



“There’s some
weird s***
going on in the
woods”

Landscape, Cults, and Folklore in
the Films of Andy Mitton and
Chad Crawford Kinkle

By

Paul A J Lewis



Structure

- What is “Folk Horror”?
- Folk Horror and Regional Horror
- The Cultist’s Point-of-View: Chad Crawford Kinkle’s *Jug Face* and *Dementer*
- Entering the Folkloric Zone: Andy Mitton’s *YellowBrickRoad* and *The Witch in the Window*

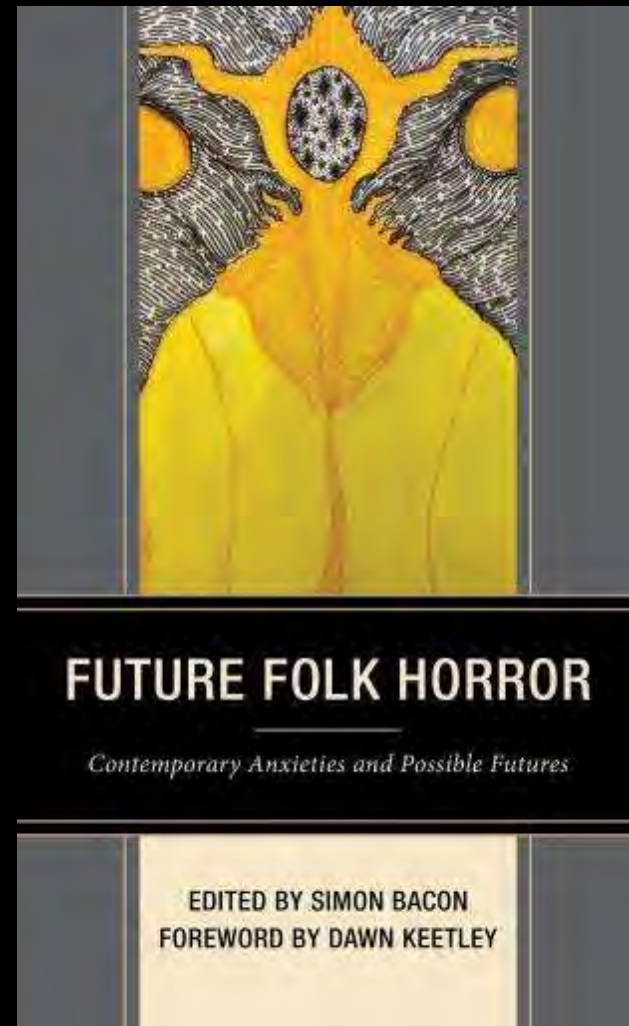
A book chapter, written for the volume

Future Folk Horror: Contemporary Anxieties and Possible Futures (ed. Simon Bacon)

Part of Lexington Books' Horror Studies series

To be published on 15th July 2023

<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781666921243/Future-Folk-Horror-Contemporary-Anxieties-and-Possible-Futures>



What is Folk Horror?

- Term first used by film director Piers Haggard in a 2003 Fangoria interview with M J Simpson, in reference to Haggard's 1972 film *Blood on Satan's Claw*.
- Popularised by the 2010 BBC documentary *A History of Horror* (presented by Mark Gatiss).
- Since then, used retrospectively to denote a specific group of British horror films of the late-1960s/early-1970s:
- Michael Reeves' *Matthew Hopkins: Witchfinder General* (1968)
- *Blood on Satan's Claw* (aka *Satan's Skin*)
- Robin Hardy's *The Wicker Man* (1973)





Defining Traits

- Exploration of isolation within a rural landscape.
- Juxtaposition of Belief with its Other (either Paganistic / cultist beliefs or folklore).
- Definably British.
- However, recently the label has been expanded and used in reference to films from other countries and different eras, and films are being made with the folk horror label in mind (eg, Robert Eggers' US horror film *The Witch*, 2016; Ari Aster's US film *Midsommar*, 2019).
- Comparison could be drawn between 1940s *film noir* (a term coined by French critics 20 years later) and the *neo-noir* films of the 1980s and 1990s – the latter offering an overt, knowing pastiche of what are seen as the traits of *film noir*.



