

# Folk Horror: Development and Properties of the Genre

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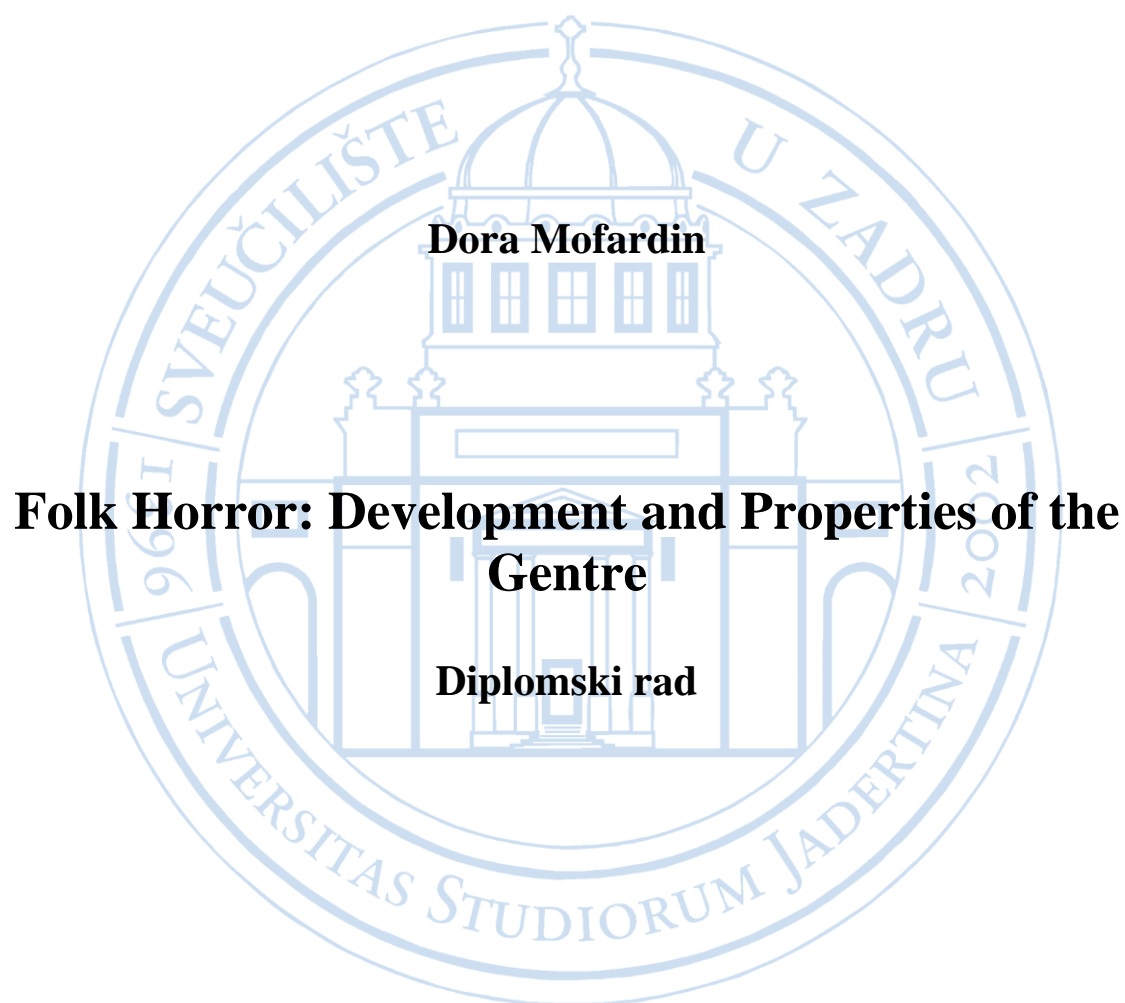
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Diplomski rad

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Zadar, 2024.



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Zadar, 15. rujan 2024.

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## 1. Introduction

Folk Horror is a subgenre that often features pastoral scenes, beautiful villages, lively festivals and charming countryside scenes captured on a sunny afternoon as it evokes a feeling of nostalgia for some simpler times. However, even though they are pleasant images, this particular sub-genre still fits into the broader genre of horror. These light elements serve as a contrast to the genre's darker themes and to hide the sinister elements lurking beneath the surface.

Emerging in the late 1960s and 1970s, it first captured the public's attention with its combination of rural settings, old traditions, and eerie atmospheres. After a period of being relatively unnoticed, Folk Horror is now experiencing a resurgence and has got the attention of various people like the fans of the horror genre as well as scholars and academics. This growing interest has led to a deeper discussion on its themes and cultural significance.

This subgenre is characterized by its focus on isolated, rural communities where ancient customs and folklore govern people's everyday lives. The subgenre frequently depicts the collision between the modern world and primitive, sometimes pagan, practices. Its narratives include themes of isolation, superstition, and the uncanny, and they often focus on the tension between old and new ways of life. By talking about the fears of returning to the past and the dark aspects of human nature, Folk Horror provides an interesting perspective on the tradition, beliefs, and the supernatural.

In its history and gradual development we can see that Folk Horror often experiences peaks in popularity as a response to various political events and societal shifts. These stories that draw inspiration from the tension between tradition and modernity, feel relatable during times of political turmoil and cultural change. For example, periods of political uncertainty or backlash against rapid modernization can amplify interest in Folk Horror as people show interest in the narratives that talk about the clash between the old and the new. The subgenre's focus on isolated communities and ancient customs often serves as a metaphor for the fears and anxieties caused by contemporary events, which makes it more interesting during such times.

The aim of this paper is to present the evolution of Folk Horror throughout history and to analyze several selected films within the framework of the Folk Horror chain. The analysis will focus on the role of rural landscapes and how it shapes social structures and morals, the isolation of characters from the norms present in civilized parts of the world, the skewed beliefs and morals of isolated communities, and the summoning of the supernatural.

We will start this paper by defining Folk Horror and its characteristics, defining the type of work the genre includes and discussing its relationship to similar genres such as small town horror. We will also discuss some of its main themes like the concept of time, nostalgia, defining of the national identity, and its eerie atmosphere created through offscreen violence.

We will then explain the theoretical frame that this paper focuses on which is Scovell's Folk Horror chain that he presents in his book 'Hours Dreadful and Things Strange'. Scovell (2017) identifies four components that define Folk Horror: the rural landscape, isolation, the summoning of the supernatural, and a skewed belief system. The rural landscape serves as a setting, creating an atmosphere that can be both nostalgic and unsettling at the same time. Isolation, which is both physical and psychological, emphasizes the characters' vulnerability and detachment from societal norms. The skewed belief systems and moralities of the isolated communities are often in contrast with conventional values in a society, which emphasizes a theme of the fear of the unknown. And lastly, the summoning of the supernatural often serves as the culmination of the plot, bringing the story's underlying tensions and themes to a final climax. This event usually marks the peak of the characters' journey into the strange and unknown, and the impact of old rituals and twisted beliefs is revealed.

Next, we will discuss the development of the genre, first looking into its connections to the ancient folktales, the impact of the Romantic movement, and its long-lasting popularity from the 1960s to the present day. The most significant portion of this examination will focus on the genre's roots in the Romantic movement, particularly its interest in rural life, the importance of nature, and the portrayal of isolated, exotic communities that are distant from the modern civilization. We will talk about how the Romantic period's interest in these themes built the foundation for the contemporary Folk Horror genre.

The main part of this paper focuses on the analysis of three movies: *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971), *The Wicker Man* (1973), and *Witchfinder General* (1968), which are

often referred to as the unholy trinity of Folk Horror (Scovell, 2017). These movies are chosen to be analyzed because they are regarded as the cornerstone of modern Folk Horror and the most significant examples of the subgenre. These movies also emerged within the same sociocultural setting, specifically, in Britain during the late 1960s, as a response to the counterculture and New Age movements. We will examine Scovell's theory to see how the movies use each of the elements of the Folk Horror chain.

## 2. Defining Folk Horror

Scovell (2017) defines several types of movies which fall under the subgenre of Folk Horror. It includes works that use aesthetics or themes of folklore to create an antique atmosphere and uncanny or horrific effect. Next, it includes works that depict a contrast between antiquity and modernity, most oftenly portraying a cultural clash between them. And finally, works that create "its own folklore through various forms of popular conscious memory" (Scovell, 2017, p. 17).

