blood on Satan's Claw*, and perhaps in a more elegant and communicative manner, the community in *Jug Face* is explicitly shown to have originally been a common, Christian settlement that was simply effected by their geographical circumstances into a new, twisted way of life. Kinkle's continues twisting the trope by

eliminating the outsider point of view from his film. By immersing the audience entirely within the cult, a grey moral area is opened that allows for a sympathetic light to befall on the characters.

The Wicker Man and *The Blood on Satan's Claw* both function in some kind of narrative triangle: The outsider, or Western, civilised man; the community with the skewed moral system; and the belief system which sustains the morals, be it supernatural or not. Often, the latter two are joined in opposing the former. By removing the first element, Kinkle creates a cult narrative in which, ultimately, the community are explicitly shown to be the victims of a looming, supernatural entity, in which they base their belief system. The townsfolk, while brutal in their ways, are shown to live in a somewhat functioning life with a strong social tissue, and still connect with the outer world to do business. This social tissue is disintegrated when the Pit, the belief system, is defied. Ada's act and its consequences can be understood to be because of the breaking of the social norms of the Pit and the people. While the film is not a very overtly feminist text, Kinkle does place importance on the role of social progress in Ada's character. She is the one that is being allowed out into the world, momentarily, with her father. This allows her to obtain a pregnancy test, a piece of technology from the Christian, Western world, which sets off the horrific events taking place in the film. The origin of the horror is subverted, and sacrifices to the Pit, which would be a source of angst and terror for the audience, but a controlled, normal act for the character, becomes an onslaught and the near-destruction of their society, thus attaining the usual combination of fear on both sides of the screen.

Ada disrupts her community by introducing Western progress and suffering a surge of its individualism, as she fears for her life and for her baby, putting at risk every other aspect of her life revolving around her community. This is even further twisted by Kinkle, as her incestuous relationship is also showcased to be the skewed morality in the film, and one shared by both the New and the Old World. This is emphasized in the opening scene of the film, as she is shown having intercourse with his brother, along with cuts of the Pit and the jug faces being crafted, exemplifying all the moral wrongdoings taking place in the village. Ada becomes the "symbolic outsider", a term used in *Woodlands* (2021) by Mitch Horowitz

when commenting upon Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery", a short story written in 1948 from which Kinkle may have drawn influence for the way in which Ada is ultimately shunned by her cult-like community.

Ultimately, the Chain is completed by Ada's sacrifice, a sombre moment in which the point of view of the disintegrating community finally weighs over her own: she is being selfish in her quest for individuality. Having her jugular slit for the Pit, *Jug Face* finally cements its religious nihilism, having made clear that no happy ending was probably possible. Despite the coming peace for the community, its final scene further emphasizes their absolute subordination to the whims of the Pit. The audience is made aware that Ada's grandfather also broke the religious contract when hiding her wife's jug face, and so, the audience is led to believe that surges of individual clinging to life will inevitably happen again. Scovell notes how "in many Folk Horror examples, the chain has already established itself by the time of the film's narrative" (2017: 18). *Jug Face* portrays a particularly bleak depiction of the Chain. Rural Tennessee is no Summerisle, and its inhabitants will not be able to break it once the crops continue to fail next year.

The United States' history with religious fundamentalism and experimentation, as Horowitz explained in *Woodlands*, is "at the country's very root" (2021). An earlier depiction of the more classical cult-related Folk Horror in the United States is be Leo Penn's 1978 limited TV show *The Dark Secret of Harvest Home*. Cults are presented in different ways, and, certainly, Kinkle's conception is unique in its genre. Other contemporary iterations of cult-related, Folk Horror-adjacent films are Kevin Kölsch and Dennis Widmyer *Starry Eyes* (2014) and David Robert Mitchell's *Under the Silver Lake* (2018), which both depict regular, working class people's run-in with elite Hollywood cults which secretly act out with omnipotent power, both being deeply informed by modern folklore around Hollywood. Rural hillbillies and the Hollywood elite have their common denominators in that they uphold their social order, and in the brutal events that may be unleashed if these are disturbed. Finally, they may both be read as symbollic for right wing values, which are a cause of concern and perceived as a looming problem by the new Folk Horror Directors, which tend to hold left-leaning or liberal beliefs in their work.

Jug Face takes the most influence of Southern Gothic in its depiction of the cult. Despite not being presented as the real antagonists, their values are those associated to the rural American far-right, having strict views on marriage and sex which can be reduced to the excruciating control of women.