The “Folk Horror Chain”

Adam Scovell: *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange* (2017)

The Folk Horror Chain includes:

- the **landscape**, and its “effects on the social and moral identity of its inhabitants”
- **isolation**, engendered by the landscape, and experienced by “just a handful of individuals or a small scale community”
- **skewed belief systems/morality**, facilitated by the isolation of the community; and
- a **happening/summoning**, in which “such beliefs [...] will manifest through the most violent and supernatural of methods.”

Regional Horror

A US trend in horror films from different states of the US, made by filmmakers working outside Hollywood.

Peak period of regional horror filmmaking was between 1960 and 1990.

During this period, particularly during the early years of home video, it was relatively easy for independent filmmakers to find distribution for their films.

Regional horror films often explore local folklore and traditions: for example, the Cropsey legend (in *The Burning*, 1981), the Jersey Devil (*The Last Broadcast*, 1998), Wendigo (*Ghostkeeper*, 1981), or Bigfoot/Sasquatch (*Night of the Demon*, 1980).

Part of my thesis in the book chapter revolves around overlapping of British folk horror and US regional horror.



Chad Crawford Kinkle and Andy Mitton

Chapter is anchored by interviews with both filmmakers.

Kinkle has made two feature films:

- *Jug Face* (aka *The Pit*, 2013)
- *Dementer* (2019)

(both of these feature input from regional horror stalwart
Larry Fessenden)

Andy Mitton has made five feature films:

- *YellowBrickRoad* (co-directed with Jesse Holland, 2010)
- *We Go On* (2016)
- *The Witch in the Window* (2019)
- *The Harbinger* (2022)



On folk horror and regional horror...

Kinkle: "Regional horror is about people from a specific place in time. That's the first step into folk horror. For me, I've always been fascinated with locations first because I think they shape the people who live there."

Regionality of both filmmakers:

- Kinkle's films made in Tennessee
- Mitton's films filmed in New England

Both filmmakers said, separately in interviews with me, that they were very much influenced by Robin Hardy's *The Wicker Man*.



A movie poster for the film 'Yellowbrick Road'. The title 'YELLOWBRICKROAD' is written in large, stylized, yellow and white letters at the top. Below the title, a young boy is shown in a dark, wooded area, looking up with a wide-eyed, screaming expression. In the background, a figure is visible on a path. At the bottom right, there is a road sign that reads 'THIS ROAD HAS NO FAIRY TALE ENDING'.

Understanding of Folk Horror

Kinkle: “I’m not sure if I even knew the term “folk horror.” I was clearly aware of *The Wicker Man* and other films that felt like it [...] But, I do take a certain amount of pride that *Jug Face* is considered folk horror [...] To me folk horror are stories about groups of people who reject the notion of the modern, and [...] fall back on something old and generally supernatural to guide them. In those terms, both *Jug Face* and *Dementer* fall under the umbrella of folk horror.”

Mitton: “I feel like the term has been floating around in my head to some degree since I’ve been aware of horror [...] It makes me think of *The Wicker Man* (1973) first and foremost [and] stories that stem from the warping of cultural and religious practices. I think about the woods and rural spaces, and the feeling of a protagonist often new to a foreign set of rules, and having to learn it along with us, often on a track that moves from fascination to unravelling horror.”

The Cultist's Point-of-View: Chad Crawford Kinkle

Kinkle's films *Jug Face* and *Dementer* both focus on isolated cults.

Jug Face focuses on a rural cult in Tennessee which practices human sacrifice (to an entity in "The Pit"), the victims of which are selected by a local potter who makes "Face Jugs" in the likeness of the intended sacrifice.