Scovell (2017) argues that Folk Horror as a genre as we know it today emerged in the 1960s. It is not a strictly defined genre with a specific set of criteria, but rather a cluster interconnected work. The works that usually fall under Folk Horror are British horror movies from the 1960s and 1970s whose theme is a common obsession with the British landscape, its folklore and superstitions (Gatiss, 2010). While Gatiss (2010) bases his definition on the works which focus on rural Britain, there is a large number of works of Folk Horror that exist all over the world even though the British Folk Horror is most often discussed and analyzed in academia. Every country has their own folklore and superstitions which gives an opportunity to create Folk Horror (Scovell, 2017).

Johnston (2014) defines Folk Horror not as the horror narratives which stem from folk tales, but the horror narratives that center around "the folk", or the regular people living in rural countryside. While national folktales can sometimes serve as an inspiration, Folk Horror narratives are not simple adaptations or retellings of those stories. Instead, the genre is focused on the common people and rural countryside as the central characters.

Folk Horror as a term in academic discourse is relatively new, with the large number of the works published on the topic appearing only after Scovell's (2017) "Hours Dreadful and Things Strange" in which he presents his Folk Horror chain. However, the director Piers



Haggard first uses the term to describe his movie *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971) (Scovell, 2017).

The word 'folk' in Folk Horror refers to ordinary people, usually living in rural areas. While many gothic and horror stories focus on rich lords and kings while the story is set in their luxurious castles, Folk Horror concerns itself with those on the opposite end of socioeconomic spectrum. The term is largely associated with the people of rural places and pre-industrial ways of living.

Similarly to Scovell, Rodgers (2018) tried to define the genre and proposed a term 'wyrd', the old Anglo-Saxon way of spelling 'weird'. This term would serve as an umbrella term for media which includes folkloric elements, encompassing the media beyond Folk Horror such as gothic and science fiction sub-genres that use folkloric elements to create an eerie atmosphere. She proposes that narratives that touch on the themes such as witchcraft, paganism, hauntings and sinister villages fall under the genre of 'wyrd' tales.

Furthermore, Folk Horror can also be compared to what Langan (2007) calls 'small-town horror', sharing numerous overlapping characteristics and examples from popular media. Similarly to Folk Horror, small-town horror also depicts sinister communities that hide dark secrets. They share common themes of authenticity and a deep anxiety about the disparity between outside appearances and hidden reality. Small town horror also touches upon themes of xenophobia which is also a common theme in Folk Horror narratives.

Probably the most noticeable similarity is in their plot sequence which often follows an outsider arriving in a remote village or small town and discovering atrocities that happen there. Great examples can be Lovecraft's stories which can fall under both Folk Horror and small town horror. The most notable example is his short story "The Shadow over Innsmouth", which involves a man visiting a small town in New England who slowly discovers the town's ominous history, their ancient religion and strange rituals. In this story atavism and a return to the past play a significant role. It suggests that primitive elements, such as savage rituals or genetic monstrosities, persist and even flourish within the confines of the small town.

As we can see, small-town horror is often narrated through the perspective of a protagonist with strong morals through whose eyes we observe the people of the town just as

the numerous protagonists of the Folk Horror narratives. There is also rarely a monster, but the people themselves create horror from preserving harmful traditions and resisting change. The main difference between the two subgenres is that Folk Horror is more closely connected to the rural landscapes and its way of life, while small-town horror, as the word suggests, depicts the life of people in a small town dealing with the struggles of the middle class (Langan, 2007).

Another important theme of Folk Horror is time. The concept of time, history and tradition are central components of Folk Horror, involving either sustaining the past traditions into the modern times or returning to and revisiting the past traditions in the present time (Thurgill, 2020). The genre connects the past and present, creating a clash between modernity and Enlightenment versus superstition and faith (Scovell, 2017). The genre also evokes a sense of nostalgia for something that is lost. It can touch on political themes, patriotic ideals and questions around class. It plays on a sense of longing for the lost values of the past simultaneously subverting the idea of safer and simpler times, making a horror that comes from regressive thinking, and lack of norms and customs that protect us in a globalized society.

However the type of nostalgia that this genre evokes is not that for personal experiences but rather an imagined past created through images in the media. Boym (2001) states that nostalgia can involve a sense of loss or absence even if it is felt for a past that never truly happened. Landsberg (2004) names this concept 'prosthetic memory' and it describes the memory of times and events that are created through media and not through witnessing something from direct experience. In this manner, Folk Horror creates an imagined past and history that is only loosely based on, or not at all connected to reality. The writers tend to use our limited yet existing understanding of rural life to enhance their own artistic, thematic, and narrative goals.

Elizabeth Sussex (2011), for example, in her analysis of David Gladwell's film *Requiem for a Village* (1975) asserted that it was crucial to view his work as a response to the current events and situations rather than merely a longing for the past. She emphasized that Gladwell's inspiration did not stem from nostalgia for his own experiences. Instead, it was prompted by the sight of new towns expanding across the country, gradually replacing and overshadowing what existed before. Sudden and rapid changes therefore evoke a desire for something permanent and stable. Folk Horror includes such a sense of continuity, or an idea

that a community which remains largely unchanged occupies the same place for a very long period of time (Johnston, 2014).

The nostalgia for something lost and the appeal to preserve and recover the past is also connected to the search of a personal identity, especially national identity. It is often a search for an identity in our roots, building our narrative based on where we came from. Wellek (1949) describes how the idea that nations should revert to their authentic spirit was especially prominent in the 19th century because of the industrialization and rapid changes happening in urban centers. The genre is well-suited for examining issues of national identity, encouraging a return to a more genuine, older identity connected to the land, but this identity is tied to horrors that contemporary society prefers to hide or generally forget. Folk Horror draws on the idea of a true national identity which survived in hidden and remote communities (Johnston, 2019). It takes the glamorized idea of a fight to preserve one's authenticity against the homogenizing processes of globalization, exposing it as mere deception. Even though we connect folk histories to the past, they play a part in constructing national identities and its imagery in the present (Casey, 2020). National identities are a relatively new concept, developing mostly since the 18th century and becoming more established due to migration, communication technology, trade and overall interconnectedness on a global scale.

We can see that national identity is often a theme in supernatural tales where there is a foreign 'other' that poses a threat, from a Transylvanian vampire attacking England in 'Dracula' (1897), to strange foreign objects that carry destructive powers from numerous Lovecraft's stories, to more recent alien invasion narratives. In all cases, foreignness presents danger. The foreigner is a threat to the natural state of a place and its authenticity (Johnston, 2014). On the other hand, in Folk Horror, the evil comes from within, it is not foreign. The problem arises from inside the small community, often evoking an ancient power that can only be dealt with lost knowledge of old generations. Return to the simplicity of a rural life is, therefore, not presented as something to aspire to, but something to fear. The sense of nostalgia created at the beginning is slowly torn down and replaced by repulsion.

Another important feature in Folk Horror is the unsettling atmosphere and vaguely defined source of threat and danger. As Rodgers (2023) points out, in Folk Horror it is rare to see a well defined threat or a monster. If there is a knowable monster, it means that it can be defeated, but the Folk Horror genre likes to create a setting in which the characters cannot directly fight against the danger. While watching the movies from the Folk Horror genre we

do not expect sudden jumpscare, but the entire atmosphere feels unsettling. Anyone and anything can present danger.

Macfarlane (2015) calls this atmosphere eerie, describing it as that type of fear which at first manifests as unease and then gradually intensifies into dread, and is triggered by subtle hints and disturbances rather than direct assault. Violence usually happens off-screen leaving only small details that indicate that the horrific events occurred (Rodgers, 2023). For example, In *The Witch* (2015) the characters of the devil and the evil witch are mostly kept off-screen, using only atmosphere and animals as symbols that indicate their presence (Walton, 2018). Similarly, in *Midsommar* (2019) the film creates a dark and heavy atmosphere, not by showing more violence, but by having the main characters slowly disappear one by one, making the audiences almost not notice their absence until we are reminded of it through subtle details.

The movies from unholy trinity also follow this pattern, from the initial illusion of safety, to subtle hints that start to create a sense of danger, to finally revealing horrific deeds that the folk are doing. Explicit violence is shown only at the end, for example, in burning sergeant Howie alive in *Wicker Man*, showing the torture of Sara and Marshall in *Witchfinder General*, and scenes of rape and murder in *Blood on Satan's Claw*.

