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Folk Horror

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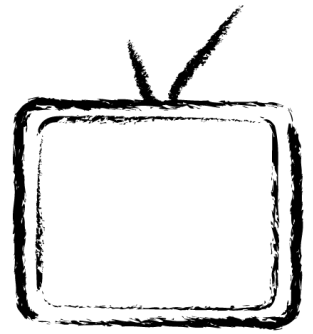
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„Child be Strange!“ – Adolescent folk horror as counter heritage in British TV series of the 1970s

Von Manuel Trummer

Introduction

With movies such as *Witchfinder General* (1968), *Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971) and above all *The Wicker Man* (1973), the years between 1967 and 1977 mark the formative decade of modern folk horror. The influence of these films on the British TV landscape of the time is fundamental. As the *unholy trinity*¹ of the genre – as Adam Scovell calls the three films – they are now also the subject of numerous scholarly texts on folk horror and have been thoroughly analysed.² Parallel to these three outstanding classics, an extensive but lesser-known corpus of productions aiming decidedly at a young audience also emerged from the British TV stations of the 1960s and 1970s.³ This unusual and unique approach of genuine adolescent folk horror not only shaped the contemporary television landscape and youth culture in Britain but continues to have an impact on the 21st-century revival of folk horror. Among the productions that current leading directors of the genre such as Ben Wheatley cite as formative influences,⁴ *The Owl Service* (ITV, 1969–1970), *Children of the Stones* (ITV, 1977) and *Penda's Fen* (BBC, 1974) are the most important. Analogous to Scovell's tongue-in-cheek term, they form an *unholy trilogy* of youth-oriented folk horror. This unusual, worldwide unique interplay of youth culture and folkloristic-mythological themes in the time window from 1967 to 1977 reflects fundamental socio-cultural transformations of contemporary British society.

It is precisely these processes that are in the focus of this article, examining which socio-cultural and broadcasting policy developments conditioned this remarkable boom of folk horror aimed decidedly at young people on British television in the 1960s and 1970s. What explains the prominence of the genre in these years and how did writers and directors adapt the genre's characteristic themes, motifs, and conventions for a younger audience?

Methodologically, the article uses a reading based on Ina Merkel's model of a historical-critical film analysis, using close readings that prepare a historical context analysis in the second part. Following Merkel, the article understands the TV dramas discussed as „embedded in contemporary historical webs of meaning“, whereby they „therefore contain moments of power (ideology, norms and values, dominant fiction) as well as counter-power (counter-images, popular pleasure) [...]. They are

¹ Scovell 2016.

² Cf. Fehlmann 2018, 165–179; Rodgers 2017; Rodgers 2019, 133–152; Scovell 2017; Trummer 2020, 255–270.

³ A rather comprehensive list can be found in Paciorek 2015, 311–319.

⁴ Cf. Rodgers 2017, 58.

articulations based on the cultural codes valid in a society at a time, with the help of which the world shown in the film is interpreted for a contemporary audience with its specific problems and needs.”⁵ The exemplary material for the analysis is the style-defining and influential *unholy trilogy* of adolescent folk horror: *The Owl Service*, *Penda's Fen* and *Children of the Stones*. These three pioneering productions can be understood as paradigmatic for the conjuncture of a broad and multi-layered corpus of adolescent dramas with occult, mythological and mystical narratives in this era.⁶

Adolescent *folk horror*: Terminology and current state of research

British adolescent folk horror follows the characteristic narrative, iconographic and ideological motifs of the wider genre that has been forming since the late-1960s as a broad canon of productions that is fluid at its edges and has been subsumed under the term folk horror since the 2000s. In his popular definition, the British film scholar Adam Scovell sees four characteristics as central.⁷ *First*, folk horror productions usually rely on an atmospheric staging of landscape, which itself has a narrative quality and – as a psycho-geographical plot device – significantly influences the development of the characters and story. Central to this are – *second* – experiences of isolation, remoteness, and exclusion to which the main characters – usually depicted as ‘urban’ – are exposed. The isolation and remoteness of the landscapes of folk horror is not merely constituted as a distance to be measured geographically or spatially, but – *third* – also as a moral gap between locals and strangers, between country and city. The ‘alien’ values of the rural communities in the novels, movies and TV shows usually manifest themselves in beliefs that are staged as archaic, backward, or fanatical. Above all, bricolages of supposed Celtic and Germanic-Nordic religiosity – as formulated by 19th-century Romanticism and folklore and the Cambridge Ritual School at the beginning of the 20th century, but also by the gothic literature of the time – provide the exotic and entertaining iconographic substrate here.⁸ However, in any case the central element is the survival of pre-modern traditions, myths and norms, which lie embodied in the landscape but often also manifest themselves in the local architecture, archaeological sites or artefacts. In the interplay of these three motifs, the plot – *fourth* – finds its climax in a tense event that usually has a ritual character and is often accompanied by a drastic sacrifice and violence or decisively changes the relationship between the main characters and the locals. If one or more links of this four-part *folk horror chain* are given, according to Scovell a classification in the genre folk horror would be obvious.

A broad and lively discussion of different aspects of folk horror has established itself in cultural, literary and media studies around Scovell’s definition. While the three exemplary productions in this article – *The Owl Service*, *Penda's Fen* and *Children of the Stones* – are also regularly discussed in these approaches as examples and central pillars of the genre, the evident question of the general boom of folk horror in youth television in the 1960s and 1970s – which Andy Paciorek calls „the golden age of British supernatural youth drama”⁹ – currently remains unanswered. For this paper, the results of a

⁵ Merkel 2014, 260.

⁶ Cf. Paciorek 2015, 311–319.

⁷ Scovell 2014.

⁸ Cf. Fehlmann 2018, 165–179; Trummer 2020, 277–286.