Kinkle was influenced by Face Jugs, which are a very real phenomenon in Tennessee and a few other rural states.

Dementer's narrative examines a woman who has fled a cult (led by Larry Fessenden) and taken a role as a care-worker, but is unaware that she has essentially been chosen as a "sleeper" agent who selects victims for the cult's rites of sacrifice.



Jug Face trailer


THE FOLLOWING PREVIEW HAS BEEN APPROVED FOR
APPROPRIATE AUDIENCES
BY THE MOTION PICTURE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA, INC.

THE FILM ADVERTISED HAS BEEN RATED



www.filmratings.com

www.mpa.org



Clear sense of the influence of *The Wicker Man* on both films.

Examination of the Folk Horror Chain:

- Landscape
- Isolation
- “Skewed” beliefs (the beliefs of the cultists)
- A “happening” (the sacrificial rites)

Kinkle presents these “skewed beliefs” from within, focalizing his narratives through members of the cults rather than outsiders (as per *The Wicker Man*, for example).

We see “outsiders” through the cultists’ eyes (eg, *Jug Face*’s store owner, who tells his daughter “You can’t get in the middle of these people. There’s some weird shit going on in the woods there, and we don’t want any part of it.”

The films refuse to deny the beliefs of their protagonists.

Kinkle: “Ambiguity is around us in everyday life and so I tend to find those types of stories interesting [...] It’s not surprising that all of my films handle the supernatural in similar ways.”

Kinkle’s suggestion is that the rural landscape and isolation facilitate the growth of “skewed beliefs”: “This goes back to the setting or environment that the story takes place in. It is for me, the environment that enforces the rules that the people find themselves under.”





Why present these narratives from the cultists' point-of-view?

Howard David Ingham: "the brilliant thing about *Jug Face* [...] is that it encourages you to identify with people who are condemned to live in a world with small horizons, and [...] it has something much deeper and trenchantly political to say about how communities of good people who believe evil things can choke the horizons out of their children."

Kinkle: "It's about perspective. An outsider's prospective is always going to be limited and judgmental within the story and they will have to rely on being told by other characters who are in the know to understand things. To me, it's far more interesting to be a 'fly on the wall' as an audience member. But this makes the audience do more mental work throughout the film to sort out the logic."

Entering the Folkloric Zone: Andy Mitton

Mitton's films examine folkloric trends in isolated setting.

YellowBrickRoad focuses on a group of student documentary filmmakers who decide to make a short film about a town in which the inhabitants mysteriously wandered into the forest during the 1930s.

The Witch in the Window focuses on Simon, a man who is renovating a house in rural New Hampshire with his young son. Local folklore suggests the house is haunted by a "witch," Lydia.




The Witch in the Window trailer



Again, there is adherence to the Folk Horror Chain.

Examination of the Folk Horror Chain:

- Landscape
- Isolation
- “Skewed” beliefs (folklore)
- A “happening” (the appearance of Lydia)



In October of 1994
three student filmmakers disappeared
in the woods near Burkittsville, Maryland
while shooting a documentary...

A year later their footage was found.

THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT

ARTISAN ENTERTAINMENT presents a HAVAN FILMS production a film by EDUARDO SANCHEZ & DANIEL MYRICK

HEATHER DONAHUE MICHAEL WILLIAMS JOSHUA LEONARD "THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT"

PRODUCTION DESIGNER BEN ROCK ART DIRECTOR RICARDO R. MORENO DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY NEAL FRIEDRICHSON MUSIC BY ANTONIO OJEDA EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS BY BOB FICK AND HF
CO-PRODUCED BY MICHAEL MONELLO PRODUCED BY GREGG HALL & ROBIN CORNIE WRITTEN, DIRECTED AND EDITED BY DANIEL MYRICK & EDUARDO SANCHEZ

"The Blair Witch Project" and "Blair Witch" are the registered trademarks and service marks of Havan Films, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Digital Cinema. © 1999 The Blair Witch Project, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Printed in USA. Home Video Distribution by: MCA Home Video.

www.artisaneent.com | www.blairwitch.com



The use of the term “folkloric zone” was originally employed by Douglas Cowan when writing about *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) to denote a (usually rural) space that may be penetrated by “travelers lost on a road in the dark [...] or students who seek out the source of folk tales and folk warnings.”