### 3. Folk Horror chain

In his book "Hours Dreadful and Things Strange" Adam Scovell (2017) identifies the main elements and themes present in the Folk Horror genre and he provides a theoretical frame through which we can examine the genre. In the analysis of the unholy trinity of Folk Horror we will use his Folk Horror chain to analyze how each of the four components of the chain manifest in these narratives. Through this approach we will better understand how these elements contribute to creating the unsettling atmosphere and psychological tension characteristic for Folk Horror. The Folk Horror chain has 4 components: rural landscape, isolation, skewed belief system and summoning of the supernatural.

The rural landscape tends to serve as a setting, but it can also be considered as a character that has its own will and helps move the plot. It involves rural and remote locations, such as isolated villages, large forests, mountains, islands etc. The rural landscape plays a significant role in shaping the story and creating an eerie and claustrophobic atmosphere.

The element of isolation refers to the setting usually being cut off from the rest of the world, physically and socially. Isolation shows the vulnerability and helplessness that comes from the lack of comforts of modern society, especially the lack of widely accepted norms and values.

Folk Horror usually includes communities with their own unique, and often disturbing, moral codes and traditions that can clash with the protagonist's sense of right and wrong, leading to tension and conflict. This is the element that Scovell names as skewed morality. The skewed morality of these isolated communities tends to result in strange rituals and unsettling practices such as sacrifices.

Lastly, the summoning of the supernatural is the culmination of the plot of a Folk Horror story. Isolated groups summon supernatural forces which brings to light the fear of the primitiveness and savagery that is allowed to flourish outside of the boundaries of modern civilization that relies on science, logic and rationality.

#### 4. Development of Folk Horror

##### 4.1. Folktales

To explore the development of the genre and its roots we have to first examine the oldest and most long lasting form of Folk Horror which are folktales. Folktales are stories which survive within folk songs, nursery rhymes, dances, and so on, serving as an endless inspiration for recovering and repackaging these stories in a new way. Usually stemming from unknown sources and being passed down by word of mouth causes these stories to develop numerous different versions and interpretations. While the Folk Horror that we examine in this paper is not defined as a retelling of a folktale but as a specific subgenre with its established characteristics, we have to examine the relationship between folklore and horror. Rodgers (2023) claims that many horror stories usually originate in folktales such as myths, urban legends, histories and oral tradition. Similarly, Trubshaw (2010) points out that horror is often based on existing folklore and it includes well known monsters such as werewolves, vampires, mummies and others.

Some suggest that folktales serve to explain the unknown, helping individuals and societies cope with what they do not understand, attaching a story to it, simplifying it and making it less intimidating. Ash (1973) states that folklore emerges because people, confused by the mysteries of the universe, invent stories to make sense of it all.

On the other hand, there is also an idea that folk stories are often appropriate stories for children due to their simplicity. These stories do not serve to make something less intimidating but to be educational and they are oftentimes purposefully scary and gory to teach children about what is dangerous for them and how they are supposed to behave. Johnston (2014) points out how such comparison to children's stories further connects folktales to something simple and primitive, specifically to primitive societies.

## 4.2. Romantic period

Even though the folk stories are as old as time and we can infinitely trace them back, the beginnings of the Folk Horror genre as we know it today can be traced to the Romantic movement of the 19th century. Discussions about the Romantic era usually start by looking at the social, economic, and political factors that led to this artistic movement. Main points include a strong focus on intense emotion and personal expression in art, and an increased sense of personal freedom and individualism. Nature became more important, and there was a rebellion against established social and artistic norms. Technological advances were significant, and there was a fascination with the unknown and exotic. Interest in folklore and folk music was revived and a subculture of nonconformist intellectuals, artists, and musicians emerged during this time (Day, 2011).

Romantic literature featured recurring themes such as the rebellious individual, historic past, myth and folklore, the glorification of nature, distant settings, sentimentalism, the nobility of uncivilized people like Native Americans, admiration for simple living, focus on the common man, fascination with Gothic themes, the supernatural and mysterious, introspection, melancholy, horror, and a humanitarian social and political outlook (Emerson et al., 2013). In this discussion of the influence of the Romantic period we will structure it by connecting the traits of Romantic movement to each of the elements of the Folk Horror chain.

### 4.2.1. Rural landscape: appreciation of nature and folklore

An important aspect that characterizes the romantic movement is the focus on ordinary people and their lives. Unlike in the previous artistic movements that often focused on aristocracy, luxury and lives of the upper classes, Romanticism takes interest in a common man, simple life, authenticity and more down-to-earth portrayal of the world. Writers began catering to a diverse audience, including the general public, rather than just the elite and the minority of educated people (Day, 2011). Romanticism values folklore, folk music, art and customs because of their innate purity. Just as they admire nature for its unspoiled beauty, Romantics see folklore and folk music as something that represents nature, authenticity, earthy wisdom, and creativity that is free from academic or artistic constraints. With the surge of nationalism in the Romantic period, we can also see that writers and poets drew inspiration from folk tales, artwork that depicted ordinary people and their everyday lives, while in music many composers of the time incorporated folk tunes and rhythms into their music to connect with their cultural heritage (Greckel, 1979).

Romantics also saw nature as a powerful force that would inspire feelings of awe and wonder. They saw it as an escape from the busy, industrial world. To them, nature was alive and full of energy, reflecting human emotions and spirituality (Day, 2011). In fact, during those times numerous artists adopted the philosophical movement known as Transcendentalism. They believed that society and its institutions, like organized religion and political parties, corrupted individuals. To them, people are at their best when self-reliant and independent. Nature and its pureness is contrasted to the depravity of the culture and society (Emerson et al., 2013). One of the most important events that generated such interest in simplicity, nature, and lives of ordinary people is the fast spreading of industrialization. As people became more disconnected from nature, they yearned for it even more. The busy, dirty, impersonal, and often unpleasant city conditions made the untouched countryside and simple rural life seem perfect. Influenced by Rousseau and poets of the era, nature was idealized and almost revered, leading to a surge in nature painting during the nineteenth century (Greckel, 1979).

Romantic's works reflected rebellion against the alienation and mechanization they saw developing in the modern times, as well as the growing depersonalization and opportunism present in people's relationships. We can see admiration for the authenticity of pre-industrialized times and support for preservation and return to a more organic way of life (Kilgour, 1995). Industrialisation incited fantasies of simple rural life and of exotic far away places. The allure of the remote, the contained, the strange, the imaginary, and the ideal,

alongside the highly imaginative, the fantastic, and the strange realms of the subconscious, often associated with a departure from day-to-day reality, captivated many during the late 1800s. This fascination extended to portraying distant lands and peoples, leading to a surge of interest in Oriental culture (Day, 2011).

Folk Horror again uses the Romantics' escapist fantasies focusing precisely on exotic faraway places and simple lives of common people. The genre amplifies the Romantic idea of accepting the dark emotions about the landscape and takes it to an extreme. Instead of portraying it as escaping from uncomfortable day-to-day life into the serenity of some remote, exotic land, the narrative focuses on taking away the comfort that we have living in the safety of a larger society and being trapped in the wild, untamed nature, along with simple, regressive and uneducated individuals. Those simple farmers whose lives were idealized in romantic stories are the same figures that are feared in Folk Horror narratives while the places that offered escape in Folk Horror serve to entrap the character.

Just as the Romantics, Folk Horror also uses landscapes to capture nature's terrifying awe. Yet, it also suggests that this terror stems from primitive ideals, contrasting with Romanticism's distant admiration. The depiction of nature as something spiritual and godlike is turned to the image of nature that still possesses some supernatural qualities, yet this time they are dangerous, dark and evil. This creates contradictions in Folk Horror, as it nostalgically looks back like Romanticism but also criticizes such idyllic perceptions (Scovell, 2017).

#### 4.2.2. Isolation: Escape from the industrialized society

The next aspect of Folk Horror that we can trace back to the Romantic movement is the isolation. The Romantics idealized isolation as a way to gain deep self-awareness and achieve spiritual enlightenment. They believed that retreating from society allowed them to deeply connect with nature and their own inner thoughts. Romantic poets and writers praised people who lived solitary lives and found inspiration through connecting with nature. The Romantics valued individualism, introspection, and authentic experiences and emotions which is most visible in their idealization of isolation.

Day (2011) argues that isolation is a central theme in Romantic literature, and it is often depicted as a physical and psychological state. The Romantics strived towards



withdrawing from contemporary society which they saw as corrupted, and to connect with the pure and authentic nature and one's inner thoughts and feelings. Day (2011) also points out that the theme of isolation can be connected to a sense of alienation. Romantic heroes often struggle with feelings of being misunderstood and disconnected from the rest of the society. They feel rejected because of their complicated feelings and life experiences that are unique only to them.