⁹ Paciorek 2015, 311–319.

research project on children's television in Great Britain provided a valuable framework.¹⁰ The project – which was set up from the perspective of British cultural studies – analysed the transformation of children's and youth television between 1946 and 1980. Based on archival sources and interviews with experts, it primarily focused on the changes in British broadcasting policy of the era. Regarding the boom in adolescent folk horror, the results of the project imply that broadcasting policy realignments within the BBC in the direction of a more contemporary and less pedagogical youth television¹¹ as well as a commercial competitive situation between the BBC and the ITV broadcasting stations created an extremely favourable situation for avant-garde and sophisticated television during these years.

Diane Rodgers argues in a similar direction, suggesting that British television from the late-1960s onwards also underwent a process of technological development that allowed new freedoms for ambitious productions and more complex narratives, while there was simultaneously an increased interest in folklore, the occult, and spirituality – core motifs of folk horror – in other areas of popular media cultures.¹² The unusual boom of these offbeat, uncanny themes in youth television and the underlying broadcasting policy attempts to reach and engage the increasingly critical young audience with contemporary programmes thus also reveal a series of broader socio-cultural conflicts that were emerging in British society at the time. It is not far-fetched when Aaron Jolly reads the boom in folk horror on television of the time as an analogy to the „political turmoil“ of the 1970s.¹³

Based on this state of research, this article argues that the unusual focus on folk horror in the youth programme of the time is a symptom of a convergence of several transformation processes in Great Britain in the 1960s and 1970s: a) broadcasting-political; b) popular-cultural; and c) socio-cultural-political. The popularity of folk horror in youth television seems to be due to the applicability of its typical narratives to contemporary conflicts as well as a time-specific interest in its themes and motifs, especially among the younger generation. Folk horror as a genre – like horror in general¹⁴ – thus can be understood as a transgressive medium, which offers alternate readings of national heritage and memory cultures in the sense of Foucault's „Counter-memories“¹⁵.

Starting with the *unholy trinity* of adolescent folk horror – the productions *The Owl Service* (1969–1970), *Penda's Fen* (1974) and *Children of the Stones* (1977) – the following section organises the material for the subsequent analysis.

The *unholy trinity* of adolescent folk horror. Narratives, motifs, conflicts

City versus Periphery and England's colonial past – *The Owl Service* (Peter Plummer, Alan Garner 1969–1970)

As the first of the three style-defining productions of British adolescent folk horror of the era, *The Owl Service* was broadcast in December 1969 in eight episodes, each lasting 30 minutes. The series was commissioned by *Granada Television*, a broadcasting station of the British private television network

¹⁰ Buckingham 1999.

¹¹ In particular, the closure of the Children's Television department in 1962 and the integration of the youth audience into the general television programme. Cf. McGown o. J. [a].

¹² Rodgers 2019, 133–152.

¹³ Jolly 2015, 270–282.

¹⁴ Cf. Wood 1986, 8.

¹⁵ Foucault 1977, 139–164.

ITV, which had mainly been covering the northwest of the country from its headquarters in Salford and Manchester since 1956. In contrast to other British private stations of the time – which primarily operated with American purchases – from the beginning *Granada* focused on high-quality, independent productions and thus had a lasting influence on the country's TV culture from the 1960s onwards.¹⁶ The social realism of many of its productions – which dealt with problems of the English North and West – contributed to the station's reputation as the leading private broadcaster in terms of quality.¹⁷

Peter Plummer was the producer of *The Owl Service*. Plummer had previously been responsible for several crime series, such as *The Man in Room 17* (ITV, 1965–1967) and *The Fellows* (ITV, 1967), but was also behind a few episodes of Britain's longest-running TV series, *Coronation Street* (ITV, 1960–present). Staged in the form of a television play with a small ensemble of characters, the series is based on the fantasy novel of the same name published two years earlier by Alan Garner.¹⁸ After its publication, *The Owl Service* quickly became one of the most successful English-language books for young people in these years and established Garner as one of the leading British writers for adolescents.¹⁹ Garner was involved in the scripts for the TV adaptation of the popular novel, and was in close contact with the production team.²⁰

The Owl Service sets the *folk horror chain* in Scovell's sense in motion narratively with a harsh urban-rural contrast. The plot takes the wealthy urban businessman Clive with his son Roger, his stepdaughter Alison and her mother – Clive's new wife – to a remote Welsh mountain valley, where they spend their first holiday together after Clive's marriage, in an old cottage that had belonged to Alison's late father. Director Plummer stages the isolated rurality of the setting with slow landscape shots in which the nature of the Welsh valley gains its own atmospheric quality and plot power. However, central to the narrative is the urban-rural contrast in the acting. Thus, the fashionably dressed London teenagers Alison and Roger – drawn with a slightly urban-blasé touch – are juxtaposed with the cranky local gardener Huw Halfbacon and the housekeeper Nancy with her son Gwyn. The constellation of characters thus marks not only an urban-rural dichotomy but also class differences between a wealthy English upper class and its servants from the periphery of the provinces subjugated by England throughout history.²¹ It is precisely this class difference between Huw, Nancy and Gwyn – drawn as simple and biographically interwoven with the history and landscape of their Welsh valley – and Roger, Alison and Clive – as representatives of an urban elite – that takes on a central role in the dramaturgy of the series. For example, the strong Welsh dialect of the locals marks a moment of conflict: when Gwyn tries to discard it to be taken seriously by the Londoners Roger and Alison, it also articulates the locals' feeling of inferiority to the guests from the big city. Alison and Roger's arrogance towards the old sagas of gardener Huw Halfbacon also illustrates social distance between city and country, but also between enlightened modernity and pre-industrial times.

At the centre of this underlying class struggle are teenagers Roger, Alison, and Gwyn. When Alison and Gwyn find the titular porcelain service with owl ornamentation in the cottage attic, the plot kicks

¹⁶ Cf. Elen o. J.

