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## Hinterlands and SPAs: Folk Horror and Neoliberal Desolation

Robert Edgar

### Abstract

Through analyses of contemporary literature and cinema this chapter argues for a specific form of landscape that is neither rural nor urban but forms a category in its own right - hinterlands. These are post-industrial landscapes where the forces of capital have shaped them and attracted a workforce who have then put down roots only for finance to be withdrawn. This leads to a cycle of perpetual decay. Following the four aspects of the Folk Horror chain the chapter identifies how these post-industrial landscapes are 'sparsely populated area' where economic isolation leads to a skewed belief system. However unlike traditional Folk Horror texts summoning never happens as the rituals that are followed are everyday drudgery.

### Chapter

Folk Horror's preoccupation with rural landscapes is well documented (Scovell, *Folk Horror: Hours Dark and Days Bewitched* 2017, 79-120) and the centrality of a rural landscape evident in foundational Folk Horror texts such as *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (Haggard 1971) through to second wave examples such as *A Field in England* (Wheatley, *A Field in England* 2013). In much Folk Horror the depiction of a rural landscapes and urban landscapes are presented as a binarism. This separation, with associated notions of 'civilised' and 'primitive', present a dialectic, itself useful in narrative fiction where the opposition creates conflict (at the core of drama) and through this a form of closure, even if not always complete

resolution. This can be seen in narratives which (interestingly in common with Westerns), see a stranger come in from out of town, usually a representative of urban ‘enlightened’ society. This character type runs through proto Folk Horror texts for example in the character of Parkins in M.R. James’ classic ‘Oh Whistle and I’ll Come to You My Lad’ (James, Oh Whistle and I’ll Come to You, My Lad 2007) to modern examples such as Sam in *The Third Day* (Munden, Barrett and Lowthorpe 2020). Unlike the Western these characters are in some way fated and even tacitly responsible for their fate; with Sergeant Howie in *The Wicker Man* (Hardy 1973) being perhaps the clearest example of this. There is a lure in the rural, a place where the rules are different and the ‘urbanite’ assimilates to the ‘skewed’ belief system that pervades or they are sacrificed, in some form or another. To get to the rural there has to be a movement from one topography to the next, seemingly a border to be crossed. Of course work has been done on the Urban Wyrd as a form closely related to Folk Horror and which adopts many of its core tropes but takes them into the built environment:

*The Urban Wyrd* is a form that taps into the undercurrent of the city ... it can find new narratives hidden below the top-layer; of dark skulduggery and strangeness beyond the reasonable confines of what we consider part of city life (Scovell, Folk Horror: Hours Dark and Days Bewitched 2017).

Key in Scovell’s definition is the hidden nature of the of the ‘strangeness’, that there are parts of the urban environment which are hidden just below the surface waiting to be uncovered, in a manner that might well suit one of M.R. James’ characters. There is a well-established separation between these two physical and conceptual landscapes.

This chapter asserts that the land that exists between the urban and the rural and which might all too readily be described as a border can, in some quasi-Folk Horror texts, serve as a third space: the hinterlands. If the urban and the rural are opposites then that which exists on the

edge of the city is a space that might all too easily be described as ‘liminal’, a space where the distinction between the two blurs. In a number of Folk Horror narratives there is a ‘passage’ of some sort; the journey over the water in *The Wicker Man* or *Enys Men*, or the causeway in *The Third Day* or in *The Lambs of God* (Walker 2019). This is a useful formal position given that the border provides a moment of transition from one state to another; a form of portal oft as if in an episode of *Sapphire and Steel* (Hammond 1979-1982). Via the analysis of films by Shane Meadows and Ben Wheatley and examples of contemporary Northern writing, most particularly the work of lyricist, musician and writer Jason Williamson’s collection of short fiction, *Happy Days*. This chapter will argue for and exemplify some of the manifestations of the Folk Horror chain in this particular form of fiction.