Isolation in Romanticism and in Folk Horror are connected through showing the effects of solitude on people's minds, emotions and actions. While in Romanticism, isolation is often about escaping society to connect more deeply with nature and oneself, in Folk Horror, isolation creates fear and unease as the characters become trapped far away from security, being forced to deal with supernatural forces or twisted pagan traditions. While they both explore what happens when people step outside of the society, showing both the appeal and the risk of being alone, Folk Horror puts more focus on vulnerability of people, when Romantics, on the other hand, considered it as a positive and healing experience.

#### 4.2.3. Skewed belief system: Secularism and rebellion

Next, the Romantics emphasized man's feelings, sentiment and intuition rather than his intellect and reason alone (Wellek, 1949). The movement is a direct reaction to Classicism and Enlightenment which dominated the 17th and 18th century. Immanuel Kant's idea of Enlightenment is when people start thinking for themselves instead of relying on others for guidance. In his essay "What is Enlightenment?", he describes it as moving from a state of immaturity, where people don't use their own understanding, to maturity, where they confidently use their own reason. This shift means that individuals become able to make their own decisions without depending on external authorities (Foucault, 1986). Romanticism flourished after the age of rationalism, and it put into focus feelings and intuition rather than scientific reasoning. In literature, Romanticism often focused on themes like reflecting on or criticizing the past, celebrating sensitivity and emotion, celebrating the heroic isolation of the artist or narrator, and respecting a wild, untamed, and pure nature (Emerson et al., 2013).

The movement valued strong emotions as a true source of artistic experience, especially feelings like fear, horror, terror, and awe. It emphasized the awe inspired by wild, untamed nature and its picturesque beauty (Emerson et al., 2013). It celebrated folk art and ancient customs, valued spontaneity, and promoted a natural understanding of human

activities shaped by language and traditions. It focused on nature as a place free from society's judgment and restrictions (Emerson et al., 2013).

Folk Horror as a genre touches on this aspect with its villainous characters who turn away from science and knowledge that the modern world relies on. Instead they trust in ancient beliefs passed through generations. Their freedom from society's restrictions allows them to engage in behaviors that are immoral and off-limits from a perspective of a modern man and civilized society. Their lives usually center around their religious beliefs. These religious beliefs do not come from widespread and socially accepted religions such as Christianity, but are adopted from old pagan and satanic cults. In some narratives they invent their own systems, rules and beliefs, again completely independent from the moral guidance of the civilized world.

The Romantic era is characterized by the rejection of strict rationalism and any type of established authority. Therefore, secularism is another important element in the rejection of authority as the Romantics sought religious experiences in music, poetry, literature, art, and nature rather than in the established church (Day, 2011). Folk Horror, just like the Romantics, often rejects reason and adopts new forms of moral authority, frequently theological (Scovell, 2017).

#### 4.2.4. Summoning of the supernatural: Imagination and mystery

Finally, the aspect of the supernatural can be seen in Romantics' admiration for imagination and mystery. Day (2011) explains that Romantics were interested in the unknown and mysterious aspects of life which they saw as essential to understanding life and universe. For the Romantics, imagination was a tool that allowed them to go beyond the limits of rational thinking. Poets like Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, and others also experimented with new themes in their work such as the supernatural and the realms of "the far away and the long ago." (Day, 2011, p. 17). They were drawn to themes of the supernatural because they allowed them to make sense of the unknown, eerie, and mystical aspects of the world.

For example, Coleridge uses supernatural elements in his poems "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "Kubla Khan". They both create a sense of awe and terror by using exotic motifs, symbols, dream-like atmosphere and hints to the supernatural and godly

presence. Keats, on the other hand, liked to write about the distant past and mythological references in his poetry, focusing on the theme of passing of time. He was inspired by old legends and classical myths which connect the human experience to something otherworldly. These poets and other artists of the time used the supernatural and the distant past and supernatural elements to escape the mundane reality.

We can see that Folk Horror in many ways subverts Romantic ideals. It turns them from an idyllic fantasy about faraway lands into horror that comes from glorifying the not-so-glorious past. All of its characteristics, such as emphasis on irrationality and feelings, admiration for the lives of ordinary people, rebellion against industrialization and interest in history and the past, are used to create a perfect setting in which the horror takes place.

#### 4.3. Early 20th century

From the romantic period onwards we can see a gradual development of narratives that center on small communities that engage in strange rituals. Some notable examples are Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" (1835), Algernon Blackwood's, "Ancient Sorceries" (1908) and Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" (1948). All of these stories share a theme of dark aspects of human nature and societal norms. Each story includes themes of hidden evil lurking beneath the surface of ordinary, everyday life. In "Young Goodman Brown," Hawthorne includes the theme of the loss of innocence and the presence of evil in a seemingly pious community. Blackwood's "Ancient Sorceries" talks about hidden evil forces in a small French village, suggesting that ancient, dark practices can survive in the most unsuspecting places. Similarly, Jackson's "The Lottery" portrays the horrific consequences of blindly following tradition which can lead to cruelty and violence.

Probably the most famous works based on Folk Horror at the time are the novels and short stories of H. P. Lovecraft who incorporates themes of tradition and ancient evil with cosmic horror. The conflict between the ancient and the cosmic, and the balance of preserving cultural traditions while acknowledging their insignificance in the vast cosmos, forms the foundation of Lovecraft's fiction (Evans, 2004). He was interested in discovering local and regional traditions, which he viewed as organic developments and he embraced an ideology that glorified pre industrial folk culture. His ideal was an 18th-century New England with small rural villages, traditional crafts, and farming which is reflected in most of his work (Evans, 2004). Both his research and his stories stemmed from an anti-modernist belief, a fear

of what he saw as the decline of tradition and the breakdown of American culture due to the moral, racial, and scientific chaos of the 20th century (Evans, 2004).

His fictional places such as Arkham, Innsmouth, and Dunwich remain largely unchanged since Colonial times. However, in these towns, the past is a burden. Poverty and isolation have preserved neighborhoods and towns from the colonial era, but have also led to ignorance, superstition, inbreeding, and mixing of races, which Lovecraft considered the ultimate horror (Evans, 2004).

#### 4.4. From 1960s counterculture movement to today

Finally, the era which defines Folk Horror as a fully developed subgenre and as a base for all Folk Horror works that followed refers to the horror movies of the 1960's and 1970's. The sudden emergence of the genre is connected to the British counterculture movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. This movement includes the counterculture that developed in the west, specifically in Britain and America, and it encompasses "the influx of drug culture, the sexual revolution, avant-garde ideologies and other elements" (Scovell, 2017, p. 24) as opposed to more conservative culture of the past. The counterculture of the 1960s would eventually become recognized as hippie culture, which is characterized by alternative lifestyle and rejection of conservative ideologies. Counter culture trends of the time stand for social freedom. There follows interest in spirituality, folklore, paganism and other things we can commonly find in Folk Horror. Scovell (2017) particularly points out the films *Witchfinder General* (1968), *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971) and *The Wicker Man* (1973) as the representatives of the Folk Horror in cinema, naming them the unholy trinity. They represent a genre and are also interconnected, coming from the same cultural wave.

British Folk Horror cinema thrived in the 1970s, following the influence of the unholy trinity of films while it fell in popularity in the 1980's when horror movies featuring rural settings started getting overshadowed by numerous slasher films dominating the horror genre. However, the genre would come to experience another resurgence in 2010's with a number of Folk Horror movies being filmed and also starting to be academically discussed and analyzed as its own separate subgenre.

Scovell (2017) explains this resurgence due to the current political climate. He claims that his book "Hours dreadful and things strange" perfectly captures the post-Brexit era,

mirroring the themes of Folk Horror. It includes a rise in xenophobic attacks, a herd mentality, criticism labeled as heresy by pro-Brexit media, and a widespread embrace of political fantasy and inwardness.

Casey (2020), on the other hand, points out the environmental concerns as a reason for the genre's recent popularity. While the original wave of Folk Horror movies in the 1970s reflected rising environmental concerns and the clash between counterculture and authority, the second wave is linked to ecological worries and grassroots activism.