From a hauntological point of view, *Jug Face* has little to offer in terms of music, as its score, composed by indie artist Sean Spillane, is a mildly atmospheric mix of foreboding yet jangly guitars and country-rock songs. However, the time-wound is very present in the film from a diegetic point of view. The mythology around the Pit, unleashes its ghostly yet manifestations in the *Shunned*, spirits of those members of the community who also rebelled against its desires, "suffering a fate worse than death", as Kinkle puts in his *Irish Journal* interview (2014: 156). Thus, the time-wound is literally opened by Ada's defiance, causing the past trauma of the spirits, still wearing the marks of their gory deaths to wreak havoc in the present of the story. Kinkle further plays with this time displacement in the presentation of the community itself. *Jug Face* does not hint at any reason to believe the time is any other than the 2010s. However, the community is depicted existing outside of modern technology, available on town apart from cars, and an inferred telephone that Ada's father must use to find out about her escaped daughter's location. Their music is old, Ada's grandfather does not have a bathroom, and a small radio in her room, the only piece of communication technology explicitly shown in the film, looks mid-century. The Folk Horror Chain intertwines this displacement, with the protagonists' moral system is what keeps them away from it, exemplified by Ada's nerve-wrecking care of not being discovered with a pregnancy test.

Their appearance of frugal, mid-20th Century living, can be further intertwined within hauntology as it can be prone from entering the "nostalgia mode", as coined by Fisher (2012). Despite Kinkle's intentional depiction of the community's conditions on a negative light, the nostalgia mode of the internet may read these images as evocative of a 'simpler time', and lead to them appearing on an aspirational, "Southern Gothic" post, an internet trend which romanticises the images of derelict, overgrown houses, interior decoration, or Ada's raggedy, "country-chic" outfits, barely acknowledging a vague idea of

close-knit community and forgetting about the often humiliating living conditions and misogyny depicted in the film. While Kinkle effectively works with nostalgia to hauntologically open a time-wound in the narrative, it is as prone to befall into "nostalgia mode" and be ultimately stripped of its politics, and have the original intention of these aspects fade away into a commodified Southern Gothic internet trend.

To conclude, these concerns hold real ground in the United States nowadays. Since the 2010's, and after the Crash of 2008, economic stagnation has led to an even greater class divide in the country, as well as a continuous rise of far-right nationalist movements, fears of which are reflected in these texts. Folk Horror addresses this by portraying these aspects of life under Capitalism as 'backwards' and intimidating, more elegantly portraying it in the backwoods community in Southern Gothic or Appalachian examples, which have long been the recipient of these ideologies in film, but perhaps more relevantly now than ever; or leaning into paranoia of our ruling classes operating underground, in ways in which democracy is useless and are absolutely beyond our reach and creating horror in the fear of losing autonomy and agency over our own bodies. Folk Horror is not especially hopeful in this matter, as its horrifying depictions of cults and ruralities in the modern era tend to persevere in the end, warning the audience, at best, of the presence of what they symbolise.

4.2. Witchcraft in Robert Eggers' The Witch: A New England Folktale

Perhaps the best well known film of this new wave of Folk Horror, *The Witch* (2015) was instantly beloved by critics and audiences, setting a difference with most films within the genre and making it the most successful of these films. Director Robert Eggers crafted a meticulously historically and folklorically informed text, from its accurate depiction of 17th Century clothing and speech, from its documentation on the European tradition on witches, permeating the film in a quintessentially European horror, brought upon the New World.

The Witch: Set in New England during the 1630s, religiously extremist but pious William (Ralph Ineson) and his family, consisting of his wife Katherine (Kate Dickie), eldest daughter Thomasin (Anya Taylor-Joy), son Caleb (Harvey Scrimshaw), and young twins Mercy (Ellie Grainger) and Jonas (Lucas Dawson) and newborn Samuel, must leave their Puritan

settlement after William chooses exile before compromise over religious disagreements about the “pure and faithful dispensation of the Word of God” (2015). They establish a farm on the edge of a dark, foreboding forest.

One day, the baby suddenly disappears while Thomasin is watching over him. Unknown to the family, Samuel has been abducted and killed by a witch in the forest. The family is devastated, and Katherine blames Thomasin for the loss. Strange events and ominous signs begin to plague the farm: crops fail, and Caleb disappears while hunting trip after encountering the witch, only to return in a severely ill state after his bewitching, and die after a fit of religious hysteria. The twins accuse Thomasin of witchcraft, claiming she speaks with the family's goat, Black Phillip.