Whilst this binary separation might work in many examples, this third topographical category exists where the narrative function of the ‘portal’ as transition and journey is not afforded in such a clear manner. The subsuming of hinterlands under a conception of the rural is perhaps understandable as on a surface level they encompass aspects of the aesthetic of the conventionally rural *and* urban but where on closer scrutiny their features are subtly distinct. These hinterlands are isolated not particularly or purely because of their geography, they are often depicted alongside a rural space, but because of the economic circumstances they have been left in. These are the spaces where industry has been, a form of civilisation has risen and then, as economic fortunes have changed, they have been left to rot. If Sergeant Howie was right and the crops will fail the future of Summerisle is to be recreated as hinterlands; where sacrifices are being made each year, but the old gods are not listening.

## Hinterlands and SPAs

It would be almost difficult to deal with any discussion of topography without a discussion of Foucault's notion of Heterotopia. (Foucault 1997) Given that, in Foucault's terms, a Heterotopia refers to physical spaces that sit outside of the social norm, hinterlands perhaps form something of an anomaly. The hinterlands, as defined in this chapter, do not sit outside dominant culture, but nor are they in it. They are not 'other' spaces, as with his examples of gardens, prisons or cemeteries, they are a direct result of dominant culture as a consequent of specific political decisions. They are then spaces dictated by a set of socio-economic circumstances expressed in fictional representational forms but nonetheless these depictions are of real spaces and as such they are not liminal. These are then simultaneously sites of transition and sites of permanence where the past is evident but, in hauntological terms, the future has collapsed and they are stuck in a situation of perpetual decay;

Landscapes do not merely exist; rather they are shaped and defined by social processes. Where construction, industry and development define the flux and velocity of urban landscapes, we might look to agriculture, conservation and land management as the social processes that produce rurality. It is human intervention that forms and shapes the texture(s) of the land around us. (Thurgill 2020)

Thurgill's analysis is of the separate and polarised urban and rural. The distinction in hinterlands is in the 'construction, industry and development' have ceased and therefore there is no flux or velocity. Mark Jenkins' *Enys Men* (Jenkin 2023) depicts an isolated landscape, and a feature so central to Folk Horror cinema looms large; indeed there are repeated long shots of the isolated island covered in grass and surrounded by dangerous cliff edges. The sense that civilisation is over on this island would be to perpetuate a binarism with the world

beyond the sea with at best the island being a temporal or dimensional border. Rather this is a landscape which has already shaped by commerce and where the spectral remnants of this lurk underground; in the case of *Enys Men* this is the presence of tin miners. Whilst the focus of this chapter is predominantly British fiction it is interesting to note that these tropes exist elsewhere in the work and mining has a developing place in Folk Horror, and can be seen perhaps most prevalently in Appalachian Folk Horror as can be seen in the series podcast *Old Gods of Appalachia*, where the spirits of the land have been ‘awakened’ by digging into the mountains (Old Gods of Appalachia n.d.) The haunting of the land by an industry no longer in use or which has been economically and environmentally discredited gives its spectral population a further function:

Haunting disrupts the nature/culture debate that is never far away from discussions around landscape. Haunting breaks down binary distinctions: visible/invisible, present/absent, alive/dead, here/there. Haunting transgresses boundaries as well as binaries. What is the natural and the supernatural? Where does one begin and the other end? (Heholt and Downing 2016, 13)

On one hand the Hinterlands delineate the edge of the urban area, the point where the city and the countryside blur; the space where the Urban Wyrld morphs into the landscapes of Folk Horror. In contemporary Folk Horror these hinterlands, the former industrial towns and villages which at once corrupted the land; they are the sites of former industrial growth that have been left to rot.

Our house was laid out like any bungalow or park home on the outskirts of any smallish city where old people and poor families live. Daddy was no architect but he could follow a grey and white schematic rustled from the local council offices.  
(Mozley 2017, 8)

These are spaces which were intended to be populous, used for business and leisure and instead have fallen fallow as austerity bites. With the removal of people the spaces have taken on a dark character, as Mark Fisher notes the eerie is, ‘constituted by a failure of absence or by a failure of presence.’ (Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* 2017, 61)

A common theme is the detritus of industry and once prosperous habitation, a bleakness that makes the horror even more horrific. In geographical terms these hinterlands are synonymous with sparsely populated areas (SPAs), furthering the important sense of isolation:

... the hinterlands have struggled more with population loss, slow economic growth, and declining social services, thus failing to capitalise on the opportunities presented by ‘boom and bust’ cycles common in SPAs. (Carson, Carson and Argent 2022, 104-105)

The Hinterlands are then not ‘Dark Suburbia’, with the dangerous safety and security of middle class conformity as in *The Stepford Wives* (Forbes 1975) or *Blue Velvet* (Lynch 1986). They are not the crumbling brutalist effigies of inner city life so familiar to subgenres such as ‘Hoodie Horror’ in texts such as *Eden Lake* (Watkins 2008). These examples feature a population who are present, albeit sometimes hidden in terror. The origins of the hinterlands develop in a post-industrial age, but their foundations can be seen in the work of writers and film makers in the late 1960s and 1970s. These are spaces marked by industrial estates and by the arterial roads that surround cities. These are the spaces of J.G. Ballard’s *Concrete Island* (Ballard, *Concrete Island* 1974). This book, (along with *Highrise* (Ballard, *Highrise* 1975) and, to an extent, *Crash* (1973)) can be seen not just examples of magic realism or as progenitors of some speculative dystopia but also as early projections of the fate that awaited

the industrial zones that would, when there was an inevitable industrial breakdown, become semi-abandoned;

... SPAs cannot simply be considered as extreme cases of rurality, located at the outer edge of a rural hinterland that is functionally, socially and culturally connected to an urban core. Essentially, SPAs are located 'beyond the periphery' ... where functional networks and conventional core-periphery interdependencies with distant urban centres either do not exist or are inherently fragile. Unlike in rural-agricultural areas, where settlements have historically spread out from urban centres to the hinterland in a continuous and contiguous way ... [these] have more commonly evolved as a result of opportunistic land use, leading to special-purpose settlements built around resource or 'staples' extraction (e.g. mining, forestry, pastoralism, energy) ... (Carson, Carson and Argent 2022, 105)

It is perhaps no accident that leading Folk Horror director Ben Wheatley directed the first and only adaptation of JG Ballard's *Highrise*. Ballard didn't write about 'hinterlands' as they appear in post-millennium Folk Horror texts but perhaps his speculative fiction predicted their arrival. *Highrise* and *The Concrete Island* both discuss the breakdown of what was, in the 1970s, a new phenomenon in living. (This latter text is the middle volume in what Beaumont and Martin refer to as in his 'concrete and steel' trilogy (Beaumont and Martin 2016, 3) and this triumvirate of texts is significant in its speculation on what will happen to society through forms of brutalist urban planning, predating and predicting the emergence of these hinterlands. In this period there is speculation about what the future will bring, in hinterland horror the future has come and gone.

## Not much to do for recreation

Hinterlands are created as anonymous, impersonal, developed primarily for business and where ‘villages’ have sprung up around that industry; whether it is a mine head at the centre of a northern pit village or the new build around a major supermarket with associated multi-screen cinema and other facilitators of leisure; the blinking light of the fast food restaurant an oasis in an otherwise threatening landscape. A common feature is the ‘industrial estate’.

Wheatley chose to end his adaptation of *Highrise* with a 1976 speech from Margaret Thatcher when she had recently become leader of the opposition in the UK Parliament and was heading towards an inevitable political victory in 1979 and subsequently, heralding a form of neoliberalism which would go on to contribute to the forms of societal and social collapse that is being discussed here:

A free enterprise system is a necessary but not a sufficient condition. There is only one economic system in the world, and that is capitalism. The difference lies in whether the capital is in the hands of the State or whether the greater part of it is in the hands of people outside of State control. Where there is State capitalism there will never be political freedom. (Thatcher n.d.)

In Wheatley’s adaptation of *Highrise* this is followed with song ‘Industrial Estate’ by The Fall, from their first album, *Live at the Witch Trials* (The Fall 1978), thus connecting the political rhetoric back to a real physical space and manifestation of economic growth.

Although even a cursory reading of the lyrics will confirm that Wheatley’s use of the track is deeply satirical. (The Fall’s Mark E. Smith was himself no stranger to dabbling in what would later become classified as Folk Horror; for example in *Otherwise* (Smith and Duff 2021). (See also (Halligan and Goddard 2010) (Stanley and Norton 2021)).