¹⁷ Cf. Cooke 2005, 183–197.

¹⁸ Garner 1967.

¹⁹ As early as 1967, Garner was awarded the prestigious Carnegie Medal for the best children's book by a British author for *The Owl Service*.

²⁰ Cf. Tate 2021.

²¹ Ingham 2016, 165f.

into gear. After Alison traces the owls on the plates, they disappear, and the young woman begins to act increasingly strange and alienated. In parallel, Roger discovers a prehistoric standing stone with a circular hole in a nearby valley, which gardener Huw Halfbacon calls the „Stone of Gronw“. The megalith was thus a site in the Welsh saga cycle *Mabinogion*, which was understood (and marketed) as an oral relic of Celtic mythology, especially by the Romantic and mythological schools of the 19th century. The „fourth branch“ of the *Mabinogion* tells the story of Blodeuwedd, a young woman created from flowers by the magician Gwydion to marry his nephew Lleu. After Blodeuwedd cheats on Lleu with the warrior Gronw, Lleu kills him with a spear that tears a hole in a rock behind which Gronw had sought shelter, the Stone of Gronw. As a punishment for her infidelity, Gwydion eventually turns Blodeuwedd into an owl.

As the plot unfolds, a relationship triangle with undertones of eroticism, jealousy, and anger unfolds between the teenagers, centred on the enigmatic Alison. Huw Halfbacon and the housekeeper Nancy realise that the three young people are caught up in Blodeuwedd’s story and unconsciously re-enacting it. It emerges that Huw, Nancy, and Alison’s deceased biological father had also been through the same unhappy relationship story one generation earlier. Although Roger manages to break the curse at the end in a ritualistic, intense conversation, the final shots suggest that this has not broken the ever-recurring cycle of the *Mabinogion*.²²

The plot of *The Owl Service* is extraordinarily complex for a show aimed at a young audience. Its slow narrative style demands a high level of attention and deviates markedly from the action-oriented US imports that dominated the programming of ITV’s broadcast stations at the end of the 1960s. The audio-visual design corresponds with the high narrative demands. Not only was *The Owl Service* Granada Television’s first full colour production,²³ but the psychedelic sound and image design – used for example to underline danger, moments of shock, or the confusion of the teenagers – seems experimental and avant-garde compared to contemporary youth television.

The Owl Service thus takes on a prominent significance in terms of design and narrative – and not only – for adolescent folk horror. It is the first show to draw on British mythology to tell a present-day teenage relationship drama. How mythology – in this case, Welsh mythology – is staged as a threatening power embodied in the land and its people is subsequently formative for the development of the narrative canon of folk horror in general. By drawing on supposedly pre-Christian mythology to create a divide between modernity and pre-modernity, it also creates an urban-rural contrast that assigns specific roles to the respective protagonists. What makes *The Owl Service* ground-breaking here is how this urban-rural contrast – which is marked by the *Mabinogion* – is carried on into a class conflict between the upper class of London and the population of the Welsh periphery. Alongside the pre-modern mythology, what thus also looms ominously over late-1960s Britain is the nation’s colonial legacy and its history of social inequality.²⁴

Generational conflicts and formations of counter-heritage – *Penda’s Fen* (Alan Clarke, David Rudkin 1974)

The second ground-breaking production of youth folk horror on British television in the 1960s and 1970s is the television film *Penda’s Fen*, produced by BBC Birmingham and broadcast in colour on 21st March 1974

²² Cf. Trummer 2020, 283: It is precisely this cyclical understanding of time, which is significantly associated with pre-industrial, rural communities, that characterises the representation of the rural in folk horror.

²³ McGown o. J. [b]

²⁴ Cf. Ingham 2016, 166f.

as part of the BBC1 series *Play for Today*. Like *The Owl Service*, the film proves to be extraordinarily complex in terms of its addressed young target audience. The style – which uses dream sequences, metaphors and a multitude of historical references and symbolic allusions to tell the story – is experimental and bears the characteristic stylistic signature of the socially critical British playwright and theatre-maker David Rudkin (* 1936).²⁵ *Penda's Fen* moves on the edge of common definitions of folk horror, although its atmospheric-symbolic exaggeration of the English countryside as well as its examination of the afterlife of pre-Christian myths in the country's present make clear use of other trademarks of the genre. Nevertheless, author Rudkin himself refuses to read the film as folk horror, as he had conceived it as a „bloody political piece.“²⁶ Indeed, *Penda's Fen* offers a coming-of-age story that fundamentally questions the country's culture of memory through supernatural elements and recourse to British national myths. In the process, a generational conflict reveals itself, which Rudkin understands as a call to disobedience and individuality aimed at the younger generation.²⁷

The plot centres on seventeen-year-old Stephen, the only son of a pastor couple. While Stephen holds conservative and nationalistic convictions at the beginning of the film – expressed in a rant against modern popular culture and family ideas, for example – the young man's world view becomes increasingly cracked through a series of encounters and mysterious *happenings*. Thus, Steven's neighbour – the socialist writer Arne, whom he despised at the beginning – sows the first doubts with his polemics against capitalism, technocracy and environmentally destructive progress. Three visions and dreams in which a demon confronts Steven with his repressed homosexuality – among other things²⁸ – unsettle the young man, who subsequently rejects the rituals and expectations directed at adolescents in a conservative-nationalist school system. When Steven learns on his eighteenth birthday that he was adopted and originally from Wales, his last convictions of English superiority and a heteronormative family order that he had formerly defended as „natural“ also collapse. Another supernatural encounter with the British national composer Edward Elgar (1857–1934), whom he admires as well as conversations with his father and again his socialist neighbour Arne finally open Steven's eyes to a „different“ England, beyond toxic notions of ethnic purity, militant masculinity and heteronormative, puritanical sexuality.