We could argue that the genre's popularity persisted and flourished during the global pandemic in 2020. During this period, many people found themselves yearning for a simpler and more relaxed lifestyle, one that contrasted sharply with the stressful and restrictive circumstances imposed by lockdowns and social distancing measures. This widespread longing for tranquility and a return to nature was further amplified by a significant number of social media influencers who adopted and promoted the so-called "cottagecore aesthetic" which romanticizes rural life and emphasizes a deep connection to nature, appealing to those seeking solace and a sense of peace amidst the chaos of political events in the world. The rurality was not only presented in a wholesome and romanticized way, but a large number of Folk Horror films were produced and released on streaming platforms from then onwards. As we can see from the genre's long history, political turmoil and rapid change often lead us to turn to nature, simplicity and isolation, even if they are presented to us through the genre of horror.

## 5. Analysis of the movies

In this analysis we will focus on the unholy trinity of Folk Horror which consists of: *Witchfinder General* (1968), *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971), and *The Wicker Man* (1973). We will talk about each element of the Folk Horror chain and then discuss how they are applied to these movies. Before the analysis we will briefly describe the plot of the movies.

*Witchfinder General* (1968) takes place in England during the English Civil War in the 1640s. The witchfinder from the movie's title refers to the character of Matthew Hopkins who, alongside his assistant John Stearne travels through the countryside and accuses innocent women of witchcraft, torturing and executing them for a payment. The main victims of Hopkins' crimes in this movie are Sara and Marshall who are engaged to be married. Sara's uncle is accused of witchcraft so she desperately offers sexual favors to Hopkins and his

assistant in exchange for sparing her uncle's life. Stearne takes advantage of Sara which leads Marshall to seek revenge on him. Marshall's revenge ends in a final confrontation between him and Hopkins. Even though they manage to kill Hopkins, the movie ends with Marshall and Sara losing their sanity because of all the horrors they witnessed.

Next, *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971) is set in 17th century England and it begins with a farmer discovering a mysterious skull in the fields which suddenly disappears after he alerts the village authorities. This event leads to several strange occurrences such as a group of children finding a claw that seems to match the skull and people starting to grow patches of fur on their bodies. Soon we find out that the reason behind all of it is a girl named Angel Blake and a group of children that she leads to perform satanic rituals in a ruined church in the forest. They eventually sacrifice one of the girls from the village to summon a demonic creature. A final confrontation occurs when a mob led by the judge of the village manages to defeat Angel and the demon, breaking the curse and returning everyone to normal.

And lastly, in *The Wicker Man* (1973) sergeant Neil Howie visits the island of Summerisle to investigate the disappearance of a little girl named Rowan Morrison. Howie is shocked to see that the islanders participate in numerous pagan rituals and freely engaging in sexual acts. While he is looking into Rowan's disappearance, he asks the islanders about the girl but they all claim they never heard of her. Soon after he comes to the conclusion that Rowan is to be sacrificed due to a failed harvest. Finally, on the celebration of May Day, he discovers that the islanders, led by Lord Summerisle, tricked him and that the missing girl was fine all along. He tries to escape but is captured. In the end it is revealed that Howie himself is intended to be sacrificed and the villagers burn him alive in a wicker man.

### 5.1. Rural landscape

The first link in the Folk Horror chain is the rural landscape. Unlike other horror subgenres, the landscape that we see is usually colorful and bright. It does not have to involve the scenes of nighttime or dark and claustrophobic spaces to create an unsettling atmosphere (Rodgers, 2023). The setting is rather idyllic and calm, at least at the beginning before we slowly uncover the dark secrets it conceals. But the landscape is not just a setting or something we are supposed to view from a distance, but it acts as a character itself. It is an active participant in the story shaping the morals and social structures of the people who

inhabit it. It is dynamic as it influences the behavior of all characters involved while also setting the action in motion (Thurgill, 2020).

Many have already discussed how customs and culture often have strong ties to the specific landscape from which they originate. For example, Nicholas Crane's (2016) book, "The Making of the British Landscape," illustrates how human activity shapes the local landscape, and the other way round, how the characteristics of the local landscape influence human activity. Folk Horror talks about this by depicting the deepest ties developed between the folk and the land.

The connection to the place or land is a common theme in horror genre such as in ghost stories where a ghost or some demonic entity is deeply connected to the place. They are also often tied to old ruins and buildings which are connected to the past, again representing the remains of something that is lost in the present (Rodgers, 2018). In the Folk Horror subgenre the link between the people and the land is made to seem as something magical or spiritual. It cannot be understood through logic and science because it stems from ancient wisdom that a modern man cannot comprehend. The connection to the rural landscape is so strong in shaping their cultural identity that it successfully resists the change that is happening in urban spaces. This effect is enhanced by the idea that the landscape often conceals something forbidden, adding to its mystique (Scovell, 2017). Motifs such as monoliths and stone circles can serve as symbols of history and mystery, and often play a very important role in the storyline. Remote and rural landscapes serve as the main setting for Folk Horror's revelation of lands "dark heritage" (Walton, 2018). This dark heritage can be demonic possessions, witch-hunting, use of magic and performance of violent rituals.

As with many oppositions that Folk Horror explores, such as science and religion, and past and present, the landscape perfectly encapsulates the division between the urban and the rural. Mitchell (2005) claims that landscapes are defined by social processes. So on one hand processes such as industry and construction define the urban landscapes, while agriculture and land management define the rural landscapes. Folk Horror depicts spatial politics which separate rural communities and contemporary modern society, both physically and culturally, presenting the rural communities as dangerous and immoral (Thurgill, 2020). The rural communities are observed through the 'urban gaze' therefore, they become problematic because of their remoteness, isolation and backwardness. In these narratives the lack of quality resources that worlds metropolises have such as schools, doctors, transportation and

other, make the people turn to alternative and primitive ways of living which involve participating in absurd rituals to achieve their desired results (Thurgill, 2020). Johnston (2019) proposes a different reading suggesting that Folk Horror shows the appeal of the rural as an escape rather than as an urban fear of the countryside. It shows how city dwellers see the countryside as a place to relax and get away from the busy city life, even though they may not fully understand it (Scovell, 2017). For example, *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) puts emphasis on this rural/urban divide, with naive students underestimating the landscape and its folklore. It's about educated figures setting out to film a documentary while arrogantly dismissing older traditions and locals' warnings. Similarly, in *The Ritual* (2017) and *Midsommar* (2019) we see groups of friends choosing remote rural places as vacation spots, not understanding how the lands' histories and traditions will entrap them.

In the films that belong to the unholy trinity, the setting is always a small remote village with inhabitants who uphold an immoral belief system. Out of the three films, *The Wicker Man* (1973) depicts people's ties to the land and nature the most. Their relationship to the land is shown through their cultural practices, for example, their traditional celebrations and ritualistic human sacrifices that are a regular part of their way of life. The villagers of Summerisle live in complete harmony with their environment, with each one of them playing a specific role within their tightly-knit community. Their unity is best shown in their efforts to trap Sergeant Howie on the island. The islanders' knowledge of their surroundings and their cooperation allow them to execute their plans. They understand how the island and its nature work, from its geography to its natural cycles and they use this knowledge to their advantage. The islanders sabotage Howie's boat and guide his actions without his knowledge so that he follows the path they have laid out for him. Howie, confident in his ability to outsmart the villagers, remains unaware that he is just a pawn in their elaborate scheme. Every step he takes, believing he is closer to finding out the truth, only leads him further into their trap.

The plot culminates in Howie's realization that the villagers have anticipated all of his moves and they were leading him to his death all along. The most important elements in their success were their coordination and deep connection to the land. In *The Wicker Man* the island itself becomes a character because its rhythms and secrets are intertwined with the fate of the people who inhabit it.

The fruit harvest is also one of the most important parts of the year for them. This period is not just a practical necessity but it is deeply spiritual and it marks an important



aspect of their way of life. The villagers live in a reciprocal relationship with the land, where they harvest its fruits but feel compelled to give something back in return. This reciprocity is most dramatically symbolized through their practice of human sacrifice. They offer a life to the land as a type of payment and gratitude to ensure continued fertility and abundance.

Their devotion to nature is also shown during their rituals where participants wear masks with animal faces. These masks are more than just a disguise. They represent a belief in their unity with the natural world, suggesting that they see themselves as extensions of it. This symbolic act of becoming one with nature during their ceremonies shows the depth of their connection and commitment to maintaining harmony with the environment.

The motif of the earth itself is another important feature throughout the film, most notably in the moment when Sergeant Howie sets out to exhume a grave while trying to solve the mystery of the missing girl. The act of digging into the ground can be read as a symbol for a search for truth and revelation and the answers to his questions are, quite literally, buried in the earth. In this context, the land becomes a keeper of secrets as it holds the key to the island's mysteries and the villagers' true nature. Therefore, the earth in *The Wicker Man* is both a source of sustenance and a spiritual entity that demands respect and sacrifice. It becomes a powerful character with whom other characters have to interact and often comply to its will. The villagers' rituals and beliefs reflect a worldview where human existence is intimately linked with the cycles of nature. Through these elements, the film uncovers the complex and often unsettling interplay between humanity and the natural world, revealing the lengths to which people will go to honor and appease the forces that they believe govern their lives.

