**Would the Stones like Fries with That?**

**Examining the Tension Between Modernity and Folk Horror in *Children of the Stones***

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Folk horror and modernity can be seen as two sides to the same coin. Often presented as polar opposites, they are integral to each other. Folk horror is a particular sub-genre of horror, which combines horror themes with folkloric elements to bring a horror which is rooted in place and people, in other words, a horror which comes from folk.

The folk, who populate folk horror, are usually composed of those from isolated rural communities, who are presented as other, in regards to modern city life.[[1]](#endnote-1) The tension this creates, when the folk community is “invaded” by modern ideas, represented by outsiders, often leads to horror. As, the folk horror community, ‘are unmodern, superstitious and, above all, capable of enacting extreme violence in order to conserve the rural idyll.’[[2]](#endnote-2) The violence and horror of folk horror does not come from extra-terrestrials, ancient evils, or demonic monsters. Although the rural community may be in service to a real, or imagined, others. It comes from somewhere much closer to home; real people, protecting their way of life, in the face of what they see as foreign invasion by the agents of modernity.

Modernity can be understood as encompassing, among other things, the enlightenment tenants of reason, and science. Which throw off the superstitions that have coloured much of pre-modern life. It is anthropocentric, believing in the capability of reason to explain the world.[[3]](#endnote-3) Resulting in the systems we live by today, which influence our modern world. It can be detrimental, as it is often a single homogenous bulldozer, which will plough over anything that stands in the way of progress. Think HS2 cutting through ancient landscapes for quicker commutes, to serve the modern needs of businesses.

Folk horror communities, because they are often spatially isolated from the modern world are contrasted with modernising forces. Modernity translates as mastery over nature.[[4]](#endnote-4) This can cause tension with the folk communities, which have often kept to the ‘old ways.’[[5]](#endnote-5) This can involve a closer pastural life, which is more in communion with nature than modern city life. When this perceived threat from modernity looms, the community often rallies together to expel it, leading to dire and horrifying consequences for the invaders.

The clash between the modern and the old is a staple of folk horror, and the horror it creates seems to intensify with time. As the old ways get further and further away from the modern world of iPhones and TikTok, the spatial gap and culture clash becomes more acute. *Children of the Stones* (UK, Simon Barnard, 2020)[[6]](#endnote-6), a radio remake of the original 1977 series, exemplifies the tension between new and old. The updated time it takes place in, 2020, adds to this discourse and the horror which ensues.

For those not familiar with the story it follows Mia, Mathew in the original, and her father Adam Brake, as they move to the village of Milbury; so Adam can take a job trying to examine and analyse the famous Milbury stones, an ancient stone circle which encloses the village.

In the remake, part of this story is told through Mia’s podcast, ‘proto-science’, in which she investigates the weirder phenomenon in the world, think Fortean Times. While recording this she meets several of the village children, who have all recently moved to town. They comment on the weird behaviour of the rest of the village; the repeated phrase ‘happy days’ or universal praise of the school as, ‘such a good school’.

At a local festival, in honour of the stones, Mia is chosen as a mock sacrifice. While undergoing this she recognises the voice of the masked person playing the role of priest, Ralf Hendrick, as she listens to his podcast. It transpires that Ralf is the one who has secretly employed her father to investigate the stones, after they had a heated debate on television over Ralf’s claims to have made contact with extra terrestrial life. This culminates in the villagers being brainwashed, through Ralf’s use of ‘the music of the spheres’ amplified by small bits of the stones enclosed in straw dolls.

He then plans on using the music to brainwash the world, into being “happy”. By performing a ritual which coincides with a solar event, an eye opening, or solar supernova, witnessed by the villagers hundreds of years in the past. Mia, using her gifts to go inside the minds of other people, or objects, manages to free her father and foil Ralf’s plans. The village and all its inhabitants, except Mia and her father, disappear.

The modern within folk horror often appears in the form of the “invader” the outsider who moves to or becomes aware of the folk horror community, and sits at odds with its more archaic morals.[[7]](#endnote-7) In *Children of the Stones* this modernity finds a home within Mia’s dad, Dr Adam Brake. As a Doctor of science Adam represents the modern scientific method and rational world view which is integral to modernity. In the series he is investigating the stones, something old and ancient, which resist his scientific categorization, in effect resisting modernity. The stones are hard to place within a taxonomy, which puts them as anthesis to modernity, which views everything in the world as definable and knowable. Their unknowable nature is a blot on the planning sheet of modernity.

Adam’s scientific rational world view brings him into conflict with Hendrick, and his daughter Mia. In folk horror, power and knowledge is in the earth and blood, passed down, opposed to recorded and written in books.[[8]](#endnote-8) The knowledge of what the stones ‘want’ comes through Hendrick and Mia’s experience with them, and is easily dismissed by Adam as merely anecdotal. Not holding up to the rigorous science of double-blind experimentation and modernity, he dismisses it as untrue. Ironically, the music of the stones, or music of the spheres, is described by Hendrick as little more than maths, the pure language of science, which he is able to tap into through his more open-minded view of the world, which embraces old knowledge, and marries it with his scientific background.