Two aspects of Scovell's *folk horror chain* serve as arguments in this narrative construction of an alternative British culture of memory. On the one hand, the land and landscape itself takes on an increasingly symbolic quality as a *lieu de mémoire* as the story unfolds. This is particularly evident in Steven's discovery that the name of his home village Pinvin derives from the Old English Penda's Fen. Penda in turn was the last pagan king of England. These memories of the pagan past, the revolutionary potential of the old gods, reviled by Christians as demons, have been buried by modernity, as Steven's father explains in a remarkable monologue, although the landscape of England would still carry this „different“ England and its disobedience to the prevailing norms as a possibility of utopia. It would be up to the young generation to retrieve and use this revolutionary potential which lies embedded in mythical places such as Penda's Fen: „Where fathers fail, they look to their sons to achieve“, Steven's father says, turning to him.

On the other hand, England's pagan past becomes the central vehicle for the movie's attack on conservative value systems, the church, and the politics of national memory in 1970s England. According to Steven's father, King Penda's resistance to Christianisation was also a battle against the „new machine.“ Especially in connection with similar monologues by Steven's neighbour Arne, the reading of paganism as an anti-

²⁵ Rabey 1997.

²⁶ Scovell 2016, 71.

²⁷ Cf. Harle/Machin 2019.

²⁸ Jolly 2015, 270–282.

modern, anti-capitalist, and ecological moment of resistance – a sort of English counter-heritage of the marginalized and repressed – becomes more than clear. The climax of Steven's spiritual emancipation from the national conservative norms of his environment is finally a supernatural encounter with King Penda himself. In a monologue lasting several minutes, Rudkin lets England's last pagan king make a final reckoning with notions of ethnic purity, masculinity, and class: „I am nothing pure, my race is mixed, my sex is mixed, I am mixed. Mud and flame, man and woman, nothing special.“ Penda directly addresses the reformed Steven, who becomes the representative of a youth on the move and the liberator from the true „enemies of England,“ a patronising, manipulative parental generation: „Sick father and mother who would have us children forever.“ King Penda's fervent address ends in the style of William Blake with the revolutionary exhortation: „Cherish the flame! Our sacred demon of ungovernableness, cherish our flame. Our day shall come. Child, be strange!“

David Rudkin confirms this reading in an explanatory introduction to the second – and last – broadcast of *Penda's Fen* in the BBC programme. Through the landscape and its slumbering pagan past, his aim was to portray a visionary England whose history and society are diverse, multi-layered and liberal. The recourse to Anglo-Saxon mythology and the symbolic exaltation of the British countryside in *Penda's Fen* must be seen as an appeal to the young generation for resistance and disobedience. Through the language of *folk horror*, Rudkin's pagan, resistant reading of British history thus creates a “different” England with a more diverse heritage even a younger, more liberal and forward-thinking generation can identify with.

The countryside as a „parallel universe“. *Children of the Stones* (Peter Graham Scott, 1977)

As the third ground-breaking production, the ITV series *Children of the Stones* illustrates the importance of folk horror for British youth television of the time. The studios of HTV West were responsible for the seven-part series, which first ran in 1977 in the afternoon programme and is occasionally described as the „scariest children's series of all time.“²⁹ HTV West was an ITV broadcasting company based in Bristol and Cardiff that was primarily responsible for Wales and the Southwest of England. A major contribution of HTV West to British television history were high-quality youth series, which were also sold internationally. The HTV Junior Drama Workshop founded by the broadcaster in Bristol held major importance in this respect, as it specifically trained young actors and actresses for productions aimed at a young audience.³⁰

The influence of *Children of the Stones* on the development of folk horror is enormous, not least because it significantly contributed to the formation of its characteristic narrative elements. The plot unfolds once again against a striking urban-rural contrast, which can be read as a divide between enlightened modernity and pre-industrial traditions. Astrophysicist Adam Brake and his son Matthew serve as the protagonists, who come to the village of Milbury from an unnamed university town to explore the local stone circle with state-of-the-art technology. Director Peter Graham Scott filmed the scenes in Milbury at the original megaliths in Avebury, repeatedly setting the scene with lush panoramas and atmospheric, sometimes unusual close-ups of the stone circles. In combination with the soundtrack by Sidney Sager with its avant-garde, sometimes threatening choral recordings, the audiovisual staging of the story is on an artistically high level, which seems unusually elaborate and complex, especially regarding the youthful target group.

The visual staging of Milbury initially follows notions of the rural idyll that literature has attached to the English countryside since the early-19th century. Milbury is an agrarian village in the countryside,

²⁹ Newton 2018.

³⁰ Cf. Vahimagi o. J.; McGown o. J. [a].

with Morris dances, a pub, a church and a village school, and a community that seems harmonious at first glance. However, Matthew – who goes to school in Milbury while his father explores the stone circles – soon discovers that the village population is divided. Behind the cordial surface, a hidden cult operates. Thus, some ‘normal’ people – including the museum director Margaret, who was not born in the village, and the cranky hermit Dai – are opposed by the so-called *happy ones*. The latter not only act in an exaggeratedly friendly and harmonious manner, but also apparently possess heightened mental capacities and psychic abilities. During the plot, Professor Brake not only discovers that the stone circle has special electromagnetic qualities, but that these have also been influencing the village community in a mysterious way for thousands of years. *Children of the Stones* proves this narratively with the reference to a snake symbol and Stone Age and Druidic temples. Just as in *The Owl Service* and *Penda's Fen*, the British prehistory here looms ominously into the present. A central role is now played by the village headman Hendrick, whereby the aristocratic man seems to control the villagers with the help of the standing stones and certain rituals. When Adam, Matthew and Margaret try to escape, they discover that escape from the stone circle around Milbury is not possible. In a ritual *happening*, Hendrick reveals himself as a former astrophysicist who has discovered that the stone circle is connected to a black hole that has created a parallel universe in the village. The cruel human sacrifices of the Stone Age ancestors went back to it. With superior technology, Hendrick now tries to harness the power of the stones and the black hole for himself.