Next, *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971) begins with a farmer discovering a strange, deformed skull while working in a field. This discovery is both a literal finding and a symbol of the deep relationship between the inhabitants and their environment, in a tangible and a spiritual sense. The initial portrayal of a simple man laboring in the fields, with his horse pulling a plow, establishes a pastoral and hardworking setting. This seemingly ordinary life is abruptly disrupted by the skull's appearance, which leads to several unsettling occurrences in the village. The skull triggers a series of strange events that unsettle the community and expose the darker forces lurking beneath the surface of their tranquil existence.

Following the discovery, the villagers begin to exhibit peculiar symptoms: patches of fur start appearing on their bodies, and their behavior becomes increasingly erratic. This physical transformation signifies their growing disconnection from their previous sense of normalcy and their descent into a more primal state. The villagers' strange new behavior culminates in their following Angel Blake, a charismatic figure who leads them into the woods. Here, they engage in a gory ritual, willingly sacrificing parts of their bodies to assemble a monstrous entity. The villagers' physical transformations and their ultimate act of self-sacrifice to create a demonic entity illustrate how deeply they are bound to the land. Their actions reflect a belief that their fates and identities are unconditionally tied to the earth, demonstrating how their traditions are deeply rooted within them. As with other Folk Horror narratives, this illustrates the unbreakable link between the people and their surroundings, being physically tied to it, sacrificing a part of your body to give life to demonic entities inhabiting the land.

Lastly, *Witchfinder General* does not make such deep parallels about the complex relationship between people and their land as the previous two films. Instead, the rural landscape serves more as a setting rather than a character in its own right. Unlike films that explore the deep spiritual and environmental connections within rural settings, *Witchfinder General* focuses more on the actions of the characters, their cruelty and the corrupting nature of power. Other than portraying lives in the rural landscape, we do not see many meaningful interactions with the natural world.

## 5.2. Isolation

Isolation is the second link in the chain that is connected to the landscape. The landscape isolates the characters, separating them from larger society and trapping them. Scovell (2017) states that The Folk Horror chain can potentially apply to any geographical area worldwide, as long as the landscape is sufficiently isolated to influence the morality of the small communities living there. The setting of Folk Horror narratives is, therefore, any remote place that the characters cannot escape from or seek any help from the outside. Such places include large forests, islands, mountains and other similar places or natural elements which physically separate a small community from any bigger city. One example can be the film *The Children of the Corn* (1984) where a remote small town is surrounded by large corn fields in which a cult of murderous children performs their sacrifices and other rituals. Similarly, fog, as an element of nature, can also isolate and trap the characters, as for

example, in TV series *The Nightmare Man* (1981). In such a setting, the characters are far away from benefits that they can get in a more civilized, urban setting such as safety that the norms and morals of that society provide.

When it comes to unholy trinity, the setting that most clearly illustrates the element of isolation is the island in *The Wicker Man* (1973). The island is far from the mainland and the main protagonist's only escape is his boat which the islanders easily break to trap him. Howie is far from the comfort and safety of the larger society. The norms and customs that he notices on the island disturb and frighten him, especially because he is a pious man while the islanders are vulgar and promiscuous. They educate children about the phallic symbolism of the maypole, openly have intercourse in the fields, use strange alternative medicine and overall have completely different morals and values than the main protagonist who comes from a life in modern civilization.

*The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971) and *Witchfinder General* (1968) are very similar in the way they isolate their characters. They are both set in small villages. Unlike *The Wicker Man*, *The Blood on Satan's Claw* and *Witchfinder General* do not have the character who acts as an outsider, but all of the main protagonists come from within these isolated communities.

Sara and Marshall, as the leading characters in *Witchfinder General*, are found in a society torn down by a war. Mathew Hopkins and his assistant travel to different villages to extract confessions from suspected witches through torture. Sara and Marshall are in love, but they are trapped in a bad situation when Hopkins accuses Sara's uncle of witchcraft. The community's choice to tolerate and even support Hopkins' reign of terror rather than stand up against his inhumane actions reveals a deeper layer of isolation. This isolation is not merely a result of the physical remoteness of the rural setting but is also determined by the psychological and social dynamics within the village. The villagers' decision to accept Hopkins' terror can reflect the herd mentality and deeply ingrained superstitious beliefs that dominate their society. The community's compliance with these superstitions creates an atmosphere of conformity where questioning or challenging Hopkins' authority is seen as risking one's own safety or being branded as a witch sympathizer. He manipulates these fears to maintain control, capitalizing on the community's reluctance to speak out. The isolation experienced by the community is more complex. It is shaped by their physical separation from broader society and the psychological isolation caused by their collective fears and superstitions.

*The Blood on Satan's Claw* also talks about the theme of isolation through people's mentality rather than just the remote landscape. The community depicted in this film is one where people lack education and competent authority figures. When the farmer first warns the local judge of the skull that he found, the judge dismisses him, claiming that it was just his imagination. In addition to that, it is also clear that the reverend of the village, the doctor and other mature people such as all the children's parents are not capable of protecting or guiding the youth. Angel Blake, henceforth, easily outplays all authority figures in the village, assembling her own group of followers. The people's isolation lies in the lack of support and protection. They allowed Angel to summon the monster by not paying attention to all the strange events that transpired and by being disconnected from the young people of the village. Since the film is largely inspired by the counterculture movements of the 1960s, it is not surprising that it depicts the theme of generational gaps and rebellious youth.

### 5.3. Skewed belief system

Next link in the Folk Horror chain are the skewed beliefs of the isolated community. The skewed belief systems and ideologies are not just about letting pagan and occult beliefs flourish, but Folk Horror takes advantage of the sense of otherness associated with rural life to distort the reality of its narrative worlds (Scovell, 2017). The folk represent the uncivilized part of a civilized society (Dundes, 1980). The horrific elements of rural life are emphasized, contrasting them to the refined lives of middle classes in urban spaces. The lack of social progress in these imagined rural communities usually leads to developing a skewed belief system and morality.

To portray the otherness of the people inhabiting rural places, there is often a character of an outsider. The outsider represents logic, rationality and norms and values of contemporary society. The folk are, on the other hand, usually depicted as the more horrific side as opposed to the morally correct and rational outsider. There is a clear contrast between the culture of the outsider and the community that he enters. Johnston (2019) argues that the ending never resolves the tension between the two worldviews or shows one side to have all the right answers. Maintaining this tension beyond the narrative's conclusion shows that Folk Horror relates to our contemporary uncertainty, where neither organized religion nor political organizations provide all the answers, but looking to the past also does not seem to offer a viable alternative.

In the unholy trinity of Folk Horror, only *The Wicker Man* has a character that represents the outside world, that being Neil Howie, but numerous other films use this character trope as well. Several examples are Thomas Richardson in *Apostole* (2018), Ichabod Crane in *Sleepy Hollow* (1999), Pete and Alison in *Alison's Birthday* (1981), Martin Lowery in *In the Earth* (2021), Christina in *The Old Ways* (2020) and many others. Johnston (2019) comments on the character of the outsider and their inability to fit in. The people of the community have established roles and a set place in the community while the outsider does not. Therefore, they have to be banished in some way, in most cases sacrificed in their pagan rituals.

Skewed beliefs of a community are directly tied to the isolation and remoteness. There is a theme of old customs connected to rural life surviving despite the numerous changes and developments (Evans, 1993). Some of the unsettling disturbances brought about by Folk Horror lie in its potential to challenge power dynamics, altering perceptions and comprehension of the true mechanisms of the universe from urban, educated elites to rural, working-class communities. The belief system that the folk adopt can be seen as a form of rebellion. By adapting pre-Christian practices and beliefs, they create their own identity, separating themselves and rejecting the outside world and mainstream culture. They create their own insular culture that is free from being influenced by globalization and immigration (Johnston, 2014). Such narratives subvert the trope in which the elites or secret societies maintain their privileges through gate keeping secrets and forbidden knowledge and instead put ordinary people from rural areas in power because they possess the knowledge of how the universe and nature work (Johnston, 2014). We can therefore, understand the folk as an authentic community fighting back against the consumerism that prevails in mainstream society. This portrayal can be seen as empowering for those who come from lower socioeconomic classes and would consider to align themselves with the common folk as opposed to those who have more conventional economic and cultural power (Johnston, 2014).