When the tension reaches its breaking point, William locks Thomasin and the twins up in the goat shed, suspecting them of being under the witch’s influence. That night, the witch attacks the shed, killing the twins. The next morning, William is killed by Black Phillip, who is revealed to be the Devil in disguise. Katherine, driven mad with grief, attacks Thomasin, forcing Thomasin to kill her in self-defense. Alone and desperate, Thomasin turns to Black Phillip, who speaks to her and offers her a life of freedom and power if she signs his book. She agrees, sealing her pact with the Devil. The film concludes with Thomasin joining a coven of witches in the forest, embracing her new identity as a witch.

The Folk Horror Chain is present in *The Witch*, and a comparison with the previous one, seen on *Jug Face*, showcases its broadness. Landscape is, as usual, ever present in the film. The New England backdrop engulfs Thomasin and her family from their set out into the wilderness, with the camera remained fixed and allowing their carriage to become ever smaller against the tall, looming trees. For the remainder of the film, a vast majority of the action takes place in a clear in the woods in which the family establishes their new farm. The location amplifies the anxiety of the film, with its lonesome patch of human-touched land against the gigantic woods, directly tied to the witch in the film. Her power over it, and therefore the Devil’s, is also a contributing factor in the oppressive ambient, causing the crops to fail and the hunting to be unfruitful. This is a horrific subversion of colonial idealism,

as theologist A. B. McGill puts it: “the farmstead overlooked by ominous woods is a tragic parody of Eden. The characters crave apples and Caleb regurgitates a bloody one” (2018: 410).

The portrayal of isolation and what it does to people falls more directly under the influence of *Witchfinder General*, which seems to be the least pervasive of the trilogy in its cultural relevance to other Folk Horror texts. The family’s isolation precedes the woods, coming from the specific political and religious conventions at the time. William’s religious beliefs being considered extremist is the first source of their isolation, which is later greatly amplified by their physical surroundings, as previously delved into by Horowitz and Murphy in *Woodlands* (2021).

The “religious experimentation and radicalism” (2021) is not, however, the sole source of a skewed morality in *The Witch*, at least, not within the strict functions of the Chain. Puritan settlements in the American colonies may not be considered a “halting of social progress” in Scovell’s terms (2017: 18), but rather a historical development in the progress of the United States. Furthermore, these religious beliefs, while a central part of the film, came along with the settlers from Britain, rather than being the direct result of the isolation of the American landscape, as is directly stated by William when being tried for this in the opening scene. However twisted in their obsession with sin, in William’s pride, or Caleb’s lust, these standard negative elements of religious narratives that are not equally skewed in comparison to sacrificial cults or cannibalistic, incestuous families seen in other Folk Horror films, despite how much “bloodshed and sacrifice dominate the religious imagination of the grieving”, as put by McGill (2018: 410).

Isolation in *The Witch* manifests itself in a nihilistic, unescapable paranoia that gradually creeps in through the duration of the film and destroys the basic social fabric of the colonies’ way of life, being family. The events suffered under the effects of their own landscape slowly drive the characters to madness, and, in turn, finally combines with their obsession with sin in order to twist moral order, reflected on the growing distrust, tension,

and crystallised in the parents' locking up of their own children only for the twins to be murdered by the witch.

The final link is especially brilliant in Eggers' film. Thomasin finally discovering that Black Phillip is the Devil and giving into his contract to "live deliciously" is a perfect example of what Scovell names "summoning" (2017: 18). All of the narrative steps of Folk Horror have been literally taken to arrive at this final point, perhaps only as clearly appreciable in *The Wicker Man*.

Writer Chris O'Falt remarked on how "*The Witch* delves literally into a bygone era, drawing from historical accounts of witchcraft and demonic possession from the early modern period to convey a palpable sense of anxiety concerning female sexuality and the arcane – as well as the links between the two –as the Puritans themselves may have experienced" (2016). Eggers' excruciating attention to detail results in a very effective exploration of the folk aspects of witchcraft. Bernice M. Murphy recalled on how "small Puritan towns turning against each other" in *Woodlands* (2021) was a common trope in this kind of horror, and the central role of witches in this, losing their former part on the social fabric of community as healers or midwives, is combined the daunting American wilderness and their own figure as a monster representing female empowerment.