In this story, *Children of the Stones* takes up science fiction elements that are characteristic of youth television in the 1970s. Especially the successful TV series *Dr. Who* as well as the popular *Quatermass* films of the 1960s form a significant influence here. It takes up typical tropes of folk horror: apart from the urban-rural contrast, these are above all a clash between rational modernity and a survival of irrational, barbaric ideas of a pagan past. The linear image of time of the enlightened protagonists from the city meets cyclical ideas of time in the rituals of the village population, which have shaped the ‘parallel universe’ in Milbury for thousands of years and are difficult to escape. However, just like *The Owl Service* and *Penda's Fen*, *Children of the Stones* goes one step further beyond classic folk horror tropes by offering its audience a decidedly socio-critical reading. Thus, the role of the aristocratic Hendrick and his practices of brainwashing the villagers is once again easily understood as a critique of rigid British notions of class and domination. When the nobleman Hendrick – together with the local priest – turns the population of Milbury into *happy ones* who no longer want to escape from the cyclical time orders and traditions of the village, this articulates a subversive narrative in terms of the British class hierarchies of the time. Hendrick’s intention to eliminate the free will of the population by means of modern technology and electromagnetic transmission techniques may also be a hidden critique of the media.

The golden age of British supernatural youth drama? An analysis

Social criticism and generational conflict. Adolescent folk horror as a medium of transgression

In the examination of the material, it became clear how much the three productions studied were able to influence the formation of folk horror as an independent genre of entertainment television with their narratives and dramaturgy. Characteristic of this is first the intensive psycho-geographical reading of the landscape. In all the examples, through its atmospheric charge the British countryside not only serves as a setting for the storylines, but itself becomes an active moment that drives the plot

forward. What all productions have in common is the negotiation of rural Britain as a quasi-living repository of lost traditions, myths, but also of a hidden life force that – as *Penda's Fen* formulates most clearly in terms of Romantic thought – is waiting beneath the modern surface to be tapped by a young generation to renew the country. Similarly incorporated are the myths of the *Mabinogion* in the lush mountain valleys that *The Owl Service* stages, and the unconscious psychic connection to the Neolithic that the people of Milbury possess over the ritual landscape of their village. An urban-rural divide also emerges in all productions at the level of the protagonists. Whether it is the scientist who investigates the stone circles in *Children of the Stones* as a representative of a rational, enlightened modernity or the blasé members of the London upper class – as in *The Owl Service* – the productions translate these contrasts into conflicts between modernity and pre-modernity, between individualised lifestyles and the traditional communities of the villages that serve as locations for the action.

However, other conflicts run across these fronts, which are typical of folk horror and constitute the actual significance of the three productions studied: thus, underneath the primarily gruesome and mystical plot, generational and class conflicts and a critical examination of the province and the periphery as anti-idylls trapped within themselves always unfold. The narrative of Milbury as a “parallel universe” most clearly expresses this pessimistic, tendentially progressive-liberal assessment of being trapped in outmoded, oppressive traditions and a disconnected province. In this critical attitude towards social hierarchies and conservative values, British adolescent folk horror of the 1970s directly addresses the needs of its young audience, by offering a different reading of the nation's past and heritage. Folk horror transcends the institutionalized memory culture and turns the English countryside into a subversive *lieu de mémoire* of the young, the marginalized and the forgotten. By subverting the British past adolescent folk horror of the 1960s and 1970s created a national “Counter memory” with an emancipatory potential, especially for a younger generation.

Indeed, the generational conflicts in the examples studied reflect real social conflicts that had increasingly politicised teenagers and young adults all over Europe and North America around the epoch year of 1968.³¹ Accompanied by the soundtrack of progressive pop culture³² and the fashion of *Swinging London*, England was also gripped by a wave of youth protest movements around 1970. Resistance was directed – among other things – against the Vietnam War, as in the „Anti-Vietnam War Grosvenor Riots” in March 1968, against the Greek military government, as in the “Garden House Riot” in Cambridge in February 1970, but also for a reform of education policy, as in the occupation of Hornsey College of Art in 1968, or against the outlawing of homosexuality by the church, as in the protests of the *UK Gay Liberation Front* in 1971.³³ Politically left-leaning and socialist directors like David Rudkin acted as cultural translators between the young protesters of the late-1960s and early-1970s and the TV programming of the time. The rebellion of the younger generation was also embedded in a serious economic crisis that led England into recession in the 1970s and led to resistance and a radicalisation of the political fringes across all social camps.³⁴

In this explosive mixture of social unrest, youthful rebellion, and the boom of the horror genre in television programming, Aaron Jolly sees a time-specific connection between „large-scale dissatisfaction with the government, class tension and the clash between old and new ideologies.”³⁵

³¹ Cf. Harris/O'Brien 2014.

³² Tranmer 2014, 90–106.

³³ Cf. Thomas 2008, 335–354.

³⁴ Cf. Coates 1982, 141–166.

³⁵ Jolly 2015, 270.

Against this backdrop, he interprets the boom in (adolescent) folk horror in England in the 1970s as an attempt to overcome oppressive norms. In doing so, he places British folk horror in the international context of the horror genre that flourished worldwide in the 1970s, especially in the US. Robin Wood also sees horror media as a kind of social-psychological pressure relief valve that allows its audience to transcend existing norms: „Central to the effect and fascination of horror films is their fulfilment of our nightmare wish to smash the norms that oppress us and which our moral conditioning teaches us to revere.”³⁶

All productions use recourse to pre-Christian myths apostrophised as ‘pagan’ as a powerful and tense foil to effectively stage these contrasts. The narrative function of these neopagan bricolages is ambivalent. While *The Owl Service* and *Children of the Stones* – for example – use prehistoric myths and rituals as an alien and barbaric moment of tension and cyclically recurring threat, in *Penda’s Fen* they serve as a counter-heritage of the marginalized and to represent the possibility of a more diverse national culture of memory as well as a moment of resistance, against capitalism, but also against rigid conservative value systems, especially those of the Christian churches and the national conservative British establishment and its institutions.