The films focus on outsiders, representatives of secular, urban society, who unwittingly find themselves lost within the “folkloric zone” (the students in *YellowBrickRoad*; and Simon and his 12 year old son Finn in *The Witch in the Window*).

The rural space is juxtaposed with the urban environment, particularly in *The Witch in the Window*. At one point, Simon learns of a death video Finn has seen on the Internet whilst living with his mother in the city. “Look, Finn. The world’s kind of a sick place, I guess,” is the only advice Simon can muster for his son.



Mitton: “Haunted house movies are in my bones.”

However, with *The Witch in the Window* Mitton deliberately wanted to make a film that was “purposefully shape[d] in the *opposite direction*” of pictures “of *The Conjuring* sensibility” that “had programmed the mainstream to expect certain things visually, and sonically. Cold, haunting sets. Night scares. Sudden jumps in an effective—but over time, predictable—rhythm.”

Mitton spent time with *Witch*’s cinematographer, Justin Kane, in “turning those expectations on their heads with *Witch*. We wanted a movie that was foundationally warm instead of cool—so the dread would feel more invasive and wrong when it arrived. And our scares would be in daylight, and would play the off-rhythm to what we’ve been programmed to expect.”

Reflecting on *The Witch in the Window*, Mitton said that

“the only thing I really had in mind was to make a haunted house movie that explored my fears of parenting in the face of the unknowable and unstoppable bad forces of the world. But in hindsight, it’s easy to see how it fits into the [folk horror] tradition. The folklore is there, certainly the rural environment, the locals who know more than our heroes, the slowly unspooling dread.”

Mitton:

“[W]hat’s in common between the two films more than anything [...] is how nature plays a role. Even in the screenplay for [*Witch*], Louis’ story of how the Lydia legend came to be was always set as voiceover against nature, and to natural sunlight moving through the empty rooms of the old house. Just like in *YellowBrickRoad*, how we weave the lore with the trees swaying, the strange music. To be removed visually from these stories within stories, and instead listen to them as we look at nature, with no human beings in the frame - for me it helps to feel what’s underpinning these stories: something older than us, bigger than us, something eternal and (perhaps mercifully) just out of reach.”



Ambiguity

Both Kinkle and Mitton value ambiguity.

Kinkle: "Ambiguity is around us in everyday life and so I tend to find those types of stories interesting [...] It's not surprising that all of my films handle the supernatural in similar ways."

Mitton: I like ambiguous evil in horror movies. I want clues about the humanity that may or may not be within them, I want teases and enough detail to make a story rich [...] but I also want things veiled and mysterious, the way the scariest things feel to me in life. I know there are those who wish there was more about Lydia in the story, more blanks filled in—but for me what was important is that we know just enough about her to satisfy the arcs of my main characters, and the completion of the themes I was exploring. The rest should be that beautiful gray area."

Conclusion

“Folk Horror” originally applied to a very specific group of British films (of a very specific period).

However, its concerns extend beyond this – particularly the focus on the rural space and isolation, something that Mitton is particularly interested in.

“Urban spaces will always be defined by humanity. Almost everything in sight is made by man. Everything plays by the rules of man [...] But when we leave the buildings and lights and sounds of people for the wide open spaces, those things are taken over by the natural world—animals we don’t feed and trees we didn’t plant and *true* darkness—and we lose our footing. Our rules don’t matter so much. And there might be whole other sets of rules we couldn’t even imagine. Ones which aren’t built aren’t our own survival - and might possibly be *opposed* to it.”