As mentioned before, the United States' history of witch trials has spurred a very rich collection of horror films on the matter. More historically oriented ones like Dennis Azzarella's *The Witches of Salem: the Horror and the Hope* (1972) are referenced by Eggers. Despite this, connections to *Eyes of Fire* (1983) may be more relevant to this essay, and can be made for the film's depiction of a European witch venturing into the American wilderness, although being starkly different in tone and treatment of its issues. However, both Leah and Thomasin represent the same femenine potential which inspires fear because of its threat to patriarchal order, with or without environment-affecting powers. Another film with very deep intertextual relations to *The Witch* is Benjamin Christensen's 1922 film *Häxan: Witchcraft Through the Ages*, a silent Danish documentary which presents dramatisations of the workings and societal roles of witchcraft in European history, helped

by imagery that stills holds its ground against modern horror films. Eggers' inspiration on *Häxan* is obvious in some of the visual cues used in *The Witch*, especially, the expressionist chiaroscuros used to present the titular witch in her hag form, grizzly murdering Samuel and making an ointment out of his remains, and later spreading it on her body to gain her ungodly powers.

Christensen's documentary was revolutionary in its depiction of witches, especially, in its "direct tie between mental illness and witchcraft", as pointed out by Sam Deighan in *Woodlands* (2021). *Häxan* ventures into an almost sympathetic view of the mythical figure of the witch, questioning it and suggesting that these people might indeed have been set into lives outside of expectation and social norm for a variety of reasons such as class, gender or illness.

The figure of the witch and gender issues in Folk Horror are addressed perhaps in the most comprehensive manner in Eggers' film. The folkloric figure, personified in both Thomasin and the antagonist, were analysed by scholar Victoria Madden in *Final Girls, Feminism and Popular Culture* (2020). Commenting on Clovers' theorisation around the Final Girl (1993: 35-42), Madden argues that Thomasin's final decision represents what could be tied back to a clash between worlds, as, "in *The Witch*, Thomasin's victory is […] over patriarchal culture, represented through the destruction of each member of her family who safeguards repressive ideals" (2020: 147).

Thomasin, the most developed character of the family, is presented as a person overridden by the idea of sin, as exemplified by her opening lines:

> I here confess I've lived in sin. I've been idle of my work, disobedient of my parents, neglectful of my prayer. I have, in secret […] broken every one of thy commandments in thought. Followed the desires of mine own will […]. I know I deserve all shame and misery in this life, and everlasting hellfire. But I beg thee, for the sake of thy son, forgive me, show me mercy, show me thy light (2015).

While Clover argues that final girls are finally tied to the antagonist killer by their masculinisation over phallic symbols such as the use of knives to survive (1993: 48-49), Madden argues that *The Witch*, subtly following the narrative steps of a *slasher* (a fully

compatible genre with Folk Horror, as has been stated) subverts this idea by finally equalling the heroine and the killer "by a shared femininity which ultimately leads not to Thomasin defeating the witch, but joining her" (2020: 144).

In *Woodlands*, Eggers states that "the witch represents men's fears, fantasies and ambivalences towards women, female power, and female sexuality. She also embodies women's own fears and anxieties about their power in themselves in a male-dominated society" (2021). He poses an emancipatory message in his film, which is challenged by Madden, posing that "that the hag and the temptress (figures straight out of the *Maleas Maleficarum*, a 1498 treaty which fuelled the witch-hunting hysteria, constructed to shun witch figures outside of their place in community as healers or seers) constitute the faces of what Thomasin will ultimately become after willingly joining Satan's coven at the film's end appears to complicate a feminist reading of *The Witch*. Indeed, Creed (1993, 7) explicitly warns against viewing the abject woman as 'feminist' or 'liberated' by sheer virtue of her depiction as an 'active' figure" (2020: 140). Madden's remarks make for an appropriate final comment on the reflection of this issues in the bleak Faustian deal before the film's climax:

> That the things for which she excises herself from society are almost absurdly simple — 'the taste of butter,' 'a pretty dress,' 'to see the world'—indicates the extent to which patriarchal culture has habitually policed female subjectivity and 'effectively demonized the notion of active female choice' by continually limiting women's access to even the most basic commodities Given the current Trump-era economic climate, in which women's rights, particularly over their own bodies, remain under siege, Thomasin's choice is perhaps all too relatable for women in the western world [...] Removing her sullied shift dress, the last remaining marker of Puritan life and of woman's allegedly 'abject' nature, she walks willingly into the woods as a blank slate ready to embrace a new world order (2020: 146-147).