„Speed and space and adventure“. Broadcasting policy conditions

At both a narrative and audiovisual level, the three exemplary productions have remarkable complexity and a high artistic standard. The interwoven narratives demand full attention even from an adult audience, as well as a sound prior knowledge of mythology and symbolic forms. In addition, there is an ambitious image and sound design, which operates technically advanced very early on with the colour film but also relies on experimental cuts and avant-garde, specially composed soundtracks. The fact that the BBC and ITV entrusted these productions to established directors with cinema experience such as Peter Graham Scott, celebrated authors such as Alan Garner and socially critical theatre writers such as David Rudkin also reveals the high level of ambition characteristic of British youth television in the late-1960s and 1970s, the „golden age of supernatural youth drama”³⁷ as Andy Paciorek writes.

This „golden age” of supernatural youth television of the 1960s and 1970s – which is decisively characterised by adolescent folk horror – is based on a series of broadcasting policy developments that fundamentally changed the British television landscape from the 1960s onwards. As early as September 1946, the BBC had its own children’s television programme – *For the Children* – which was broadcast weekly on Sundays from 1948. From the beginning, children’s television was characterised by underfunding, which considerably limited the possibilities of the producers, as well as the claim to educate rather than entertain. This was also reflected in rigidly regulated programme slots in which children and young people were supposed to watch television, strictly separated from the adult programme by one-hour, broadcast-free shutdowns: puppet theatre for the younger ones,³⁸ film adaptations of British literature (e.g. by Jane Austen) for the adolescents. Above all, the American influence on the young audience was to be curbed in this way.³⁹

When the ITV stations began broadcasting, the BBC – with its restrictive and educational children’s and youth programming – soon began to lose its young audience to the competition. Unlike the BBC,

³⁶ Wood 1986, 80.

³⁷ Paciorek 2015, 311–319.

³⁸ McGown o. J. [a].

³⁹ Buckingham 1999, 19f.

the commercially operating ITV stations also relied on American imports from the beginning, including westerns, thrillers, and action series. By the end of the 1950s, up to 85 percent of the young audience preferred to watch the programmes of the ITV stations rather than the BBC's youth programmes.⁴⁰ The BBC reacted publicly with criticism of ITV's policy of harming young people and internally with restructuring measures. An expansion of production capacities now made it possible to produce increasingly more elaborate, high-quality in-house productions, while at the same time bowing to audience pressure and buying in individual popular US productions. With the disappearance of the term "children's television" from the programme schedule from 1960 onwards, those responsible also tried to make their programme more attractive to young people. Owen Reed (1910–1997) – who as head of BBC Children's Television had been largely responsible for the innovations since 1956 – stated in 1958: „So far, BBC Children's Television has drawn its strength mainly from the classics [...] But the really compelling factors are speed and space and adventure [...] Children are conditioned by cinema-going into an intoxicating measure of realism.“⁴¹ Subsequently, Reed relied on the „romantic adventure film“ as the future for the BBC's young programming and laid important foundations for the boom in folk horror from the late-1960s onwards, especially with historical productions such as *Rob Roy* (1961), albeit initially without great success with young audiences.

A crucial role in the reform of *Children's Television* was subsequently played by Stuart Hood (1915–2011), who was Controller of BBC programming since 1961. An intellectual socialist with a distaste for the station's southern English and London traditions, the Scotsman Hood and his deputy – the Welshman Donald Baverstock – not only began to radically question the educational and uncritical pretensions of BBC programming but also eliminated the separation between children's and adult television in the programme scheme, which also led to the dissolution of the *Children's Television* department in 1963.⁴² Youth programming thus fell under the responsibility of the *Family Department* and the *Drama Department*, which now produced revolutionary series such as *Dr. Who* (BBC, from 1964) for both adult and youth audiences. With Hood's reforms, the BBC won back a large part of the young audience and now in turn began to influence the ITV stations. Above all, the claim to develop „a sense of the world around us“, which Hugh Green – the Director General of the BBC demanded of his departments in 1964 – also illustrates as the socially critical aspect that was reflected in many productions of the time. The youth programme was supposed to „activate“ and „question“ things,⁴³ not merely reproduce existing hierarchies and power relations of the British middle class, as Stuart Hood had already criticised at the beginning of the 1960s.⁴⁴ For many filmmakers, these reforms – which also resulted in a productive competition between the BBC and ITV – meant a golden age of unprecedented creative opportunity. Looking back, BBC producer Anna Home remembers the period around 1970 as a „lush“ time when there was a great „freedom to experiment.“⁴⁵

British folk horror and especially adolescent folk horror thus becomes understandable as the result of these reforms. The astonishingly experimental narrative forms, the implicit social criticism, and barely veiled generational conflicts, as well as the participation of renowned literary figures and filmmakers

⁴⁰ Buckingham 1999, 21.

⁴¹ Cited in Buckingham 1999, 24f.

⁴² Buckingham 1999, 27–29.

⁴³ Buckingham 1999, 35.

⁴⁴ Buckingham 1999, 35.

⁴⁵ Cited in Buckingham 1999, 33.

are to be read against the background of these developments and the creative competition between the BBC and ITV for the tastes of the increasingly critical youth audience.

Fantasy and spirituality. Folk horror as escapism?