Milbury, is shown as an isolated community. Mia describes it as if the 21st century never happened. Noting the lack of vegetarian or gluten free options in the local eateries. Although this is a humorous example, poking fun at the dietary trends of metropolitan society, it shows the isolated nature of the community. James Thurgill notes of folk horror, ‘its usage of folk communities as oppositional to modernity, the mainstream and the middle classes.’[[9]](#endnote-9) Milbury, not embracing dietary trends, often associated with modern, and perhaps more well off, middle class or gentrified areas, shows this in a way that embraces the changing modern landscapes of cities, and current cultural trends. In other words, it presents a resistance to a modern, which is very modern. That it hasn’t been influenced by these trends, shows how Milbury has, even in the age of the internet and phones either not learnt of, or more likely resisted, this.

Anyone who has ventured from the metropolis to more rural villages will perhaps have been similarly shocked by the lack of things we take for granted in the cites; our specific dietary requirements being taken care of, or a decent expresso. There is perhaps a slight jump to make from not being able to order a proper coffee, and ritual blood sacrifice, luckily I’ve so far never found a causal link between the two. Although, due to Covid, I have not ventured out into the countryside for a while, and who knows what will lurk in the post pandemic rural landscape.

The landscape shapes its inhabitants, which is true of folk horror and *Children of the Stones*. In folk horror the rural landscape has its own influence on the folk that call it home, and influences the narrative’s horror.[[10]](#endnote-10) In contrast, a tenant of modernity is humanities shaping of and influence over the environment.[[11]](#endnote-11) The idea of being shaped and changed by the environment, even though arguably cities and any environment has some influence on its inhabitants, doesn’t sit easy with modern sensibilities. Modernity asserts that humanity is master over all it surveys and to be confronted by communities which don’t uphold this tenant, and in fact undermine and reverse it, has a certain kind of ironic horror, especially when examined in the context of climate change.

Milbury’s landscape has a huge influence on the villagers, as the stones surround the village. In this way they influence the villagers, through Hendrick’s music, by controlling them; literally shaping and changing their minds, and actions. The village of Milbury is, in a way, in thrall to an ancient part of the landscape. The stones are described as circling the village, and influencing technology, audio recorders and phone signals. In a way they seem to cut off Milbury from the modern world, and influence technology, a very modern invention, negatively.

The stones inside the straw dolls are described by Hendrick as Wifi boosters, another irony, modern terminology is still leaking into the rural folk community that is Milbury. In other parts of the story the stones seem to act in direct opposition to modern technology. Whenever Mia approaches with her audio recorder we begin to hear static and interference. The Wifi signal in Milbury is described as patchy, and the phone signal also suffers. In this way the stones act as a barrier between the village and the modern, represented here by technology.

As an artifact the stones sit in opposition to modernity, as a reminder of an old and bloody past of pagan sacrifices. The stones are described as hungry and demanding sacrifices to be fed. They are continuing to have this influence on the current inhabitants and compel them to undertake ritual sacrifice to feed them, this is in contrast to modern morals, and tenants of enlightenment. It is a throwback to another age, their simple existence and influence runs in stark contrast to modernity.

Sacrificial exchange, blood for better crops, is a tenant of folk horror.[[12]](#endnote-12) As noted above, it is reminiscent of an older, superstitious time, which modernity had thought dead and buried, but which it is reminded of through the folk horror community. It is metaphorical of the sacrifices older rural communities had to make, giving their blood and body in order to tend the soil. Something which, to an extent, modern agricultural practices have banished, through tractors and pesticides.

The philosophy of folk horror is that, through first the spread of Christianity, then industrialization, and the forming of the modern world we live in, we have lost something along the way.[[13]](#endnote-13) It began with the silencing of the “old ways”, our pagan roots, and ended with the spread of corporations.

Folk horror tells us something about our anxieties towards modernity and modern technology. If modernity is a normative system, which aims to make everything the same.[[14]](#endnote-14) Something we see more and more with large corporations and standardised new build properties. Folk horror reminds us, perhaps in an unpleasant way, of a counterculture to this. Which is something that appeals to us, in the same way that local coffee shops appeal in the world of Starbucks, or green grocers do when confronted with Tesco, or Aldi.

Folk horror connects us with a romantic, preindustrial, or even pre-Christian idea of the past.[[15]](#endnote-15) This is not without a warning, and the literal sacrifices, in *Children of the Stones* and other folk horror classics, like *The Wicker Man* (UK, Robin Hardy, 1973), are metaphorical of the actual sacrifices a rural pastoral life can bring. For the most part we no longer toil from dawn till dusk in the fields, swapping this for the similarly gruelling, 9-5, with the benefits of sick and holiday pay, as well as weekends off, something our ancestors would not have enjoyed. There is always a darker side to the pastural life of the folk horror community, one of blood and sacrifice, in the end it’s not all just, ‘Happy Days’.

1. Thurgill, James *Fear of the Folk: On* topophobia *and the Horror of Rural Landscapes*, P 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Thurgill, *Fear of the Folk,* P 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Wagner, Peter, *Modernity*, 2012,P 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Anderson, Gail-Nina, ‘The Old Ways’ in *Fortean Times* *July 2019,* P 36. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Barnard, Simon, *Children of the Stones,* 2020. (Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p08tk8ff>). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Anderson, ‘The Old Ways’, P 36. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Thurgill, *Fear of the Folk*, P 42 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Thurgill, *Fear of the Folk*, P 43. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Wagner, *Modernity*, P 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Thurgill, *Fear of the Folk*, P 43. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Anderson, ‘The Old Ways’, P 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Wagner, *Modernity,* P 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Anderson, ‘The Old Ways’, P 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)