Next, when we speak of a belief system we usually associate it with religion, but in Folk Horror narratives the skewed belief system rarely has a theological basis. The isolated community does not perform atrocious rituals in the name of god or for a religious belief. If there is a deity that they worship it is usually an excuse for enjoying in violence and sadism. *Witchfinder General* is a very good example where Hopkins sells the idea of helping people protecting them from witches, while him and his assistant torture and kill innocent women

and make money because of it. Even though there is no mention of specific religion or deity that the people worship, Hopkins nonetheless uses the norms and values of the community and benefits from them. In *The Wicker Man* there is a similar situation where the islanders perform sacrificial rituals. It is never clarified whether they truly believe in the pagan gods that they worship or if they just enjoy what this religion allows them to do.

The beliefs that they hold also contradict rationalism, logic and science which are praised by the modern, developed world. Johnston (2014) states that some narratives suggest that the anti-rationalism of the past cannot be escaped, and that it is in fact a more accurate understanding of the world than rational thinking which ties to the theme of giving power to the folk as the gatekeepers of knowledge. Their beliefs and rituals give them a sense of cohesion and identity while repelling the outsiders. They also challenge dominant power structures and ways of thinking by adapting their own way of life and easily maintaining it, in some cases suggesting that the folk might truly have access to the real knowledge of how the world works, more than scientists or world leaders.

However, it is impossible to ignore the fact that the folk are portrayed as villains of the story and their beliefs and knowledge is belittled. A good example can be found in the film *Midsommar* (2019) where the folk community bases their faith on interpreting nonsensical scribbles and paintings drawn by a mentally disabled individual, showing that they do not even rely on some ancient knowledge passed through generations, but on whatever they decide the drawings mean. Similarly, in *The Wicker Man*, the narrative strongly suggests that the sacrificial rituals practiced by the islanders are, in the end, ineffective and cannot actually restore their harvests. This implication leads to an eventual downfall, where the islanders, desperate for a successful ritual, might turn to sacrificing Lord Summerisle himself if their crops continue to fail.

Moreover, the film reveals that these sacrificial practices are a relatively recent introduction to the island, brought by Lord Summerisle's ancestors. This suggests that the island's current belief system is not a deeply ingrained cultural tradition, but rather a constructed ideology imposed from Summerisle's family. The older generations of islanders likely had different beliefs and practices before these pagan rituals were introduced as a means of control. This questions the rationality behind these beliefs and hints at the fragility of the constructed social order on Summerisle.

On the other hand, there are examples where the ways of life are so old that they cannot be dated (Johnston, 2014). The customs predate christianity and go back to the earliest pagan beliefs which creates a sense that we are discovering something authentic and innate to the land and the people who inhabit it (Evans, 1993). Because of their insularity, the people preserve practices forgotten in the modern world. *The Blood on Satan's Claw* depicts a scenario where evil slowly and gradually takes form through the environment and the inhabitants of a rural village. The film shows a demonic force as it slowly assembles itself, appearing from the land and spreading like an infection among the people. Initially, this presence manifests subtly, with traces of it appearing in the ground, as if the earth itself caused this. These unsettling signs then extend to people's homes, suggesting that evil is infiltrating all aspects of life, reaching into private spaces. The most visible manifestation, however, is on the bodies of the villagers. Individuals begin to exhibit physical signs of the evil presence, such as patches of monstrous fur, indicating that they are being claimed by this dark force. This physical corruption stands as a symbol of the internal and spiritual corruption taking place, as the villagers increasingly fall under the influence of evil. The origins of this malevolent entity are not clear. The film does not provide an explanation of where it came from, but it hints at an ancient and primal evil that predates the current events and the people that it involves. This suggests that there is a timeless horror that has existed for centuries and that transcends human understanding. This portrayal includes themes of ancient, hidden dangers and the consequences of meddling with forces that are better left undisturbed.

Similarly, *Witchfinder General* depicts the people who do not question the authorities or the ways of life. They never think about their belief in witches or reevaluate Hopkins' methods of witch hunting. The villagers' accept the "old ways" and refuse to engage in rational thinking which makes them complicit in the violence and injustice that occurs. By not questioning the status quo, they allow Hopkins to hunt the innocent people with excuse that it is religiously and morally righteous. The folk in this story accept the belief system that existed long before them and they do not show any intention of changing it.

Finally, the skewed belief system also includes the theme of manipulating the masses, especially those uneducated and superstitious. The most obvious examples we can analyze are Lord Summerisle in *The Wicker Man*, Matthew Hopkins in *Witchfinder General* and Angel in *The Blood on Satan's Claw*. From other films we can mention the characters of Stephanie Bax in *The Witches* (1966) and Fisher in *Robin Redbreast* (1970). These characters become leaders and impose their beliefs on large numbers of people willing to follow them. Hopkins

and Bax, for example, do not necessarily belong to the communities but they find a way to gain power over them through exploiting their superstitions.

In *The Wicker Man*, Lord Summerisle emerges as the central figure responsible for corrupting the morals of the community. He indoctrinates the island's inhabitants with the belief that performing human sacrifices is essential for making sure they get a bountiful harvest. His manipulation taps into their deep-seated fears and desires, securing their compliance and devotion. Despite his outward appearance of being an integral part of the community, participating in their rituals and celebrations, Lord Summerisle's true nature is not as what he presents it to be. He is, in fact, a powerful landowner who wields significant influence over the island's residents. His authority is maintained through the introduction of pagan beliefs, which he uses as tools of control. The duality of Lord Summerisle's role as a seemingly devoted participant in the island's cultural practices as well as a manipulative overlord, exposes the power dynamics and beliefs within the community.

In *The Blood on Satan's Claw*, the character Angel plays a central role in assembling a group of followers, positioning themselves in direct opposition to the town's established authority figures, including the Judge, the Reverend, and the Doctor. Scovell (2017) argues that Angel is purposefully dressed in loose flowy robes and flower crowns to evoke the aesthetic of 1960s hippie culture, portraying teenage rebellion against the old ways. He also compares her to the members of the Manson family paralleling her groups actions such as rape and murder to the real life crimes the family committed during the 1960s. Angel's influence over her followers mirrors the characteristics of real-life cults of that era, which often preyed on the vulnerable and marginalized members of society. Angel targets the village's youth, particularly those who are most susceptible due to their lack of guidance and support from the older generations. She identifies and exploits their weaknesses, offering a sense of belonging and purpose that they have not found elsewhere. By drawing in young people who feel neglected and aimless, she creates a devoted group that is willing to challenge and defy the traditional structures of power within the community. The vulnerability of her followers makes them easy targets for her charismatic leadership, as she provides them with the direction and affirmation they crave. This dynamic both strengthens her control over her group and puts focus on the state of the village that allows such events to happen. Angel's cult becomes a force of rebellion against the established norms and authorities, symbolizing a broader conflict between the old and new, order and chaos, stability and change. Her actions and the subsequent rise of her followers illustrate the destructive



potential of charismatic leaders who exploit the disenfranchised, leading to a community's destabilization and moral decay. The lack of strong moral guidance led her to impose her own twisted beliefs onto others.

Lastly, as we already mentioned, in *Witchfinder General* the character of Hopkins embodies the exploitation of societal ignorance and unquestioning acceptance. He takes full advantage of the community's inability or unwillingness to critically examine the world around them. Unlike a traditional leader who commands through charisma or authority, Hopkins thrives in this environment by subtly influencing and manipulating others. Hopkins' power lies in the ease with which he shapes public opinion and bends it to his will. This influence is rooted in the fact that he is rarely, if ever, confronted or questioned. His actions and motives go unchallenged, allowing him to operate with impunity. By presenting himself as a figure of authority and expertise in identifying and eradicating witches, he instills fear and establishes an illusion of legitimacy. This, in turn, convinces the townspeople that his brutal methods are necessary and also beneficial to their safety and well-being. Hopkins' ability to convince everyone of the righteousness of his actions is a direct result of the community's passive acceptance. Through his character, *Witchfinder General* points out the downsides of blind faith and the ease with which fear can be exploited by those in positions of perceived authority. His character shows how individuals can be led astray when they fail to question and confront those who wield power over them. His manipulation of societal fears for personal gain shows the importance of critical thinking and questioning of those in the position of authority.