The reforms begun by Owen Reed and continued by Stuart Hood favoured a youth television that was characterised by „speed and space and adventure“⁴⁶ material from British history and mythology (e.g., Robin Hood, King Arthur, Rob Roy) and sophisticated series and film formats that were also interesting for an adult audience. In the 1960s, spy and crime formats were dominant under the influence of the James Bond films, while ITV shaped youth programming in England with its science fiction series. Series like *Fireball XL5* (1962–63), *Stingray* (1963–64), *Thunderbirds* (1965–66), *Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons* (1967–68) and *Joe 90* (1968–69) directly reflected the space enthusiasm of the 1960s with their technological hero stories.⁴⁷ With the turn of the 1970s, science fiction abruptly lost importance and folk horror and numerous other productions with supernatural and mystical elements began to dominate youth-oriented television in Britain. What are the reasons behind this unusual boom?

A clue can be found in *The Owl Service*. Like many other youth productions of the time, the ITV series is based on a popular fantasy novel whose author Alan Garner was one of the most well-known writers in the country towards the end of the 1960s. The use of a popular literary original promised to meet with success with a wider audience. Moreover, with their fantastic recourse to Anglo-Saxon and British myths, Alan Garner's novels were themselves part of a larger literary trend that had taken hold in the post-war period, especially in youth-oriented literature. With the publishing of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* in paperback in 1965, fantasy became one of the most important literary genres. The late-1960s became the founding era of the modern fantasy market and fundamentally shaped popular cultures. In addition to Tolkien's epic, the paperback editions of C.S. Lewis' *Narnia* cycle – published in 1959– exerted a considerable influence on authors of youth-oriented fantasy, including Joan Aiken and Ursula Le Guin. Leading publishing houses simultaneously capitalised on and fuelled the fantasy boom of the late-1960s with paperback editions of classic fantasy. For example, Ballantine Books published not only the paperback versions of Tolkien, but also new editions of the stories by Lord Dunsany or William Morris. Parallel to the discovery of Tolkien and Lewis by a broad audience, a market for more serious, adult-oriented fantasy also emerged, producing Michael Moorcock's *Elric of Melniboné* series – for example – but also numerous new editions of the pulp fantasy by Robert E. Howard (*Conan the Barbarian*) or Clark Ashton Smith.⁴⁸ Fantasy began to replace science fiction as the most popular genre among a wide audience in the second half of the 1960s.

Several British authors – like Tolkien and his reception of Anglo-Saxon myths – took a „special English path“ and combined the supernatural and the fantastic with recourse to the native mythological world. An early, influential example of this is T.H. White's retelling of the King Arthur story, which reached a wide young audience from 1958 as a complete edition under the title *The Once and Future King*. In 1966, Kevin Crossley-Holland published *The Green Children*, based on a 12th-century Suffolk saga. In 1968, John Gordon used the Cerne Abbas chalk giant in Dorset as inspiration for his *The Giant under the Snow*, and Ruth Manning-Sanders had already been familiarising a young audience with

⁴⁶ Cited in Buckingham 1999, 24f.

⁴⁷ McGown o. J. [a].

⁴⁸ Cf. James 2012, 70–74.

traditional material since 1962 with her retellings of British sagas in *A Book of Giants*.⁴⁹ However, the most outstanding contributions to this genuinely British fantasy were made by Susan Cooper in 1965 with *Over Sea, under Stone*, the prelude to her popular *The Dark Is Rising* series, which was influenced by Celtic, Arthurian and Norse mythology. On the other hand, Alan Garner was successful as a writer of books for young people in the mid-1950s, first with his fantasy novel *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*, which was influenced by a saga from Cheshire, the Celtic-inspired sequel *The Moon of Gomrath* and *Elidor* (1962), in which he combined Arthuriana and Anglo-Saxon mysticism with class and social criticism for the first time. Garner had also been encouraged to write his fantasy novels by the British publishing house Collins, as publishing director William Collins wanted to profit from the success of the Lord of the Rings trilogy in those years.⁵⁰

The fantasy boom of the 1960s was quickly reflected in the television program, where the supernatural and the fantastic were increasingly successful. Above all the special English direction – which combined fantasy with local history and Arthurian, Celtic, or Anglo-Saxon mythology – was met with the strongest interest by the BBC's youth departments, which were still trying to include educational and national elements, but also the creative program makers of the ITV stations. Alan Garner's *The Owl Service* thus marked the beginning of a boom in genuinely British folk horror that lasted throughout the 1970s.

The folk horror boom of the late-1960s and 1970s – but also the fantasy enthusiasm of the time – was based on other developments that particularly affected British popular culture from the mid-1960s onwards. Thus, the occult and supernatural themes of many folk horror productions of the time, their fascinated examination of witchcraft, Celtic and pre-Christian myths can also be understood as a response to an increased interest in spirituality in the pop culture of the time.⁵¹ From the 1950s onwards, Gerald Gardner (1884–1964) had established Wicca in England as a supposedly 'ancient' witchcraft religion suppressed by Christianity and published a successful book in 1954 with *Witchcraft Today*. This was followed in 1957 by the founding of the Museum of Magic and Witchcraft on the Isle of Man. Following Gardner, Alex Sanders (1926–1988) became the "King of Witches" in the 1960s and advanced to become a media personality who was successful in talk shows and maintained close contact with the popular pop bands of the time. Pop music served as a transmission belt for experimental spirituality in the younger generation: the Beatles placed the famous occultist Aleister Crowley on the cover of their *Sergeant Pepper* album, Led Zeppelin were influenced by both Crowley and Tolkien, while the Rolling Stones cooperated with Californian Satanists around Kenneth Anger.⁵² Alongside this trend towards subversive pre-Christian and anti-Christian spirituality, another boom had gripped British pop music in the 1960s, as bands like Fairport Convention, Steeleye Span and Pentangle began to combine traditional British music with rock music with enormous commercial success and thus reached a young audience of millions, not least via folk horror films like *The Wicker Man* (1973),⁵³ whose soundtrack was recorded by British folk-rock musicians. This pop-cultural interest in spirituality,⁵⁴ and subversive, anti-conservative values with a simultaneous interest in

⁴⁹ Cf. Levy/Mendlesohn 2016, 120f.