On a different note, *The Witch*'s Folk Horror is also amplified by Hauntology. In his article, Andrés Alberto Calvo remarks on the film's music in Fisher's terms, as "[Mark] Korven's score bears a number of similarities with electronic ambient music, most notably the omnipresence of drones, but it achieves this through the use of obscure traditional instruments like the nickel-harpa instead of any digital sources. This generates an overlapping of timelines that destabilises *The Witch*'s status as a period film and opens up the time-wound" (2021: 87). He goes on to state that "the time-wound is brought about by

formal techniques whose concern with materiality situate the film at a temporal crossorads" (2021: 89). If the time-wound is opened by non-diegetic media, it may be argued that it may also be opening diegetically, as Thomasin's brutal struggles emerging from her womanhood are temporally displaced, haunting and bleeding into the present in which women fear for the oppressive lack of autonomy and realisation she lives under until her final conversion, coincidentally the same present that allows for a voice such as Thomasin's to be heard and empathised with by an audience free of the religious fundamentalism that shunned women like her in the 17th Century. Calvo strongly champions *The Witch* as the best example of Hauntology as a tool for American Folk Horror, after being being constrained into Britishness by Mark Fisher. For him, the discipline "allows for the encounter between various temporalities – and, given the film's characters are English settlers, geographies – to take place" (2021: 87). In contrast to *Jug Face*, Hauntology in *The Witch* is falls on a much more complex web of time displacement – obviously helped by the stretch of time displace being much wider – that effectively subverts nostalgia in regards to other similar 'New England folktales', successfully presenting an "exorcism" of the past with its music and its narrative climax.

After this final, hauntological crystallisation of the trauma depicted in the film, ultimately the folkloric exploration of *The Witch* still deeply explores the anxiety over feminine agency in patriarchal societies against the background of the mythology around witches. The Folk Horror in Eggers' film is a maximising lens which isolates these traumas into a Marvellous boiling point. Its release in 2015 and within this new wave of films and its massive success is no coincidence. Much like *Jug Face*, the film tackles the anxiety of an growing far-right surge in the United States, now much closer to the eventual election of President Donald Trump in 2016 and its even greater amplification. Laws and measures introduced which further police women's bodies harken back to an oppressive past, which *The Witch* manifests.

Conclusions

The analysis of this small corpus reveals that contemporary Folk Horror films in the United States do respond to a common body of trauma and fear, being the growing perception of oppressiveness and inequality in the country following the Crash of 2008, cementing itself during the 2010s and finally crystallising in Donald Trump presidential election of 2016. These political events have been perceived as a rising of the Old Ways, much like the Oil Crisis and the surge of counterculture in Britain during the 1970s, and have been so manifested in Folk Horror. Their moral nihilism has not changed a lot since last century, given that a great amount of films in the New Wave also portray these fears as unbeatable and victorious in the end.

In contrast to them, apart from their politics being more in tune to nowadays' neoliberal order with a bigger prevalence of identity politics or feminist outlooks, is these films' relationship with nostalgia. As Mark Fisher posed in his writings, the derivative nature of the new wave of films is notable in regards the first one, and being at risk of falling into "nostalgia mode", a simple look at the past with no political projection towards the future, leaving the aspect of progress in Folk Horror stagnant.

Folk Horror has historically been used in film to represent anxieties that are tied to the people, their landscape and their beliefs, very often opting for a more grounded approach (supernatural or not) than other, more mythic iterations of horror. This has allowed to persevere, scattered yet consistent throughout the second half of the 20th Century, especially in the United States.

While it originally dealt with issues of religious history, rural anxieties and communal problems – all informed by folklore – in the British Isles, American Folk Horror has been proved to set itself apart from its British counterpart by several means. Through its impressive expansiveness, its original Anglo-Saxon roots have been recreated since their crossing of the Atlantic in inception of the United States. The country's extremely rich history of colonisation, religious experimentation and radicalism, slave trade, numerous diasporas and overwhelming expansion has spurred massive amounts of trauma that permeates its lands, haunting the present.

Despite the analysis and elucidation of some central political and social anxieties which deeply influence the new wave of Folk Horror, the scope and length of this essay renders it unable to capture all of its boughs and furrows, scattered across the country, in their entirety, as any scholarly research is yet to do in a comprehensive and exhaustive way, despite attempts such as *Woodlands Dark and Days Bewitched* coming very close. Because of this, this essay barely testifies to the necessity for the continuation of research in this field, as well as it now more than evident potential interest, which is slowly but surely growing as the subgenre becomes better known thanks to box office hits such as *The Witch* or *Midsommar.*

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