Descriptions of landscapes then take into account the detritus of former industrial landscapes. This is something which is perhaps most pronounced in Northern British writing in that these are sites of former industrial success and stand in sharp contrast to post 2010 Conservative political rhetoric about a 'Northern Powerhouse' and 'Levelling Up', where in reality investment has fallen and poverty has risen. In Jenn Ashworth's *Fen* there is a clear indication that the landscape is largely constructed of this silt;

It's not late yet, but at this time of year it gets dark early. The narrow, jumbled streets are deserted. The fells are dark. It's the off season, and the promenade is empty. There's the lido boarded up. No way to get in, but the in the concrete bowl of the place, an old supermarket trolley in the deep end, and the little yachting pool bright green and thickened with algae. (Ashworth 2016)

This form of landscape writing subverts prior representations of the rural idyll of the Lake District, inspiration to generations of poets venerating the rugged landscape. In Ashworth's vision the fells themselves are dark and this version of the lakes is edged by deserted streets and dilapidated shops. In this form of hinterland horror the rural seems to be keeping the horror at bay, a protective force when compared to traditional Folk Horror narratives. In Jason Williamson's 'Glaisdale Road' pushes the rural away even further and takes us into the heart of the hinterlands;

When the cob van arrived the misery weakened and the giant torture chamber on Dale Road that housed the heaped mass of used sofas, its walls all emulsion white and flaked, covered under the imagined light that shone from the Cob Van, like a kind of Industrial Estate Ark of the Covenant ripping through the bodies of the opposing army, which on this particular battlefield, were the piles of used fucking sofas. (Williamson, Glaisdale Drive 2018, 83)

Williamson's evocation of a warehouse is as a torture chamber, paint peeling and stark light. This is an exemplar of places that have been forgotten and lost with abandonment being a theme of both people and the detritus that litters the environment. There are some seeming comparators with speculative fiction and that genres interest in the relics of the past being totemic; for example, in *The Road* (McCarthy 2006) or *Station Eleven* (Mandel 2015). Mark Fisher wrote about the adaptation of PD James' dystopian novel *Children of Men* in his seminal work *Capitalist Realism*.

'Capitalism is what is left when beliefs have collapsed at the level of ritual or symbolic elaboration, and that all that is left is the consumer-spectator, trudging through the ruins and the relics.' (Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* 2009, 10)

Margaret Atwood argues for speculative as an exploration of 'things that really could happen but just hadn't completely happened when the authors wrote the books.' (Atwood, *In Other Worlds: Science Fiction and the Human Imagination* 2012, 6) Fisher's consideration of PD James as speculative fiction highlights that its power to be terrifying is rooted in our understanding of the world being rooted in a recognisable form of capitalism and where the events are a logical conclusion; it is projecting into an imagined yet extrapolated future.

Similarly in hinterlands horror the process of decline has already happened but we are witnessing the result as present in the world in a recognisable and familiar world. As the decline has already happened and there is no need for any fantastical extrapolation. The hinterlands represent a form of society which is perpetually stuck in decline with a pervading sense of bleak daily ritual. This is the underlying narrative form of Richard Littler's *Scarfolk*; 'Scarfolk is a town in North West England that did not progress beyond 1979. Instead, the

entire decade of the 1970s loops ad infinitum' (Litter n.d.). In hinterlands horror rather than trudging through the 'ruins and relics' people are living perpetually within them. For a relic to have any potency it has to have a sense of history and provenance. If the world as presented is in a loop or perpetual present there is no history in which to root a relic. This is a theme which starts to coalesce in Northern British fictions which start to depict landscape and working class communities, isolated from developing centres.