⁵⁰ Lake 2010, 315–320.

⁵¹ Cf. Hutton 2001, 283; Rodgers 2019, 137.

⁵² Cf. Trummer 2011.

⁵³ Cf. Sweers 2005.

⁵⁴ E. g. Winsworth 2014, 160–172.

British, pre-industrial traditions also formed the fertile breeding ground on which the conjuncture of folk horror could unfold in British youth television of the 1970s.

Résumé: A different England

At the beginning of the paper, the question was raised concerning the reasons for the astonishing boom of youth folk horror in British television in the 1970s. As it turned out, from 1969 onwards several larger social and broadcasting-political lines of development came together, resulting in a creative concoction that was unique in England worldwide at the time.

First, dynamic developments took place at the social level. A serious economic crisis met with the youth protest movements of the years around 1968. Social hierarchies and institutions, the British class system, the military, the educational system and not least the Christian churches as representatives of a conservative value system came under increasing pressure. For many of these conflicts, folk horror productions such as *Penda's Fen* or *The Owl Service* provided an effective resonance space by drawing the possibility of a different England, a more diverse national culture of memory. Second, a number of broadcasting policy developments flanked the increasing importance of the youth audience and current pop-cultural developments. This was reflected in higher quality standards and considerable creative freedom in both BBC and ITV productions from the late-1960s onwards. A young generation of left-progressive directors and authors used these freedoms for a very individual interpretation of the horror and mystery genre, which often took up socially critical myths and figures from national history. Third, the international boom in fantasy literature – which had been triggered by the paperback editions of Tolkien's *The Lord of The Rings* and the novels of C.S. Lewis, among others – favoured the genesis of adolescent folk horror on British television. Popular fantasy authors such as Alan Garner cooperated with the television stations and provided direct models for the folk horror productions of the time. Fourth, with its interest in pre-Christian beliefs, pagan traditions and anti-clerical spirituality, the popular culture of the *Swinging Sixties* formed the fertile breeding ground on which the numerous folk horror productions of the time flourished. The soundtrack was provided by the rock music of the time, in which recourse to traditional music was also a central source of inspiration, especially for a younger generation of directors and viewers.

Taken together, adolescent folk horror in British television of the 1960s and 1970s thus occupies a hybrid position. On the one hand, it represents a globally unique, national special path that resulted from the coincidence of the socio-cultural transformation processes described above and thus produced a genuinely 'British' form of youth entertainment television with emancipatory aspirations. On the other hand, British folk horror of the time also stands in the context of the international horror genre and, as a transgressive medium, addresses social taboo breaks and challenges established systems of norms. It is precisely this transgressive potential of folk horror that opens further perspectives on the emancipatory possibilities of the horror genre in general. As shown, subversive readings of the past form a central narrative element of the genre. By interpreting the past through a different lens, folk horror creates counter-memories and counter-heritage which shift the perspective toward marginalized and subaltern social groups. Especially regarding postcolonial memory cultures and indigenous cultural heritage, but also issues of class and rural poverty, it seems worthwhile to further consider the transgressive potentials of folk horror.

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Zusammenfassung

In den Jahren zwischen 1969 und 1979 kommt es im britischen Fernsehen zu einer erstaunlichen Konjunktur von *folk horror*-Produktionen, die sich gezielt an ein jugendliches Publikum richten. Zahlreiche Serien und Fernsehfilme prägten darin mit ihrer ungewöhnlich progressiven Inszenierung, ihrer experimentellen audiovisuellen Gestaltung und ihren komplexen, nicht selten politischen Narrativen nicht nur die Entwicklung des *folk horrors* entscheidend, sondern auch die britische Fernsehlandschaft der Zeit.

Am Beispiel der stilprägenden „unholy trinity“ des jugendlichen Folk Horror, den Serien *The Owl Service* (1969–70), *Children of the Stones* (1977) und dem Fernsehfilm *Penda's Fen* (1974) untersucht dieser Artikel den aussergewöhnlichen Boom jugendorientierten *folk horrors* im britischen Fernsehen der 1970er-Jahre. Er vertritt dabei zum einen die These, dass diese Konjunktur das Ergebnis eines Zusammentreffens von gesellschaftlichen, populärkulturellen und rundfunkpolitischen Entwicklungen war, wie es im Grossbritannien der Zeit einzigartig war. Zum anderen arbeitet der Artikel das transgressive Potential des *folk horrors* heraus. Mit seinen charakteristischen subversiven Lesarten nationalen Erbes und nationaler Geschichte etablierte der *folk horror* in diesen Jahren eine alternative Erinnerungskultur, die sich in ihrer Progressivität und Diversität als sehr attraktiv – nicht nur – für ein jugendliches Publikum erwies.

Abstract

In the years between 1969 and 1979, British television saw an astonishing boom in folk horror productions aimed specifically at a young audience. With their unusually progressive staging, experimental audiovisual design, and complex, political narratives, numerous series, and television films decisively shaped the development of folk horror and the British television landscape of the time.

Using the example of the style-defining „unholy trinity“ of youth-oriented folk horror, the series *The Owl Service* (1969-70), *Children of the Stones* (1977), and the television film *Penda's Fen* (1974), this article examines the extraordinary boom in youth-oriented folk horror in 1970s Britain. It argues that this boom was the result of a confluence of social, popular cultural, and broadcasting policy developments unique to Britain at the time. On the other hand, the article elaborates the transgressive potential of folk horror. With its genre-characteristic subversive readings of national heritage and history, folk horror established an alternative culture of memory in these years, which in its progressiveness and diversity proved very attractive – not only – to a young audience.