#### 5.4. Summoning of the supernatural

The final element of the chain is the culmination of all previous ones where the isolation and twisted morals lead to the summoning of something demonic or supernatural. The summoning refers to pagan entities and their practicing magic, witchcraft or worshipping the devil or another entity. Supernatural and spiritual elements play an important role in Folk Horror. Sometimes they are a part of people's imagination and their belief system, and sometimes there is a physical embodiment of the supernatural creature that they summon.

The films of unholy trinity are largely influenced by the culture and events of their time. Gatiss (2010) suggests that the rise of occult themes in cinema was influenced by the images of rebellious young people in protests and riots people saw in everyday life and in

media. He explains that this resonated with American audiences because of the growing generation gap. Clean-cut youth were being replaced by outspoken, rebellious young men and women. The main idea is that the films reflect a time when communes blending mystical beliefs and free love were possible. The horror comes from its depiction of the evolution of 1960s and early 1970s counter-culture ideals and ancient pre-Christian British traditions. Occult themes, therefore, appear everywhere in the period's pop culture such as in music, literature and especially in movies and TV shows (Scovell, 2017).

In Folk Horror narratives the supernatural and magical are treated as normal as other activities like farming or fishing. The fantasy blends so easily with reality that it's hard to distinguish between the two (Scovell, 2017). However, Johnston (2014) points out that there are mostly no supernatural forces involved, but all evil comes from people's activities. The horror is entirely or largely caused by the people. Even if there is a monster or a supernatural occurrence, its existence and power is only sustained through the people who summon it and keep it alive. There are no real supernatural elements, but everything that happens is a result of people's wrongdoings. The villain is therefore not a monster or some supernatural force, but the people themselves.

As the summoning ties to the skewed beliefs, we can observe how all of the stone circles, mysterious runes, cursed objects etc. serve only as a symbol, not of real magic but of the reality that the people themselves create. There is a possibility that the horror stems from something so old that it predates the people who live on the land (Johnston, 2014) as, for example, the monster summoned in *The Blood on Satan's Claw*. However, in *Witchfinder General* and in *The Wicker Man* the evil comes only from people. There are never any supernatural elements shown.

The summoning usually happens in the end when the community performs their traditional rituals that are supposed to protect them and the land they live on. Such rituals are in most cases human sacrifices. The element of sacrifice in exchange for something can be found in a large number of Folk Horror stories, such as *Children of the Corn* (1984), *Robin Redbreast* (1970), Shirley Jackson's 'The Lottery' (1948) and, as we can see in our examples, *The Wicker Man* and *The Blood on Satan's Claw*. The islanders sacrifice Howie to please their gods and receive a bountiful harvest, while Angel sacrifices several people of the village to summon the monster.

Murphy (2022) emphasized the inherent pessimism and fatalism in much of Folk Horror. The human sacrifices are senseless and unjustifiable, yet they persist almost automatically and unavoidably. Individual actions mean nothing in the grand scheme, being completely unable to change the cycle. The rebellious outsider might present only a slight obstacle in a cycle which always ends in the same way (Johnston, 2019). As opposed to modernity which typically praises progress and forward movement, Folk Horror adopts a more cyclical and socially stagnant approach (Scovell, 2017).

The outsider character is simply there to witness the way of life of the people without being able to change anything. In *The Wicker Man*, there will always be the same rituals, year after year, and Howie is just another sacrifice as many have been before him. In *Witchfinder General*, the true evil is the misogynistic society that will continue to punish the women even if the character of witchfinder is defeated. Due to the strong connection to the land and nature which also operates in cycles, the folk continue the same cycle and the same way of living. There is rarely a happy ending where the evil in Folk Horror is defeated. Sometimes it is possible for the outsider to escape, but the community that they escaped remains unchanged.

## 6. Conclusion

Throughout this paper we provided a detailed analysis of the genres defining characteristics and its evolution throughout history. We examined its core features that include the rural setting, isolation, skewed morality and supernatural elements. By analyzing selected movies *The Wicker Man*, *The Blood on Satan's Claw*, and *Witchfinder General*, we illustrated how these works present the genre's features.

We can conclude that Scovell's Folk Horror chain is not a perfect, all encompassing theory as it leaves out numerous features and character tropes that make up the genre. For example, he only briefly mentions its distinctive aesthetic and the character of the outsider whose beliefs clash with those of the folk, which are features present in most Folk Horror films. Nonetheless, his theory provides a good foundation for the analysis, giving us a basic structure of the genre.

Furthermore, we also came to see that the movies of the unholy trinity do not perfectly comply with Scovell's theory. For example, one of the elements of the chain is the summoning of the supernatural, while *The Wicker Man* and *Witchfinder General* do not

feature any supernatural occurrences at all. Similarly, we saw that while *The Wicker Man* puts an emphasis on the rural landscape, people's strong connection to it, and its very important role in the story, the movie *Witchfinder General* uses the landscape simply as a setting, pointing to the fact that different elements of the Folk Horror chain can be of more or less importance depending on each individual case.

Even though the genre talks about the past and the old times, we can see that it represents the anxieties of the present day. The stories of simple life in rural spaces often experience the greatest peaks in popularity when the reality is anything but simple and peaceful. Political turmoil, societal changes and wars often lead us to consuming media about isolated, faraway places and returning to the past even when that media falls under the unsettling horror genre.

Finally, we can conclude that Folk Horror is a complex genre with numerous aspects to explore and discuss. Despite its deep roots in cultural narratives and long-standing storytelling traditions, Folk Horror has only recently begun to attract significant academic attention. Because of this, much of the genre's underlying functions remain uncovered. This recent academic interest shows the potential for further research and discussion. As the genre continues to evolve and gain recognition, it offers opportunities for analyzing its various themes, symbolism, and overall mechanics of the Folk Horror narratives.

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## 8. Folk Horror: Development and Properties of the Genre: Summary and key words

Folk Horror is a subgenre of horror that stands out due to its distinguished aesthetic which includes pastoral scenes, small villages and portrayals of a simple, rural life. This genre is particularly interesting because of its depiction of contrasting themes, such as the tension between the old and the new, the urban and rural spaces, and the contrast between nature's beauty and human corruption. In this paper, the aim is to discuss the development of the Folk Horror genre, define its main characteristics and to analyze the movies *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971), *The Wicker Man* (1973), and *Witchfinder General* (1968). We will start by defining Folk Horror and the types of work that fall under this genre. We will explain the theoretical framework of this paper which is based on Scovell's Folk Horror chain that he introduced in his book *Hours Dreadful and Things Strange*. Following this, we will discuss the development of the genre, tracing its connections to old folktales, the influence of the Romantic movement, and its development from the 1960s to the present. The main part of this paper will involve the analysis of the selected movies by applying Scovell's theory to evaluate how these films incorporate the elements of the Folk Horror chain. Through this analysis we aim to gain a deeper understanding of the workings of the genre and its occasional surges in popularity.

Key words: Folk Horror, isolation, rurality, Romanticism, skewed belief system

## 9. Folk Horror: Razvoj i odrednice žanra: Sažetak i ključne riječi

Folk Horror je podžanr horora koji se ističe svojom prepoznatljivom estetikom koja uključuje pastoralne scene, mala sela i prikaze jednostavnog, ruralnog života. Ovaj je žanr posebno zanimljiv zbog prikaza kontrasta poput napetosti između starog i novog, urbanog i ruralnog prostora te kontrasta između ljepote prirode i ljudske pokvarenosti. U ovom radu cilj je razmotriti razvoj Folk Horrorra, definirati njegova glavna obilježja te analizirati filmove *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971), *The Wicker Man* (1973), and *Witchfinder General* (1968). Rad ćemo započeti s definiranjem Folk Horrorra i vrsta djela koja spadaju u ovaj žanr. Objasniti ćemo teorijski okvir ovog rada koji se temelji na Scovellovom Folk Horror lancu koji je predstavio u svojoj knjizi *Hours Dreadful and Things Strange*. Nakon toga, raspravljat ćemo o razvoju žanra, od njegove veze sa starim narodnim pričama, utjecaja Romantizma i njegovog razvoja od 1960-ih do danas. Glavni dio ovog rada uključivat će analizu odabranih filmova primjenom Scovellove teorije kako bi razmotrili kako ti filmovi uključuju elemente folk horora. Ovom analizom nastojimo steći dublje razumijevanje djelovanja žanra i njegovih povremenih porasta popularnosti.

Ključne riječi: Folk Horror, izolacija, ruralnost, Romantizam, iskrivljeni sustav vjerovanja