In hinterlands horror the environments that are depicted should be populous, the housing estate is a common feature, but the absence of people is what leads to the underlying sense of unease. This is an approach utilised in *Dead Man's Shoes* (Meadows 2004). Made in 2004 Shane Meadows' 'revenge drama' predates the popularisation of the term Folk Horror and is omitted from much of the analyses of the 'second wave' of Folk Horror cinema. It's narrative does not connect so straightforwardly to into the elements of the 'Folk Horror Chain', although there is a clear sense of isolation for the central character Richard as he returns to Meadow's version of the Derbyshire town Matlock. It is this return that is important, unlike Neil Howie, Richard belongs in this space. The return is not at the instigation of the cult, far from it, his return signals their downfall as well as his. In the opening title sequence, 'the soldier' returns home, through clearly and identifiably rural settings – through woods and across fields. The sense of isolation is not in the countryside, nor is it for Richard as we see his brother walk alongside him, the isolation is in the depiction of Matlock.

In *Dead Man's Shoes* it becomes a town surrounded and isolated by countryside that. As Richard enters the town it is silent and bereft of population; essentially it is an SPA. The town

itself is depicted as a series of housing estates with close ups of seemingly abandoned and rusting children's toys with litter scattered nearby.

As Fisher notes, 'An example of the second mode of the eerie (*the failure of presence*) is the feeling of the eerie that pertains to ruins or other abandoned structures.' (Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* 2017, 62) These are not ancient ruins but they are in a ruinous state, uncared for. Where we do see life that we do see takes place in dilapidated interiors of brightly lit flat roofed pubs where the drug dealing takes place in the open and the clientele play pool or stare into the middle distance. This is a place the law has forgotten. The antagonists live in ageing houses where petty crime, drug use and humiliation are the 'skewed' rituals that structure people's lives; or at least the people that we meet. It is Richard, in seeking revenge for the ritualised killing of his brother who seeks to change this. It is as if he has been summoned from the past to enact a terrible revenge on the gang, only to eventually have to sacrifice himself.

It is perhaps no accident that Meadows chose to direct the BBC adaptation of Benjamin Myers' *The Gallows Pole*, itself a Folk Horror inflected historical novel. (Myers 2017) In this novel Myers examines the foundations of industrialisation in Northern England via the story of David Hartley and the Cragg Vale Coiners. This novel presents the destruction of a traditional rural way of life in favour of a developing capitalist system. This perhaps brings Meadows full circle; *The Gallows Pole* presents the origins of capitalism and *Dead Man's Shoes* presents its logical conclusion. There is no return to the land, as the land as the land has been changed so fundamentally with this as people's relationship to it.

Folk Horror master Ben Wheatley, in conjunction with screenwriter Amy Jump, deals with such landscapes and themes in *Kill List* (Wheatley, *Kill List* 2011). The opening of *Kill List* seems a very long way from the safety of Sergeant Howie's mainland in *The Wicker Man*. We are presented with a domestic space on the edge of the city. In common with *Dead Man's Shoes*, Jay is a soldier who has returned home, traumatised by his service. In genre bending fashion he has teamed up with Gal and they earn a living as deeply unsympathetic hitmen. As with Paddy Considine's portrayal of Richard these are characters we can understand but we are not endeared to them in any way. Early in the film Jay is seen taking medication whilst the film intercuts shots of their small town. It is an urban development, anonymous and nestled amongst fields, but not part of the rural idyll.

Wheatley and Jump carefully use the hinterlands beyond the location of Jay and his wife Shel's house. Jay and Gal exist in anonymous spaces in keeping with their occupation and throughout the early and mid-part of the film we are exposed to a variety of SPAs, often viewed from the anonymity of the travel hotel.

This isolation grows as the cult at the core of the story begin to draw Jay further into their plan and the film moves from a 'hit man movie' more firmly into a piece of Folk Horror. In what is perhaps a nod to *the Wicker Man* there are echoes of the scene where Willow MacGregor tempts Neil Howie from and through the wall of the next bedroom when Fiona waves from the edge of a motorway verge, looking up into Jay's anonymous travel hotel room.

She has no need to worry about anyone seeing her, other than Jay and despite the size of the hotel there is no one there. All that can be heard are the cars thundering past on arterial roads.

### Austerity Dogs

‘The attitude of ironic distance proper to postmodern capitalism is supposed to immunize us against the seductions of fanaticism. Lowering our expectations, we are told, is a small process to pay for being protected from terror and totalitarianism.’

(Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* 2009, 10)

Mark Fisher wrote this in 2009, recognising and identifying representations of cultural collapse. This is rooted, in artistic terms at least, at least in the presentation of a dialectic. Where there is a dystopia there is an (e)utopia waiting. What wasn't predictable was the turmoil that would follow in the wake of the 2008 financial crash and the narratives that would spring up around it leading to the Brexit vote in 2016 with subsequent and ongoing issues of social upheaval and instability. As Dan Coxon notes in the introduction to Folk Horror short fiction collection, *This Dreaming Isle*;

... these days it's almost impossible to discuss Britain, past or future, without Brexit rearing its scaly head. When this anthology was first conceived ... the crucial vote on 23 June 2016 was still three months away, and the notion of Britain being anything other than part of Europe seemed ludicrous and far-fetched. Little did we know that two years later – after the Leave vote, the failed negotiations, the infighting and the resignations – it would still seem ludicrous and far-fetched, but we would be shackled to it nonetheless. (Coxon and Campbell 2017, 5)

One of the aspects of 'hinterlands horror' is that it is rooted in the ordinary. There is no cult in operation or conspiracy to be had. The fear is essentially then a result of a ritualised set of beliefs which are themselves rooted in a form of hegemony. A reason why this form of horror finds a very particular form of voice in Britain in the 2000s, leading to the Brexit vote and beyond. England perhaps in particular has no special claim to political extremism as has been evidenced over the last 20 years across the world. In the UK this has taken on a very particular form in relation to protracted debates around the country's relationship to the rest of Europe and particularly the European Union. In 2016 the marginal referendum vote to leave the EU was partly caused by swathes of Northern England voting leave.

The political landscape of Britain is different today, even if the actual landscape hasn't changed. The notion of 'Britishness' is all too often marred by reactionary nationalistic sentiments, the chest-thumping of the far right or the 'tea-and-scones' tweeness of Theresa May. (Coxon and Campbell 2017, 5)

(See also (Berberich 2019))

As Adam Scovell notes of depictions of the rural in eerie fictions and of *Enys Men*;

Eerie work resists the picture-postcard vision of rural England and marks it as a site of violence and trauma, historically and contemporaneously. The countryside of the eerie is the location of previous class struggles. such as the fights against the Enclosures Act – the 1773 act that effectively made huge swathes of common land private – and Gerrard Winstanley's rebellion of Diggers who continued to work on land that was privatised by the act. (Scovell, *Enys Men: The films that frighten us in unexplainable ways* 2023)

The difference in hinterlands horror is that the battle was never fought. As has been well debated by political analysts there is evidence that Brexit was a reaction from those people

who had been long ignored, who had witnessed the decline of their towns into hinterlands and found an easy and erroneous group to blame rather than the focus being on preceding years of economic austerity. (Blyth 2013) (Davies 2016) (Farnsworth and Irving 2018). Hinterlands horror does not openly debate such political issues. The horror is in the ability people have to go to the extremes they will based on a (skewed) belief system. For example Jay and Gal in *Kill List* have a clear desire for people to suffer for their actions – although for Jay its possibly just enough that somebody is suffering. What makes Folk Horror so unnerving is the recognition that belonging to a cult is a capacity that we have within all of us. In hinterlands horror it is the acceptance of a state of being in and amongst a desolated landscape, and for the inherent capacity to commit acts of violence to sit within.

### Austerity Dogs

The Sleaford Mods are unique in the popular music landscape. Formed in 2007 the group consists of Jason Williamson and Andrew Fear and is perhaps best categorised as a form of electronic punk, although this does not do their oeuvre justice. Their work has consistently presented a picture of contemporary urban Britain which observes small town life (often their home town of Nottingham) but they do not judge the people or the situation – this is life as it is lived. The titles of many Sleaford Mods songs evoke a bleak sense of the mundane as trauma with songs such as ‘Jobseeker’, ‘The Wage Don’t Fit’, ‘No One’s Bothered’ and ‘Tied Up in Nottz’. Each of these depicting, with judgement or solution, life in a town that has been forgotten. Lyricist and singer Jason Williamson’s second collection of short fiction, *Happy Days* comprises of a series of vignettes, each of which provides a small portrait of life in the hinterlands. (Williamson, *Happy Days* 2018) Amongst the most unsettling of the stories in *Happy Days* is ‘Gallows Hill’ (Williamson, *Gallows Hill* 2018), which also features as a song on the *Sleaford Mods EP* (Mods 2017). The lyrics of this song describe a post-industrial landscape where people are trapped in relentlessly low paid work, alienated from

the world around them and where this is a cycle that has run through recent generations.

Williamson describes this oppression of generations as present in 'backways' where 'workers burn'. (Williamson, Gallows Hill 2019, 160)

The title of this piece is significant in clearly referencing a site of state sanctioned murder and with this some form of eerie and potentially supernatural occurrences. It is also the central image in M.R. James' 'A View from a Hill'. In this story Fanshawe arrives from out of town using that most modern of methods of travel, the train. He sees the gallows on the hill through borrowed 'spectral' binoculars. This is the tradition of the enlightened academic visiting a place he does not understand to be met with something which transcends time. This too is how Williamson opens his short story, with evocation of a supernatural presence on a hill; 'The Tower lurched over the hill and kept watch on its stone and gate with the help of slanted wood that hung from holes in the highest point in its structure.' (Williamson, Gallows Hill 2018, 76) but this quasi-historical image, (as if seen by one of M.R. James' historians), gives way to a depiction of the hinterlands.

Blue plastic sheeting and large abandoned bricks lay all over ... If you looked hard enough the wheelie bins that were scattered around the trees could be passed off as giant green tree shoes and if you had enough in your veins then the trees would look at you and fill you with horror because they obeyed the tower too. (Williamson, Gallows Hill 2018, 77)

In this story Gallows Hill is the site of an old cemetery with all the associated resonances that has. Except in this location the ancient Victorian railing have been damaged by the omnipresent traffic, the Tower 'Eyeing the beaten workers over dashboards, wanting them in an almost carousel motion.' (Williamson, Gallows Hill 2018, 78) This creates the sense of something ancient which is sitting above the town, a weird presence, 'It ... dominated the

area more so than the old lace and ale factories. It held a miserable permanent power that infiltrated those that wanted it.’ (Williamson, Gallows Hill 2018, 80) An ancient presence aligned to the mills and other factories, the detritus of business that, in this story brings despair and no wonder given that location in which it sits and wields its power have become a site of prostitution. Unusually the story changes focaliser and we move from the Tower to an interior and Jakub, a character who stays inside for flat lager, nicotine and pornography. Williamson describes the mood; ‘Life slipped away like last week and the willingness to combat this was a part time employee that did the bare minimum and less than that when his back was turned. (Williamson, Gallows Hill 2018, 81) And then the story ends. Unlike the narrative conclusion of *Dead Man’s Shoes* Williamson denies us the comfort of resolution. The bleakness that pervades the environment extends to the narrative, there is no respite from the situation and environment in which they find themselves, there will be no intervention or sacrifice called for by the Tower, instead we leave the characters in the same situation we found them and the situation repeats on a loop.

It can be no accident that Jason Williamson was selected by Ben Wheatley to feature in his 2021 production of *Rebecca*. (Wheatley, *Rebecca* 2021). In this Williamson features as a ‘folk singer’ in the kitchens of Manderley whilst the party takes place in the house above. During the party and following sight of Rebecca’s dress Wheatley has the new Mrs de Winter confronted by partygoers in animal masks, clearly redolent of *the Wicker Man*.

Hinterlands gain their power to horrify precisely because they are recognisable spaces which exist as a direct result of a series of contemporary socio-economic decisions which in turn have left people behind and trapped. In geographical terms these spaces are separate to but

located within other landscapes, most often surrounded by a rural landscape which needs to be traversed. The absence of an opposition, of a dialectic means that fundamental change is unlikely to happen. This is part of their terror, that time and with it progress has collapsed and all that remains is stasis. The images of mild desolation abound – spaces uncared for and uncaring in return. Places with a clear landscape, which are isolated, where skewed belief systems can and do develop, but where ritual is replaced with grim and unrelenting routine.

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